

When the Rains Come by Brit

Of all the things I love about being a cop, there's one thing I *hate*—directing traffic. Okay, maybe that and paperwork, but traffic duty's the greater of the two evils. Especially in this heat. Yeah, I know, it's all part of the job, but *still*... I can think of a million other things I'd rather be doing than standing in the middle of an intersection sweating to death, dodging little old ladies with lead feet, and sucking in so much exhaust that I'm sure my lungs will shrivel into raisins by the time I'm twenty-five. And it's hot. Did I mention that?

Gripe, gripe, gripe, Hutchinson.

My regular training officer was out with the flu, so I was assigned to Sergeant Robinson. Nice enough guy, even if he is on the verge of retirement and a bit on the skittish side. He's worked this beat for the last five of a thirty-four-year career in blue and has never gotten wounded in the line of duty. Not once. And now, for whatever reason, he's got himself psyched out that he's going to buy it before he retires in three weeks. Makes for one skittish war-horse with paranoia. Lucky me.

Today had been pretty uneventful until we got a call around three o'clock to go down to Forty-eighth and La Plata to direct traffic. A local dry cleaners had caught fire and the place was a complete loss. By the time the fire department had arrived, it was fully engulfed and they couldn't even make a dent in it, so they instead focused on keeping the surrounding buildings from going up as well. It was quite a challenge, since it hadn't rained in over six weeks and everything was kindling dry. Granted, most of the ancient buildings on the block were brick, but anything flammable in their construction—trim work, doors, windows, drywall—could instantly ignite into an inferno, given half a chance. The forecasters kept saying the rains were coming, but we hadn't seen a drop. Wouldn't be the first time they'd been wrong. It hadn't rained in so long, it felt like the heat had sucked the life out of everything, myself included. If something didn't change soon, I was sure I'd turn to dust and blow away with the first strong wind.

So, while the pumper trucks and hoses obstructed a portion of the road, and firefighters hustling about blocked the other three streets, I stood in the middle of the intersection directing traffic, while my sergeant monitored the sawhorse barricades keeping the spectators at bay. My shirt was drenched clear through, my arms felt like lead from being held out in front of me for almost two hours, and Robinson was standing in the shade with the rest of the crowd. Our relief from the next shift should have been there a half-hour ago, but there was no sign of them. So, there I stood, sweating like a...well, a *pig*...waving my arms around until they were about to fall off. Lucky me again.

Did I mention it was hot out there? Man, would I be glad when the rains came.

Our relief finally showed up forty-five minutes late with some lame excuse about being held up by the precinct desk sergeant. It was another team like Robinson and me. I hadn't met the training officer before, but I've got the rookie officer in most of my courses. Guy by the name of Starsky. I met him three weeks ago when the Academy sessions began. Seemed like a nice enough guy. A bit loud and kind of cocky, but okay. I'm not sure how much of that attitude is real and how much of it is the bravado I've seen in a lot of trainees. When it's not really a guy's ego, it's typically a façade to cover either fear or some insecurity. Anyway, I hadn't had that much interaction with him at that point, other than when I wrestled him in the self-defense course last week. I pinned him pretty quick and he didn't like that at all. I know he wasn't expecting me to take him, and afterwards he kept an eye on me. Not maliciously or anything, more like he was trying to figure out how I did what I did. I hadn't bothered to mention to the instructor, or anyone else for that matter, that I'd wrestled in college.

So, this Starsky and his training officer, Sergeant Bates, finally got there to spell us and they stopped to talk to Robinson. After a minute, Bates sent Starsky over to relieve me in the middle of what had become five o'clock rush hour traffic in that noisy little neighborhood.

Starsky darted in and out of the cars and stopped in front of me, giving me a nod. "Hey, Hutchinson, how's it shakin'?"

I gave him a dirty look because the sweat dripping off my forehead was burning my eyes. "What do you think?"

Starsky just grinned at me and didn't make a move to take over the flow of traffic. Did I mention that I also thought this guy could be annoying? He stretched and looked up and down the street. "Hot enough for ya?"

I called him something distinctly unpleasant that questioned his parentage, and changed the flow of traffic.

Starsky chuckled. "Well, if you're through waving your arms around, I sup—"

A rumble overhead distracted us both, and we glanced up to the sky. The edge of a dark mass of clouds was just obscuring the sun and beginning to thunder.

"Come on, baby..." I breathed. I was rewarded with a few raindrops mixing with the beads of sweat on my face. "It's about time!"

"Yeah, but it didn't have to hit on my shift," Starsky grumbled. "All right, go on. You're startin' to smell funny. I'll take it from here."

As soon as Starsky mirrored my hand positions, which held off the traffic in front of us and beckoned on the side streets, I dropped my arms. "It's all yours."

The rain began to sprinkle a bit. Those who'd been watching the fire from behind the barricades looked up to the sky appreciatively at first, but as the sprinkling became more consistent, they quickly began to disperse.

As I turned to cross the street and head for the sidewalk, one of the gawkers darted away from the crowd and into the street, just as a car was turning toward us. What happened next only took a few seconds, but it impacted my life in a way I never expected.

The driver swerved to miss the running pedestrian, but over-steered the vehicle, sending it directly toward the center of the intersection and toward Starsky and me. When she noticed us, the driver slammed on her brakes, but had been going fast enough that the car began to skid on the then wet pavement. After a month and a half with no precip to wash away the oil left from traffic, the rain made the blacktop like ice to a breaking vehicle.

The next thing I knew, it felt like my arm was being jerked out of its socket. Starsky had bolted forward and grabbed my forearm, hauling me out of the path of the car. But because of his sudden and violent movement, he lost his own footing in the process and was clipped by the sedan, tumbling him over the hood and headfirst onto the pavement.

I swore and rushed around the vehicle. Starsky was sprawled on the blacktop, unmoving. I quickly knelt next to him and checked for a pulse, ignoring the hysterical babbling of the driver, who had gotten out of her car and was shrieking behind me. Robinson and Bates rushed over to us, and my training sergeant tried to calm the older woman down as he escorted her out of the honking traffic now at a standstill around us.

I looked up at Bates. "Call an—"

Starsky surprised us both by not only quickly returning to consciousness, but by pushing himself up off the blacktop and trying to stand with the aid of the car's fender.

I grabbed him by the arm to steady him and stop him from getting up past his knees. "Whoa, wait a minute. Don't try and get up yet—"

"What are you talkin' about? He's fine, ain't you, kid?" Bates reached down and turned Starsky's scraped face up toward him. I could see he was disoriented, and tried to look at his pupils for dilation, one of the signs of a concussion. If nothing else, Starsky shouldn't be moved until he was checked out by the paramedics.

Bates instead brusquely patted Starsky on the side of his head and hauled him to his feet. "You're all right. Takes more than a bump with a Buick to take you out, huh, kid?"

"Yeah, sure." Starsky drew himself up, but I could tell he was unsteady and hurting. He glanced at me and attempted a quick grin. "I'm okay, like he said. Thanks."

My eyes narrowed and I was going to suggest he at least sit down for a few minutes when Bates gave Starsky a friendly shove back toward the intersection to unclog the traffic

blocked by the vacant sedan. The sergeant turned and gave me a sour look when he realized I hadn't moved either. "Whassa matter? You grow roots, Blondie? Get outta the road!"

I knew better than to argue with a training officer, but I was still concerned for Starsky. The fact that he'd been knocked unconscious, however briefly, was enough to send him to the hospital to be checked out. But by then he was steadily waving traffic around the sedan, so I moved on as I was told.

Robinson had taken down the necessary information from the driver that had hit Starsky, and had given her a ticket for going faster than the current driving conditions allowed. I was surprised they hadn't issued her anything more, since the incident had involved hitting a pedestrian, or rather, an officer. Robinson had to get her calmed down before he could escort her to her car. She called out to Starsky how sorry she was and that she hoped he wasn't hurt. He gave her a big smile and a nod, then stopped traffic in all directions so she could pull away and continue on to wherever little old ladies go in a hurry on rainy afternoons.

Bates was busy clearing the remainder of the gawkers from the scene, as the firemen began rolling up their hoses and storing their gear back in the trucks, now that the fire had burned itself out and was smoldering in the sporadic rain. The droplets that made it past the brim of my patrolman's cap tasted like salt as they mixed with the sweat that had dried there on my face.

My training officer finished speaking with one of the firemen and beckoned me as he made his way down the block to where we'd left our patrol car. Robinson groaned, placing a hand on the back of his ever-aching neck, as we walked toward our black-and-white unit. I ignored his not-so-covert solicitation for a sympathetic response and glanced back over my shoulder toward the intersection. Even from a distance, I could tell Starsky was pale, though his movements belayed that anything ever happened.

Robinson threw a foul look my way when I hadn't asked about the reason for his groan, but I continued to ignore him. As melodramatic as it sounds, something just didn't... well, *feel* right. I was as sure of that as I was my own name, and it could only be attributed to what had just happened. My sergeant opened his door and started to get in out of the drizzling rain, but stopped when I called his name. My focus went back to the intersection. "Look, I know he said he was fine, but I just can't—"

I saw Starsky take a step backward, staggering as if he'd been pushed. After righting himself, he lurched forward, bending at the waist and vomiting onto the wet pavement. With the loss of his direction, the cars that had been stopped began moving forward into oncoming traffic, and everything quickly ground to a halt. Impatient drivers immediately laid on their horns, with some ignoring the rain and rolling down their windows to shout and gesture at the other drivers.

I don't remember making the conscious decision to move. I just ran full-out, my eyes remained on Starsky. He staggered out of the paths of the cars, his face ashen, but instead of heading toward Bates, he crossed the street and made his way into an alley—a wounded animal going off to hide.

I dodged in and out of traffic, hollering back at Robinson and Bates for an ambulance. Entering the alley, I skid to a stop—Starsky was nowhere in site. Even though my own heartbeat was loud in my ears, I found him by the sound of his dry heaves coming from the other side of a dumpster farther down the alley.

Starsky was on his hands and knees by the time I reached him, and just as I knelt next to him, he collapsed onto the blacktop. I quickly rolled him onto his side, in case he vomited again. He was conscious and began fighting against me. “Easy, take it easy, Starsky. It's me, Hutchinson. I've got you. Just stay still.”

“I gotta get up, it's worse when I'm flat.”

“What's worse? The dizziness?”

He nodded and instantly regretted it. “That and my guts. I'm gonna be sick.”

Starsky pushed himself up onto his knees and heaved again. When he finished, he fell back on his rear, one hand supporting him from toppling over, the other clutching his forehead.

“Look, Starsky, you've probably got a concussion. You should stay put until the ambulance gets here, okay?”

I reached out to him and he waved me off. “I'm all right.”

He wasn't. That simple gesture nearly sent him face-first onto the pavement. I caught him as he crumpled, and drew him to me so I could support him without his having to lie down until help arrived. He instinctively latched onto my arm, and, as we huddled there, I had the oddest sense of...*something*. Something significant. Something yet to come. I don't know how else to explain it. I don't know if Starsky sensed it, too, but this often cocky, always self-sufficient rookie allowed his guard to fall and for me to hold him up.

We both heard the running footsteps at the same time. I hollered back to identify where we were when Robinson yelled my name from the mouth of the alley. Starsky tried to push himself out of my grip, though I could tell he didn't have the strength or coordination to do it easily. “What are you doing? Stay put, you idiot, you're hurt.”

He struggled to sit up, cursing. “Bates—”

“He's coming, don't worry.”

“No, I—”

“You’re hurt, for crying out loud.” He struggled out of my grip and I let him go. There was something going on inside the guy’s head, but I sure didn’t know what. Maybe someday he’d tell me, but right now, it didn’t matter. Something crossed my mind that didn’t make a lot of sense at the time, but I went with it. “What are you afraid of?”

He looked at me quickly, and I could see what the sudden movement cost him.

“I’m not afraid of anything.” His eyes burned as he said it, and I knew he was lying. To himself, anyway. “I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, you can.” As he stared back at me, I saw his pride. His determination. And somewhere in the depths of his eyes, I caught a glimpse of the man I would like to call my friend. “But you don’t have to.”

I don’t know what Starsky saw in *my* eyes, but after a moment, he tried to ease himself back down to the tarmac. Giving in to the pain and disorientation, he fell back against me with a groan. It was all the confirmation he needed to give. My grip around him returned and tightened instinctively, hoping to offer some emotional support as well as physical. “I’ve got you. It’ll be okay.”

He trusted me enough to be vulnerable. Trusted me to care for him. Trusted me to be his friend.

I would not let him down.

Robinson and Bates were with us now, the latter looking worriedly at Starsky, trying to figure how much trouble he’d be in for letting his trainee get banged up. Robinson ran a hand across his face, wiping away the gentle rain that continued to fall. “Ambulance’s is on its way. You two gonna be all right there, Hutchinson?”

I nodded and the two of them turned to go back out to the mouth of the alley and wait for the ambulance.

A flash of lightning creased the sky, and as the thunder answered its call, the rain began to fall in torrents. Starsky lay quietly against me, his eyes shut tight against the pain and nausea, letting me care for him the only way I could at the moment—holding him, supporting him, trying to keep the rain off. For now, it was all I could do, but it was enough.

The rains had finally come.

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