

Fallen

by Brit

A furious wind whipped from behind the lone lost man, pasting his clothing to his body like a second skin. Each bitter gust seemed to be stronger, more violent than the one before and threatened to knock the quaking figure right off the iron grid-work of the bridge.

Peering down from his precarious vantage point on top of the guardrail, he could just barely make out the river's angry whitecaps as the frigid waters churned by. From somewhere in his jumbled thoughts, he believed it was almost cold enough to snow, but the chances of that were as slim as his turning back from his chosen path.

Another strong gust struck him, knocking the center of his balance forward toward the desperately long plunge. With a strangled groan, he tightened his grip on the bridge's diagonal support beam just above his head. He looked down again at the teeming current, hoping for peace once he met its embrace. At that moment, the rolling black waters were a mirror image of the disconnected thoughts rampaging through his head. Barely recognizable sounds and disjointed memories all seemed to crowd his mind, like a dozen different movies projected simultaneously on the same tiny screen.

The overwhelming despair that had driven him to the precipice flooded up from somewhere deep within him, and he stood a little straighter on the iron beam as his resolve finally solidified. This was the only way to end the sorrow. The only way to end the pain, confusion, and anger that was driving him mad. Had driven him mad.

All he wanted was for it to be over.

No more pain. No more rage. No more smothering madness enveloping him like a shroud. No more voices inside his head, taunting him, mocking him. He simply and fiercely wanted his suffering to end, and there was nothing that could stop him.

He took a ragged breath, preparing for the fatal step that would bring the release he craved. He glanced back down at the water, knowing it would be cold, but that after a moment, it wouldn't bother him, and he would no longer care as the rushing river dragged his body away.

His free hand ground into his eye as the voices again swelled in a calliope of madness, each one increasing in volume as if competing with the others for his attention. The voices were venomous, hating him, ravaging him, condemning him for the atrocities he'd committed, the lives he had taken, the innocence he had ripped from fragile worlds.

He flung his hand from his face as if shoving his accusers away as his right foot left the bridge.

“Hutch!”

There was such love, anguish, and urgency in that one statement, the crying out of his name a clarion that caused him to hesitate. He shook his head to clear it as his extended foot returned to the bridge as if of its own accord. The voices of horror continued their chorus of rants, challenging him to throw himself into sweet release. The single voice that called his name seemed to be swept along with the wind, and was no more than another singing in his madness. His focus returned to the churning waters and what he needed to do. Trembling, his foot moved away from the bridge and hovered in the darkness.

“Hutch, please! Don’t! Don’t do it. Whatever it is, we can get through this, you and me. Just like we always have. Hutch, please.”

His foot returned to the cold iron surface and he slowly turned around, although not expecting to find anyone *real* behind him—just more of the crazed wraiths that sometimes danced before him unbidden, frightening him to death.

But there on the bridge, backlit by the headlights of the idling Torino, stood the only one who mattered. Hutch couldn’t put together enough rational thought to know who the person was, why he mattered, or even why he would want to help him, stop him. But something deep within broke through the madness and took him by the heart. Still, he knew the figure might be another apparition like the ones that had tricked him before. With the headlights shining from behind, the form was entirely in silhouette. But the outstretched hand reaching for him was obviously pleading, desperate to bring him down from the bridge. Desperate not to let him fall.

Desperate for him to live.

“Hutch, please! Just take my hand. It’ll be all right, I promise. *Please!*”

Without really understanding why, but knowing without a doubt it was the most important thing he had ever done, Hutch carefully reached his quaking hand toward the outstretched arms and let himself be helped down off the ledge of the bridge and into a fierce embrace.

Quiet words of comfort were murmured into his shoulder, but Hutch couldn’t understand them. It didn’t matter, though. All that mattered was the warmth of the touch and the strong arms that kept him from falling.



Starsky had never been as unnerved as he was at that moment. He couldn’t possibly believe what he’d seen with his own eyes: his partner—only seconds from ending his life. It simply made no sense, and Starsky’s universe tilted precariously off-balance. Gently

but urgently leading Hutch away from the bridge and toward the waiting car, he glanced at his partner's face when the headlights caught them. Hutch ducked his head from the glare and threw up an arm to protect himself from the piercing glow. In that brief instance, Starsky saw the face of a haunted specter—bloodless, soulless. Lost. The last time he had seen a face so ravaged....

No! Starsky cursed under his breath. *It can't be, can it?* When they finally ended their stumbling retreat, Starsky all but bearing Hutch's weight, he propped his partner up against the side of the car and opened the door, releasing the interior's meager light.



“I’m sorry, Hutch, but I gotta know.” Starsky’s voice shook as if his heart were breaking. He gently slid up one sleeve of Hutch’s thin shirt without protest, then the other. Relief and fear coursed through him when no needle tracks were discovered.

If it’s not heroin, then what? Starsky rolled Hutch’s sleeves back down and gave his partner a small smile of encouragement to mask his fear. If drugs hadn’t caused Hutch’s maniacal behavior, then it truly was a mental illness so engulfing that it drove him to the edge of reason. The bite of the cold November wind surged through his leather jacket and made Starsky shiver. He knew Hutch must be chilled to the bone.

Starsky swallowed hard and pushed the passenger seat forward, then helped Hutch into the back. He kept his voice low and even. “It’ll be okay, buddy; you’ll see. Let’s get you somewhere warm and then you can rest. That sound okay?”

With one leg inside the Torino, Hutch jerked to a stop and looked around wildly. It was beginning to rain in earnest, and the dampness plastered his disheveled hair to his head. Impervious to Starsky’s vice-like grip on his wrist, his glazed eyes finally landed on his partner’s. His jaw worked as if he was trying to remember how to speak, but no sound came. He finally gave into Starsky’s firm pull on his arm and allowed himself to be helped into the car, where he curled up as best he could and stared obliviously at the back of the driver’s seat.

Starsky jerked off his jacket and shook it hard once to get the rain off of it, then leaned in to drape it over Hutch. His partner never acknowledged the gesture except to close his eyes. Hutch’s rapid eye movement under closed lids matched the frightened beating of Starsky’s heart, propelling him to close the passenger-side door and sprint around his car to slip in behind the wheel.

Resisting the urge to floor the accelerator, Starsky exerted what self-control he could and simply slipped the car in gear to cautiously back away from the bridge. He couldn’t help

feeling as if he were somehow retreating from some demonic force that had nearly swallowed them both.



The call woke Huggy out of one of the best dreams he'd had in a very long time. When the leggy woman in his sleep turned on a blender full of margaritas, the expected whirring of the appliance was superseded by the annoying clamor of his telephone. It took Huggy a few unpleasant moments to realize it was all a dream, except that his phone really was ringing. Several more moments passed before he brought the receiver fumbling up to the side of his head. "Man, this had *better* be important!"

"Huggy, listen to me." Starsky's voice was urgent. "I need a miracle and I need it fast."

Grinding the sleep out of one eye, Huggy instantly thought of numerous biting responses, but the desperation in his friend's voice brought him up short. "You're in luck. The Bear is, indeed, a worker of miracles." When Starsky didn't respond, Huggy felt a tightening in his stomach. "Starsky, what's wrong? Talk to me, man."

Starsky exhaled heavily. "Everything's wrong. Nothing's making sense, and I don't know what to do about it."

"Starsky, what are you talking about? Where are you?"

"I'm at a pay phone. It doesn't matter where. Look, something's going on, and I can't figure it out. Not...not yet. But I need someplace where...where *we* can go. Someplace safe. I need time to figure this out."

Huggy caught the emphasis Starsky had slipped in and instantly put it all together—Starsky's cryptic inferences, his using a pay phone rather than his own at home or the police radio, needing a safe place. The partners were in trouble, and apparently he was the only one they could trust.

"Okay, I just need a few to shake out some details." Huggy's mind was already racing through a list of possibilities. "Where, when, and how?"

"When you were being set up with Lou Malinda's money and had to run, we had to hook up. I'll meet you there."

Huggy felt the knot in his gut grow. Starsky wasn't just afraid that his own phone was tapped, it was possible that the bar's phones were bugged, too. "Done. Give me..." He looked at his bedside clock. "...an hour and a half."

"All right. Thanks." Starsky started to hang up the pay phone, but thought better of it. "And, Hug—make sure you're not followed."

The sharp click and buzz that followed only heightened Huggy's apprehension. What had been going on over the last month had been bizarre enough, but whatever had gone down that night had Starsky running scared.

Huggy pushed himself out of bed and into his clothes. He could only hope the favors he would be calling in would be enough to keep his friends safe.



The rain was coming down in torrents now, and Huggy pulled the brim of his cap down farther, but to no avail. The rain continued to drip off the brim and onto his ears and chin. He'd left his car on a side street of the warehouse district, blocks away from the culvert, and made his way through the back alleys until he reached a break in the fence. Fortunately, this section of town was not on the radar of the city's road commission, so the gaps in the fencing remained.

He cautiously made his way down the steep cement causeway, sliding several times and nearly falling. When he reached the bottom, he dodged the two small streams of runoff made by the heavy rain, until he reached his destination: a wide drainage pipe leading farther under the heart of the city. It was here he'd hidden from the mob years before, accused of a crime he didn't commit, until Starsky and Hutch had rescued him. Reaching the expansive opening, he placed one hand on the cement half-circle of its opening and peered into the black nothingness. He started to call out Starsky's name when two bright lights pierced the darkness, effectively blinding him.

He automatically threw up his arms in defense, but dropped them when he recognized Starsky quietly calling his name, and the lights were turned off. A low-wattage flashlight was turned on near the car, lighting Huggy's way. When he got up to the car, he shook his head in a mixture of consternation and admiration. Only the driver's side door of the car had enough room to open, with only a few scant inches of clearance remaining on either side. "Man, I didn't think a car would fit in here. You *must* be in a mess of trouble if you're willing to risk taking the paint job off of this heap to hide in here."

Without further preamble, Huggy held up a set of keys. "Your fortress awaits you."

Starsky took the keys and aimed the flashlight at an address tag attached to the key ring. "Where's this at?"

"It's a ways—about 170 miles north of the city, just outside of Guadalupe. If you give me a little more time, maybe I can get you something closer."

"No. No, this is good."

Huggy nodded. "It's a not-so-little pad in the middle of nowhere belonging to a very former associate of mine who made it out of the neighborhood by questionable means, so don't ask any questions, dig? His place is right off the beach so there's plenty of

breathing room, and you can see whatever's coming after you first. The only other house around has a very exclusive clientele, who are not known for venturing outside the immediate premises to seek their pleasures, if you know what I'm saying. If the madam of the casa should happen to see any persons of your particular persuasions, she's gonna smell fuzz a mile away and do her best not to see or be seen."

Starsky nodded and exhaled as if he'd been holding his breath for hours. "Thanks, Huggy. I know this must have cost you some. I—"

A low groan from the backseat of the Torino caught their attention, and Starsky aimed the flashlight at the source of the sound. Hutch blinked a few times at the uncomfortable light and twisted away from it, grinding his head into the back cushions of the seat.

Huggy's jaw went slack at the sight of Hutch's ravaged features. "Tell me he's not—"

"No. No, it's not heroin. That's the problem. I don't know *what* it is. The only thing I can think of is that—"

"That it's some other drug, or that he really has gone over the edge!" Huggy's conclusion came out in an angry hiss, though he didn't know who he was mad at.

"Or someone pushed him there." Starsky scrubbed his face with his hands. "I don't know. I mean, I really don't know jack about mental illness, but I do know he's not been himself over the last few weeks—"

"That's an understatement," Huggy rumbled, still angry over his last run-in with Hutch.

"But if there really is something wrong with Hutch—something physical or mental or whatever—would it come on so suddenly? There's got to be more to it than that."

"All right. But what if that *is* it? What if Hutch has really lost it?"

"Then we'll deal with it." Starsky exhaled heavily, trying to blow away some of the tension. "Right now, there's too many other possibilities."

"You mean like somebody's making him act this way? Driving him crazy? Starsky, do you know how crazy *that* sounds?"

"Yeah, but what else have I got? All I know is that he needs help, and I'm the only one who can keep him safe while I get it for him." Starsky slid back into the driver's seat of the Torino.

"Okay. You know I'll do whatever I can. I've got a friend's Maverick about three blocks north of here behind the bakery on San Palau. Dark blue two-door parked out back. Keys are under the floor mat. It's yours for as long as you need it."

Starsky dug his wallet out of his back pocket and withdrew a spare key to the Torino, then handed it back out the window to his friend. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Hug.”

“Good thing you don’t have to find out. You want me to contact Dobey?”

Starsky nodded, though Huggy couldn’t see him. “Later this morning. Let him know Hutch is with me and that I’ll contact him when I can.”

“He’s going to want to know more than that.”

“I can’t tell him what I don’t know.” Starsky was silent for a moment. “Give me fifteen minutes, just in case someone followed you. If they’re waiting where you left the Maverick, then at least you won’t be a target. Once you leave, get the Torino out of sight. And I need you to get Hutch’s car, too.”

He dug out a crumpled copy of the directions to Hutch’s car from his jeans’ pocket, along with the car keys he had retrieved, and offered them to his friend. Huggy frowned when he realized how far out in the middle of nowhere the LTD had been left, and wondered what possible reason the partners had for abandoning it there. When he lifted his eyes in inquiry, Starsky’s face creased in pain and he simply looked away, unable to answer the unspoken question.

Starsky started the Torino and turned on the parking lights as Huggy made his way back out of the culvert. When he was clear, Starsky slowly drove the car out and stopped in front of his waiting friend. “Huggy, I...”

Huggy reached through the car’s open window and clasped Starsky’s arm. “Just be safe, and take care of our blond brother. You need anything, you call.”

Starsky wrapped a hand around Huggy’s and gave it a quick squeeze before steering the sedan through the shallow water and into the night.

There wasn’t an ambush waiting for them behind the bakery, and Starsky was able to transfer his nearly unresponsive partner from the Torino to the Maverick with little resistance. The blowup he had feared didn’t happen until they were on the interstate, twenty miles out of the city.



Demonic voices again assaulted Hutch from every angle. The horrific shrieks were of all tenors, threatening, mocking, and denouncing him. One voice, low and raspy, stood out above the rest, although it didn’t rise in volume or tone: “*Sharks...we’ll drop his body...nobody will find it...*”

Hutch's left hand crept forward along the side of the driver's seat to grasp its adjustment lever, while his right rested on its back. In two violent motions, he jerked the lever to release it, while his right arm shoved the back of the seat, folding it forward. Starsky was



slammed into the steering wheel, and the car careened as he instinctively hit the breaks.

Hutch scrambled to the opposite side of the car, wrenching up the release lever of the passenger seat and forcing it forward. If his blurred vision hadn't prevented him from successfully taking hold of the door handle before Starsky brought the Maverick to a sliding stop on the shoulder of the freeway, he would have flung himself out of the moving vehicle and

onto the blacktop at sixty-five miles per hour.



Starsky ignored the pain from where his jaw had met the steering wheel, and shoved the passenger seat back into position. The horror of what Hutch had almost accomplished nearly made him vicious as he turned back toward him. "What do you think you're doing?! Are you out of your—?!"

He pulled himself up short and exhaled heavily to release his fear, then worked his bruised jaw and decided he'd live. Hutch sat frozen in the back seat, taking deep, shuddering breaths as his eyes darted about wildly, looking for a different escape route.

"Okay. It's okay, Hutch. You're okay. It's going to be okay. Nothing's going to hurt you here. You don't have to run, okay?" Starsky's gentle monologue was as much to reassure himself as it was his partner. Eventually, Hutch's breathing slowed and he lost some of the desperation in his eyes. The last thing Starsky wanted to do was have to handcuff his partner, but he would if he had to. "Hutch, I need you to just relax and lie down. Will you do that? Just take it easy and try to sleep, okay?"

He was surprised when Hutch responded by obediently lying back down on the seat and wrapping his arms around his stomach as if it hurt. He closed his eyes to try to get some rest, but the hard play of his jaw muscles told a different story.

Starsky reached around to pick up his jacket off the floor and draped it back over Hutch's trembling form. He had to force himself to focus back on the freeway, and he returned the car to the thin line of traffic heading north. But even as he drove, his eyes constantly flickered to the readjusted mirror so he could monitor the tormented figure behind him.

The next seventy miles seemed like an eternity for both of them.



Starsky had to again all but carry Hutch into the beach house. With one of his partner's arms slung over his shoulder, he kept a tight grip on Hutch's wrist, while his other arm wrapped around the thin frame, keeping him from tumbling to the ground. As they struggled along the stone pathway, Starsky's voice was low, offering encouragement that sometimes sounded like pleading.

Huggy had made good on his word. The house was miles from its nearest neighbors, which was both a blessing and a curse. With little protection around them, he would have to hope that they were simply "hidden in plain sight." At least no one could sneak up on them. All the same, Starsky would be keeping his weapon within reach at all times.

The single-story ranch was tastefully furnished in monochromatic tones, with chrome and smoked glass throughout. Obviously, someone with money lived there, but Starsky chose at that moment not to think about how the wealth had been gained.

The sole bedroom was on one of the beachside corners, just off the living room. A series of narrow windows lined the tops of two walls, allowing ample light to filter in, yet providing maximum privacy to the occupants. Dropping his duffel bag at the doorway, Starsky coaxed Hutch onto the bed, where he fell into an exhausted, unmoving heap. After removing his partner's shoes, Starsky berated himself for not checking Hutch's pockets earlier to ensure that he wasn't carrying anything he could hurt himself with. Hutch never stirred as Starsky went through his now-dry clothes and wondered where his partner's gun and holster were. All the search revealed was a crumpled scrap of paper with the name of the crossroads where Starsky had found him. The location was written in his partner's handwriting, but it was nearly illegible.

Shaken, Starsky thrust the note into his own pocket, then crossed to the master bath and examined the room to make sure there was nothing left in it that Hutch might use against him or himself. He left the bathroom light on in case Hutch awoke in the middle of night disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings.

Starsky picked up his bag and turned off the bedroom light, then paused in the doorway to watch the steady rise and fall of Hutch's chest. What had happened to his best friend was still a mystery, and he couldn't remember a moment in all of his adult life when he'd felt so frightened and alone.



Years of service to the city had conditioned Starsky to sleep lightly when he needed to. A rattling at the sliding glass door that opened onto the deck propelled him off the living room couch. By the time his feet hit the floor, he had already pulled his gun from the holster he'd slept with lying across his chest.

The moonlight streaming in through the glass made it easy to identify Hutch as he stood there, agitated that he couldn't manage the door's simple lock. His jerks on the handle became more and more desperate.

Starsky stuck his gun in his waistband at the small of his back and quickly moved to Hutch's side. Every muscle seemed to tense, but he kept his voice low and friendly. "Hey now, Blintz, where do you think you're going, huh? Kind of late to be working on your tan."

When Starsky gently took his partner by his wrists and steered him away from the door, Hutch pulled himself free and backed away a few steps. Hutch then shifted from one foot to the other in irritation, as if trying to figure out which was the easiest way around his roadblock. Disconcerted by the vacant look in Hutch's eyes, Starsky stopped his advance and held his arms out to his sides to show he was no threat. "Take it easy, Hutch. It's okay. Let's get you back to—"

Before his sentence was completed, Hutch lunged forward, throwing his full weight behind a one-shoulder drive to Starsky's chest. The force of the blow thrust Starsky backwards through the plate glass. In an instant, he lay amid the shards with the wind knocked out of him, slivers of pain radiating across his back as pieces of glass pierced his skin. Starsky arched his back away from the even greater agony of taking a direct hit in the small of his spine from the gun he had slid into his waistband. Hutch stared down at him, stunned. The pain in Starsky's voice as he whispered Hutch's name reached through the confused jumble of Hutch's thoughts like nothing else could.

Rationale seemed to surface as Hutch's eyes briefly cleared. "Starsky, I...no!" But just as quickly, that moment of sanity was ripped away and Hutch's hands flew up to his ears as if to close out the sounds around him. Hutch stumbled over Starsky's prone form and bolted off the deck and down the beach toward the black waves, oblivious to the now-bleeding soles of his feet.

As soon as he could draw a modicum of breath, Starsky forced himself to sit up and get unsteadily to his feet. Hutch's agonized groans as he made his way down to the water propelled Starsky into motion, pushing aside the pain lancing across his back from countless cuts. As he staggered after Hutch, Starsky gritted his teeth and pulled off his ruined shirt, blood and glass splinters falling in his wake. After a few steps in the sand, he pushed himself to run, catching up with Hutch just as he made it to the water and tumbled to his knees.

Starsky slid to a stop at Hutch's side and fell to his knees beside him. The salty waves elicited a gasp of pain as they lapped at the cuts on his back. Hutch buckled at the waist as he began pounding his temples, bringing his head dangerously close to submerging under the waves.

Starsky reached around Hutch from behind and caught his wrists. He pulled their arms tightly across Hutch's chest, engulfing him in a bear hug that left little room for

movement. Hutch struggled violently, thrashing against his partner. Starsky felt as if his world was shattering around him as he let himself be pulled and tugged in whatever direction Hutch bucked. His voice held a quiver he couldn't control as he pleaded with his partner. "Please, Hutch. Please stop. Please. Please don't be crazy. Please. I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do."

It only took a moment more before Hutch's strength gave way and he sank back against Starsky's stronghold, then stared into the oncoming waves as if stripped of all his senses. At a loss of what to do, Starsky gripped him tighter as they remained kneeling in the surf.

As the waves continue to pound against them, Starsky couldn't help wondering if he was too late, if Hutch was already beyond his reach.



Starsky half-led, half-carried Hutch back to the beach house and laid him on the bed. Tears crept up from behind his eyes, and he pushed away the desire to simply collapse on the floor with his back to the wall and cry. With a resolve born of desperation, he retrieved a pair of handcuffs from his duffel bag and clamped one cuff around Hutch's right wrist and the other to the chrome framework of the bed's headboard.

As he walked to the master bathroom, his stiff gait was that of an old man's. The bruised face that looked back at him in the mirror was exhausted and lost. Starsky turned to see the reflection of his back and was shocked to see the deep red tapestry of new bruises and still-weeping cuts. He opened the mirrored vanity and withdrew a few sterile pads and tape. After wetting and soaping a washcloth, he returned to the bed to care for Hutch's feet. As he sat down gingerly on the edge, Starsky glanced up at his partner's face. While Hutch was obviously sleeping or in a stupor, his eyes performed a frantic dance beneath the shuttered lids. Starsky gently swabbed Hutch's feet, brushing away the remaining beach sand plastered there by dried blood. The cuts caused by Hutch's escape over the broken glass were superficial and only bled lightly under his ministrations. Once the gauze was taped in place, Starsky stared at the tortured face lit by the moonlight streaming in from one of the windows. *What am I going to do if Hutch really has lost it? How can I help him?*

A memory came unbidden of the twisted, forlorn face of a stripper named Cindy, who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time during the investigation of Helen's murder. The image of that poor woman rocking in her hospital bed, crooning nonsense to herself over and over again turned his stomach in cold fear. They knew that Solenko and his men had destroyed Cindy's mind chemically, but how did this happen to Hutch? What pushed him over the edge?

Changes in Hutch's behavior paraded before him, and he couldn't deny the evidence. If only the apparent insanity had come on without any warning, Starsky could convince himself that a trauma or shock had caused a temporary illness, or that the change was caused by some form of attack by one of the countless criminals who had sworn

vengeance on either of them. Still, he couldn't believe or accept that Hutch wouldn't get better if he just tried hard enough to help him. They'd stay there in their haven for a week. That's what it would take, Starsky knew, for him to accept the truth of the situation or see some improvement. One week, and if nothing changed for the better, he would give in to the reality of the situation and get Hutch the professional help he needed.

Now, Starsky only had to accept it.



Early the next morning, Hutch's strangled cry for help propelled Starsky out of his own troubled sleep. He was up off the bedroom floor where he'd been drowsing, and crossed the short distance to the bedside within seconds of hearing Hutch's inarticulate pleading. Hutch had vomited at some point, and bile stained the front of his shirt. When his partner began flailing his arms hard enough to draw blood against the handcuffs' restraint, Starsky knelt on the bed to grab his wrists. "Easy, Hutch. It's okay. You're fine. You're safe. I'm here. Take it easy."

When Hutch felt the contact, his eyes flew open and Starsky was taken aback. Even with only the light from the living room streaming in through the open door, he could tell Hutch's eyes were abnormally bloodshot and the pupils dilated. His momentary distraction gave Hutch the advantage and he swung his free arm hard, pulling it from Starsky's grasp and landing a direct blow to his eye. Starsky reeled back, but never lost his grasp of Hutch's manacled wrist. The exertion seemed to slow the maniacal thrashing, and Starsky was able to find purchase on Hutch's free arm, then held it firmly down across his chest. With an effort, Starsky worked to control the fear that never seemed to leave him. "It's okay, Hutch. It's going to be okay. Easy, it's okay. You're okay now."

Hutch's breathing slowed as well, and after a few minutes of Starsky's desperate words of comfort, he lapsed into an uneven cadence of sleep. Starsky released his grip and slowly backed off the bed to watch Hutch drowse for a few moments. Warily, he returned to the bathroom's medicine cabinet and retrieved a roll of gauze. Hutch never stirred as he cautiously removed the handcuff, then his partner's stained shirt. Starsky gently wrapped Hutch's bleeding right wrist with the gauze and taped it in place. He then wrapped the uninjured wrist as a protective barrier before regretfully cuffing and securing it to the bed frame with a second set of cuffs—Hutch's own—that he retrieved from his duffle bag. When he finished, he slumped to the floor and leaned against the wall, remembering another place and time when he'd almost lost his partner, and the terrible vigil that followed. *But then...then, I knew what to do. I knew he'd be all right. Now...*

Now, I may never get him back.



“It’s me.”

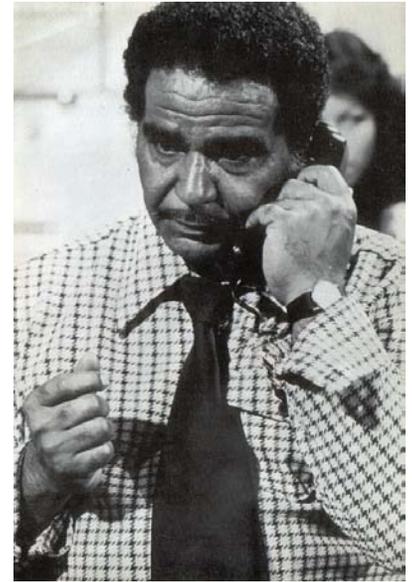
Captain Dobey dropped his pen and pushed away the case file on his desk. He wasn’t surprised by the weariness of Starsky’s voice, but there was something else there—something he couldn’t put a finger on—that unnerved him, making him come across gruffer than he had intended to. “What did you think you were doing, running off like that? Why didn’t—?”

“Cap’n, please. I only have a minute. Did Huggy fill you in?”

Dobey further recognized the edge in Starsky’s voice, the note of caution. Huggy had told him as much as he knew, mainly that Hutch was in serious trouble, and his partner was trying to keep him safe. Starsky’s terse response shouted his obvious fear that even Metro’s phones might be bugged, and he didn’t want to stay on the line long enough to have the call traced. The captain couldn’t help wondering just who his boys were up against to have his best detectives running scared. “He did. What do you need me to do?”

“I don’t know yet. I just need some time to figure this out.”

As much as he respected Starsky’s intuition, especially when it came to his partner, Dobey knew he had to speak the words he wouldn’t want to hear. “Starsky, you might not be doing Hutch any good if he really has had a...well, a meltdown.”



There was silence on the line before Starsky finally responded. “There’s got to be something I can do.”

“I know you think that your friendship, the *bond* the two of you have is strong enough to get you through anything as long as you take it on together. But, son...” The captain hesitated. “This time, it may not be enough.”

“It has to be. It’s all we have left.”

Starsky hung up the phone and glanced at his watch, assuring himself that he hadn’t been on the line long enough for the call to be traced. He knew the captain was worried for them, but he was surprised to realize that speaking with Dobey hadn’t given him the reassurance he had been hoping for.

The sound of the bed creaking from the other room reached his ears, and he crossed to the doorway to look in on his partner. Sweat glistened across Hutch’s forehead and upper lip, and his respiration was rapid. Starsky swallowed hard as he took in the tableau before him. “Hutch, you okay?”

“Please. Please.” Hutch’s voice was weak, desperate. His glazed stare zeroed in on Starsky, though he never really seemed to realize that he was anything more than an apparition. “Please, let me go. I’ll tell you anything you want, just please let me go. *Please.*”

Starsky moved to Hutch’s bedside slowly, so as not to startle him. He placed a hand on Hutch’s brow, hoping somehow his touch would soothe him and calm the fearful murmuring.

“Please...please,” Hutch whispered.

“Please,” Starsky echoed, then swallowed hard and closed his eyes. “Please come back, Hutch.”



He should have been starving, but found he could only stomach half of the peanut butter sandwich he had made for dinner from the few provisions he was surprised to find Huggy had placed in the trunk of the Maverick. Starsky made a mental note to thank his friend for the unexpected help. How Huggy even thought to throw in a loaf of bread, a few cans of soup, and a jar of peanut butter on such short notice was beyond him.

Starsky’s jaw itched from three days’ growth of beard and he scrubbed his face, toying briefly with the idea of taking a quick shower, even if it meant changing into a less than clean set of clothes. After placing his half-eaten sandwich in the refrigerator, he stripped off his shirt and turned toward a second bathroom with a shower just inside the foyer, a small luxury intended to be used as the home’s owner came up from the beach so he wouldn’t track sand through the house.

Before he pulled the door closed behind him, he heard Hutch cursing and thrashing weakly against his binding. Starsky was beside him in an instant, placing his hands on Hutch’s shoulders to keep him from hurting himself. “Easy, Hutch; take it easy.”

Hutch looked at him blindly and grimaced, as if Starsky’s gentle pressure were hurting him. Starsky felt Hutch try to pull away, and he slowly released him. When Hutch didn’t continue pulling against the handcuffs, Starsky sank onto the side of the bed, facing his partner. Seeing that Hutch was watching him and hoping for some sign of recognition, Starsky tentatively placed his hand on Hutch’s forearm. Hutch frowned, as if the contact caused him pain, and withdrew his arm, shifting to move as far from Starsky as his confines would allow.

Starsky put up his hands to placate him, then slowly rose from the bed and moved to the other side of the room so he would remain in Hutch’s line of sight. He stiffly lowered himself onto the floor with his still sore back resting gingerly against the wall. Starsky drew up his legs toward himself and rested his forearms on his knees. While Hutch was

still unresponsive, Starsky was pleased that he at least seemed to be watching him through half-lidded eyes.

A memory struck him and made him shake his head. “We’ve been here before, you know.” He didn’t expect a response from Hutch. He continued, “But then...then, I knew what we were up against. Knew what to do. Knew it was going to be all right. But



now...” Starsky shook his head and looked at the shell of a man before him, torn that someone like Hutch could have fallen as he had. Hutch had always been strong—physically, intellectually, and emotionally. To see him reduced to a nearly catatonic state was killing something deep within Starsky that he wasn’t sure he could bring back if he couldn’t save his partner.

“I never told you this, but I think I remember dying.” Starsky’s voice was quiet, knowing he was probably just speaking to himself. “Or something like it. Maybe I really remember *not* dying. You know, coming back. Like something was pulling me back. Wanting me to live. *Needing* me to live. I remember that feeling, I guess. Maybe it was me not wanting to die, not wanting to leave. But...” Starsky glanced back up at his partner from where his monologue had left him staring off into nothing.

“I think it was you. I think you weren’t ready to let me go.”

Exhaustion mingled with fear and desperation for his partner. Starsky felt his throat tighten as he gazed hard into his eyes. “I’m not ready to let you go either, Hutch. Not now, *not ever*.”



It took a moment for Starsky to push aside the thickness of sleep and force himself into wakefulness. He wasn’t sure what woke him as he ground his fists into his eyes, but the last thing he expected was to hear was his name. Exhaustion was pushed aside by a tendril of something he thought he’d lost—*hope*. Scrambling up off the floor, he staggered to the foot of the bed.

The room was a war zone, courtesy of the past seventy-two hours of Hutch's incoherence and spurts of violence. Sleep had been punctuated by restless dreams, and on a few occasions, Hutch had bellowed in fear or rage and thrashed against unseen demons. Starsky hadn't dared to remove the handcuffs, but leapt to his partner's side each time the nightmares had tormented him, to offer what strength and comfort he could.

Hutch lay on the bed in only his blue jeans, hollow-eyed and disheveled. He had lost a considerable amount of weight, and his ribs and collarbones were clearly defined under his pale skin. He looked at Starsky wearily and with some confusion in his eyes, but there was a spark of reason in their depths that had been absent for the past three days, and there was no mistaking the familiar wry humor. "Do you want to explain to me why I'm half-naked and handcuffed to a strange bed?"

Starsky felt his eyes burn as he failed to produce the expected comeback or even a greeting. He wanted to believe more than anything that—by some miracle—they'd been released from the hell they'd been condemned to, but he was afraid to embrace that fragile hope. "What exactly do you remember?"

Hutch's brow furrowed as he looked from one of his bandaged wrists to his gauze-swathed feet, struggling to grab hold of any memory, but nothing was forthcoming. "Not a thing." He managed a small tired smile that was more like a grimace. "But it must have been one heck of a party. How'd you get that shiner?"

Starsky couldn't produce a grin as he instinctively touched the darkened injury. Hutch looked fearful as he took in his partner's exhausted features, the guarded pain in Starsky's eyes. When Starsky's only response was to look away, he swallowed hard, but tried to keep his tone light. "C'mon, the joke's over. Turn me loose."

His unease seemed to intensify with the realization that Starsky was making no move to free him from the bed. "Starsky, what's *really* going on? What's wrong?"

"I'm not..." Starsky furiously considered how much to tell Hutch. As he stared at the floor, he was assailed with images of Hutch wild-eyed and incoherent atop the rail of the bridge, ready to plunge to his death. Having his partner respond with clear eyes and thoughts—as if he hadn't once been poised to take his own life—was too good to be true. "I'm not sure what to tell you. What's the last thing you remember?"

"Remember before what? Waking up just now?"

"Yes."

Hutch shook his head, not liking Starsky's evasiveness, and with a groan, shifted to ease the tightness of his back and shoulders. "I don't know. What are you getting at? And are you going to unlock these?" He gave the handcuffs an irritated tug.

Starsky moved to the bed and sat down on the edge, needing the comfort of Hutch's nearness and silently offering his own. "Humor me. What's the last thing you remember?"

Hutch exhaled heavily, surprised at how shakily the air left his lungs. Something was terribly, *horribly* wrong, but even as frantic as he was becoming, he knew he had to trust that Starsky had a reason, even if he didn't understand it. Even if it was scaring him to death. "Remember about *what*?"

"Anything. What's the last thing you remember before waking up?"

"I..." Hutch was pulled up short when he realized that he not only couldn't remember what landed him handcuffed to a strange bed in a strange house, but also the fact that his short-term memory was full of blurred images that didn't make sense or piece together. Whatever had brought him to this point was no sophomoric prank. He swallowed hard and tried to get Starsky to meet his gaze. "Tell me."

When Starsky again hesitated, obviously struggling, Hutch's fear soared. "Tell me what I can't remember!"

Starsky stood and reached into his pocket to pull out the handcuff key. He moved to the head of the bed and unlocked each cuff, then gently peeled away the gauze around Hutch's raw wrist, gratified to see the wounds were no worse than when he had first tended to them. He sat back down wearily at the foot of the bed, facing the wall. "I'm not sure where to start."

A chill ran through Hutch as he looked down at the still-healing scrapes that circled his wrists, but he started at the sight of Starsky's back. "You can start with *that*."

Starsky craned his neck around but didn't need to follow Hutch's gaze to the mass of cuts and bruises on his back, joining the tapestry of his old wounds. "It's nothing. Hutch, I need to know what you remember."

Hutch slid forward and gently reached out to touch Starsky's wounds, needing to assure himself that the angry cuts weren't in need of stitches. When Starsky simply looked away, Hutch scrubbed his face with his hands and stared up at the ceiling, as if to find the answers painted there. "I...I don't remember much, and what I do remember scares the hell out of me."

Starsky shifted to face him, and the concern Hutch saw on his face prompted him to name the fearful images that assailed him. "Water. Dark water, and lots of it. But...but before that, fighting with Robinson at the office, I think. A lot of yelling. You and me running down an alley chasing...I don't know. Somebody. I was so angry, livid. I couldn't control my anger. And these...these *voices*." Hutch's voice dropped to a near-whisper as the horror surfaced. "Starsk, I remember hearing voices. Like a hundred radios were

blasting in my head at the same time, but none of them were tuned to the same station. I don't know how else to describe it. That's...that's about it."

"What's the last day—the last whole day—you can remember clearly?"

Hutch took a moment to consider the question. "The day before yesterday, I guess."

Starsky looked away from him. "What happened then, the day before yesterday? Give me details."

The fact that Starsky was so persistent and quiet told him how bad their circumstances were and that scared Hutch more. "We had court in the morning for the Phillips' case and got out early. We went to Huggy's for lunch. You had the special and I had the fish, and it was horrible."

Starsky smiled briefly, but continued to study the floor. "It *was* horrible. What else?"

Suddenly, Hutch felt more exhausted than he could ever recall. "Responded to a 2-11 on the way back to the station, but the blues had it under control by the time we got there. Did paperwork for a few hours and called it a day. You had a date that night, and I stopped and picked up some groceries on the way home. Made some soup for dinner, finished the book I was reading, and went to bed. That about does it. Those other memories must have been yesterday, because they don't fit in." Apprehension made Hutch's tone a bit sarcastic. "Did I get it right?"

Starsky nodded and looked up. "Yeah, you got it right. But, Hutch..." The tightness around his eyes increased. "The day you remembered wasn't the day before yesterday. It was *four weeks* ago."

The last day Hutch remembered completely had occurred exactly as he had relayed it. As Starsky looked back, that may have been the last "normal" day he'd had with his partner. Drawing a deep breath, he recounted the nightmare they'd been living.



In hindsight, the changes in Hutch's behavior had started simply over the passage of several weeks. They were so subtle that they were overlooked or attributed to stress and fatigue. They had been working on a murder case, which they were beginning to determine was a mugging gone bad. With no motive as to why the middle-aged accountant was the target—beyond being in the wrong place at the wrong time—they had nothing concrete to go on. And while several people may have witnessed the event, no one was talking.

Hutch began having mood swings from irritability to sullen silence. The silence grew into bouts of depression and self-doubt. But then, his mild anger began growing into something more.

Something dangerous.

Hutch had taken to bringing his lunch from home each day and only grabbed a carton of milk or yogurt from Metro's cafeteria, or purchased orange juice when it was available from some takeout stand while on patrol. To Starsky's delight, he had become solely responsible for picking their lunch destination, since Hutch was content with eating whatever he'd brought with him.

One afternoon, the two had ventured down into the bowels of the station to the cafeteria, although Hutch claimed he wasn't hungry, just thirsty. After waiting in line to purchase a small container of milk, he had stepped away from the cashier while taking a drink directly from the carton, and backed into the lunch tray of Detective Al Robinson, causing him to upturn his lunch onto his chest and stomach, chili and soda staining his white shirt and tie.

"What the—?" Robinson sputtered as Hutch staggered to the side, spilling the milk down the front of himself as well. "Way to go, Hutchinson!"



Hutch held his arms out in disbelief and looked down at the fluid causing his own shirt to cling to his torso. "Me? Watch where you're going, you moron!"

"What are you talking about? *You* ran into me, idiot." Robinson angrily brushed some of the clinging chili off his shirt, some of which landed on one of Hutch's shoes.

Without a word, Hutch stiff-armed the detective, sending him stumbling backwards. Robinson swore and, after regaining his balance, tackled Hutch at the waist, sending them both to the floor. Starsky had already been seated at the far side of the cafeteria when the altercation started, but was across the room quickly and pulled Robinson off his partner and held him back. "Hey, come on; it was an accident. Let me buy you another lunch, Al, okay?" Starsky tried to placate him. "A little spilled chili is no big deal."

Robinson glared down at Hutch, who still lay sprawled out on his back, uncharacteristically laughing loud enough to be heard across the room. The surrounding officers and clerks watched the bizarre incident with bewilderment. “Get out of my face, Starsky. And you’d better keep him on a shorter leash, or it’s gonna be a big deal.”

“I got it, Al. C’mon, I’ll get you another bowl of chili, all right?” Starsky pulled out his handkerchief and began to wipe off some more of the stain from Robinson’s shirt.

Robinson pushed Starsky’s hands away and stormed out. The tense silence in the room quickly turned to quiet chatter with many eyes still on the partners. Starsky was further surprised when Hutch got to his feet, his face now enraged as he stabbed his partner in the chest with a pointed finger. “Don’t ever do that again.”

Starsky looked at him incredulously. “Do what? Stop Robinson from kicking your sorry butt? You could’ve at least apologized to the guy.”

“For what? Plowing into me?” Hutch sneered, even though they all knew the accident was his fault. “You’re full of it. I’m not apologizing to him or anybody else, for that matter. And don’t *you* ever apologize for me again!”

Hutch pounded out of the cafeteria, leaving his partner standing mutely in the middle of the mess.



“Starsky, pull over!”

Hutch’s agitated command caused Starsky to whip the Torino in the direction his partner was pointing. The sedan was barely skidding to a stop before Hutch had jerked open the door and was climbing out, stumbling over a sewer grate.

“What is it? What did you see?” Starsky had sprinted around the front of his car, gun drawn, and was barely able to catch up with his partner’s longer strides as they raced down an alley.

“White male, mid-fifties, navy pea jacket, carrying a shotgun!” Hutch gritted out as they raced to the edge of the building.



“A shotgun?” Starsky lowered his voice as they slid to a stop, then peered around the corner. The alley was filled with dumpsters and piles of broken skids, offering a myriad of hiding places for a psycho with a gun.

“It’s a dead end. He’s got no place to go.” Starsky knew how “off” his partner had seemed lately. Something was wrong that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He began to take a step forward, only to be yanked back by Hutch.

“Why do you get to go first?” Hutch hissed.

Starsky cocked an eyebrow. “Because I’m shorter.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I make a smaller target.” Starsky grinned to cover up his misgivings about Hutch’s performance and slipped out of his grip. After taking a second to peer around the corner, he eased alongside the wall with his gun thrust before him, sweeping both sides of the alley as he moved to the protection of the nearest dumpster. He glanced back to Hutch and nodded for him to come forward on the other side. Hutch followed suit, crossing to the far wall of the alley as Starsky covered him.

Once Hutch reached the relative safety of several garbage cans, he gestured for Starsky to move forward.

Starsky had only taken about three steps out into the open when a sound behind him caused him to spin around. He was taken completely by surprise by Hutch’s flying tackle, but still managed to have the wherewithal to jerk his gun out of the way as his partner forced him to the ground.

The wind knocked out of him, Starsky could only watch as Hutch scrambled to his feet and took a wide stance over his prone body, then began firing toward the end of the alley. Starsky rolled onto his belly to take aim as well.



He blinked a few times, trying to clear his eyes, but even then couldn’t see what Hutch continued to fire at. Small explosions rippled across the wall as each bullet chewed into bricks and mortar. Hutch finally lowered his weapon to his side when the

unmistakable click of an empty chamber sang out against the ringing of the shots.

“He’s gone.” Hutch sounded disappointed and mildly perplexed as he stepped over Starsky, finally allowing him to rise.

Without a word, Hutch retreated back toward the street, his empty gun dangling from his hand. Starsky’s eyes widened as he watched, and when Hutch finally climbed back into the Torino to call in the incident, he cautiously made his way to the farthest end of the alley, completing the sweep. He wasn’t entirely surprised that no gunman lay in wait for them, but it did nothing to quell the gnawing concern in his gut.

He placed a hand on the wall amongst the chipped bricks and bullet fragments from Hutch’s rampage and leaned heavily forward, desperate to figure out what had just happened.



There had been unusual bouts of silence throughout the remainder of their day, other than to talk about the specifics of the case. When the Torino slowed to a stop in front of Hutch’s place at the end of their shift, he opened the car door without a word, but Starsky’s hand on his shoulder prevented him from leaving.

Starsky broached the subject cautiously. “What happened earlier in the alleyway—”

“It’s all in the report. You signed off on it, too.”

“But that doesn’t mean—”

Hutch wasn’t letting Starsky get a word in edgewise. “I know you said you didn’t see him, Starsk. It’s no big deal. You must be getting slow in your old age.”



Hutch’s tone was light, but there was no mistaking the hard edge beneath the surface. “They assigned patrols to keep an eye out for the guy that got away. I’m not going to lose any sleep over it, and neither should you. I’ll see you in the morning.”

And with that, Hutch was gone.



“What do you mean, you can’t do it?” Hutch’s irritated voice boomed out of the computer room and spilled down the hallway, causing several heads to turn in that direction, including Starsky’s.

“Hutch, you’re not hearing what I’m saying. I said this particular database can’t sort the information that way. But if you give me a couple of hours—”

“Hours?” Hutch spat. “We don’t have a couple of hours. I need the information now, and if you can’t figure out how to make that thing work right, then maybe you should go back to being a meter maid!”

“Now, you just wait a minute, Mister. I just need to do some formatting changes so it can process the data—”

“Right,” Hutch sneered. “You mean you need to call in somebody who actually knows what they’re doing in here. If you can’t do the job, then maybe the Department should find somebody who can!”

Hutch nearly plowed into Starsky who was barreling into the room just as he was storming out.

“Hey!” Starsky grabbed him by the arm when Hutch ignored him and stepped around him. “Just a minute!”

Hutch jerked his arm out of Starsky’s grip and glared at the officers who had stopped in their tracks when they heard him dressing down Minnie. “What’s your problem?”

Starsky looked at him in disbelief. “I’m trying to figure out what *yours* is. What do you think you’re doing, talking to her that way?”

“She’s a big girl; she’ll get over it. I’m just trying to solve a murder case. I don’t have time for incompetent people who sit around all day making up excuses for their own shortcomings.” Hutch turned on his heels and left Starsky with his mouth open, watching his departing back. After a moment, Starsky looked around at those in the hallway as if challenging them to speak up, but the other officers wouldn’t meet his glare and quickly went about their business.

Starsky’s focus changed to Hutch’s retreating figure. He knew his partner was under a lot of stress, but there was no excuse for his behavior. Even though he had no answers, Starsky continued into the computer room to see if he could do any damage control.



His anger over how Hutch had been treating people of late was outweighed by his concern for his partner. Hutch's erratic behavior was totally out of character, but every time Starsky broached the subject, Hutch had made excuses or refused to talk about it.

Starsky sat at his desk, turning a pencil end over end on the blotter before him as he watched Hutch finish up his portion of a report. Glancing at the clock for the umpteenth time, he was relieved to see there were only a few minutes left before they could log out for the day. With any luck, Hutch wouldn't blow him off again, but would accept his offer to grab some dinner or do something together that would give them a chance to talk about whatever it was that his partner didn't want to talk about.

"So," Starsky hedged as Hutch signed off on the report and tossed it in the outgoing basket. "You maybe want to go grab something to eat?"

"No, I don't maybe want to go grab something to eat." Hutch at least recognized how curt he'd sounded and made a conscious effort to be civil in spite of the pounding in his head. "Thanks."



"I'll buy?"

His partner's coaxing tone grated against Hutch's nerves and he clenched his teeth to keep from snapping. "No, thanks. I've got food at home."

Starsky's mind raced. "Okay, so why don't we eat at your place, then head on over to the school and shoot some hoops? I know it's kinda cold out, but once we get goin', it'll be—"

"What part of 'no' don't you—?" Hutch had pushed himself up out of his chair in anger, but stopped in mid-sentence when he realized all the eyes in the room had fallen upon them. Starsky's face had become stony, but Hutch could easily read the hurt and embarrassment on it. It still didn't dispel his irrational rage.

"Look..." Hutch leaned down on the desk so he was close enough for Starsky to hear his lowered voice. It seemed to take supreme effort to control himself, and even though he was obviously trying to be civil, his politeness was noticeably forced. "Thanks, but *no*. I'll see you tomorrow."

If Hutch had even bothered to look back, he would have seen Starsky's eyes burning into the blotter before him.



A few more days passed in a blur.



They had responded to the 2-11 simply because they happened to be only blocks away from the convenience store being hit. As soon as Starsky pulled into the adjoining alley, Hutch was slipping out of the car and walking calmly toward the front entrance. They'd operated this way a hundred times before, with one casually entering

the store like they were an ordinary customer, while the other found a way in to the back of the store to take the robbers by surprise. Starsky knew instinctively that something was still "off" with Hutch, even before his partner exited the car without a word. Usually, there'd be at least some brief agreement—or argument—as to whose "turn" it was to enter the lion's den as the decoy. Not only did Hutch *not* give a verbal claim to the more dangerous task, there was no look, no nod, nothing to signal Starsky to be careful.

Starsky paused just long enough to watch his partner disappear, before turning the corner of the building to find the service entrance. Hutch never looked back.

Starsky found the back door ajar, the lock and handle broken and twisted out of shape by the crowbar discarded nearby. He cautiously eased the door open and was about to slip in when four shots pulsed in succession. He was nearly certain that the familiar bark came from Hutch's weapon, but the realization did nothing to stop his heart from doubling its beats and lodging in his throat.

He barreled down the dark hallway with his gun drawn. Just as he was about to slide to a stop before entering the store, two men wearing ski masks turned the corner and fired at him in nearly point-blank range. Only throwing himself into an open storeroom to his right saved Starsky from taking a bullet in the face. He couldn't prevent himself from colliding with an already damaged shelving unit housing canned goods, which came toppling down on top of him as he fell to the floor. Dazed, he looked up in time to see Hutch illuminated by the open doorway leading to

the alley, following the fleeing robbers walking stonily down the hall, his gun thrust before him, a stream of bullets following one after another.

Hutch didn't answer when Starsky called his name; instead, he continued to move with a deadly calm out the back of the store and into the common backstreet area shared by several stores on the block.

By the time Starsky upended himself from the cans and remains of the shelving to race out of the building, Hutch was standing in the middle of the lot, unprotected, as he reloaded his gun. Starsky watched as the robbers sprinted across the blacktop to their mottled grey sedan and piled in. Before Hutch could fire, they were already speeding down the alley, but only for an instant. Finding the Torino blocking their escape, the car was thrown in reverse and barreled backwards. It ended in a spinning slide as it returned to the open area where Hutch still stood, legs splayed, waiting for their reappearance.

Starsky bellowed, "Halt, police!" but couldn't be heard as the robbers gunned the engine and threw the gears in forward, then began hurtling directly toward his partner.

Hutch calmly, almost maniacally stayed rooted to his spot and slowly raised his gun to fire directly toward the windshield. While the driver and passenger ducked, Starsky could tell each shot went high or wide, with few actually finding the sedan. None struck their target.

In an instant's realization, Starsky knew that the car would plow Hutch down. He was further horrified to realize, by the expression on his partner's face, that Hutch was insanely confident he would somehow be able to stop the car from hitting him.

Starsky rushed a few yards farther into the lot to give himself better odds before planting himself in a wide stance and firing. He knew he couldn't aim for the driver; that would give him no guarantee the speeding car would veer away from his partner. Instead, he shot and exploded the two driver's side tires, forcing the sedan sharply to the left, away from Hutch and directly toward him. Within an instant, it was nearly upon him, and he dove away, landing hard on his shoulder as he rolled and nearly knocked the gun from his grip. He came up on one knee, prepared to fire again as he watched the disabled car plow into the side of one of the brick buildings.

The passenger staggered out of the car, blood staining the ski mask where his forehead had connected with the dashboard. He raised his hands in surrender as he fell to his knees before Starsky.

Hutch was already at the driver's car door and jerked it open. He reached in with his free hand to rip the ski mask off the man's head, then grabbed a fistful of coat. The driver was hauled from the car, and Hutch placed the muzzle of his gun against his temple.

Starsky stood up from where he had just finished cuffing his suspect and left him lying face down on the blacktop. "Hutch, stop! What are you doing?"

The rage on Hutch's face shook Starsky. He was even more horrified when Hutch pulled the gun away from the man's face and, instead of firing, back-handed him across the face with the barrel. He let the man fall bonelessly from his grip, and stuffed the gun back into his shoulder holster.

The robber's moan seemed to enrage Hutch further. He reached down and grasped him by the front of his coat and nearly pulled him to his feet. With his face twisted in a red fury, Hutch began bellowing at the suspect, swearing and berating him for pulling a gun on him in the store, then trying to run him down. Each curse and rant was accompanied by a blow to the head, and within moments, the knuckles of Hutch's hand were cut and bloodied as well.

Starsky shook himself out of where he stood frozen in stunned disbelief and raced around the car to break Hutch's vise-like grip on the robber. He barely managed to shove his partner up against the brick wall, and it took all of his strength to hold Hutch in place and restrain the upraised right fist from raining down on him as well. "What's the matter with you?"

Hutch's chest was heaving as he looked down at Starsky's disbelieving face. "You saw him! He tried to kill me! He was resisting arrest!"

Starsky's jaw worked before he shook his head in bewilderment. The contorted face before him was that of a madman, not his partner. His voice dropped to a strained whisper as his throat constricted in fear and confusion. "What is it? Tell me what's wrong, Hutch. Whatever it is, we can get you some help. Nobody has to know. You don't have to—"

The shove happened instantly and Starsky had no time to react; he sprawled backwards and tripped over the unmoving body of the robber.

"You, too?" Hutch raged at him. "You're just like all the rest!"

"Hutch?" Starsky gaped from where he lay on the blacktop. "What are you talking about? You almost took that guy's head off!"

Hutch looked at the unconscious man between them as if seeing him for the very first time. The anger that had distorted his features turned to disbelief and agony.

Starsky slowly made his way to his feet as if he feared his partner would bolt. “Hutch? Hutch, please, talk to me. Something’s wrong and we both know it.”

Hutch’s rage returned, and his face hardened as he pulled his handcuffs out of his back pocket and flung them at his partner’s feet. “Just leave it alone. Leave me alone.”

“Hutch—”

Hutch spun on his heels and stormed into the back entrance of the store, leaving Starsky behind in disbelief. Starsky checked on the unconscious man before handcuffing one wrist to the car’s side mirror. When he finally made his way into the store to check on his partner, Hutch was gone.



“Cap’n?”

There was something in Starsky’s voice that sent a shiver down Dobby’s spine well before he looked up from the case file to see the carefully veiled despair in the detective’s eyes. He knew something significant was going on between the partners but, as they too often had in the past, they had closed themselves off to handle it on their own, only bringing him in when they were over their heads.

Captain Dobby calmly met Starsky’s plaintive eyes and patiently waited for him to speak. He had heard rumors of Hutch’s explosive and erratic behavior, but was giving the pair their space until they were in danger of crossing too far over the line.

Starsky opened his mouth, but abruptly changed his mind and smiled briefly. “Nothing. Have a good night.”

“Starsky.” The captain brought the retreating figure up short. “Whatever it is, don’t let it go too far.”

It was Starsky’s turn to feel a chill run through him as he nodded and slowly walked away.



By the next week, Starsky had finally convinced Hutch to join him for a few beers at The Pits after their shift. Part of him wondered if his partner agreed just to get him off his back. Hutch had become increasingly pensive and surly, but every time Starsky tried to broach the subject, he was rejected or ignored, or worse—it turned into an argument. Short of camping outside his partner’s door and howling at the top of his lungs until Hutch told him what was going on—which he was seriously considering as an option—Starsky was at a loss. He knew if things didn’t turn around soon, he would have to do something drastic, even if it meant they were pulled from active duty, or worse.

At least tonight, he could try and get Hutch to relax and perhaps even open up. They were discussing the case’s meager evidence when Huggy slipped into the booth beside Starsky and, as he often did, listened in on their conversation, sometimes offering insight or asking questions the partners hadn’t considered.

Starsky finished counting off the number of crimes made at gunpoint in the past month with a similar MO, the value of the jewelry stolen, and how they could possibly be the work of one perpetrator. Though threatened with a handgun, no one else was actually hurt during the list of robberies, other than one woman who had been struck when she didn’t respond to the robber’s demands.

Huggy took a long drink of his beer then wondered aloud if the robber attacked her when he realized that her items weren’t worth much.

“Don’t you think we’d already considered that?” Hutch snapped. “Do you think we’re stupid?”

Astonishment at Hutch’s overreaction marred Huggy’s features for a moment. Concluding that he was being put on, he smiled tentatively and raised his beer for another drink. “Well, there’s ‘book smarts,’ then there’s ‘street smarts’.”

Hutch’s reaction was swift and violent as he lashed out and clamped onto Huggy’s forearm, causing him to slam the beer back down on the table. Huggy’s hand went numb under Hutch’s grip, and the mug slipped from his fingers. The emptied contents splashed onto the table and into Hutch’s lap. Hutch released his grip on Huggy and leapt up, wiping the foam and beer off the front of his shirt and slacks. “You moron!”

Starsky had been stunned when Hutch exploded, but finally got his bearings. “Hutch!” he hissed. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“Me?” Hutch raged back. “Look what he did!”

Huggy sat back in stunned silence, gripping his arm where Hutch had latched onto it.

Starsky surged up out of the booth and stood nose-to-nose with his irrational partner. His voice dropped into an outraged hiss. “Look, I know you’re tired. I know you’re overloaded. We both are. But that’s no reason to treat your friends like—”

“My friends?” Hutch barked back, not giving an inch. “Look, you might consider some two-bit, uneducated snitch *your* friend, but don’t think for a second that some back-alley hood has ever been anything more to me than a necessary inconvenience that I have to stomach to do my job.”

Hutch stormed out of the bar with all the patrons’ eyes following him out the door, then coming back to rest on the two men stunned into silence in the back booth, beer pooling beneath the table.



“Starsky!” Hutch’s urgent voice on the phone was muffled and slurred.

Even though Starsky had to struggle out of the fuzziness of sleep, his anger immediately bubbled to the forefront of consciousness. He had considered going over to Hutch’s apartment right after the altercation at the bar, but had been too furious to try and reason with his partner. In hindsight, he wondered if the time for rationality was over. It had taken hours before Starsky had calmed down enough to fall asleep, and he was livid to think Hutch had the chutzpah to call him a few hours before dawn.

“You’ve got a *lot* of explaining to do. What you said earlier to Huggy was way out of line, and I don’t know what’s been—”

“I know, I know!” The fear in Hutch’s voice cut through Starsky’s fury. “Starsky, please! I need you.”

Starsky felt his gut tighten and his anger was shoved aside. “What’s wrong? Hutch, are you okay?”

“I think...” Hutch’s voice struggled. “I think there’s someone in here. I hear them!”

“Somebody’s there? In your apartment?”

“Yes,” Hutch hissed. “My gun—”

“Is hanging up by the front door.” Starsky threw back the covers and reached for the jeans he’d left in a heap by his bed. “I’m on my way, Hutch. Lock the bedroom door, then call for back-up. I’m on my way!”

A hundred scenarios ran through Starsky’s mind as the Torino sliced through the neon-tainted streets. He snatched up the microphone as he drove. “Zebra Three to Central.”

“This is Central Dispatch; go ahead, Zebra Three.”

“This is Sergeant Starsky. What’s the ETA to Sergeant Hutchinson’s residence?”

The silence over the radio brought bile to his throat. Starsky’s thumb jammed down on the microphone again. “Do you copy? I asked what’s the ETA of the black-and-whites dispatched to Sergeant Hutchinson’s apartment.”

“I copy you, Zebra Three, but we have no orders to dispatch any units to Sergeant Hutchinson’s residence. I have units patrolling approximately four miles from his location. Do you want them to respond?”

Starsky could only guess that whoever Hutch had heard in his apartment had gotten to him before he could make the call for back-up. He cursed himself for not making the request himself. “Yes! Tell them to treat it as a hostage situation involving an officer. I’m en route and may beat them there.”

The sedan took the next turn too fast and slid, sideswiping a parked car. Starsky continued on, ignoring the damage he’d inflicted.

He reached Venice Place before the patrol cars, and sprinted up the dark stairwell with his gun drawn, using all the stealth he could manage in his haste. He placed his free hand on the door handle to see if the door was still locked, and was taken completely by surprise when it was flung open. Starsky stared down the barrel of Hutch’s gun, its sight aimed directly between his eyes.

“Hutch!” Starsky’s relief quickly changed to annoyance, then concern when his partner didn’t withdraw the weapon. He slowly opened his arms as if surrendering, and relaxed his grip on his gun. “Hey, come on. It’s okay; it’s just me.”

Hutch’s eyes were wild and glassy as he kept the bead of his weapon trained on Starsky’s forehead for a couple of uncomfortable heartbeats

before he seemed to realize who was standing before him. Starsky could see the transformation occur as Hutch shook his head to clear it.



“Starsk?” Hutch looked bewildered as he finally lowered his gun. “What...what are you doing here?”

“What do you mean? I—”

The door at the bottom of the stairwell opened and one of the patrolmen

cautiously peered in, his gun thrust before him.

“Everything’s under control.” Starsky extended his hands and turned slowly toward the officer, one he didn’t recognize. “I’m Sergeant Starsky, and this is my partner, Detective Hutchinson. I’m just going to get my badge out, okay?”

The patrolman kept his gun trained on the two of them but nodded, allowing Starsky to reach into his back pocket with his free hand and withdraw his badge, which he then flipped open.

Convinced, the patrolman relayed to his partner still outside the building that everything was okay, and returned his gun to his holster. “You still need us? You want us to check the perimeter?”

“Yeah, take a look around, will you?” Starsky wasn’t sure what had happened yet and still wasn’t convinced his partner wasn’t in any danger.

Hutch had already moved back into the apartment and slipped his gun back into its holster. He sat on the edge of the couch, staring at the sheathed weapon in his hands. “How’d you get here?”

Starsky came in the rest of the way and closed the door behind him, then shook his head, confused by the question. “What do you mean? I drove.”

“No.” Hutch looked up from the gun. “*Why* did you come?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Starsky’s eyes narrowed as he studied Hutch. “Don’t you remember calling me?”

“I called you?”

“Yeah.”

“I called you and asked you to come over here?”

Starsky exhaled heavily; the unused adrenaline and the fear for his partner made him exasperated and a bit angry. “You called me fifteen minutes ago and said there was someone in your apartment and that you couldn’t get to your gun. I told you to call for back-up—which you didn’t—and busted my tail to get over here. I called for the extra units on the way, which is why there’re two guys looking for nothing outside. That’s why I’m here.”

“I...” Hutch placed his elbow on his knee, then buried his face in his free hand. “I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry. I don’t remember calling you.”

Starsky exhaled again, trying to dispel his anger, but nothing could shake his concern. “It’s okay. I’m just glad nobody was really after you. Maybe you were dreaming, or sleepwalking, or something.” Even as he spoke, Starsky knew how hollow the excuses were. “Look. We both know something is going on with you, Hutch. If you don’t want to talk to me about it, that’s fine. But this has got to stop. Either you’re going to talk to Dobby or *I am*.”

Hutch took a moment before he looked up, crestfallen. “I really am sorry. I didn’t mean—”

A light knock at the door interrupted the apology, and the two patrolmen stepped into the room. While they remained professionally polite, it was obvious they were less than thrilled by the wild-goose chase. “Just wanted to let you know that we didn’t find anything outside but a couple of cats going through the garbage. Will there be anything else, *Detectives*?”

Starsky didn’t like the officer’s sarcastic tone, but couldn’t blame him. “No, thanks. I’ll handle it from here.”

After he heard the second door close at the bottom of the stairs. Starsky sat down on the couch next to his partner. “Maybe you heard the cats outside and thought it was something else. My Aunt Rosie used to sleepwalk and talk, and always thought it was her high school principal coming after her and—”

“I wasn’t dreaming!” Hutch pushed himself up off the couch and crossed over to the closet door where he replaced his holstered gun. “I just don’t remember, that’s all.”

Their gazes locked for a moment before Hutch finally looked away. “You can go home now. I’ll be fine. I don’t need you here.”

Starsky leaned forward and untied his shoes, then kicked them off. He pulled the pillow out from behind his back and flung it to the other end of the sofa, then stretched out toward it. “G’night, Hutch.”

Hutch stared at the prone form for a moment before locking the front door and flicking off the light, then he padded out of the room to his own bed.



“Hutch, we need to talk about last night.” Starsky set his coffee mug in the sink when he saw his partner finally emerge from the bathroom. Hutch had been in there so long, Starsky believed that his partner had been avoiding him, hoping he’d get tired of waiting and finally leave for the station without him.

“Can’t it wait?” Hutch asked, sitting on the couch to pull on and lace his tennis shoes. “We’re running late as it is, and Dobey’s expecting our reports first thing.”

Starsky scowled at Hutch’s evasiveness, but then schooled his expression to remain impassive. “We both know the reports can wait. And we both know there’s something going on with you, and whether you want to talk about it or not, we—”

“I’m just tired. I’m tired; you’re tired. We’re both tired.” Hutch stood and retrieved his weapon from the closet, then made his way to the kitchen without meeting Starsky’s intense stare. He pulled a brown paper sack out of the pantry and began filling it with his lunch.

“That’s a load of bull. Look, if you don’t want to talk about it with me, fine. But you need to talk to somebody. There’s that new guy in the Department, Schmid. Maybe you could—”

Hutch had pulled a carton of yogurt out of the refrigerator and slammed the door at Starsky’s suggestion. “Schmid? The new psychologist?”

“All I’m saying—”

Hutch glared at his partner. “It’s what you’re *not* saying, Starsky. What you’re not saying is that you think I’m nuts.”

Unruffled, Starsky’s head cocked to one side, his expression saying, *Oh, come on!*

Starsky's unspoken rebuke took the wind out of Hutch's brief diatribe. Shamefaced, he looked away and his voice softened. "I don't need a shrink."

Hutch's contrite expression confirmed his self-doubt to Starsky more than his shouting ever could have. Starsky felt his pulse quicken as his concern for Hutch grew. "What *do* you need?"

Hutch's demeanor quickly changed again and he threw up his arms in exasperation. "I *need* to go work. I *need* to get there before eight, so Dobey won't have our butts in a sling."

Starsky stared at his partner as Hutch waited expectantly for a response. Finally, Starsky nodded and pushed himself away from the counter. He passed Hutch and walked to the door, then held it open for him. Just as Hutch was about to pass through it, Starsky closed the door halfway, forcing his partner to stop. "This isn't over."

Starsky pulled the door back open and stepped through, leaving his partner to follow and close it behind them.



They had chased the two suspects from a 2-11 down a sidewalk, one of them turning back and firing at them as he ran. The shot flew high and wide of Hutch, but the realization of another life-and-death moment blindsided him into immobility. He stumbled to a halt, staring blindly at his partner's charging figure, Starsky unaware that he had stopped. Fear had captured Hutch once before and the shame was almost as debilitating.

The two perpetrators split up, one still running forward, scattering the crowd before him by waving his gun and shouting, while the second turned into an alley on his right. Starsky continued pounding after the first man, knowing he had to stop him before a bystander was hurt.

Just as Starsky charged past the alley, the second man stepped back into the open and fired at Starsky's back. If Hutch hadn't stopped, he would have been in pursuit of that gunman, and Starsky never would have been in danger.

What saved Starsky's life was an old man who had been shoved aside by the first robber as he ran past. He had stumbled into the bench at the bus stop, and was righting himself with the aid of his cane just as Starsky rushed by him. The old man's cane slipped out from under his tottering weight, and he lost his balance, careening into Starsky. The two twisted as

they fell, and the bullet meant for Starsky slammed high into the old man's back.

The site of the man's blood blossoming on the back of his wrinkled white shirt was what finally put Hutch in motion. Starsky untangled himself from beneath his unwitting protector and turned him onto his side. After quickly holstering his gun and bellowing for someone to call for an ambulance, he whipped out his handkerchief and applied pressure to the wound. Starsky looked up in relief as Hutch came stumbling up to the pair and dropped to his knees beside them. "When I realized you weren't behind me... Are you all right?"

Hutch looked down at the wounded man, his shame and horror causing him to tremble. His voice came out as a tight whisper. "Starsk, I don't know what to say. I just...I froze."

Starsky didn't say a word, but his concern for Hutch's safety changing to confusion and anger was evident in every deepening crease on his face. He reached across the unconscious form and grabbed Hutch's wrist, drawing his hand over to his blood-soaked handkerchief and pressing it hard against the wound.

"Stay here," Starsky growled before launching himself down the sidewalk to see if he could still possibly catch sight of the perpetrators as they fled. They were long gone, so he quickly returned to Hutch and the old man. The distinctive wail of sirens was quickly approaching, so he began crowd control, clearing the perimeter to give the paramedics quick access. He then determined who had witnessed the shooting and asked them to wait so their statements could be taken.

All the while, Hutch remained wooden on the sidewalk, watching in horrific fascination as the old man's blood seeped from between his fingers while he applied pressure to the wound.

Later at the station, Captain Dobe had bawled out the pair royally, his bellows rattling the window panes of the detectives' bull pen. Hutch had sat mutely by, while Starsky attempted to explain and defend the course of events, withholding the fact that he didn't understand his partner's actions, either. The captain's voice was only one of hundreds rampaging through Hutch's head in a barrage of accusations and condemnations. When Dobe realized that Hutch was barely responding, he stopped his tirade abruptly and told the pair to finish up their paperwork and go home. But before he stormed back into his office, he leaned over to Hutch and quietly ground out that he expected the detective back in his office first thing in the morning with an explanation, or he would pull him from active duty until he was cleared by the Department psychologist.

Hutch simply glanced up at his superior, nodded once, and went back to pecking at the typewriter, oblivious to the fact that the keys were spelling out nonsense.



The ringing of the telephone woke Starsky, and he was surprised to realize that he'd even slept. He had called Hutch's apartment several times earlier that evening, but there was no answer. A call to The Pits confirmed that Hutch wasn't there, either, and from Huggy's angry tone, it was a good thing, too. Starsky then spent a few frustrating hours attempting to work on his latest model ship, but too often found his mind racing furiously over the past months' events and his partner's erratic behavior. He started making simple mistakes, nearly ruining the hull, and finally gave up before he did further damage. After retrieving a beer from the refrigerator, he sat down in front of the television set to watch the end of a basketball game and eventually fell asleep on the couch.

"Hello?" he asked around a yawn.

"Starsky? It's Minnie, honey. Look, I'm sorry to wake you, but we got trouble. Well, actually, it's more like *you* got trouble."

"What's wrong, Minnie?" Starsky was instantly alert, the hair on the back of his neck rising. "Wait a minute." Starsky blinked to clear his vision as he peered at the face of his watch, only illuminated by the wavering glow of the television set. "It's after midnight. Are you at the station?"

"Mmm-hmm," Minnie intoned. "Night shift ran into problems with the processor and couldn't get hold of the tech, so they called in Mother Minnie to the rescue. But that's not what I'm callin' you about. You met that new dispatcher, Alisa? Works nights?"

Starsky thought for a minute, trying to be patient, but wondering what was so urgent that Minnie would be calling him at home. "Yeah, yeah. Cute little blonde? I met her, I don't know, a few weeks back. Why? Minnie, what's going on? Is it Hutch?"

"Don't you know it. What's going on, Starsky, is that partner of yours is in a heap of trouble. He's got Alisa here so flustered that she's either going to report him to IA or quit. Look, it's not any of my business that your better half's gone off the deep end, especially after the way he treated me."

Starsky groaned and gritted his teeth. "Minnie, please."

“All right. But only because it affects you, Starsky. That’s why I called. I don’t want you to get into any trouble because Hutch has decided to fly off to Planet Jerk.”

“Just tell me.”

“About a half-hour ago, Alisa gets a call from your partner. He’s all bent out of shape because he says when Dispatch called him, they didn’t give him any directions. Said he was calling from a pay phone and didn’t know how to get to where he needed to go.”

Starsky’s mind raced. “I know he’s been difficult to deal with lately, but calling back for directions isn’t—”

“Starsky, *nobody* from Dispatch called him tonight. Alisa didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. He chewed her up one side and down the other. She finally got the address he was lookin’ for out of him, and was able to look it up and tell him where to go. I tell you what. If it’d been me, *I* would’ve liked to have told him where to go!”

When Starsky didn’t respond, Minnie continued with her voice lowered. “And to make things worse, darlin’, Alisa said it sounded like Hutch was drunk. That’s why I’m calling you. It’s bad enough that boy almost made her cry, being so rude to her and all, but to be three sheets to the wind and log in for duty? You don’t need me to tell you that ain’t good, Starsky.”

Starsky felt his guts twist. “Minnie, what was the address he asked directions for?”

“Just a second, let me ask Alisa.”

Starsky heard Minnie set the receiver down and leave her desk. She returned after a moment and relayed the information along with directions, then sighed. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on with your partner, but you be careful, okay?”

“Thanks, Min. And tell Alisa—”

“Yeah, I know. Apologize on Hutch’s behalf. I will. But, Starsky...” Minnie’s voice held a note of bitterness. “How long you gonna keep apologizing for that boy?”



Starsky almost missed the last turnoff on the country road. There had been no streetlights, or homes for that matter, in the last dozen miles, and the county sign marking the dirt road had been hit and abandoned years before, leaving it tipped at a steep angle and nearly impossible to see.

The road was riddled with potholes, slowing down the Torino considerably. He could tell where at least one other vehicle had driven down the road recently, but many of the tracks ground into the damp dirt would soon be gone with the sleet-like rain and gusting winds.

Starsky cursed for the fool's errand he was on and was considering giving up his search when his headlights reflected off the bumper of Hutch's LTD, tucked off the road on a short stretch, most likely used by the California Conservation Corps that managed the state lands the directions had taken him to.

He immediately cut his headlights before pulling over and turning off the engine. Starsky felt the familiar surge of adrenaline as he checked that his gun's clip was fully loaded, then zipped up his leather jacket and turned the collar. Getting out, he cautiously circled his partner's car, looking for any signs of what direction Hutch might have taken on foot. After stumbling around in the pitch black, he returned to the Torino and retrieved a flashlight from the glove box. Before he turned it on, though, he wrapped his handkerchief around the lens, diffusing the light. If Hutch were out there meeting a snitch or in the midst of trouble, the last thing Starsky wanted was to alert them to his presence. Still, he had to have some light if he was going to go traipsing around the middle of nowhere.

He circled Hutch's car again, and, while he was no tracker when it came to the woods, Starsky could at least determine that nothing in the underbrush indicated that Hutch had gone farther in, which left the road as his only course. Starsky began walking down the muddy track, but any footprints Hutch may have made—or car tracks if he'd been picked up by someone—were long washed away by the rain now falling nearly diagonally in the wind.

Shivering, Starsky backtracked to the Torino and got in. Losing hope, but refusing to give up, he started the car and began driving slowly forward. The lights from the sedan would give him away and ruin the element of surprise, but it was a risk he was willing to take, and there was no way he could proceed without them. After the first mile, he was astonished to find that the road changed to blacktop before narrowing to a one-lane iron bridge arching over a turbulent canyon river, swollen with the first of the winter rains.

The Torino rocked to a stop when Starsky's foot slammed on the brakes. As the car had crept onto the bridge, the headlights pierced the darkness to reveal the lone figure swaying on the guardrail, clutching the diagonal girder above his head as he peered down into the icy darkness.

When Starsky realized it was Hutch, and what he was about to do, nothing—including taking five slugs in the chest—had hurt and terrified him more.

After he had desperately managed to coax Hutch down from the bridge and into the back of the Torino, they escaped back down the road, swallowed up by the darkness.

Even if Starsky had looked back, he would have missed the eyes filled with hatred peering back at them from the other side of the bridge, seething in frustrated rage.



The hot water from the shower had made Hutch feel weak in the knees, and he had to steady himself as he crossed into the kitchen, still scrubbing his hair dry with a towel. He had re-banded one of the deeper cuts on his right foot, and its tenderness added to his unstable gait. Starsky was already seated at the smoked-glass table, a pot of soup warming on the stove. When he saw Hutch coming, he got up to retrieve the meal and a half-eaten loaf of bread. "It's not much."

"Right now, I could eat a horse." Hutch eased himself into the chair, his arm and shoulder muscles still stiff from having thrashed against the restraints.

"Horse, I don't got. Soup, I got." Starsky poured the soup into his partner's bowl before filling his own and setting the pot down on an oven mitt in the middle of table. He gingerly sat as well and picked up his spoon. "Unless, that's not *really* beef in the soup."

Hutch's spoon stopped halfway up to his lips. "Starsky, that's disgusting."

Starsky lifted his spoon in a salute before inserting it into his mouth. "Happy trails."

After peering at the indistinguishable lump of meat from the canned soup, Hutch pushed aside the unpalatable thought and ate. His stomach lurched and protested, but he continued slowly, knowing he needed to regain his strength.

They ate in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Starsky finished first and watched as his partner also managed to eat two pieces of dry bread before giving up. Hutch got up from the table and made his way to the living room, stopping before the remaining pane in the sliding glass door. A sheet of plywood covered a portion of the frame. Through

half-lidded eyes, he could take in the panoramic view of the ocean and not meet the concern in Starsky's eyes that he tried so hard to conceal.

After a moment, Hutch found the courage to speak. "I think I remember something."

"Yeah?" Starsky's voice was tinged with both encouragement and fear.

"Yeah. I...I have no idea when this actually happened, but I remember I had just left for a run. It was in the morning and it was still cool outside. Most of the shops on my street weren't open yet. Lou—the guy who owns the newsstand—was just opening it up for the day."

"Okay. So what happened next?"

Hutch shrugged his shoulders in confusion. "Nothing, really. Except that I swore I heard someone call my name."

Starsky's eyes narrowed as he tried to understand the significance of the memory. "What's so unusual about that?"

Hutch's face became paler as he glanced at his partner. "There was no one else around, Starsk. And the voice...the voice was *Gillian's*."

The pair went silent for a moment, while the weight of what Hutch had revealed sunk in. When he finally spoke again, Hutch's voice was nearly a whisper. "So, am I crazy?"

"You mean, are you less normal than normal?" The hint of humor in Starsky's gentle reply would have been reassuring under different circumstances, but couldn't quite dispel Hutch's fear.

"Starsk," Hutch pleaded quietly, his eyes never leaving the waves that pelted the beach outside the house. His heart lodged in his throat as he sensed Starsky coming up behind him.

Starsky stopped beside his partner and took in his profile before turning his focus out toward the water as well. Without commenting, he placed his hand on the back of Hutch's neck and squeezed it once. Instead of removing it, though, he let it rest there, offering his partner what comfort he could.

As he stood absorbing Starsky's quiet strength, Hutch realized it felt like something within him had been lost. But as shaken and confused as he felt, he was even more certain that Starsky would be there to help him find his way back.



The sun was beginning to set on Hutch's first day after returning to some semblance of normalcy. He had spent most of it drowsing on the couch under his partner's watchful eye. He knew that Starsky only pretended to be reading the dog-eared paperback and spent more time glancing over the top of the pages, searching for any sign of erratic behavior or desperate need. The constant vigil was more reassuring than unnerving, allowing Hutch to give into his fatigue and rest peacefully.

When he awoke at sunset, his bleary eyes caught sight of Starsky sitting hunched over the kitchen table, his forehead nestled in the palms of his hands. "Why don't you get some sleep, Starsk?"

Starsky quickly scrubbed his eyes and got up from the table to cross the room. "Maybe later. How are you feeling?"

Hutch sat up then stretched his arms out in front of him. "Like I've been wrestling with an octopus." He met his partner's gaze with concern of his own. What Starsky had gone through over the past several days must have been a form of hell all its own. "The handcuffs—if you had to restrain me, I'm guessing I was less than a stellar patient."

Starsky managed a tired smile. "Were you ever?"

"I'm sorry, you know."

Starsky's brow knit. "Sorry? Hutch, you've got nothing to be sorry for."

Unable to accept Starsky's easy dismissal of the guilt that threatened to overwhelm him, Hutch rose stiffly and crossed to the faucet. Drawing a glass of water, he took a slow, small swallow, not wanting to upset his stomach. Staring out the small window above the sink, he took in the colors heralding the end of the day and was touched by its calm beauty contradicting the flurry of emotions racing through his mind. Calming his thoughts, Hutch turned away from the window and rested his back against the counter. As expected, Starsky had been watching him from the table.

"Starsk, was I using?"

"Hutch, I—"

"I need to know, Starsk. Was I shooting up?"

"No. No, you weren't. When I found you on the...*that night*, I..." Starsky's head dipped down as he swallowed hard. He was ashamed for thinking his partner could ever knowingly and willfully have chosen to shoot heroin. "I'm sorry. I checked your arms as soon as I had you away from the bridge. Then later that night when I cleaned off your feet, I checked behind your knees for any signs, any tracks. I'm sorry; I didn't want to think that, but I didn't know what else it could have—"

“Don’t. Don’t apologize. I would have done the same thing if I’d been in your shoes.” Hutch exhaled wearily before crossing to the kitchen table and slipping into a chair across from Starsky. “I...maybe I was taking something else. It’s not like I don’t know where to get it on the street.”

“No!” The flat of Starsky’s hand slapping the tabletop startled Hutch. Starsky’s eyes flared. “I don’t believe that and neither do you. You’ve been through so much as a cop, Hutch, and you’ve never done anything more than had a few beers when things got rough.”

“More than a *few* beers,” Hutch responded wryly.

Starsky picked up on the morose humor and let it push aside the anger born out of his frustration and concern. “Okay, more than a few. We both have. But you’d never do drugs. I’d bet my life on it.”

Hutch smiled gratefully and reached across the table to grip Starsky’s hand in appreciation. After a moment, he released it and leaned back in his chair, his eyes searching his partner’s face for answers.

“Okay, so we’ll rule out that I was using.”

“Or that you went nuts.”

Hutch’s eyes narrowed when Starsky named his fear. “What else would explain all of this?”

Starsky’s mouth opened to speak, but nothing came forth as he thought furiously. Finally, he gave up. “I don’t know.” When he saw his own apprehension mirrored in Hutch’s eyes, he smiled gently. “Don’t worry. If you are nuts, you’ll be in good company. I’ll just make sure Cabrillo State’s got double-occupancy rooms.”



The bulk of the next day was spent with the pair catnapping and a slow walk out to the shoreline. Starsky could tell Hutch was wrestling with what he’d been told, but didn’t push. If his partner continued showing signs of improvement, Hutch would eventually begin asking the questions that would help him face the nightmare they’d been living.

It didn’t take long for Hutch to tire from the trek to the beach, and he suggested they go back to the warmth of the small house. His unsettled expression watching the waves roll at his feet wasn’t lost on his partner.

Hutch managed to eat half a sandwich about mid-day, then retired to the bedroom. Starsky promised to get him up in time to watch the ball game that came on later that

evening, then settled onto the couch with the same rumpled paperback he'd been unsuccessfully reading for days.

At eight o'clock, Starsky turned on the TV set and switched through the channels until he found the game. When the screen didn't come in clearly, he turned the rotor in a few different directions until the picture came into focus. Satisfied, he retrieved the remains of a bag of chips and a half can of peanuts, then called out for Hutch to join him.

When Hutch didn't respond, Starsky made his way to the bedroom and rapped gently against the open door jam. The last light from the sunset washed the room in amber.

Hutch lay on his side with a sheet carelessly draped across him. The arm beneath him dangled bonelessly off the bed, while the other was tucked up under his jaw. Struck by the waning sunlight, his hair was disheveled and slightly matted, as if he'd been sweating. It didn't take long for Starsky to realize that Hutch wasn't sleeping, but staring unresponsively at the stark wall.

"Hutch?" Starsky crossed to the side of the bed and crouched to put himself in Hutch's line of vision. When he didn't even acknowledge his presence, Starsky sat on the edge of the mattress and rested his hand on Hutch's arm. "Hutch?"

"Maybe you should have let me fall." Hutch's voice was a defeated whisper.

Starsky's heart lurched, even though he had expected to see traces of the depression's uncharacteristic behavior resurface before their battle was won or lost. He forced himself to keep his voice light. "What, and have to break in another partner? Not when I've finally got you house-trained."

"I remembered something else."

"Yeah?"

"You're not going to like it." Drawing a shaking breath, Hutch recounted as best he could remember the night after he had failed to protect Starsky.

Despair.

Blinding, numbing, suffocating hopelessness.

Hutch had felt that fear before: fear of his life coming crashing to an end. And for what? To stop some greasy punk from ripping off a gas station? His life ending for a measly twenty-four bucks and some change?

He began to tremble. He had balked once before, but then, it was because of Gillian, and he had frozen in fear at the idea of losing his



life before theirs together really had a chance to begin. He had loved her, truly loved her, but she had died because of that love. He never forgave himself that her blood was on his hands.

It didn't surprise him that her voice whispered in his ears, coaxing him to come to her. He could almost see her across the room, silhouetted by the glow of the sunset streaming in through the glass of the greenhouse.

Gillian beckoned him, her arms inviting his embrace. And her smile! What Hutch would have given to see her smile at him that way just one more time! She tilted her head just so, urging him to come to her, and he could withstand it no longer. Lurching to his feet, he staggered toward the greenhouse window and Gillian.

But when he was within a foot of her gossamer image, her once-beautiful face became a specter skull, translucent skin pulled tight across white bone. Her hazel eyes dissolved into blackened sockets, and her gentle smile became a bloodied mouth housing hundreds of dagger-like teeth.

The Gillian-demon roared in blood-lust and lunged at Hutch, and he fell backwards in fear, curling up on himself. He was sure the demonic form engulfed him; her shrieks coursing through his body in an unending echo of accusation and horrific pain.

Hutch covered his ears with his hands, aiggeng himsthe-lh hin ae(m)8(e)-1(r)-2ech, aansm telf. Hon hl

ofh him w Huts b(h)5(euout)bm (i)-2(l)3()5(h)5((ne)4((l)-2d((gge)4)-

He listened to the Dispatch operator's explanation that an anonymous caller had a tip regarding their ongoing murder investigation. The caller was willing to talk to Hutch, but he had to come alone and it had to be now. Hutch's free hand clawed at the desk drawer for a piece of paper. By the time he scratched out the address, the paper was nearly mangled.

It seemed like he was moving through sludge as he stumbled across the room to shrug into his harness and jacket. By the time he left his apartment, he was oblivious to his split and throbbing lip, and the events of the past twenty minutes were already forgotten.

Hutch's eyes pinched shut, and he burrowed his head deeper into the pillow as if he could somehow hide from the world there. The sight of his courageous, nearly invincible partner reduced to the shattered figure beside him pierced Starsky. Rage mingled with fear, and he vowed that he would make whoever had caused Hutch's suffering pay dearly.

His love for Hutch overrode his desire to lash out at their unseen enemy. Starsky gently reached out and placed his callused hand on the side of his partner's head. "It's going to be okay, Hutch; I promise. We'll get through this."

Hutch's expression softened, and Starsky could feel him turn slightly into his hand, as if seeking its offered comfort. "I...I can't...I can't..."

"You can't what, Hutch?" Starsky's thumb moved against Hutch's temple with tenderness few would have thought the detective capable of. When Hutch didn't continue, Starsky's throat constricted, and the despondency and hopelessness that engulfed his partner washed over him as well. "Hutch, I'll help you. We'll get through this together, I promise. Trust me."

Something in Starsky's voice broke through Hutch's isolation. Hutch clenched his jaw as he tried to find a way to express the grief that overwhelmed him. When no explanation was forthcoming, one desperate need escaped: "Don't leave?"

Starsky's throat tightened even further, but it couldn't stop him from responding. "Never. I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

The sun continued to set as the two remained in the silent room. Starsky left his hand resting on his partner's shoulder, guarding him against his unnamed terrors, as Hutch found healing in Starsky's quiet presence and strength.



The next morning, the sound of the front door creaking woke Starsky enough to watch his partner quietly slip out of the house. As soon as the door closed, Starsky eased off the

couch. He had remained beside Hutch for hours last night, even well after his partner had finally fallen asleep, before retiring to the couch.

Starsky padded to the window, watching to see where Hutch was headed. Since the car keys were still in his pocket, he had no fear of Hutch trying to leave. Within moments, the muted figure appeared from around the side of the house and continued down to the beach. He had on his light jacket against the morning chill, and a steaming mug of coffee clutched in both hands. He stopped at the water's edge and stood facing the brisk breeze that carried the waves onto the shore. The wind swept Hutch's hair from his forehead, and he lifted his face toward it, as if it could dispel his uncertainties.

Starsky poured his own cup of coffee and watched from the kitchen window. He debated whether or not to join Hutch, but decided to give him the time and space he needed to come to grips with the events of the last month.

After draining his cup, Starsky slammed it down on the counter harder than he'd intended. He was certain Hutch was on his way back to some form of normalcy. Starsky could almost make himself believe the past months hadn't happened, as if the maniac masquerading as his partner had never existed. He could almost believe the night he'd found Hutch perched on the bridge, ready to take his own life, was nothing more than the worst nightmare he'd ever faced. But it was all too real, no matter how hard he tried to pretend it wasn't.

He was certain Hutch's behavior was somehow not his partner's fault, and definitely not because he'd lost his grip on reality. Even though he hadn't shared his theory yet, he was more and more certain that someone had wanted Hutch to lose his mind *and* take his life, and somehow, right under his own nose, had nearly made it happen. It was an assault on his partner, pure and simple.

They want a fight, Starsky thought, and we're sure as hell going to give it to them.



It wasn't long before Hutch made his way back up from the oceanfront, and Starsky threw the last pieces of bread in the toaster for a modest breakfast. The two ate in silence, as Hutch continued to stare distractedly out toward the waves.

“How did that sliding glass door really get broken, Starsk? And don't tell me you tripped over your own big feet and fell through it.”

His question took Starsky by surprise, but he smiled reassuringly before returning his focus to the half-eaten plate of toast before him. “Can't hide anything from you, huh? You ought to think about becoming a detective.”

Hutch's hand darted out and grasped Starsky by the wrist, preventing his hand from continuing its journey to bring the food to his mouth. The toast broke from Starsky's grip

and tumbled back to the plate. “I need to know, Starsk. What did I do? Did I push you?”

Starsky sighed heavily and met the intensity of Hutch’s stare. The anger he read there was directed inward. “It doesn’t matter, Hutch, okay? Nobody got hurt and—”

“Nobody got hurt, huh?” Hutch released his grip, and his hand continued up to gently grasp Starsky’s chin and turn his head aside. “And what about this shiner? ‘Nobody got hurt’ with that one, too?”

Starsky good-naturedly pulled away from Hutch’s grip and resumed eating his breakfast. “Your left’s not *that* good, pal.”

Exasperated, and more than a little disconcerted by his lack of memory, Hutch pushed away from the table. He ran his hands down his face as if to scrub his anxiety and regret away. “I don’t know what to say, Starsk. I’m sorry that I—”

Starsky jabbed a finger at him. “Don’t. Don’t apologize for something you had no control over.”

“Like temporary insanity?”

“Like somebody making you that way. Hutch, I don’t know who or why or how yet, but my gut tells me—”

“Your gut? C’mon, we both know that I lost it somewhere along the line. I don’t know if it’s the pressure we’ve been under lately, or—”

“No. No way. I don’t buy it. Why now? When you started acting...when all of this started, things weren’t going bad. Sure, we were working on a few cases, but it was all standard stuff. Nothing big, like some whack-job trying to blow our heads off or poison us or...” Starsky looked hard into Hutch’s face. “But what if that’s it?”

“What? Poison? You think somebody drugged me?”

“Think about it. It’s possible. When I found you on the bridge that night, I—”

“You thought I was using.” Hutch’s voice held no accusation.

“I didn’t know what else to think. I didn’t want to, but nothing else made sense. Like I said, there were no tracks that I could find, but who knows where somebody else could have nailed you. Or maybe you were slipped something, like in a drink.”

The possibility seemed to relieve some of Hutch’s concern, but the idea that he was losing his grip on reality plagued him. “Okay, it’s feasible. But I think we still need to consider the possibility that I have a real problem that you and I can’t fix.”

Starsky's hands curled into fists, but he calmed himself for Hutch's sake. "You want to see a head doctor, fine. We'll get you to one. But Hutch, just...just give us a shot at this. If we don't come up with something within a week, then I'll drive you to the funny farm myself, if that's what you want, and they can check us both in. But we both know if we take you to a shrink without being sure, it's gonna go on your record, and it'll take IA forever before you're cleared again for duty."

Hutch's voice was soft. "Maybe I shouldn't be out there, Starsk. What if I freeze up again and you end up paying for it?"

Instead of blowing off Hutch's concern, Starsky answered seriously. "That's a chance I'm willing to take."

"I'm not so sure *I* am."

"Hutch, I trust you. I've never stopped trusting you, and I'm not gonna quit now."

"How can you be so sure, Starsk?"

"It's nothing I have to be sure or unsure about. It's just...it's us."

Hutch was still, tentatively absorbing Starsky's assurance. "Okay, so presuming I'm not nuts and that someone's out to make me think I am—"

"And trying to get you to kill yourself or get killed in the process."

"Where do we go from here? Like you said, we can't exactly go to the Department with this. IA would have a field day with it. With *me*."

Starsky remained quiet while he chased away some horrific images that danced around his memory. "Hutch, what does this all remind you of?"

Hutch's eyes narrowed briefly until the realization slapped him in the face. "You think Jennings is still trying to get back at us? He's locked up, Starsk. It's not like he can make connections with a hit man from inside Cabrillo State."

"He had enough connections to hire Bellamy to get to me. We were both marks."

"Okay, sure. But still..." Hutch rubbed his temple against a growing headache. "I don't know; maybe. Maybe it's worth looking into."

"Okay. We'll start there. It might be a long shot, but it beats starting cold and trying to figure out who else might want you dead."

Hutch scowled. "It's not like there's hundreds of people lining up, you know."

Starsky grinned sardonically. “Well, maybe not hundreds, anyway.”

“You’re a lot of help.”

“I try.” Starsky smiled and shifted in his chair to ease his back, but refused to grimace and prod Hutch’s feelings of guilt. “I’m thinking, too, that we need some help.”

“Dobey?”

Starsky nodded. “I figure we need proof that you’ve been drugged. It’s probably almost completely out of your system by now, but maybe there’s still something there that can tell us what you were given, and how. Maybe that’ll give us some leads.”

“So, what are you thinking? It’s not like we can waltz into the local hospital and request a blood test.”

Starsky shook his head. “I’m going to call Cheryl Jennings.”

“You can’t be serious. What are you going to tell her? That we think her dad is still after us and orchestrated another drug hit? From a psychiatric hospital, no less?”

“You got a better idea?”

Hutch chased different scenarios around in his mind, but couldn’t think of another discrete source to help them. “No. I guess she’s our only hope.”

“Not our *only* hope, Hutch,” Starsky said quietly.

“What else have we got?”

“Us.”



Starsky called Captain Dobey shortly after they had cleaned up their breakfast dishes. Hutch didn’t have to be standing very near to hear their captain’s exclamations of relief over his recovery, then his very loud admonishments as to how Starsky handled the rescue. With “no private parties” ringing in his ears, Hutch retreated to the safety of a shower and let his partner contend with the details. When he returned to the living room, Starsky relayed that he had also called Huggy and filled him in as best he could.

It didn’t take long to pack up their few belongings and head back to the city.



It was mid-afternoon by the time Starsky guided the Maverick into the alley behind The Pits. Hutch remained in the passenger seat, studying his hands, while Starsky went to the door and pounded. After a long moment, the door cracked open after Angie, Huggy's cook, had peered through the peephole and identified the detective.



Starsky returned to the car and looked in on his partner through the open window. "You okay?"

Hutch nodded, but Starsky could easily read his discomfort. "I...I can't believe I said those things to Huggy. Or to anyone else, for that matter."

"You can't take the blame for this, Hutch. Once we figure out what was done to you—"

"I know, I know. But even so. What I said, how I treated people, had to come from somewhere inside my own psyche. What does that say about the type of person I really am?"

"What you *am*," Huggy drawled, as he leaned up against The Pits doorframe and lit a cigarette, "is a dude who thinks too much." Huggy shook out the match and tossed it aside. "And whose profession of choice makes him a target for whack-jobs and psychopaths to take potshots at. And has lousy taste in friends."

Hutch got out of the car and raised his hands imploringly. "Huggy, I don't know what to say."

Huggy cocked an eyebrow and took a pull on his cigarette. "Say, 'Huggy, I'm sorry for calling you a two-bit, uneducated, back-alley snitch'."

Hutch's face blanched with shame, but he responded in a low voice, "Huggy, I am so sor—"

Huggy put up a hand to cut off his friend before turning to Starsky. "Man, you're right. They really messed him up if he's willing to grovel."

"Told ya," Starsky retorted, relieved by Huggy's quick acceptance of the situation and lack of apparent resentment toward Hutch. "So, where's my car?"

At a loss over being let off the hook by his friend so easily, Hutch quietly moved to the front of the Maverick and leaned back on the hood. Huggy tossed the remainder of the cigarette to the ground and tapped it out with his boot. "Merl's. I figured it was about time that clunker went 'uptown'."

"Huggy," Starsky warned.

With a grin, Huggy moved closer to Hutch's side and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hutch is with me on this one. Ain't it about time you got rid of that funky white stripe and got something with a bit more class, like...?" Huggy's look invited Hutch to join in the good-natured tormenting.

"Flames? Skull and cross-bones?"

"An improvement, but perhaps too understated." Huggy looked thoughtful. "I was thinking more along the lines of the Batmobile."

"Big fins on the back."

"Bubble top and a big yellow bat signal."

"As long as *I'm* Batman, and *he's* Robin." Hutch nodded, his tentative grin relaying his gratitude for Huggy's easy reconciliation. "And no tights for me. Him, yes. Me, no."

Starsky stared at the two with mock annoyance before shaking his head, although it couldn't mask his pleasure over the normalcy of their banter. "You're *both* crazy."



After retrieving the Torino, which actually had been stored at a service station operated by one of Huggy's contacts rather than at Merl's, the partners headed back to Metro to fill in Captain Dobey. Hutch hesitated as they approached the squadroom and took a moment to glance through the plate glass window. Several detectives were at their desks, involved in their various investigations. In the middle of them was Detective Robinson, who looked up just as Starsky pushed open the door. Anger overtook his features, and he glared at Hutch as he passed by the window. Starsky was determined to run interference and put his hands out as if to ward off any blows as Robinson stood. "Look, Al, there's a lot you don't know about yet—"

"Get out of my way, Starsky," Robinson growled, pushing past Starsky and turning down the hall to get away from Hutch who had paused outside the door.

In three quick strides, Hutch caught up to the detective and placed a tentative hand on Robinson's sleeve. "Al, wait. I just want to apologize for—"

Robinson jerked his arm away and, in no uncertain terms, told Hutch what he could do with his apology before storming away.

Hutch took a step in the retreating detective's direction, but Starsky stopped him. "Let him go, Hutch. Once this is over..."

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.” Hutch continued to stare down the hall to the doors through which Robinson had disappeared before once again shrugging off his regret and entering the squadroom, trusting Starsky to walk him through the aftermath.



The pale, contrite detective who sat before him was not the same frenetic, angry, and lost man he had been a week and a half before. Captain Dobey and Hutch stared at each other, gauging one another as Starsky looked on anxiously. Hutch broke eye contact first, staring hard at his shoes as he flushed with shame and embarrassment. “Captain, I don’t know what to say, except that I’m sorry. I don’t understand what—”

“Hold on. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve got nothing to apologize for. With your co-workers, that’s another story. Maybe not an apology, just an explanation. But not yet, Hutch. I know it’ll be hard, but until we get to the bottom of this, you don’t want to tip your hand, however it turns out.” The captain’s frankness wasn’t intended to be unkind, and neither detective could blame their superior for needing evidence to back up their theory on Hutch’s behavior. “And, Hutch...”

Dobey exhaled heavily as he studied the man who was like a son to him. “The first sign of you going back to what I’ve seen over the past month, I, well, you know I’ll have no choice but to do something about it.”

Hutch sensed Starsky tensing in the seat next to him and rested his hand on his partner’s arm. “We understand.”

Dobey nodded. “For the record, I believe you’re on to something. I don’t believe for a second that you were using. But I’ve got to admit, the way you were acting made me think maybe the job had gotten to you. Even a strong man can break. You’re not invincible, although I know you two seem to think you are.”

Dobey’s slight smile seemed to ease some of Hutch’s tension. “I... Thanks.”

The captain cocked an eyebrow. “Now, if somebody’s out to get you, we’ve got to figure out how and with what. Maybe that’ll give us a better chance at figuring out who.”

“Exactly!” Dobey’s approval seemed to energize Starsky, and he pushed himself up out of the chair. “But I may have blown that lead by keeping Hutch away too long. It could be out of his system by now.”

Dobey reached for the phone. “So get on the stick! I’ll call County General, and you two—”

Starsky reached out to stop the captain from bringing the receiver up to his ear. “No, not County. You know any kind of drug testing on an active officer will be reported to IA.”

The captain nearly growled as he set down the receiver. “And they’d immediately start their own investigation—”

“And get in the way of ours,” Hutch finished.

Dobey studied Hutch’s drawn features as he considered the alternatives. “I could take you *off* active duty, Hutch. Take care of it that way. Give you time to—”

“No,” the partners responded as they often did—immediately and in unison.

Starsky shook his head vehemently. “*We* need to be out there. We need to find whoever did this to us.”

Starsky’s inference of unity was not wasted on his superior. “All right. But I want in on this. I want to know who you’re talking to and what they’re telling you. Somebody wants one or both of you dead, and I’m not...” Dobby’s voice hitched with unexpected emotion, surprising them all. “I’m not about to lose you both.”



Cheryl Jennings had always possessed a fragile air about her. Her father’s nervous breakdown, his maniacal attempts to avenge his son’s death, and finally his conviction and sentencing to a psychiatric ward had taken a toll on her. She had thrown herself into her work, as if she could somehow make up for the damage her father, and ultimately her brother Jerry, had caused.

When Starsky and Hutch showed up at her lab, the change in her physical appearance was immediately evident to both men. She was paler than they’d remembered, and deep furrows along her forehead marred her normally genteel features. Still, she seemed pleased to see them and blushed when each in turn greeted her with a fond kiss on the cheek.

Embarrassed by the warm flush staining her face, Cheryl’s hand flew to the nape of her neck to tuck back the errant strand of hair that had been tickling her all day. “I wasn’t expecting...I mean, I haven’t seen the two of you in so long, I...” Exasperated with herself, she exhaled and gave a small self-deprecating chuckle. “How are the two of you?”

“We’re fine. Now.” Starsky glanced at his partner, then smiled at Cheryl’s obvious fluster. “How have you been?”

“Please?” Cheryl gestured for the pair to follow her out of the lab and into her small adjoining office. She looked more comfortable as she perched on the desk and waited for them to take their seats across from her. “I don’t suppose this is just a social call, is it?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Hutch replied lightly.

Cheryl noticed for the first time Hutch's nearly translucent skin and sunken eyes. Starsky looked almost equally drawn, with a tightness about his mouth and eyes.

"What's wrong? Hutch, are you okay?" Her heart rose in her throat when Hutch looked away, and she turned to search Starsky's face anxiously. "David?"

"Cheryl," Starsky leaned forward in his chair and rested his hand on the technician's. "We need your help."

"Anything. What can I do?"

Starsky squeezed her hand before releasing it. "We think Hutch was drugged, and not just once. This may have been going on for a while. Months, even. He seems to be okay now, but a few weeks ago, well, he...he wasn't himself. I think whoever did this was trying to drive him crazy. Crazy enough so he'd...."

Hutch continued when his partner couldn't. "Somebody wanted me dead, Cheryl, and they almost succeeded. I was out of my head, and I was either going to make a mistake serious enough to get me or both of us killed, or I was going to lose it and..." Hutch paused as he glanced at Starsky. "...and kill myself when I couldn't take it anymore."

"Do you—?" Cheryl closed her eyes in horror, fearing the worst. "You think it was my father."

"We don't know," Starsky cut in. "We don't know who, or what, or how. That's why we need your help."

When Cheryl opened her eyes, they were bright with unshed tears, but she was able to pull herself together. "What do you need me to do?"

"Toxicology." Hutch leaned forward. "It might give us a place to start if we knew what I was given and how."

Cheryl stared numbly at Hutch before her professional training kicked into gear. She shook her head in anger and disgust, then pushed herself off the desk and into the lab to don a pair of gloves. She returned just as quickly with her equipment and waited as Hutch awkwardly rolled up his sleeve. "How long do you think this has been going on?"

"Three or four weeks, maybe more." Starsky felt his chest tighten as he watched Cheryl insert the needle into the vein in Hutch's arm and draw a vial of blood. It was over in seconds, and Hutch applied pressure to the small wound as he curled his arm upward. "But, sweetheart, you've got to look long and hard, because I may have screwed up our chances here."

“What do you mean, David?” Cheryl asked as she applied first-aid tape over the cotton ball on Hutch’s arm.

Hutch’s free hand gripped his partner’s forearm. “When all of this came to a head, Starsky found me and hid me away until he could figure out what to do next.”

Starsky picked up the thread. “After a few days, he started to come out of it.”

“So Starsky believes—”

“We believe,” Starsky interjected.

“That I didn’t have some sort of breakdown.” The expression on Hutch’s face belied his lingering doubts. “So, if we work under the assumption that I had been drugged somehow, hiding me away for a week may have caused whatever I’d been given to leave my system.”

“Well, maybe we’ll get lucky. It really depends on what the compound was. Some drugs, like hallucinogens, never actually leave your system. Trust me, if there’s anything in your blood, I’ll find it.”

Hutch stood to leave. “That’s what we’re counting on.”

“Call us as soon as you have something.” Starsky rose as well and gripped Cheryl’s hand again.

“This might take some time, though. Why don’t you two go home and get some sleep?”

Starsky waited for Hutch to respond, letting him make the call, although hoping he would agree to get some rest. Hutch seemed to be considering it before he shook his head. “We will, but first, there’s somebody we need to talk to.”



“We don’t have to do this now, you know,” Starsky murmured as he watched Hutch ease himself into a visitation room chair. His partner’s movements were rigid, and more than enough to convince Starsky that Hutch was a long way from recovery.

“Yes, Mother,” Hutch grunted as he watched for the door to open. When no one immediately materialized, he turned his focus back toward Starsky. The blatant concern on Starsky’s face was enough for Hutch to let down his guard long enough to smile gently and assure his partner. “I’m okay, really. After this, we’ll grab something to eat and go home, all right?”

Starsky nodded marginally. He’d nearly lost his partner to someone’s demented form of revenge; he wasn’t about to lose him now to Hutch’s own stubbornness.

He was about to say more when the door clanged open and a familiar orderly stepped in, followed by a man clad in striped pajamas. Professor Jennings blinked owlishly as he looked around the room, as if the fluorescent lights were too bright and hurt his eyes. The orderly closed the door behind them before helping the older man into the chair across the table from the two detectives. Duane Jackson shook their hands, smiling broadly. The orderly hadn't changed much over the few years since the partners had gone undercover in the mental institution. "I never thought I'd see you two in here again. I wish it was under happier circumstances—at least, as happy as it gets here at Hotel Cabrillo. I checked the phone records like you asked. The professor hasn't made any calls since they admitted him."

"What about visitors?" Hutch asked. "You have to keep records of those, too, right?"

Jackson nodded. "We do. I checked that out, too. Nobody's come to visit him, except his daughter, but he refuses to see her." When neither of the detectives asked him further questions, he turned to leave and gestured toward the two-way mirror covering an entire portion of one wall. "I'll be in the next room, so if you need anything, just wave."

Starsky nodded his thanks before turning his attention to the deranged man who had neatly orchestrated an attempt on his life that had nearly succeeded. He couldn't suppress a shudder as memories of excruciating pain rippled through him. Hutch glanced his way, also remembering the horrific experience. The sight of Starsky lying on a gurney, unable to communicate as his life ebbed, was forever engraved in his memory. When Starsky caught his gaze, Hutch nodded encouragingly, as if to remind his partner that they'd beaten the odds then, and would again.

Renewed anger coursed through Starsky, pushing away the shadows. "So, Professor, it seems that you've been a busy boy here in the nuthouse."

"The sun was out yesterday." Jennings' voice was weak, almost a whisper, as he stared past them.

Hutch grimaced with the realization that the old man had either sunk further in his delusions, or was so heavily medicated, getting any useful information from him might be impossible. With a supreme effort, Hutch pushed away his own anger and sense of urgency and calmed his voice. "Yes, Professor Jennings, it was a very beautiful day yesterday, even if it was a little chilly."

Starsky looked at his partner as if he'd grown a third arm. "Hutch—"

Hutch put up a hand to silence Starsky and continued calmly. "I understand they have a nice solarium here that lets in quite a bit of light."

“We had oatmeal again for breakfast. Quite lumpy, actually, and a bit too bland for my taste, but palatable once you get used to it. Tonight is meatloaf, I think. Today’s Tuesday, isn’t it? Tuesday is meatloaf.”

“Actually, it’s Monday, Professor,” Hutch responded in a calm, almost soothing tone.

“Pity. The meatloaf’s quite good. Monday’s chicken. Overcooked, too. Pity. Are you sure it’s not Tuesday?” The professor’s eyes met Hutch’s with some measure of coherency, but without recognizing the man who had arrested him for the attempted murder of his partner.

Hutch recognized the flicker of rationality and pushed ahead. “Professor, not that long ago, you contacted a man by the name of Victor Bellamy and hired him to inject Starsky here with a lethal dose of drugs that would kill him within twenty-four hours. You also paid Bellamy to do the same to me once Starsky was dead. You blamed us for the death of your son, Jerry. Do you remember, Professor?”

Jennings smiled expectantly. “Jerry? Is he here? He’s early.”

“Early?” Starsky shifted in his chair to lean closer to the professor. “What do you mean ‘he’s early’?”

“I’ve been expecting him. He’s promised to come and visit soon. It’s been so long since I’ve seen him. He’s been so busy. So very busy, you know.”

“Professor...” Hutch shook his head in frustration and in pity. “Jerry is gone. You blamed Starsky and me for his death, because we were the ones who arrested him for dealing drugs. That’s why you devised that poisonous compound. That’s why you wanted us dead.”

“Did you try again?” Starsky’s voice rose in volume and intensity, hoping to break through Jennings’ placid vacancy. “Who did you call to take us out this time? What kind of drugs did you have them give Hutch? Who did you talk to? Who tried to kill Hutch?!”

“Bagels.”

Starsky was taken aback by the soft response to his fury. “What?”

“I wanted a bagel.” Professor Jennings turned toward Hutch and blinked. “Just so sick of lumpy oatmeal.”

Starsky glanced at his partner, unsure of how to proceed. Hutch tried to reach Jennings one more time. “Professor, do you know who we are?”

“There was this little shop just off-campus. I couldn’t remember the name, but I knew she’d remember. She did. She remembered.”

“Who, Professor?” Hutch asked. “Who remembered?”

“Cheryl?” Starsky joined back in. “Have you spoken with Cheryl?”

The old man continued as if he’d never heard them, lost in time and space. “I asked her to bring me one and she came. Ah, it was just like I remembered. So soft and chewy. And with just a touch of cream cheese. Ah, heaven!”

Starsky shook his head in confusion at Jennings’ recollection. He stood and crossed to the table, then leaned in close to the professor, desperate to break through the fog that seemed to engulf his mind. “*Who* came, Professor? Was it Cheryl? Or someone else?”

Jennings looked at Starsky as if he’d just noticed him for the first time. “What day is this? Is it Tuesday, by any chance? Tuesday is—”

“Meatloaf day.” Starsky sat back down on the edge of the table, deflated. He had interrogated enough criminals to know when they were faking insanity or lack of memory, and he knew that Jennings had truly lost touch with reality. Whether or not he had anything to do with the attack on Hutch was yet to be proven, but he was certain the professor was not putting on an act.

Hutch accepted their defeat as well and waved to the orderly to come back in for the old man. Jackson returned instantly and helped Jennings to his feet. “Did you find out anything that’ll help you with your investigation?”

Starsky shook his head. “He said that someone—a woman—brought him a bagel. Said she knew of some little bagel shop just off-campus that he used to go to. Are you sure he hasn’t had any visitors?”

Jackson’s brow knit together. “I looked over the registry as soon as you asked, and no one has checked in to see him for six months, and that was his daughter. Something set him off during their visit, and he’s refused to see her since. I’d be happy to show you the registry, just in case I missed something.”

Starsky had been watching his partner, who was looking at Jennings standing mutely next to the orderly, dazedly looking about the room. The mixture of compassion and frustration on Hutch’s face couldn’t mask his exhaustion. “We’ve got to get across town. I don’t suppose you could have someone make a copy of those records?”

“Uh, sure. I guess that’d be okay. Unless my supervisor says it’s a violation of privacy or something. Do you need to have some sort of subpoena or something for stuff like that?”

Hutch didn't take offense to Jackson's innocent question, but there was no mistaking the edge in his voice as he stood. "Do we need to get a subpoena?"

Jackson shrugged good-naturedly. "Not by me. I'll ask the receptionist to make the copies, but it might take a while. We're still using an ancient Xerox machine here, not one of those new big fancy jobs from Japan or wherever."

"Thanks," Starsky responded, shaking Jackson's hand. "I'll send a patrolman over in a few hours to pick them up for us."

Hutch shook the orderly's hand as well, then watched as Jackson led the docile professor from the room. Unexpectedly, Jennings stopped and turned back toward them, faded blue eyes watery with tears.

"Thank you for visiting me."



Hutch was fast asleep on Starsky's couch when the patrolman knocked on the door. Starsky pulled open the door and stepped out onto his stoop to accept the documents. "Did they give you any trouble?"

"The supervisor over there at the nuthouse grumbled something about needing a court order, but still gave me the copies."

"Thanks, Marty." Starsky pulled the copies from the manila envelope and glanced at them as the patrolman made his way back down the stairs. The receptionist at Cabrillo State had been thorough, copying the visitor registry from that morning back to the day Jennings had been admitted. She also included a copy of the professor's transfer and admitting papers from the county jail to the mental facility.

Starsky eased the door closed behind him as to not wake Hutch, but found him sitting up on the couch, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"How long was I asleep?" Hutch groaned as he stretched his back muscles, tight from the uncomfortable position on the couch.

"About three hours. You hungry?"

"I could eat." Hutch yawned, then grimaced. "On second thought, maybe I'd better ask what you have to eat in this dump first."

"Dump?" Starsky looked offended, his mouth working as he tried to come up with a retaliatory comment.

“Never mind.” Hutch pulled off his shirt and flung it in Starsky’s face as he rose up off the couch. “I’m going to hit the shower. You order a pizza and I’ll be out by the time it gets here.”

“Ingrate.” Starsky huffed as he threw Hutch’s shirt back at the retreating figure, causing it to wrap around his head.

Hutch paused with his eyebrows raised as he pulled his shirt back off. “‘Ingrate?’ Have you been reading *Reader’s Digest* again?”

“Shut up and take your shower.” Starsky lifted the phone’s handset and began dialing the number of the pizza parlor down the street from memory. “Your noxiousness is offensive to my olfactory.”

Hutch grinned broadly and retreated into the bathroom. After hanging his shirt on the door hook, he turned on the shower to heat up the water. Steam quickly filled the small room, and he used his hand to wipe a small circle on the mirror above the vanity. The face that looked back at him was a vast improvement over just a few days ago, but still looked ravaged. With a small self-deprecating smile, he withdrew Starsky’s shaving cream and razor from within the medicine cabinet, then lathered his face.

As he placed the razor against his jaw, the shower’s steam swirled across the mirror a second time. Within an instant, he was lost in the tableau that began to play out before him in the mirror’s mist. Everything moved in slow motion, and the images surrounding him seemed to emerge from a thick fog. He was being pursued by some unnamed threat and he was terrified. He tried to sprint down a dark back alley, but it felt as if he were trying to run through wet cement. His gun was tight in his grip as he ran, but he didn’t turn and fire at whatever was pursuing him because he knew he only had one bullet left, and if he didn’t strike a direct hit, he would be lost.

Hutch’s heart raced, both in his dream and in reality, sweat drenching him in both worlds as well. The dream-Hutch dodged trashcans and crates in the alley, slowing him further, and he knew the hellish thing chasing him was nearly upon him. He slammed into the brick wall at the dead end of the alley and turned to face it, his motions like a movie played at a fraction of its intended speed.

He fired his last precious bullet, straight into the heart of the pursuer, who was nearly on top of him. The dim figure staggered back, clutching his chest where blood cascaded out from between pale fingers. As the apparition took a few halting steps, it entered into a beam from a lamp bolted above a darkened doorway. The dream-Hutch shivered as he watched the bloodied man finally lift his head to look him full in the face, his expression a mask of utter disbelief and intense pain.

The face was his own.

Blood continued to spill out from underneath his mirror image's hand and run down his torso as it collapsed into an unmoving heap. The dream-Hutch fell to his knees beside the still figure and gathered it to his own heaving chest. When the weight of the body became almost too much to bear, he shifted it in his arms, causing the head to loll back. But this time, it was Starsky's dead eyes staring sightlessly back at him, his face frozen in agony.

The dream-Hutch pulled the body closer, so Starsky's head rested on his shoulder, and sobbed.

The real sob that escaped Hutch's lips broke the spell the nightmare held over him, and he blinked to clear his vision. What made the violent dream even worse was the realization that he hadn't been asleep.

As his vision cleared, Hutch was shocked to find that he stood pale, trembling, and sweating before the bathroom mirror, his jaw and chin still partially covered with shaving cream, the razor poised before him, a trickle of blood running down the length of his throat.

With an effort, he shoved the images from his mind and quickly finished shaving, cutting his face twice more in his haste. Still shaken, he unbuckled his belt as he turned back toward the shower to turn down the hot water. As he glanced up at the cascade, he was completely blindsided as the crystalline downpour seemed to explode in fragments of color and light, throwing his mind back into the same confused and desperate state as that night on the bridge.

A hundred voices seemed to rage through his mind. Each shriek came from somewhere deep within his subconscious—the cries of those he once loved, those he couldn't save, those he had killed in the line of duty. Each called in desperation for his help, or to taunt and punish him, demanding his death in blood debt.

The room tilted and Hutch's vision faded to near-black as he stared at the water pouring from the showerhead, each drop a flashing shard of light to his over-stimulated mind. Oblivion beckoned, drawing Hutch forward with the promise of release, the same way the raging river had called to him on the bridge, and later the waves on the beach.

Driven by a force he could not control or escape, Hutch cried out as he flung himself forward into the shower. The curtain and rod were ripped down as he fell, slamming him against the tiled wall and cutting his forehead. The sprinkling water dazzled him until the rounded droplets turned into shards of glass, tearing his skin from his body in his tortured mind. Maddened by the touch of the razor-sharp water pelting against his skin, he retaliated by gripping the showerhead with both hands and giving it a strong jerk. At first, it didn't budge, but on the third pull, it broke free from the pipe. The momentum carried Hutch backwards, careening to the bottom of the tub. The shower poured out from the pipe like a garden hose, drenching him and streaking his face with the blood from his cut forehead.

Starsky burst into the small room, alerted by an inhuman wail. He found his partner clad only in his jeans, curled in upon himself at the bottom of the bathtub, the water beating down on him. Hutch's clenched fists were ground again his temples, as if trying to block the sensory overload of memory, sound, and light.

"Oh, Hutch," Starsky murmured as he knelt next to the tub. "No."

He leaned in and tried to pull Hutch's fists away, afraid that he would hurt himself. Hutch struggled against the confinement, and the raw look of insanity on his face, coupled with the pounding water that soaked them both, was enough to loosen Starsky's grip, giving Hutch enough leverage to free himself and surge forward, knocking Starsky to the floor.

Hutch shot out of the tub, slipping on the wet tile, but still making it out of the bathroom ahead of Starsky. He made a beeline for the front door, with his partner only a step behind him. The door was jerked open hard enough to cause it to rebound off the wall and nearly close again. Hutch's hesitation was just long enough for Starsky to throw an arm around him from behind and pull him away from the door.

Hutch's instincts took over. He grabbed Starsky's forearm and threw his weight forward while bending at the waist, pulling hard. Starsky catapulted over Hutch's back, flipping onto the couch with enough force to bounce off of it and crash onto the coffee table. The momentum broke the table, tumbling Starsky with it to land on his side. He continued to roll back up onto his feet and charge forward. Fortunately, Hutch had been disconcerted when he'd wrestled Starsky off his back and had unsteadily watched his partner's landing rather than fleeing the apartment.

Starsky advanced like a linebacker and caught Hutch squarely in the solar plexus with his shoulder, taking them both down hard. Hutch's breath was forced out of him as he landed with Starsky on top. He lay stunned, wheezing for air, as Starsky pushed himself up and pinned his partner's arms to either side of his shoulders. Starsky was breathing heavily from the exertion and from his own fall as he watched Hutch struggle for air, his eyes wide with pain. His compassion for Hutch's discomfort was not enough to move Starsky from where he straddled him, water from the shower still running off his head and streaming to fall off the tip of his nose and onto Hutch's pale face.

Nearly two slow minutes passed before Hutch was able to breathe normally. He only struggled angrily against his captor once, before laying his head back down on the carpet in exhaustion and closing his eyes. Starsky watched anxiously as Hutch's features relaxed and his jaw fell slack.

Alarmed, Starsky started to speak, but stopped when Hutch's eyes cracked open again and he frowned. "Why are you dripping on me?"

Starsky's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized Hutch's face, desperate to see his partner's return to rational thought.

Hutch exhaled, exhausted, every muscle in his body going limp from the trauma of the flashback. "Seriously, Starsk, I know you haven't had a date in a while, but this isn't exactly putting me in the mood."

Starsky pushed himself off to the side. "Jackass."

Hutch looked quizzically at his still-drenched partner before realizing he was soaked to the skin as well, and his wet blue jeans were beginning to become uncomfortable. The fact that he couldn't remember how they'd come to be on the floor, let alone in that condition, shook him. "What just happened?"

Starsky ran his hands across his face before getting stiffly to his feet. "Nothing."

"Starsky." Fear strained Hutch's voice. "Did I lose it again? What happened?"

Starsky stuck out his hand to help his partner to his feet. "Nothing we can't handle."

Hutch studied Starsky's face. Pushing aside his misgivings, he accepted his partner's confidence as well as his hand, and allowed himself to be drawn up off the floor. The pull continued once Hutch was on his feet, and he was enveloped. He let Starsky's strong arms surround him, protecting him from his own fears and doubts. He returned the embrace, patting Starsky on the back in gratitude.

Starsky released him with a small smile and held him at arm's length, taking in the clarity in Hutch's gaze with relief. "It's okay. We should've known something like this could happen. I should've been ready for a flashback."

"A flashback? I figured I kind of blacked out or something, but that wouldn't explain why we're both soaked and I was taking a nap on your mangy carpet."

"First you call my apartment a dump, and now my carpet's mangy? Well, that's gratitude for you." When Starsky shook his head in exasperation, droplets flew from his curls. When he realized that a few had struck Hutch in the face, he grinned wickedly, then tightened his grip on Hutch's arms and shook his head in earnest. Hutch recoiled and began laughing, releasing his tension.

That was how the pizza delivery boy found them when, instead of knocking on the front door left ajar by Hutch's attempt to escape, he pushed it open the rest of the way with his foot while tapping on the doorframe with his free hand. "Pizza deliv—"

The partners froze at the sound of his voice and dropped their grips on one another in embarrassment. The delivery boy's mouth dropped open as he took in the sight of the two wet men inside the dry apartment with a destroyed coffee table, its contents scattered

about the floor. He looked from the wet detectives to the cloudless blue sky, then back to the partners.

Starsky recovered quickly and dug his drenched wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans and awkwardly approached the delivery boy. When Starsky pulled out a crumpled and soggy ten-dollar bill, the teenager shook his head and simply thrust the pizza box into his hands before turning on his heels and hurrying down the steps.

Starsky looked down after him and shouted his thanks before stepping back inside and closing the door with their dinner.



Hutch had finally given in to Starsky's insistence and allowed his partner to bandage the small cut on his forehead from falling earlier. Only then was he allowed to eat, and the pizza was devoured as the pair read through the lengthy visitor and phone call documentation from Cabrillo State. They were both disappointed when the logs failed to reveal any phone calls to or from Professor Jennings, or any visitors other than the initial attempts by Cheryl that her father refused to accept.

Afterward, Hutch mopped up the water that had pooled on the bathroom floor while Starsky cleaned up the living room. The showerhead would require more than a quick fix, so Starsky called his landlord with the abbreviated explanation of how he'd "had an accident" in the shower that resulted in the damage. The broken coffee table was moved to his porch to wait for a weekend when he could better determine if it was salvageable.

They ended up finding a basketball game on TV to watch, and afterward, the news and Johnny Carson. Hutch finally started dozing and gave in to Starsky's insistence that he take the bed rather than the couch. They both knew Starsky could keep a better eye on him if he was stationed in the living room should Hutch have another flashback, but Hutch accepted the offer based on his insistence that the bed would be kinder to his back.

Both men slept uneasily, waking frequently and wondering what tomorrow would bring.



The phone rang the next morning while Starsky was shaving and Hutch was drying the breakfast dishes. Flipping the damp dishtowel over his shoulder, Hutch crossed over to the phone and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hutch? Thank goodness. This is Cheryl Jennings. I'm glad you're there."

"Cheryl, what's wrong?"

"Have you been back to your apartment yet?"

“Since we saw you? No, we’ve been here. Cheryl, what’s going on?”

“Hutch, I got the lab results back. There are definitely traces of several different hallucinogenic compounds in your system at various stages, suggesting a build-up over time. I can explain more of this later. The important thing is that I need for you to go over to your apartment and clean out your kitchen and your cupboards. Treat it all like evidence. From what I can tell, the drugs are something you ingested. I need the stuff from your place so we can prove it.”

Hutch was stunned. “And maybe we’ll get lucky and find some prints.”

“What if you call in the Department lab team and have them dust the whole apartment for them? That way, if someone broke in or picked the lock, we can figure out who did this to you.”

“No, not yet. There’d be too many questions in an official investigation that we’re not ready to answer. But Dobe knows something’s going on and is with us on trying to figure out what. We’ve got a few favors we can call in with one of the print technicians who can take care of it ‘unofficially’.” Hutch ran his free hand through his hair in an odd mixture of frustration and relief. “Thanks, Cheryl. I don’t know what we’d do if you hadn’t been able to help us.”

“I want to find out who did this to you, Hutch, even...even if I don’t like what I find out.”



Starsky and Hutch had donned gloves as they transferred the contents of Hutch’s pantry and refrigerator into labeled evidence bags.

“Handling all this food,” Starsky grouched, “is making me hungry.”

“It’s only ten o’clock and you just ate an hour ago. How can you be hungry?”

Starsky stopped from where he was dumping a few remaining dried banana chips into the bag Hutch had just labeled. “Why do people always ask that?”

Hutch barely glanced up with an eyebrow cocked by way of inquiry.

“You know, ‘how can you be hungry?’ I don’t know *how*, I just am. I can’t explain it. I see food, smell food, I get hungry. If I even think about food, I want to eat.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you don’t think too often, then, huh?”

The pounding on the door interrupted Starsky’s retort, and Hutch went to answer it. A bleary-eyed Bill Farnsworth from Metro’s crime lab stood outside the door yawning hugely and reminding the partners that it was still the middle of the night for him, since

he'd switched shifts nearly a year before. Still muttering about being hauled out of a dead sleep with no explanation as to why secrecy was in order, the prematurely balding man went about his work, grousing the entire time he dusted each now-empty food container and bag to lift the prints. He then dusted the phone, doors, and windowsills for good measure. Still yawning, he promised to sort out the prints that evening while he was in the lab, and if anything besides the partners' prints showed up, he would "unofficially" run them through Records to see if there were any matches. Still yawning, Farnsworth tucked his lab satchel under his arm and stomped down the stairwell.

After Hutch loaded the evidence into one of his gym bags, the partners left as well. Before Starsky turned the key in the ignition, Hutch heard him grumble under his breath, "I'm still hungry."



The partners spent the next morning at the station, sorting through old case files in an effort to narrow down their search to any of their previous arrests with a vendetta against Hutch. The list of possible suspects was long, but they were able to push to the back those who were still in prison. Dinner was a quick bite from Metro's commissary, and they were just ready to call it a night when Bill Farnsworth slipped into the detective's division with a mug of something steaming in one hand and a file folder in the other.

"It's not much, but it's a start," he intoned as he flipped the folder to land directly in front of Hutch, then perched on the edge of the desk.

Starsky was behind Hutch in an instant, peering over his shoulder. "What'd you find?"

"Like we figured, most of what we came up with from around the apartment itself were Hutch's prints, and some of yours. Ah, but I got quite a few partials that weren't and ran them through R & I, although nothing matched anybody we had on record. Here's the interesting thing, guys. Several of the packages that had partial prints on them are all from the same person, and whoever left them tried to *wipe them off*." Farnsworth leaned over and flipped his report to the third page, then pointed to a short list. "Here're all the containers and bags I lifted them from. They all had private labels on them from Sunny's Health Food Store. Of course, I found other prints on the name brand, store-bought stuff, but none of them matched each other. I'm guessing they just came from stock boys. But the partial prints that somebody tried to wipe off, those were on the weird health food junk."

Starsky reached past Hutch to pick up the folder. "I told you that crap wasn't any better for you than real food."

Hutch ignored his partner and turned his attention back to the lab technician. "The partial prints—you said they were all from the same person?"

Farnsworth nodded. “Yep, all of them. Ah, but I’ve saved the best news for last. I did come up with a full set of prints. Perfect set. Complete. And not from the same person who left the partials. One was on a cellophane bag of dried-out banana slices, and the other was on some sort of sesame cracker kind of thing. Don’t know what the heck those were, but they looked like something I had to clean up after my wife’s cat once.”

Starsky grinned wickedly at the analogy. “That’s great. Give me more good news, like you found a match for the prints.”

Farnsworth nodded, matching Starsky’s smile. “I got a match.”

Hutch stood up quickly in excitement and clapped the technician on the back. “Farnie, you’re the best!”

Farnsworth chuckled at the praise, pleased that his efforts could make a difference. “Was there ever any doubt? I’d like to say we’re even, Hutch, but I think you owe me now.”

“You got it!” Hutch snatched the file back from Starsky and flipped to the last page to read the results.

“So...” Farnsworth rubbed his hands together in anticipation of a juicy story. “Are you guys going to tell me what this espionage hush-hush work is all about?”

“Later,” Hutch murmured, still reading the report. Finally, he came to the arrest record of the person matching the prints and looked at Farnsworth in blatant disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Prints don’t lie, Hutch.”

“Who is it?” Starsky pulled the report from Hutch’s unresisting hands to read what had confounded his partner. “Sophia Caladone? Aka ‘Sunny’ Caladone? Who’s that?”

Hutch shook his head in confusion. “She’s the sweet old lady who owns the health food store down the street from me.”

Starsky’s attention returned to the file. “Yeah, well, it says here this sweet old lady was busted in ’67 for possession, resisting arrest, public nudity, and assaulting a police officer, and that she was 52 when she did it!”

“A sweet middle-aged lady with a bad attitude?” Farnsworth offered.

“Who knows?” Hutch frowned. “The better question is whether or not the containers you lifted the prints from are the critical ones.”

“And if they are,” Starsky continued, lifting the phone receiver and dialing Cheryl’s number at the lab, “why does sweet old Sunny have it in for you?”



Starsky’s call to Cheryl came in just as she was double-checking the results of her testing. She was able to quickly confirm that the packages of dried banana chips and sesame snacks that carried Sunny’s prints did not contain any traces of drugs whatsoever, but agreed that it didn’t necessarily suggest that the storeowner could be cleared of suspicion.

The assortment of other dried fruits, whole grain snacks, and powdered vitamin supplements were the pay dirt, housing the menagerie of hallucinogens that had been used to drug Hutch: Atropine, PCP, Sodium Fluoroacetate, Ethylene Chlorohydrin, Amphetamines, Preludin, Mercury, Dieldrin, Cocaine, Sodium Thiocyanate. Cheryl was astounded that Hutch’s system hadn’t literally shut down under the onslaught of chemicals.

Her findings also confirmed that the poisoning was done by whoever left the partial set of prints. Since there was no sign of a break-in at the apartment, it could only lead them to believe that the person who put the drugs in Hutch’s purchases was an employee at the health food store. Starsky relayed the information to Hutch after they thanked Farnsworth again and excused themselves.

Hutch shoved open the squadroom door and waited for Starsky to precede him into the hallway. The fact that several detectives and patrolmen gave them a wide berth, avoiding Hutch with irritation or blatant resentment, was not lost on the pair, and Hutch flushed under their scrutiny.

Starsky glared back in response and, once they pushed open the doors to the police lot, gripped Hutch’s shoulder to give it a quick squeeze of assurance. “We’ll get this cleared up soon, okay? Just hang in there.”

Hutch gave his partner a brief nod as he climbed into the Torino, but his eyes remained troubled.

“Okay, who else have you seen working at the health food store the last couple times you’ve been in there? Has it been the same person? Do you remember how many people work there?” Starsky’s questions shook Hutch from his reverie.

“I don’t know; let me think. It’s just a small shop on the corner, a couple blocks down from my place. Sunny waited on me the last time I went in.” Hutch’s expression darkened. “At least, the last time I can remember going in. Who knows how many times I’ve been in there in the last month?”

“All right, don’t sweat it. We’ll go in, and if Sunny’s there, we talk to her. Find out how many people she’s got working for her. We get their names, track them down, ask them a few questions. Or we call Dobby in and get a warrant to take them to Metro for prints.”

Hutch nodded. “And if Sunny’s not working and I recognize the person behind the counter—”

“We buy some masticated liver powder—”

“*Desiccated* liver powder.”

“And butterfly bones.”

“Which gets us their prints.”

“Which we take back to Farnsworth for a cross-match, and Alakazam, Captain Marvel, we nail ’em.”

Hutch felt some of his apprehension dissipate under Starsky’s confidence. “Just like that, huh?”

Starsky nodded with a grin. “Just like that.”



Sunny was the sole person working that afternoon when Starsky and Hutch entered the small store. They couldn’t help noticing the “Help Wanted” sign taped to the glass door as it was pushed open, causing a tiny bell to peal and announce their entry.

The sixty-four-year-old was deeply tan; her years in the sun creasing her face like patchwork. Her eyes were startlingly blue and held a note of mischief and good humor as she turned her attention from the shelf she’d been stocking to the two men blanketed in the afternoon sunlight.

“Hi there, Blondie. Long time, no see. Don’t tell me you’ve finally come to your senses and you’re ready to date a more ‘experienced’ woman?” Sunny batted her lashes coyly as the two approached the counter.

Hutch grinned lightly in response. “Sunny, you heartbreaker; I think you’d be the death of me.”

“Yeah? But what a way to go!” Sunny’s smile widened as she turned her focus on Starsky. “How about you, darlin’? You look like you could use a little fun with ‘the Sun’.”

Starsky reddened at her flirtations and would have readily played along if their reason for being in the shop hadn't been so grave. He reached into his back pocket and withdrew his badge, then opened it for her to see. "Maybe next time, Sunny. Right now, we need to ask you some questions."

"Aw, cheese! You're cops? I would have figured you were too cute to be the fuzz. Well, it wasn't mine, I swear. I don't know what Leo told you, but it wasn't mine."

"Leo?" Hutch glanced at Starsky to see if he was just as confused. "Sunny, what are you talking about?"

"Uh, nothing." Sunny stopped up short. "What are you talking about?"

Starsky broke in. "Sunny, who's Leo? Does he work here?"

"No, no. Leo, he's my old man. We've been together since, oh, probably 1967."

"When you got busted in San Francisco," Hutch affirmed.

Sunny's eyes widened. "Is that what this is about? Look, I did my time, man. It was the 'summer of love,' and everybody was doing it. If you want to blame somebody, blame Timothy Leary—"

"No, Sunny, that's not why we're here," Hutch interrupted, putting his hands out to placate her. "We just want to ask you a few questions, all right?"

"Sure, sure, Blondie. Uh, Officer Blondie. What do you need to know?"

"How many employees do you have working here?"

"Right now? Uno, and you're looking at her. It was dos; now it's back to uno."

Starsky nodded toward the front door. "We saw the sign. Somebody quit?"

"Yeah, Darlene. She'd only worked for me a couple months, part-time. Two weeks ago, she doesn't show up. No call, no note. Nada. I called the number on her job application, and the guy who answered didn't hardly speak no English, but I figured out there was no Darlene there. She didn't even come back to pick up her last paycheck."

Hutch's hand had moved to his temple as he struggled with a dim memory. "This Darlene—did she have short brown hair, tall, very slender? Looked a bit like Dorothy Hamill?"

"Yeah, that's her. Dorothy Hamill, sure. She always made me think of that clown lady. You know, Shields and Carnell? Cute kid, even if she was built like a boy."

Hutch shook his head. “Yarnell. It’s Shields and Yarnell. And they’re mimes, not clowns.”

“Whatever.” Starsky looked at his partner like he’d lost his mind for worrying about such details before turning his attention back to Sunny. “What can you tell us about Darlene?”

“Nice kid, real good with the customers. I had no complaints, other than her bailing on me.”

“Wait a minute,” Starsky jumped in. “You said you got her phone number off her job application. Could we see that? There should be an address.”

“Sure, it’s here in the back.” Sunny motioned for them to follow her into a short hallway behind the cash register. Three doors were at the end: one leading to a bathroom, one to a tiny office, and the third to a stockroom. The office was so cluttered, anyone who didn’t know the piles intimately would be hard pressed to ever find anything in them. Several large plants vied for space, and an overweight orange tabby drowsed on a pile of papers atop the file cabinet.

It took two jerks for Sunny to open one of the skewed drawers of the file cabinet, upsetting the massive cat in the process. It hopped down and sauntered out into the store to find a patch of sunlight to lie in. After digging through the overstuffed drawer, Sunny withdrew a tattered file folder and selected two documents stapled together from the top. “Here she is, Darlene Polnechecz.”

Starsky accepted the pages. One was a job application, and the second was a copy of her social security card and a university-issued registration card. “No driver’s license? Wait, this is a student ID.”

Sunny shrugged. “She was a college kid. Said her license was suspended when she got caught driving after having too much to drink at a frat gig. I felt bad for her because she needed the job, and since she had her social security card, I gave her a chance.”

Hutch’s gaze narrowed. “What college does it say she’s enrolled in, Starsk?”

Starsky’s features had hardened as well. “Cal State Long Beach. Same place Jennings taught.”

Sunny looked from one detective to the other. “What’s this all about, anyway? She in some kind of trouble?”

Hutch politely ignored her questions. “If she wasn’t driving, how did she get here from the university? Did she live around here?”

Sunny shook her head. “Bus stop’s the next block over. I know she took it because she was always complaining about the way the bus driver was constantly checking her out. Dirty old cuss. The address she put down on the application is one of them dorm rooms on campus.”

Hutch withdrew a pad of paper from his back pocket and, knowing he didn’t have a pen on him, reached inside Starsky’s jacket to pull the pen from his chest pocket. He began copying down the information from the application as Starsky tilted it in his direction so he could see it better. “Okay, thanks, Sunny. We appreciate your cooperation.”

Starsky handed her back the documents along with his business card. “If you hear from Darlene, don’t tell her we were asking about her, but call us, okay? It’s important that we find her first.”

“Yeah, sure. Okay.” Sunny followed the pair back out into the store. “Say, I haven’t seen you around much lately, Blondie. Is there anything I can get for you while you’re here? I got a special this month on wheat germ. You need some banana chips, maybe?”

Hutch turned marginally green as they made their way to the door. “Not today, Sunny; thanks. I haven’t had a taste for them lately.”



Hutch picked up the mic to the radio as soon as the Torino was in motion. “Zebra Three to Dispatch. Patch me over to R & I.”

“Roger, Zebra Three; one moment.”

As they waited to be transferred, Starsky guided the sedan through the streets of Venice, heading south toward the city. It didn’t take long for static to announce the patch through.

“Records, this is Minnie.”

“Minnie, this is Hutch. I need you to run a check on a Darlene Polnechecz. That’s Darlene with a ‘D,’ as in David. Polnechecz is Paul-Ocean-Lincoln-Nora-Edward-Charles-Henry-Edward-Charles-Zebra.”

“Copy that, Zebra Three. I’ll let you know as soon as the record search is complete.” Minnie’s tone wasn’t icy, but it was far from the easy rapport they’d had together.

“Minnie, I...” Hutch hesitated, knowing that he owed her an apology for his unintentional actions, but not wanting to disclose anything while countless officers listened in on their conversation. “Thanks. Zebra Three, out.”

Hutch sighed heavily as he replaced the microphone on its cradle. “Exactly how many people do I owe apologies to?”

Starsky merely gave his partner a sympathetic smile and returned his focus to the road ahead. After a quiet moment, Hutch spoke again, his voice low. “I am sorry, you know.”

“Hutch, c’mon. We’ve been over this before. You don’t owe me an ap—”

“I owe you my life, Starsk.” Hutch faced the windshield, but rather than seeing the city streets blurring by, the memory of wind-whipped waters clouded his vision. “If you hadn’t found me that night—”

“Hutch.” Starsky’s voice held a note of warning. This was not a topic he wanted to discuss at that moment, if at all.

“I mean it, Starsk. If you hadn’t found me on the bridge...if you’d come five minutes later, I’d be—”

Hutch was nearly unseated when Starsky whipped the Torino to the curb and slammed on the brakes. Starsky punched the car into park and gripped the steering wheel tight enough for his knuckles to turn white. After an intense moment of silence, his muscles seemed to unclench and he sagged back against the seat. Another minute passed before he turned to face his silent partner. “When I saw you standing on the rail of that bridge, I was so scared, I almost couldn’t move. But I knew if I didn’t, you’d jump, and I would’ve gone in right after you. Hutch...” Starsky reached over and grabbed his forearm. “I have never been so scared in my entire life as that one bleeding moment on the bridge. If I’d lost you...”

Hutch’s hand enveloped the one gripping his arm. “Thank you. Thank you for coming back for me. The way I’d treated you, the way the drugs were making me act, I wouldn’t have blamed you if you’d given up on me.”

The tension was too much for Starsky, and he pulled his hand away. “Nothin’ doin’. You know how hard it is to find a good partner these days?”

Hutch understood what his partner was trying to do, but couldn’t quite let him out of the moment yet. “Yeah, yeah, I do.”

Starsky cocked an eyebrow at him as if to say “that’s enough,” before throwing the Torino into gear and easing back onto the street. They were both surprised by the squawk of the police radio. “Dispatch to Zebra Three. Come in, Zebra Three.”

Starsky’s hand darted out and snatched up the microphone. “This is Zebra Three.”

“Hold for R & I.”

“That was quick,” Starsky remarked.

Minnie was almost instantly on the line. “Hutch?”

“It’s Starsky, Minnie. What do you got?”

“No priors on your Darlene Polnechecz. The only reason she came up in the system is because about five months ago, she reported a theft.”

“What’s the police report say?”

“Polnechecz is a twenty-two-year-old junior at Cal State Long Beach with a campus address, originally from Chicago. Five months back, she reported the theft of her student identification and social security card. Says it was taken from her wallet, but she didn’t know when or how. Just noticed it missing one day when she went to buy books at the campus bookstore and needed her ID. Since her social security card was missing as well, campus security made a police report. Neither IDs were ever recovered, nor have they shown up with somebody trying to use them.”

“Until now,” Hutch murmured as he dug the information he’d taken down at the health food store out of his pocket. “Ask her what the address shows on the police report.”

Starsky depressed the microphone. “Minnie, what’s the last known address for Polnechecz?”

“Police report lists her at 5300 Parkside Commons, fifth floor, Room 52-B. That’s a dorm room on the west side of Long Beach State’s campus.”

Hutch shook his head. The address he had copied down was Harlan Hall, Room 283. “Not the same address as was listed on the store’s job application.”

“Then let’s check them both out.” Starsky hit the microphone again. “Minnie, we’re headed out of Venice. What’s the quickest route to campus?”

Minnie was back after a brief moment. “Pick up the 405 South, then go south on Bellflower right into campus.”

“Thanks, Min. Zebra Three, out.”



As soon as the partners pulled onto campus, they flagged down a campus police cruiser and, after explaining why they were there, asked for more specific directions to both of the student housing addresses they had amongst the maze of the university. Neither detective was terribly surprised to learn that the Harlan Hall address listed on the health food job application didn’t exist. Within minutes, they were on the fifth floor of a dorm

complex and knocking on the door to Room 52-B. An attractive young black woman cracked open the door as far as the security chain would allow. “Yes?”

Hutch raised his badge for her to see. “We’re looking for a Darlene Polnechecz.”

“Yes?” The woman’s eyes went from Hutch’s badge to his face, then to Starsky’s face.

Starsky leaned forward a bit to get a better look through the small space. “You’re Darlene Polnechecz?”

The partners heard a long-suffering snort before the door closed, and the sound of the chain being slid out of its track followed. The door opened to reveal Darlene crossing over to where her purse was hung off the back of one of the mismatched chairs circling an old turquoise Formica table just off the kitchenette. The living quarters were actually a small two-bedroom apartment, much larger than the typical student housing on campus.

Darlene withdrew her wallet and held up her driver’s license for the partners to inspect. “Yes, I’m Darlene Polnechecz. My daddy’s Hungarian and my mother’s...*not*.” Her smile mocked the two without much malice, since she was more than used to people’s reaction to her name and lineage. “Is something wrong? Did somebody finally find out who swiped my stuff?”

“Not yet, but we might be getting close. We’ve recently learned of someone who’s used your identification to get a job, but the address they listed here on campus was bogus,” Hutch explained.

“To get a job?” Darlene perched on the arm of the worn sofa and crossed her arms. “Well, at least if whoever this is put down my social security number, I might get a refund at tax time for a change. I don’t suppose they’re still working at whatever job they were applying for?”

“No, afraid not.” Starsky smiled at the young woman’s matter-of-fact attitude. “That would make our jobs too easy.” He looked quickly around the room. “This is a fairly big dorm room. Do you have a roommate?”

Darlene nodded. “Marcy. Marcy Struthers. But she’s not here right now; she’s at rehearsal. Got a show that goes up Friday night.”

Hutch’s eyes narrowed. “Drama student?”

Darlene nodded. “And pretty good, too. Got the lead.”

Starsky picked up Hutch’s train of thought. “She wouldn’t happen to be about your age, short brown hair, thin, kinda looks like Dorothy Hamill?”

Darlene turned and reached for a binder on the coffee table adjacent to the couch to pull out a theater production flyer, then handed it over to Hutch. “Not unless Dorothy Hamill’s been hiding one really big secret.”

Starsky moved to Hutch’s side for a better view of the playbill. It showed a young black couple holding each other under the headline of *A Raisin in the Sun*.



The partners opted to pick up something for dinner from a local taco stand and take it back to Starsky’s apartment. Since Hutch finished his single chicken taco first, he was elected to call Captain Dobey at home and give him an update on their progress. While Starsky finished the last of his third burrito, he continued glancing over the copies of visitor sheets from the mental hospital, hoping they’d both simply missed Polnechecz’s name somewhere on the pages, but knowing it wasn’t likely that they would have. He nearly choked when he realized what they *had* missed.

Hutch turned to see what was happening and quickly told Dobey good night and hung up. He was instantly at Starsky’s side, pummeling him on the back until his partner waved him off. “Stop it! Are you trying to kill me?”

Hutch snorted as he sat down across from Starsky and took a drink of his Coke. “That’s gratitude for you. Next time, I’ll let you choke.”

“Here.” Starsky handed over the last two pages he’d been reviewing and reached across the table to retrieve Hutch’s soda.

Hutch glanced over the sheets and shook his head while Starsky finished off his partner’s drink. “We both went over these. Did we miss a name? What did you find?”

“Check out the *dates*.”

Hutch’s gaze flew to the top right corner of each page. One was a copy of Wednesday, the twelfth, and the other was for Friday, the fourteenth. “How could we have missed this?” He gathered up the remaining sheets and reviewed the dates. “There’s no Thursday?”

Starsky’s grin was malevolent. “There’s no Thursday.”

“You think somebody pulled it out on purpose?”

“I think somebody pulled it out on purpose.”

“You think we should pay them a visit?”

“I think we should pay them a visit.”

Within moments, the two had pulled on their jackets and were racing down the stairs.



With the addition of a pair of hot pants and roller-skates, the thick-waisted woman at the front desk at Cabrillo State could have passed for a roller derby queen. The dishwater blonde's hair was pulled back into a loose bun at the nape of her neck, and her hospital smock bore the stains of countless battles with patients resisting their medications or meals. Sitting at the nurses' station that doubled as the reception desk during the evening hours, she presented the picture of perfect boredom as she slowly chewed her gum and worked on a book of crossword puzzles. She barely glanced up as the detectives strode purposefully up to her desk.

"Are you the shift nurse in charge?" Hutch looked around impatiently for someone who at least appeared to have a pulse.

"I ain't no Hot Lips Houlihan, but yeah, I'm in charge tonight. Visiting hours ended at six. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

Hutch presented his shield. The nurse gave it a glance, then looked up at his face. "So?"

With undisguised disdain, Hutch flipped the case shut and returned it to his back pocket. Starsky didn't wait any longer for the woman's cooperation; he reached over the counter to the workspace below and retrieved the guest registry, then began leafing back to the missing Thursday date.

Still boisterously chewing her gum, the nurse cocked an eyebrow, but that was all the movement she seemed willing to muster. "You got a warrant?"

"Nope," Starsky responded curtly as he found Wednesday the twelfth and Friday the fourteenth. The original page for Thursday was also missing from the book.

"Here." Hutch pointed to a remaining narrow strip of paper with ripped edges nestled in the coils of the spiral binding, a remnant of the removed page. His gaze smoldered as he turned his attention to the nurse. "There's a page missing from this book. What happened to it?"

Her shrug was barely discernable as she focused on the crossword before her. "How should I know?"

Starsky's eyes narrowed. "Is there anybody else who works the night shift here?"

She took a moment to finish filling in a series of boxes as she answered a question of the puzzle. "Just me during the week."

“Who works here on the weekends?” Starsky prompted.

“How do I know? I’m not here.”

Infuriated by her apathy, Hutch reached across the counter, snatched the puzzle book from the nurse’s grip, and slapped it down on the counter. “Look, Nurse Cratchet.” He glanced at the woman’s name badge, which read “Phillips.” “If we don’t get some answers—and I mean right now—I’m going to not only have a warrant, I’m going to have every health inspector and every patient advocacy agency in the county, plus the board of trustees, in here in less than an hour.”

The woman looked mildly annoyed rather than frightened, thanks to her years of working around the erratic and often violent behavior of mental patients. With an exasperated sigh, she turned in her chair to face the two angry men. “Okay, fine. A visitor asked me to look the other way while she tore out one of the pages.”

Starsky’s expression remained cool compared to Hutch’s open hostility, but it clearly was not friendly. “Was it Thursday, the thirteenth?”

Nurse Phillips leaned back in her chair and looked over her shoulder at the calendar hanging behind her. After a moment, she tilted back to her original position, the chair squeaking a protest as she did. “Yeah. It was a couple of months ago on Thursday, the thirteenth.”

“She took the page with her?”

A shrug didn’t interrupt her gum chewing. “I guess. It’s not like she ripped it out then just left it on the counter.”

“What was the girl’s name?”

“Don’t know.”

“Was it Darlene Polnechecz?”

“Don’t know.”

Hutch gripped the counter. “What did this girl look like?”

“I can’t remember everybody that comes and goes out of this place.”

“Try,” Starsky managed from between clenched teeth.

Another sigh and a moment more of gum chewing followed. “She was slender, Twiggy-skinny. Young. Straight brown hair cut short.”

“Who’d she come to see?” Hutch asked, already knowing the answer.

“Don’t know.”

“Was it Richard Jennings?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Hutch glanced at Starsky before returning his focus on the nurse. “So, why’d she want to tear the page out of the guest book? She must have had a reason.”

When no response came, Starsky’s hands shot out like lightning and slapped the counter hard. Nurse Phillips jumped minutely and glared at the detective for breaking through her non-committal shell. “Look, *lady*,” Starsky spat, “if you don’t start giving us straight answers in the next five seconds, I’m placing you under arrest for accessory to assault with the intent to commit murder.”

Not to be cowed, her eyes narrowed. “*Whose* murder?”

“Mine.” Hutch’s quiet response held as much deadly force as Starsky’s violent one.

The room was completely silent except for the ticking of the wall clock behind the desk, but the tension emitting from the two detectives had become a living thing. It seemed to have no effect on the nurse as she glanced from one detective to the other, the picture of bovine-like blandness. When she finally responded in her near monotone, her eyes held a spark of fear, replacing some of her earlier apathy. “Okay, fine. She came in just before visiting hours was over. Said that the old man was once her professor and that they’d been having a winter-spring fling until his wife and the university found out. When that happened, the wife left him, and the school forced him to retire to cover up the scandal. The old man snapped under the strain, and his kids committed him here. She was still madly in love with him and wanted to see him, but they still had to sneak around, because if the university found out, he’d lose his disability and have to leave this wonderful facility. After their visit, she must’ve realized she shouldn’t’ve written her name in the guest book, and, since she wrote it in ink and couldn’t erase it, she told me her story and asked for the favor.” Another shrug. “Who am I to stand in the way of true love?”

“You’re a hopeless romantic,” Starsky responded dryly. “Has she been back since?”

“Nope. At least, not during the week. I don’t know about the weekends.”

“Because you’re not here on weekends.” Starsky turned the pages of the guest book until he found the dates that continued after the pages they’d already been given copies of. Hutch joined him, and they quickly scanned the pages for Darlene Polnechecz’s name, the nurse watching them blandly the entire time.

“Even if she came back, using her fake name would be too much to hope for, anyway,” Hutch muttered.

Starsky nodded. “So what’s next? You think we’ll get anything more out of the professor?”

“Visiting hours are over,” the nurse automatically intoned.

“Do you really care?” Hutch bit back.

As expected, she shrugged and retrieved her crossword book back from where Hutch had slammed it down on the counter. “Just don’t forget to sign the guest book.”



The time spent with Professor Jennings was brief and fruitless. The old man had trouble sleeping and was often medicated shortly after being served dinner. This was one such night, and, as he lay in his bed staring blearily at the ceiling, he never even acknowledged the detectives’ presence.

Too wound up now to sleep themselves, they decided to head over to The Pits to try and burn off some energy with a round of pool while they discussed their next move. They never noticed the car that followed them out of mental facility’s parking lot and stayed just a few blocks behind them, all the way to the bar.



Huggy sat across from Starsky and Hutch in the dim booth, often looking past them to ensure his small staff was able to care for the noisy crowd without him for a few minutes. “So, what’s your next plan of attack after all this strategizing and philosophizing?”

“Good question.” Starsky stirred a third teaspoon of sugar into his decaf coffee before taking a tentative sip. Neither of them had ordered their usual beer, afraid that alcohol would trigger another of Hutch’s flashbacks. “What do *you* think?”

“Well, now that you ask, I would—” Huggy’s response was cut short by the unmistakable sound of a busboy’s tray being dropped to the floor and the ensuing calliope of many dishes and glasses breaking all at once.

Startled, the partners both spilled coffee on the table and themselves and pulled out handkerchiefs to dab at their clothes and mouths. Huggy sighed heavily and got up out of the booth. “I think I’m going to put up a ‘Help Wanted’ sign in my window tomorrow morning.”

Hutch brushed some of the spilled liquid off the table before downing what remained in his cup. “Well, I’ve had about as much excitement as I can stand for one day; how about you?”

Starsky downed his coffee, then licked a few remaining droplets off his fingers. “What do you think we should do next?”

Hutch pulled himself out of the booth and waited for Starsky to follow. “Go home; get some sleep.”

Starsky stood as well and adjusted his leather jacket. “I meant about the case.”

“So did I. Go home and sleep on it.”

“Oh, okay.” Starsky adopted his “Bogey voice” and shrugged his shoulders back resembling the icon. “Your place or mine, sweetheart?”

Hutch looked at his partner with disdain. “And you think that line would pick up somebody at a bar? They’d have to be blind drunk.”

Starsky looked mildly wounded. “Well, I—”

Hutch turned and walked away. “And deaf.”

“I—”

“And desperate!”

Starsky started after him. “Gimme a break. I was kidding.”

“I should hope so!” Hutch called back after him. Seeing a modicum of doubt creeping onto his partner’s face, Hutch smiled in triumph and pushed open the bar door to leave, Starsky trailing behind.



As always, Huggy was already back at The Pits by 9:00 a.m. to restock the bar and let in Angie, his short-order cook of six years, to begin prepping for the day. Huggy was lighting up his second cigarette when a tapping at the back door signaled the cook’s arrival.

“Yo, Angelino, what do you know?” Huggy intoned, as he unlocked and pushed open the door.

“‘Mornin’, Boss.” Angie’s voice was deep and gravely, the result of a bar fight when he was a much younger man and from years of smoking cigars.

Huggy was pulling the door closed behind them when another voice greeted them from down the alley. A young blond man was jogging toward them, waving. "Hello!"

Huggy took a drag from his cigarette, watching the approaching stranger wearily. "What can I do you for?"

"Uh, Mr. Bear? Hi, my name is Joe Schimmel, and I was in your bar last night."

Huggy's eyes narrowed, wondering if the young man before him was an underage plant sent in to bust him for serving a minor.

"What were you doing in my bar last night?"

"Just...just having a beer."

"You old enough?" Huggy scrutinized the boy's delicate features. "What are you, fifteen? Sixteen?"

"No, sir. I just turned nineteen. I'm a sophomore at Long Beach State, actually."

There was an awkward silence as Huggy continued scrutinizing the young man, wondering what he wanted and why he was in The Pits' alleyway at 9:15 in the morning. "Did you lose something in the bar last night?"

"No, no. It's just that I couldn't help overhear you saying to your friends last night that you needed to hire a new busboy. Well," he said, smiling broadly, "I'm your man."

Huggy looked at the stranger accusingly. "You just 'overheard' that, huh?"

Joe had the courtesy to flush. "Well, I mean, I wasn't eavesdropping or anything. I just happened to be at that end of the bar when the tray was dropped and you made the comment. I mean, losing that many dishes can get pretty expensive. How often does your busboy drop his tray?"

"Almost nightly," Huggy snorted. "Still—"

"And the cost of replacing dishes can really add up. A businessman such as yourself is naturally trying to yield the highest profit margin possible."

Huggy raised an eyebrow as he regarded the eager young man before him. "What's a towhead like you really doing in this part of town? It ain't like this is some college hangout."

“Well, you see, sir...” Joe hesitated, studying his shoes. “My, well, my girlfriend doesn’t live too far from here, and, uh, she’s not exactly the *kind* of girl my folks would expect me to bring home. And they think I’m staying in the dorms and all, so...”

“But you’re downtown here with your brown sugar. I can dig it,” Huggy responded knowingly.

“Yes, sir.”

“‘Yes, sir.’ I can dig that, too. All right, Joe Schimmel, I’ll give you a chance to break less dishes than the dude I got droppin’ them now. You break less and keep calling me ‘sir,’ and you’ve got yourself a job. When can you start?”

“Right now! Today! Thank you, Mr. Bear.” Joe pumped Huggy’s hand. “You won’t regret it!”

Huggy pulled back his hand to save it from the young man’s effusive shaking. “All right, all right, don’t bruise The Bear. You run down to the post office and make a copy of your driver’s license, then come back here after lunch and give it to Angie, my chef extraordinaire. He’ll give you a job application to fill out and show you the ropes. We’ll try you out on the pre-dining crowd, dig it?”

“Yes, sir, I dig it, sir.” Joe started walking backwards down the alley, ready to run to the post office and back. “Thank you, Mr. Bear!”

Huggy tossed down the butt of his cigarette and ground it out with his heel. “*Mr.* Bear. I can dig that.”



The partners had gotten a decent night’s sleep for a change, but six hours of rest and a new morning’s perspective still failed to provide any insight as to what direction to take. They opted to stick with their existing plan to plow through the previous arrest records and see if anyone matched the description of the pseudo-Darlene Polnechecz.

A break in the case came later that day from a source they’d least expected. Starsky reached across to his partner’s side of the desk and retrieved the ringing phone, while Hutch poured them each another cup of coffee from the pot behind him. “Starsky.”

“Uh, this is Sunny. From the health food store. Is this Detective Blondie’s partner?” Sunny asked hesitantly.

“Yeah, Sunny, this is Detective Blondie’s partner.” Instinctively, Starsky twisted in his seat to avoid Hutch’s reaction. He wasn’t surprised to find a nearly full pot of coffee poised above his head as if Hutch were about to dump it on him, but he released a wicked

grin all the same, knowing Hutch would only go so far in retaliation. Still smiling, he asked, “What can I help you with?”

“Well, I don’t know if you need this or not...or I guess, if it’ll help or not. But I found this picture of Leo and Mr. Tibbles.”

“Uh...” Starsky twisted back around so he could lean his elbows on his desk. “Leo’s your boyfriend?”

“Right, my old man.”

“And Mr. Tibbles is?”

“My cat.”

“Your cat?”

“My cat.”

“Your cat is Mr. Tibbles.”

“That’s right.”

Hutch set a mug of coffee down in front of Starsky and moved to the opposite side of the desk. He sat down on the edge and looked expectantly at Starsky, trying to follow what he could hear of the conversation. “What’s her cat got to do with anything?”

Starsky waved off his partner. The call was already giving him a headache. “Sunny, what’s a picture of your boyfriend and your cat got to do with—?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. It may be nothing, but I was putting the picture in a frame for my desk. It’s a really cute one that I got down at old man Miller’s antique shop. Actually, it’s not really an antique shop. More like a flea market, or a garage sale, but of course, it’s not in a garage, it’s a shop, so he calls it—”

“The picture, Sunny? What about the picture?”

“Oh, yeah. I was putting the picture in the frame when I noticed that she’s in it, too.”

“She? Who’s she? Mrs. Tibbles?”

“Mrs. Tibbles? There is no *Mrs.* Tibbles. Unless, of course, you count that calico from the alleyway that I think he’s been—”

“Sunny!” Starsky had never had a migraine before, but was sure this would be his first.

“Behind Leo and Mr. Tibbles is Darlene. Or the chick that said she was Darlene. Anyway, like I said, I didn’t know if it would help or not, and it’s kinda blurry, but if you needed a picture of her, I have one.”



After the partners retrieved the picture and negative from Sunny, having promised they’d bring them back, they returned to Metro and made a beeline to the lab. Within an hour, they had made multiple copies of an enlargement of the photo, cropped to show only the woman posing as Darlene. As Sunny had indicated, Darlene’s image was marginally out of focus, but was still identifiable. She resembled Dorothy Hamill, as Hutch had described, but with an even more slender build than the figure skater. Her expression showed surprise and perhaps even annoyance at having been caught on film.

They ran up a flight of stairs to R & I and found Minnie engrossed in the green-and-white data sheets still being spewed out of the pin-fed printer. Starsky walked up quietly behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders, which he began kneading, eliciting a low moan of pleasure from the officer.

“I’ll give you five dollars to *not* stop that, whoever you are.”

Starsky stopped and assumed a wounded tone. “What do you mean ‘whoever you are’? How many strange men do you have rubbing your shoulders?”

“None stranger than you, darlin’.” She spun in her chair with a bright smile that faded once she caught sight of Hutch standing just beyond his partner. She immediately became all business. “What do you need, Starsky?”

“Minnie.” Starsky’s voice carried both pleading and a warning.

“No, Starsk, it’s okay.” Hutch placed a hand on his partner’s shoulder and moved him aside. Without forethought, Hutch crouched before the small woman so he was even with her eyes. The gesture took her aback, but she remained silent. “Minnie, Starsky tells me I said some things to you in the past month that were pretty horrible.”

“Starsky *told* you?” Minnie bit back. “You mean you don’t remember telling me that I wasn’t good enough to become a real cop and make it out of this computer closet?”

“Minnie.” Starsky’s voice was sharp enough to cut through her anger. “Give him a chance.”

Hutch waited for Minnie to face him again. “Yes, Starsky had to tell me, because somebody has been drugging me for, well, we don’t know how long. At least over a month. It was a pretty strong hallucinogenic compound that accumulated in my system, and it made me do some drastic things. And say some things I never would have said on

my own, Minnie. I am truly sorry that I hurt you, but I swear, I didn't know what I was saying."

Minnie's mouth had dropped open, and she looked back to Starsky for confirmation.

"They drugged him so he'd make a mistake and get one or both of us killed, Minnie," Starsky managed from his clenched jaw.

Hutch reached out and grasped the small woman's hands, his voice tight with concern. "Minnie, I think you are one of the smartest, most intuitive women I've ever known. I think it's a privilege to work with you and to call you my friend. It's killing me that I would ever say anything to make you think otherwise."

Minnie searched Hutch's eyes before flinging herself forward to wrap her arms around his neck. The momentum knocked Hutch backwards, and he had to throw a hand behind him to keep them from completely sprawling onto the floor.

"I knew it! I *knew* you didn't mean to be like that, Hutch. Not my Hutch! I would've never believed it if I hadn't heard you say it with my own ears! But now...now... Ooh!" Minnie released her grip and stood suddenly, planting her fists on her hips and thrusting her jaw forward in determination. "So what are we going to do to catch these turkeys?"

With a relieved grin, Starsky reached down to help Hutch to his feet, then turned to give Minnie a hug of his own. "What would we ever do without you, Min?"

When Starsky released her, Minnie wiped away a tear just cresting her lower lashes. "You better hope you never have to find out, Slick."



Leaving a copy of the photograph in Minnie's capable hands to cross-reference, their next move was to head back over to Cabrillo State to see if any of the staff or Professor Jennings recognized the pseudo-Darlene.

They had only left Metro a few miles behind when Hutch noticed Starsky's repeated glances in the rearview mirror. He shifted in his seat to get a better view from the passenger-side mirror. "Company?"

"Tan Pinto about three cars back. Been with us since we left the station."

"So what are we going to do about it?"

By way of reply, Starsky rotated the steering wheel with a hard left and slammed on the breaks, causing the Torino to fishtail until it faced the opposite direction and forcing traffic to swerve away from it. The trailing Pinto immediately careened into an alley on its right, disappearing from view.

Starsky peeled after it, the Mars light Hutch had slapped on the roof wailing in its wake. The garbage cans and used produce boxes within the alley narrowed it, leaving barely enough room for the Pinto to skirt through, but more than once caused the Torino to slow or knock them aside.

Hutch snatched up the radio's microphone as they drew close enough for them to read the smaller car's plates. "Zebra Three to Dispatch, we are in pursuit of a late-model tan Ford Pinto in an alley westbound off of Fremont, near Twelfth. This should dump us out onto—?"

"Hudson."

"Hudson. California license plate three-zero-five, Nancy-William-Oscar. That's three-zero-five, Nancy-William-Oscar, copy?"

"Copy that, Zebra Three. Attention all units in the vicinity of Hudson and Twelfth, Zebra Three is in pursuit of a late-model tan Ford Pinto, California license plate three-zero-five, Nancy-William-Oscar. Please respond."

If any other units radioed in, neither of the partners heard it. The Pinto shot out of the alley in a sliding right turn, the Torino hot on its bumper. From seemingly out of nowhere, the smaller car's passenger-side fender was clipped by an oncoming garbage truck's right front bumper, sending it spinning away. Both men shouted as Starsky turned the wheel urgently to the left and floored the accelerator to miss the inevitable collision. They nearly cleared the truck slamming on the brakes, but the larger vehicle still swiped the passenger side of the Torino, shoving it nearly two yards before coming to a shuddering stop.

The partners were thrown forward, with Starsky barely avoiding slamming his head into the steering wheel. Rattled, he turned anxiously to his partner. "You okay?"

"Yeah, you?" Hutch exhaled heavily.

"I'll live." Starsky arched his back slightly and tilted his head, sore from the impact and being held in place by his seatbelt. He knew they'd both hurt worse tomorrow.

Hutch craned his neck to look behind them. The Pinto was nowhere to be seen. "We lost him."



"Terrific," Starsky spat, as he shoved open the door and got out to check on the extent of the damage to the Torino. Hutch tried to open the passenger-side door, but it wouldn't budge. His only choice was to either climb out the open window, or use the driver's side door. He opted for the latter and slid across the seat to follow after his angry partner.



Other than the damage to the door and a considerable dent in the rear panel, the Torino had withstood the collision well, considering the impact, and was at least still roadworthy.

No responding officers had arrived at the intersection in time to intercept the Pinto, and R & I called them back to say that the car had been reported stolen two nights before. The owner was a student registered at Cal State Long Beach. Hutch asked Minnie to provide a copy of the photo to a patrolman so he could show the picture of the fake-Darlene to the owner of the stolen car. There was a slim chance he might be able to ID her, in case she had also committed the theft.

In the meantime, Starsky and Hutch returned to Cabrillo State and found the less-than-cordial Nurse Phillips walking in at the same time, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from her lip. With a grunt, she explained that she was coming in earlier than her normal shift to pick up a few hours for one of her co-workers who was going home sick.

“We’re glad we caught you,” Hutch said honestly, ignoring her cranky demeanor and pulling the photo enlargement out of a manila envelope. “We’re hoping you can identif—”

“That’s her.” The nurse took a drag from her cigarette and pulled it out of her mouth. The same hand stabbed at the photo, smoke following the gesture. “That’s the girl who said she was playing footsy with old man Jennings.”

“You’re sure?” Starsky searched her face.

“Sure, I’m sure.” Having done her part, Nurse Phillips continued her trek into a side door of the building without another word, the still-burning remains of her cigarette tossed into a sand-filled coffee can beside the door.



They found Professor Jennings at a small round table in the facility’s recreation room. He was only as lucid as during their last visit, and greeted the detectives like old friends, insisting they join him at the table and indicating that their “waitress” would be back in a moment to take their orders. The noisy room was filled with other patients in various stages of dementia playing board games and doing crafts, and a few uninterested orderlies.

“She’ll be back with our drinks in just a minute. The service is a little slow here, but they make a fine New York-style cheesecake; wait and see,” the professor crooned, his fragmented mind placing him in the small bistro he and his long-dead wife used to

frequent. “I always ask for a nice steak. Quite tasty, actually. Though there was this one time it tasted suspiciously like chicken.”

Hutch laid a hand on the older man’s forearm to get his attention, and held out the photograph. “Professor, do you know this woman?”

Jennings immediately snatched the 8x10 from Hutch’s unresisting grip and brought it up to his watery eyes. “Oh, thank you!”

With even further surprising agility and speed, the old man was up and out of his chair, then dashing through the room. He would have made it out of the rec hall, except that one of the large orderlies standing sentry at the doors managed to stop him with a gentle but firm one-armed embrace from behind. His tone was good-natured and kind. “Where you headin’ off to in such a yank, Professor? You got a hot date or somethin’?”

When the professor didn’t struggle, the orderly released him, but kept a hand on the older man’s shoulder. “What you got there, Professor? A picture of your girlfriend?”

“Bagels!” the professor exclaimed delightedly, jabbing a thick finger at the image.

Starsky and Hutch approached, confused by Jennings’ response, but already drawing their conclusions.

“Is this the woman who brought you bagels, Professor?” Hutch asked gently, hoping for a rational response. “Who is she?”

“Bagels!” Jennings smiled widely, but the joy that lit up his face faded just as quickly, and tears filled his eyes. All energy drained from him, and his expression became a mask of deep grief. “Home. I want to go home. Please? Please, just let me go home.”

“Professor?” Starsky was moved by the utter misery that seemed to steal the last spark of life from the old man.

Jennings clutched the photograph to his chest and buried his face in his other hand as he began to sob. The orderly looked up expectantly at the detectives, silently asking them what to do next. Hutch shook his head and held up his hands, surrendering the professor into his care. The orderly tried to withdraw the now-crumpled photo from the professor’s grasp, but Starsky stopped him. “Let him keep it. If he says anything about it, gives a name, anything, call us. The nightshift nurse, Phillips, she’s got our number.”

The orderly nodded, grateful for the detectives’ compassion. He knew they wouldn’t get anything more from pressing Jennings that night. “Will do. I’m gonna get him back to his room, then.”

They watched the pair retreat down the hallway, the tall orderly's arm draped comfortably across the frail old man's shoulders as he guided him. Hutch sighed and looked away, then ran his hands over his face.

Starsky placed his hand on Hutch's shoulder, concerned. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I had just hoped... I don't know." Hutch exhaled heavily and shook his head. "I don't know what I was hoping for."

Starsky tightened his grip. "You were hoping he would've given us her real name. Me, too. At least we have a pretty good idea that she's the one who came to visit him."

"Unless it's just that the professor's got a thing for brunettes."

They left the rec room and started down the hallway. Hutch was surprised when Starsky stopped suddenly, deep in thought. "What?"

Starsky looked up, his brow furrowed. "You don't suppose Cheryl would know who this girl is? Seeing as how the professor recognized her. Or at least, we think he recognized her."

"Brilliant," Hutch grouched. "Why didn't we think of that when we first got the photo?"

"Because we didn't know for certain that she was the one who came to visit Jennings until just now. Besides..." Starsky began walking again. "I can't be brilliant all the time."

Hutch gave Starsky a dark look and fell in step with him as they traveled down the dimly lit hallway.



They found Cheryl at the university chem lab, diligently peering into her microscope to double-check the toxicology results on Hutch's food samples. Without preamble, Hutch pulled a photo from the envelope and held it up for Cheryl to see, announcing that the woman whose image was captured there was the one who had poisoned him.

They hadn't anticipated Cheryl's reaction, and Starsky barely had the wherewithal to catch her before she hit the floor in a dead faint.



The pungent scent of smelling salts, retrieved from a first-aid box mounted on one of the laboratory walls, brought Cheryl back to consciousness, but didn't stop the room from spinning. Her stomach lurched, followed by the bitter aftertaste of bile, but she managed to pull herself together and sit up with Hutch's help.

Hutch's face anxiously searched hers, but he pushed aside his need for answers until he knew Cheryl was okay. "Are you all right? Do you think you can stand?"

Cheryl nodded and swallowed hard. She still felt weak-kneed and allowed the two men to bear her weight until she was upright. She gratefully slid onto the lab stool Starsky had pulled over with one foot while still supporting her weight. Once Hutch steadied her in place, Starsky crossed out of the room into the hallway to retrieve a cup of water from the cooler for her.

Embarrassed by her weakness and dreading what she had to tell them, Cheryl lowered her eyes as she took a trembling sip of water. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Hutch couldn't mask the urgency he felt. "Cheryl, who is she?"

Cheryl closed her eyes, but couldn't keep the tears from falling. "I am so, so sorry, Hutch."

Starsky's grip on her forearm tightened, unintentionally bruising her. "Cheryl, who is it?"

"Lindsay," Cheryl choked out. "It's Lindsay Worthington."

Starsky turned to his partner to see if he recognized the name. Hutch shook his head; the name meant nothing to him. Cheryl took a shuddering breath and opened her eyes. She and Lindsay had once been best friends, more like sisters. She had been a vibrant, compassionate, idealist with the world on a string until *then*.

Cheryl exhaled, and more tears cascaded down her cheeks. "Jerry...Lindsay was my brother Jerry's fiancée."



Hutch leaned back heavily against the lab table, oblivious to Cheryl who had moved across the room to stare out its single window, unsuccessfully trying to stem her tears. Starsky reached out and placed a familiar hand on Hutch's stomach before dashing across the room to Cheryl's office. Within moments, he connected with Metro and requested an APB on Lindsay Buckingham, giving them her last known address, which Cheryl had provided.

"I guess it was pretty foolish to think this was over with Vic Bellamy and arresting Jennings," Hutch remarked quietly when he sensed Starsky moving up behind him.

Starsky rested one arm on the table and leaned in close to his partner, a silent offering of comfort and strength. "We couldn't have known, Hutch. Spending our lives looking over our shoulders is no way to live."

Suddenly exhausted and a bit overwhelmed, Hutch simply nodded. Starsky could sense his fatigue and knew his partner was at his limit. Hutch's healing was still in progress, and Starsky wasn't about to let anything get in its way, including finding the one who had caused the damage to begin with.

"C'mon, Captain Marvel." Starsky's voice was too low for Cheryl to hear his gentle tone. "That's enough sleuthing for one day. Let the rookies pick up Lindsay; we're done."

Hutch suddenly felt like he could have curled up in the corner of the lab and slept for a week. "What? And let them have all the glory?"

"It's tough being a superhero. Let's go before somebody figures out that you forgot your cape."

Starsky gave Hutch's arm a tug and he slowly got to his feet. "I told you, it's at the dry cleaners."

Cheryl had managed to staunch her tears, but her eyes were bright as she watched the detectives approach. "I don't know what to say. Hutch, I'm so sorry."

The sides of Hutch's mouth lifted in a compassionate smile. "Cheryl, you couldn't have known."

Cheryl shook her head after she blew her nose. "I haven't even seen her since Jerry's funeral. I phoned several times, but she never returned my calls. I...I just thought she was trying to start over, you know? That staying in touch with me or my dad was just too painful, and she was trying to move on. So, after a few months, I just gave up. I figured she'd try and contact me when she was ready. But this? Oh, Hutch, I never in million years thought she'd be capable of something like this!"

Hutch opening his arms was enough of an invitation for Cheryl to lean into his embrace, and her tears began to fall again. "I had no idea—"

One strong hand stroked the back of Cheryl's head. "I know, I know. It's okay. It's going to be okay."

Starsky placed one of his hands on her back as well. "We'll find her and get her the help she needs."

"I know you will." Cheryl pulled away and nodded, dabbing her eyes. "If there's anything I can do, please...."

Hutch nodded as he cupped the side of Cheryl's face with his hand, his thumb gently brushing away an errant tear. "Lindsay has been to visit your dad. Maybe if—"

“What?” Cheryl bristled, then slumped with acceptance as the realization hit her. “Of course. That’s where she got the information she needed to make the poisonous compound she put in your food, isn’t it?”

When both men nodded, affirming her deduction, a spark of anger crowded her grief. “Damn him!”

Starsky pushed aside his own simmering rage at Professor Jennings. “Cheryl, we’ve seen your dad in the last few days. He’s not operating on all cylinders right now.”

“Not him,” Cheryl spat. “Jerry! If he hadn’t been so careless, so, so stupid as to get caught up in drugs, none of this would have happened! He not only ruined his own life, he ruined my father’s and Lindsay’s, and,” her voice dropped to a near whisper, “and mine. How can you even stand to be around me, knowing that my family—?”

“It’s not you, Cheryl,” Hutch responded fervently. “It was them, not you.”

Starsky nodded. “You’re doing everything you can to help us. We need you.”

“Yeah? Okay.” Cheryl sniffed and straightened, pulling herself back together. “What else can I do? You know I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

“Good girl.” Hutch patted her arm. “We need you to visit your father. I know he’s refused to see you in the past, but we’d like for you to try again. Maybe he’ll tell you something about Lindsay.”

“Of course, sure. I’ll go there right now.”

“Thank you.” Hutch placed a quick kiss on Cheryl’s cheek and took a step back. He was surprised by the weakness in his knees, and stumbled. Starsky’s hands were holding him up in an instant, and his eyes frantically searched Hutch’s face. “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.” Starsky’s voice was tight.

“Shows what you know.” Hutch shook off Starsky’s grip, but when he saw the blatant concern on his partner’s face, he relented and gripped his shoulder. “Okay. We’ll get something to eat from another one of those fly-infested taco stands on the way to your place, and we’ll call it a day.”

Starsky’s face relaxed, but only marginally. “Maybe a doctor should—”

“I’m fine, I promise. I’m just a little tired, that’s all.”

“Do you think that’s it?” Starsky looked at Cheryl. “Is he going to be okay?”

Cheryl nodded remorsefully. “The effects—the damage—of what Lindsay gave him...it’s going to take a while before Hutch feels like himself.”

“All right, all right. Hutch himself is right here. You don’t need to talk about me as if I’m not in the room.” Hutch smiled slightly to take the sting out of his words. His expression softened as he studied Cheryl’s face. “You going to be okay?”

Cheryl’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “Yes. I’ll just be glad when this is all over.”

Starsky’s jaw clenched as he again took in his partner’s pale face. “That makes three of us.”



The address Cheryl had given them matched what the DMV had on file for Lindsay Worthington, but the apartment was now occupied by a single mother with two small children. The post office had no forwarding address for her, and a stack of mail, including unpaid credit card bills, were bundled and being held there.

Cheryl called from the mental health facility’s nurses’ station to say that she had gone to see her father, but he’d already been given something to help him sleep that evening, and she would try again first thing in the morning.

Starsky learned all of this as Hutch slept on his couch. They had barely made it into the apartment with a bag of takeout before Hutch was asleep, almost the instant he sat down. Before Starsky could re-enter the room with a couple of sodas from the kitchen, Hutch was snoring softly into the fist that propped up his head from the armrest. Starsky placed their dinner in the refrigerator, then returned to the living room. Figuring Hutch needed sleep more than food for the time being, he eased him over and helped him stretch out across the cushions. Hutch never truly woke, simply burrowing his face into the pillow. Starsky pulled the brightly colored blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over the still form. “Soon, buddy,” he promised, his voice low. “This will all be over soon.”

Popping the top off of his soda, Starsky stationed himself at the kitchen table and picked up the phone’s receiver. A call to the station put him in touch with Captain Dobey, and he filled in his superior on the day’s events and requested a subpoena for Worthington’s held mail, hoping that any credit card activity might reveal her whereabouts.

Dobey assured him he would get the necessary paperwork processed and that they should be able to serve the seizure warrant first thing in the morning. Before they hung up, the captain asked about Hutch and, as always, warned Starsky to be careful.

With an affectionate smile that would have embarrassed the older man, Starsky affirmed he would and hung up. He stood and stretched tiredly, then glanced at the wall clock. It was only 8:00, but he knew he could easily fall into bed and sleep the entire night

through. Taking his drink with him, he moved into the living room, then gave Hutch's shoulder a gentle shove from behind the couch. "Hey."

"Hmm?" Hutch grunted without opening his eyes.

"Dinner or sleep?"

Hutch responded unintelligibly, but Starsky understood the response. "I figured. C'mon, you're going to get a stiff neck, then you'll be grouchy in the morning."

Hutch called Starsky something unpleasant and didn't move. Starsky smiled and gave him another shove. "I am not. C'mon."

With a grunt, Hutch shoved back the blanket covering him and sat up on the couch, blinking blearily at his partner. "Where are we going?"

"Not we—you. You're going to bed. They don't pay me enough to sleep with you, too."

Hutch grimaced. "That's not what I meant."

Starsky offered Hutch a hand and pulled him to his feet. "What did you mean then?"

"I..." Hutch yawned hugely and blinked again. "I don't remember. What were we talking about?"

"Beats me." Starsky smiled and turned, leading him into the next room. Hutch followed, nearly sleep-walking in his wake, with the Mexican blanket from the sofa trailing from his grip. "C'mon, you big baby, and don't trip over your blanky."

Hutch staggered past his partner and crawled into the bed, mumbling, "You and your 'blanky' can go to—" Burrowing his face into the pillow muffled out the rest of his directive.

"I'll send you a postcard when I get there." Starsky grinned broadly.

Pausing in the doorway, Starsky couldn't reason away his ever-present fear for his partner's well-being. He had no doubt they would bring Lindsay Worthington to justice, but he was less sure about bringing Hutch back to health. To wholeness.

He stood in the shadows for a few minutes more, watching the even cadence of Hutch's breathing in sleep. No matter what happened in the days ahead, no matter how long it took, he would keep vigil.



The shrill ringing of the phone the next morning jerked Starsky out of the deepest sleep he'd had in weeks. It startled him so badly, he rolled off the couch and onto the floor, face first. By the time he righted himself, Hutch was already stumbling out of the bedroom to check on him. When he decided Starsky would live, Hutch moved into the kitchen and snatched up the receiver. "Hutchinson."

"Detective Hutchinson, this is Metro Dispatch. Stand by for a patch-through from a Nurse Yakomora, from the Cabrillo State Mental Health Facility."

"Starsk." Hutch motioned for his partner to join him at the phone, and tilted the receiver away from his ear so Starsky could hear the conversation as well.

It wasn't long before the Dispatch operator returned. "Go ahead, Nurse Yakomora; you've got Detective Hutchinson on the line."

"Thank you. Detective Hutchinson, I'm a floor nurse at the Cabrillo State Mental Health Facility. You spoke with Nurse Phillips, our night-shift head nurse? She left the day shift instructions that if anyone came to visit Richard Jennings we should let you know right away."

"Yes, I'm glad you're calling. Who is it that came to visit the professor?"

"Well, yesterday afternoon his daughter, Cheryl Jennings, came to see him. That was at..." They could hear paper rustling as the nurse apparently checked the guest log.

"That was around five-thirty," Starsky filled in, for her benefit as much as Hutch's. If the nurse noticed the change in speaker, she gave no indication.

"Yes, you're right. It says here she signed the guest book at five-twenty-four. I wasn't sure if anyone had made you aware of that or not. Since she's the professor's daughter, I wasn't sure if that mattered to your investigation."

"We'd like to know of anyone who comes to see him," Hutch confirmed, "especially the woman in the photo we left there."

"Yes, our entire staff has reviewed the photograph. We haven't seen her, but I thought I should call to let you know that Mr. Jennings does have a guest. He just signed in. A Mr. Larry Sinclair. Like I said, Nurse Phillips said we should call."

Hutch felt his pulse quicken. "Look, call Security and have them detain whoever's visiting the professor."

"We can't just—"

"Yes, you can! I don't care what excuse you use, but keep that man there. We can be there in twenty minutes, all right?"

The nurse hesitated. “I—”

Starsky took the receiver out of his partner’s hand, and Hutch rushed to the bedroom to retrieve his shoes. “Look, this person may be linked to murder, lady. Do you really want them running around your hospital?”

“No! Of course not!”

“Then call Security! I don’t care if you have to lock down the entire place; just don’t let him leave. Will you do that?”

“Yes. Yes, I will.”

“Good. We’re going to send a black-and-white unit to assist. They’ll be there in...” Starsky glanced at the kitchen clock. “...less than ten minutes.”

“Okay. I’ll hang up and call Security right now.”

“Do it!” Once Starsky heard the sound of the line being disconnected, he continued. “Dispatch, I need the nearest unit sent to the Cabrillo State Mental Health Facility to detain a male suspect, a Larry Sinclair, visiting Professor Richard Jennings.”

“On what grounds, Detective?”

“Suspicion of attempted murder. Have them hold the suspect for us; we’re on our way!”



The patrolman first looked annoyed as Starsky and Hutch slid to a stop next to his black-and-white sedan. His expression changed to amusement as Starsky bound out of the Torino, and he contemplated which looked more ruffled—the right side of the detective’s car, or his clothing.

“What’d you do, sleep in your clothes? Haven’t you ever heard of a dry cleaner? I thought they paid detectives better than that.”

Starsky instantly recognized the officer. “No, Rogers, patrolmen on the take make a heck of a lot more than us poor slobs do.”

“Cute, very cute.” Rogers glanced past Starsky to where Hutch had slid across the seat and was getting out from the driver’s side of the car. “What? Were you two pulling an all-nighter?”

“Something like that,” Hutch responded as he joined his partner. “Why aren’t you inside with the suspect?”

Rogers shrugged. “He was long gone before I even got here. Nurse Yahmo...” Rogers flipped open his notebook to verify the pronunciation of the nurse’s name. “Yucko...”

“Yakomora,” Hutch corrected impatiently. “What’d she say? What happened?”

“Right. Nurse said she called Security and followed their rent-a-cop down to Richard Jennings’ room, like you said. Once they got there, they found that the perp, who had signed in as ‘Larry Sinclair,’ had split, and the old man was unresponsive. Eyes were open and he was breathing and everything, but just staring off into space. Wouldn’t say nothing. My partner and I covered the grounds before you two got here. The guy’s long gone.”

“Terrific,” Starsky growled, slamming his fist into his thigh in frustration. “You get a description?”

“Sure. Blond male, clean-shaven. Young. Maybe eighteen to twenty. Average height. Wearing a navy turtleneck and tan jacket. Dark brown corduroys. Glasses. That’s all we got.”

“Sounds like the driver of the tan Pinto.” Starsky looked at Hutch for affirmation.

“Right. Now, let’s think this through.” Hutch’s hands traveled up to rest his fingers on his temples. “You said he signed in. There’s got to be prints on that pen.”

Starsky was already in motion toward the entrance. “Unless he used his own. But we might get lucky and lift something off the guest book or counter.”

Hutch fell in step with his partner, but turned back to issue orders over his shoulder. “Call in for a lab team, Rogers; we’re going to need to dust the reception desk and Jennings’ room.”

“On it.” Rogers threw the pair a two-finger salute and moved to his patrol car as they charged into the ward.



Starsky and Hutch thought they had finally gotten a break when they learned that the suspect had used the hospital-issued pen to sign the guest book. Unfortunately, two other guests had arrived and used it after he had, so the prints were likely to be overlapped or smeared. Still, the pen and guest book were confiscated by the lab, and the rest of the desk was dusted for prints, as well as the doorframe, chair, and bed frame of Professor Jennings’ room.

Jennings was taken to the infirmary to be examined, but no cause could be immediately determined to diagnose and treat his current semi-catatonic state.

Despite their best efforts to offer reassurance, Starsky and Hutch's bristling presence made the nursing staff nervous. Each in turn gave a description of the young man to the detectives and police artist, who was surprised that the nurses' depictions were amazingly similar.

The artist quickly produced a charcoal composite from their descriptions and held it up for the partners to see. "As best as I can tell, here's your man."

Fine-boned and clean-shaven, bearing no particular scars or birthmarks and wearing dark-rimmed glasses, the man could have been any college student from anywhere in the country. Hutch exhaled heavily and was about to thank the officer, when Starsky reached out and snagged the drawing out of the artist's hand.

"Starsk?" Hutch leaned in closer to study the drawing, trying to determine what his partner had picked up on. Without a word, Starsky thrust the artwork into Hutch's hands and in three strides was at the nurses' desk, placing his hands on the countertop, and with a quick hop and twist, seated himself on the work surface. He leaned back to pull up a stack of papers in order to quickly rifle through them. Once he found what he was looking for, he slid off the counter and called over Nurse Yakomora, Hutch, and the sketch artist.

"Remember Monique and Harry?" Starsky asked his partner. Hutch blanched and nodded. The memory of the schizophrenic woman shrieking at them after nearly adding Starsky to her bloody list of murders still sent a cold knot to his guts.

"Look!" Starsky laid the blown-up photo of Lindsay Worthington on the counter then spread his hands out to cover the top of her head. "Picture her without makeup, cut her hair shorter like a guy's, and dye it blonde. Put her in men's clothes and add some glasses. Is that the 'Larry Sinclair' who was here?"

The nurse gasped as her hand flew to her mouth. Unable to speak, she nodded vehemently.

Hutch's eyes widened in surprise, and he berated himself for not seeing it sooner. He laid the artist's sketch down next to the photo Starsky still held, and sucked in a breath. The two were identical.

The revelation was a breakthrough, but it also meant that Lindsay Worthington now knew they were on to her, and she would come after them again.



Within a few hours, the lab confirmed that many of the prints lifted from the hospital pen and guest book were smeared and overlapping. They were, however, able to retrieve a partial print and run it against those taken from the health food store.

They were a match.

The existing APB was altered to reflect Lindsay Worthington's transformation, and within hours, every law enforcement agency within a three-hundred-mile radius had received copies of Lindsay's "before and after" depictions.

After spending the afternoon at the station to update Captain Dobby, the partners checked in with Cheryl Jennings, who was at her father's bedside in the infirmary. There was no change in the professor's condition; while apparently "awake," he remained unresponsive and catatonic. Cheryl was shocked at the revelation of Lindsay's tactics and had no further insight to offer as to what to expect next. The men promised to keep in touch with Cheryl, and she in turn indicated she would contact them the minute her father's condition changed, or if she thought of something that might be useful.

Exhausted, Starsky and Hutch decided to stop at The Pits to touch base with Huggy and grab some dinner before heading home for the night. Walking into the darkened bar offered a sense of respite to both men and, in some small way, an opportunity to leave their troubles outside of the building, if only for a few hours.

"Home, sweet home," Starsky sighed as the door closed behind them.

Hutch scanned the odd mix making up the dinner crowd as he looked for their friend. "Yeah? Well, if this is 'home' for you, you've sure got some weird relatives."

"At least my relatives will claim me," Starsky retorted as he moved farther into the bar, having spied Huggy just coming out of the kitchen.

"Good point," Hutch murmured half seriously and followed his partner to the last available booth at the end of the restaurant.

As they slid in opposite one another, Huggy produced two cups of decaf and set them down on the table. "And a superlative evening to my two fuzzy friends."

"Superlative?" Hutch grunted, reaching for a cup.

"It's all in how you look at it." Huggy straightened, giving them a philosophical look. "Life, it is said, is a bowl of cherries."

"Yeah?" Hutch took a long drink. "Then what am I doing here in The Pits?"

Starsky tipped his cup in a salute. "Having coffee."

"Thank you, Erma Bombeck." Hutch tipped his in response, then drank again.

“Emma who?” Huggy raised a quizzical eyebrow before going to the bar to get a beer. He took a drink as he walked back to their booth and set the beer down. “What you naysayers of positive thinking need is some nourishment to stimulate and congregate your more cheerful brain cells.”

“What’s good tonight?” Starsky asked as he shifted in his seat so he could stretch out his legs across the bench.

“Everything is always good at The Pits,” Huggy replied indignantly. “It just so happens that tonight’s special is the fish or Angie’s famous Irish stew, just like he made back in his native homeland.”

Hutch did a double take. “Homeland? Angie’s from East LA.”

“So he throws in a little hot sauce from the barrio. C’mon, everybody knows a good bowl of stew warms the cockles of your heart. Besides...” Huggy planted his hands on his hips. “I got a ton of the stuff and I don’t want to have to throw it out.”

Hutch threw his hands in the air. “Well, with an endorsement like that, how could I pass it up?”

“Two.” Starsky raised two fingers, then lifted his cup, indicating that he’d like a refill.

Huggy grinned as he crossed over to the bar and placed their orders with the waitress while he retrieved the coffeepot. He joined them, sliding in beside Hutch, since Starsky remained sprawled out, and placed the pot on the table. “You two look like something the cat dragged in because it was too embarrassed to let the rest of the pussycats see him with it.”

“So much for positive thinking,” Starsky retorted as his stomach growled. He patted it sheepishly, then yawned widely.

“Oh, I’m positive, all right. I’m positive you two look worse for wear.” Huggy shook his head. “You got anything new on who tried to take you out?”

“Yeah, but we’re not getting anywhere with it.” Hutch sighed, then rubbed his eyes. “Have you ever heard of a—?”

He paused as the waitress approached the table, bearing a tray with their meals. She had been attracted to both detectives from the moment she first met them, and smiled enticingly at them as she always did when they were around.

“Heard of who?” Huggy asked as he retrieved one of the bowls from her tray.

Starsky grabbed the bowl out of Huggy’s hands and smiled at the waitress. “Talk later, eat first.”

Hutch exercised a bit more decorum as he accepted the meal the waitress offered and thanked her. By the time he had placed his napkin and silverware to the side of the bowl, Starsky already had half of his meal devoured, shoveling in bits of roll between spoonfuls of the stew. “Starsky, slow down before you accidentally swallow the spoon, too.”

“I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I got a whiff of this. It’s great!” Starsky managed around mouthfuls.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you...? Oh, never mind. Just shut up and eat. You’re too disgusting to talk to right now, anyway.”

Hutch dug into his meal as well, but after the second bite, set down his spoon and looked over at Huggy. “What did you say Angie put in this stuff? It tastes funny to me.”

Huggy shrugged. “Got me. ‘Ancient Chinese secret,’ I guess.”

“I thought Angie was Puerto Rican.” Starsky glanced up from his stew.

“As long as it’s not Calgon he’s putting in there.” Hutch grimaced, pushing the bowl away from him.

“You gonna eat that?” Starsky asked, licking his spoon and already pulling Hutch’s bowl in front of him to replace his own empty one.

“Be my guest.” Hutch shook his head in a mix of consternation and revulsion, but grabbed back his dinner roll from off the side of the bowl before Starsky devoured that as well. Huggy simply grinned and flagged the waitress. “Sweetness, bring my blond brother here a salad, would ya?”

The woman nodded and flashed Hutch a bright smile before entering the kitchen. She returned in a moment and served Hutch with a promising wink. “Huggy, Tony needs you up at the bar. Says he’s having a problem hooking up the beer tap again.”

“Dang thing never threads right,” Huggy grumbled as he slid out of the booth. “I’ll be back quicker than you can say ‘Pepto-Bismol’.”

“Oh, that’s encouraging,” Hutch responded as he attacked his salad, now suddenly famished as well.

The men had finished their meals by the time Huggy returned from his errand, sitting down with a flourish and a long-suffering sigh. “A Bear’s work is never done. So, back to business. You were going to drop a name before Juanita there dropped off your dinners.”

Hutch pushed his plate to the side. “Let me throw a few out and see if they ring any bells. Lindsay Worthington?”

Huggy considered the name, then shook his head. “Nothing.”

“How about Larry Sinclair?”

“Nada. Are these folks I should know?”

Now that his meal was over, Starsky twisted to place his back against the wall and stretch out his legs on the bench seat again. “No, probably not. We just figured it was worth a shot.”

Huggy was disappointed that nothing immediately came to mind that would help his friends. “You know I’ll see what I can scare up. So, who are these cats? Are they partners in crime?”

Starsky shook his head. “No, that’s where this gets a little weird. They’re one and the same.”

Huggy’s brow furrowed. “Say what?”

Hutch pulled the folded copies from his back pocket and laid the first photo out on the table. “Lindsay Worthington. She was Jerry Jennings’ fiancée.”

“Jennings? Why do I know that name?”

Hutch nodded. “Because Richard Jennings wanted Starsky and me dead a few years back. He’s the one who had Vic Bellamy break into Starsky’s apartment and poison him.”

Huggy snapped his fingers. “And it was the professor’s son you guys had put away for dealing.”

Starsky cracked open one eye and yawned. “You got it. His son was Jerry—”

“And now the dead guy’s girlfriend, this Lindsay chick, gets in on the action and goes after Hutch. Man!” Huggy looked distressed. “What a freaky bunch.”

“Here’s the freakier part.” Starsky grimaced. “Either because she knows we’re on to her, or to throw us off track, she cuts her hair, dyes it blonde, and shows up at the Cabrillo State Hospitality Suites to visit Jennings, posing as ‘Larry Sinclair’.”

Huggy picked up the slightly blurred picture of Lindsay to envision the attractive young woman as a man. “Can she pull it off?”

“She can and has,” Hutch explained. “She passed muster with the staff at Cabrillo.”

Huggy shook his head as he continued looking at the photo. “I don’t know, guys. I just don’t see it.”

“Here.” Hutch slid the artist’s rendering across the table.

The photo of Lindsay Worthington slipped from Huggy’s suddenly numb fingers. Within a heartbeat, he snatched up the copy of the drawing instead. “That’s Joe! That’s my new busboy!”

“What?!” Starsky bolted out of the booth, looking wildly around the room for the disguised woman.

Huggy stabbed his finger at the drawing and looked at his two friends with horror. “Just hired him. He, I mean she, came to me for a job, and I—” Huggy pulled himself out of the booth with Hutch right behind him.

“There!” Starsky bellowed. He had glanced back toward the swinging door of the kitchen just in time to see where it had been held open a few inches by Lindsay Worthington. She had been assisting Angie in the kitchen with prep work all evening, but had snuck to the door every time she could to try and overhear the detectives’ conversation with Huggy.

Starsky threw himself through the door, plowing over the unsuspecting Angie in the process. He scrambled to keep his balance and hurled himself after the fleeing figure, who was already slipping out the back door and into the alley. Hutch and Huggy also rushed into the kitchen and followed after Starsky, weaving their way between the prone cook, prep tables, and stoves.

Starsky burst through the back door just as Lindsay reached the end of the alleyway. Before she could round the corner onto the street, she crashed into an oncoming group of bar hoppers.

They cursed as she charged through, shoving them aside, with one falling heavily on his backside. Once they regrouped, a few tried to stagger after her, but the idea of exerting enough energy to chase after the sprinter was too much. When they saw a second figure racing toward them from the alley, they turned toward the outlet for their alcohol-induced irritation.

The ominous intent of the four drunken men blocking the end of the alley was enough to bring Starsky to a sliding stop. He could hear Hutch and Huggy crashing out of the back of the bar behind him, but knew he had to act fast if he was to have any chance of catching the deranged woman.

“Out of the way; I’m a cop,” Starsky growled, trying to watch all the men at once. With barely two feet between them, he knew going for his gun would be useless, and he’d risk having the weapon turned on himself. He knew, too, that Hutch would be beside him in seconds and would have the wherewithal to have his own gun ready.

“Sure, whatever you say, Officer,” the man to Starsky’s right responded casually and moved as if to get out of his way. It was enough to distract Starsky and, in the dim light of the alleyway, gave the remaining three men the opportunity to move in on him. Starsky cursed himself for the rookie mistake and ducked just in time to have the first blow sail inches above where his head had been. But while he was bent over, the knee of the fourth man came up to catch him squarely in the jaw, knocking him backwards a few steps. He kept his balance as he twisted away, but opened himself up for another of his attackers to grab him by the shirt and pull him in close. He was unprepared for the kidney punch that sent an explosion of pain rippling through him, sending him to his knees.

The unmistakable bark of Hutch’s warning shot ripped through the darkness, and the four men scrambled away under the cover of night, tripping over the alley debris as they fled. Hutch rushed past his partner to the end of the alley, desperate for any sign of Lindsay Worthington. His frantic search only showed a few stray cars rolling down the street and the four fleeing drunks that had blocked Starsky’s pursuit. He returned his gun to its holster and trotted back to where Huggy was helping Starsky to his feet. Starsky seemed dazed, but was coming back around. Still, Hutch was more than a little concerned when he saw Starsky’s pinched features and the red welt on his jaw that seemed to be bruising right before his eyes. “You okay?”

“Sure.” Starsky’s voice was tight, and his expression seemed more angry than pained when he swore vehemently. “We were so bleeding close.”

The partners followed Huggy back into the bar. They stopped at the back cooler so Huggy could grab a dishtowel and make Starsky an improvised ice pack for the darkening welt on the side of his face.

Angie gave the trio cautious glances as they propped themselves up on an unused prep table, talking in low voices.

“Now what?” Huggy asked. “What can I do?”

Hutch was struck with a revelation. “You had her fill out a job application or paperwork, right?”

Huggy nodded excitedly. “Yeah, and a copy of her—his—driver’s license. I’ll go get them.”

While they waited for Huggy to return, Hutch scrutinized his partner. He wasn’t sure if Starsky looked pale because of the pain, or from the erratic lighting in the small kitchen.

With one hand, he pulled the ice pack away from Starsky's face and looked over the growing bruise. "You always did have a glass jaw. How're the ribs? He nailed you pretty good."

Starsky pulled away from his partner's gentle grip. "It's not the ribs I'm worried about. I think he rearranged a few things in there."

"Too bad he didn't knock any sense into you." Hutch's tone was light, but the weight of the words hung between them. "Why didn't you wait for me? I could've saved you the grief."

"I—" Starsky looked away from the intensity of his partner's gaze.

Hutch bristled, but his anger was turned inward. "Did you think I wouldn't've been able to back you up?"

"No, of course not!" Starsky hissed, glancing over to where Angie was purposefully not paying them any attention, but hearing them just the same. "I just...when I realized it was her, all I could think about was what she did to you, how you almost... I wanted to take her down, and I guess I wasn't thinking."

The earnest anger in Starsky's eyes assailed Hutch's self-doubt as nothing else could have. Assured, he nodded as he gave his partner's forearm a squeeze.

Huggy returned from his upstairs office and handed Hutch the paperwork Lindsay Worthington had filled out. "Here you go. But I gotta tell you, man, I am real sorry." He pointed to the copy of the driver's license of Joe Schimmel. There was a considerable resemblance to Lindsay Worthington's transformation, but anyone who would have given it a closer look would have realized the two were not the same people. "After he/she asked me for a job, I told 'Joe' to make a copy of his license then come back later and fill out an application with Angie, here. I never bothered to look at it, because I figured the kid wouldn't last more than a day or two, and I wouldn't have to worry about filling out any tax forms. If he did make it a week, I would've. Man, I am really sorry."

Angie felt three sets of smoldering eyes burning into his back. He raised his hands in defense. "Don't look at me; I just did what I was told—take the kid's papers and leave them in the office, then show him how to bus tables and do dishes. Nobody said nothin' about checkin' out them papers. Joe picked up on stuff real fast and said what he really wanted to learn was how to cook. I said no at first, because that's not what Huggy here said to do. But the kid got done with the busin' and dishes and needed something else to do. He kept pestering me, so I let him do some of the simple stuff in the kitchen to keep him outta my hair." Angie looked nauseated. "Did I hear you say that Joe was really a broad?"

The partners ignored the question, but felt their anger toward the cook diffuse. Under the circumstances, they couldn't really blame him for Worthington's actions.

Hutch ran his hands through his hair and exhaled heavily to try and clear his head. “Okay, let’s think this through. To take a job here with you, she’s getting bolder, or more desperate to move in this close to us. I think it means she’s going to make her big play soon.”

Starsky worked his sore jaw for a moment and shifted from where he sat on the table to try and make his complaining side more comfortable. “Terrific. Like she hasn’t got us chasing our tails as it is. How are we supposed to figure out where she’s gonna turn up next?”

Hutch cocked an eyebrow. “Remain targets. Watch our backs.”

Starsky sighed. “Just another day in paradise.”

Huggy shook his head. “Why don’t you two quit the police business and get a nice, easy, normal job, like diffusing nuclear bombs or something?”

“What kind of fun would that be?” Starsky asked as he tossed Huggy the half-melted ice pack and followed Hutch out the door and into the night.



It was nearing midnight by the time they made their way to the address listed on the copy of the real Joe Schimmel’s driver’s license. En route, Hutch called in to the station to update the APB on Lindsay Worthington with her last known whereabouts. He also placed a call to R & I, asking for any information they had on the theft of Schimmel’s wallet, and learned that he’d reported it stolen about a week before. The report made at the time stated that Schimmel had met a young woman he knew only as “Veronica” at a college tavern one night and took her back to his apartment. The next morning, the woman—and his wallet—were gone. The vague description he provided the officers with was that the college-age woman had short dark hair, was slender, and had large brown eyes. Beyond that, he could provide little more information, claiming he’d been fairly intoxicated, as—he had thought—was she, and looking for a good time.

The partners pounded on the door of a large, rather run-down house hosting several equally run-down cars in the driveway and street, the epitome of low-cost rental property catering to the college crowd. After a few moments, a rather haggard twenty-something man opened the door, yawning. “The party ain’t until Thursday, man.”

Hutch flashed his badge and instantly had the student’s attention. “Detectives Hutchinson and Starsky. We’re looking for Joe Schimmel.”

The student looked instantly relieved, indicating his obvious guilt over some yet undiscovered discretion or crime. “Joe? Yeah, he’s here. C’mon in, I’ll get him.”

“Getting him” equated to his yelling back into the house, which garnered several muffled shouts for him to shut up, as the occupants were either studying or attempting to sleep. Starsky and Hutch moved farther into the living room, taking in the collegiate squalor from multiple unsupervised and uncaring young men.

After a moment, the muffled thumping of bare feet down the stairs reached their ears, and Joe Schimmel appeared. The eager expression on his face changed to disappointment when he took in the sight of the two men. Obviously, he was expecting someone of the opposite sex to be waiting for him. “Oh, hi.” Schimmel looked back to his friend. “What’s up?”

The roommate crammed his hands into his pockets nervously and nodded toward Hutch, then Starsky. “This is Detectives Starsky and Huckinson. They want to talk to you.”

Hutch exhaled. “I’m Huckinson, he’s Starsky. We’re here about the wallet you reported stolen.”

“Yeah, great.” Schimmel perked up a bit. “Did you get it back?”

“No, not yet,” Starsky responded, pulling out Lindsay Worthington’s picture. “But we’re wondering if this is the young woman who’s accused of stealing it from you?”

Schimmel looked at the picture for a moment before smiling sheepishly at the two detectives. “Uh, maybe?”

Hutch frowned. “What do you mean, ‘maybe’?”

“I mean, it could be. I was kinda blitzed that night, you know? It’s hard to say.” Schimmel’s grin turned sickly, realizing how lame his excuse sounded.

“Of course,” Hutch responded dryly, pulling out his business card and handing it over. “If you remember anything else about that night or the woman, call us at the station.”

“Yeah, sure.” Schimmel looked at the card. “Oh, hey—did you know they spelled your name wrong on these?”

The students missed the look the partners gave one another before Starsky responded, “Yeah, but we can’t get our captain to reprint them. You know how it is, budget cuts and all.” Starsky turned and opened the door for his disgruntled partner. “Come on, Huck, time’s a wastin’.”

Hutch shook his head in disgust and preceded Starsky out the door. He was halfway to the car before he realized his partner was standing motionless on the porch stairs. He instantly knew something was wrong. “Starsky, what is it?”

Starsky had a death grip on the handrail and was hunched forward. “I...just give me a sec. I don’t feel so great.”

“What is it?” Hutch was beside him in an instant, one hand on Starsky’s forearm to steady him. Even in the dim glow from the street lamp he could see that Starsky was pale and sweating. He instantly equated the pain to the blows Starsky had taken earlier in the alleyway. “Maybe you need to sit down.”

Starsky swallowed hard and shook his head. “I’ll be okay; my gut and my sides are on fire.”

“Starsk, listen to me. We can’t take any chances. I’m getting you to a hospital.”



“What? No, I’ll be fine.” Hutch was already urgently leading Starsky down the steps and supporting him by the arm as they moved slowly across the walk toward the Torino parked in the street. “Hutch, I...I told you, I’m—”

Starsky doubled over, landing hard on his knees. His stomach bucked, and he fell forward, his trembling arms barely able to stop himself from sprawling onto the cement. He vomited violently twice, his stomach and throat burned raw. He sensed that Hutch was beside him, and started growing faint and disoriented. He pushed himself away from the bile, trying to get upright, but ended up toppling over. Hutch caught him as he did, and was shocked when Starsky turned his face toward him just before he passed out.

Blood streamed from Starsky’s mouth and trailed down his slack jaw.



The ambulance screaming through the night provided a horrific episode of déjà vu, and Hutch was instantly transported to the night Starsky had been injected by Vic Bellamy. Starsky was unconscious then, too, but Hutch had no clue as to what had happened to his partner, or what the next twenty-four hours would hold. Now, Starsky lay on his side so as not to choke on his own blood. It continued to trickle from his mouth and nose, and occasionally, he would rouse enough to cough up more before passing out again.

As the ambulance tore through the darkened streets, its red and blue lights piercing the darkness, Hutch watched as the paramedics did what they could for his partner. Until they reached the hospital and tests determined what the cause of the bleeding was, there was little he or the paramedics could do, and Hutch was terrified.

“Please.” Hutch whispered, willing his partner to fight. “Please.”

He clenched and unclenched his hands in fear and frustration until he realized they were sticky. He glanced down at his upturned palm and saw that his hands were covered in Starsky’s drying blood.



Even though Hutch held the bag of saline as the paramedics pushed Starsky’s gurney into the ER, he repeatedly stepped on the heels of the man before him in his haste to get his partner the help he needed. Once inside the treatment room, the saline bag was taken from his unresisting hands by a nurse and hung on the IV stand attached to the exam table Starsky was transferred to.

Hutch stood numbly at the back of the brightly lit room, watching the scene before him play out like a hellish nightmare. Nurses and orderlies swarmed around his too-pale partner, removing his clothes and swabbing the blood away from where it continued to trickle down the side of his face. Starsky’s face looked almost translucent as he lay as still as death. If it weren’t for the shallow rise and fall of his chest—and the ever-present froth of blood—Hutch would have been sure that they’d already lost him.

Dr. Almeda charged into the room and was handed Starsky’s stats, which he quickly pored over while the duty nurse filled him in on what they knew to that point. He quickly looked over the data, then moved to Starsky’s unmoving side. His brow furrowed. “This doesn’t tell me much; when did the bleeding start? What are the probable causes?”

“We don’t know yet, Doctor.” The nurse glanced around the room until her eyes lit on Hutch’s mute figure. “That’s his partner in the corner, Detective Hutchinson.”

“Hutchinson.” The doctor covered the distance between them in four steps. “It says Detective Starsky was involved in an altercation earlier this evening. Did something happen that could have caused internal bleeding?”

Hutch’s jaw worked as he recalled the fight in the alley. “He got knocked around pretty good. I know he took at least one punch to his back. Maybe to his kidneys?”

“That gives us a place to start. All right, let’s get an ultrasound done, stat. I don’t want to open him up unless I have to. As soon as that’s done—and I mean *now*—I want blood and urine samples sent up to the lab for a screen. Then I want his vitals, hemo, and clotting time checked every fifteen minutes until we know what’s going on, got that?”

“Yes, Doctor!” The nurse who responded had already phoned the lab and requested the ultrasound equipment up to the exam room.

“Doctor? What are you doing for him? Why aren’t you trying to stop the bleeding?” Hutch had anxiously moved alongside Almeda, shaken to his core. He was losing his partner, and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Okay, look. I’ll give it to you straight.” Almeda gripped Hutch’s arm and forced himself to slow down his typical rapid-fire speech. “What happens next is critical. We’re going to do a urinalysis and an ultrasound to see if your partner’s kidneys were damaged and that’s causing the bleeding. If that’s not it, then we’re going to run him right into surgery and open him up. We’ve got to figure out where the bleeding is, and stop it.”

Hutch’s face flushed. “He’s bleeding to death! Why aren’t you doing anything to stop the bleeding?”

Almeda raised his hands to placate Hutch. “We need to wait for the ultrasound because if it starts clotting before we get our pictures, it’ll be all that much harder to determine the source. We work fast; don’t worry, Detective. Okay, here’s the tech now. Let’s get moving, Bert.”

The technician had entered the exam room at a run, pushing the ultrasound cart ahead of him. Within moments, he was rolling the scope over Starsky’s side to capture the kidney function. “You might want to see this, Doc.”

Almeda was quickly beside him with Hutch right over his shoulder, staring at the monitor’s screen. “What is it?”

“It’s not the kidneys. There’s some bruising, but nothing that should cause any bleeding. You’re going to want one of the specialists to confer, but I just don’t see enough damage.” Bert pointed to the screen and shook his head.

“Okay, prep him for surgery. Let’s get moving!” The doctor slapped his hands together once, as if to propel the rest of his staff into motion. As they shoved Starsky’s gurney out of the room, Almeda looked back at Hutch with frustration. “Are you sure there’s nothing else? Any other accidents or injuries in the past week that might have led to this? Had he been complaining about an upset stomach or a burning sensation?”

As he watched his partner disappear from sight, all the injuries Starsky had sustained in the past few weeks—from being pushed through the sliding glass doors at the beach house to when the Torino was sideswiped by the garbage truck—ran through Hutch’s mind. “It could be a number of instances, Doctor. It’s not as though we sit behind a desk all day. And these past few months, we—”

The doctor’s brow furrowed when Hutch stopped cold, his face paling. “What is it, Detective?”

“Doctor...” Hutch put out a supplicating hand. “The blood they drew. Would that include any kind of toxicology report?”

“Yes, I ordered it, not knowing what we were up against. Why?”

Hutch shook his head in frustration, angry with himself for not thinking of it sooner. “The details don’t matter, but there’s a possibility that Starsky’s been poisoned or drugged. What can you think of that would cause internal bleeding?”

The doctor looked appalled at the prospect, but instantly considered Hutch’s line of thought. “Coumadin, sure—it’s a blood thinner used to treat coagulation. You know, blood clots. Warfarin is its generic, and it’s basically what they make rat poison out of. But if he ingested it today, it wouldn’t work this fast.”

Hutch’s mind raced, trying to remember if Huggy had mentioned how long Lindsay Worthington had been working for him. “Does it have a cumulative effect?”

“Do you mean someone might have been poisoning him for a while? Naturally. If there have been several other doses, then, yes. Coumadin poisoning—sure, that would explain why his bruising is so severe if he just took those hits tonight. Otherwise, it’d take at least a day for the color to be that dark and intense. That could be it!” The doctor charged out of the room, shouting for the lab results of Starsky’s blood draw.

Hutch all but fell back against the room’s sterile wall and slid to the ground, burying his head into his hands.



“Detective Hutchinson? Are you all right?” The nurse had stepped into the darkened room so silently Hutch hadn’t even heard her. His face remained pillowed against his arms propped up by his knees as he sat on the cold tile floor of the exam room.

“How is he?” Hutch lifted his head to peer at her blearily, his need to know greater than his exhaustion.

“The doctor’s taking care of him right now. Dr. Almeda’s the best; your partner’s in good hands.”

Hutch nodded and shakily pushed himself up off the floor. He lost his balance, and the nurse gripped his arm to steady him. “Detective, are you all right? Are you dizzy? Nauseated?”

“I don’t know.” Hutch scrubbed his face with his hands. “Maybe a little. I don’t know.”

“Dr. Almeda sent me in here to ask if you’d eaten the same food Detective Starsky had and to get a blood draw from you.”

Hutch grimaced. “Yeah, probably. We might not have had the same food, but if he’s been poisoned, the person who did it had the same access to my meals, so it’s a possibility.”

The nurse nodded grimly and steered Hutch over to a chair near her equipment. After donning gloves, she labeled the vial and prepared a syringe, then pulled up Hutch’s sleeve to strap on a rubber strap around his forearm.

“Wait.” Hutch put up his hand to ward off the needle from his exposed vein. “There’s something else they’re going to find.”



“Hutch!” Captain Dobey hurried down the hall, far swifter than most would give him credit for. His fear was clearly etched on his normally stern face. “I just got the call. What’s going on? How is he?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ve seen...” Hutch swallowed hard before he continued, each word bitten off. “When he went down...Captain, I’ve seen corpses with more color than he had. He was losing so much blood, I...I don’t know.”

The captain straightened his coat and tie. “Where’s the doctor? I want to talk to him personally.” A nurse walking to her station came within Dobey’s reach, and he reached for her, causing her to stop. “I’m Captain Harold Dobey from the Ninth Precinct. I want an update on Detective Starsky, and I want it *now*.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get it for you.” The startled woman hurried away, once she was released from the imposing man’s grasp.

The slight curve at Hutch’s mouth was a grim smile. “Starsky always says you’re pretty scary when you get mad.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Dobey jabbed a finger in Hutch’s direction. “So, what have they done for him? You said he’d been poisoned, and that caused the bleeding?”

Hutch nodded wearily. “Rat poison. Who knows how many opportunities Worthington’s had to get to us? They’ve got Starsky stabilized; he was going into shock when we brought him in.”

The captain placed one of his large hands on Hutch’s shoulder. His voice was surprisingly soft. “But you did get him here in time, Hutch.”

“They got the bleeding stopped with something called Aquamephyton. It’s basically vitamin K. They’ve administered that and plasma, to counteract the Coumadin and clot his blood. I haven’t heard anything beyond—”

“Hutchinson? I figured you’d still be out here,” Dr. Almeda interrupted, then thrust a hand out to Dobby. “You must be their captain. I’m Dr. Almeda. I just wanted to let you know that things are looking better. It’s a good thing you got him to the ER as quickly as you did. Had this gone on much longer, he probably would have gone into DIC, which I’m sorry to say, would have been irreversible.”

“DIC?” Hutch shook his head, not understanding.

“Nothing you’d want to see. Not just bleeding from the mouth and nose, but his eyes, pores. Nasty stuff. I don’t care how many times I’ve seen it, it gives me nightmares for months. Whoever did this to him—to you both—wants you very, very dead, and not in a pretty way.”

When Almeda noticed how Hutch had paled even further and how his captain looked gray, he smiled apologetically. “Well, enough of that. The good news is that he’s coming along. Like I said before, his cell counts are up, which is what we want to see, but they’re not quite where we want them. Not yet, anyway. It’s just going to take some time, but barring any foreseen complications, he’s going to be fine in a day or two.”

“So, what are you doing for him now?” Dobby asked. “Hutch said you’re giving him vitamin K and plasma?”

“Yes, and whole blood, too. We’ll continue to monitor his PT—his Prothrombin Time. That’s the bleeding and clotting factor. We’re also going to watch his hemoglobin and his PTT, make sure his PT and INR get back down to where they’re supposed to be.” Almeda recognized his audience’s anxious and overwhelmed expressions and got to the point.

“He regained consciousness a few minutes ago, asked if you were all right, Detective, then dozed off. Oh, but not before demanding that we dress him in a pair of scrubs. Didn’t want to freeze his butt off, he said. He’s weak, but resting comfortably.” Almeda chuckled and shook his head. “Your partner’s something else. He’s going to be our guest here for a few days. It’s just going to take him a while to get back to normal.”

Hutch’s smile was weary, but filled with relief. “That’s what I needed to hear, Doctor. Can I see him?”

“Sure, right after we admit you.”

“Admit me? What for?”

Almeda’s jaw clenched. “I don’t know what kind of criminals you’ve ticked off, Detective, but your partner’s not the only one who got fed blood thinner.”

“What?” Dobey growled, giving Hutch a more thorough once-over. It was then he noticed that Hutch’s sleeves were still rolled up past his elbow, and a discolored Band-Aid in the crook of one arm gave evidence that blood had been drawn on him as well.

“The lab results came back positive. I’m no detective...” The doctor gave the two a brief, quirky smile. “But I’d say that somehow your partner ingested more of the poison because there’ve been more opportunities to get it into his system—either because he eats more than you do, or more frequently.”

“Yes on both counts,” Dobey harrumphed. “That boy’s a human garbage can. Let us know when you’re done being a doctor and want to carry a badge.”

Hutch chewed the inside of his cheek. “I haven’t exactly been eating well since...in the last few weeks. And tonight, Starsky ate his dinner and mine. Could that be what finally did it?”

“It’s possible. And, Detective?” Almeda glanced over at Dobey, believing he should not disclose what Hutch had earlier confided to the nurse. “What you mentioned earlier? As far as our tests are concerned, nothing out of the ordinary showed up.” The doctor abruptly switched mental gears. “Look, I need to get back to the ER. We just got a dispatch for a multi-car pile up on the 10, and we’re expecting quite a few people to be brought in shortly. Dr. Ferguson’s been called in, and, after you’re admitted, we’ll put you in the same room as your partner, then give you the same course of treatment as Detective Starsky. Don’t worry—he insisted we let you wear a pair of scrubs instead of a gown, too.”

Almeda took Hutch by the arm for a quick look at the damp Band-Aid, evidence that Hutch’s blood was not clotting as quickly as it should. “I’ve authorized a unit of plasma for you as well. After that, we’ll continue to monitor your hemoglobin and clotting time.” The doctor chuckled darkly. “Between you and your partner, and this latest mess out on the highway, we’re going to have to send the vampires out to get more blood before the night’s out.”

“You need more blood, Doctor?” Dobey raised an eyebrow as he asked. “I can get you more blood.”

“Captain,” Almeda said as he clapped him on the shoulder. “If you can round up some donors in the next day or so, I’ll take out your appendix for free.”

Almeda trotted down the hall with a wave and disappeared through the double doors that led to the ER exam rooms.

“Hutch,” Dobey asked as he returned his focus on the detective. “What did the doctor mean about something not showing up on the lab results?”

“He didn’t know if I’d told you about the hallucinogens that Worthington tried to kill me with. I told Almeda and the head nurse what brought us to this point, knowing that traces of those drugs would show up in any blood work they did on me. They were just trying to protect me.”

“Okay, then.” Dobe placed his hand on Hutch’s back and steered him toward the nurses’ station. “You high-tail it over there and get registered. I’m heading back to the office to recruit some volunteers to get down here and give blood.”

“You mean you’re *ordering* some ‘volunteers’ to get down here.” Hutch smiled in understanding as he let his superior propel him to the desk.

“Same thing,” Dobe grunted before leaving Hutch in the capable hands of the nursing staff and charging out the door.



“Hey.”

When Starsky’s eyes slowly cracked open, he wasn’t surprised to find Hutch peering at him from the side of the bed. Somehow, his partner’s tired smile reassured him, and it didn’t take a detective to decipher the relief that flooded Hutch’s face. “Hey, yourself.”

Hutch’s hand had been resting on Starsky’s wrist, which he gripped tightly before releasing it to sit back in the hard plastic chair. “Make me a promise, will ya?”

Starsky swallowed to try and get rid of the odd but familiar metallic taste of blood still in his mouth. “Sure. What?”

“Next time I tell you the food tastes funny, don’t eat it. Okay?”

Starsky managed a grin, then coughed. “Water?”

“Sure, buddy.” Hutch pushed himself up out of the chair, mindful of his own IV, and maneuvered the casted pole beside him as he moved to the nightstand between the two beds to pour the water.

Starsky frowned when he realized Hutch was being treated as well. “What’s wrong? Did she get you, too?”

“Here, drink this first.” Hutch placed one hand under Starsky’s head and tilted it forward, while bringing the cup up to his partner’s mouth to drink. Once Starsky nodded that he was done, his eyes demanded an answer. Hutch continued as he put down the cup.

“Did they tell you what put you in here?”

“Yeah, they told me all about Worthington putting rat poison in the food. Are you okay? Did it make you sick, too?”

Hutch shook his head and sat back down, then placed a reassuring hand on Starsky’s arm. “Not like it hit you. They ran some tests and saw that my blood had been thinned, but I hadn’t ingested as much as you had. They’re giving me fluids and plasma to boost my blood count, same as you, and keeping me overnight for observation, which is good because there’s no way I was leaving you here alone, even with the guard Dobey’s posted outside. Do you remember what happened tonight?”

Starsky stared at the ceiling, his relief in knowing Hutch was going to be okay mingled with the blurred memory of intense pain striking him down as they left the campus rental house. “Not much beyond our questioning Schimmel and not getting anything concrete from him. Then it just hurt like hell. Worse than before.”

Hutch knew instinctively what “before” meant. For his partner to admit that the internal bleeding was even more excruciating than Professor Jennings’ poisoning years ago made his heart constrict with pain of its own. “When you went down—”

“Don’t.” Starsky swallowed his own fear; the intensity of his eyes beckoning Hutch away from the still too-raw horror of the night’s events. “Just leave it. The doctor said I’m gonna be okay. We both are. That whack job ain’t got us yet.”

Hutch gave a small nod, the best he could manage under the circumstances. “Okay.”



True to his word, Captain Dobey had the hospital lab full of off-duty officers and clerks by 8:00 the next morning. The air was full of light-hearted and nervous chatter as the men and women who risked their lives nearly every day in the line of duty pretended not to be afraid of a little needle and some blood. Some of them actually appeared a little green, but when Dobey had made the “suggestion” that they volunteer, most of them realized immediately it would be in their best interest to comply. And once they had heard about the attack on the detectives, most were grateful to have something concrete they could do to help.

Captain Dobey stood beside a bleary-eyed Huggy, looking over his small army of donors with satisfaction. At the center of the activity was Minnie, greeting each newcomer with a quick hug before guiding them to the registration table and helping them get started on filling out the necessary paperwork before they could actually donate.

A bedraggled Dr. Almeda poked his head into the waiting room, and his face broke into a wide smile. “Captain Dobey, you are a miracle worker!”

Dobey looked very pleased with himself as he crossed his arms over the wide expanse of his chest. “It’s the least we could do, especially after last night. Our department takes care of its own, Dr. Almeda.”

Huggy noticed a technician at one of the tables beckoning the pair over, and said, “That’s good to hear, Captain, because it’s your turn. With any luck, Hutch’ll be the one to tap into some juice that knows how to groove. You ever see him on the dance floor? That blond brother is downright embarrassing.”

Dobey cleared his throat nervously as Huggy grabbed his arm and attempted to steer him toward the table. “Now, just a minute there, Huggy. I think there are others who have been waiting longer than we have. Uh, Phillips! Aren’t you before me?”

The uniformed officer looked up from the form he was filling out. “No, Captain. I’m not done with the paperwork yet. You go ahead.”

Captain Dobey looked urgently around the room again, the telltale strain of desperation beginning to raise his voice. “How about you Collins? Beacham? Rodriguez?”

The three officers all shook their heads and went back to their forms. After one more frantic search of the room, Dobey allowed himself to be led to the table. Making the best of the situation, he squared his shoulders as he took a seat. “All right then, ladies and gentlemen,” he announced loudly. “Let your captain show you how it’s done.”

With that, he turned toward the technician, who had just donned a pair of rubber gloves and was facing the captain with a needle in one hand attached to an empty bag held in the other. Without another sound, the captain’s eyes rolled up in his head, and he slid off the table to land on the floor in an ungraceful heap.

Huggy shook his head and turned to address the crowd of stunned onlookers. “Ladies and gentleman,” he said with a flourish in the direction of the unfortunate captain. “I give you your shining example of ‘how it’s done’.”

Afterward, Dobey was never quite sure why he’d awakened to a room full of thunderous applause.



The day was spent quietly for the partners, the dimly lit hospital room offering them a sense of safety and security they hadn’t experienced in months, allowing them to sleep or drowse throughout the majority of the day.

Huggy had wandered in mid-morning to check on them, but only Hutch was awake. In quiet tones, he described Dobey’s heroic efforts to bring in donors, only to be overshadowed by his embarrassment over fainting. Once Dobey had regained consciousness, Huggy had driven him back to the station, before returning with

sandwiches and sodas from a local deli for the donors. The Pits was officially closed for the day, as Huggy wasn't taking any chances, and he had instructed Angie and the rest of the staff to throw out all of the existing stock that wasn't frozen. It was unlikely that Worthington had tampered with any of the other food, but he believed it was worth losing some of his inventory in order to be sure that he kept his friends and customers safe.

Hutch laughed out loud when he heard about Dobey fainting, but quieted quickly when it nearly woke Starsky. He thanked Huggy for all he was doing to help, as well as for the paperback book he brought along when he'd learned earlier that Dr. Almeda had decided to keep Hutch for a few more days to "monitor" him. It was the physician's way of helping the detectives, recognizing that if Hutch was released, he would most likely end up spending the night in Starsky's room anyway, propped up in a plastic chair, watching over his partner's safety.

After Huggy had left, Hutch started reading the book, but it wasn't long before exhaustion took over and he was sound asleep, the paperback nestled in the crook of his arm.



"You look like you could really use this!" The candy striper extended the large styrofoam container toward the patrolman still in the throes of an enormous yawn.

Officer Biggs smiled gratefully as the aroma of coffee greeted him. It was nearly 1:00 a.m., and the inactivity of being on guard outside the detectives' hospital room was lulling him to sleep. He tucked the photo of Lindsay Worthington into his shirt pocket and accepted the cup from the grandmotherly volunteer and thanked her. "You're a godsend," he glanced at her name tag, "Bernice. I appreciate it."

The older woman smiled cheerfully. "I'd love to take the credit, but it wasn't my idea. That pretty little thing over there asked me to give it to you." Her voice quieted, happy to be a small part of the romantic conspiracy. "She's a little shy. But if you ask me, I think she thinks you're cute."

"Yeah? Really?" Biggs sat up straighter in his chair. "Which one?"

The candy striper looked over her shoulder and nodded in the direction of the nurses' station, where a trim young nurse with long red hair peered over the top of her glasses at them. When she and the officer made eye contact, she blushed and raised the patient chart she'd held before her higher, blocking her face. She started to turn away and stumbled into the counter. Flustered, she gripped the chart to her chest and fled down the hall. Biggs watched her hustle away appreciatively, finding her shyness thoroughly charming.

"Yep, I'd say she likes you, Officer!" Bernice chuckled.

“What’s her name?” Biggs strained his neck to catch a last glimpse of the nurse as she turned the corner and disappeared from view. He smiled to himself, his ego properly stroked, and took a drink of the coffee.

“Sorry, you got me there. This is only my second time on night shift.”

Biggs cocked an eyebrow and studied the older woman before him with mild suspicion. “I’ve never heard of any candy strippers working at night.”

Bernice shrugged good-naturedly. “I didn’t know they did either, and I’ve been volunteering at this hospital for years. My husband’s a millwright, but when they made him foreman, he had to go to third shift. So, I come to the hospital nights now while he’s working so that we can be on the same schedule.”

Appeased, Biggs nodded and thanked her again for delivering the coffee. Bernice wished him a good night and returned to her cart of books and magazines to be offered to sleepless patients and restless family members in the waiting rooms.

Biggs took another drink from the sweetened coffee as he watched her walk away, the soft padding of her shoes and squeak of the pushcart fading down the hallway as she went.



It was the pain that woke him. At first it was minor, only enough to begin his stirring toward wakefulness. The sting and the warm, wet sensation at the hollow of his throat. Hutch’s hand clumsily quested toward the source, only to be stopped by the increasing pain, causing him to gasp and struggle awake.

His eyes flew open, but he had to blink several times to bring his gaze into focus within the dim lighting. He fought to pull together where he was and what was happening, but his deliberations were dull and it frightened him. *Flashback or drugged? Have I been drugged again? How?* Gradually, Hutch’s thoughts began piecing together as his vision cleared. He tried again to lift his hand, but his body refused to cooperate.

A red-headed nurse hovered above him, her face vicious as she peered down at him in abject hatred. Her hands were clasped before him, and Hutch strained to see what she held to his throat.

“Don’t move,” she hissed in a low voice. “If you so much as twitch, I will shove this blade right through your throat and pin you to this bed until you drown in your own blood. Do you understand me, Hutchinson?”

Hutch’s mouth worked silently before he whispered, “Yes.” While his body remained still, his mind raced, trying to make sense of what was happening. He stared hard at the face before him, and his eyes widened when recognition finally struck.

“That’s right; you two figured it out.” Lindsay’s mouth twisted in a bitter smile.

Hutch’s jaw clenched. “Starsky? If you...hurt him—”

The intensified pressure against his throat caused Hutch to gasp, and he felt blood run down the side of his neck.

“You’re in no position to threaten me, Hutchinson,” she spat. “The only reason you’re alive is because I have something to say to you before you pay for what you did to Jerry. You can’t do a damn thing right now, anyway, not with what I pumped into your IV. I’m no fool.”

Lindsay leaned forward. “How did you feel these past months? The drugs, how did they make you feel? Like you were losing your mind? Like you’d lost everything? I hope your life was a living hell!”

She straightened marginally while still keeping the pressure of her weapon against his neck. Hutch blinked again to refocus his eyes, trying to keep her clear before him. Whatever she had injected into the saline pump seemed to have caused his muscles to quit obeying him and his vision blur. Glancing down past her hands, it took him a moment to realize that the metal object in her grip was a long, double-edged knife. Lindsay followed his gaze and smiled, enjoying the torment she was inflicting. “You’re going to die, you and your partner. The only question is when and how badly it’s going to hurt. If you do anything stupid, I’m going to make sure you beg me to kill you to end the pain. Understand?”

“Yes,” Hutch whispered, again. He knew that even as quiet as Lindsay had been, Starsky should have woken from the activity around him if he had been able to. Fear clenched his gut. “Starsky...what have you done...to him?”

Lindsay tossed her head toward the second bed. “Take a look.”

Hutch turned as much as he was able to, even though flesh and muscles pulled painfully against the blade. In the dim light, he could see that Starsky lay pale and unmoving. But what caused Hutch’s heart to constrict was the pool of blood on the floor between them. Starsky’s arm dangled lifelessly off the side of the bed, and while the IV needle remained in his arm, Lindsay had cut the line. Blood fed back out of the needle and ran through the tube to the floor. Starsky was slowly bleeding to death and would eventually slip into shock, if he hadn’t already, and die if help didn’t come soon.

The rage etched in Hutch’s face matched his captor’s as he swore at her, trying in vain to speak cohesively against the drugs. “Don’t be...stupid! You should get out of here...while you can. That...guard’s going to be...checking—”

“Biggs?” Lindsay grinned maliciously. “He’s stoned out of his mind right now. I got some old bat to give him the coffee I doctored up. Mellowed him right out. Other than asking me out and trying to grope me as I came in here to give you your ‘nightly medication,’ he’s in his own happy little world. He’s not going to save you. Neither is your partner. Not again. It’s just you and me, Hutchinson.”

“Save me...again? You know about...the bridge?” Hutch continued to stare up into her eyes, willing her to concentrate on his face so she wouldn’t see him struggling to make his limbs cooperate. He knew their circumstances were desperate, and, unless he could overpower her soon, he and Starsky didn’t have a prayer. The compound she’d injected him with continued to make his voice thick.

“I was there that night. I was going to kill you myself. You must have nine lives, Hutchinson. With the amount of junk you accumulated in your system, I figured you would’ve ended up dead long before that night.” Lindsay swore. “But that night, you climbed up on the railing. It was perfect! I was just waiting for you to jump. Or at least fall. You should have fallen.”

Hutch didn’t show his relief when he cautiously clenched and unclenched a fist, and kept talking to distract her. “That night...on the bridge...how did you know where I was?”

“I’m the one who called you, you idiot. Told you I was your precinct’s Dispatch operator and you were so stoned, you believed me.”

He knew he had to keep her talking. “I don’t...remember the call.”

“Of course not. You came into the health food store earlier that week, and what I laced in your food should have fried your brains completely. That’s why you couldn’t remember. I sent you out to the middle of nowhere to finish you off. I wanted you to beg for your life like Jerry never had the chance to do! I needed to see you suffer like he did, and when I finally got tired of your begging, I was going to blow your head off and roll your sorry carcass off that bridge. They never would have found your body. Never. Then, I would have finished off your partner.”

“Starsky....”

“Yeah, good old Starsky,” Lindsay’s voice shook, her facing hardening. “Got you down before you jumped. He cheated me!”

Hutch gasped when Lindsay shifted her weight and leaned in close, increasing the pressure on the blade at his throat. Another flood of warm blood ran down his neck, and he knew he would have to act soon, even if his efforts to save his partner lay open his neck in the process.

“Jerry didn’t deserve to die. Not like he did,” Lindsay growled. “And it’s your fault, Hutchinson. It’s your fault Jerry’s dead! I hope you burn in h—”

Just as Hutch was about to desperately flail his uncooperative arms at his captor, the blade against his neck miraculously disappeared as Starsky grappled Lindsay from behind, toppling them both to the floor. The knife fell from Lindsay's nerveless fingers when her elbow connected with the floor tile. It took her a moment to push her way out from underneath Starsky's nearly unresisting weight. As she got up, her long red wig and nurse's cap tumbled behind her, revealing her short, bleached hair. Lindsay stood in the pool of Starsky's blood, looking wildly about for her knife, which had slid across the room during the brief skirmish.

"Guard!" Hutch bellowed, as he awkwardly pulled himself up out of the bed, his adrenaline finally beginning to counteract the effects of the Valium.

As the door was unsteadily shoved open by the doped-up Officer Biggs, Lindsay spied her knife. She charged forward and snatched up the weapon, then continued toward her only means of escape. Seeing the blood-spattered room, Biggs had the wherewithal to reach for his service revolver, but Lindsay was already pushing past him, slashing him across his thigh as he reached for her with his free hand. She made a one-handed attempt to pull his gun, but as Biggs crumpled to the floor, she was knocked heavily into the doorframe. With Hutch unsteadily advancing, she fled the room, her footprints stamping out a trail in Starsky's blood.

With the immediate threat removed, Hutch spun back to his partner. From the floor, Starsky had propped himself up against the side of the bed, and was pulling the ruined IV out of his arm. His hand clamped around the wound, stemming the flow of blood. "I'm okay. Stop her!"

Torn, but knowing the madness had to end, Hutch nodded and reached down to grip his partner's shoulder. With his other hand, he punched the call button to the nurses' station before crossing to the door. Biggs sat with his back against the wall, panting in pain and gripping his leg to hold back the tide of blood that seeped from between his fingers.

"Help's coming, just hang in there. Be sure to call for back-up!" Hutch cautioned as he drew Biggs' service revolver from its holster. He took a second to look back to where Starsky huddled on the floor, holding his arm.

"Go," Starsky quietly admonished. Hutch nodded again before making his way down the hall, following the faint imprints left by Lindsay's escape. He stumbled once as he passed the nurses summoned to their room, the drugs still wreaking havoc with his equilibrium. One nurse shrieked at the sight of the bloodied detective lurching down the hallway with a drawn gun, but Hutch ignored her.

The trail became fainter and more inconsistent as soon as Hutch turned the first corner. He knew he was lucky when, instead of continuing down the maze of hallways, Lindsay had taken the stairwell, heading up. If she hadn't, he would have lost her trail completely within a few more yards.

Hutch made his way up the stairs as fast as his shaking legs could manage, the service revolver held before him, ready for anything. When he made it to the first landing, he peered through the small window cut into the door leading to the next floor. When he didn't see anything out of the ordinary, he quickly contemplated whether or not to continue upward or to check with the floor nurses for any signs of Lindsay. He decided to continue upward, knowing that, as Starsky and Biggs alerted the staff of their critical situation, the hospital would go into lockdown, and Security and the police would scour the grounds.

Hutch returned to the stairs and was rewarded by the sound of a door slamming closed a few floors above him where the stairwell ended at the roof. He redoubled his efforts, breathing heavily under the waning effects of the drugs and exhaustion, and surged up the stairs.

When he reached the door, he shoved it open with his elbow and swept the gun before him. He was grateful that the expanse of darkness across the roof was broken up by the lights of neighboring buildings on three sides and street lamps below the fourth. Keeping the weapon thrust before him, Hutch closed the stairwell door and moved farther away from the small structure. He slowly crept toward the back of it, expecting to find Lindsay hiding there.

The sound of feet slipping on the roof's loose stones caused him to turn toward the farthest corner of the building. He could just make out the white of Lindsay's nurse's uniform, and the hairs on his neck and arms stood up as adrenaline coursed through him again.



“Freeze!” Hutch bellowed. “It’s over, Lindsay.”

As Hutch crept closer, her features became clearer under the diffused light of the surrounding buildings. She turned back toward him, still wielding the knife, her face that of a cornered animal, wild to get away. Hutch closed the remaining distance, but still left a few yards between them, prepared for whatever she might do next.

He never expected, though, that she would turn and climb up onto the ledge. “Stop! Get down from there, Lindsay. We...” Hutch was surprised by an unexpected thread of compassion for her. “We can get you the help you need. I know you’re hurting. I know you’re angry; I understand. But it doesn’t have to end this way.”

Lindsay peered through the darkness to the nearly empty street seventeen floors below. “Jerry. Oh, baby!”

“Lindsay, listen to me! Jerry wouldn’t want this. He wouldn’t want you to die for nothing. You just need help. We can—”

“Nothing? *Nothing?*” Lindsay spun back at Hutch, shrieking. “*He* died for nothing! He was everything to me, don’t you get it? He didn’t deserve to die!”

“I know; I understand.” Hutch reached out his free hand toward her in supplication, but didn’t lower the weapon. He would help her, but he wasn’t foolish enough to drop his guard. “But he wouldn’t want you to throw your life away. Please, come down. We can get you help.”

“I don’t want to be helped. I want him back and I want you dead!”

Hutch gritted his teeth for self-control. “I know. I know you blame Starsky and me for Jerry’s death. But, Lindsay, if he hadn’t been dealing—”

“Shut up! Just shut up!” Lindsay’s voice reverberated across the flat roof. “You don’t know anything! You don’t know what it’s like to need it so badly you’ll do anything to get it!”

Hutch’s face remained stoic as he took another step toward the ledge, his quiet voice bringing her up short. “Maybe I do.”

“Don’t come any closer!” Lindsay thrust the knife out between them. “Stop it! Stop trying to use your two-bit police psychology on me. It won’t work. It’s your fault—you and your partner’s—that he’s gone. Do you know how he suffered, Hutchinson? Do you? I know; I was with him in the hospital. I will never forget...I can’t forget...” Lindsay suddenly began to sob, her face a mask of rage and grief.

Hutch watched her warily as he edged forward, wondering how much longer he could remain standing until help arrived.

Lindsay finally seemed to notice that Hutch was nearly within reach, and just barely missed laying open his face with a vicious backhanded swipe of the knife. The force of the failed blow caused her to lose her balance, and her arms began to pinwheel. Her right foot slipped out from behind her and she landed on her stomach on the thick concrete ledge, her legs dangling out into nothingness. As her feet scrambled ineffectively for purchase, Lindsay slipped farther over the edge until only her arms were caught on the side of the building.

Hutch instinctively tossed aside the service revolver and surged forward to pull her back. But as his hands caught the fabric of her nurse’s uniform, she screamed madly and struck blindly at him with the knife, even though it caused her to fall farther away from the building. The only thing that prevented her from plummeting to her death was that Hutch had somehow managed to retain a one-handed hold on her weaponless arm.

Lindsay's dead weight pulled Hutch over the side of the building until his stomach rested against the ledge. With both hands now gripping her arm, Hutch gritted his teeth and pulled back as hard as he could, but couldn't find the leverage he needed to draw Lindsay back up over the edge of the building.

"Drop the knife and give me your other hand! C'mon, Lindsay, you don't want to die. Let me help you!" Hutch implored as he searched the deranged eyes looking back up at him.

He was relieved when Lindsay clumsily managed to shove the knife into the pocket of her nurse's smock. It remained within her reach, but he would deal with that after he got her to safety.

Lindsay finally swung her free arm up and locked her hand with Hutch's. Hutch tightened his stomach muscles in an effort to pull them both backwards, but was totally unprepared when Lindsay drew her knees up to her chest and planted her feet against the side of the building. In one swift movement she shoved hard, straightening her legs and back in an attempt to pull Hutch off balance and send both of them plummeting to their deaths.

Hutch felt his feet leaving the roof under the inertia of the thrust, though he managed to remain draped across the ledge. Realizing how close she was to succeeding, Lindsay locked her elbows and arched her back, pulling back even farther. In another instant, she would drag Hutch over the edge into the wind-swept blackness. Hutch struggled to pull his arms free from Lindsay's grip, but had no leverage.

For one bizarre instant, Hutch's vision distorted and he was no longer on the hospital rooftop, but standing on the iron support beams of the bridge with blackened waters swirling below. The calliope of voices again rampaged through his mind, demanding release by throwing himself over the side.

As Lindsay continued to struggle against his hold, Hutch was brought back to the present as he felt the concrete scraping his stomach raw and his feet leaving the rooftop. Just as he was drawn over the precipice, familiar arms clamped around his waist.

"No!" Starsky bellowed, his voice muffled against the back of Hutch's shirt as he drew his partner back with all his strength. One of Starsky's legs was thrown up against the short retaining wall for leverage, and he pulled Hutch's taut form away from the edge.

Hutch's arms felt like they were being pulled out of their sockets by Lindsay's countering weight. "Lindsay, stop fighting us! We can help you. This is no way to die!"

Lindsay's eyes went wide with panic when she realized Hutch was inching back onto the roof with Starsky's added force. Enraged further, she released her death grip on Hutch's wrists and began twisting her arms as hard as she could.

Hutch tightened his weakening grip, desperate to keep her from wrenching herself free. Lindsay managed to pull one arm away, and Hutch quickly joined his now-free hand with the other grasping her wrist.

Dangling by one arm, Lindsay reached into her pocket and withdrew her knife. Teeth bared, she growled as she slashed upward, striking Hutch across the back of one hand. She struck again, this time with more purpose and laid open his forearm before losing her hold on the knife. Hutch's blood cascaded down across his hands and hers, making his already sweaty grip impossible to maintain until finally, Lindsay's hands slipped from between his.

She free-fell soundlessly, staring back at Hutch with a maniacal smile until she became nothing more than a white blur slicing through the darkness below.

When Hutch's weight settled back against him and he knew his partner was standing safely on the roof's surface, Starsky peered into the darkness just in time to see Lindsay's colorless form strike the pavement below. The unnatural echo of her violent death would haunt them both for months to come.

Hutch gripped his arm to staunch the flow of blood as he staggered a few steps back away from the edge of the roof and began to tremble. Starsky turned instinctively toward him and captured him in his arms just as Hutch's legs began to give way, although he barely had enough strength remaining to keep them both from falling to their knees. "I've got you. It's okay. It's gonna be okay. You're safe now. It's over."

Hutch closed his eyes and swallowed hard before nodding. "You okay?"

"We're both okay." Starsky's arms gripped him tighter as Hutch gave way to his exhaustion and rested his forehead on his partner's shoulder.

After a moment, Hutch pulled away, and Starsky allowed him to go only an arm's length so he could study him. Hutch met the concerned gaze and nodded again, silently confirming that he would be all right. Starsky smiled gently and, when Hutch dropped his head in exhaustion, moved in without thinking until their foreheads touched.

Starsky closed his eyes against his own wave of weakness and, when he opened them again, was surprised to find himself seated with his back against the short retaining wall. Hutch was kneeling before him, anxiously shaking his shoulder with one hand, and pressing his other against the still-bleeding crook of Starsky's arm from where he had pulled the IV.

"Take it easy." Starsky ineffectively tried to wave off Hutch's grip. "I don't think my head's attached that good right now."

Hutch's face flooded in relief, and he released Starsky's shoulder so he could all but collapse next to him. "You just scared the spit out of me."

"After the past month, I didn't think either of us had any spit left *to* scare." Starsky exhaled tremulously.

"You kept me from falling—again." Hutch's voice was quiet, both from exhaustion and emotion. He grasped his still-bleeding arm and shook his head as he took in the sight of their blood-spattered clothes. The thought of how close they'd come—again—was more than unsettling. A quick glance to his side confirmed that Starsky remained conscious, although pale and decompressing from the adrenaline rush that had propelled him up the flights of stairs and kept Hutch from falling over the side of the roof.

Starsky sensed his partner's eyes on him and met the gaze with a small nod. They had lived to fight another day.

The sound of hospital Security and a host of policemen bursting onto the rooftop ended the partners' conversation, and the two lifted their faces to the uniformed men as they approached. While waiting for wheelchairs to transport them back into the hospital for treatment, Starsky and Hutch reported the end of the madness that had taken Lindsay Worthington.



"Well, I guess that's it." Hutch finished reading over the transcript of his deposition and signed off on it, then reached across his desk to hand it to Captain Dobey. Starsky had already signed his and was sitting on the edge of Hutch's desk, finishing a cup of coffee.

The two had just been cleared for duty that morning, one week since Lindsay Worthington's death. They still looked pale and exhausted in Dobey's eyes, and he planned to give them nothing more strenuous to do than paperwork over the next week. They'd be bored to death and complain every chance they got, but their whining would be a welcome change to their superior.

"The only thing that report doesn't explain is why she waited so long," Starsky stated, as he pushed off the desk and crossed back over to the coffeepot. "I mean, it's been what? Six-and-a-half years since Jerry Jennings died? Why now? Why not come after us then?"

"Or after Professor Jennings tried to take us out," Hutch agreed thoughtfully, tapping his pen on the desk blotter.

"I think I can answer that." Cheryl Jennings had slipped into the squadroom, a sheaf of papers in her hand.

Captain Dobby stepped back from the desk and pulled out Starsky's chair for Cheryl. She smiled and thanked him, then laid the papers before her. She looked up at the three men apologetically. "I don't think I can tell you how sorry I am for all—"

"Hey, none of that." Starsky sat in the chair next to the technician and gripped her hand. "How many times do we have to tell you before you believe us that we don't blame you for any of this?"

Cheryl nodded, but the grief never left her eyes. "I know. I just can't help feeling like there must have been something I could have done." She exhaled, as if to clear her misgivings, and picked up the top sheet of papers to hand to Captain Dobby. "This might explain things."

"A death certificate?" Dobby quickly scanned the document until he found the deceased's name. "Jerry *Worthington*? Who's that?"

"My nephew, who I never even knew existed until today." Cheryl looked from one partner to the other. "I don't know if you remember, but when we realized that the person you were looking for was Lindsay, I mentioned how I had tried several times to contact her after Jerry's funeral, but she wouldn't return my calls. Now I can guess why."

Cheryl pulled a birth certificate from the pile. "Six months after my brother went to jail, Lindsay had a baby."

Hutch shook his head in sympathy. "Why do you think she didn't contact you or your father? I'm sure you would have helped."

"Maybe she just couldn't deal with it, Hutch. I found other documents in her things, including a doctor's diagnosis. It looks like Lindsay was using drugs when the baby—Jerry—was born." Cheryl's voice tightened with emotion. "The baby was underweight and showing signs of drug withdrawal. He was born with Lindsay's addiction. The hospital called in Protective Services and was going to take the baby away from her. That's when she disappeared. Until now."

"How'd your nephew die, Cheryl?" Starsky's thumb stroked the back of Cheryl's hand.

"I got a copy of the coroner's report. It happened a little over six months ago. An accident, if you can call it that." Cheryl's voice shook with bitterness and loss. "Lindsay was stoned and ran a stop sign. Her car was broadsided and little Jerry was killed. It was her fault, but she lashed out against you instead."

The three men exchanged glances of mixed emotions. Starsky finally spoke, "And that's when everything fell apart."

“That’s when *she* fell.” Hutch’s eyes locked with his partner’s. “And there was nobody there to catch her.”



“Is this it?”

Starsky nodded slowly, staring ahead. “This is it.”

Seemingly unaffected, Hutch glanced over at his partner, concerned by the tight lines around Starsky’s eyes and mouth. “We don’t have to do this.”

“I have to do this.”

They walked onto the bridge slowly. Starsky’s eyes were locked on the spot where Hutch had stood a few months before, poised to end his life. The January winds remained cold, and a light breeze lifted the hair from their foreheads. The sun shone brightly, contrasting the dark memory of that night. With each step, images of its unfolding events seemed to race before Starsky’s inner eye, like a myriad of slides clicking steadily forward. He hadn’t realized that he’d slowed to a stop until Hutch’s hand gripped his shoulder. That single touch broke through the memories that haunted him, and he was able to place his hand on top of Hutch’s and move forward to the railing of the bridge.

They leaned forward and peered down the hundreds of feet into the rolling and foaming river.

Hutch whistled low and grinned with morbid humor. “Good thing I don’t remember any of this. That would’ve hurt.”

“You don’t remember?”

“No, not really. Just the waves, I think.” Hutch shook his head then looked at his partner. If the tables had been turned, he wasn’t sure how he would be able to deal with images of Starsky prepared to kill himself.

Starsky met his friend’s probing gaze and read the concern there. “It’s getting easier.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Starsky smiled slightly to try and assure Hutch. “How ’bout you?”

“‘How ’bout me,’ what? I told you, I really don’t remember—”

“No, about all the rest of it. Being drugged again. Nearly dying *again*. Feeling guilty over something you had no control over *again*.” Starsky’s placid expression took the sting out of his words. “You want me to keep going?”

Hutch’s responding smile was self-effacing. “No, you’ve made your point. Am I that transparent?”

“Like a beer mug at Huggy’s when he actually washes them.”

“And then, only once a week.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, I get it. I’m blaming myself. But, Starsk...” Hutch raised his hands in futility. “I can’t help thinking there was *something* I could’ve done. I should have known something was wrong with me and done something about it.”

Starsky turned toward his partner and leaned his weight against the bridge. “What? What could you have done?”

“I...I...” Hutch’s mind raced, but couldn’t connect with any clues he could have acted on. “I don’t know. There must have been something I could have done, should have done.”

Starsky’s voice was low. “Let it go.”

“Let what go? The guilt? The wondering ‘what if?’” Hutch shook his head. “It’s not that easy, Starsk. A woman’s dead because of—”

Starsky’s hand shot out and gripped his partner’s forearm. “Don’t. Lindsay Worthington did *not* die because of you. She didn’t die because you weren’t strong enough to hold on. She didn’t die because you weren’t smart enough to talk her down from the ledge. She didn’t die because you weren’t fast enough, clever enough, good enough, have white enough shirts or fresh enough breath.”

Starsky’s morbid quip made Hutch smile lightly. “No?”

“No.” Starsky loosened his grasp and turned back toward the swirling waters. “Lindsay Worthington died because, well, because she did. The lady had problems, Hutch, serious problems.” He chuckled without humor. “You know, if she hadn’t fallen off the roof and had gone to trial, some three-piece-suit lawyer would’ve told her to plead not guilty based on insanity. As if murder or attempted murder is a sane thing to do. Nope, you’ve just got to let it go, Hutch. If I didn’t, I’d be as unhinged as she was.”

“What did you need to let go of? You figured out what was going on.”

“Yeah, but not until you nearly—” The sentence was cut short when Starsky’s throat tightened. “I knew you weren’t yourself. I tried to get you to talk to me or to the Department shrink, but maybe if I had tried harder, it would’ve never gone as far as it did. You wouldn’t’ve been here that night.”

“Starsk, you did everything short of tying me up, stuffing me in a closet, and smacking some sense into me. No, wait. That’s pretty much what you did do.” Hutch grinned and was pleased to get a similar response from his partner. “All right, I get it. If the tables were turned, I’d be second-guessing myself as well.”

Starsky reached into his pocket and withdrew a photo and a crumpled piece of paper. He kept the paper for himself and extended the photograph to his partner. “Here.”

“What’s this?” Hutch asked as he accepted the picture. Turning it over revealed the bright, cheerful faces of Jerry Jennings and Lindsay Worthington. Jerry stood behind Lindsay with his arms wrapped around her shoulders. Their smiles boasted of their love for one another and their hope for the future.

“That’s them before dope ruined their lives. That’s what should have been.” Starsky held up the crumpled paper. “This is the note I found on you that night on the bridge.”

Hutch peered at the page in surprise, unsettled by the erratic version of his own handwriting. “What’s it say?”

“It’s directions to this bridge. It brought you here.”

“You kept that?”

“Yeah.” Starsky stared hard at the nearly illegible scrawl. Hutch could see that the page seemed to embody his partner’s fears and the lingering self-condemnation. He placed his hand on Starsky’s shoulder as both men stared at the items in their hands.

“So,” Hutch said quietly. “Just let it go, huh?”

Starsky met his gaze, his mouth lifting in a small smile of encouragement.

The two turned back toward the water and, without speaking, lifted the crumpled note and photograph out over the guardrail of the bridge. A gust of wind coaxed the pages from their hands and gently tumbled them before they landed on the rolling water below.

They watched as the tide embraced the last remnants of that night and carried them away.

As they left the bridge behind them, Starsky casually mentioned that they had one more stop to make before heading over to The Pits for dinner. Hutch looked at him quizzically but, when his partner offered no more explanation than that, agreed to go along with whatever plans Starsky had made.



Still healing from the aftereffects of the past months, Hutch dozed off in the familiar and comforting rhythm of the Torino as they headed back into the city. It wasn't until Starsky had circled his block in Venice, trying to find a place to park on the busy street, that he woke up to look blearily around. Hutch yawned and stretched as they walked toward his apartment, and asked what they were doing there.

Starsky merely grinned mysteriously and stated, "Trust me."

As they climbed the narrow stairwell, the sounds of chatter and music escalated. When Hutch asked again what was going on, Starsky merely laughed and surged past his friend to throw open the unlocked door to the apartment.

A party was in full swing as they entered, and Hutch was immediately swarmed by friends and co-workers. Surrounded by the boisterous laughter and good-natured chatter, Hutch felt something within him settle into place, like the last piece of a puzzle linking the picture whole again.

Accepting a beer from Minnie as she glided by, setting her sights on making small talk with a new patrolman she was interested in, Hutch took a long drink and looked around his apartment with contentment. He wasn't surprised to find Starsky watching him from across the room as he spoke with one of the stewardesses Hutch sometimes went out with when she had a layover. Only half-listening to the woman's cheerful diatribe, Starsky raised his own beer in a small salute to Hutch and took a drink.

Hutch smiled and, with a nod, returned the gesture and drank. They'd been to Hell and back—again—and he didn't know what might lie before them. What he did know, he knew soul-deep: they'd face it together. And no matter what happened, if he should ever fall again, Starsky would be there to catch him.



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