

# *The Sacrifice*

## *by Brit*

*John 15:13 ~ Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.*

It was a mistake from the very beginning.

David Starsky hated working with the Feds and now the whole stupid operation was blown by some overeager operative. He was tired, he was hungry, and he didn't know where his partner was. *Some days it just doesn't pay to be one of the good guys.*

The detective slammed the Baretta's clip home and moved off down another deserted courthouse hallway like a shadow. Two uniformed officers trotted in his wake, trying hard to emulate the senior officer's stealth.



In the northwest parking garage Ken Hutchinson crouched beside two patrolmen, wondering for the umpteenth time where in the world his partner was. After all the initial confusion of District Attorney Peter Watkins being taken hostage, the DA's office called in the local precinct in order to assist the FBI as the situation became more volatile. What should have been a small, low-key part of their full-scale operation had just turned into one rather loud, rather large mess.

Hutch and his partner had been split up in order to take charge of the less experienced uniformed officers. The last time he had seen Starsky was over the tops of several squad cars. Silent hand signals and gestures affirmed that Starsky and his assigned men would meet him in the opposite corner of the building where they anticipated the extortionists Phillip Randolph and Richard Capernicus would most likely be attempting their escape.

Months of undercover work by the FBI had just gone down the toilet due to a junior agent's faux pas. Posing as an assistant from another district court, the rookie had been assigned to hand deliver a report to the DA, which in reality was false information to be fed to the extortionists. The "confidential" material was to be the token of good faith by DA Watkins to the two skittish criminals, indicating his desire to "work" with them. Randolph and Capernicus were fairly new to Southern California, having built a successful empire on the east coast. Their plan now was to add the west coast DA to their growing number of public officials "in their pocket". In turn, they would ensure Watkins' rise in political power with, of course, all the entailing benefits of having "their man" and subsequently, the law, look the other way for their "business" activities.

The Feds' sting operation was going by the book with Watkins' assistance until that afternoon. After delivering the sensitive material as directed, the junior operative had bid the three men good night, acknowledging Randolph and Capernicus by name. Never having met them before,

nor being introduced to them by name that afternoon, the tip off set in motion the rookie's death and taking hostage the district attorney.

The FBI of course, had had their man wired, so the blowing of the setup was broadcast via the tap, as was the death of the junior operative. Samuel Taylor, the federal agent in charge, immediately put negotiations into play by calling the DA's office. Randolph and Capernicus demanded safe passage out of the courthouse to an airfield, where they would agree to release Watkins at a neutral destination. The Feds felt the whole deal was chancy, but with the DA's life at stake, options were limited.

The police and federal agents immediately cleared the building and surrounding streets. The ninth precinct responded to the FBI's request for assistance, and detectives and uniforms were immediately dispatched to key locations throughout the building, hoping for an opportunity to take out Randolph and Capernicus before they made their break. Holding Watkins as their shield, the two men made their way into the bowels of the Metropolitan courthouse and toward their freedom.

It was by some fluke Hutch and the two uniforms, Martin Perrigo and Romer Avelechez, were able to beat the retreating extortionists and their hostage to the underground garage. Starsky and Hutch had been in court all afternoon, and had only stopped by the station to brief their captain when the call for assistance came. Now Hutch was crouched behind a white Cadillac waiting for the bad guys to make a break to their waiting car. The sedan shielded the officers from view and was directly in the path the felons would have to take in order to reach either their Mercedes or the DA's Volvo. Perrigo shifted uneasily, his night stick bouncing off the car's fender. The noise reverberated through the parking garage, its cement walls amplifying the sound.

Hutch turned vehemently toward the man, his glacial blue eyes shooting daggers at the younger officer. Perrigo's already pale face registered his regret as he settled into a more sunken crouch, his gun held ready. Hutch turned his attention back toward the elevator and stairwell doors.

*Starsk, where in the heck are you?*



After springing silently into the eighth empty room, Starsky was getting more than a little frustrated. The endless halls of the turn-of-the-century courthouse echoed ghostly voices and footsteps, leading the officers on a wild goose chase. It was only a small consolation that they were nearing the stairwell leading to the parking garage. Resignedly, he motioned for the two patrolmen, Johnson and Battaglia, to follow him into the stairwell. If they were able to find the two fugitives and their hostage before they made it to the parking structure, they had a better chance of getting the DA out alive. But once the two men made it to their car, any attempt on the police's part to stop them would most likely result in bloodshed. The thought of his partner waiting in the lion's den with only a couple of rookies to back him up made Starsky's heart beat a little faster as he slinked down the stairwell, senses straining for signs and sounds of the retreating felons.



From his vantage point Hutch had a clear view of both the elevator and stairwell doors. He wasn't too surprised when the latter cautiously opened and DA Watkins was thrust out, his arm twisted behind his back. Watkins made a more than effective shield to anyone hoping to take a shot at the extortionists.

Hutch turned back to the two patrolmen and mouthed *on my signal*. Getting nods of confirmation, he held his breath, waiting for the three to pass by the white Cadillac en route to their waiting Mercedes.

The tension made the hairs on the back of Hutch's arms stand up. *Easy, now*, he thought to himself. *Just bide your time and wait for an opportunity. They just might let their guards down when they think they've got a clear path to their car.*

Capernicus and Randolph continued scanning the parking garage for signs of movement, propelling the DA before them. Overcome with terror, Watkins tripped over his own feet and went sprawling onto the pavement.

*Perfect!* Hutch took only a second to signal Perrigo and Avelechez before springing to his feet and covering the felons with the Python. "Freeze, police!"

Within a split second the two uniformed officers were up as well, drawing beads on the two felons. Slowly Randolph and Capernicus raised their arms, their faces betraying their rapidly calculating minds as they searched for a chance of escape. What should have been the end of a potentially deadly situation dissolved when the district attorney staggered to his feet, placing himself between the police officers and his captors. In less than a heartbeat, Randolph grabbed Watkins around the throat and took aim at the three cops. Likewise, Capernicus fired, beating a hasty retreat toward the Mercedes.

Hutch ducked behind the Cadillac and moved toward the hood of the car to change his location as a target. The detective drew a breath and sprang up, firing at the fleeing extortionists, making certain that he didn't accidentally hit the DA.

*Some days it just doesn't pay to be one of the good guys.*



At the first sound of gunfire from the parking garage, any need for stealth within the stairwell was thrown out the window. Starsky began hurtling down the steps at breakneck speed, slamming into the walls, and pushing himself off again. *Hang in there, partner. Cavalry's coming.*



As the shootout continued, Hutch's bullet caught Randolph in the shoulder, propelling the burly man backwards. Watkins was dragged down with him and was thrown heavily into a nearby sedan. The force of the propulsion caused the DA to bang his head against the front fender and slump into a semi-conscious state. Watkins continued his descent to the pavement until Capernicus snatched him back to his feet and clutched the dazed man to his chest as a shield against further attack.

Capernicus placed the muzzle of his pistol against the DA's head and yelled for his partner to make his way to the car. Randolph moved unsteadily to his feet and staggered to the waiting Mercedes. Capernicus slowly made his way toward the sedan, dragging the slack DA with him. Perrigo and Avelechez followed Hutch's lead in maintaining a draw on the extortionist, but not firing. Capernicus reached his destination, managing to sling Watkins against the rear door, then open the driver's.

Warily, Hutch watched as the felon prepared to stuff Watkins into the car. The blond detective tensed in anticipation of a final opportunity to end the mess before Capernicus made it out of the garage. He was ready when Capernicus leveled his gun in the officers' direction, random shots forcing them to once again take cover behind the Cadillac. But what Hutch wasn't anticipating was Capernicus turning the gun on the car to the detective's immediate left. Hutch popped up from behind the sedan in time to see Capernicus shoot the neighboring car directly in the gas tank, turning the import into a rocketing ball of flame. The force of the explosion propelled Hutch backwards. The successive bullets slamming into the Caddy directly in front of him, searching for its gas tank, forced the three officers into a crouching scurry away from their former sanctuary.

They were barely two car lengths away when Capernicus found his target, turning the white vehicle into an inferno. The blast sent Hutch tumbling into the other two men, sprawling them into concrete supports and other vehicles.

With the police temporarily out of his way, Capernicus shoved his dazed hostage into the front seat, pushing him through to the passenger side, and scrambled in after him. Rubber was left on the cement as the Mercedes squealed up the ramp of the parking garage and into the daylight.



If the sound of gunfire was enough to send Starsky headlong down the stairwell, then the sound of the first explosion sent him over the edge, literally. Rather than charging down the stairs, often two or three steps at a time, he flung himself over each level's rail to the next set of stairs. More than once his ankle twisted and a sharp pain burned up his leg in protest, but he continued on like a man possessed.

Snipers and assisting officers were ordered to hold their fire when it was realized that Capernicus continued to hold his gun to the DA's head. The Mercedes was allowed out of the parking garage and onto the emptied boulevard. Squad cars immediately fell into pursuit, but remained at a conservative distance, tailing the felon to the airfield in hopes of a second chance.



Starsky flung himself out the stairwell door, gun sweeping the area, just as the white Cadillac became a raging ball of fire. The blast from the explosion sent the detective backward into the brick wall, temporarily stunning him. By the time his vision cleared, all he caught was a fleeting glimpse of the Mercedes' taillights. The trailing patrolmen burst out of the stairwell moments behind the detective's slump to the floor. Officer Johnson grasped Starsky by his elbow, hauling him to his feet, while Battaglia crossed over to the still burning vehicles.

Starsky shrugged out of the younger man's grip. "Where's Hutch?"

Not expecting an answer, Starsky began a limping trot toward the burning vehicles. "Huuuuuuuuuutch!"

Perrigo hauled himself up from behind a green LTD. "Over here!"

Starsky quickly turned toward the voice and ran past the shaken officer. The sight of his unconscious partner lying face down on the cement brought him up short before he grabbed the trailing Johnson and propelled him toward the ramp's opening. "Call an ambulance! *Move!*"

By now FBI agents and patrolmen were filtering into the parking structure, the unmistakable sound of fire engines howling in the distance. Oblivious to the activity around him, Starsky knelt next to his partner, leaving the unconscious Avelechez to his own partner's care.

Worried blue eyes belayed the detective's flippant words as Starsky checked Hutch's breathing and signs of consciousness. "Hey, c'mon, Blondie, this ain't no place for a nap, you know."

Gentle taps on the blond's cheek brought a groaning response. "Starsk, do that to me again and I'm gonna have to beat the crap out of you."

Awkwardly, Hutch tried to push himself up into a sitting position, but the blow to his head when he was knocked to the concrete prevented his limbs from fully cooperating. The relief on Starsky's face was evident as he grasped his partner under his arms and helped him lean against the nearby LTD. Starsky continued to hold on to his partner's arms and scanned the blond's eyes for pupil dilation. A small trickle of blood trailed down Hutch's face from a large scrape above his right eye.

"That's some road burn you've managed to get, Blintz." Starsky released Hutch in order to retrieve a handkerchief from his back pocket, but immediately regained his grip when the blond began to topple over. Starsky managed to get the cloth out while keeping his partner upright. Hutch gasped as gentle pressure was applied to the wound and unsuccessfully tried to push his partner's hands away.

"I'm fine, I'm fine."

"Sure you are, and I'm Jimmy Carter. How many fingers am I holdin' up?"

Hutch cast bleary and unfocused eyes at his partner.

“None, you idiot. You’ve got one hand on my jacket and the other one on my head.” The clarity of Hutch’s words still didn’t match the glazed look in his eyes.

“Okay, smart guy, how many of *me* do you see?”

Indignantly Hutch gave his partner a sour expression, but after looking at the dark-haired man for a moment, his already blurred vision wavered and Starsky became triplets.

“*Three...*” Hutch mumbled regretfully.

“Just what I thought. Where’s that ambulance?” Shifting his weight to take some of the pressure off his complaining ankle, Starsky craned his neck around to see if the paramedics had yet arrived. A twinge of guilt hit him when he noticed Perrigo sitting worriedly next to the unmoving form of Avelechez. “How’s he doin’?”

Perrigo glanced up, concern in his eyes. “I don’t know. He must have hit his head pretty hard.”

“Don’t worry, kid. Help will be here any minute.” As if summoned by his words, the all too familiar sound of an ambulance siren echoing throughout the garage announced the EMT’s arrival. Starsky breathed a sigh of relief--help was here and Hutch would be all right. He shook his head in disgust; the whole day had been one big series of preventable errors. *Stupid Feds.* The operation had been a mistake from the beginning.



The next morning found the two detectives in Captain Dobey’s office going over their account of the hostage situation a second time with the senior FBI agent, Samuel Taylor. Hutch and Avelechez had been kept in the hospital overnight for observation, but had still managed to issue statements for their reports. Starsky was at the hospital by 8:00 AM to wait with his partner until the doctor signed Hutch’s release, then brought him in to the station, where Taylor had insisted on talking with the detectives to ensure nothing had been missed the night before.

The detectives weren’t surprised to learn the tailing units had lost Capernicus and Randolph somewhere along the way and that they had made a fairly clean getaway. It also wasn’t surprising to learn that the district attorney’s body had been found that morning in a state park fifty-five miles south of the city. While it wasn’t officially their case, Dobey knew his men well enough to know that Starsky and Hutch wouldn’t let it go, whether they were formally “invited” by the Feds to assist or not. Initially, the FBI had decided they wouldn’t require the detectives’ assistance in tracking the extortionists, but the more Taylor talked to the two men, the more convinced he became that his superiors were wrong. The two detectives were definitely worth tapping into.

After a few hours, Starsky and Hutch were dismissed with instructions to continue finalizing their current case before it went to court, and to contact Taylor with any additional information they might come up with pertaining to the DA's murder.

"And don't forget to stop at IA on your way out, Hutchinson," Dobby growled without looking up from the report he and Taylor were flipping through. "They want to talk to you about the two cars that got toasted."

"As if I could forget," Hutch mumbled, heading out of Dobby's office to his desk, where he began searching each drawer for aspirin.

Starsky extracted a bottle from his center drawer and tossed it onto his partner's desk, then continued with a slight limp over to the communal coffeepot. Hutch sat down heavily on the edge of the desktop, fumbling with the plastic cap until his partner returned and exchanged the aspirin bottle for Hutch's coffee mug. Starsky easily popped open the container and shook out four tablets, which he then extended to the blond. Hutch grimaced as he washed down the medication with rather old and lukewarm coffee.

"Well, I suppose I better get this over with."

"What, IA? Nah, they can wait 'til tomorrow. You, I'm taking home." Starsky extracted the coffee cup from his partner's hand, not letting on that he noticed the slight tremor there. He then continued around the desk and tugged Hutch's jacket off his chair.

"But Dobby said..."

"Dobby said to *stop* at IA on your way out. We go, we *stop*, we tell them you'll be by tomorrow to answer their questions, we leave. Simple as falling out of a bowl of jello."

Hutch glanced up at his partner's face as he accepted his jacket. "*Falling out of a...* Starsky, that doesn't make sense."

The smiling man led his partner out the squad room doors. "Made perfect sense to me. Must be your concussion."



Agent Taylor had become increasingly impressed with Starsky and Hutch's arrest record and how they handled themselves during the hostage crisis. He told Captain Dobby that he wouldn't refuse the two detectives' assistance should he offer it. Dobby took the hint and placed the two at Taylor's disposal with the condition that it didn't interfere with their finalization of the Dobson case, about to go to trial.

By noon of the second day, Starsky and Hutch were becoming increasingly frustrated. Hours had been spent talking to various hospital and ER personnel throughout the state, trying to determine if anyone fitting Randolph's description had been admitted or treated in the last thirty-

six hours for a gunshot wound. So far their efforts were futile. A tip came when they least expected it and needed it the most.

Starsky was reaching for the phone for the umpteenth time when it rang. “Starsky.”

“If it isn’t my favorite fuzzy friend.”

“Hey, Hug, whatcha got?”

“Maybe nothin’, but a source who would prefer to keep his head connected to the rest of his body passed on a bit of information you might be interested in.”

“Huggy, you’re the best.”

“Was there ever any doubt?”

“Be down there in fifteen.”

“Uh, let’s make it thirty and at some other fine establishment. In the event that these dudes are as lean and mean as I’m hearin’, I just as soon they not find out that it was a certain Bear that sent you hunting, dig?”

“The usual second choice?”

“Sure, maybe I’ll even stay for the matinee.”



Within twenty-five minutes the detectives were seated in a darkened movie theater, the last portion of a triple-X movie flickering across the screen. The theater was small and nearly empty, with only a few questionable members of society sprinkled throughout the worn and dirty seating.

Something on the screen caused Hutch to do a double take from his original glance upwards. “That’s *disgusting!*” he hissed at his partner.

Starsky squinted up at the image on the screen, then cocked his head to one side while he tried to discern what was happening. “I’m not even sure it’s legal,” he whispered back.

The two detectives were drawn into the images on the screen before them, looks of disbelief and distaste marring their features.

“*Mer-SAY!*” They were so engrossed in the picture that the awed voice behind them caused them to jump. Huggy immediately shushed them, an amused expression on his face. “Ain’t never seen nothin’ like *that* before.”



“And let’s hope we never do again,” Hutch whispered back, then turned in his seat toward Huggy. “What do you have?”

Huggy swallowed the popcorn he had been chewing and attempted to draw back the bucket as Starsky reached for a second handful. “A blitzed cat who shall remain anonymous was frequenting a certain house of ill repute when their...uh...shall we say *extracurricular activities* were interrupted by a small army of toughs carrying in somebody who had gotten in the way of a bullet.”

“Randolph?” Starsky asked around a mouthful of popcorn.

“That’s the name this dude heard. Apparently the room he and his lovely were in was the executive suite because that’s where they brought Randolph in. My customer was also unceremoniously tossed out of the room without receiving any compensation for his interrupted ‘date’ and was told in no uncertain terms to keep his lips zipped unless he’d like to have them permanently removed from his face.” Huggy tossed another handful of popcorn into his mouth. “He ends up at my place, and after a few Scotches you couldn’t shut him up.”

Hutch looked at his partner. “Hooray for Scotch.”

Huggy nodded. “Yeah, but when he sobered back up, he realized what he’d said and who he’d said it about. I don’t think he’ll be returning to collect for services *not* rendered anytime soon, if you catch my meaning.”

Starsky tried to snatch another handful of popcorn, but Huggy jerked the bucket just out of his reach. “You got an address for us?”

“Does the Pope wear a funny hat? Do you know where Eddington crosses Thrity-eighth, then becomes a one way? Follow it down to the last block. On the southwest corner there’s a deli--Antonio’s. The backrooms house more than a few salamis.”

Starsky threw an amused look at his partner. “Yeah, I’ll bet we can even find a few rump roasts back there.”

Hutch merely gave him an exasperated glare. Grabbing a handful of his partner’s coat, Hutch rose and dragged Starsky out of the theater. Huggy merely chuckled at the two and reclined in his seat, contently finishing his popcorn.



As they pulled away from the adult theater, the decision was made to pay a visit to Sweet Alice, hoping she would be able to give them an idea of what to expect when they raided Antonio’s secondary business. There would be time to kill waiting for the requested warrant to be issued, and the more prepared they were going in, the less likelihood there would be of losing the elusive racketeer.

It had been awhile since Hutch had heard from the prostitute, so they were unsuccessful in locating her until their third stop at a bar just outside of their jurisdiction. Cigarette smoke and dim lighting dulled the interior of the small lounge. A few patrons sat at the bar or in booths, nursing their drinks and waiting for the after-dinner crowd to bring some life to the place. Sweet Alice sat on the furthest stool, allowing her to examine each new patron as they entered the bar and gauge her prospective clients. A genuine smile lit up her face at the sight of Hutch, followed by his partner, entering the bar.

Alice quickly exhaled and snubbed out her cigarette. Slightly anxious hands brushed the blonde hair off her shoulders, and her eyes fairly danced when Hutch leaned over to kiss her rouged cheek.

“Handsome Hutch! What on earth brings you to this part of town? You can’t just be looking for me?” An honest blush rose in her cheeks.

“Hello, Alice. Why else would we be here?” Hutch offered Alice his hand and led her to a booth in the far corner. Starsky trailed behind the two blonds, smiling ruefully at the effect his partner had on some women. But then, Sweet Alice wasn’t just *some* woman. Starsky sat opposite the two.

“*Hello, Alice.*”

“Oh, Starsky!” Alice reached out a hand to quickly squeeze Starsky’s. “Honey, I’m sorry. I was just so surprised to see you two walk in...”

“It’s okay, Hutch has that effect on a lot of people.” Starsky smirked at his partner. “Alice, what do you know about a little extra action going on in the back of Antonio’s Deli over on Eddington?”

Alice looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, they haven’t been in business too long, maybe a half a year or so. A couple of bigshots from out east came in and started ‘buying out’ some of the smaller fries and independents.”

Starsky and Hutch threw a knowing look at each other. Apparently, Capernicus and Randolph’s activities included more than just the protection and extortion business. Starsky turned his attention back to Alice. “Have you ever been in the back of the shop?”

“No, though they did give me the option of either coming to work for them or finding a new barstool to rest my tired dogs on.” Alice cast her eyes away from the two men. “They were pretty serious about it.”

Hutch’s arm encircled Alice’s shoulders as his blue eyes turned icy. “Alice, did they hurt you?”

Alice gave a short laugh and swallowed back the brief flash of fear. “No, honey. At least...not much. But it was enough to convince me to take my trade somewhere else.”

Starsky reached out a hand to take Alice's. "Which is why you came clear out here."

"Hey, it's not so bad, sugar. And a little change of scenery does a body good." The concern in the two men's faces was enough to bring tears to her eyes. Alice forced herself to push down her emotions--vulnerability was dangerous in her line of work. "I've never been to Antonio's, but a friend of mine went to work for them. She told me that it's a real swanky place with red velvet bed covers and drapes."

Some of the hardness left Hutch's face. "Did she tell you how it's laid out? How many rooms? Anything like that?"

"It seems like she mentioned there was a meat locker with two doors connecting the deli out front to a lounge in the back, and that there were maybe four or five rooms beyond that."

"Did she mention any other entrances or maybe a back exit?"

Alice thought for a moment. "She did say that there wasn't a direct back exit, but you had to go into a wine shop next door to get out. I remember because it seemed odd at the time, but I guess that would make the lounge less obvious."

"Have you ever heard of anyone named Randolph or Capernicus?" Starsky asked. "Or anyone who's been hurt recently and brought in to the back of Antonio's?"

Alice looked apologetic as she shook her head. Hutch leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. His left hand pressed a folded bill into her smaller one. "Thanks, beautiful."

Alice glanced down at the twenty folded into her palm. "Aw, Hutch, you know you don't have to..."

Hutch rose along with his partner. "You take care, Alice."

"You sure you boys can't stay for a drink?"

Starsky pulled his car keys out of his pocket. "Not tonight, schweetheart. Suddenly I've got a craving for salami."



After the warrant was issued Starsky and Hutch touched base with Dobby. Backup was assigned, and it was decided that Agent Taylor would accompany the captain on the raid.

Hutch pulled the LTD into a parking spot a few doors down from Antonio's. Starsky reached for the microphone. "Okay, Cap'n, we're in position."

"Copy that, Starsky. All units hold your positions until signaled. Starsky, don't do anything cute. Be careful in there."

Starsky grinned into the microphone. “Cap’n, I’ve told ya before: *he’s cute, I’m...*”

Dobey interrupted with a bark. “*Just get your butts moving, Starsky, and quit with the comedy routine!*”

Starsky hung up the microphone and joined Hutch in front of the sedan. Hutch gave his partner a shove in the direction of the deli. “You’ve *got* to get new material.”



The old Italian behind the counter couldn’t decide if the two men examining the sliced meats were cops or numbers runners. Either way, he didn’t need them hanging around, scaring off potential customers for either of his trades. His best bet would be to get rid of them, and fast.

“What can I do you for?” Wiping his hands on the front of his apron, he approached the counter.

Starsky turned to Hutch quizzically. “I don’t know, what looks good to you?”

“Starsk, don’t you know what kinds of fats and preservatives are in these things? Eating garbage like this will send you to an early grave.”

The butcher’s expression became hostile, as he menacingly snatched up a meat cleaver. “Now, *lookit, you two...*”

Starsky’s hand shot out with lightning speed and grabbed the counter man’s wrist. The tight grip numbed the butcher’s hand so that he dropped the knife on the counter. Starsky drew him across the meat case until they were nose-to-nose. His badge appeared in his right hand, which he held up to the Italian’s face. “No, you *lookit...*we’re just here to talk to your boss about a little liverwurst, *capish?*”

Hutch moved quickly behind the counter to stand beside the butcher, shoving the knife into the deli case and slamming the sliding glass door. “So why don’t you just take us on back through your magic freezer and we’ll announce ourselves? Then you can take your salami and make yourself scarce. Got it?”

The butcher glanced from one set of piercing blue eyes to the other and nodded grimly. It didn’t take him long to deduce that he’d rather deal with the bosses later than with the two maniacal looking cops now.

After Starsky released him, the Italian led the two through the meat locker. Rows of pre-cut selections lined the walls and a few whole hogs and sides of beef hung from hooks in the middle of the frigid room.

“Hey, Hutch, check it out. Who am I?” Starsky hunched his shoulders and took a few jabs at a side of beef, causing the meat to swing. He then threw his arms in the air and did a victory dance while imitating the roaring of a crowd.

The blond simply shook his head at his partner’s antics. “Starsky, cut it out.”

The butcher stared at Starsky in disbelief, then turned to Hutch. “What he hit the cow for?”

Starsky stared at the man in amazement. “That was ‘Rocky’, didn’t you see ‘Rocky’?”

“Who’s this Rocky? Why he beat up on dead cows?”

“Never mind. Just unlock the door, then get out of here.” Starsky shook his head as he pulled the two-way radio out of his back pocket. Depressing the microphone button he affirmed to Dobey that they were heading in.



The raid itself only lasted a total of eight and a half minutes. On Starsky’s signal, fourteen uniformed officers stormed the brothel and brought ten people into custody. Flushing out Randolph was another matter.

Once all of the prostitutes, clients and assorted workers were corralled, had their rights read to them, and were led out to the awaiting squad car, it was determined that Randolph was not among those arrested. Starsky, Hutch, Dobey and Agent Taylor returned to the lounge area, as uniformed officers continued to comb the rooms for additional evidence.

“So what are you thinking--that this was just a stopping point before they moved Randolph somewhere safer?” Taylor asked, rifling through the desk.

Frustration evident on his face, Starsky threw himself down on one of the red velvet settees. “It’s possible. In a city this size, he could be anywhere.”

“*If* he even stayed in the city.” Hutch sat down on the arm of the recliner, next to his partner.

Two more uniformed officers entered the lounge to report. “Nothing, sirs. We’ve searched the entire building and there’s no sign of him.”

“That’s just great!” Dobey turned on the two detectives. “Well, what are you doing just sitting around? Get your butts in gear and...”

“Wait a minute!” Hutch raised a hand for silence. “Did you hear something?”

The room immediately went dead silent. The only sound was the ticking of an elaborate wall clock. Starsky cocked his head at his partner, his eyebrows raised. *What did you hear?*

Hutch quickly shook his head, his ears straining for the noise to repeat itself. After a long second the occupants of the room exhaled their collectively held breaths.

“What did you think you heard, Hutchinson?” Taylor asked, leaving the desk and crossing to join the other men.

“I thought I heard the floor squeak.”

Taylor shook his head. “It’s an old building. That could have been any one of us shifting his weight.”

Starsky glanced over to his captain with a wicked grin forming on his face. Dobey’s finger was pointed in his direction before he could open his mouth. “Don’t *even*, Starsky.”

Hutch shook his head in frustration. “No, the noise came from over here.” The blond walked over to the farthest wall, dominated by an elaborate stereo system that had been shut off after the arrests. Starsky’s gaze turned away from his irritated captain to follow his partner. His first glance was in appreciation for the expensive sound equipment, but a second look noted that the walnut paneling that made up the walls stopped a half inch *above* the carpet in a three foot section, rather than continuing down into the lush piles like the rest of the walls.

“*Hutch!*” Starsky hissed as he joined his partner. He then pulled Hutch a few feet away from the wall and pointed to the bottom of a three-foot section. As the two crouched down to examine the area, they could make out a faint glow of light coming from the gap. The detectives looked at each other with grins, then stood. A quick examination found an area that had been cut out of the wood to form a hidden door. Hutch turned and gestured for Dobey, Taylor and the two officers to get ready. The unmistakable sound of a trigger being cocked was audible as Starsky lay his ear against the paneling. He quickly flung himself across the hidden doorway shouting “*Down!*” as he knocked his partner to the floor in a flying tackle. Starsky’s sudden movement put Captain Dobey in motion as well, the larger man shouldering Taylor aside and out of the line of fire. A deafening roar exploded into the room as the first volley from a shotgun blasted through what was once a concealed entryway. As pieces of paneling and stereo parts flew through the lounge, the two uniformed officers threw themselves behind a small wet bar.

A second blast tore an additional portion of the wall away before Starsky and Hutch could disentangle themselves and draw their weapons. Before a third shot could be fired, the partners had rolled to their feet and taken aim at Randolph through the three-foot hole in the wall. The other officers in the room quickly drew their guns and joined the detectives.

Randolph’s sawed-off shotgun wavered from one detective to the other, sweat pouring from his pale face. The exertion of scrambling for safety when the raid began, and the kickback from the two blasts had reopened his shoulder wound. Blood stained through his bandages and shirt as he took on the look of a cornered animal, the barrel swinging from one target to the next.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you.” Starsky’s voice was soft, but there was no mistaking its deadly edge. “You might take one or two of us out, but you’ll never get all of us.”

Randolph's rapid breathing beat an odd counterpoint to the ticking of the wall clock. A few tense seconds passed before he finally let the shotgun slip from his hands and onto the floor.



Captain Dobey waited outside the hospital room, nursing a cup of cooling coffee. The uniformed guard stationed outside Randolph's room had long since given up trying to make small talk with his senior officer, and sat stoically beside the door.

When the two detectives finally emerged, Dobey could tell by the grim lines set on their faces neither they nor Taylor had made any headway with the prisoner. "What'd you get, anything?"

Hutch ran a hand over his face. "Nothing. That leech in a three-piece suit that calls himself a lawyer advised him to keep his mouth shut, and that's exactly what he did."

The three men began to travel down the hallway. "So, what's next?"

"I'd say we start with some of the girls that we brought in today. Maybe with a little bargaining we can persuade one of them to spill the beans." Starsky yawned.

"Provided that there are beans to be spilled," his partner retorted, pushing Starsky into the elevator.



Capernicus was packing up another box of materials from the "legitimate" business fronting all their other operations when the phone rang. Having dismissed his secretary with the story their stock trading firm had gone bankrupt, the extortionist snatched up the receiver and sat on the edge of his desk. "Teilman and Associates."

"Mr. Capernicus, it's Eddie."

"I thought I told you not to call me here, Eddie."

"They've got Mr. Randolph."

"Who has Mr. Randolph?"

"The cops. Somehow they found out where we were and busted in through Antonio's place. They took everybody--Phil, Jake, even all the girls."

"How is it that you're not with them, Eddie? This had better *not* be your one phone call from the police station. Tell me that you're not *that* stupid, Eddie."

“No, sir! Of course not! I was making a run for Mr. Randolph when the cops came. I got there just as they were hauling him into the squad car.”

Capernicus threw his head back with an oath, then rubbed his free hand across his face.

“What do you want I should do now, Mr. Capernicus?”

“I need time to think, Eddie. These additional complications were not allowed for.” The pseudo-businessman thought furiously. “With Jake and Phil and the others from the Eddington Street location out of commission, that puts us a bit short-handed. I’m not convinced these current set of circumstances mandate our leaving the west coast just yet. Do you think you can manage to find us some additional manpower? I think you know what kind of help we’re looking for.”

“Sure, Mr. Capernicus. For the kind of money you’re offering, I can get just about anybody you want.”

“That’s good, Eddie. Go to it then. I’ll contact you later today with your next assignment.”

“Uh, Mr. Capernicus, what about Mr. Randolph? You want me to try and bust him out? They took him to County General ‘cause he was bleedin’ again. That should make it a heckuva lot easier to get to him than if he was in lockup.”

“No, that won’t be necessary, though I’ll give the matter some consideration. Most likely the police will offer Mr. Randolph a reduced sentence if he turns over federal evidence, which will be a temptation to my partner. He never had as much loyalty to the operation as I would have hoped. We’ll have to see how this plays out with him before we decide our next move.”

“What about the three cops that saw you snatch that Watkins guy? What do you want to do about them?”

Capernicus rubbed his eyes against the ache that started behind them. “With theirs and Mr. Randolph’s testimonies, the prosecution would have substantial evidence. It would be a fairly airtight case, provided they can find me. But without witnesses, it’s all circumstantial, and *that* my lawyers can deal with.” The extortionist snorted. “Even if I were convicted, my sentencing would be minimal, which we would appeal until I was dead and buried. But as I said, they’d have to find me first.”

With a sigh, the graying man stood and crossed over to the picture window looking over the city skyline. “How unfortunate for Mr. Randolph. He’s just become a liability.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Like any good businessman, I’m going to start eliminating the liabilities.”





Starsky and Hutch spent the better part of the day tracking down a few dead-end leads and touching base with their assortment of contacts. Interrogating the prostitutes and brothel employees from the previous day's bust yielded nothing of any value. Either they didn't know anything, or they were more afraid of what would happen to them if they *did* talk than of going to jail.

The partners spent the day completely unaware that Capernicus' men were monitoring their every move. When the Torino came to rest in front of The Pits, a vagrant staggered out of a nearby alley and made his way to the phone booth on the block's south corner. It took three attempts before the trembling hand was able to insert his only dime into the slot. The wino opened his dirty palm to read the number that had been written there for him in marker.

"They're here." The vagrant had to pause to clear the phlegm from his underused voice. "Them two cops you was askin' about--*Harsky and Stutcherson*--they just got to The Pits. So, how about the rest of that money you promised me?"



There were few occasions when Huggy was truly surprised, and this was one of them. His bar had been robbed a few times in the past, but rarely since word on the street placed him in tight with a certain set of detectives. Starsky's car was so recognizable that whenever the Torino was parked in any proximity to the bar, it was like a warning beacon against trouble.

In Huggy's mind, it stood to reason the five men wearing ski masks and waving baseball bats and pipes around must have been from out of town. There was no way anyone local would try and rob The Pits when they knew Starsky and Hutch were around.

Once the five men burst into the room the boisterous crowd fell immediately still, the only noise coming from the old Wurlitzer behind the pool tables. The music was cut short when one of the assailants charged across the room and smashed a length of pipe into it, silencing it permanently.

The gloved hand of the nearest thug snaked out and grabbed Huggy by the front of his turtleneck, sticking a small caliber pistol under his chin. "Open the cash register, *now!*"

If nothing else, Huggy was nobody's fool. Raising both his hands in a gesture of surrender, he began to slowly make his way backward toward the register. "I can dig it, just be cool, man."

A second assailant grabbed Diane by her apron and drew her near. "C'mon, baby, fork over the cash you got in there." The waitress complied with shaky hands, digging into the apron pockets for her tips. Fearful brown eyes swept over the crowd, desperately seeking out her two favorite customers. Even as afraid as she was, Diane knew better than to call out for their help and blow whatever rescue they might be devising.

All the other patrons watched in stunned silence as the other three hooded men began working the crowd, taking wallets, purses and jewelry. Starsky and Hutch sat tensely, half-afraid

someone in the bar would identify them as cops, or that the robbers would discover their guns and badges before they had a chance to retaliate. Even though it appeared only the first hood had a gun, the odds were still definitely against them.

Starsky glanced over at his partner and murmured under his breath, “How do you want to handle this?”

Hutch raised an eyebrow without turning his head toward the other man. “Me? What makes you think *I’ve* got a plan?”

Starsky issued a snort. “*You’re* the one always claiming to be the brains of this outfit.”

Hutch was about to give a retort when the thug relieving the cash register of its contents began to get agitated. Huggy was roughly shoved into the back of the bar, knocking over several bottles of liquor. The next shove propelled him into the pool table, directly next to Starsky and Hutch’s table. “C’mon, man! Where’s the rest of the money? There’s gotta be more than this!”

Huggy glanced over at his friends’ taut faces, knowing they were fighting for self-restraint. He threw them a warning look, knowing the odds of the detectives taking on the five men in the crowded bar would undoubtedly leave more than one innocent person dead. Huggy pushed himself up off the pool table with his hands raised in front of him again. “Look, friend, I’d give it to ya if there *was* anything more to give! I...”

The assailant backhanded Huggy with the stock of his pistol, sending him crashing back onto the pool table and rolling off of it. The two detectives leapt to their feet, slamming their table into the gunman. The blow sent him crashing to the floor, but not before his pistol went off by reflex, shattering an overhead light. Patrons and employees went scattering from the room or ducking beneath their tables for protection.

Starsky managed to clear his Baretta from its shoulder harness when the next thug rushed him, sending them both tumbling over a table. The remaining three men all rushed for Hutch, who dove and rolled out of their reach. With a number of bystanders still in the room, neither of the detectives wanted to shoot until they knew with a hundred percent certainty they had a clear line of fire.

When Starsky hit the ground, the wind was knocked out of him. Matters were further complicated when his assailant landed on top of him and the force of the blow loosed Starsky’s gun, sending the Baretta sliding under a nearby booth. Patrons cowering nearby fled to the safety of the kitchen as the detective began to grapple with the larger man, both determined to retrieve the handgun.

On the other side of the room Hutch was scrambling from behind the pool table, trying to make his way to the better protection of the bar. Fortunately, Huggy was nowhere to be seen, and out of harm’s way. Hutch hoped that his friend had the presence of mind to call for backup. The detective drew his gun and stood up from behind the pool table, trying to cover all three of the robbers at once. The assailants scattered within the still crowded room, using terrified patrons as

cover. Hutch knew that his Python was virtually useless. As he made a dash toward the counter, a chair seemingly flew out of nowhere and struck him squarely on his back with a spine-numbing blow. Hutch tumbled forward and landed against the bar, his gun dropping from lax fingers. Before he had a chance to recover, two of the masked robbers were on him, each grabbing an arm before he realized what was happening. A third attacker rushed up on Hutch from behind, his arm drawn back with a lead pipe, preparing to cave in the detective's skull.

At the last possible second, a familiar bellow reverberated across the room: "*Huuuuuuuuuutrch!*" Starsky had been successful in besting his opponent, but hadn't managed to retrieve his gun from somewhere beneath the now empty booth. Just as Starsky staggered upright, wiping at the blood from his split lip, he saw the rush attack on his partner.

Even though Hutch was still stunned by his encounter with the thrown chair, he had the wherewithal to make himself as small a target as possible by going completely limp at Starsky's warning. The unexpected dead weight dragged his two captors together as Hutch slumped to the floor. The third attacker was unable to check his forward motion in time, and mistakenly slammed the pipe across the back of one of the other robber's head. The remaining two men stumbled on top of Hutch, one them accidentally kicking the Python out of reach, the other landing a haphazard kick to the detective's jaw, stunning him further.

Starsky propelled himself toward the two men dragging his partner to his feet when a motion to his right caught his eye. The original gunman had recovered from their attack with the table, and was aiming the pistol at the blond detective struggling to break free.

Starsky changed course by springing onto a nearby chair and throwing himself toward the gunman. The assailant changed his aim to the body hurtling toward him. Catlike reflexes contorted Starsky in midair, twisting his body even as he descended on the gunman. The detective's face registered surprise as Huggy seemed to appear out of thin air, brandishing a pool stick, which he effectively used as a bat against the gunman's back. The thug crumpled to the floor, his shot going wild. Starsky's body still collided with the hood's, laying him out flat. As he scrambled up off the inert form, he snatched up the small caliber pistol and gave Huggy a quick thumbs up. The black man returned his focus to the unconscious form sprawled before him, the now cracked pool cue held ready in the event that either of the two men Starsky had taken down should recover.

Hutch, in the meantime, was holding his own against the last two attackers, the third of which never revived from the blow to his head. He slung one of the men to the floor and delivered a right cross to the other, knocking him unconscious. Hutch turned to where he had last seen his partner when the man he had just thrown to the floor recovered, the detective's Python in his hand. Hutch quickly grabbed him by the wrists, grappling for the pistol. The inertia of their fight caused them both to lose their balance and fall to the floor behind the bar.

Following the sickening thud of bodies hitting the floor, the unmistakable roar of Hutch's gun silenced the room. In his hurry to assist his partner, Starsky stumbled into a table. For a terrified heartbeat he froze, sprawled across the wooden top, at the sound of the gunshot. The last masked

assailant sprung up from behind the bar and ran hell-bent out the room and up the stairs to the freedom of the darkened streets.

Starsky flung himself up from the table like a man possessed, and rushed to the back side of the bar. Hutch lay sprawled on the floor, absent of any signs of life. An uncontrollable rage consumed Starsky and propelled him up the stairs to the cooling twilight. The desperate energy that drove him quickly brought him within a few feet of the escaping felon.

Blinded by fury, Starsky planted his feet and took aim, snarling, "*Halt, or I'll shoot!*" The running man hesitated only enough to change his course, barreling to his right toward a row of parked cars. Starsky allowed for two heartbeats to pass between the last word and the punctuating blast of the pistol bucking in his palm. The running felon faltered as if he were suddenly slipping on ice, then crumpled to the ground, dead before he even hit the pavement.



Starsky never even paused to watch the body fall to the ground. As soon as he knew he had made his target, he spun away and hurled himself down the stairwell to The Pits. About halfway down, he lost his footing and slid down the remaining steps. Fear and anguish drove him behind the bar to where he had last seen his partner. What he found stopped his heart, which had lodged into his throat moments earlier.

Huggy knelt next to Hutch, who was sitting up, resting his elbows on his knees. The blond looked up at his partner and coughed. Starsky staggered to his friend and dropped to his knees, then slid the rest of the way onto the floor.

*"I thought..."* A shared memory flashed through both detectives' minds: another time and place, but the words, anguish and rage were the same--*I thought you were dead.*

Hutch coughed again, his ribs bruised from where the gunman had landed on him. "He missed."

*"What?"* Starsky shook his head, confused and overwhelmed with relief. The reassuring, if not delayed, sound of sirens trumpeted the approach of assistance.

*"I said, he missed.* When we fell, he was on top, and the gun was pointed past me. He knocked the wind out of me, but must have thought he shot me, because I didn't move--*I couldn't* move. So, I just played possum. He panicked and ran."

*"You played what?"* Starsky hollered at his partner. *"I thought..."* With a groan Starsky covered his eyes with his bruised hands and rolled onto his back, giving himself a moment to get his adrenaline under control.

The sound of rushing feet echoed down the stairway. Three uniformed officers burst through the open doorway, guns drawn.

“Hey, we got a dead guy out there!” a fourth officer called out as he entered the room. He then scanned the silent and unmoving room. “We got a bunch of dead guys *in here*, too!”



As it turned out, there were only two among the dead that evening: the man resisting arrest Starsky had shot, and the man whose skull was caved in by his own counterpart. It was well past 2:00 AM as the detectives sat in the darkened bar with Huggy, Captain Dobey and Agent Taylor.

“What I’m thinking...” Starsky paused to down the rest of his coffee, “is that they weren’t here to rob Huggy at all.”

Hutch glanced up sharply at his partner. “How do you mean?”

Huggy got up gingerly from the table to retrieve the coffee pot from behind the bar. “Sure had me fooled.”

“I think it was a hired hit. Clumsy, *yes*. Unprofessional, *yes*. But definitely hired.”

“And you think we were the targets?”

“No, not *we*.”

“You mean *me*? I was the target? Oh, come on, Starsk. Don’t you think that’s a bit of a reach?”

Starsky turned to his captain and the FBI agent, hoping to draw them into his line of reasoning. “Think about it: nobody local would have pulled that kind of a stunt if it had just been a robbery, me and Hutch are too well known here. So at best, it woulda had to have been from somebody out of town...”

“Or desperate,” Hutch interjected.

“Okay, or desperate. But think about how it all came down. How many times could they have simply snatched the cash and split, even after things heated up? But they didn’t. They were more intent on removing that blond head of yours from the rest of your body.”

“I seem to recall a few of them dancing with you tonight.”

“Yeah, but only to keep me out of the way.” Starsky leaned toward his partner, the intensity of his concern darkening his eyes. “Face it, Blondie, you were the target tonight.”

Hutch looked away from his partner’s anxious eyes. “Okay, so even if I was--and I’m not saying I agree with you on this one, Starsk--they blew it. We’ve got three of them in custody. This could be the break we’ve needed to find Capernicus.”

Agent Taylor exhaled loudly. “*That*, gentleman, would solve our problem. In the meantime, Hutchinson, watch your back.”

Hutch nodded his head toward his partner and gave the older man a weary grin. “Well, sir, that’s what I’ve got *him* around for.”

Starsky snorted. “And don’t you forget it, you lucky devil.”



The ringing of the phone propelled Starsky out of his bed, a flying mass of arms and sheets. Normally, an early morning call would only elicit a directionless arm flopping in the general vicinity of the phone and a mumbled, “‘lo?”, but the tension that had plagued them both for the few days kept the detective on edge, even in his sleep. After he rubbed his burning eyes, he could make out his partner sitting up expectantly from where he’d been sleeping on Starsky’s couch. Both men had claimed they were simply too exhausted to take Hutch all the way back to Venice the night before. Though neither would admit it, they both slept better after the gunplay at The Pits knowing that the other was nearby. The detective cleared his throat before speaking. “Starsky.”

Dobey sighed before he spoke. “You and your partner better get down here. They got Avelechez.”

The two detectives made eye contact from across the room. Starsky didn’t need to be told who *they* were. “How? When?”

Another sigh preceded the black man’s response. “Just get down here.”



A crime scene, especially involving a homicide, draws a considerable crowd. But place that same spectacle in front of a police station and you’ve got nothing short of a circus, even on a Sunday morning. Starsky and Hutch were forced to park in the station’s garage rather than their customary spot on the street in order to avoid the crowds and television crews. They then fought their way through the mass of humanity to get to the sheeted remains of Romer Avelechez. As they broke through to the barricades holding off the crowds, Hutch grabbed the shoulder of a patrolman.

“Get these vultures out of here, huh?”

“We’re trying, Sergeant.”

“*Well, try harder!*”

Starsky put a restraining grip on Hutch’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Ease up. They lost somebody today, too.”

The grim expression on Hutch's face abated minutely as he turned back to apologize to the uniformed officer, but he was gone. Returning his attention to the task at hand, Hutch moved along side his partner to the body of the slain patrolman. A county medical examiner named Stravinski was finishing up his initial investigation and authorizing the body to be removed to the awaiting ambulance.

"Whatcha got, Strav?" Starsky called over, as he knelt to lift up the corner flap of the body bag off Avelechez's face. The attendants paused in transferring the body onto a stretcher while the detective viewed the patrolman.

"Starsky. Hutchinson," the older man greeted, as he removed his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. "Small caliber bullet, probably a twenty-five or a thirty-eight, point of entry at the base of the skull, half inch above the collar line, execution style. Close range, got some gun powder residue back there. Hands were bound with coat or some other large gauge wire. Other than a few contusions, no other sign of trauma. Initial estimate that he's been dead six to eight, so that puts the time of death approximately 11:00 or 12:00 last night, but don't quote me on that. I'll know more after I get him on the table. But they didn't do it here, this was just the drop off point. Obviously trying to make a point, not just eliminate a cop."

Hutch jotted the information down on the small pad of paper he retrieved from his jacket pocket. Deep lines of tension and anger formed around his eyes and mouth. He quickly glanced up from his writing to the other officers and detectives milling around the scene. "Any witnesses?"

"None." The answer came from Dobby, as he descended the station stairs with a few other officers in tow.

"You've got to be kidding!" Starsky sprang up and joined his partner. "Somebody offs a cop then dumps the body at the foot of the station and *nobody* sees nothing?"

"What kind of fools and idiots work here?" Hutch barked at no one in particular.

"I see two kinds right in front of me!" Dobby bellowed back. "Now haul your self-righteous backsides on up to my office to get briefed!"

Hutch's blue eyes turned to ice, as he stared back at his commanding officer. After a few tense moments, the blond moved forward in curt movements. Starsky followed in his wake, but not before placing a consoling hand on his captain's arm. The large man nodded curtly in response, but never took his eyes off the sheeted form as the gurney was lifted into the waiting ambulance. *Some days it just doesn't pay to be one of the good guys.*



Dobby stomped into his office, slamming the door behind him. Starsky and Hutch sat silently in their chairs, the latter staring angrily out the single window. Without a word the captain flung himself into his protesting chair and drew the Capernicus/Randolph case file out of the center

drawer. The manila dossier was slapped onto his desk as he examined the two detectives in turn. When Starsky finally looked up and met his gaze, Dobey growled, “This was no random killing of a cop.”

Hutch turned abruptly away from the window, words grinding out of clenched teeth. “We know that, Captain. Stravinski said the shot was an execution style placement.”

Starsky placed a calming hand on his friend’s arm, but his words were no less harsh. “And dumping his body here unseen leaves a very loud message.”

“But what you two *don’t* know is yesterday somebody tried to take out Avelechez earlier in the day.” Dobey had their attention now. “Around 3:15 Marty and Romer responded to a two-eleven at a convenience store. Somebody took a shot at them...”

“What’s so unusual about...”

“Starsky, if you’d shut up long enough to let me explain, you’d know that *what’s so unusual* is the shot that blew Avelechez’s hat right off his head came from a sniper holed up in the building *across* the alley from the convenience store. The shot wasn’t from the perps in the two-eleven.”

Starsky’s eyes narrowed. “A lookout?”

“Not likely.” The captain blotted sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. “The two-eleven was a couple of inexperienced teenagers with an unloaded handgun. Probably paid off in order to get Avelechez and Perrigo out in the open.”

Hutch reached over to gather up the case folder from Dobey’s desk. “This is the Randolph/Capernicus file.”

Starsky glanced up sharply from where he had begun reading over his partner’s arm. “You think Avelechez’s death is connected.”

“What else can I think? Aside from the three witnesses...*make that two*...the majority of the evidence is circumstantial, certainly nothing that will get them for murder one. Eliminate the witnesses...”

“...and there’s little or no case,” Starsky finished grimly.

“Captain, don’t you think that’s a bit of a reach?” Hutch passed his partner the case file. “There could be any number of reasons why somebody would want to kill a cop.”

“Are you hearing what you’re saying, Hutchinson? You tell me *why* somebody *would* want to kill Avelechez. You heard the ME say it was an execution, not a random shooting. Use your brains.” Dobey pulled the duty roster out of his desk drawer and began scribbling furiously. “As of right now you two are off the Dobson case *and* this one. I’m putting Perrigo and you two on inactive status and I want Hutchinson to lay low for a bit.”



“Oh, come on!” Somewhere in the back of Hutch’s consciousness he realized that he *didn’t* hear his partner’s indignant voice harmonizing with his. Still, he pressed angrily on. “You can’t do that!”

Dobey paused in his writing to cock an eyebrow at the errant detective. *Watch me.*

“But, Captain...”

“Now don’t *‘but, Captain’* me, Hutchinson. If I’m right, they’re going after you again and Perrigo as well.”

“Fine. I understand you think they might be trying to eliminate the witnesses. I accept the possibility. But we’re not doing anybody any good by holing up until Capernicus is caught. Captain, we’ve spent almost nine months putting together the Dobson case--*nine months*. Our contacts are not going to trust anybody else, and if Dobson gets wind of anyone new moving in, he’ll haul his operation out of here so fast...”

“Do you have enough for a conviction?”

“Yes, but there’re loose ends...”

“Someone else can tighten them for you...”

“...and you know we’re the Feds’ best bet on finding Capernicus.”

“All right, all right. I get your point. But I still don’t like it.” Dobby turned to the silent partner. “Starsky?”

Hutch turned his focus on his partner with an accusing stare. *Are you going to support me in this or not?*

Starsky locked eyes with Hutch, studying him. Finally he relented, nodding minutely. But the final look he gave his partner promised that if things got dicey he was changing both of their minds--*and fast*--whether Hutch liked it or not.

“Cap’n, Hutch’s right. I don’t like it either because that big, blond head’s an easy target. But in a few more days, we’ll be able to hand you Dobson with a bow on his greasy little head. In the meantime, I’ll take care of the Blintz.”

Dobey exhaled and ran his hand over his face. A shrewd glance from one set of blue eyes to the other affirmed the two detectives’ determination to see the case through until Capernicus was apprehended. A pencil was jabbed in Hutch’s direction. “All right. But I’m putting a car outside your apartment on twenty-four hour detail.”

“Fine.” Hutch stood up and slapped his partner on the shoulder as he headed for the door. Starsky stood up to follow.

“Starsky!” Dobby called, halting the detective. “Be careful.”

The grin Starsky gave his captain was meant to reassure him, but fell short of erasing the tension in both of their eyes.



Federal Agent Taylor gave Phillip Randolph a few minutes to mull over the final offer of immunity. The interrogation of the remaining three assailants busted at The Pits yielded nothing of any value, other than they were paid off by a contact made on the street and had allegedly only *heard of* Phillip Randolph and Richard Capernicus. It now boiled down to getting Randolph to talk.

A tick developed under the extortionist’s right eye, as he swung a nervous gaze from the agent to the armed guard standing by the hospital room window. Providing all the names, dates and figures demanded of him, in addition to ratting on his partner, would spell certain death without protection before, during and after the trial. Afterwards, he would be guaranteed placement in the Federal Witness Protection Program, giving him a completely new identity and immunity from prosecution. All Randolph would have to do was sing like he’d never sung before at the upcoming preliminary, giving enough information to allow the case to go to trial once Capernicus was apprehended.

Randolph knew that his choices were limited. If he went to federal prison, he would likely be dead within months. He had made too many enemies throughout his years in business and would be an easy target for revenge. If he squealed on his partner and their associates, his life wouldn’t be worth squat if he remained on his own without federal protection. The only real chance of survival he had was in taking the agent’s offer, and if nothing more, Phillip Randolph was a survivor.

“Okay. Where do you want me to start?”



Starsky and Hutch were used to causing a bit of a stir when they walked into certain establishments, especially when things were heating up on the streets. But in the last nine years of their partnership, it rarely happened when they entered The Pits. The moment they walked across the room, the voices that made up the noisy din softened perceptibly, and more than a few sets of eyes followed them as they made their way to the bar.

Leaning against the counter, Starsky turned to his partner. “*That* was weird.”

Hutch raised his eyebrows in agreement. “Could be something’s brewing.”

The brunette stared at Hutch with mock amazement. “You think? You ever thought about becoming a detective?”

“Maybe your fly’s unzipped again.”

“Shut up and buy me a beer.” Before Starsky could call over to Diane, Huggy approached them, two mugs in hand.

“What it is, gentlemen?”

“Hiya, Hug,” Starsky greeted as he accepted the beers. “I think the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees when we walked in. What’s the word?”

“Word? Man, there *ain’t* no words, if you catch my meaning.” Huggy took a swipe at the countertop with his towel. “Things ain’t been this quiet since...since I don’t know when.”

“When we walked in things got a bit quiet.” Starsky glanced around the room as it returned to its previous level of noise. “What gives?”

“What gives is the patrons of this fine establishment know you two made a major dent in the some of the local action.”

Hutch took a long drink of his beer. “And?”

“And the people of this fair city are too worried about their own hides to be talking about anybody else’s.” Huggy folded his thin arms across his chest. “Ain’t good for information, but it *is* good for business. Jittery people imbibe in the spirits to calm their frazzled nerves.”

“Well, in that case...” Starsky guzzled the last of his drink and slammed the mug down on the bar top. “Bring me another one.” He gave his partner’s disapproving look a shrug. “It’s for medicinal purposes. You wouldn’t want me to get jittery, would you?”



The next morning the detectives gave their final court appearance, providing the prosecuting attorney enough evidence to convict Mitchell Dobson on three felony counts of embezzlement and a reduced sentence for voluntary manslaughter. It wasn’t quite the sentence they had been hoping for, but it was enough to put the greasy little man away for what would undoubtedly be the remainder of his greasy little life. The satisfaction they felt at the payoff of ten months of work paled in comparison to their growing frustration over the Randolph/Capernicus case, the loss of Avelechez, and the threat against the remaining witnesses.

Hutch noticed how the strain was beginning to affect his usually affable partner. Starsky was getting anxious and easily provoked. The two detectives left the courtroom after shaking hands with Linda Barkley, the prosecuting attorney, both unsuccessful in their attempts to coax her out

for a victory lunch. The trim lawyer thanked them both politely, offering a rain check when her case load lightened.

“You’re losing your touch, old man.” Hutch chuckled as they made their way out of the courthouse into the midday sun.

“*Me?* I don’t see her falling all over you either, pal.”

“Yeah, well...” Hutch’s voice trailed off as he watched a dull gray Chevy slow considerably in front of the courthouse, then pull into a parking spot at the end of the block.

“What? Whatcha see?” Starsky turned to follow his partner’s gaze at the nondescript vehicle.

“It’s probably nothing, but I think that’s the same Chevy I saw this morning sitting across from my apartment before you picked me up.”

Starsky’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “*Hunt or fish?*”

“Let’s go fishin’, partner.”

The two crossed the street and got into the Torino. Starsky gunned the engine, then laid rubber as he pulled out onto the street. Hutch took in the plate numbers as they passed the Chevy and tried to get a good look at the driver, but they turned their head away as the Torino passed by. Starsky headed toward the business district and, as they reached the first cross street, executed his typical tire squealing slide and hit the gas. Both men watched out of the rear view mirrors.

“Here fishy, fishy, fishy...” Hutch intoned. Within seconds the gray Chevy raced around the corner, obviously trying to keep the Torino in sight. Starsky turned to the left, cutting through a parking lot and shooting out onto a one-way street, headed in the wrong direction.

“Sheesh! *I hate it* when you do this!” Hutch groaned as he clutched the dashboard, fighting the desire not to close his eyes against the oncoming traffic.

“Nag, nag, nag.” Starsky swung the red sedan onto a side street, knowing it dead-ended into a service bay and loading dock for a small clutch of businesses. He glanced up to make sure the tail was still following. “Get ready with the net.”

The Torino swiveled into the shipping area and slid to a halt behind a large dumpster, well out of sight of anyone entering the cul de sac. Starsky and Hutch poured out of the car and positioned themselves against the wall of the building nearest the alley entrance. The Chevy careened down the passageway, turning sharply and slamming on the brakes when the driver realized that he’d been trapped in a dead end.

As soon as the car shuddered to a stop the detectives rushed it, their guns thrust before them. The driver panicked at the sight of the two advancing on him from different angles and threw the car into reverse, churning up dust and debris. Starsky dove out of the vehicle’s path, rolling

behind the dumpster just before the Chevy drove over where he had been standing seconds before. Hutch fired a warning shot into the air, shouting, "Police!" as he raced toward the front of the car.

The young Asian man at the wheel ignored the warning and gave the steering wheel a hard crank, spinning the sedan into the dumpster. Hutch heard his partner cry out even as the car was thrown into forward and peeled directly to where the blond stood, blocking the only escape route through the alley. The large receptacle was sent spinning against Starsky, rolling over his right leg up to his thigh, pinning him beneath it.

"*Starsky?*" Hutch bellowed as he aimed and fired into the car, shattering the windshield. The Chevy's driver flinched as the glass webbed, but maintained his deadly path toward Hutch. The blond fired again at the oncoming vehicle as he realized the driver's intent was to crush him against the brick wall behind him. Hutch didn't wait to see that his shot went wide, but rather jumped on top of a nearby trash can. He then flung himself up to the fire escape, catching the ladder with his left hand while maintaining his grip on the Python. Hutch's legs swung free from the trash can just as the Chevy plowed into the wall below him.

The ancient metal of the fire ladder snapped under the duress of Hutch's weight, sending him sprawling on the hood of the Chevy. Even though he was stunned, Hutch managed to find a purchase on the hood's casing as the driver put the car in reverse and peeled away from the wall. The detective tried in vain to draw a bead on the driver while they careened out of the alley, but the Asian jerked the wheel from side to side, trying to shake Hutch off the car, or at least ruin his aim.

Starsky was finally able to extract himself from beneath the dumpster, shredding the leg of his jeans and gouging the flesh on his thigh as he freed himself from the rough metal. Ignoring the pain shooting down his leg, he hurtled down the alley after the sedan and his partner. Just before the Chevy reached the street, Starsky planted himself and took steady aim. The single shot exploded the rear driver's side tire, but never slowed the car down as it barreled out toward the afternoon traffic. Starsky continued his race down the alley, fearing what would happen to his partner once the sedan made it onto the busier streets.

The Chevy left the alley and executed a sliding turn onto the street, sideswiping a Lincoln Continental traveling westbound. Hutch was flung off the Chevy and across the hood of the Lincoln, the momentum rolling him off the second vehicle and onto the pavement. The Chevy disentangled itself from the wreck and tore down the street, leaving behind pieces of rubber from the destroyed tire. As Starsky cleared the alley with his faltering gait, he glimpsed the Chevy careening around the corner, the rim of the wheel digging into the pavement.

"*Hutch, Hutch, Hutch...*" Starsky intoned pushed his way through the growing crowd to get to his dazed partner. Hutch was just now pushing himself up off the blacktop to a sitting position. "Somebody call an ambulance!"

Hutch shook his head to clear it. "I don't need an ambulance." He looked at the blood soaking through his partner's pant leg. "But maybe *you* do?"

Starsky shook his head. “I don’t need an ambulance. You okay?”

“I just said I was, didn’t I?” Hutch tried to stand, but was unsteady and went back down onto his backside. Starsky tried to stand as well, making it as far as a crouch, then tried to help Hutch up.

“No, you said *you didn’t need an ambulance*. You *didn’t* say that you were *okay*.” In trying to pull the blond to his feet, Starsky started to go back down as his rapidly swelling leg gave way.

“*I’m okay*, are *you* okay?” Hutch grabbed his partner by the hand to keep him from falling, but it only resulted in both of them sprawling back down onto the pavement.

“*I’m okay*.”

By the time the first squad car arrived, the two detectives were seated on the curb, their heads in their hands, recovering from the last few moments’ events. One patrolman approached the damaged sedan, looking for someone to explain what had just happened, other than the obvious damage done to the Lincoln. The second patrolman met the Lincoln driver, then looked over to the two ragged men on the curb. “They okay?”

Neither detective looked up. “*We’re okay!*”



The two detectives returned to Hutch’s apartment to clean up from their scrape in the alley and change for Avelechez’s funeral. Originally, the plan had been to catch a bite to eat after their court appearance, then go directly to the church service. The altercation cut short their time and appetites. Both men’s injuries were superficial, though painful, neither saying a word about them in light of what they would have to face that afternoon. As they left the scene, though, Starsky had hesitated before turning over the ignition and looked at his partner. “*Strike two*,” was all he said, then started the sedan and drove them to Hutch’s place in silence.

After his own shower Hutch loaned his partner a pair of his slacks, a clean shirt and suit coat, even though they were a bit long for Starsky.

Hutch checked in with R&I for information on the Chevy’s plates while Starsky took his turn in the shower. The patrolman had called in the identification and description at the scene, only to be told that the car had been reported stolen the day before. Nothing new had surfaced since then, other than that the sedan had been abandoned a half mile away from where Starsky had shot out its tire. The lab had dusted the interior for prints, but unfortunately, that had only revealed the perpetrator didn’t have a prior record in the state of California. The information was already being sent out of state for similar checks.

Hutch hung up the receiver as Starsky emerged from the bathroom, dressed in the borrowed clothes. Hutch couldn’t even muster up enough energy to make a crack about the poor fit.

Feeling older by ten years, he hauled himself out of the chair and slipped into his jacket. Starsky slapped him on the shoulder as they headed out the door and into the sunlight.

It was time to bury the dead.



To give your life in the line of duty is usually viewed as something *noble* by societal standards. But to other cops, it's often just the waste of a good man and a pain that never fades. The romanticizing public often forgets within a day or two.

Slowly, the multitude of police officers began to make their way from the graveside service toward their waiting cars. Some still lingered under the canopy, offering condolences to Avelechez's grieving widow and two small children. The morning sunlight warmed the cemetery grounds in direct contradiction to the cold grief there.

Not for the first time Hutch threw a concerned glance at his partner. Funerals were always difficult for Starsky, but a *cop's* funeral unflinchingly brought back a barrage of unwelcome memories. Starsky's sunglasses didn't block out tight lines around the brunette's eyes, nor could they mask the scrapes along Hutch's own temple and cheekbone. Hutch cocked his head in his partner's direction, gaining his attention. One elegant eyebrow raised from behind the glasses-- *you gonna be okay?*

Starsky's expression didn't change, but a small, resolved nod was issued.

Hutch grasped his partner's shoulder. "Let's go find Perrigo. He's not taking this too well."

"Would you?"

"You have to ask?"

The two made their way across the lawn toward the line of waiting cars. They found Perrigo standing under a large maple, blowing his nose.

"You doing okay, Marty?" Hutch asked, watching the tall officer wipe quickly at his eyes.

"Yeah, sure, Hutch. I'll be fine. It's kinda hard, you know?"

"Yeah." Hutch glanced over at Starsky. *Though I hope to God I never really know what it's like to lose a partner.* "Can we give you a lift back home or to the rec hall?"

"Nah, thanks though. I drove myself. Needed some time to think."

A young man from the funeral home approached the small group. "Officer Perrigo, I'm sorry to interrupt, but we need to move your car out of the way. Some of the family needs to go ahead to the rectory hall. If you'd like, I'd be more than happy to move it for you."

“Uh, yeah. That’d be great.” Perrigo dug into his jacket pocket for his keys. “You can just leave the keys in it, I’ll be heading out after I say goodbye to a few folks.”

Perrigo waited until after the attendant was out of earshot before turning his attention back to Starsky and Hutch.

“I heard you’re staying on the case even though Captain Dobey wanted to pull you off for protection.”

“That’s right. We’ve come too far on this one to...” Hutch’s words were drowned out by an explosion in the cemetery’s drive. The three men instinctively began running toward the source of chaos developing there. Perrigo’s race slowed to an astonished halt when he realized that it was his own car fully enveloped in flames, along with the cars directly before and behind it.



“Bomb squad’s released your car, Starsky. The said the only tampering they found looked like someone had hooked up detonator wires to the ignition, but left it unfinished. Must be they panicked or got interrupted.” Dobey growled at the two men sitting slumped in front of his desk, their suit coats displaying the effects of the day’s fiery climax. “Perrigo’s gone into protective custody, I think you should reconsider and do the same, Hutchinson.”

The blond ignored his captain’s warning. “No leads yet on the bombing?”

“Whoever planted the bomb in Perrigo’s ignition was at the cemetery with over fifty cops no more than a hundred yards away. He obviously knew what he was doing. Bomb Squad’s working on priors with similar MO’s. No one’s been able to come up with anything on Capernicus’ whereabouts either. NYPD’s getting back with me later today about his east coast connections. You two got anything new?”

Starsky got up from his chair and made his way to the water cooler, favoring his left leg. “We’ve checked out all the names R&I came up with. It looks like all of Capernicus’ and Randolph’s usual assortment of goons are either in jail or dead.” The paper cup was quickly drained and discarded. “They don’t have the best track record of hiring very bright help.”

“Except whoever planted the bomb, but maybe he’s new blood,” Hutch added as he stood. “That puts us back at square one.”

“So, what are you two yo-yos still doing here?” Dobey growled, retrieving the case folder from Hutch.

“I was just thinking that myself.” Hutch turned toward his partner. “Where to next? Huggy’s?”

Starsky nodded and headed to the door, stepping aside to let his partner pass. “Sounds like a plan.”





The evening trade was just beginning as Starsky and Hutch entered the dimly lit bar. Barely pausing to make eye contact with the proprietor, they continued through the small crowd to the corner booth.

Huggy gave a lift of his head in greeting, as he finished drawing a pitcher of beer and placed it on Diane's awaiting tray. Wiping his hands on his apron, he poked his head into the kitchen.

"Hey, Angie! Cover the front for a minute, will ya?" Huggy didn't wait for the grumbling affirmation, but made his way to the bar's cooler and extracted three long-neck Coors and continued toward the back booth.

"Well, well, well..." Huggy intoned, sliding into the bench opposite his friends. "I hear there was almost a pig roast today, if you'll pardon the expression."

"Gee, Hug, your concern is overwhelming," Hutch remarked dryly, as he popped off the bottle top. "What else have you heard about our little barbecue?"

"Not much. Just that a Mister Capernicus is one bad dude, and looking to get rid of a couple of obstacles in the way of his remaining in business."

Starsky downed half his beer in one take. "Tell us something we don't know. Like who the hired help are these days."

Grimly Huggy shook his head. "I've only heard of a couple of the more major ballplayers. One cat by the name of Eddie Fraiser. Used to be a professional welterweight until he got ousted for playing rough, if you catch my meaning."

Starsky perked up at the name. "Hey, I remember him. Didn't he kill a man in the ring back in '77?"

"One and the same. It seems 'Lighting Eddie' Fraiser was on Randolph's payroll then and it was a hired hit. They figured that the boxing league would rule it as accidental, which they did, and that he'd only be suspended. A few months later he's back, but dig this--Eddie started boxing dirty again, and its wham, bam, *no* thank you ma'am, he's out of fighting permanently. *In* the ring anyway."

"Terrific. Anybody else?"

Huggy thought for a minute before answering. "There was another dude by the name of Michael Franscoli. Him and his brother, Kevin. But Michael got in the way of a semi-automatic hailstorm about six months ago. Other than that, I got zip."

Hutch finished off his beer and threw a twenty on the table. “Thanks, Hug. If you hear anything else...?”

“Hutch...” Huggy quickly grasped the detective’s wrist in a surprisingly strong grip as his friend climbed out of the booth. “Listen, my blond brother. These are some bad cats. A certain Bear would be put out if you were another notch on Eddie’s championship belt. Watch your back, man.”

Hutch smiled and jerked his head toward his partner. “That’s what *he’s* there for.”

Huggy released his grip and finished off his own beer. Starsky continued out of the booth as well.

“Hug...”

“First word I hear, it’s yours.”

Starsky patted the thin hand lying clenched on the table and followed his partner out the door and into the night.



Capernicus answered the call on the second ring, even though it woke him from a sound sleep. He listened intently to the person on the other end of the line without comment and simply hung up when they were finished.

By memory, the extortionist dialed the private home number of Walter Morgan, warden of the California Simi Valley Maximum Security Facility. Capernicus ignored the annoyance of being awakened at 1:00 AM by the man on the other end of the line.

“I understand you received a new *inmate* today. I anticipate you know what I expect of you.” The receiver slid smoothly back into its cradle and Capernicus rolled over onto his side, into the rest of a man without a conscience.



Correctional Officer Patrick Higby hummed under his breath as he carried the metal tray toward the maximum security cell. He was pleased with his special assignment, knowing he was somehow playing a part, albeit small, in one of the biggest cases to hit Southern California in years.

In keeping Officer Perrigo safely hidden until the trial, Higby felt he was in a win-win situation: someone higher up might hear of his proficiency in protecting a witness, which could result in a promotion or transfer; and he had someone of interest to talk to. Higby had long since reached his limit of boredom with his usual assignment of solitary confinement prisoners. While Perrigo

had only been on the force for a few years, he seemed to have some pretty interesting experiences and an easy way about him that Higby was drawn to.

Having passed through the checkpoints, Higby finally reached Perrigo's cell door. C.O. Ron McFarlan sat in a chair outside the door reading yesterday's newspaper.

"Hey, Ron. What's new?"

The junior officer looked up from the sports section with disgust and began folding the paper. "Dodgers lost again."

"And you're surprised by this? They've stunk all season." Higby tilted his head toward the cell. "Anything I need to know about?"

McFarlan stood and stretched, throwing the newspaper on his chair. "Nah, he musta slept straight through. Haven't heard a peep out of him since about 3:00 AM."

The younger man inserted the key from the ring on his belt and pulled the massive door open for the relief officer. Higby stepped into the cell. "So, Perrigo, how do *you* think the Dodgers'll do the rest of the..."

The metal tray hit the floor with a clatter. Higby staggered out of the cell, retching from the sight of Perrigo's inert form, blood and brain tissue splattered against the wall just above his body.



*"Explain to me how this could have happened!"* Captain Dobe thought he would explode. The roar of his voice reverberated throughout the detectives' squad room and well into the hallway. Under normal circumstances a bellow of this degree would have sent men scurrying from their desks, but not this time. This time, rage stemmed from the concern for one of their own. Fearing the worst, Starsky and Hutch scrambled into Dobe's office without knocking, just in time to see the captain slam the receiver down with enough force to knock the phone onto the floor. The three men stared silently at the device as it began emitting a busy signal.

The senior officer slowly turned and stared out the window.



Agent Taylor was accompanied by a second FBI agent as he pushed Randolph's wheelchair into the hospital's service elevator. Four accompanying marshal servicemen walked point, forming a wall of protection around the extortionist. The elevator serviced victims flown in via the med-chopper and linked the helipad to the burn unit located on the top floor of the hospital. This secluded area provided the ideal circumstances to move Randolph to the new safe house, under the protection of the U.S. Marshal Service.

The medivac unit landed on the helipad only minutes before. The pilot remaining with the chopper while the FBI agent that had accompanied him climbed out and radioed for Taylor to bring Randolph up. Four FBI snipers were already in position at each corner of the hospital roof, alert for any hostile action during the transition. Within moments the small entourage emerged from the elevator and rushed to the helicopter, assisting Randolph inside.

Agent Taylor shook hands with his two agents and wished them luck, as the pilot increased the rotors' speed for lift off. The senior officer called through the two-way radio for final affirmation from the snipers that their quadrants were secure, then granted clearance to the pilot.

The helicopter lifted smoothly off the pad and, after gaining sufficient altitude, hurtled north. Taylor watched the chopper as it disappeared from sight. A small measure of satisfaction rippled through the agent as he prepared to release the four snipers on the roof. Taylor's gratification was short lived when an explosion reverberated through the nearby city blocks. The senior agent spun in the direction of the eruption, only to find a fireball raining over the streets.



Hutch, Starsky, and Dobey sat across from Taylor at his desk. The FBI's offices weren't much different than those in their precinct, but the agent seemed almost swallowed up by his own workspace.

Taylor sighed heavily before lifting his head up from his hands. Tiredly, he ran his hands through his hair, leaving the gray tufts standing up at odd angles.

"I received a preliminary report from Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms a few minutes before I called you, Captain. No one, of course, survived in the 'copter. All the bodies on board have been identified and accounted for, in addition to four civilians that were killed on Topeka Boulevard from the wreckage and fallout. There were a dozen or so more injuries from the traffic accidents the explosion caused, the two in critical condition were taken over to University Hospital." The agent looked out his office window. "The other agents, Yarborough and Ramsey, were two of my best friends."

"Has ATF come up with anything yet?" Captain Dobey's voice was almost gentle.

"Nothing definite yet. The initial search is showing that, in layman's terms, the rod operating and controlling the back rotor had been tampered with. It appears that it had been sawed almost three quarters of the way through before the rotation wore at it enough to make it break completely. That back rotor is what maintains the direction of the helicopter, so when it stops working, the body of the 'copter begins to move uncontrollably in the same direction as the blades, making it impossible to navigate."

Hutch spoke up. "Wait a minute, don't helicopter pilots have to do a flight check every time they make a landing?"

“Yes. We performed an extensive background check on the pilot, Jon O’Malley, as soon as Randolph agreed to give federal evidence in exchange for protection. O’Malley, of course, checked out fine--decorated in Vietnam, had been flying for County General for almost fifteen years. Hadn’t had anything more on his record than a parking ticket back in ‘75. Well, he had just dropped off a set of accident victims when the call from the Marshal Service came in for us to move Randolph. Since my man Ramsey would be at LAX to meet him in less than five minutes and have to move out immediately, O’Malley went against procedure and had the hangar’s mechanic do the pre-flight and refuel while he ran in to use the john.”

Starsky’s eyes narrowed. “So you think maybe it was the mechanic that tampered with the rotor?”

“That’s what it’s looking like. With nobody watching over the mechanic and with the amount of noise in the hangar, he could have easily ripped through that rod, even though it was guesswork as to how much of it had to be cut through to make it snap *after* the pick up with Randolph aboard.”

“Who knows? Maybe the extra weight alone would be enough to finish the breakage. So where’s the mechanic now?” Dobey sighed, anticipating the answer.

“That, Captain, is the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Mechanic’s name is Dan Squires. Twenty-five, lived in California for maybe five months, no known immediate family, kind of a loner, no priors. His supervisor said he simply disappeared right after O’Malley and Agent Ramsey lifted off. An APB’s been issued and we’ve got men staking out his apartment.” The agent’s face seemed to have aged several years since they had first met him. Eyes full of loss turned toward Dobey. “Captain, I wish you’d get your men to reconsider remaining on this case and lay low for awhile.”

Before Dobey could speak, Hutch sat forward in his chair. “Sir, I appreciate your concern, but if a man’s not safe surrounded by the FBI and U.S. marshals, it’s not gonna matter where I am or what I’m doing.”

“*Hutch...*” Dobey began.

“Captain, we both know that Starsky and I are your best bet. No offense to Agent Taylor, but we know these streets better than anyone out there. If anybody’s going to dig up Capernicus, it’s going to be us.”

The captain’s eyes swung away from the agitated blond to his partner, who sat slumped in the chair next to him, eyes boring into the floor. Taking Starsky’s silence as consent, though not a happy one, Dobey eventually nodded. “See what you can find out about this Squires, but stay out of ATF’s way. If you come up with anything, report to Taylor.”

Hutch nodded to his superior and waited for further admonishments. Instead Dobey simply growled, “Get out of here. You two don’t need me to tell you how to do your jobs.”

Hutch stood to leave, but when his partner didn't immediately follow, he slapped him on the arm and continued out of Taylor's office. Starsky followed more slowly, his face a careful mask of underlying anger.

When they reached the outer offices of the federal building, Hutch finally broke the stony silence. "What's with you?"

Starsky continued out of the building to his car, unlocking the passenger door before continuing around to his own door. The angry man threw his partner a glare and slid into the sedan. Hutch followed suit. "Well?"

"For somebody with four years of college under his belt, you're pretty *stupid* sometimes!" Starsky ground out.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you seem to think you're...you're *invincible*!" Starsky's eyes burned. "For crying out loud, Hutch! Capernicus just iced his *partner*. Yeah, Perrigo and Avelechez were obvious targets, but this was the guy he'd been in business with for twenty some-odd years. Randolph was under twenty-four hour watch by both the FBI and the federal marshals. What makes you think you're not gonna buy it out there on the streets all by yourself?"

Understanding finally struck Hutch. His reply was almost quiet. "Because I've got *you*."

Starsky's mouth opened for a moment, either with a lost retort or in disbelief. He looked away, clenching his jaw and the steering wheel to the point of pain. A desperate fear filled his eyes. "What if it's not enough? What if *I'm* not enough? Hutch, if you get blown away out there, *how am I supposed to live with that?*"

Hutch reached over and placed his hand on his partner's tense shoulder. Unspoken words were passed between the two, mixed with anxiety and determination. After a moment, Hutch nodded to his partner. "Let's go."



Murray Phelps rolled down the freighter's gangplank with the last load on his forks. As the small Yale truck bounced along the dock, a flash of color in the water caught his gaze. The dock worker glanced over at the number painted on the piling and finished setting down the crate beside the others he had just unloaded during his shift.

Phelps swung off the forklift and stretched out his lower back muscles, relieved that his day was almost over. Shaking out a cigarette as he walked over to the piling marked A54, Phelps paused long enough at the dock's edge to strike the flint of his lighter. The cigarette fell out of his open mouth while the lighter fell to the planking unnoticed at the sight of the body floating face down in the water.



“Zebra Three, stand by for a patch from Captain Dobby.”

“Copy that, Mildred. Zebra Three, standing by.” Hutch glanced over at his partner, the tension in Starsky’s face still evident. “Wonder what’s up.”

“Maybe he finally figured out who put the fake cockroach in his lunch bag last month.”

Hutch smiled at his partner. The anxiety was still there, but his attempt at a lighter conversation was a start.

“Dobby here.”

The blond depressed the microphone. “Go ahead, Captain.”

“Get in here; they’ve found Squires.”



Hours later, the two detectives took the homicide report with them to the station cafeteria. They had spent the remainder of the afternoon at the morgue and the prison cell where Perrigo’s body had been discovered earlier, then made a trip to the pier where Squires body had been located. Neither man had much of an appetite, but figured a change in scenery from the squad room might help clear their heads.

After making their modest dinner selections, they headed for the most secluded table near the far wall. It wasn’t lost on Hutch that his partner skillfully maneuvered himself into a position of being able to shield the blond from any potential threat.

“So what do you think?” Hutch asked as he opened his container of yogurt. He watched Starsky discretely scan the room.

“About what? Perrigo’s murder or about that glop you’re about to eat? It looks like the paste we used in the third grade.”

“Huh, I thought you never made it past the *second* grade.”

“Cute. Do you think you want to eat that crap or wear it?”

“I think there was somebody pretty high up on Capernicus and Randolph’s payroll that was in on this. Even if it was a paid hit made by an inmate, how else would they gain access to a maximum security cell? And how the heck would an inmate get a gun and silencer in there?”

“What about a guard?”

“Possibly. Taylor’s questioning those two--what were their names?” Hutch snapped his fingers. “Higby and McFarlan. How else could somebody get to Perrigo with a round-the-clock guard who swears on his mother’s eyes that no one came or went anywhere near that cell for the twelve hours he was on duty? Of course, it could be the guard was under the orders of a superior in Capernicus’ pocket...”

“...or the warden.”

“...or the chief of police...”

“...or whoever. Shoot, it could even be the governor for all we know.”

“Great. So where does that put us?” Hutch turned a disturbed gaze at his partner.

“Same place as always when it’s ‘*who do we trust*’ time.”

The blond bolstered a bit of a smile. “Me and thee.”

“Me ‘n thee,” Starsky echoed back with a grin of his own.



Starsky and Hutch were beginning to feel like they were grasping at straws. But with little to go on, they were desperate enough to follow any lead, no matter how thin. The latest came by way of one of their new informants, a vagrant by the name of Milburn. He had only provided the detectives with something useful a few times before, and Starsky still wasn’t sure he was ready to trust the homeless man yet.

Hanging up the phone, the brunette stood up from his desk. There was *something* in Milburn’s voice that left an uneasy feeling in his gut. It was a warning that rarely failed him.

“What’d you get?” Hutch asked, glancing up from the notes he was jotting down in the case file.

“Mebbesumfin,” Starsky mumbled, as he continued to chew on Milburn’s tip and the end of his pen.

Hutch cocked an eyebrow in his partner’s direction. “And for those of us who speak English?”

“Maybe somethin’, don’t know.”

Hutch glanced up at the vague response and replaced the notebook in his jacket pocket. “Well, let’s go find out.”

Starsky followed Hutch out of the squad room, pausing as his partner stopped for a drink of water at the fountain. Starsky replayed the conversation with Milburn in his head, trying to



figure out why the information left a bad taste in his mouth--*Meet me at Steadman's Tavern at 5:30. I got something on that cop that got iced in the pen.*

Finished, Hutch brushed the dampness from his moustache and studied Starsky's furrowed brow. He had been on edge for the past week, none too discretely suggesting Hutch take Dobey's offer of protection. Their differing views had led to many heated discussions with Hutch digging in his heels to remain "on the outside".

"Where'd you park?" Hutch's question interrupted Starsky's mental indigestion.

"Huh? Oh, out front."

Starsky shouldered past and headed down the hall to the station's front doors. Hutch followed a few steps behind with a roll of his eyes. *This case had better break soon or we'll both be basket cases.*

The unsettling feeling escalated as Starsky descended the steps. He paused at the bottom, allowing four uniformed officers to pass, then waited for Hutch to join him before continuing toward the Torino and voicing his concern. He was drawing a breath to speak when a glint of light from a passing car caught his eye. Instinct set Starsky in motion, catapulting him against his partner's back. The leap landed Starsky's forearm in the middle of his partner's back, slamming Hutch onto his hands and knees behind the protection of the Torino's front fender.

Starsky staggered as he reached inside his jacket to draw his Baretta. Just as the handgun cleared its holster, a slug from a high-powered rifle sliced through the collar of his windbreaker, laying open the flesh of his right shoulder. Ignoring the burning sensation of the wound, Starsky continued his draw even as the propulsion of the shot knocked him to one knee.

Hutch had drawn his Python and followed his partner's bead on the taillights of the now fleeing sedan. Both men fired several shots, but the light blue Impala was quickly disappearing into traffic. Several officers flooded out of the station upon hearing the shots, taking cover behind parked vehicles. The sedan squealed around the corner and disappeared from view.

Starsky turned to the nearest patrolman. "Light blue Impala, probably a '72 or '73. California plates: Mary, Robert, Lincoln, nine-oh-three."

Hutch pulled drew himself up and replaced his gun in its holster. "Mary, Robert, Lincoln, nine-three-oh."

Starsky shook his head. "Nine-oh-three."

The patrolman's head followed the conversation like the spectator at a tennis match, until Hutch finally shrugged his shoulders. "It's one or the other, take your pick."

The patrolman just stood there for a moment, confused. Two voices rang out in unison. "*What are you waiting for?*"

The young officer startled like a deer and sprinted to his partner waiting in an idling patrol car. The description and plates were called in as they sped to join other squad cars in pursuit.

As the partners turned back toward the station a delayed flair of pain staggered Starsky and sent him reeling into the Torino. Hutch was immediately at his side, concern pinching his features. It was only when he took his partner by the shoulders to steady him against the hood of the car that Hutch felt the dampness of blood soaking through Starsky's shirt and jacket.

"You're...why didn't you tell me you were hit?" The exasperation in Hutch's voice couldn't mask his concern. As gently as he could, he began peeling the ripped clothing away from the wound.

Starsky hissed as the material pulled at the tender flesh of his right shoulder. "Stop it, it's only a graze." He pushed ineffectively at Hutch's hands.

"Starsky, quit it! You're probably gonna need stitches at least." Hutch traced the bullet's path across the flesh of his partner's shoulder, then placed his clean handkerchief against the injury. Even knowing the wound was superficial couldn't block the icy fear that gripped him--*a few more inches...*

As Starsky reached up to apply pressure, Hutch turned his gaze away from the wound down to his hands. His partner's blood mingled with his own where his palms had been scraped on the cement. The sight of Starsky's blood there unnerved him. *That was so close...too close.*

"Hutch?"

The blond lifted his eyes to meet his partner's. Starsky's expression softened at the fear in Hutch's face. "Let's go inside, Dobey'll want to know what's going on."

Hutch shook his head. "Hospital first. I can call Dobey while they're stitching you up."

"Hutch, I've bled worse cutting myself shaving. Dobey'll have kittens if we don't fill him in."

"Fine. Then I'm taking you to County General." Hutch grasped his partner by the elbow, offering support without having been asked for it. Additional officers were already filtering down the steps. Hutch turned back to Starsky before they were interrupted with questions. "Starsk...*I'll do it.*"

Starsky turned his paling face toward his partner and stopped, his cobalt eyes searching Hutch's for understanding. Hutch glanced away from the probing gaze, back to where Starsky's blood stained his hands.

"I'll do it...I'll go into hiding."



Starsky steered the Torino into the car wash's lot and pulled into line behind a nondescript black Cadillac. Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel betrayed his nervousness. "You set?"

Hutch didn't even look up from his newspaper. "Mm hmm." His non-committal response relayed his anger toward the circumstances forcing him into hiding.

Starsky's agitated fingers moved on to tapping out a tempo on the hard surface, bringing the Torino up closer to the car wash as the line progressed.

"You remember the signal?" Starsky's hands moved in a combination of long and short taps. "Got it?"

"Mm hmm." Hutch turned the page.

"Don't forget to call at 3:00 PM sharp. Start with the first pay phone number on the list. If I'm not there for whatever reason, wait 'til the next day, call *the second* number at 3:00 P.M. If I'm not there the second day, go back and call the *first* number on the third day, then if..."

Hutch's hand shot out from behind the newspaper, gripping his partner's dancing one. "Starsk, *I got it*. Stop worrying, you're driving me nuts. I've got it all right here." Hutch released his partner's hand and tapped himself on the temple. "I'll be okay. *Okay?*"

Starsky searched his partner's eyes for any sign of doubt or fear. What he saw must have reassured him because after a few heartbeats his features lost some of their tightness, though he couldn't manage a smile. "Okay."

Starsky pulled the Torino into the car wash's entry slats. He quickly rolled down the window and extended three singles. "Deluxe wash."

"You got it. Have a nice day, sir."

Starsky rolled up the window as he shifted the car into neutral. The automatic conveyer belt gripped the Torino's tires and pulled the car into the wash tunnel. After the soap was sprayed over the body of the sedan and the brushes scrubbed past, Hutch quickly reached into the car's back seat and retrieved an overnight bag. As he made to open the passenger door, Starsky's grip on his arm stopped him.

"Hutch..."

The blond turned and met Starsky's concern. With a gentle nod, Hutch reached back and patted the hand that held his wrist.

"*You, too.*"

Starsky squeezed the wrist one more time and released his partner. After a torrent of rinse water, the dryers began a wind tunnel to blow the excess moisture from the car. Hutch flung himself

out of the dripping Torino and sprinted against the wind toward the black Cadillac on the line ahead of them. Another blond man got out of the Cadillac's passenger side and ran toward the Torino. Without a word between them, J.D. Turquet shrugged out of his jacket and handed it off to Hutch who exchanged it for his own. Turquet slapped his black cowboy hat on the detective to cover Hutch's lighter colored hair, then reached up to peel off the false moustache Hutch had been wearing since shaving off his own that morning.

“Ow!”

“Sorry 'bout that.” Turquet haphazardly slapped the moustache under his nose and traded sunglasses with Hutch. “Good luck, amigo.”

“You, too.” Hutch continued to the Caddy and slipped into the passenger seat.

“Just in time, too,” Huggy grouched. “Here come the dudes with the towels.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, two workers emerged from outside the car wash and approached the Cadillac, wiping away the remaining drops of water. Hutch slid low in the seat and tipped the cowboy hat further over his face, concealing his features. The sedan left the car wash, but before slipping north on to Palmcrest Boulevard, Huggy tapped the brakes twice, signaling the Torino behind him.

As the red car emerged from the car wash, Turquet had Hutch's newspaper raised up to eye level, covering his features from any casual look inside.

Starsky paused at the end of the drive, staring after the receding Cadillac. With a sigh, he finally tore his gaze away from the taillights and pulled into traffic, heading south, away from his partner.



After his third stop and as many changes of clothes and vehicles, Hutch was beginning to feel more than a little ridiculous. The second change came after the car wash by stopping at The Pits. There, disguised as Turquet, Hutch went through the kitchen and up to Huggy's apartment. The person who emerged was a seventy-year-old derelict, ala the costume Hutch had constructed a few years back to fool his partner during a deadly game of hide-and-seek. The derelict made his way a mile north to a flop house where his room had been rented for a week. The man who left there was a thirty-something hippie that looked like he should have been playing bass for “The Grateful Dead”. The rather large, rather hairy man poured himself into a psychedelically painted VW bug and headed out of the city toward Bakersfield. As much as Hutch hated the lengths to which Starsky had made him go to assure his safety, he had to admit he felt more secure than he had in weeks.

*A few days, Hutchinson, it's just for a few days. A few days of perfect boredom, sitting on pins and needles until the case breaks, or until I can convince Starsky that I'm better off out there with him.*

Three hours later Hutch found himself at a nondescript “Super 8” motel with the reservation his partner had made under the name of “Ollie Begoode”. Hutch all but winced as he gave the reservation clerk his name, paying cash for his room in advance. *Starsk, I’m gonna kick your butt royally when this is all over.*

Slinging his canvas army bag over his shoulder, Hutch made his way down the inner hall to his unit. Out of habit, he thoroughly searched the room, checking the shower, closets and windows before settling himself down on the vinyl floral print armchair. Snapping on the TV for some background noise to break up the lonely silence, Hutch dug out a beer from the groceries he had purchased at the Seven-Eleven a few miles up the road. He finally propped up his feet against the TV cart, his gun resting on his lap, beginning his weary vigil.



The deadbolt slid home with a familiar *click* that marked the end of another exhausting day. Huggy was looking forward to nothing more than a long, hot shower to ease the dull ache that had developed in his lower back. He was totally unprepared for the voice that seemed to come out of nowhere and the baseball bat that rested on his left shoulder.

“I’m going to give you one chance to give me the answer I need. Is that clear?”

Huggy remained utterly frozen except for the curt nodding of his head.

“Where is Detective Hutchinson?”

The black man tried to swallow past the lump in his throat. “*Who?*”

As the bat came in contact with his ribs, it was obvious this was not the answer his assailant was looking for.



“What do you mean, *he’s gone?*” Capernicus roared, spittle flying from his mouth as he turned on Eddie. “How can he just *disappear* if you were tailing them like you were supposed to?”

The former welterweight fidgeted before Capernicus’ scrutiny. Eddie fumbled with his packet of cigarettes, lighting up quickly and throwing the crumbled cellophane on the office floor. The small room was set apart from the rest of the abandoned print shop which now served as Capernicus’ base until the extortionist could “wrap up” his loose ends and relocate. The print shop was one of a dozen similarly neglected warehouses in the city’s shipping district. A dozen or so men still on Capernicus’ payroll came and went as extortion monies were brought in.

“Look, Mr. Capernicus, we were behind him and Starsky at the station. They went to a taco stand, through the car wash, to the bank, then back to the station. A coupla hours later they went to The Pits, and after that, Starsky left alone. We hung out ‘til the place closed, figuring Hutchinson was holing up there. We broke in, but the only person left was that black guy named

Huggy. We tore the place apart, but Hutchinson just wasn't there. We tried persuading Huggy, but he wouldn't tell us where Hutchinson was, even after we knocked him around for a while. The next thing we knew we heard sirens, so we split. He didn't know where Hutchinson was or he woulda told us."

"You sound pretty sure of that, Eddie."

Eddie smiled self-confidently. "Oh, I'm sure my special brand of persuasion would have *encouraged* him to tell us if he knew."

"Well, then, get out there and find somebody else to *persuade* and find that cop!"



Starsky prowled the admitting desk's hallway, knowing every door, light fixture and drinking fountain by heart. *How many hours have we spent in these hallways? As much time as we spend in this stupid hospital, you'd think they'd name a wing after us...*

A gentle voice from behind broke his reverie. "Detective Starsky? You can see Mr. Brown now."

Starsky nodded at the older woman and followed her down the hallway to Huggy's room. He would only be held overnight for observation, but the detective felt more than simple obligation to visit his friend. He wasn't sure what caused him to pause in the doorway--the ghastly sight of Huggy's injuries or the guilt from what caused them.

"Hey."

"Hey, yourself. Did you get the number of the bus that hit ya? I could put in a call to DMV."

"Very amusing, Starsky. And here I thought they hired you as a cop for your questionable looks and not your comedic forte."

Starsky's smile didn't quite dissipate the strain around his eyes. "Hug...I'm..."

"Forget it, Starsk. I knew this could happen going in. It's not the first time I've been injured in the line of *your* duty."

While the words were offered lightly and meant to ease Starsky's mind, they stung the detective all the more with the sincere acceptance of their dangerous bond.

"What'd they want?" Starsky already knew the answer.

"What do you think? They wanted a road map and directions to your blond shadow."

"We're gonna make it up to ya, Hug."

“Just make sure the White Knight’s around long enough to fulfill that promise, dig?”

Starsky nodded once, then patted his friend gently on the leg before heading for the door. “What’s the diagnosis anyway?”

Huggy tried a casual shrug, but the movement brought a wave of discomfort across his elfin features. “Dislocated this, cracked that...nothin’ that’ll permanently hamper my smooth moves with those who groove. Get out of here, will ya? This’ll be the first *day’s* sleep I’ll get in a long time without some drunken dudes poundin’ on my door to open up the bar for breakfast.”

Starsky nodded again. “Yell if ya need anything.”

“Later, Starsk.” Huggy watched his friend make his way out of the hospital room. There was a dejection to Starsky’s shoulders and an air of tension that crackled from him like static electricity. *A coupla days, Starsk. Hang in there for just a few more days...and watch your back, Kemosabe.*



Two sets of eyes watched as Starsky got off the hospital elevator and turned down the hallway. Hernandez and Marciano casually stood up from the plastic waiting room chairs and made their way toward the detective. The two hoods almost ran into one another when they turned the corner and found Starsky talking with two uniformed officers near the admitting desk.

Hernandez and Marciano quickly changed their paths and continued out of the hospital, heading for their nondescript Pontiac sedan, parked several car lengths behind the Torino.

Marciano swore as he slid into the passenger seat. “Mr. Capernicus didn’t say it’d be *this* tough to snag the cop.”

Hernandez gave his partner a curious look. “Well, what’dya expect--we just walk up to him and say ‘Hey, pig, hop in the car. Mr. Capernicus wants to know where your partner’s at’? Man, are you stupid.”

“And you can kiss my...”

“Shut up, here he comes.”

The two thugs slid lower in their seats, watching as Starsky trotted across the sidewalk to his car and left the hospital. The Pontiac pulled out seconds behind the red sedan. A few miles down the road, Marciano began to squirm. “What are you waiting for? Let’s get him.”

“I’m waiting ‘til we get outta all this traffic. Ya think people won’t call the cops if they see us knock him off the road? Use your...” Hernandez swore as the darkened interior of the car was filled with alternating red and blue lights.

Marciano craned his neck around to look at the patrol car behind them, as his partner pulled the Pontiac to the side of the road. Ahead, he could make out the rapidly disappearing lights of the Torino. “What are you doing? Are you nuts?” Marciano pulled a handgun out of his coat pocket.

“Shut up, and put that away. We don’t know that they’re on to us. If we run now...” Hernandez quickly turned to face the officer approaching the driver’s side window, as Marciano stuffed the pistol back into his coat pocket. A false smile graced the driver’s features. “Good evening officer, is there a problem?”

The patrolman’s flashlight blinded the two briefly as the beam swept through the interior. “Yes, sir. Were you aware that you have a taillight out? Your tags are expired as well. Driver’s license and registration, please.”



It was 2:59 PM when the phone rang from the booth on Ocean Drive. Starsky snatched up the receiver with a grin. “You’re *early*.”

“What do you mean, I’m early? It’s three o’clock.”

Starsky glanced at his watch a second time. “No, it’s 2:59. Actually, *now* it’s three o’clock, but when the phone rang, it was still 2:59.”

“You’re a warped individual, you know that, Starsky?”

“So I’ve been told. Well, what’d you do today?”

“Oh, let’s see. I took a drive along the ocean after a lovely lunch at *Chez Roberts*, then I took in the Metropolitan Opera’s production of *La Nozzia de Figaro*. Afterwards I had a nap and woke up just in time to call you at three o’clock.”

“Two fifty-nine.”

“You need professional help, pal.”

“Bored, huh?”

“There hasn’t been a word created yet that describes how bored I am.”

“And it’s only the first day.”

“Twenty-three hours, forty-eight minutes and...seventeen seconds.”

“And you think *I’m* mental?”



“Just find Capernicus so I can come home.”

The expression on Starsky’s face became wistful. “Talk to you tomorrow, Blintz.”



It was the tremor in little Rosie’s voice that caused Edith to drop the whisk she had been using. “*Mommy?*”

Edith spun away from the eggs she had been beating and, wiping her hands on her apron, rushed to the living room where a rerun of “Gilligan’s Island” still blared from the TV set.

A stocky man held a gun to Rosie’s head, the other hand holding her close with a handful of the little girl’s t-shirt. A ski mask obscured his features, but Edith could see enough exposed skin to know he was white.

As soon as her mother entered the room Rosie extended her arms to Edith and began to cry. With her eyes never leaving the cold gray ones of the intruder, Edith began to make comforting noises to her child.

“Shush now, baby. It’s all right. We’ll just see what this man wants and it’ll be all right.” Her face hardened as she contemplated the reason for the intrusion. “Well? What *do* you want?”

An oily smile curved up the corners of the man’s mouth. “You’ve got a pretty little girl here, Mrs. Dobey.”

An icy fist gripped Edith’s heart, but her face remained impassive.

“It’d be a shame if something happened to such a nice little thing.” The assailant cocked back the trigger of the gun, still pressed tightly against Rosie’s head. The fear in Rosie’s eyes finally broke Edith’s resolve and she hesitantly reached out for her daughter.

“Look, you don’t need to hurt her. Just tell me what you want. Money? Is that it? Do you need money?”

A steely grip encircled Edith’s outstretched hand as Rosie was flung away. “I need information, lady. Just tell me where Officer Hutchinson is hiding and maybe I won’t have to hurt you or your little girl.”

“Hutch?” Edith looked bewildered. “I...I don’t know where he is. Nobody knows where he’s hiding.”

The gunman pulled Edith tightly against him, her arm twisted up behind her back, eliciting a sharp cry of pain. “Do you think I’m stupid? Everybody says Hutchinson and Starsky are tight

with your husband. If you don't want anything to happen to your kid you'll tell me where he's hiding out!"

"Please! I swear, I don't know!"

The intruder slapped his pistol across the side of Edith's face, knocking her to the ground. Rosie tried to run to her fallen mother, but the thug pushed her roughly against the stairs. Dazed, Edith had no recourse when the masked man grabbed the neckline of her dress and tore it roughly away, exposing her chest.

"In a minute you're gonna beg me to..." The gunman had begun to lower himself to the semi-conscious woman when the sound of the back door slamming froze him.

"Mom?" Cal yelled as he entered the house.

"*Cal! Daddy!*" Rosie screamed, knowing her father had picked up Cal from basketball practice on his way home. The gunman swung toward the kitchen, leveling his gun at the teen.

Rosie's cry was enough to stir Edith back into a more conscious state. Finding her assailant momentarily distracted, the prone woman was able to strike out with a well-aimed kick between the gunman's straddling legs. As the intruder doubled over, Cal rushed him, the semi-automatic discharging into the wall as it was flung across the wooden floor. Edith rolled onto her hands and knees and scrambled after the weapon.

The back door slammed shut a second time as Captain Dobby made his way into the house, arms laden with grocery bags. At the sound of the shot he dropped his burden and charged into the living room, gun drawn. The tableau that greeted him caused his heart to stop. A masked assailant had just regained his feet, Cal lying stunned below him. Edith sat on the floor, her dress torn, an unfamiliar pistol in her hands pointed at the intruder. Rosie sat in horrified silence on the stairs.

Dobby drew a steady bead on the masked head. The assailant outstretched his hands in a gesture of surrender, but his eyes darted quickly about the room, gauging his options.

"Don't even *think* about it." The captain's eyes never left the gunman's face. "Cal, move away from him. Call the station and tell them what's happened. Tell them to send an ambulance for your mother. Then call your Aunt Irene to come over here and stay with you kids."

"Harold, I'm fine," Edith remarked, trying unsuccessfully to stand. Her unstable movements distracted her husband for a split second.

The brief glance of concern was enough for the intruder to make his break. Spinning, he made a dash for the front door through the short hallway. Within a heartbeat Dobby had him in his sights. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

The fleeing man never missed a beat and threw himself out the large, rectangular window that made up the bulk of the front door. The sound of shattering glass seemed to fill the room as Captain Dobeý rushed forward, firing. Then the only sound in the small house was the muffled sobs of Rosie crying into her mother's shoulder.

There was no expression on Harold Dobeý's face as he stood on the inside of the destroyed door, staring stonily at the motionless form of the intruder. A gentle rain began falling on the body, washing some of the blood away that had begun to pool underneath him. Only an autopsy would determine if it were the jagged piece of glass that struck his jugular vein that killed him or the .38 bullet lodged in his spine.



Captain Dobeý met Starsky at the front door of his sister-in-law's house. The detective was grateful to see the two black-and-white units parked out in front, as well as an unmarked car, but his remorse for the need of such protection gnawed at him.

"Cap'n, I just heard what happened..." A gesture from his superior stopped Starsky in mid-sentence. Dobeý jerked his head toward the interior of the house and stepped out onto the porch. Through the picture window, Starsky could see Rosie and Cal curled up on either side of their mother watching TV with Edith's sister.

"Is everybody all right?"

Anger flared briefly on the large man's face. "As *all right* as they can be considering what they've just been through."

"Cap'n...I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything. Just find these bastards and put them away."

Starsky stared into the eyes of one of the people he respected most in the world, wishing he could take away some of the rage and fear for his family. He then looked away and nodded once, turning to make his way down the porch stairs.

"Starsky."

The detective turned back to his superior with tormented eyes.

"We're doing the right thing, son. Just keep him safe."

The anguish didn't leave the cobalt eyes as Starsky nodded again and dashed through the rain to the Torino.



The next morning found Starsky at the station where he had spent the night going over forensic evidence. The bulk of the day was passed there, his efforts yielding little, except for the elimination of potential leads. A Mrs. Bernadette Ellis, Randolph and Capernicus' secretary from the fictitious Teilman and Associates, was located and brought in for questioning. It was obvious to Starsky, Dobey and Taylor the sixty-five year old grandmother knew nothing of the extortionists' actual business dealings, and honestly believed that she'd been working for a struggling trading firm. She was soon released with the department's thanks and a brief tour of the station at her request.

At 2:15 Starsky sprinted out of the station to his car, briefly scanning the area before he got in. The majority of vehicles he recognized, but took note of the few unfamiliar ones. The detective adjusted his rear view mirror to take in more of the second lane to his right as he pulled out into traffic and was rewarded with the reflection of a nondescript tan Pontiac merging as well.

Starsky turned abruptly at the next intersection and accelerated. Another glance into the mirror revealed the Pontiac running a red light in order to keep up. Starsky cranked the wheel for a hard left turn, guiding the Torino out of the heavy midday traffic toward a less traveled street where it would be easier to detain the Pontiac. Keeping the tan car in sight, Starsky whipped into an all-day parking lot. At the first interior intersection, he quickly circled around a row of cars and waited for the Pontiac to join him there.

Hernandez and Marciano scraped bottom as the Pontiac bounced into the parking lot, quickly scanning for the Torino amongst the parked cars.

"Where'd he go?" Hernandez asked, straining his neck to look behind him for the bright red sedan.

"Man, if we lost him again, Capernicus is gonna have our..."

"Shut up! Worry about him later, just look for the cop." Hernandez swore under his breath as cruised slowly through the lot. "He ain't here. How do you think he managed to..." The last of the hood's sentence was cut off as Starsky stuck his Baretta against the side of his head through the open window. The hunted had just become the hunter.

Either fear or reflex caused Hernandez to hit the accelerator, propelling the Pontiac forward. Starsky bellowed, "Stop, or I'll shoot!" then fired through the rear window as the car continued its flight. Even as the glass shattered, he could tell the driver was struck in the right shoulder, exactly where he had aimed. The sedan lurched to the right, sideswiping an import, before staggering back on its path. Starsky hurtled after the Pontiac as it jerked toward the lot exit, then dropped into a crouch, drawing a bead on the driver's side tire.

The instant his finger began tightening on the trigger, an elderly couple walked into the lot, directly into the erratic path of the fleeing Pontiac. Starsky cursed under his breath as he pulled his shot, knowing that if he fired, he could very easily send the disabled car directly into the couple. Even so, Hernandez swung the car erratically, hoping to throw off the detective's aim

and steered the car toward the pedestrians. The old man was struck in the hip, knocking him and his wife to the blacktop, as the sedan roared out of the lot into midday traffic.

Starsky rushed to the fallen couple, the woman already struggling to her knees. Her husband lay on the tarmac, moaning as he clutched his side. A trickle of blood streaked down the side of his head where he had struck it on the ground.

“Easy, folks, easy. I’m a cop.” Starsky knelt and helped the woman to sit next to her husband. He quickly pressed his handkerchief to the old man’s head, then placed her hands against it. “Hold this in place while I call for an ambulance. It’ll be okay.”

Starsky glanced briefly over his shoulder for any signs of the fleeing Pontiac as he ran to the Torino. He wasn’t surprised the car was no longer in sight.



Starsky sprinted from his car to the telephone booth on Ranchero Drive. He was seven minutes late from the appointed time, and there was no way to tell if Hutch would continue to try and reach him.

“Yeah?” Starsky breathed into the receiver.

“You’re *late*.”

“It’s nice to hear from you, too, Blintz.”

“Tell me you’re late because you were busy busting Capernicus.”

The silence on the other end of the line as Starsky searched for something to say was disappointing. Hutch sighed and again accepted the circumstances, though he couldn’t shake the unsettled feeling that had developed earlier that day. “So, has anybody missed me?”

“Sure...at least the couple of people who even noticed you were gone.”

“You’re all heart, Starsk.”

“Anything good on TV?”

“Do you have any idea what kind of mind-numbing crap they play during the day while we’re out there pounding the pavement? I was so bored with these insipid game shows I ended up watching a rerun of some old show called ‘Here Come the Grooms’ or something.”

“I remember that one. Ma used to love that show.” Starsky chuckled. “You ever wonder what happens to actors on those old shows?”

“Yeah, they become insurance salesmen and garbage collectors.” Hutch sighed heavily.  
“Starsk, if you don’t get me out of here soon, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“Partner, you *lost* it a long time ago.”

“*Starsk...*”

“Talk to you tomorrow.”



Another day ended with Starsky finally getting some sleep, this time at Hutch’s apartment. He had convinced himself of the need to go over to Venice Place and check on his partner’s plants, even though he knew Hutch had watered them before he left on his forced exile. Starsky waved at the unmarked patrol car halfway down the block monitoring the apartment, then let himself in with his spare key. The one tucked along the top of the doorframe had been removed when Hutch left. After wandering around the studio and misting the vines overtaking the living room, Starsky sat down on the couch to sort through Hutch’s mail. He was asleep within minutes.

By 7:00 AM, the morning sun warming his face roused Starsky off the couch, his back stiff, but feeling oddly refreshed and unintentionally comforted. A quick shower woke him further, and donning a denim shirt from Hutch’s closet, Starsky set out to find something more palatable than the questionable contents of his partner’s refrigerator.

A trip to The Pits offered nothing more than breakfast and the affirmation that Diane had picked up Huggy from the hospital as promised. The proprietor was still asleep, but Diane would have him call Starsky at the station later that morning. Starsky touched base with a few of his more reliable snitches, but nothing new had turned up on Capernicus’ whereabouts. The remainder of the day was spent in the squad room, and after a brief update from Agent Taylor and Dobey, Starsky settled down at his desk to review some information on Capernicus and Randolph’s east coast connections the NYPD had dug up. The ringing of Hutch’s direct line drew his attention.

Starsky leaned across his desk and snatched up the receiver on the second ring. “Starsky.”

“David? It’s Muriel Hutchinson...”

The hesitancy in Hutch’s mother’s voice made him immediately uneasy.

“Muriel? What is it? What’s happened?”

“It’s Richard, he’s been in an accident.”

A cold knot formed in the pit of the detective’s stomach. “What *kind* of accident?”

Muriel’s voice became more intense. “David, what’s going on out there?”

Starsky cleared his throat, knowing Hutch had only given his parents a vague description of the last week's events, and that he was going "under" for awhile. He knew his partner had warned his parents that it was remotely possible that someone may try and contact them to find out where he was, a warning that Richard Hutchinson had scoffed at with the attitude of his son blowing things out of proportion.

"Muriel, I...I don't know what to tell you, other than that Hutch had to go away for awhile until an important case goes to trial. Is Mr. Hutchinson all right? What happened?"

Muriel sighed. "Yes, he'll be fine, just a bit shook up, though he won't admit it. This morning a couple of men forced Rich's car off the road, then tried to get some information from him about Ken's whereabouts."

"Was he hurt?"

"He was knocked around a bit when his car was run into the ditch. The men that did it were beginning to get a bit rough with him until a passing motorist pulled over and offered his help with what he thought was an accident."

"And they just wanted to know where Hutch was?"

"Apparently. But, David, someone broke in to Katherine and Steve's house earlier this week." Hutch's sister and brother-in-law lived a few miles from the Hutchinson homestead.

"Oh, man. Are they okay?"

"Yes, they were quite frightened, as you can imagine. They had just come home from the store and there was someone going through their house."

"So, what happened?"

"Well, whoever it was didn't have a chance to get much, because Tina got to him first."

"Tina? Who's..."

"Tina was a friend's Rottweiler Katherine and Steve were dogsitting."

Starsky began a throaty chuckle until he realized the full impact of what Mrs. Hutchinson had just said. "Wait a minute, you said *was*?"

"The burglar shot and killed her, David. Then he must have figured one of the neighbors would hear the shooting because he just took off. Never stole anything from the house, either. We...well, at first we just assumed it was a random burglary..."

"...until Mr. Hutchinson got run off the road. I'm sorry to say that you're right; whoever it was is pretty determined to find your son."

“David, is he in trouble? Has he been hurt?”

“He...he’s safe.”

“He’s not hurt?”

“No, no.”

“Where is he?”

“Mrs. Hutchinson, I...”

“David?”

“I’m sorry, the less you know...”

“Never mind, if whatever you’re working on means he’s not there with you, it must be important.” The blonde woman’s voice dropped perceptibly. “Or dangerous. Take care of him, David.”

“You know I will. Are you two going to be okay? We could make arrangements here...”

“No, no. The local sheriff is a friend of ours. He’s made sure that we’re being taken care of. You just be careful.”

Starsky gently set down the receiver and shook his head. *How far would Capernicus go?* A sudden chill ran down the his spine. He snatched the receiver back up and dialed. Within a few rings it was answered.

“Hudley Motors, Nick Starsky speakin’.”

The detective grinned into the phone. “*The* Nick Starsky?”

“Yeah, who...? *Davey?*”

“How’s it goin’, kid?”

“It’s goin’. I guess there are worse ways of makin’ a buck.”

The relief of his brother finally having an honest job was enough to make the worried man smile. “*Besides* sellin’ lemons? Not many.”

“You’re a very funny man, did anyone ever tell you that? Maybe that partner of yours needs to keep you on a tighter leash.”



At the mention of Hutch, Starsky's smile faded. "Right. Hey listen, Nick, I won't keep you long, but I need you to do something for me."

"Don't tell me you're finally getting rid of that red zebra you call a car?"

"Nick, I need you to stay with Ma for awhile."

"What do you mean? You mean like..."

"I mean move back home. It'll just be for a few weeks, maybe not even that long."

"What are you talking about? I can't...me and Theresa were goin' away for the weekend and..."

"There'll be other weekends." The urgency in his brother's voice caught Nick up short. "Nick, I *need* you to do this."

"Davey, what is it? Are you in some sorta trouble?"

"Nick, I...just do me this one favor, all right?"

"Sure, but..."

"Thanks, Nick. I'll let you know when things settle down. Take care."

Starsky quickly replaced the receiver and ran his hands over his face. He still wasn't reassured.



"So, tell me what's going on in the outside world."

Even with the roar of Beverly Hills traffic surrounding him, Starsky could hear the boredom in his partner's voice. He could easily picture him, sitting in one of the uncomfortable motel room chairs, idly flipping a deck of cards into the waste can, the TV on but muted, a warm and stale beer nearby. The thought of such perfect and *safe* boredom made Starsky smile. "Oh, not much. Captain Dobby's decided to try out for the Rams, Huggy's been named Businessman of the Year by the Optimist Club, and I have a date tonight with Kate Jackson."

"Same old, same old, huh?"

"Yep. How 'bout you? Seen any good movies lately?"

"I'm so sick of watching TV in this fleabag, I'm losing my mind...and *don't* say that I've already lost it. That line's getting old."

"Hang in there, I heard there's a John Wayne double feature on Channel five tonight."

“Starsk...”

“Just a few more days, Blintz.”

“You getting anywhere?”

“Got a few leads to follow up on.” Starsky quickly decided to withhold the information about his partner’s family, knowing that it could possibly draw Hutch out.

The urgent feeling that had been tickling at the back of Hutch’s subconscious for the better part of two days nudged him again. “Hey, Starsk?”

“Yeah?”

There was a hesitant pause, as Hutch tried to put into words what he was sensing. Starsky smiled into the receiver. “*You, too.*”



Two men followed Eddie through the back delivery door of the dingy print shop. While both had the same muscular build of street fighters, it was easy to discern that the youngest of the three men was different, his eyes a bit close together and sunken too deep into his skull. His face bore a perpetual air of innocence. Eddie turned to him and barked out an order. “Kevin, you stay here by the door. Don’t let nobody in, got it?”

“You g-g-got it, Eddie.” Kevin stomped purposefully toward the door and, crossing his arms across his broad chest, positioning himself like a sentry.

The other snorted disgustedly. “Man, what do you keep that moron around for?” He was unprepared for the shove that propelled him against a skid of dusty paper stock. Eddie’s finger jabbed at his face.

“You shut up, Johnson. Kevin does exactly what he’s told to and he ain’t got no smart mouth. I better be able to say the same thing about you, *got it?*”

“Be cool, man. Be cool. I didn’t mean nothin’ by it.” Johnson slowly lifted himself up off the large sheets of paper and dusted himself off.

“Good thing. Now c’mon, Mr. Capernicus is waiting. And you *don’t* keep Mr. Capernicus waiting.”



*What?* The hairs on the back of Starsky’s neck rose as he pushed open his apartment door and looked around the room. For all intents and purposes, it looked as if an earthquake had struck. His bookcase had been turned over, destroying Mexican pottery, his few Chinese sculptures, and

the Spanish Galleon he had finished just last month. All the contents of his kitchen cupboards had been tossed to the floor. Even the cushions of his couch had been torn to shreds and discarded around the room. The detective drew his Baretta from its holster and moved into the living room, listening intently. With an unconscious grace Starsky worked his way to the kitchen, then the bedroom and bath, sweeping the rooms with his pistol in the event the intruders were still present.

The ringing of the telephone spun him around in a tight coil, handgun thrust before him. When the source of the noise registered in his tense mind, Starsky holstered his weapon with a grimace and snatched up the receiver from his bedside stand. “Starsky.”

A predator’s smile lit his face as he listened. “Thanks, Hug, this could be it.”



Eddie and Johnson entered the glassed-in office outside the pressroom. Capernicus was seated at a rusting metal desk, going over the day’s take. He didn’t even glance up when the two entered the room.

“Did you get the day’s receipts taken care of, Eddie?”

“Uh, yes, Mr. Capernicus. We delivered them to Mr. Holmes just like you told us to.”

“We?” Capernicus looked up and gave the new man a chilling glance.

“Yes, sir. This here’s Wally Johnson.”

The young black man nervously wiped his hand on his pant leg and extended it to his new employer. Capernicus glanced disdainfully at the hand and ignored it, returning to his bookwork.

“Very well. Eddie, I have another job for you, though I must say I’m very disappointed in the lack of success in locating Detective Hutchinson. You *do* know how displeased I was with Hernandez and Marciano’s failed attempts.”

Johnson felt a cold fist clench in his stomach as Eddie swallowed and replied, “Yes, sir.”

“There’s a certain irony in the fact that we could execute a cop within a maximum security cell under armed guard, yet we couldn’t take out a detective roaming freely on the streets with only his partner.” Capernicus’ arctic gray eyes turned to Eddie and Johnson in turn. “It’s an irony I don’t find amusing.”

“What...what’s the next job, Mr. Capernicus?”

“If anyone’s going to know where Hutchinson is, it’s his partner, David Starsky. I’ve had Hernandez and Marciano seek him out, but they’ve been unsuccessful in bringing him in.”

Capernicus' eyes bore into each man in turn. "That will be the *last* time they will disappoint me. I've set up a meeting with the detective for this afternoon. Eddie, I want you to go to Hutchinson's partner and persuade him to tell you what I want to know. *You* won't disappoint me, will you, Eddie?"

"No, sir, Mr. Capernicus!"

"Good, I thought not. That will be all, Eddie."

Eddie and Johnson quickly left the office and retrieved Kevin from his post at the door. The three men rode in silence as they left the business district and drove along the wharf toward the city. Johnson fought the churning in his stomach and asked the question that had been burning through his mind for the last several minutes. "Hey, Eddie. What *did* happen to them two cats that didn't blow away the cop like they was supposed to?"

Eddie turned slightly frightened eyes on the new man. "You *don't* want to know."



Huggy's tip on Capernicus' whereabouts had come out of the blue. But since the barman had indicated it was from a reliable source, Starsky was more hopeful than he had been in weeks. The alley he pulled into was next to a building that had long since been condemned. Many of the windows and doorways were boarded up, which made it an ideal location for hopheads and vagrants. There was no sign of life within the surrounding blocks, as if the entire neighborhood, which was made up mostly of similarly abandoned apartments, had fled or been wiped out by some mysterious plague.

Still, the inactivity didn't lessen Starsky's tightly controlled caution. As he climbed out of the Torino, he checked the clip in his Baretta, snapped off the safety and secured the weapon in the waistband of his jeans. Starsky readjusted his windbreaker over the pistol, concealing it from casual observation.

Leaving the Torino in the alley, Starsky made his way down to a side entry. The door had long since been ripped off its hinges and discarded, revealing a stairwell to the second floor. The detective placed a hand on the broken railing as the first two steps groaned under his weight. Starsky frowned at the thought of his foot breaking through the dilapidated wood, but continued up. Just before reaching the landing Starsky paused. Ahead lay a darkened hallway with four doors. Detecting movement from the first room on his right, he drew his Baretta. With cat-like grace he cleared the last two steps and crouched before the open door, sweeping the room with the pistol thrust in front of him. In the dimming light he could make out the blond hair and features of an unarmed man about twenty, his arms raised in a gesture of surrender. His nervous smile did nothing to reassure Starsky, and when the young man's eyes widened in surprise and darted over the detective's shoulder, Starsky spun on his heel to protect his back.

While his reflexes were lightening quick, they were still not fast enough to protect him from the two-by-four that slammed him just above his right eye, knocking him down the stairwell.



By ten o'clock that morning, Dobey was beginning to worry. Not that Starsky was the most conscientious of his men by any means, but since the whole Randolph/Capernicus fiasco began, and certainly since Hutch went into hiding, Starsky had consistently let him know his whereabouts in the event something broke in the case. A call to the detective's apartment yielded no response, nor had Starsky responded on any frequency to the radio dispatcher's attempts to locate him. Huggy hadn't heard from him since the previous evening.

The captain put away his fears while he met briefly with Taylor, reviewing the forensic evidence from the helicopter crash. By eleven, the returning fear was almost tangible. Dobey picked up the phone and punched the first line. "This is Captain Dobey. I want you to put out an APB on a missing officer."



Twelve...thirteen...fourteen...

On the twentieth ring Hutch gave up. The sinking feeling he had in the pit of his stomach turned into a tidal wave with the click of the receiver. Something was definitely, horribly and inexplicably *wrong*.

Hutch rested his elbows against his knees. A quick glance at the bedside clock confirmed it was 3:15. *Don't read more into it than necessary. It could be that he had a hot lead or that the case finally broke. Just because he's not there doesn't necessarily mean trouble.*

The nervous energy propelled the detective out of his chair toward the room's single window. Standing to one side of the closed drapes, Hutch lifted the curtain marginally, taking in the hazy afternoon sun. The nagging feeling that had plagued him grew in its intensity until he didn't think he could stand another minute in the room. Hutch crossed purposefully to the nightstand and snatched up his gun, and shrugged into his jacket. Three strides brought him to the hotel room door.

Hutch stood for a moment, his hand on the doorknob. Throwing his head back in frustration, he leaned heavily against the door to collect himself. After a moment he took off his jacket and threw it on the bed, snatched up his worn copy of All the President's Men and returned to the vinyl chair.

*One more day, dirtball. That's all you get. Twenty-four hours, Starsk, then I'm coming in.*



Starsky was still unconscious when Kevin flipped his inert body off his shoulder and lay him on the print shop's cement floor. The detective's left leg laid out at an unnatural angle, and his

forehead bore testimony to the blow of the two-by-four. Kevin checked Starsky's bonds almost gently, ensuring that the handcuffs were snug, but not damaging. He then rifled through the Starsky's pockets, relieving him of his wallet, I.D., jackknife, and car and handcuff keys, which he passed on to Eddie.

At Eddie's nod, Kevin crossed through the room to an area behind some ink drums. He had claimed the area as his own space and arranged his meager belongings there. Kevin retrieved a well-worn chair and the comic book he had been reading earlier, and returned to where Starsky lay, prepared to watch over the detective and ensure he didn't try and escape.

Capernicus exited the office to watch Kevin with wary interest as Eddie went through Starsky's things. If recent events had not mandated he go into hiding, Capernicus would have quickly hired more competent help. "Tell me again why you keep him around."

Eddie looked up quickly at his employer, hoping to convince him of Kevin's value. "Aw, Mr. Capernicus, Kevin won't be no trouble. He's a good kid, even if he is a retard. His brother, Michael Franscoli, him and me go way back. I promised Mike that if anything ever happened to him, I'd keep an eye out on Kevin. Besides, he's as strong as a moose, and he'll do whatever I tell him to."

Capernicus studied Kevin, unsure if it was his mental retardation that unnerved him, or the unflinching stare that was often focused on him with guileless eyes. "Fine, just keep him quiet and out of my way."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Capernicus."

"And if he makes any slip-ups, it's *you* I'm holding responsible, Eddie. Is this...*Kevin* reliable?"

"Oh, yes, sir. That cop ain't goin' nowhere."

"Fine. Have Kevin keep an eye on him. When Starsky comes around, we'll see what we can find out. In the meantime, you and I need to wrap up some business within the city."

"You got it." Eddie followed Capernicus to the office.

"Eddie, no screw-ups this time. I want Hutchinson dead. *Very dead.*"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything useful in Starsky's wallet?"

"Nah." Eddie continued dismantling the case of Starsky's badge and wallet, searching for hidden compartments that might give a clue as to where Hutch was hiding. Photos were pulled from their casing and tossed onto the desk, along with the detective's police I.D. and badge. "Nothin' unusual--photos, a couple of bucks, an organ donor I.D. card...ain't *that* too bad."

“What’s that?”

Eddie threw his boss a malicious grin. “When I get through with him, there won’t be enough of him *left* to donate.”



When Starsky regained consciousness, he realized he was not alone. Duct tape was extended across his eyes, virtually blinding him. Devoid of his sight, Starsky’s senses of smell and hearing became more acute. A damp staleness greeted his nose, as well as considerable dust. Faint breathing from nearby was barely detectable. His cheek scraped along the cement floor, as he forced his protesting body to roll from his stomach onto his side. A hiss of breath escaped between clamped teeth when his broken leg twisted during the roll.

Whoever was breathing nearby shifted in his seat. Starsky raised his head toward the sound, sending waves of pain through his head. “Do you realize kidnapping a cop is a federal offense?” The sound of his own voice sounded surprisingly loud. Starsky listened intently for a response. When one wasn’t forthcoming, he tried again. “What’s the matter? You got enough *chutzpah* to snatch me, but not enough to talk?”

The chair creaked again as it was relieved of its burden, and shuffling footsteps approached him, stopping a few feet from his head. A heartbeat passed before his captor hesitantly spoke.

“My na-name is K-K-Kevin. Wh-who are you?”

Starsky was in no mood for pleasantries. His vulnerability made him nothing short of livid. “What’s *my* name? You *morons* kidnap me and you *don’t* know who I am?” Starsky heard Kevin stand up from where he had evidently been crouching nearby.

“I’m *n-n-not* a mo-mo-moron; Ed-Eddie was r-right! Y-y-you’re just-t-t like all the o-o-other c-c-cops!”

Dust from Kevin’s retreat made Starsky sneeze, setting off little fireworks in his already throbbing head. From the sounds within the room he could tell Kevin wasn’t too far away, probably still watching over him, but not so close as to initiate another conversation. If this Kevin person really didn’t know who he was, then he just might have a chance of making him an ally. *If* he hadn’t already blown it.



Kevin waited until Mr. Capernicus, Eddie and the other men who had been called in earlier to leave the office before he snuck in and began rummaging through the desk drawers. He was rapidly growing bored with the inactivity and hoped to find a pencil or marker to draw a cartoon character with. Kevin had come up with an idea for his own comic strip while he was watching over the cop and wanted to get started before he forgot. The discarded skids of paper were like manna, and too great a temptation to let sit by idly.

Buried under a warped pad of paper in the center drawer were the cop's picture I.D., badge, wallet and a rumpled plastic sleeve of photographs. Kevin looked nervously around the room, as if he were afraid of getting caught looking at something he knew he shouldn't. Curiosity eventually overrode his fear, and he opened up the badge, his fingers tracing the shape of the shield. The accompanying picture was of the man they'd brought to the print shop. Kevin sounded out the name and title: Detective Sergeant First Class David Michael Starsky. *Michael? That was Mikey's 'full' name.* In the picture Starsky's grin showed assurance and determination, his eyes alight with a fierceness Kevin couldn't name.

Kevin returned the badge to the drawer and picked up the sleeve of photos Eddie had removed from the wallet. The first picture was of a pretty young woman in her mid-twenties, smiling at the camera. *His wife?* The opposite side of the sleeve revealed the same woman, the detective and several children and teenagers gathered around them. Most of the kids had on t-shirts or gym clothes and one was holding a basketball. Kevin could tell by their faces the kids were like him, and maybe the picture had been taken at a special school, similar to the one he had attended.

The next photo was black-and-white, minute rips and creases attributing to its signs of aging. The picture was of a curly-headed boy, a well-worn baseball glove clutched in front of him. Crouched next to him could only have been his father, their features a mirror image of one another. The father was smiling a broad, lopsided grin as he held a baseball in one hand, and his patrolman's cap in the other. The light from the camera glinted off the badge over his chest.

The last picture was of Starsky and another man, standing on the roof of a flashy red car. But it wasn't the fierce grins on the two men's faces that caught Kevin's eye, but rather the face of the blond whose hand rested on Starsky's shoulder. *Mikey?* Kevin wished that the picture had been larger so he could make out the features of the blond better. He knew it *wasn't* his brother, but the resemblance was enough to make his stomach hurt and tears form with the ever-present ache. With the brother he idolized gone, all he had left was Eddie, and life would never be the same again.



Starsky could discern two sets of footsteps approaching him. The detective carefully schooled his face not to show how uncomfortable he was when his assailants stopped scant inches from him. They had left him on the floor next to a large piece of machinery, his hands cuffed tightly behind his back to a metal pole. Before he realized what was happening, a hand grasped an end of the duct tape from across his eyes and ripped it away in one sudden movement. The adhesive tore at the tender flesh around his swollen right eye, and Starsky had to blink at the sudden light. Rough hands grabbed him by the arms and hauled him to his feet. Blinding pain ran up Starsky's left leg when he unintentionally put his weight on the broken limb, so he settled for leaning against the metal guardrail he was handcuffed to.

“Well, Detective Starsky, by now I'm sure you've figured out who I am and what it is I want.”



Starsky glared at the graying man, then quickly took in his surroundings. He had no assurance they wouldn't soon replace the tape, and wanted to figure out his best escape route while he was able to see. The room he found himself in housed a small sheet-fed printing press and other pieces of equipment Starsky could only surmise were for a similar process. The equipment looked to be in various levels of disrepair and obviously hadn't been used in years. Skids containing large sheets of paper sat around the perimeter of the small warehouse, covered with plastic sheets and layers of dust. Similarly, dented ink barrels stood like sentinels throughout the room. A small, glassed-in office sat off to one side. Grimy windows were positioned along one wall, over fourteen feet from the floor--too far to be considered as an escape route without a way to get up to them first

Eddie took note of the detective's inattention and snapped a kick against Starsky's broken leg. Starsky threw his head back against the pain shooting through him, his breath escaping through clenched teeth. His gaze turned murderously toward the ex-fighter.

"Mr. Capernicus is talking to you, *pig*." Eddie's grin was anything but pleasant.

"Listen, Fraiser," Starsky was quickly interrupted by Capernicus.

"Save your threats, Detective. You're really not in any position to be making them. You obviously know who we are and what we're capable of, so let's cut to the chase."

Starsky glanced around the room a second time, locating the doors and shipping bays, but no telephone. His gaze lingered on the two men before him, then came to rest on the third standing behind Capernicus and Eddie with straw blond hair and a perpetually innocent expression. He identified him as Kevin, and was correct in having assessed him to be categorized as one of the "special needs" students Terry dedicated her life to teaching.

The detective flicked his gaze back to the others, but said nothing.

"Where's Detective Hutchinson?"

Starsky's gaze never wavered. "I don't know."

Eddie's foot lashed out a second time. "You're lying!"

The agony burning up his leg left Starsky gasping. When he was able to raise his head again, Starsky met Eddie's glare, his own promising retaliation.

"Detective, I didn't get where I am today by *not* getting what I wanted. You *will* tell me what I want to know."

"*Where you are today*, Capernicus, is holed up like a rat in an empty warehouse, hiding from the police, with nothing to show for it. Was it worth it?"

The extortionist's backhand snapped Starsky's head to the side. Blood trickled from where Capernicus' ring cut his lip.

"I am not a patient man, Detective. *Where is your partner?*"

Starsky returned the man's stare without saying a word. Capernicus didn't take his eyes away as he softly spoke to the man next to him. "Eddie, I think he needs to be *persuaded* to cooperate."

The first punch the boxer landed snapped Starsky's head back with a crack. The next series of blows were delivered to his midriff, already tender from his tumble down the apartment stairwell. Starsky found he could no longer remain standing balanced on one leg against the guardrail, and slumped to the ground. Eddie hauled the detective to the guardrail again, holding him upright.

"Where is Detective Hutchinson?"

Starsky shook his head to clear his vision, but remained silent. The next blow sent him back to the floor.



The phone ringing sent Hutch shooting out of the chair he'd been dozing in like a rocket. The receiver was snatched up before the second ring ended. "Yes?"

Starsky would only contact him at the hotel if Capernicus were arrested or something went horribly wrong. Hope and tension warred across Hutch's face as the voice at the other end of the line finally spoke.

Hutch's shoulders gradually sagged as he gave a curt reply. "No, you've got the wrong number."

The detective walked tensely across the room and sat down at the edge of the bed. Worried blue eyes bore into the telephone, willing his partner to call.



The sound of shuffling feet identified the person entering the room as Kevin. Blindfolded a second time, Starsky listened intently to the activity around him. Several people came and went from the warehouse, obviously attending to Capernicus' business. As time went on, he had determined that Capernicus had a more solid heel and Eddie's steps were quicker, more energized.

"Kevin?" Starsky asked hopefully. The split and bleeding lip made his speech a bit slurred. "I was wondering when you were coming back. I wanted to say that I'm sorry." Starsky tried to lift his head toward where the footsteps had stopped. The silence lasted so long he began to wonder if he'd mistaken the young man's entry.

“Why?” The voice that answered sounded like a little child’s, rather than the twenty-year-old man that responded.

“Maybe I hurt your feelings earlier. I don’t really think you’re a moron. I would never call you that.”

The crate squeaked in protest as Kevin sat down. “Y-y-you’re just say-saying that.”

Starsky shook his head rapidly, ignoring the pain that made it feel as if his brain had detached and was sloshing around in his skull. “No! I mean it. You just seem different from the other two.”

Kevin’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I *am* di-di-different.”

“Yeah, but it’s a *good* different. You haven’t punched me, have you, Kevin?”

“No. Th-th-that’s not my job.”

“What is your job?”

“Eddie t-t-told me to wa-watch you and make sure you d-d-don’t try and esc-c-cape.”

“Now, how could I do that? I’m trussed up like some kinda Thanksgiving turkey.” Starsky pretended to test his bonds. “As a matter of fact, they’ve got me cuffed up so tight, it’s kinda hurting. You wouldn’t mind loosening these up, would you?”

“Eddie w-w-would get really m-mad if I I I did that. He said I c-c-couldn’t t-t-touch them.”

Starsky sighed, accepting the resolve in Kevin’s voice. At least for the moment. “I understand. Do you think it’d be all right if you gave me a drink of water or somethin’? I’m really thirsty.”

“Well, I su-suppose th-that’d be okay.” Starsky listened to the retreating footsteps and what sounded like a plastic cooler opening up. The coke Kevin offered after sitting him up was flat and warm, but it was wet.

It was a start.



The day passed with an incredible slowness, made unbearable by the worry plaguing him well before the first missed phone call. The twenty-four hours that followed were as unnerving as those spent trapped beneath his car in the canyon years ago.

Hutch held his breath as he dialed the first number, the one used on the very first day of his exile. Blue eyes darted nervously as he listened to the unanswered ringing. *Twelve...thirteen...fourteen...* Hutch punched the cradle to disconnect, then dialed the next number, also from

memory. The furrow between his brow deepened as the phone rang endlessly. The receiver was all but knocked off the nightstand with the ferocity of Hutch's disconnecting the line and dialing the third number. The litany continued on with the fourth attempt, which yielded the same results.

Tense muscles went lax with futility, as Hutch dropped the receiver in the cradle and laced his fingers together, supporting his chin with elbows resting on his knees. Sky blue eyes darkened with concern as he sat staring at the phone, again willing it to ring.

*Starsk, where are you?*



Starsky had already begun to lose track of time, but figured that almost an entire day had passed since he was taken from the abandoned apartment building. They had removed the duct tape blindfold and though he could see windows, they showed very little in the passage of the time through the filth and decay. The next blow to his face brought him to a more alert state rather than deeper into the unconsciousness he had been blissfully sinking into. The distinct metallic taste of blood rolled across his tongue.

“Where’s your partner?”

“What time is it?” Starsky lifted his head back up and attempted to crack one swollen eye at Eddie. They had cuffed him to Kevin’s wooden chair since his broken leg obviously wouldn’t support him to stand under the blows. Capernicus sat on a skid of paper nearby, glaring. Still, he glanced down at his watch at Starsky’s question.

“What does that matter?” Eddie snarled.

“What *time* it is will make a difference as to *where* he is.”

“Four o’clock,” Capernicus growled from his perch.

“AM or PM?”

“Afternoon.”

“Ah. ‘Cause if it were four AM, then he woulda been in his kitchen mixing up one of his god-awful breakfast drinks. Do you have any idea how disgusting desiccated liver tastes?”

Eddie delivered another rapid-fire blow that cracked across Starsky’s face, breaking his nose. Blood immediately began to flood down his face. “He ain’t *at* his apartment! Tell us something we don’t know!”

Capernicus leapt to his feet and pushed past Eddie, grabbing Starsky by his shirt.

“Listen, *funnyman*, you can make this harder on yourself or you can make it easier. Either way, you *will* tell us where your partner is.”

“You know, I interrogate people for a living. You two really need to work on your techniques.” Starsky paused to cough and spit out some of the blood that had pooled in his mouth. Somehow he managed a cocky smile, even with his face beginning to throb. “Look, why don’t you uncuff me and one of you sit in the chair, then *I’ll* show *you* how it’s done?”

The snap of Capernicus’ backhand reverberated throughout the small warehouse. Starsky felt the world growing fuzzy again.

“*Where is Hutchinson?*”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re trying my patience!”

“Really? Try mine.”

Eddie’s large hands snaked out and delivered a second blow to the detective’s already broken nose. Starsky couldn’t help but cry out against the wave of pain.

“Still find this amusing, Detective?”

Starsky couldn’t find the energy for another witty retort, but did manage a bloody sneer at the extortionist. Glancing down at the mess on his hand, Capernicus retrieved a handkerchief from his suit pocket and began to clean off the gore.

“*Fine*. If you want to take your secret to the grave with you, *we can arrange it*.” Capernicus threw the cloth on top of one of the paper skids. “We’re both determined men, Detective Starsky. Stubborn, even. We know what we have to do and we do it, no matter what.”

“I’m *nothing* like you, Capernicus.” Starsky’s voice was full of disgust. “You *sacrificed* your partner.”

Capernicus crossed his arms in front of his thin chest and smirked at his captive. “Isn’t that what you’re allowing *your* partner to do to you?”

Starsky opened his mouth with another retort, but swallowed it back instead. Goaded Capernicus wasn’t going to get him anywhere. He tried lying instead. “If I knew where he was, I’d tell you. Nobody’s worth this.”

“I’d agree with that, but I’ve seen you two together. I’ve had you two observed from the minute we left that parking garage. I know all about you and your partner.” Capernicus sneered as he watched Starsky shake his head against the pain in his broken nose. “Quite a reputation you two have developed. You think I don’t know how you’ve risked your life for him before? I was

there at the station when my sniper tried to take him out and you pushed him out of the way.” Capernicus placed his grip onto Starsky’s collarbone, adding pressure to the healing wound caused by the gunman’s bullet. “No, I think you’re holding out, Detective. The question is, *for how long?* Where’s Hutchinson?”

“*Go to hell, Capernicus,*” Starsky ground out.

“Oh, I will. But I’m taking you with me if you don’t tell me what I want to know.”



It wasn’t until Hutch glanced away from the telephone to his watch that he realized he had been staring at the receiver for over two hours. His partner could have missed yesterday’s call for any number of reasons, many of them logical, but many of them too painful to contemplate. *But missing today as well, a second day without a call...*

That could only mean *one* thing.

Hutch sprung up from the sagging hotel bed. Within three strides, he was pulling his canvas army bag out of the small closet and stuffing his few possessions inside.



“Does it hurt much?”

The question startled Starsky, but he tried not to show it. His body felt like it was on fire. To make matters worse, they had rebound his aching arms behind his back, pulling on the torn muscles in his chest, back and shoulders. A new piece of duct tape ran from temple to temple, obliterating his vision. His broken leg was thrust out in front of him, no longer aching, but frighteningly numb.

“Only when I whistle.”

Kevin laughed, the bright, cheerful sound grossly out of place in the dingy room. “You’re funny. Y-y-you give fu-funny answers to Mr. Ca-Ca-Capernicus and Eddie.”

“Yeah, I’m a laugh a minute. You ought to hear me after a couple of beers sometime.” Starsky grunted as he tried to reposition his arms.

Kevin moved in front of Starsky, then crouched down to where the detective was handcuffed again to the guardrail at the base of a printing press. A gentle hand reached out to touch the welt that ran along the length of Starsky’s right jaw. At Kevin’s touch, he automatically flinched away. “D-d-don’t worry, I won’t hurt you.”

Starsky turned his head toward where he estimated Kevin’s voice was coming from. He tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Yeah, sure.”

Kevin shook his head, though Starsky couldn't see around the duct tape. "Nope." The hand reached out to touch the wound again, but Kevin stopped inches before he actually made contact and let his hand fall away. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I d-d-don't like it when they hurt people."

"Well, I'm not too thrilled with it either."

Kevin studied the bruises that showed through Starsky's torn shirt. Amongst the angry red flesh stood several pale scars across his chest and abdomen. "You've b-b-been hurt before."

Starsky felt the gentle touch on his stomach travel to his chest. "This isn't the first time somebody's wanted me dead."

"Why d-d-don't you j-j-just tell them what they w-w-want to know? Then Mr. C-C-Capernicus would let you g-g-go."

Starsky tried again to shift into a comfortable position on the cold concrete floor as he thought for a moment. The more he came in contact with Kevin, the more he realized his stutter added to people's initial perception of his inability. "Challenged" Terry would have called him. Kevin was far more capable than many of the students that had been in her classes.

"Kevin, haven't you ever had somebody, a friend or maybe someone in your family you'd do *anything* for?" Starsky waited for a moment for his question to sink in. He knew he was taking a huge gamble confiding anything in him, but the risk might pay off if he could sway Kevin's sympathies. "My partner is my very best friend. If I tell your boss where he is, they'll hurt him worse than they've hurt me. I can't let that happen."

"Is he the man in th-th-the picture?"

"What picture?"

"The one from your wa-wallet."

"Yes, that's Hutch."

"He has b-b-blond hair like me a-a-and Mikey." Kevin's voice dropped back down to a whisper. Starsky had to strain his ears to make out the next words. "Mikey's dead."

Starsky's brows furrowed. "Who's Mikey?"

"Mikey was m-m-my brother. M-M-Mikey's gone now. They k-k-killed him."

"Who killed him? Eddie and Capernicus?"

“No, some b-b-bad men. Mikey g-g-g-got into a f-fight with them and they sh-sh-shot him dead. N-now I’m all al-alone, ‘cept for E-Eddie.” Kevin wiped at his nose. “Mikey t-t-told Ed-Edie to t-t-take c-c-care of me.”

“So *that’s* why you’re working for them,” Starsky said, more to himself. “Your brother, Mikey, wouldn’t you have done anything for him?”

“Y-y-yes!”

“Don’t you see, that’s why I need to help Hutch, he’s closer to me than my own brother. If I could just...”

“Kevin!” Eddie slammed the door from the office behind him as he entered the print area. Kevin scrambled to his feet. “Let’s go, we got some things to do.”

Starsky heard Kevin scurry after Eddie, and he was again left alone in the chilly room. *Think about it, Kevin! Remember Mikey, and think of me and Hutch.... Hutch! I don’t know what’s going on in that blond head of yours, but you just stay put! Stay...safe.*

Starsky began pulling at his restraints and testing the metal bar behind him for any sign of weakness. He knew in the back of his mind it was futile, but it was better than simply sitting on the cold concrete floor, waiting for the next onslaught to begin.



The Captain found he couldn’t concentrate, no matter how hard he tried. He hadn’t realized how long his mind had been wandering until he glanced down at his wristwatch and saw that a half hour had passed--a half hour of staring out his office window, tapping the eraser of his pencil against the desk top.

The buzzing of his phone twisted him back to his desk as he snatched up the receiver and punched the blinking light of the first line. “Dobey.”

Mildred’s voice sounded anxious. “Stand by for a patch with Zebra Seven.” A series of clicks sounded in the large man’s ear until Mildred returned. “Go ahead, Zebra Seven.”

“Captain?”

“Whatdya got, Stevens?”

“We found his car.”

“And?”



“No sign of Starsky, but there aren’t any signs of foul play in or around the car itself. Andy’s checking out some of the nearby buildings for...” The sound of Stevens’ partner shouting a reply in the background was transmitted through the microphone. “Hang on just a sec, Captain.”

Tension coursed through Dobby as he waited for the report to proceed. Within a minute Stevens continued his broadcast. “Cap’n, Andy’s found a side entrance to one of the buildings here. It looks like there’s a few streaks of what could be blood on the stairwell walls and steps, but not any great quantity. There are a few wooden steps with new breaks in them as well. We’d better get the lab out here.”

The pencil that Dobby had been clutching in his hand snapped in two under the pressure of the captain’s fury.



Capernicus had Eddie and Kevin set Starsky back in the wooden chair, binding his feet and arms to its legs. His back and shoulders ached and burned constantly, and Starsky had felt a couple of his ribs crack earlier. Pain he could handle. Pain was familiar. But the constant darkness...the darkness brought up memories best left buried and was beginning to unnerve him.

Time was lost in the darkness, hours seemingly stretching into days. Initially, Starsky broke up the tension that seemed to drain him by taunting his captors, even when he realized they were no longer within earshot. As he found himself growing hoarse, Starsky began humming to himself in an attempt to dispel the looming silence. Adrenaline finally gave out, and he slumped into a restless doze. After a few hours, his sixth sense brought him back to consciousness, snapping his head up like a hunted deer’s. Listening intently, footsteps were discernibly approaching him.

“So, Detective,” Capernicus began after a slap across Starsky’s temple. “Are you ready to cooperate?”

Starsky managed a smirk after recovering from the blow. “What do *you* think?”

Eddie landed a sharp right across the detective’s jaw, all but flipping the chair over backward. Starsky shook his head against the pain, clearing his head.

“Where’s your partner?” The familiar and unwelcome feel of cold metal against Starsky’s temple startled him, but the trigger cocking back made his blood turn cold. “I’ve had just about all I’m going to take from you, Starsky,” Capernicus ground out. “Tell me where your partner is!”

“*Never!*” Starsky spat back. The involuntarily jerking of his head away from the .38 wasn’t enough to clear his temple from the gun’s muzzle when the extortionist pulled the trigger.



The VW van rolled to a backfiring stop a block away from The Pits. Hutch glanced into the rearview mirror a final time, checking the security of the wavy, graying beard stuck to his face.

A quick twitch of his upper lip reassured him it would stay in place as he climbed out of the vehicle and lumbered down the street toward the bar.

To the casual observer, he was just another rough character in an equally rough neighborhood, heading for the local hangout. In reality, Hutch was checking out every vehicle lining the street near the bar for occupants, seeking out anyone that might be looking for *him*.

None of the cars parked along Holland Avenue were occupied, so Hutch continued his trek into the noisy bar. He made his way toward the restrooms, surreptitiously scanning the crowd, trying to identify anyone Capernicus may have sent to watch out for his return.

As he made his way to the men's room, Hutch had to force himself not to stare at Huggy. Fading bruises and stiff movements gave evidence to his recent injuries. A flush came to Hutch's cheeks as the anger within him flared. *Who else has been hurt while I was safe in that crummy motel?*

As Hutch stood at the sink, washing his hands, he double-checked his disguise, willing himself to assume a nonchalant countenance though a rage ran through him. He lumbered back into the crowd, scanning the room a second time. Hutch was convinced it was safe enough to approach Huggy when he identified two men entering the bar from the street, their attitudes belligerent as they scanned the room as well.

Hutch shouldered his way through the friendly mob and back out into the street, neither thug giving him more than a casual glance. He had to force himself to maintain character until he reached the VW. Hutch swore to himself as he turned over the ignition and sat for a moment, his mind racing furiously. *I could tail them, but there's no guarantee that they report directly to Capernicus, IF he's even got Starsky. More than likely they report to some middle man. But if I'm wrong...*

Hutch chewed his lower lip for a moment before making his decision. Slowly the van pulled out into the nearly empty street, taking note of the license plate of the only additional car that had parked since his brief stop at The Pits. As soon as he dared, he'd get R&I to run the plates, hopefully identifying the two thugs that had cased the bar. In the meantime, he'd check out his partner's apartment and his own, and anywhere else he could think of to look for Starsky.



Starsky couldn't stop his trembling from the hammer's crack reverberating in his ears. A shudder passed through him as he realized Capernicus' intent was a deadly game of one-man Russian Roulette. Without being able to see, Starsky's hearing had become more acute. It didn't take long to identify the sounds of at least one more bullet being added to the pistol's chamber, then the familiar snap as it was brought home. The cold steel muzzle was again placed against his temple, the barrel then spun, sounding agonizingly loud in the silence of the room.

“Surprised you’re still alive, Sergeant Starsky? *You should be.*” Capernicus’ voice hissed in his ear. “This next time you might not be so lucky.” The next words were ground out with a military precision. “Where is Hutchinson hiding?”

Starsky tried to force his mind to concentrate on anything but the deafening silence that seemed to pulsate through the warehouse: *his car needed a front-end alignment; their upcoming vacation; the date he had set up for the weekend...*

The cocking of the .38’s hammer interrupted his jumbled thoughts. “Where’s your partner?”

“I don’t know!”

“You’re lying!” The squeezing of the trigger forced the hammer forward again, and a second time the empty “click” of the chamber filled Starsky’s head. A thin sheen of sweat began to bead on his upper lip, as yet another bullet was added and the barrel spun a third time. The odds were definitely not in his favor.

“How long do you think your luck can hold out? Don’t you realize that you could be dead in less than three heart beats?” The hammer cocked back again, cold and menacing. “Where is your partner?”

Capernicus waited a full minute for his captive to answer, the muzzle remaining firmly pressed against Starsky’s temple. The silence of the room was shattered when the gun finally fired.



An old drunk staggered down Ridgeway, weaving haphazardly along the sidewalk. Occasionally, bits of a song were discernable in an inebriated warble, other times segments of a seemingly two-sided argument were audible. Hutch pulled a pint of cheap whisky from the deep pocket of the trench coat and paused long enough to make a show of removing the cap, placing the bottle to his lips and returning the liquor to his pocket.

By the time he was within a half block of his partner’s apartment, Hutch could make out the lit tip of a cigarette within a parked car. Two men sat slumped in the sedan with a direct view to Starsky’s apartment. Hutch took some small comfort in the hope the two men were perhaps waiting for his partner’s return, not his.

Hutch continued his unsteady trek down the sidewalk, passing directly next to the dark sedan. As he got to the end of the block, he turned to cross the street, twisting his head with another pull on the bottle, enabling himself to read the rear plate of the car. Committing the series of numbers and letters to memory, Hutch continued down the block, looping back to the dilapidated van and climbing in with a frustrated oath.



Starsky couldn't help but cry out as the gunpowder burned across his forehead. It took him several moments to get his breathing under control, with the realization that Capernicus had pulled the gun away from his temple at the last second. Still, his relief didn't alleviate the searing pain along his hairline.

Starsky understood in an instant Capernicus would do everything in his power to extract Hutch's whereabouts from him, but wouldn't kill him outright until he got what he wanted. All he had to do now was hold out until someone found him or he managed to escape.

In light of the brutality he'd already faced, the realization was little comfort.



Captain Dobby rose from his bed and padded across the floor to the window facing his backyard. Moonlight spilled through the leaves of the tree, dappling the lawn. Sleep eluded him, not for the first time since he had sent Edith and children away. The weight of his concern for his family and his two friends aged him considerably, chipping away at his hope and determination.

He had no way of contacting Hutch, and couldn't decide whom he was more angry with, Starsky, his partner, or himself. Starsky had been belligerent, not even telling his captain that Hutch was going under until after the fact, then refusing to tell even him or Huggy where he had gone, even under the threat of suspension and disciplinary action. Dobby suspected Starsky knew it was all smoke anyway, an act for the irate marshal service and FBI agents. Dobby knew Hutch would eventually come out of hiding when his partner didn't contact him, and suspected Hutch already sensed something had gone wrong. The captain had long since lost his awe of the uncanny connection between the two men--like two halves of the same whole. But if one were gone...*how on earth am I going to explain to you that your partner disappeared without a trace?*



"Da-David? Are you awake?"

Starsky sucked in a steady breath, as he heard Kevin hesitantly approach him.

"Hey, Kevin." Starsky forced himself to form words around the dull ache in his swollen face. "Seen any good movies lately?"

"M-m-movies?" Kevin's brow furrowed. "I d-d-don't underst-stand...are y-y-you making fun of me?"

"No, Kevin. I was just trying to be funny. I know you've been stuck here, too."

"Oh. Okay." The young man sat on the floor next to Starsky. His gentle voice quieted even more. "I-I-I don't like it wh-when people make fun of me be-because I'm d-d-different."

“I’d never do that, Kev. My...my fiancée was a teacher at a school for kids that were special. Some of them are good friends of mine.”

“You pl-played b-b-basketball with them.”

“How...? Oh, the pictures, right. Yeah, we played a lot of basketball with them, me and Hutch.”

“Hutch is the man th-they’re looking for.”

“That’s right, Kevin. They want to hurt Hutch. Then he can’t go play basketball over at the school anymore.” Starsky waited for his words to sink in. “Kevin, if you could just...”

“I used t-t-to go to sc-school.” Starsky could hear paper rustling. “They l-let me d-d-draw there.”

Even in the midst of his own turmoil, Starsky’s heart softened. He drew a breath and asked patiently, “Yeah? What d’ya like to draw?”

“I d-drew a superh-h-hero. His n-n-name is Won-der M-m-man.”

Starsky even managed a bit of a smile. “Really? What kind of super powers does he have?”

Kevin’s eyes lit up. “W-w-would you l-like t-t-to see him?”

“Well, sure, but the tape...?” Starsky asked hopefully. Kevin quickly reached up for the blindfold, but the sound of approaching footsteps sent him scrambling to his feet. Eddie’s voice echoed through the room.

“Kevin, where ya at?”

“I’m-m-m here, Ed-die!” Kevin hesitated only for a moment before stuffing the paper into his jeans’ pocket and hurrying over to the loading bay doors to follow Eddie outside. The roar of an engine and the sounds of a car pulling away filtered into the warehouse.

Starsky pulled at his restraints almost subconsciously as he let his mind wander to the days when Terry was alive--when “me and thee” became “me and thee *and she*” for awhile. The memories of times with Hutch and the love of his life filled the lonely room and he was comforted.



The futility Hutch felt began to consume him. Standing in front of the mirror at the gas station restroom, the blond stared at his reflection. The disguises finally stowed away in the canvas bag, the face looking back at him was smooth shaven and drawn. Sky blue eyes gazed unflinchingly at the worry that marred his features. *Something’s missing...something’s not right.*

His hand reached up to touch the reflection in the mirror, fingertips resting on the grimy surface. The blue eyes flickered past the image of his own face to the empty space over his right shoulder. An ache sharp as glass pierced him with the thought of his missing partner. *That's why the reflection's wrong...*



Minnie Kaplan juggled the two bags of groceries into one arm as she continued to dig through her purse for her keys. The mail she had stuck in her mouth didn't help with her burden or growing irritation. Shaking out the apartment key on her ring and managing to get her door open, she was totally unprepared for the hands that snaked around her waist and clamped over her mouth. The mail she had placed between her teeth hampered the assailant from completely covering it, allowing for her to emit a scream. The fumbling hand wrapped itself around her throat, cutting off her air supply. Minnie continued to struggle, as the man dragged her into her apartment. In the darkness, the assailant tripped over her coat tree, and the two were flung to the floor. Minnie's chances of escape or retaliation were greatly diminished when Eddie twisted as they fell, landing on top of her, and knocking the thick-rimmed glasses off her head. Minnie felt her ribs give way on impact. As luck would have it, Eddie struck his head on the coat tree during their descent, and rolled off her after they hit the floor.

Knowing she had to use what might be her only opportunity to escape, Minnie scrambled to get out of Eddie's reach, rather than try judo in close quarters. She propelled herself toward the bedroom, hoping if she could make it, she could lock the door and retrieve the pistol she kept in her nightstand. Before she could get more than a few steps, an iron-like grip latched onto her ankle and sent her back to the floor.

Praying that her neighbors were home, Minnie began screaming for help, each breath drawn torturously against her broken ribs. A hand was quickly clamped over her mouth as Eddie straddled her, adding pressure to her throbbing side.

*"Shut up or I'll kill you right now!"* his voice hissed. "All I want is information, understand? Just tell me where they've got Hutchinson and you'll get out of this alive!"

Minnie's eyes widened, then narrowed in fury. She had no clue as to where Starsky had stashed Hutch. Even if she did know, there was no way she was going to give him away. Minnie tried to shake her head under the suffocating pressure of her assailant's hand. Eddie felt his fury mounting. "Look, I'm running out of patience. *Where is he?*"

Minnie managed to mumble indiscernibly into his palm. Eddie released some of the pressure without taking his hand completely away. "Say that again."

Her eyes took on a furious glint. *"Go to hell, turkey!"*

Eddie lashed Minnie across the side of her head with a vicious backhand. The fist swung back a second time, bringing up blood from her nose. "Tell me where Hutchinson is!"

Minnie shook her head against the pain that surged across her head. Infuriated, Eddie laid a blow full in Minnie's face, rocking her head against the floor. Flares of light flooded through her head, then darkness overtook her.



Captain Dobby snatched up the phone on the second ring, throwing himself into his chair as he crammed the receiver up to his ear.

"Dobby!" he barked into the mouthpiece and snatched up a pencil. He both hoped and dreaded it would be Capernicus, making a demand for Starsky's life, or anything that would give them a clue as to where the detective was being held.

"Cap'n, it's me." The voice was instantly recognizable.

"Are you on a secure line?"

"I don't know. I don't *care*. Where *is* he?"

"Hutch...I..."

"I'm coming in."

The next sound the captain heard was the buzzing of a disconnected line.



The throng of onlookers made it difficult for Dobby to make his way into Minnie's small apartment. When Minnie had not shown up for duty that morning or answered her phone, the R&I officer she was supposed to relieve from the graveyard shift had sent a unit over to check on her. The medics had just finished strapping her onto the stretcher and were raising the gurney to transport her to the awaiting ambulance.

Dobby swallowed the lump that rose to his throat as he stared down at the swollen and bloodied face. Minnie managed to open her eyes fractionally when she realized her superior officer had arrived.

"...didn't tell him nothin', Captain..."

"Minnie, what did he want?"

"...didn't tell him, Captain..."

The EMT at the head of the stretcher spoke up. "She's been saying that since we got here."

Dobey returned his attention to the semi-conscious officer. “Didn’t tell him what, Minnie? What did he want to know?”

“Hutch. He wanted Hutch. But I didn’t tell him nothin’. Didn’t beg neither, Cap’n. I never begged...”

Dobey gave the small shoulder a gentle pat as he again swallowed the lump forming in his throat. Gruffly, he waved the attendants on. “What are you waiting for? Go on, get her out of here.”

Dobey forced his gaze away from the two men pushing the gurney out the door, and instead cast an experienced eye around the room. The lab team was already at work gathering evidence in the small apartment. Dobey’s survey stopped when he spied Minnie’s glasses on the floor, the right lens shattered under the evening’s struggle. The captain reached down and picked them up, tucking the glasses in his breast pocket.

Anyone observing Dobey would have noticed the tightening around his face and the growing fury in his eyes. There was going to be hell to pay.



When Starsky woke, he felt a wave of emotion flooding him for a split second, railing him with feelings of futility and desperation. The rage he’d felt for the last several days had fled, a product of his vulnerability and inability to defend himself. Now all that was left was a dull ache and numbness, knowing any hope of escape or rescue was quickly diminishing.

*Get it together, Starsky. Just keep holdin’ out. Even if you never make it out of here, you’re keeping Hutch safe, and that’s all that matters.*



“So, now what?” Eddie asked, sitting heavily down in the chair across from Capernicus’ desk, massaging the knuckles of his right hand. “This guy’s one tough nut. Most woulda been squealin’ like a girl by now.”

Capernicus looked at him in undisguised contempt. “It’s only a matter of time before the police track us down. I don’t have to explain to you the necessity of finding Hutchinson before then.”

“No, sir, Mr. Capernicus. You want I should get a little more ‘creative’ with the cop?”

“We may have to, though admittedly, I don’t have the stomach for this type of situation.” The extortionist ran his hands through his graying hair. “Fine. Do whatever you have to do.”

Eddie nodded with a grin, then crossed over and opened the office door. “Kevin! Get in here, I need you.”



Kevin came out from behind his ink drum wall and moved slowly to the office, dreading whatever task Eddie would have for him. He purposely avoided looking at Starsky lying on the floor.

“Yeah, Ed-Eddie?” Kevin asked, as he entered the glass enclosure.

“I want you to stay in the office for a while. Mr. Capernicus and I are gonna talk to the cop some more and I want you to holler if the phone rings. Don’t answer it, just let us know if it rings. Got it?”

“I go-go-got it, Eddie.”

Eddie followed Capernicus out of the office, then turned and locked the office door, securing Kevin inside.

“You think that’s necessary, Eddie?” Capernicus growled. “Isn’t your trained ape manageable?”

The last thing Eddie wanted to do was reveal his concerns about the attachment Kevin seemed to have developed to the detective. “He’ll be no trouble. I just don’t want him gettin’ in the way, that’s all.”

“Whatever. Now, what did you have in mind?”

The smile Eddie gave his boss was not pleasant. “Just a little something I learned in Vietnam.”



Starsky remained lying on his side, his desperate thirst preoccupying him. He hadn’t seen Kevin in quite a while, not since he had managed to sneak him another sip of warm soda. *How long ago was that?* It seemed like years.

Footsteps approaching set Starsky on edge, even though he tried to remain motionless, as if he were still unconscious.

“Pull him up,” Capernicus directed.

Starsky felt Eddie’s rough hands pull him to his feet where he stood unsteadily, leaning against him. The duct tape was stripped from his face in a stinging jerk. “I don’t suppose you’d like to save us all a lot of time and effort, and cooperate now?”

Words were becoming difficult to form, but attitude came readily. “You...can take your... *cooperation* and...”

Eddie hauled Starsky toward a large, stainless steel sink against the wall. During the print shop’s more profitable days, it had served as a hand-washing station for its employees on route to the time clock to punch out for the day.

Starsky eyed the sink dubiously. Possibly as long as a year ago water had filled the tub and had been unable to drain. In the months that followed the water had rusted, an oil-like film floating upon the surface. What lay under the skim was questionable. *What are they...?*

Staring at the brown mess, Starsky missed Capernicus' nod to Eddie. Before he had a chance to draw a significant breath, Starsky's head was forced below the surface, his battered forehead resting against the cracked and rusted sink. Eddie leaned his weight against Starsky, who was bucking to draw himself out. It was all the ex-boxer could do to keep his prisoner submerged.

"Okay." At Capernicus' assent, Eddie tugged back at Starsky's curls, pulling him out of the stagnant water. Starsky's mouth gaped open, trying desperately to fill his tortured lungs and cough out water at the same time.

"Again." Starsky had barely been able to draw enough breath to shove away the black spots crowding out his vision when his head was thrust into the oily water. Again, Eddie threw his weight on Starsky's back, crushing him against the steel edge, adding to the agony of his cracked ribs and bruised abdomen. With surprising speed, Capernicus lashed out with his foot, nailing Starsky behind his right knee so his full weight would rest against the tub. When Starsky's movements began to weaken the two men drew him back out of the water, Eddie having to support him as he fought to get breath. Capernicus stood close enough to feel the moisture from Starsky's tortured exhalations.

"Tell me! Where's Hutchinson? *Tell me!*"

An extremely weak "no" was all the sodden man could manage. Instantly, Starsky's head was thrust into the brown water, the pressure on the back of his head making it impossible for him to fight back effectively.

Enraged at the futility of their tactics, Eddie drew back his fist and nailed Starsky in the kidneys. The blow would have sent any healthy man to his knees. The overwhelming pain forced the air out of Starsky, which was quickly replaced by the sink's filthy water. Eddie knew immediately he had made a mistake when he felt the body beneath him stiffen, then go limp.

Eddie quickly pulled the inert body from the sink and let him onto the floor. Capernicus shoved him away from the limp form. "What did you do, you moron? How am I supposed to find Hutchinson with him *dead?*"



While Eddie and Mr. Capernicus went out into the print shop, Kevin returned to the center desk drawer and pulled out Starsky's sleeve of pictures. He carefully looked through them, lingering on the picture of the detective with the other "different" children, then at the one of him and his friend, Hutch. Shouting from the small warehouse tore his attention away, bringing him over to the door's window. What Kevin saw there caused the sleeve of photos to drop unnoticed from his numb fingers.

Kevin went ballistic when he heard Capernicus yell at Eddie that Starsky was dead. Frantically, he tried to open the door, yanking on the handle until it threatened to fall off in his hands. He then began pounding on the window to get Capernicus' and Eddie's attention, but the two men ignored him as they continued arguing. Kevin rushed to the file cabinets where a decrepit desk lamp sat and flung the light out the door's window. He then reached through to grasp the key left hanging in the lock, ignoring the searing pain as the jagged glass tore open the flesh of his arm.

Kevin flung himself out the door and rushed to the limp body. He quickly stretched Starsky out flat on his back, and with one hand under his neck lifted, opening the airway. He then lowered his ear to the detective's mouth, reciting to himself *look, listen and feel*. With the absence of breath, his other hand rested on Starsky's forehead and his thumb and forefinger reached out to pinch the nostrils. Kevin quickly filled the detective's lungs with two breaths of air, turning his own head after each to make sure that the chest was rising and falling with exhalation.

Eddie and Capernicus were both taken aback by Kevin's sure and confident movements. The precise rhythm he set up convinced them he knew what he was doing. Capernicus shook his head. "Where'd the moron learn to do *that*?"

Eddie shrugged his shoulders without taking his eyes off the drama before him. He had long since forgotten the story Michael Franscoli had once told him of how Kevin had successfully completed a first aid course at his special school in order to help with the younger children. Kevin had even applied the Heimlich maneuver on a choking second grader, saving his life.

"*C'mon, cop. Breathe...*" There was no concern from Eddie for the detective's life, nor remorse for his actions. His only regret stemmed from knowing he'd be next laid out on the floor if he blew their last chance to find Hutchinson.

Two tense minutes went by before a shudder and cough alerted Kevin that his efforts were effective. A more severe cough brought up the first of the dirty water from Starsky's lungs and stomach. Kevin quickly grasped him by his shredded shirt and jeans' pocket, and rolled him onto his side. Starsky continued coughing and gagging, vomiting up the majority of the stagnant fluid he had swallowed.

Wild joy flew through Kevin as the young man crawled over to where Starsky lay gasping, and gathered him up against him. The blood from Kevin's arm mingled with the stains on Starsky's shirt as he rocked the nearly unconscious man, talking to him softly and patting his matted curls.

A hand snaked out and grabbed Eddie by the collar, dragging him nose-to-nose with his boss. Capernicus' voice was deadly. "You stupid sonuva...*you almost cost me everything!*"

"I'm...I'm sorry boss...I got carried away! It won't happen again, *I swear!*"

"You're right, it *won't*. I'll kill you myself before it does!"



Capernicus stormed into the small office area, slamming the door behind him. The remaining pieces of glass hanging in the window frame fell to the floor. He stalked through the room, seeking to burn off some of the consuming rage. The sound of the door reopening startled him, and he whirled around to see Kevin standing quietly before him.

“Well? What do *you* want?”

“Mr. Ca-Ca-Caperni-c-cus, I...I...”

“You *what*? For crying out loud, you *moron*, what is it?”

“I th-th-think you should l-l-l-et Da-Da-David g-g-g-go.” The severity of the young man’s stutter increased under Capernicus’ mocking scrutiny. “He d-d-d-don’t know n-n-nothin’.”

“*You’re* the one who doesn’t know *squat*, you lousy excuse for a human being.” Capernicus had found an outlet for his anger. He stalked up to Kevin, who outweighed him easily by seventy-five pounds, and began pushing him roughly. “What do you think we’ve been doing here for the last four days, huh? Your *friend* out there has information I need, and when he leaves here, it’ll be in a pine box!”

Each sentence was punctuated with a shove, slamming the younger man into office equipment. Kevin cowered against the tirade, somehow infuriating Capernicus more. He finally lost control and began striking Kevin harder and faster until the young man sunk to the floor to protect himself from the blows.



He’d been dreaming again, dreaming of the time Hutch’s car had been forced off the road and he’d been trapped under it for several days. Only this time it wasn’t Hutch who was pinned in the wreckage, unable to move, in his delirium *he* was the one who couldn’t get out from underneath the wreckage and was dying--dying and losing hope.

But then somehow, miraculously, Hutch *was* there, laying a cool cloth on his fevered brow, murmuring soothing words.

“Hutch? *Hutch...help me...*”

The gentle hand wiping at his face paused for a moment before continuing. Kevin’s voice was a wisp. “No, n-n-not Hutch. It’s m-m-me, K-Kevin.”

Starsky forced his eyes to open. The bruises on Kevin’s face were shadows in the darkened room.

“Kevin, you’d...better go. They’ll...be mad...if...they find you...with me.”

Kevin's hands paused briefly in their gentle ministrations. "I know."

The small show of kindness brought tears to Starsky's battered eyes. "Why...why are ya...doing this?"

"I c-c-couldn't help Mich-chael."

"Oh." Starsky's mind raced. He was in no shape to run, but with Kevin's help...Starsky knew it was his last chance to escape, or at least get word to Dobey. "Kevin, I'm sorry...you couldn't...help...your brother. But you...you helped me, didn't you?"

"Yes." The answer was filled with pain, both emotional and physical.

"Kevin, please...you're my...only chance. If you...could just...unlock the cuffs..."

"No." The response was a whisper, but definitive.

"Kevin, *please*... They're going...to kill me...kill Hutch--*my* brother. Do you...understand, Kevin? *They're...going to... kill us.*"

"Yes." Tears were evident in the young man's voice as he stopped sponging Starsky's face.

"Kevin, listen...to me! You could...call my...captain...ninth precinct...there's a card...in my wallet...with the...phone number...he wouldn't..."

"Kevin! What are you doing in here?" Eddie's hissing voice reverberated throughout the room. "You idiot! Don't you know how mad Capernicus would be if he found you in here? Get out of here, now!"

From Starsky's vantage point all he could make out was Kevin's running feet and Eddie slamming the storeroom door.



The hand that covered Dobey's mouth was firm, but without a fierceness to inflict pain. Instinct still caused his hand to grope toward his dresser to retrieve the service revolver hidden there.

"Captain, it's *me*." The large, callused hand was withdrawn.

"Hutchinson, that's a good way to get yourself shot," Dobey hissed. "How did you get in here?"

Even in the dark, Dobey could make out Hutch jerking his head toward the now open bedroom window. Without a word the captain climbed out of bed, and picking up his robe, switched on the nightstand's lamp.

Hutch blinked owlishly as he looked around the room. "Where's Edith?"

“*Away.*” Dobby threw him a harsh look, then studied him more closely. Even the dim light couldn’t disguise the deep circles under Hutch’s eyes. Several days’ worth of stubble bristled from his normally smooth face and lines of tension marred his eyes and furrowed between fair brows.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re not sure yet.”

“Well, what *are* we sure of?”

“Don’t start. Capernicus and a few of his thugs have been busy. You could say they’ve been paying visits all over town. Huggy, Minnie, even here. I got word they harassed your parents and busted into your sister’s house, too.”

Hutch swore under his breath. “Are they...are they all right?”

“They will be.”

An unsteady hand reached up to rub tiredly at his already bloodshot eyes. “Cap’n, *where’s Starsky?*”

“I don’t know. They haven’t contacted us yet. I want to think that they snatched him in order to find out where you were.”

“You *want* to think? What does that mean? Do you think he’s still...?”

“We don’t know. They’ve left everyone else they’ve ‘visited’ alive. There’s no reason to think they’ve changed their MO with Starsky.”

“The FBI hasn’t come up with anything? What about the evidence from Perrigo and Avelechez’s murders--anything?”

“Not much. Nothing concrete.”

Hutch stared hard at his captain, then finally nodded tiredly. Unsteadily he turned and made his way back toward the window. Dobby quickly grabbed him by the arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“If they’re looking for me and they’ve got Starsky, then I’m going to let them know I’m available for negotiations.”

“That’s suicide.”

Hutch sighed, the anguish on his face evident even in the dim light. “It’s *Starsky*.”



“I’m talking to you, cop!” Capernicus stalked up to the semi-conscious detective and grabbed him by his hair, jerking his head up from where it rested against his chest. “This can end *right this second* if you’ll just tell me where your partner is!”

Although Starsky’s head was ringing, Capernicus’ voice managed to register. He tried to open his swollen eyes, but was only partially successful. He did manage a bloody sneer.

“*Come on, pig!* Hutchinson--where is he? *No one* can possibly be worth this kind of pain! You can end this with a *word*.” When he received no immediate response, Capernicus pushed the swollen face away from him, disgusted by the futility of their actions.

With a supreme effort, Starsky lifted his head up off his chest. There were no words that could possibly make the felon understand. More eloquently than any speech was the glob of bloody spit that nailed Capernicus directly on his right cheek.

The pain caused by the effort of spitting drew Starsky over the brink of consciousness, moments before the next blow landed, knocking him from the chair and onto the floor.



Kevin watched as Capernicus struck Starsky’s face, knocking him to a crumpled heap at his feet. Finally, he covered his eyes and looked away, until a series of oaths marked Capernicus storming across the room to the office. Kevin waited several minutes before daring to peek from behind the makeshift wall of ink drums. Capernicus sat in the office with his back to the window, animatedly talking on the telephone to someone.

Kevin managed a crouching run to where the detective lay, his breath quickening with unsettled emotions. Cautiously, he prodded Starsky’s shoulder, trying to wake him. A few more attempts proved unsuccessful. Tears filled Kevin’s eyes at his own futility, and he wished for the tenth time that day for his brother. *Mikey would know what to do. Mikey would make it better.* Kevin’s hand traveled up to Starsky’s battered face and trembled as it made contact with fresh blood. Unnerved, he backed away and crouched behind the ink barrels. Kevin buried his face against the cradle of his arms and wept silently.



Hutch threw twenty dollars on the tabletop and climbed out of the booth. Mickey’s hand crept out to retrieve the money, but a vice-like grip froze him inches from the bill. The alcoholic looked up into the ice-blue eyes and was instantly chilled by the fury and disgust there. Hutch spat out each word with precision.

“I’m only going to say this *once*, Mickey, so I’d advise you to listen very carefully. I’ve never forgotten how you sold me out to Monk and his goons. Obviously, I’m very serious about finding my partner, or I wouldn’t be here sharing the same air with you. You’re going to start telling everyone you see that I’m back in town, and that I’m angry.” Hutch’s voice almost dropped to a whisper, but never lost its deadly intensity. “Do you understand me, Mickey? I am *very, very angry.*”

Mickey shook his head rapidly, his cap all but bouncing off his head. Hutch dropped his grip from the snitch’s now numb hand and stalked out of the bar to the streets.



“Are you just *stupid*, or what?” Eddie goaded, giving Starsky a shove with his foot. He was no longer bound, too weak to stand or even try to defend himself. “*You’re going to die, pig.* You know that, don’t ya? We’ll just leave ya here for the rats to feed on, whether you’re dead or not.” Eddie crouched down in front of Starsky and grabbed a handful of the matted curls, jerking his head up at a painful angle. “You hear me, cop? How’d ya like to lay here and watch the rats feedin’ on your face and there’s nothin’ you can do about it?”

The swelling only permitted Starsky to crack his eyes open a fraction. His tongue was thick from dehydration, making speech nearly unintelligible.

“...*fool*...you’re...a fool, Eddie.”

He gave Starsky’s head another jerk, eliciting a small grunt of pain. “*You’re* the one lying on the floor, man!”

“When this is...all over...Capernicus’ll kill...kill you, too.”

“You’re full of it, pig! He needs me!”

“He...he killed...his *partner*, Eddie. You’ll...just...be dead weight...”

Eddie lashed out with his boot, catching Starsky’s exposed stomach. Starsky felt his already broken ribs dig into something deeper, the pain causing him to retch.

Eddie left Starsky lying in the middle of the warehouse floor. Fresh blood began to bubble up from his panting mouth, but he was too weak to wipe the froth away.

Kevin stood at the far end of the room, dancing from foot to foot in indecision, wanting nothing more than to go to his friend, yet knowing too well the repercussions of his actions. Finally, he slunk off to the opposite end of the warehouse to find food and maybe a Coke he could share with Starsky. Then he would wait for Eddie and Capernicus to leave again.



Eddie lit a cigarette, tossing the extinguished match in Starsky's direction. "So now what, Mr. Capernicus? I'm not sure how much more he can take. Maybe if we give him a day or two to shore up, I can try something else."

"Except that we don't have a day or two. We need Hutchinson *now*. Some of the other men have heard that the police have increased their manpower in looking for us. It's only a matter of time before they get lucky." Capernicus looked down at Starsky's mangled body thoughtfully. "Of course, there is one thing we haven't tried."

"Yeah? Well, sir, if you don't mind my saying, I really don't think the cop can take much more. I'm surprised he's lasted as long as he has. Tough little S.O.B."

"The one thing we haven't done is use him for bait."

"What do you mean? Hutchinson's probably figured out a long time ago that we're the ones who snatched his partner."

"Of course, but he hasn't found us yet, has he? And that's presuming that Hutchinson's come out of hiding. The last thing we need is to be caught in here by the police with Starsky."

"So, do we dump him?"

"Not yet. What if..." Capernicus crossed over and perched on the edge of the worn desk. "What if we contacted Hutchinson and offered him his partner?"

"What do you mean? Just give Starsky to him?"

"Use your brains, Eddie. What's Hutchinson's Achilles' heel? I'm betting that it's his partner. If Starsky's refused to give up Hutchinson no matter what we've done to him, what do you think Hutchinson would do for his partner?"

"Ransom?"

"A *trade*. Hutchinson's life for Starsky's." Capernicus turned steely gray eyes on his assistant. "We contact Hutchinson and give him a series of instructions that will lead him here--alone. No backup or we kill his partner. We'll tell him that he's to come solo, and we'll let Starsky go. Once he's here, however, we take care of them *both*."

"Think he'll buy it?"

"In a heartbeat." Capernicus turned cold, hard eyes to where Starsky lay on the floor trying desperately to move. The detective had heard every word of their conversation, but neither of the hoods were concerned. "You just keep Starsky alive until Hutchinson gets here. If what you've told me about these two is true, they're no slouches. Hutchinson will want to talk to his partner to ensure he's still alive or he won't deal. We'll give him what he wants, but once Hutchinson meets up with us, they're both dead and we're home free."

“I don’t know, Mr. Capernicus. Nobody’s seen Hutchinson in almost a week. These guys are good. On the street they say they’re the best. A little nuts, but nobody to mess with. And if you do one of them, you might as well kiss your mother goodbye, because the other one will track you down like a dog.”

“Good. There’ll be no problem motivating Hutchinson in to come here and retrieve his partner.”

Eddie glanced over at the struggling man bleeding on the floor. *Provided he lives that long.*



Hutch cruised the streets throughout the remainder of the night in the Torino, making himself as visible as possible. His only concession to his superior was to don a flak vest from the station when he retrieved his partner’s car.

In times past, Hutch would drive the red sedan in Starsky’s absence, somehow gaining comfort and reassurance from the familiar car. But this time...this time it was devoid of his partner’s presence. It was a disquieting feeling.

Hutch scanned Holland Avenue for the car he had seen there days before, even though R&I yielded nothing about the plates he provided for it or the one in front of Starsky’s apartment. The blond found a parking spot in front of The Pits and cautiously stepped away from the vehicle, scanning the street.

Determining that there were no apparent threats, Hutch made his way into the bar, again scanning the crowd for familiar and unfamiliar faces. A thin, black hand latched onto his forearm and spun him around.

“What are you doing out on the streets? Where’s Starsky?” Huggy hissed, drawing Hutch into the kitchen. The look on the blond’s face answered all the bar owner’s questions in a heartbeat. “Aw, man! If you’re out there alone, that means...”

“I’ve got to find him, Hug.”

“You figure Capernicus snatched him?”

“You mean there’s been *nothing* on the street about all of this?”

“Nada. Like I told you before, folks’s scared and ain’t talkin’.”

Hutch jabbed a finger into Huggy’s shoulder. “Then I need for *you* to do some talking. Let people know that you’ve seen me.”

Huggy nodded grimly. “So *they* can see you. I dig it, but I don’t like it.”

“What choice do we have?” Hutch squeezed his friend’s shoulder before he made his way back into the night.



When the call came in on the captain’s direct line, it wasn’t too much of a surprise. He more than half expected Capernicus to have found out about Hutch’s suicidal mission. Dobby snatched up the receiver on the third ring. “Dobby.”

“Captain, I believe we have someone who would be of great interest to you and Detective Hutchinson. That is, provided that you can get in touch with him. Your lovely wife didn’t seem to be able to provide us with that information.”

“Who is this?”

“I think you know who it is. We had hoped that Detective Starsky could be persuaded to tell us where his partner is, but he’s a very stubborn man, Captain. No matter how much *persuasion* we employed, he wouldn’t give us what we wanted. You find Hutchinson and tell him that. Tell him we *persuaded* his partner within an inch of his life. Then tell him we want to talk about a trade. You’ve got three hours, Captain.”

“Wait a minute, how do we know he’s still alive?”

“I guess you’ll just have to take my word for it.”

“No deal, we want proof!”

“You’ll get your proof. Just get in touch with Hutchinson. You’ve got three hours, Captain.”

“Three hours? How the...” Dobby realized he was shouting into a dead receiver. Hutch sprinted into his superior’s office just as the large man was hanging up the phone.

“I heard you yelling. What have you got?”

“That was Capernicus.”

“I figured as much!” Hutch bit out. “Where have they got Starsky?”

“They said three hours...they said they’d call back in three hours.”

“Why didn’t you keep them on the line? How can we trace...”

“Hutchinson, back off! What the blazes do you think I was trying to do? They’ll call back in three hours. They want to speak to you about a trade.”

“Then he’s still alive.”

“Maybe.” Angry brown eyes met blazing blue. “Let’s just hold on to that. In the meantime, let’s follow up with a couple of ex-employees of Randolph’s that are currently doing ten-to-twenty. County should have them downstairs in Interrogation by now.”

Dobey made his way out of his office ahead of the blond. Hutch stood silently for a moment, staring at the phone as if he were willing it to ring again. His reverie was broken by a large hand gripping his shoulder.

“I’ve switched my lines to the operator. If they call back early, the switchboard will put it right through. Let’s go, son.”

Hutch nodded once and followed him out the door.



Eddie looked up from cleaning his gun as Capernicus walked out of the office. “How’d it go?”

His boss nodded briefly. “Dobey’ll find Hutchinson. They’re going to want proof.”

“Figured as much. We’ll just have to make the pig squeal.”

Capernicus looked down to where Starsky lay. “Exactly. If he won’t talk, we can always take a Polaroid of him with today’s newspaper and have it delivered to the police station. That’s worked in other situations before. Eddie, go round up Johnson and the others, I want a man posted on every entryway from here to the wharf. Anybody who even *resembles* Hutchinson gets within ten feet of this place, blow his head off.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Capernicus.” Eddie paused for a moment. “What if he brings more cops with him?”

“Then we stick with the original plan, Hutchinson in exchange for Starsky. It’d mean we’d have to make a fast trip out of the country, but it’d be worth it to drop Hutchinson out of a plane over the Pacific on our way.”

As soon as the two men left the printing area, Kevin risked a look over the skid of paper he’d been hiding behind and moved to where Starsky lay pathetically struggling. Eddie had long since given up the need to bind him, knowing that the detective was in no condition to necessitate it.

“David, di-di-did you hear? Th-they’re going t-t-t-to call Hutch and h-he’ll c-c-c-come rescue you.”

Starsky had a hard time forming words, though his mind was surprisingly clear. “Kevin...would you...let me have...a drink...of...your Coke?”

“Sure. I’ll g-g-get it.” Kevin crept back to the crate and returned quickly with the half-finished soda and a portion of his stale sandwich. “Let me h-h-help you sit up...”

Kevin began to lift Starsky into a sitting position, but the movement caused the detective to cry out in pain. At that same moment Eddie reentered the warehouse. Seeing Kevin with Starsky, he glared and rapidly crossed over to the young man. Kevin dropped the soda and Starsky, the fall sending the detective back into a state of semi-consciousness and smashing the Coke bottle on the floor in the process.

Eddie cuffed Kevin on the side of the head and dragged him out of the shop by the arm to the adjacent storeroom, leaving Starsky lying on his side. As his vision cleared, his eyes came to rest on the broken bottle, a scant foot from his face. Starsky remained motionless as Eddie flung open the storeroom door, hollering something at Kevin, then stomped back across the print shop and out the dock door.

Starsky fought against it the darkness that clawed at him. *Focus, focus...think of other things besides the pain, think...* Memories rolled over him like a flood. Hutch’s arms around his shoulders when the poison burned his guts so badly all he could do was lay in his partner’s arms and gasp in the torment. Hutch carrying him through the Italian restaurant when he was too stunned to move. Hutch’s tears as they sat on the floor playing monopoly, unwrapping Terry’s farewell gifts. The joy in Hutch’s face at the hospital when he first woke up after Gunther’s assassination attempt.

*But this time...* This time there would be no more rescues--no more last-second saves.

A sob escaped, and Starsky gagged as the tears brought up congestion from his fluid-filled lungs. He spit out what he was able to and managed to bring his hand up to wipe at the fluid on his mouth. Though his eyes were unfocused, he could still make out the fresh blood he had coughed up. With an uncanny certainty, he knew the blood was not from his injured mouth. He had seen too many fellow officers with gunshot wounds to the stomach, too many soldiers with punctured lungs. Starsky knew what coughing up blood meant.

He would be dead by evening.

As he lay there, two things became clear: first, if Capernicus contacted Hutch, nothing in heaven or hell would stop Hutch from coming for his partner; and second, Hutch would be dead before they ever saw each other again. There was no way Capernicus would let Hutch elude him again. If Capernicus forced Starsky to speak during a phone call, or showed him alive in a photograph, Hutch would risk coming alone, without backup or protection. *But if I were already gone...*Hutch would *know* it, somehow. Yes, he would still come to retrieve his body, but would bring an army of cops to avenge his partner’s death. *But alive...* Allowing Hutch to give himself up was never an option, so there was no need to further contemplate what he had to do.

Now all he needed to do was find a way out.

Starsky attempted to blink his vision clear again, and his eyes came to rest on the shattered soda bottle. The thought of dying should have terrified him, but he was beyond caring, beyond fear. His sacrifice would be the last thing he could do for his partner.

It took incredible effort to drag himself the remaining distance to the broken bottle. The exertion brought on a spell of coughing, bringing another batch of bloody froth trailing down his cheek. Starsky had to give himself a moment to regain his strength, but felt a grim sense of satisfaction. By not binding him, they had underestimated him again.

Swollen and clumsy fingers brushed over the pieces of glass, searching for a suitable piece from the breakage. The bottom of the bottle remained intact with an uneven scalloping of glass rising from its base. One portion stuck up an inch above the rest at a deadly point. Another muscle spasm from his abdomen jarred Starsky like a seizure. *Be gone soon, anyway...just can't take any chances...and I'll be damned if they'll use me first to get to Hutch!* After days of captivity and losing control over his own fate, there was a fierce satisfaction in knowing he still had control over how he would die.

The jagged bottle glowed dully from the dim overhead light. Starsky drew another shaky breath, overwhelmed by pain and the enormity of what he was about to do. Unsteadily, he extended his right arm, trying to judge the distance between his wrist and the free-standing piece of glass. Starsky raised his arm as high as he could and forced himself to keep his eyes open and locked in on the sharp point. The arm trembled in the air for a moment before plunging toward the jagged edge.



“Nothing!” Hutch felt himself at the end of his rope. The hour and a half spent interrogating Randolph and Capernicus’ former employees yielded little. No early call from the extortionist had come through on any of the switchboard lines to Dobby, and the officers staking out Hutch’s apartment had checked in, reporting no calls had been received there either. Hutch leaned heavily against the wall outside the holding tanks. “We haven’t got a single thing we can use. *Good God*, what am I going to do?”

Dobby gripped Hutch’s shoulder and gave it a quick shake. “First thing you’re going to do is go get a sandwich and some coffee before you fall over, then you’re going to meet me in my office. Something’s gonna break soon, Hutch. We’ve just got to be ready when it does.” *I just hope it isn’t you that breaks first, son.*

Hutch tore his eyes away from the ceiling. Giving a brief nod, he made his way unsteadily down the hall toward the commissary.

Dobby watched Hutch stagger away, the effects of countless days without sleep evident in his every movement. “*Good God*, is right.” The captain’s eyes looked past the ceiling. “Dear Lord, what *are* we going to do?”



Starsky stared at where his arm lay on the cold cement, scant inches *past* the dagger-like glass. Survival instincts had kicked in and subconsciously forced his arm away from certain death at the last second. A self-incriminating sob escaped his lips. *What kind of a man are you? You've lived your life for him, why should it be that hard to die for him?*

The rebuke was enough to raise the shaking arm back into the air. *God...please remind him how much I loved him.*

Starsky's right arm plunged downward a second time, his eyes riveted on the broken bottle. Even with his agonized muscles screaming in protest, he was able to pierce his wrist on the shard. An uncontrollable cry escaped as the glass ripped through muscles and veins, slipping between bones and nicking the main artery. Blood immediately began to pool and flow from the critical wound.

Without conscious forethought, Starsky began to whisper what he remembered of Kaddish, the ancient prayer for the dead: *"Y'hay shlomo rabbo min sh'mayo--May there be abundant peace from Heaven--v'chayim alaynu v'al kol Yisroel--and life, upon us and upon all Israel--v'imru Omein--and say Amen--Oseh sholom bimromov--He who makes peace in his high holy places--hu ya'aseh sholom olaynu--may He bring peace upon us--v'al kol yisroel--and upon all Israel--vimru Omein--and say Amen."*

A surge of fear coursed through Starsky with the thought that perhaps he had not severed enough of the major artery. If that were the case, then he would need to release the glass serving as a dam to hold back his life's blood. Shaking fingers reached out to pull the imbedded shard free, but Starsky found it increasingly difficult to get a sufficient hold on the slick surface.

Cutting the fingers of his left hand repeatedly with each attempt, the exertion left Starsky panting. As the comfortless darkness began to overtake him, the dying man prayed the initial wound would be fatal.



Kevin had found a large scrap of machine felt buried in a storage room that could serve as a blanket. As long as Mr. Capernicus and Eddie didn't know about it, it would be worth trying to get it to David. Coming upon the prone body, Kevin was overwhelmed by the amount of new blood draining from the unmoving man. The blanket was dropped, forgotten.

*"Eddie! Mr. Capernicus! Oh, David..."*

Kevin's distressed cries brought the two men quickly to where they had left the detective an hour earlier. Seeing the blood surrounding him, Eddie rushed forward and knelt beside Starsky.

"I don't believe it! The idiot tried to kill himself!"

"What the...? *Is he still alive?*"

Kevin dropped to his knees and began rocking, arms hugged around himself. Eddie found a weak and thready pulse in Starsky's throat. "Barely. He's bleeding like a stuck pig, though."

"Well, don't just sit there, wrap up his wrist, that'll help stop the bleeding. Don't bother taking the glass out, just raise his arm up or something." Capernicus ran an unsteady hand through his graying hair. The glare he focused on Eddie cowered him. "Do you want to tell me how this happened?"

"I...I mean...I just went outside..."

"What about him?" Capernicus jabbed an accusatory finger in Kevin's direction. "I thought he was supposed to be watching him."

"He...I didn't tell him to. I told him to go into the storeroom to stay out of the way..."

"Never mind, you *imbecile!*" Capernicus cut Eddie off with the slashing of his hand. The dirty rags Eddie was wrapping around Starsky's wrist were stemming the flow of blood, though there was still a considerable amount of seepage. "We still need him. *You* keep him alive until we get Hutchinson."

"*That's crazy!* In the shape he's in...how do you expect me to keep him alive?"

"That's *your* problem. If the cop dies *before* we get Hutchinson, you're gonna join him in *Hell.*"



Four hours had passed since the initial call had come in. Hutch paced Dobey's office like a man possessed. "Are you sure there's no way we could've missed it if they called early?"

"Of course, I'm sure. And if they couldn't get through to me, do you honestly think they would have given up? They want you bad, Hutch. They're just letting us sweat a little."

"Do you think something could have gone wrong? What about Starsky? What if..."

"Don't. Don't start with the '*what ifs*'. We'll know when we know."

The energy that had propelled the blond across the room for the past two hours seemed to leave him instantly. Hutch slumped in the chair across from Dobey's desk. Placing his face in his hands, the detective hoped his intertwined fingers masked his silent tears.



When the call came into the precinct, it could have very easily been chalked up as one of the typical night shift crazies. If it hadn't been for a change in the duty roster, the call might not have even been taken seriously.



“BCPD, what’s the nature of your emergency?” Tanya Bartonelli was dog-tired. It had been a long, long week full of life’s little aggravations: a dead car battery, a sick puppy, and contract workers that were taking their own sweet time in finishing her deck. The last thing she needed on her shift was yet another prank call. At first, all she heard was heavy breathing, as if someone had been running or... *Here we go again.* With a bit of agitation in her voice she repeated herself.

“BCPD, *what’s the nature of your emergency?*”

“Th-th-they...they’re go-go-gonna k-k-k-kill h-h-him...I c-c-c-can’t le-le-le-let them d-d-d-do that...th-th-they...”

Something in the man’s voice caught Tanya’s attention. The caller was either stoned or drunk, or something...*something* just wasn’t quite right. The now alert dispatcher tried again.

“Sir, you need to slow down. What is your name, please?”

“Th-th-they’re going t-t-t-to kill hi-hi-hi-him!”

Kevin had waited until Eddie and Capernicus had left him alone to watch over Starsky, then crept into the office. A quick yank on the center drawer revealed the detective’s wallet and I.D. Kevin dug through both until he came across a business card with Starsky’s name on it and a phone number. Nearing panic, he quickly dialed the precinct number, all the while looking fearfully through the broken window for Eddie and Capernicus’ return.

“Yes, sir, I understand. But I can’t help you unless you slow down and give me the information that we need. Do you understand?”

Kevin took a deep breath to steady himself. Mikey had always told him that when he got excited or upset no one could understand him. Anxiously, he swallowed hard and concentrated as he had been taught to do. “Ye-yes, I unde-de-derst-stand, bu-bu-but please hu-hurry. They’re go-going to ki-kill him!”

The dispatcher sighed with eternal patience. She realized that the caller probably wasn’t drunk, but could very well be one of the thousands of crazies living in the city who called to report a murder every time one of their favorite soap opera characters got offed.

“Who are they going to kill, sir?”

“D-D-David! M-m-m-my friend, D-d-d-David St-Starsky!”

“*Who* did you say?”

“They’re c-c-coming!” Kevin breathed in terror. The receiver was slammed down against the cradle as Kevin sprinted from the room to his chair near the unconscious detective.

Bartonelli received no response to her repeated inquiries, but could hear muffled noises in the background. Apparently, her frantic caller had not hung up the receiver properly, leaving the line active. The dispatch operator's fingers flew over the keyboard, as the tracing device continued its search of the line.

Bartonelli pressed her headphones tighter to her ear to try and discern clues from the distant background noises. She could make out footsteps approaching the discarded receiver. *The original caller or who? The killer?*

A different, gruff voice barked into the phone, "Hello? Who's there?"

Intuition caused Bartonelli to hold her breath, praying her computer wouldn't choose to alert her that moment the trace was completed, and at the same time praying the man wouldn't hang up before she was able to discern their location.



Dobey scribbled out the address of a secluded warehouse section off pier thirty-eight as Bartonelli rolled the information off for him. Excitement welled up inside him as he barked out Hutch's name to get his attention. The intensity of his captain's voice propelled Hutch into the office.

"*Captain?*" The fear reflected in the detective's eyes was enough to make Dobby cringe. "What have you got?"

A feral grin graced Dobby's face. "*Him.*"



Hutch jerked the wheel of the Torino to the left, narrowly missing the small coupe that had ventured through the intersection, unsuspecting of the red whirlwind that barreled down La Porte toward the ocean. Even with lights and siren, Hutch was moving through the business district so fast that he would be on top of any oncoming traffic before they heard the car's mournful wail. Tonight the siren sounded more like the hunting cry of a wolf closing in on its prey.

*I'm coming, Starsk. Hang in there. Hang on, so when I show up you can ask me 'what took you so long?'*

Dobby barely agreed to let Hutch go out ahead of the patrol cars he was issuing, knowing there was nothing in heaven or on earth that could have stopped the desperate man. He did manage to make Hutch promise he would only search the area and not move in until backup arrived.

They both knew it was a promise he wouldn't keep.



As Hutch made his way into the wharf-side warehouse district, he cut the siren and pulled the bubble light off of the dashboard. Getting out of the car, Hutch scanned the area, grateful for the remaining sunlight illuminating the docks. A flash of movement from the top of a nearby building caught his eye, and Hutch looked up in time to see the silhouette of a man armed with a rifle disappear from the roof.

The hunted was about to become the hunter.



Capernicus sent Wally Johnson back up to the rooftop with a two-way radio after he'd reported seeing Hutch through his field glasses drive onto the nearby dock. The detective would soon be in his range. Capernicus then crossed over to where Eddie was prodding the unconscious Starsky with his boot.

“Well, Eddie, it looks like our hand's been tipped even without making contact with Hutchinson.”

“What do you mean?”

“He's here at the wharf. Somehow Hutchinson found out where we are, so it's just a matter of time before he finds this print shop.”

“So what's the big deal? That's what you've wanted all along.”

Capernicus grasped the bigger man by his shirt and drew him in until the two were scant inches apart.

“The *'big deal'* as you put it, and I'll use small words so you understand, is that first, somehow, *someone* tipped him off. And second, cops travel in packs like dogs. If Hutchinson is on his way, then you can be sure he's not alone.” Capernicus shoved him away, causing Eddie to trip over Starsky's innate form and sprawl on the floor beside him. “That, you moron, is the *'big deal'*.”

“Okay, okay, I get the picture. But *I'm* not the one who spilled it.”

Capernicus gave him a thoughtful look. “No, probably not you. But who else?” He looked slowly around the room. “Eddie, have you seen *Kevin* lately?”

“Kevin? No, I...oh, come on now, Mr. Capernicus.” Eddie stood up and crossed back over to his boss. “You don't think that Kevin was...was smart enough to do that?”

“Or *dumb* enough. I've learned in the last few days that he's just *full* of surprises, so let's find out. Kevin! Kevin, come on over here, I have something to discuss with you!”

The two men paused for a moment, listening intently. Finally, as Capernicus was about to call out a second time, a shuffling was heard behind some crates. “Kevin, come over here. I need to ask you a question.”

The lilting tones did nothing to quell Kevin’s fears as he stepped out into view. “That’s a good boy.” Capernicus’ voice was like silk. “Come out here, Kevin. David’s been asking for you.”

Somehow Kevin didn’t believe the older man, but hesitantly took a step out of the shadows. Capernicus drew his gun and fired, striking Kevin squarely in the chest. The bullet flung the young man backward, the overwhelming pain not erasing the look of surprise on his gentle face.

“*What the...?*” Eddie exclaimed. Disbelief and the explosive roar of the .38 rocking him back. “What if it *wasn’t* him that squealed?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Capernicus calmly put the pistol back in his belt and returned to the small office to retrieve his briefcase. “He’d outlived his usefulness long ago. Get the body out of here.”

Starsky tried to keep his rasping breathing even, maintaining the pretense of unconsciousness. Still, he couldn’t prevent the single tear from escaping down his cheek.



Every nerve in Hutch’s body was taut as he scanned the deserted buildings, the pounding of his heart sounding unnaturally loud in his ears. Silently, he padded along the walls, keeping himself deep in the shadows. As he reached the first corner, he crouched, then risked a look down the alley that separated the buildings. In the second doorway, no more than a few yards from him, was the unmistakable glow of a cigarette and the faint smell of tobacco wafting to him.

Without his eyes leaving the figure in the doorway, Hutch felt the ground around him for a stone. He then lobbed the rock at the corner of the next building, directly across from himself. The shadowy figure tossed down his cigarette and gripped his rifle, crossing the alleyway to investigate the noise. As the gunman paused at the corner, Hutch stole up behind him and brought down the butt of the Python behind his ear, knocking him to the ground, unconscious. Hutch quickly handcuffed and gagged the man with his own handkerchief. The hood’s rifle was slung over Hutch’s shoulder as he trotted back through the shadows to Starsky’s car.

Hutch leaned into the Torino and depressed the button on the microphone. “All units, this is Zebra Three confirming address at Pier thirty-eight, southwest corner, lot area 1036, and requesting immediate assistance. Possible sighting of suspects at building Twelve A. Proceed Code Two, repeat *Code Two*. Possible Eleven-ninety-nine.”

Hutch released the microphone and the static was immediately broken by a Baker unit’s response. “Ten-four, Zebra Three, this is Baker Five confirming en route, ETA three minutes, no lights or sirens. Stand by for Captain Dobey.”

Hutch fairly shook in his impatience. He was about to speak into the microphone again when the sound of a single gunshot from within the nearest building broke the silence of the wharf.

“Shot fired, I’m going in!” he barked and threw the microphone into the car. The blond’s long strides ate up the tarmac as he made his way toward the warehouse, each footstep a prayer that he wasn’t already too late.



The two-way radio at Capernicus’ hip crackled to life. “He’s coming, Mr. Capernicus.”

Capernicus snatched the receiver off his belt. “You see him, Johnson?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then take him out *now!*” The extortionist slammed the radio unit on top of the desk, followed by both of his hands to either side of it as he leaned heavily against the wooden top. Thinking furiously for a moment, he turned to the print shop in time to see Eddie shutting the door to the storeroom where he had placed Kevin’s body.

Capernicus charged into the print shop and grabbed the bloodstained wooden chair, dragging it toward the office. Here he would have the best vantage point and the most protection from Hutchinson and his backup. As Eddie returned he jabbed a finger in Starsky’s direction. “Get him up. Yes, get him up.”

Eddie unceremoniously hauled the unconscious detective to the chair and looked around the room for the handcuffs.

“No time for that.” The extortionist picked a roll of duct tape off the floor and quickly bound Starsky’s wounded arms behind him. Capernicus yanked the detective’s head back by the hair, holding him up from where he slumped in the chair. The .38 appeared in his hand and rested against Starsky’s temple.

“If Hutchinson makes it past our men on the roof, I still have my trump card to play.”



Hutch’s headlong flight toward the warehouse would have ended abruptly if he hadn’t stumbled. Several consecutive days without sleep had sapped his coordination and agility. As the detective twisted to dodge a broken skid he hadn’t seen until he was upon it, the sniper took aim from the roof and fired. As the shot blew past him, instincts kicked in and propelled Hutch to his left, tumbling behind some abandoned ink barrels. Hutch awkwardly holstered his Python and hefted the rifle, waiting for a second shot and popped up, firing in the general direction of the gunman. He waited a split second before ducking down, hoping to glimpse the flare from the sniper’s rifle.

As a third shot rang out, Hutch shifted his position, hoping to elude the sniper, then popped back up and took aim. But before he had a chance to pull the trigger, the distinctive sound of a third rifle fired closer still. Instinct again sent him facedown on the cement. In looking up to locate the new shooter, Hutch caught sight of Wally Johnson falling gracelessly from the rooftop to the alley below.

The sound of several feet running greeted Hutch as he wearily pushed himself to his knees. Dobe transferred his own rifle to his left hand and extended his right to the detective. Hutch's blue eyes spoke his gratitude as he took the proffered hand and was assisted to his feet. Nodding to his captain, Hutch turned and sprinted toward the warehouse doors with Dobe, Agent Taylor and a dozen patrolmen close behind him.



Starsky drifted in and out of consciousness. Simply breathing took up all of his energy. Voices infiltrated his mind, volumes changing at disturbing rates. The pain that coursed through him seemed familiar now, almost as if it had always been a part of him. Occasionally it would intensify, forcing him to the brink of blacking out. But now he *had* to stay alert--Hutch's life depended on it.

He could barely make out Eddie's frantic, "He's coming!" and Capernicus', "Let him come. He won't leave here *alive*."

Starsky continued his struggle to remain conscious. There was still one more thing he could do before the darkness overtook him for the last time.



Hutch was so exhausted he gave up trying to kick in the warehouse door after one attempt. A well-meaning patrolman came forward to try as well, but Hutch handed him the rifle and waved him off, then blew the door lock apart with a single shot from the Python. Stealth had been nullified by the shootout with the sniper. Now the only thing left was taking out Capernicus and getting to his partner.

A fierce shove erupted the door open. Hutch burst through like an avenging angel with the wrath of God burning in his eyes. The room was filled with shadows, the only light trickling in stemming from the dwindling daylight. Capernicus and Eddie were merely phantoms planted before the office. A dozen purposeful steps placed Hutch in the middle of the room, his gun leveled at Capernicus' head. Eddie nervously stood behind and just to the side of his boss, obviously hiding something, though his hands were in plain sight.

Even the entrance of the dozen patrolmen couldn't drown out the sharp click of the Python's trigger cocking back. "You've been looking for me, Capernicus." Hutch ground out each word with a deadly precision. "*Here I am.*"

Capernicus appeared to be unruffled, even facing fifteen gun barrels directed at him.

“So you are. It’s about time you found me. Perhaps you’re not the detective you think you are, Hutchinson.”

“*Shut up.* Where’s my partner?”

“Skipping the pleasantries? Very well, have it your way.” The two men stepped aside, revealing the chair that held Starsky’s ravaged body. Eddie shoved the chair from behind, moving it and its occupant ahead a few feet into the waning sunlight.

Hutch’s blood froze in his veins, his weapon wavering from its deadly bead on Capernicus. *That can’t be...please, no!* If it hadn’t been the man whose face he knew better than his own, Hutch would never have recognized his partner.

Capernicus stood rigidly next to the grotesque figure hunched over in the chair. It appeared that only his grip on the matted curls kept Starsky from falling to the floor. Capernicus’ other hand held a .38 pressed tightly against the detective’s temple.

The sound of multiple hammers cocking behind him both alarmed and reassured Hutch. He held out his free hand to hold the reinforcements back, but his eyes never wavered from the grisly sight before him. “Stay back! Hold your fire!”

Out of his peripheral vision Hutch could see his captain take a hesitant step beside him. Dobey also called out for the uniforms to hold their position.

A moment of silence dominated the warehouse space, as if every man in the room quit breathing. Every man but Starsky. His breath came in shallow and tortured rasps that reached the ears of everyone in the room. Capernicus gave Hutch a moment to drink it all in before finally breaking the explosive silence.

“You were supposed to come alone, Hutchinson. Now that half of California’s finest are here, we’ll have to revise our plans.” Capernicus looked on with perverse amusement as Hutch’s face drained of color. “What’s the matter, Hutchinson? You don’t recognize your partner?” Capernicus jerked the hand holding Starsky’s head back, revealing more of the battered face to his audience. Hutch’s gut twisted into a knot at the sight of the destroyed features, hardly recognizable in its deformity. Starsky’s skin seemed waxen and far, far too pale, a thin sheen of sweat glistened dully. The only sign of life came from the labored breathing and the fresh trail of blood that ran down his throat.

“*You...*” There were no words Hutch could bring to mind that embodied the hatred he had for the man before him. He involuntarily took a step forward, every muscle in his body trembling with a burning rage, except for the arm extending his gun. Only the cocking of Capernicus’ .38’s trigger froze Hutch’s advance as nothing else could.

“I wouldn’t advise it, Hutchinson. There’s only *one* reason your partner’s still alive. Drop your guns--*all of you*--or I *will* put him out of his misery right here and now.”

No one in the room moved. Capernicus glared malevolently at Hutch. “Last chance. You drop your guns and get Hutchinson over here, or Starsky’s dead.”

Hutch hesitated for only a split second before slowly lowering the gun to the side of his body, stiffly crouching to set the Python down. Capernicus marginally relaxed his hold on Starsky’s head.

The familiar sound of the Python’s hammer being returned to its safe position was all the indication Starsky needed to know Hutch was surrendering. Utilizing the absolute end of his strength, he awkwardly threw his weight forward and fell out of the chair, taking everyone in the room by surprise. Capernicus’ gun, still aimed at Starsky’s head, unintentionally fired in response to the movement.

Reflexes allowed Hutch to continue his descent into a firing crouch. Six continuous slugs caught Capernicus high in his chest, abdomen and face, forcing him backward in a grotesque death dance until the weight of his corpse drew him to the ground. As Eddie attempted to draw his own gun and flee, one slug from Captain Dobey’s service revolver struck him high in the shoulder and sent him to the floor.

Within a second the room was perfectly still, the silence only broken by the reverberating shots echoing through the deserted print shop. All eyes were focused on the broken and bleeding bodies lying on the floor, the forgotten wooden chair separating two of the still figures. Rage and anguish coursed through Hutch, finally erupting into a bellow of despair that propelled him forward, the Python dropping forgotten at his side. When he reached his partner, he fell to his knees, overwhelmed by the sight of the broken shell before him, fresh blood seeping from the bullet wound at the back of Starsky’s head. All other sound and activity fell away as Hutch tenderly reached out to touch him, hesitating briefly at the suffering evident there, before laying his trembling hand on Starsky’s back.

*For me...you took all of this for me...how can I live with that? How can I live without you?*

Hutch’s heart skipped a beat when he realized the slight movement under his fingertips was not from his own shaking, but from Starsky’s ragged breathing. His eyes widened with the awareness that his partner was *not* dead.

Not yet.

“Get an ambulance in here, *now!*” Hutch bellowed over his shoulder.

Captain Dobey was in the process of swallowing back tears as he picked up Hutch’s discarded gun. At Hutch’s cry he rushed over to his side.

“It’s already en route, called in before we got to the wharf. The uniforms are directing it in. I...” Dobey paused at the sight of Starsky’s almost indiscernible features. “*Dear God...*”



“But he’s *alive...*” Hutch whispered in awe, afraid to move Starsky for fear of causing him additional pain. “*Oh, Starsk...*”

Starsky’s eyes were blackened to a midnight hue. The left eyelid was torn, seemingly held in place with dried blood. A large protrusion and laceration over his right brow threatened a skull fracture. Vivid bruises layered his body in varying stages of age and color. Apprehensive hands explored the matted curls where blood continued to seep, determining the extent of the bullet wound. Rather than finding the penetration point, Hutch discovered a graze bleeding profusely from broken skin, but not from entering the skull. In light of the severity of Starsky’s condition, the relief that should have been overwhelming was only marginal.

“It’s only a flesh wound, it...it only grazed him.”

“*Thank God,*” the captain breathed. Dobey crouched across from Hutch, his eyes filling again with unshed tears as he took in the sight of his friend. He pulled out his clean handkerchief and applied gentle pressure to the back of Starsky’s head. At a loss of what to do, Hutch pulled out his jackknife and began sawing away at his partner’s restraints. Slowly, the duct tape began to fall away from the bound arms. A single, bulky piece remained wrapped tightly around Starsky’s right wrist, securing a filthy rag and a hard object to it. Unsure of what lay beneath the makeshift bandage, Hutch left the cloth in place. The raspiness of his partner’s breathing alarmed him.

“Cap’n, I know we shouldn’t move him until the ambulance gets here, but I’m afraid he can’t breathe well this way. Help me get him on his back.” Dobey placed careful hands on either side of Starsky’s head and, in unison, the two maneuvered him onto his back, cautious in the event of past trauma to the neck or spine. As Hutch continued to monitor his partner’s breathing, a uniformed officer ran up to the captain.

“Sir, there’s still more of Capernicus’ men outside...” Gunfire punctuated the officer’s statement. “Our unit has them surrounded, but they’re blocking the ambulance from getting through.” With a snarl Dobey propelled himself onto his feet and steered the uniform out of the warehouse, trailed by Agent Taylor. The captain would put an end to this siege if he had to pick off each gunman himself.

Left alone for a moment, Hutch began an endless litany to his partner, trying to offer comfort and encouragement. He tenderly repositioned Starsky’s right hand off the floor and across his partner’s stomach. “What’s this from, huh, pal?” *What kind of hell have you been through?* Trembling hands traveled up the immobile man’s arm. *So cold--shock?* Without a second thought, Hutch scissored his legs and eased himself under his partner’s torso so Starsky nestled in the crook of his arm. The labored breathing seemed to sound less distressed than it had when he was lying flat, but it was still unnerving. Hutch wrapped his other arm around the cooling man, fighting the desire to pretend the mangled body he held was *not* his partner’s.

A second officer jogged over to join Hutch with a blanket retrieved from his patrol car. With quiet efficiency he draped the blanket over the prone figure. “We’ve almost got it taken care of

out there, Sergeant. Ambulance'll be here in a few minutes." The officer attempted to give Hutch a smile of encouragement.

Hutch turned his attention back to his partner, gently securing the blanket as best he could. Starsky's head lolled to one side, struggling to lift, too weak to even rise up. Hutch tenderly placed his hand into the matted curls and raised it so it rested against his chest, easing Starsky's discomfort.

"It's okay, buddy. *It's me, I'm here.*" One eye opened a fraction against the swelling and crusted blood. Hutch searched the gaze for any sign of recognition, but the lack of response shook him to his core. How many times had he closed the eyes of friends? How many men had he killed in the name of justice, and mercifully lowered their eyelids in death? The single cobalt eye meeting his stare was like one already dead, the spark of life extinguished. The overwhelming remorse forced a sob from Hutch's throat as he turned his head away. He almost missed the voice as soft as the wind.

"*utch...*"

Hutch's head snapped back to his partner's face. He had lost hope of ever hearing his name spoken by his partner again. "Starsk! *Thank God!* I...just take it easy, I'm here. Everything's gonna be okay, now. Just hold on a little bit longer..."

Matted lashes fluttered, open fractionally. Hutch could see that the entirety of Starsky's right eye was bloodshot, showing no white around the midnight iris.

"...*you... 'kay...*?"

A second choking sob ripped from Hutch's throat. Tears that had been surfacing overflowed down his face.

"That's *my* line, pal. Starsk...I can't believe...just...just *hang on*, okay? Cavalry's coming."

"*You...n'hurt?*" Starsky's words were breathy, barely audible. His breathing came in high-pitched wheezes, the result of flailed ribs and fluid-filled lungs.

"Yes! Yes, I'm fine...just...be still."

"*Shots...*"

"Don't worry about it, just a few strays. We're okay now. Capernicus is dead, he can't hurt you anymore, I promise." Hutch brushed away the bright red blood that began to trickle again down his partner's jaw. It took a supreme effort not to give in to despair. "You...you just hang in there."

"*Kev...in...*"

"Kevin? Who...?"

“...shot...store...room. Help’m...”

Hutch looked wildly around the room for additional officers not in the process of rousting Capernicus’ remaining men. “Dickerson! Nann! There’s another injured man in some sort of storeroom, check it out!”

The two uniformed officers nodded to him and began searching the warehouse for a storage room. Hutch quickly turned his attention back to his partner. “Okay, Starsk, they’ll take care of him. Don’t worry...”

A wave of agony lanced through Starsky, eliciting a strangled cry. His back arched with the severity of the pain, sapping the breath from him. One hand reached out blindly and Hutch interlaced his fingers between his partner’s bruised ones.

“Easy, buddy, *easy*. Don’t try and talk now, just...*just hang on...*”

The pain passed, but left Starsky gasping for breath and seemingly even weaker than before. Hutch’s mind raced in desperation against the horror of the moment. Other times, *so many times before*, he had found his partner at the last possible instant and Starsky would grouse at him, a brave front to mask his fear. But not this time. This time there were no ‘*what took you so long?*’ or ‘*how do I look?*’ gibes to offer relief.

“...*’isten...*” A single tear escaped from Starsky’s left eye, mingling with the dried blood to leave a brown trail down his cheek. Hutch stroked the tear away, unmindful of his own, and shushed his partner, trying to keep him calm.

“*No...lis’en...Hutch...I...I...we were...the best...huh?*” Hutch felt a cold touch on his heart as surely as he felt his partner’s chilled skin under his fingertips. “*Tell...Dobey...’n Hug...tell ‘em...tell...*”

“No.” Hutch shook his head adamantly. “No, *you* can tell them *later...*just...”

Starsky’s glazed eye opened a fraction wider and made contact with Hutch’s tear-filled ones. The midnight gaze that Hutch knew so well cleared for an instant.

“...*aw, Hutch...don’t cry...s’okay...*” Another jolt of pain lanced through him. “*Hutch...r’member...I loved...you...*”

“No...*no!* You’re *not* doing this! You are *not* saying goodbye!”

“*Hutch...s’time...I can’t...*” A racking cough convulsed through Starsky, bringing more frothing blood. Hutch recognized the unmistakable sound of the death rattle. “...*you... hav’ta...let...me go now...*”

“No! Not yet! You *can't* give up, Starsk!” Frantically, Hutch wiped at the stream running from his partner's mouth.

“Hutch, please...it's...hard...I can't....let me go...”

“No! You listen to me, Starsky! I need you here with me! *I can't do this without you!*”

“*M so tired...so...tired...of pain...*”

Hutch encircled Starsky's shoulders, as if holding him tighter could hold him back from death.

“Starsky try! *If you love me, then hold on!*”

“Hutch...you know...I...”

“Then don't leave me! *Promise* you'll hold on!”

Overwhelming fatigue and pain forced a sob from Starsky, all strength gone, the life running out of him. He wanted so much to simply let go and give in to the comforting darkness of death. Finally, he nodded marginally, silent sobs breaking forth as gasps.

“Say it! Say it, Starsky! You've *never* broken your word to me.”

“...I...” Another onslaught of pain ripped through Starsky, arching his back and tearing the breath from him. Hutch's grip never wavered, never offered him release from the vow. “...I... *promise...*”

“Swear to it! By...by...” Hutch's mind raced. They both knew that Hutch would one day forgive him for breaking his word and slipping away. There had to be something more for Starsky to swear by that would demand his great heart to try. Hutch's blue eyes took on a darker glint. “*Me and thee...*”

Starsky's bloodshot gaze held his partner's for a heartbeat. There was no other oath by which he could promise that bound him more to Hutch.

“...me...’n thee...” Starsky finally succumbed to the blackness that clawed at his consciousness.

Panic seized Hutch as his partner's body fell lax. Rational thought left him until he was able to find the faint movement of the shattered chest, proving Starsky still held on to life, even if only by sheer stubbornness. *No*, Hutch thought savagely. *By love.*

Hutch pulled Starsky's body higher into his arms, absently rubbing his hand gently over a still arm in a gesture to comfort them both, and remaining oblivious to the chaos surrounding them. Starsky had given his word that he wouldn't leave him, and his partner had never broken his word.



Time, they say, is the great healer. Nine months had passed since Hutch found what was left of his partner's destroyed body. He bent over and selected another smooth, white stone from the beach and studied it for a moment. A Scripture verse, memorized decades ago during a lonely childhood, crept into his memory: "...*I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it...*" A new name...

A new life. A new beginning.

With an unconscious grace, Hutch drew his arm back and pitched the stone back into the ocean, skipping it across the waves. A sense of *déjà vu* overtook him for a moment, remembering a few years ago as he and Starsky stood on another beach. That day he had hurled the badge he had come to hate into the ocean, and the badge his partner still honored along side it. But Starsky had chosen their friendship over duty. Another stone followed the first. *What am I throwing away this time?*

He continued to watch the play of sunlight across the water, the reflection stinging his eyes. The lonely cry of a seagull broke through the sound of the waves lapping at the shoreline and the whistling breeze that lifted the hair from his brow. For some reason, the bird's mournful song brought a lump to his throat and tears to his eyes unbidden. Tears came so much easier since *then*. It was funny how he measured the timeline of his life from when he found his partner... found out how much Starsky was willing to sacrifice for him. Sometimes the price of love was high. *Too high.*

A trembling hand darted up to wipe at his eyes. Starsky had always loved the ocean. *Hated to get wet, but loved the water.* Loved the waves, the gulls, the shells and the driftwood that washed ashore. For Hutch, it had once held great mystery, its hidden depths a treasure to be discovered. Now he simply enjoyed it for its beauty with an uncomplicated pleasure, much like Starsky always had.

Hutch continued staring out into the sunlit waves and didn't hear the other's approach until he was standing next to him.

"You okay?"

Hutch smiled gently in response and turned, grateful as he always was for another day. "Sure, you?"

Starsky smiled knowingly and turned his gaze out to watch the waves. Hutch kept his eyes riveted on his friend's face, marveling at what he found there. For a heartbeat Hutch was back at the warehouse, staring in disbelief at the ruined shell of his partner. The trauma unit surgeon's voice rang through his memory. "*Flail chest by blunt trauma, that's what's causing him to cough up blood. Scleral hemorrhage, lower mandible jaw fracture, fractured zygoma. Concussion, and subacute subdural hematoma. Multiple fractures of the femur, penetrated*

*artery resulting in life threatening blood loss. Dehydration, shock...your partner should be dead, Detective Hutchinson.*”

Scars and healing tissue still lingered, but the reconstructive surgeries were nothing short of miraculous. The surgeon had been none other than the cousin of Romer Avelechez, the first uniformed officer murdered. The plastic surgeon did everything within his power to restore the detective who had withstood Capernicus, and his gratitude was extended to the partner that had administered “appropriate justice” in the doctor’s eyes.

Only those who knew Starsky intimately could tell his features were minutely different. The nose was a bit straighter, the cheekbones a bit more pronounced, but perhaps that would fade when he put back on the considerable weight he lost since the first of the surgeries. The plastic surgeon had done an incredible job returning Starsky’s destroyed features, though the patient joked this was his one opportunity to improve on “perfection”, and perhaps fulfill his mother’s secret wish for her son to look more like Paul Muni.

Strangers and acquaintances would only notice healing scars on a handsome face, evidence of an often violent profession. A fading scar followed the side of his head along the left earlobe; a thin disfigurement broke the curve of his right eyebrow, and another scar on his upper lip seemed only to show when he smiled, which was seemingly more often than Hutch.

Therapy was making considerable headway in regaining Starsky’s strength and mobility, whereas months ago the future seemed bleak. The extensive internal damage had seemed to be a constant source of frustration. Infections had come and gone, reeking havoc on the surgical repair. Upon admittance to the hospital, Starsky had undergone emergency surgery to stop the internal bleeding, rebuilding the flail breakage of four ribs and a punctured lung. One kidney and his spleen had been removed, as well as a portion of the large intestine.

The self-inflicted damage to his wrist had been of great concern to the orthopedic specialist. It was almost four months before noticeable headway had been made in use of the right hand and forearm. However, Starsky was now able to grip and hold a glass on his own. The day he was able to accomplish this task marked a turning point in his recuperation. His left hand kept a tight grip on the cane assisting him in walking, which was significant in and of itself. Considerable damage had been done due to the multiple fractures in his left leg, but determination propelled him along from a wheel chair to a walker, then to a cane. Starsky kept a running bet with Huggy as to how soon he would begin walking unassisted. A loose fitting shirt masked more scars that few were privy to, but he simply attributed them to a lifetime’s collection, and philosophized he’d probably get a few more in the next sixty or so years of active duty.

*Active duty*--that was the goal. While a few scoffed at his partner’s determination to return one hundred percent to his former level of activity, those who knew Starsky--*really* knew him--didn’t doubt for a moment the determination that fueled him toward a complete recovery.

*You can’t keep a good man down*, Hutch thought to himself. Starsky turned to face him as if hearing the unspoken words, and reached out to grip his partner’s elbow with his right hand. Both men relished the growing strength evident there.

“Hutch, how you *really* doin’?”

Hutch glanced quickly away from the probing blue eyes, coming to rest on the inside of his partner’s wrist. Scar tissue puckered the flesh in a thick, two-inch line.

“I’m fine, Starsk.” The huskiness of his voice betrayed his inner turmoil. “What do you say we head back now?”

Starsky glanced down to where his partner’s gaze had lingered on the scar, then back to the troubled eyes. “*Hutch...*”

Hutch pulled himself away from the gentle grip. “Let’s go.”

“No. Nope. *Not this time.* We need to talk, and I’m tired of tap dancin’ around this.” Awkwardly, Starsky began lowering himself to the sand, trying to catch himself with one arm while balancing himself on the cane with the other. Hutch automatically reached out to help him, but threw his arms up in frustration when Starsky waved him off, wanting to do it himself. The result was Starsky falling on his backside with a grunt rather than the dignified sitting he was trying for, but he was pleased with the results, however graceless.

Stretching the stiffness out of his leg, Starsky rested his cane across his knees and looked up at his partner, squinting into the sun lighting Hutch from behind like a halo. “So talk to me.”

Hutch paced a few steps in mild exasperation, clearly avoiding the unspoken topic. “Starsk, there’s nothing *to* talk about. *I’m fine.* You’re the one who’s gone through hell and *you’re* fine. Everybody’s fine.”

Starsky shook his head. “That’s not the point and you know it. Yeah, I feel like I’ve been to Hell and back, but I didn’t go there *alone.* Something’s eating you up and I’m tired of waiting for you to want to talk about it.”

Hutch merely rolled his eyes and avoided looking at him. Starsky extended his right hand. “C’mon, sit down for a minute. You’re driving me nuts. *C’mon.*”

Hutch finally looked at his friend’s face and sighed. Reaching down to take the proffered hand, he hesitated at the sight of the scarred wrist. The increased strain around Hutch’s eyes was not lost on Starsky.

“So that *is* it. I thought as much.” Starsky exhaled softly, retracting the outstretched arm and holding it in his lap. The moments of slamming his wrist onto the shard of glass played before him in pieces like a broken film. “Hutch, sit down. *Please.*”

After a few tense seconds, Hutch unceremoniously threw himself down beside his partner and drew his knees up to his chest. Wrapping his arms around his legs, he stared out at the dancing waves. Hutch’s voice was tight when he finally responded. “*What do you want me to say?*”

“Hutch...this is tearing you apart. I need for you to tell me what’s going on inside that head of yours. We’ve always been able to talk through the mental garbage.”

“Look, *I’m fine*. And we’ve been through all of this before...in the hospital...your counseling sessions...it’s all been talked out.”

“Yeah, we’ve talked, but apparently it isn’t *all out*.” Starsky turned his focus back out to the waves for a moment, looking beyond the seascape to the not-so-distant past. “I know it was really hard for you to quit feeling guilty about what Capernicus did to us, even though nobody blamed you, except *you*. Everybody thought you had gotten past it. Ya know, you’re really good at covering stuff up, but the only person you had fooled was *you*. I know there’s been something else you wouldn’t talk about, even after all this time.” Starsky looked back at his friend and extended his right arm, slipping it gently between the other man’s chest and forearm. “It’s about *this* isn’t it?”

Immediately, Hutch’s shoulders dropped from their tense position as he tenderly cradled his partner’s arm against him. With his eyes squeezed tightly shut he turned his face away. “*Starsk...I...my God, Starsk...*”

Hutch couldn’t find the words to describe how he felt when he learned the lengths to which his partner had gone in order to protect him. It happened during the interrogation of Eddie Fraiser, as the hood described all the horrors they had put Starsky through. Hutch had never come so close to losing complete control as he did that night, listening to Fraiser give his statement. Names, dates, and locations were rattled off, fingering several public officials in California, New York, New Jersey and Illinois. At first, he refused to believe the hood’s account of Starsky’s attempt to end his own life, but then the pieces fell into place. Fraiser detailed the murders of DA Watkins, Avelechez, Perrigo, Randolph, the pilot and U.S. marshals on the helicopter flight, and the attempted murder of Kevin Franscoli, whom they found on the verge of bleeding to death in the print shop storage room. More than a few tears were later shed when Hutch was able to wheel the recovering Kevin into Starsky’s hospital room. He had later spoken to the federal judge on Kevin’s behalf, and the young man was placed in a state operated adult care program rather than tried along with Fraiser. The detectives began visiting Kevin every week at the care facility after Starsky’s release from the hospital. Both men were encouraged to find him settling in to his new life and looking forward to being allowed to work with some of the younger students with their outdoor activities very soon.

Through the months of healing and therapy, Hutch tried his best to resolve the turbulent feelings gnawing at him. The last thing he wanted was for Starsky to be worried about him, or worse, that Starsky *would* somehow subconsciously blame him for what he went through as a hostage. Such an admission would destroy Hutch. It was better to try and bury his fear than have to embrace it if it were true.

“Aw, *Hutch*. I’ve told you before it was the *only* choice I could make then. *Is it...?*” Starsky struggled with a half-formed thought. “Is it because I lost hope? That I wanted to die? If you had come...I didn’t *want* you to come, Hutch. They would’ve killed you. Buddy, what *is it?*”



Hutch remained silent, but shook his head. Starsky searched his mind for other reasons. “Hutch, look--I knew that there was *no way* anyone could possibly find me in time. I was coughing up blood, there just wasn’t...wait, when you...when you were sick?” He still found it difficult to talk about the time that Hutch had the plague, it had been too close a call. “Remember? You were in the hospital and they were just about to put you in the oxygen tent. You knew that you were dying. You just *knew*, right?”

Hutch didn’t speak, but merely turned his head a bit more in his partner’s direction. “Well, at that point I *knew* it, too. It’s weird, but somehow you *do* know. I wouldn’t have lasted more than a couple of hours...the internal bleeding...they say I was going into shock. If they had gotten me to make the call to you, they would have killed me right then anyway because I had served my purpose. I heard them say so, and I had no reason to doubt they wouldn’t do it. Hutch, I also *knew* that if you heard my voice, there wasn’t anything on this earth you wouldn’t do get to me, even if that meant giving up your own life. And that’s what would have happened. Hutch I *had* to do this. There was no way out of this one. I was going to be dead soon anyway, so a few hours wasn’t that big of a sacrifice.”

As soon as the words were out of Starsky’s mouth Hutch’s head snapped around as if he’d been slapped. Pale blue eyes burned with an inward rage and self-loathing as he leapt to his feet. “A *few hours*? Starsky, you sacrificed *everything* because of me--*for me*. They beat you to within an inch of your life and left you for dead, drove you to the point of slamming your wrist into a chunk of glass, and you’re telling me that finishing yourself off was *no big deal*? *My God, Starsk!*”

Starsky’s expression softened under the delayed outpouring of Hutch’s pain. “And I’d do it again.”

The honesty and love that radiated from his partner’s eyes felled Hutch and brought him to his knees beside him. “*Starsk...*”

Starsky’s voice was warm, taking the sting out of his words. “Hutch, you idiot. You’d do the same thing for me and never think twice about it. It’s always been that way with us. Why should it surprise you now?”

“But, Starsk...”

“*But, Starsk*’, nothing. *You* didn’t do this to me, the bad guys did. This *isn’t* your fault, it’s the bad guys’ fault, and the bad guys got theirs. *That’s* what this is all about. *I’m* okay with this. I’m not saying that it’s no big deal and that I’m not glad they’re rotting in Hell right now, but I’m really okay. I need for *you* to be okay with it, too, but *for real*. No more guilt, no more beatin’ yourself up over something you didn’t do and you couldn’t control.”

“I don’t know if I *can...*”

“Of course, you *can*. I’ll be with you every step of the way.” Starsky began to struggle to his feet. This time he didn’t refuse Hutch’s help. Once he got upright, Starsky quickly searched his partner’s face, grateful to see a little less strain than he did before, and perhaps a small release of the guilt that had gripped him by the heart for so long. The pain and anguish weren’t completely erased, but it was a start. With a chuckle Starsky drew his partner into a tight embrace, all but losing his balance in the process, threatening to pull Hutch down with him.

Steadying them both, Hutch returned the embrace. After a moment he pulled away, staring hard into the cobalt eyes. “You’re *really* okay? You’re not just saying it for my benefit?”

“I give you my word. When have I ever broken my word to you?”

Hutch remembered the promise made in a warehouse, cold as a tomb. “*Never.*”

“All right then. We’ll get through this together. I promise.”

Hutch looked at Starsky with less haunted eyes. “Me and thee?”

“It couldn’t be any other way.”

