

# IT COULD'VE BEEN WORSE

## By Lisa O'Brien

*Station 51, structure fire, 3835 Montgomery Street, 3-8-3-5 Montgomery. Time out 08:20.*

"Station 51, KMG-365." Captain Hank Stanley tore the two sheets from the pad on the radio stand in the engine bay and replaced the mic on its hook. He handed one sheet to Roy DeSoto, who was already in the driver's seat of Squad 51. Cap continued around the front of the squad to the passenger side of the engine, where he donned his turnout coat and helmet before climbing up into the passenger seat.

John Gage donned his helmet, then took the call slip from Roy and leaned forward to jot the time of the call on the slip. "I was lookin' forward to a cup of Marco's coffee," he commented as Roy pulled out of the station. "Hope we get back while the pot's still fresh." He paused as Roy reached the street. "Clear right."

"Well, if you'd get up a little earlier, you could have your first cup of coffee *before* you come to the station," Roy returned as he turned left onto the highway.

"I was out kinda late last night." John flashed a grin at Roy. The grin became a smirk when the older, settled man let out a tolerant sigh and shook his head. He chuckled. "Take Pacific up to 220. The 3800 block of Montgomery is right off 221." He braced his hands on the dash as the squad approached the rear bumper of a decrepit sedan. "Watch this guy in front."

"I'm watching him," Roy drawled, passing the slower vehicle on the left, then pulling back into the right lane.

\*\*\*\*\*

Neighbors gathered in small groups watching the flames and smoke engulfing the two-story house. Twin sirens heralded the arrival of Station 51 in the residential neighborhood. Mike Stoker pulled the engine past the squad, pausing for Marco Lopez and Chet Kelly to jump down from their places behind the cab. After a signal from Marco in the rear view mirror, Mike pulled the engine forward, laying two lines of hose.

A few of the onlookers turned their attention to the fireman as Marco hooked the supply line from the hydrant to the pumper and Mike jumped down from the cab to hook the feed line to the pumper, then prime and charge the line.

Cap climbed down from the engine and lifted the H.T. "L.A., Engine 51. Requesting a second alarm assignment to our location."

*10-4, 51. Tones sounded from the H.T. Engine 16, respond with Station 51 to a structure fire, 3835 Montgomery Street, 3-8-3-5 Montgomery. Time out 08:27.*

"Lopez, Kelly, get an inch and a half on the house."

A woman broke through the by-standers. "Thank God! My husband . . . he's still inside!"

Cap turned to the woman. "Where is your husband, ma'am?" He took the woman's arm to lead her away from the hose. The woman gasped and pulled her arm away. That was when Cap noticed the reddened, blistering skin on her hands and forearms. He turned to the squad, where John and Roy were donning their turnout coats. "DeSoto, we have a burn victim." He turned back to the woman. "One of our paramedics'll take a look at your arms. Where was your husband when the fire started?"

The woman shook her head. "I'm all right. They need to get Charlie out."

"Yes, ma'am. We've got plenty of people," Cap returned patiently.

"He was in the garage . . . I tried to get to him." She waved her burned arms and shook her head.

"Is there anyone else in the house?" Cap asked as 16s' siren sounded through the neighborhood.

The woman sobbed. "No . . . Charlie."

Roy came over with the drug box and a packaged burn sheet. He set the items down. "All right, ma'am. Why don't you just have a seat here on the curb?"

"Gage, we've got one victim in the garage," Cap called to John, who was strapping on his air tank and mask. "Have you got it covered here, DeSoto?"

"Yes, sir." Roy was already cutting away the sleeves of the woman's shirt.

Cap left then and joined Chet and Marco on the hose. "We've got one victim still inside. I'll back Lopez up. Kelly, get an air tank and go into the garage with Gage."

"Right, Cap." Chet trotted over to the engine as Cap took his place behind Marco. He quickly strapped on an air tank, then removed his helmet and put the mask on.

John was waiting for Chet at the end of the driveway. Marco and Cap directed the hose on the garage, where the fire burned the hottest.

"Door's blown off." John's voice was raspy and distorted by the mask.

Chet nodded silently, then led the way into the garage. "I'll take the left, you take the right."

The two firefighters separated, carefully negotiating through the dense smoke filling the small space. Intense heat kept Chet from reaching the far wall, where flames were devouring a workbench. *Hope the guy didn't get himself under that.*

"I found him!"

Chet crossed to the opposite wall of the garage and knelt behind the victim's head.

"Watch his head and shoulders . . . he's burned . . ."

*Pffft*

Chet instantly recognized the noise. "Gage, get down!" He shouted.

A ping sounded as metal struck metal. The *pffft* sound repeated in rapid fire succession. Before John could react, something struck his right side. He fell back and landed hard on the concrete floor of the garage. Stunned, he stared up at the ceiling for a second. *What the hell?* Something scored the concrete near his right cheek and he turned away from it.

"Stay down!" Chet shouted as more projectiles ricocheted around the garage.

John dropped down onto his belly and put his head down. His side stung, his face stung and his ears rang as adrenaline rushed through his veins. "What the hell?" He hoped Chet could hear him.

The roar of the flames changed as a two streams of water hit the bench.

Chet shook John's shoulder. "Johnny, you okay?"

John slowly pulled himself up. *Must'a fallen in a puddle of water.*

"Johnny?" Chet repeated.

"Yeah . . . I'm okay . . ." John motioned toward the victim. "Let's get him . . . outta here."

The two carefully lifted the man, keeping his spine straight as they carried him to the gaping door of the garage, where they transferred him to a waiting backboard. Sharp pain lanced through John's side as he lifted the backboard, causing him to falter for a second.

"You sure you're okay?" Chet called from the foot of the backboard.

"Must'a pulled somethin'." John gritted his teeth to keep a firm grip on the backboard. He led the way down the driveway to the tarp Roy had laid on the yard.

Chet and Johnny set the backboard down and quickly shed their tanks and masks.

Chet set his tank down, then straightened. "Do you guys need me?"

John shook his head. "I think we've got it. Thanks, Chet."

Chet turned and jogged back to the house, where Cap backed Marco on the hose.

"Let's get another line, Kelly!" Cap shouted to be heard over the din of the flames and water.

John wiped sweat from his eyes and struggled to slow his breathing. His hands shook as he placed a non-rebreather mask over the patient's nose and mouth. The numbers on the dial wavered as he set the flow.

"You okay, Johnny?" Roy removed the stethoscope and reached across the patient to squeeze John's shoulder.

John nodded silently and reached under his turnout coat to pull his pen from his uniform pocket. "Want me to call it in?"

"Yeah. BP's 90/70, pulse is 120, respiration's 20." Roy opened a second burn sheet. "I'll get the sheet and sterile water on his torso."

John wrote the readings on the pad Roy had left on the open biophone. "Rampart, this is Squad 51, do you read?"

"Go ahead, 51." Dr. Kelly Brackett's voice responded.

The numbers he'd just written on the pad wavered and blurred and John felt the rotation of the Earth around him. He reached out and anchored himself to the biophone.

"Go ahead, 51," Brackett's voice repeated.

"Johnny?" Roy's voice sounded like it was coming from miles away.

John slowly lifted his head and blinked to bring the two images of Roy together into one. His right side throbbed and he looked down at his turnout coat. There was a small, blackened hole in the right side. He fingered the hole. "I think I got shot." Mike was suddenly there, moving him away from the biophone. "The victim . . ."

"Roy's got it covered, Johnny."

*I'll pass out if I lay down.* John pushed Mike away and reached for the biophone, but it was gone. When he stood to look for it, the world did another fast spin beneath his feet. With nothing to hold onto to anchor himself, he swayed with the rotation, then saw the ground rising up to meet him. *Oh, shit. Bad idea.* A pair of hands on his arms stopped the rush of the grass. The same hands turned him and then he felt solid ground under his back.

"Stay with me, Johnny." Mike's voice barely reached him through the buzzing in his ears.

The morning sky spun above John as he felt somebody pulling off his turnout coat. He gasped as hands put a pressure bandage on his right side.

"Sorry, Johnny." John recognized Charlie Dwyer's voice.

*What's Dwyer doing here?* "S'okay . . . Charlie." John's eyes slid shut.

"Open your eyes, Johnny," Dwyer's voice ordered. "You've gotta stay awake and tell me how you're doin'."

John struggled to open his eyes. *Why's Dwyer sitting on my chest?* He didn't see Dwyer. All he could see were blue sky and clouds. "Chest . . ." Someone placed an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. The cool metallic tang of oxygen filled his nose and mouth and rushed against his cheeks.

"Okay, Johnny, the gurney's here." Dwyer put a blanket around him.

The throbbing in John's side turned to white hot pain when they lifted him. Sky and clouds were replaced by a curtain of black.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Open your eyes, Johnny," Charlie Dwyer ordered as John's eyes slid shut. When the order got no response, he rubbed his right fist in the center of John's chest. "Come on, Johnny, open your eyes."

"He okay?" Chet asked. He and Marco had just been relieved by the third alarm crew.

"Yeah, Chet, he's gonna be fine," Dwyer responded, then turned to the ambulance crew. "Let's get to Rampart." He followed the gurney to the ambulance and climbed in ahead of it, setting the biophone on the bench seat across from the gurney.

John groaned as the attendants rolled the gurney into the vehicle. One of the attendants climbed in and sat in the seat behind John's head. Dwyer handed him the I.V. bag, then checked John's pulse as the ambulance rolled away from the scene. Dwyer was deflating the B.P. cuff when he noticed that John's eyes were open.

"Hey! Welcome back." Dwyer opened the biophone, wrote the readings on his pad, then turned back to John. "How're you doin'?"

"Got . . . shot." John's response was muffled by the mask.

"Yeah. Are you breathing any better with the mask?"

"Ummm . . . yeah. M'side hurts." John groaned again as the ambulance hit a bump in the road.

Dwyer patted John's shoulder. "We'll be at the hospital in a couple minutes." He turned to the biophone and picked the handset up. "Rampart, this is Squad 16, do you read?" When he looked back down at John, he was unconscious again.

\*\*\*\*\*

Awareness returned to John as the gurney was pulled out of the ambulance. He groaned as a new wave of pain swept through his entire right side. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and watched the tiles of the hallway pass above him. The pattern was broken as the gurney passed through a doorway and into a treatment room.

Once the door was closed, the level of sound rose to compete with the buzzing in John's ears. He tried to concentrate and distinguish individual voices without success. The buzzing was too close.

Dr. Brackett's face loomed above him. His lips moved, but the words took a minute to reach John. "Can you hear me, John?"

"Uhhhh . . . yeah." John's mouth was dry and he swallowed. "My side . . . hurts."

"We'll give you something for that in a few minutes, Johnny." Again the words were out of sync. "How did this happen?"

"Got shot."

"Did someone have a gun?"

John frowned. "Didn't . . . see one." He groaned and winced as someone touched his side. "Don't . . ." He moaned as the hands continued probing. "Doc . . ."

Dr. Brackett turned and his mouth moved, but the words were garbled. The hands went away and that was all John cared about. The doctor turned back to John. "We'll get you something for the pain." He patted John's shoulder.

John sighed. "Kay." The promise of relief was almost enough. He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing through the mask. He felt the trail of cold fluid as it entered his left arm at the wrist. It was just below his elbow when the buzzing in his ears changed. He tried to open his eyes, but the lids felt like they'd been taped shut. He was wondering whether that should worry him when he drifted off.

\*\*\*\*\*

Roy reached the entrance to the Emergency Room and turned, pacing the length of the floor back to the closed door of Treatment Room 3. It would be a long time before he forgot the vacant look in John's eyes as he realized he'd been shot. Roy still wasn't sure how it had happened. He'd been busy treating Mrs. Martin's burns.

Roy would have a hard time forgetting the sight of his friend being overcome by shock and blood loss. By that time, Mr. Martin had started aspirating. So Roy watched helplessly as John stood and passed out. *Thank God Squad 16 was in the area and took the call. They saved John's life and Mr. Martin's.*

Roy turned and paced back to the entrance and literally ran into Chet. *Why am I not surprised he brought the squad in?*

Chet didn't give Roy the chance to tease him. "How's John?"

Roy shook his head. "Dr. Brackett hasn't come out yet." He frowned. "What the hell happened in there? We couldn't hear anything over the fire."

Chet rolled his eyes. "The guy loaded his own ammo. He had a barrel of gunpowder right by his work bench. A rifle fell, went off and BOOM." He waved his arm for effect. "I guess the fire heated up the ammo on the bench . . ." He shook his head. "What a stupid thing to happen."

Roy nodded. "Yeah."

The treatment room door opened and a nurse came out, followed by Dr. Brackett. Both firefighters stepped aside to let the nurse pass, then closed in on the doctor.

"How's Johnny?" Chet asked before Roy could.

"The wound was through and through and we've stopped the bleeding. There aren't any signs of bleeding into the abdomen." Dr. Brackett crossed his arms. "John's vitals are stable and we're replacing fluids. I'll have to wait for the x-rays to come back, but it looks like surgery won't be necessary." He paused. "I'm going to admit him for observation, so you'll need a replacement."

"Cap's trying to line somebody up right now," Chet volunteered.

"Why don't you two head back to the station? If the x-rays come back and surgery's necessary, we'll give you a call," Brackett suggested.

"Could we see him? Just for a minute?" Chet asked hopefully.

"He's asleep right now."

"Oh." Chet nodded. "Okay. Maybe tomorrow then." He looked at Roy. "I'll wait for you in the squad."

"Is Chet okay?" Brackett asked with raised eyebrows.

Roy chuckled quietly. "Only Johnny and Chet understand it, Doc." He looked toward the entrance, then back at Brackett. "When Johnny wakes up, let him know I'll be by later tonight."

Brackett nodded. "Will do. Although, he's pretty worn out from the blood loss. I wouldn't be surprised if he slept through the night and into tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, I'll stop by anyway." Roy raised the H.T. "Thanks, Doc." He smiled, then left the E.R.

\*\*\*\*\*

Just as Dr. Brackett had predicted, John drifted in and out of dreamless sleep during the morning, afternoon and evening. When he finally woke, it was light outside, but he had no idea how long he'd been asleep. He recognized a hospital room, but had no idea why he was there.

John did a physical inventory. His head hurt, but it wasn't a concussion headache. So he probably hadn't hit his head. He didn't find any casts, so broken bones were out. Then he found the large bandage on his right side. Underneath, he found two holes that hadn't been there when he reported to the station . . . whenever.

Images of the structure fire and the odd noises in the garage came back to John. He could remember Chet yelling at him to stay down, but everything after that was a blur. He knew then that he'd been shot, but had no idea how.

*Maybe I should find out what day it is first, then worry about how I ended up here.* John carefully shifted in the bed and groped for the call button on the rail. As he was about to press it, a soft knock sounded on the door.

"Come in." John's voice was barely above a whisper. He grimaced and tried to clear his throat, but his second attempt wasn't much louder than the first.

The door slowly opened and Roy's head appeared. "You awake yet?"

John grinned and motioned. "Come on in." He grimaced and tried once again to clear his throat.

Roy walked in, leaving the door open behind him. He crossed to the stand next to the bed and poured water from an orange pitcher into a matching orange cup. "The nurse said you could have a little water."

John took the cup, sipped, then let out a relieved sigh as the cool liquid slid down his parched throat. After a second sip, he tried his voice. "Thanks." He grimaced, cleared his throat, then took a third sip.

"How're you feeling?"

"A little tired. My right side's pretty sore." John scooted down in the bed and pulled the covers up.  
"How long have I been here?"

"Since yesterday morning." Roy grinned. "You only slept one day. That's why you're still tired."

John rolled his eyes. "Very funny." He frowned. "What happened? I mean, I remember the fire and going into the garage with Chet. We found the victim, then there were these weird noises and Chet yelled at me to stay down . . . then it gets kind'a fuzzy."

Roy put his hands in his pockets. "Mr. Martin . . . that's the guy you and Chet brought out . . . well, he loaded his own ammunition."

John's eyes widened. "The fire set off the ammunition on the workbench." He frowned. "How's Mr. Martin? Is he gonna be okay?"

Roy smiled. "He's gonna be fine. He's got first degree burns, but he's stable and his lungs are clear."

"Man . . ." John shook his head. "Do they know what started the fire? Somethin' blew the garage door clear off."

"Mr. Martin kept his gunpowder next to the workbench. He was breaking down a rifle, it went off . . ."

"Man, that Mr. Martin's one lucky guy. That gunpowder could'a taken out the whole house."

Roy nodded. "Yeah. He's not the only one."

"No, he's not. And it could'a been a lot worse." Then John grinned. "But it wasn't."

Roy smiled. "No, it wasn't." He looked down at the floor, then back up. "So, any idea when they're cuttin' you loose?"

John shook his head. "Dr. Brackett hasn't been in since I woke up." He shrugged. "They'll probably make me eat something, walk around a bit . . . you know the drill."

Roy nodded. "Yeah, better than I ever wanted to." He chuckled.

"Then, I haven't seen any of the nurses on the floor yet." John's grin widened. "I might just wanna stick around for a few days."

Roy chuckled and shook his head. "You and that girl crazy computer you call a brain."

John waggled his eyebrows.

"Well, on that note, I'm goin' home to see my wife and kids." Roy pulled a set of keys from his pocket and set them on the tray. "Mike's car was in the shop, so we brought your car over and his wife picked him up here. I brought the clothes from your locker in last night."

John smiled and picked up the keys. "Thanks, Roy."

"If you decide to get out of here today, come by tonight for dinner. Joanne's making spaghetti."

"Stoker's recipe?" John leaned over and set the keys down.

"That's the only one she uses since you gave it to her." Roy walked to the door. "So, should we set a place for you?"

"If they let me out, I'll be there."

*March 2, 2000 – March 10, 2000*

*Author's Notes: I got this idea from a case I read years ago. Yes, someone really set off a barrel of gunpowder when a rifle discharged. He, of course, sued the rifle's manufacturer, but that's another story. Thanks to Linda, who beta read the story that was meant to be a surprise for her. At least the rest of the members on the list will be surprised – LOL!*