

Fallen

by Brit

Part Two

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

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

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

Hutch’s spoon stopped halfway up to his lips. “Starsky, that’s disgusting.”

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

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

They ate in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Starsky finished first and watched as his partner also managed to eat two pieces of dry bread before giving up. Hutch got up from the table and made his way to the living room, stopping before the remaining pane in the sliding glass door. A sheet of plywood covered a portion of the frame. Through half-lidded eyes, he could take in the panoramic view of the ocean and not meet the concern in Starsky’s eyes that he tried so hard to conceal.

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

“Yeah?” Starsky’s voice was tinged with both encouragement and fear.

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

“Okay. So what happened next?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Starsky managed a tired smile. “Were you ever?”

“I’m sorry, you know.”

Starsky’s brow knit. “Sorry? Hutch, you’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

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

“Starsk, was I using?”

“Hutch, I—”

“I need to know, Starsk. Was I shooting up?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Or that you went nuts.”

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

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



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

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

Hutch managed to eat half a sandwich about mid-day, then retired to the bedroom. Starsky promised to get him up in time to watch the ball game that came on later that evening, then settled onto the couch with the same rumped paperback he’d been unsuccessfully reading for days.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I remembered something else."

"Yeah?"

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

Despair.

Blinding, numbing, suffocating hopelessness.

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

He began to tremble. He had balked once before, but then, it was because of Gillian, and he had frozen in fear at the idea of losing his life before theirs together really had a chance to begin. He had loved her, truly loved her, but she had died because of that love. He never forgave himself that her blood was on his hands.



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

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

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

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

Hutch covered his ears with his hands, his own face a mask of agony as a thousand voices cascaded over top of each other, condemning him for their eternal damnation by his hand. The voices raging in his mind smothered Hutch until he could take it no longer. His breath came in great gasps, wracking his too-thin frame. Hutch pushed himself up off the floor and staggered to the closet.

Shaking hands jerked his gun from its leather holster, and he leaned against the wood door, staring down the barrel. Before he lost his nerve, he quickly reversed his grip on the handle and brought the barrel to his mouth, bruising and splitting his lower lip in his urgency. It took both hands to steady the weapon as he placed his thumb against the trigger. Still at the mercy of the raging voices in his head, Hutch bit back down on the barrel.

His thumb tightened against the trigger just as the phone rang, its shrill call abruptly silencing the voices in his head and causing Hutch's hands to jerk the gun away.

With frightening clarity, he walked across the room and set the gun down on the desk, almost forgotten. He picked up the receiver, his voice a calm contrast to the mania of only a moment before. "Hutchinson."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The next morning, the sound of the front door creaking woke Starsky enough to watch his partner quietly slip out of the house. As soon as the door closed, Starsky eased off the couch. He had remained beside Hutch for hours last night, even well after his partner had finally fallen asleep, before retiring to the couch.

Starsky padded to the window, watching to see where Hutch was headed. Since the car keys were still in his pocket, he had no fear of Hutch trying to leave. Within moments, the muted figure appeared from around the side of the house and continued down to the beach. He had on his light jacket against the morning chill, and a steaming mug of coffee

clutched in both hands. He stopped at the water's edge and stood facing the brisk breeze that carried the waves onto the shore. The wind swept Hutch's hair from his forehead, and he lifted his face toward it, as if it could dispel his uncertainties.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Hutch's hand darted out and grasped Starsky by the wrist, preventing his hand from continuing its journey to bring the food to his mouth. The toast broke from Starsky's grip and tumbled back to the plate. “I need to know, Starsk. What did I do? Did I push you?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Like temporary insanity?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Starsky’s hands curled into fists, but he calmed himself for Hutch’s sake. “You want to see a head doctor, fine. We’ll get you to one. But Hutch, just...just give us a shot at this. If we don’t come up with something within a week, then I’ll drive you to the funny farm myself, if that’s what you want, and they can check us both in. But we both know if we

take you to a shrink without being sure, it's gonna go on your record, and it'll take IA forever before you're cleared again for duty."

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

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

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

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

"How can you be so sure, Starsk?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Starsky grinned sardonically. "Well, maybe not hundreds, anyway."

"You're a lot of help."

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

“Dobey?”

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

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

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

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

“You got a better idea?”

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

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

“What else have we got?”

“Us.”



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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Huggy,” Starsky warned.

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

“Flames? Skull and cross-bones?”

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

“Big fins on the back.”

“Bubble top and a big yellow bat signal.”

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"No, I'm afraid not," Hutch replied lightly.

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

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

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

“Anything. What can I do?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So Starsky believes—”

“We believe,” Starsky interjected.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

He was about to say more when the door clanged open and a familiar orderly stepped in, followed by a man clad in striped pajamas. Professor Jennings blinked owlishly as he looked around the room, as if the fluorescent lights were too bright and hurt his eyes. The orderly closed the door behind them before helping the older man into the chair

across the table from the two detectives. Duane Jackson shook their hands, smiling broadly. The orderly hadn't changed much over the few years since the partners had gone undercover in the mental institution. "I never thought I'd see you two in here again. I wish it was under happier circumstances—at least, as happy as it gets here at Hotel Cabrillo. I checked the phone records like you asked. The professor hasn't made any calls since they admitted him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Actually, it's Monday, Professor," Hutch responded in a calm, almost soothing tone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Bagels.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you for visiting me.”



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

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

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

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

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

“About three hours. You hungry?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The face was his own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The partners froze at the sound of his voice and dropped their grips on one another in embarrassment. The delivery boy's mouth dropped open as he took in the sight of the two wet men inside the dry apartment with a destroyed coffee table, its contents scattered about the floor. He looked from the wet detectives to the cloudless blue sky, then back to the partners.

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

"Cheryl, what's wrong?"

"Have you been back to your apartment yet?"

"Since we saw you? No, we've been here. Cheryl, what's going on?"

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pounding on the door interrupted Starsky’s retort, and Hutch went to answer it. A bleary-eyed Bill Farnsworth from Metro’s crime lab stood outside the door yawning hugely and reminding the partners that it was still the middle of the night for him, since he’d switched shifts nearly a year before. Still muttering about being hauled out of a dead sleep with no explanation as to why secrecy was in order, the prematurely balding man went about his work, grouching the entire time he dusted each now-empty food container and bag to lift the prints. He then dusted the phone, doors, and windowsills for good measure. Still yawning, he promised to sort out the prints that evening while he was in the lab, and if anything besides the partners’ prints showed up, he would “unofficially” run them through Records to see if there were any matches. Still yawning, Farnsworth tucked his lab satchel under his arm and stomped down the stairwell.

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



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

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

Starsky was behind Hutch in an instant, peering over his shoulder. “What’d you find?”

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

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

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

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

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

Farnsworth nodded, matching Starsky's smile. "I got a match."

Hutch stood up quickly in excitement and clapped the technician on the back. "Farnie, you're the best!"

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

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

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

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

"Prints don't lie, Hutch."

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hutch nodded. "And if Sunny's not working and I recognize the person behind the counter—"

"We buy some masticated liver powder—"

"*Desiccated* liver powder."

"And butterfly bones."

“Which gets us their prints.”

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Starsky broke in. “Sunny, who’s Leo? Does he work here?”

“No, no. Leo, he’s my old man. We’ve been together since, oh, probably 1967.”

“When you got busted in San Francisco,” Hutch affirmed.

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

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

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

“How many employees do you have working here?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

“Roger, Zebra Three; one moment.”

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

“Records, this is Minnie.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hold for R & I.”

“That was quick,” Starsky remarked.

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

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

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

“What’s the police report say?”

“Polnechecz is a twenty-two-year-old junior at Cal State Long Beach with a campus address, originally from Chicago. Five months back, she reported the theft of her student identification and social security card. Says it was taken from her wallet, but she didn’t know when or how. Just noticed it missing one day when she went to buy books at the

campus bookstore and needed her ID. Since her social security card was missing as well, campus security made a police report. Neither IDs were ever recovered, nor have they shown up with somebody trying to use them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thanks, Min. Zebra Three, out.”



As soon as the partners pulled onto campus, they flagged down a campus police cruiser and, after explaining why they were there, asked for more specific directions to both of the student housing addresses they had amongst the maze of the university. Neither detective was terribly surprised to learn that the Harlan Hall address listed on the health food job application didn’t exist. Within minutes, they were on the fifth floor of a dorm complex and knocking on the door to Room 52-B. An attractive young black woman cracked open the door as far as the security chain would allow. “Yes?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hutch's eyes narrowed. "Drama student?"

Darlene nodded. "And pretty good, too. Got the lead."

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"Check out the *dates*."

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

Starsky's grin was malevolent. "There's no Thursday."

"You think somebody pulled it out on purpose?"

"I think somebody pulled it out on purpose."

"You think we should pay them a visit?"

"I think we should pay them a visit."

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Starsky’s eyes narrowed. “Is there anybody else who works the night shift here?”

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

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

“How do I know? I’m not here.”

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

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

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

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

"She took the page with her?"

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

"What was the girl's name?"

"Don't know."

"Was it Darlene Polnechecz?"

"Don't know."

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

"I can't remember everybody that comes and goes out of this place."

"Try," Starsky managed from between clenched teeth.

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

"Who'd she come to see?" Hutch asked, already knowing the answer.

"Don't know."

"Was it Richard Jennings?"

"Yeah, maybe."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you really care?” Hutch bit back.

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



The time spent with Professor Jennings was brief and fruitless. The old man had trouble sleeping and was often medicated shortly after being served dinner. This was one such

night, and, as he lay in his bed staring blearily at the ceiling, he never even acknowledged the detectives' presence.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So did I. Go home and sleep on it.”

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

Hutch looked at his partner with disdain. “And you think that line would pick up somebody at a bar? They’d have to be blind drunk.”

Starsky looked mildly wounded. “Well, I—”

Hutch turned and walked away. “And deaf.”

“I—”

“And desperate!”

Starsky started after him. “Gimme a break. I was kidding.”

“I should hope so!” Hutch called back after him. Seeing a modicum of doubt creeping onto his partner’s face, Hutch smiled in triumph and pushed open the bar door to leave, Starsky trailing behind.



Part Three