

The Chili Conspiracy

Icabu

Station 51 and Truck 85, a high ladder truck, were participating in a training exercise at the department's large, live fire training facility. Their task: testing a new device that holds a small or large diameter hose to the top of the ladder, allowing the firefighter to pivot the hose 180 degrees. This would enable any ladder truck to provide aerial coverage and free the firefighter from trying to hold the hose while also holding onto the ladder.

Any exercise utilizing the five-story 'Infernal Tower' at the training center was extremely hot duty, especially when the day's temperature neared one hundred degrees – like today. With the ladder extended just past the lip of the top story, the gas-fueled fire produced an abundant amount of heat that roiled up into the faces of the firefighters. Marco was first up with the inch and a half hose, followed by Chet, Mike, Roy, and John; each was paired with a crewman from Truck 85. Roy and John were also busy keeping everyone hydrated, watching closely for heat difficulties.

Hank Stanley volunteered to change to the two and a half inch hose for phase two of the exercise, allowing the overheated firefighters a welcome respite. The firefighters from both companies knotted into small groups; lively discussions, animated gesturing, and good-natured laughing drifted through the air.

"Looks like it's going to be four years in a row," Marty Martinez, from 85s, boasted to anyone listening.

"Not that 'secret' family recipe again," Chet groaned, not being one to ignore anyone's boasting.

"Only the recipe that's won the Department's Chili Cook Off the past three years," Marty boasted again, puffing out his chest for emphasis.

Chet gritted his teeth and stretched to his full height, which put him to Marty's chin. "The only reason your chili won is because Marco hasn't entered his family's 'secret' chili recipe."

"Bring it on, Kelly. It's too late to enter the Department contest this year, but we'll have our own contest. 51s against 85s."

"You're on!" Chet glared up at Marty.

Mike Stoker came around the back of Engine 51 and grabbed Chet by the arm. "Excuse us, guys," he mumbled towards Marty and a growing gathering of 85s crew. He hauled Chet behind the engine, Marty and company laughing loudly at their backs. "What are you doing, Chet?"

Chet sat on the tailboard and shrugged. "Just a friendly competition."

"I've never heard Marco say anything about a 'secret' family chili recipe," Mike cautioned.

Chet frowned and scratched his head. "Me either. I'm sure he has one, though. His family is steeped in tradition, they must have a 'secret' chili recipe." *I hope...*

Mike shook his head at his conniving friend. “I sure hope you’re right.”

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“Okay, guys,” Captain Bryant announced through the bullhorn from the Observation area, “time to suite up. Lopez, are you ready?”

Marco had his gear on, but wasn’t getting any air. After a checking everything twice, even tapping on his regulator, he waved over to the captains. “My regulator’s busted,” he yelled. “I’ll have to get another one from the truck.” Marco gestured at his regulator, then back to Engine 51. He saw Hank nod to him so he dashed to the truck.

“Kelly, you’re up,” the bullhorn blared. “Let’s keep it moving.”

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Chet made his way down the ladder after extinguishing the fire; his exhaustion caused him to stumble down the last couple of rungs. His crewmates met him at the bottom and helped remove his gear. “Man,” Chet gasped, “they increased the fuel pressure. I didn’t think I’d ever get the fire knocked down.” He sent a glare over to the ‘Observers’, which included his own captain. He got a shrug from Hank and a smirk from Bill Bryant.

“Here, Chet,” Johnny waved a bottle of cool water in front of Chet’s face. “Drink this.”

Chet grabbed it, popped off the cap, and immediately poured the refreshing contents over his hot head. He shook his drenched head, akin to a wet dog, his soaked curls releasing on his crewmates. “Aahh...” he sighed at the cooling relief.

“Hey,” Johnny exclaimed, “cut it out. You’re supposed to drink it.” He wiped Chet’s sweaty droplets from his face.

Chet plopped down on the engine’s sideboard, grabbing the water Roy offered, and gulped it eagerly. Some of the cool water dribbled down to his shirt, mingling with the salty stains, both darkening the shade of blue.

Marco now stood at the top of the ladder with Jack Evans, the engineer for Truck 85. He waved his arm, signaling Mike to charge the line. The charging line thumped against the holding device, startling Marco with its ferocity. He pulled the nozzle lever to release the powerful spray and swiveled the handle to extinguish the flames. Already drenched in sweat from climbing the ladder, the billowing heat from the flames increased his personal discomfort. Thermal currents created a brief, gentle breeze, wafting a cloud of cooling mist over him.

Snap! Pop! The clamps holding the swivel device to the ladder rung broke in half; the pressure from the hose sent the device out of control. Marco and Jack struggled to get control of the device and maintain their footing on the narrow ladder. Marco reeled from a blow to his face, his facemask shattered, a trickle of blood coursing down the side of his face and neck, staining his collar. Below, Mike shut down the pump as soon as he saw trouble atop the ladder. The rigid hose quickly went limp, a great relief to the two aerial firefighters.

“Roy, John! That thing hit Marco in the head, he’s bleeding,” Jack yelled down to the gathered crews as he and Marco began their descent.

“Okay, Jack. Get him down here. We’ll be ready,” Roy yelled up the ladder, and then ran to the squad to assist Johnny with the equipment.

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Marco sat on the edge of the exam table in Treatment Room Four at Rampart’s Emergency Department, seven stitches richer.

“Sounds like you got off pretty lucky, Marco,” Dr. Kel Brackett told his patient.

“You’re not kidding, Doc. You should see what it did to my face mask.” Marco probed the freshly bandaged wound under his right eye. “Doc, is my eye going to swell shut?”

Kel Brackett crossed his arms and stepped back. “It shouldn’t, Marco. I do think you’ll have a healthy shiner though.”

Marco frowned. *Better than being blinded by the blasted thing...* he reasoned to himself. “Thanks, Doc. Am I still on duty?”

“I’m going to release you to duty, but if you experience any difficulties at all, get back here,” Brackett instructed.

Marco hopped down from the exam table. “You got it Doc. No problem.”

Brackett opened the door, revealing the anxious crew of Engine 51. “Your fan club awaits,” he laughed.

Marco joined his crewmates, accepting their well wishes and putting up with their jibes about his darkening eye. The engine crew made their way to the duty desk where Roy and Johnny were signing for their supplies with Dixie.

“How is he?” Hank inquired to Dr. Brackett.

“Seven stitches. X-rays are negative. He’s yours, but keep an eye on him – no pun intended. Get him back here if he has any problems.”

Hank laughed at the pun, unintended or not. “We’ll do that. Thanks, Doc. You guys take good care of my men.” Hank extended his hand to Dr. Brackett.

Surprised, Kel shook Hank’s hand. “You’re welcome, Hank. You guys do a good job of keeping me in patients.”

Hank replied with a disparaging look, then walked with Dr. Brackett over to the duty desk that teemed with firefighters. “Mike, better put us back in service. Let’s get back to the barn guys.” Hank gathered the crew and headed down the hall.

“LA, Engine 51 back in service,” Mike spoke into the handy-talkie as he strode after Hank.

“Engine 51,” replied LA dispatch.

John picked up the handy-talkie he had laid on the duty desk. “LA, Squad 51 back in service,” he winked at Dixie. “See ya later, Dix.” Roy gathered the supplies and the duo trotted after the engine crew.

Dixie smiled to herself as she watched the gaggle of firefighters turn the corner and exit the hospital.

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“Come on, Marco. You make pretty good chili, but you must have a ‘secret’ recipe for special family occasions or something,” Chet nearly pleaded.

Marco rolled his eyes, which was slightly painful. “What makes you think my family would have a ‘secret’ recipe for chili?”

The tones sounded before Chet could reply, sending both men running to the apparatus bay. “Squad 51. Woman down. Rolph’s Market, 650 East Carson. 6-5-0 East Carson. Cross street Avalon Blvd. Time out 1750.” Sam Lanier’s voice echoed across the bay.

“Squad 51, 10-4. KMG-365,” Hank said into the station mic, then handed Roy the notepaper. The squad roared out of the bay, lights flashing and siren blaring.

“Mike,” Hank stopped his engineer. The bay door clanged closed behind them. “Roy was fixing dinner, see if you can figure out what it’s supposed to be.”

“Sure, Cap,” Mike nodded and headed for the kitchen.

“Thanks.” Hank returned to his office and the mound of paperwork from that morning’s training exercise.

Mike entered the kitchen to find Chet and Marco at it again. He gave Marco a sympathetic shrug and headed for the counter, where a bowl of hamburger sat. Mike sniffed at the bowl contents, wrinkling his nose at an unexpected aroma. *Onions...and something else...*

“It just stands to reason, Marco,” Chet explained. “Martinez from 85s won the Chili Cook Off three years in a row with a ‘secret’ family recipe. I figure your family recipe should be at least as good.”

“Speaking of secret recipes,” Mike turned to Chet and Marco sitting at the kitchen table. “Do either of you know what Roy was fixing for dinner?” He received blank stares from both of his crewmates. Mike sighed, looked at the ingredients abandoned on the counter for a moment, then began his own preparations.

Chet returned his attention to Marco. “Now, Marco, ol’ pal...”

“Okay, Chet,” Marco acquiesced. “My family does have a ‘secret’ chili recipe.”

Chet jumped up from the table, knocking over his chair. “I knew it!” he yelled.

“Geez, Chet,” Mike said. “It’s only chili.”

“It’s much more than that, my engineer pal,” Chet grinned, picking up his chair. “Much more than that.”

The racket from the kitchen brought Hank out of his office. “Everything okay in here?”

“Yeah, Cap,” Marco answered. “Chet’s just getting excited over here.”

“Well, settle down.” Hank poured himself a cup of coffee and returned to the office.

Chet scooted his chair closer to Marco. “Do you know this ‘secret’ recipe?”

“No,” Marco replied with a grin.

Chet backed up a little. “Can you get the recipe? Someone must know it.”

“Sure,” Marco laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Chet asked suspiciously.

“The reason it’s a ‘secret’ recipe is because it’s awful. No one fixes it anymore, haven’t for nearly two generations. My abuela refused to hand down the recipe to my mother.”

Chet stood again, careful not to knock over the chair. “You’re kidding, Marco. I know you’re kidding.”

Marco stood too, tiring of the conversation. “No, Chet, I’m not kidding.” He went over to the counter to help Mike with the salad.

Chet got the dishes and cutlery and began setting the table. “Can you still get the recipe, Marco? Maybe there’s something we can do with it.”

Marco sighed heavily. “Okay, Chet. I’ll call my Grandmother tomorrow.” He grinned at Mike. “She likes me, so she’ll probably tell me the recipe.”

“You mean it’s a verbal recipe?” Mike asked.

“Well, yeah. It wouldn’t be a secret if you could write it down,” Marco explained the obvious.

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Hank sat down at the table full of food, the engine crew filling up their plates, two empty place settings mirrored the absence of the paramedic crew. Dinner conversation traded between the aborted training exercise and chili ingredients; Hank was unable to connect the two diverse topics.

“LA, Squad 51. Respond a second ambulance to this location.” John’s voice echoed through the half empty apparatus bay from the Dispatch speaker mounted on the wall.

“10-4, Squad 51,” Sam replied.

“Wonder what that’s all about?” Hank voiced across the table. The engine crew continued their dinner silently, the clink-clank of the cutlery the only sounds from the table.

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“Thanks for finishing dinner for me, Mike,” Roy said, pushing himself away from the table. “Turned out really good, even though it started as meatloaf.”

“Thanks,” Mike shrugged, “it looked like it would make good burgers.” *I hate meatloaf...*

“They’re great, Mike,” Johnny said around a mouth full of burger. “Couldn’t have done better myself.”

“So, Roy,” Hank started, “what happened on that last run?”

“An elderly lady slipped on a grape and injured her hip,” Roy began.

Johnny snorted from across the table. “More like old bat,” he said under his breath.

Roy heard the remark and explained. “She was very agitated and scared. It took a while to settle her down.”

“She bit me,” John exclaimed, rubbing a reddened area on his forearm.

Chet burst out laughing. “That’s not why you called for the second ambulance is it, Gage?”

“No,” Johnny glared at Chet. “That’s when things got interesting.” Johnny wiped his mouth on a napkin, preparing to take over the storytelling. “You see, Roy went in with the old bat – er, elderly lady. I started cleaning up when one of the on-lookers slipped on another grape, fracturing her elbow.”

“I had to practically pull him out of her treatment room at Rampart,” Roy smiled.

“Well,” John said coyly, “she was extremely grateful I was there to help her.”

“A good looking chick?” Chet asked.

John nodded his head. “Very. She was incredible.”

“Well,” Roy picked up the story. “We both ended up at Rampart and the squad was still at the grocery store. Luckily, Vince was at Rampart and gave us a lift back to the squad.”

Hank laughed. *Only these two...* He noticed Marco sitting on the couch, reading a magazine, not participating in the banter. “Roy, John, why don’t you guys clean up the dishes tonight.”

The paramedics followed their captain's gaze to Marco. "Sure, Cap. It'll only take us a few minutes," Roy agreed. He and Johnny began clearing the table. Chet and Mike lent a hand.

Hank sat down beside Marco. "You doing okay there, Pal?"

Marco looked up from his magazine. "Sure, Cap," he answered in a low voice. "It's been a long day, just taking a break." *And avoiding Chet...*

Hank studied Marco's injured eye closely. *Still a little swollen...* he concluded. "You want some ice for that?"

"No, it's fine Cap, really." Marco sunk down into the chair a little bit, and raised his magazine a little higher. *Now go away before you draw unwanted attention...*

"Okay, but you let me know if there's any problem."

"You bet...and thanks." *Whew...*

Hank returned to his office and the never-ending paperwork.

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The klaxon blared, Sam Lanier talked. "Squad 51. Infant not breathing. 4718 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. 4-7-1-8 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. Cross street Park Avenue. Time out 1955."

Roy dried his hands on his pants as he ran for the squad. John tossed his dishtowel over his shoulder, chasing Roy out the doorway and to the squad.

"KMG-365," Hank hurriedly replied and got the notepaper to Roy. *Infant not breathing...* It sent a cold chill through Hank.

The garage door slowly closed, blocking out the retreating sound of the squad's siren. The engine crew slowly returned to the kitchen; Hank took over washing, Mike dried, and Chet put the dishes away. Marco kept a silent vigil on the couch.

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"LA, Squad 51," Roy's strained voice came from the Dispatch speaker at Station 51. "Cancel the ambulance to our location, we are transporting in the squad."

"10-4, Squad 51," came Sam's reply.

Mike paused wiping the table and hung his head. *It must be bad...*

Vaya con Dios... Marco prayed silently.

"It'll be okay guys," Hank told the worried faces. "Roy and John know what they're doing."

"Yeah," Chet added. "If the kid has any chance, it's with them two."

“That’s right,” Hank agreed.

Chet put on another pot of coffee on and sat down at the table when the klaxon sounded again. The engine crew dashed for the truck as Sam’s voice echoed around them. “Engine 51, dumpster fire in the alley behind Nu Look Dry Cleaners. 1070 East Dominguez Street. 1-0-7-0 East Dominguez Street. Timeout 2017.”

“Engine 51, KMG-365.” Hank acknowledged the call and jogged around the front of the engine and hopped into the passenger seat.

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Roy backed the squad into the empty apparatus bay, and studied Johnny’s long face. “We’re home.”

Johnny sighed heavily. “Yeah.”

The weary paramedics entered the kitchen; Roy made a beeline for the coffee pot. “Still warm,” he announced, pouring two cups of liquid caffeine.

“I’ll pass,” Johnny said from the table.

Roy brought the second cup over and set it beside Johnny anyway, then sat at the table too, sipping at the dark liquid in his cup. “We did everything we could, Johnny. Don’t beat yourself up over this.”

Johnny leaned back in his chair, sad brown eyes downcast. “I know, Roy. I’ll be okay. Just give me a minute.” He sipped at the coffee he didn’t want.

“Sure, Pal.” Roy set his nearly empty cup in the sink. *They cleaned up for us too...* He wandered out into the apparatus bay, pretending to check the squad.

Johnny pushed his half empty cup of coffee away. *Babies shouldn’t die...* He pulled himself up and headed for the latrine. As he entered the apparatus bay, John stopped as Hank’s voice squawked from the Dispatch speaker. “LA, Engine 51 returning to quarters.”

“Engine 51,” came the automatic reply.

Johnny stood in the middle of the bay with his eyes closed, sighing away his pent up grief and blame. He looked up at the Dispatch speaker. *That thing talks all day and I rarely hear it, unless it’s our crew...* A slight smile crept across John’s face and he headed for the dorm to take advantage of a perfect opportunity to short-sheet Chet’s bed.

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Roy and Johnny sat at the kitchen table having cookies and milk when the engine backed into its spot in the bay. The noise level rose as the crew made their way into the kitchen, bringing with them a faint smell of smoke.

“Ooh, cookies,” Marco said, snatching an Oreo on his way to the fridge for the milk.

Mike and Chet brought two glasses each for Marco to fill and helped themselves to the pile of cookies.

“I’m having coffee,” Hank informed, grabbing a couple of cookies before heading to his office. *Damn paperwork...*

Johnny claimed the extra glass of milk and another ginger snap.

Roy beat Chet to the last chocolate chip cookie, devouring it with a victorious grin. Chet wrestled Marco for the remaining Oreo.

“Ha!” Marco exclaimed in victory. His half of the sandwich cookie had the white stuff. Chet chewed his creamless Oreo half and snatched the remaining ginger snap from Johnny’s grasp.

There was a charged silence as five sets of eyes held the last cookie, oatmeal raisin. Five hands shot for the lone cookie, Mike and Chet getting their hands on the prize.

“Ha! Haa!” Chet shoved his larger portion of oatmeal raisin into his mouth, crumbs catching in his bushy mustache.

Mike ignored Chet and finished off his smaller portion, chasing it with milk.

The guys settled down at the table. Mike cleared his throat. “Say Roy, John. How did it go with the baby?”

The smile on John’s face faded away. With a groan, he left the table to rinse his milk glasses.

The three firefighters turned to Roy, who was picking at a fingernail.

Mike stood. “Man, I’m sorry. I thought for sure...”

“It went sour real quick,” Roy started, then stopped as John left the room. *They deserve to know...* Roy thought. “He wasn’t breathing when we arrived - too long. We were losing his pulse so I decided to transport in the squad. There was just no time...” his voice caught. “Johnny bagged him on the way to Rampart, the little fella lying in his lap.” Roy rubbed at a spot on the table, not looking at the guys. “He still had a weak pulse when we got to Rampart, but he just faded away despite everyone’s efforts.” Roy looked up and held eye contact with each of the three concerned firefighters, then cast his eyes down at his hands on the tabletop. “His name was Johnny.”

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The klaxon blared, the lights blinked on and the firefighters of Station 51 scrambled into their waiting turnout gear. “Engine 51, rubbish fire in the alley. 23839 South Banning Blvd and East 238<sup>th</sup> Street. 23839 South Banning Blvd and East 238<sup>th</sup> Street. Time out 0320.”

Johnny made it to the squad before realizing the call was for the engine only. He jogged over and hit the door button while Hank acknowledged the call. He watched the engine disappear into the crisp night air until the door closed again. He went to the kitchen for a glass of milk and found Roy sitting on the couch. “What’cha doin’ sittin’ out here?” Johnny asked sleepily.

“Nothing.”

Johnny looked up from pouring his milk. “Nothin’?” Milk sloshed onto his hand. “Shit...” He hurriedly set his overfull glass on the table and cleaned the spill with a napkin.

Roy stretched and leaned his head against the back of the couch, staring at the ceiling. “Do you think we should have waited for the ambulance?”

Johnny stopped in mid gulp, nearly choking. “Man, Roy, you know better than that. There wasn’t any time for waiting. You made the right call.”

“It didn’t help the outcome.”

“Nothing was going to do that. Don’t you beat yourself up over this. We did the best we could.”

“I guess so.” Roy dragged himself off the couch, watched Johnny rinse his glass. “Let’s hit the sack before we get called out.”

“Right behind ya.” Johnny’s hand caught the light switch on the way out.

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Chet sat at the kitchen table, a pile of cookbooks in front of him. He had a large book open, reading it intently. Marco rushed in the side kitchen door carrying a large pot that he sat on the counter. Johnny waltzed into the kitchen looking puzzled at the unusual goings on.

“What ya reading, Chet? ‘How To Drive a Fire Engine in 500 Easy Steps’?” Johnny picked up one of the cookbooks, then another. “What the...”

“Put it down, Gage,” Chet growled without looking up.

Johnny put the book down. “Grouch,” he pouted, then went to check out what Marco had brought.

Marco grabbed Johnny’s arm in mid reach. “You can’t eat this, John,” he glared past Johnny to Chet. “It’s for something Chet’s conspiring.” Marco gave Johnny an apologetic glance, then went and stood next to Chet. “Day after tomorrow we have to clean my Grandmother’s gutters.”

Chet glanced up at Marco from his book. “What...”

Marco pointed over his shoulder to the pot that Johnny had now opened. “I got the recipe, but it’s going to cost you... and me.”

“The recipe? Great!” Chet stood, catching Marco’s glare. “Whatever she wants, Marco. This is great.” He went over to the pot, shoving Johnny out of his way.

“You’ll regret that statement,” Marco said to Chet’s back. *You don’t want to be indebted to my abuela...*

“Hey,” Johnny exclaimed as Chet elbowed him away from the pot of chili. “What are you up to anyway?”

Chet spooned some of the ‘secret’ recipe chili into a bowl and prepared to taste it. He turned to Johnny with a scheming grin. “This chili is going to beat Martinez’s over at 85s.”

Johnny frowned at Chet, a pitying look. “Doesn’t he use some family recipe that always wins the Cook Off?”

“Yeah,” Chet acquiesced. “But, no longer.” Chet poked a spoonful into his mouth, tasting carefully.

Johnny snickered out loud at Chet’s face as he watched him forcefully gulp down the bite of chili. He clapped Chet on the shoulder. “I don’t think Martinez has anything to worry about.” Johnny left the kitchen, still chuckling, to assist Roy with checking out the squad.

“Man, Marco. This stuff IS awful. Are you sure you followed the recipe?” Chet gulped a glass of water, trying to rinse the lingering taste out of his mouth.

“Yes, Chet,” Marco grouched. “I followed every word. Oh yeah, after we clean the gutters we have to wash all her windows, inside and out.”

“Yeah, whatever...” Chet said distractedly, carefully tasting another small spoonful of the chili. “This isn’t too bad, just kinda bland. We should be able to work with it. I got some great ideas from that book.”

Roy stuck his head through the doorway. “Roll call guys.”

Hank looked the guys over, making sure everyone looked sharp; he settled for their usual. He glanced at his clipboard. “Chet, Marco, need you two to bring in five hundred feet of hose off the rack and pack it on the bed. C-shift had a hose blow last night so be prepared for hose testing soon. Roy you have the dorm, Mike’s on latrine duty, and John you’re the cook today. That’s it, let’s hit it.”

Roy and Johnny dug in the supply closet. Roy gathered the broom and dustpan to sweep the dorm, and Johnny gathered rags and polish for the squad since he wasn’t cooking right away. The Klaxon blared. “Squad 51. Possible heart attack. 17128 South Keegan Avenue. 1-7-1-2-8 South Keegan Avenue. Cross street Walnut . Time out 0820.” The paramedics hastily dropped their cleaning supplies and headed for the squad.

Hank entered the kitchen while Mike was stacking Chet’s cookbooks on the end of the table. “What’s all this?” he asked his engineer.

“Something Chet has going. A chili cooking contest with Martinez at 85s,” Mike indicated the pot on the counter.

Hank stole a spoonful of the chili. “I don’t think Martinez has anything to worry about,” Hank said, pulling a face.

“That’s Marco’s ‘secret’ family recipe. Chet’s going to try and doctor it up,” Mike added, then left to do his latrine duties.

Hank sat the pot on the stove and turned it on to simmer. *I know what this needs – the Stanley family secret to great chili...* Hank searched the refrigerator for his prize ingredient. “Aha!” He took the green bell pepper, cleaned it, cut it in eight chunks, scored the skin with the knife to release the flavorful oils, and added them to the warming pot of chili. Later, he would remove the pepper chunks, leaving the flavor without its source. The phone rang and Hank trotted to the office to answer it.

Mike wandered into the kitchen after finishing the latrine cleaning. Sipping a steaming cup of coffee, he watched Chet and Marco out the side door. *If they would quit arguing and fighting, they would finish in half the time...* he observed, watching Chet and Marco wrestling with the hoses on the rack. Stifling a laugh with a mouthful of coffee, and nearly snorting it out his nose. Mike watched as the line to lower the hose slipped through Chet’s hands. The falling coupling just missed Marco’s head as it clanged to the ground. Mike shrank back into the kitchen, not wanting to witness Chet’s death at Marco’s hands.

Mike lifted the lid on the simmering pot of chili, taking a taste. *Not too bad. Heating it up must have helped...* “I know what it needs,” Mike mumbled to himself. He rummaged through the spices in the cabinet, finally finding the one he desired – celery seed. He double checked the amount of chili in the pot, then poured a measured amount of little seeds onto the cutting board. Taking a wide, flat blade knife, he proceeded to crush the small mound of seeds, creating a celery seed powder. He scooped the powder with the knife and stirred the new ingredient into the chili. Mike then went to straighten up the day room.

Hank made his way through the apparatus bay, entering the kitchen. He heard John call the squad available to Dispatch. *Hope they make it back here this time...* Hank thought. He stepped out the side kitchen door to check on Chet and Marco. They had the hose off the rack, rolling the lengths into neat coils. “Mike, help them get the hose on the bed. I’d like this job done before lunch.”

“Sure, Cap.” Mike finished straightening the newspaper pile, then opened the back apparatus bay garage door and strolled out to his crewmates.

The squad backed into the wide-open bay. Roy and Johnny amiably discussed some topic as they exited the truck and headed to the kitchen. Johnny stopped short when Hank met them at the doorway.

“Everything go okay?” Hank asked, rocking back on his heels.

“Yeah, the guy’s in CCU awaiting bypass surgery, the kid only had minor burns, and the woman merely hyperventilated,” Johnny answered, ticking off the calls on his fingers.

“Good. You ready to start lunch?”

“Sure, Cap. I’ll go wash up first,” Johnny spun around, gave Roy a raised eyebrow, and disappeared through the dorm.

“Uh,” Roy hesitated in front of his Captain. “I’ll get the stuff there and sweep up the dorm,” Roy indicated the broom and dustpan he hastily propped in the corner by the closet when they were called out earlier.

Hank nodded at his senior paramedic, watching as Roy collected the gear and headed across the bay. He snorted a laugh when John rushed out the dorm door, colliding with Roy. The dustpan clattered to the floor.

“Sorry...” Johnny mumbled, shuffling around Roy and the broom.

Hank stepped aside as John swept into the kitchen. Off-tune whistling wafted from the kitchen as John went about fixing lunch for the crew, punctuated with a clattering of pans and dishes. Hank looked across the bay to see that Roy had disappeared into the dorm. A smile settled on his face as he made his way back to the office and his own daily grind.

“This thing’s always empty,” Johnny grumbled to himself as he stared into the empty pepper mill. He opened the spice cabinet and rummaged for the peppercorns. *Oh, man, it’s way in the back...* Johnny stretched his arm to the back of the cabinet, his elbow knocked several spice jars out of the cabinet, scattering them over the counter and stove. Johnny jumped as the lid to the chili pot clattered to the floor due to a direct hit from the jar of onion powder; and yet another spice bottle rolled out of the cabinet, landing with an audible ‘plop’ into the pot of chili. “Damn...” Johnny got a spoon to fish the jar out of the chili, frowning to see the rescued jar no longer had its top corked. He continued fishing, finally spooning up the cork. He carefully rinsed the jar and cork and rejoined them. A fair amount of the jar’s contents were missing, added to Chet and Marco’s chili. Johnny’s eyes widened as he read the label. “Serrano Pepper Extract,” he mouthed. Below the printed label, someone had scribbled in pencil, ‘Hot!’. *They’re going to kill me...* he thought and quickly stirred the chili, spreading the small oil slick throughout. Johnny quickly returned the scattered spice jars to the cabinet, covered the chili pot, filled the pepper mill, and continued making lunch. Off-tune whistling permeated the station once again.

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“Come and get it!” Johnny yelled through the kitchen doorway. The guys straggled in, sat at the table and dug into Johnny’s chicken salad sandwiches and vegetable tray.

“Where’re the burgers, Gage?” Chet asked between bites.

“Don’t worry, I won’t disappoint you at dinner,” Johnny retorted, reaching for a sandwich.

“Say, this isn’t bad, Johnny. Whose recipe is it?” Marco asked while studying the sandwich contents, trying to discover the ingredients.

Marco held up his hand, seeing that Johnny had just taken a large bite of his sandwich. “Never mind, just write it down for me. I can make this for the next Lopez family picnic.”

Johnny nodded, gulping down his sandwich, a practice demanded by frequently missing meals due to ill-timed calls. A practice Johnny mastered like no other.

“That’s good, Marco. You certainly don’t want to make the Lopez family chili for your picnic,” Chet teased.

“Cut it out, Chet,” Marco admonished, complete with pointed finger. “You’re the one who challenged 85s.”

“How was I supposed to know your ‘secret’ family chili was so bad?” Chet snorted.

Marco rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Gentlemen,” Hank soothed, “we don’t need any more family cooking references. I’ve tasted Marco’s chili and it isn’t that bad. I won’t say it’s a contest winner,” he gave Marco a sympathetic glance, “but it’s quite edible.”

The rest of lunch passed without incident, not even an interrupting call. John began clearing the table. Marco assisted, discussing the chicken salad recipe. Mike and Chet went to finish packing the hose bed, and Roy went to mop the dorm floor. Hank disappeared into his office with a fresh cup of coffee.

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“Marco, let me look at that,” John said, wiping his hands dry on the dishtowel draped over Marco’s shoulder. John noticed some redness around the small bandage Marco had covering his stitches.

“Why? It feels okay,” Marco said defensively, his hand reflexively touching the bandage under his eye.

“No, I mean it. It looks a little red, maybe some infection starting,” Johnny said, paramedic mode enabled.

Marco grew concerned, seeing the determined set of Johnny’s face. “They come out in a couple of days. I haven’t noticed anything wrong.” Johnny steered Marco to a chair at the table and eased him into it. “I’ve been keeping it clean, really.” Johnny peeled off the bandage. “It doesn’t hurt at all. I even... Ouch!” Johnny probed Marco’s slightly infected sutured cut.

“Come out to the squad and I’ll get some antibiotic on that.” Johnny assisted Marco out of the chair, leading him to the squad.

“I’m not one of your patients, Johnny,” Marco grouched, pulling his arm away. “I can walk by myself.”

“Okay, Pal,” Johnny agreed, walking ahead. He opened the passenger side door, motioning for Marco to have a seat, then retrieved the drug box from the side compartment. After a thorough cleaning, he applied a liberal amount of antibiotic ointment and a clean bandage. Mike and Chet came over from the engine, giving Marco moral support as John worked on him. Hank came out of the office to check the goings on.

“Should we report this to Dr. Brackett?” Hank asked John seriously.

“No!” Marco answered. “No more hospitals or doctors.”

Hank kept his eyes on the paramedic, not the patient. “I don’t think so, Cap,” Johnny replied. “I think we caught it in time. We’ll keep an eye on it – so to speak.”

Marco groaned. *Not another eye joke...*

Roy joined the group after putting his mop and supplies away in the utility closet. “What’s up?” he questioned.

“Just a little infection setting in, nothing serious,” Johnny answered.

Roy gave Marco’s eye a cursory once over. *Good catch, Junior...* He gave Marco’s shoulder a pat, then left in search of the coffee pot.

Roy eyed the pot of chili as he leaned against the kitchen counter sipping his coffee. Unable to resist, he took a spoonful and immediately gulped the rest of his coffee. *It’s definitely hot enough...* Roy remembered how Joanne once tamed a flaming pot of chili and went to the fridge with hopes of finding the cure. *Yep...* He grabbed the bottle of lemon juice and squeezed an estimated measurement into the pot, stirring thoroughly afterwards.

Hank passed Roy in the kitchen doorway, empty coffee cup in hand. “I think there’s only one cup left, Cap.” Roy turned to join the others still gathered around the squad.

“All right, I’ll make another pot.” *Man, do we ever go through this stuff...* He filled his cup and went about making another pot of their staple brew. Hank removed the spent green pepper chunks from the chili simmering on the stove. The tones sounded and Hank quickly turned off the stove and jogged to the base station alcove.

“Station 51, Squad 36. Multi-vehicle accident with injuries. At the intersection of Wilmington and East 223rd Street. Wilmington and East 223rd. Time out 1515.

“That’s just down the street.” Johnny indicated the traffic backing up in front of the station. The squad, followed closely by the engine, wove through the backlog of traffic, slowly making their way to the accident scene.

“Chet!”

“Yeah, Cap?”

“Phone.”

“Thanks, Cap. I’ll pick up in the dorm.”

Marco and Mike shrugged at each other, watching as Chet jogged across the bay, then returned to their respective newspaper sections.

Hank poked his head into the kitchen. “Mike, I’d like to go over last shift’s log with you. Got a minute?”

“Sure, Cap,” Mike folded his newspaper section, scooted away from the table, and followed Hank into the office.

Marco read a couple more depressing headlines, then folded his paper section, stacking it atop Mike’s deserted Sports section. He made his way over to the stove, putting heat to the pot of chili again. He grabbed a spoon and took a taste. *Not too bad... too much Tex, not enough Mex...* Marco went to a cupboard and retrieved a true Mexican ingredient – cocoa, unsweetened. He spooned two tablespoons full into the pot, then a third, and stirred thoroughly. He sniffed deeply, savoring the new aroma. *Definitely better...*

Chet clomped into the kitchen and plopped down in a chair. “That was Martinez over at 85s. He’s set up the chili contest for tomorrow morning after shift, at Rampart. He got Brackett, Dixie, Early, and Morton to be judges.” He walked over to the stove, like a man walking death row. “Boy, are we ever gonna bomb out on this one.” *I haven’t been able to do anything with the chili...*

Marco scowled at Chet. “I think it’s pretty good, now. And, I don’t remember ‘we’ challenging Martinez to the contest.”

Chet eyed Marco suspiciously. “What do you mean?” He looked into the pot, sniffing deeply. “What have you done to it?”

“Just gave it a ‘secret’ Mexican ingredient,” Marco smiled slyly. *Chet would never think to put cocoa in chili...*

Chet was really suspicious now. He leaned over the pot and sniffed again, cautiously. *Smells okay...* He stuck his finger into the pot, quickly poking the covered digit into his mouth, tasting carefully.

“Hey,” Marco exclaimed, “don’t put your grubby fingers in my chili.”

This isn’t half bad... Chet thought, a mischievous grin spreading behind his moustache. *Not bad at all...* “I think we may have a chance here, Marco. It’s a little hot, though.”

Marco took a taste. “You’re right, Chet, it is hot. I don’t know what happened. My Grandmother never uses hot spices.”

Chet gave Marco a sly look. “Yeah, but she didn’t make it.”

“I followed the recipe to the letter,” Marco countered.

“It’s not too hot,” Chet soothed. “In fact, I think it has just the bite it needs.” *Whatever you did sure helped...*

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It was a nervous crew of firefighters that made their way to Rampart Hospital the next morning. The pot of chili was turned off and back on four times as the station was toned out on calls. Even though it was Chet that got them into this, the whole shift backed him up – more than he knew; much like when John made a station-wide bet on the softball game at the Department picnic. They would deal with disgrace, should it occur, in their own manner. The station would own victory, should that occur.

The A-shifts of 85s and 51s gathered in the lounge at Rampart, along with the judges – Kel, Joe, Mike, and Dixie. On the table were four sets of coffee cups, one labeled ‘A’ and the other ‘B’, each containing a dollop of chili. The two station captains, Stanley for 51s and Bryant for 85s, had set up the table so only they knew the owners of ‘A’ and ‘B’.

Martinez sauntered over to Chet. “I simmered this chili all shift, Kelly. I think it’s the best I’ve ever made.” He had the look of a very confident man.

Chet chewed at his lip. “We got so many calls last shift,” Chet started, “we had to shut it off a lot...”

“You’re already making excuses, Kelly,” Martinez chuckled haughtily. “Is it that pathetic?”

Invisible steam shot out Chet’s ears. “It’s not pathetic at all, Martinez,” Chet replied through clenched teeth. “In fact, it’ll blow yours away.” *Man, he pushes my buttons...*

“We’ll see about that real soon now, won’t we,” Marty whispered, then returned to the other side of the lounge with the rest of his crew.

Marco put his hand on Chet’s tense shoulder. “Hey, man, don’t let him get to you like that.”

Chet jumped at Marco’s touch, then listened to his advice and forced himself to relax. “You’re right, thanks. There’s just something about him...”

Marco nodded his head. “Just ignore him, he’s all blow and no know.”

Chet laughed. “Good one, Marco. I’ll remember that.” He gave his buddy a thankful glance.

All eyes turned to the table as the hospital crew stepped up to the cups of chili. “Taste the ‘A’ cup first,” Hank explained, “then wash it down with a drink of water,” he indicated four cups of water behind the labeled cups of chili, “then taste cup ‘B’. If you need more chili or water, let me or Bill here know,” Hank indicated to Bill Bryant. “If you need to switch between ‘A’ and ‘B’, please take a drink of water before switching.” The judges dug in.

Mike and Kel both tasted back and forth between the two cups, knowing that station bragging rights were on the line. Joe and Dixie were able to make up their minds with a single taste of both cups. Finally, they all turned to face the anxious crews. Kel held up his chosen cup, labeled ‘B’. Mike’s chosen cup held the ‘A’ label. Dixie slowly turned her cup for the crews to see the label; she had chosen ‘B’. Joe held his hand over his cup’s label, enjoying the suspense, then slid his hand down to reveal an ‘A’ on the label.

Marty Martinez jumped up from the couch, where he was resting confidently. “A tie! It’s a tie! Whose bright idea was it to have an even number of judges?”

“I think that was your doing, Marty.” Chet was delirious, a tie was more than he was expecting. He’d had thoughts of sleeping on the couch at the station as well as facing five sets of cold shoulders, not to mention how the other shifts would react – even though the other shifts weren’t directly involved, the whole station’s reputation was at stake.

“What now?” Johnny asked. He was answered by a series of shrugs.

“I’ll go get someone else,” Mike Stoker volunteered, and disappeared out the door. He returned a short minute later, Vince Howard in tow. Marty nodded his head in agreement at the additional judge selection.

Dixie handed her ‘A’ cup to Vince, along with a clean spoon. He tasted carefully, then took a drink from a cup that Kel handed him. Joe donated his cup of ‘B’, which Vince also tasted carefully. After a thoughtful moment Vince held up the ‘A’ cup. “I like my chili hot, so this one gets my vote.”

Captain Stanley held his hand out to Captain Bryant, who took the consolation graciously. Hank turned the two chili pots around; Marco’s pot had a label with the letter ‘A’ emblazoned on it, Marty’s was similarly labeled, but with the letter ‘B’.

Chet jumped up and grabbed Marco by the shoulders. “We won! We actually won!”

The crew of 51s pulled themselves together and crossed the lounge to shake hands with their competent adversaries. Chet had a big, mustached smile as he pumped Marty’s hand; Marty stonily pumped back. The fact that Marty was boast-less was prize enough for Chet.

“My regards for your family’s chili recipe, Marco,” Marty commented as Marco shook his hand. “Any chance you’ll divulge the secret?”

Marco smiled and shook his head. “Sorry, Marty. My Grandmother would kill me if the recipe got out of family hands.” *Plus, I have no idea what happened to this pot of chili...*

“I understand, but it’s a shame that something that good remain a secret.”

Marco just nodded his head so he didn’t start laughing.

Marty Martinez gripped his second place pot of chili possessively as he left the lounge. The rest of his crew tried consoling him as they filed out of the room. The exuberant crew of 51s A-shift gathered around their prized chili, everyone grabbing a cup for a taste. Both crews were slightly bewildered by the outcome of the contest.

“Man,” Johnny said around a spoonful of chili. “This really did turn out great. I was afraid that after I spilled...” Johnny stopped in mid-sentence as he felt the eyes of his shift mates on him. He stared back innocently, a nervous grin spread crookedly across his face.

“Now, guys,” Johnny defended himself, “it was an accident. Really.” Johnny brought his hand to his chest to emphasize his innocence. “The hot sauce fell out of the cabinet and spilled in the chili. I didn’t do it on purpose.” John sauntered over to Vince Howard. “Besides,” he shrugged, “it needed it to win. Right Vince?” Johnny elbowed Vince, dislodging the deputy’s chili from his spoon.

“Yeah. Right, John,” Vince replied with deep baritone flatness. He moved away from the excitable paramedic, and scooped another spoonful of chili.

“It was a little much, Johnny. I had to use Joanne’s sure-fire cure for too much chili-fire,” Roy laughed, and then sobered as all eyes switched to him. Roy shrugged sheepishly at the guys. “I had to. It nearly took the hide off my tongue.”

“What did you put in here?” Chet stopped chewing and screwed on a face as if Roy had announced that he’d put poison in the chili.

Roy rolled his eyes at Chet’s expression. “Lemon juice, Chet. Just plain lemon juice. The lemon oils neutralize the capsaicin.” Roy took another bite of his chili that burned its way down his throat. “To a degree,” he added.

“Well, you don’t need a scientific degree to know that what really makes chili good is cocoa,” Marco piped. “All good Mexican recipes use it.”

Chet whirled around to face Marco. “You put chocolate in there?”

“Not chocolate. Unsweetened cocoa.” Marco finished his chili and went to the sink to wash out the cup.

Chet stared into his cup with disbelief. “What else is in here?” Chet asked, eyeing Mike and Hank.

“Celery seed,” Mike mumbled at his feet.

“Seeds?” Chet echoed, aghast. That was all he had heard Mike mumble. *What’s wrong with these guys...*

“Celery seeds,” Mike repeated defensively. “You crush them into a powder. It helps blend flavors.” He shrugged and joined Marco by the sink.

Hank walked up to Chet and grasped his shoulder. “Green pepper is the real winning ingredient.”

Chet dug his spoon around the remaining chili in his cup. “There aren’t any green peppers in here.” He eyed his captain suspiciously.

“Of course not,” Hank explained. “You take ‘em out after it simmers a while.” He squeezed Chet’s shoulder. “You get all the taste and none of the mush.” Hank washed his cup after Mike.

Chet stared at Hank, trying to picture him digging out diced green pepper pieces from the pot of chili. He shook his head. *I don't want to know...*

Two doctors, an intern, a nurse, and a deputy sheriff squeezed past the knot of firefighters arguing over which added ingredient magically transformed the bland original chili into the current prize winning pot. Outside the lounge door, which muffled the increasing volume of the argument inside, Dixie turned to her co-workers. "Don't they realize," she pointed towards the door and the bickering crew, "that it took their combined efforts to win?"

Kel and Joe exchanged looks, then turned to Dixie. "No," the duo answered in unison.

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Hank Stanley parked the old reel mower next to the shed, surprised at how winded he was. *The yard wasn't that big, I must be getting soft...* He sat down on the freshly mowed grass and watched the rest of his crew work on Marco's Grandmother's chore list. Roy was nearly finished trimming the bushes, John and Marco were on the roof cleaning the gutters. Mike and Chet had just begun washing the outside of the windows...

Hank jumped up, eyes on the gutter cleaners. *Why did I ever let John up there?...*

Johnny stepped off his ladder onto an unseen mud-coated leaf from the gutter. Immediately, he lost his footing, sliding feet first down the sloped metal roof. He lay flat, toes pushing against the slanted metal, and hands uselessly grasping at the smooth surface. He managed to slow his progress towards the drop-off, but panic set in as his feet ran out of roof. "Marco," he hissed, not wanting to risk the movements that yelling would require.

Marco was in the process of scooting his ladder down to the next section of guttering to be cleaned when he heard Johnny hit the tin roof. "Madre de Dios," he whispered, taking in Johnny's slow descent. He dove head first at Johnny, extending his arms to reach Johnny's outstretched arms. As luck would have it, Marco's left arm overlapped Johnny's right to the elbow. Marco grimaced in concentration as he dug in his toes and right palm against the pull from Johnny on his left arm. He had no leverage to pull; it was up to Johnny now.

Johnny clamped harder to Marco's extended arm as he swung his feet back onto the roof. He paused to catch his breath, and then crawled up slope a safe distance. Sitting up, he peered over the edge of the roof. *That would hurt...* He waved off Cap and Roy, who were staring up at him with overly concerned faces. He carefully stood and returned to his ladder, adjusting its position, and climbing up to gutter level. After a couple of minutes, he turned to Marco. "Thanks." He paused, not sure what else to say. "Foot just slipped," he finally added.

"Yeah, John," Marco replied flatly. He reached into the second story gutter, scooping the soggy leaves and sticks and plopping them into the bucket hanging from a ladder rung. His face and arms were smudged with the smelly black sludge from the gutter bottom. He glanced back at Johnny, and couldn't help smiling at the hapless paramedic; Johnny also wore a copious amount of gutter goop. They continued scooping, plopping, and scooting until reaching opposite ends of the guttering.

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Johnny and Marco joined their shift-mates under the backyard shade tree after cleaning themselves up with the garden hose. Both were soaked beyond simply cleaning off the gutter goop.

Hank took in the soaked pair with a chuckle. *Boys will be boys...*

“Thanks for your help today, guys,” Marco expressed.

“We owed her, remember?” Chet reminded Marco.

Marco’s Grandmother came out to the tree and greeted her Grandson’s friends with a warm, friendly smile. Marco took her on a tour to show off the completed chores, the pair exchanging rapid fire Spanish. They returned to the tree, the guys standing now, listening to the foreign conversation. Shortly, the elderly lady swiftly returned to the house, leaving Marco facing the crew with a long face.

“What was all that?” Hank questioned Marco.

“She wants us to stay for dinner,” Marco replied dolefully.

“That’s great, I’m starved,” Johnny exclaimed.

“Yeah, me too,” Mike agreed.

“Great. Uh, why the long face, Pal?” Hank inquired.

“She... um... she was surprised at the interest in the old family chili recipe and fixed us a big pot of it for dinner.” Marco took a step back from the fallen faces. The chorus of groans made him want to run, as did his own stomach.

“Now guys,” Hank soothed, “it wasn’t that bad.”

“Yeah, you’re right, Cap,” Roy agreed. “Let’s eat.” He put his arm around Marco’s shoulders and started for the house.

“Dibs on the salt and pepper!” Hank called. He joined Roy and Marco, and motioned the others to follow.