

## The Nuisance: Cap's Story

By [Lisa O'Brien](#)

It started as just another pain-in-the-ass 0200 response. Don't get me wrong. I don't see all 0200 runs as a pain-in-the-ass. Dispatch responds the engine to "unknown" calls because we might be needed by a victim that doesn't have time to wait for additional units to get to them.

When it's all said and done though, a lady fazing out in a bar and the County sending the whole station to tend to her is a pain-in-the-ass. We're supposed to call 'em false responses. I prefer pain-in-the-ass. It's much more accurate.

Before we could get her name, the woman took off with some other nutty broad. That was it. Show over. We were ready to head back to the barn for some shut-eye. At least until the wake-up tone at 0700.

Gage and DeSoto were first out of the bar, with me and Vince right behind them. Vince was on his way out the door when we heard tires squeal and an engine rev, then the sound of a human body hitting something. Hard. Once you've heard that sound, you never forget it. I saw it happen once when I was still jockeying a hose and it's a sight I never want to see again. I'm not crazy about the sound, either.

"You okay?" I heard DeSoto's voice. "TRAUMA BOX!"

Taillights were disappearing in the distance by the time Vince and I made it out to the sidewalk. The engine was empty, which meant that any one of my men could be down. My legs weighed a ton as I ran to the front of the squad and out to the street

All I could see for DeSoto's back was a man's legs. I couldn't tell from the legs who it was, then I recognized Lopez and Kelly by their mustaches. Stoker's as tall as I am and has a tendency to slouch. He had his left hand on a leg. Which meant the man down was Gage.

"Don't let him be dead," was all I could think as I reached the tan coats on the street. The patrolman I saw hit by a car all those years ago was dead before he hit the pavement. I thought, "What the hell happened?" as I knelt between Lopez and Kelly. That was what I meant to say. "Hell happened?" was all that came out of my mouth.

Marco knelt behind John's head. Chet appeared at my left with the trauma box and Stoker checked Johnny's left leg for fractures. I caught a glimpse of John's right leg and prayed that Mike had sense enough not to touch it.

It looked like John was trying to sit up. He kept lifting his head and left shoulder from the pavement. Roy put a hand on John's chest.

"Johnny?" I swear Roy's voice was an octave higher. I'm used to Roy sounding calm, cool and

collected, even in the worst situations. "Are you all right? Can you hear me? Can you hear me?" He was just as scared as the rest of us.

I finally remembered the H.T. in my hand, "Engine 51, I have a Code I at this location. Respond an ambulance." I pulled my helmet off and set it on the ground behind us. Chet and Marco did the same.

Roy's hand was still on John's chest. John lifted his head again. "Get back," Roy barked. Whether he was talking to us or Johnny, I'm not sure. "Where do you hurt?" he asked.

"My . . . my hip . . . my back . . . my leg." It didn't even sound like our Johnny Gage. "Ah," then his eyes closed.

My first thought was that we'd lost him. It must've been Roy's, too, because he looked over at me. The look in his eyes made my heart stutter. "Somebody get a soft collar on him," he ordered.

Chet fumbled with the trauma box, finally getting it open and pulling a collar out. Marco silently took the collar and gently placed it under John's neck, fastening it.

"I'll get the backboard," Mike said, quickly rising and heading for the squad.

God bless Mike Stoker. When my head's up my ass, I can always count on him to have his on his shoulders.

"We're gonna have to wrap and run," Roy muttered. "Johnny, can you hear me?" His voice still sounded scared, but had returned to its normal tone.

Johnny's only response was a groan. His eyes opened halfway, "Wha?"

"The bad news is the drug box is in worse shape than you are," Roy informed, "The good news is you won't have any needles until you get to Rampart."

John's lips quirked. "Good," he whispered.

Mike returned with the backboard and knelt next to John. Marco and I positioned ourselves on John's left, while Chet and Roy got into position on his right. I've helped John and Roy move hundreds of victims. But when it's one of my own, I get this knot in the pit of my stomach. I ignored it as the five of us turned him on his side, keeping John's spine straight. The knot doubled as he gasped and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Sorry, Pal," I muttered as Mike placed the backboard under him and we set him down as gently as we could.

Johnny groaned again. Roy quickly checked John's right arm from the shoulder to the wrist, while Mike checked the left arm.

"No fractures on the right arm. Mike?" Roy asked.

"No fractures on the left arm," Mike responded.

"Chet, can you help me get his turnout coat off?" Roy asked.

"Yeah, sure," Chet's voice was shaking and I noticed his hands were, too.

"I'll give you a hand, Roy," I volunteered. I didn't miss the relieved look that got me from Kelly.

While we maneuvered John out of his turnout coat, Mike splinted John's right leg. I'll say it again, "God bless Mike Stoker."

"Cold," John whispered as Roy tossed the turnout coat aside.

"We'll have you bundled up in a minute," Roy promised, tearing open a yellow blanket pack.

I heard the ambulance siren approaching as Mike and Roy bundled Johnny up in the yellow plastic blanket. Vince moved off and directed the Mayfair past us. I stood up as the doors opened, trying to get the circulation going in my legs again.

I bent over, ready to pick up the left foot of the backboard. Marco took the left shoulder and Mike and Chet moved to the right side.

"Can you get it?" I asked Mike, who was standing and bending over like I was.

Vince took the right foot of the backboard, leaving Chet to lift the middle.

"Can you guys make it okay, there?" Roy asked, picking up the trauma box and biophone as we lifted Johnny.

"Bring up the gurney," I said, looking around behind me as the attendants wheeled the gurney over.

"I'm gonna put this stuff in," Roy announced as we set Johnny down on the gurney.

"Okay, Chet," I began, "You bring the squad in, Pal."

"How you feeling?" Roy asked Johnny as the attendants turned the gurney around.

"Ummm...trying to think of something funny, but I hurt too much," John responded.

"All right, well, take it easy. Hang in there," Roy responded.

"Oh," John groaned as the gurney was wheeled toward the open doors.

For a second, I felt useless. I started to help the attendants with the stretcher, but Vince was already helping them. I wanted to say something comforting to Johnny. The knot in my stomach was the size of a bowling ball and no words would come out.

Roy climbed into the ambulance and I lifted the H.T. "LA, Engine 51. Squad 51 10-8 to Rampart."

"Engine 51," dispatch acknowledged.

As the driver closed the ambulance door, I saw Marco bend and pick up John's helmet and turnout coat. He and Chet walked over to the squad, talking quietly. I knew how shaken up Chet was. I also knew that Marco was the only one he'd admit that to. I bent down to pick up my own helmet, then walked back to the engine.

I looked at my watch. 0235. Vince climbed into his squad car and drove away. The engine was headed back to the barn. For us at least, it was over. For Johnny and Roy, it was just beginning.

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I heard the bay door lifting along its rail and quietly sat up, pulling on my turnout pants and trying to stand without all my joints creaking. Just because I couldn't sleep didn't mean I had to disturb Mike and Marco. Still, I wasn't too surprised when they both sat up and did the same.

The three of us stopped behind the engine as Chet backed the squad into the vehicle bay. When the squad stopped, we walked around behind it, waiting for Chet to get out.

"How's Johnny?" Marco asked as Chet climbed out of the driver's seat.

"He had internal bleeding. They took him up to surgery about an hour ago," Chet informed. "Roy's gonna call Joanne when he's ready to leave," he added, walking into the kitchen.

"I don't know about you guys, but I could use a cup of coffee," I said, following Chet into the kitchen.

"I'll make it," Marco volunteered, heading over to the stove.

Chet sat down on the couch with a loud sigh. "I cannot believe this night," he said quietly.

"None of us can, Pal," I returned, pulling a chair over from the table. "Did you guys see anything that might help the cops find this creep?"

Chet shook his head. "I heard it," he said, "but all I saw was the guy turn around and look at Johnny, then peel off."

I looked over at Mike, who was leaning against the counter next to the stove. "What about you, Mike?"

"I'm not sure what I saw," Mike admitted quietly. "I mean, it was like it was all in slow motion," he trailed off and looked down at his size 14s.

"I was sitting next to Chet," Marco offered. "I jumped out of the engine when I heard," he paused. "What I want to know is what that guy's problem was?"

"Probably a drunk," I snorted. "We had a cop right there, but he was inside with me."

"Why the hell didn't Vince chase him?" Chet asked and I could tell he was angry. He'd probably been brooding over that at the hospital.

"Johnny was in trouble," Marco said calmly. "He called it in while we were taking care of John."

"Fat lot of good that'll do," Chet muttered.

"It was a pretty unique car," Marco continued. "How many purple 280Zs could there be?"

"In California?" Chet asked sarcastically. "Probably a thousand in Hollywood alone."

"It was dark blue," I argued. "The lights made it look purple."

"No, Cap, it was *purple*," Marco insisted. "Purple cars are very popular in the *barrio*," he added. "The hood and the windshield are bound to be messed up. The cops'll probably find it in a repair shop in a couple of days."

"GTA!" Mike exclaimed, finally looking up from his shoes. "And Marco's right, the car was purple. A purple, 1975 Datsun 280ZX. The driver was a white male, in his 20s, with sandy blond hair. And it had a vanity plate. GTA."

In the 4 years I've worked with Mike Stoker, I think that's the most I've ever heard him say. "That's great, Mike!" I exclaimed, laughing. "See, Chet, they'll find the creep."

Mike walked over to the phone, pulling his wallet from his back pocket. "I'm gonna call Vince," he said, picking up the phone and fumbling with it and the wallet.

"While you do that, I've got a mountain of paperwork to get through," I announced, standing. "Give me a shout when the coffee's ready."

"Will do, Cap," Marco promised.

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I finished the last of the paperwork just as the wake-up tones sounded at 0700. B-Shift was due to relieve us in an hour. One of the hardest things about this job is the need for the engine to stay in service, no matter what happens. We all want to be at the hospital. The fact of it is that we *can't*. If it

had been Chet or Marco hit by that car, Battalion would've sent out a replacement by 0300.

Not to mention the fact that Roy's had to finish quite a few shifts without John. That ate him up, too. There's a little more leeway with the paramedics. It was relatively quiet, so another squad was able to cover Roy and John's sector. I think the doctors at Rampart had a little to do with that, too. The graveyard shift's usually understaffed as it is.

My joints creaked as I got up from the chair. They've been doing that a lot lately. As long as they don't hurt, I'll live with being a little creaky now and again. I still had the knot in my stomach, too. Hope that isn't something serious.

I left the office and went to the kitchen for my fourth cup of coffee, hoping the feeling would come back to my right hand. Chet, bless his little black heart, brought my first three to the office. I got the feeling he had more on his mind than Vince's dereliction of duty. He didn't volunteer and I didn't pry.

Chet and Mike were at the table in the kitchen. Marco was fixing chili and eggs on the stove.

"Smells good, Marco," I said, joints creaking as I settled in a chair.

The phone rang and Chet was out of the chair like he'd been shot from a cannon. "I've got it," he announced, grabbing the handset. "Station 51, Fireman Kelly." He paused and grinned. "It's about time, DeSoto," he scolded. "How's Gage?" Another pause. "Uh-uh. Uh-uh. That's not a surprise." He nodded. "Okay. Yeah, I'll tell him. Yeah, see you Monday." He replaced the handset, returned to the chair and sat down.

We waited, but he didn't say anything. I could swear he was doing it on purpose. "Well?" I asked. "How's John?"

"Oh, sorry, Cap," Chet returned. "Roy says he came out of the anesthesia okay. They just moved him from Recovery. Gage's still out of it, so Roy's gonna head home for a couple hours sleep."

"That's a relief," I said, feeling the knot in my stomach dissolve. "Did Roy say how long Johnny'd be out?"

"Dr. Early says 6 weeks with his leg," Chet responded. "He'll be in the hospital about 2 weeks, 'cause of the surgery."

"He's gonna go nuts," Marco said. "Man, his right leg's broken. He won't even be able to drive."

That brought a grin to my face. "That's what you think. He'll have my wife and Joanne and Beth chauffeuring him all over town," I said. "What a rough life."

Marco laughed. "I get your point, Cap," he said. "But is it worth getting hit by a car?"

"Probably not," I returned, then stood. "I'd better call Battalion. It's not gonna be easy finding

somebody willing to work in this nuthouse for 6 weeks."

"Good luck," Marco called after me. Then the twit laughed.

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"We're going over to Rampart this afternoon to see Johnny, Cap," Marco said as we walked out to the parking lot behind the station. "Want to go with us? Mike's driving. We can pick you up."

"Thanks, Marco," I responded, unlocking the wife's station wagon. "I'll have to see what Marie has on her honey-do list. How about I give you a call later?"

"Sure," Marco responded, opening the unlocked driver's door of his truck. He looked over at Mike, who was hanging clothes in his back seat, "What time are you picking me up, Mike?"

"2:30," Mike responded, getting into his own truck.

"If I don't see you then, I'll see you Monday," I called, getting into the wagon.

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I ended up at Rampart, even though my house is in the opposite direction. Marie's honey-do list on Saturdays off made War and Peace look like a comic book. Without my son around to pitch in, it usually took me all weekend to get halfway through the chores.

I headed in to the Admission desk, waiting while the woman behind the desk finished a call.

"Can I help you?" she asked as she replaced the handset on the base.

"Yes, I'm checking on the condition of a patient. John Gage."

"Are you a relative?"

"Well, no," I answered honestly. "I'm Captain Stanley. His boss."

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't release information about a patient to anyone but members of the immediate family."

Okay. I didn't like it, but I understood. "Thanks anyway."

"Captain Stanley?" I was almost out the door when I heard a voice and turned.

"Dr. Early," I said as he walked over.

"You must be here to check on John," Dr. Early said with a smile.

"Think we could pass for brothers?" I joked, nodding my head at the desk. "Being his boss doesn't get me anywhere."

Dr. Early laughed, "Luckily, you know people in high places. Come on, I'll take you upstairs."

"Great." I followed him to the elevator. "How is he?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I was gonna get one of those hospital platitudes like, "He's holding his own," or "He's doing as well as can be expected."

Dr. Early shrugged, "He's doing pretty well for a guy run down by a car less than 7 hours ago."

I laughed out loud at that one. "Good one, Doc," I replied. The elevator doors opened and we stepped out into the hall. The knot in my stomach was suddenly back. I put a hand on Dr. Early's shoulder and stopped him. "Um...Doc, seriously, what am I in for here?"

Dr. Early smiled. "When I checked on John a half an hour ago, he was asleep," he answered honestly. "He had abdominal surgery, so he's going to have some pain when he's awake," he paused. "His leg's been set, but that may bother him for a day or so."

I nodded. "Okay," I took a deep breath. "I hate hospitals," I admitted, feeling a little guilty. "I tell myself that I wait and visit when the patient's on the mend, because it's better for them. But it's really for me."

"That's perfectly understandable, Hank," Dr. Early replied, then winked. "I'm not crazy about them myself. But my music career never took off," he continued down the hall, stopping in front of a door and pushing it open. "Just a short visit. John needs his rest."

"Thanks, Doc," I said, stepping into the room. Dr. Early forgot to tell me that Johnny wasn't looking his best right now. He was pale and sweaty, his face set in a grimace. He looked worse now than he had at the scene this morning.

I swallowed and walked quietly over to the bed, not wanting to wake him if he was asleep. I'm sure Marie would understand if I put off the chores this weekend to visit John this afternoon.

Before I could creep out of the room, Johnny opened his eyes, "Cap." His voice was scratchy. He tried to sit up, then groaned and clutched his left side.

"Take it easy, Pal." I put a hand on his left shoulder. "You know I don't stand on formality."

John's eyes closed and he took several shallow breaths. "Sorry," he whispered, opening his eyes again and trying to smile. It made the grimace worse, but I had to give him points for trying.

"Nothing to be sorry for, Pal," I responded, pulling a chair over and positioning it so he could see me without having to look up.



"My fault," John whispered. "Wasn't paying . . . attention."

Okay, John's racked up a lot of injuries. Hell, I've got eight years on him and I've only been injured 3 times. None of John's injuries were because he was reckless or ignored regulations. His worst injuries, including this one, were beyond his control. Two of them involved animals. Well, an animal and a reptile. "Who told you that? Has somebody else been in to see you?"

"Talkin' to Roy," he whispered back. "Didn't see . . . the car."

"John, you were barely in the street and he was going the wrong way," I said gently. "He was probably drunk. And the driver knew that. Why do you think he took off?"

"He did?" he asked, sounding confused.

"Like a bat out of hell," I informed, "Mike gave a description to Vince and he even got the license plate number. It's a personalized plate. They'll be able to track it down." I wasn't going to mention that proving the owner was behind the wheel wouldn't be so easy. And proving that he was drunk would be impossible.

"Mike," John repeated.

I grinned. "You should've seen him, Johnny," I began. "I don't think Mike Stoker's talked that much in his entire life. But he talked Vince's ear off at 6 o'clock this morning." Yelled his ear off is more accurate. Telling John that now would be sort of like kicking a puppy. It would've tortured him to miss seeing Stoker blow his top. I gently patted his left knee. "You just concentrate on getting better."

"Kay," John returned, then groaned. "Hurts," he mumbled. "'M tryin' . . . to think . . . of something . . . funny," he paused. "Not working."

"Well, that's 'cause you want to laugh and that hurts," I advised. "Try thinking about something nice. Like your favorite place to hike. Or that new nurse in Pediatrics."

"Yeah," John whispered. "That might..." he paused and groaned, shifting in the bed. "That might work."

"Are you questioning my judgment, Gage?" I asked sternly.

"No, sir," John responded, managing a grin.

"Chet, Marco and Mike are planning on stopping by later today. If you don't feel up to it, I can call and tell them," I winked. "Hell, I'll order them if you want me to."

"No," John responded. "Thanks, but . . . company might . . . help."

"Rest'll help, too," I advised, then stood. "Go to sleep. That's an order."

"Yes, sir," John returned, "Thanks, Cap."

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The heavenly scent of cinnamon rolls baking greeted me when I walked into the house. I followed the aroma into the kitchen and found my wife under the sink, working on the garbage disposal. That told me that she planned on letting me out of the honey-do list today. And I loved her for it.

"What are you doing?" I barked.

"It's about time, Hank," Marie called from under the sink. "You left the station over an hour ago."

"I ran an errand," I informed, kneeling and patting her left thigh. "Up. That's my job."

"That you've been putting off for two weeks," Marie said, sliding out from under the sink. "How's Johnny?" she asked. "Did they find the driver?"

That caught me off guard. "How'd you know about Johnny?"

"Roy called Joanne. Joanne called me," Marie responded. "I'm glad somebody did."

Uh-oh. That honey-do list was starting to look pretty good. Before I could manufacture a lame excuse, she winked at me.

"I know, you didn't want to worry me, or wake me." I swear the woman reads my mind. "Or you thought it would be better to tell me in person."

I grinned. "All of the above."

Marie stood and turned to the sink.

"Are you sure that thing's fixed?" I asked dubiously as she turned the water on.

"It is now," Marie returned dryly. "The rolls will be cooled and iced in about 20 minutes," she informed. "While you're waiting, you can answer my question about Johnny. How is he?"

I kissed her. "He's gonna to be all right," I informed. "It'll take some time, but he's gonna be just fine."