

Heart Sight

by Brit

*Unending gratitude to my good friends, beta readers and assorted cast of characters...you guys are the best (and you know who you are, even if you won't admit it!).
Thanks for ALL the encouragement and guidance, with this story and all the other scribbblings.*

Chapter One

It had ended like any other day.

There was certainly nothing out of the ordinary to distinguish it from any other routine day of legwork on a case. A shop owner had been paying the local heavies for protection, and when he finally got enough spine to tell them what they could do with their blood money, they torched his place. This had actually been happening to several businesses throughout the city, but this time, the shop owner got burned in the process, literally. As in “to a crisp.” Which is why we were called in—now it was a homicide, not simply another unsolved arson. I don’t mean to sound so callous about a man’s death, it’s just that sometimes it’s easier this way. You internalize it too often and it’ll eat you up when you’re not looking.

So, now we were heading back home...I mean, to the station. Huh. What kind of subconscious slip was that? I guess it’s just that we spend so much time there...well, you know what I’m getting at. Anyway, I was driving (for a change) and decided to take the freeway. It was almost seven o’clock and I hoped it wouldn’t be congested for once. That was our first mistake.

Within three miles of getting on Interstate 5, we came to seven lanes of parking lot. I said something distinctly unpleasant and threw my head back in frustration. All I wanted was to get back to the station, report to Dobey and head for home. We were both hot, tired and irritable as it was, but add the fact Starsky claimed to be nearing starvation to the magnitude of death, well, it was about to get ugly.

Starsky snatched up the microphone and called Dispatch, asking if the Highway Patrol had reported what was going on. After checking it out, a new operator named Cora responded.

“Zebra Three, Highway Patrol reports a multiple vehicle accident at the Interstate 5 and 405 junction and are requesting assistance.”

Starsky looked at me with a pained expression as he reached under the seat for the Mars light. “Figures. Now we gotta go direct traffic?”

He sighed and slapped the light on the roof, then depressed the button on the microphone. “Zebra Three responding.”

Cora came back on, “Zebra Three, I’ve got a note here from Captain DobeY reminding you to finish your reports tonight before you log out.”

“You’re all heart, Cora.”

“Don’t blame me, Zebra Three. I’m just the dispatcher.”

I managed to grin at the sour look on Starsky’s face and began to edge the LTD across four lanes of traffic. The other drivers stuck with us were less than congenial, but after several minutes of hollering, badge waving and gesturing—not all of them pleasant—we were able to slip onto the shoulder. The car rumbled along at thirty-five, but it didn’t take much time to make it to the head of the procession. Apparently, the accident hadn’t happened all that long ago, since it appeared the fire and rescue squads had arrived only moments before we had.

What lay before us was nothing short of mayhem. Starsky muttered something under his breath as I pulled ahead, counting the number of vehicles involved as I did. There were at least sixteen cars and a single dilapidated half-ton truck sprawled about in various states. Gas, oil and anti-freeze pooled beneath several cars and the tanker lay on its side like a wounded animal. Fortunately, it hadn’t ruptured. A quick glance at the identification along its side and rear indicated it carried Freon, the non-explosive stuff found in radiators and refrigerators. I exhaled gratefully. If it had been a volatile load, like gas or something...well, it would have upped the ante tenfold. As it was, there were several injured and miles of backed-up traffic. I could tell right off that we were going to need more ambulances.

I pulled the LTD further off the shoulder and out of the way, and we headed into the thick of things. A lanky CHP officer by the name of Barizca was obviously in charge, directing the other patrolmen and EMS where needed. At the flash of my badge, he nodded and requested we help with the wounded, herding them toward the first ambulance that was acting as a sort of triage. Starsky and I split up and began checking the cars for the injured. Splitting up was our second mistake.

Within an hour, the Highway Patrol had two lanes of traffic moving slowly around the wreckage. If the tanker had been explosive, there was no way they would have let anyone within miles of it. Several of the cars involved in the accident had been towed away, and the Aeromed chopper had flown out the more seriously injured. Two of the fire engines were in the process of hosing the lost fluids off the road with whatever the foamy stuff was they used. An empty tanker was en route to transfer the Freon from the disabled rig before it could be righted and hauled away as well. With all the people still milling around, I had lost sight of my partner quite a while ago, but wasn’t too concerned, just hungry. I grinned with the thought that Starsky should be well past the starvation level by now. Maybe we’d just log out and go right to Huggy’s for dinner. DobeY had probably left for the evening and the reports could wait until morning.

I had just accompanied the jittery driver of the overturned truck to Barizca, who was taking statements for his accident report, when I caught a glimpse of the familiar dark curls on the other side of the tanker. Starsky was holding a small child on his hip while talking with the still-shaken mother. Two other children, a little girl probably around five and a boy maybe three, stood alongside Starsky. The girl had her hand on my partner's jacket, the other held the little one's next to her. For some reason the picture made me smile.

I left the truck driver with the CHP officer. He seemed increasingly nervous at the prospect of giving his statement. I reasoned it could have been a reaction to the accident, which can be a scary thing in and of itself, or maybe the incident was his fault and he was afraid of retribution. I put the man out of my mind as I crossed the tanker one last time en route to the LTD. The sun was beginning to set and a slight breeze stirred up the air around me, an odd mix of anti-freeze, gas, exhaust and something else—something *rotten*. Hard to say what. I continued over to my car, thinking we should be wrapping things up here soon and I intended to log us out for the day. The reports definitely could wait until morning.

As I was coming back to Officer Barizca, I noticed the truck driver becoming more and more agitated, throwing repeated glances over at his rig. I noticed the stench of rotten *something* again and followed his darting gaze back to the tanker. What *was* it that had that smell? Rotten eggs?

Liquid petroleum.

LP was the only thing I could think of that smelled like rotten eggs. So, the tanker *wasn't* hauling Freon, but was most likely illegally carrying the gas, probably stolen. You'd be surprised what you can buy on the black market these days. No wonder the driver had seemed so nervous. It wasn't a question of *if* the tanker would go up, but rather *when*. The realization sent me forward at a run, and I grabbed the driver by the arm and slammed him face down onto the patrol car. "He's got LP in that tanker! Clear the area!"

Without asking questions, Barizca charged toward the officer directing traffic, yelling for his partner to stop the oncoming cars. We were too far away for him to be heard above freeway noise, pumping fire engines and slowly approaching vehicles. I turned around to look for Starsky, and the truck driver took advantage of my lack of attention to break free. I didn't waste any time chasing him down. I had more important things to worry about at the moment.

The sound of scraping metal sent a cold finger up my spine. A quick look back at the traffic confirmed it: a Nova—Starsky would have said rivaled my LTD—was just passing by the tanker. The scraping sound was coming from its tailpipe dragging along the blacktop, a shower of sparks behind it.

Barizca and I realized what was about to happen moments before all hell broke loose.

I bellowed Starsky's name and waved him away from tanker, realizing the slim chance of him hearing me over all the noise. Somehow, miraculously, he did. It was probably only a whisper in his ears, but my partner's head whipped around like he'd been stung. I had no idea if he was

too close to the tanker should the spark ignite the fumes, had no idea how big of an explosion there would be, or how much damage it would cause. All I knew was that my partner was in harm's way.

And I couldn't protect him.

But all Starsky needed was to hear the warning in my voice to put him in motion. He spun on his heel and took it all in within an instant: the dragging tail pipe, the running CHP officers, *the little boy who was no longer beside him*. The toddler had been in tow moments before, but was now a few yards away from Starsky and the rest of his family, closer to the tanker. He had dropped his sister's hand and wandered away, and was squatted down, picking up something off the tarmac, oblivious to anything else. Starsky thrust the child he'd been carrying into its mother's arms, then shoved the woman and the little girl into a scramble away from the truck.

He turned and charged toward the little boy, his face...I still have nightmares about all of this and the expression etched in his face. It was a mixture of fear, horror and perhaps sorrow. I think he knew what was about to happen and expected the worse. But he went anyway. That's Starsky. That's my partner. Anyway, he was within a yard of the kid, his arms outstretched to snatch the boy up when it went.

All this within a matter of seconds.

The explosion was horrific. Deafening. Hot. I had almost made it back to the relative safety of the squad car, still watching my partner's charge, but the blast knocked me on my face. I quickly scrambled back up, ignoring the pain in my back and head, and ran toward the inferno the tanker had become. I darted in and out of staggering and prone people. Many of them were hurt, but even those lying flat were beginning to stir. A few of the cars closest to the tanker, including the Nova, were engulfed as well. Nobody could have made it out of those alive.

I passed them all.

On the other side of the burning truck were two still figures. The mother Starsky had been assisting had picked herself and her daughter up off the blacktop and rushed back, dropping to her knees at the side of her little boy and scooping him into her arms. I don't remember making a conscious decision *not* to stop and check on them, but by the healthy squalling the kid was soon doing, I knew he could wait a moment while I continued on to the unmoving figure sprawled a few feet away.

Starsky was lying on his back where the blast had laid him out. I would be grateful—later—that the fireball had not simply consumed him and the little boy. Right now, I was just plain terrified. Starsky's face and exposed hands were a bright red, probably with at least second-degree burns. His mouth was open, but it looked like he was struggling to breathe. I knelt next to him and laid my hand on his chest, which bucked against my palm in his effort to get air. He made a high-pitched wheezing sound with each gasp. It took me a couple of precious seconds to try and figure out what was wrong. *Seizure?* He must have hit his head on the tarmac. I scanned Starsky's raw face, the slight swelling of his lips. *Burns from the blast? Chemical*

burns? Airway? Lungs? The heat from the blast may have scorched the delicate tissues, causing them to swell and close off.

“Medic!” I can’t tell you how frantic I was. My best friend lay there, struggling to breathe, and there wasn’t a stupid thing I could do about it. There was blood running into my eyes, and I brushed it away as I stood up. I scanned the bedlam around me for anybody who could help. I must have looked pretty desperate, because one of the two paramedics that had been checking out the little kid immediately trotted over.

Before he could ask me what I needed, I grabbed him by the arm and hauled him to his knees next to Starsky. “He can’t breathe!”

Apparently my assessment had been correct, because he yelled over to his partner for an endotracheal tube and oxygen. The other paramedic gripped the mother’s shoulder as she kept a damp cloth of some sort on the back of her toddler’s head. He ran to the ambulance and retrieved a canister of oxygen and some other paraphernalia, then came back to us. The first man had a hand under Starsky’s neck, attempting to keep his airway open. He had already administered a shot of something. A tracheal tube was quickly inserted into Starsky’s mouth, and I flinched as they guided it in. Under the best of conditions, they’re unpleasant and painful. I couldn’t imagine what it would feel like ripping against a burned and rapidly closing throat. Trust me, I’m not complaining. My partner hadn’t been able to breathe; if they had to open up his throat to keep him alive, I would have offered them my jackknife. Oxygen quickly followed and Starsky’s breathing stabilized. Some sort of burn-gel was liberally slathered on his face, throat and hands. I was grateful he’d been wearing his leather jacket and a cotton shirt that day. If he’d had his nylon windbreaker on, it might have melted right onto his skin.

A team of firemen materialized and assisted the paramedics in getting Starsky onto a backboard and into the ambulance. I climbed in right behind them, but knew enough to stay out of their way, even though I wanted to be at Starsky’s side. I guess I should have wondered if there was anyone else who needed more help, was more seriously wounded, but I didn’t. Good, bad, or ugly, I just didn’t care. I’ll deal with that guilt some other time.

The ambulance tore away from the accident site, and a quick glance confirmed some of the firefighters were busy trying to extinguish the blazes, while others were helping the injured. After starting an IV, there wasn’t much more the paramedics could do for Starsky’s burns, and they went about the business of monitoring his airway and breathing. They followed up by taking his blood pressure and other vitals, then began asking me the routine questions I knew the answers to by heart: not on any medications, no known allergies, his doctor’s name, medical history, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I barely heard them or my own answers because I was too preoccupied with watching the rise and fall of my partner’s chest. It’s absurd, but I was afraid that if I somehow looked away or relaxed for even a second, Starsky would stop breathing.

I can’t remember being that scared in a long, long time.



Chapter Two

The first thing I said when I saw Dobey was, “Sorry, Captain, those reports are just going to have to wait until morning.” He gave me a pained look, and I was sorry I’d said it. He’s been more of a friend to us than our superior for years now, and I owed him more than a stupid remark. But he understood. He always does.

“So, how is he?” The captain looked beat.

I shrugged and ran the heels of my hands over my eyes. It was almost eleven and I was wrung out. I was too tired to even be glad for the company. I’m sure Huggy would show up later, after he closed The Pits for the night. If he knew how bad things were, he’d be here in an instant. As it was, *I* didn’t even know how bad things were or weren’t at this point.

Dobey and I sat there in the burn unit hallway for a couple of hours, mostly in silence. He asked me a few questions about what had happened, though I know he already knew, but I filled him in. There really wasn’t all that much to tell. We tried to talk a bit about the arson/homicide investigation, but neither of us seemed to be able to concentrate on it much.

Around midnight, a burn specialist by the name of Dr. Engles, a neurosurgeon whose name I didn’t catch the first time around, and Dr. Chartrand, an ears, nose and throat man, sat down to talk to us. I’ve got to tell you, having a doctor finally come and fill you in will give you a knot in your stomach the size of Minneapolis, but *three* doctors at once....

Typically, they’ll drop the bomb on you first, then try and backpedal into offering you some hope. I don’t know if these guys were merciful or what, but they began with the “good news” for once, rather than the “bad.”

Dr. Engles began. “Detective Hutchinson, Captain Dobey, we’re very fortunate Detective Starsky wasn’t any closer to the flash point than he was; his injuries could have been much more substantial than they are. Barring any unforeseen complications, and with the proper treatment and rest, he’s going to be fine. We’re fairly confident his injuries are temporary.”

I’m glad Dobey was there with me, because he began asking all the questions I couldn’t come up with. I just kept hearing “*barring any unforeseen complications, he’s going to be fine...injuries are temporary*” over and over in my head like a broken record.

An ER surgeon had given the initial diagnosis right after we brought Starsky in, and had calmly explained the heat of the blast and the gases that ignited were what burned Starsky’s face, hands, throat, and quite possibly his eyes and lungs. They would know more once he regained consciousness.

Three specialists were immediately called in. While Engles, Tyson (that was the neurosurgeon’s name), and Chartrand were examining Starsky, he had regained consciousness, though not coherency. Still, during that time they were able to determine that he couldn’t see.

Starsky blind?

I had to force myself not to go running to his room right then and there. A wave of nausea rolled over me. Starsky had woken up in the ER, confused, unable to see, a tube down his throat...and I wasn't there for him. I should have demanded to stay with him. I should have...

Dobey's hand on my shoulder brought me back to the conversation. He must have known I'd checked out for a minute.

Engles went on to explain how the heat from the blast gave my partner second-degree burns over the exposed areas of his flesh, namely his hands, throat and face. These were extremely painful, but not life-threatening, and no permanent damage was done to his skin tissue or nerves. Some special kind of burn salve whose name I would never be able to remember, let alone pronounce, was applied to the affected areas and left uncovered to heal. Since the nerve endings on the fingertips were quite sensitive, they had applied the salve there, but had wrapped them for comfort and protection.

The intense heat from the blast did sear the delicate tissue in Starsky's nasal cavity and throat, causing significant swelling, which had begun to close off a considerable portion of his airway. Fortunately, although damaging, the burn was minimal enough to have not closed off his airway completely, and was not severe enough to scorch his lungs. If it had....

The doctors confirmed that the EMTs acted appropriately in inserting the tracheal tube, as there was no way for them to make a complete diagnosis on the field, and they had no way of knowing the extent of the damage to his throat and lungs. As it was, the doctors felt confident enough that the tracheal tube had been removed. Starsky was breathing on his own, the assisting oxygen only acting as a precautionary measure and to ease the burden on his damaged throat and lungs. They were also fairly sure the injuries would only require antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, and monitoring. They would also be starting Starsky on antibiotic therapy to ensure that no fluids or infections developed in his lungs. He would have a sore throat for quite some time, between the swelling and the bruising caused by forcing the tracheal tube in, and it was very likely he wouldn't be able to talk for several days at least. After all the stakeouts I wished Starsky would stop his incessant talking...the thought him not being able to communicate verbally would have amused me under other circumstances, but in light of everything he'd just gone through, it was immediately pushed aside.

Since Starsky had only regained consciousness briefly in the ER, they weren't sure of the degree of damage to his hearing. I knew my own ears had been ringing a bit after the blast, but with Starsky having been closer, I'm sure his were a good deal worse. The specialist explained briefly how the ear works, with three small bones that vibrate, and if any one of them were to go out of alignment, the hearing could be affected. His examination of my partner indicated this was probably the case, but that the eardrum was unharmed. As healing progressed, all should return to normal, most likely within a day or two.

While their expressions remained politely optimistic, I could see the minute tension and strain growing around their eyes and mouths as they continued, and finally focused on Starsky's loss of sight. While the corneas and delicate membrane that encompasses the eyes both had mild burns, a CAT scan determined the blistering heat had not caused Starsky's blindness, but rather the force of the explosion. Surprisingly, his concussion was mild. But when Starsky was knocked down, he hit his head against the concrete hard enough—as Dr. Chartrand explained in layman's terms—to “rattle” his skull. A Craniofacial Trauma developed, causing swelling and damage to the blood vessels supplying the optic nerve. As a result, small blood clots had formed, preventing his sight.

My face must have paled significantly, because the doctor reached out and compassionately gripped my arm. He went on to explain that with successful treatment of steroids, which they had already begun intravenously, the clots should eventually dissolve within a matter of weeks. The only complication that might arise would be if, as the blood dissipates, fluid should happen to fill the sacs left by the clots.

Then his blindness would be irreversible.

I had to have them explain the damage to his eyes twice. My head was just too full to really comprehend everything they had told me. Thank God the captain was there. He assured me, more than once, that he understood what the doctors said, and that barring any unforeseen complications, everything looked like it was going to be okay.

Other than that, we'd have to “wait and see.” *Wait and see*. They'd just told me that my partner was blind, with no real guarantee of his vision returning, as well as burns that closed his throat, and they want me to *wait and see*. How many years of med school does it take for someone to diagnose “wait and see?” I wasn't feeling too generous right then, I guess.

The doctors concluded by explaining that recuperation would simply take time, patience and lots of rest. Knowing my highly energized partner, I anticipated the next few weeks were going to be sheer hell for both of us. A bored and restrained Starsky is an unhappy Starsky, and could be the biggest pain in the butt the world has ever seen. He was going to drive me up the wall and down again with his endless griping, whether he could verbalize it or not.

And I was going to relish every minute of it.



The first night in the hospital is always the hardest, I think. My back hurt enough that I eventually asked the desk nurse for something, and she gave me a couple of pain relievers the size of horse pills. A pillow swiped from a passing cart was stuffed behind my lower back, as I tried to get comfortable on the torturous visitor's chair.

It shook me a bit, seeing Starsky wrapped up like he was. Gauze encompassed both hands, making them look like bear paws. More gauze held large pads in place over each eye. A conical oxygen mask was strapped over his mouth and nose and I wondered if it hurt, being

pressed against the tender flesh of his face. An IV of steroids, antibiotics and saline dripped steadily into his right arm, replenishing the fluids lost by the burns, plus enough morphine to knock him out. Funny, they give him morphine to take away the pain enough so he can sleep, then they come in every couple of hours to make sure he's responsive after the concussion. I'm grateful I didn't go into medicine after all; some of their logic is beyond my comprehension.

I couldn't help staring at him, glancing every so often at the rise and fall of his chest. I guess I was still spooked that he was going to stop breathing. The white dressings stood out against his inflamed skin. Later, I'd kid him about looking suspiciously like his car. Right now, it just wasn't funny.

I stretched out my back and tried to find a comfortable position on the chair by placing my feet on the edge of the bed. I was asleep in minutes.



Starsky was sitting upright in the hospital bed and his paw-like hands had managed to claw off the oxygen mask. His breathing was raspy and he was almost thrashing in the bed. I'm not sure which woke me. At first, I thought I was back at the accident site and he was again trying desperately to breathe. Right now he was getting enough air on his own, but his disorientation and fear were making him panic. How could he help it? He wakes up not knowing where he is, maybe can't remember what happened, can't see, can't speak and probably can't hear...I would have been scared out of my wits.

I grabbed his wrists as he reached up to try to remove the pads over his eyes, and he began to fight me. I could tell he was weak and pretty much out of it, thanks to the morphine.

"Easy, buddy, easy. I'm here, it's me." Starsky continued to fight me even after I spoke to him in increasing volumes, so I knew he couldn't hear. I did the only thing I could think of to calm him, let him know that I was there: I slid onto the side of the bed, facing him, and gathered him in an embrace. He was trembling, and his heart was beating so fast it reminded me of a captured bird's.

He tried to push me away, but his hands were ineffective. I held him tighter and rubbed his back, talking to him constantly. I felt his body stiffen, as recognition finally broke through the fear and confusion. The fumbling hands reached up to either side of my head, as if trying to confirm who it was by touching my face, but again, the gauze prevented contact.

"It's okay, Starsk, trust me, it'll be okay." It's always been a matter of trust with us, you know? I felt him shudder and exhale, then lean into the embrace, nestling his head on my collarbone, the morphine probably numbing his burned skin enough to allow the contact. I kept talking to him, knowing while he couldn't hear me, he could feel the resonance of my voice. We sat like that for a few moments, my heart beating a natural counterpoint to his frantic rhythm, until he gradually calmed into matching mine. Soon his breathing lost some of its raspiness as well. After a while, I ran out of things to say. We were so used to the comfortable silence of simply knowing the other was there, words weren't always necessary. But tonight he

needed more, because when I stopped my monologue he stiffened, needing to “feel” the sound when all his other senses had been stripped away.

I began to sing.

The music naturally moved me to gently rock him, my hand absently rubbing his back, comforting us both. It had been a long time since I had seen my partner so vulnerable, but these were extraordinary circumstances that left no room for pride, no room for shame. We were down to the basics of him and me.

When he finally felt boneless against me, I knew he had fallen asleep. I laid him carefully back on the bed and replaced the oxygen mask, then repositioned the chair so my hand lay on the undamaged part of his arm. That way when he woke again, he would know I was there with him. Just as I was about to shut my eyes, the nurse glided in, checked his IV and oxygen, and gave me an encouraging smile without saying a word.

I was asleep again before she left the room.



Chapter Three

I woke up after four hours of uninterrupted sleep, the sun creeping in through the window blinds. I felt lousy, my back protesting the cramped night spent in the unyielding hospital chair, and the rest of me aching from the face plant I did last night. *Last night?* Nope, it wasn't just a bad dream like I'd hoped. I was grateful I hadn't replayed the explosion over and over in my dreams, as is often the case. But then again, the waking nightmare I found us in was bad enough.

I had to stop thinking like that. Starsky looked horrible: his face still an angry red, still swathed in bandages; but he was *still* breathing, *still* alive, and they said he was going to be okay. Everything else I could deal with as it came.

Like what if the doctors were wrong. Like what if my partner wouldn't be able to see again. I can't begin to tell you what that thought did to me—if Starsky were permanently blind. I wondered what it would do to him. Not to us, but to him. Nothing would change our friendship, but would he change? How could he not? Being a cop was all he ever wanted to be. And the other things he loved to do—photography, ship building, driving. What if he could never drive the Tomato again?

I looked across to the gauze that encased half of Starsky's head and imagined sightless blue eyes. A sourness rose up in my throat. How many times had I depended on their expressiveness to tell me what Starsky couldn't or wouldn't say? On the job, when stealth was critical, his eyes would often warn me of what lay ahead. Or what he was thinking. My partner's eyes were as fathomless and as changing as the ocean: indigo when he was happy, the color of a storm when he was angry or frustrated, cobalt when he was hurting.

When I looked into my partner's eyes, I could see myself reflected there, not like in a mirror, but how *he* saw me, and I liked that a far sight better than how I saw myself most days. I wished Starsky would wake up so I could focus on something more than the "what ifs" that haunted me.

I was grateful when Huggy arrived. He made it well before visiting hours began, a bag of bagels and thermos of coffee in tow. He managed to sweet talk the nurse on duty from throwing him out with a bribe of a bagel with extra cream cheese. I don't know how he does it sometimes. He couldn't stay long, but I appreciated the diversion.

Captain Dobey came right as visiting hours began and gave both my unconscious partner and me a critical once over. I still refused to leave Starsky alone at that point, and Dobey never asked me to. Instead, he simply handed over my gym bag containing a fresh set of clothes and what I needed for a quick shower and shave. I never remembered to ask how he got into my apartment, since I had gotten out of the habit of leaving my key above the doorframe.

Naturally, Starsky was temporarily taken off the duty roster, and Dobey pulled us from the homicide we'd been working on for the last week. I opted for sick days rather than a reassignment, both the captain and I knowing I would draw on my vacation time, or take a leave of absence if necessary, for the duration of Starsky's recuperation.

The hospital must have taken pity on me (or else the captain pulled a few strings), because later Starsky was moved to a room with a second, unoccupied bed. He had spent the majority of the day in a medically induced sleep, and the doctors assured me that it was the body's way of healing, and what he needed most. The trio of them stopped by periodically, checking on Starsky's condition, making the typical physician's responses of "hmm" (how many years of medical school does it take them to master that?), making notations on his chart and assuring me everything was going along "nicely." By mid-afternoon they removed the claw-like bandages from his pink hands and changed his script from morphine to something a little less potent. His eyes, they assured me, would just need some time for the steroids to do their job. Amazing things, the eyes, they said. Quite capable of almost healing themselves, they said.

All I knew was that I wanted those blues looking back at me.

I spent the rest of the day by Starsky's bedside reading (out loud, to the amusement of the nursing staff) and letting some of the summer sun filtering in through the window blinds soak into my aching muscles. I still wasn't one hundred percent convinced Starsky was going to be okay, not until he woke up and started griping at me, but for some reason I was oddly content just to sit nearby, watching him sleep.

I don't remember what I read, but the day passed quickly.



The sunset that evening was spectacular, the sky a Monet's blend of lavenders and pinks, and I wished for the umpteenth time that Starsky's eyes would heal quickly. He was progressing within the trio's expectations and they had removed the oxygen.

I hadn't even realized that I'd been humming to myself until I stopped when I heard Starsky shifting on the bed. One swollen hand lifted and lay back down on his chest, and his head turned in my direction.

I softly called his name, hopeful against my better judgement.

Starsky's face was still a vibrant pink and his features were tense. His eyebrows knit together and he shook his head as if a fly was buzzing near him. If it was anything like I had experienced, I knew his ears would probably still feel a bit fuzzy or, at least, a ringing remained. Ah, but if this were the case, it was another step toward healing. I said his name a bit louder as I approached the bed. This time, he definitely turned in my direction and his hands came up to the pads covering his eyes.

"Whoa, there, pal. Take it easy." I sat down on the bed next to him and startled him. I gently pulled his hands away from his face by his forearms, not wanting to add to his pain by grappling with his still inflamed skin. "Starsk, can you hear me?"

I could tell he was still disoriented, but he nodded. He licked his lips and tried to respond, but nothing made it past his throat. He grimaced and his hands automatically went up to his neck.

"Starsk, you're gonna be okay," I told him. I placed a hand on his shoulder, and his hand that had been gingerly touching his neck came down to rest on top of mine. "You're in the hospital, buddy, but the doctors say you're gonna be just fine. Do you understand?"

He tried to speak again, but the pain stopped him, so he settled for nodding. I could see he was getting frustrated and maybe a little distressed, so I punched the button for the nurse. "Take it easy, Starsk. I know you're probably a little out of it right now, but I'm right here. I won't go anywhere."

His face relaxed minutely, then his hands came up to his ears and he tilted his head to one side, as if it hurt him. "Starsk? Can you still hear me?"

He nodded, and even with the bandages I could see him scowl, telling me that he was becoming more and more alert. He probably didn't think much of his progress, but I could have done cartwheels around the room knowing his hearing seemed to be in the process of returning. A glimmer of hope surfaced with the thought that perhaps sight and speech were not too far behind.

Once more, his hands reached up to touch the pads on his eyes and his throat, and I could understand his unasked questions: *Why? What happened?*

"There was an explosion, Starsk. Do you remember it?"

Starsky's brows furrowed again as he shook his head a little.

"You will. We were helping with an accident on the freeway when it happened." I gripped his arm to reassure him. "Don't worry about that now, though, okay? What's important is that you're going to be okay. A little singed, but the doctors said nothing's permanent, just trust me."

I could tell he was hurting by now, and probably more than just a little scared. Who wouldn't be? Still, he settled back on the bed, trusting me to have told him the truth and to take care of things. It's an incredible responsibility and privilege—that kind of trust. I hope I never do anything to betray it.

The duty nurse quickly walked in and assessed the situation. I explained that Starsky had been awake for a few moments and seemed to be in some discomfort. She talked to him a bit, getting him to respond with a jerk of his head to her questions, and his responses seemed to please her.

She checked his chart and injected an additional something into the IV. After giving my shoulder a brief squeeze, the nurse left, promising to update our trio of doctors. Starsky relaxed against his pillows, and I placed my hand on his forearm until I thought he had fallen back to sleep. As I began to move away, he surprised me by pulling on my arm to draw me toward him, though his grip was weak. I followed him willingly.

Starsky gingerly let his hand travel up to my face and touched my mouth. He then brought it down to my chest, letting his gauze-wrapped fingers remain over my heart before returning it to rest over his own. I understood him as clearly as if he had spoken out loud: *You sang for me and my heart heard it.*

His hand returned to my face, my mouth, and again, I understood him. I began to sing softly and he rested his hands on his stomach, his face relaxing even more as he absorbed each note. It didn't take long for him to fall back to sleep, but I continued singing well into the night because my heart was so full, and the song there refused to be silenced.



I think we both slept better that night. I sure woke up feeling a far sight better. Of course, it helped having a bed to stretch out on rather than one of the hospital's sadistic chairs. I was even surprised to find Starsky sitting up in bed, sipping a little water. He must have heard the bed creak (or was that my back?), because he immediately turned in my direction expectantly and raised an eyebrow: *Hutch?*

"Yeah, it's me. Morning." He nodded in agreement, though I'm sure he still felt lousy. "How you feeling?"

He shrugged and tilted his head, not even trying to speak yet. I asked if his throat was sore and he gave a little nod in agreement. I'm sure he was sore all over. The blast had thrown him several yards, slamming him flat on his back. He was literally covered with bruises. But I knew I wouldn't get any more out of him about the pain he might be experiencing, even if he could talk. That's another of the weird contradictions that makes up my partner. I've seen him beaten to a pulp, shot, stabbed, and any assortment of major catastrophes, and he won't say a word. Bellamy's poison was ripping his guts up and he only once broke down and uttered, "It hurts, Hutch. Oh God, it hurts." Of course, then I wasn't too sure he only meant the physical pain. Ah, but a hangnail or case of the sniffles, and it's all I can do to shut him up about it.

"Are you remembering anything more about what happened, yet?" I was trying to keep my questions to "yes" or "no" answers. He nodded. "Do you remember the explosion?"

Again, he nodded. Starsky seemed to think for a moment, then extended his hand toward the floor, palm down. I wasn't sure what he was getting at. "Help me out here, Starsk. Your hand? What is it?"

He shook his head, mildly frustrated. He then brought both hands vertically in front of him. They had removed the bandages, but I could tell the swollen and raw skin was still sore and hampering his movements. He made an hourglass shape—ah, a woman! Why should that surprise me? "The nurse?"

I got up to get the buzzer to call for her, but he shook his head. He did the woman shape again, then continued to pantomime holding a baby. His left hand continued to the side of the bed, indicating two different heights—the heights of children: *The family at the accident*.

"I'm with you now. They're all okay, Starsk. The little boy's gonna be fine. He got some first- and second-degree burns on his back and head, but the doctors say he'll be all right. They also said that you probably saved his life, partner."

He scowled at this, not being able to imagine how he had made a difference. "They said the force of the explosion would have propelled him forward so hard that it probably would have staved in his skull. Because you had him in your grip, at least when the explosion happened, you absorbed the majority of the shock wave for him."

Starsk just gave a little nod: *You'd do the same thing*. So typical of him.

He spent the rest of the morning dozing. He was actually able to manage some chicken broth and jello for lunch, but by the expression on his face, I could imagine that he was devising ways to puree a burrito.

The trio of doctors came in around two o'clock, which was a grateful interruption from my reading Starsky the newspaper. After a few pokes and prods and a quick examination of his eyes and throat (followed by the accompanying chorus of "hmms"), Dr. Engles concluded perhaps in a day or two, Starsky could finish his recuperation at home with daily office visits.

Starsky's response was to fling off the covers and swing his legs over the edge of the bed, then turn in my direction expectantly with his hand extended: *Let's have some clothes, pal.*

The doctors agreed Starsky could go home—tomorrow, or the day after—but for now, they wanted to keep him a bit longer for observation to monitor the reduction of swelling in his airway, the blood clots, and check for any fluids in his lungs. I asked them a barrage of questions, making sure Starsky's release would in no way endanger him further. This earned me one heck of a scowl from my partner, but I shuddered at the thought of a relapse of the injuries. The trio assured me that if he continued to progress as well as he had, there was little likelihood of that. None of us mentioned the fact that the blood clots might not dissolve with the steroids, or that fluids would overtake the space they left, leaving my partner permanently blind, and I wasn't going to bring it up.

We spent the remainder of the day passing time with the dozen or so visitors from the station that came through, none of them blessedly staying too long, as Starsky was tiring easily, as was I. The day climaxed when the mother of the three children came in to thank Starsky, but when she saw his condition, she burst into tears, which seemed to unnerve him. He looked to me for help, and I quietly ushered her out of the room, thanking her for stopping by, and assuring her that Starsky would be just fine, given a little time for healing.

When I came back into the room, Starsky looked miserable. It was as if, up until then, he was able to keep up the pretense that everything *was* fine, that he *wasn't* worried, and he *was sure* his vision would quickly return. But now....

“What is it, Starsk?”

He shook his head and tried to speak, but his abused throat wouldn't allow the passage of sound. The face I knew so well transformed into stone, his jaw rigidly clenched. He was purposefully shutting down, refusing to deal with whatever he was feeling, whatever was scaring him.

I sat down on the bed next to his legs. “C'mon, now. Don't do that. This isn't over yet.”

A little flair of frustrated anger snorted out of him as he threw up his arms: *Exactly. I want this to be over!*

Ah. “I know, pal. It's just gonna take a little time, that's all. Give the steroids time to do their work.”

His face softened a bit, as he let his fears creep out of the box he tried to stuff them into. His hands raised up slightly, beseechingly: *But, what if...?*

“Hey, hey...let's not worry about the 'what ifs' until we have to, all right? Starsk?”

He breathed deeply and exhaled, which seemed to relax the tension in his face and shoulders a bit. His nod was resigned, probably more for my benefit than a reflection of his own optimism.

But it was a start.



I could tell Starsky was nervous as we made our way down the hospital corridor. I was content to let the day nurse push the wheelchair, even though it wasn't the most chivalrous thing to do, I suppose. So, don't tell my mother. For some reason I felt better walking *beside* my partner, rather than pushing him from behind, and I think he did, too. By the time we got to the main floor where I signed his release forms, Starsky was agitatedly fussing, and trying not to show it.

I placed my hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. "So, what do you think? You ready to bust out of here?"

Still unable to speak much, he gave me a snort: *Are you kidding?*

"That's what I figured." I took the handles of the chair and rolled him toward the double doors leading to the parking lot. As soon as we made it out the door, Starsky put a hand up to stop me. I paused and waited. Starsky seemed to be doing a dozen things at once: smelling the fresh breeze after days of the hospital's filtered air, hearing the sounds coming from the street, feeling the morning sun against his skin. But more than that, I knew there were a whole lot of thoughts and fears going through his head. It was bad enough, being blind and unable to speak in the hospital where he was fairly protected and cared for, but now, out here...it was a whole new ballgame.

Starsky pulled the pair of sunglasses he had "told" me to bring and slipped them on over his padded eyes. They didn't completely cover the telltale gauze, but at least masked them from a casual glance in his direction. He straightened himself in the chair and folded his hands in his lap before giving me a terse nod.

I gripped Starsky's shoulder again, just to remind him that he wasn't alone in this. He glanced up at me with that grin of his that mocks his own fears, and we both knew no matter what lay ahead, we would handle it together.



Chapter Four

Getting Starsky used to his apartment under the current circumstances was easier than I'd thought. Walking around the small space with him brought back memories of the guilt that absolutely tormented Starsky when he accidentally shot Emily, temporarily blinding her. It was a horrible, horrible time in our lives, and one best left forgotten. I felt miserable, watching him wander around his place, his hands outstretched in front of him as he made his way around. *What if...*

I can't tell you how many times I had to force myself not to dwell on the 'what ifs.'

Ah, but Starsky always kept up a brave front, if not for himself, then for me. People at the station had commended me for taking care of him, encouraging him, but honestly, it was a two-way street all the way.

The doctors had told me we could take off the pads covering Starsky's eyes the first night home. Just before Starsky was ready for bed, he sat down in his fan chair expectantly, then pointed up at the gauze. I sat down on the coffee table and unwound his bandages, and gently peeled away the round pads.

Starsky slowly opened his eyes.

I know what we both expected. We were both hoping that, somehow, miraculously, the medications had worked far more rapidly than anticipated and he would be able to simply open his eyes and see me.

The familiar dark blue eyes darted around the room, desperately trying to see anything: figures, shadows, light, *something*. But there was nothing. My partner's sad smile told me as much: *Not yet*.

I felt my heart constrict when I looked into those sightless, cobalt eyes. To never have him see again, to never feel him looking back at me...I couldn't bear it.

I gripped his shoulder to assure him. "We just need to give it time, that's all."

He nodded and sighed a bit, then lifted his face back toward me and gave me a brave smile that didn't quite cover the fear that tensed his face. His hand came up and gripped my arm, assuring *me*. Without my help, he made his way into the bedroom alcove and got into the sweats he sleeps in. I asked him if he needed anything before I got into the shower, and he shook his head, waving me off: *No thanks, good night*.

I shut the bathroom door and turned on the shower. Then, under the noise of the pounding water, I leaned against the sink and cried.



The next week passed by slowly. I thought my partner would be scaling the walls, but Starsky slept a lot, and I read and played my guitar. We killed time by playing things like "twenty questions" and guessing games with one of his stupid trivia books. It's funny how the simple things like these that used to annoy me to no end during stakeouts became a balm to us both. I think we were in a bit of denial of what could or might happen. The doctors were optimistic, so we simply held on to that. I reminded Starsky we'd faced worse odds and came out on top. There was no reason to doubt our luck yet.

About the third night at home, the outburst I had been waiting for finally came. He'd been too patient, too compliant, too accepting of the situation, and it was all very unStarskylike.

He'd headed for the shower after I went out for a run. Stretching my legs and burning off a little of my pent up energy felt better than it had in a long time, so I opted for another mile. By the time I reached the top of Starsky's apartment stairs, I was breathing heavier than I would have liked, but it was worth it. As soon as I walked in the door, I knew something was wrong.

I could hear water running, but it came from the kitchen, not the bathroom. I quickly crossed through the living room and found a state of chaos, with Starsky standing at the sink, running his hand under cold water.

It didn't take much of a detective to figure out what had happened.

Coffee and grounds were splashed all over the counter top and stove, but the percolator was not nearby. A quick glance found the now dented appliance lying across the room, the wall bearing testimony as to where it struck when it was thrown, the remaining coffee and grounds staining the paint. A coffee cup and the sugar bowl lay broken on the floor near an overturned chair.

I quietly called out Starsky's name and asked him if he was all right. He jerked his head once but otherwise ignored me. I set the chair upright and crossed to him. Grabbing him by both arms, I turned him around so I could see how bad the burn on his palm was. He wasn't having any of my concern, though. Both hands came quickly up in-between my arms and thrust them away: *I can manage!*

Yeah, right.

Starsky stormed out of the kitchen—his face the epitome of independent rage—right into the wall dividing the rooms, face first.

I turned to watch him just as he did it and tried to call out a warning, but he was already connecting with the plaster. It was enough to stagger him back, and he stumbled down to the floor. Independence be damned, I knelt in front of him, placing a hand on his arm.

Starsky placed his elbows on his knees, and his uninjured hand covered his face. I could feel him shaking with frustration, futility and anger. He looked so lost, so untouchable. After a minute, I helped him to his feet and he let me lead him to the couch. I winced as he simply sat there, staring into nothingness. A vibrant shiner was already started on his right cheekbone, darkening his eye. Just what he needed.

I got out a wash cloth and some ice. He let me examine his hand, and I was grateful to see it was only a minor burn on top of the already puckered skin. Still, I guided his burned left hand to hold the ice on the right side of his face: two treatments for the price of one. "If it's any consolation, you ought to see the other guy."

That at least earned me a hoarse chuckle, and I returned to the kitchen to clean up the mess.

Later that night, DobeY stopped by with the pretext of having me sign a few reports, but we all knew he was checking up on us. I went to retrieve him a beer from the kitchen when I heard him ask Starsky how he had gotten the shiner. I walked back into the room to see Starsky assume an air of the martyred victim and point in my direction. I about choked on my own beer when I saw the look DobeY gave me. “Now, just a minute!”

Starsky sighed dramatically and melted on the couch. The captain’s face contorted in anger. “Hutchinson! What’s wrong with you? Of all the irresponsible things you’ve ever done, this tops them all!” His voice continued to escalate as he dressed me down. “What kind of man are you to strike a defenseless soul like your partner? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. As a matter of fact, I’d have you up on charges so fast your head would be swimming if I were a complete moron and believed this load of crap for an instant!”

The smug expression on Starsky’s faced lingered only a second after DobeY’s diatribe rang through the room and his words sunk in. His smirk changed to a look of disgust as he held out his hand in my direction: *Quit laughing and give me a beer.*

I gave him a soda instead, and the rest of the night passed peaceably.



The next few days were quiet, and our time together had its own soothing qualities. Starsky’s voice began to show signs of a comeback, but all he could manage was an incredibly raspy whisper in short stints. The specialist told him to keep his communications brief and limited, giving the damaged tissue and vocal chords time to heal.

More than once I’d catch Starsky staring out the window into the sun. I’m sure he could feel the warmth on his face, but I know he was trying to see its light. He didn’t stare long, afraid of damaging his eyes, and each time I saw him do it, it always felt like I had a fist clenched around my heart.

Communicating had been a bit awkward earlier in the week, but we got the hang of it. We’ve rarely needed words anyway, him and me. But there were always the times when he’d get bored, and just wanted to “talk.” Now, since my partner’s a bit of a ham, he was always naturally good at charades. Unsurprisingly, this aided us both during these times when he needed to “tell” me something. He was usually pretty clear making his needs known, but I goaded him when I could by feigning ignorance and responding with things like, “Three syllables, sounds like...caterpillar?” Boy, did he get ticked off at me more than once.

We had tried having him write on a large pad of paper at the hospital. This occasionally worked when he needed to explain something and hand gestures were inadequate. Unfortunately, Starsky’s handwriting is atrocious at the best of times, trying at the worst. Compound that with his current lack of direction on the page, and it was like trying to read a drunken monkey’s scribbles.

I think I about pushed him over the edge one night at dinner. I had promised myself I wouldn't take advantage of his current disabilities (well, not much anyway), but I couldn't help myself.

I had made spaghetti. Being the kind man that I am, I even cut Starsky's portion up into something more manageable, rather than watch him battle the pasta with a fork and spoon, spinning it into a ball and stuffing it in the gaping maw that passes for his mouth. A kitchen towel was crammed into the front of his shirt as a barrier against any errant sauce. Apparently, though, I hadn't cut the pasta small enough, because Starsky managed to have a fairly long strand slap him on the side of his face, leaving a trail, as he shoveled in the first "solid" food he'd had in weeks. Now, that really wasn't all that funny. But then, somehow, in the process of wiping away the sauce with his napkin, a piece of spaghetti that had stuck to the cloth was transferred to Starsky's hair, just over his ear. Proud of being able to take care of the mess on his own, Starsky obliviously resumed eating, the pasta arrogantly dangling from one wild curl.

That was funny.

I about choked trying not to laugh. With his vision gone, Starsky's hearing was far too acute and he knew immediately I was laughing. At him. Placing his fork down, he gave me a dirty look and waited expectantly.

Well, I know I can be a real jerk sometimes, and now was *not* the time to be laughing at my partner. I finally got myself under control and managed to explain to him that he had pasta hanging from the side of his head.

Starsky gave me a look that left no room for doubt of his intent and began searching his mass of curls for the lost pasta. The fact that he missed it every time sent me over the edge. I'm sure the pressure of the last week set me off more than the renegade dinner, but regardless, I was soon laughing so hard, I couldn't catch my breath.

Like I said, Starsky's hearing was incredibly sensitive right now, and I'm sure it aided him in nailing me in the chest with a forkful of spaghetti. Before I could settle myself, a second missile was sent my way, but this time I ducked, and dinner hit the wall with a resounding "splat."

When I looked up, Starsky was grinning back at me like a Cheshire cat and silently called me something I can't repeat in polite company.

The rest of dinner passed without incident. However, the next morning, I woke up to find a new blob of congealed spaghetti stuck to my forehead.



After the second week, we were both getting more than a little stir crazy. Starsky's reddened tone had faded, looking more and more like mild sunburn. The aches and pains that had plagued us both from the blast had faded along with our bruises. I made a few court

appearances throughout the week on some of our existing cases, and Huggy stopped by to keep Starsky amused. I knew my partner was bored out of his mind, and I was running out of ideas.

His visits to the specialist went without incident and were virtually uneventful beyond the doctors' repetitious "wait and see" diagnosis. So, we waited until he could see.

One afternoon after a light lunch, Starsky whispered hoarsely that he wanted to stretch his legs. We changed into shorts and threw a six pack in a cooler (he was allowed one, I got the other five—not all at once, don't worry). A quick drive through midday traffic took us across town, but the park seemed to a bit too crowded for both our tastes. I headed for the beach. We agreed the fresh ocean air felt great on our faces as we cruised along the shoreline.

It took awhile, but I found a fairly secluded area and parked the Torino. Starsky got out and immediately kicked off his shoes and yanked off his socks. His face lit up like a little kid's as the sand crept up between his wiggling toes. I came over beside him and tossed his shoes back into the car, along with mine. I told him our little excursion wasn't a free ride and that he'd have to help carry the cooler. He instantly knew this was my way of guiding him down the beach without his having to hold onto my arm like we had been doing while going to his doctor's appointments. There, among similar injuries, it somehow didn't seem like big deal—his holding my elbow as we walked down the long hallways. But here in public, well, I wanted him to feel like he was maintaining his dignity and independence. Besides, my partner was *not* blind. Just...temporarily...well, you know what I'm getting at.

Starsky nodded and took up one side of the cooler, and we set off at his pace toward the sound of the waves rolling gently onto the shore. His face seemed to relax a bit as his head turned wonderingly toward the cries of the gulls overhead, then toward the children playing in the distance. I hadn't even noticed how tense his face had been until it visibly relaxed here.

I let Starsky know we were close enough and we set the cooler down, along with the old blanket I'd brought. I laid it out and told Starsky he could sit, but he shook his head and began walking toward the waves. I watched him carefully, noticing how his movements were slow and a bit cautious, but not overly hesitant. My fearless partner. The beach there was quite sandy, with very few rocks to trip him or hurt his feet. Starsky stopped when he felt the sand become firm and damp. A look thrown back in my direction was all the invitation I needed to join him.

Starsky heard me approach, then waved an arm toward the skyline. He kept his face out toward the ocean for a moment, then turned it back to me with a smile, eyebrows lifted expectantly: *Describe it to me.*

I swear, I could have bawled right then and there. There was a lonely beauty where the sea met the sky. The ocean was the color of my partner's eyes. *My partner's sightless eyes....*

I swallowed hard and tried to keep my voice light as I described the colors of the masterpiece before me, but I knew he heard what I was feeling. I kept my face toward the ocean as I spoke,

but his hand on my shoulder interrupted my monologue. Starsky gripped it once, then let his fingers weave into the fabric of my shirt and pulled me along as he turned and jogged away!

While he couldn't manage the sound, Starsky's face lit up with laughter as he ran—*backwards*, no less—down the shoreline, dragging me in tow. Weeks of pent-up energy and frustration cried out for release. When he felt I had caught up with him, he turned and began running in earnest. I paced myself along side him and reached out to grab his arm, to guide him, but I stopped myself. There was an expression of fierce joy on Starsky's face at the ability to move freely again. I kept close to his side, within arm's reach if he needed me. The pace was easy, more like a moderate jog, because I knew Starsky's lungs and throat couldn't handle too much exertion yet. As we made our way down the beach, I would call out, "Head to your left, there's driftwood coming up," or "the sand in the stretch ahead looks soft, careful." He'd nod and follow my direction, trusting me not to hold him back or even lead him, but to simply run beside him and keep him safe. This kind of trust is an incredible privilege and an awesome responsibility.

I let my partner run as far as he wanted.



Chapter Five

The day at the beach ended with the two of us getting soaked, after Starsky decided to try and push me into the shallow water. As much as I knew he hated getting wet, I pulled him in with me. We dried off by sitting in the dying sunlight, nursing a beer, and I described each color of the sunset as the palette of the sky changed.

Starsky's growling stomach demanded attention, and we opted for a quick stop at The Pits. This would actually be only Starsky's second venture into public, aside from his daily doctor's visits. Earlier in the week, we'd made a quick stop at the station for me to sign off on some reports and compare notes with Logan and Roper, the team who had taken over the arson case for us. Starsky smiled and nodded at the numerous greeters and well-wishers, but I think he was a bit overwhelmed by the flood of noise at the station. He didn't ask to go with me again after that.

The Pits wasn't much quieter in the crowd or noise departments, but Starsky appeared to be comfortable enough sitting across from me in the booth, his sunglasses still on. Huggy was excited to see us out and about, and brought us both a bowl of Angie's infamous minestrone and some soft rolls, both which Starsky attacked vigorously and had no problem getting past his still sensitive throat.

After we finished our dinners, Huggy slid in next to Starsky. He knew it was no longer our case, but he didn't really care to start doing "business" with Logan and Roper, since he already had his share of fuzzy friends looking for handouts. Huggy had gotten word that a restaurant owner in the upscale side of Venice had been getting hit up for protection money, but he didn't want to play the game. Threats had been made against the restaurateur's wife and teenage

daughter, and the situation was about to get ugly if he didn't cooperate. Word had it that the owner was about to do something desperate, so Logan and Roper would have to get to him soon if they had any hope of getting his cooperation in nailing the bad guys. A matchbook was tossed in my direction, providing me with the restaurant's name and address. I was surprised that I knew the place. I had actually taken Caroline, my latest interest, there. It was quite a place, with an intimate dining room on the second floor, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windowpanes right off the channel. Needless to say, I could only afford to take the lovely lady there occasionally on a cop's salary. Good thing Caroline was interested in me for my...uh...*mind*, and not my wallet.

Huggy stayed at the table with Starsky, describing the latest features of his new pinball machine, while I put in a call into the station. As it turned out, Logan was down in San Diego to attend a family wedding and wouldn't be back until morning. Roper was logged off duty and wasn't answering his phone.

Next, I called Dobby at home, only to get Cal. The captain and Edith were out for the evening and he was watching his sister. Cal, of course, wanted to know how Starsky was doing and asked if we could stop by some time soon. I promised we would.

After I hung up, I pulled out my notebook with the phone numbers of other detectives on the squad that might be able to check out the tip. Huggy came up and explained that he had to go take care of a minor catastrophe in the kitchen. Starsky was sitting patiently in the booth, spinning his soda glass between his hands. I knew it was a nervous gesture, but to outsiders it probably looked like he was bored.

"Hey, buddy, it looks like nobody's around to check out Huggy's tip. I just need another minute to track somebody down. Maybe Greisham and Mullner...."

Starsky's hand found my arm and gave it a tug. A finger wagged back and forth between us as he hoarsed out: *We can go.*

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Starsk." I wasn't concerned that there was going to be any trouble that night, but Starsky was vulnerable right now. I didn't want to risk it—didn't want to risk *him*. "Besides, it can probably wait until tomorrow when Logan and Roper get back."

Starsky waved off my concern with an exhaled "phhht" and got out of the booth. With his hands in his pockets, he turned to go, hesitating long enough for me to walk up to his side, my own hand in my pocket with my elbow extended far enough to rest against his back, guiding him. I don't remember how or when in the last week we had devised this position, but it worked for both of us. I remained in contact with him, which made me feel better; and he retained his freedom and sense of independence, which made him feel better.

I think he could feel my tension as we left the bar, and so, as we approached the Torino, Starsky turned and extended his hand and roughed out: *Keys?*

I cuffed him gently and jerked open the passenger door for him.



We got there at closing time. In a low voice I described the place to Starsky: the entryway was cavernous; an enormous chandelier hung high overhead; the staircase, an architect's masterpiece of mahogany and wrought iron, was open on both sides as well as underneath, sweeping into the parlor. I'm sure Starsky would spend some time chewing on how they accomplished this without additional supports under it. I made a mental note to bring him back here when he could...*later*. To either side were large archways, the one to the right leading to a bistro open for the lunch crowd, and to the left leading to a wine shop that featured the restaurant's own label. We ascended the stairs, Starsky keeping light contact with me by his elbow resting against my back and his other hand on the rail. Fortunately, the grand staircase was wide enough for four people to walk abreast. The landing swept up to either side of an archway leading to the main dining room, and ended at the parlor bathrooms. The dining room was as I remembered it, with a quiet elegance. Lights from the neighboring boat landings danced on the water. The last patrons were leaving just as we entered the dining room. We asked to speak to the owner, and I'm sure by the expression on his face as he approached us, he thought we were representatives of the extortionists. We both flashed our badges, Starsky doing a great job of playing the strong, silent type, never letting on about his current condition.

I laid out a plan of police involvement and protection, guaranteeing the safety of his family. The owner, a Bernard Matowski, ranted and raved, stating all the injustices he faced, having to disrupt his entire life and livelihood, both for the thugs and the cops. Just when I was about at the end of my patience with the animated little man, I realized how quiet the room had become. All the diners had left earlier, but now there was no one there but the three of us—no chefs, no wait staff, nobody. The owner's tirade quieted as well, as Starsky's head swung around the room, listening, then turned to me expectantly.

"What's going on?" I growled.

"Maurice? Phillippe?" The restaurateur crossed over to the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. Rather than the doors swinging out, they swung back in, followed by three very large, very menacing, very ugly types.

"I'm sorry we're closed." Matowski's voice quivered as he spoke.

"Yeah, we know. We locked the door behind us." The first man ground out. "Mr. DiAngelo sends his greetings."

The restaurant owner glanced at Starsky and me nervously, as if expecting us to arrest them on sight. I put out a restraining hand to warn him to keep his mouth closed, not to expose us. I'll give him credit: he kept his cool. The smaller man turned back to the flunkies. "I told you before, I'm not going to give you any money. Not one red cent!"

I think having us there gave Matowski a false sense of bravado. His voice wavered a bit as he yelled. False or not, too bad it didn't last longer.

The first thug pursed his lips and adjusted the lapels of his jacket, then turned to leave with the other two in tow. “Suit yourself. I’ll let your daughter know her daddy didn’t think she’s worth ‘one red cent’ right before I put a bullet in her head.”

Matowski lost it, and began screaming in our faces. “Arrest them! Shoot them! They’re going to hurt my daughter!”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the three men propelled themselves back down the stairwell, but I had no delusions that they were making a break for it and knew that they’d be lying in wait for us. After our hearing their threats against Matowski’s daughter, plus whatever other evidence we might have, there was no way they were going to let us out of there alive. I drew my Python, but didn’t go running after them. Starsky and I both waved off the owner’s blathering as we listened for doors opening and closing, indicating that the thugs had left. After a few moments of held breaths, we knew they hadn’t. I whispered my partner’s name and Starsky shook his head: *Nothing. They’re still with us.*

I could see Starsky’s face blanch, knowing instinctively what was going down, but not knowing what he could do to help. He immediately grabbed the owner and croaked: *Phone?*

Matowski ducked behind the relative safety of the mahogany bar that lined one wall and snatched up the phone receiver. He tried to dial the operator, but found the line dead and said as much.

These guys were no slouches and worked fast. How in the world were we going to get out of this one? I crossed over to the cowering Matowski, leading Starsky by his sleeve. Matowski looked at us strangely, but we didn’t have time to explain things. “Do you keep a gun anywhere around here?”

He nodded then scrambled to the other end of the bar. Reaching underneath past a small crate of wine, the restaurateur pulled out a lock box. “I kept it around for after we had all those blackouts a few years back.”

He sat the box down on the bar top and looked at us. “Well, open it,” I hissed.

“I lost the key some time ago.”

Starsky snorted in disgust. I took the butt end of the Python and broke off the cheap lock with one quick strike. Matowski opened the case and pulled out a small caliber pistol and a handful of bullets. He offered them to me expectantly.

I looked back at him in disbelief. “Well, load it!”

“I don’t know how. I..I’ve never fired a gun in my life.”

Starsky snorted again and reached out, groping for the gun and ammunition. He quickly found the owner's outstretched hands and began loading.

"He's blind!" Matowski turned to me, almost accusingly. "He's a *blind* cop?"

"Sure. Haven't you heard of 'Affirmative Action'?"

He looked at me in disbelief, then looked at Starsky who had loaded the pistol in seconds flat—one of the benefits of having been in the Army was to dismantle and load your weapons. Blindfolded. Old habits die hard.

Starsky raised his eyebrows at me: *So, what's the plan?*

I shoved Matowski behind the bar and pointed at him to crouch down and stay low. I then positioned Starsky at the end of the bar. "Listen, Starsk. I'm gonna make my way to the car and call for backup...."

Starsky interrupted me with an angry shake of his head. He tried to talk, but in his anger and urgency, his throat couldn't handle more than a few hoarse sounds.

"C'mon, Starsk. Work with me, here. I...." I didn't want to hurt his pride, but he knew what I was saying was true. "I can go faster by myself right now. Besides, somebody has to stay here and take care of Matowski, right?"

Starsky's face turned to granite, knowing I was right. I understood the anger he felt at the situation and his loathing for his limitations, but it was for the best. We both knew he didn't want to be the cause of anything that would endanger me. I could see the muscles play under his skin as he clenched his jaw, and he finally nodded.

For a second, a wave of my love for this man rolled over me. Blinded, mute and incredibly vulnerable, he's worried about being unable to protect me, not about his own defenselessness. What would I ever do without him? I prayed I never had to find out.

I turned to the restaurant owner. "Tell me about the back stairs."

He looked at me blankly. "The delivery stairs?"

"Where do they lead? Is it an open stairwell like the front? Is there a service elevator?"

He shook his head. "There's a door from the kitchen to the stairwell, then they...uh...lead straight down to the main floor."

"Elevator?"

"No."

“Is there a door at the bottom of the stairs?”

“Yes.”

“Once you get through the door, then what?”

“It opens into a small receiving bay just off the alley.”

It sounded like a great place to set a trap, but the odds were a far sight better than going down the open stairwell in the front. I turned back to Starsky who was listening to the exchange with a scowl. He didn't like the odds either.

“Okay, pal, here's the layout. I'd say it's about a thirty-six by forty-eight foot square room. You're at the bar against the west wall. The bar ends maybe three feet from either end of the wall. On your right is the glass wall facing the south channel. Straight ahead, the room is full of maybe twenty tables, and the far wall has a couple of swinging doors that lead to the kitchen. That's where I'm headed. On your left, about twelve feet away, is the main entry into the room.”

Starsky crouched and extended his arms, the pistol in his grip. I lined him up so that his bead was on the main entry. I then placed the wine crate on the bar top to his right. “Swing your sights toward the kitchen entry.”

He did as I instructed, bringing his extended arms to the right until they hit the crate. I pushed his arms back a bit, along with the crate, so that his aim was directly center of the double doors. “When you hit the crate, you're dead center of the kitchen doors.”

Most people would have thought I was insane, giving my...sightless partner a gun, and maybe I was. But we never cared much what other people thought, so why start now? Starsky turned his head toward me and nodded, exhaling. We both knew it was a long shot, but our best shot. We couldn't simply just sit there, waiting for the bad guys to come flush us out.

“Okay, then. I'll slip on down, call for the cavalry, then be back in five minutes, okay? If anybody comes up here in the meantime...”

Starsky nodded again and I gripped his shoulder in passing. One strong hand on my arm stopped me up short before I could walk away. His hand transferred from my sleeve to a finger poking me unerringly in the chest. Starsky then jerked his head toward the door and made a low whistling sound, then raised his gun up as if pulling his shot: *When you come back, let me know it's you!*

I smiled gratefully, even though he couldn't see me. “I knew I kept you around for some reason.”

Starsky rolled his eyes and hunkered back down into position, his aim drawing an exact bead on where I had told him the main entryway was.

“I’ll be back in a flash.”

He nodded once and I could tell he was focusing all of his concentration on listening for any sounds coming from the other rooms. I spared a glance at Matowski, who was balled up behind the bar, his lips moving in silent prayer. I hope God heard him.

I slipped out of the dining room and into the kitchen. The room was massive, almost as large as the dining room itself, hosting multiple work surfaces, three huge refrigerator/freezers, and a gas stove the size of a pool table. I trotted past the equipment and headed for the stairs. The door had a small window at eye level, allowing the occupants to check out whoever was at the door. I moved to either side of it, trying to see as much as I could of the landing. As best as I could tell, it was clear. I gripped the knob, turning it gently, and gave the door a shove.

Nothing happened. It wouldn’t budge.

I tried the knob again. The lock was, of course, on the inside of the door, and was unlocked, so the handle turned easily. This time I gave the door a shove with my shoulder, throwing my weight against it, but it still wouldn’t move.

I scrambled across the kitchen to a stool used by one of the prep cooks and hauled it over to the door. Standing on top of it, I could look through the window to the other side of the knob. Just what I was afraid of; the bad guys had propped a two-by-four under the handle. It set diagonally, across the small landing to the wall, effectively barricading the door from the outside. I swore as I jumped down from my perch and kicked the stool. My only way out was the open stairwell in the front.

I crossed back to the double doors, calling Starsky’s name. I heard the familiar “snick” of a safety being returned, so I knew he had heard me. I quickly crossed the dining room, heading for the archway to the main stairs. “Change in plans. They’ve blocked the back door.”

Starsky stood up and looked in my direction, a scowl on his face. I knew exactly what he was thinking, because I was thinking the same thing. The odds were getting worse. I paused long enough to grip his arm.

Before descending the stairs, I took precious time to scan over the top of the railing into the lobby, looking for any man-shaped shadows. The room was unsurprisingly empty. I spent more precious seconds investigating each of the large bathrooms on either side of the landing, making sure I didn’t spend enough time in either to allow any of the uglies to sneak up the stairs and ambush me while my back was turned poking around the johns.

I stood at the top of the flight for an instant, trying to swallow down the fear rolling around in my gut. There were over thirty steps and an open banister on either side ahead of me—I would be an easy target from the entryway, bistro and wine shop. I felt like I was running a gauntlet. And I was.

I took a deep breath and threw myself down the steps, taking them two or three at a time —ala Starsky. The instant I detected movement from the bistro on my left, I gracelessly let my feet go out from under me, landing hard on my side. It was bone jarring, but it saved my life. Bullets flew overhead, exactly where I had been seconds before. I slid on my now sore hip and shoulder, my knee banging against the stairs and railing. I managed to get off a shot, though I bounced on a couple of stairs as I slid further down. My aim went wild, but it still hit the doorframe next to one of the thugs, and the wood splinters nailed him in the face, forcing him back. In hindsight, it was a crazy thing to do. I could have just as easily hit one of the metal stair rails, the shot ricocheting back into my face.

I rolled onto my back, anticipating that a second man would be lurking in the entryway, and the third was probably in the wine shop. A thug popping out of the entryway shadows with me clearly in his sights rewarded me. I got off a quick shot before he did, scrambled over the side of the banister and dropped the remaining ten or so feet. Another shot in the direction of the entryway and one toward the bistro gave me enough time to charge into the wine shop, plowing into the first shooter who was just now recovering from the blast that threw splinters into his face. As I pile drove into him, we went sprawling with me on top. It didn't take much to subdue him, and within a minute I had him handcuffed and flat on his face. One down, two to go. I stood up from where I had planted a knee in this guy's back when a small explosion caused me to jump. *What the...?*

Smoke billowed into the wine shop from the entryway, and I could already see the shadows caused by the flames dancing on the walls. I stuck my gun ahead of me as I raced to the entryway, pausing long enough to sweep the room. One of the thugs was lighting Molotov cocktails from the entryway and pitching them into the lobby. The explosion I'd heard was duplicated as the bottle smashed against the wall, whatever the flammable liquid was, was spread quickly into an inferno. The second man covering him saw me and fired, sending me back into the wine shop's cover. They were either going to force us out the front door, making us easy targets, or let us go up with the building. The semi-conscious man on the floor began to stir.

I returned the gunfire, but all I managed to do was force them out the front door, which slammed shut behind them. I hoped they hadn't somehow barricaded it as well.

In the meantime, the flames were beginning to grow, licking up the walls to the second floor. The thick smoke was beginning to overtake the room. I almost left the thug on the floor to fend for himself, but my conscience wouldn't allow it. Swearing, I stuffed the Python in my belt and hauled the now struggling man to his feet. As I propelled him toward the lobby, Matowski appeared at the head of the stairs, panicked. Thank God he at least had the wherewithal to realize it was time to make our exit. He began pounding down the stairs, fear making his face a mask. But he was alone. *Where was Starsky?*

I dropped my grip on the prisoner and rushed toward the fleeing restaurateur, jerking him around as he went for the door. The smoke was getting thicker and causing us both to choke. "Where's my partner?"

Matowski coughed in my face and pointed up the stairs. I gripped his arm harder and wished it was his balding little head I had in my hands. Just as I was about to propel him back into the lobby, the handcuffed man rammed into both of us, knocking me off balance as I tripped over Matowski. The thug crashed through the front door, running out into the night with Matowski following right behind him. Just as I had expected, gunfire instantly followed. Cursing, I drew my gun and rushed to the door. If nothing more, I could offer Matowski cover fire and hope for the best. Still, he was clipped in the leg, sending him to the pavement. The two hoods turned their guns on me, sending me back into the lobby, slamming the door behind me. *Where were the cops?* It's not like we were in the "bad" part of town—on *our* beat, for crying out loud. This was Venice. Gunplay and burning buildings were not an everyday occurrence even if it was two a.m.

I bolted up the stairs, coughing as I went, fear propelling me like nothing else could. *Where was Starsky?* Between sounds of the gunfire and explosions, the smoke and crackling of the growing fire—he had to be terrified. I know I was.

I burst into the dining room and instantly spotted him, rooted in the same position I had left him, looking for all the world like a statue, controlled fear and tension frozen on his face. An instant of realization hit me that I hadn't announced myself, hadn't alerted him that I was coming in the room. Unfortunately, I didn't realize it until *after* I saw his finger tighten on the trigger.



Chapter Six

I must have closed my eyes. If I had kept them open, I would have seen Starsky's face change in a heartbeat, the same instant he pulled his shot, firing into the ceiling. The snowfall of plaster was lost in the smoke billowing into the dining room.

How he knew it was me I'll never know, but I wasn't gonna question it.

"Starsk!" I barked out, my voice going hoarse from the smoky stairway. It wasn't as bad yet here, but the smoke was growing increasingly thicker as the flames licked up the stairwell. Starsky made his way out from behind the bar and took a few tentative steps in my direction, following the sound of my coughs. I took him by the arm and led him back toward the stairs. "They set the place on fire. We're gonna have to make a run for it down the stairs, then blast our way out of here."

I felt Starsky stiffen, but his steps never hesitated. The flames were growing increasingly higher, and I knew the stairs would soon be impassable. When we reached the landing, I helped Starsky shrug out of his jacket and draped it over his head. His features were pinched with fear, but he never doubted that I would take care of us both. "You ready?"

Starsky nodded and tried to say something, but the smoke caused him to cough hoarsely. I could only imagine what it was doing to his still-healing throat, lungs and eyes. I knew we

couldn't wait any longer, so I gripped his elbow and stepped onto the now burning stairs. Starsky adjusted his weight to follow behind me as a sound like a falling tree startled us both. I felt the stairs beneath me buckle and pitch, throwing me off balance.

I don't know how Starsky sensed what was happening, but the arm I had been gripping shot out and latched onto my forearm, hauling me back onto the landing and we both backpedaled. The smoke stung my eyes as I watched the freestanding stairs crumble before us. I wasn't so sure the landing wasn't next, so I steered Starsky back into the now inflamed dining room and rushed back toward the kitchen. Starsky began coughing in earnest now, almost doubled over with the effort to breathe. We made our way to the back door, and I tried in vain a second time to force the door open. Using the butt of the Python, I smashed open the small window and stuck my arm through, but I simply couldn't reach the two-by-four jamming it shut.

I rushed to the sink and wet down two dishcloths, trying to calm my racing heart as I gave one to Starsky, then guided his hand to hold the cloth over his mouth and nose. We scrambled back out into the dining room, and I cast desperately around the room, looking for any inspiration as to how to get out of this. It was such a cruel irony to look out the wall of windows, past the reflection of the fire dancing on the glass, onto the serene waterscape before us.

Water.

I cursed myself as four kinds of fool. "C'mon, Starsk. We're outta here."

Starsky coughed again and raised an eyebrow comically in my direction: *About time you figured a way out of this.*

I led him to the far wall, picking up a chair as I went. I turned his back to the panes of glass as I heaved the chair against it, shattering the two-foot-wide pane. The chair dropped sixteen feet and crunched against the rocks below before rolling into the channel and sinking. I felt the blood drain from my face. The water seemed deep enough, and any water would be better than hitting the ground. Still, we would need to jump out far enough to miss the rocks acting as a barrier between the channel and the foundation of the restaurant.

A second chair was used to knock away the remaining glass. Starsky's eyes were watering continuously now and his breathing was sounding worse. Over his shoulder I could see the flames engulfing the walls on either side of the archway and the far end of the mahogany bar. We didn't have much time left.

"Okay, Starsk, you're the one who said we should go out like Butch and Sundance. So, now's our chance. It looks like our only shot is to take a swim."

That brought up his head in an instant. His mouth opened and I expected a protest, but he quickly closed it and swallowed, then croaked out, "What's the plan, Sundance?" I managed to grin as I coughed.

I grabbed his left hand and led him to the window. I was yelling to be heard over the first. “The opening’s only about two feet wide. We’ll go together, one in front of the other. Just don’t let go of my hand. We’re gonna have to clear a few rocks, so don’t hesitate when we go, pal. Think you can do it?”

Starsky coughed again and nodded, then gave me a quick thumbs up with his right: *Piece o’cake*.

I grabbed the window frame with my left hand. “Let’s do it then. On three.” Again, Starsky nodded, bending his legs in preparation. I squeezed his hand once. “One....”

The explosion knocked us both forward. Later, I realized I had forgotten about the gas stove in the kitchen. Hindsight. The blast knocked me out the window and Starsky into the window frame, his arm shooting through what was left of the pane next to him. The rest of the window’s glass came raining down with me. I didn’t quite clear the rocks in my descent, my right leg slamming into one of them. The pain was incredible, but I managed to swim out far enough to get a good look up at the second floor. In the distance I heard fire trucks. *Finally*.

“Starsky!” I bellowed. I could see him extract his arm from the jagged remains of the window and stagger to his feet, shaken. The flames were within feet of him, and the smoke pouring out of the restaurant ebbed and receded, occasionally obliterating him from my view. Still, I could make out fresh blood above his right eyebrow. Another blow to his head...what would the damage do to the blood clots? What if...

Get a grip, Hutchinson, you can worry about that later...*if there is a later*.

“Starsky!” I called out again, hoping that he could hear me above the roar of the fire. The palms of his hands went up to his head, grinding them into his eyes. The pain he must be experiencing...

I can’t describe how scared I was for him, up there, alone—and there wasn’t a blasted thing I could do to help him. It was all up to him now.

“C’mon, partner!” I was treading water now and beginning to tire. My right leg was completely numb and the weight of my clothes kept dragging at me. I didn’t know how deep the water was here and didn’t want to find out. “Starsk!”

He finally heard me, coughing fiercely, and turned in my direction, his face searching for me. “Starsky, jump! I’m right here, you can do it!”

He placed a hand on either side of the windowpane, but hesitated, undecided. He knew if he jumped, he would have to clear the rocks, have to go under, have to surface to stay alive. Behind him the flames were almost on top of him. Blinded, hurt, fighting to breathe...*alone*. I can’t remember feeling this helpless when he needed me the most.

I could see the fear on his face, the anguish, the indecision, and I knew it was going to cost him his life. “Starsky!”

He looked in the direction of my voice, then back toward the fire, weighing the odds of trying to make his way out some other way, the odds of someone coming to rescue him. I tried the only thing I could think of. “Starsky!” *For the love of God, hear me!* “Starsky! It’s ‘who do you trust’ time!”

He must have heard the desperation in my voice, because he turned back toward me. “Starsky! Do you trust me?”

His head came up like a startled stag’s. I took a breath to yell again, but as the smoke billowed out of the window, Starsky disappeared from my sight.



Chapter Seven

The horror that ran through me froze my limbs, almost dragging me underwater. I took in a lung-full of air to cry out his name again, when the hurtling mass that was my partner streaked through the window and into the night. After clearing the opening, he tightened the best he could into a ball, the smoke from the burning room had clung to him and was streaming from his clothes. Looking back, I realized he looked like a shooting star.

It was one of those unearthly moments in life when things seem to happen in slow motion. I watched him streaking toward me. He was so certain where my voice had been coming from, I had to push myself a few strokes out of the way before he landed directly on top of me. Just before he struck the water, I lunged, getting a handful of his shirt. His momentum pulled us both under, but I slowed his descent and we managed to make our way to the surface. He coughed harshly, both from the smoke and the water. I could tell he was trying to control his panic, fear warring with relief as he tried to stay above water and get enough air.

“You did it, Starsk. Take it easy now, I’ve got you. Trust me, I won’t let you go.” I tried to calm him as I maneuvered quickly behind him. I wrapped an arm across his chest, then began a sidestroke to pull us both toward shore.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to swim far before several firemen jumped in the water to help us. I was grateful, uncertain that I could’ve kept it up much longer, and I knew Starsky couldn’t have that much left either.

As soon as we were brought up onto the bank, we were wrapped in blankets and given oxygen. Neither of us fought it, and we were content with just sitting there in the damp grass, giving ourselves a few moments to depressurize. Eventually, one of the firemen looked over the cut on Starsky’s arm; he wrapped it and then splinted my leg. Starsky managed to stop coughing after a few minutes and simply leaned against me, both for warmth and the contact we both needed at that moment.

I threw an arm across his shoulders, pulling him close. “Nice exit there, Butch.”



We found out later that night, or morning, rather, that Matowski had received only a graze to his calf when he was shot, and somehow managed to elude the three extortionists when they began firing on me, then called for help. That, at least, raised him up a notch in my estimation. I still wanted to wring his neck for leaving Starsky alone in the dining room once the fire started, but my thoughts of revenge would have to wait.

Dobey gave me three kinds of holy hell for going out on the call, let alone taking Starsky with me. Of course, his anger at me was nothing compared to my own. I refused to let myself think about how close we’d come. Again.

We spent two more days in the hospital for smoke inhalation. It turned out I hadn’t broken my leg as I originally thought, but had a deep bruise that ran the length of my calf. Starsky took a few stitches above his brow from where he had plowed into the window frame during the explosion, and a few more on his arm. More tests showed no additional damage to his eyes and skull. Starsky slept most of the two days we were guests at University Hospital. The few times he woke up, he’d always check and make sure I was there. His voice was getting stronger, even though it was a bit raspier than a few days before—an aftereffect of the smoke.

On the third day we were released in the afternoon, and I took Starsky back home. Edith Dobey had been by and the place was spotless. Several precooked meals were in the fridge with a note of instruction taped to each. You gotta love that woman.

After an early dinner feast of homemade lasagna, Starsky rasped out that he was sick and tired of being sick and tired, and wanted to stretch his legs. I suggested an easy walk to the park, but he declared that we needed another trip to the beach. I agreed, but only on the condition that he took it easy. I won’t repeat what he said to that, but we went anyway.



We made it to the beach with plenty of daylight to spare, not that the lack of light would have bothered Starsky. Lately, the nighttime just seemed lonelier to me.

We took an easy walk down the shoreline, with the waves slipping across our bare feet. The silence was comfortable as we listened to the song of the gulls and the endless waves. Starsky stumbled once and slowed down, though I didn’t see anything that would have tripped him, so I attributed it to fatigue. I reached out for his arm to steady him, and he didn’t pull away as he had in the past. Eventually, I released his elbow, content to let him go at his own pace, both of us knowing I’d be beside him if he needed me.

Gradually, Starsky slowed to a stop and awkwardly sat down in the sand, facing the waves and the setting sun. I backtracked a few paces and sat down next to him, drawing my legs up and

resting my crossed arms on my knees. The wind had picked up a bit and ruffled our hair. After a few more minutes of silence, I began to describe the sunset without him asking me to.

“There’s a lot of color tonight. There’s a streak of orange the color of fire, and it blends away to amber. Around the bottom, closer to the waves, there’s a bit of lavender and...”

“Red....”

His voice was raspy, and there was a wetness to it that almost sounded like a sob. I turned to see two tears streaming down his cheeks, his blue eyes filled, and the biggest smile... “What did you say?”

He turned to me, his smile brightening even further. “There’s red in the sunset.”

I scrambled to my knees and grabbed him by the shoulders. “You can...?”

He nodded, laughing. “Everything’s blurry, but colors, shadows.....”

I pulled him up as I stood and bear hugged him so hard that I lifted him right off his feet, both of us laughing. I let him go when he started coughing. I kept my hand on his shoulders as he wiped his eyes. In a minute my own would spill over. For a brief moment our foreheads touched as they sometimes do, a silent communion between us that we’ve never shared with anyone else. “When?”

“Just as we were coming up the beach. All of a sudden I could start making out shadows.”

I nodded. It must have been why he stumbled. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I wanted to be sure. I was afraid it really wasn’t happening.” Starsky peered intently at my face. One trembling hand came up to the side of my head, cuffing me gently, then his thumb wiped away the tear that finally spilled over. “Hutch....”

I broke out in a smile, and he grinned back in response. He grinned because he *saw* me smile! I was overwhelmed again and drew him to me again, pounding him on the back. “Come on, partner. What do you say we go interrupt a certain trio of doctors’ dinners and get them to meet us at the hospital?”

Starsky drew away from me laughing and nodding. His grin turned mischievous as he dangled the car keys he had slipped out of my jacket pocket in front of me. “Sure, but I’m driving!”

Even if he couldn’t clearly see the expression of horror on my face, he knew it was there. With a bark of laughter, he turned and began pounding through the sand in the direction of the parking lot. I laughed and sprinted toward the car as well. He glanced back at me once, not to make sure I was there, but just to share the sheer joy of the moment with me again. His blue eyes couldn’t have shown any brighter than they did right then.

When I caught up with him, I didn't take the keys away, that would come later. Right now it was enough to run beside him.



Brit