

Fallen

by Brit

Part One

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.

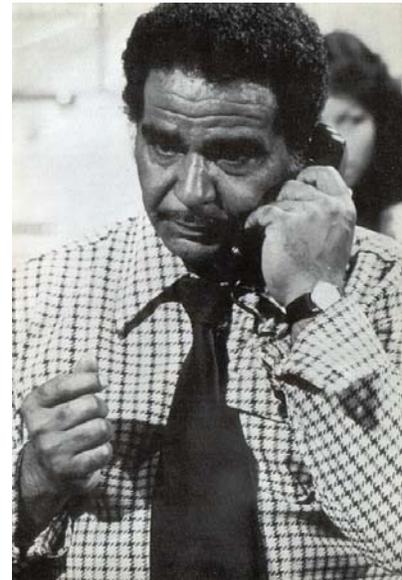


“It’s me.”

Captain Dobe y 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?”

Dobe y 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, Dobe y 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 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.



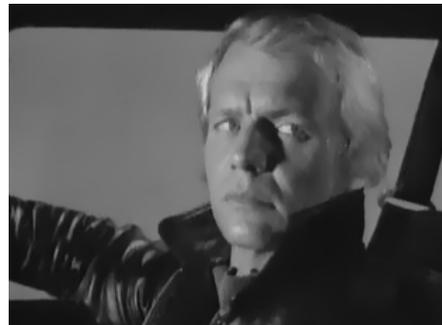
There had been unusual bouts of silence throughout the remainder of their day, other than to talk about the specifics of the case. When the Torino slowed to a stop in front of Hutch’s place at the end of their shift, he opened the car door without a word, but Starsky’s hand on his shoulder prevented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



Part Two