

The Price of a Life

by Brit

Captain Harold DobeY was a content man.

The sky above Southern California was actually quite blue for a change, the smog having lifted with the midday sun. Temperatures were a bit cool for June, but comfortable enough for Bermudas and short sleeves. DobeY refrained from his almost perpetual scowl as he glanced down at the newest addition to his wardrobe: a very, *very* loud teal Hawaiian-print shirt, selected by his eleven-year-old son, Cal, with the “help” of Starsky and Hutchinson. The shirt was boisterous at best, gaudy at worst, and would probably be a welcomed addition to the closet of one Huggy Bear Brown. But it was, after all, a Father’s Day gift, and DobeY would wear it, if only at home and with the likelihood of *only* family seeing him in it. The shirt was partially covered by his other Father’s Day gift, given to him by four-year-old Rosie. A chef’s apron proudly sported a pair of bright red lip prints with the phrase “Kiss the Chef” emblazoned on it. DobeY was more than convinced the same pair of detectives had something to do with Rosie’s choice of gifts as well.

A long three months were over. DobeY, the commissioner’s office, Internal Affairs, and his two best detectives had been up to their necks in the removal of three uniformed officers from the force. The whole episode began with the shooting death of Jackson Walters, a black bus driver from East LA. Jackson had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and Andrews—a rookie, short on brains and long on prejudice—inadvertently took him down.

DobeY had been disturbed by the last meeting with Starsky and Junior, the bus driver’s son, just before Jackson’s funeral. It was then that the captain had promised the young man he would “take care of Andrews.” The investigation into the shooting put Andrews on suspension, leading him to accuse DobeY of siding with “another brother.” Once the words were out of Andrews’ mouth, every officer within earshot of the heated discussion froze. DobeY’s glare and tone turned icy as he informed the patrolman he was no longer simply suspended, but additionally, being written up for insubordination. Andrews exploded, losing his self-control and calling the captain a “self-serving nigger.” Before DobeY had a chance to respond, Andrews was lost under 165 pounds of curly-haired muscle nailing him to the wall. What followed was barely controlled chaos, resulting in Hutch pulling his partner off the suspended patrolman, who was subsequently felled by the blond’s solid right cross. Andrews turned in his sidearm and badge, then stormed out of the station house, vowing revenge.

DobeY was not easily unnerved, yet he felt a chill run down his spine as the patrolman glared at him throughout the IA hearing. The proceedings yielded the expected results of Andrews’ dismissal from the force. Andrews left the review board enraged, angrily informing anyone within earshot, of the injustices he’d suffered under the leadership of a reversed prejudice judicial system. DobeY exhaled a mixture of disgust and satisfaction. Busting dirty cops left an acrid taste in his mouth. Busting dirty bigoted cops was like tasting blood. As he watched the hate-filled young man storm out of the room, DobeY saw two forms move up to stand on either

side of him—one dark, one fair. There was a comfort and strength in the shadow of such friendship.

That was three months ago; today was another story altogether. With a sigh of contentment, DobeY flipped the sizzling burgers with an experienced twist of his wrist. All *was* right with his little world.

“Are they done yet?” David Starsky extended a fork toward one of the burgers cautiously, avoiding the grease-induced spurts of flames from the coals. DobeY’s immediate reaction was to smack the offending appendage with the flat side of his spatula.

“Get out of here, Starsky; you’re worse than the kids.”

Edith DobeY breezed past the two men to set the last of the place settings on the picnic table. “You might as well give up, David.” Her voice dropped dramatically in a rough imitation of her husband’s growl. “Those burgers won’t be ready—”

“Until they’re ready!” came a mocking chorus of three from the pool. Rosie sat at the edge of the shallow end, dangling her feet into the water. Her brother, Cal, paused on the diving board, waiting for Hutch, who was chest-deep in the water, to throw the next Nerf ball pass.

“C’mon, Starsk!” his partner called out as he lobbed the foam ball into the air. Cal hurled himself off the diving board, catching the ball in flight before sprawling into the deep end. “It’s not like we haven’t heard this all before, right, Rosie?”

“Uh-huh. Come on, Uncle Dave. You can play with me until the burgers are done.”

“Sure, *schweetheart*, unless your Dad’ll let me help grill those burgers?”

“NO!” came the response from the rest of the small group. Starsky looked at them with dismay.

“Why not?” Starsky’s expression turned pathetic, but it didn’t change the manifestations of horror from the others. “Oh, come on! One little fire—”

“*Little* fire?” DobeY barked. “Perkins next door called the fire department when he saw the flames! And do I need to mention what it did to my grill?”

“And the picnic table,” chuckled Hutch.

“And the deck,” Cal added.

“Okay, okay, I know when to give up. But you know, Cap’n, if you’d teach me how to do it *right*—”

“I don’t have that much insurance! Now, get out of my face so I can grill in peace.” DobeY almost gave in to Starsky’s dejected expression as he walked toward the pool. “Starsky?”

The detective turned back hopefully.

“Where on Earth did you get those ridiculous swimming trunks?”

Starsky looked down at the bright red trunks, then at his backside.

“What do you mean? I had these specially made.” Starsky spun around, trying to get a better look at the white racing stripe that ran south from the waistband to turn and taper to a point across his left hip, mirroring the detailing of Torino.

“I thought maybe you got them from the circus or something.”

“Harold!” admonished his wife. “They’re fine, David.”

“Yeah, Uncle Dave, I think they’re cool.”

“Thanks, Rosie. I think they’re cool, too.” Starsky donned a haughty expression and continued his saunter to the pool. “Come on, kiddo. Let’s show these two old prunes in the pool how a cannonball’s done!”

The little girl eagerly scrambled to her feet and adjusted the waterwings on her arms. She then pulled an oversized pair of goggles over her eyes and clamped on her nose plugs. “Contact!”

“Contact!” Starsky echoed, extending his arms and grasping Rosie by both wrists.

Edith simply shook her head at her “four children.” The first time Starsky and Rosie devised their modified game of “cannonball,” she had worried about her youngest’s safety in the roughhousing. When she expressed her concern to her husband, he simply responded with: “Those two overgrown kids would never let anything happen to Cal or Rosie.” And that was that. Almost a month of the simple game had proven him right.

“Engage engines!” came Rosie’s nasally command.

Starsky began making the sound of a rumbling motor. “Engines engaged!”

“Clear the runway!”

Hutch and Cal noisily swam away from the middle of the pool in mock terror.

“Runway cleared! Prepare for takeoff.” Starsky began to crouch as he and Rosie finished their litany. “Three...two...one...*takeoff!*”

Starsky leaned back and swung Rosie off her feet in a complete circle. As soon as the little girl was over the pool, he released her to fly several feet in the air. At the last moment, Rosie tucked herself into a tiny ball.

“*Cannonball!*” Starsky raised his arms in triumph. Rosie quickly surfaced and began to dog-paddle to the side.

Reaching the cement edge, she pulled off her nose plugs and goggles. “How big was it?”

“Huge!” Starsky spread out his arms to indicate the size of the waves. “You just about washed Cal and Hutch right out of the pool.”

Rosie looked at her mother skeptically. “Was it really that big, Momma?”

Edith paused from removing the lids from the assortment of salads. “It sure was. You almost soaked your father!”

“Just about put my fire out!” Dobeys groused. “Well, come on, you hooligans, or I’m going to eat all these burgers myself!”

The Dobeys children pulled themselves from the pool and joined their parents around the table, good-naturedly teasing one another. Hutch paused by his partner to dry himself off. Not for the first time, he noticed Starsky staring after the little family with a wistful expression on his face. The kids were giving their father some rather wet but heartfelt hugs before they sat down on the wooden benches. There was an unmistakable longing in Starsky’s cobalt eyes as the scenario played out before them.

Hutch placed a hand on Starsky’s shoulder. “What are you thinking, buddy?”

Starsky pulled his gaze away with an almost physical effort. “Oh, nothing, really. I guess, well, it’s just...”

“It’s just that it’s Father’s Day,” Hutch finished. “And Cal’s about the same age you were when your father was killed.”

Starsky managed a small smile. “That obvious, huh?”

“Only to me, pal,” Hutch returned with a soft grin.

Starsky sighed. “It’s great to see them together, you know? They have a terrific relationship, just like me and Pop did. I guess I just still miss him sometimes.”

Any response Hutch was going to make was cut off by a familiar bellow. “Are you two going to stand there yakking all day, or are you going to grace us with your presence and eat the burgers Starsky’s been drooling over for the past half-hour?”

As the two detectives made their way to the small feast and sat, Dobeys reached for his children’s hands, preparing to say grace. It was good to know he could keep the partners in line, even on their day off. Or at least he preferred to think it was his commanding tone, rather than Starsky’s voracious appetite, that propelled them to the picnic table.

All was right with his world, and he was content.



“All right, children, settle down. Let’s get our rugs out for a story.” Miss Witmeirs’ day camp group noisily obeyed, crossing over to the pigeonholed counter housing each child’s “quiet time”

rug. The small pads were laid out on the floor and the assortment of five- and six-year-olds lay down in anticipation of the story to come. All except Rosie Dobey.

“Rosie, what’s wrong? Let’s take our seats so we can get started.”

“Miss Witmeirs, somebody drew on my rug!” Nearby children sat up or craned their necks to see what Rosie was talking about. The young teacher quickly crossed the room, anticipating a childish prank or undisclosed accident on Rosie’s rug.

“See?” Rosie pointed at the pink rug where she had unrolled it. “It’s shaped like me.”

A silhouette of a child’s body was painted in red on the fabric. To a child, it might have resembled a picture traced of themselves to color in as they had during arts and crafts. To the teacher, it resembled the chalk outline of a body, marking where death had claimed a child.



Cal fumbled through the combination to his locker a second time. Frustration at the thought of being late for basketball camp made his motions jerky as he spun the dial. The lock had worked fine throughout the school year, so there was no reason for it to act up during the summer leagues.

Finally, the last number clicked in the tumblers, and the lock sprang open. Wrenching open the door to retrieve his gear, Cal was greeted by a black-and-white photo from the 1920s pasted to the inside of his locker door. Three young black men were hanging by their necks, obviously dead. Surrounding them with torches were the robed figures of the KKK.



All *wasn't* right with his world.

Dobey wearily made his way through Metro’s parking lot to his car and slammed his briefcase down on the Cadillac’s roof. Throughout the course of the week, a total of six threats had been made against him and his family, warnings he hadn’t taken lightly from day one. A few minutes ago, he had received a call from Edith, saying they had received a package in the mail containing pictures of the four of them. The first photo had been taken about a month ago as they left Sunday morning

services, and the other pictures included family members as they were coming and going from their various activities. Whoever was stalking them knew their habits and schedules well. Just before he left the office, Dobey had arranged for round-the-clock black-and-whites to be stationed at his home. Tomorrow, he would officially pull Starsky and Hutchinson back from where they’d been on loan to Narco and assign them to the case. *His case.*

As engrossed as he was replaying the last week's events in his mind, Dobe's inattention didn't prevent his reflexes from propelling him around at the sound of approaching footsteps—five-to-one, and Patrolman Andrews in the lead. *Ex-Patrolman* Andrews. Dobe's experienced eyes darted around the lot. As late as it was, the normally highly trafficked area was empty. Still, a person picking off a cop in a police parking lot was either grossly confident or suicidal.

"I hear you've been getting my messages, Dobe."

The captain knew he would have to act fast if he had a chance at all of getting out of the ambush alive. It was well after 8:00 p.m., the shift change over hours ago, and he was alone outside the structure. Assuming a docile expression, the large man extended his hands in a sign of resignation. "What do you want with me, Andrews?"

Andrews gave him an oily grin. "Well, now, you should have thought of that before you—"

The sentence was never finished as Dobe flung himself at the nearest man. Surprisingly agile for his size, the tackle engulfing the smaller man ended with the captain rolling into a crouch and drawing his gun, while obtaining a firm grip on the forearm of a second man. The brief skirmish still provided Andrews with enough time to maneuver behind Dobe and bring his pistol across the back of the captain's head in a viscous blow.

Even as unconsciousness began to overtake him, Dobe still had the presence of mind to fire his weapon. Though the shots went wide of their mark, he knew they would serve his purpose: gunshots fired outside a police station would soon bring the troops running. He only hoped he would still be alive when they got there.

Enraged, Andrews aimed his pistol between the eyes of the now unconscious man. None of his men dared move as Andrews' arm trembled through the mental battle that ensued. Finally, he tore his gaze away from the captain and holstered his gun.

"O'Neill, Pipmeir, you two get him in the van, *now*. Move! I'll take care of these two morons." Andrews jerked the men Dobe had felled to their feet, then picked up the gun that had fallen from the captain's slack hand. Dobe's briefcase followed his inert body onto the floor of the van.

Just after the white service van pulled out of the parking lot, three uniformed patrolmen spilled out of the stairwell and surveyed the now empty structure. Guns drawn, they methodically worked the area, but found no trace of a disturbance. Even as thorough as they were, they failed to see marks made by the three slugs imbedded in the concrete wall near Dobe's sedan, or the broken gold tie tac engraved with the letter "D" lying nearby.



Minnie drove like a woman possessed to the small ball field in Venice. Not more than an hour ago, the ransom demands had been called into the DA's office, and the Feds were already forming their tactics team. One of the FBI agents assigned to the case wanted Starsky and Hutchinson to be with him when he broke the news to Edith. The call came into Metro where

Minnie was spending her Friday night poring over the manuals for their new computer system. She knew where “her boys” were and would put them in motion.

Tears filling her eyes, Minnie came to a sliding stop in the parking lot behind the baseball stands. She could see the detectives in their white-and-blue sweats jogging off the field as the third out was called. Even under the illumination of the lit ball field, she could tell both wore a relaxed expression she didn’t often see as they stormed in and out of Metro. Hutch was laughing at something Starsky was saying, but the smile died away as he saw Minnie getting out of her car, her face tight with apprehension. Hutch nudged his partner, and the two broke into a run, coming to a dusty stop at her side.

Minnie swallowed hard. “Somebody snatched the captain.”



Senior FBI Agent Lieutenant Donald Sanderson ran his hands through his silver hair. He had all but begged his commanding officer to let him head up the recovery team on the Dobeys case, but Commander Pickerell knew him all too well when he said Sanderson was too close to the subject to be objective. It was no secret that Sanderson and his wife Betty had been close friends with the Dobeys for years, even serving on the same church board as the captain. At least Pickerell didn’t pull him from the assignment all together.

Sanderson, Starsky, and Hutch had gone to the Dobeys’ to discuss the ransom demands with Edith. All three wished there were some way to take away the fear in her eyes—anticipating the worse—as she watched them walking up the sidewalk to their house. Edith had been understandably distraught, but maintained her composure as she calmly explained to her two children that their father was called away on a case and wouldn’t be back until morning at the earliest.

The three men stayed with Edith until the U.S. marshals arrived to protect the small family, posting themselves around the house until the crisis passed. Edith’s sister also showed up to spend the night, just before the three men left. As they made their way to the porch, Edith’s voice called them back. She looked at each friend in turn, then nodded, knowing they understood her silent plea to bring her husband home safe.



Now Sanderson stood in the middle of his darkened office, seething. Earlier, Andrews had called in the ransom demand: one million dollars in unmarked, small denomination bills, out of numeric sequence. The ex-officer made no attempt to deny his identity when asked by the federal agents, actually gloating over his revenge. The drop was scheduled for the following midnight, and instructions would be called in later. Starsky and Hutch stormed into his office, apparently having just received the same briefing he had.

Sanderson sat wearily on the edge of his desk. “You heard?”

Hutch’s face was an icy mask. “What are those bureaucratic morons thinking?”

“They aren’t!” Starsky ground out, his features a livid contrast to his partner’s. The detectives from the ninth precinct had just been informed by the mayor’s office that no attempt would be made to rescue the captain until the drop, and that it would be handled by the FBI in cooperation with the local SWAT team. The need for caution in handling the kidnapping was linked directly to the mayor’s re-election campaign, and a recent public opinion poll on the perceived increased violence in the city. Any failed attempt or excessive force exercised by the police department would make for bad press. “Those morons and bureaucrats are gonna sit around contemplating their navels for the next twenty-four hours, then try and out-smart and out-maneuver the kidnapers.”

“And Harold winds up dead either way.” Sanderson looked from one set of fiery blue eyes to the other. “And maybe Edith and the kids as well. With all the contact they’ve had with the family before the kidnapping, I doubt they won’t—”

“Wait a minute,” Starsky interrupted. “What contact are you talking about?”

“Harold didn’t tell you?”

Hutch shook his head. “We’ve been working with Narco for the past few weeks and out of the office. What’s been going on?”

Sanderson explained about numerous calls to the Dobey household, the unidentifiable voice spewing racial filth, making threats, and hanging up. Starsky’s and Hutch’s faces became enraged.

“*Andrews!*” Hutch ground out.

“That piece of—” Starsky spat. “You’ve issued an APB?”

“Of course.” Sanderson nodded. “But that’s not all.” The two detectives became livid as he detailed what had happened to Cal and Rosie. “So that’s why the mayor’s office won’t afford to risk—”

Starsky grabbed the older man by his arm. “That’s why we can’t afford *not* taking the risk to get the captain back first. If he’s already come that close to the kids...”



Hutch stepped up next to his partner. “...there’s no way they’re *not* going to get to them. We’ve got to get Andrews first.”

Starsky drew a ragged breath, forcing himself to think clearly. “So, what are we gonna do about it?”

Sanderson sighed and moved to sink slowly into his chair. Elbows resting on the desk, his fingers made a tent before him. “*Officially*, nothing.”

“But *unofficially*?” Hutch crossed his arms in front of his chest, understanding what the older man couldn’t say.

“Look, you two boys know what kind of position I’m in here.” Sanderson had been called a rogue throughout his tenure, to the point of missing out on advancement opportunities within the Department. He was an outstanding field agent, even if his tactics were questioned by the agency, but his results and easy manner were what drew Starsky and Hutch to him. A new department head had it out for Sanderson, and any step out of line would lead to the agent’s dismissal and subsequent loss of many of his retirement benefits due him in less than five years. “As an agent, I cannot condone or support any outside actions in this situation. I would have no official participation or knowledge if, say, a recovery attempt were made.”

There was no humor in the feral grin on Starsky’s face as he exchanged glances with Hutch. “Officially speaking.”

Sanderson returned the same grin with a dangerous glint in his eye. “*Officially*, I would not be able to express my contempt for the weasely little twit who calls himself the mayor of this city, who would probably wet himself if he ever spent a *good* day in any one of our shoes. Officially, I wouldn’t be able to offer a list of the contacts who owe me a favor and could dig up some leads on Harold’s whereabouts.”

Hutch nodded his understanding “Officially speaking.”

Sanderson pulled a small leather notebook out of his breast pocket and ripped out the last page then handed it to Hutch. “You know where to find me.”

Starsky and Hutch headed out the door. It was now 3:00 a.m., leaving them only twenty-one hours to find their captain and friend.



Their first stop was The Pits. Starsky and Hutch pounded on the back door until they heard Huggy hollering “We’re closed!” through the thick metal door.

“It’s us!” the two detectives yelled back in unison, then looked at each in mild surprise at their chorus.

Huggy swung open the alley door and pulled another drag from his cigarette. “A little late for a nightcap, isn’t it? Shoot, Hutch, ain’t it about time for you to go to the gym?”

“You mean, you haven’t heard anything yet?” Starsky asked, passing Huggy through the doorway.

Huggy looked back and forth between the two. “Heard what?”

Hutch stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind them. “The captain’s been kidnapped.”

“You’re putting me on. Who would want to snatch the big guy?”

“We already know the who and the why. What we need to know is the *where*.” Starsky picked up the eight ball from the center of the pool table and rolled it around in his hands, expelling some of his nervous energy. “Ransom drop’s tonight at midnight.”

“We want him back *before* then.”

“Missing his melodious voice already, huh?” Huggy stripped off the dirty apron and tossed it on top of the bar. “I can dig it. Let me put my ear to the ground and find out what’s rumblin’ besides the San Andreas Fault.”



Wheezer Johnson was no stranger to the warehouse district. After forty-five years of loading and unloading rail freight, he knew every one of the fourteen buildings in the southwest blocks like he knew his own reflection. A fire feeding off a load of dry chemicals gave Wheezer his nickname and an early retirement that kept him bouncing between the homeless shelter and the VA Hospital.

When the weather was good enough, though, Wheezer made his home in one of the warehouses from which he once eked out a living. He hadn’t visited Building 209 in several months, due to a stint of bronchitis that laid him out at the VA for a week. The homeless man headed there now, staggering under the effects of the bottle of Mad Dog he’d been able to lift from a convenience store while the clerk was chasing a pair of teenage shoplifters out the door.

Wheezer unsteadily climbed the dilapidated stairs leading him to the fourteenth of fifteen levels. The fourteenth—his favorite floor—hosted many smaller offices and storerooms, perfect for a bit of privacy from the other occasional homeless person, and safety from the drug dealers that sometimes frequented the district. After a night of roaming the streets, he was ready to find a quiet spot and settle down with his bottle for a good day’s sleep.

He was surprised to the point of nearly losing his grasp on the wine when he rounded the corner leading to the smaller storerooms to see one of the doors open and people inside. Even more frightening was the angry white man screaming slurs at the black man tied to a chair, obviously roughed up. Wheezer instinctively flattened himself against the wall and began sidling away from the scene, though his eyes were drawn to the scenario playing out before him.

When he heard Whitie call the bound man “Captain,” Wheezer knew he was witnessing more than just some bad crap going down, and decided to make a hasty retreat. His coordination was poor on the soberest of days, and Wheezer stumbled heavily across the floor, causing the ancient boards to creak. Before he was able to curse under his breath, a hand snaked across his chest and gathered a fistful of his coat, slamming the homeless man against the wall.

“Where the hell do you think you’re headed?”

“Nowhere, man—I ain’t headed nowhere. I was just lookin’ for a place to sleep.”

“What’s going on out here?” Andrews stormed out into the hallway.

Wheezer's captor slammed him against the wall a second time. "I found this bum creepin' around up here, but I don't think he's seen nothing."

Andrew's arctic glare sizing him up sent a chill down Wheezer's spine. He had the feeling he was given the same consideration the angry blond man would give a cockroach. "Get rid of him, Murdock—permanently. He's just another worthless coon living off my taxes."



The man called Murdock, who hauled Wheezer out onto the docks, wasn't paying too much attention to his charge, never anticipating the homeless man would put up a fight. Murdock was caught completely off guard when his intended victim jumped into the bay before he'd had a chance to place a bullet in his head.

Murdock fired twice into the ripples, marking where the old man had disappeared, the gun making its odd *wuffling* sound due to its silencer. He peered vainly into the inky darkness for any sign of life or death. When none appeared, he weighed the odds of the derelict surviving swimming to shore in his heavy clothes, against what would happen to him if he were to tell Andrews he'd let the old man get away.

Lighting up a cigarette, Murdock went back toward the warehouse, the decision easily made.



As the footsteps of his intended assassin retreated above his head, Wheezer dug his nails deeper into the post he clung to, shivering against the cold water. He cursed the loss of his overcoat and shoes, which he had quickly discarded after swimming under the boardwalk. Willing his teeth to stop chattering, the former Marine paddled silently toward the breaker wall, his anger and sense of survival propelling him forward.

Wheezer unsteadily climbed the dock's ladder and slid quietly through the shadows cast by the buildings. He quickly ran through his list of options for shelter and perhaps some dry clothes, his mind surprisingly clear courtesy of the adrenaline that had kept him alive just moments before.

Taking another deep breath to calm himself, Wheezer began an unsteady jog out of the warehouse district. He had a friend who owed him a favor for a hot tip he'd provided a month or so ago, and would cash in on it.

And maybe—if he played his cards right—Huggy would throw in a couple of drinks as well.



When Dobe regained consciousness, he was astonished he was still alive. He knew the blows were given for the perverse enjoyment of his captures, not to subdue him. He had defended himself the best he could, which had been limited, since his arms were bound behind him and he was blindfolded. He had remained silent throughout, until Andrews wanted to "make the nigger lick his shoes." That elicited a string of obscenities from the captive that would have made a

sailor blush. The captain knew he and God would have a long discussion about his language—*later*—but right now, he hoped the Lord was pretty ticked off, too.

When the door swung open, DobeY was surprised to see light coming from the opposite room, not having realized his blindfold had been removed after he had lost consciousness, and the darkness around him was due to the small storeroom he'd been locked in. He blinked at the silhouetted figure entering the room, and Andrew's oily voice mocked him.

"So, the big man's coming around? You were out for quite a while there. You ready to lick my boots yet, *boy*?"

DobeY bit his tongue and simply glared.

Andrews lashed out, slapping the captain across the face. "Answer me!"

Still, DobeY remained silent, waiting for his head to clear.

"You better feel more like talking, you stupid nigger, because that's the *only* reason we've let you live. The Feds demanded to hear your voice—prove you're still breathing—or the ransom was no deal." As he lit a cigarette, the flare of Andrews' lighter briefly lit his face, and the younger man studied his victim. One eye was swollen shut, and the left side of DobeY's lower lip was split. "You're only gonna live long enough to regret the day you ever laid eyes on me."

The longer the captain remained silent, the more infuriated the ex-patrolman became. Finally, Andrews lashed out again, nailing DobeY's shoulder. When he'd first been brought to the room, the captain had been shoved across a dilapidated desk, collapsing it. Andrews was fairly sure he'd broken the other's arm or shoulder in the fall. DobeY groaned against the pain, then grit his teeth, seething.

"You answer when you're spoken to, *boy*!"

"When I get my hands on you—"

"You had your chance, *Captain*. But you're not so big and bad when you don't have your butt-kissin' suck-ups with you, now, are you? I ought to—"

"Hey." Andrews was interrupted by the entrance of a man DobeY didn't know, but recognized from when he was first jumped outside the station. The fact he was no longer blindfolded merely confirmed that they were going to kill him, since they didn't need to conceal their faces from possible identification by him. "I just got the word that your favorite detectives have been askin' all over town about him."

"They haven't found anything, right?"

"Nah, nobody's saying nothing, 'cause they ain't heard or seen nothing. It's cool."

Andrews looked back over to the captain, who sat stock still, listening for anything that might be useful, and trying desperately to see anything within his limited range of vision that could be used to tip off the Feds. "Well, I'd say it's about time to make our next call, stir things up a bit.

We can holler at them for letting Starsky and Hutchinson nose around, and up the ante. Maybe move up the deadline for the drop. That'll keep 'em hoppin'." Andrews placed a hand on either side of the captain's shoulders and leaned in so his face was only inches away. His voice was unemotional, but deadly as a viper. "I want you to understand something, Dobey. One word—just one little word—that might tip off the Feds or your two buddies, and I'll kill your family, starting with your daughter. But not before I have a little fun with her, you understand?" Andrews' tone turned lower still as he began to describe in detail what he would do to the four-year-old. Dobey's face contorted in rage, and he somehow managed to throw himself out of the chair at the younger man. Andrews easily sidestepped the charge and knocked the captain back down, landing heavily on his injured shoulder. He lay there a moment, chest heaving in fury and pain.

Andrews grabbed his captive by his jacket lapels and hauled him to a seated position, continuing as if he was never interrupted by the captain's futile retaliation. "And then, I'll do your wife. Got it? Not one word."

Still breathing heavily, Dobey stared hard into the eyes of madness, until he finally looked away and nodded. He would make the call.



By midday, Starsky and Hutch had been through all of the snitches on Sanderson's list, and had made contact with the majority of their own. Fatigue and discouragement were beginning to take their toll on the pair. Hutch leaned heavily against the roof of the Torino, staring across it at his partner.



Starsky glanced down at his watch. "Nine hours and counting."

"So, where do we go from here?" Hutch rolled his shoulders to relieve the tension and fatigue growing there.

"We might as well check in with Huggy and grab some coffee. Maybe he's heard something by now."



Wheezer Johnson had slept off the remainder of the morning and part of the afternoon in Huggy's spare room above the bar before waking and making his way down to the bar to talk further with Huggy. A few drinks loosened his tongue, and the homeless man relayed the information he had withheld from the barkeep when he'd first arrived. When Huggy heard about the large black man being held at the warehouse, he immediately raced to the phone while trying to convince Wheezer to stay put. But when he turned back around to promise Wheezer a few more rounds for his cooperation, the homeless man was gone.



Starsky scrubbed his face with both hands, trying to dispel some of his tension. “It’s a long shot.”

“But even if it’s not the captain, something’s going on there.” Hutch nodded and swung his focus back toward Huggy. “Your friend, this Wheezer...he’s reliable?”

“As reliable as any guy on a seven-year binge,” Huggy snorted. “But yeah, Wheezer—he’s a cat of a different stripe. He pounded on my door a couple hours after you two split. I don’t recall reading in the paper that it was ‘visit the Bear in the middle of night’ night. But here comes Wheezer, all wet and shivering, and madder than blazes. I think he’s straight up when he says he wasn’t out chasing pink elephants around the harbor.”

“Okay.” Starsky pushed himself up off the barstool. “Then the only question left is—”

Hutch followed suit. “—how do we get the captain back without them mussing up his pretty face.”

“Yeah. I kinda like how his eyes bug out at us when he’s really mad. I think I’d miss that.” Starsky grabbed Hutch by the arm and pulled him toward the door. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Now, I’m afraid. Am I going to like it?”

“Probably not.”

Huggy just shook his head at the departing pair.



The two men found themselves in the midst of organized chaos as they shouldered their way into Sanderson’s office. It was apparent something major was happening to warrant such activity.

As soon as the older man made eye contact, Hutch nodded toward the doorway. The partners left the office and waited down the hall.

Starsky dug his hands into his pockets. “What’s going on?”

“Edith got the call an hour ago.” Sanderson cleared his throat. “It was Harold, and the instructions for the ransom—they’ve moved the drop up by three hours.”

“What?” Starsky responded. “What do they think—?”

“Wait, it gets worse.” Sanderson put up a restraining hand. “They want Edith to make the drop.”

The detectives’ reactions were swift and vehement.

“No way!” Starsky slapped the wall with an open palm. “There’s no way we’re letting her do that!”

Hutch’s expression was just as fierce. “They’ll kill her, too.”

Sanderson nodded, then glared back toward his office. “That’s what I told them. They’re in there right now ‘calculating the risk.’ They want to put her in a flack vest—”

“No!” Starsky growled. “One of us, but not Edith.”

Hutch’s voice took on a deadly calm. “Listen, we got a tip and just may know where they’re holding him.”

Sanderson perked up. “Well, let’s have it!”

Starsky shook his head. “First, we want your word that we get a crack at this before the Mod Squad there comes in.”

“Those are highly trained professionals—”

“Whose hands are tied by a spineless bureaucrat. You said so yourself.” Hutch gestured back toward the office.

“I appreciate what you two want to do—”

“Then let us do it,” Hutch cut him off. “C’mon, Lieutenant, we’ve been straight with each other so far. You know that Starsky and I aren’t afraid of ducking under the red tape. We have a better chance of getting in there *now* than your small army does later.”

“And that’s our captain. To them, he’s just some pawn that *if* they get him back alive, it’ll be good press.” Starsky moved in tighter to Hutch’s side—a unified front. “We go in, we can get him out, or at the very least, check the layout and report back to you so the cavalry can do their thing. If the tip was bad, or it’s not Dobey, then we don’t waste the Feds’ time tracking down a false lead.”

Sanderson appeared to be wavering, but didn’t give his consent. “I don’t like this. We’ve got a half-dozen agents protecting Edith and kids, but that doesn’t guarantee their safety. And what about you two? I don’t like the idea of the two of you going in without back-up.”

Hutch gripped the agent’s arm. “Look, give us two hours. If we haven’t made contact with you by then, you can write us off and send in the big guns to get the captain out.”

“In the meantime, double the protection back at the house—just in case.” Starsky’s voice rose in anticipation of bringing the agent around.

“And who’s going to protect the two of you?”

The detectives looked at each other for a beat before Hutch faced Sanderson. “We’ve got us.”

Sanderson glanced from one determined face to the other. “All right, give me the address and you’ve got your two hours. But use this opportunity wisely. I don’t want to be the one to tell Edith that our screw-up cost Harold his life.”



With Starsky and Hutch in tow, Sanderson made his way down into the recesses of the federal building and extracted a large ring of keys out of his pocket. A floor-to-ceiling fence in a darkened corner of the basement partitioned off an area reserved for agency’s surplus. Sanderson opened the lock and rolled the large door open, then motioned for the two detectives to follow. He turned down the ninth aisle and, after scanning several boxes, pulled one down.

Starsky continued looking around at the paraphernalia stored on the shelves. Equipment ranging from M-16s to tear gas to Hazmet suits filled the enclosure. “Hutch, will you look at all this stuff?” Starsky’s voice held the same awe as a kid given carte blanche in a toy store.

“Here,” Sanderson said, holding out clothing to each of the men. “Those should fit you, I think.”

Both accepted a black turtleneck and dark pants similar to those utilized by paratroopers, complete with an assortment of pockets for various weaponry and equipment. Sanderson looked them over critically. “Hutch, your shoes are dark enough, but, Starsky, we’ll need to get you something else.”

The agent asked Starsky his shoe size and moved to a different aisle. After giving him a pair of dark boots, he continued to another box and extracted a black knit cap and tossed it to the blond. “You two boys got enough fire power?”

Starsky’s eyes lit up. “Whatcha got?”

“Give me a break, Starsk,” Hutch grouched.

Starsky barely glanced at his partner. “Hey, *you’re* the one who carries an elephant gun.”

Sanderson had already moved down the aisle, and Starsky hurried to follow him. Hutch brought up the rear, rolling his eyes at his partner’s enthusiasm.

The small arsenal was diverse and powerful enough to impress even Hutch, who geared himself with a small semi-automatic machine gun. Starsky selected a high-powered rifle with a scope. Turning away, he sited across the room. A small chill of *déjà vu* ran through him, as he remembered the last time he had used such a weapon. For an instant, he thought he saw flames dance before his eyes, and the fear that he had just lost his partner burned in his gut. Hutch’s hand on his shoulder brought him back to the present.

“Can we go now?”

“Wait.” Sanderson tossed Hutch a high-powered two-way radio, a length of rope, and a canister the size of a woman’s compact. “Black out.”

“What’s that?”

Starsky glanced back over his shoulder from where he had returned to look over the weaponry. “We used it in ’Nam. Prevents reflection off your skin.”

Before Hutch had a chance to say anything, Starsky exclaimed. “Look at this! What is it—a shoulder holster for midgets?”

Sanderson took the small weapon from him. “No, a leg holster. That’s a .22 caliber. It only takes one round and doesn’t necessarily have the greatest accuracy, but if you’re in a tight spot it’s probably better than nothing.”

Starsky was enthused all the same.

“Be my guest.” Sanderson grinned and locked up the weapons rack. Starsky yanked up his left pant leg and strapped on the miniature firearm.

Hutch raised an eyebrow. “So what are you supposed to do? Just before some guy with a .357 blows your head off, take the time to pull up your pant leg, grab that peashooter, and hope he’s near enough for you to hit him? Oh, and maybe, you’ll be lucky enough to *bruise* him? Why don’t you just stick a rock in your pocket?”

Starsky gave his partner a dirty look, then raised his leg, his hand grasping the general area of the weapon without really getting a handle on the trigger. “I’ll bet I could just fire right through the pants.”

“And blow your foot off in the process.” Hutch shook his head as the three men began their trek out of the basement. “For crying out loud, Starsky—”

“Bond.” Starsky’s accent was atrocious. “*Dave* Bond.”

Hutch snorted. “Yeah, well, I think your brains are shaken, not stirred.”



A quick stop at Metro allowed the Torino to be swapped for the more nondescript LTD. The drive through Bay City to one of its warehouse districts was made in silence. When the partners reached their destination, Hutch called in to Sanderson, and the time clock began. As they climbed out of the car, Hutch pulled on the black stocking cap the federal agent had given him, and began tucking in the stray wisps of blond hair. Before Hutch had a chance to object, Starsky had smeared a significant blob of the black camouflage grease across the blond’s right cheek and was working on the left.

“What the—? I can do it, I can do it.” Hutch pushed his partner’s hand away and leaned against the LTD’s door, bending until his face came into view in the side mirror. Starsky already had covered his face, throat, and the tops of his hands. In the waning light, his features were already becoming less distinguishable. As Hutch finished up his own face and throat, Starsky began humming “The Banana Boat Song.”

“Shut up, Starsk.”

Starsky's toothy grin was exceptionally bright against his new complexion.



The westerly rays of the sun cast shadows through the abandoned warehouses, providing sufficient cover for the two detectives to scurry from building to building, making their way from an empty lot a quarter mile away toward Building 209. When they reached the warehouse adjacent to their destination, Hutch crouched down next to his partner, as Starsky drew out from one of his numerous pockets a blueprint of the building. An urgent call made en route to the precinct to switch cars had set Minnie in motion, and within minutes, the partners had a quarter-inch scale schematic of every building on the pier. How she had managed to come up with the diagrams so quickly was beyond them, but they were coming to expect her to work magic at a moment's notice. Starsky quickly scanned the print, then cast a critical eye on the warehouse.

"There," he said, pointing to the south side. "According to this, there's a stairwell right off that back entry that'll take us to the fourteenth floor, just like Wheezer said."

"A good place for someone to be waiting to blow our heads off, too." Hutch pulled Starsky's arm closer to him and changed the angle of the print so he could see it better. "What's this?"

Hutch pointed to a series of dotted lines that followed each level of the building. "Starsk, was there another print of this building? One that showed more detail, like the electrical?"

Starsky reached back into the blowsy pocket off his right thigh and extracted a second diagram. "This one's the overhead view of the main floor."

Hutch's finger traced the similar dotted path as he saw on the previous drawing. "Look, here's the air duct."

"Yeah?" Starsky looked to where Hutch's finger lay. He then scanned the legend on the side of the print. "Specs here say it's a D-series ventilation system. What do you think that means?"

Hutch shrugged. "Don't know. Let's hope it means it's big enough for you to fit your gluteus maximus through there."

"My maximum *what*? Look, smart—"

Starsky's grumbling was ignored, as Hutch began a crouching trot along the shadowed side of the building. The brunet quickly refolded the two maps and returned them to his pockets. As he re-shouldered the rifle and began a stealthy jog of his own, he began devising ways to get back at his partner—as soon as he figured out exactly what it was Hutch had said to insult him.



A quick look through the grimy first-floor window revealed a posted sentry patrolling the hallway, periodically glancing through the open doors into each room. After the guard turned at the end of the hall and disappeared from view, the detectives watched for several minutes, gauging the timetable until the armed man's return. After his second pass, they determined they

would have approximately six minutes between each patrol. After the guard passed a third time and no one else appeared, they managed to quickly, and fairly quietly, pry open the window.

The two made a beeline for the stairwell and spent the next ten minutes quietly making their way up to the fourteenth floor. They experienced one heart-stopping moment glued to the walls when the ninth-floor watchman briefly entered the stairwell, but only long enough for a cursory glance up and down the multiple levels and to fling his cigarette butt into the semi-dark abyss.

Finally reaching the fourteenth floor, Hutch quickly glanced through a window in the hallway door, while Starsky watched and listened for any other guards to enter the stairwell. After the hall guard passed by the small window, Hutch motioned for Starsky to follow him into the hallway. He had just begun to turn the doorknob, when a second man came into view and stood outside a closed door—an obvious sentry for that room.

Hutch pushed Starsky away from the door. “There’s at least two of them on this floor. Fifth room down on the left.”

“And a bunch more throughout the building. There goes the idea of going in with both barrels blazing.”

Hutch jerked his head toward the grate above Starsky’s head. “Which means we’re going to have to check it out through the air ducts.”

Starsky nodded, then gave Hutch a curious look, remembering something. “Now, what were you saying about my maximum gladiola?”

Hutch grabbed Starsky by the wrists. “We’ll find out.”

Hutch raised his foot and stood on the tops of his partner’s bent legs. In one quick movement, he swung himself around to straddle Starsky’s shoulders. The brunet straightened, adding to Hutch’s height, and moved into position under the vent. Starsky handed up his Swiss army knife, and Hutch quickly removed the two screws holding the grate in place. Just as the blueprint indicated, the ductwork was approximately three-feet by three-feet, ample room for both men to uncomfortably maneuver to the various rooms on the floor. In the process of removing the grate, Hutch lost his grip and the grate slipped from his hands. His quick intake of breath was all the warning Starsky got. Years of conditioning kicked into gear, and he caught the vent before it struck the floor. However, it forced him to lunge to the side to make the catch, and Hutch’s additional weight caused him to stagger dangerously close to the stair rail. The blond’s own reflexes caused him to grasp Starsky’s head, effectively blinding him.

After a moment of staggering like a drunken sailor, Starsky was able to steady himself and stand upright. “You mind removing that screwdriver from my eye socket?” he hissed.

“Oh, sorry,” Hutch whispered back as he removed his hands from Starsky’s face and returned the driver attachment into the body of the knife. “Smooth moves there, partner.”

“Just be happy Ramon didn’t dip.” Starsky repositioned them back under the open ductwork. He then pulled a coil of rope out of one of his numerous pockets and tied it to the grate, then lowered it gently to rest on the floor. “Glad we packed the kitchen sink. You ready?”

“Let’s do it.”

Starsky cupped his hands under Hutch’s feet, then pushed, providing his partner with a platform to step onto his shoulders as he pulled himself up through the vent shaft to the ductwork, which traveled to either side of the opening. The blond slid forward until his entire body was in, then pushed himself backwards until only his head was visible to his partner. “Well, c’mon.”

Starsky cocked an eyebrow at him, then retrieved the cord attached to the grate and looped it through his belt. “Very funny. Rope?”

Hutch grinned and untied the end of a length of rope secured to his midsection. He then slipped the loop up around his chest and tossed the remainder down to Starsky. “Better hustle, we’re running out of time.”

“That’s my fault? You ready?”

Hutch wrapped the rope around his forearm and gripped it tightly, while bracing himself against the vent opening with the other. “Go.”

Keeping his eyes on his partner, Starsky hoisted himself up the rope and quickly drew himself to the opening. When Starsky had a good grip on the frame, Hutch crawled backwards, allowing his partner the room he needed to pull himself in the rest of the way. “Hurry it up; our friend’s due any minute.”

Starsky cleared the opening, then curled himself into a ball in order to turn himself around to face Hutch and the opening. He quickly grabbed the cord attached to his belt and prepared to hoist the grate cover back up to them. The sound of footsteps coming toward the stairwell door froze the partners, leaving the grate to swing mere inches above the floor. Starsky and Hutch held their breaths, staring at one another. In unison, they turned their attention to the figure casually opening the door, a cigarette held in one hand and the other cradling an M-16. His gaze was bored, as if he were certainly not expecting to see anything out of place there. Exhaling his cigarette’s smoke, he drew himself back into the hallway. But as he continued, the guard was nudged with a sense of something being out of place. *Was there something on the floor that hadn’t been there before?* The man tossed aside his cigarette and quickly retraced his steps. When he reached the stairwell door, he entered the enclosure with his gun ready.

Everything was as it had been. The guard chalked it up to the fatigue of having to maintain his uneventful post on the fourteenth floor, too many hours without sleep, and a fairly significant hangover. With a shake of his head, he shouldered his weapon and shut the stairwell door, returning to his weary plodding up and down the hallways.

If he had taken a moment to look up to the ventilation grate, he might have seen ten blackened fingers gripping the enclosure.



It took the detectives over fifteen minutes to stealthily make their way through half the maze of ductwork, counting the turn-offs until they reached the room Hutch had seen the man come out of earlier.

“Hurry it up, Starsk,” Hutch hissed at the figure ahead of him who had paused to review the blueprint.

Starsky waved the little mag light back toward his partner. “I’m doing the best I can up here. I can’t see more than two feet in front of me.”

Hutch glanced up at his partner’s backside for the hundredth time. “Well, the view back here’s not so great, either.”



The fifth path of the ductwork was the pay-off. The ceiling vent revealed an office space that was bare except for a dilapidated desk and chair and a second door that apparently led to another office or closet. A single guard sat in the room, dully skimming through a hot rod magazine.

Starsky twisted himself around to face his partner, while Hutch peered through the grate. “Only one guard here, and who knows how many more outside.”

“And what’s behind Door Number Two, Monty?”

“I don’t know, but that sure doesn’t look like Carol Marol to me.”

“If it is, she sure needs a shave.” Hutch grinned as Starsky began his trek backwards. “Let’s see if we can make a trade for what’s behind the next curtain.”



The adjoining room revealed through the grate was barely illuminated from a single low-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling. Even so, it was enough for them to make out the bound figure slumped in a chair. The captain appeared to be either asleep or unconscious, his chin resting on his chest.

“Okay, Sherlock,” Hutch hissed to Starsky’s darkened image. “We didn’t consider how we’re going to unscrew the grate from the *inside*.”

So close to victory, Starsky’s frustration was evident, even through the camouflage paint. With an angry snort, he lunged forward, throwing his entire weight upon the ventilation grate. Who was more surprised when the metalwork gave way freely was a toss-up among the three men. Dobey’s eyes popped open, and he instinctively looked upward toward the source of the disturbance, just in time to see a dark visage clutching the ventilation grate swing into view. Starsky would have fallen completely through by his own momentum if Hutch hadn’t lunged forward and caught him by the belt, leaving him to dangle from the opening by his hips.

“Hiya, Cap’n,” Starsky whispered as he gently swung a few feet from his superior.

“Starsky.” Dobey’s voice was raspy with fatigue and pain. “You are the ugliest black man I have ever seen.”

A grunt drew the captain’s gaze back up to the vent opening. Hutch’s strained face came into view, wisps of blond hair had crept from under the knit cap and were plastered to his damp forehead. Dobey cocked an eyebrow. “I stand corrected.”

“Up or down?” Hutch grunted.

Starsky quickly looked at the floor, assessing his options. “Up.”

“Figures.” To his credit, Hutch managed to haul Starsky in with minimal noise. Dobey peered into the darkness, though in the dim light, his view was minimal. Minute shuffling noises indicated Starsky returning through the ductwork and the setting down of the grate. An instant later, he swung out again, this time, by more controlled means. Starsky hung for a minute from the opening, then dropped almost soundlessly to the floor in a crouch. Hutch followed suit a moment later, then crossed to the chair to untie the captain. Starsky moved to the door, pressing his ear against it and straining to hear any sounds of alarm.

“Don’t think that I’m not grateful to see you two, but these turkeys were pretty explicit about what they would do if the Department tried anything. Edith and the kids...are they all right?”

“We’ve been working with Sanderson, Cap’n. He’s doubled the field agents at your house, so it’d take a tank for Andrews to get to them.” Dobey uttered a deep groan when his hands were finally freed, and he immediately cradled his right arm, wincing as he did.

“How bad?” Hutch knelt in front of the older man.

“I’ll live. They knocked me around a bit, but I think the only real damage is my shoulder—probably broken.” Dobey looked from one man to the other. “You two look ridiculous.” A genuine smile briefly creased his face with a new thought. “Wait until Andrews sees you two. Now that my hands are free, I’m gonna show that boy a thing or two about ‘boot licking’.”

Starsky swore under his breath. “And when you’re finished with him, Hutch and me get our turns.”

Hutch nodded. “Cap’n, how many men are out there? It’s time to start thinking about how we’re going to get out of here.”

Both Starsky and Hutch looked back toward the ceiling vent from where they had come.

“Don’t even think about it,” Dobey growled.

“Well, there’s always the cavalry.” Hutch crossed to the corner of the room farthest from the doorway and pulled out the two-way radio, speaking to Sanderson in a hushed voice. Starsky moved back to the door, listening intently for any movement or changes on the other side.

Before Hutch had a chance to finish, Starsky’s urgent whisper of “Company!” forced him off the radio. He passed Dobey his Python and drew the machine gun from his shoulder. The captain

sat back in his chair, his bindings kicked into a corner, Hutch's weapon held tightly in his left hand. Starsky and Hutch flattened themselves against the walls on opposite sides of the door. There was a moment of collectively held breaths until the door swung open.

"You grunting and groaning in here, boy?" The thug approached Dobey, kicking him in the shins to awaken the apparently sleeping man. "Wake up, nigger, I'm talking to ya!"

The brief monologue allowed Starsky and Hutch enough time to determine that the man was alone. One silent, swift move from Starsky, and the captor was laid out on the floor from the rifle stock meeting the back of his cranium.

Hutch retrieved the discarded ropes from the corner and bound the guard. For good measure, he removed his knit cap and stuffed it in the man's mouth. "There, that'll keep *you* from 'grunting and groaning,' *boy*."

Dobey looked from one man to the other, then spoke in hushed, urgent tones. "What next? Whatever it is, we'd better do it right. I don't want any of these turkeys getting away to retaliate against Edith and the kids."

Hutch compassionately gripped the other man's arm. "Got it, Captain. Well, one option is, we can sit tight and wait for Sanderson and his team to move in, then take care of Andrews and any of his goons that come back here."

Starsky shook his head. "Too risky. We're trapped like rats in here. It wouldn't take much for them to blast their way through—our protection's too limited."

"Back through the vent?"

"Not with his broken shoulder. We'd be too slow if we got discovered."

"Then our only option's to take the scenic route."

"How soon before Sanderson shows up?"

Hutch grabbed Starsky's arm, peering at his watch. "He promised it'd be no more than fifteen, so we've got just over ten minutes to kill."

"Nice choice of words."

Dobey, who'd been watching the exchange like a spectator at a tennis match, finally broke in. "If you two clowns are finally finished, I'd say we'd better get a move on."

"You heard the man, Starsk."

"I love it when he takes charge." Starsky moved to the doorway and cracked it open, peering into the outer room. Seeing it was clear, he nodded to the other two.

Hutch helped the captain stand, then steadied him when he staggered. He quickly slipped an arm around Dobey for support and led him toward the door. Hutch made eye contact with Starsky,

his blue eyes expressing concern for their superior's condition. Starsky nodded in understanding, then determinedly slid through the outer room to the door leading to the hallway and freedom.



Starsky called out to the guard in the hallway with some forced amusement in his voice, “Hey! Come in here. You gotta see this.” When he cleared the doorway, the guard was knocked unconscious with a sharp blow behind his ear.

After propping the captain against the wall, Hutch dragged the limp body of the second guard into a darkened corner and relieved him of his weapon. “Captain, do you know how many of them there are? Any idea where they’re holed up?”

Dobey thought hard, dredging up sounds and conversations. “I heard them say more than once they were ‘going up.’ They might have meant the next floor, but I never heard their footsteps above me. It’s an old building, so I should have heard something. They must have meant the roof.”

Hutch shook his head. “Pretty sloppy then, if we were able to approach the building without being detected.”

Starsky’s expression turned smug. “Maybe it was our superior stealth and wreath-like—”

“*Wraith*-like,” Hutch interjected.

“*Wraith*-like prowess that—”

“No, they’re just short on brains,” Dobey grunted. “And big on fire-power. I don’t know where they’ve been storing it, but they’ve got enough juice to light up an entire city block.”

“So Andrews and his flunkies have got some significant backers.” Hutch scowled. “And if that’s the case, why would they need that much muscle and money?”

“I’ve heard at least a dozen different voices, all spitting out the same racial garbage. This is a lot bigger than just some bigoted punk who got kicked off the force.”

Starsky’s expression turned deadly. “You think it’s the Klan?”

“It’s not the local VFW. Klan or neo-Nazis. Look, are you two going to stand around flapping your jaws, or are you going to rescue me?”

Starsky looked at his partner. “He doesn’t do the damsel in distress thing very well, does he?”

“Sleeping Beauty, he’s not. But he’s right. We’d better get moving, or we’re going to miss our welcoming party.”



With the hall guard out of the way, the trio decided getting out of the building via the same stairwell by which Starsky and Hutch had entered was the safest option. Their trek down the first two hallways was uneventful, but the third contained another bored-looking guard. He was avoided simply by ducking into a storage closet and waiting for him to pass. Since they had no way of knowing whether or not his duties included checking in on the captive or with the other two guards—who were hopefully still unconscious—their escape became even more urgent. The trio hurried down the last hallway to the stairwell. Starsky glanced at his watch. “Six minutes until the cowboys arrive.”

“Yeah, well, I’d rather be outside when they get here than holed up with the Indians.” Hutch peered through the door’s window, then cautiously pushed the door open. He slid into the stairwell, one hand easing the door shut behind him. He cautiously took a step toward the railing, looking it up and down for the presence of guards. The tip of a rifle stock harmlessly poking over the rail two stories below warned him of their presence, and he quickly withdrew from the line of vision. After a moment, he heard footsteps and the sound of a door opening and closing. He waited a count of ten to ensure it wasn’t a ploy, then pulled the hallway door back open to usher in Dobey and Starsky.

The three quickly made their way down the flights of stairs, hugging the walls and pausing at each doorway for Hutch to cautiously peer through its window, then signal the others on again. The captain continued to cradle his arm, his face graying from the pain.

“Hang on, Cap’n,” Starsky encouraged. “Only two more to go.”

As soon as the words were out of Starsky’s mouth, the slamming open of a door above their heads clamored throughout the stairwell, followed by the rush of angry voices. None of the fleeing men needed any prompting to begin a mad dash down the remaining steps. Immediately, they heard the sound of pounding feet behind them, and gunshots pinged off the handrails and pelted the floor close to their feet.

“Let’s hope Sanderson’s watch is fast!” Starsky hissed as he checked his pace, careful not to plow into Dobey, struggling before him.

Hutch ground to a halt before the final landing, only six short steps from the door leading outside. In his concentration on the stairs before him, the captain failed to notice that Hutch had stopped, and rushed into him. Hutch stumbled forward and was greeted by several shots, missing him by inches. Starsky lunged forward and jerked his partner up behind him onto the relative safety of the stairs.

Hutch slung the M-16 off his shoulder. “I’ll give you cover...”

“...and I’ll get you on the flipside.”

“Just stay out of my way when I come through.”

“Gotcha.” Starsky retrieved Hutch’s Python from the captain and tucked it in his waistband for a right-handed draw. The rifle was slung back over his shoulder, then he drew his own Beretta. He looked at the captain. “Ready?”

At his superior's nod, Hutch stepped forward to the guardrail and turned upward, firing the M-16 at the men taking aim from the upper landing. The machine gun fire forced the kidnappers back, allowing enough time for Starsky to rush down the last stairs and jerk open the door, then brace it with his hip. Captain Dobey immediately followed, charging through as Starsky drew the second pistol and began returning fire over top of his partner's M-16. Hutch then leapt down the short flight, hitting the open door hard with his shoulder and bouncing off to run in the captain's wake. Starsky backed away from the door, still firing, but once he cleared his opponent's line of vision, turned and bolted after the others.



Federal Agent Fitzwallace shifted in his seat, out of boredom and agitation. With a quick movement he rotated his head, releasing some of the tension. The guard over the Dobey house had almost doubled in response to the impending ransom drop. Their next step would prove to be riskier than they had originally planned. The radio clipped to his belt crackled to life. "Fitzwallace here."

The responding static was broken up by a familiar voice cursing. "We've been made. You know what to do when the call comes in."

"What? How the—?"

More vehement cursing cut him off. "He's doing it right now. So you just do what you're getting paid to do!"

Fitzwallace switched off the two-way and reattached it to his hip, then turned up the agency's receiver inside the van, knowing that any moment, he'd be put into action by Dispatch.



The three men pelted away from Building 209 and across the loading yard, ears straining for sounds of pursuit or rescue. As soon as they made it to the next building, they plastered themselves against the wall. Starsky peered back through the growing darkness. "If Sanderson doesn't get here soon..."

The captain swore under his breath. "If anything happens to Edith and the kids..."

"Here they come!" Starsky shouted, shouldering the rifle and sighting it on the first man that poured out of the building. The shot was true, striking the thug in the calf and laying him out. The second shot ripped into the next man's forearm, spinning him to the ground. Starsky's third and fourth bullets effectively forced the rest to take cover or stream back into the building. Just before a volley of gunfire retaliated back at them, Hutch dove and rolled out past the security of the building, then leveled a round from the M-16, causing the remaining felons to scatter. Starsky popped back out as well, firing from both pistols, providing Hutch with the cover he needed to scramble back to his place next to Dobey.

The three of them looked skyward simultaneously at the sound of an approaching helicopter. Hutch nodded approvingly. "The Feds sure know how to make an entrance." He drew the two-

way radio to his mouth. “Sanderson, this is Hutchinson. We have a visual on you up there. Watch for gunfire from the roof, possible snipers.”

Static crackled on the line. “Hutch, what are you talking about? ETA three minutes. We’re *driving in* off Washington Street!”

Hutch’s gaze quickly followed the helicopter hovering in their direction. As it turned to face them, the three could just barely make out the armed figure leaning out of the bubble and opening fire.



Edith looked at the clock for what seemed like the hundredth time that hour. Horrific scenarios played through her mind of what the kidnappers had done to Harold, and what they would do to the children if she failed to follow their instructions.

Rosie lay on the floor a few feet from the television, watching a cartoon rerun, while Cal attempted to read his history assignment at the dining room table. Every time his mother looked up to the clock, Cal could see her and followed her gaze. Though she said nothing, he could feel her tension until he couldn’t stand it.

“Momma, I—” Before Cal could finish his sentence, they heard the lock turn in the front door and four FBI agents stormed in. Rosie looked up in bewilderment, clutching a toy rabbit to her chest.

“Agent O’Neill, ma’am. I’m sorry for the intrusion, but I need for all of you to come with us immediately.”

“I don’t understand.” Edith stood. “What is it? Did something—?”

“No, ma’am, I don’t wish to alarm you, but we need to vacate the premises *now*.” The agent gave Edith a telling look, mouthing the word “bomb.” She then wasted no time putting the children in motion.

“Cal, gather up your books. Rosie, honey, bring your bunny and come here.” Her youngest simply remained where she was, staring at her in fear. “Rosemarie, don’t make me tell you twice.”

Rosie scurried to her mother, clutching Edith’s leg in fear. Edith scooped up her daughter and put an arm around Cal as he returned to her side. With a visible effort, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin—the very picture of dignity. With a nod to Agent O’Neill, she followed the man out the door, surrounded by the three other men.

The small family was quickly ushered out of the house to the curb, where they climbed into an unmarked van, followed by two other agents. As the side door slid smoothly shut, Fitzwallace gave O’Neill a brief nod of satisfaction before scrambling around to the driver’s side of the vehicle.

The navy van sped down the road, leaving in its wake a dozen federal agents to search the Dobey home for a bomb that wasn't there.



“Run!” The cry was simultaneous as the three plowed down the alley toward the only possible shelter. The large dumpster wasn't ideal, but at least offered some refuge from the rapid fire nipping at their heels. Miraculously, no one was struck, having had the advantage of running in the opposite direction of the gunman, which forced the pilot to swing the helicopter in their direction as they sped away.

As soon as they dropped panting behind the container, Hutch grabbed the radio out of his pocket. “Sanderson, I don't know where you and your boys are, but *now* would be a great time to make an appearance.”

They all cringed as the gunshots ricocheted off the face of the dumpster, rocking the container against their backs. Hutch described the scene and gave their location.

“What is he using, a bazooka?” Starsky asked incredulously, his voice rising over the whirring of the blades.

“Well, we can't just sit here.” Hutch looked over to his partner. “They keep us pinned down, and Andrews will just walk right up here and take us out from either side.”

The captain looked up and down the building, then pointed. “There're a couple of doors and windows. Maybe we can get inside.”

Starsky looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. “Are you kidding? That guy'd pick us off like—”

Dobey's glare alone stopped Starsky mid-sentence. “This dumpster's on wheels, isn't it?”

“Oh.” Starsky grinned. “That's why you're the captain.”

It took some effort for Starsky and Hutch to find a purchase on the sides of the dumpster without offering any part of their bodies as targets. The captain remained between them, matching his steps to Hutch's, as they finally got the groaning container moving toward the building's doors. Gunfire continued to rain down on them in a shower of sparks.

Hutch was finally close enough to reach out and try the door, which was securely locked. He pulled his hand back an instant before gunfire from the helicopter tattooed the doorway. A quick series of shots from his own weapon obliterated the lock, and the door opened on its own.

“That's great,” Starsky hollered. “But how are we gonna get in without getting nailed?”

The three looked around quickly, hoping for inspiration. Starsky happened to look up and was rewarded. He quickly spun around to face the dumpster and, faster than Hutch had ever seen his partner move, reached out to the side to grab the lid of the container and pulled it open toward him. The metal cover flipped over on top of the trio, standing up like a shield. The angle at which Starsky held it was enough to provide some cover from the aerial assault.

More shots pelted the lid, almost knocking it out of Starsky's hands. While the bullets made indentations in the metal, none of them ripped through. Starsky gave a wry grin to the other two. "Sometimes I amaze even myself."

"That doesn't say a lot," Hutch quipped. When Starsky leaned around the side of the dumpster and returned fire, providing a cover for his partner, Hutch quickly reached out and lifted up the remaining section of the lid. "Get ready, Cap'n."

At Hutch's nod, Dobe propelled himself from under the cover of the dumpster lids through the darkened doorway. Gunfire again rained down, but none found its mark. "You next, Starsk."

"Why me? You go."

"Because," Hutch barked in exasperation. "Because my arms are longer."

"Oh."

Hutch slid to the center of the dumpster and supported both lids, then watched as Starsky dove through the open doorway. Just as he prepared to drop one of the covers, a shot found its mark through the two-inch gap between the lids, slicing open his forearm. Hutch gasped in pain and dropped to one knee behind the safety of the container. The lids crashed down above him and lay like a roof over his head.

"Huuuutch!" came Starsky's cry from within the building.

"I'm all right, I'm all right!" Hutch called back through gritted teeth. Starsky's anxious face peered out from just beyond the doorway.

"Hutch, slide the M-16 in here!"

Hutch awkwardly slipped the safety on and slid the weapon a few feet into the doorway. Starsky's hand dashed out and dragged it out of the line of fire.

The sound of several voices and running feet turning down the alley caught Hutch's attention. A quick look over his shoulder confirmed that Andrews and his cronies would soon be upon them, and another flurry of shots from the helicopter ensured their safe passage.

"Starsky!" There was an edge of urgency in Hutch's voice. "Don't waste a lot of time there, pal!"

Starsky took advantage of the sudden pause in the helicopter's firing and rushed out of the doorway, the M-16 blazing. Dust swirled up around them, marking the helicopter's unexpected departure to the open loading area adjacent to the warehouse. Just beyond it, Starsky could see several federal vehicles sliding to a halt as agents poured out with guns drawn. To his left were the retreating figures of Andrews and his men, running full tilt through the dust and debris lifted by the whirling blades as the helicopter settled.

“They’re gonna fly outta here!” With a curse, Starsky tore down the side of the building into the whirling debris field. Andrews and several of his men had boarded the helicopter, which was quickly lifting off. The dirt whipped up by the blades’ rotation made it almost impossible to see from the ground, but the federal agents had effectively subdued the felons who were unable to escape with Andrews.

With a burst of light, someone from within the helicopter again open fired, this time on the federal agents making the arrests. Several took cover, but a few fell beneath the onslaught. Planting the machine gun against his ribcage, Starsky opened fire on the helicopter, but the ammunition clip quickly emptied. Starsky threw down the weapon, knowing Hutch had carried the extra clips. Within seconds, the helicopter would be out of range. The rifle was quickly unslung, and Starsky dropped to one knee to steady himself.

Blinking back the sweat out of his eyes, Starsky sighted the pilot in his crosshairs. The instant his finger tightened on the trigger, the man sitting in the co-pilot’s seat leaned forward, taking the bullet high on his shoulder instead. A trace of a smile crept onto Starsky’s face as he continued to watch through the scope—it was Andrews. The helicopter bucked once as the wounded man fell against the pilot, but then righted itself and bore east, away from the warehouse district. As the bird lifted farther away, Starsky could see Andrews turn in his direction, recognition playing across his features. Starsky sighted and fired again, but the helicopter was quickly out of range.

Slinging the rifle over his shoulder, Starsky dogtrotted back to Hutch and Dobey. Sanderson and a paramedic were there, binding Hutch’s flesh wound. The captain already bore a sling.

“He all right?” Starsky asked the paramedic as he knelt next to his partner.

“I’m fine.” Hutch sounded annoyed by the medical attention.

“I wasn’t asking you. I was asking him.” Starsky jerked his finger at the other paramedic. “Is he?”

“Fine? He will be. Nothing some stitches and a tetanus shot won’t take care of.” The paramedic completed the first aid with a strip of tape to hold the gauze in place.

“I don’t need any stitches or a—”

“You shut up,” Starsky told him. “You’re delirious from the pain. Captain, how are you holding up?”

“Sanderson tells me that they got away, Starsky. *They got away!*” Dobey’s voice escalated. “We’ve got to find them before they—”

Sanderson steadied his friend as Dobey lurched to his feet. “Harold, that’s not all of it.”

The tension between the small group crackled. Sanderson cleared his throat before continuing. “There was a mole in my department. Two, actually. We got a call just a few minutes ago. They...they took Edith and the kids.”

“No!” Captain Dobey leaned back against the wall of the building, his legs no longer able to support him.

Starsky’s and Hutch’s reactions were urgent. “*No! How?*”

Sanderson ran his hands through his thinning hair. “There was—supposedly—a bomb threat made. The two rogue agents—we know now that it was Fitzwallace and O’Neill—apparently got Edith and the kids into an FBI van, supposedly to take them to a safe house. The other two agents accompanying them were found in the abandoned van, dead. Fitzwallace and O’Neill switched vehicles at that point, and...well, they took Edith and the kids.”

The captain’s voice was almost too quiet to hear. “This never would have happened if you hadn’t tried to get me out.”

“Come on, Harold. You know as well as I do, they wouldn’t have let you live, let alone—”

“There was a chance they wouldn’t have harmed my family! Yeah, they probably would have killed me, but not Edith and—” Dobey’s voice choked off in rage and horror. “Why? Why did you risk them? I told you not to—”

“Harold, I—”

“No.” Starsky stopped the agent with a hand on his arm. “Captain, it wasn’t Sanderson’s fault.”

Dobey’s wild gaze turned toward Starsky and Hutch. “You two?!”

Hutch started to explain, but Starsky interrupted him as well. “No, not Hutch either, Captain. It was *my* idea. If you want to blame someone, blame me.”

Hutch tried to override his partner. “Blame Andrews.”

But Starsky continued. “Hutch didn’t agree to it at first, neither did Sanderson. If you have to blame someone—”

Starsky wasn’t prepared for the force of the backhanded blow that lashed across his jaw, as Dobey’s fear boiled over into rage. “*You!* Who the hell do you think you are, risking my family so you could play hero?” The captain continued to shove the unresisting Starsky as he ranted, shrugging off the restraining hands of Hutch and Sanderson. “Huh? I told you *not* to try anything, but you didn’t listen to me—you *never* listen to me!”

With Hutch slinging an arm across the captain’s chest from behind and Sanderson restraining him by his uninjured arm, the two were finally able subdue the larger man. At that moment, an agent jogged up to the volatile group and held out the receiver from a field telephone. “Captain Dobey, it’s him—it’s Andrews.”

Sanderson’s and Hutch’s grips fell away. The captain’s hand was trembling as he took the receiver and held it up to his ear. “If you hurt them—”

“Shut up and listen to me.” Andrew’s voice sounded strained. “I should kill them all right now,

do you hear me? I should put a bullet between each of their eyes, then leave them out in the desert and let the vultures out there strip them down to nothing. Do you hear me?"

Dobey's voice shook. "Yes, I hear you! Tell me what you want me to do."

"That's better, you stupid nigger. You've got one last chance. Do you hear me? You do anything—you or your bootlicking suck-ups—and you'll never see any of them again." Andrews moaned before he continued, a response to the first aid he was receiving from one of his men. "And you tell that kike, Starsky, his life isn't worth spit right now, because when I'm through with you, I'm going after him. You go home, *Captain*. You go home and wait for my call. No cops. No Feds. No traces—nothing. You'll get your instructions then. Oh, and Dobby—the ransom just tripled, got it?"

"That's...how the hell do you expect me to come up with *three million dollars*?"

"What's the matter? Aren't they worth it? What price would *you* put on their lives, Captain?" There was silence on the line for a moment while Andrews let his words sink in. "Twenties and fifties, out of sequence. Now go home, nigger. Go home and worry about what I'm doing to your wife...and maybe the girl, too."

The line went dead.



Hutch could see that Starsky was wracked with guilt, and all he got was monosyllabic answers to any attempt at conversation. Captain Dobby refused medical treatment and insisted on being taken home to await further contact. Sanderson assigned two other agents to stay with him, but the rest of the Feds were ungraciously ushered out of the Dobby home. Sanderson would rely on the bug implanted in the captain's phone, and would take up his post at his office, keeping up the ruse that they were following Andrews' demands.

Starsky disappeared from Hutch's place right after he dropped off his partner and made sure he was comfortable. The trip to the emergency room had been quick and silent, each man lost in his own thoughts. Hutch's wound required fifteen stitches and the promised tetanus shot.

Hutch made himself a cup of herbal tea, then tried to get comfortable on the couch with a book. He finally gave up when he couldn't concentrate and turned on the TV instead, hoping some inane movie would lull him to sleep until his partner showed up again.



Hutch realized he must have finally dozed off when the pounding on his front door woke him up from his uncomfortable sprawl on the sofa. After pulling his gun from its holster, left within easy reach from his position on the couch, Hutch quietly made his way to the door and stood to the side of the frame.

"Who is it?" A quick look at the wall clock indicated it was 4:00 a.m.

“S me...I can’t find...” Hutch jerked the door open, knowing who the slurred voice belonged to. “...M’ keys.”

It’d had been quite a while since Hutch had seen Starsky *this* drunk—not the mellow haze they’d get to when they felt like they were fighting a losing battle, despite their best efforts. When it felt like the world was crumbling around them, the two of them would get blitzed *together*. But tonight, Starsky started without him—hadn’t even invited Hutch, but rather holed up like an injured animal licking his wounds. And now, finally, he was at his partner’s door, smelling like something Hutch couldn’t even put a name to.

Hutch reached out and hauled in his partner, steering him toward the couch. “Sit down before you fall down, you idiot. You didn’t drive, did you?”

Starsky waved him off. “Pppphht. ’Course I didn’t. Cabbed it. You think I’m stupid?” Hutch hiked up one blond eyebrow. “Never mind, don’ answer that.”

Hutch lowered himself onto the arm of his couch. “So why’d you start the party without me, partner? You know I would’ve joined you.”

“Cause you...*you* din’t screw up like I did. This one’s my doin’.” Starsky unscrewed the cap off the pint of whiskey he retrieved from his jacket pocket. After taking a long pull from it, he gestured at the quiet blond. “You, on the other hand, you...quit moving around on me. Yer making me dizzy.”

“I’m not moving, Starsk.”

“Oh, well, there’s three of you. Which one are you?”

“The good-looking one.” Hutch snagged the bottle out of Starsky’s grasp. “I think you’ve had enough, Gordo.” Hutch started to put the bottle on the coffee table, but changed his mind and took a drink from it himself.

Starsky hauled himself off the couch and wove his way to Hutch’s refrigerator, pulling out a long-neck Coors. “Bar’s open. You want one? First round’s on me.”

Hutch nodded and waited patiently for him to finish his soliloquy. Starsky made his way back into the living room, pausing long enough to greet a few of the plants that seemed to snag his coat as he brushed by. “Friendly roommates you got. Now, where was I?”

“Smashed. Has it helped at all?”

The eyes that met Hutch’s were steady. Bitterness crept in, surpassing the alcoholic cloud. “Not one bit.”

“Starsky, you’re not—”

The beer bottle was thrown against the wall with so much force it shattered and exploded across the floor. The inertia caused Starsky to stumble over the coffee table and stagger against the couch. Hutch lurched to his feet in anticipation of the second act. But instead of consuming

rage, despair set in. Starsky sunk to the couch and buried his head in his hands. “My fault, oh, God; it’s my fault. If anything happens to them, I couldn’t stand it, Hutch. I couldn’t live with it.”



Hutch quickly moved beside his partner and threw an arm around the quaking shoulders, drawing him close. “Easy, buddy, easy. We don’t know yet. We’ll get them back, okay? Don’t give up yet.”

Starsky’s voice remained muffled behind his hands. “He’ll never forgive me, Hutch, and I sure as hell don’t blame him for hating me, but...” The spent detective pushed himself away from his partner and looked at him soberly, a solitary tear rolling down his face. “But it’ll never be as much as I hate myself right now.”

“Aw, Starsk, you *know* that the only one to blame is Andrews and—” Hutch reached out to pull his distraught partner back into an embrace, when Starsky’s grieving face took on the knowing look that he was about to lose the contents of his stomach. As Starsky hurtled into the bathroom, Hutch crossed into his kitchen and began making coffee.



Edith was frightened, but it was nothing compared to her burning rage. She had followed Fitzwallace’s gruff and demeaning instructions almost meekly, biding her time and praying for an opportunity to escape. The first fifteen minutes of flight from their home had been tense, but the two agents sitting in the back of the unmarked federal van with them had been friendly, almost apologetic for the inconvenience. When the vehicle suddenly swerved into a deserted parking lot, the two agents knew something was wrong and drew their weapons. By then, the “agent” from the front passenger seat already had a pistol with a silencer pressed against Edith’s temple. She and kids were unceremoniously ushered out of the van and into a camper attached to the bed of a pickup truck and locked inside. The van driver left the vehicle and climbed into the pickup, starting it. After a moment, the second man hurled himself into the passenger seat. Edith clutched her children to her, sending up a silent prayer for the two real agents she now feared were left for dead in the back of the van.

The long drive out of the city was ended after a slow trek over a cratered road. Edith guessed they were hidden in a secluded country or wooded area. The remainder of the night was passed locked in the back of the truck. No food was offered, but a gallon of distilled water had been left there for them. When Edith pounded on the wall of the camper, demanding answers to her questions, she was simply told to shut up with no further explanation or contact from the bogus agents.

According to Edith’s watch, it was just after 4:00 a.m. when the pickup truck started back down the rocky road. Several hours passed before the camper door finally opened, the smell of salt water immediately assailing them, and they were pushed through an area of shipping containers

and crates. A few sloops and schooners gently rocked beside a large pier, and several cargo freighters were moored nearby or anchored farther in the harbor. O'Neill and Fitzwallace steered the group to a small fueling station off one of the smaller docks. The single-room building was filled only with an old metal desk and several empty filing cabinets. A small closet stood off to one side. The sole window had once faced the exterior fuel pumps, but was now boarded over.

As soon as they were shoved inside, Edith rushed to the door and laid her ear against it, straining to hear any useful information from their captors. All she was able to discern was that O'Neill was going back to Andrews, and Fitzwallace alone was enough to watch over the "pickaninnies." The two men laughed over a comment Edith couldn't make out, then the sound of the truck driving off signaled O'Neill's exit.

Edith gave each of her children a hug and kiss, and told them to be brave. She then began prowling the room, searching for anything that would work as a weapon against Fitzwallace. The metal desk and filing cabinets were falling apart, the drawers broken out. Opening the closet door revealed a wooden dowel once used to support coat hangers, and a flimsy wooden shelf set above it. The closet was longer than the width of the doorframe on one side, but was solid, offering no escape route to the outside. The dowel refused to budge from its frame and couldn't be used as a weapon.

Frustrated, but not defeated, Edith continued to scan the room. She would do anything to protect her children, and there was no way she was going down without a fight.



The two detectives were in Sanderson's office by 11:00 a.m. Both men were pale: Hutch from his wound, and Starsky from his self-incriminating binge and rapid sobriety. Still, there was a hunger in both of their eyes that encouraged the older agent. The two had already made their rounds, checking out the word on the street, but their sources didn't yield anything important. Even Huggy had come up dry.

Hutch finally broke the silence in the room. "So, what's next?"

Sanderson shook his head. "I'm afraid we wait. Don't get me wrong, I've got men scouring the city. Offices from all over the state have a least one unit in motion. But unless something turns up beforehand, we wait for them to make their move. Harold's cooled off a little from last night. He's at least agreed to wear a wire."

It was easy for Hutch to feel Starsky's tension as he sat studying his hands, desperate to do anything. "What if—?"

An intercom interrupted them. Sanderson quickly depressed the microphone button. “Yes?”

“Line three is the patch from the captain’s line, sir. This is it.”

Sanderson punched the third button, now lit, allowing the tap to be played through the phone’s speaker.

“...you do to her, Andrews?” The rage in the captain’s voice crackled over the phone line.

“Use your imagination. It shouldn’t be too hard to figure out.”

Dobey began to curse, but was quickly interrupted. “Listen up, nigger, and remember—if I see one Fed, one cop, or anybody who even *looks* like a pig, I’ll blow your family away, got it?”

“The ransom—where? When?”

“You think I’m stupid? I know this line’s bugged. Get in your car and drive to the phone booth over on the corner of Wilmot and Hammond. You’ve got three minutes.”

The line went dead from Andrews’ connection, but Dobby simply dropped the phone. The men in Sanderson’s office could hear the captain’s rushed footsteps and him barking at the two agents not to follow him, or he’d shoot them himself.

Hutch looked anxiously at Sanderson. “Now what?”

“We’re tailing Harold, of course, and monitoring Andrews’ instructions. As long as he keeps the wire on, we’ll know his every move. But Harold was adamant—we don’t move until we’re sure of the drop. Then—”

“Then?” Hutch raised his eyebrows.

“Then we pray we’re not too late.”



Dobey was breathless when he snatched up the receiver from the phone booth. “Yes?”

“Well, you’re smarter than I thought—I don’t see a single cop or Fed with you.”

The captain anxiously scanned the streets and buildings on either side of him, desperately trying to spot Andrews or any of his men watching him. “So, where’s my family? I want proof that they’re still...that they’re all right.”

“You’re in no place to make demands with me, Dobby. Oh, they’re still alive—a little worse for wear, but they’re still breathing. At least for the moment.”

“I want to talk to my wife!”

“Like I said, you’re in no position to be demanding anything. You’ll just have to take your chances.”

“Where’s the drop?”

“No way. You might not have any back-up with you, but I’ll just bet you’re wearing a wire. Go to Santa Clarita Street. There’s a bar there on the corner of Third. In the back, there’s a bunch of trashcans. Taped to the bottom of one is your instructions.”

“Santa Clarita and Third...”

“Now look across the street at that little grocery store. See that blue Mustang?”

“Yes.”

“The keys are under the floor mat. That’s your ride for the rest of our little trip.”

“What are you—?”

“I told you, I’m not stupid—I know you’re in tight with the Feds. I don’t doubt for a second your car’s been rigged up with a homing device.”

Sanderson cursed, confirming to Starsky and Hutch that’s exactly what they’d done.

Andrews continued. “Oh, and, Dobby—hear what I’m saying. I’ve got people all over this city, and they’ll be watching you. Get the instructions and take them with you. Put them on the dashboard of your car and keep them there. We’ll be watching to make sure you don’t leave them for any of your cop buddies to find. We’ll also make sure you don’t read the instructions out loud—into your wire—so they’ll know where you’re going. Now, maybe we can’t be everywhere at once, but do you really want to risk your precious little family’s lives on the off chance that the moment you whisper where you’re going won’t be one of the times we’re watching? Think about that. Think about the risk, then think about how many different ways I could kill your little girl and where I could leave her body.”

“All right!” Dobby roared. “I got it, okay? *I got it.*”

“Good,” Andrews’ voice gloated. “Then get a move on. You’ve got one hour to get where you’re going, fatman.”

The next sounds over the wire were the captain slamming down the receiver and charging out of the phone booth and across the street, recklessly dodging traffic. The Mustang’s engine was gunned and the squealing tires marked his pulling onto the street. Then, if one listened very carefully, they could make out murmured prayers of an anguished husband and father.



They were ready when the opportunity for escape came. Fitzwallace entered the small enclosure, the sunlight streaming in from behind him. He was prepared for the darkness in the small office

and clicked on his flashlight, scanning the room. Edith and Rosie sat huddled in the corner, the mother's sweater draped across them like a blanket.

Fitzwallace kept his pistol trained on his captives as he quickly shone the light around the room, then charged to the desk and peered under it. "Where's the boy?"

"Gone." Edith lifted her chin defiantly. "He snuck out and went for help, so you'd better get out of here before my husband has half of California come raining down on you."

"Stand up!" Fitzwallace gestured with his pistol. Edith and Rosie stood, the child clinging to her mother. "Now step away from the corner."

The two obeyed, proving that Cal hadn't somehow been hiding behind their huddled mass. Fitzwallace flashed the light around the room again. The beam eventually reflected off the dull brass knob of the closet. The felon grinned wickedly. "You think ol' Fitz is stupid, don't you?"

Fitzwallace stomped across the room. With some effort, he was able to open the closet door with his hand still grasping the flashlight. Once he jerked the door open, he thrust both light and pistol into the small enclosure.

No one stood waiting inside to meet his wrath.

"What the—?" Fitzwallace bent under the wooden dowel and turned to shine his light into the closet's alcove.

The empty closet was the last thing he saw before hitting the floor and losing consciousness.



Sanderson and Hutch poured over a city map, trying to determine the most probable location for the ransom drop, considering Dobey would have left Santa Clarita and Third and given approximately one hour to reach his destination.

The FBI, at least, had not been idle. Undercover agents had been placed throughout the city, attempting to sight the navy Mustang Dobey now drove. A visual was made of him getting on Highway 1, heading north.

Starsky sat frozen by the desk, concentrating on the audio from the wire, hoping to hear some clue from his captain. Hutch glanced worriedly at his partner, concern for both Dobey and Starsky marring his features. Sanderson asked him a question, and he returned his focus to the map—comfort would have to come later.

An odd intermittent tapping sound accompanied the vehicle and street noises over the wire. Starsky's eyes narrowed as he stared at the speaker. A familiar ghost touched his memory—*but what?* Starsky strained to hear the tapping again, but all that came through were the constant sounds of the freeway.

"C'mon, Cap'n, help me out here," he whispered. As if bidden, the tapping began again.

“That’s it!” Starsky jumped and beckoned the other two men. “Listen!”

Hutch and Sanderson rushed back to the desk and waited silently. A faint click could be heard over the speaker.

“What is it, Starsk?” Hutch shook his head. “What’s that sound from?”

“I don’t know—his hand, probably, his wedding ring against the steering wheel...” Starsky’s eyes shone with excitement. “It’s *code*! Morse code! I didn’t realize what the rhythm was at first. I only remember a little bit of it from the service...listen, there he goes again.”

The three men held their breaths, straining to recognize the pattern.

“F...I...something...something...” Starsky racked his memory for the next letters, then cursed when no recollection came. “R...M...A...something...S...P...I...something, something, 3...8.” His fist slammed against the desktop, causing its contents to jump. “I can’t remember!”

Sanderson raced out the door, calling back, “I’ve got a man who’s a communications expert!”

Hutch, in turn, rushed back to the city map, placing his finger on Dobby’s starting point. His other finger traveled to the additional pins marking approximately an hour’s travel. “Starsky, look at this!”

Hutch excitedly jabbed his finger at the northern most pin. “F-I—*Fisherman’s Warf*!”

Starsky smiled a predator’s grin. “What do you wanna bet that they have a Pier 38?”

Hutch scooped up a pair of two-way radios from Sanderson’s desk as the partners rushed out of the office. When they met Sanderson and another agent coming back down the hall, they paused only long enough to tell them what they’d deduced, and Sanderson promised he’d call them on the radio if the complete code revealed some other location. Either way, the FBI would be en route and ready to strike when the ransom drop was made.

A call from the LTD’s radio patched Hutch through to Huggy, and he briefly updated their friend. Within minutes, they reached their next stop: a small restaurant where Huggy was waiting to exchange Hutch’s car for a nondescript sedan he had rented in case Andrews and his men recognized the familiar vehicle. They were taking no chances on being spotted and, after the quick detour, tore off down a less traveled route toward their final destination.

And they knew once they got there, they’d move heaven and earth to see that Andrews paid for what he’d done.



Cal quickly scrambled down from his hiding place, safely tucked away in the recessed corner of the closet’s shelf. He’d been afraid when Fitzwallace had first shone his flashlight in, and relieved when he’d neglected to aim it upwards toward the shelf. The teen set down the desk drawer he had used to strike the felon with, then gratefully fell into his mother’s embrace.

“You did real good, Cal. I’m proud of you.” Edith picked up Fitzwallace’s fallen pistol and snapped on the safety before tucking it into the waistband of her skirt. She turned to her children. Rosie’s eyes were huge, and she shook from fear and fatigue. Cal didn’t look much better. Edith dropped to one knee and took a hand of each child. “Now listen to me. We’ve still got to get out of here. We’re going to have to go quickly and quietly. If I tell either one of you to do something, then I need you to do it right that second, do you understand? Don’t hesitate, don’t ask any questions; just do it. And whatever happens, I want the two of you to stay together. Rosie, you mind your brother, and Cal, I need you to take care of her. You both understand me?”

“But, Mom, what about you?” Cal asked, gripping her hand.

“I’ll be fine, but we might need to split up. I hope not, but if it happens, you two stay together. Promise me?” At their hesitant nods, Edith stood and led them to the door. Peering out into the sunshine, she determined there was no one in the immediate area. Edith gave the children a fleeting smile, then placed a finger to her lips to remind them of the need for stealth. Drawing a shaky breath, she drew her gun and led her children outside.



Starsky growled as he jerked the sedan around a slower moving semi, then floored the car past the rig. Oncoming traffic was forced to slow and pull off the shoulder, followed by a cavalcade of honking, shouts, and hand gestures. Hutch merely gritted his teeth and clutched the dashboard tighter, hoping they’d make it to the pier before the captain, and in one piece.

The final twenty minutes of the journey seemed to take an eternity, and more than once Hutch had to flash his badge as a patrol car caught up to them, gesturing for the speeding car to pull over.

When Starsky and Hutch reached Pier 37, a friend of Huggy’s was waiting for them as promised. The grizzled fisherman was the manifestation of the legendary “Old Man and the Sea,” but the partners would scarcely have noticed if he’d been a mermaid. The two scrambled down the ladder off the dock to the proffered skiff. Hutch took the rudder, leaving Starsky to clutch either side of the craft as it skipped across the waves toward Pier 38.



Andrews stepped off the sixty-foot schooner with a sense of satisfaction. Everything was falling back into place after the first fiasco when they’d lost Dobey. Now the ante had been upped, and three million dollars would set him up very nicely in Europe. He again went through his mental checklist, assuring himself that he had collected everything necessary, right down to the boards, hammers, and nails that would secure Dobey and his family into the fueling office. Andrews smiled at the thought of including Starsky, Hutchinson, and any other cop or agent who got in the way, along with enough plastic explosives to obliterate the small building and everything in it. By the time the Coast Guard responded from their branch office four piers down, Andrews and his men would be at sea, en route to meet Huessman, their contact, twenty miles off the coast.

Andrews' brow knit in a moment of concern. Timing was critical on many levels. Dobey had to show up on time. Even then, the explosion that would exact his revenge could only be savored from afar, or they would miss the precious window of opportunity to be picked up by Huessman—the foreigner had made the need for timeliness perfectly clear. If Andrews literally missed the boat, Huessman and his “organization” wouldn't offer a second chance. Once they reached shore in Seattle, a private jet would take them into Canada, where they would obtain their new identities. Then, it was a clear shot to Germany and a whole new life among other Aryans with the same mindset and goals as Andrews and his men.

Yes, Andrews affirmed to himself. Three million dollars would go a long way in contributing toward the “New Order.”



Captain Dobey drew a deep breath as he slammed home the ammunition clip, then tucked the pistol into the holster hidden by his coat. He grimaced in pain; his injured shoulder hadn't stopped throbbing since the injury occurred, adding nausea to his blinding headache. As he climbed out of the Mustang onto the pier, the duffel bag containing the price of his family in tow, he knew his pain would end in the next hour—one way or the other.



In spite of the slime and algae clinging to the rungs, Starsky and Hutch swiftly climbed up the boat ladder on the south end of Pier 38. Silent hand signals sent each detective in a different direction with the intent of circling the area and meeting on the opposite side near the west entry. Before they lost sight of each other, both men paused to look back. No words or further signals passed between them, but the message was clear: *Be careful, partner.*



Edith, Cal, and Rosie had only made it several yards from the fueling station before they were set upon, Andrews and five of his men rushing them from behind. The cocking of a pistol stopped Edith in her tracks, and she dropped the handgun when ordered to. As she and the children slowly turned to face their captors, Edith's eyes darted around them, desperately seeking an escape route.

“You'd never get very—” Andrews didn't have the opportunity to finish his gloating statement before Edith launched herself at him and shouted for her children to run. Two other men quickly subdued her, but her distraction was enough to put the children in motion. Cal hesitated only a second before he grabbed Rosie's hand and pulled her, running away from the encounter. At her faltering steps, Cal scooped up his sister and poured his heart into their flight. As fast as he was, carrying Rosie made him easy game for his pursuers. Pipmeir quickly caught up to them and jerked Cal to a stop by grabbing him by his shirt collar. Rosie was dropped to the ground when Cal threw himself at the bigger man, striking him for all he was worth. Pipmeir thrust the boy away, and a fierce backhand drove Cal to the ground where he lay unmoving.

Rosie's scream reverberated throughout the wharf.



Hutch continued his crouching run, darting between six-foot-high crates and steel containers twice as high. But at the sound of Rosie's scream, he changed direction back toward the water.

As he prepared to make a dash across an open aisle, he first peered around the edge of the crate he'd been hiding behind—straight into the barrel of a .38 Special.



Starsky's head came up at the sound of Rosie's scream like a wolf catching a scent. As much as he wanted to race straight toward the source of the cry, Starsky pushed himself into a ducking jog and continued farther north along the waterfront.



Lieutenant John Vestman hung up the phone, the call confirming that his manifests were right. There were no scheduled shipments in or out of Pier 38, just as his log had read. Actually, no freight had been moved from that particular dock even after the quarantine had been lifted earlier in the week, the result of some contaminated fruit shipped in from Mexico. *So what was that schooner doing at 38?*

Locking the door behind him, the Coast Guard officer made his way to his speedboat and shoved off.



"*Hutch!*" the captain hissed as he leaned unsteadily against the crate, lowering his weapon. Hutch exhaled gratefully, realizing how close he'd come to eating a bullet. Still, even in his relief he didn't fail to notice the tremor in Dobby's hand and the grayness of his face.

Anger and relief played across Dobby's features. "Where's Starsky?"

Hutch couldn't bring himself to look guilty for disobeying orders—again. "Captain, we—"

"Never mind. Look, I'm going to meet Andrews and give him the money. Whatever you two or Sanderson's men have cooked up, *don't* interfere with this until my family is safe, understand?"

Hutch was wounded by the implication that they would further jeopardize Edith and the kids, but he simply nodded.

"Okay then." Dobby stiffly replaced the gun and adjusted the duffel bag strap across his shoulder. He opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind and resolutely continued toward the small fueling station office—the drop-off point for the ransom.

Hutch waited until his superior was out of sight, then continued his headlong flight toward the docks.

Pipmeir was surprised to have a hard time controlling Rosie. When the large man struck her brother, knocking him senseless, the little girl erupted into a flurry of punches and kicks. Pipmeir grabbed her by one arm, and Rosie raged against him. He attempted to pick up Cal, but almost lost his grip on the girl and decided to simply take her back to Andrews, then come back for the boy. While her blows didn't hurt him, it was enough to trip him up more than once as he dragged her back to the small building.

“Momma!” Pipmeir released the squirming girl, knowing she'd run straight to her mother. Edith clutched her daughter to her chest.

“Where's the boy?” Andrews demanded.

Pipmeir raised his hands in a gesture of acquiescence. “I'll get him, I'll get him. The girl was a handful. He's out cold, anyway.”

“What did you do to my son?”

Pipmeir ignored Edith's question and backtracked to where he'd knocked Cal out. He was surprised to find him gone, but was even more surprised when he turned around and received a solid blow across his jaw.

Before the man had a chance to recover, Cal struck him again with the board from a broken crate. He missed Pipmeir's head, though, and struck him across the shoulder. Enraged, Pipmeir grabbed the makeshift weapon when it was swung at him a third time, and yanked it out of Cal's hands. Before he had a chance to use it on the youth, the cold muzzle of a gun pressed against his temple stopped him in mid-swing.



“Drop it.” Hutch's words were as icy as the steel of his weapon. Pipmeir complied and slowly raised his hands.

Hutch stepped back, then came around to face the man. His other arm reached for Cal, who gratefully slipped into Hutch's one-armed embrace.

“You okay, there, pal?” Hutch's voice gentled, but he never took his eyes off his captive.

“I'm all right, Hutch, but we need to find my mom and Rosie.” Cal's voice shook. “Is my dad okay?”

Hutch nodded. “I saw him just a minute ago, he'll be fine.” Hutch's eyes narrowed as he dropped his arm from around Cal and advanced on the felon. “I'm only going to say this once,

so listen up, dirtbag. You're going to take us to where you're keeping the others. If you make *one move* that I don't like, I won't hesitate to put a hole in you the size of a Volkswagen, understand?"

The frost in Hutch's voice was more than enough to convince Pipmeir. He nodded, swallowing. "Gotcha."

Hutch pulled out his radio and called for Sanderson. "It looks like high noon is about to start."

The static of the radio was broken by a determined response. "We'll be ready!"

Hutch turned down the volume and stuck the radio back on his belt. He then waved his Python in the felon's face.

"Okay, move."



Guns were drawn and leveled at Dobey as he stepped into view, the duffel bag held painfully in one hand, while his pistol was aimed directly at Andrews.

"Harold!" Edith tried to break free from her captor's grip, but she was quickly hauled back, as was Rosie.

Her husband swallowed down his fear for his family. "Are you all right, sweetheart? Rosie?"

At her father's concern, Rosie began to cry in earnest, pleading for her daddy to come to her. The captain hadn't thought it was possible for his heart to break further.

"Rosie, honey, come on now. Don't cry, baby. This will all be over soon, I promise." Dobey's gaze swung up to meet Andrews with murderous intent.

Andrews laughed. "What are you going to do, Dobey? Take on all of us?"

The captain shook his head without taking his eyes off the blond man. "I never figured I'd walk out of here, but if nothing else, I'll die knowing that I sent you to Hell first."

Andrews laughed again, but this time it rang hollow. He pulled out a two-way radio and barked into it. "Curtis?"

Static responded, then a voice. "It's clear. He came alone."

Dobey felt the knot in his chest loosen slightly. Somehow, Starsky and Hutchinson had managed to elude them. He only hoped that when Sanderson and the federal boys showed up—and he was sure they would—they wouldn't blow it.

Andrews looked around the group. "Where's Pipmeir and the boy? We're running out of time!"

“Here.” Pipmeir stepped into the open, but didn’t move toward the group. Cal rushed past him to his father’s side.

Andrews smiled and nodded. “Well, let’s get to it then. Dobe, give me the money.”

“No.”

“No?” The former officer instantly blazed. “You think you’re gonna call the shots here?”

Dobe remained deadly calm. “Edith and Rosie first, then you’ll get your money.”

Andrews rolled his eyes, knowing the outcome would be the same. “Whatever. O’Neill.”

O’Neill took Edith and Rosie each by the arm and led them halfway to where Dobe and Cal stood. Andrews nodded in satisfaction. “Okay, now you.”

Dobe took a step forward, but when he realized Cal had moved with him, he glanced at his son. “No, Cal.”

The teen gritted his teeth, but did as he was directed. His father continued forward until he was a few feet away from Edith and Rosie. For a moment, the pier was strangely quiet.

“The money!” Andrews barked.

Dobe painfully extended the duffel bag, and O’Neill reached for it. Again, there was silence as if the entire group collectively held their breaths during the exchange.

The sound of an approaching speedboat shattered the silence.

The pier instantly erupted. O’Neill snatched the bag out of Dobe’s grip, then slammed it across the captain’s head, knocking him off balance. The felon took advantage of the moment and wrenched Dobe’s pistol out of his hand. Edith charged O’Neill, but the larger man felled her with the butt of his gun across her temple.

Hutch burst into the clearing, but his bead on Andrews was blocked when the ex-patrolman rushed forward and snatched up Rosie, clutching the squirming child to his chest. Hatred burned in his eyes as he backed away, a pistol crammed under her jaw.

“Don’t do it, Andrews!” Hutch aimed his Python directly toward the other’s head.

“Hutchinson! I should’ve known you and your partner would show up! Stand down!” Andrews didn’t push things further when Hutch lowered his weapon but refused to drop it. “Where’s the kike?”

Hutch thought quickly, ignoring the sidelong look from their captain. “Hung over. He’s home, throwing up his guts.”

Andrews’ focus swung over to Dobe. The captain was helping Edith as she staggered to her feet, his gaze murderous as he watched Andrews and his men regroup. The bewildered Coast

Guard lieutenant stood in his speedboat with his arms upraised, Fitzwallace's gun holding him at bay.

Andrews' grasp on Rosie caused her to wince in pain, her breaths coming in rapid, shallow gasps.

"So help me, Andrews, if you hurt her—"

"You'll what, Dobe? Arrest me? Shoot me? No, I don't think there's a thing you can do at this point. Besides, why would I want to hurt such a sweet little thing?" Andrews' voice took on a sickeningly sweet tone as the hand that clutched Rosie's arm slid slowly across her chest.

"You bastard!" Dobe broke free of Edith's grip and took several tottering steps toward Andrews. The sound of pistols being cocked didn't stop him.

"One more step and you're all dead, Dobe." Andrews' words came as a soft hiss. The captain stopped, trembling with rage. Hutch and Cal stood at either shoulder. "No, your little girl will be safe...for now."

"No! You've got your money. You've got me. That's what you wanted all along, Andrews." Dobe choked out the last words with deadly force. "*Let her go.*"

"Not yet. She's my little insurance policy, isn't she?" Andrews jerked his head backward toward a boat moored right off the pier. "We're going for a little ride."

O'Neill sidled up to Andrews. "What are you doing? This isn't part of the plan. Just stick them in the office and we'll be done with them."

"There's no time!" Andrews snapped back, frustrated with the change. Still, he was no fool—he needed the girl as a guarantee. Thinking quickly, he formulated a plan that would still get them out to meet Huesman in time, and still allow him to exact his revenge.

Andrews jerked his head toward the lieutenant. "In an hour, I'll call you on the Coast Guard's frequency four. You'd better be here on the dock. Then you and your little entourage will take the skipper's boat here and meet me at the coordinates I give you." Andrews jerked his head again toward the schooner. Dragging a protesting Rosie with him, the group made their way toward the gangplank.

"No!" Edith tried to break away, but her son held her back.

"What guarantee do I have that you won't hurt her?" Dobe growled.

"Absolutely none. But what choice do you have, nigger?"

Hutch was still during the exchange, but far from idle. Blue eyes scanned the docks and boats, looking for opportunities and his missing partner. A flash of color caught his eye, as a familiar mop of curls ducked behind a crate near the dock. Starsky was out of view from the others, but Hutch was able to catch a glimpse of him as he quickly made his way to the stern of the large boat. He was too far away for Hutch to lock his gaze with his partner, but the brunet gestured his

intent and gave Hutch a small wave. Hutch controlled his expression. He didn't like Starsky's plan one bit, but knew they were out of options. Almost imperceptibly, he nodded back.



Starsky knew he didn't have much time before Andrews and his squad would get on board the schooner—aptly named “Stingray”—so he moved as quickly and quietly as possible. The second gangplank was not an option, as it was within sight of the group. Grasping the docking rope closest to the boat's stern, he swung himself out over the water and pulled his legs up to hook his ankles around it. Methodically, he pulled himself hand-over-hand to the gently swaying boat. His mind raced, feverishly devising a plan to get Rosie away from Andrews. When he



reached the side, he pulled himself onto the deck and scurried to find the best cover he could until Andrews and his men could join the party.



Andrews backed up the gangplank, both arms firmly clutching Rosie. Only once his men were on board and the engine brought to life, did he release the trembling girl. The boat pulled steadily away from its moorings and quickly began its trek to open sea.

“What are we waiting for?” Cal hollered to his parents, grasping Hutch by the arm in an attempt to drag him toward the Coast Guard craft.

Hutch tried to calm the frantic young man. “No, Cal, not yet. Andrews told us to wait, and if we don't at least hold off until they're out of sight, then we don't—”

“Don't *what*? You think we can deal with him? ‘You can't deal with a terrorist,’ isn't that what you always say, Dad? Isn't it? What are we waiting for? You know what he's gonna do to her! He's—” Cal's tirade turned into choking tears, the events of the last several days catching up with him.

Edith's last thread of control began to crumble as well as she reached out to her son. “Harold, what chance do we have?”

Hutch picked up his gun from where he had tossed it earlier. “We've got a good one, Edith. Starsky's on board, too.” The woman's head jerked up to meet his gaze. “Don't give up yet.”

A small nod came from Edith before she burrowed her head back against her son's shoulder. Hutch gave his captain's arm a squeeze before he ran to meet the Coast Guard lieutenant.

Hutch explained the situation as he radioed back to Sanderson. The FBI agent's next call was to issue helicopters and watercrafts to aid in the final rescue.

During the brief exchange, Captain Dobey never moved nor acknowledged Hutch. He simply stood staring at the departing boat, praying his last vision of his daughter wouldn't be of her standing at the boat's rails, tears streaming down her frightened little face.



“What'd you do with the brat, Pip?”

Pipmeir continued looking through his binoculars toward the shore to make sure the Coast Guard vessel hadn't left port yet, or they were being followed by anyone else.

“Nothing. I just left her on deck. She ain't got anywhere to go.”

“Now what, Andrews?” O'Neill asked as he steered the Stingray out into the choppy Pacific waters.

“Now, we wait. I'll call Dobey like I said, give him the coordinates, then wait for them to come get his kid.”

“After all this, you're going to let them go, just like that?”

“Don't be a fool, O'Neill. Dobey's going to pay for what he did to me. Ain't that right, Curtis?”

“You got it.” Curtis entered the cabin carrying a large wooden box and gently set it down.

“What's that?” Pipmeir asked, momentarily taking his eyes off the rolling waters.

“A little surprise for Dobey. Once he hooks up with us, we take the kid and leave in the Coast Guard's cruiser to meet Huessman as planned. We can still use the brat for insurance against the Feds, or whoever else tails us. In the meantime, Curtis here will have disabled the engine and radio to give us a good head start. That'll give Dobey and his family, oh, about ten minutes to say goodbye to one another before this tub blows sky high.”



Fresh tears began to run down Rosie's face when she heard Andrews' plans. Clutching the rail, she made her way to the boat's stern. She knew there was nowhere to go, and that jumping overboard would be useless. Still, she wanted to put as much distance between herself and her captors as she could. At least, she reasoned, she could warn her daddy about the bomb and he would save them. Then everything would be okay, she hoped. Rosie wandered down to a raised hatch and sat down. A noise from behind some crates was barely audible above the breaking swells. Rosie spun around toward the source, ready to scream or run, but there was no need.

“Uncle Dave!”

Starsky hoped the roar of the engines and pounding water would override her cry, but he still raised a finger to his lips. Rosie flung herself into his waiting arms, where he held her tightly for a moment, grateful that she seemed unhurt. Starsky gently pried her away and held her at arm's length. His initial thoughts had been to somehow overtake Andrews and his men, but there were

far too many of them, and Rosie's safety was his first priority. The best thing he could do was to get her off the ship.

"Here's the plan—your dad and Hutch won't be too far behind us. So we're gonna put on these life jackets I found and slip over the side, slick as you please. They'll never even know you're gone, and as soon as your dad and Hutch get here, we're home free, okay?"

"Okay!"

Starsky holstered his gun and helped Rosie into a life vest far too large for her. He secured the long ties as best he could, confident that they'd hold when she hit the water. He was just slipping his left hand through the armhole of his own vest when the familiar sound of a hammer cocking froze him. Starsky only spared O'Neill a glance before he pulled Rosie behind him and out of harm's way. He never saw his assailant smile as his finger tightened on the trigger. The bullet caught Starsky high on his left shoulder and spun him around, face down on the deck. Unconsciousness engulfed him, and he never felt his face slam onto the wood flooring.

"No!" Rosie screamed, throwing herself on Starsky's prone form. She grasped the back of his shirt in her small hands and began tugging at him, urging him to get up. "Uncle Dave, Uncle Dave, please...please...don't leave me here alone. Uncle Dave don't die...*please*."

O'Neill grabbed Rosie by her pigtail and jerked her to her feet. Reaching down to Starsky's still body, he tore the Beretta out of its holster and shoved it into his own waistband, then began clawing at Rosie's life vest's straps to remove it. Finally free, Rosie returned to Starsky's side. O'Neill grabbed the other vest that had fallen off Starsky as he went down. Flipping the unconscious detective onto his back, he placed his heel on the bleeding shoulder, then sighted his gun between Starsky's eyes. Rosie fought to control her sobs.

"Please, please...I'll be good. Don't hurt him anymore...please."

Whether moved by Rosie's tears, or simply overconfident, O'Neill holstered his gun. "Yeah, you ain't goin' anywhere." Giving Starsky's bleeding shoulder a final shove, O'Neill flung the vests over the side of the boat and headed back to the cabin.



"What was that all about? You didn't shoot the kid, did you?" Andrews barked as O'Neill entered the cabin.

"Cop." O'Neill laid Starsky's gun on the counter next to Curtis' bomb.

"*What?* What are you talking about?"

"The blond cop's partner—the kike. He must've stowed aboard somehow and was gearing up the kid to go overboard."

"*Starsky!*" Andrews spat. "And?"

“And he ain’t gonna bother us anymore. And don’t worry about the kid, she ain’t going nowhere.”

Andrews growled and snatched up the microphone. It was payback time.



Lieutenant Vestman opened the throttle of the trawler Sea Star One and set out due west in the wake of the Stingray. As the Coast Guard’s forty-four-foot boat rolled into the Pacific, channel four was opened, waiting for Andrews’ directions.

Within the hour, Andrews had radioed his coordinates, giving them forty minutes to rendezvous. Dobeey was suspicious as to why there were no further demands, but knew this was about revenge, not money. Reason told him it was a set-up, pure and simple. But reason flew out the window in the face of further endangering, or possibly even losing Rosie. The captain and Edith sat close together within the small cabin, the large man cradling his arm, Edith rubbing his back gently in an unconscious gesture of comfort.

Hutch followed Cal onto the deck.

“We gotta get her back, Hutch. If anything happens to her...” Cal’s voice choked off.

Hutch reached out and grasped Cal’s shoulder, offering what little hope and comfort he could.



Rosie continued to hold onto Starsky, even after her tears silenced. She was conscious of his blood soaking into her dress and hair as she lay across his chest, but she didn’t care. She felt very tired and very, very small.

She almost didn’t feel his hand on her arm until Starsky emitted a soft moan.

“Uncle Dave? Uncle Dave? Are you all right? Please be all right, *please*. I can’t do this by myself, please be all right.”

“Shh, Rosie. Give me a minute.” Starsky forced his eyes open and took as deep a breath as he dared against the excruciating pain in his shoulder and chest. “I’m okay, honey. Can you...can you help me sit up? Just take my hand.” Starsky extended his right hand to her. Rosie immediately grasped his wrist in both of her own and leaned backwards, trying to draw him up. The familiarity of the gesture surprised him and gave him an unexpected idea. Sitting up, however, brought on waves of dizziness and nausea.

“Uncle Dave?”

“Just a second, sweetheart.”

Rosie’s voice rose in pitch as she touched the gash on his forehead caused by the fall. Awkwardly, she wiped at the blood now streaming into his eyes. “Uncle Dave, there’s so much blood! I—”

Starsky pulled her into a one-armed embrace. “It’s okay, Rosie! It’s okay. I’m gonna be fine. I just need a minute to think, that’s all. Just a minute to think.”

Rosie’s breathing began to normalize against his chest. An idea came to fruition.

“Honey, where are the life jackets? Did he take them?”

Rosie nodded. “He threw them into the water.”

Starsky swore under his breath. “Okay...that’s okay. Here’s the plan. Back around those crates, there’s a seat along the rail that has cushions on it. The cushions flip up and that’s where I found the life jackets stashed. I need you to go back there and look for a couple more jackets. Can you do that?”

Rosie pulled back a bit from him and nodded. “But, Uncle Dave, they have a bomb, too! They want to kill Daddy!” Her voice rose again as new tears threatened to spill over.

“I know, Rosie, I know. But we’re not gonna let them, okay? Did you see where they put the bomb?”

“No, I just saw one of them bring it into where they’re driving the boat. It was in a big box.”

“What kind of box? How big was it?”

Rosie thought for a second before responding. “A wood one. Like the kind bananas come in at the store.”

“That’s good, Rosie, that’s real good. Now, I need you to be brave for just a little while longer, then we’ll be safe and won’t have to worry about the bad guys. Can you do that? Can you be brave just a little while longer?”

One small hand wiped at her eyes. “Yes.”

“Good girl. I’ll wait right here for you. Try and be as quiet as you can. Make sure there’s nobody back there first. They can’t see us here, but we don’t want to be too noisy, all right?”

Rosie nodded again and slipped in the direction he had indicated. Starsky grimaced as he fought to remove his shoulder holster. *This’d better work...because we don’t have any other options.*



Vestman stroked his graying moustache as he scanned the horizon for signs of the Stingray. Roving the binoculars to the north, it didn’t take long for him to spot its silhouette against the skyline.

“ETA twenty minutes and closing!” he shouted to the Dobeys. Picking up the microphone, Vestman spun the dial to a secured frequency. “Sea Star One to Air Alliance Twelve, we have visual. Stand by on alert.”

The FBI helicopter's radio crackled back. "Air Alliance Twelve, confirming stand-by alert status, Sea Star One. Will hold for further instructions on frequency eight."

"Roger frequency eight, Air Alliance. Sea Star One out."

A flash of color in the water caught Vestman's gaze, and he brought the binoculars into focus. Two life jackets floated in the water. He immediately dropped the throttle and the schooner gradually slowed. Edith and the captain stood and crossed to the lieutenant.

Dobey peered through the window. "What's wrong?"

"Maybe nothing," Vestman responded, leaving the small room and heading to the bow of the craft. Hutch and Cal were already at the rail.

The two life vests bucked in the waves caused by the Sea Star's wake. Hutch's voice was tight. "Do you think...? The vests weren't tied."

Vestman cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "HELLO!"

Even as Edith and the captain joined them at the rail, the small group stood stock-still, straining to hear any response. The only sounds that greeted them were the cries of gulls and the lapping of the waves against the side of the boat. Vestman called out twice more, with the same results. Finally, he looked at the group, offering no hope or denial that Starsky and Rosie hadn't perished there. "I'd say we should continue on. It's possible that those vests have been there for a while and weren't even from the Stingray. All right?"

At Hutch's nod, Vestman charged back into the control room and pressed the throttle forward.

Vestman shook his head and scanned the horizon in either direction.

"Now what?" Edith whispered to her husband.

Dobey grimly looked to the horizon, willing the boat to fly. "We wait. We wait, and we pray."



Starsky leaned his head back against the hatch, fighting down waves of nausea. His shoulder throbbed mercilessly as blood continued to seep across his t-shirt. Hearing Rosie's sandals return across the deck, he schooled his face into a mask of confidence.

"There was only one left, Uncle Dave. I tried to pull the cushions off the bench because maybe they'd float, but they wouldn't come off."

"You did great." Examining the last life jacket lowered his hopes even further—much of the cork stuffing in the left front panel had leaked out. Even if he thought he could wear the jacket and hold on to Rosie, the dilapidated preserver could never withstand his weight. Still, Starsky felt a grim determination in what he had to do; the little life in front of him was the only thing that mattered.

“Okay, here we go, *schweetheart*.” Starsky knew they were running out of time. He helped Rosie get the life vest on and awkwardly tried to tighten the restraints solely with his right hand. Even at the best of times, Starsky wasn’t ambidextrous. “Now, I’m gonna need your help getting out of my shirt.” Starsky began to pull the bloodied t-shirt off by grasping it behind his head and pulling. Rosie reached up to help him slip it away from his injured shoulder. Starsky couldn’t help gasping as the cloth and congealed blood pulled away from wound. Rosie’s eyes grew wide with fright at the sight of the damage.

It took him a moment to roll onto his knees, then grimly stand. Starsky swayed unsteadily, waiting for the black dots to clear from his vision. Rosie quietly waited for him to indicate their next step. Placing a hand on her shoulder for both comfort and steadiness, Starsky led her to the guardrail.

“I figure Hutch and your dad are only ten or fifteen minutes behind us. What we’re gonna do is bail outta here.” Starsky looped his t-shirt through the armholes at the front of her life jacket. “Can you tie this in a knot for me? I’m gonna have to help you over the side, because we need to get you as far away from the boat as we can.”

Rosie was panic-stricken. “But, Uncle Dave! I can’t even swim, not really!”

“I know, that’s why you’re wearing the life vest. It’ll keep you above water, and I know you can dog-paddle. Once you’re out there, you just have to wait until this boat is far away from you. Then I want you to untie my t-shirt and use it like a flag. You can wave it at your dad when the Coast Guard boat gets here, so they’ll know where to find you.” Even as he said it, Starsky knew it was a lame idea. Unfortunately, it was the only chance they had left and he was losing ground fast. The weight of risking Rosie’s life this way tightened his chest, but staying aboard the ship meant certain death.

“What about you, Uncle Dave? What are you gonna do?”

Starsky’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “After we get you off this tub, I’ll be right behind you. Then we just need to wait until your dad and the good guys come along and scoop us out of the water like a couple of big fish.”

“But why can’t you wear the vest, and I can just hang on to you? I know you’re hurt bad. What if you...?”

“Aw, Rosie, I’ll be fine.” Starsky reached down and tried to secure the ripped portion of the jacket. “Even if we could hang on to each other, the jacket wouldn’t hold me up. You’ll be fine, and I’ll be right behind you. Okay?”

Tears threatened to spill over from her soft brown eyes, but she nodded nonetheless.



Starsky knelt down beside her. “Rosie, I want you to know how proud I am of you. You’re very, very brave—just like your daddy.”

Rosie didn’t wait for Starsky to pull her to him. He relished the feel of the tiny arms around his neck for a moment, then drew away. He knew his strength was leaving him as swiftly as the blood flowing down to his abdomen. If he didn’t act fast, he’d never have the reserves to do what he had to.

“Remember a couple weeks ago when Hutch and I were over, and we were playing in your pool? We’re gonna do another big cannonball and get you out there.”

“Why? Can’t we just jump together?”

“I’m afraid not. You need to get away from the side of the boat, so I’m gonna help you fly out as far as you can. I’ll jump right after.”

“Then I wave your shirt?”

“Give the boat a few minutes to get ahead so the bad guys won’t see you, then wave it away from the sun. Then you’ll be facing the direction your dad and Hutch’ll be coming from.” Starsky closed his eyes as a wave of pain and nausea lanced through him, his knees threatening to buckle.

“Uncle Dave?”

Starsky swallowed and forced his eyes open with a thin smile. “You ready, kiddo? Good. Rosie, promise me one thing. Whatever happens...if we get separated or something, you keep on waving that shirt until your dad or someone finds you, okay? Don’t wait for me, whatever happens, all right? Do you understand?”

“I understand.” Her small voice was barely a whisper. She understood more than he realized.

“And Rosie...” Starsky took a moment to swallow back his feelings of finality. “If I...when this is all over...I need for you to tell your dad something for me, okay? Tell your dad...” Starsky had to pause again and look away, burning with the thought of too many things left unsaid.

Starsky pulled himself together, then quickly passed on to the little girl what he knew could well be his final connection to those he loved. Rosie watched him with wide eyes and dutifully repeated back the message.

“Good girl. Okay, let’s get you in for a swim.” Starsky gave Rosie a reedy smile and reached out with his right hand to grasp one of her thin arms. Both of her hands tightened around his wrist. Taking a few steps away from the rail, Starsky turned his back on the water. He knew he would have to swing Rosie high enough to clear the three-foot barrier before releasing her into the ocean.

“Ready? I’m gonna spin us around once, then you’re gonna be airborne, kiddo. Make sure you tuck into a cannonball before you hit the water, okay?”

Rosie didn't respond and kept her eyes downcast.

"Hey, come on, Rosie. We've done this a hundred times. You're gonna be fine."

Rosie looked up, her soft brown eyes full of fear. "Promise?"

"Have I ever broken a promise to you?"

"No."

"Then I promise."

Rosie nodded and drew a deep breath. "Okay."

"Okay then, let's fly. On three. One...two...*three!*" Starsky leaned back against the light pull of Rosie's weight, pivoting them in a circle. Her feet left the ground as she gained significant height. But even the small burden of her additional weight tore at Starsky's chest. With a gasp, he fell to his knees and, in the process, slammed Rosie against the guardrail.

"Rosie, I'm sorry. Are you hurt?" Starsky grated out. He clenched his left shoulder as best he could to staunch the now-coursing blood.

Rosie was only shook up and bruised. Tears welled up in her eyes again, but more from fear than pain. "Uncle Dave, are you all right? What are we gonna do?"

There was nothing else he could do. Starsky mentally shook himself and drew on the last of his reserves. Using the guardrail for leverage, he hauled himself back up. He took a moment to wipe the wet blood off his hand and onto his jeans, then offered it again to Rosie. The noise had probably alerted Andrews' crew—this was their final chance, and they knew it.

"We do it again."

Without waiting for Rosie to prepare herself, Starsky grabbed her tiny wrist. Sensing his urgency, she took hold of his arm. Starsky grit his teeth and swung Rosie in a complete circle, then lunged with the arc of her flight over the guardrail. Searing pain ripped across his tortured shoulder, all but blinding him. As Rosie cleared the barrier, they released their hold on each other and she soared away from the boat. The force of the throw propelled Starsky against the guardrail, where he clung to remain upright. He held his breath as he watched Rosie fall away, tucking into a tight ball at the last moment before hitting the water. It wasn't as far as he had wanted her to go, but it was enough to keep her from being dragged under by the wake. Anxious seconds passed as Starsky searched for Rosie to surface. No cry of alarm sounded from the bridge as the rest of the ship quickly passed where she'd submerged. Starsky was beginning to fear the worst, but as the swells began to die down, a small pigtailed head broke the surface. Rosie looked back to see him follow suit.

Come on, just one more blow for the good guys, then it's all over. Feeling more tired and weaker than he'd ever felt, Starsky struggled up the deck until the control room was in sight, but he was still protected from the occupants' line of vision. It was a huge effort to pull himself up to sit on the top guardrail. The bullet had not exited out his back and was in fact lodged somewhere in

nerves and muscles, grating with every move. He knew there was no way he could swim or even tread water until Hutch and Dobeys caught up with them. But he also knew that what happened to him no longer mattered, only the safety of the ones he loved.

The sound of running footsteps confirmed the discovery that they were missing. It was time to act quickly, even if it meant his life. Otherwise, they'd spot Rosie floating in the water and go back for her—then the price of his life would be for nothing.



Hutch anxiously accepted a second set of field glasses from Vestman. Brushing his windswept bangs out of his eyes, he raised the glasses and focused. Through the magnified lenses, he could make out the Stingray's name plated on the stern. ETA ten minutes. *Hang in there, Starsk. Just hang on.*



Starsky could see Andrews' men looking off the aft deck through their field glasses. Maybe help would arrive sooner than he'd hoped. Leaning over to his left ankle was murderous to the point of him having to climb back off the rail and lift his leg in order to reach it. Finally, Starsky was able to lift his pant leg high enough to remove the small pistol still strapped there. Unsteadily, he climbed back onto the guardrail and took a moment to shake free the sweat that stung his eyes, blurring his vision. A quick glance to the water showed that Rosie had untied his blue t-shirt from her life vest and was preparing to wave it. *Good girl! No matter what happens, keep going; they'll find you.* Starsky palmed the tiny pistol in his right hand. *Why couldn't they have hit the right shoulder instead?* He remembered the conversation with Hutch about the miniscule weapon. What were the odds that it would have enough range to take out his target, even if he were able to shoot accurately right-handed? Hutch had bet the little gun wouldn't have any more fire power than a Daisy BB rifle, anyway. It was stupid for Starsky to ever think he could rely on it. *Wanna take odds on that bet?* Starsky looked down at his tremorous right hand. *Heck, I wish I wasn't even in the game!*

The sound of running feet moving in his direction from the bow spurred Starsky on. A lone man exited the cabin and stared at him, open-mouthed.

It didn't take more than a few seconds, but for Starsky, it seemed that time stood still—running assailants to his right, with semi-automatic weapons drawn; Andrews emerging and aiming the detective's own gun at him.

Starsky didn't draw a bead on any of them, but instead at the crated bomb Curtis had set to detonate once the Dobeys were onboard. Extending his right arm, Starsky ignored the screaming pain in his chest and squeezed the trigger. The tiny revolver barely bucked in his callused palm.

The first explosion flung him over the side of the boat, debris stinging the side of his face and back as he fell away. Just before he hit the water, Starsky almost smiled. For the first time in his life, he was glad his partner was wrong.



What the—? Hutch blinked the sweat out of his eyes and readjusted his grip on the binoculars. Fire? Starsk, what the heck's going on out there?

“Vestman! The Stingray’s caught fire!” Hutch bellowed into the cabin, then raced back to the boat’s bow.

“No!” Dobey hauled himself to the guardrail, where Hutch shifted from foot to foot in agitation. Edith and Cal rushed to join him.

“Let’s see what’s going on!” Vestman hollered from the control room, snatching up the microphone.

“Sea Star One to Air Alliance Twelve, move in now! Repeat, Air Alliance Twelve, Stingray in distress, move in! Move in! Copy?”

Sanderson, aboard the helicopter hovering ten miles off the coast, responded. “We copy, Sea Star. Double A-Twelve en route, ETA eight minutes.”



The second successive shock wave sent Starsky tumbling head over heels into the water, until he didn’t know which way the surface was, and he wasn’t sure he cared. A crushing weight deflated his already exhausted lungs, and the salt water made his tortured shoulder feel as if it were on fire. The second explosion had been the fuel tanks igniting, and the blow forced him further toward unconsciousness. Starsky had heard drowning was like falling asleep, which at the moment, didn’t seem terribly frightening. His blue jeans were heavy and pulled at his legs like weights. *To just slip away...* He was tempted for a split-second, but wasn’t ready to give up. Hutch would never forgive him, and then, there was Rosie. *What if she got hurt in the explosion? What if the Stingray wasn’t toast and Andrews was still alive?*

Starsky began a one-armed struggle toward the surface.



Hutch tore his gaze away from the burning Stingray. A second explosion had sent debris and flames shooting into the sky like fireworks. *Oh, Starsk, what’s going on? Hutch’s grip on the binoculars turned his knuckles white. How could you and Rosie have survived that? Are you already...? No! No, I would’ve...felt it...would’ve known somehow you were gone.*

The Sea Star One continued on its course toward what remained of the Stingray.



Edith buried her head against her husband’s broad shoulder. *My baby! Oh, my sweet baby! Dear God, please! Please, not like this! How can I go on if she’s...? Oh, Father in Heaven, hold her! If you have to take her now, tell her we*



love her, Jesus. And hold her. Hold my baby close until I can hold her again myself.



Cal gripped the Sea Star's railing until he thought he could break it in his anger. A myriad of emotions consumed him, especially the silent rage he'd felt since they had learned his father had been abducted. *How could this have happened? Who were they that had played with their lives as if they were nothing? Hate them so because of the color of their skin? And Starsky...he was one of the best. Who did they think they were to take Rosie and Starsky away from them?*

Cal wiped angrily at the tears running down his cheek. *I hope you all burn in Hell!*



No, no, no, no, no...please, God, no... The plea seemed to wipe out all of Dobey's thoughts. He unconsciously tightened his grip around his wife's trembling shoulders. Memories flashed through his mind: helping to deliver Rosie, her Christening, her first steps, her learning to ride a bike. Rosie sobbing in his arms when her kitten was struck by a car, Rosie and Starsky playing in the pool with Hutch and Cal...Starsky! *Oh, Starsky, I never told you I didn't mean what I said. I was so afraid for my family... I never blamed you, I was just so afraid.* Regret and grief tore through his heart until all that was left was the numbness of disbelief.



Rosie untied Starsky's t-shirt from the oversized life vest, but was having a hard time controlling her movements as she tried to use the wet material as a flag. Shaking from both cold and fear, it was difficult to concentrate on what she was doing. Her fear became terror when she felt the preserver begin to loosen around her, threatening to spill her into the deep waters. "Help me, Uncle Dave! It's slipping! Help me!"



Just when he thought his starving lungs would burst, Starsky broke the water's surface. It took more than a few desperate moments to catch his breath. Awkwardly, he fumbled with his jeans until he was able to kick free of them. *I'm so weak, how can I...?* He continued to tread water, though it was more of a thrashing of his legs and balancing with his right arm. His left hung uselessly at his side. Pain continued to threaten to steal his consciousness as each wave lapped at him and sent rivers of pain through his still-bleeding shoulder. Frantically, Starsky scanned the skyline for signs of Rosie. Her distant call of help forced him to turn until he could see her bobbing form almost a quarter-mile away. He couldn't make out her words over the sound of the waves and the crackling debris from the burning Stingray, but he could definitely hear the fear in her voice.

Starsky drew as deep a breath as he could and slowly began making his way toward the tiny figure.



Rosie was panicking by the time Starsky completed his painful crawl to her. She was still dog-paddling, but was hardly able to keep her arms within the too-large vest, or her head above water. Along the way, Starsky had come across a portion of a life preserver that had been torn in half when the Stingray blew up, and was pushing it out in front of him.

“Uncle Dave...I...I can’t paddle anymore. The life vest...I can’t get it tied...and I...” She finally began sobbing so hard her words were indistinguishable. Rosie slipped out of the vest and the ocean enveloped her. Starsky lunged forward and pulled her back above the surface and to his chest. Immediately, Rosie began coughing up water and wrapped her trembling arms around him.

As exhausted as he was, Starsky was still able to keep the two of them afloat—barely. *But how long can I keep this up? What if there’re sharks out here? Come on, partner, this ain’t lookin’ too good. I can’t do this one on my own.*

After a moment, Starsky placed Rosie’s hands on the broken life preserver. Scanning the horizon for any sign of rescue, he sent up a desperate prayer.



“There!” Hutch’s heart leapt when he finally sighted Rosie and Starsky through the field glasses. Vestman followed the pointing arm and steered the craft toward the sun. As the vessel surged closer, the Dobeys joined Hutch at the deck, finally getting a glimpse of the survivors. Hutch frantically began ripping off his boots and shirt. Understanding his intent, Cal followed suit. Dobby reached a shaky hand up to his own shirt, awkwardly trying to remove it.

Hutch barely paused in his disrobing. “No, Cap’n...we’ll get them up out of the water. We’ll need you and Edith to help them on deck.”

The larger man barely nodded, frustrated at his limitations. Hutch and Cal quickly grabbed up two life preservers and rushed back to the railing. The distance between the *Sea Star* and Starsky and Rosie was rapidly diminishing. Hutch could make out Rosie’s ragged, one-handed wave of the blue t-shirt. *But where’s Starsky?*



Frantically scanning the water, Hutch was relieved to see his partner’s head break the surface, the waves having pushed him several yards away from Rosie. He had assumed the dead man’s float, barely keeping his body at water level. It was then that Hutch could make out the pool of blood floating around him. Starsky’s too-pale face broke the surface again, and as the *Sea Star* drew closer still, Hutch knew time was running out.

Hutch whipped around toward Vestman in the control room. “Hurry! We’re losing him!”

Vestman shook his head grimly; he was already at full throttle. There was nothing more he could humanly do.



The minute it took to close the gap between the ship and the Stingray's victims seemed to take an eternity. Vestman had steered the craft as close as he dared without sending a rolling wave over the already exhausted pair. Before the boat slowed significantly, Hutch and Cal were over the side, swimming desperately.

Every fourth stroke, Hutch lifted his head out of the water, both to breathe and to keep his position locked in on his partner. Each time he looked, he saw the dark head struggle to raise above the water, but it was evident that Starsky was growing weaker and would soon succumb to the ocean. Hutch could feel the stitches in his arm tearing free, but never slowed his frantic strokes. With only a few yards remaining between them, Hutch watched in horror as Starsky's head could no longer raise itself, and his partner's body began its descent into the ocean's depths.

The Sea Star rolled against its own reverse throttle. Vestman charged past the stunned captain and Edith as they clung to the rail. He reached the aft deck just in time to see Hutch dive underwater where he'd last seen Starsky.



Hutch tried desperately to focus his eyes on his partner through the seawater. Swift, sure strokes dug him deeper into the ocean until he thought his lungs would burst. The odd, unworldly silence of the ocean encompassed him, adding to the nightmarish quality of the moment. The reality of losing his partner crowded out all rational thought. It wasn't until black spots began to appear in front of his eyes that Hutch regretfully forced himself back to the surface for another lungful of air.

As Hutch again kicked his way farther into the depths, fear filled his exhausted muscles with the adrenaline necessary to continue on.

Starsk, where'd you go? It can't end this way...it can't! Hutch paused in his descent and scanned the eerie blackness from side to side, urgently seeking his partner's shadow within the uncaring ocean.

There!

A few meters below and to his right, a silhouette was slipping into the depths.

If I hadn't paused long enough to get my bearings, I would've missed him, and it would've been too late! If I hadn't... God, help me. Help us!

Hutch savagely kicked out in his partner's direction, hands grasping at Starsky's limp ones. Making contact with his partner brought an unfathomable amount of relief. But Hutch knew the battle wasn't over yet, and time was running out—for both of them.

Again, black spots swam in front of Hutch's eyes, as his lungs burned in protest. He knew if he didn't break the surface soon, he would join his partner in succumbing to the ocean's claim. One arm looped across Starsky's chest, Hutch kicked hard and towed his unyielding partner toward the surface. He fought the need to gasp out for air as his strength began to leave him. Sunlight danced like stars above him as they surged upward.

Hutch pressed on toward the daylight, even when he could no longer see it, and the blackness engulfed him.



Vestman was losing hope of seeing the detective return to the surface a second time, and he forced himself to assist pulling the two Dobeys children onto the deck while he continued to scan the ocean. Edith and the captain immediately encircled their children in an embrace, and the family comforted one another. The lieutenant quickly wrapped a blanket around each of the children and returned to the cabin. Pushing the throttle, Vestman turned the craft toward where he had last seen Hutch go under.



The Dobeys moved to the rail, worriedly scanning the water's surface for any sign of life. Vestman left the cabin and began to remove his own shirt when a shadow became visible just beneath the waves.

"There!" Cal cried out. The youth quickly scrambled over the railing again and maneuvered himself to Hutch's side as he broke the surface. Hutch had enough presence of mind to draw his partner's head out of the water as he drew air in great gasps that shook his frame. Cal quickly took Starsky under one arm and began to assist the two men toward the boat. Vestman threw himself flat on the deck, reaching for the unconscious detective. Cal and Hutch lifted Starsky's arms to the lieutenant and proceeded to push the limp form up the side of the boat. Edith and the captain added what strength they had to pull Starsky onto the deck. Dobeys repositioned him onto his back and tilted Starsky's head back to open his airway. Vestman assisted Hutch and Cal back onto the boat, then ran to the cabin.

"Can you handle this, Hutchinson?" Vestman waited for the blond's ragged nod of affirmation. "You stay with your partner; I'm taking us in!" As the boat swung back toward land, the lieutenant snatched up the radio microphone and called in his coordinates to the helicopter en route.

Hutch staggered over to his partner and dropped to his knees. Placing the side of his face close to Starsky's mouth, he couldn't hear his partner's breathing or feel the exhalation of breath. Starsky's chest wasn't rising and falling, either, and the area around his mouth had turned a shade of blue. Quickly, two fingers were placed on the side of his partner's throat, desperately searching for a carotid pulse. Starsky's pulse was weak and unsteady, but was present. Still, Hutch knew he only had moments before permanent brain damage occurred—if it hadn't already—from lack of oxygen.

Hutch began a litany: *chin lift, head tilt, pinch off the nostrils, give him a breath, turn my head, look, listen, and feel for Starsky's exhaled breath... Ignore the blood that covered Starsky's*

chest; ignore the throbbing of his own wound and the blood streaking down his arm; ignore Rosie's sobs. Oh, God! Chin lift, head tilt... Hutch could feel his body tremble from fear, exhaustion, and adrenaline. *How many more times could they pull it off? Was this it, or would they live to fight another day?*

Dobey's voice cut through his panic. "Slow down, Hutch, you're giving him too much air. His stomach's expanding."

Hutch shook his head grimly and hesitated only long enough to take a calming breath. *Easy, Hutchinson, easy.* He continued rescue breathing, but not as forcefully. Cal knelt next to them and pressed his t-shirt against Starsky's gunshot wound.

Edith's soothing words and gentle hands had finally calmed Rosie down. "It'll be okay, baby. I promise."

"*Promise!*" Rosie pulled away from her mother with wide eyes. "I promised Uncle Dave that I would tell you something!"

"Shh, honey, it can wait, it can wait."

"But I promised!" Already overwhelmed, Rosie's voice rose higher. Edith reached out and began rubbing her daughter's arms in a gesture that comforted them both.

"All right, all right. Shh...now, what is it?"

Hutch continued breathing for his partner.

"Momma, he told me to tell you all something when this was all over. But it's not really over yet, is it? Uncle Dave's not gonna be all right, is he?"

"Honey, we—"

Rosie plunged on, the exhaustion making her frantic, but her memory was crystal clear. "He...he told me to tell you and Cal that he loves you, and he thinks of us as family."

Hutch felt a catch in his throat as he watched for Starsky's body to exhale the forced air, and tried to tune her out. Rosie turned from her mother to face her father hovering over Starsky's prone form. The little girl took her father's large hand in her two smaller ones.

"Daddy, Uncle Dave told me to tell you he was so sorry and that you would know what for." Dobey's face grew grayer as he looked from his daughter to the motionless detective. "And that next to his own daddy, you're the man he looks up to the most."

The captain withdrew his hand and covered his face, sinking down onto the deck bench and pulling his daughter up next to him. Rosie's tiny voice broke with her tears. "Uncle Ken—"

"No." Hutch never broke the rhythm of rescue breathing.

"But he said that—"

“No!” Hutch paused long enough to check Starsky’s pulse before continuing. “You’re *not* saying goodbye...not yet!”



Vestman leaned out of the ship’s cabin. “Air Alliance ETA two minutes. They’re dropping their medic down with oxygen instead of trying to take your partner up in the basket—don’t want to waste the time. Ground transport will meet us onshore in fifteen. I need two of you to catch and steady him when he comes down the line.”

*Come on, Starsk! Don’t give up yet; it’s not your time...it’s not **our** time.* Hutch’s body threatened to collapse, but he knew he wouldn’t give up until the medic could relieve him, save Starsky—save them both. *I need you, buddy, I can’t do this alone...please, Starsk! I—*

At first he thought he was seeing things—that he’d finally snapped in exhaustion and distress. But when the ragged breath came again of its own volition, Hutch knew his prayers had been heard. As Starsky began to cough and gag, Hutch’s first-aid training kicked in. Cal backed away, and as gently as he could, Hutch extended Starsky’s arm. Then, grabbing the opposing shoulder and hip, he rolled his partner onto his side as Starsky began vomiting up seawater. *I never thought watching him puke would make me this happy,* came the light-headed thought. Starsky continued to breathe in wet, ragged gasps. As his lungs expanded and filled, pain contorted his face. Hutch debated leaving his partner lying on his side in case he vomited more seawater, but the obvious pain that positioning caused Starsky changed his mind. Hutch gently drew him into a seated position, supporting him with his own body and rubbing his back against the rasping breaths.

“Thank God...thank you, God,” he murmured into his partner’s damp hair. Hutch could hear the Dobeys’ grateful exclamations behind him, but he couldn’t focus on their words.

“utch?” Starsky rasped, disoriented.

“Yeah, buddy, it’s me.” Hutch awkwardly wiped at the tears threatening to spill over.

“at’s good.” Starsky’s coughing produced more ragged gasps.

“Easy, pal, easy.” Hutch swung his long legs behind his partner and drew him back against his chest. His right arm reached across Starsky’s torso and applied pressure against the still seeping wound. Cal quickly offered his shirt again for Hutch to apply as a compress. The additional pressure caused Starsky to gasp, and his head fell back against Hutch’s shoulder. Hutch leaned his head against his partner’s, watching the rise and fall of Starsky’s chest. “Hang in there, partner; medic’ll be here in a minute.”

With a lurch, Starsky fought his way back to consciousness and tried to look around. “*Rosie?*”

“I’m here, Uncle Dave!” Rosie drew away from her mother, with her father a step behind her.

“Easy, Starsk. She’s fine. We’re all fine. Just take it easy, buddy.”

Starsky settled down in the blond's arms, though his back arched against the pain. Blood continued to trail out from under the compress, cascading down his chest and mingling with that from Hutch's reopened stitches.

Dobey knelt down next to the prone man. "Starsky...son, I..." Overwhelmed, he bowed his head, unable to continue. A bruised hand reached up to grasp the captain's sleeve.

"Sorry," came Starsky's slurred and agonized whisper, as his hand dropped to the deck. A different kind of pain filled his eyes. "*M so sorry.*"

Dobey's head jerked up to negate the need for an apology, but the detective had passed out. Hutch sighed raggedly and reached out to his superior and friend. "There'll be time for that later, Cap'n. He knows."

Dobey nodded and wiped his eyes, standing unsteadily. The unmistakable sound of an approaching chopper caused them all to look to the skyline, and within moments the forced breeze began to lift their hair and clothes. Dobey steered Cal toward the bow to assist in the line descent of the medic.

"Rosie?" Hutch called out quietly to the little girl. He looked down at his unconscious partner, reassured by the sight of the battered chest rising and falling. "What did he want you to tell me?"

Rosie approached him almost shyly, as if afraid of waking Starsky from sleep. In a puzzled voice she tried to explain. "It...it didn't make a lot of sense. He just told me to tell you '*me and tea.*' He said you would know what that meant."

Hutch fought the lump in his throat. A short bark of laughter escaped that was more like a sob. "Me and *thee.*"

The blond head briefly lowered and rested against Starsky's, in sweet reunion. When he nodded at the waiting girl, a single tear finally made its way down his cheek. "Thank you, Rosie. I...yeah, I know *exactly* what that means."



The hospital room was dark except for the single fluorescent light above Starsky's bed. Hutch made up the excuse of needing a cup of coffee, and gave the captain's arm a squeeze as he passed by him in the doorway. The two had talked before in quiet, gentle voices in the waiting room as the surgeon removed the bullet from Starsky's shoulder and repaired the muscle damage. Dobey's voice had been broken as he apologized for his harsh words, but Hutch gently cut him off, understanding the fear that had consumed him.

There wasn't much to discuss on the captain's "case," though follow-up would occur to ensure the arrest of any other affiliates of Andrews who hadn't perished in the explosion. Once Starsky was out of surgery and listed in stable condition, Hutch finally allowed his superior to usher him back to the ER to have his own wound re-stitched.

Starsky had slept through the first two days following the rescue, still being given fluids and antibiotics intravenously. Initially, he had been given three pints of blood to replace what had been lost, and spent the first day on oxygen to ease his breathing. The doctors were pleased with his progress and were optimistic about his recovery. Breathing treatments would soon follow to ward off the onset of pneumonia.

Today, Starsky had spent a few hours of wakefulness between periods of drowsing. Dobey had checked in on him periodically throughout the day, but this was the first time Starsky had been awake while he was there. Hutch spied him haunting the doorway and made up an excuse to give them some privacy.

“How’s your shoulder?” Starsky’s voice was raspy and fatigued.

“I was about to ask you the same thing.” Dobey eased himself down into the chair Hutch had vacated, and adjusted his sling. “The doctor reset the collarbone and told me to take it easy.”



The silence that followed was tense, pressure building, until both men spoke at once.

“Captain, I’m so sorry—”

“Starsky, I’m sorry for what—”

Starsky smiled slightly, and Dobey chuckled, shaking his head. “All right, since I’m your commanding officer, I get to go first.”

Starsky closed his eyes and nodded, finding a measure of peace in his captain’s eyes.

“Starsky...I...well, I’m sorry for the things I said to you. I’ve already talked to Hutch, and he figured it was just that with all that was going on, well, that I—”

The captain’s speech was interrupted by the soft snore emitted from the bed. Dobey looked at the now-sleeping figure and shook his head—at first mildly annoyed, then with fond amusement. “Probably the first and last apology you’re ever going to get from me, and you fall asleep.”



When Hutch returned from the hospital cafeteria, two cups of coffee in hand, he paused in the doorway, warmed by the sight before him. Captain Dobey still sat in the hospital chair, pulled close to Starsky’s bed, his eyes closed. The older man’s lips moved slightly in silent prayer, his large hand gently resting on top of Starsky’s.



Some September days in Southern California could be glorious, and this Saturday was no exception. Captain Dobey flipped the hamburgers over, their juices causing the flames to dance and sizzle. He looked around his yard contentedly, his family enjoying the balmy day as much

as he was. Edith sauntered by, a salad and bag of chips in hand. With a saucy arch of her brow, she paused to lean toward him and kiss him soundly. With a grin, she walked away. “Just following directions!”

Dobey smirked and smoothed out his moustache after setting down his spatula. Maybe the “Kiss the Chef” apron wasn’t such a bad gift after all.

Another glance around his backyard served to tell him what he already knew—he was fortunate to have such a family. Each one of them had shown extraordinary bravery during the nightmare earlier that summer, and they had returned to their lives a little wiser and a little more appreciative of each other. Andrews had demanded three million dollars ransom—a million each for the three most priceless blessings a man could have. Dobey knew the moon and every star in the heavens combined wouldn’t have equaled the price of their lives.

And now, the horror had dissipated and their scars were healing, and life seemed to be getting back to normal for all of them. All except... The captain’s gaze swung back over to the pool. Cal and Hutch were lobbing the Nerf ball back and forth, just as they had last Father’s Day, his son hurtling himself off the diving board with each catch. At the shallow end, though, was a much calmer scene. Starsky, again in his ridiculously loud swim trunks, sat on the edge of the pool with Rosie, both dangling their feet in the water. The little girl hadn’t entered the pool since the incident on the Stingray, much to her parents’ concern. They agreed not to push her too soon and give her time, but it forced them to hide the heaviness in their hearts from the loss of Rosie’s innocence.

Starsky casually slipped into the shallow water, using only one arm to push himself off the edge. His wound had since healed, and physical therapy was gradually increasing his strength and mobility. Still, an angry pink scar marked the violence that had almost taken his life.

Starsky moved out a few more feet and turned to face Rosie. He snapped his fingers as if he’d just had an idea. “We could play tidal wave.” His good arm was extended and he spun around, sending a wave to lap at the little girl’s legs. Rosie simply stared at her feet and shrugged her shoulders.

“Or...” Starsky enthused. “I could bend my knees, and you could jump off them backwards.”

Rosie stood up, her expression suggesting she was about to walk away. Starsky watched her intently until she spoke. “Uncle Dave? Do you ever think about what happened?”

Starsky nodded. “Well, sure. What happened was pretty scary.”

Rosie finally met his eyes. “Were you afraid?”

“Yes, sweetheart, I was. We were all afraid.”

Rosie’s voice became so soft, he almost missed it. “I was *really* scared.”

Starsky nodded and realized everyone was discretely listening to their conversation. He hoped he could find the right words to encourage her. “But you were very brave, Rosie.”

The little girl looked at him skeptically. “I didn’t feel brave.”

Starsky smiled gently. “You know, Hutch is a lot smarter than me, but I’d never tell him that to his face.” He knew full well Hutch could hear every word. “And he told me once that being brave isn’t the same as feeling brave. Being brave is doing what you have to do, even when you feel afraid.”

“You think I was brave?”

“Yes, you were definitely very brave. And I think that no matter what other scary things you might have to face someday, you’ll be able to handle them, because you’re already very, very brave.”

Rosie looked at Starsky for a few minutes, thinking hard. Without a word, she turned and slowly walked away.

Starsky sighed, disappointed he was unable to get through to Rosie. He felt Hutch’s hand grip his shoulder, and he nodded, accepting the quiet comfort and support. He was just turning back to climb out of the pool, when the sound of running feet slapping against the wet pavement got his attention.

Starsky and Hutch turned just in time to see Rosie propel herself off the end of the swimming pool in their direction, her little voice shattering the silence.

“Cannonball!”

Harold Dobey smiled widely. All was going to be right in his world once again.