

Fallen

by Brit

Part Three

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 comfortingly 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 groused. “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 rumpled—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 Dobey, 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.



Part Four