

Summary: On a long weekend, Starsky and Hutch enjoy a nice, quiet time at a cabin on a lake.

Really??

Both hurt.

Categories: Gen

Genre: Action/Adventure

Warnings: Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

A Bond of Friendship

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"Starsky!"

Laying near the edge of the bed after a restless night, Starsky jerked awake. "What, where, ooooh!" he cried out as he dropped off the bed and hit the floor with a thump. He laid still a few seconds then turned to Hutch and growled, "Damn Hutch. Did 'ya have to do that?"

"Yes, I had to! We're late! It is 8:45! What's with you? This is the third time this week. Dobby's gonna' put us on traffic duty!" shouted Hutch.

Starsky scrambled to his feet and headed to the bathroom, trying with difficulty to shake off the sheet wound around his right foot. Finally, free of it, he called over his shoulder to Hutch,

"Would you make some coffee, please, huh? I'll be ready in five 'kay?"

Shaking his head and mumbling to himself, Hutch made his way to the kitchen to do the task.

Ten minutes later, Starsky appeared in the kitchen wearing his dark blue long sleeve T-shirt over his favorite faded jeans. He grabbed the cup out of the hand Hutch was holding it in.

"Thanks Hutch. You're a lifesaver."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just get moving. You drive." Hutch unplugged the coffee machine and strode past his friend heading to the front door. Starsky gulped the hot liquid down and ran to strap his gun on. He grabbed his navy blue wind breaker and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The ride to work was silent. Starsky kept glancing at Hutch out of the corner of his eye. He decided it would be better to keep his mouth shut as he observed the glowering mask of his friend's face. After another poor night of sleep the last thing he wanted to do was argue with his best friend.

As soon as Starsky was through the squad room doors, Dobby bellowed out, "Starsky, Hutch! Get in here now!"

Starsky froze, turned and glanced at Hutch who simply pushed him through the door and then closed it and sat down in the chair on the right. Grinning sheepishly, Starsky sat down as well.

"Sorry Cap. It was my fault we're late. I promise it won't happen again."

"You're sorry!" Dobby roared, his face taking on a dark red hue as he glared at Starsky.

"This is the third day in a row and as I recall you promised on each of those days that it would be the last time! What do you have to say about that?"

Starsky's smile faded. He looked at Hutch who was glaring at him also. His head dropping, eyes on the floor, he shrugged slightly with rounded shoulders and said softly,

"Cap, Hutch. I'm sorry. I haven't been sleeping well and the past couple of cases have been kinda' rough. I'm just all in I guess."

Frowning, Hutch took a closer look at his curly haired friend who was still staring at the floor with hunched shoulders. This was not a normal Starsky.

Hutch met Captain Dobby's questioning eyes and shrugged.

"Starsky, look at me." Hutch said softly.

Starsky raised his head and looked over at Hutch, one eyebrow raised. Hutch frowned as he noticed that his buddy's face was paler than normal and the skin below both eyes was sunken and darker than usual.

"What?" Starsky growled out.

Without answering, Hutch turned back to the captain.

"You know Cap'n. He is looking worn out and the last three weeks have been grueling. What about letting us take a long weekend? We don't have a case right now."

Captain Dobby looked from Hutch to Starsky and now, really looking at one of his two favorite detectives he could see how exhausted the man appeared. Relaxing back in his chair he studied both of his boys and then leaned forward and said,

"Okay. I figure you both are worn out. Go ahead and get out of here." Raising his voice, he added, "And you better be back here bright eyed and bushy tailed and ON TIME Monday morning!"

Starsky had listened hopefully to the conversation, his right lip curving slightly upwards.

Now he sat up straight grinning broadly.

"Sounds good buddy. Just don't get lost."

"I saw a little trail leading off from the back of the cabin. I'll just follow that. I might be awhile."

Hutch looked at Starsky and then said, "Sure buddy. Enjoy. Why don't you plan on being back by six at the latest and I'll have our dinner ready and waiting?"

Grinning, Starsky said he would do that and not to worry, he could find his way back.

Starsky followed the meandering little trail deeper into the woods. He disturbed a squirrel which raced to and scampered up the trunk of a tree and then with its tail twitching began to scold him. Starsky eyed the squirrel with a frown and kept moving. It felt good to stretch his legs after sitting in the boat for so long.

The deeper into the woods, the quieter it got except for an occasional bird call or the scrambling of squirrel's feet as they ran up and down trees. He crossed a small, shallow creek and followed the path upwards. He stopped abruptly wondering what it was he just heard. He stood listening and not hearing anything else he shrugged his shoulders and continued walking. Then he stopped again. It was a scream. A very little but high pitched scream. It was coming from further up the trail.

Starsky began running in the direction the scream had come from. He didn't hear anything more and hoped he could find whoever it was. He ran through some thorny, wild raspberry vines, unaware of the scratches it left on his arms. He broke through a thicket and stopped. A camp was set up about twenty feet ahead. One large tent and one small tent behind it. Two men were sitting on a log next to the fire pit they had made. The two men were looking at him with suspicion. One was a big, heavy set man, with a beard down to his chest. His black hair was unkempt and oily. He was wearing blue jean overalls. The man next to him was as thin as a bean pole. His dark eyes stared out from beneath shaggy eyebrows. His blond hair was dirty and stringy. He too wore overalls. A scar that ran from just under his nose to the right side of his mouth pulled his lip up into a permanent sneer.

"What you lookin' at Mister? And what are you doing here?" the heavyset man barked out reaching his hand to the rifle that was leaning on the log beside him. Another rifle was propped next to the skinny one.

Starsky took a step forward and was about to speak but was cut off by Beanpole.

"We didn't say you could come any closer Mister. You stay put. Ya' hear?" Starsky was starting to get a bad feeling about these two.

"Answer the question! What are ya' doin' here?" said Beanpole.

"I heard someone screaming. I was coming to see if I could help. Is someone hurt?"

The bigger man that Starsky decided to call Grizzly growled, "Maybe ya' 'ought to mind your own business."

Starsky, already tense and on alert, felt prickles down his spine. "Look, I heard the screaming. Now if someone is hurt I may be able to help. I have a little training in first aide. And I know someone screamed."

"Well, Mister, that was my 'niece.' She saw a big spider and it scared her som'pin fierce." He said and let out a laugh. Beanpole looked at his friend and grinned.

"I'd like to see her and make sure she is alright." Starsky ground out.

Both men stopped their chuckles and stared at Starsky, who met their stare and didn't back down. Grizzly then hollered, "Mandy! Get yer' butt out here right now."

Starsky watched as a small girl, with dark brown hair, and wide hazel eyes stepped hesitantly out of the big tent. She looked like she was around ten years old. She wore worn out blue jeans and a man's shirt that was way too big for her. The sleeves were rolled many times so that her forearms were exposed. Starsky noted what looked like fingerprint type bruises on both arms. The girl was looking down at her feet and shaking.

Starsky's heart squeezed painfully as he looked at the girl.

"Are you all right? Have you been hurt?" he asked softly.

Without looking up Mandy vehemently shook her head. She quickly glanced up at Starsky and then looked down again.

"See? I told ya' she wasn't hurt!" Grizzly shouted.

Starsky was nobody's fool. He knew the girl was not being treated right. Not with those bruises and her fearful behavior. He glared at the two men and then turned his attention back to Mandy.

"Honey, are you sure you're okay? I'm a police detective and I can help you." Starsky noticed but ignored the startled movements from the men when he said who he was. It didn't surprise him in the least that they were not happy about who he was.

Mandy looked at Starsky. He looked like such a nice man. But she couldn't say anything because she would be beaten and they would hurt the nice man too. She darted her eyes over to the two men, then down at the ground again while shaking her head.

"Okay, Mister. You heard her. Now 'git out of here. Yer' not welcome and ya' got no business snooping around here even if ya' are a cop!" Grizzly stood up as if daring Starsky to do anything.

Starsky sighed. The girl had gone back into the tent.

Starsky pointed his finger at the two. "I am warning ya' right now that you better not hurt that child. I'm going to come back tomorrow and see how she is. If she's been hurt anymore you both are going to be in a world of pain." He growled, before turning and marching back the way he came.

It took him less time to get back to the cabin than it did leaving. Starsky was so angry and frustrated about the situation he had just left behind and he marched rapidly back down the trail. Once he reached the porch, he stopped, breathing hard and fuming. Needing to lash out and not thinking clearly, he smashed his left fist into the nearest wooden support pillar. Crying out in pain, he stood and stared at his bloody hand. At least the pain gave him something else to focus on.

The cabin door was flung open as Hutch rushed through it to stand before Starsky. He saw the injured hand and swore.

"Starsky, what the hell happened? What, what the, did you do this?" Looking at the blood on the wooden pole, he got his answer. "Starsky? What is this all about?" When he got no answer, he said, "Never mind. Come in here and let me take care of this. You can tell me what's wrong while I work on that hand."

Telling Starsky to sit at the table, Hutch went to his duffle bag and got the first aid kit out and brought that and some wash clothes and towels and set them on the table. He found a bowl in the cupboard and filled it with warm water and set it on the table before sitting down next to Starsky. As he gently dabbed the blood off with a wet washcloth, he grimaced almost as much as Starsky did, realizing how much it had to hurt. He looked up at Starsky, who was looking at his hand.

"Starsk," he said gently. "What happened to get you so upset? And don't tell me nothing. You don't haul off and slug a wood pole for just anything. And how in the world did you get all these scratches?" He looked into Starsky's eyes earnestly, his eyebrows raised, gently beckoning him to open up. "Huh? Tell me buddy. What's wrong?"

Starsky sighed, then slammed his right fist onto his thigh. "There is a little girl up in the woods that I know damn well is being abused. But she won't admit it and there was nothing I could do at the time. I hated leaving her there!"

As Hutch continued gently tending to Starsky's hand, he listened as his friend told him all that had happened. As he finished wrapping gauze around his partner's hand, he swore repeatedly. Both he and Starsky cared about all the victims they dealt with, but their hearts were especially broken when it came to kids.

"Okay," Hutch said, as he tended to the scratches, bathing the blood off, gently drying them and then putting on small bandages. "We both go up there tomorrow. With our guns. But we don't have any jurisdiction here. We would have to come back and have the local authorities take over."

Starsky glared at Hutch and snorted. "Jurisdiction, 'schmurisdiction'! I'm not going to leave that girl there again! Not if she is really being beaten. When we get up there, I'll go talk to Mandy and you keep the beasts distracted. Okay?"

"Okay Starsk. But we are going to tread very carefully. If those jerks are as bad as I think they are from what you've told me, this is not going to be so easy to do with just the two of us."

Starsky looked into Hutch's eyes and nodded.

The big man moved up to and stood at Hutch's head. He grinned and said, "You pigs are going to be our entertainment for a while. That is for as long as 'ya last that is." He looked over to Harley and said, "Ya' just remember I get Curly here first. Now let's get them strung up." Harley, his cheek bulging with chew, grinned and nodded. He grabbed Hutch by the shirt collar and hauled him up to his knees. Hutch gasped at the pain in his right shoulder that radiated down his arm and into his chest and back. He needed to do something, but he was already feeling so lightheaded and weak.

"Get on your feet Pig." Harley pulled harder on the shirt as Hutch struggled to stand.

Finally, breathing hard, he stood on trembling legs. He looked down at Starsky again just as Harley pushed him forward. Hutch stumbled but managed to stay on his feet. He moved forward as he was pushed toward a tree about twenty feet from the camp. He was jerked to a stop about three feet from the trunk of the tree. Panting in pain, sweat trickling down his face and body he stood shakily wondering what exactly was going to happen now. He kept alert for a chance to surprise one or both of them.

Bert approached Hutch, a rope in his hand that he proceeded to throw up and over the branch that stretched out about fifteen feet above them. He dropped the rope then felt around Hutch's jeans until he found the detectives hand cuffs. He cuffed Hutch tightly, tied the rope securely around the cuffs where they linked together between Hutch's hands.

Harley set his gun on the ground and followed his friend close to the tree where Bert wrapped the rope around the trunk. Then each of the men started pulling the rope until Hutch was strung up and hanging about a foot off the ground.

Hutch groaned as the pain sent lightning bolts of pain spreading out from the bullet wound from the stretch. The cuffs were already cutting into his wrists. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and grit his teeth. Opening his eyes as he heard the men walking back toward Starsky, he groaned again. "Oh, Starsky." Tears welled in his eyes as he thought of his pal being strung up the same way. He worried that if the bleeding from Starsky's low back wound had slowed down, that this would cause it to start up again. His own shoulder was still steadily seeping blood.

He watched as Bert kicked hard into the bullet wound with his heavy boot. Starsky jerked and cried out in pain. Hutch's face twisted in anger as he called out to the two brutes. "Stop it you bastards! Is that all you are good at is beating a man when he is down and defenseless? Stop it!" He jerked and twisted and only proceeded to injure his wrists.

Bert strode over to the struggling blond and slugged him in the gut. Hutch fought to get his breath back. Already weakened, he passed out before he got a good breath.

Starsky felt himself being pulled rapidly upward by both arms. His world began to spin like a Merry-Go-Round out of control. Before he could even try to stop it, the contents of his stomach spewed from his mouth onto the ground before him and some splattered onto Bert's shoes, who bellowed in rage and slugged Starsky in the kidneys. Starsky gasped in pain and his knees buckled and the two poachers dragged Starsky toward another branch on the same tree Hutch dangled silently from.

Stopping below the branch, Bert held Starsky up by putting his arms through Starsky's, then linking his hands together so that Starsky was dangling from his bent elbows. Starsky panted in pain. He could feel the blood from the bullet wound running down his back and soaking his blue jeans. He managed to lift his head up and through bleary eyes he saw Hutch unconscious and hanging from his cuffed hands. Furious, his adrenaline shooting through him, the brunette slammed his foot down on the man's boot and pushed backwards trying to tip the huge man over backwards. Unfortunately, his Adidas didn't do much to hurt his captor and being too weak from the blood loss, he couldn't topple the huge man.

Harley had thrown another rope over the new branch and walked back, got Starsky's cuffs out and fastened them around the trembling man's wrists. The two then repeated the process from before until Starsky was hanging also. Starsky groaned in pain as his arms were stretched high above him. Blue eyes watched as Bert walked out into the woods, returning with a branch that was about five inches around and six feet long. It was a fresh branch and hard. Starsky swallowed, tensing.

Bert laughed and said, "Now Pig, I will teach you a few manners."

Starsky began to kick out at the man. He wanted so to wipe the evil smile off the man's face.

"Go ahead, ya' Bastard! Give it your best shot ya' asshole! Feeling really brave when your competition can't fight back!" spat Starsky.

Bert scowled. "Ya' talk mighty big don't ya' Pig?" Bert sneered. "Well, let's see how ya' feel when I get through with ya!" With that Bert swung the branch hard into Starsky's right rib cage. Starsky screamed as the bones broke. Without pause Bert swung again and struck the bullet wound on his captive's back. Starsky couldn't help but scream out again. His hands, that were gripping the rope to keep his weight off his wrists, were becoming slick with sweat. The sweat streamed down his face and torso. Blood flowed heavily from the bullet wound. His head hung to his chest as he panted in agony. He shuddered, hearing the wicked laugh from his torturer.

"What's the matter Pig? Where's all that big talk now?" Bert asked standing before Starsky. Starsky raised his head as high as he could and spit into the man's face. Infuriated Bert began to swing the branch repeatedly over Starsky's torso front and back and his legs. More bones broke on both sides of his rib cage. The pain was agonizing and he began to cough up blood. He screamed again and again as his right thigh bone broke, then his left shin, both breaks tore through the skin. He began to have trouble catching his breath. He now twisted and struggled while both wrists were being strained and cut from the cuffs. His vision began to tunnel. A final strike of the branch hit over his left kidney and blessed blackness consumed Starsky as he passed out.

Harley, who had been watching impatiently as Bert beat the curly one finally moved forward and stood in front of the bigger man.

"Doggone Bert, ya' didn't hardly leave me nothin'!"

"Ya' can have the other one. He pissed me off big time Harley. Big time!"

"Starsk, Starsky are you with me?" There was no response and Hutch sighed as a tear fell unnoticed. The pain was almost more than he could bear. Beads of sweat popped out and rolled down his face. His hands were numb. Gazing around he noticed the absence of the men. He tried to reach the rope with his swollen hands, but they were too numb and stiff. Frustrated, he started cursing and almost missed the snap of a branch behind him. He froze and then called out, "Come on you bastards. Come where I can see you, you cowards." He heard footsteps and tried to twist around to see who it was, but couldn't.

Then the girl appeared before him.

"Are, are you Mandy?" asked Hutch.

"Yes, Mister." She looked him over, tears bubbling out of her eyes. "I'm so sorry."

Hutch kept his voice calm and low and spoke, "Mandy, we need your help. I'm afraid my friend is going to die if we don't get out of here. Do you think you could untie the rope from the tree and help me?"

"I'll try Mister." Mandy walked toward the trunk of the tree, trying not to look at Starsky.

Hutch watched as the girl struggled to undo the knotted rope, fearing she might not be strong enough to undo it.

Her face was reddening and she had her teeth gritted together in frustration as she frantically worked at the knot. Tears began coursing down her cheeks.

Hutch felt his hopes disappear.

"Mandy, honey, you can stop. They made them too tight. It's okay. Thank you for trying. You can still help us. Follow the trail that leads behind me to the cabin and then the road that leads to the office building. Can you do that? Tell them to call the police and tell them where we are. You think you could? I'm afraid we aren't going to make it unless you can get us some help."

"Okay Mister. I'm scared, but I will go." She said, her voice wobbly.

Suddenly they both heard Bert's voice hollering for the girl.

"Go Mandy, get out of here before they see you. And, thank you. We'll be okay."

Mandy nodded and spun around running as fast as she could away from the camp.

Starsky began to rouse. His tortured moans cut Hutch straight through to his heart.

"Starsk, can you hear me? Starsk?" Hutch asked.

Starsky was overwhelmed with pain. He almost blacked out again from it, but fought to stay alert. He thought he had heard Hutch's voice. His wrists hurt and his hands felt numb. It felt like his shoulders were going to be torn out of the socket. Every breath was like having daggers shoot into his chest. He couldn't get enough breath and he could tell it wasn't just from the pain. The

coppery taste of blood in his mouth confirmed that he had a punctured lung. The bullet wound and both legs throbbed with every beat of his heart. He could feel blood running down from all the injuries. He tried to lift his head, but couldn't. He moaned in frustration and fear.

"Starsk, can you hear me?" Hutch asked while looking around for any sight of the two men.

Starsky tried nodding his head. "Oh, God Hutch. I h hurt so bad." He rasped. He struggled again to lift his head and succeeded enough to look over at his friend.

"Hu, Hutch, are you okay? How bad, ya hurt?"

Hutch smiled, his eyes shining with tears. "Oh Starsk. I'm doing better than you. I hate to tell you this but our friends are on their way back here."

Starsky dropped his head and moaned again. "Oh, God Hutch. I don't, think I, can take, much more." He said gasping for air.

"I know." Hutch could see the bastards approaching the camp. "Starsk, Mandy is on her way to the office to let them know where we are. Just stay with me you hear?"

Starsky managed to nod his head a bit.

"Well, looky' here." Bert called out as they neared the two suffering men. "It looks like at least one of them is awake!"

Harley grinned. "Yeah, mine is for sure." He flung a dead rabbit and four squirrels to the ground and spit tobacco from his mouth.

Bert hollered at Harley, "Don't just throw them thar'. Since the damn girl is gone, you get to cook. And hurry it up, I didn't get no lunch and I'm starvin'. So, get to it."

Harley started to object, but the words died in his throat as he got a look at his friend's face. It was red and one look at the eyes spurred Harley into action. Grabbing the animals and pulling a knife from a sheath on his belt, he sat down on the tree trunk and began skinning their meal.

Bert wandered over to Starsky. "Hey, ya awake boy? Ya' don't look so good. Not so smart mouthed now are ya?"

Starsky managed to lift his head and spit blood into the man's face.

Bert roared, "Ya fuckin pig!" He bent down picking up his branch and slammed it across Starsky's crotch. The brunette let out a short scream, then gasped for air. He could hear Hutch screaming, but he sounded far off. He struggled to grasp the rope with his hands but they wouldn't work. He started to twist and kick out, but was just too weak. Another strike of the branch to his abdomen left him trying to get some air into his tortured lungs. Then his head exploded and he fell into a black abyss, free from pain.

"Take it easy son. We're going to get you to the hospital. You're safe now." said the Sheriff as he pulled out a walkie talkie and spoke into it requesting a helicopter for both men. Tell them to land at the Lake View resort. We'll be bringing them there ASAP." After receiving confirmation, he stuffed the device back into his pocket.

Starsky was trying to say something again, but was too breathless.

"Rest now. We're going to take care of both of you." He glanced toward the sound of a commotion. Hutch had awakened and was trying to get up.

"Starsky! Starsk. I've got to get over to him. He needs me to be there!"

Starsky once again tried speaking and got out a weak "Hut ch.."

Jack and the sheriff glanced at each other and shrugged their shoulders. Sheriff Daniels got up and moved to Hutch's side. Hutch was panicky, thrashing about as he fought off the hands holding him down.

"Please just move me next to him! He needs me. I've got to get to him!" Hutch cried out.

"Okay, pal, just hold on. Rob, Brad, let's get him on that blanket and we'll move him over by his friend."

Hutch relaxed back to the ground. He cried out in pain as they picked him up and put him on the blanket. The men then carried him over to Starsky's side. Hutch struggled to roll onto his right side so he could see his friend.

"I'm here Starsk." He reached for Starsky's hand and Starsky grasped it tightly. "We're going to be alright Starsk. Help is here."

Starsky looked at Hutch. "How.." is all he could say before coughing. Frothy blood was oozing from the corners of his mouth.

"Oh Starsk. Leave it to you to be asking about me when you can't even talk. I've been better buddy, but I'll be okay. It's you I'm worried about."

Starsky looked deep into Hutch's eyes, and was convinced he was telling the truth. Hutch could see the pain in Starsky's eyes. His face was ghost white. He gasped in air and began to talk again. "If, i, if I, don, makeit, "

Hutch reached his hand up to cup Starsky's face. "Don't you dare say it. You are going to fight and stay with me! You don't give up! I c, c, can't go on wi, without y, you. So, you are going to fight a, a, and, hang in there for me, you hear? Hang in there for me!"

Starsky closed his eyes and nodded. Hutch glanced up as the sheriff spoke, "Okay, we need to get a move on back to the resort. We need to get him on the blanket and then we are going to carry you both down to the office area."

checking his surgical site. She left the room promising to check on Starsky. Returning a few minutes later she told him that he was still in surgery.

Hutch sighed, hating to be stuck in bed when he could be up where he could keep track of his partner. He looked at his leg. A thick bandage was wrapped around his thigh. His right shoulder was bandaged and wrapped with gauze. He knew when the pain killer wore off, he was going to be in some major pain, but he was not going to take any more until Starsky was in the bed next to him.

He had finally fallen asleep. He awoke in pain and not seeing Starsky in the other bed he pressed the call light.

His nurse, a cheery red head, entered the room with a syringe in her hand.

"No." Hutch growled. "Where is my partner? I want to see him before I have anything for pain." He scowled at the nurse.

"Well, Detective Hutchinson, I'm sorry, but Detective Starsky will not be coming here for a while. He is in intensive care right now. I will call the doctor and ask him to come and explain things to you. How about I give you the shot after the doctor has talked to you?"

"Yeah, yeah, that will be fine. Damn it. I should be there with him." He spat out.

"I'm sorry. I will go page Dr. Abernathy, he's the surgeon that worked on your friend."

Hutch watched her leave the room and sighed. "Starsky, I'm sorry I'm not by your side. I just hope you are okay." He said aloud.

By the time the surgeon made his way into his room, Hutch was in major pain. He had sweat beading his face and running down his neck. The nurse had followed the doctor in and stood back, syringe in her hand, waiting on the doctor.

Seeing the condition of the patient and the nurse holding a pain shot he nodded to the nurse and said, "Go ahead and give him the shot. He should have had something by now."

"No, wait." Hutch said raising his swollen hand palm forward. "Not until I know about Starsky."

"Detective, ah Hutchinson, is it? You will have plenty of time to hear what I have to tell you. Let the nurse give you the medicine before the pain gets out of control."

Hutch nodded and allowed the nurse to inject the pain medicine. He then turned his attention to the doctor. "How is my partner? Is he going to be okay?"

Smiling the doctor said, "Firstly, my name is Dr. Abernathy." Hutch nodded.

"Okay, your partner is very sick. He has a concussion from a blow to the head. I had to put in fourteen stitches to close the wound from the blow. Both leg fractures were surgically reduced. The left tibia or shin bone fracture was such that we had to put in a steel rod to maintain stability.

He is going to be bedridden for a while as we could not cast either leg because the wounds will need to heal first. His left kidney is bruised. I removed the bullet from his back. His genitals are very bruised and swollen." Hutch began to swear.

"The chest injury is worrisome. He had seven broken ribs. His right lung was punctured by one of them. It has been repaired. But he continued to have trouble breathing so he is currently intubated. We are also watching very closely for infection as his temperature is elevated. For these reasons we are keeping him in the ICU until we can remove the tube from his airway. Are there any questions?"

Hutch was frowning. "But he will be okay, right?"

The tall, brown haired doctor smiled gently. "Detective, there is always a chance for something else to go wrong. That is why we want to keep a close eye on him. I assure you we will take very good care of him."

"Doctor, I know you probably will think I am crazy, but my partner and I are very close and have been through many tight situations before and, well, we do better if we can be together. I know I can't stay in the ICU, but could I at least visit with him?"

"Well," said Dr. Abernathy, "I would need to check with your surgeon first to see if he wants you to move around that much, but as far as I'm concerned it is okay with me."

"Thank you, Doctor." Hutch said, settling down into the pillow as he felt his eyes getting heavier.

"You're quite welcome. Get some rest now. I'll talk to your surgeon. Take care."

Before the doctor had left the room, Hutch had surrendered to the sedative effect of the pain killer and was asleep.

Hutch awoke when his breakfast tray was brought in and set up for him. He thanked the girl and while looking over the tray he wondered how Starsky was doing and if his doctor had given the okay for him to go visit him. He didn't have to wait long to find out as his nurse came in and told him that he could visit as long as he was on a gurney. He smiled and thanked her and asked her to find out if he could visit after he had eaten. She told him she would and left the room just as Captain Dobe was entering with a small plant in his hand.

Hutch smiled. "Captain, what are you doing here?" he said weakly.

Dobe set the plant down on the windowsill and pulled a chair to the bed and sat down.

"Well, Sheriff Daniels called and let me know that you two were here. He told me some of what happened." He paused then asked, "How are you, Hutch? Are you hurt bad?"

"I'm tired and I hurt but I'm much better off than Starsky is." Hutch said with a sad look on his face. "I got a bullet in the shoulder and my left femur was broken. I'm going to be laid up awhile. They can't put a cast on because of the wound when the bone broke through the skin."

Dobey grimaced and shook his head. He watched as Hutch took a bite of the oatmeal on his plate and chewed slowly. He noted that both wrists were bandaged and his hands were swollen.

Swallowing, Hutch looked at Dobey and said, "Cap'n, Starsky is so broken up. That bastard beat him with a big branch. He's in ICU. They have him on a ventilator. His ribs were all broken up and one punctured his lung. He has a concussion, a bruised kidney and both his legs had open fractures like mine. His temperature is up too. They are worried there is some infection. He was in so much pain." He said, choking back a sob. His eyes shone with tears.

"I'm so sorry Ken." Dobey said placing his hand on Hutch's arm. "I'm so sorry this has happened to both of you."

They both looked at the door as a gurney was being pushed into the room. Hutch told the captain that he had permission to visit with Starsky as long as he went up on a gurney.

"Why don't you come with me, Captain?" Hutch asked as he pushed the bedside table to the side. Most of the food remained untouched.

"I believe I will do just that if they will let me in."

Fifteen minutes later the nurse pushed Hutch's gurney along-side Starsky's bed. Since the room was crowded with medical equipment, the captain decided to wait outside. Hutch slowly and painfully rolled to his left side. He reached over and grabbed his partner's swollen right hand and held it. Seeing Starsky so still always bothered him. It was so unnatural for his partner. There was a thick bandage on the right side of his head with bruising extending down to his jawline. His right chest was bandaged and secured with hospital tape. A drain extended out from the right side of the bandage. A thick bandage was located further down toward the abdomen extending under his back. His entire chest and abdomen was badly bruised. Both legs were bandaged and elevated. The tube from his bladder was draining bloody urine into the bag hanging from the bed.

"Hey buddy. I'm here. I can't stay but they are going to let me come and visit you. I'm so sorry you are going through all of this. If I could take it from you, I would in an instant. You just rest and get better. I know I always complain that you talk too much, but I hate not hearing your voice at all. I'll be back as often as I can. I got to go now. See ya later." He finished as the nurse came into the room to end the visit.

As the nurse was moving Hutch from the room, Dobey stepped in and moved over to his detective's side. Observing all the bandages, tubes and equipment he shook his head and wiped a tear from his face. Not only were these two his best detectives, they were like sons to both him and his wife, Edith. He hated seeing this usually energetic man so silent and still. He patted the man's arm and then left the room.

He caught up to Hutch and the nurse at the elevators. He rode down with them and stayed to see Hutch settled in his bed. Hutch was pale and worn out from the activity. He was also grimacing as the pain was reaching an unbearable level again. The nurse had noticed this and brought in and gave him a shot to help the pain and then left the room.

Dobey reached over and patted Hutch's shoulder.

The nurse came in. Hi, what is, hey he's awake. That's wonderful." The petite blond moved to Starskys' other side and leaned over him.

"I'm Wendy. I've been your nurse since you've been here." She noted the sweat and could see the lines of pain on her patient's face.

"Oh dear, let me get you something for the pain." She stepped around the bed but was stopped when Hutch held up his hand.

"Wendy, he was struggling with the ventilator. I was wondering if the doctor might take it out now?" Hutch was laying on his side on the gurney that was pushed up tight to Starsky's bed.

"I'll page Dr. Strand and he will want to check your friend out. But, he just might be able to remove it now that Detective Starsky is awake. I'll be back with something for his pain." She smiled and left the room.

Starsky once again looked at his friend. He noticed that Hutch was laying on the gurney and frowned. He looked Hutch in the eye again, concern radiating out of his eyes.

"I'm okay Starsk. My thigh was broken like yours so until the wound heals, I can't bear any weight and the doc thinks I should avoid sitting upright. So here is my chariot." He smiled and even though it hurt he reached out again to cup Starsky's chin. "I've been so worried about you buddy. You scared me. I'm going to be old and gray before my time if you don't stop these close calls." Hutch smiled but Starsky could see that it didn't reach his eyes.

Footsteps brought the nurse and Dr. Strand into the room. Wendy quickly went to Starsky's bedside and injected the pain medicine into his IV port then moved out of the way allowing the doctor to approach his patient.

"Hi Detective Starsky. I'm Dr. Strand, your medical doctor while you are here. I've been informed that you are not happy with this machine breathing for you anymore?"

Starsky nodded slightly.

"Well it has been four days since surgery and as you are awake now, I think we can remove it. First I want to listen to your lungs." He listened to different areas over the lungs and straightened. "Yes, it can come out. It isn't going to feel good. I will need you to try to cough when I tell you to. Are you up to this?"

Starsky glanced at Hutch and held his hand up. Hutch grasped it and both he and his partner looked to the doctor again.

"Okay. Here goes."

The removal went smoothly although it hurt the brunette. The nurse disappeared only to return shortly with some ice chips. She spooned some into his mouth. Starsky closed his eyes in relief as the cool liquid passed over his sore throat.

Two floors down, Hutch awoke with a start. His heart was thumping in his chest. At first, he didn't know what was wrong and then he knew in his heart and his gut that Starsky was in trouble. He pressed the call button repeatedly, then began shouting for the nurse.

His nurse for the night ran into the room. "What's wrong? Are you alright?" she asked as she stopped at the side of his bed. Her name was Evelyn. She was an older woman and had a no-nonsense attitude as well as doing things by the book.

"I need to get up to Starsky right now. He's in trouble and he needs me!"

"Detective Hutchinson, this is what you were shouting about and waking the other patients for? We cannot allow you to go to your partner and you must keep quiet." She said sternly.

Hutch started shouting louder, "You either get me up to my partner or I will get there by myself! My partner needs me! We are so close that we can sense things that happen. Now if you're not going to help me, get the hell out of my way!" He started to swing his legs over the side of the bed. He gasped at the pain from both his shoulder and his leg.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" The nurse spat. "Stay put. I'll get a gurney!" She spun around and stomped out of the room. She returned in a few minutes.

"Get your legs up on the bed again. She pressed the button to raise the entire bed. When it stopped, she put the brakes on the wheels of the bed and the gurney and then braced against the gurney and told Hutch to work himself over. He did, although by the time he was centered on the gurney he was sweating, exhausted and in pain.

Putting the railings up and unlocking the brakes she quickly moved the gurney out the door and over to the elevators and proceeded to take him up to Starsky's room.

The nurse stopped suddenly as she reached Starsky's room. She was flabbergasted to see that Starsky really was in trouble. She could see him thrashing around while his nurse tried to calm him.

She quickly explained to Starsky's nurse what was happening and then pulled the gurney into Starsky's room. Starsky's nurse lowered the side rails on his bed while the other nurse pushed the gurney tight to the side of the bed and set the brakes.

"What's wrong with him?" Hutch shouted.

Starsky's nurse explained briefly about the infection and that they were trying to get his temp down so they could take him to surgery.

"What's your name?" he asked the plump, black haired woman. She told him.

"Well Amy, I want to thank you." He said and then immediately rolled to his side and captured Starsky's flailing hand. He began to talk soothingly to his frantic friend in that voice he used only for these times. Starsky gripped his friend's hand fiercely.

"Hutch? Hutch?" he rasped weakly.

"I'm here buddy. I'm here. Take it easy. Try to calm down and not move around so much. You are aggravating your wounds."

"Oh, dear God Hutch! It hurts so bad. Every breath! I can't stand it anymore! Help me! Please?" Tears began to flow down his cheeks again as he tossed his head from side to side.

"I know Starsk, I know." Hutch said, his own eyes welling with tears. "If I could take this from you I would. You know that don't you buddy?"

Starsky shook his head. "No, no. Don't want you to hurt. Not you! Oh, God help me, I can't stand this anymore!" He then began to mumble incoherently as his body once again succumbed to the fever.

Amy returned and placed the thermometer under Starsky's left arm.

"Amy, my God. Can't you give him something for this pain?" Hutch asked, a tear escaping his eye and streaking down his cheek.

"I'm sorry, no, I can't give him any more. He just received some medication right before you came up here." She looked down at Starsky and shook her head.

"Poor dear. He is so very sick."

She removed the thermometer and smiled. Starsky's temp had lowered to 102.4 degrees.

Telling Hutch the good news, she left the room to page the surgeon.

Hutch continued to talk quietly to his friend. He was scared to death that this infection was going to take his friend from him. And it tore his heart to pieces to see Starsky in such severe pain and there wasn't a single thing he could do to help him. He bowed his head and prayed for the first time in several years.

Starsky was lost in a world of pain and crazy images of circles and dots and floating amoeba like figures. They swirled, faded away then, raced back and grew in size as they got closer. Then he was back in the jungles of Vietnam. Once again, he was a prisoner of the North Vietnamese, screaming as they ripped his toenails off with pliers. He screamed and shook when they electrocuted him.

Then, he heard a calm, quiet voice. He clung to that voice. This voice he knew. This was Hutch. His friend, his support, the one who loved Starsky so much, he would take a bullet for him.

The visions faded away as he listened to the steady, soothing voice. Each breath was agony, but with Hutch at his side he calmed down. His lids raised and he looked into Hutch's eyes.

"Hush." He slurred. "Than' you."

Hutch smiled down at him. "For what?"

"For alway,, being, here, for m, me."

"No need to thank me Starsk. It goes both ways you know."

Starsky's eyes squeezed shut and he stiffened as a spasm ripped through his gut. He squeezed Hutch's hand so hard, Hutch was afraid that some bones might break.

Starsky began to rock his head from side to side. Tears of pain leaking from his eyes.

"What is it Starsky?"

"I can't stand it. I just want to stop breathing. It hurts so bad Hutch!" Starsky uttered from behind clenched teeth.

"Well, we are going to do something about that right now." Hutch startled a bit at the sound of Dr. Abernathy.

"David, your temperature has come down enough for me to go back in and clean out that lung. We will be taking you to surgery in few minutes. Hang in there." He said and then left the room.

Amy appeared next and injected a sedative in the port of Starsky's IV and soon, Starsky's eyes began to droop.

Amy turned to Hutch and said, "I'm going to have to move you out now. I'll have an orderly take you back to your room."

Hutch leaned towards his friend and reached out to cup his chin in his hand.

"Buddy, I have to go now. You can do this. And things will start improving after this is over with. Love ya buddy."

"Love, ya, too, Hush" Starsky slurred as his eyes closed.

As the nurse pushed him out into the hallway, Hutch choked back a sob, but couldn't stop the tears from tracing down his cheeks. He balked at going to his room. He knew he could not sleep anyway. He demanded to be allowed to stay in Starsky's room while he was in surgery. Amy was only too willing to let Hutch stay. She admired the friendship these two had.

Hutch did doze off for a while. His nurse Evelyn stopped by to check on him. After that he was wide awake.

It was at 7:30 am when Amy entered the room and moved Hutch out to the hallway. He watched anxiously as the orderlies wheeled Starsky past him and into the room. He groaned as he saw the breathing tube replaced. Starsky was very pale.

Dr. Abernathy approached Hutch. He smiled and gave Hutch a pat on the shoulder.

"It went well. I made sure I got every last bit of the infected material out of the lung. I've never seen lung tissue so inflamed. It is no wonder that David was in so much pain. I hope never to

"Come on Starsk. Open those eyelids and let me see those blue eyes of yours. You're taking too much time here. Quit shirking and wake up already." Hutch said and chuckled.

Starsky heard his friend and forced himself to lift his heavy eyelids. He squinted and looked to his left to see Hutch leaning forward with a big, goofy grin on his face.

Starsky made a weak smile and said, "Hey." His voice was hoarse and weak.

"Hey yourself. It's about time you quit lazing around and woke up. How are you feeling?"

"Sore, tired. Breathing is okay now." He said sighing in relief.

"How about some ice chips? I asked the nurse to bring some in when I saw you were waking up."

"That would be good. Throat sore." He looked over Hutch. "How are ya doin'?. Ya okay?"

"I'm doing well. The doc says he may let me go home tomorrow."

Starsky accepted an ice chip, then frowned.

Hutch noticed and asked him what was wrong.

Starsky wouldn't look him in the eye and mumbled "nothin."

"Starsk? Come on, me and thee remember? We don't keep secrets from each other."

Starsky glanced at Hutch and then looked at his blanket. "I just, just don't feel like being alone."

Hutch's heart was in his throat. He reached for Starsky's hand and held it firmly in his grasp.

"Awww, Starsk. It's okay. Even if I am discharged, I plan to be here every day, all day. I'm not going to leave you alone. Okay partner?"

Starsky looked to Hutch shyly, with a small lopsided grin on his face.

"Thanks Hutch. Thanks for everything. I knew ya' were with me while I was under. Sometimes I heard ya' talking, sometimes I just felt your presence."

"I'm glad it helped you. You would do the same for me, so no need to thank me."

Starsky accepted another ice chip and then his eyebrows rose. He swallowed the cold liquid and looked anxiously at Hutch.

"Hutch. Whatever happened to Mandy and those two animals? Do ya' know?"

Hutch nodded. "The Sheriff that rescued us came to get my statement five days ago. He says that Mandy is now living with a very nice foster family. He knows the family personally. Bert and Harley? They resisted arrest and were killed at the camp."

Starsky smiled. "That's good news all the way around."

Now Hutch became serious. He shifted in his seat and then leaned toward Starsky again.

"Starsk?"

"Yeah?"

"Starsky, you never told me what was bothering you. Will you please tell me now buddy?" Hutch asked softly.

Starsky looked down at his feet and then met Hutch's eyes with his own. "Okay, Hutch. It seems kinda' dumb now." He cleared his throat and tried to gently shift positions.

"Hutch, my doc back home. He found a suspicious mole on my back. I was supposed to make an appointment to have it removed and tested for cancer." He looked away again and said, "I was scared and I haven't made the appointment. Too scared to find out I guess." He shrugged his shoulders. "Kinda' dumb, huh?" He chanced a look at Hutch.

"God Starsky. I can't believe you have been carrying this load on your shoulders this long. Why didn't you come to me? Don't you know how much I care and would want to be with you to support you?"

Looking at Hutch again, Starsky saw the hurt in his eyes. He was ashamed of himself for not confiding in his best friend in the whole world.

"I'm really sorry Hutch. I know you do and would. I, I don't really know why I didn't tell ya'. I guess I'm just dumb, huh? Please forgive me Hutch. I never meant to hurt ya'."

"Starsky there is nothing to forgive. You were scared and didn't even know how to deal with it yourself much less bringing someone else in on it. Just, now that I know, will you make the appointment if I go with you?"

Starsky nodded. "Yeah, sure. It's not so scary knowing you will be there with me. Thanks Hutch. I really can't believe I was scared to tell ya'"

His eyes started to droop and a huge yawn forced his mouth wide open.

"Hey buddy. You need to rest now. We've got plenty of time to talk. Oh, and Huggy will be here tomorrow to visit. I called and let him know you were due to wake up today and he was already chomping at the bit to come up and see us."

Just then Dr. Abernathy strode into the room and to the foot of Starsky's bed.

"I have some news for you David. I could have told you earlier, but you were pretty sick and I figured it would be better to wait anyway."

Starsky looked questioningly at his doctor. "What is it, doc?"

When I removed the bullet from your back I noticed a mole that looked rather suspicious."

Both Starsky and Hutch looked at each other for a moment.

Dr. Abernathy continued. "I removed it and the surrounding tissue and sent it in to be biopsied. I got the results today and I am happy to tell you that it is non-cancerous."

"Ya' hear that Hutch? I don't have cancer. That's just the best news you could give me today." He said directing his attention back to the doctor. "Thank you so much, doc."

"Okay then, I have another surgery to perform and I need to be on my way. Happy for you David." He said and then left the room. Starsky and Hutch stared at each other again.

"Well, that was good timing." Hutch said. And, such a relief as well."

"Yeah. Wow." Another mouth splitting yawn forced its way out.

"Go to sleep Starsk. You need it. I'll be right here by your side."

Starsky nodded and worked his head deeper into the pillow. Another yawn and his eyes closed. Soon he was breathing evenly.

Hutch smiled and sat back to keep watch over his partner. He was so thankful that this man was his friend. He couldn't imagine life without him. In fact, he didn't think he could face the world without Starsky by his side. There was a true bond of friendship. A rare treasure and he would *treasure* it the rest of his life.

END