

Common Ground

Linda B.

“Hey, buddy.” Starsky flopped down on the dock. The canal was dark, the stars and moon providing the only light. “Whatcha doin’?”

“Listening to the quiet.” Hutch took a sip of beer and then held up the bottle. “There’s more in the fridge if you want one.”

“Thanks, later.” Starsky looked out across the water. He found the gentle sway of the water and the shimmer of the moonlight mesmerizing.

Hutch closed his eyes. “Can’t you hear it?”

Starsky listened a minute, then shrugged. “I hear your neighbor’s old boat hitting the dock.”

“By the way...” Hutch turned toward Starsky. “...what are *you* doing here? Didn’t I drop you off at your place not too long ago?”

Starsky considered his response. Hutch had been withdrawn and even a little pale when he’d dropped Starsky at his apartment, and by the time Starsky had reached his front door, he’d decided to fabricate an excuse and drop by Hutch’s before the night was out.

He’d cleaned up and grabbed some supper, while letting Hutch have a little quiet time and space. Now, he was there sitting on the dock, with no real explanation except the truth. “I wanted to make sure you were okay. It was a rough day.”

“Not any rougher than most—a few arms to twist, a couple shootouts, some dead bodies. What’s new about that? I’m just tired. We’ve put in a lot of hours lately. Haven’t slept so well.” He brought the beer bottle up to his lips and added before taking a sip, “You didn’t have to come over. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Hey, I ain’t no babysitter.” Starsky straightened up, mock anger on his face, though he secretly wondered if Hutch’s nights were still haunted by Forest. He knew his were. Time had passed, but the memories remained too fresh. Forest was safely behind bars, but despite what people might think, it would take a lot more than a locked jail cell before they’d forget.

“Actually, if I’ve got to have one, I prefer mine with long legs, shoulder-length hair, and of the female persuasion.”

“I’ve got long legs.”

Hutch laughed and patted him on the back. “C’mon, let’s get you a beer.”

Starsky stood up and turned to follow his partner. “Hey, what’s that?” He bent down, eyes searching the water for something he’d seen floating nearby.

“What’s what?”

“Saw something in the water. Something shiny.” Starsky knelt down, eyes searching through the murkiness of the dark water. The clouds shifted, allowing the moonlight to strike the water. “There it is.” He lay on his stomach and reached into the water.

“What’dya find?”

Starsky sat up, holding an object in his hand. He wiped it off with his shirttail and held it up in the moonlight.

“It’s just a bottle, Starsk. Throw it back.”

“No. There could be a note inside.”

Hutch shook his head in disbelief at Starsky’s eagerness, wondering if his partner would ever lose that boyish curiosity. “If there is something inside, it’ll be soaking wet. Who knows how long that bottle’s been in the water?”

“I don’t care. I wanna see if there’s something in it. C’mon.” Starsky started for Hutch’s bungalow. He held the bottle up to the evening light, eyes straining to see through to the inside.



Hutch relaxed on the couch and watched Starsky, seated Indian style on the floor, shake the brown bottle for the tenth time. “I don’t think there’s anything inside, Starsky.”

“I do.” Starsky picked at the duct tape that sealed the top and encircled half the bottle. “Something rattles when I shake it. Besides, why would someone go to the trouble of putting all this tape on the top if not to keep something inside and the water out? You got a steak knife?”

Hutch reluctantly stood up and went to the kitchen.

“Here you go.” He set a beer on the coffee table and handed Starsky the knife. “Be careful.” His partner might be an excellent marksman, but his enthusiasm had been known to get him into trouble.

Starsky stuck the point of the knife under the edge of the tape. “Now, you sound like Dobey.” He pushed harder, prying at the tape. Finally, loosening a section, he tugged.

Hutch leaned back on the couch, a smile threatening to escape, his earlier dark mood forgotten. He had to give Starsky credit. He certainly was determined.

Starsky gave a hard yank and, feeling the edge give, unwound the tape. Beneath it was a bottle cap that Starsky untwisted and removed before peering in.

“Well?” Hutch asked.

“Yep, there’s something inside. Now, I have to figure out how to get it out.” Starsky held the bottle upside down and shook it. Nothing fell out. “You have any tweezers?”

Hutch sighed, rose from the couch, and headed into the bathroom. *Why did Starsky’s projects always become his?*

Starsky glanced up as Hutch returned. “Thanks. I think it’s a note.”

Hutch sank down on the floor next to his friend. “Can you get it out without wrecking it?”

“I think so. It doesn’t look too wet. The cap and all the tape must have kept the water out.” Starsky went back to work.

“You lived near the Atlantic Ocean, Starsk. You ever put a message in a bottle?”

“Sure.”

“How old were you?” Hutch asked, enjoying his image of a young Starsky carefully writing a note, folding it, and then sticking it into a bottle.

Starsky paused, his mind retrieving details of a day so long ago. “I don’t know, maybe nine. That summer Pop took Ma, Nick, and me to the Jersey shore. We’d had a picnic, and Nick and I wanted to put a message in one of the empty soda bottles. Ma found an old piece of paper in her purse and we scratched out a note. We folded it up and stuck it in the bottle. Ma made Pop go back to the car for some masking tape he had in the trunk, and we wrapped it around the top. Then we walked out to the longest pier on the boardwalk. At the very end, Pop threw it in.” Starsky stared into the distance, pulled back into his memories. “We all stood there and watched it bob up and down until it disappeared.”

“Anyone ever find it?” Hutch asked gently, careful not to intrude in Starsky’s reminiscing.

“I don’t think so; at least we never heard from anyone. But then, I’m sure we didn’t tape it as good as they did this one. It probably filled with water and sank the first day. Whoever sealed this one took a lot of time.”

“And a lot of tape.”

Starsky grinned. He held the bottle upside down and, with the tweezers, gripped the paper inside. “I think I’ve got it.” He cautiously twisted and pulled the paper until the top stuck out of the bottle.

“Be careful. You don’t want to tear it,” Hutch cautioned.

Starsky gently held on to the top and removed the paper as carefully as if he were detailing a model ship. He let out an audible sigh of relief as the paper slid out.

“What does it say?” Hutch asked, suddenly as anxious as Starsky to know what it said.

“Gimme a minute.” Starsky, handling it like a piece of evidence, opened the paper and read silently.

“Well?”

“It’s from a boy, name’s Paulie. Says he’s seven years old.”

“Does it say anything else?”

“Nope. It just gives his address and the date. This bottle’s been floatin’ in the water almost ten years. Pretty amazing.” Starsky handed the paper to Hutch. “I wonder if he still lives there.”

“Doubt it.”

Starsky shrugged. “Yeah.”

“I’m getting hungry. You eat yet?” At Starsky’s nod, Hutch added, “That never stopped you before. C’mon, let’s go to Huggy’s.” Hutch held out his hand.

Starsky untangled his legs, took the proffered hand, and stood. As Hutch put on his jacket, Starsky reached down for the piece of paper Hutch had laid on the coffee table and slid it into his back pocket.



“It’s about time you two decided to show up for work.”

Starsky and Hutch flinched at the voice behind them. They’d hoped to make it to their desks before running into their commanding officer. The pool challenge at Huggy’s the previous evening had gone on far too long, neither one willing to have the other declared the winner.

“Mornin’, Cap’n.”

“Don’t ’mornin’ me, Starsky. You’re late again.” Captain Dobey held open the door leading to his office. “My office—now.”

As they walked through the door, Hutch whispered, “See, I told you.”

“What do you want to tell me, Hutchinson?” Dobey grouched.

“Nothing, sir.” Hutch glared at his partner, who sank into the chair in front of Dobey’s desk, a grin threatening to break out.

“I’ve been in the commissioner’s office, where he read me the riot act because the Sterling murder hasn’t been solved.”

Starsky shifted in his seat. “But we aren’t on the Sterling case, sir—”

“You are now.”

Hutch raised an eyebrow at Starsky before looking back at Captain Dobey. “I thought Garcia and Thompson were working the Sterling murder, practically around the clock from what I understand. It’s not their fault nothing’s turned up. Something’s bound to break soon.”

“Well, understand this—it’s your job now to make sure it does. I report back to the commissioner in twenty-four hours.”

“Just because Sterling was the cousin of the mayor’s wife—”

“Starsky! I don’t care whose cousin he was.” Captain Dobey loosened the tie threatening to strangle him. “I want this case solved and the murderer behind bars. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, now get out of here. Garcia and Thompson are waiting to fill you in.”



“Morning, Starsky, Hutch.” Detective Miguel Garcia held out his hand in greeting. “Nice to have you join us.”

“Well, thanks.” Hutch returned the handshake before sitting down at the conference table. “We’re glad to help out. We know you guys have invested a lot of time on this case.”

“That’s for sure. And we’ve taken a lot of heat about it, too. Dobeys been all over our butts.”

“Welcome to the club. He’s over ours *all* the time.” Starsky’s grin resembled a Cheshire cat’s. “You must be doing something right or he wouldn’t be after you. You’ll find out Dobeys bark is worse than his bite.”

“Well, I hope you’re right.” Dave Thompson sat down across from Hutch and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. “You guys are used to these high-profile cases. I’m beginning to think Dobeys wants to hand the commissioner our heads on a platter.”

“He’s no different from you. He wants you to come up with something so the commissioner gets off *his* butt.” Hutch leaned back in his chair. “Why don’t you fill us in with what you’ve got so far?”

“Gladly.” Thompson pulled over the case file and flipped it open. In no time, four heads were buried in the paperwork.



“Have you thought of anything Garcia and Thompson might have missed, Starsk?” Hutch knew Starsky had been mulling the evidence over and over in his head as he looked out the passenger window. Starsky might fool some people with his joking around, but Hutch knew Starsky’s shrewdness better than anyone. Given time, they’d find the missing link.

Starsky turned to look at Hutch. “No, not yet. They’ve done a pretty thorough job for newer detectives. They’ve got a few leads to go on. Dobeys should be proud of them instead of breathing down their backs.” Starsky’s stare returned out the window. Leaning forward suddenly, he directed his partner. “Turn right!”

Hutch immediately turned right at the next side street, his eyes scanning the area. “What’dya see?”

“This is the street Paulie lives on.”

Hutch’s eyes shifted from one side of the street to the other. “Paulie? Paulie who?”

“The boy in the bottle.”

Hutch stopped the car and glared at Starsky. “Have you lost it? What do you mean ‘the boy in the bottle’?”

“You know. The bottle we found last night in the canal—”

“You made me turn down this street for that?”

“Don’t you wanna know if he still lives there?”

“Starsk, the note is ten years old. What are the chances he’ll still live there? This neighborhood has gone nowhere but downhill.”

Starsky shrugged. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

Hutch scowled at his partner, but seeing the disappointed look on Starsky’s face, resistance became useless. “Okay, come on. Let’s check it out.”

Starsky’s smile lit up his face. “Pull over here.” Exiting the car, he leaned down to look in the window and pointed across the street. “It’s the building right over there.”

Shaking his head, Hutch turned off the ignition and got out. He fell into step with Starsky as they crossed the street. The four-story apartment building showed years of neglect. From several windows, clothes left to dry in the heat of the afternoon sun were hung from lines strung between the windows and the fire escape. Hutch stepped around an overturned trashcan, its contents spilling out onto the sidewalk and gutter. “This place has seen better days.”

“Yeah. Do you think they’ll still be here?” Uncertainty found its way into Starsky’s voice.

“If they’re lucky, they’ll be long gone.” Hutch took the steps into the building two at a time. “Do you know the apartment number?”

“The note says Apartment 315.” Starsky stopped at the rusty mailboxes lining one side of the entrance, and scanned the numbers. “There’s a name on 315.” Starsky leaned closer and squinted at the faded letters. “It’s hard to read, but it looks like a-m-b-e-r.”

“Is that their last name?”

“No, but it’s Lambert, Paulie Lambert.”

Hutch shrugged. “Could be. Let’s go knock on the door.” They entered the rickety elevator, and Hutch said a silent prayer that they would make it safely to the third floor.

“Here it is.” Starsky stopped in front of the door marked 315.

“And what are you going to say if someone comes to the door?”

Starsky shrugged. “I’ll ask if Paulie still lives here.” He knocked on the door. When there was no immediate response, he knocked again.

“Give it up, Starsk. Nobody lives here anymore.”

“Well, somebody lives in the building. There’s laundry hanging out. Maybe they’ll know where the Lamberts went. Let’s try the apartment next door.” Starsky started to turn away when the door opened an inch.

“Who’s there?” The female voice on the other side of the door was cautious.

Starsky reached in his back pocket and pulled out his credentials. “Detective David Starsky, and this is Detective Hutchinson, ma’am.”

“What’s Paulie done now?”

Starsky threw Hutch a triumphant glance. “Nothing that we know of. We just wanted to talk to him for a minute. Is he home?”

The door shut and the sound of several chain latches and a deadbolt being undone filled the silence. The woman, dressed in a faded housedress, opened the door wider and motioned them inside. A child about four years old rested on her hip, the little girl’s face buried in her mom’s shoulder. Occasionally, she’d be brave enough to sneak a peak at the two men. She sniffled a few times and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand before burying it again into her mother’s shoulder.

“Whatcha want Paulie for?”

Starsky glanced around the apartment. The furnishings were few and threadbare, but it was neat and clean. “Are you Mrs. Lambert?”

“Yeah.” Brushing a loose strand of brown hair back behind her ear, her stance was defiant, but her face reflected mostly fatigue, someone beaten down by what life had brought her.

Starsky reached out his finger and ran it down the little girl’s arm, trying to get her attention, hoping to make her smile. Now that he was here, he wasn’t sure how to start. “Uhhh—”

“What my partner is trying to say is we found a bottle in the canal, and inside it was a piece of paper...” Hutch paused a moment, realizing how silly it sounded.

“What’s that got to do with Paulie?” Her eyes narrowing, Mrs. Lambert stared at Hutch.

He shifted on his feet. “Well, Paulie’s name and address were on the paper.”

“Since when is it against the law to write your name and address on a piece of paper?”

Starsky pulled his hand back having successfully extracted a shy smile from the little girl. “He wrote it when he was seven. And we were amazed to find it in decent shape. We were just curious to see if he still lived here.”

Hutch noticed a whistling teenaged boy, repeatedly tossing a baseball in the air and catching it, approaching the open doorway. When the boy spotted the two men standing just inside the apartment, he turned on his heels and ran down the hallway toward the stairwell.

Hutch took off, Starsky immediately following.

They reached the stairwell door just as it shut. Racing down two flights of stairs, Hutch caught up with the boy at the bottom landing. He grabbed onto the boy’s shirttail and pulled up short. Starsky stopped behind them, holding onto the railing as he caught his breath.

“Hold on a minute, would ya?” Hutch panted, as the boy tried to pull away. “Are you Paul Lambert?” The teenager stared at them refusing to answer.

“Why d’ya run?” Starsky asked. “We just wanted to meet you.”

“Why?” the boy demanded, openly hostile. “Who are you anyways?”

“I’m Detective Starsky,” and, pointing at Hutch, he continued, “and this is my partner, Detective Hutchinson.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why did you run when you saw us?” Hutch asked.

Paulie glared at them defiantly.

Starsky stepped down and stood next to Hutch. “Look, we just wanted to meet you.” Starsky reached into his back pocket and extended the note. “You *are* Paulie Lambert, aren’t you?”

The boy reached for the piece of paper and slowly opened it. He silently read it and then looked up at the two officers. “The name’s Paul.” Incredulous, he asked, “Where’d you find this?”

“We found a bottle in the canal with this inside. You remember writing it?” Starsky asked.

Paulie studied the note in his hand, the open hostility on his face softening. “That was a long time ago. Me and my dad....”

Hutch relaxed his grip on Paulie's shirt. "We wondered if you still lived here, that's all."

Paulie looked at the two detectives. "Can I keep this?"

Starsky's eyes met Hutch's and he shrugged. "Sure."

Paulie backed away from the two men and started up the stairs.

"What's your sister's name? She's a real cutie," Starsky called after him.

Paulie hesitated, then turned back to look at Starsky. "Sarah."

"Pretty name for a pretty little girl."

"Yeah." Paulie turned back and started up the rest of the steps two at a time.

"Hey!" Starsky caught up to him on the stairs. "Here's our phone number. If you need help or anything, give us a call."

Paulie hesitated and then shoved the paper in his pocket.



Garcia and Thompson were waiting in the squadroom when Starsky and Hutch returned. "Hey, guys," Starsky said as poured two cups of coffee and handed one to Hutch before stirring sugar into his own. "You find anything new?"

"No, we keep coming up with one dead end after another. It looks like a robbery, plain and simple. We still haven't found any witnesses. We explored whether Sterling could have been into something shady," Thompson replied, "but he looks clean. Michael Sterling was a janitor at a high school, nothing insidious about that, and we can't link him to anything criminal."

"It's still possible..." Starsky flipped his chair around and sat down. "...that he was into something he shouldn't've been, or—"

"Discovered something he shouldn't have," Hutch finished for his partner.

Thompson nodded. "There's a reason he took a bullet in the chest and, like you, we aren't totally sold on robbery being the answer."

"Did you talk to the high school staff yet?" Starsky asked.

"Yeah, but we didn't find out anything new. The principal was out at the time."

“Why don’t you two go fill Dobey in on what you’ve found, or rather haven’t found, and we’ll head over to the school and talk to the principal,” Hutch suggested. Starsky stood as Garcia and Thompson gathered up their case file. “Maybe it’ll be enough to keep the commissioner off his back.”

“And Dobey off ours,” Garcia muttered.



Starsky and Hutch walked through the main entrance of Henderson High School, searching for a sign directing them to the office. They turned left at the first corridor and pulled up short.

“May I help you gentlemen?” The black man in front of them stood several inches above Hutch and was as broad as their captain.

“We’re here to talk to the principal. Can you tell us where the office is?” Hutch asked.

“I’m Principal Richardson. Frank Richardson. What can I do for you?”

Hutch pulled out his credentials and flipped them open. “I’m Detective Ken Hutchinson and this is Detective David Starsky. We’re investigating the death of Mike Sterling; we understand he was a janitor here.”

“Yes, he was. His murder was a terrible thing. Why don’t you come to my office; we can talk better there.” Principal Richardson turned around and led them a short distance down the hallway. Passing the entrance into the main office, which was bustling with students, they entered his office through a side door. “Detectives, have a seat. Have you found out who murdered Sterling?”

“Unfortunately, no; not yet. We’re hoping you can give us a little information about his job here—who he worked with, anyone else he might have known or come in contact with. Whatever you can tell us might be useful.” Starsky withdrew a small notepad from his jacket. After slapping his jacket pockets several times, he reached for the pen Hutch extended.

“Well, Officers, I don’t know if I can tell you very much. Mike Sterling worked for the school about five years. He reported to work on time and did a full day’s work. He was divorced, and there were never any disciplinary issues, if that’s what you’re wondering about. He got along well with the entire staff.” Mr. Richardson paused a moment, his eyes breaking contact with the detectives. He sighed before continuing. “I’m sorry. It’s been a difficult beginning of the school year for the students and staff. We lost Mike, and during the summer, we lost a student to a drug overdose. Mike’s going to be missed around here. He got along with the students very well, even with some of the more difficult ones, if you know what I mean. He liked to play baseball with some of the students after school.”

“Who’d he work with?”

“We have several janitors in the building; some work during the days, and there are several on the night crew. I can get you a list of their names and addresses if you’d like to speak to them.”

Hutch nodded. “That would be very helpful.”

Richardson stood. “I’ll have my secretary put that list together. It should only take a couple of minutes.” He exited the room going into the main office area, where his secretary sat just outside his door. He returned a few moments later. “Mary is putting it together for you right now.”

“Thanks. Is there anything else you can think of that might be useful?” Hutch asked.

“Not right now.”

Hutch stood to leave. “Thanks for your assistance.” He handed the principal a piece of paper. “Here’s our phone number. Call us if you think of anything else.”

“I certainly will. Hold on just a second and I’ll get that list of names and addresses for you.”

As they left the building and walked down the sidewalk to their car, Hutch said, “Nice man. Reminds me of Dobey.”

“Yeah, he has that same ‘don’t cross me’ kinda look.”



“At the moment, it looks like the only real avenue to explore further is the school,” Captain Dobey said as he observed the four men sitting in front of him. “From the information you’ve gathered, it sounds like there’s been increased drug activity in the area. As I recall, a drug dealer was murdered a few blocks from there less than a month ago. And a student OD’d several months back. There could be a connection.” His eyes settled on Garcia.

Garcia nodded. “We’re already on it, Captain. Just waiting on the forensics report to see if the bullets came from the same gun that killed the dealer.”

“So? What’s the next step?”

Hutch shot Starsky a glance before replying. “Well, we came to the same conclusion and discussed the possibility of someone going undercover in the high school.”

Dobey silently considered the idea for several minutes. “Garcia and Thompson were already in there asking questions as part of the investigation. It’s likely someone would recognize them. What about you two?”

Hutch hesitated, the last time they’d been undercover at a high school still too fresh in his mind. A few years ago at the beginning of their partnership, they’d been undercover at McKinley High School, and Starsky had busted Gary Vincent Prudholm. It had been nothing out of the ordinary, but more recent events made it impossible to forget. Gary’s father, George Prudholm, had killed two cops trying to invoke his revenge on Starsky, because his son had been knifed to death in jail and he held Starsky responsible. Hutch had come so close to losing his partner—emotionally, physically, and professionally—how could he forget? And he knew Starsky hadn’t. Now and then, Starsky would be lost in thought, lost in his own nightmare, thinking about what could have happened. Even though Starsky never acknowledged it, Hutch knew there were officers that still avoided him, as though revenge was some kind of disease Starsky had contracted.

Starsky shifted forward in his chair. “Well, Captain, we already gave that some thought. Hutch and I were there for a short time, but we only met with the principal. We went into his office by way of a side door and never even made it into the main office. I don’t think anyone will recognize me.” Starsky ignored the look he knew the blond had flashed in his direction. While they had discussed the idea over lunch, no decision had been made as to who would actually go under and with what cover. Hutch had even expressed his opposition to it.

Dobey nodded. “Starsky, I’ll call Mr. Richardson, and we’ll get you set up as the replacement janitor.”

“Captain—” Hutch turned toward his superior officer.

“Hutch, if in fact, there is a connection with the student’s murder, this could put the entire student body and staff at Henderson at risk. That’s a lot of people to protect, and I don’t want Starsky in there alone.” Dobey reached for the phone. “You’ll make a perfect substitute teacher.”

“T-t-teacher?” Hutch asked incredulous, his earlier concerns suddenly overridden by the thought of getting up in front of a bunch of students. “I’d be better at cleaning than I am at teaching.”

“Haven’t looked in the back of your car lately, have you?” Starsky muttered.

“Cap’n, I can’t stand getting up in front of people. It...it always makes me nervous.” Turning to his partner for help, he implored, “Right, Starsk?”

Starsky grinned at him. “Remember at the barbecue last summer what a great job you did singing?”

The size of the knot in Hutch's stomach increased. "Starsky, you tricked me into that, and I...nearly passed out from fright."

"Uh...a few beers took care of that."

"I can't drink before every class. Cap'n, isn't there something else—?"

"Hutchinson, your covers will be perfect. Besides..." Dobey chuckled, pleased with himself. "Starsky's already dressed for his part."



In three long strides, Hutch had caught up with Starsky and grabbed his sleeve. "Hey, slow up."

Starsky slowed, but looked at the ceiling rather than his partner.

"Are you sure you're okay with going under in a high school?" he whispered, narrowing the space between him and Starsky so the two uniformed officers approaching them wouldn't hear their discussion.

"Why shouldn't I be?"

Hutch knew Starsky was purposely avoiding the subject. "Starsk, you know—"

Starsky shifted his stance. "It made sense." He shrugged. "We'd already discussed someone going under, and when Dobey suggested it, I thought it was a good idea, so I jumped on it. Besides, you'll be in there with me. What's the problem?"

Hutch rolled his eyes and slipped his hands in the pockets of his black-and-white baseball jacket. "You have to ask me what's the problem? You really want me to believe you've forgotten? Do I have to remind you—?"

Anger flashed in Starsky's eyes. How could he forget? If it hadn't been for Hutch's voice whispering his name—its silent plea penetrating the sound of his own rapidly beating heart—he would have shot and killed George Prudholm. "You don't have to remind me of anything!" He cut the narrow space between them in half and breathed, "I have to live with those two officers' deaths every day."

Hutch felt his heart wrench, and he softened his tone and stance. "I know that, buddy. I just want to be sure you're ready to handle any memories this assignment might dredge up. Busting Prudholm's son at McKinley started it all. Going undercover at Henderson, possibly busting more kids..."

"Don't worry; I can handle it." Starsky reached up, fingers briefly touching Hutch's jacket sleeve. "I know you're concerned. Somewhere deep down so am I, and just

maybe, I need to face that. Maybe by doing this, I can save a kid's life rather than take one."

"Starsk, you didn't take Gary's life." Hutch sighed. As much as he'd tried, he'd never been able to fully reason Starsky through the guilt, to convince him he'd only been doing his job at the time. "Gary Prudholm died because he made the wrong choices. That's not your fault. He created his own nightmare."

"A nightmare I'm still living, thanks to his father."

"Quit torturing yourself, Starsk. Prudholm's behind bars and receiving treatment. Thankfully, he'll be there for a long time."

Starsky leaned forward to catch Hutch's eyes. "Look, it'll be okay. Besides, you'll be in there covering my back. Why should I be worried?" Starsky watched Hutch's face change from apprehension to acceptance. At Hutch's nod, Starsky clapped his hands together and started moving down the hallway. "C'mon, let's go find you some teacher clothes."



The next morning, Starsky reported to Henderson High School at 7:00 a.m. His first stop was Principal Richardson's office. After being introduced to the office staff as the temporary janitorial replacement, the principal introduced him to Tim Baker, the other janitor on duty. Starsky followed the graying custodian to what Tim laughingly called the "dungeon." Located at the far end of one of the hallways, the room contained the furnace, as well as a small office and supply room. Along one wall of the supply room were several lockers.

"You can put your stuff in this locker, if you want, David."

"Dave's fine," Starsky said as he hung his jacket in the locker. "Rumor has it, the guy I'm replacing was murdered. That right?"

Tim nodded. "Yeah, pretty sad. Mike was a nice guy and a hard worker."

"You knew 'im then?"

"I guess you could say that. We worked together, but this is a pretty big school and Mike was a quiet guy. We worked together, but we didn't really socialize, if you get my drift."

Starsky nodded and looked around the room. "This wouldn't happen to be his locker would it? I'd feel kind of creepy using a dead man's locker."

"Nah, his locker is two down from yours. A couple'a cops went through it right after his death and it's been cleaned out. Come to think of it, a couple'a days ago, I found a jacket

that belonged to him in the gym locker room. He must've left it there by mistake." Tim pointed to a green army jacket hanging on a hook next to the door. "I keep meaning to call his family and let them know it's here, just in case they want it back." He looked embarrassed for a moment and then added, "Sounds kinda dumb, doesn't it?" He shrugged. "But you never know." Standing up, he headed to the door. "Well, let's get going. I'll give you a tour of the school and start you on the job. Hope you're a fast learner 'cause I won't be able to stick by you all day. There's lots to be done around here. These kids sure don't pick up after themselves. You'd think I was their mother." Tim walked out into the hallway, shaking his head in disbelief.

During the morning hours, Starsky followed Tim's instructions as the two cleaned throughout the building. Starsky had caught only a brief glimpse of Hutch, standing in the hallway outside one of the classrooms, talking with two teachers. As he and Tim had passed by, Hutch shot him a quick glance, but made no acknowledgment.

About an hour later, Tim left Starsky on his own, giving him clear instructions on where to clean next, while he went to handle an emergency in one of the girls' bathrooms. Starsky stopped sweeping and poked his head inside several empty classrooms until he found the right one. Hutch was seated at the desk in front, apparently mesmerized by what he was reading. Starsky looked around to make sure the desks were empty. "Whatcha doin'?"

Startled by the interruption, Hutch looked up. "Boy, am I glad to see you." He dropped the papers. "I'm never going to be able to do this."

"Why not? You're the smartest guy I know."

Hutch, expecting Starsky to tease him, was humbled by the honesty he saw reflected in his partner's eyes instead. "Starsk, I'm supposed to be teaching Physics all afternoon. What do I know about any physics theories or calculus?"

Starsky shrugged. "That should be easy. Just tell 'em to read the chapter and outline it. I remember doing a lot of that when we had substitute teachers in school."

"And I always hated it. No, I'm supposed to be the teacher; I'm supposed to *teach* them something."

"Okay." Starsky looked skyward, searching for some distant memory. "Then, tell 'em...uhmmm...how displacement is the integral of velocity, and velocity is the integral of acceleration, and acceleration is the derivative...."

Hutch's mouth hung open.

Starsky paused. "What's wrong? You never heard that before?"

Hutch shook his head in amazement, as Starsky winked. “Like I said, let ’em outline the chapter.”

“Now I *know* I should be the one pushing the broom.” Hutch sighed in resignation. “So? You find out anything yet?”

“Nope, the guy seems to have been well liked. Doesn’t seem to have any enemies that I’ve come across. What about you?”

“Same.”

“Tim said he found Sterling’s coat. I’m hopin’ to get a chance to look through it later. Maybe there’ll be something in the pockets.”

The bell signaling the change of classes sounded, and, as several students began to wander in, Starsky picked up the garbage can next to the desk and dumped the trash into his cart. Setting the can back down, he leaned over and whispered, “Catch up with you later. Huggy’s, about seven.”

Hutch tightened his tie and looked over his wire-rimmed glasses. The knot was back in his stomach. “That’s if I survive.” Pushing back his chair and standing up, he cleared his throat several times before saying a little louder, “Come on in and take your seats. I’m Mr. Hutchinson, your teacher this afternoon.”



Starsky pulled the Torino out of the school parking lot and headed west. He’d gone only a couple of blocks when he recognized the apartment building where Paulie Lambert lived. While Paulie hadn’t been too happy when they’d shown up at his apartment, Starsky still wanted to find out more about the teenager. As close as the Lamberts lived to the school, it occurred to Starsky that he hadn’t seen the boy there. *Hell, that’s probably a good thing; Paulie’s the one person who could identify us.* Starsky made a mental note to check the school roster to see if Paulie was enrolled at the school.

He knocked several times on the apartment door before it opened.

Paulie stood in front of him, wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap flipped backwards. “Whadda *you* want?”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by and see how things were goin’.”

Paulie turned and walked to the couch where he sank down in front of the television, his eyes glued to the screen. Since Paulie had left the door open, Starsky took it as an invitation and entered, shutting it behind him. Paulie continued to ignore him. “So what’s happening?”

“What’s it to you?” Paulie took a sip of pop and set it down on the metal TV tray in front of him. “Aren’t there any criminals out there that you have to catch?”

Starsky bit his lip, keeping his flip retort to himself. He’d seen other kids like Paulie—too many, in fact. Starsky studied the teenager, trying to figure out what was it about Paulie that drew him. He was like so many others—a smart-alecky street kid who tried to hide his inner feelings, a kid on the verge of adulthood. *That was it!* Paulie reminded him of Nick at that age. “I see you like baseball.”

Paulie reached up and pulled off his Oakland A’s cap, tossing it onto the sofa next to him.

“That’s something else we have in common, but my favorite team’s the Yankees. Do you play?” Starsky said as he took his stance and swung an imaginary bat in the air. “What position?”

“Shortstop.” The boy’s eyes remained bonded to the TV screen.

“Maybe we could go to the park and hit a few balls someday.”

No reply.

Starsky tried again. “What about goin’ to a ball game together?”

Paulie stood up and flipped the TV channel. “What didya mean earlier when you said ‘something *else* we have in common’? We ain’t alike.”

Starsky straightened. “Well, when we showed you the note the other day, you said something about ‘me and my dad,’ and I assumed you and your dad must’ve written the note together, like me and my pop did when I was a kid back east.”

“You put a message in a bottle like I did?” Paulie’s curiosity got the better of him.

“Yeah, but we threw it into the Atlantic Ocean. I never heard from anyone. I guess that’s why I wanted to let you know we found your note.” Starsky looked around. “Where’s your dad now?”

“He left,” he replied bitterly, sinking back into his chair, his demeanor returning to his earlier sullen one.

Starsky studied the room, noticing some blocks, a coloring book, and crayons on the floor. It was quiet beyond the noise of the TV. “Where’s your mom and Sarah?”

Paulie finally looked at him. “At the grocery store. Are you done with the inquisition yet?”

“Yeah, but I’ll be back.” Starsky returned his glare before turning to leave. “That may be strike one, but I’m not out.” Paulie blinked first.



“You’re late,” Hutch said, glancing at his watch.

Starsky slid into the booth. “Only a few minutes. What’s happening?”

Hutch leaned his arm against the back of the booth and took a sip of beer. “Nothing. I already ordered a Huggy Bear Special for both of us.”

“How’d the physics class go?”

Hutch grimaced. “I’d rather be out on the streets tracking down a bunch of killers than in front of a group of high school students any day. They all think they’re smarter than you.”

“Weren’t you smarter than your parents?”

Hutch, leaning back in the booth, retorted, “When’d you get so smart?”

“Must be that subscription to *Reader’s Digest* you got me for Christmas.”

“Did you touch base with Gomez and Thompson?”

“Yeah, Gomez said Dobey called to say the report came back from Forensics. Looks like the bullets matched in both the Sterling murder and the drug dealer’s. Now, we just have to find out who pulled the trigger. You get a chance to check out Sterling’s jacket?”

“Not much in the pockets, though interestingly, there was a page torn out of the newspaper. It was dated a little over two months ago, and the article about the murder of Juan Montanez was circled.”

“The drug dealer.”

Starsky nodded as Huggy set their meals on the table. “Hey, Hug. How’s it goin’?”

“Hanging in there, man, same as always.”

“You ever hear anything about a Juan Montanez?” Hutch asked, watching Starsky bury his fries in ketchup.

“You mean the drug dealer who had the most unfortunate of experiences a while back?”

“Yeah, you know anything about him?” asked Hutch.

“Or drugs bein’ sold ’round the high school?” Starsky added, his speech garbled by the large bite of hamburger he was chewing.

“Don’t know nothin’ about drugs at the school, and, if he was dealing there, he deserved what he got. Word on the street was Montanez was new in town. Least whys I’d never heard of him or run into him.”

“Can you dig a little deeper for us, Hug?” Hutch asked. “We need to know more about him. Oh, and while you’re at it, will you see if you can find out anything about Mike Sterling as well? He’s the janitor at the high school that was killed recently. Maybe he wasn’t as clean as people seem to think.”

Huggy nodded. “I’ll see what I can do for ya.” He watched Starsky finish his burger. “You hungry?”

Starsky patted his stomach. “Not anymore.”



Starsky pushed the broom down the hallway, a red and white bandana hanging out of his jeans back pocket. He stopped to scrape gum stuck to the floor and watched Principal Richardson pass by, walking a very unhappy student down the hall toward his office. *Probably feels just like me when Dobey drags me into his.* The principal nodded good morning, but didn’t stop.

Starsky continued sweeping down the hall, hoping to spot Hutch, since he was never sure which class he’d find his partner subbing in.

Rounding the corner, he pulled up short. The blond was coming toward him, engrossed in a book he held in one hand, while carrying a briefcase in the other.

“Got your nose in the books already, Teach?” Starsky whispered as Hutch passed by.

Hutch looked up and, noticing an open doorway, moved Starsky inside. “Starsk, I don’t know how long I can do this.” He nervously pulled on his tie.

“What are you talkin’ about? You’re doin’ fine. I hear the kids talking as they pass in the halls. They like you, especially the girls.” Starsky winked.

“I’ve got no classroom management skills.”

“What’s that?”

Hutch glanced down the hallway, checking to see who was coming. “Starsk, I’m assigned to one class for the entire week.”

Starsky was confused. “Isn’t that a good thing? That way, you can get to know the students and actually have them do some work.”

“It would be great if it was Literature or History, or something I had some background in, but it’s...” Hutch again looked out into the hallway.

Starsky leaned on his broom and waited expectantly. “It’s...?”

“It’s Home Ec.”

“So?”

“You ever take Home Ec.?”

Starsky considered his answer. “I don’t think so.”

“That’s because it’s for girls. I have to teach them things like cooking and sewing, how to take care of their homes....”

“So? That should be easy; you have your own apartment and you take care of it.” Starsky paused and then added, “Well, sort of.”

As the bell rang, Hutch moved toward the door. “Quit grinning and tell me where Room 140 is.”

Starsky pointed down the corridor. “It’s the third room on the left.” As Hutch hurried away, Starsky continued down the hall, pushing the broom and whistling, convinced that he’d gotten the easier assignment.



Starsky picked up the remains of his sack lunch from the picnic table and headed inside. He hoped this undercover assignment ended soon. Brown bagging it was not his thing, but that’s what most of the janitorial staff did, so he followed suit. Besides, he missed having lunch with Hutch. He entered through the side door and started to drag a trashcan outside for the students headed out to lunch, when he heard voices coming from the room on his right. Remembering it had been empty moments before when he’d checked the room and turned off its lights, he moved closer. The voices were too soft for him to hear clearly, so he hung just outside the door.

“What do you think, Marty?”

“I think you need to keep your big mouth shut, Joe. This isn’t info you need to be broadcasting all over the place.”

“You don’t have to worry.” There was a pause and then Joe continued, a nervous hesitation added to his voice. “When’s the...stuff...supposed to arrive?”

“Any day now, if my plans work out. It’s...” As the voices approached the door, Starsky grabbed the nearest trashcan and started hauling it out. The two students were silent as they entered the hallway and spotted Starsky, moving quickly in the opposite direction.

Starsky watched them walk away, but both students had their backs to him with their heads down, and neither looked back. Starsky made note of their clothing, but realized it wouldn’t do him much good. They were dressed like every other student in the building—jeans and t-shirts. The only thing that might help identify them was their hair. The taller one had long black hair pulled back into a ponytail, while the skinny kid’s blond hair was permed.



“Marty, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s the name I overheard.” Starsky and Hutch were seated on a park bench along the beach not far from Venice Place. “That, and Joe. One’s tall, maybe Hispanic, black hair pulled back into a ponytail. The other’s thin, with blond permed hair. Other than that, they’re dressed like every other male student. Sometimes I wonder if any of them ever heard of individuality.”

Hutch shook his head. “Um...I don’t place either one. It doesn’t help that I’m in a class full of girls all week.”

“One of ’em could be the boyfriend of one of those girls.”

“I’ll hang out in the hallway more between classes to see if I can spot them.”

“How’s the class going, Betty Crocker?”

“I lucked out. The lesson plans call for cooking all week, so I don’t have to worry about sewing. I can fake my way around a kitchen but not a sewing machine.”

Starsky chuckled and then straightened. He leaned in and, with all seriousness, added, “And don’t get any ideas about teaching those girls how to cook with black strap molasses, desiccated liver, or any of that other healthy junk you try to get me to eat, partner. I’d have to turn you into Mr. Richardson for endangerment.”



The next morning, Hutch made a point of standing in the hallway, watching the masses switch classrooms. The first three periods were futile. At fourth hour, he scanned the hallway, watching the kids at their lockers, switching books and chatting with each other.

He heard someone yell out, “Hey, Joe, hold up!” and searched the crowded hall for who would respond. A thin blond with permed hair stopped and turned around. A student he recognized from one of his physics classes approached Joe, and the two put their heads together, obviously conversing. Joe nodded several times before they parted.

Once inside the classroom, Hutch took roll and then introduced the day’s lesson. The plan had called for making a lemon meringue pie, but the notes from the teacher had said the sub could change the plans if they’d be more comfortable doing something else. So he took her at her word and changed the plans.

Hutch walked around the room observing his students’ progress. Stopping at the teacher’s desk, he took a sip of coffee, and a bookshelf to his right drew his attention, giving him an idea. He searched through it, pleased when he actually found what he’d been hoping for—a yearbook. He thumbed through it, but didn’t spot anyone he recognized immediately. Hutch tucked the book into his briefcase, intending to have a more leisurely look at it with Starsky over dinner.

Noticing smoke coming from one of the stoves, Hutch left the desk and hurried over. “Sally, Sally, what do we have burning over here?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hutchinson. My mother always told me I shouldn’t cook. The quiche tipped over when I put it in, and it spilled all over the bottom of the oven.”

“Not a problem, but we can’t have the smoke alarm go off, can we?” Coughing and waving the smoke away, Hutch turned the stove off and opened the oven door. Finding a set of potholders, he reached in and removed the quiche. “Let’s put it in another oven.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Hutchinson,” Sally continued. “I’ll stay in at lunch and clean out the oven. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. We can easily fix it.” Hutch put his arm across Sally’s shoulder; she looked up at him, eyelashes fluttering. “At least the fire department didn’t have to be called,” he added thankfully. Starsky would never have let him live that down.



Seated at a picnic table outside Jose’s taco stand, Starsky flipped through the Henderson High School yearbook as he waited for Hutch to return from the health food store down the street. He stopped at the name Lambert. Paul Lambert. Starsky’s eyes slid across the page to find the picture.

“Recognize someone?” Hutch asked, setting his salad down and sliding his long legs between the table and bench.

“It’s Paulie—Paul Lambert. He’s in last year’s book as a junior. That would make him a senior now.”

“Dropped out, huh?”

“Must’ve, too bad. I guess it’s good for us since he could blow our cover, but I wonder why. He only had a year before graduating.”

“Lots of kids drop out. You know that. Unfortunately, they don’t realize the impact of what they’re doing.” Hutch squeezed on the dressing and mixed it into his salad. “It’s not easy being that age, especially with all the drugs out on the street and the other trouble they can get into.” He took a bite of salad and watched Starsky study a picture in the book, wondering why he was reminding his partner of something he already knew so well. Starsky’s background was so different from his. While he’d attended a private school in Duluth, Starsky had left his mom and brother in New York at a young age and had come out to Bay City to live with his aunt and uncle and attend public school. He’d spent years learning the streets, and his life could have turned out very differently. Hutch said a silent prayer of thanks for the man sitting by his side. “You ever think of dropping out?”

Starsky flipped through a few more pages. “I thought about it once or twice, but not seriously. I knew I wanted to be a cop like my pop, and you have to have a diploma. I couldn’t afford to pay for college, and my grades weren’t good enough for a scholarship, so I signed up for the Army. Nick, on the other hand....”

Surprised, Hutch set his fork down. “Nick, dropped out? You never mentioned that before.”

“Well, when I found out about it, I borrowed money from my aunt and uncle and took a plane home. It was just before I entered the Academy, before you and I met. He wouldn’t listen to Ma, so I figured I had to go back and ‘discuss’ it with him.”

“What happened?”

Two sets of eyes met. “I took him in the alley and beat the ever lovin’ shit out of ’im. Then, I told him he was being not only disrespectful to Pop and the Starsky name, but hurting Ma, and I wasn’t gonna stand for it. Besides, he had no business being on the streets; all he was gonna do was get in trouble.”

Starsky had often mentioned fighting with his brother, but Hutch had always imagined it to be normal brother-to-brother fights, nothing matching this caliber or importance. “He go back?”

“He did and he graduated. Six months later, he ended up on the street trying to hustle a quick buck. A lot of good it did.” Starsky shrugged and took a bite of his burrito before glancing back down at the pictures. “Hey, this kid’s name is Joe, Joe Collins.” He leaned in to look closer. “It could be him. His hair is blond and permed. What do you think?”

“Joe Collins, huh? That means he’s a senior now. Looks like the kid I saw in the hallway. Let’s run his name through Records tomorrow and see if they turn up anything.”

Pleased with their success, they doubled their efforts searching through the pictures but found no matches with the name of Marty or Martin.



“C’mon, Mr. Belcher, I can pull it off,” Marty whispered. “Gimme a chance.”

Stan Belcher glanced at the people in the restaurant. The two of them were seated in the corner, and no one was paying any attention to them. “Your cousin, Juan, was stupid. He comes into this town, thinking he’s gonna make a name for himself. First, he spouts off at the mouth. Then, he moves in on the wrong territory, courting the wrong people. He was going to start a war. Mr. Canfield was not happy. I tried to warn your cousin, but he wouldn’t take the hint and got what he deserved. Now you’re telling me you want to take over his action? Do you honestly think Mr. Canfield’ll be willing to give you a chance?”

Marty leaned in. “Yeah, I know I can do it. I’m not like my cousin. When he told me what he was doing, I told him he was stupid. My loyalty would be to Mr. Canfield; he’d never have to doubt that. I know he’s interested in the high school. I’m a student there. I can peddle the stuff from inside the school and nobody’ll catch on. I’m new, I get good grades, and I have the teachers snowed. I haven’t done anything to attract attention and I’d keep it that way. They’d have no reason to suspect me. Trust me.”

Belcher sliced off a piece of steak and raised the fork to his mouth. “You’re just a kid.”

“So what? I can handle it, and my word’s good. Just before I moved here, I’d started working the streets for Mr. Wexford in San Francisco.”

“Wexford, huh?” Belcher sat back. He’d heard Mr. Canfield mention the name before. “I’ll speak to Mr. Canfield, but I make no promises.”

Marty nodded. “Good enough. I’ll be back in touch.”

“No, *I’ll* be back in touch.”



Belcher pulled up in front of the wrought-iron gates and waited impatiently as they slowly opened. He wasn’t sure he could fully trust Marty, but he also knew he couldn’t ignore him. It might be worth giving him a chance, since establishing a base in the high school was a priority to Mr. Canfield. They’d tried to get a foothold in the area with

Juan, but then the janitor, Sterling, had to start nosing around. They'd taken care of him when he started asking all the wrong—or was it the right?—questions. Trying to play amateur detective was stupid. Look what it got him—a pine box.

Belcher walked into the library where James Canfield, wearing a green and gold dressing gown, was pouring a glass of brandy. “What’s so important, Belcher, that it couldn’t wait until morning?”

“You know that kid I was telling you about, Mr. Canfield? The high school student, Marty?”

“Isn’t he related to that pusher Juan?” Canfield sank down in his leather chair. “The one Bryant removed for us when he decided to start working for himself on the side?”

“Yes, sir, that’s him. Marty—full name is Martin Rodriguez—is Juan’s cousin. He’s only been in town about six months, but he tells me Juan had promised to include him in his action. Now Marty is offering to take over Juan’s territory for you.”

“Why should I trust him?”

“I think he’s sincere when he says he wants to work for you, Mr. Canfield. Unlike Juan, Marty understands you’re the boss, and he claims he isn’t stupid like his cousin. I made sure he understood what happened to Juan—and why it happened. After meeting and talking to him several times, I think he might be right about the high school.”

Canfield frowned as he swirled the ice around in his glass. “The high school might be too hot right now.”

“Marty seems like a smart kid, doesn’t do anything to attract attention to himself. After all, it was him that gave us the information that alerted us to Sterling and his nosing around. If we reward him with a little action, he’ll keep his eyes and ears open for us.”

“He isn’t stupid, I’ll grant you that. He knew that information would get him noticed.” Canfield set his glass down and walked over to the window. “Okay, let’s give him a try. Someone working in the inside can make things a lot easier for us.”



Starsky set his bag of groceries on the kitchen table and grabbed the ringing phone.

“Starsky, here.”

“Hey there, bro.”

“You find out something for us, Huggy?” Starsky asked, pulling the milk out of the bag and setting it in the refrigerator, the headset tucked between his ear and shoulder.

“Not much. Word has it that Juan came from the San Francisco area and been here about eight, maybe nine months. People on the street say he might’ve been working for Canfield. Apparently, Juan liked to stir things up and made some enemies real quick.”

He and Hutch had crossed paths with Canfield on several occasions, but hadn’t been able to make anything stick long enough to get him behind bars, thanks to the bank load of lawyers he surrounded himself with. “What about Sterling?”

“Only thing I could find out about Sterling was he spent several evenings a week working at a Boys Club not too far from the high school. A lot of the kids hung out there, and he liked playing ball with them. During the summer, he tried organizing a league to keep ’em off the street.”

“Thanks, Hug.”

“I hear anything else, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay, catch ya later.” Starsky hung up the phone and leaned against the wall. *Damn!*

He picked up the phone again and dialed. When Hutch answered, he said, “I heard from Huggy. Looks like Juan was working for your friend and mine, Canfield. And it looks like Sterling was one of the good guys. You find out anything about Collins?”

“Records only turned up two speeding tickets. Where should we go from here?”

“How about having Garcia and Thompson check out the Boys Club tomorrow? Maybe they’ll find someone who knows something. I’ll call Garcia. You wanna get together?”

Hutch considered it but then declined. “I’ve got to go over my lesson plans for tomorrow; I think I’m going to change what the teacher left.”

Starsky grinned, glad his partner was on the other end of the phone and couldn’t see him. Leave it to Hutch to be so conscientious. “Okay, see you in the morning. How about dinner tomorrow?”

“Sure.”



The next day after school, Marty walked out a side door and, lighting up a cigarette, acknowledged Joe waiting for him.

“Hey, Marty, tonight the night?”

Marty frowned, hid the cigarette behind his back, and scanned the area. “Keep your voice down, idiot. You want the entire school to know what’s going on? We don’t need any teachers showing up.”

Joe leaned against the school wall and studied his shoes. “I checked it out and didn’t see anybody. There’s only a few cars left in the parking lot, and we’re near the back of the school. Even if somebody was left hanging around they wouldn’t notice us.”

“You never know when someone could come out that door.”

“So tell me what’s happening. You told me I could help.” Joe shifted from one foot to the other. He was having difficulty keeping his excitement in check. Being the big man in school, money in his pocket, with a chick on each arm was his dream, and it felt so close he could taste it. “Were you able to make the connection?”

“Yeah, I talked to Belcher last night. Told ’em Juan was my cousin and that I was willing to take over for him, but I wasn’t stupid. I told him up front I knew my cousin was cheating them and that I didn’t go that way. A business deal is a business deal.”

“Whad’he say?”

“He didn’t promise anything. Said he’d talk to the ‘top man’.” Marty stopped as footsteps neared. He puffed on his cigarette.

Joe looked up. “Hey, that’s Paulie!” He pushed away from the brick wall and hurried across the grass, slapping Paulie Lambert on the shoulder. “Paulie! How ya doin? How come I don’t see you at school anymore?”

“Hey, man...I dropped out. I don’t got any time for books. I plan on working.”

Joe noticed Marty still leaning against the school wall, watching them, and he nodded in his direction. “Come here. I want ya to meet somebody.”

Paulie’s eyes followed Joe’s toward the building where a fellow student, wearing a navy blue t-shirt with “The Rolling Stones” embossed on the front, stood smoking.

As they moved closer, Joe called out, “Marty, this is a buddy of mine, Paulie Lambert.”

Marty nodded his acknowledgement.

“Hey, good to meet you,” Paulie responded, never removing his hands from his jacket pockets.

“Marty’s new,” Joe was quick to add.

“How’s it goin’?” Paulie asked.

“Pretty good. Meeting new people, getting a feel for the school.” Marty glanced over Paulie’s shoulder, noticing one of the janitors crossing the parking lot and getting in his car.

Joe and Paulie both turned to see what had gotten his attention.

“What’s he doin’ here?” Paulie asked.

“What do you mean?” Joe asked. “He’s the new janitor; he’s replacing Mr. Sterling.”

Paulie watched the fancy red-and-white car back out of its parking spot and head to the exit. “He’s no janitor. He’s a cop.”

Marty pulled away from the wall and grabbed Paulie’s shoulder, turning him toward him. “Whaddya mean? A cop? You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Paulie shrugged off Marty’s hand. “Name’s Starsky.”

Marty turned and watched the car pull into traffic. He smiled—his ticket to Mr. Canfield had fallen into his lap.



Stan Belcher walked out of the bank and shoved his checkbook into the inside pocket of his brown suit coat. He pulled out his sunglasses and slid them on.

“Mr. Belcher?”

Belcher continued walking and ignored the young man at his side. “I told you *I’d* get in touch with you.”

“I know that, but I’ve got some info I think you’d be interested in.”

Belcher opened the door of his black Buick. “What info could you possibly have that I’d be interested in?”

“Actually, I think your boss will be interested in the information.” Belcher treating him like a dumb high school student angered Marty, but he managed to swallow the smart response on his lips. He had to go through Belcher to get to Canfield, and he didn’t want to irritate him. “Look, it’s important. I helped you before with Sterling, didn’t I?” He paused. “It involves a cop.”

Belcher studied Marty, weighing whether what he’d said had any real importance. “Get in the car.”

As the Buick pulled away from the street and blended into the flow of traffic, Belcher said, “Okay, explain.”

“I found out there’s a cop doing double duty as a janitor at our school.”

“So? Maybe he’s moonlighting for extra money,” Belcher bluffed, watching Marty’s reaction through half-opened eyelids. “I understand the city doesn’t pay its finest that much.”

“You really think that’s the reason? When we both know a school janitor was murdered and a student OD’d not long ago?”

Belcher didn’t believe it at all, but he didn’t want Marty thinking he had the upper hand. “Possibly.”

“Well, I don’t, and I think—”

“Don’t you understand? I don’t care what you think, punk.” Belcher abruptly turned the car to the right and pulled to the curb. “Look, I’ll take your information to the boss and get back to you.”

Marty opened the door and exited the car. He disliked the man, but he was certain Belcher wouldn’t ignore the information. He couldn’t afford to. Having a cop nosing around the school could ruin a lot of Canfield’s plans.

Belcher leaned over. “You wouldn’t happen to know this cop’s name would you?”

Marty leaned in the window. “Starsky.”



“There may be trouble already, Mr. Canfield.” Belcher sat down on the sofa’s edge and loosened his tie. It was growing increasingly warm in the room. Mr. Canfield hated receiving bad news, and Belcher didn’t like being the one to deliver it.

“Explain.”

Canfield’s eyes bore into his, any hint of pleasantries disappearing. “This evening, Marty told me about a cop working at the high school. Apparently, he’s taken Sterling’s place as the janitor.”

Canfield considered the implications. “That’s a little too coincidental, don’t you think?”

“Yes, Mr. Canfield. That’s why I thought you should know about it.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know this cop’s name would you?”

“Starsky.” Belcher waited for the information to sink in.

“As in Starsky and Hutchinson?” Mr. Canfield slammed his hand on the desk. “Damn! We don’t need those two on our backs. They’ll ruin all my plans like they did a few years ago. They locked up half my men in a sting operation, and if it weren’t for an unfortunate incident where some of the evidence ended up as inadmissible, I’d be behind bars right now. They swore they’d be back to get me. I can still picture them outside the courtroom, almost in my face, warning me. Any idea what Starsky already knows?”

“No.”

“Well, your job is to find Detective Starsky and take care of him. We don’t need him digging any deeper.”

Belcher rose, pausing at the door. “If we get rid of Starsky, won’t his partner show up on our doorstep?”

“Then we’ll take care of him, too.” Canfield turned back to the window. “Oh, and, Sam, reward Marty. He deserves a little thank-you for passing along this information. We’ll see what he can do with some uppers; just tell him to stay clear of the high school until Starsky disappears.”



Starsky knocked on the door. He whistled as he waited and then leaned his ear against the door. Hearing the sound of a little girl yelling, “Momma, Momma,” brought a smile to his face.

The chains were unhooked and the door opened. “Detective Starsky, are you looking for Paulie again? He’s not here and I don’t know where he’s at.”

“No, no.” Starsky knelt down so he was at Sarah’s level. “I just wanted to drop something off for a lovely young lady.”

Sarah hid behind her mother’s leg but smiled shyly.

Starsky pulled his arm from behind his back and held out a soft little doll, wearing a pink-and-white pinafore and straw hat. Blonde braids with pink ribbons tied at the ends hung from below the hat. Sarah’s large blue eyes stared back in wonder, but didn’t stop the smile on her face. “Do you like her, Sarah? She needs a good home and I heard there was one here.”

Sarah hesitated and looked up at her mother. Receiving a smile and a nod, Sarah reached for the doll and hugged it.

“What do you say, Sarah?” her mom asked.

“Thank you.” Sarah looked up, an even bigger smile spreading across her face.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart. The clerk told me her name was Molly, but you can change it if you want.” Starsky stood up, pleased with the response he’d received.

“Detective Starsky, thank you very much. I know Sarah will love her and give her a good home, but you shouldn’t have.”

“Well, I was at the store, picking out a birthday present for a little girl named Rosie, and this doll kept calling out to me ‘Take me home, take me home.’” He laughed. “And I couldn’t resist. To be honest with you, Rosie’s a little too old for this kind of doll, but I couldn’t pass her up. I thought of Sarah and hoped you wouldn’t mind.”

“When I saw the smile on her face, you knew I couldn’t say no. It’s been quite a while since Sarah had a new doll. Again, thank you.” Mrs. Lambert looked around the small room. “Would you like to come in?”

“I can only stay a minute.”

“Well, have a seat and I’ll get us some lemonade.”

As Mrs. Lambert went into the small kitchen, Starsky sat down on the sofa. Sarah brought the doll over to him and leaned against his leg, still smiling shyly.

“Is there another reason you came?” Mrs. Lambert handed Starsky a glass.

“Well, I was hoping for some information, Mrs. Lambert.”

“Call me Kate. What can I help you with?”

“Well...Kate, there’s been an increase in the sale of drugs in the area—”

“Tell me about it.” The bitterness in her voice surprised Starsky. “Several kids in the neighborhood have died from overdoses, and a drug dealer was murdered nearby. It scares me. I know this isn’t the best neighborhood, don’t misunderstand me, but people used to watch out for each other. Doesn’t seem like they do anymore.” Katie glanced out the window at the garbage strewn about the streets. “In a way, I’m glad Paulie dropped out of school.”

“He dropped out?”

“Yeah, after his best friend, Neal, died from a drug overdose a few months ago. Only now, I’m worried Paulie might get into the same stuff. I’ve tried to protect him, but it’s really hard when he’s on the street so much.”

“Mrs....uh, Kate, what’s Paulie doing if he’s not going to school?”

“He’s trying to find a job.”

“Does he have any idea who his friend was buying from?”

Kate shook her head. “I asked him if he knew when it happened, but he’s always denied knowing anything. It got so he’d blow up whenever I’d say anything about it so I quit asking. Detective Starsky, he worries me a lot. He’s changed so much since his dad took off, and now this happened.”

Starsky said softly, “We all change when something happens to our best friend.” His stomach churned as memories flooded in. Not that long ago, Hutch had almost died at the hands of Forest and the drugs his goons had injected him with. It had been a long road home, but they had survived. *At least I didn’t lose my best friend.* “I understand how Paulie must be having a difficult time coping with it. Losing your best friend...” Starsky swallowed hard and stood to leave. “Thanks, Kate. I’ll try to track Paulie down and talk with him. We have more in common than he realizes.”

Katie stood. “I hope he’ll listen. I’m so afraid of losing him.”

Starsky entered the hallway and turned back. “Ummm...does Paulie ever go to the Boys Club near the high school?”

“Not anymore. He and Neal used to all the time; they played baseball on one of the teams. But ever since Neal died, Paulie doesn’t go anywhere near the place...doesn’t play ball anymore. It hurts me because he and Neal always dreamt of being professional ball players, but when Neal died, I think the dream did, too.”



The next morning, Starsky knocked at the hall entrance to the principal’s office. Mr. Richardson opened the door. “Good morning, Detective Starsky. Come on in. Do you have some information for me?”

“I wish I did. Actually, I was hoping you could give *me* some.”

“What do you need?”

“Do you know anything about a student named Marty?”

“Marty, hmmm? Do you have a last name?”

Starsky shook his head.

“Well, it doesn’t ring a bell, but let me check with my secretary, Mary. She’s the real boss in the school, knows everyone and everything that’s happening before I do.” Mr. Richardson smiled and walked into the main office, carefully closing the door behind him. Within a few minutes, he returned carrying a manila file. “We have a new student named Martin Rodriguez that goes by the name of Marty. Is that who you mean?”

“Could be.” Starsky looked at the picture on the inside of the file. “Yeah, that’s him.”

Mr. Richardson glanced through the file. “It says here he entered Henderson about two months ago, at the beginning of the school year. He had good grades at his former school, and I’m not aware of him causing any trouble, either here or there. Why?”

“Nothing special. I’ve heard the name a few times and wondered who he was. Thanks.” Starsky turned to leave. “Oh, what can you tell me about Paul Lambert?”

“Nice kid, though a little troubled. His parents were divorced about four years ago. As I understand it, his father moved out of the area one day—no explanation. Last year, Paulie’s friend, Neal, started hanging around with the wrong crowd, and a few months back, Neal died from a drug overdose. Paulie’s been going through some tough times the last few years, and he’s having difficulties coming to grips with it all. He dropped out of school this year, but we’d sure like to see him come back.”

“Thanks.” Starsky reached for the doorknob. “I hope the next time I come back to your office *I* have some answers for *you*.”



“Hey, Paulie!”

Paulie stopped as Joe slung an arm across his shoulder. He shrugged it off. “Whatcha up to?”

“Not much; waiting around for Marty.” Joe leaned in and whispered. “He’s in the liquor store over there, buying some booze.”

Paulie looked across the street at the Fairview liquor store. Marty was still inside. “He got fake ID?”

“Yeah, his cousin got it for him. We’re gonna party tonight. Wanna join us? We’re celebrating.”

Paulie considered the idea, but Joe wasn’t someone he particularly liked hanging around with. He—and Neal—had avoided Joe as much as possible, even though Joe seemed to have an interest in them. Joe was always trying to prove he was a big man with the girls, habitually on the fringes of trouble, a follower, not a leader. And something about Marty gave him an uncomfortable feeling. “What are you celebrating?”

“Our plan’s comin’ together.”

“What plan?” Paulie asked.

“Marty made some connections in town, and if everything goes right, we’ll get a boat load of uppers to sell. We’ve got a built-in demand at the high school.” Joe laughed. “You know how girls always like to diet? Well, these will help ’em along.”

Paulie glanced across the street; Marty was still inside. “What do you mean if everything goes right?”

“Well, there’s been a cop at school noising around,” Joe puffed on his cigarette and smiled. “Marty shared this information with the ‘right’ people, and they’re gonna take care of him, if you know what I mean.”

“Are you crazy? If this cop turns up dead, you’ll be an accessory.”

Joe laughed. “Nope, we ain’t crazy. It’s our way in to some action. When Marty told his contacts about that cop working at the high school, they showed their thanks by giving us the speed.”

“I’ll *bet* they’re thankful.” Paulie’s heart sank as he realized he’d been the one to tell them that Starsky was a cop. *Are the cops going to think I’m an accomplice?* “Do you know what they’re planning to do?”

Joe, feeling impressed with himself, didn’t hesitate to explain. “Marty said they’re taking the cop to one of the factories on Porter Street.”

“There are lots of factories on Porter Street.”

“I think it’s an old dress factory or something like that. So, you want to join us?”

Seeing Marty crossing the street, Paulie begged off. “No, thanks. I already have plans.”



Hutch glanced at his watch again and anxiously paced his apartment. He was ready to strangle his partner. It was 8:30, Starsky was over two hours late for dinner, and he was starving. He dialed Starsky’s apartment for the twentieth time, but there still was no answer. He’d called Huggy twice, finally, eliciting a promise from him to have Starsky call if he showed up there.

The phone rang and Hutch reached for it. “It’s about time, buddy. Where are you?”

“Detective Hutchinson?”

Realizing it wasn't the expected voice on the other end, Hutch found his voice rising. "Yeah, who is this?"

"It's Paul...Paul Lambert," Paulie said, as he watched his sister sitting on the floor playing with a pink-and-white dressed doll. "You...your partner said...I could call..."

Hutch, sorry that he'd responded so harshly, changed his tone. "Sure, what's up?"

"Well—" Paulie stopped, feeling foolish. After his conversation with Joe, he'd rushed home and searched for the piece of paper he'd thrown in the trash, thankful that he'd ignored his mother's order to empty it. From past experience, he knew he couldn't believe everything Joe said, but at the same time, he didn't feel that he could ignore it. "I heard something today I thought you should know about..."



"Dobey here."

"Captain, it's Hutch. I think something's happened to Starsky."

"What makes you think that?"

"I just got off the phone with Paul Lambert—"

"Who's Paul Lambert? A new snitch?"

"Someone Starsky found in a bottle."

"A bottle?! What the—?"

"There isn't time now, Cap'n." Hutch anxiously ran a hand through his hair. "I'll explain later, or rather he can, when we find him."

Dobey sank into his desk chair, yanking the tie away from his neck. "What did you get from this Paul character?"

"Apparently, someone recognized Starsky at the high school, and Paul heard they planned to 'take care of him'." Hutch, deciding there was no reason for Captain Dobey to know Paulie was the one who had inadvertently identified Starsky, continued, "He was due at my place almost three hours ago, and there's no answer at his place."

"Any idea where they would've taken him?"

"Paul said they mentioned an old dress factory on Porter Street."

“Porter Street, huh?” Dobby abruptly stood up, letting his chair bang into the wall behind him. “There’s an old garment factory named...uhmmm, named...Maxwell’s. Yeah, that’s it—Maxwell’s. It went bankrupt several years ago, and I don’t think it was ever bought.”

“That sounds like our best shot. I’ll meet you there.”

“I’ll have a black-and-white join you. Wait for them and don’t do anything stupid. That’s an—” Dobby heard the phone slam into its cradle before he got the last word out.



Hutch flipped off the siren as he neared Porter Street. Scanning the buildings for some kind of identification, he finally spotted faded red lettering across the top floor of one wooden structure—Maxwell’s Designs. He pulled into the empty dock area of the warehouse.

Exiting the car, he extracted his gun. There were no sounds, no signs that anybody had been there. *Was he searching for Starsky in the wrong place?* Hutch returned to the car and reached for the flashlight in the glove box. Shoving it in his pocket, he cautiously stepped up the stairs onto the dock, eyes and ears vigilant, gun ready. *Maybe I should wait for back-up. What if Paulie set me up?* Hutch paused and then remembered Starsky might be hurt somewhere inside. He bent down to enter the building through a half-open dock door. It took a moment before his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

It was a large open room, holding several packed crates and a high-low to the left. Hutch moved toward the door leading to the corridor. Opening it slowly, he paused. Only silence. He moved quickly down the hall, opening doors and checking every room. There were stacks of garments lying around, sewing machines, and bundles of materials. *This place is a tinderbox—one big incendiary.*

Hutch took the stairs to the second floor two at a time. He repeated his search to no avail. He was headed up the stairs to the third floor, when he stopped and sniffed. The place smelled damp and musty, irritating his allergies, but there was something else. Smoke.



Starsky moaned and tried to open his eyes, but he found the spinning room and the constant throbbing in the back of his head too much to handle, and he forced them closed again. Instinct told him it was imperative he figure out where he was and find a way to get out, but the dizziness and increasing nausea was proving more pressing. He concentrated on the rest of his body and what shape it was in, quickly discovering his arms were tied behind his back. Struggling to free his hands only succeeded in scraping his skin raw.

Starsky cautiously rolled onto his side, intending to push himself up. Drawing in a deep breath, he focused all his energy on rising. Making it to his knees, he started to cough,

realizing he'd inhaled not only air but smoke. After several quick breaths, he doubled over, no longer able to fight off the nausea.

Reopening his eyes, Starsky blinked repeatedly, straining to see through the darkness. Smoke continued to flood in, causing his eyes to sting and tear. He pushed back his growing panic and scanned the room, trying to locate any possible escape, but nothing was visible through the darkness. Ducking instinctively at the sound of crackling fire and the crashing of nearby beams, Starsky whispered a prayer of thanks when he realized they'd missed him. Rising on shaking legs, he banged into the metal leg of a table and gratefully used it to help balance himself. The room was spinning, but through the fire's light, he saw the outline of a door. He headed toward it, face bent away from the fire and flames, when a sudden boom sent several more ceiling beams crashing down, one hitting him on the back of the head. Starsky fell to the floor sliding back into unconsciousness.



Hutch sniffed several times, the knot in his stomach tightening. Now certain that someone had intentionally left Starsky inside and set the building on fire, Hutch threw caution aside, rushing up the remaining stairs and entering the hallway. It was growing smokier the higher he went.

Intensifying his search, Hutch continued to frantically call out, "Starsky!" but to no avail. He pulled his collar up around his face and, grabbing a small remnant of material from one of the many stacks lying around, pressed it to his mouth. Straining to see through the haze, he blinked back the tears beginning to form from the smoke. Brushing away the tears with his sleeve, he opened the doorway to the fourth floor. Smoke filled the landing, and Hutch pushed the door shut, pausing to draw in a quick breath before attempting to proceed farther. Starsky was there somewhere, and he had to find him before it was too late.

Opening the door to the top floor, he flung himself into a wall of smoke. The flashlight beam was practically useless. Enveloped in darkness, he tried to guide himself using the wall, despite the heat coming from the other side. The sound of crackling dry timber ahead filled the air. Embers flew at him, and he held up his hand to protect his face. Wrapping the material around his hand, he opened the first door and immediately pulled it shut. The interior of the room was ablaze.

Staying low to the ground, Hutch moved across the hallway. Finding the next door, he twisted the knob and flung it open. Shining the flashlight across the room, Hutch, lightheaded and dizzy, sank to the ground, finding it increasingly difficult to breath.

Hutch stiffened. What was that sound? Reaching for the flashlight, he pointed it toward the corner of the room. At first he saw nothing but fallen beams, but then he locked on what looked like the sole of a shoe. Crawling forward, he could feel his heart pounding faster—a blue Adidas. “Starsky?” Scrambling to his partner’s side, Hutch bent down in disbelief. “Starsk? Can you hear me?” His words were barely audible to himself, his throat dry and raspy. He was finding it increasing difficult to swallow.

Hutch immediately untied the ropes binding Starsky’s arms, and carefully rolled him onto his back. Leaning in close, he made sure his friend was still breathing and, after a silent prayer of thanks, pulled Starsky into a fireman’s carry.

Hutch staggered under Starsky’s weight as he attempted to rise. Together, they headed toward the stairwell.



Hutch, using one hand to guide himself down the steps, gripped Starsky with the other. Touch was the only sense he had left to rely on to guide him down the stairs. Smoke surged around them, filling the stairway with utter darkness. *We’re living one hell of a nightmare, buddy*, thought Hutch. He shifted Starsky across his shoulder. He could hear the floors above collapsing, while far off in the distance, the sound of sirens filled the night. *There isn’t enough time...*

There was a sudden explosion above, and Hutch instinctively turned aside, using his body to shield his partner from the flying debris and embers. He gripped Starsky tighter, and cautiously, but as swiftly as possible, continued down the stairwell. Exhaustion was overwhelming him, causing every muscle in his body to ache. *We’re almost there, Starsk, almost there*. Fighting his greatest fear of passing out and dropping Starsky, pushed Hutch to his limits.

Too late, Hutch realized he’d missed a step and his knees began to buckle. Frantic, he grabbed for the wall, adjusting their combined weight. Concentrating on overcoming the force of gravity, Hutch threw himself backwards rather than pitching headlong down the remaining steps. Pain shot through his back as his body, along with Starsky’s weight, hit the steps. He lay there, biting his lip and fighting the pain, sweat pouring down his face. Overwhelmed by uncontrollable coughing, his arms shuddered. He focused on staying conscious. Reaching out a hand, he shakily ran his thumb along Starsky’s smoke-smudged cheek. *Sorry, buddy. I didn’t want it to end this way*.

Hutch closed his eyes, trying to gather his last reserve of strength.

As if in a dream, he felt his body being moved, his head lifted, and something slipped over his face. He felt Starsky's body being lifted and frantically fought to pull him back, to keep Starsky near. But the pressure of the weight disappeared. Suddenly it became easier to breathe, and Hutch fought his way back through the shadows, his eyes fluttering open. He tried to focus on a shadowy figure leaning over Starsky, placing an oxygen mask over his face. Hutch reached out and touched the fireman's arm—*was he real?* The fireman nodded. Unexpectedly, he felt himself being lifted and thrown over someone's shoulder. As they turned and headed toward the building's exit, Hutch succumbed to his exhaustion.



Hutch pulled at the oxygen mask covering his face and tried to sit up.

“Leave it on and lie down, Hutch. And that’s an order.” Captain Dobey placed a hand on Hutch’s shoulder, keeping him on the gurney with gentle pressure.

“Starsk—?” The single word spoken in a whisper.

“The medics are loading him into the ambulance. A second one is en route and will be here momentarily to take you to the hospital.”

“How...” Beginning to cough, Hutch waited for it to subside before continuing, “...is he?”

“Unconscious at the moment. After a quick examination, the paramedics said he’s probably suffering from a concussion and smoke inhalation. He has a nasty gash on the back of his head that will undoubtedly need some stitches, and there are lacerations on his wrists where he apparently was tied up. There are a few burns on his face, but the paramedics said they were nothing serious, probably only first or second degree.” Hutch nodded. So far, nothing more than he’d initially determined on finding Starsky. “But the good thing is, he’s alive and stable. Thanks to you. You did a good job, son.”

Hutch relaxed back against the gurney, reveling in the oxygen and feeling entirely spent. The siren of the departing ambulance pierced the air. To Hutch, it was music to his ears.



Hutch settled uncomfortably in the chair next to the bed, his back complaining about the upright position. His promise to Starsky—that he would be there when he woke up—was coming at a cost, but be there he would, despite the fact that the doctors said he belonged home in bed. His back was killing him and every bone in his body ached. Rubbing a hand across tired eyes, Hutch carefully leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. A sudden spasm in his back caused him to straighten up and reminded him it was time to take his medication.

The doctors had released him from the hospital that morning, after keeping him forty-eight hours for observation. When the smoke he'd inhaled was cleared up and he showed no signs of pneumonia or any other lung-related complications, they'd discharged him with a supply of pain pills and muscle relaxants for his pulled back muscles. He was supposed to go home and rest, but he didn't want to leave until after he'd seen Starsky and knew he was okay.

Hutch looked over as Starsky's leg shifted on the bed. He started to get up, but his partner was quiet again, apparently still sleeping soundly. Sighing, Hutch sat back down, content to watch Starsky sleep. *It was too close this time. I really didn't think we were going to make it.*

When he'd been wheeled into the hospital, his first words were "Where's Starsky? Is he okay?" But it was hours before anyone would give him a reply. He found out later that when Starsky had arrived at the hospital, the staff had immediately done an arterial blood gas, and, finding his oxygen levels low and carbon dioxide high, they'd rushed him into a decompression chamber for several hours. After further treatment, Starsky had been placed in the bed next to his partner, at Captain Dobey's insistence, but it was several hours later before he had finally regained consciousness.

They'd removed the oxygen and IV from Starsky that morning, and everything indicated his making a full recovery. He was sleeping now and would remain in the hospital a few more days, just to be sure there were no complications, but even that couldn't make Hutch remove the grin plastered on his face whenever he thought about it. It had been close—too close—but they'd made it through.

Knowing he couldn't put off taking his pills any longer, Hutch went into the bathroom, filled a glass with water, and popped a capsule into his mouth. He was leaning against the sink, when a voice, still dry and raspy, startled him. "Hu-sh?"

"Yeah, I'm here." Hutch exited the bathroom, any thought of fatigue disappearing. "Bout time you woke up. How are you feeling?"

Starsky thought a moment before answering. "Got a headache, and..." He winced as he shifted on the bed. "...my body aches all over." Starsky scrutinized Hutch through half-closed eyes. "You get run over by a truck?"

"That's how I feel."

"It's how ya look."

"Guess you haven't looked in a mirror lately." Hutch moved next to the bed.

"You goin' home to bed?"

"Later. First, I'm headed over to arrest Marty, and then I'm going to interrogate him."

Starsky reached out and touched Hutch's arm. "Go home, first, Hutch. You look like something the cat dragged in. It can wait another day."

"No, it can't." Hutch's voice turned frosty. "Marty's going to give me the name or names of whoever's behind this. And they'll live to regret it."

"Hutch, be...careful." Starsky stopped to take a deeper breath. "Member, I...I can't cover your back."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. You take care of yourself and listen to the doctors and nurses." Hutch laid his hand over Starsky's, careful of the bandages encircling his wrist. "Besides, I know how much you hate being in the hospital, buddy, so I wanna get your sorry ass out of here as soon as possible."



Hutch pulled into the parking lot of Henderson High School, a black-and-white following him. He marched into the main office and flashed his badge. "Mary, I want to know which classroom I'll find Marty Rodriguez in."

Confused, Mary rose from her chair. "I'll go to the counselors' office, Mr., I mean, Detective Hutchinson. They have a copy of every student's schedule."

Mary returned a few moments later. "He's in Mr. Bishop's Biology class. Do you know—?"

Hutch turned on his heel and motioned for the two officers to follow. At the door of Room 110, Hutch saw Mr. Bishop lecturing his class. He knocked on the door, and Mr. Bishop glanced over surprised. He opened the door, observing the two policemen standing behind Hutch. "Mr. Hutchinson, can I help you? I don't need you to sub this afternoon."

"No, I need to see one of your students—Marty. Marty Rodriguez."

"Sure." Mr. Bishop turned back to his students. "Mr. Rodriguez, Mr. Hutchinson would like to see you in the hallway."

Marty, unsure who Mr. Hutchinson was, rose from his chair and stepped into the hallway.

"Yeah? Whaddya want?"

Hutch, wishing he could whack the insolence off Marty's face, instead grabbed hold of his shirt and threw him against the nearest locker.

“Wait a minute!” Marty shouted. “What’s this about?” He uneasily eyed the two uniformed officers.

“You’re under arrest.” Hutch turned him around and handcuffed him.

“For what? I didn’t do anything!”

“For messing with my partner!” Hutch shoved Marty at one of the officers. “Read him his rights, Collins, and take him to the station. Book him on the attempted murder of a police officer. I’ll be there shortly. I have something to do first.”



Hutch observed Marty in the interrogation room through the one-way mirror. Marty was drumming his fingers on the table and glancing around, trying to look casual and tough, but the façade was beginning to break. He’d been sitting there for thirty minutes, and Hutch had been watching and waiting.

Captain Dobey walked in. “Well, have you talked to him yet?”

“Not yet, just letting him squirm a little. You find out more about him?”

“He moved here from San Francisco not long ago. He’s been clean here, but the juvenile authorities from the bay area tell us he’d been arrested in a sting operation about a year ago. He was on the premises, but the police didn’t find any drugs on him. Since the prosecutor had bigger fish to fry—a certain Carl Wexford—” Hutch nodded in recognition as Dobey continued, “—and this was a first offense, it was dropped. His father was killed in a traffic accident about six months ago, and his mother moved to this area to be with family and for employment.”

“Okay...” Hutch headed to the door. “...time to get some answers.”

“Hutch, you’re tired and angry, and you have every reason to be, but remember he’s a minor.”

Hutch let the opening door slam into the wall behind him, locking eyes with Dobey. “He’s also involved with trying to kill Starsky.”

Hutch entered the room and threw the file folder in his hand on the small table. “How ya doing, Marty? I’m Detective Hutchinson.”

“What am I doing here? Nobody’s told me nothin’.” Marty leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms. “You got nothin’ on me and I wanna go home.”

“You’ll go home, if and when I let you.” Hutch leaned on the table. “First, I want some answers.”

“What if I don’t have—?”

Marty never finished the question, as Hutch seized his shirt and pulled him up and out of the chair. “Don’t think you can mess with me, Marty. I’m tired, hurting, and short on patience.” Hutch tossed him back into the chair and leaned in closer. “I want to know the name of the person or persons you told about Detective Starsky, and I want it now!”

Marty sank back into the chair and swallowed hard. The ice blue eyes staring at him didn’t blink. “Detective Starsky?”

“You know exactly who and what I’m talking about. Don’t play innocent. Who did you tell Starsky was a cop?” Receiving no response, Hutch carefully straightened.

Changing tactics, he pulled a chair next to Marty and changed his tone to a more casual one. “Sorry, Marty, I don’t mean to be so hard on you. I’m just a little tired and my back’s killing me. If you tell me what you know, I’ll personally speak to the judge on your behalf, letting him know how cooperative you’ve been. He’ll go easier on you. You’re a minor and you helped us out. It’ll give him something to consider when he sentences you for the attempted murder of a police officer.”

Paling, Marty slumped. “Murder? I didn’t do anything!”

“Maybe not directly, but you made it possible for someone else to, and that makes you an accessory.” Hutch, pointing his index finger at Marty, continued, “Look around you. You’re in a police station, and we don’t take the attempted murder of a police officer lightly. Least of all me—especially when it’s my partner.”

Hutch stood and started for the door. “Knock on the door when you’re ready to talk and the officer outside will come get me.”

Hutch reached for the knob.

“Wait, Detective Hutchinson—”



“Hutch! Wait! That’s an order!” Captain Dobey’s voice carried down the corridor as he barreled down the hallway. Every person, except the blond, stepped out of the way. “Hutchinson!”

Hutch stopped and turned on his heel. Dobey approached him, puffing at the exertion. His voice softened, “Where are you going?”

“To get Canfield.”

“No, you’re not. You’re going home, or you can go visit your partner in the hospital. I’m going for Canfield.”

“He’s mine, Cap’n.”

“Not in the mood you’re in. I want to have a case to try and I need a *live* body to prosecute.”

Hutch turned away in frustration. “But, Cap—”

“Look, I know how you feel. But Starsky needs you more.” Dobey’s voice softened. He spotted Garcia coming down the hall. “Garcia, find your partner; we have an arrest to carry out.” Turning back to Hutch, he added, “Home or the hospital, which is it?”

Hutch unclenched his fists. “The hospital.”

“Okay, I’ll be by to check on both of you after Canfield is picked up and behind bars. Understood?”

“Understood.” Hutch pushed the doors open and disappeared through the exit.

Captain Dobey turned. “Garcia! Thompson! Where are you? We don’t have all day!”



“C’mon, Paulie, hit it to me!” Starsky took his stance and punched the pocket of his baseball mitt several times. “I’m ready.” He bounced sideways, anticipating the hit. At the sound of the bat connecting with the ball, Starsky threw off his baseball cap and ran backwards, dropping and rolling as his foot found a hole in the grass and threw him off balance. The ball soared over his head. He stood up and wiped off the dirt. After locating the ball in the grass field, he ran toward home plate, yelling out, “Good one! An in-the-park home run! You’ll be playing in the majors before you know it!”

Starsky enthusiastically patted Paulie on the back, and then looked up to see his partner approaching them. He swung an imaginary bat. “You should’ve seen it, Hutch. Paulie’s a great ball player. I’ll bet ya he’ll be in the majors someday.”

Hutch couldn’t help smile at Starsky’s exuberance. “I saw it. Now he just has to teach you how to catch.”

Paulie frowned. “Oh, I don’t think I’ve learned enough to do that.”

Hutch laughed at the boy’s concerned look. “No one has.” Seeing Starsky’s furrowed brow, he slapped him on the back and added, “Don’t worry, Starsk, you’re too old and decrepit to play ball anyway.” Hutch turned to the boy standing on his left. “I want to

introduce you to someone, Paulie. He's a friend of mine and likes to play ball, too. This is Kiko. I'm his Big Brother."

Kiko reached out a hand. "Hey there, Paulie. Good to meet you."

Paulie extended his hand. "Hi. What position do you like to play?"

"I like pitching."

"Cool, you wanna pitch me a few?"

"Sure." Kiko turned to Hutch. "That okay?"

"Of course. Starsky and I'll go sit on the bench and watch. I think it's time for him to rest." Hutch slung his arm across Starsky's shoulders. "C'mon, partner, time for the old folks to sit it out."

Starsky tossed the ball to Kiko and joined his partner walking to the bench.

"Did you talk to Paulie about going back to school yet?" Hutch asked

"Yeah, and he agreed. I didn't even have to beat him up like I did Nicky."

Hutch laughed. "That's good."

"I convinced him that if he went back to school, he might be able to win a baseball scholarship. I already talked to Principal Richardson, and he's going to look into it. The kid's good, Hutch, really good."

Hutch watched Paulie hit a few balls into center field. "You're right; he is good. And he's lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yeah, lucky that you cared, buddy. Lucky that you dragged that bottle out of the water."

"Do you know what happened to Sterling yet?"

"Well, from what we could get out of Marty, Neal played on one of the teams at the Boys Club, and Sterling was angry that Neal had started shooting up. He'd taken Neal under his wing and thought he had a lot of potential. Took it personally when Neal died, I guess. He'd tried to provide a safe place for the boys, but found out it was impossible. So he started asking questions, and eventually found out that Juan was Neal's supplier. He planned to confront him, but then Juan turned up dead as well. Sterling continued investigating, but none too quietly, and Canfield had him killed."

Starsky watched the ball sailing out into center field. “Why didn’t he just contact the police?”

“Who knows.” It was a statement not a question. Noticing Starsky’s sudden quietness, he asked, “What are you thinking?”

“I think we should stay out of high schools.”

“I agree. You almost didn’t make it this time.”

“Not just me.” Starsky shifted to look at Hutch. “I never really said thanks. You should’ve gotten outta that building and saved yourself. You could’ve died in there—”

“And left you? No way!” Hutch reached over and patted Starsky’s knee. “Besides, you’d have done the same if it had been me in there.”

Starsky knew it was impossible to argue with his partner on that fact. That was how they operated—always covering each other’s backs, regardless of the cost. “I guess it turned out okay.”

“Speaking of okay. How are you?”

“Fine. I got the all-clear from the doctor. Dobeys’ll be happy to hear I’m cleared for duty again.”

“Well, that’s good news, but it’s not what I meant.”

Silent for a moment, Starsky finally returned Hutch’s gaze. He knew what his friend was referring to. “We’ve got Canfield behind bars, and maybe, just maybe we can keep drugs out of the high school a little longer. It’s too bad Sterling wanted to play amateur detective instead of coming to the police and telling us what he knew. We might’ve been able to save Neal—and save his family and Paulie all the grief and anger.”

“What about Prudholm?”

Starsky hesitated before continuing. He’d just as soon drop the subject, but Hutch wouldn’t, at least not until he answered what his partner thought was the bigger question. “The two cases turned out entirely different. I guess I’ve finally accepted the fact that there wasn’t anything I could have done about Gary Prudholm. We were young and inexperienced at the time, but I don’t think I would have done anything differently. I was trying to save Gary by busting him and giving him a chance to straighten out. I’m not responsible for what happened to him in jail.”

Hutch smiled. He’d been waiting for Starsky to finally recognize the truth. “And his father?”

“He’s...he’s just sick, and behind bars where he belongs. And we never have to hear from him again.” Starsky stood, cheering, as Paulie smacked the ball toward right field, and Kiko raced off the mound to snag it. “Think they’ll get along? They don’t have much in common.”

Hutch watched the growing smiles on the faces of the two boys. Their enthusiasm was contagious. Rising to stand next to his partner, Hutch slung his arm across Starsky’s shoulders. “Neither did we, buddy, neither did we.”

The End