

The Storm

by Brit

It was getting to the point where this trip made the one to Pine Lake seem like a Boy Scout overnighiter.

The state park and campsite had been idyllic: only two cratered, dirt roads leading back through the mountainous terrain; and it was still early in the season, so there were very few campers in a fifty mile radius. The March weather had been unseasonably warm and the partners had an entire week off to themselves. It should have been a good time for a little R and R.

Should have been.

It was bad enough when it started to storm, forcing the men inside after only two days into the excursion. It was bad enough when the wind whipped through Hutch's old tent, rending a tear at the center seam and letting in the torrential rains. It was bad enough to sit through Starsky's litany of grouching, then as expected, his hacking, sneezing and wheezing after spending a sleepless night drenched to the skin.

But when Starsky *stopped* complaining about every minute detail of the trip—Hutch's guilt set in and he admitted defeat. The gear was packed in apologetic silence and the ten-mile hike back to where the Torino waited in the camp's parking lot began.

I'd rather listen to you grouse, partner. Hutch shifted his backpack higher onto his shoulders and shook the wet strands of hair out of his eyes. Glancing behind him, Starsky was the very picture of abject misery. A wet Starsky was not a happy Starsky. "Hang in there. Just another mile and a half and we'll be at the general store. Then we'll get you into some dry clothes."

"But all my clothes are *drenched*, no thanks to that sieve you called a tent." A sneeze punctuated Starsky's statement.

"So, we'll pick up something for you to wear home at the store, all right?" Hutch fought to keep his patience. After all, it's not as if he had asked for the unexpected storm. The reports had forecasted the spring weekend was going to be perfect for the excursion, and that the inclement weather shouldn't have hit until the middle of the following week, long after the two men had returned to the city.

"Terrific. Stiff farmer jeans and a flannel shirt." The sodden man spat out "flannel" as if it were an epithet. Starsky shook water out of his curls while glaring at the back of his partner's head.

Hutch smiled in spite of himself and pushed forward up a muddy embankment. The path was like walking uphill on ice, but he managed, using a nearby branch for leverage. He didn't think twice as he let go of the tree upon reaching the summit, and paused at the top long enough to check on his partner's progress. Starsky was seated in a mud puddle at the bottom of the rise, a red welt rising on his left cheek.

"Starsk, you okay?"

The look Starsky gave told him he was everything *but* okay, though he never uttered a word. A murderous glare transfixing his partner, Starsky gingerly got up from the puddle, mud stuck to his legs, hands and backside, and thrust his index finger forward. "Go."

The remaining mile was uneventful. A tiny brass bell heralded the detectives' arrival into the small store that almost appeared to be frozen in time from the turn of the century. The grocery also doubled as an overnight lot for campers' vehicles, and the waiting Torino was a welcomed sight. The minute Starsky cleared the porch and slammed open the door, he dropped his backpack and stomped over to the meager assortment of clothing and gear. With a scowl he snatched up a pair of jeans and, as predicted, a red flannel shirt. As he continued his stomping, he passed the storeowner and paused only long enough to jerk his thumb at Hutch, growling, "*He's* buying."

The old man grinned as Hutch rolled his eyes and moved to the pigeonholed shelves of clothing. Selecting a change of clothes socks for both he and Starsky, as well as some cold and flu tablets, Hutch made his way to the counter and pulled out his billfold.

A pair of kind gray eyes examined the sodden detective from behind his glasses. "Well, you did say he wasn't much of the outdoors type."

"Truer words were never spoken." Hutch shook out the damp bills before handing them over.

That earned a chuckle from the storeowner. "I've got boots there in the back if you're interested. Let you have them a good price—kind of a 'rainy day sale'."

Hutch gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks, but we've both got our tennis shoes out in the car. Storm came up a bit early, didn't it?"

"I'm not surprised, this time of the year. That trough of cold air came down quicker'n they forecasted. Warm weather we had before sure had the river's running with the snow melting off the mountain, but now with all this rain..."

The bell over the door rang again as a young woman hurried through the door, a toddler in one arm and her other draping a coat over their heads.

“Well, Janie! My word, girl. What are you doing out in this storm? I thought you would have enough sense to stay inside until it passed over.” The storeowner threw an apologetic look at Hutch. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

“Hey, Mr. Wittiker.” The young blonde’s face brightened. “Richie ‘n me couldn’t stand being stuck in the cabin any more. Right, Richie?” The eighteen-month old grinned back at his mother, then at the familiar storeowner, but seeing Hutch shyly buried his face in the nape of her neck. The young woman grinned at the drenched man and shook her head. “Half the time I can’t get him to stop talking. Nobody understands a word he’s saying, but it doesn’t bother him any. He just keeps on talking.”

Hutch chuckled. “Sounds like somebody I know.”

Janie shook out her jacket and crossed over to the wooden counter to set her son down, fussing with his miniature bib overalls. “I just stopped in to leave a note for my folks. All the phone lines are down and I know they’ll check here with you when they can’t reach me back at the cabins. I’m heading back to San Diego.”

“Oh, honey! Now, that’s wonderful. I knew you two could work things out.”

Hutch felt awkward, standing around in the midst of such an intimate conversation between two obviously good friends, but the out-of-the way store didn’t have any changing rooms, and his miffed partner had locked himself in the only bathroom. He wandered away from the counter and examined some of the local newspaper clippings tacked up on a bulletin board.

“It wasn’t an easy decision, but...I love him. I knew that I had to give it just one more try.”

“Does Brad know you’re on the way back?”

“No. I tried to call him at the base, but the lines went out just as they were putting me through. And, well...I just can’t wait any longer to see him. Now that I’ve made up my mind to make this marriage work, I can’t stand being away from him.”

Mr. Wittiker smiled at her impatience. He had known Janie since she was a toddler herself, and it seemed that once she had her mind set on something, there was no changing it. A rumble of thunder reinforced his initial concern, and a quick glance out the window showed that the storm was returning to its former state of fury. The old man pulled a pretzel out of a glass canister on the shelf and offered it to Richie.

“Now, Janie, I know you’ve got your mind set, but don’t you think you should wait until the storm passes? Bob over at the ranger station said the river was getting pretty high, and it won’t be long until the south fork is impassible.”

“Then we’ll just have to go down Logan’s Road is all.” The blonde smiled gently at the concern in Mr. Wittiker’s eyes. “I’ve been through these woods every summer since I was two—I know what to look out for, and I’ll be careful.”

The storeowner nodded, though not reassured. His gray eyes sought out Hutch’s when the detective looked on the tableau with some concern of his own.

“Excuse me?” Hutch crossed over to the counter. “I’m sorry to have eavesdropped, but it’s a small store, you know.” He was grateful that the young woman didn’t seem offended. “I heard you mention that you know these roads pretty well. My partner and I were going to head back in too, and I was hoping that you wouldn’t mind if we followed you?” He threw a knowing glance back at Mr. Wittiker. “This way getting lost won’t be one more thing that goes wrong with this trip.”

“Partner?”

“They’re cops.” Mr. Wittiker volunteered. “Detectives from the city.”

“And if any of us should run into trouble with the road, then we can use our radio to call for help.” Hutch smiled ruefully and produced his badge. Richie, losing a bit of his shyness, reached out for gold shield.

“What’re ya bustin’ the kid for? Pretzel theft?” Starsky’s congested voice mocked Hutch from behind.

“Starsky, this is...Janie?” Hutch hesitated.

“Thompson.” she confirmed as Starsky stuffed his wet clothes, including his socks and shoes into Hutch’s arms and shook her hand, then waggled his fingers at the little boy contently destroying his pretzel.

“And Richie. My partner, David Starsky.”

“Nice to meet you.” Janie smiled, shaking his hand. She then turned back to the blond. “And you’re...?”

“Oh!” Hutch grinned broadly, attempting to mask his embarrassment as his partner snorted. “Hutchinson. Hutch. Ken. I mean, Ken Hutchinson.”

“But you can call him Hutch. Everybody does. Even his mother.”

“She does n...” Hutch trailed off when he caught his partner’s mocking smile. Hutch began a stumbling retreat toward the vacant bathroom. “I’m going to get out of my clothes now. I mean...that...I’m going to change out of my wet clothes. Into these dry ones. In there. Now.”

The three adults standing at the corner watched in fascination until the blond finally made it to the small room and slammed the door. They continued to watch as the door opened marginally to retrieve the shirtsleeve trapped between the door and the jam. The door slammed shut a second time.

“And they let him carry a gun.” Starsky murmured under his breath. A relieved grin plastered his face as he turned back to Janie. “So, what’s this I overheard about an escort back to civilization?”



The Torino crept along Logan’s Road less than a car length behind Janie Thompson’s El Camino. Drops of rain and hail pelted the car’s hood and roof, setting off a small calliope of sound inside. Even with the wipers operating at their highest speed, the rain sheeted down the windshield, making visibility next to impossible. Mist surrounded the landscape, casting everything beyond a ten-yard parameter into a haunting gray. Starsky let loose an explosive sneeze at the same time a burst of lightening illuminated the dark interior of the car.

“Bet you couldn’t do that again if you tried.” Hutch mused over the rumble of thunder.

“Shut up, and watch the road.”

The next few minutes passed in a tense silence, both men’s eyes fixed on the blurred taillights ahead of them. A flash of green off the side of road caught their attention.

“What’d that sign say?”

Hutch shook his head, keeping his focus on the red lights ahead. “I couldn’t make out the name, other than it’s the ‘something’ river. I think that means we’re getting cl...”

A flash of lightning, striking close enough to blind both men, interrupted the thought. An enormous thunderclap immediately followed, marking the proximity of the bolt. A second cracking noise rose above the din of the rain.

“Starsky! Watch out!”

The scene before them was a blur of colored movement. Starsky slammed on the brakes as the dark form of a charred tree fell from the side of the road, blocking Janie’s path. She reacted instinctively to the obstacle that seemed to come out of nowhere and cranked the steering wheel a hard left. In her panic, Janie stomped on the accelerator rather than the brake, plunging the sedan off the embankment, where it rolled the twenty yards to the teeming river’s edge.

Without a word, Starsky put the car in park and the two stunned men threw themselves out of the vehicle and raced down the riverbed, sliding through the wet brush to the now-destroyed car. The two-door sedan had miraculously landed upright, though it’s right side was

submerged half way up the door. As soon as the partners came to a sliding stop, experienced eyes assessed the situation. The river, now milky gray from the churned mud and debris of its beds, continued to rage and pull at the embankment. The small sedan shifted as the river pushed against it. They could see the form of Janie, slumped across the front seat. Hutch rushed to its side and began pulling against the jammed driver's door.

"Where's Richie?" Two steps behind his partner, Starsky quickly peered through the webbed back window and could make out the toddler, still strapped in his carrier, wedged on the floorboards between the seats. He wasn't moving.

Starsky cautiously made his way into the fast current and around the back end of the car. The spring mountain water sent slivers of ice into his legs and thighs.

"Be careful!" Hutch called out, still trying to force the driver's door open. Frantically he began calling out to Janie, hoping to rouse the still woman.

The passenger side door was in worse shape than its mate, and no amount of tugging would release it. The window was partially broken out and Starsky quickly stripped off his flannel shirt and wound it around his hand to pull off what remaining shards he could. Knocking the pieces of glass inside would land on the two passengers. It probably wouldn't have hurt Janie's back, but with Richie's exposed face at risk, Starsky wouldn't try it. As soon as he was able to clear away most of the shattered window, he leaned into the car and gave Janie's shoulder a gentle shake. When there was no response, Starski twisted to the back and attempted to lift Richie's car seat out, but the carrier was wedged in too securely between the two seats. He could make out a darkening blue spot above the boy's right eye, but was somewhat reassured when he could discern the rise and fall of the toddler's chest. "He's wedged in tight."

"Cover him. I'm gonna break the window." Hutch drew his Python, giving Starsky a moment to pull himself out of the car to shake out his shirt, then lean back in to drape it over Richie's still form. As soon as his partner was clear, Hutch struck the driver's side window with the butt of the gun to finish shattering it, then quickly tapped out the rest of the glass.

Another wave from the raging waters flowed over the hood of the sedan, raising the water level to Starsky's hips and shifting the car. Brief eye contact between the partners confirmed their fears: they would have to get them out, and fast.

Starsky threw himself across the jagged window frame a third time and frantically pulled at the car seat. Under the shirt, Richie began to show signs of returning to consciousness, twitching under the jerks and tugs at his carrier.

Hutch reached through the now open window and grasped Janie by her left arm and under her torso. He knew it wasn't the best way to move an accident victim, but the threat by the rising river didn't allow for caution. Slowly, he pulled the young woman into a seated position. Hope fled along with his initial adrenaline: Janie's blue eyes were open in death and her head hung at an unnatural angle. Hutch still checked her carotid artery for the absent

pulse, then slowly leaned the body forward to rest against the steering wheel. Stunned, he rested his forehead on his arm for a moment, then took a deep breath and shook the rain from his eyes. Movement to his left caught his attention.

“Starsky!” Hutch only had a second to call out a warning before a rotted tree trunk slammed into the sedan, narrowly missing his partner. The impact was still enough to jar the El Camino, and Starsky lost his balance, throwing all of his weight against the car door and window frame.

Starsky gasped as a shard of glass too large for him to have cleared tore into his side, slicing through flesh and muscle. Clenching his teeth, he found his footing and pulled himself away from the source of his pain, then refocused on the nearly awakened toddler. He looked up to where Hutch peered anxiously at him through the broken window. “Janie?”

“She’s gone. She must have broken her neck when the car rolled.”

Starsky looked up to meet his partner’s eyes, blue eyes twinned in anger and regret. Another surge of the rising river jarred the sedan and the two could feel it slip further into the murky water.

“Hurry, Starsk!” Hutch reached in further and grabbed Janie’s body under the arms. With effort he was able to slide her dead weight from the car and lay her high on the embankment. He quickly scrambled back to the car to help his partner before the river claimed its prize.

Starsky pulled himself away from the window frame, his side pulsating. He could feel the odd contradiction his warm blood made against his chilled flesh. “Hutch! Try and pull the seat forward!”

Hutch nodded once then leaned back into the car, blindly feeling for the release mechanism. When he finally found the lever under the front seat, he gave it a viscous tug, then jerked the bench forward several times unsuccessfully. “Can you push against it?”

At Starsky’s nod, Hutch counted quickly to three. A grinding noise marked the seat’s movement an inch and a half, but it was enough to allow Starsky to yank the car seat free. Hutch retrieved the diaper bag from the floor of the front seat, which he tossed further up the embankment. He then quickly scrambled to the back of the car to accept the burden Starsky handed up to him from the edge of the river, the water still at his hips, even close to the bank. Richie chose that moment to wake and begin squalling in reaction to the crash and Starsky’s damp flannel shirt still draped over him.

As Hutch shifted the child carrier in his hands, he noticed blood along the handle just before the rain-washed it away. His concern escalated when he extended his hand to help his partner out of the water, noting Starsky’s pale complexion and the bluish tinge around his lips. Hutch’s worse fears were confirmed when Starsky reached out the hand that had been clutching his side and small rivulets of blood trailed down his outstretched arm. Starsky gasped as the severed muscles protested, and he swayed in the forceful current, grasping his

side. Hutch set Richie down and was beside Starsky in an instant, supporting his climb out of the freezing water. Once the two struggled onto the bank, blue eyes locked together for a moment, one glazed in pain, the other bright with concern, before Hutch gently pulled his partner's hands away from the wound. Flesh and muscle were laid open in a four inch long gash, and Hutch wondered how close it had come to completely piercing the delicate internal organs. Hutch quickly stripped off his shirt and wound it into a single length, then wrapped it tightly around Starsky's middle.

Starsky gently pushed Hutch's hands away and clutched his side over the flannel. "It's not safe down here. Get Richie up to the Torino. I can make it by myself."

"Don't be stupid..."

"I'm not. The quicker you get up there, the quicker you can call in the cavalry." Starsky's expression softened. "I won't get lost, I promise. *Just go.*"

Hutch afforded himself one more moment to assure himself that his partner would be okay for the moment before giving Starsky's shoulder a brief squeeze and hurrying up the hill with his burden. The picture of blood already soaking through the flannel shirt propelling him forward as nothing else could.

Starsky knew he should be still and wait for Hutch's return, but instead pushed himself forward. He paused for a moment before Janie's still body, then began his own trek up the steep bank, numb against the blood darkening his soaked jeans.



Hutch finally found the ranger's channel on the Torino's radio. "California State Ranger Station Twelve, this is Detective Hutchinson from BC Metro, do you copy?"

The static on the line gave Hutch a cold moment of flashback to the empty silence that taunted him in Topanga Canyon years ago—trapped, desperate, dying. "California Ranger Station Twelve, do you copy?"

"Station Twelve, we copy, Detective Hutchinson." The line was broken and filled with static as another volley of lightening struck nearby.

"A tree went down on Logan's Road, just north of the bridge. It looks like part of the bridge is damaged. I can't be more specific than that." Hutch shook the water from his eyes. "A car rolled down the embankment. The driver's dead. Her little boy might be hurt, and my partner...my partner's hurt as well. We need an ambulance—stat. Copy?"

Hutch heard the ranger swear on the other end of the line. "We've got a problem, Hutchinson. There are only two routes in and out of this forest, and now they're both impassible. The south fork's bridge is under four feet of water. There's no way I can get an ambulance in and out of there right now, and with the storm, Aero-med can't come in for a

pick up.” The pause on the radio was long enough for Hutch to think he had lost the ranger. Another burst of thunder and lightening rolled through and the radio came back to life. “...if you can get here, we can do what we can and wait out the storm, copy?”

“No, dammit! Repeat that, over!”

“If the tree isn’t too big, I can bring a chain saw and we can get it cleared out as long as the bridge is stable. If not, you can get here to the station, we can do what we can for their injuries, and wait out the storm ‘til help can fly in, copy?”

“The tree...” Hutch looked at the large trunk of the still smoldering tree. Not only was the mammoth blocking the road, the sheer weight of it had reduced a good portion of the wooden bridge to splinters. The whole structure looked as if it could give way at any time. There was no way Hutch was going to risk crossing it, even on foot. “Oh, hell, the tree’s about three and a half...four feet in diameter. There’s no way we could get through that thing and move it ourselves, and I don’t think I’d trust the bridge after the tree hit it. Tell me how to get to you. You have medical supplies, over?”

“We’ll do what we can. Just get here.” The ranger gave Hutch clear directions to the station, and relayed that he would be meet them half way at an obscure turn off so that they wouldn’t miss it, leading them the rest of the way in. He also told Hutch to mark the location of the accident so he could come back and retrieve the driver’s body, since Hutch had placed it far enough away from the river that it wouldn’t be lost in the angry waters. Initially Hutch protested, disturbed at the thought of leaving Janie behind, but then saw the wisdom in allowing the ranger to return and care for it until it could be transported properly.

Hutch was grateful there was only one corpse that would need to be retrieved.

After hanging up the microphone, Hutch double-checked Richie before scrambling back down the embankment to help his injured partner. A bottle had been found in the diaper bag, and the toddler was frantically nursing, more out of the need for comfort than for nourishment. His blue eyes were still wide with fright.

Hutch knew that his own eyes shone with the same fear.



The drive to the ranger station was tense, a continuation of the bad dream that seemed to have started days ago. Starsky slumped in the passenger seat, breathing shallowly. After finishing his bottle, Richie spent the next twenty minutes crying heavily, wanting to be held, wanting his mother, until he finally fell into a fitful sleep, overwhelmed. Hutch felt horrible for him, but knew Starsky was in no shape to hold the toddler. The cut to his abdomen refused to stop bleeding, and Hutch’s flannel shirt soaked through with blood. All the blond could do was drive as quickly as he dared in the onslaught of rain and get the three of them to shelter and safety. He tried very hard not to think of the corpse left behind.

Within twenty minutes Hutch spotted the flashing lights of the ranger's jeep. Quickly pulling the Torino next to it, he rolled down the window and called out through the storm to the ranger who did the same. "I'm Hutchinson."

The ranger nodded. "McGruder. How they doing?"

"Not good. How far are we?"

The ranger began rolling up his window. "Two miles back. There's a spot in the road where there's water running over it. I'll flash my lights when we get to it. Take it slow and you should be okay."

Hutch nodded as he rolled up the window. Watching the jeep turn around, Hutch placed his hand on his partner's shoulder. "Hang in there, buddy. We're almost there."

Not expecting a reply and not receiving one, Hutch threw the car in gear and followed the ranger through the rain.



The ranger station was small and crude, but to Hutch it was a haven. McGruder hurried to the Torino and Hutch carefully pulled Richie and his carrier out of the back seat and loaded him into the ranger's arms. Starsky was another story, having passed out en route and couldn't be roused. Hutch opened the passenger door and carefully pulled his partner close, then gathered him into his arms. Another moment of déjà vu' struck him as he carried Starsky away from the Torino, just as an unnerving bolt of lightning ripped through the sky.

Another night of terror, another storm.

Rain lashed against Hutch's face as he struggled with his precious burden toward the porch, unnerved by the warmth of Starsky's blood seeping through the damp of his t-shirt. Even after he laid his partner out on the ranger's cot, Hutch couldn't shake the vision of Starsky's blood pooled beneath him on the Torino's seat, a darker black against the ebony leather.

He was unsure if he could ever sit in that seat again without the memory coming to mind. A cold fist of fear gripped his guts. *If I ever get the chance again.*



Starsky woke up to the toddler's crying and gentle hands untying the blood-drenched shirt from around his side. He felt warm water slop over his stomach and side, trying to loosen up the congealed blood so as not pull on the wound further. A quick glance around the room identified the rather spartan office of the ranger station.

"Hutch?"

“Easy there, Starsk.” Hutch grasped Starsky’s hands from where they were ineffectively trying to push the ranger away from his ministrations.

Starsky nodded, accepting Hutch’s admonishment and trusting him. He was having a hard time focusing at the moment. “Water?”

“You just spent the last how many days out in the rain and *now* you want water?” Hutch chuckled quietly as he retrieved a glass of water from the station’s tap. With gentleness few would have thought possible of him, Hutch cradled one large hand under his partner’s head and raised it slightly, then tipped the glass to Starsky’s lips. “Just a bit now.”

Hutch lowered his partner back on to the cot and sat in the chair at Starsky’s side. McGruder had finally managed to peel away the gory shirt to expose the wound. When the air hit the gaping cut, Starsky drew in a hissing breath and reached to cover it back up with his hands. Hutch intercepted his partner’s questing grasp. “Hold on, buddy. Bob’s got to clean that out, okay?”

Starsky’s head had lolled to one side, but he was able focus on Hutch’s face. “Kay.” The brunet blinked. “Who’s Bob?”

McGruder eased the shirt out from under Starski and tossed it off to one side. With a quick smile he continued washing blood away from the wound.

“Hi, Bob.” The cough that followed elicited a hissing breath against the pain it caused. “Forgive me if I don’t stand.”

“No problem.” McGruder gave Hutch a quick look. “We need to get him out of his wet clothes.”

Hutch nodded at the ranger and focused on his partner. “You heard the man. No time for modesty.”

“Yeah, but will you respect me in the morning?” Starsky’s teeth began chattering against the dampness that seemed to permeate to his core.

“You always were a cheap date.” Hutch quickly unlaced his partner’s Adidas, and for some reason found himself unnerved by the stained tube sock, dyed a rust color by the blood that had seeped there. Hutch waited patiently for Starsky to undo his jeans, then made quick work of removing the sodden clothes and replacing them with a pair of the ranger’s pajama bottoms. A blanket was quickly draped around him, but left the seeping wound exposed. Hutch moved back up to Starsky’s side and squeezed his shoulder as McGruder gently blotted the wound. “How’s it look?”

“Well, the good news is, the bleeding’s pretty much cleaned the wound out. I’m still going to douse it with hydrogen peroxide to be sure. When the river runs like that, you never know what you can pick up in it.”

“T’riffic.”

Hutch grinned affectionately down at his partner’s response before returning his attention back to the ranger. “So, what’s the bad news?”

McGruder studied the wound for a moment more. “I’m hoping there *is* no bad news. Your partner’s lost quite a bit of blood here, Hutchinson. I have no way of knowing what damage that’s caused, but there’s no real indication of shock, so I’m optimistic. I’m going to contact the Orange County ER and get a hold of somebody there—find out what else we can do until the weather clears some and we can transport him. I’m thinking that as long as we can control the bleeding, keep him clean and dry, and that cold doesn’t turn into...well, anything worse, we may be okay until we get him some real medical attention.”

McGruder finished rinsing out the wound with peroxide, watching as the agent bubbled slightly as it met with some bacteria and dirt. The ranger smiled with some assurance at the worried look Hutch gave him, and placed a clean towel over the cut. Standing, he quickly crossed the single room to the band radio.

Hutch gripped Starsky’s shoulder to distract him as McGruder made contact with the hospital dispatch. “Hey, you hear that, Starsk? Bob thinks you’re going to be okay.”

Starsky licked his lips. “at’s good.” The azure eyes widened. “What about Richie? Is he okay?”

“He looks like it. We’re checking him every hour for a possible concussion. Right now he’s sleeping.”

“Okay.” Starsky’s eyes drifted shut until a wet cough started. Blue eyes widened as his diaphragm expanded and pulled at the torn muscles. Starsky instinctively fought to sit up and hold onto Hutch against the searing pain in his side.

Hutch grabbed him by the shoulders and forced the weakening man back down, his face a mask against the feelings of helplessness churning inside. “*Easy, Starsk, easy.*” Hutch felt his chest tighten at the site of Starsky’s blood blossoming on the white towel.

“McGruder!” Hutch applied pressure to the wound, briefly closing his eyes at the dampness being absorbed by the makeshift dressing. *How many times will I have to have his blood on my hands?*

The ranger quickly finished his conversation with the ER personnel and returned to where Starsky fought to control his congested coughing. “Okay, I’m gonna need your help here. Roll him onto his side.”

Starsky complied as best he could, but felt his strength running from him. Needing the help of a stranger was awkward under the best of circumstances, so he smothered his feelings of vulnerability by keeping his focus on Hutch's familiar grip. His partner helped steady him in place with his free hand, the other keeping pressure on the wound. McGruder retrieved more materials from his first aid supply and began ripping tape in five-inch strips.

"Okay, guys, since I don't happen to have my sewing kit handy, and don't know where my stapler is, we're gonna have to improvise."

Starsky threw the ranger an alarmed look. Hutch mirrored his partner's expression.

"I'm kidding! A little joke, that's all." McGruder continued ripping the first aid tape.

"T'riffic. Ten thousand comics out of work and you've got to be funny?" Starsky rasped out. When another series of coughs came from deep in his lungs, blood continued to pool, running in streaks down Starsky's stomach and back.

"Take it easy, Starsk. Don't talk, and maybe you won't cough as bad."

"Actually, the doc said coughing's gonna be good for him, but that's our 'catch twenty-two'. The exposure he's had to the cold and damp for the last couple of days, plus his time in the river could cause fluid to form in his lungs, and that'll open the door to pneumonia. Coughing will help keep his lungs clear. Only problem is though, it'll hurt like blazes because the cut muscles are so close to his diaphragm, which'll expand every time he takes a deep breath. All that action might start the bleeding up more than we can handle."

Hutch's glare conveyed his anger and futility. "So what the hell are we supposed to do for him?"

McGruder gave him a frank look and an honest answer. "What we can. I don't have the gear or know-how to suture him. I'm gonna use these strips of tape to act like giant butterfly bandages. That'll close the wound and help with clotting. Then, hopefully, the bleeding will stop. In the meantime we'll keep an eye on it for infection." The ranger's eyes soften as he looked at his pale charge, the detective's breathing becoming increasingly raspy with an oncoming cold and fatigue. "We'll treat what's in his bronchials and lungs best we can, and keep it from becoming something more dangerous. He'll have to cough to keep his lungs clear. You can ease some of his pain by holding his sides when he does. The support will keep the muscles quieter and give them a chance to heal. We'll keep him propped up some to ease his breathing. Keep him warm, dry and calm. Watch for shock. *That's* what we can do for him."

Hutch looked down to the half-closed eyes, glazed with pain and the beginnings of a fever. "Okay. What do you need me to do first?"

McGruder smiled at the fierce determination in the detective's eyes. "Now we're talking. I'm going to close up the wound with these bandages. That'll give it a chance to clot—control the bleeding. Put your hands on either side of the cut, and close the wound for me."

Hutch swallowed hard, but schooled his features, trying desperately not to betray his own misgivings to Starsky. He knew he was the only one his partner would completely rely on, so there was no way he was going to show anything but calm and optimism. "You want a bullet or something to bite on?"

He was rewarded with a small grin, but not the smart remark he was hoping for. Fear gnawed at him a little bit harder—Starsky was worse off than he'd thought. Hutch placed a hand on either side of the wound, then at McGruder's directive, pushed the two portions of muscle closer to each other. The ranger quickly laid the tape vertically, effectively holding the wound together. Starsky's eyes widen and a thin sheen of sweat beaded on his upper lip, but he remained silent, almost oblivious to their careful ministrations.

The two men sat Starsky's lax body up so the ranger could quickly wrap his abdomen in gauze to add pressure to the wound and keep the cut clean. One hand behind his partner's neck and the other around his back, Hutch gently laid Starsky back down on the cot, resting him against the pillows McGruder had retrieved. The blanket followed, and Hutch carefully tucked it around his partner's unresponsive body. A bolt of lightning flared close by, causing the station lights to flicker. Hutch scanned the small room, holding his breath and hoping that the power remained on. The thunder that followed woke Richie and the toddler began fussing.

Restless for something to do, Hutch picked up the sodden mess of Starsky's clothes and moved across the room to the attached kitchenette's sink and began rinsing out the blood. The blond felt bile rise up in his throat as he pulled his partner's badge out of the jeans' back pocket. The soaked leather was darker still with blood. More had stuck to the gold shield nestled there. *To protect and serve...*

The ranger's hand on his shoulder broke Hutch's reverie. McGruder then hauled the two more chairs from the small kitchen table in front of the stone fireplace. "His clothes'll dry faster over here."

After wringing out the clothes and draping them over the chairs, Hutch crossed back over to check on Starsky. Satisfied that there was nothing more he could do for him at the moment, Hutch watched as McGruder picked up Richie and nestled him in the crook of one arm. The ranger retrieved a can of formula from the diaper bag and crossed back to the kitchenette. "Could you give me a hand, Hutchinson?"

"Hutch." the blond stated as an affirmation. A quick glance under the blanket showed no additional blood on the gauze and Hutch crossed the room.

"Richie or formula?" McGruder asked with raised eyebrows, offering both.

“Either.”

McGruder handed Hutch the child. “How did you know his name? Starsky and I didn’t mention it.”

“I know him and his mom. Knew his mom. Met the father last summer when they all came up together.” McGruder paused from opening the can, sorrow crossing his features. “Janie and her family had been coming out to these woods longer than I’ve been up here. A damn shame. Soon as I get you all settled I’ll go get her...her body. Bring it on up to the shed at least, out of the weather. Doubt anything would disturb it, but it just don’t feel right leavin’ out there, you know?”

Hutch shook his head, remorse that they hadn’t had a chance to save the young mother, and sympathy for the child he cradled in his arms, imaging the void he’d face as he grew up. He turned his attention to the ranger, watching as he mixed half the formula with water and set it on the stove to warm.

“It’ll go longer this way.” McGruder answered Hutch’s unasked question. The ranger turned and leaned against the short cupboard. “I’ve got some hot dogs we can chop up for him too. I’m thinking that while you’re feeding Richie and your partner’s sleeping, I’ll go back down and get...get Janie. Take a look at the bridge too, before it gets much darker. Shine my beams on it if I have to. You’d think it was midnight, as dark as the storm’s makin’ it. If the bridge is half as bad as you say it is, it limits our options.”

“We’ve got to get him to a hospital.”

McGruder nodded slowly, watching Starsky sleep. “Only place for Aero-med to land is about a mile from here. Even so, a ’copter can’t land in this kind of wind. If the Logan’s Road bridge is out, and the south fork bridge is under water...”

“What about a boat? Have the ambulance waiting on the other side?”

The ranger swung his focus back on Hutch and nodded. Retrieving the now warmed bottle, he tested it by taking a swig himself and grimacing, then passed it to the blond. “That’s what I was thinking. Wouldn’t dare try taking the boat out at dark, even now at dusk, you couldn’t see a blasted thing coming after ya from upstream in this mess. Best shot’s in the morning. If I put her in upstream a bit, we can go with the river and cross, kinda at an angle. There’s no way we’d make a straight cut when it’s running this high. I don’t like the odds, but I don’t think we’ve got much choice.”

The silence that followed left each man with his own thoughts and fears, and the quiet was only broken by the pelting rain and raging thunder tearing through the mountains.



The sound of Starsky's coughing and congested breathing startled Hutch out of his fitful doze. He'd only been asleep for a few hours at best, having stood watch while McGruder had gone back to retrieve Janie Thompson's body. Hutch's being woken was actually a welcomed reprieve from the dreams of torrential rivers and sinking cars.

Hutch could feel the heat radiating off his partner even before he lifted the blanket from the fever-glistened body. The gauze was stained with a small patch of fresh blood, probably caused from the recent bout of coughing.

Quickly pulling his chair closer to the cot, Hutch placed the back of his hand against his partner's forehead, not surprised to feel the heat there.

"How's he doing?" McGruder whispered. The two had been sleeping in the rocking chair near the fireplace, and now ranger held the toddler over his shoulder as he approached Hutch. Fortunately, Richie still slept.

"He's hot. Do you have anything else we can give him for the fever? Aspirin?"

McGruder shook his head and began swaying gently when Richie stirred under their hushed conversation. "Aspirin's good for fevers, but it thins the blood. I don't think we can afford to risk it. Doc said to keep giving him the meds I had—the cold and flu stuff. Said that would keep the congestion broken up some."

The ranger glanced down at his watch, tilting it toward the fire light to read the dial. "We ought to let him sleep a bit more, then wake him up to try and get him to cough some."

Hutch grimaced. At the Orange County on-call doctor's prompting, just before midnight they had gotten Starsky to sit up on the edge of the bed. Hutch held onto Starsky's waist, inches below the wound, and encouraged him to cough, breaking up the congestion in his lungs before it settled there. It didn't take much effort to begin coughing, but once he started, the pain of his diaphragm expanding against the sliced muscles ended with Starsky slumped against his partner, the bleeding of his wound starting up again, and leaving the flesh around the cut hot and inflamed. As much as he knew how critical it was to keep Starsky's lungs clear of fluid, Hutch was hesitant to put him through it again so soon.

Hutch ran his large hands over his face. "This stinks."

McGruder nodded solemnly. "Yeah." The ranger shifted the small child from his arms and laid him in Hutch's. Surprised, Hutch quickly gathered the child to him and gave McGruder a questioning look.

"Go sit in the rocker for awhile. I'll watch after your partner." McGruder nodded his head toward the inviting space near the fire. "Go sit. You'd be surprised how rocking a child is good for what ails you."

Hutch gave the ranger a curious look and crossed the room as directed. Settling into the larger oak rocker, he shifted Richie into a more comfortable position high on his shoulder, and watched the firelight play across the toddler's blond hair. Without realizing it, Hutch began rocking, the warmth of the small blaze lulling him. Even with the sound of rain pelting against the small windows, Hutch felt the muscles he hadn't even realized were bound relax marginally.

He was asleep in minutes.



If it doesn't stop soon... Hutch shrugged off the web of apprehension that gripped him. It had been a long night and a longer morning, though you wouldn't have known the sun had risen by the darkened sky. Waking Starsky twice more to get him to cough was disheartening—each time his partner seemed weaker and more disoriented than the time before. By 6:00 AM it was all they could do to rouse him long enough to relieve himself in the bathroom and drink some of McGruder's canned juice. Starsky's breathing was becoming more and more labored and the wound continued to weep lightly, staining the bandages.

A new volley of thunder and lightning shook the small cabin. McGruder swore as static broke up the reception on his two-way radio. “*I said* I can't wait much longer to transport Sergeant Starsky from the station. I need for an ambulance to meet me at the south fork bridge as soon as it can haul its tail up here. Over.”

More static rumbled across the small speaker as the transmission continued. “Copy...’at, Bob...problem’s...’ty General...car pile-up on...Freeway...’bulance tied up with...best can do...afternoon, over?”

McGruder could easily see the play of muscles over Hutch's jaw as he clenched his teeth in aggravation. Hutch looked down at the sleeping form of his partner and shook his head. With a frustrated exhalation he threw his hands in the air. “Do we have any options?”

McGruder gestured helplessly. When the blond lowered himself into the chair next to his partner, the ranger continued trying to setup a rendezvous with the hospital.

“Awh, Starsk. What the hell have I gotten us into this time?” Hutch was surprised to see fever-glazed blue eyes staring back at him.

“Blond idiot...”

Hutch raised his eyebrows at the whispered words.

“S’not your fault.” Starsky struggled to clear his throat and continue. “Skylab coulda fallen out of the sky and bonked me on the head, and you’d have found a way to blame yourself.”

Hutch grinned marginally. “Well, maybe not *Skylab*. Odds are too great. Now, a meteor—I’m sure *that’d* be my fault.”

Starsky tried to chuckle, but the effort set him to coughing, his face mirroring the pain it caused.

“Easy, buddy.” Hutch gently pulled Starsky into a seated position, then slipped to one knee next to his partner, positioning Starsky’s arms over his shoulders, supporting him. Gentle arms wrapped carefully around his torso, Starsky felt immediate relief in his side as he continued to cough.

“That’s it,” Hutch murmured, “Take little breaths.”

Starsky’s voice rumbled against his partner’s shoulder. “‘Suck it in and take little steps’...”

While he couldn’t hear the quiet exchange, the bark of laughter from Hutch caused McGruder to turn and watch the two detectives curiously. He finished making arrangements with the hospital, then crossed the room to check on Richie. That completed, he simply sat on the edge of the couch, discretely studying the men from across the room.

There was such open and honest trust between the two detectives, it left no room for anything else. Their friendship seemed as natural as breathing—and as critical. In amidst the nightmare that had begun with the unexpected spring storm and its heart-rending aftermath, watching the exchange, the ranger was somehow comforted.



At four that afternoon, as the storm was starting to dissipate, McGruder got the call from County General. The ambulance had been freed up from the interstate pileup and dispatched to meet them at the south fork’s bridge. Starsky had seemed to rally a bit after sleeping through the rest of the morning into the early afternoon, and was able to walk cautiously to the jeep, with Hutch’s grip steadying him. The ranger had hooked up the boat and trailer at first light, so all that was left to do was load up its passengers for the trek to the upstream landing of the still raging river.

The ride was mostly silent, aside from Richie occasionally fussing. Hutch kept a cautious eye on Starsky, frowning as his partner closed his eyes against the pain that shot through him with every jarring movement of the jeep, regardless of how cautious McGruder drove. When Richie began to complain more, Hutch occupied him by quietly singing a children’s’ song about love and ladybugs. The blond flushed deeply when both Starsky and the ranger joined Richie in applauding at the end of the song, and he gave his partner a withering look when asked if he took requests.

“You can take your request, pal, and...”

“We’re here.” McGruder interrupted. The two men in the back seat looked ahead through the glistening windshield to the river before them. Swollen twice its normal size, the river pushed angrily over the embankments to the roadway, whitecaps churning with storm debris. McGruder confirmed that the ambulance was in place downstream at the next landing, then swung the jeep in a tight circle, backing the trailer into the turbulent water where the boat ramp should have been.

Hutch turned back to his partner, concern darkening his eyes. “It’s gonna be all right.”

Starsky met the worried gaze calmly, knowing that the confidence he had in his partner would be evident there. Hutch nodded once, then got out of the jeep to help McGruder unload the whaler.

Starsky took as deep a breath as he could manage and exhaled, grimacing at the pull on his muscles. Looking down at the wide-eyed toddler, he smiled and did his best Bogey, “Well, it’s just you ‘n me, kid. Whatdya say we blow this joint?”

Richie smiled and grabbed Starsky by the nose, laughing.

Hutch stuck his head in the jeep, a light rain dampening his hair to his forehead. “You two ready?”

Starsky turned his face away from Richie and Hutch’s direction and coughed, wincing as he did. Swallowing down the pain, and presenting a brave front, he nodded and smiled back at the toddler. “Piece a cake. Right, kid?”

Hutch scrutinized his partner, seeing how the grin didn’t quite mask the tightness around his eyes, nor his pale and drawn features. Still, he knew they were out of options. Hutch slipped a child size “Mae West” life jacket around Richie and secured him as best he could. He then pulled the toddler and his car seat out and made his way to the water’s edge where McGruder held the idling whaler close to shore, bucking against the current. Hutch waded out to the side of the boat and placed Richie between the two front captain’s chairs. He struggled back to the shoreline and put an arm under Starsky’s, then supported him through the churning water to the boat. Helping his partner sit on the side of the whaler, Starsky carefully swiveled around and put his legs in, then made his way to the stern’s bench seat. Hutch quickly followed and helped Starsky into his life vest before securing his own.

With Hutch’s assistance, McGruder swung into the boat and quickly took the wheel as the forceful current pulled at the whaler, threatening to spin it into the flow. McGruder settled into the driver’s seat and steered the small craft into the speeding waters.

Minutes seemed like hours as the small craft wove its way down the churning current, rolling with each wave. Spray from the dipping boat joined with the rainfall to soak the four passengers.

“How long did you say this cruise lasted?” Starsky asked after fifteen minutes of the rough passage. Hutch noticed that his partner’s face had paled even further and his arm was clamped over his side.

Hutch shook his head and turned toward McGruder. “How long is this little tour was gonna take?”

McGruder craned his head back and gave the partners a mischievous grin. “It’s a ‘three hour tour’, little Buddy...a three hour tour...” The ranger trailed off, singing the TV theme slightly off key. Both detective’s rolled their eyes, but appreciated McGruder’s attempt to alleviate some of their tension as the whaler rolled downstream.

“T’riffic,” Starsky grumbled. “If we get stranded on some deserted island, I got dibs on Ginger.”

Hutch smiled and shook his head, but the concern never left his eyes. Searching the icy waters around them, he could make out debris boiling alongside the small craft, pulled from off the river’s embankment. His inspection eventually landed his gaze on Richie, the toddler wide eyed, nervously nursing his bottle, but not fussing as the boat rolled along, spray whipping over its side.

Hutch called up to McGruder. “This doesn’t even seem to phase Richie.”

The ranger glanced down at the little boy, then hollered back at Hutch. “He comes from some pretty tough stock. You should have seen his...”

A flash of movement caught Hutch’s eye. Ahead to his left, a log came to rest with other debris clustering against a large oak that had fallen into the river as the bank eroded, and it lay submerged. If it hadn’t been for trash and branches crushed against its still outstretched branches, Hutch never would have seen it. “Off port!”

McGruder’s head spun back the front, already cranking the wheel a hard left to miss the snare. Even still, the whaler ran into one of the tree’s branches and the bow of the boat reared into the air, and turned against the thrust.

Luck was with them as the craft slapped back down into the water rather than flipping onto its back, as it easily could have. Still, Richie’s car seat bounced out of the secure space between the captain’s chairs, sending McGruder lunging for it, and snagging it before it slid more than a few feet.

The recoil had thrown Starsky forward into the small space between his bench seat and the captain’s chairs. Hutch leapt after his partner, not realizing he was safe, when a second wave hit the small craft, listing it again to the left.

Starsky felt rather than saw his partner stumble and flip over the side of the boat. Instinct shot his arm toward Hutch, and he was rewarded with a handful of flannel. The momentum of Hutch's weight rolled him onto his back and propelled him to the side of the boat.

Hutch felt the shock of the icy waters steal his breath away as he slammed over the side. He wasn't at all prepared for the force that bounced him back against the whaler, not allowing him to slip under or have the current drag him quickly downstream. Hutch latched onto the vice-like grip holding him by the front of his shirt, then kicked his legs to turn himself around in order to grab hold of the boat. He was startled but not surprised to see the pale face of his partner grimacing down at him.

The whaler bounced again against a dip in the river, and Hutch felt his grip on the wet side of the boat slip. Just as his fingers were about to lose contact, Starsky's bloodied left hand clamped around Hutch's wrist and tried to draw him back through the current. Starsky's eyes widened at the searing pain of the already frayed muscles tearing further. Hutch kicked hard, trying desperately to propel himself closer, but the water seemed almost desperate to claim him and drag him under.

Hutch kicked out again, fear for his partner propelling him marginally forward. Starsky closed his eyes against the agony pounding through his abdomen, his jaws dancing beneath the skin as he gritted his teeth against the pain. A growling yell came from him as he pulled again, frustrated with his growing weakness and the seemingly increasing fury of the river. Just as he felt his strength giving way, McGruder leaned over the side of the hull and latched on to Hutch's forearm, adding his strength to the other failing men. With the added effort, Hutch was quickly pulled to the whaler, then over its side, where he collapsed onto the floor, Starsky kneeling wearily beside him. McGruder immediately slid back into the captain's chair and gained control of the weaving boat as the river continued to push it downstream.

"Helluva time to go for a swim, Hutchinson!" McGruder shouted over Richie's wailing.

Starsky looked up from where he'd been clasping his side, breathing heavily against the exertion. "Richie all right?"

"Yeah, just scared the crap out of him!"

Starsky looked down at his partner lying on his back with his palms pressed into his forehead, trying to catch his breath. "I know the feeling."

The brunet reached out to touch the new bruise on side of Hutch's jaw, earned when he flipped over the side. "You okay?"

Hutch grasped the bloody hand extended toward him and quickly sat up just as Starsky pitched forward. Gathering the other to him, Hutch pulled back the quilted shirt, finding the sweatshirt underneath drenched in blood. "Dammit, Starsk!"

Starsky stirred as Hutch pulled up the second shirt. “What was I supposed to do, let you float away?”

Hutch sighed in affectionate exasperation as he pressed the cloth back to the cut. “You could have.”

“Naw, not when I’ve finally got you broken in.” Starsky’s breath hissed as Hutch applied greater pressure to the seeping wound. Warily, Starsky gave in to the pain and laid his head upon Hutch’s chest, too tired to move.

“We keep this up, and Bob’s gonna think we’re weird.”

Starsky chuckled marginally. “Let him wonder. I don’t think I could move if I tried.”

Hutch’s free arm joined the first at the wound, effectively encircling his partner. The move wasn’t necessary for adding pressure against the cut, but its proclamation was loud and clear: *Me and Thee*.



The ambulance ride to County General had passed in a haze for its passengers. The small group was grateful that the storm was reduced to mere showers on route, allowing for greater speed and safety on the roads.

Meeting them at the hospital was a distraught Corporal Brad Thompson, weeping openly as he took the waterlogged toddler from McGruder’s arms. The ranger and a nurse then led the young widower into a room for the staff pediatrician to give Richie a thorough exam before releasing him to his father’s care. The Corporal wept again as the ranger explained to him how they had had to leave Janie’s body behind at the ranger station, and the plans to recover it.

Hutch had sat wearily outside the post-op, waiting for word on his partner, when the thunder began its litany once more. *Won’t this storm ever end?* Within a few hours, the on-call surgeon emerged to find an exhausted Hutch and McGruder sitting numbly on the hard plastic chairs, nursing cold coffee. The relief in the blond detective’s eyes was substantial when the doctor assured them that Starsky was in stable condition, having come through the surgery fine, and would be in recovery for an hour or so more before being moved to a private room.

When his partner was finally settled in his room, Hutch gratefully sank into the worn chair pulled up next to Starsky’s bed. Kicking off his still drying shoes and propping his feet up on the bed rail, Hutch groaned as he stretched, and crossed his arms over his chest.

When the duty nurse came to check on Starsky’s sutures and IV, she found the two men soundly asleep, snoring in an odd kind of nasal harmony. The woman smiled fondly as she

picked up the still-damp, discarded shoes and placed them on the register to dry. A blanket was draped over the man in the chair, and with a smile, she left the room.



Two mornings later, the detectives were sitting on the side of Starsky's bed arguing good-naturedly when Corporal Brad Thompson, knocked shyly on the doorframe of the room, Richie dozing on his shoulder. Hutch stood and immediately crossed the room to meet the younger man, shaking his hand in warm sympathy and introducing himself and Starsky.

Starsky in turn greeted and shook the soldier's hand. After a harsh cough, he smiled apologetically and tried to get better look at Richie's face.

In response to Starsky's obvious desire to see that Richie was truly all right, Thompson turned so that the detective could see the boy's peaceful face for himself. "Bob told me all about what happened when Janie...at the accident. Doc says Richie's fine. No concussion, no dehydration. He's been pretty fussy though. I think it's because he misses..." the younger man trailed off, unshed tears closing off his throat. "I'm sorry..."

Hutch reached out and gripped his arm. "It's okay, we understand."

Misplaced anger blazed in Thompson's eyes as his head snapped up at the detective. "Do you?" he challenged.

Starsky's exhalation set him to coughing, but he waved off Hutch's move to support the still-healing muscles. After a moment, he met Hutch's gaze. There was no anger or defensiveness in either of their eyes. "Yes, actually we do."

"Here, sit." Hutch pulled up the visitor's chair for the soldier and motioned him down as he sat back on the bed next to Starsky.

Thompson shifted Richie and burrowed his face in his son's hair. "You don't understand," he ground out, his anguish tearing from him. "It's *my* fault she's dead."

The young widower looked desperately from one man to the next, guilt radiating off of him. "She died because of *me*. If I hadn't been such a jerk, we never would have fought, and she never would have left and come up here to think. It's *my* fault!"

Hutch studied his hands for a moment as the tears Thompson had been holding back finally made their way down his cheeks. "We do understand, Brad. Both of us, because we've both been right where you are now."

Starsky picked up when Hutch's voice became tight. "You see, Hutch and me, we've both been very lucky to fall in love with some incredible ladies with lousy taste in men." His partner's eyes were bright when they met Starsky's. "But what we do—being cops—means our lives are, well, sometimes things get...beyond our control."

Hutch looked at his partner, remembering more than the deaths of Terry and Gillian. “And sometimes the people we love get hurt because of it.”

Starsky understood all the unspoken words the blue eyes conveyed. “But we keep on doing it, because, well, that’s what we are. Sometimes it hurts like hell, but we can’t give in, we can’t let them win. Me and Hutch, we lost our ladies because of that: what we do, what we are. And there’s not a day that doesn’t go by that we don’t remember the cost.”

Thompson slowly looked from one man to the next. “So...how do you live with that? How do I go on, knowing that?”

Starsky placed his hand on the sleeping toddler’s blond hair. “You go on because of him.”

Hutch leaned forward, but looked past the father and son in the chair. “You go on because of love. You go on because he needs you.”

“And because she would want you to. It’s like as long as you go on living...well, a piece of her does, too.” Richie woke at the sound of the voices above him and smiled widely at Starsky. A small hand reached up and grabbed the detective by the nose.

The three men chuckled as Richie began “talking” to them, babbling on at a high speed. Corporal Thompson sighed and stood, slinging the toddler into a secure position on his hip. “Well, I better get going. Janie’s parents are expecting me. I...I want to thank you for all you’ve done. I know you did all you could for her, and for Richie. I owe you my son’s life.”

Hutch stood and helped Starsky to his feet. The two shook Thompson’s hand and said their good-byes to Richie. Starsky stiffly made his way to the room’s sole window, the sunlight that flooded through the panes warming him and causing him to squint. “Think they’ll be okay?”

“I think so, but it’ll be a rough road.” Hutch joined him at the window, both taken by the sun’s rays streaming through the few remaining clouds. “The storm’s over.”

The silence that held them for a moment was companionable, the two lost in shared memories. Starsky finally spoke. “Hutch?”

“Yeah?”

Starsky turned to face his partner. “Thanks.”

He didn’t have to elaborate, Hutch knew, as he always did, what was left unspoken. “Yeah. Me too.”