

Officer Down

Linda B.

“Did you read this, Hutch? It’s sick!”

“What’s sick?” Hutch asked, as he turned the car right onto Lakewood Boulevard.

“To do that to anybody, let alone a famous man, is wrong. He was the consummate actor, comedian...”

Hutch glanced over at his partner. “Who and what are you talking about, Starsk?”

“Charlie Chaplin.”

“What about Charlie Chaplin? Is he sick?”

Starsky looked at Hutch and shook his head in disbelief. “No, he died. And it says here that someone stole his coffin from a cemetery in Switzerland.”

“Somebody stole his coffin?”

“Why would somebody want his coffin, Hutch?”

“Beats me, but the guy in front of us is making *me* sick. Look at this idiot.”

“Huh?” Starsky, already engrossed in the article, didn’t look up. “What’s he doin’?”

“Put the paper down and watch this guy. He’s weaving all over the road.”

Starsky lowered the paper and watched the beat-up green Dodge Dart lurch from one side of the road to the other before returning to the center of the lane, barely missing a taxi in the oncoming lane. “He’s definitely had too much of something. What do you wanna do? Call a black-and-white to pick him up?”

“Yeah, let’s pull him over before he kills somebody. Then they can take him back to the drunk tank.”

Starsky slapped the Mars light on the roof as Hutch sped up behind the Dart. It was almost a minute before the driver reluctantly pulled into a party store parking lot and stopped. Hutch angled the Ford behind the car, blocking any escape. As Hutch exited the car, Starsky reached for the mic. “I’ll call for the black-and-white and check the license plate.” He kept Hutch under surveillance as he walked toward the driver’s side of the car. “Zebra Three to Dispatch.”

“Dispatch here.”

Hutch extended his hand toward the window, and Starsky mentally ran through the routine procedure as he waited for a response from Dispatch. Hutch had just asked to see the driver’s ID, proof of insurance, and registration. Next, he’d ask for the driver to step out of the vehicle to perform a dexterity test.

Dispatch verified that a black-and-white was on its way, and Starsky opened his door. It might have been a routine stop, but Dispatch had reported the car as stolen and that meant anything could happen. Starsky, taking two steps, kept his eyes glued on his partner’s back. The driver had stepped out of the car, but Hutch stood between them, blocking his view.

As he reached the end of the car, a gunshot sent Starsky diving to the pavement. Drawing his gun, he yelled, “Hutch?!”

No response.

Flat on his stomach, Starsky peered under the car and saw Hutch lying on his side next to the green car. From this angle, he could see Hutch’s legs, but he couldn’t see where or how badly he was shot. Where was that black-and-white?

A second and third shot shattered Hutch’s side of the windshield, forcing Starsky to stay down. Inching back to the front end of the car, he rose above the hood, searching for the driver. Starsky’s eyes instinctively shifted toward Hutch. He still hadn’t moved. Frantic for a response or any sign of movement, he called out again. “Hutch!” In quiet desperation, he whispered, “C’mon, buddy, answer me.”

The driver suddenly dashed from the front of the Dart, heading across the parking lot toward the store. Starsky rose and aimed. “Police! Freeze!” The suspect ignored him. Starsky fired twice, but missed as the driver stumbled behind a pickup truck and headed for the far corner of the building. A woman, carrying a grocery bag, exited at that moment and screamed as she threw her bag in the air.

Starsky darted between the parked cars, grabbed the lady, and shoved her toward the store. “Get inside and stay there!” He ran to the end of the store and pulled up short. He turned the corner, gun aimed.

Nothing. The suspect was gone. He ran to the end of the store and into the alley. The suspect was nowhere in sight. His eyes searched the blacktop, looking for blood that could provide a trail to follow. *Damn! Nothing.*

Starsky shoved his gun into its holster, raced back across the parking lot, and knelt next to the abandoned car. Hutch’s eyes were closed, his face ashen, and he still hadn’t moved. Starsky, his heart pounding, gently rolled him onto his back and was astonished

at the amount of blood covering the left side of Hutch's shirt and pooling on the cement. He leaned down and said a prayer of thanks as he realized Hutch was still breathing. "It's okay, buddy. I'm here. Everything...everything's gonna be okay." Starsky checked Hutch's pulse. Where was that black-and-white? Shedding his jacket, he wrapped it around Hutch to keep him warm and ward off shock. "I've gotta call for an ambulance, Hutch. I'll be right back. Don't move."

Hearing a car, Starsky looked up to see a patrol car finally pulling into the lot. He stood, waving his arms. "Officer down! Ambulance—now!"

One officer grabbed the mic as the other ran toward him gun drawn. Recognizing Paul Johnson, an officer with at least fifteen years on the force, Starsky blurted out, "The suspect is male, Caucasian, early twenties, about six foot, scraggily, brown hair, wearing jeans and a blue nylon parka. He took off across the parking lot and ran into the alley behind the store, Paul. He's armed, drunk, and dangerous, so be careful."

"Ambulance is on its way, Starsky." Eric Gomez, Johnson's partner, rushed to join them, his eyes scanning the wounded detective, trying to determine the extent of his injuries. "How's he doing?"

A lump was forming in Starsky's throat as panic grew and he was finding it difficult to talk. "I don't know. He's alive—that's enough for now." Starsky hoped he sounded more convincing than he felt.

Johnson grimly turned to Gomez. "Call for more units and let's go. The suspect headed down the alley behind the store; he could be hiding anywhere. He's armed and dangerous."

In a matter of seconds, the two police officers were headed down the alley.

Kneeling, Starsky yanked off his holster and then stripped off his shirt. Rolling the shirt into a ball, he shoved it under Hutch's, pressing it to the wound in his side, trying to slow the flow of blood. Sinking the rest of the way to the ground, he lifted Hutch's head into his lap, brushing away the dirt on his cheek and the blond hair away from his forehead. "It's gonna be okay. Just hang in there, buddy, hang in there. Please." A shiver ran down his bare back, but he wasn't cold. He pushed back the voice in his head—the voice of his mom saying, "...that means somebody's walking on your grave." Only it wasn't his grave he was worried about.



Captain Dobey rounded the corner. He was in search of Starsky, and the nurse at the desk had directed him to the waiting room at the end of the long hospital corridor. At the door, he stopped to observe his curly-haired detective. Starsky, wearing a scrub shirt with his gun and holster on top, was leaning forward in the chair; his head down, elbows

resting on his knees, hands folded. His eyes were closed. Dobby hesitated, not wanting to interrupt what appeared to be a silent prayer.

Starsky straightened and rolled his head in a circle to the right and then the left, before reaching back with his hand to rub and squeeze his taut neck muscles.

The pressure he was under was obvious to Dobby. They'd been here before, and there were no words to relieve that pressure. It didn't matter which one of these two were injured, it was just as hard on the one left behind, waiting. It wasn't until the doctor declared that the injured partner had made it through safely and would be okay, that one could feel, almost see, the steam escape from the pressure cooker life had put them in. Dobby cleared his throat.

Starsky opened his eyes and stood up. "Sorry, Cap'n, I didn't hear you."

"Have a seat, Starsky." Dobby placed his hand on his detective's shoulder and sat next to him. "Have the doctors been out yet, son?"

Starsky shook his head. "No, and I'm getting worried. He's been in there an awfully long time."

"Tell me what happened."

"Hell if I know. We'd stopped a drunk driver, and next thing I know, there's a gunshot and Hutch is bleeding all over the parking lot. Have Johnson and Gomez found the driver yet?"

"No, they're scouring the neighborhood. Don't worry, they'll find him. All available officers are on it, and a number are even canvassing the area on their own time. Everyone wants to find who did this to Hutch."

"It was a stolen car."

"I know. We've lifted some prints to help us identify the driver."

"What if you can't find a match?"

"Then we'll find him another way."

Starsky stood up, walked to the window, and looked out. "I should be out there looking."

"You should be right here—looking after Hutch. He needs you more."

Starsky slammed his fist on the windowsill. "It was stupid, Cap'n! I'm a better cop than that; even a rookie would've known better. I didn't even see it coming!"

“You can’t anticipate everything, Starsky.”

“I didn’t even get a good look at his face. Maybe he recognized Hutch...I don’t know.” Starsky shook his head. “I keep replaying it over and over in my head, but there’s only one answer—I failed. It’s my job to cover his back.”

“You haven’t asked for an easy job.”

“Detective Starsky?”

Starsky immediately turned, and in two strides was next to the doctor who had just entered the room. “Yeah. How’s Hutch?”

“I’m Dr. Morgan.” The thin middle-aged doctor offered his hand to Starsky.

Captain Dobey extended his. “I’m Captain Dobey. Ken Hutchinson is one of my detectives. How’s he doing?”

“Well, he’s out of surgery and in Recovery. When your friend—”

“And partner,” Starsky threw in.

Doctor Morgan nodded. “—and partner came into Emergency, he’d lost a great deal of blood, and his hemoglobin had dropped significantly. We had to stabilize him prior to surgery. In order to do that, we transfused a couple of units of blood into him. We’re keeping him on oxygen until he’s a little more stable, and he’ll be getting IV antibiotics to ensure that his wound doesn’t become infected.” Seeing the distress on Starsky’s face, he hastened to add, “But he came through the surgery fine.”

Starsky, focusing on the doctor’s last few words, ran his hand through his hair. “Oh, thank God.”

“Your partner was shot at close range, Detective, and the bullet entered his left side, passing straight through and exiting. He was extremely fortunate since the bullet narrowly missed his stomach and intestines. Luckily, he didn’t take it in the abdomen or spleen, or it could have been an entirely different story.”

“You’re saying the drunk’s aim was off?” Starsky asked bitterly.

“Be thankful,” Doctor Morgan reminded him.

Starsky checked his anger and nodded. “Can I see him?” Now that he knew Hutch was okay, he didn’t plan to waste any more time in this sterile waiting room.

“Give the nurses about fifteen minutes to get him settled in his room. Then you can go up to see him, but only for a few minutes. They’re taking him to a room on the fourth floor; one of the nurses at the desk will direct you.”

Starsky, suddenly feeling jubilant, grabbed the doctor’s hand and pumped it. “Thank you, Doc. Thank you very much.”

Dr. Morgan smiled. “My pleasure.”

Fully aware of one of the first questions coming out of Hutch’s mouth when he regained consciousness, Starsky hastened to add, “I know he’s gonna ask this, so I might as well. When can he come home?”

“Well, one thing at a time,” Doctor Morgan cautioned. “It’ll probably be a few days. I want to continue to monitor him for any infection or internal bleeding. But his prognosis is good and I don’t anticipate any complications. When he does go home, he’s going to be weak and he’ll experience some difficulty moving around. He’ll need plenty of rest and he should be careful not to overdo it.”

“That’s okay. I’ll take care him.”

Doctor Morgan, appreciating the quiet confidence in the detective’s voice, nodded. “Remember, don’t stay too long.”

As the doctor left the room, Dobby turned to Starsky. “I’m going to call in and see if the suspect has been apprehended yet, and check on whether they’ve located the bullet. As soon as you see Hutch, go home and get some rest. That’s an order. Oh, and give me your gun and holster.”

“What?”

“You don’t need it here in the hospital; it might scare the nurses. Besides, it doesn’t go well with your outfit.”

Bewildered, Starsky looked down. He was wearing his holster strapped over the scrub shirt the nurse in Emergency had given him, since his own shirt was full of blood from being pressed against Hutch’s wound. At the time, he’d been so concerned about Hutch that he’d automatically put it on, never giving a thought to what he might look like. He grinned as he removed his holster and handed it to his captain.



“Can I help you, sir?” A nurse came around the corner and dropped the medical chart in her hand into its bin.

“Yeah, I’m looking for Detective Hutchinson...Ken Hutchinson.” Starsky thumped his fingers on the counter, impatient to see his partner.

“Just a moment, sir. I don’t recognize that name; he must be a new arrival. Several new patients have come up in the last thirty minutes. Let me check which room he’s in for you.”

As the blonde nurse searched through the paperwork, Starsky leaned over the counter, reading upside down. “There it is.” Starsky pointed to the name. “Where’s room 415?”

“You go down the corridor to your left and it’s—”

Starsky had already turned the corner and was reading the numbers on the doors.

At room 415, the door was ajar, almost closed. He hesitated a moment, listening for any voices or activity, but it was quiet. Maybe Hutch wasn’t there yet? He slid through the narrow opening. The first bed was empty, and the curtain between the two beds had been pulled slightly forward, blocking his view of the second. “Hutch?” Starsky whispered as he inched forward. There was no response.

Starsky walked to the edge of the bed and uttered a sigh of relief. It was Hutch, alive and breathing, only he was asleep. An IV dripped into his arm, as well as a pint of blood, and he was receiving oxygen. Starsky moved to the head of the bed, where he brushed back a few loose strands of blond hair and whispered, “Good to see ya, buddy. You look like hell, but then I guess that’s fair—I *feel* like hell. You’ve gotta stop doing this.” He stood there a few minutes, staring at the rise and fall of Hutch’s chest. Touching Hutch’s hand, he was relieved to feel the warmth. He had been afraid it would still feel cold and damp, like in the ambulance.

Pulling the chair from the corner of the room over to the bed, Starsky sat down. He didn’t plan on leaving any time soon, so he might as well be comfortable. Starsky chuckled at the thought. Was he ever comfortable in a hospital chair?



The squish of soft shoes moving across the floor startled Starsky, and he straightened up, realizing he’d dozed off. He reached for his holster and remembered he was still wearing the scrub shirt the nurses had so kindly brought him when he had arrived at the hospital. His shirt and the jacket he’d wrapped around Hutch hadn’t been returned to him yet, and he’d given his holster to Dobey.

“Sorry.” The blonde nurse he’d met at the counter was taking Hutch’s blood pressure. She whispered, “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Starsky stood and moved to the bedside. He glanced at her nametag. “That’s okay, Sue. How’s he doing?”

“His vitals are fine and he should be waking up soon.”

“Is he in any pain?”

Sue shook her head as she checked on the drip. “Not at the moment, but the pain medication will be wearing off soon.”

“Well, put in some more,” ordered Starsky, indignant at the thought of Hutch having to endure any pain.

Sue smiled. “We will, but we’ll wait until he wakes up and requests it. I’ll be back in a little bit and check on him again before I’m off duty.”

“Thanks.” Starsky leaned his arm on the bed rail and reached out to pull the blanket up around Hutch. He was oblivious to the smile the nurse flashed him as she left the room. Starsky turned to sit back down when he heard Hutch moan. Instantly next to the bed, he whispered, “Hey, buddy. Everything’s okay. Can you hear me?”

“Starsk...” His name was barely audible, but Starsky didn’t care, Hutch was back.

“Yeah, how ya doin’? Can I get you something? Some water?”

Hutch swallowed and nodded. “Throat’s dry.”

“Just stay still.” Starsky reached for the plastic cup with ice chips the nurse had left. “Take a sip...but slowly.”

Hutch tried to lean forward but winced at the movement.

“I told you to stay still. I’ll bring the water to you.” As Hutch lay back against the pillow, Starsky brought the glass up. “You’re gonna have to take it easy for a while.”

Hutch took several quick sips through the straw before Starsky pulled the glass away. “What happened?” he asked. “I feel like I’ve been run over by a Mack truck.”

“You were shot. I don’t know what happened. I thought maybe you could tell me. You walked up to that car, and all of a sudden there’s a gunshot and you’re layin’ on the pavement.”

Hutch closed his eyes, trying to recreate the scene in his mind. “Who was it?”

“Don’t know yet. Half the police force is out looking for him. Thought maybe you recognized him or something.”

Hutch shook his head and then grimaced in pain. “I think I’m better off lying perfectly still. Moving makes me feel sick to my stomach.”

“You want some more pain medication? The nurse said—”

“No, I wanna talk to you. Pain meds make me loopy and put me to sleep.”

“The doc said you need to sleep.”

“Did he say how long I have to stay here?”

Starsky laughed. He certainly knew his partner. “He hasn’t come by yet today, Loopy. We’ll ask him when he does. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but I think you’re in here for several days.”

Hutch groaned and leaned back into the pillow, relaxing into the comfort it provided. Starsky watched in relief as the distress on Hutch’s face lessened.



“Hutchinson?” Captain Dobey entered the room with Huggy close on his heels. “Starsky?”

“Yeah, Cap’n. We’re over here.” Starsky looked up and smiled. “Hey, Huggy.”

“Hey, Bro. How’s Blondie doin’?”

Seeing Hutch awake, Captain Dobey turned toward him. “How are you feeling, Hutchinson?”

“Been better,” Hutch added. “You find the guy yet, Captain?”

“Johnson and Gomez brought in your suspect and booked him. Richard Brady. Does that name mean anything to either of you?”

Starsky and Hutch looked at each other in puzzlement. “No,” Starsky replied for both.

“I didn’t think so. He has a record as a teenager, including grand larceny and an assault. In the last year alone, he’s had several DUI arrests. I couldn’t find a connection to any cases you two have worked.”

“So, that’s it?” Starsky asked. “Just a random shooting?”

“If you want to call it that. It turns out he’d been drinking and didn’t have a ride home, so he decided to steal a car. Unfortunately for you, Hutch, but fortunately for others on the road, you two decided to pull him over. He’d discovered a small handgun in the

glove compartment and decided to use it rather than be arrested. One more DUI arrest and he'd lose his license, maybe put him behind bars for a while."

"And shooting a police officer isn't gonna land him jail for a hell of a lot longer?" Starsky shook his head at the idiocy. "Where'd they find him?"

"His aunt lived nearby, and he took the alley to her apartment building. She didn't suspect anything at first, but something didn't feel right and she grew more and more suspicious. She could smell the whiskey on him, and he kept checking the windows, hiding behind the curtains as he peered out. She asked him what was wrong, asking why he looked nervous, but he said it was nothing.

"Later, she left to buy some milk at the corner store and was stopped by Johnson and Gomez when she walked out of the apartment building. They asked if she'd seen anyone matching the suspect's description. She shared her suspicions and filled them in on her nephew's history. She offered Johnson the key to her apartment, where they found him asleep on the couch. Apparently, as soon as he'd entered the apartment, he'd ditched his jacket—a blue parka—tossing it in a ball in the closet. They also recovered the weapon. It was stuffed in the pocket of the jacket."

"And that's it?" Starsky's voice rose. "Some two-bit punk out on a joy—"

"Starsk..."

"—ride decides to take out my partner—"

"Starsk..."

The soft voice was more insistent, and Starsky instantly shifted toward the bed. "Watcha need, Hutch?"

"You to calm down. It's over," Hutch whispered. "I'm okay, and they found the guy."

Their eyes met and Starsky nodded his agreement.

"That's it, Starsky," Dobby continued. "Except now he'll be charged with the attempted murder of a police officer, in addition to driving while intoxicated, stealing a car, weapons possession, and whatever else we can throw at him." Dobby looked at Hutch and, seeing him yawn, patted his leg. "Time for us to go. You get some sleep, son." Dobby turned toward Starsky and pointed his finger. "And you...I gave you an order to go home and get some rest. That was hours ago. What are you still doing here?"

Starsky grinned. "Ahhh, c'mon, Captain. You honestly didn't think I'd go anywhere, did ya? Besides, some of the nurses are beginning to think I work here." He looked down at the scrub shirt he was wearing. "I was hoping to get a few phone numbers."

Huggy held out the bag he'd carried in. "Sorry to disappoint you, but *I* knew you wouldn't've left, so I stopped by your place and picked you up a clean shirt, dude."



"Hutch, take it easy. Stop and catch your breath first. Then we'll get you into bed." Starsky dropped the small duffle bag on the floor just inside the door of Hutch's apartment. He kept his hand on Hutch's elbow, guiding him as they slowly continued to move into the room. It was obvious that just going up the steps to his Venice Place apartment had worn Hutch out.

Once Hutch had enough energy to continue, Starsky steered him toward the bedroom. Nearing the bed, Starsky quickly pulled back the blankets, propped up the pillows, and patted the mattress. "Here you go."

"Thanks, Starsk, but you don't have to go to all this trouble."

"What trouble? Just because I washed and changed the sheets for you?" Starsky, in his best Groucho Marx imitation, wiggled his fingers on an imaginary cigar and looked shocked. "Why, I'd do this for anyone."

Hutch started to laugh, and then grabbed his side. "Don't make me laugh. I can't handle it yet."

"Okay, okay. Just get in bed. Doc Morgan said you needed a lot of rest, and I swore to him that you'd get it. Remember, you owe me."

"Owe you? For what?" Hutch asked as he gently sat on the edge of the bed.

"Here, let me help you with your shoes." Starsky knelt down and started untying the shoelaces. "You owe me, because if it wasn't for me convincing the doc I was gonna move in with you until you were better, you'd still be laying in that hospital bed. He wanted you to stay another twenty-four hours. I had to practically swear on..." He paused for a moment and then asked, "You ready?"

"Ready."

Starsky placed his hands under Hutch's knees and helped him lift his legs onto the bed, as Hutch swiveled and cautiously leaned back against his pillows, his right arm supporting the bandage on his side. Starsky saw the beads of perspiration on Hutch's upper lip. "You okay?"

Hutch finally nodded after taking several quick breaths.

Starsky pulled the blanket across Hutch's legs. "I'll get you some water and the pain meds, then you can rest."

Hutch dutifully took the pills Starsky offered. “I’ll be asleep in a few minutes and then you can go home.”

“Home? And why on earth would I do that?”

“Because I’ll be fine, and I don’t think you’ve left my side for more than five minutes in the last couple days.”

Starsky studied Hutch’s pale face. “Well, I guess I better get your ears checked next. I said I was moving in, and *you* better get used to it. I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“Okay, okay. We’ll talk about it later.” Hutch yawned and pulled the blanket up closer to his chest.

“Like hell we will,” Starsky muttered as he picked up Hutch’s shoes and moved them to the end of the bed.

“Whadya say?”

“Nothing. Go to sleep. I’ll be in the other room. Just call if you want something.” Starsky waited for Hutch to close his eyes before he left. He stopped a moment to look back, and whispered, “I ain’t goin’ nowhere, buddy. You can count on it.”



“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Starsky came out of the bathroom barefoot, dressed in his jeans and towel drying his hair. His plan had been to catch a quick shower while Hutch was still asleep, and he was surprised to see Hutch up and walking around.

“I was just lying there thinking about how sick I am of being in bed—any bed.”

“Well, that I can understand. C’mon, let’s swap your bed for the couch.” Starsky swung the towel over his shoulder and moved close to Hutch in case his help was needed, but he resisted the urge to reach out, knowing it was time for Hutch to feel more in control. However, he couldn’t avoid wincing as he watched him slowly bend down to sit on the cushions. “You okay?” Starsky asked, concerned as Hutch grimaced, his right arm held tight against his stomach, supporting his side. When Hutch nodded, he added, “I’ll get you a blanket and pillow.”

“There’s a spare blanket at the top of—” Hutch stopped at the grin on Starsky’s face. “What?”

“It’s not like I don’t know where to find it, Hutch.”

Hutch chuckled. “Oh, yeah, we’ve done this before, haven’t we?”

Starsky returned in a couple minutes, his arms overflowing with the blanket from the closet and two pillows from the bed. “Here, can you shift sideways and put your legs up on the couch? I’ll slide the pillows behind your back for extra support.” He waited patiently as Hutch cautiously pulled his legs onto the couch and stretched them out. That done, he layered the pillows behind Hutch and spread the blanket across his legs.

“Starsky, I’ll be fine. I’m not going to break.”

“I know. I just wanna be sure you’re comfortable.”

“I am. Just sit down; you’re making me nervous.”

Starsky pulled over a kitchen chair, flipped it around, and sat down, his arms resting on the back. “You’re sure I can’t get you anything?”

“A beer.”

“Not likely, not when you’re on meds.”

“What are we going to do? Just sit here looking at each other? Why don’t you turn the TV on?”

“Didn’t you say you had enough of the TV in the hospital?”

“See if you can find an old movie or something.”

Starsky stood and turned on the TV. He continued to flip through the channels, stopping a few minutes here and there to determine if the program was worthwhile. Finding nothing of interest, he turned back to Hutch. “There’s nothing...” But Hutch’s eyes were already closed.



Starsky stirred the contents of the pot on the stove and turned down the heat. Opening the cupboard to his left, he took out two bowls and then removed two spoons from the drawer. He carried them to the table, glancing up to see if his patient was still asleep. He was pleased to see a pair of blue eyes watching him. “So? You decided to join the living?”

“Yeah. What’s for dinner?”

“Huggy dropped off some soup a little while ago. I just finished heating it.”

“I didn’t hear him.”

“You weren’t supposed to. Besides, he only stayed for a minute. He wanted to check on how you were doing and drop the soup off. You feel like getting up, or do you want me to bring it over to you?”

Hutch tossed back the blanket. “I should get up. I’ve been in one position for too long.” He slowly lowered his legs off the couch, sat up, and then took a deep breath, preparing to stand. Even though he’d been home twenty-four hours, moving around was something he still tended to avoid whenever possible. Placing his hands by his sides on the couch, he rose.

Starsky was instantly at his side. “Let me help.” But Hutch waved him away. Respecting his increasing independence, Starsky stepped back, but hung close by as Hutch made his way to the table.

Hutch sat down and picked up his spoon. “Smells good. What have you been doing while I slept?”

“I cleaned up the apartment some, watered your plants, read a little. Watched you.”

Lifting a spoonful of soup to his mouth, Hutch stopped and looked up. “You watched me?”

Starsky chuckled. “Yeah, can you believe I watched you sleep?”

“Why in the world would you do that?” Hutch asked. “You must really be bored. It’s definitely time for you to go home.”

“For one thing, I was appreciating the fact that you were still around, Blondie. You looked pretty peaceful for a change. Besides...” Starsky shrugged. “...there was nothing on TV. I did a few things around here, but there was nothing else that needed doin’, so I sat in the chair and watched you...and...” Starsky stopped, suddenly eager to change the subject “Eat up; your soup’s getting cold.”

“And what?”

“I said, ‘your soup’s getting cold’.”

“No, you were going to say something else. What was it?”

Starsky examined a spot on the floor before replying. “I was gonna say I watched you and...I thought.”

“Thinking can get you—make that *us*—in trouble.” Hutch studied his friend as Starsky got out of his chair, went to stand by the counter, and took a sip of beer from the bottle he’d left there. He’d suddenly become pensive. It had been several days since the shooting, and they’d only talked about it on the surface. Starsky always seemed to avoid

the subject when Hutch brought it up. There was something deeper bothering Starsky, and Hutch knew he had to reach his partner before he shut down or changed the subject again, or he would never get to what was really on his mind. “What did you think about? And tell me the truth.”

“Truth?”

“Truth.”

Starsky silently debated how much he really wanted to say—whether he really wanted to face the thoughts that had been haunting him. Finally, he knew he had to let his partner in; he owed him that much. “While you were sleeping, I had a lot of time to think. I thought about you layin’ there, bleeding. I thought about how close we came this time, and I wondered how many more times you could get shot or hurt before there was permanent damage.” Starsky paused a moment before adding, “I thought about how I failed. How I didn’t cover...”

Thoughts were racing through Hutch’s head, but he considered his reply carefully before answering. He’d suspected Starsky had been feeling guilty, and hadn’t been sure how or when to broach the subject. Now he had an opening. “Oh, Starsk, don’t do this to yourself. First off, you didn’t fail. Me—sitting at this table—is proof of that. I don’t know anyone more dedicated to being a cop than you, and I wouldn’t trust anyone else on that police force to cover my back the way you do. I don’t care how good they are. No one can replace you—replace *us*. We’re partners, a team, remember?” Hutch leaned forward to catch Starsky’s eyes. “Me and thee?” As their eyes connected and Starsky nodded, he continued, “Second, getting shot at or injured is part of the job, and that’s the risk we take. We knew that the day we signed on.”

“I just get sick of watching you get hurt, Hutch.”

“And the same goes for me when it comes to you being hurt. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do. But do you think we’ll ever get sick enough to call it quits?”

“I’ll let you know when I do, if you promise to let me know when you feel the same way. Deal?”

Starsky returned to sit at the table. “Deal, I guess.”

“That doesn’t sound too positive. What do you mean, you ‘guess’?”

“Do you think that’ll happen before one of us gets killed?”

“That’s one question I can’t answer—only God knows if and when that’s going to happen.”

Starsky shrugged. “I think I’d feel better if I had a little more reassurance than that.”

“We can’t know the future, Starsk, you know that. But...as long as you’re the one covering my back, there’s a much smaller chance of me getting hurt or dying.” Hutch watched the emotions playing across Starsky’s face. “One thing *is* certain, and that is, right now, there are a lot more sick people out there that need to be brought to justice before they can harm others. That’s the job we’ve taken on, good or bad. And I’m not ready to call it quits, even after what happened.” He studied Starsky. “Are you?”

Starsky tilted back in his chair and locked eyes with Hutch. “No. I guess I’m not ready to call it quits, not if you aren’t. But I don’t want you to worry; I’ll be there to cover your back, side, front, whatever it takes, so there won’t be a next time.”

“I don’t worry about that.” Hutch’s smile reached his eyes. “By the way, did they ever find it?”

“Find what?”

“Charlie Chaplin’s coffin.”

“Oh, that...not yet. Like you said—there’s a lot of sick people out there.” Starsky motioned with the spoon in his hand. “Eat up, Hutch, while it’s still warm. This is your nurse talking. It’s about time for me to give you your meds and tuck you back into bed.”

“You know, Starsk, you might not be the prettiest nurse around...” Hutch laughed and cuffed Starsky on the head. “...but you make one hell of a partner.”

The End