

Play Ball

By Linda B

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Chapter 1

Thumping his hands impatiently on the steering wheel, Dave Starsky leaned forward and again peered through the windshield. Finally spotting his partner, Ken Hutchinson, exiting from the deli with his hands full, Starsky reached across the seat and pushed open the passenger door.

“Took ya long enough,” he grumbled.

“Look, Starsk,” Hutch replied, carefully sliding into the seat, “next time it’s your turn to stand in line.”

Starsky grinned at his partner. “Not my fault you’ll have to report back to work before you get to eat.”

Hutch handed him a strawberry shake and large pastrami on rye. “Here eat up, buddy. I’ve got about 15 minutes before I’m due back.”

After settling into his seat and shutting the door, Hutch glanced over at his partner to see if he’d started in on his sandwich. It had been over four months since Gunther’s attack on his partner and Starsky still needed to put on more weight. In those four months, Starsky had come back from death, fighting through the pain, through the tears. Now, Starsky was starting his second week back on the job, his doctors finally giving their permission for him to return to a part-time desk job. The two still shared Starsky’s apartment and had easily settled into a morning work routine. They’d rise early and go for a run in the park. They’d start out together but about half way through Starsky would bow out and rest on one of the park benches while Hutch continued running. When Hutch finished his run, he’d swing by to pick up his partner; then the two would jog slowly back to the apartment. After showers and a quick breakfast, usually coffee for Starsky and a health drink for Hutch, the two men then headed to the precinct in separate cars.

“At least you have something to go back to.”

“What do you mean, Starsk?”

“I’m sick of sittin’ at that stupid desk, doin’ nothing but paperwork. I spend my morning being everybody’s clerk.”

“It’s only been two weeks, Starsk! You’ve got to give yourself more time.”

“Time for what? Time to grow old and crotchety like Dobey?”

Hutch chuckled, “No, Starsk.” Then, he added gently, “Time to gain back your strength.”

As Starsky sat, stubbornly silent, Hutch prodded, “Come on, Starsk. You’ve only taken a few small bites.”

Starsky laid the sandwich down and sipped on his shake. “Yeah Hutch, but you’ve got to get back before Dobey gets mad. I’m surprised he’s not screaming at you now for hanging out in the office every morning. ‘Sides, I can take it home and eat it later.”

‘Yeah sure,’ thought Hutch, *‘and when I get home I’ll find it in the trash like the rest.’*

Hutch took a sip of his coffee before responding. “Fine, but you better eat it. Right now drink up that shake and drive me back to work.”

Starsky stuffed the sandwich back into the bag and turned the key in the ignition as he sipped on the shake. He knew Hutch was concerned about him and he really wished he could eat like his partner wanted, but he was just too tired. Starsky didn’t want to admit to Hutch how tired he was, but he was beginning to think even a half-day at a desk was still too much. He couldn’t admit that to anybody because he really wanted to be out on the streets. Hutch hadn’t accepted another partner despite what Dobey said and he was working the streets alone. Starsky knew he had to get out on the streets soon. It was his job to back up his partner. He just wished he didn’t always feel so tired. Ever since starting back to work, he’d go home every day and crash for a few hours. He had to, just so he could stay awake in the evening when Hutch was home. He could tell today wasn’t going to be any different.

Starsky felt Hutch’s eyes studying him, and it was beginning to get irritating. “I’m finishing the shake!” he said angrily, as he pulled the Torino up in front of the precinct. He was tired of constantly having his partner watch him eat, tired of it being the first topic of conversation from Hutch. He knew his partner cared about him. That was why he watched him so carefully. But eating, when and how much, was one thing Starsky felt the need to control. The attack by Gunther had destroyed whatever control he’d had over his life. He needed to take it back—even if it was only one small piece at a time.

“Starsk...”

“Just get back to work. I’ll see ya later.”

Hutch slowly opened the car door and started to climb out. There was a lot he wanted to say but he also knew how to read his partner and this wasn’t the time or the place. “I’ll be home by six, Starsk. I’ll make supper when I get there.”

‘Just get some rest buddy,’ Hutch thought, concerned about the constant dark shadows beneath the blue eyes. *‘You look terrible.’*

Hutch shut the door and started up the steps. He turned his head at the sound of the Torino peeling away from the curb. Wincing at the sound, he shook his head and watched the Torino and his angry partner disappear.



Rubbing his forehead Starsky regretted being angry with his partner. He knew Hutch was concerned about him but after all these months it felt stifling. He just wanted to be normal again, to be out on the street. Doing what he did best...his job, at his partner's side.

Lost in thought, Starsky sensed, rather than saw, the flash of silver to his right. Reacting on instinct he swerved to the left and slammed on the brakes. He winced at the sound of something bouncing off his front right bumper. Adrenaline pumping, he jumped out of the car and ran around the front of the car, stunned to see a silver and blue bike lying in the street and it's young rider lying next to it. He'd never seen the bike coming from between the parked cars.

"Whatcha' doin' man?!!" yelled the young boy as he tried to disentangle his legs from the bike to stand up.

Running over to help the boy, Starsky asked worriedly, "Are you hurt? Just sit there and don't move. I'm gonna check you out." Kneeling next to him, Starsky reached for the boy's shoulders and gently started checking for injuries, his heart racing at the near miss.

"Ouch, that hurts," the tow-haired boy cried, pulling his right elbow from Starsky's hands, tears forming in his eyes.

"Let me look," said Starsky, as he gently rolled up the boy's torn sleeve. "Looks like it's just scrapped to me. It's bleeding a little. Can you bend your arm?"

The boy hesitantly bent his elbow, wincing at the movement.

"What's your name?" asked Starsky studying the blond-haired, blue-eyed boy in front of him. '*Looks like a miniature Hutch,*' thought Starsky and, despite the gravity of the situation, he couldn't help but smile briefly.

"David."

"How old are you?"

"Seven and a half."

"Do you live around here, David?"

David nodded, turning away as he rubbed his shirtsleeve across his eyes, but Starsky had already seen the tears forming. “C’mon, let’s check out your bike.”

Starsky stood and lifted up the bike to inspect it. He tried spinning both wheels. “The front wheel looks bent and the light is broken....”

“The light was already broken,” David mumbled.

“Well, David, looks like I’m gonna’ have to drive ya home.” Starsky gently placed an arm around David’s shoulders.

“Kay,” came the dejected reply.

Starsky carried the bike to the car trunk and loaded it in. He opened the passenger door as David climbed in gingerly holding his elbow.

Five minutes later Starsky and David arrived at the small, rundown house. On the way over, Starsky learned that David lived with his 15-year-old brother, Billy, and their mom, Carol. They’d only been in California for three months and their mom worked evenings at the Bon Ami Lounge, a place Starsky recognized as a sleazy bar and grill.

“What’s your name?” asked David, as Starsky placed the bike next to the back door.

“Same as yours—David.”

“Really?”

“Yep, David Starsky. Sergeant David Starsky.”

“Sergeant?”

“Yeah, I’m a police detective.”

“A policeman?” David asked in wonderment, his eyes open wide. “That’s what I want to be. That and a ball player.”

“Hey, I like your choices. Come on, David, let’s go in and clean up that elbow,”

The two walked to the front door. Removing a chain from around his neck, David unlocked the door and the two entered the small house.

Starsky glanced around the tiny living room. Other than an empty glass, a cereal bowl half filled with milk lying on the coffee table in front of the TV, and several newspaper want ad sections lying on the floor, the small house was neat and tidy.

Concerned, Starsky asked, “Where’s your brother and mom?”

“Billy’s got a paper route. He’ll be home soon. Mom went to work early today.”

Going into the bathroom, Starsky wet a washrag and found some band-aides. He gently, but thoroughly, washed the scrapped area and bandaged it up.

“That feel better?”

“Yeah,” David nodded his head.

“You sure you’re okay? I can take you to the hospital and let them to check you out?” Starsky questioned, scared that he had hurt; no, almost killed the young boy in front of him. The realization made his heart pound and his stomachache. He was glad he’d never eaten the sandwich Hutch had bought him. He knew he wouldn’t have kept it down.

“I’m okay.” David answered, but Starsky knew that wasn’t true when David began to cry.

Starsky reached over to pull David into his arms and whispered, “It’s okay, bud...it’ okay.”

When the sniffing finally stopped, Starsky pulled back to check out his young friend, “Feelin’ better?”

David nodded. “But my bike’s broken and we don’t got no money to fix it.”

“I know, but it’s only the wheel. How about I fix it for you tomorrow?”

David looked up at him and smiled. “Can you?”

Starsky returned the smile and ruffled David’s hair. “Sure, I’ll see ya tomorrow afternoon.”



Back at his apartment Starsky thankfully sank into the comfort of the couch. Working all morning, and the additional stress of the last two hours, had drained him. The near tragedy kept replaying in his mind. The flash of the bike, his instinctive swerve, David lying on the concrete. He knew he’d been tired, distracted when driving, but he’d almost cost the boy his life. ‘*Why wasn’t I paying more attention?*’ he wondered over and over until his head ached. ‘*Will I be too tired, too distracted when I’m working the streets with Hutch? Will I cost him his life?*’

Starsky stretched out on his back, staring at the ceiling. With his left arm resting on his forehead, his body finally gave into its exhaustion.

Chapter 2

“Starsk?” Hutch called softly as he opened the front door. Receiving no reply, Hutch walked in carrying a bag of groceries. Spying his partner asleep on the couch, Hutch carefully shut the front door and walked quietly into the kitchen, setting the bag on the counter.

He walked back over to the couch and covered his partner with the afghan hanging over the back. Hutch didn’t want to disturb him; happy to see the tired, worn expression replaced with a peaceful one. Deciding to let Starsky sleep as long as needed, he went into the kitchen to start supper, humming softly as he worked.

Starsky woke to the sound of silverware clanging. Sitting up, he spotted Hutch setting the table and quickly tried to stand. But he’d moved too quickly and he found he had to grab the back of the couch for support. He stood still, waiting for the dizzy spell to pass.

“Whatcha’ doin’, Hutch? It’s my job to set the table when you’re cookin’.”

“That’s okay, buddy. You were sleeping so peacefully, I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“But...”

“No buts...dinner’s about ready. I stopped at Huggy’s before coming home and he sent over some beef stew. Smells great doesn’t it?” Hutch looked over at his partner before continuing, “I also picked up some salad fixin’s and some of the Italian bread you like.”

Starsky rubbed his hand through his hair, still trying to wake up, but he had to admit the food did smell good.

“You okay?” Hutch asked, beginning to get concerned.

Starsky nodded. “Just wakin’ up still, I guess.”

“Well, go wash up,” Hutch urged Starsky. “Food’s ready.”

Starsky walked into the bathroom and, upon returning a few minutes later, sat down at the dinette table.

“Here you go.” Hutch put the pot of stew on the table in front of him and handed Starsky the ladle. “Did you do anything today?”

Starsky, chewing on a piece of bread, glanced at Hutch and then quickly averted his eyes. “No.” He wasn’t sure why but he knew he couldn’t tell Hutch about the accident today. It had happened because he was tired and he knew his partner well enough to know Hutch would only worry about him. He didn’t need to give Hutch another reason for mothering him. He couldn’t tell Hutch he was

afraid. Afraid that one day he might be too tired to cover his partner's back. Sickened by the thought, Starsky shoved the bowl away.

Concerned, Hutch watched as Starsky quit eating. "You've got to eat more than that, Starsk. Huggy worked some magic here. He'll be really upset when he finds out you didn't eat." He studied Starsky's pale face. He was tired of trying to force food down his partner but he knew he had to do it. Most of the time Starsky acted too tired to care and if he didn't eat more he'd never gain his strength back. At this rate, he'd never be strong enough to come back to work full-time, anytime soon. And Hutch wanted—needed—his partner back.

Reading the concern on Hutch's face, Starsky pulled the bowl back and put a small spoon into his mouth, a slight smile on his face. One that didn't quite reach all the way to his eyes. One that didn't fool Hutch.

The rest of the evening passed quietly as Starsky watched the TV while Hutch read. Hutch knew something was bothering his partner but he hadn't figured out what—yet. Hutch, glad to see that his partner had perked up a little, found himself smiling behind his book as Starsky enjoyed a rerun of Abbott and Costello's "Who's On First" routine. Hutch couldn't help but laugh as Starsky recited the entire routine with the actors.



The next morning brought the usual routine and Hutch was pleased to see that his friend was more animated. He hoped that whatever was bothering his partner last night was now forgotten.

Hutch was sorting through some files on his desk and Starsky was grabbing his umpteenth cup of coffee when Captain Dobey opened his office door and ordered. "Starsky, Hutchinson...get in here now."

The two officers followed Dobey into his office, Starsky stirring the sugar into his coffee.

"What's up, Cap?" asked Hutch, as he and Starsky settled in their chairs.

"There was a murder last night at the Amigo Bar. The bar was robbed and it's owner found in the back alley, shot to death. Shot three times in the back."

"Any witnesses?" Starsky inquired.

"Nope. He was found this morning by the garbage men emptying the trash bins."

"What do you want from us, Cap'n?"

"Well, everyone's caseload is on overload and I thought I'd have you two investigate..."

Starsky sat up straight in his chair. *'Dobey's giving us something that's not just busy work,'* he thought.

Dobey held up his hand. "Starsky before you get too excited, you're still on half days and under doctor's care..."

"I know, Cap'n, but..."

Hutch, shifting in his chair, interjected, "Don't worry Captain, we can handle it. Starsky can make phone calls..." Hutch could feel Starsky glaring at him as he continued, "...we'll just work from the office in the morning and I'll check out the leads in the afternoon."

'That's what you think,' Starsky thought. Here was his chance to prove he could still be a detective. Could still do the only job he ever wanted to do and Hutch was taking away his opportunity.

"Okay." Dobey handed Hutch the casefile. "You need to check in with Barnes and Johnson in Robbery. There've been three different robberies in that neighborhood over the last two weeks but this is the first involving murder. It's their case so they'll call the shots and you two assist."

"Johnson and Barnes work too slow. It should be our case. Why can't we call the shots?" Starsky demanded.

Dobey, intentionally avoiding Starsky's eyes, replied gruffly, "They're good cops. You'll work fine together."

'It's 'cuz of me,' thought Starsky. *'He doesn't think I'm ready.'* Starsky glared at his partner to see if he also felt that way but Hutch continued to flip through the file.

Closing it with a snap, Hutch passed it over to Starsky, who continued to try and make eye contact with his partner. Hutch, purposely avoiding Starsky's eyes, stood up to leave. "We'll get right on it, Cap'n. Are you coming, Starsk?"

Chapter 3

"What the hell was that?" Starsky exploded as soon as Dobey's door was shut.

"Starsk, let's take it outside," Hutch offered softly seeing the heads of their fellow officers shoot up at Starsky's explosion. Hutch grabbed Starsky's arm and steered him toward the hallway door.

Starsky shut his mouth, pulled his arm out of Hutch's reach and glared at the staring officers, daring anyone to speak. The only thing he could think of was that his partner didn't trust him anymore.

Starsky barely controlled his anger until they made it outside the precinct door.

“Let’s go get some coffee, Starsk.”

“Coffee!! I want to know what the hell you’re thinking. ‘We’ll just work from the office in the morning and you’ll check out the leads in the afternoon!’ And…” Starsky could feel himself warming up. “Johnson and Barnes in charge and us assisting!”

“Starsk, I didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” said Hutch trying to placate his partner and calm him down enough to have a rational discussion. And watching his partner’s reaction, Hutch realized that was going to be a near impossibility.

“Didn’t mean it the way it sounded!” Starsky sputtered. “Since when did you start liking working alone?”

“I don’t buddy. I don’t…just let me explain.”

They’d walked down the sidewalk to the small park on the corner and Starsky sank into one of the black park benches. Hutch could already see signs of weariness in his partner’s face and he was sorry he’d upset him. “Look, Starsk. I know you’re itching to get back out on the street. I want that too but we still need to take it a little slow…”

“Quit mothering me!!!”

Hutch took a deep breath and continued, “I was just trying to buy us a little time. Dobeys given us a chance here to work a real case and there’s always things to do before we hit the streets—talk to Barnes and Johnson in Robbery, review similar crimes, check release dates from previous felons. I can do some follow-up in the afternoon—like interviewing witnesses by myself. You’re tired now. Over the next couple days you’ll build up some more strength and we can then go out together. If you start too soon, or do too much you’ll wear yourself out. And you know Dobeys will be watching. If he suspects we can’t do it he’ll pull us with out blinking an eye.”

Starsky sat glumly staring at his folded hands. He’d caught Hutch’s verbiage. ‘If he suspects we can’t do it’, knowing Hutch was taking part of the responsibilities. *‘What you should have said is if Dobeys suspects I can’t do it,’* thought Starsky.

After several minutes of angry silence, Starsky relaxed and sighed. He knew his partner had a point. “Okay, let’s just go back to work. I’m too tired to argue with you. I have to save it up for Johnson and Barnes.”

Hutch stood up and reached out a hand to help Starsky stand up. “Come on, pal. Let’s go back to the office. We’ll solve this case and get back on the street doin’ it.”

Starsky’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, but he reached for Hutch’s extended hand and stood up.



The majority of the morning had been spent meeting with Johnson and Barnes, reviewing casefiles and shaping strategy. Hutch had sat back and let Starsky handle the meeting with Johnson and Barnes and as always his partner's instincts and intensity amazed him. And while Starsky wasn't satisfied with the situation, Hutch was thrilled when he saw his partner quickly drawn into the facts of the case. It was good to see him back at work—really back at work—not just sitting at a desk doing busy work. Looking at his partner's deep blue eyes alive and sparkling despite the pale face, Hutch couldn't help but feel his partner was back.

Starsky had been unusually quiet at lunch and Hutch figured he was mulling over the facts they'd learned that morning. Reluctantly Starsky had agreed that Hutch would question the other robbery victims, while he'd search the casefiles for similarities or any possible leads.

Hutch was pleasantly surprised that Starsky didn't gripe anymore about the situation. Actually, his partner seemed lost in thought several times during lunch and when Hutch had questioned him, he'd just shrugged him off. *'Something besides this case has to be bothering him'* thought Hutch, *'I'll find out what it is tonight.'*



Starsky walked up the front steps and knocked on David's front door. When no one came to answer it, he knocked harder and listened for any sounds. Hearing the TV, he knocked louder and, still not receiving a response, tried the doorknob. Finding it unlocked, he pushed it open and yelled. "David!"

When David didn't come, he walked into the small livingroom, glanced in the kitchen and, then, hearing the sound of TV emanating from the bedroom to the right, knocked on it's door.

The door opened a crack and David peeked out.

"Hi!" he yelled in recognition.

"Well, hi there. Didn't you hear me knock?" At the shake of the blond head in front of him, Starsky admonished, "You should turn the TV down and you shouldn't leave the front unlocked. It's not safe. Anyone could walk in."

The smile on David's face disappeared and Starsky felt terrible. "C'mon, there's a new tire and light for your bike in my trunk."

David's smile flashed back. He pulled the bedroom door open and ran to the front door. "Well, c'mon," he said enthusiastically, motioning for Starsky to get moving.

Starsky couldn't help grinning back and he quickly followed him out the door.

“Well, there you go.” Starsky stood up, wiping his hands on his already dirty jeans. He picked up his tools and returned them to his trunk.

David jumped on the repaired bike and rode swiftly down the street.

“It works great!” he yelled back, as he turned at the corner and returned. Starsky, leaning against the Torino, arms across his chest, smiled at David’s pleasure.

David rode up to Starsky and jumped off the bike. “Thanks!”

“Glad it works,” Starsky replied as he rumbled David’s hair. “Hey, you want to go for ice cream?”

“Sure!”

“Well, put the bike away and get in the car. We’ll drive to the ice cream store.”

David hurriedly walked his bike over to the side of the house and leaned it against the tree nearby. He then jumped in the front seat of the Torino.

“Is this going to be alright with your Mom?”

“Yeah, I told her a cop was gonna fix my bike.”

“Did you tell her how it got broke?” Starsky asked, concerned about what David’s mother thought about him and the incident and if she’d call the precinct to complain about him being so careless.

David hid his face. “No, ‘cause I know she would’ve said I should have been watching for cars.”

Starsky glanced at him as they drove down the block. “Well, it was my fault, too. I guess neither one of us was doin’ our job.”

David looked up, relief on his face.

At the ice cream store, David quickly ordered a large cone with a double scoop of chocolate ice cream.

After watching Starsky pay for the cone but order nothing for himself, David inquired, “Don’t you like ice cream?”

“Sure, but I don’t feel like havin’ any today.”

Noticing a park across the street, Starsky offered, “C’mon, there’s a park. Let’s go sit over there.”

The two waited for the traffic to clear and hurried across the street. Sitting on a park bench they watched a neighborhood ballgame in progress, cheering when the underdogs hit a homerun.

“So, you like baseball?” Starsky asked.

“Yeah,” David answered, the ice cream dripping down the side of the cone and his arm. “Member, I want to be a ball player?”

“That’s right,” said Starsky remembering their earlier conversation. “You play on a team?”

“Nah, but I catch real good. Billy and me play all the time.”

Starsky was silent for a few moments and then suggested, “How about I come over tomorrow afternoon and we play some ball?”

Excited, David turned toward him, large blue eyes staring at him “Really?”

Starsky put his arm around David’s shoulder. “Really? I’ll be by tomorrow afternoon. C’mon, I better get ya home before your mom starts worryin’ and calls the cops.”

Sliding into the driver’s seat, Starsky noticed two, large chocolate spots on his jeans. ‘*Boy, am I glad we decided to go sit in the park.*’ Images of chocolate stains covering his beloved car seats made him cringe.

Chapter 4

Startled, Starsky opened his eyes and tried to orient himself. A noise –the sound of pots and pans banging—had startled him awake. After a quick glance at the clock, which read 6:30, and hearing more sounds coming from the kitchen, Starsky realized Hutch was working on dinner. After dropping David off at his house, he’d come home and stretched out on the bed. Now three hours later, he was waking up. The sounds of Hutch pattering in the kitchen brought a smile to his lips. ‘*What would I have done without you buddy...always taken’ care of me...worryin’ about me...*’

Starsky stood up and walked to the bedroom door. After silently watching his friend for a moment, he asked, “Need any help?”

Startled, Hutch looked up and smiled, “Sleep well?”

“Guess so...whatcha’ makin’?”

“Some lasagna.” Pleased at Starsky’s sudden interest in food, Hutch set the salad bowl in his hands on the table and pulled out a chair. “Come have a seat. The garlic bread and lasagna are just about done.”

“So how did the afternoon go?”

“Not much new info. I interviewed the three owners previously robbed and I also talked to about 20 waitresses.”

“Twenty?...Uh...tough assignment, hey?”

“Yeah, I had a few stuff their phone numbers in my hip pocket.” Hutch grinned. “If you eat nice, maybe I’ll share a few.”

Hutch filled Starsky in on the interviews, while keeping a watchful eye on how much his partner ate. And while it wasn’t anywhere near his former eating habits, Hutch was pleased to see Starsky eating more than picking at his food for once.

“It seems all three bars were robbed after they’d been closed for the night. Two men entered through the back door leading to the alley when all the customers and most or all the employees were gone. Looks like they stake out the place until it’s empty. Unfortunately, one employee didn’t leave soon enough and ended up in the hospital with a concussion when he refused to cooperate but he couldn’t identify anyone.”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t?”

Hutch shrugged, “Couldn’t, I think.”

“Anybody notice any cars hanging around?”

“Nothing unusual. All the bars have city parking lots nearby so a car could easily park for quite awhile and go unnoticed.”

“What’s up for tomorrow?”

“I guess we’ll continue checking out the employees and see if they’ve got any records, or see if we find any connections. Nothing’s obvious but who knows.”

The rest of the evening they watched some TV and Starsky even cajoled Hutch into a couple of chess games; Starsky winning both, much to Hutch’s chagrin. Relaxed and enjoying his friend’s company, Hutch forgot about Starsky’s distracted behavior at lunch.



“C’mon buddy, let’s take a break.” Concerned, Hutch watched Starsky rubbing his tired eyes. “We’ve been going over these employee records and files for a couple of hours and aren’t coming up with anything. “Let’s get out of here before Dobey decides to load something else on us.”

It had been a frustrating morning. They'd been buried in paper all morning and nothing had turned up. Twice they had thought they were onto something, but their suspicions were quickly thrown out when they learned both suspects were currently behind bars.

Starsky looked up and nodded. "Sounds good to me. I could use a break." He stood up and headed toward the door, Hutch close at his heels.

"Starsky! Hutchinson!" The loud bellow came from their captain's closed office door.

Hutch looked at his partner and shrugged. Grinning, Starsky opened the door and they disappeared down the hall.

Dobey pushed his office door open and walked into the squad room. "Starsky! Hutchinson!"

The three remaining officers looked up at their captain, and one brave soul pointed out, "They're not here, sir..."

"I see that, Lopez," bellowed Dobey. "Tell 'em to get in my office as soon as they're back!" With that, Dobey turned on his heels and walked quickly back into his office, letting the door slam behind him.



"Here ya go. It's gonna be high and to the left," yelled Starsky as he threw the ball to David. They'd been playing catch for over an hour and Starsky's arm was starting to tire. As David caught the ball, Starsky yelled, "Let's sit down for awhile." He headed for the bench nearby.

"You've got a good arm," he told his young companion, as David ran over toward him.

"I told ya I'm gonna be a ball player when I grow up."

"And what position do you want to play?"

"Outfield and I want to hit them out of the park, just like Babe Ruth."

Starsky sank gratefully into the seat, but he couldn't help smiling when David asked, "You tired already?"

"Yeah, remember I'm an old man."

"No older than my dad and he can play a long time before he gets tired."

At the first mention of his dad, Starsky couldn't resist asking, "Where is your dad?"

“He’s in Chicago. My mom and him had a big fight and we moved out here.” David tossed the baseball into his mitt several times before continuing softly, “Me and Billy miss him.”

Starsky ruffled David’s hair and mumbled to himself, “Yeah kid, I know what you mean. I miss my dad, too.” Starsky’s thoughts drifted back to the warm summer nights in New York when he and his dad played catch in the front yard. He remembered tossing the ball to his dad until twilight hit, stopping only because they couldn’t see the ball anymore. It was easy to imagine his dad throwing the ball and yelling “high and to the outside,” as he’d run back to catch the long ball...

“Wanna’ ride on the swings?”

Startled from his memories, Starsky answered, “No, you go ahead. I’ll just sit here.”

Watching David run over to the playground, he couldn’t help but smile when the sunlight bounced off his blond hair reminding him of his partner.

An hour later the Torino pulled up in front of David’s home, both its occupants tired from the sun and fresh air, ice cream cone and strawberry shake purchased and devoured. Starsky turned to David, as he shifted into park. “I’ll see ya tomorrow, okay?”

David nodded, “Kay. Can we play ball again?”

Starsky chuckled, “I don’t know if this old man’s arm can hold up, but sure it’s okay with me. I’ll be back same time tomorrow. You’re sure your mom’s okay with this?”

“Yeah, I told her ‘bout the bike, you fixin’ it, and us playin’ ball. She said it was okay. ‘Better I played ball with a cop than be picked up by one.’”

Starsky laughed, “Your mom’s a smart lady. Okay, go on inside. I’ll see ya tomorrow.”

Starsky watched until David was inside, then shifted into gear and drove off for home and a welcome nap.

Chapter 5

A week had gone by and there were no breaks in the case. The two teams had gotten into several arguments. Starsky was tired of always being indoors and at his desk. His fuse was getting shorter and shorter and both he and Hutch were tired of assisting Johnson and Barnes. They wanted to take the case over themselves. There had been two additional robberies but, luckily, no additional deaths. The lack of progress was wearing on everyone’s nerves and had Dobey down their backs.

For Hutch, the one bright spot in the week was Starsky’s increased appetite and the more relaxed expression on his face; that was unless he was around Johnson and Barnes. Hutch couldn’t explain

why but he knew he was watching his partner gradually return to his old self. Starsky still looked thin and tired but the pinched, haggard look around his eyes was disappearing and color was returning to his face. In the evenings, Starsky always looked more relaxed and seemed to rebound with a little more energy. But the best part to Hutch was the sound of Starsky's laughter. It came more frequently now, was deeper and lasted longer. Every chuckle, every laugh reached deep into Hutch's heart.

Hutch just wished he could hear it now, as tension filled the room and the frustration had the four of them turning on each other. "C'mon guys, there has to be some connection." Starsky, frustrated, glared around the table at Barnes, Johnson and Hutch. They'd spent the last half-hour rehashing the facts and were getting nowhere.

"All we've got to go on is a partial fingerprint," interjected Johnson, "and we aren't even sure of that."

"What about past employees, any grudges?"

"Starsky, you know we've looked into that angle!" Johnson exploded, standing up suddenly and overthrowing his chair.

"Look, there's no point in getting angry." Hutch, ever the voice of reason, tried breaking the tension as he placed his hand on Starsky's shoulder. He'd been observing his partner's rapidly changing facial expressions and he decided to step in before an angry retort erupted. "We all want to catch these two guys before anyone else is hurt or killed. We've asked all the bar owners to come up with an employee list covering the past 10 years. If we have to go back farther than that, we will. The next step is to check employees' relatives and friends for any connections. I'll stop by the bars this afternoon and we can go over them tomorrow morning. I'll also start checking on the bars in the areas that haven't been hit. Maybe someone will know something."

"You mean. I'll be checking on the relatives," mumbled Starsky unhappily. Starsky felt Hutch's hand tighten on his shoulder as he overheard the comment. Starsky was tired of having to do police work from his desk. It was all grunt work, work a rookie could do. He knew it needed to be done, but he needed to be out on the streets, with his partner...if only the doctors would clear him fit for duty.

"Look Starsky, why don't you see if you can find..."

Starsky stood up, shrugging Hutch's hand off his shoulder. He avoided looking at his partner and walked to the door. "Look Johnson, I'll do my job," Starsky replied, pointing his finger at Johnson. "I'll sit her for hours and go through the lists. I'll do all the grunt work neither you nor Barnes want to do while you're out there running around on the streets. Just don't tell me how to do it. No one, except my partner and my Captain, tells me what to do."

Starsky walked to the door and yanked it open. Hutch, close on his heels, turned toward Johnson and Barnes, "We'll take care of our end...you take care of yours."

Fifteen minutes. Hutch glanced at his watch again. Twenty minutes. Twenty minutes since Starsky, with Hutch on his heels, had stormed out of the building, entered the police garage, climbed into the Torino and peeled out of the exit. And not a word had been spoken in those twenty minutes. Hutch waited. Waited impatiently for his partner to speak. He knew his partner needed time—time to cool off, time to relax, time to think rationally.

At thirty minutes, he couldn't stand it any longer. "Starsk..."

"Don't even say it, Hutch. I blew it. I know it. Now they'll go to Captain Dobey and tell him and he'll pull us from the case."

"No, he won't."

"Johnson just gets under my skin. He's so superior and loves to tell me what to do..."

"You're a better cop than he is and he knows it. Just learn to ignore him..."

"IGNORE HIM!"

'Now I've really blown it,' thought Hutch. Trying to calm his upset partner down, Hutch responded quietly, "We've only got to work with him for little while. We'll do our part of the investigation and steer clear of him."

Expecting an angry retort from his partner, Hutch was surprised at the strange silence and then, the unexpectedly quiet response.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry for losin' your temper at Johnson? He deserved it!"

"No, sorry that I've probably gotten us thrown off this case...your first real case in months."

Hutch looked at his partner staring straight ahead and reached over to place his hand on Starsky's shoulder. They'd come so far in the last few months he couldn't stand seeing his best friend look so miserable. "Hey, you won't get us thrown off. Dobey knows better than that. He needs us to solve this case."

Starsky glanced over at his partner with a weak grin. "Yeah, he 'needs' us, right?"

"C'mon, you're yelling all the time. When did Dobey ever threw us off a case because of it?"

Starsky's silence was the only acknowledgement Hutch needed. "C'mon, let's go to Huggy's for lunch and then I'll go pick up all the lists so you have something to do tomorrow."



"High and to the right!" Starsky grinned as he watched David run to the right, mitt high in the air, "Perfect catch! Let's try to the left now..."

Hutch had spent most of the afternoon stopping at the various bars to pick up their past and present employee lists. There was only one more stop to make. He turned onto Burton St. and as he headed east he was surprised to see Starsky's Torino parked in the City Park's parking lot. *'What's he doin' here? I thought he was going home to take a nap...'*

Curious, Hutch pulled into the lot. He didn't want his partner to feel like he was spying on him but he couldn't resist the urge to make sure Starsky was okay.

Hutch walked across the grass and up a hill. Pausing beside a tree at the top, he found himself overlooking a baseball field. There, he spotted Starsky hitting a baseball high and to the left. A boy, about 8 years old Hutch guessed, ran to the left and made a perfect catch.

"Another great catch!" Starsky's voice carried to the top of the hill and Hutch had to chuckle as he watched Starsky peer out from under his NY Yankees baseball cap.

"I'm thirsty," yelled the boy, arm and mitt dropping to his side.

"Kay." Starsky motioned the boy toward him. "Let's take a break."

'Who is this kid?' wondered Hutch. *'I've never seen him and I don't remember Starsky mentioning him.'*

Watching the two interact, Hutch could tell they'd known each other for a while. He started to take a step toward them and, then, for some unknown reason, stopped. From the top of the hill, Hutch watched the two resting on one of the dugout seats. They drank companionably and talked quietly. It was obvious they'd been here before. *'Is this where the tan's coming from, buddy? The return of the bounce in your step?'*

After watching for a few minutes more, Hutch quietly turned and walked away, a smile forming at his lips.



"Hey, what's that I smell?" asked Starsky, running his hand through his ruffled curls.

"How was your nap?"

“Good, I think...” Starsky rubbed the sleep from his eyes and sat back on the couch. He was still tired from the day’s events but the smells had awakened him. “What’s for dinner? Hot dogs?”

“No wonder you’re a detective.” Hutch teased. “It is hot dogs...”

Starsky stood and stared at his partner as if he’d gone crazy. Hutch never ate hot dogs and he teased Starsky incessantly about eating them any chance he got.

“...cooked just like at the ball park, even have some chili and onions for you to put on them.” Hutch set a bowl of chopped onions on the table. ‘C’mon, sit down and eat. They’ll get cold fast.”

Starsky sat down, not taking his eyes off his partner, leery of what might come next. Hutch placed small bowls of chili and shredded cheese on the table, and encouraged Starsky again, “C’mon, eat up.”

Hesitantly reaching for the bowl of chili, Starsky’s eyes followed Hutch over to the counter. *‘He must be sick.’* Sick or not, Starsky decided he was going to eat but he’d watch his partner’s every move.

After a few minutes, Hutch sat down and started in on his own salad. “So what did you do this afternoon, Starsk?”

Starsky, still studying his partner, replied, “Not much, took a nap as usual, worked on my ship model.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Just interested.” Hutch, suddenly mesmerized by his salad, wondered why his partner was keeping his young friend a secret. He reached across the table and handed Starsky a bowl, “Here’s some onions for your hot dogs.”

“You hate it when I eat onions.”

“Well, just remember to gargle when you’re done.”

Chapter 6

It had been a long day. Dobby had pulled them off the case to work on some old case files and this was his fifth and last stop before going home. About 5 p.m. Hutch walked in the door at Bon Ami Bar, one of the bars in the robbery area. His eyes quickly roved across the room. There were two

men at the bar and customers filled three tables. Two waitresses and the bartender looked to be the only employees. He approached the bar as the bartender looked up.

“What can I get ya?” The bartender asked, wiping the bar in front of the stool where Hutch sat.

“Information. Where’s the owner?” Hutch asked, flipping open his police badge and ID.

“Not here at the moment. Went to the bank. Whatcha’ want?”

“Just looking for some info about the string of robberies happening in the area.”

“Yeah...heard about them, but I just started last week. One of the bars down the street was already hit. Mr. Steele, the owner, owns that one, too, but you probably know that already.”

Hutch twisted around on the stool and leaned his elbows on the bar. Glancing around the bar, he nodded. “Yeah, that’s why I wanted to see him. Have you been seeing anyone new hanging out around here?”

“No, but then I’m so new I’m still learning the regulars. Why don’t you talk to Betty and Carol,” he suggested, pointing at the two waitresses. “They’ve worked here longer.”

Hutch thanked him and took a seat at the table closest to the kitchen door. He watched the waitresses working for a while. Finally, one of the waitresses, a blond about 30, approached him. “What can I get for you?”

“Just some coffee and a little information.” Hutch showed her his badge as she placed a glass of water in front of him.

Returning with the coffee, she sat down briefly. “I can’t stay for long. I have tables to look after.”

“That’s okay. Your name?”

“Carol...Carol Taylor.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“About three months. I moved here about three months ago with my two boys.”

“Are you aware of the robberies taking place in the neighborhood?”

“Yeah, who isn’t. They’ve got everybody on edge.”

“Have you seen or heard anything that might be suspicious? Or might help us in this investigation?”

“No, but maybe Betty has. She worked over at the Amigo Bar where that guy was killed. She works here on a part-time basis.”

“I’ll talk to her, thanks.” Hutch reached into his pocket, pulling out a piece of paper and pen. “Here’s my phone number, in case you think of anything. Just give me a call.”

“Sure. I’ll go cover for Betty and send her over to talk to you.” Carol hesitated a second before leaving. “I hope you find them soon. I worry about my two boys. What if something happened to me...”

Hutch looked carefully at the pretty face in front of him. He reached over and patted her hand. “Don’t worry. We’ll get them soon.”

Carol couldn’t help smiling back at the blue eyes filled with concern. Reassured, she didn’t doubt what he said. She walked over to Betty and talked to her quietly, pointing at Hutch waiting in the corner.

Betty, a tall red head about 35, sauntered over, chewing her gum. “Carol said you wanted to talk to me.”

“Yeah.” Hutch held out his hand to shake hers. He noticed her hand trembling slightly, and he motioned for her to have a seat. Trying to put her at ease, he continued, “It’ll only be for a few minutes. I’m Sergeant Ken Hutchinson and I just wanted to find out what you might know about the robberies that have been occurring around here.”

Busily chewing on her gum, Betty answered, “I don’t know anything. I work here and at the Amigo Bar but I wasn’t working the night it got robbed.”

“Did you notice anyone strange? Anyone hanging around? Someone other than the regulars?”

“They’re all strange. Nope, I didn’t notice anyone.” Betty stood up, crossed her arms and stared at Hutch.

“You done askin’ questions? I got customers to go serve.”

“That’s all for now. Here’s my number. Call me if you remember anything.”

Betty glanced at the number and shoved it into her pocket. “Yeah, sure.”



It was late and Carol was tired. Tired of late nights, tired of being away from her boys. She washed off the tables as the bartender, Danny, washed the floor. Betty’s shift had ended two hours earlier and now she was stuck with cleaning up.

“You look tired, Carol.”

“I am. Can’t wait to put my feet up.”

“Well, I’ll let you out the front door and you can go home. I’ll just dump this bucket out in the alley and then, I’m outta here, too.”

“You sure?” Carol inquired gratefully.

Danny picked up her purse from the bar, took her right elbow and walked her to the door. “Where’s your car?”

“In the city lot next door.”

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Sure. ‘Night Danny and thanks.”

Carol quickly walked out the front door and turned to her left. She crossed the alley entrance that ran next to the building and hurried to her car sitting in the lot next door. This wasn’t the best of neighborhoods and she disliked walking to her car alone. She always tried to find a spot under the parking lot light for safety purposes. Carol unlocked the door and tossed her purse inside on the passenger’s seat. As she slid into the driver’s seat, the sound of gunshots filled the night silence. Quickly slamming the car door and locking it, she inserted her key and started the car. Suddenly to her left she saw two men running from the alley. Both were dressed in dark clothes, and while she couldn’t see their faces, the streetlights reflected off the gun in the taller man’s hand. He glanced across toward the lot and she sat there like a deer caught in a car’s headlights. She saw him veer toward her car, but when the sound of a police siren filled the night he continued after his partner through the lot and to a black van parked at the very back. Their tires squealed as they flew out of the lot and down the street into the dark.

Carol watched the police car come to a sudden stop in front of the Bon Ami Bar and she realized the shots had come from there. Danny! She scrambled out the door and ran down the alley behind the police cruiser. The sight of Danny lying on the ground, blood spreading across his shirt stopped her from going any further. She covered her mouth and turned away, afraid she was going to be sick.

“Miss, back away.” One of the police officers called out; then, as he came toward her, he asked, “Did you see anybody?”

Carol nodded but she couldn’t speak. *‘Only five minutes ago I was in the bar talking with Danny.’*

“Come with me, Miss.” The police officer steered her toward his police cruiser. Carol avoided looking at Danny and was startled to see the flashing lights of two more police cruisers pulling into the alley. She hadn’t heard their sirens. All she could hear was the pounding of her heart.



Hutch jerked awake at the sound of the phone ringing. He quickly grabbed it, wondering how many times it had rung and he hoped it hadn't woken his partner.

"Hutchinson."

"Hutch. This is Minnie. Sorry to wake you but there's been another robbery..."

"Where? Anyone hurt?"

"At the Bon Ami Bar and one man was killed."

'Damn,' thought Hutch. '*I was just there this afternoon.*'

"You said you wanted to be alerted immediately..."

"It's okay, Minnie. Thanks. Tell dispatch I'll be right there."

Hutch ran his right hand through his hair and reached for the jeans he'd thrown over the chair last night.

"Who was it Hutch?"

The sight of his partner standing in the bedroom door answered Hutch's question about the call waking him.

"That was Minnie." Hutch replied, pulling on his tennis shoes. "Someone was shot and killed at the Bon Ami Bar...another robbery. I'm on my way over to check it out."

"I'm coming with you."

"Starsk..."

"I'll be ready in a minute."

Hutch shook his head and pulled on his other shoe. He didn't have time for an argument with his partner even though he knew his partner didn't need to be up in the middle of the night running around town. '*Starsk, you'll be exhausted tomorrow*' he thought, '*and Dobby will have my head.*' But at the same time, he knew how great it would feel to have his partner by his side.

"I'm coming, don't leave without me!"

Hutch smiled at the frantic yell from the other room. "Well, move it then. I'll go start the car."

Two minutes later they were racing down the road, siren blaring, lights flashing. Hutch filled Starsky in with the little information Minnie had given him and as they pulled to a stop in front of the bar they watched the coroner's van pull away from the scene. Exiting the car, Starsky walked into the alley, while Hutch, noticing one of the women he'd talked to earlier sitting in the back of the cruiser, walked over to her.

"Carol?"

Carol finally looked up and found she staring into blue eyes. The same soft, blue eyes she'd looked into in the afternoon.

"Carol, are you okay? Are you hurt?" Hutch asked gently, remembering their conversation. He thought about her two boys and her fear that they might end up motherless. At the sight of a slight smile, Hutch was relieved.

"They shot Danny," she whispered.

"Did you see anything?"

Carol shook her head. "I was in my car, ready to leave."

"Sergeant Hutchinson..."

Hutch turned to see James Baker, a young black officer, at his right elbow. "She's been pretty shook up since we got here. I was gonna' take her to precinct for her statement."

Hutch nodded and touched Carol's hand. "Go with Officer Baker. He'll take care of you."

Straightening up, Hutch patted Baker on the back and whispered, "Take care of her, will you?"

Hutch started for the alley, searching for his partner. Not seeing him, he entered the bar through the back door. Despite the gravity of the situation, Hutch had to smile at the sight of his partner leaning against the bar, busily jotting down notes as he talked to one of the uniformed officers. Regardless of what anyone else thought, his Starsky was back.

"What's up?" The voice came from behind him and Hutch turned to see Johnson entering the bar. *'Oh, great, just what we need.'*

At the sound, Starsky turned and started toward his partner. Johnson came up next to them and asked, "What are you doing here Starsky? Dobey let you out from behind the desk?"

Hutch was about to lunge at Johnson when he felt Starsky's hand on his right elbow restraining him. "It isn't worth it, buddy," came his whispered voice. To Johnson, Starsky retorted. "Well, it's about time you crawled out of bed and showed up. Though I don't know why you bothered; we've already done your job."

Johnson sent Starsky a withering look as Starsky sauntered past him and back into the alley. Hutch decided to follow his partner's example and followed him out the doorway. When he found him leaning against the brick wall just outside the door, Hutch touched Starsky's shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. "Come on, let's go to headquarters. Baker's got a possible witness. Let's see what he's found out."

At headquarters, Hutch went to find Baker and Carol, while Starsky searched for coffee. Fifteen minutes later, Hutch found Starsky sitting at his desk, feet up, looking through some files. Starsky looked up, "She know anything?"

Hutch shook his head. "She didn't really see the shooting," he said, as he filled his cup from the coffeepot, "though she saw two men running from the alley, cross the parking lot and get into a black van."

"They see her?"

"Looks like one might of...at least, she says he looked directly at her sitting in her car. Seems to be in shock at the moment, maybe she'll remember more tomorrow."

"Do you think she's in any danger?"

Hutch shrugged. "It's a possibility; if he thinks she can recognize him." Hutch looked at his partner and could see the rings starting to form around his eyes. "C'mon buddy, let's go home and get a few more hours of sleep before we have to report in..."

"Yeah, let's go...coffee's rancid anyway." Starsky threw the Styrofoam cup in the trashcan and pushed the door open. "Dobey'll have my head in the morning but it sure felt good bein' back on the street together."

Hutch grinned and slapped his partner on the back as they exited. "You bet."

Chapter 7

The next morning Starsky buried his head in the pillow at the sound of the alarm. It couldn't be time to get up yet!

"Hey, sleepy head, rise and shine."

The cheery yell from the other room only made Starsky bury his head deeper into the pillow. He didn't hear his partner enter the room but he felt the towel as it whacked the back of his legs. "I said get up. You can't sleep all day. Gotta' face Dobey sooner or later."

Hutch chuckled at the muffled response coming from beneath the pillows. He'd been up for awhile and, having reset the alarm for his partner, decided to take a short run by himself. He figured Starsky could use the extra sleep, besides Hutch didn't have the heart to wake him. Since their return at 3 a.m., Starsky had slept soundly. There had been no dreams, no nightmares to awaken him. And, while these were becoming more infrequent in the last month, one was too much for Hutch. It wasn't only his partner who suffered through them.

"The shower is waiting for you and I'll have your coffee ready for you when you get out."

Starsky sat up, mumbled something and headed for the bathroom.

As soon as they entered the squad room, they could hear Dobey's voice through the closed office door. They quickly slid into their seats and started to look busy, when the door opened and Dobey barked, "Starsky! Hutchinson! My office! Now!"

Both stood and filed past their captain and into his office. Before they'd reached the chairs, Dobey bellowed, "There was another robbery!"

Hutch tried to slow the onset. "We know, Cap'n..."

"Another murder..."

"Yes, Cap'n..."

"And when do you plan on bringing these guys in?"

"We're doing our best..."

"That ain't good enough! The media is all over the Commissioner."

As Dobey stopped for a breath, Hutch managed to add, "This time there's a possible witness."

"What witness?"

"Well, she's a waitress at the bar and she was sitting in her car when the robbery occurred. Officer Baker tried to get some information from her last night but she was still in shock. I plan on talking to her later today."

Starsky sat quietly; afraid he'd direct Dobey's attention at himself if he opened his mouth. He felt badly that his partner was taking Dobey's wrath but right now he was into self-preservation. He knew Hutch would understand.

"...she did see a black van and was able to get two letters off the license plate..."

"Well, what are you waitin' here for? Get on it!"

Both men stood, ready for a quick exit, Hutch adding, “We’re on it, Captain.”

They’d almost made it to the door when Dobby cleared his throat, “And Starsky...what were you doing at the crime scene last night? No one has cleared you for active duty yet.”

Starsky kept his hand on the doorknob and didn’t turn to look at his partner or his captain. “Would you believe, I was just out for a late night snack and happened on the scene. I just stopped in to see if I could be of any assistance.”

“*Would I believe!*” Dobby threw his pencil on his desk but he stopped yelling. Instead, he continued, in a voice tired and strained, “Both of you get out of here and find those murderers. The bartender was only 28, in LA for two months...and given that tomorrow will be his birthday, I now get to call his parents and tell them that their son is dead.”

Feeling his partner’s hand gently squeezing his shoulder, Starsky pushed open the door and they exited quietly, leaving Captain Dobby staring out his office window.

Hutch called the DMV to check on the license plate number while Starsky checked on whether any black vans had been reported stolen the night before.

Setting the phone down on its cradle, Starsky picked up the pencil he’d been playing with and began tapping it on his desk. “No black vans were reported stolen yesterday.”

“Well, that might help narrow the search. DMV should be getting back to us momentarily.”

“Hutch?”

“What?”

“You know that witness is probably in danger, if they think she can ID them.”

Hutch glanced over at his partner. “Could be. It’s possible they don’t have any idea who she is but if they’ve been casing out the joint they’ll recognize her as a waitress in the bar.”

“If they do, they’ll play hard ball and her life is on the line.”

“I’ll stop by and talk to her some more this afternoon. Maybe she’ll remember more now that the shock has worn off. I’ll stop at her place after I check out the info from the DMV. Before anything happens, we’ll get her protection.”

“She got any kids?”

“Yeah, two boys.”

The ring of the phone interrupted their conversation. Hutch grabbed for it and his pen and paper. After writing furiously for several minutes, he hung up the phone and said, “Well, DMV has 20 vans with a license plate number containing a two and a six. I’ll check ‘em out later, after we run them through R&I for any possibles. I’m going down to R&I now, wanna’ come?”

Starsky, looking dejected, shook his head, “Nah, I’ve still got this stack of reports Dobby gave me yesterday. I better get them done or he’ll really be all over me.”



After another loud, unsuccessful meeting with Johnson and Barnes, the morning finished up quietly. Johnson and Barnes had left to investigate a tip on another robbery case and Hutch had agreed to check out the vans and the owners in the afternoon. Watching a tired, dejected Starsky drive away after lunch, Hutch walked to the police garage for his car and made a mental note to talk to Carol again before the day was over.



Contrary to his usual afternoon plans with David, Starsky decided to head home first for a short nap and then over to his young friend’s house to play ball. He was still feeling pretty tired from the previous night’s interrupted sleep but he certainly wasn’t going to tell Hutch. *‘Probably don’t need to tell ‘im. He reads me like a book anyways.’*



After lunch Dobby called Hutch into the office to review several case files with him and Hutch hit the streets much later than he’d intended. He’d only made three stops so far on his list of 20. None looked like a possible suspect--a mother of four, an elderly Hispanic man and a church van. He decided to make one more stop before heading over to Carol’s house to question her further.



Starsky pulled up in front of the small frame house. Spotting David’s bike resting against the tree trunk, he knew David was home. Exiting the car, Starsky, hesitated a moment, smelling smoke. Eyes quickly inspecting the neighborhood, he walked across the front lawn. The smell grew stronger. Running to the front door, he noticed smoke coming from the crack at the bottom of the door. Pounding furiously on the door, he yelled, “DAVID!” When there was no response, he kicked in the door but turned back coughing as smoke engulfed him. “DAVID!”

Starsky ran to the side of the house; feverishly trying windows but found none open. He pounded on David’s bedroom window but heard no response. Peering into the window, he saw no one. Spotting David’s black baseball bat beneath the tree, he grabbed it and swung at the window, praying that the spraying glass wouldn’t hurt David or his brother.

Throwing the bat down, Starsky climbed through the window, ignoring the pain shooting from his right leg as he caught it on a jagged piece of glass protruding from the windowframe. Covering his mouth with his sleeve, Starsky frantically searched for any sign of David or Billy. Seeing Billy slumped in the corner coughing, Starsky hurriedly picked him up and, using a fireman's carry, headed for the window, now almost impossible to see through the thick smoke. Carrying Billy out the window was difficult. The pain was increasing in his leg and Starsky felt his energy diminishing with each passing second. He lay Billy down on the grass away from the house and they both frantically sucked in the fresh air.

"Wait...here...for...help," Starsky managed between breaths. "I've got...to get...David. Is your Mom at home?" Waiting only long enough for Billy to shake his head negatively, Starsky stood shakily, patted Billy on the shoulder and headed back to the burning house with only one purpose—to find David

Taking as deep a breath as possible, while trying to ignore the searing pain in his chest and his burning throat, Starsky hurried through the window in search of David. The dark smoke billowed throughout the room making it impossible to see. Starsky felt himself tripping over something lying on the floor and out of sheer instinct raised his left arm to protect his face as he fell. As his arm hit the floor he could feel pieces of glass cut through his shirt and into his arm.



Hutch drove down Columbia Drive. He'd made four stops and he'd turned up nothing of significance. There was only one last stop for the day—Carol Taylor's house. As he turned onto Fulton Street he was shocked to see his partner's Torino parked in front of the small wooden house. *'What's he doing here?'*



Starsky, wind knocked out of him, hesitantly rose on shaky legs. His arm stung and he could feel the sticky spread of the blood as it ran down his arm.

"DAVID!!!" He called out vainly. Running to the far wall, he pulled open a door hoping it led to the hallway but instead it opened into the closet. He started to turn away when a blue-jeaned leg caught his eye. He frantically reached for David and scooped him up in his aching arms, wincing at the pain. He turned toward his only escape--the window. All sense of direction lost, he couldn't see through the thick, black smoke now engulfing the entire room.

He blindly moved forward. Hearing the sound of glass crunching beneath his feet, he guessed he was at least headed in the right direction. Finally, he found the windowsill. Using the window frame for support, he lifted his leg to climb out, his burden growing heavier.

Chapter 8

Jumping out of the car at the sight of smoke escaping from the house, Hutch turned and grabbed the radio, but on hearing a siren approaching from the distance he threw it aside and ran to the boy coughing on the grass. As Hutch reached the boy, movement to his left drew Hutch's attention and he was stunned to see his partner climbing out the window, a young, boy hanging limp in his arms. Hutch immediately stood and ran toward his partner as Starsky struggled to carry the boy away from the burning house. Starsky's face and clothes were blackened with soot, but Hutch could still make out the blood on his shirtsleeve and leg. As he reached Starsky's side, he tried to take the boy from his partner's shaking arms.

“Starsky! Give me the boy!”

Tearing eyes closed against the burning smoke, Starsky resisted, disoriented. He thought he'd heard Hutch's voice, but it wasn't possible.

“Starsky...it's Hutch! Give me the boy.”

Hutch felt his partner's trembling hands release the boy into his arms. “Hutch,” came the whispered response, as Starsky sank to his knees, his legs no longer strong enough to hold him.

Hutch hurriedly carried the unconscious boy away from the house, stumbling in his haste to return to his dazed partner. Hutch gently set the boy down and turned back to help his partner who had not moved. Carefully avoiding any possible burns or cuts, Hutch helped Starsky to his feet and guided him away from the house and toward the tree. Seeing the arrival of the fire truck and the firemen pulling their hoses, Hutch yelled, “Oxygen over here!” as Starsky struggled to take in fresh air.

Two firemen grabbed tanks from the truck and rushed to their side. The first stopped by Billy; the second, carrying two tanks rushed to David and Starsky.

Starsky had collapsed on the grass where they'd stopped and seemed to be barely conscious. Hutch watched helplessly, as the ambulance crew checked his partner's vital signs. Blood was soaking through his left shirtsleeve and his right pant leg. Rivulets of blood trickled down the side of his face from several cuts. At the sight of Starsky's soot covered hands, Hutch was concerned about how badly his partner was burned. But it was the smoke damage to his lungs that worried Hutch the most. Starsky's lungs were already weakened from the shooting. ‘*Why did you have to go into the burning house?*’ Hutch wondered, but he already knew the answer to that. He was Starsky, and no matter the condition of his own health, he would put the boys' life ahead of his own.



It hurt to breathe. The pain seared through his chest with each attempt. His eyes were stinging but he could feel a cool cloth covering them, thankfully blocking out the bright sun. He could hear voices all around him but they seemed muffled and he was too tired to figure out what they were saying. He felt hands gently inspecting his right arm and leg, and he moaned as pain suddenly shot up his leg.

“Starsk...”

Hutch’s voice. Somewhere in the fog. He tried to focus on the sound of the voice...

“Starsky...”

He tried to respond but his voice sounded weak and incoherent. Feeling something covering his mouth, he reached up to remove the weight.

“Leave it, Starsk. It’s oxygen. Just lie still and relax. The paramedic is checking you out.” Hutch kept his hand on Starsky’s shoulder, letting his partner know he was at his side.

“How is he?” Hutch asked the paramedic.

“He’s regaining consciousness now and his vitals are good. He has several lacerations on his leg, arms and face. The amount of smoke he inhaled is our greatest concern. Just keep talking to him. It’s calming him and that will help minimize any coughing. I’m going to start an IV and then we’ll transport him.”

“How’s the little boy?”

“He’s still unconscious. Your partner risked his own life to pull him out the burning house...let’s hope he makes it.”

As Starsky became more aware of the sounds and smells around him, he suddenly remembered what had happened. Jerking the mask off, he tried to sit up. “Where’s David?” he demanded but it only came out as a whispered croak. The sudden movement started him coughing and pain shot through his chest.

“Easy, Starsk.” Hutch and the paramedic quickly pushed Starsky back to the ground. “Lie still. The boys are both out of the house and are being checked over. They’ll be fine.” Hutch pointed to the right, where the paramedics were attending to David and Billy. Starsky turned his head and through blurry eyes saw Billy sitting up breathing with the assistance of an oxygen mask and the paramedics setting David on a stretcher. Relieved, he relaxed and closed his eyes. He could hear the sounds of the water hoses spraying and firechief shouting commands.

‘*Save the house,*’ was his last conscious thought. Starsky didn’t feel himself being lifted onto the stretcher.

Chapter 9

Hutch saw the nurse coming toward him and he quickly rose from the chair.

“Sergeant Hutchinson?”

“Yes, how’s my partner?”

‘Dr. Samuel wants you to come to the emergency room...’

Before she had time to finish, Hutch was opening the doors into the emergency room where the gurney had taken his partner two hours earlier. Hutch pushed the door open but hesitated a second, unsure of what to expect.

Spotting Starsky, his arm in a sling, hand wrapped in bandages, and lying on a hospital bed that raised him to a sitting position, Hutch smiled in relief. “Hey, buddy...how ya doin?”

“Okay,” came the tired reply.

“Sergeant Hutchinson,” Dr. Samuel extended his hand. “I’m Dr. Samuel. Your partner is doing fine.”

Hutch turned away from the doctor as Starsky started coughing and he rushed to his side. Starsky raised his hand, indicating to Hutch he was okay, but Hutch watched him carefully looking for any signs of stress. As Starsky got his coughing under control, Hutch again turned his attention to Dr. Samuel. “I’m sorry.”

Dr. Samuel smiled, “It’s okay, that’s going to happen to him once in awhile but he is able to ride it out with only a little discomfort.”

‘That look on his face is more than a little discomfort,’ thought Hutch but since Starsky was resting back against the bed with his eyes closed, he decided to hear the doctor’s verdict rather than argue with him.

“Sgt. Starsky is still suffering the effects of smoke inhalation which does impede his breathing. He also suffered numerous cuts and bruises as well as a few first and second degree burns on his arms and hands. The cut on his leg took 15 stitches; the two in his arm another 15. He wrenched his left shoulder. There were a few minor cuts on his forehead where he was unable to protect his face from the glass, but we applied a few butterfly bandages and they will heal fine with no visible damage.”

Hutch, glancing at his partner, felt the tension in his own body release a little. Maybe things were going to be okay...

“He’ll be okay, then?” Hutch wanted to make sure he’d heard right. “You know he had a lot of damage just over four months ago...”

“Hutch, I’m fine,” Starsky, voice hoarse, interrupted, opening his eyes again.

Dr. Samuel continued, "I'm well aware of Sgt. Starsky's past medical history. I've consulted with his doctors and..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply..." Hutch interrupted, glancing at his partner again. Starsky was still leaning back against the pillows, with his eyes once again closed. "I'm just concerned..."

Dr. Samuel smiled, "I know. Believe me, because of your partner's medical history we are taking every precaution. Actually, Sergeant Starsky is extremely lucky. There appears to be no permanent damage, though he will continue to experience some difficulty in breathing for awhile and will need to get plenty of rest. Which brings me to my next point...I'd like to keep him overnight for observation, however, Sgt. Starsky is resisting the idea. Says he could go home with you?"

Hutch glanced at Starsky, who was now staring at him with sad, pleading eyes.

Glancing back at the doctor, Hutch acknowledged, "Of course, I can take him home and stay with him if you're sure he'll be alright."

Hutch heard a sigh of relief from the bed and, resisting the urge to smile at his partner, Hutch added sternly, "That is if he's under strict orders to do what I say."

"Of course," Dr. Samuel nodded and turned toward his patient. "As you heard Sergeant Starsky, I will release you into Sergeant Hutchinson's care. It's against my better judgement based on your medical history. It would be a good idea to keep you overnight for observation, but I will release you with this warning...get plenty of rest the next few days, go to your regular doctor at the end of the week to have the stitches removed and get an all clear before you return to work."

"Sure, Doc." Starsky agreed quickly, already swinging his legs over the side of the bed eager to leave. The sudden movement brought with it dizziness and another bout of coughing. Hutch immediately went to his side.

"Keep that up partner and you'll be staying."

Starsky smiled weakly as he struggled to control the coughing. He managed to croak ruefully, "Not on your life, buddy."

Looking at Starsky, Dr. Samuel added, "And you are under orders to listen to your partner while you're recovering."

Turning toward Hutch, he continued. "If he begins to experience increased difficulty breathing I want you to bring him back immediately, but if he follows my orders to get plenty of rest and limits his activity he should do fine."

Hutch nodded, concern flashing across his face.

“Don’t worry, I don’t expect any complication. I’ll sign the paper work,” Dr. Samuel said as he exited the room, “and you’ll be able to check out as soon as they bring you the release papers.”

Eventually the coughing slowed and Starsky found it easier to breathe. “Hutch, I want to see David and Billy. How are they?”

“Well, the last I heard Billy’s been released but David’s staying overnight for observation. They think he’ll be okay and will probably be released tomorrow.”

Remembering the devastation to the house, Starsky looked at him sorrowfully, “Where are they gonna live?”

“Well, for tonight, a neighbor is taking them in. After that, they’ll have to decide...”

“But...”

Anticipating his partner’s next question, Hutch interrupted, “The fire department has already contacted the Red Cross and other agencies for them. They’ll be taken care of. We’ll check back tomorrow and make sure they are okay. Now, no more ‘buts’...it’s time to get you home. Or, if you want, I can tell Dr. Samuel you changed your mind.”

“No, no. I’m ready to go.”

Wrapping his arm around Starsky’s shoulder, he helped him off the bed and into the waiting wheelchair a nurse’s aide had brought in.

“You just remember what the doc said, ‘you’re released to my care’ so you better do what I say,” Hutch warned, in his best mother hen voice.

Starsky hid the grin that flickered across his face. Right now he was too tired to even want to think about taking care of himself—apparently that was what partner’s were for.

Chapter 10

Starsky stretched and turned over in his bed, amazed to see the sunlight still framing the window shade. They’d come home from the hospital and Hutch had insisted he get into bed. And, other than Hutch using some pillows to prop him up and then tucking him in, he remembered very little. He was surprised he had awoken so quickly when sleep had come so easily.

“Hutch?” The sound came out more of a cracked whisper, his throat still sore and dry. But it was enough; Hutch was instantly at his side.

“Well, good morning sleepy head.”

“Morning?” Starsky was confused. The clock read 8:19 and then he realized it was morning, not the night before. “I slept...?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah, straight through the night. Your body obviously needed it. You put it through a lot yesterday.”

Starsky started to straighten up in the bed, but the movement started him coughing and he sank back into the pillows.

“Hold on, buddy. I’ll get you some water.”

Hutch returned almost instantly with a glass of ice water and a pitcher. He set the pitcher down on the nightstand and sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for the coughing spell to pass. As it slowed, Hutch said, “You did pretty well last night, coughing off and on, but nothing bad enough to really wake you up.”

‘But bad enough to keep you from sleeping, I’ll bet,’ thought Starsky. He ran his hand through his unruly curls and then sipped from the glass his partner still supportively held in his hand.

“I’m okay now. Thanks.” Starsky set the glass on the nightstand and shakily stood up. “Got any coffee ready?”

“Sure.” Hutch’s hand stayed protectively near Starsky’s elbow. Seeing that his partner was moving forward, Hutch instinctively moved, ready to help if necessary. “After some coffee to wake up, you might want to shower and get the rest of the soot off,” Hutch observed.

Starsky glanced in the mirror at his face and chuckled. “Yeah, I guess I still look pretty bad. How come you let me get in bed this way?”

“‘Cause you were dead on your feet and you needed rest more.”

Seeing Starsky favor his right leg as he walked, Hutch asked, “Your leg hurt? Dr. Samuel gave me some pain medication for you.”

“Yeah, it hurts a little, but my arm hurts more.” Wincing, he cradled his arm. “Actually, I hurt in places I didn’t know I had.” Starsky sat down stiffly on the couch.

“Well, you really pushed your body, you know. Just rest there, I’ll get the coffee.”

Starsky rested his head against the back of the couch and shut his eyes. He heard Hutch return, and opening his eyes, reached for the coffee mug. Taking a sip he could feel the warmth spread through his body, and he sensed Hutch looking at him. “What?” he asked, shifting uncomfortably under Hutch’s stare.

“You going to tell me why you were there?”

“Where?”

“At the Taylor’s house. You were supposed to be home resting.”

Starsky shrugged, took another sip and said, “I went for a ride.”

“Yeah, and you just so happened to see a house on fire.”

“Sure...”

Since it was obvious Starsky was trying to avoid the subject, Hutch said gently, “Starsky...I saw you and David together in the park the other day...”

Starsky glanced up at his partner and felt the heat on his cheeks as he blushed.

Hutch reached over and put his hand on Starsky’s knee. “It’s okay buddy. It looked like the two of you were having a good time. How come you didn’t tell me about him?”

“I met David...” Starsky coughed and cleared his throat, “by accident...and I mean ‘accident’ literally.” At Hutch’s silence, Starsky continued. “We’ve been playing ball in the afternoon. I just went by his house today to pick him up as usual, only I was a little later than normal. If I’d been there the usual time none of this probably would of happened,” Starsky finished ruefully.

Starsky raised his head suddenly and looked at his partner. “Hey, what were you doin’ there?”

“Well, it turns out David and Billy’s mother, Carol, is our witness in the Bon Ami Lounge murder and robbery. You know the one we thought might be in danger. Well...I was stopping by to check on her.”

“You’re kidding?” Starsky asked, shaking his head in amazement.

“Nope, small world, isn’t it, buddy. I was there to see her and was surprised to see the Torino, even more shocked to see you coming out that window—bleeding, covered in soot and carrying David. Why didn’t you call for backup?”

Silent, Starsky thought a moment, trying to clear his still foggy memory. “Well, I just walked up to the door to pick David up and I didn’t realize the house was on fire until I was almost at the front door and then my only thought was to get David out...I guess.”

“Tell me about David.” Hutch studied at his partner carefully. “What did you mean ‘accident, literally’. What happened?”

Starsky sighed, and leaning back on the couch, told Hutch about the near tragedy and how it had evolved into the two of them becoming baseball buddies. He told his partner of picking David up every afternoon, playing ball and spending time together.

“Well, why didn’t you tell me about him?” asked Hutch softly, returning with two newly filled coffee mugs.

Starsky, shifting a little in embarrassment, decided to continue. “I would have but I thought you’d really come down on me because I nearly killed David.”

“Starsk, that was an accident. You said so yourself.”

“Yeah, but I was tired and wasn’t concentrating. Maybe Dobby would have found out and he’d say I wasn’t fit to come back yet and kick me off that stupid part-time desk job...”

“C’mon Starsk, it wasn’t that bad an accident—David was fine—he didn’t even have to go to the doctor’s to be checked out.”

“Maybe I should have taken him, but I was scared.”

Hutch stood up and started pacing. “Stop right there. You’re always accusing me of being on a guilt trip...look at you. Everything turned out fine and you and David have become good buddies.” Seeing the distressed look still on Starsky’s face, Hutch sat down next to him on the couch. “There’s something else, what is it?”

Starsky swallowed hard a couple of times and, studying his hands intently, continued, “What if I’m too tired to watch your back and you get hurt?”

Hutch’s heart ached and he rested his hand on his partner’s shoulder. “Look, when you saw the fire why did you go in?”

“I don’t know. There wasn’t any time to think. I just reacted.”

“And when it comes right down to it, if something was happening to me you wouldn’t stop to think—you’d just react. And I wouldn’t want anyone else’s reaction but yours, buddy.”

Starsky finally looked up at his partner, “You think?”

Hutch smiled, “Of course. When you’d need them, your instincts would kick in. Didn’t this just prove it? Besides, I’d take you with half your instincts working over a whole squad of officers anytime.”

Starsky sat back and, with a small grin, muttered something Hutch didn’t quite catch. “What was that?”

Starsky, blushing slightly, repeated it a little louder, "I had to take care of him. David's a miniature you."

Confused, Hutch asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, David reminded me of what I thought you would look like as a kid and whenever I'd play ball with him I'd picture it was you and me playin'," Starsky said, embarrassed.

"Oh, buddy," Hutch softly responded. "Couldn't be me. From what I could see David is a better player than I ever was."

Starsky chuckled, "Yeah, I taught him everything he knows."

"C'mon," Hutch laughed, "go take your shower and I'll call the hospital and see how he's doin'." He extended a hand to Starsky who, using it for support, stood up and headed to the bathroom.

Watching his partner, Hutch yelled out, "And keep those bandages dry!"

Chapter 11

Three days later Hutch, with Starsky in the passenger seat, pulled up at the Taylor's house. There was a small rental moving van in front. Billy, David, and their mom, Carol, were busily loading what few salvageable items they could locate.

"What's up, guys?" Starsky asked as he and Hutch walked toward all the activity. Starsky set the brown paper bag he was carrying down on the grass.

Seeing Starsky, David dropped what he was carrying and ran over to give him a big hug.

"Whatcha' doin', Bud?" asked Starsky.

"We're packin' up."

Carol came over to greet Starsky and Hutch. "Well, we're packing up what we can. There isn't too much left."

"So you found a place to stay?" Hutch asked.

"Well, not exactly, I've decided to head back to Chicago. Bobby, my husband, and I are going to get back together. The boys really need their dad and I need to be with them."

"That'll be good for everyone," Hutch said, observing Starsky and David already tossing a baseball back and forth. "Though I know someone who'll miss you."

“I know. My David is going to miss him, too. Your partner is a good man and has been a great role model for my son.”

“Yeah, I know...” Hutch nodded and smiled pensively. “They don’t come any better.”

“What about the trial?”

“Well, after what happened to you and the boys, Betty decided to come forward and she gave us enough information to convict her ex-husband and his brother of the robberies, murders and the fire.”

“Betty? Betty from the Bon Ami?” Carol asked incredulously.

“Apparently she had suspected he might be involved because she had worked at all the places that had been robbed at some point in time. And last week she overheard a conversation between the two where they were discussing the various bars that had been hit as well as several others, including the Bon Ami. She put two and two together but was afraid to say anything. When they burned your house and the boys were hurt she came forward. She feels terrible.”

Hutch watched Starsky tossing the ball to David and then catching it awkwardly with his right hand.

“It’s not her fault,” Carol said. “She wasn’t involved was she?”

“Nope. At least you won’t have to worry about coming back for the trial. We found enough evidence to convict them and you should be free and clear.”

Carol sighed. “I won’t lie to you. I’m glad. I’m afraid I’ve had enough of this place.” She yelled over to the ball players. “Come on Davey, only a couple things left to pack up. Go get you bike by the tree and bring it over.”

Hutch saw the bike leaning against the tree and he walked over to pick it up and load it into the truck. Starsky stared at the bike as his partner loaded it up.

“You like the paint job?” asked David. “Billy helped me.”

The bike was now a bright, glossy red with a white strip running down the center of the front and back fender.

Starsky, adams apple bobbing up and down, blinked to clear his eyes. “Yeah, those are my favorite colors.”

“Come on, David. Climb in the front,” David’s mom yelled. “We need to get on the road before dark.”

Starsky knelt down and looked at David. “I’m gonna’ miss you buddy. Who’s gonna’ keep my arm loose?”

David stared at his feet.

Starsky swallowed hard and said, “Here I wanted to give you something.” He reached into the brown bag he’d set down earlier and pulled out his well-worn mitt. “You take this to practice with. You’ll make a great outfielder one-day. I’ll come watch you play when you’re in the Majors. You can hit one out of the park for me.”

David, throwing his arms around Starsky, mitt squashed between them, rubbed his eyes with his sleeve.

“Go on. You need to get in the van. Your Mom’s waiting.” Starsky stood up and patted David on the butt. He watched sadly as David climbed in the cab of the truck, with Billy following.

Carol gave Hutch a good-bye hug and then hugged Starsky, whispering a tearful, “Thank you.” She then looked back at the burned house, sighed and climbed into the driver’s seat.

Starsky and Hutch watched silently as she backed the van out of the driveway and drove down the street,

Seeing Starsky staring at the house, Hutch put his arm around his partner’s shoulder. “Come on, Starsk. We’ve got a stop to make.”

“Stop?” Starsky asked confused. “Where are we stopping?”

“At the toy store.”

“The toy store?”

Hutch steered Starsky toward the car. “Yeah, I’ve got to buy you a new mitt.”

Starsky stared at his partner, as he slid into the passenger seat.

“You’re gonna’ buy me a mitt?”

“Sure...otherwise, how are we going to play ball...” Hutch grinned at Starsky as he started up the LTD and pulled into the street. “After all, I hear there’s an empty baseball field in the park just waiting for us.”

Starsky’s face lit up and he grinned lopsidedly. “Hey, Hutch, can we stop for ice cream afterwards?”

Hutch laughed, “Sure, buddy, any flavor you want.”

The End