

GALE FORCE

by TibbieB

Chapter 1

Starsky squinted his tired eyes, and peered through the windshield, straining to see past the torrent of raindrops pelting the glass. Coming down with a vehemence, they seemed more like tiny torpedoes than rain.

“Starsk, look out!”

Reacting to Hutch’s warning, he jerked the wheel of the jeep sharply to the right, barely missing the sheet of mangled tin that blew across the road, directly in their path. “That was close,” he hissed, his heart in his throat as he brought the vehicle to a screeching halt on the soggy shoulder of the road.

“So much for your ‘plum’ assignment, partner,” Hutch complained.

“Don’t start, Hutch. I didn’t hear you objecting when Dobby first brought it up. Besides, when we flew outta Bay City, nobody knew this hurricane was gonna double back and hit the Keys.”

“True,” Hutch conceded, reaching up to rub the deep ridge between his eyes. The jeep shimmied as another particularly brutal gust of wind plowed over them. “And Copeland *was* our case. I don’t know why I said that. Just par for the course though, huh?”

Starsky gave him a crooked smile. “Yeah. Only you and me could fall in a vat of chocolate and come out covered in slime.”

This graphic description of their usual bad luck for pulling rotten assignments elicited a laugh from Hutch. Leave it to Starsky to find the humor in such a lousy situation.

“This should’ve been a simple case of extradition. But thanks to Hurricane Debbie, so far it’s been a disaster. First, our plane’s diverted, we have to use our clout as cops to get priority to rent the last jeep at Avis, and then we set out like a couple of fools on this desolate stretch to Podunk, USA in the middle of 100 mile per hour gale force winds. Not my idea of a good time, Starsk.” Buffeted by the storm, the vehicle rocked from side to side, as if to punctuate Hutch’s dissertation.

Starsky watched the wind-ridden palms bending almost to the ground, their fronds sweeping back and forth across the sky like huge paddle fans. “I won’t argue that point with you. I guess we’ll just have to make the best of it. Once we get to Islamorada, I’m sure the police chief will put us up. Maybe this thing’ll blow over tonight.” Starsky

turned the starter on the stalled-out jeep, and waited for the engine to sputter to life before pulling back out onto the litter strewn blacktop.

“Right,” Hutch agreed. “I’ll check the map again and see how much further.” Bracing the flashlight under his chin, Hutch wrangled the map open to the right location, and Starsky continued inching the jeep along US 1, while dodging an odd assortment of unidentified objects being blown into their path by Debbie’s treacherous winds. Twenty minutes seemed like sixty as the two cops drove in silence, each nervous and uncertain what waited around the next curve in the road.

“Are you sure we’re on the right road?” Starsky finally asked.

“Yeah, positive.” Hutch held up the map. “According to this, we should be coming up on Islamorada about now.”

Like a spooky psychic prediction, a light appeared in the distance ahead of them. “There you go,” Hutch said, pointing toward the lit building.

“It’s about time.” Starsky steered the car into the parking lot in front of the Islamorada Police Department. In preparation for the hurricane barreling down on them, the windows that spanned the front of the building had been hurriedly boarded, giving the structure a deserted look. The wide wooden sign, dangling at the end of two chains mounted to the soffit of the front porch, swung wildly in the wind like a trapeze, threatening to crash to the floor with each gust.

Zippering his jacket against the weather, Starsky prepared to make the short jaunt to the door. “Ready?”

“Let’s do it.” Hutch hopped out on his side and raced up the steps of the wooden structure, bumping shoulders with Starsky as they both tried to sprint up the steps at the same time. Pummeled by the ever-increasing wind, they burst through the door without preamble. A red-headed, pencil-thin, young man looked up with a start from behind the counter to greet them.

“I sure hope you’re Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson,” he said, standing up and coming forward, extending his hand.

“That’s us,” Starsky answered, shaking his shoulders, allowing the rain to drip off the leather jacket and puddle on the floor at his feet.

“I’m Jackson. Glad to meet you.” Though slight in frame, he had a sturdy handshake, more in keeping with a man fifty pounds heavier. “Everyone’s evacuated but the prisoner and me,” the young man said. “I didn’t want you fellows to show up here and find us all gone. Debbie’s been working overtime in this district. “

“I hope this isn't your idea of a welcoming party,” Hutch said, tongue in cheek.

“Oh, no, sir,” the young cop hastened to assure him. “You just have really bad timing. We haven’t had a gale this strong in over four years. Usually, this is a nice, sleepy little town—the kind most people like to vacation in. But with this mess, I wasn’t even sure you could get through. If I were you guys, I’d take this jerk, get as far north as I could, and hunker down in one of the shelters to wait her out.”

“Mind if we take a look at the prisoner, and maybe grab a cup of hot coffee before we go back out into that nightmare?” Hutch asked.

“Well, sure...I mean, no...I mean, take your time. I’ve got to stick around here a little longer anyway. There’re still a few calls coming in.” The young man shook his head in amazement. “Anybody with a lick of sense is already gone, but you always have a few die-hards who wait until it’s too late to leave, then expect someone to come bail ‘em out. Believe you me, I’m heading north as soon as *I* can.”

Jackson picked up the keys to the back area and led Starsky and Hutch to the cellblock. “You must want this guy pretty bad to come down here in the middle of this hurricane.”

“Yeah, well, you know how it is,” Starsky said. “You can’t let turkeys go around knockin’ off Superior Court Judges and get away with it. We already put him away once, but he seems to be a regular Houdini.”

Copeland lay stretched out on a cot, smoking a cigarette. When they entered, he turned toward them without rising, a lazy, arrogant smile on his face. “Well, well. Look who’s here...the dynamic duo.”

“Did you really think we wouldn’t come?” Starsky answered.

Copeland smirked back, “Not really. You guys are nuts if you think I’m going out in this storm, though.”

“Not your choice,” Hutch said, stepping up to the cell. “We’re leaving in thirty minutes. It’s not up for discussion. So I suggest you do whatever you need to do before then, because we won’t be stopping until we put some distance between us and this hurricane.”

Copeland snorted derisively before sitting up and crushing the cigarette beneath his shoe. He was silent as the police officers left the cellblock and returned to the front office. “Have some coffee,” Jackson offered. “I’ve got a few stale donuts left. It’s not much, but maybe it’ll get you through till you reach the shelter. There’s one about forty miles north of here—just stay on A1. You don’t want to get caught on one of the causeways. If the waves build up enough to come up over the road, they’ll sweep you right off into the ocean.”

Starsky turned a grim face toward his partner. “He’d be a terrific spokesman for the local tourist trade.”

“I don’t mean to scare you, Detective, but back in ’35, when The Labor Day Hurricane hit this area, over four hundred people were killed—most of them trying to get back to the mainland by train. A fifteen foot wall of water washed the whole train right off the tracks and drowned them.”

Hutch made eye contact with Starsky just in time to see him swallow hard, his Adam’s Apple bobbing. He turned back to Jackson and smiled nervously. “Well, thanks for the advice. I think we’ll take you up on the coffee and donuts. We haven’t eaten anything for hours, and it sounds like things could get pretty hairy before our next meal.”



With a feeling of dejavu, Starsky steered the Cherokee through the unrelenting rain and wind, concentrating just to keep it on the road. In the back, Copeland glared at them defiantly and silently contemplated ways to get rid of the handcuffs that shackled him to the handgrip on the door. Even if he could break free of the cuffs, he’d have to take the car and a gun from the two cops in order to make his getaway; and he knew enough about Starsky and Hutchinson to realize that that would be a monumental task. They weren’t stupid, and there *were* two of them, and only one of him. Copeland had a score to settle with these two pigs, so if he had to burn them, he would. But he needed a weapon, and right at the moment, didn’t have a plan for getting one. Somehow, this storm should work to his advantage—he just had to figure out how.

“Maybe we should've stayed there a little longer,” Hutch said, watching Starsky fight the steering wheel. The strain on his partner’s face was growing more evident with each hard-earned mile, and Hutch considered offering to drive. But he knew Starsky was, without argument, the more skilled driver. Hutch still hadn’t heard the end of Starsky’s bellyaching about how he’d handled the dune buggy while they were chasing down Joey Fortune and his gang on the islands.

Starsky glanced at Hutch then quickly returned his eyes to the road. “You heard what Jackson said—it isn't gonna get any better tonight. Said to put as much distance between us and Debbie as possible. We’ll stop when we get to that storm shelter. I just hope that’s soon, cause now that it’s dark, I ain’t gonna be able to see how to drive much further—” Before Starsky could finish the sentence, a loud crack—more like an explosion—drowned out his voice. Without warning, one of the ancient white pines that had been battered by the wind all day gave up the battle. The two hundred year old majestic pine splintered and split in two gigantic pieces, one crashing across the front of the jeep, plunging its long branches through the windshield. There was no time for warnings, no time for escape. The last thing Starsky saw was glass spraying across the front seat, like sharp pellets of ice.

Chapter 2

Hutch's eyes opened slowly to the drumming, cold rain upon his face. It took a moment to regain his bearings and realize what had happened. The tree that had crashed through the roof of the jeep now lay wedged in the seat between him and Starsky. He could barely make out Starsky's form slumped over the steering wheel, unconscious, his face hidden behind a screen of spiny pine needles and splintered wood. A quick glance at the back seat confirmed what he suspected—Copeland was gone. At the moment, that seemed of little importance. Nothing mattered right now but getting to Starsky.

“Starsky! Starsk!” Hutch eased his long legs up onto the car seat, maneuvering into position to break and tear away the curtain of pine boughs, trying to clear a visual path to Starsky. By the time he could see and touch his partner, Hutch's hands were scored and bleeding from the rough bark and spiky pine needles. Gently, he lifted Starsky's head and turned his ashen face toward him. In the dark, it was difficult to make out the injured man's features, but Hutch could see his eyes were closed and his breathing shallow. “Hey—talk to me, buddy.” He lightly tapped Starsky's cheek to try and rouse him. “Starsk? Come on, open your eyes.”

The chill rain sluicing over his face and the sound of Hutch's frantic voice finally registered and Starsky's eyes fluttered open a narrow crack. “Hutch?”

Some of the fear drained from Hutch's rigid features. “Right here. How're you doing, partner?”

“What happened?”

“A tree blew over on the jeep. Are you hurt?”

Starsky moved his head from side to side with no apparent discomfort, then slowly tested his arms and legs, manipulating them one at a time until a piercing pain shot up his right thigh. Drawing in a sharp breath, he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, and bit back a yelp. “My right leg. Can ya, can ya see it?”

“Hang on.” Cursing himself for not thinking of it sooner, Hutch snatched open the glove box and retrieved the flashlight he'd used earlier on the map. Twisting away the remaining pine needles and twigs, leaving only the trunk of the tree between them, he was able to get a closer look at Starsky's leg. What he saw made his heart hammer in his chest. Across the right thigh was a deep gash, at least three inches in length. Blood flowed freely from the wound, the cleansing rain washing it away as quickly as it appeared. Hutch couldn't judge how fast it was coming, but the *size* of the laceration alone was enough to concern him.

“I'm afraid you've got a pretty nasty looking cut here,” he said, careful to keep the alarm from his voice. “I'm just gonna put a tourniquet around it, so hold on and try to stay awake, okay?”

“Yeah...sure...do whatever you need to do.” Starsky added good-naturedly, “It ain’t like I’m goin’ anywhere without ya.”

To Hutch, Starsky’s voice seemed weaker than just moments earlier—an indicator that he was losing blood fast. Stripping off his belt, Hutch reached around the tree trunk, then gently lifted the injured leg and wound the leather around Starsky’s thigh just above the gash. Although the dark-haired man winced when Hutch tightened it, he didn’t complain. Once that was accomplished, Starsky relaxed, leaned his head back against the seat, and closed his eyes against the steadily falling rain that continued to trickle in through the gaping hole in the roof.

“We’ve got to get out of here and find some shelter, Starsk. This storm seems to be getting worse, and the jeep isn’t going to offer us any protection.” As if to emphasize Hutch’s point, the car creaked under the weight of tree.

The breath caught in Starsky’s throat momentarily before he asked, “What about Copeland? Is he hurt?”

“He’s gone. I don’t know how he got away, but when I woke, he was already out of here. What’s worse, I don’t know how long I was out, so we have no way of knowing how far he’s gotten.”

“Yeah, well, I guess that’s the least of our problems right now, huh?” Starsky gave him a weak, lop-sided smile.

As an afterthought, Hutch’s hand quickly flew to his shoulder holster. Finding the Magnum missing, he searched the seat and floorboard with the flashlight, but came up empty-handed. “Damn! He took my gun!”

“Terrific,” Starsky mumbled, without opening his eyes. Reaching inside his own leather jacket, he fumbled with his holster until he felt the familiar bulk of the Smith and Wesson. “Well, at least he didn’t get mine.”

“Probably couldn’t get to it,” Hutch observed. “At least we have *one*.”

“Let me see if I got this right,” Starsky summarized. “We got no car, we’re stuck in the middle of what may be the hurricane of the century, and I may be bleedin’ to death. Now we find out our prisoner’s escaped, and he’s armed?”

Hutch smiled, amused by Starsky knack for getting to the point so succinctly. “Nothing gets past you, does it, partner?” he answered drolly. “Do you think if you lean on me, you can walk at all?”

“Are you kiddin’? You think a little leg wound can keep me down?” Starsky replied, less than convincingly. In reality, he wasn’t sure if he could even stand, but knew full-well there was no way they could stay where they were.

“Okay, then. We’ll follow the road, stay in the open as much as we can. Maybe Jackson will close up shop and head this way. If we get lucky, he’ll see us and stop.”

Starsky looked at him from under hooded lids. “Such optimism doesn’t become you, Blintz.”

“The way I look at it, partner, optimism’s about all we’ve got right now.”

“Guess you’re right. I just hope we don’t cross paths with Copeland.”

“Don’t worry about that. There’s still two of us and one of him. Besides, we’re the good guys...and the good guys always win, right?” Hutch squeezed Starsky’s shoulder, a familiar gesture of reassurance.

As Hutch hopped out on his side of the Jeep and came around to help Starsky out, the wind rose even higher, shrieking and wailing like a vengeful spirit. “Are you pinned down by the tree, or do you think can you slide out?” he asked, prying open the driver’s side door.

“I don’t think I’m caught under anything. If you’ll give me a hand, I’ll try to slide out without causing my leg to bleed any worse.”

Hutch slipped his right arm behind Starsky’s back and his left under Starsky’s left leg and began easing him across the vinyl seat of the Cherokee. They seemed to be making good progress, despite the wind and rain pounding them, until Starsky let out a howl, and threw his head back hard against the seat. “Wait! Wait!”

Hutch stopped, stricken by the pain that flashed across Starsky’s face. Even in the near dark cover of night, he could see the agony etched in his partner’s features. “Sorry. Just take it easy, okay? Just rest a minute,” he soothed.

“Hutch,” Starsky whispered, his hand closing around the front of Hutch’s jacket. “Maybe this ain’t such a good idea. Maybe I should stay here and let you go for help.”

“Starsk, I can’t leave you here. This storm’s too violent. What if the tree shifts, or something else falls on the car? You could be crushed. Our only hope is to find shelter. Besides, you’ve been through worse than this, so I know you can do it. I’ll help you.”

Starsky squeezed his eyes tightly shut. “Okay,” he whispered. “Okay. Let me try it again.”

Once again, Hutch supported Starsky’s weight and slowly slid him across the seat toward him. This time Starsky managed to maneuver his leg free and was gently lowered to the pavement as he exited the car. Hutch sank to the blacktop, next to him, relieved they had gotten through the first arduous step of escape.

“How’re you doing?”

Breathing heavily, Starsky answered, barely above a whisper, “Terrific.”

“Just sit here a moment and get your breath.” Hutch reached over and zipped Starsky’s jacket up to his chin. “Let’s try to keep you dry as possible. You don’t need to get chilled.” Knowing that Starsky was still losing blood, the threats of shock and hypothermia loomed in Hutch’s mind; even in this tropical climate, the hurricane’s rain was cold.

As the color began to return to Starsky’s pale face, Hutch decided they needed to push on. “Come on, Starsk. I’m gonna help you up now. I’ll support you on this side so you don’t have to put any weight on that leg. Ready?”

Starsky took a deep breath, steeling himself, struggled to his feet, and with a grunt, leaned his weight against the blond as he levied to stand upright. After weaving unsteadily for a few seconds, he seemed to regain his equilibrium.

“Ready?”

“Yeah. Ready as I’ll ever be,” Starsky answered with more enthusiasm than he really felt. “Let’s get the show on the road.”

Chapter 3

Under the best of circumstances, walking against the torrential downfall would’ve been difficult; but half carrying Starsky and keeping out a watchful eye out for Copeland made the task nearly impossible. Hutch knew Starsky was in pain. With each step, the injured man’s right arm reflexively tightened around the back of Hutch’s neck, in an involuntary effort to counteract the lancinating pain.

“You doing okay, buddy?”

“Yeah,” Starsky winced, “terrific. I can’t imagine why we haven’t tried this before.”

“Right,” Hutch chuckled. At least Starsky still had his sense of humor and he seemed alert. Maybe the bleeding had slowed down.

Bits of debris churned through the air all around them, stinging their faces and hands as the tiny projectiles pelted them from all sides. Wind whipped and bleeding, they trudged on. “It can’t be much further to the shelter!” Hutch shouted over the wind. “If we can just get there, maybe there’ll be someone who can treat your leg!”

“I’m fine, Hutch!” Starsky shouted back. “Let’s just keep movin’, okay?”

Hutch nodded then lowered his head against the wind and pulled Starsky closer, shouldering more the injured man's weight. With renewed determination, they pushed on faster than before. Starsky focused on keeping up, each step a small victory. Soon the sound of the wind became only a faraway roar in his head, separated from the action around him—a continuous hum, growing louder as his thoughts grew more nebulous. In the distance he heard Hutch's familiar voice—but felt *disconnected* and unable to answer.

“Starsky!”

There it was again...calling his name. The roar was louder now. “Starsky! I see a light! Can you keep going? Just a little further!” Why can't you just leave me alone? Tired...I'm so tired.... He could say the words in his mind, but couldn't seem to put them to voice.

“Starsk! Hold on. Just a little further...”

I'm tryin', Hutch...I...just can't seem to move my legs...can't go another step... It was the last thing he remembered.



Hutch felt Starsky's body go limp, his arm slowly slipping away from Hutch's neck. As the unconscious man slid to the ground, and into the mud, Hutch followed him, battling to keep them both upright and moving. Knowing their only hope was to make it to the storm shelter, Hutch rose to his knees, struggled to his feet, then, none-too-easily, scooped Starsky up like a sleeping child and began the last laborious steps to safety. Dead weight in his arms, Starsky was oblivious to the pounding rain and the brutal wind. Hutch knew he was on his own.

Ignoring the burning in his lungs as he strained against the punishing wind of the hurricane, almost incapacitating fatigue, and the dead weight of his unconscious friend, he stayed focused on the light ahead. Hutch shouted Starsky's name again, tried to reassure him that they were near help. But even the sound of his own voice was now drowned out by the deafening roar of Debbie as she bore down on them with the fury of a personal vengeance. Hutch, beleaguered, and nearly defeated reached the door of the shelter and collapsed on the stoop, carefully easing Starsky to the floor. Warily, he raised his arm and pounded on the wooden door. It opened only a crack, sheltering the occupants within from sheets of rain and wind.

“Javier! It is two men! Help me get them inside!” Hutch closed his eyes and surrendered to exhaustion.



“Can you hear me, señor? Please...señor...”

Hutch opened his eyes with a start, immediately aware he was no longer being pummeled by the wind and rain. *The shelter*. They'd made it to the shelter. He bolted upright, looking around for Starsky and spotted him stretched out prone on a canvas folding cot only a few feet away.

"How's my partner? His leg—he has a bad leg wound."

"Do not worry about him right now. He is fine. How are you?" The dark-haired man who spoke with a heavy Hispanic accent was at least twenty years Hutch's senior. He spoke softly, while wringing out a cloth he dipped in a basin of water, then continued trying to clean the scratches on Hutch's face.

Not listening, Hutch absently pushed the cloth away, rose from the cot, and in two strides was standing over Starsky. Beside him sat an older woman, her gray hair swept back from her face in perfect waves, accentuating the graceful lines of time and experience etched around her eyes and the corners of her mouth. Hutch's first impression was that it was a *kind* face. He squatted down, coming to eye level with Starsky's colorless face.

With dark, sympathetic eyes the woman looked at Hutch, and in the same heavy accent she told him, "Do not be so worried, my friend. I just changed the bandage. The bleeding seems to have slowed down now."

Hutch pulled his eyes away from Starsky's pale face and smiled at her gratefully. "Has he woken up, asked for me?" he asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," she answered. "My name is Ina. Would you tell me what happened to the two of you?"

Hutch glanced around at the sea of faces, wondering just how much he should tell these people. Many were obviously already frightened. Adding the threat of an escaped, convicted murderer would only escalate their fear. And knowing that he and his partner were partially responsible for putting them in even more jeopardy, just by being here, would not likely endear them to the refugees. "My name is Hutch. Starsky and I are detectives, here on assignment. While we were trying to get back to the mainland, a tree fell on our jeep," he answered honestly—deciding it would serve no purpose to say more.

"Mother of Mary," she whispered. "Then I would say you are lucky to be alive."

Taking in his surroundings more carefully, Hutch realized they were in a small, public building of some sort. "What is this place?" he asked.

"The old train depot. It has been here since the turn of the century and endured many *huracans*. Once the railroad was the lifeblood of the Keys. Now it is only a landmark. But we knew it would provide us safety."

“You haven’t had any other late arrivals, have you?” he asked, his eyes scanning the room once more. Only a few families were spread about the room, sparse collections of personal items gathered around them, stacked on the portable, folding cots. Some looked frightened—others just bone tired. In one corner, a small child fussed and squirmed as his mother tried to soothe him with a bottle of formula.

“No. You are the first since we got here,” she answered. “Why? Did you see others?”

“Uh...no...I just figured there could be. I’m surprised there aren’t more evacuees here.”

“There are only fifteen of us,” she answered. “These are the families who refused to leave when the officials came around and evacuated the others. Most do not speak English and didn’t understand the seriousness of the situation.” She reached down and tenderly blotted the perspiration from Starsky’s top lip. He flinched, then calmed and resumed his shallow breathing.

“My husband, Carlos, and I finally convinced them to leave, but the storm had grown so fierce by then, this is as far as we got. Only we and Javier have automobiles, so we crowded everyone into them and came here.” Hutch’s attention quickly shifted when Starsky began to stir again, his eyes fluttering open, then back shut again.

“Starsk? Starsk, wake up, buddy.” Hutch leaned over and touched Starsky’s forehead, damp with perspiration and moist, clinging, dark curls. To Hutch, it felt unusually warm, and when he looked up at Ina, she seemed to read his mind.

“Yes, he is running a fever. I wish we had medicine to give him, but there is nothing here except this basic first aid kit.”

Hutch reached up and rubbed at the worry lines creasing his brow. He supposed he should be grateful that he had at least gotten Starsky out of the rain and that the bleeding had slowed down. Carefully lifting the blanket, he looked at the bandage, watching the gauze slowly turn pink, as the blood seeped from the gash in his friend’s leg. Ina had apparently re-situated the tourniquet and found the right location to stop the blood pumping from Starsky’s body at such an alarming rate. Hutch knew he had to clear his mind and figure out a plan. Not knowing much about hurricanes, he had no idea how long they could expect this siege to last.

Chapter 4

Outside the storm raged on. From time to time, they heard one mysterious item or another bang into the building, clattering as it was swept away and replaced by another. Javier and the other men made regular checks of the windows, covering them with blankets taped to the walls to shield the occupants should one of the windows shatter or be blown from its frame. Despite the rumbling and roar, the walls held; and though at

times it sounded like the wind would tear the ancient roof from the train depot, it hung on with the tenacity of an old soldier not ready to surrender the battle.

Looking at his watch, Hutch was surprised to see it was only 11:30 p.m. It seemed to him that he and Starsky had been riding out this merciless hell for days, rather than hours.

Ina touched Hutch's shoulder lightly, bringing him back to the moment. "Let me see if his bandage needs changing again," she said softly. "Have you been checking the tourniquet?"

"Yeah..." Hutch rubbed his tired eyes. "Every time I loosen it, the bleeding increases again." He turned a worried face to Ina. "I've got to get him some help. I'm afraid he's going to lie here and bleed to death. He needs a doctor—and he needs one now." The anguish in his voice was no more piercing than that she saw in his eyes.

"I know you are frightened for him, my friend, but there is nothing more we can do right now. You cannot go into the *stormento* and expect to live through it. Even if you made it to the next town, you would find no one to help you anymore than we have been able to do. It is best you stay here with him. Your presence seems to comfort him. I see how he calms when you speak. He knows your voice, Señor Hutch, and he finds peace in it."

Hutch blinked quickly, forestalling the tears that sprung to his eyes.

"Besides," she said quietly, "should Our Father decide it is time for him to come Home, you should be here to say your good-byes."

Despite the woman's best intentions, Hutch felt the anger rise in him like mercury in the hot sun. "He's NOT going to die! We've been through too much, survived too many life and death situations for something like this to take him out. You don't know my partner, lady. He's got more will power in his little finger than ten men."

Unoffended by Hutch's outburst, Ina smiled and patted his shoulder. "I'm sure you are right. Still, you must content yourself for now, with being here. Perhaps by daybreak the eye of the storm will have passed and we can take him to a hospital in Carlos's truck. Okay?"

Embarrassed at having flared-up at the goodhearted woman, Hutch apologized, shamefacedly, "Look...I'm sorry. I guess I'm tired, and so damn frustrated that we're stuck here, unable to do anything to help him. I didn't mean to take it out on you. You and your friends have been great."

"Of course you didn't," she agreed. "Now, you go have something to eat while I change this dressing, si? Elena prepared black beans and rice on the hot plate. It is very good and will give you strength. Run along, now."

Hutch reached down and touched Starsky's forehead again, grateful to discover his skin was cooler. "Right...I'll, uh, I'll do that. Thanks, Ina." Hutch stood, stretching his long legs, then turned and gently squeezed her arm. "Thanks," he repeated, before shuffling toward the little corner table the evacuees had set up as their makeshift kitchen.

As Hutch approached, Elena turned shy brown eyes up at him; then, without being asked, she ladled the steaming, hot, black beans over a small aluminum pan filled with rice. Hutch smiled at her as he took the plate. "Thanks. That smells great."

Not having understood any word except *thanks*, Elena dropped her eyes demurely, busying her hands with pouring Hutch a cup of coffee to chase down the pungent bean mixture. Finding herself attracted to the tall, older, good-looking man, she weighed her curiosity against her courage, and found she came up sadly lacking in the latter. Before Hutch could try again to draw her into conversation, she scurried back to the cot where one of the children lay sleeping and made a job of tucking the cover around him snugly.

Hutch looked around the room at the tired faces—some dozing, others with their eyes glued to the partially boarded, cloaked windows. As the lights began to flicker again, and eventually die, a timorous murmur rose in the room, a subtle expression of fear and uncertainty. But before Carlos and Javier could light the candles, the electricity flared back to life and the room quieted again.

"Señor´ Hutch—" Ina's voice rang out across the room. Hutch's head jerked around and he saw Starsky stirring on the cot, Ina holding him back against the pillow, gently restraining his arms. Hutch crossed the room in a half dozen long strides.

"Hold on, buddy. Everything's fine." Hutch leaned over Starsky, quickly reaching down to take his hand.

"Where are we?" His mind a jumble, Starsky's eyes flitted about the room, taking in his surroundings, struggling to get his bearings. "Hutch?"

"It's okay." Hutch squeezed his hand again and sat down on the stool just vacated by Ina. "We're in the shelter. You remember the shelter? The tree fell and we were trying to get to the shelter?"

Slowly Starsky lifted his head from the pillow and tried to look down at his feet. "I...I think I remember the tree.... But my leg—it hurts like hell. What happened to my leg?"

"It looks like you were either gouged by a jagged limb of the tree, or cut by some of the glass from the windshield."

Ina's round face appeared above Hutch's shoulder. "I think it was a branch," she interjected. "The wound was very ragged and very dirty. But I have cleaned it now, and you will be fine until the doctor can take a look." She smiled at the dark-haired man kindly. "It is good to see you awake, Señor Starsky."

Starsky's head sank back into the pillow as he digested her words. "And it sounds like I'm lucky to *be* awake," he answered. "I appreciate all you've done. Thanks for takin' us in." Hutch noticed the short speech seemed to drain the energy from Starsky's weak body.

"You just rest and put your faith in God, and you will feel better soon," she reassured him, then rejoined Elena in cleaning up from dinner.

"As soon as this storm lets up, I'll get you to a doctor," Hutch said.

A ghost of a smile flickered to Starsky's lips. "Doesn't sound like that's gonna be anytime soon. Then, lowering his voice he asked, "What about Copeland? Any sign of him?"

Hutch glanced over his shoulder, making certain no one was listening. "Nothing. I haven't said anything to these people. Figured they had enough to worry about. At first, I thought he might show up, but he probably suspects we're here and decided to look for somewhere else to hold up."

"He has a gun," Starsky reminded him. "I'd think that'd make him pretty bold."

"Yeah..." Hutch pondered. "I don't know, Starsk. Right now, I'm more concerned about this place blowing away and about getting you to a hospital to have that leg looked after."

"Hey..." Starsky reached out and laid his hand on Hutch's forearm. "I'm gonna be fine. Like you said, I've been through a helluva lot worse. You think a little cut on my leg's gonna keep me down?" Starsky asked with a crooked grin, "We both know I'm not only the good lookin' one, I'm also the tough one."

Not fooled by Starsky's false bravado, Hutch smiled back and shook his head. "You're definitely *not* the modest one." His expression more somber, he added, "You just rest and let me worry about Copeland and the hurricane. We'll get out of here soon. I promise."

But Starsky's eyes had already begun to close, his strength ebbing. Hutch gently pulled the blanket up and tucked it around Starsky's neck, then went back to refill his coffee cup.



Lying on one of the canvas cots only a few feet from Starsky, Hutch drifted in and out of a troubled sleep while the hurricane raged outside. The hours had crawled by slowly, and with the dark clouds swirling around them, there was no visual sign that dawn had arrived. To the trapped refugees huddling in their shelter, praying that the tiny depot would remain steadfast against the torrential rain and wind, time seemed non-existent.

Hutch woke with a start, unsure what had stirred him from his uneasy sleep. He sat up, cocking his head to one side, listening. There it was! Silence.... The howling wind and pounding rain had stopped. The hurricane had passed. Relieved, Hutch sprang from the cot and headed for the door, only to be intercepted by Carlos.

“No, no, Señor´ Hutch. You cannot go outside yet.”

“But it’s stopped, the hurricane’s passed.”

“No,” the older man shook his salt-and-pepper head. “We are only in the eye now. She will cross soon and it will begin again. Many times, the backside is more ferocious than the front. We must stay put.”

Disappointed, but trusting the man knew what he was talking about, Hutch didn’t try to push past Carlos. In fact, he seemed to recall somewhere deep in his memory, having read about the phenomena the Cuban was describing.

“If you wish, you can open the door and look,” Carlos added.

Curious, Hutch decided to do just that. With Carlos close behind, he crossed over to the door and unlocked the dead bolt, swinging it open slowly. Standing there, in the calm of the hurricane’s eye, he came face to face with Copeland. The man grinned as he pointed the Magnum straight at Hutch’s forehead. “Well, what do you know? I never expected a pig as my welcoming committee.”

Chapter 5

Hutch froze. *How could I have been so stupid!* he berated himself. He knew, belatedly, he should never have let down his guard, even for an instant. Why the hell hadn’t he taken Starsky’s gun when he had the opportunity? Fatigue and worry over his injured partner had dulled his senses; now here he was, caught like a green rookie without a weapon—unprepared.

“Back in!” Copeland gritted out between clinched teeth. He motioned with the gun barrel for Hutch to back up.

Never taking his eyes off the murderer, Hutch complied. “Look, put the gun away before someone gets hurt. These people aren’t going to try anything,” Hutch reasoned.

“Just shut up and do what I tell you! *I’m* in charge now.” Using his foot, Copeland kicked the door shut behind them. His eyes quickly perused the room, taking in the scared faces of the men, women, and children. Most drew back and huddled against their canvas cots, the men shielding their families—unsure what was happening, and unwilling to risk asking.

“Where’s pretty boy?” Copeland snarled. “The tree get him?”

Unwittingly, Ina's eyes slid toward Starsky, revealing his quiet form on the cot to Copeland's right. The man snorted and a cruel smile curled his lips. "Good...good—looks like he's out of commission for awhile." When he spied the table laden with supplies, he barked out an order. "You—" With his free hand, he pointed at Ina. "Get me something to eat—now!"

The frightened woman scurried to the table, and with shaking hands, hastily ladled a generous portion of the beans and rice into an aluminum pan and offered it to him. "Not that, you stupid sow! You think I'm crazy? I can't eat that and hold a gun! Make me a sandwich."

Tearfully, Ina hurried back to the table and slapped a piece of bologna between two slices of dry bread and took it back to Copeland. He snatched it from her without taking his eyes off Hutch, and scarfed it down, barely bothering to chew.

Hutch cut his eyes over at Starsky and saw the slow, even breathing of sleep. No help from that quarter. Even if Starsky was awake, Hutch knew the chances of him being able to help would be slim to none. He watched Copeland stuffing the sandwich into his mouth, more like an animal than a man. From the looks of his haggard face and torn clothes he'd spent a miserable, harrowing night out in the storm. Hutch could see similar nicks and scrapes covering the man's exposed skin as those he and Starsky had endured from the biting winds and flying debris. His hair plastered to his head, and two days' beard growth only added to Copeland's look of malevolence.

"Coffee! I want coffee with this, damn you!" Copeland demanded of Ina. His eyes blazed with anger, but never left Hutch's face. He wasn't taking any chances. When Ina handed him a cup of steaming, hot coffee, he gulped it down, impervious to the scalding liquid. He tossed the empty cup on the floor, the thick stoneware shattering when it landed with a loud crack.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his free hand, Copeland seemed to regain his balance from the food and drink. "I see a truck and a car out there. One of you jokers is gonna drive me out of this dump. And just to make sure blondie here doesn't try anything cute, we'll take his partner with us."

Without thinking, Hutch stepped forward, ready to protest, but quickly found himself staring down the barrel of the Magnum again. "Uh-uh," Copeland warned. "Don't even think about it."

Seeing Copeland meant it, Hutch held his hands up in supplication, hoping to reason with him. "Okay...okay. Take it easy. Look, why don't we leave these people out of this? They have nothing to do with what's going on between us. They're just trying to survive this hurricane and get out of here alive with their families."

“Awh...you're makin' my heart bleed, Hutchinson,” Copeland sneered. “I told you I'm calling the shots now and I don't need no advice from you.”

“I know...I know... You're in charge. But Starsky and I are the ones who're responsible for your being here. Why not let *me* drive you out. I'll be your hostage. My partner can't even walk, he'd just slow us down.”

Copeland laughed. “Nice try, Hutchinson. But I know you'd take a bullet yourself rather than let anything happen to pretty boy. That's why he's going and you ain't.”

Looking around the room again impatiently, the gunman pointed at one of the men standing in front of his family. “You. You're my driver. You'll know how to get us out of here.” The man, Raphael, who could speak no English, looked anxiously at Carlos, then Javier, imploring them to tell him what the crazy man with the gun had said.

Carlos quickly interpreted and Raphael drew back in fear, turning to whisper to his wife, who, in turn, threw her arms around him and began to sob. “Please, take me instead,” Carlos offered. “It is my vehicle and I have lived here the longest. You will be safer with me.”

Copeland considered this, sizing up the older man. “All right,” he said after a moment's hesitation. “You, me and pretty boy. I want two of these men to take him—” His words were drowned out by the shrieking wind and the deafening hammering of the rain as Debbie began her deadly march over the shelter again. “What the hell—?”

“It is the hurican', señor'. She is moving again. We were in the eye.”

Hutch watched Copeland sharply, hoping for a distraction so he could make his move. Despite the howling wind and the loud drumming of the rain on the roof of the depot, the gunman stayed focused, not giving him any quarter.

“I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Eye? What *eye*? You tryin' to hand me some mumbo-jumbo? We're getting out of here now!”

“You can't, Copeland. The worst part of the storm is just beginning. If you try to leave now, you'll all be killed,” Hutch argued.

“Please, señor, he is right,” Carlos agreed. “If we leave now, we will not make it to the mainland. Please trust me. I do not want to die, and we all three will, if we try to leave now.”

Copeland's face was a mirror of conflicting emotions as he tried to decide if the scared Cuban man was lying to him. Then, without warning, a loud crash shook the ground just outside the window behind him, rattling the shelter from its concrete floors to the highest beam of the rafters. Before anyone knew what was happening, the sanctuary was plunged into darkness.

Seeing his opening, Hutch lunged forward in the pitch-blackness, grabbing Copeland's hand, driving his right arm up—deflecting the gun toward the ceiling. As he struggled for control of the weapon, Hutch was surprised by the strength Copeland still possessed after being stranded outdoors in the gale-ridden night. Hutch felt the sharp kick of the Magnum as it discharged, slamming a round into the ceiling above them. Suddenly, Hutch heard a dull thud and felt the assailant go limp and crumple on the floor before him.

Without stopping to wonder what had happened, Hutch wrested the gun from Copeland's loosened grip and stood up, pointing it down at the dark lump at his feet. Within seconds, a battery operated lantern flamed to life, revealing the prostrate man on the floor, lying in a puddle of steaming, hot black beans. Beside his head lay the cast iron pot that had held the mixture. Hutch's eyes flew up to the frightened face of Elena—the pot wielder—who seemed no less surprised by her own actions than Hutch had been.

Quiet hung in the air for only a moment before a wide grin broke the solemn expression on the girl's face and she began laughing. Hutch, awash with relief and exhaustion, gave way to the laughter himself. Suddenly, the whole room joined in—immensely amused by the irony that an armed gunman, who'd survived a night alone outdoors in one of the worst hurricanes to hit the peninsula this century, had been taken out by a sixteen year old girl, brandishing a pot of beans!

The lights flickered back on, then off, and back on again. Outside, the maelstrom still raged, but the electricity held. Hutch rolled the unconscious murderer onto his stomach and secured his hands with a spare set of cuffs. At the direction of Carlos, two of the men dragged Copeland to a broom closet and locked him in.

Ina lightly touched Hutch's shoulder. "Señor Starsky is awake," she told him with a smile. "I think his fever has broken. He's asking for you."

Stuffing the Magnum back into its holster, Hutch made his way across the room to where Starsky lay on the cot. "Hey, buddy. How're you doing?"

"Terrific," Starsky muttered. "What'd I miss? I thought I heard that cannon of yours fire. Was it a dream?"

"No, you heard it all right. Copeland's here, but we've got him in custody now."

Starsky's eyes widened momentarily, then drooped again. "Awh, come on—I didn't sleep through somethin' like that, did I?"

"Afraid so. But it's okay." Hutch smiled indulgently and patted Starsky's arm. "I'll let you take out the next bad guy, okay?"

“Okay,” Starsky whispered back. “He didn't crack that big, dumb skull of yours, did he? I mean, I wasn't there to watch your back for ya...” His eyes were only slivers of blue now, as their tired lids slid shut.

“You may find this hard to believe, Starsk, but somehow I managed to muddle through on my own,” Hutch smirked good-naturedly. You just try and get some rest. The hurricane is nearly passed, so we should be able to get you to a hospital soon. Just take it easy.”

Starsky only grunted, giving up the effort to stay awake.

Hutch sighed tiredly, running an exhausted hand over his eyes before reaching down to tuck the covers around Starsky again. Once satisfied his partner was sleeping soundly, he slumped over in his seat and fell asleep. Even the blaring sound of the cruel wind and the pounding rain couldn't keep him awake now.

Epilogue

Hutch held the door open as Starsky made a great show of hobbling into the squad room, leaning heavily on the rented cane. Most of the others merely glanced up and nodded at the two, having seen this routine repeated everyday over the week since their return from Florida with Copeland. Once Hurricane Debbie had passed over Islamorada, a FEMA team had rescued the occupants of the shelter, and taken Starsky to the nearest functioning hospital for treatment.

It turned out that in spite of the bulging knot on his skull, Copeland wasn't seriously injured, and after receiving three stitches was transported back to Cabrillo State Pen. Now under much tighter security than that from which he'd made his getaway, the case was closed and Starsky and Hutch had returned to their regular routine. Aside from Starsky's milking the situation for all it was worth, it was business as usual.

Starsky eased into his chair while Hutch headed straight for the coffee maker. Before he could pour a cup, Dobey's door swung open.

“Starsky—Hutchinson—my office.” Then, quite out of character, he added the word, “please.” He didn't even seem upset that they'd sauntered into work fifteen minutes late.

Hutch looked across the room at Starsky and arched a surprised brow. “*Please?*” he mouthed at Starsky. Equally surprised, the dark-haired cop shrugged his shoulders before following Hutch at a pathetically slow shuffle across the squad room to their boss's office.

Squeezing past Dobey's rotund figure in the doorway, Starsky asked, “You feelin' okay, Cap'n?”

“What's that supposed to mean, Starsky?!” Dobey blustered.

Opening his mouth to respond with an irreverent comeback, Starsky's jaw dropped at the sight of three familiar faces—Ina, Carlos, and Elena. “Hey, look, Hutch—look who's here!”

Hutch came forward eagerly and greeted the visitors, shaking Carlos's hand before being caught up in a warm bear hug from Ina. After unintentionally squeezing the breath out of the blond, Ina turned her robust affection on Starsky, accidentally sending the cane flying from beneath his grip. Only shy Elena held back. Even though she smiled and was obviously happy to see the two men, she succeeded in avoiding eye contact.

A casualty of Ina's boisterous hug, Hutch's hair stood out in wild tufts all about his head. Raking a hand through to smooth it, he asked, “What're you folks doing here?”

“We bring Elena by to say thank you again.” Carlos held his John Deere cap in his hand, his fingers nervously playing up and down the brim. “We use the reward money you gave her to locate her family. It is impossible to believe—but they live in San Dimas. That is only a few miles from here. We are taking Elena to be with them now.”

A broad grin lit Hutch's face. “That's wonderful news, Elena,” he told her sincerely.

“You earned that reward, Elena,” Starsky added, giving her a mischievous grin. “If it hadn't been for you, probably none of us would be here right now. You swing a pretty mean pot for a lady.”

Even though she couldn't understand them, the shy girl looked up with gratitude shining in her eyes and smiled at the two detectives, bobbing her head in agreement. When they all laughed, Carlos quickly translated their words to Elena. Then, unexpectedly, she stepped forward and wrapped her slender arms around Hutch, her head only reaching just below his chin. She gave him a quick hug, then moved to Starsky and did the same. Embarrassed by her own forwardness, Elena stepped back and giggled nervously.

Dobey, watching the scene with interest, cleared his throat and growled, “Maybe I should do us all a favor and fire the two of you and hire this young lady!”

Starsky's head snapped up, a hint of indignation dancing in his eyes. “Now wait a minute, Cap'n—it's not like I lost *my* gun. I mean I was incapacitated and all.”

This brought a scowl from Hutch. “That's just like you, Starsky! Blame it on me. If you'd been paying attention to where you were going, that tree wouldn't have fallen on the Jeep in the first place—”

With a subtle jerk of the head, Dobby motioned to the three visitors to follow him. Starsky and Hutch didn't even seem to notice as Elena, Carlos, and Ina discreetly slipped past them.

“We may as well go down to the coffee shop,” Dobey whispered, as he escorted them out of the office. “They could be at it for hours.” He quietly closed the door behind them.

In the background, the argument continued. “And that cane! Starsky, you don’t need that cane anymore than I do—”

“Now that ain’t fair, Hutch. I’m in pain here. You saw the size of that wound—”

The End

May 20-July 12, 2002 (I’m a very slow writer)