

Dahn Tu

by The Blintz

“And I’m gonna beat ya for once in my life. You know, Hutch, I’d’ve beat ya before, if you didn’t cheat all the time.”

“Cheat?!” he replied, staring at me as if I’d lost my mind. “For your information, Starsky, I do not need to cheat to beat *you* at Monopoly. Nobody would! You stink at that game.”

I turned to look out the window of the Torino at the driver’s side mirror, but I was really trying to hide the smile spreading across my face. Hutch was right. I really did stink at Monopoly, but that was only because I thought the game was stupid. It never made any sense to me at all. I mean, you push a little dog or a shoe around the board and buy property. That much I understand. What I don’t get is why I have to have all the properties with the same color card in order to buy houses for them, or why I charge my friends money to stay on my land with or without houses. And why should I charge more money for rent just because I have three houses on one piece of property? If only one person is staying there, it makes sense that he can only use one house or one hotel room, so why charge him for the whole thing?

“I just don’t get it. I go round and round the board just like everyone else, and I buy stuff just like everyone else—”

“Yeah, but all you ever buy are the railroads and maybe a utility. You can’t win that way.”

“But I like the railroads,” I said, just a little defensively.

Hutch sighed, and to tell the truth, he sounded a little exasperated. “That’s pretty obvious, Starsk. But I think it’s a bit much when you holler ‘All aboard!’ whenever somebody lands on one of them. And I can’t even begin to tell you what I think of that stupid engineer’s hat.”

“A ‘bit much’?” I took a quick glance in his direction. “Oh, and I suppose you don’t like the train noises either?”

“It’s not the train noises as much as those other noises you make all the time—”

Our conversation was interrupted when Mildred’s voice came over the radio. “Zebra Three. Come in, Zebra Three.”

Hutch grabbed the mic. “This is Zebra Three. Go ahead.”

“Zebra Three, I have a patch-through from Captain Dobey. Please stand by.”

“Standing by.” Hutch glanced at me, and I shrugged my shoulders. We weren’t really in the middle of anything big right then, and I hadn’t done anything recently to annoy the captain, so I had no idea what he wanted. We didn’t have to wonder long.

“Starsky? Hutchinson?” Even through the radio speakers, Dobey’s voice sounded unusually strained and harsh.

“This is Hutch, Captain. What’s up?”

“We have a hostage situation at the Regent’s jewelry store on the corner of Mercado and Twenty-Fourth Street. The SWAT team is already in place, the police negotiator is on the scene, and you’re to report to a Captain Marston.”

Hutch looked at me again and saw the confusion on my face. “So what do you need us for, Cap’n? Sounds like you’ve got it under control.”

“I talked to Captain Marston just a few minutes ago, and due to the circumstances, we thought Starsky might be particularly useful on this one.”

Now I was really confused. Hutch just shrugged, so I grabbed the mic out of his hand and asked the most obvious question myself. “Useful how, Cap’n?”

“Our perp is a vet, Starsky. A Vietnam vet. He’s been on the line with Marston and has been bringing up things in Vietnamese. Until they can get an interpreter there, they wanted to know if anyone in the department knew Vietnamese or was in Vietnam and might be able to help. You were the first person I thought of.”

“Terrific. We’re on our way. Zebra Three out.” I hung up the mic slowly, a weird feeling settling in my gut. “What am I? Some sort of war psycho expert?”

Hutch rested his arm on the seat back, and I felt the familiar squeeze of his hand on my right shoulder. “You’ve been there, Starsk. Sometimes that counts for more than anything you can be taught in any negotiator’s course.” I shook my head, sighing in resignation. “Besides,” he continued, obviously trying to cheer me up. “Look at the bright side. It sure beats riding around town watching our fingernails grow.”

I snorted out a little chuckle, but deep inside, I still had the feeling that nothing good was going to come out of the situation. As Hutch placed the Mars light on the roof, I executed a perfect U-turn and, siren blaring, we were on our way.



Predictably, the entire 2400 block of Mercado was a circus by the time we got there. The SWAT team had parked their van right in front of the building, and there were several patrol cars pulled in close, with uniformed and plain-clothes officers milling around, most of whom were staring at the closed blinds of the jewelry store. I parked the Torino a short distance away—didn't want to take the chance of a stray bullet knocking out one of my windows—and Hutch and I made our way to the front of the crowd.

“Where's Captain Marston?” I asked a young officer who was busy trying to take a statement from an elderly Asian woman jabbering at him in Chinese.

“Right here,” came a voice from behind me. I turned around and found myself face to face with a tall distinguished-looking man dressed in a suit and tie and, of all things, a bulletproof vest. “You must be Detective Starsky.”

I couldn't say much for his tailor, but at least he wasn't stupid. “In the flesh,” I replied, shaking his extended hand. “And this is my partner, Detective Hutchinson.”

“Hutch,” Hutch replied as the hand shaking formality was repeated between the two of them. “What can you tell us?”

“Not much,” Marston admitted, wiping at the sweat on his forehead with a clean handkerchief. “About two hours ago, this guy walks into the jewelry store and demands all the money in the register. Smashed a couple of display cases and took some watches and necklaces—things that would be easy to pawn. The store manager activated the silent alarm, and, from what we understand, some over-eager rookie used his lights and siren to clear traffic to get here fast, but didn't cut them soon enough. The perp heard the siren and went berserk, shot the manager, and took everyone in the store hostage.”

“Have you had any contact with him?” I craned my neck to see if I could make out anything through the front windows, but the blinds were tightly closed.

“A couple of times. When he wasn't speaking in Vietnamese, I managed to find out he's got three people in there—the manager, a clerk, and a customer who wandered in at the wrong time. He swears the manager's still alive, and says he'll stay that way if we cooperate.”

“What does he want?” Hutch asked.

“The usual. Money, food, and safe passage outta here. Not very original.”

“Look,” Hutch continued, and I could hear the impatience in his voice. “We were told that this guy's a vet. Who ID'd him?”

“That doctor over there,” Marston answered, pointing to a short dark-haired man seated on the curb several feet from where we were standing. “He was having his wife's watch repaired and was just leaving the store when the perp walked in. Says the guy's name is

Joe Chastain. Apparently, he's a regular at the methadone clinic the doctor runs downtown."

"Perfect." I couldn't help the sarcasm in my voice. "Old Joe's a hype."

Hutch and I exchanged a look, and I knew he was thinkin' the same thing I was. With Joe possibly strung out and lookin' for a fix, things just got a great deal stickier. Hutch ran a hand down his face before he spoke. "Hey, Starsk? What d'ya say we talk to the doctor, see what we can find out about this guy, and go from there?"

"Don't go anywhere," I said to Captain Marston, as Hutch and I headed over to the doctor.

"Excuse me, sir?" Hutch approached the doctor, holding out his badge. "I'm Detective Hutchinson and this is my partner, Detective Starsky. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"I'm Doctor Howard and I'll do whatever I can, Officer. That man in there is a patient of mine, and I don't want to see him get hurt."

Hutch's eyes cut sideways at me before he continued. "Look, Doctor. We realize you have rules about patient confidentiality, but if you could tell us anything at all that might help, it won't go any further than here."

The doctor studied a spot somewhere past Hutch's left shoulder before he finally made eye contact again and started talking. "I first met Joe a few years ago. He's a Vietnam vet, and I don't suppose you've seen him yet, but he's horribly disfigured. He suffered second- and third-degree burns over eighty percent of his body during the war, and it left him, well, not very pleasant to look at. When he got back to the States, his wife divorced him, took their only child, and he was left with nothing but pain, skin grafts, and a face difficult for even a mother to love. He started out taking prescription morphine for his pain, but that eventually led to street drugs, mostly heroin. Every once in a while, he either decides to quit or just doesn't have enough money for his next fix, and then he comes to me. I've tried to help him, but..." The doctor's voice trailed off and he broke eye contact again, shaking his head.

"Does he have any family?" I asked the doctor, although I didn't hold out much hope. "Anybody that could maybe talk him out?"

"Yeah, he's got family, if that's what you want to call them. His ex-wife moved out of state several years ago, but his father lives just a few miles from here."

Hutch cocked an eyebrow at me. "Any luck there?"

Without expression, the doctor said, “Joe’s father refuses to have anything to do with him. He won’t speak to him, won’t see him...as far as he’s concerned, his son died in Vietnam. You’ll get no help there.”

The doctor rose from the curb. “Well, gentlemen, that’s about all I can tell you. I just wish there was something more I could do.”

Hutch put his hand on the doctor’s arm and gave it a reassuring pat. “Thank you, sir. We’ll do what we can.”

We walked back toward Marston and I could tell Hutch was deep in thought. “What’re you thinkin’?” I asked, pretty sure I already knew what was on his mind. And I didn’t like it.

“Marston said Chastain wants food, right?” At my nod, he continued. “And there’s an injured man in there, right?” Again I nodded. “So, let’s negotiate. We’ll tell Chastain he can have his food *if* he’ll let a paramedic bring it to him so the manager’s wound can be treated.”

“And who might that paramedic be?” I asked, already beginning to worry.

“Me.”

“No way,” I stated emphatically, shaking my head to let him know I meant business. “You’re not goin’ in there. This guy’s got a screw loose, and he’d probably just as soon blow you away as look at you. Besides, I know a little about what he went through—”

“Which is exactly why you need to be on the outside talking to him. He needs to be in touch with someone he can relate to, someone he can trust. You’re the perfect candidate, Starsk. So it makes more sense to let me be the one to go in and play doctor.”

I was in no mood for his arguments. “I don’t like it, Hutch. It’s too risky. We’re gonna go back to the SWAT van and talk to this guy. Who knows? Maybe I can get through to him, and we won’t have to risk anyone going in there. It’s worth a shot.”

“Okay,” he relented, though I could tell he wasn’t too optimistic. “We’ll play this your way. For now.”



It turned out that Hutch was right. After talking to Chastain on the phone for forty-five minutes, I knew I hadn’t gotten very far. For the briefest of moments, we may have connected in some weird way. We talked about ’Nam and found that we’d been in many of the same hellholes over there, had many of the same experiences that makes a guy want to crawl down into the bottom of a tequila bottle and never come back out. He’d been like every other soldier I’d known—frightened, angry, and wanting to go home.

Only home had changed for him when he'd returned. As soon as we started talking about coming back to the States, it was like somebody flipped a switch and he shut me down. Then it was all business. He wanted a helicopter with enough fuel to fly for a minimum of four hours, some sandwiches and beer, and \$100,000 traveling money. He wouldn't budge, no matter how hard I tried to reason with him. The mayor and police commissioner had predictably decided they weren't going to negotiate with terrorists, so they were no help at all.

Since I had made no progress, I knew it was coming, but I still didn't like it when Hutch brought up his idea again. Unfortunately, Marston was within earshot this time and was all for it. I was outnumbered. So, with some protesting on my part and a whole lot of begging and pleading from Hutch, he changed into one of the paramedic's uniforms and prepared a bag full of the bandages and medical-looking stuff he would need.

I didn't get a chance to talk to him alone until we were making the final adjustments on his wire. I'd insisted on that. Hutch was reluctant, to put it mildly, but there was no way I was lettin' him go in there without some sort of communication. I taped the wire to his chest as snugly as I could and patted it in place with my hand.

"You're lucky you don't have chest hair, Hutch. It'll make it a lot easier to get this thing off you when this is all over."

He looked down at his chest, making sure everything was in place before he pulled his shirt down and began to tuck it in. "Yeah, but judging from the amount of tape you used, it looks like I stand a pretty good chance of losing a lot of skin."

A heavy silence hung in the air, and I realized I couldn't do it anymore. I had no more small talk left in me. "Hey," I said quietly, grabbing him by the left arm to get his attention. We were standing face to face beside the SWAT van, the crowd of people rushing around us almost forgotten. He looked up at me, his eyes questioning. "This guy's crazy, Hutch. I know his type, and he'll do anything he has to to survive. Don't underestimate him. 'Kay?"

"Okay."

"And don't be a hero. Just go in there, do what you gotta do for the manager, and get out. 'Kay?"

"Okay."

"And—"

"Starsky." His voice was quiet, determined. "I got it. I'll be careful. And I'll come back out here so I can beat you at Monopoly tonight. Okay?" He gently patted my stomach with the back of his right hand.

I smiled in spite of myself. “Okay.”

He picked up his medical bag and the box that held the burgers and beer, and, with a last nod in my direction, he headed across the street to the store.



The next few minutes were pure hell. As I focused on the radio transmitter, I heard the sounds of Hutch going into the store and a brief exchange between him and Chastain. From what I could tell, the hostages were in the back of the store in the vault, and Joe led Hutch to them, reminding him with every step there was a loaded gun pointed at his head and he'd better not try anything.

I'd just heard Chastain holler out to his hostages to stand back so he could open the door, and I even heard the faint noise of a door being opened, when all hell broke loose. There was a loud crash, a lot of cursing, a single gunshot, and then a woman crying. I heard a door being slammed shut, and then the phone beside me rang again.

My heart in my throat, I picked up the receiver, but not before I had adjusted the volume on Hutch's wire to make sure Chastain couldn't hear it as we were talking.

“Starsky.”

“What the hell do you think you're doin', cop?” His voice was high and shrill, and he sounded breathless. “I ain't playin' no games here, pig. Now you got exactly five minutes to start givin' me what I want before I start killin' me some hostages. You got that?”

My palms were suddenly sweaty as I listened for some clue about what had happened to Hutch. “Hold on a minute, Joe. What are you talking about? What's going on?”

“I'll tell you what's goin' on. You lied to me, pig. All this jive about you knowing what I've been through and understanding how I feel. Just a bunch of worthless crap.” He was nearly shouting now and sounded like he was right on the brink of hysteria.

“Wait! Joe, don't hang up! Tell me what's going on.”

“That phony doctor you sent in here. You said I could trust you—”

“What about the doctor? What happened?” My mouth was suddenly dry, and I could feel my heart thudding in my chest. There was still no sound from the wire Hutch had worn, and I assumed it had somehow been disconnected.

Joe laughed, but it was a maniacal sound that sent chills down my spine. “My friends in the vault planned a little surprise for me. They found an empty tray in there, and when I opened the door to let that so-called paramedic in, they tried to attack me. Luckily, your

friend was in the way and they missed. Too bad he was also in the way when I tried to shoot the stinkin' clerk who tried to nail me. Your friend pushed him out of the way and, well, I'm afraid I kinda shot him."

An ice-cold anger washed over me, and I could feel the blood draining out of my face as I tried to keep it together. I had to, for Hutch's sake. "How bad is it? Joe? Did you hear me? Is he still alive?"

"Yeah, cop. He ain't gone yet. And I found the wire. Let's just say it's no longer operational."

My grip on the telephone receiver was almost painful. "Now you listen to me, Joe. Don't add murder to—"

"The rules have changed, pig. I'm getting outta here, and I'm takin' that phony doctor with me. If I so much as smell pork, I'm putting him out of his misery. You understand? Have them leave a cop car with a full tank out front with the engine running. And I'm serious. The first cop car I see, or if anyone tries to stop me, he's gone. You understand?"

My knees felt weak and I couldn't seem to stop shaking. If he was planning to use Hutch as a hostage, hopefully the wound wasn't critical. At least not yet. I had no way of knowing how much blood he'd lost or how close he was to shock, but at least he was still alive.

"Joe," I tried one last time, hoping to get through to him. "Listen. If you need a hostage, leave the wounded there, they'll only slow you down. Take me instead. No gun, no wire, just—" The connection was broken, and I was talking to a dial tone. I slammed the phone down in frustration and said a quick prayer for Hutch's safety.

Marston was standing close by and had heard my end of the conversation, so I quickly gave him the gist of what was going on. I had a half-baked plan in mind and I briefed him on that, too, hoping he realized it was just a courtesy to him. I had already made up my mind, and the only person in the world who could change it once I settled on a course of action was inside the jewelry store with a bullet in him.



It seemed like hours before I caught my first glimpse of Joe Chastain. Even though the doctor from the clinic had described his scarring, it still shook me. The sight of him brought back that chill in my gut that had stayed with me every single day I'd spent in Vietnam. He walked slowly out into the street, holding Hutch in front of him as a human shield. At first, I just drank in the sight of my partner, alive and breathing. There was a bloodstain on his right pants leg, and by the look on his face, he was in a lot of pain, but he was alive. I willed him to play it cool and hang in there for just a little while longer as I watched Chastain brutally shove him into one of the patrol cars parked in front of the

store. A sharp pain lanced through my jaw, and I realized I was grinding my teeth as what used to be anger turned into rage.

As soon as the car took off, Marston began shouting out orders to the patrolmen, commanding them to follow at a distance and keep in contact on Tach Two so Chastain wouldn't hear their directives. The captain then ordered a helicopter to tail the patrol car from the air.

I ran frantically to the Torino and jumped inside, closing the door and gunning the engine to life in one motion. I tore off after the patrol car, trying to keep them in sight without letting Chastain know they were being followed. My plan was simple—I had no plan. I would tail them as close as I dared without giving myself away, and wait for an opportunity to present itself, even if that meant waiting for the best location to force the patrol car off the road.

There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the path they took. Either Chastain had no idea where he was going, or he was hoping to outsmart anyone trying to follow him. But there was no shaking me off his tail. I thought he'd spotted me once, and my heart about stopped, but I kept at it. We eventually left the city limits and made it to a winding mountain road that forced him to slow down as he negotiated the tight curves. I edged closer to the car, while trying to hang back as much as possible. I could see that Hutch was slumped against the passenger side window and didn't appear to be moving. I hoped like hell that he was playing opossum. If Hutch was okay, I know he wouldn't just lay there and let Joe take him away, so I waited for him to make some kinda move.

We came to a slightly wider section of road, with a rock wall on the left side and a steep drop-off on the right, and that's where Hutch finally stopped him. I saw him pounce on Chastain, grabbing his gun hand, and, while they fought over the weapon, the car skidded against the wall. Joe managed to push Hutch away, but as he tried to regain control of the vehicle, he overcompensated and fishtailed to the right, coming to a stop just a few feet from the drop-off. I was right behind him and jumped from my car, my Beretta drawn and leveled.

Chastain got out of the car, once again holding Hutch in front of him, his .38 Special pointed at Hutch's head.

"Give it up, Chastain," I demanded loudly, clicking the safety off my weapon as I got Hutch's attention.

"I don't think so, Starsky. You see, I still have me a hostage here, and if you shoot me, I'm gonna shoot him. I may die, but so will your friend, and I don't think you're willin' to risk it." He tightened his grip on Hutch, who was beginning to sag a little. I noticed the bloodstain on his pants had grown in size, and his face was pale and sweaty. But his eyes were clear, and I knew he was watching me to see what he should do next.

If nothing else, Joe was strong. Hutch was held up in front of him like a human shield, and I couldn't get a clear shot no matter where I looked. I didn't want to risk my partner any further, so I changed tactics, biding my time. The pity I'd felt for Chastain earlier was gone. As soon as I could shoot without endangering Hutch, he was a dead man. "Talk to me, Joe. Why'd you do it? Money? Drugs? Tell me what's goin' on with you. Maybe I can help. I know people, Joe, people that can help you."

Again, he laughed without humor, and I saw Hutch cringe at the sound. "Help me?" I could just see Joe's right eye peering at me from behind my partner's head. "You want to help me? You saw me coming out of the store. Not pretty, is it?"

I had to agree with him. His face and arms were nothing but scar tissue, red and painful looking in some places, totally white and colorless in others. His right hand, the one with the gun, had only three fingers, and even those were bent and twisted. His left hand was nothing but a stub, the fingers and thumb completely gone. Even his lips looked unnatural, and when I looked closely at the side of his head that was turned toward me, I could tell he had no ear. He was right. It wasn't pretty, and I couldn't imagine going through life like that.

I was desperate to get this over with, but needed to keep him talking, had to get him to move, even if it was just a few inches, away from Hutch. "How did it happen, Joe?"

"It. That's a nice polite way of sayin' it. *It.*" His bitterness was apparent in every word, every gesture he made. He shifted from foot to foot, but kept Hutch clenched tightly in front of him. "I was stationed in the jungle near a small village south of Da Nang. Our commanding officer thought it was a military outpost for the Viet Cong, and we'd been watching it for days with no sign of soldiers or any other military activity. But when you're in the Marines, you don't think for yourself, you don't ask questions, you just do. So when the command came down for us to take the village, that's what we did. We attacked just before dawn, but all we found were women and children. Seems that all the men were out fightin', and they'd left their families behind to scratch out whatever living they could from the jungles around them.

"The kids were starving—they hadn't eaten in days. You remember, don't you? The swollen bellies and the little stick arms and legs? Some of us guys had kids at home, you know, so we broke out our rations and started passin' them around. There wasn't nearly enough for everyone, but at least some of those kids got to eat.

"That's when the order came in. We were to evacuate immediately—they were gonna napalm the village. We tried to stop it, but the radio connection was already broken and we couldn't reestablish contact. So we gathered everyone up and headed into the jungle."

He stopped talking for a minute, and I could tell his breathing sped up as his grip on Hutch got tighter. Hutch's eyes bore into mine, confirming my fear that Joe was losing it. If he would just slip up, just for a second....

“Take it easy, Joe,” I said, trying to calm him down some. But I don’t think he heard me as he just kept on talking.

“We were about a half mile from the village when the first planes came by, dumping their liquid hell on the jungle around us. We picked up the pace a little, trying to get as far away as possible, and I really thought we were gonna make it. All of a sudden, this little woman behind me just started screaming. I knew a little Vietnamese, enough to know she was screaming ‘My baby! My baby!’ over and over, and I finally figured out that one of her kids was missing. All I could think about was my own two-year-old back home and how I’d feel if she was there, and I had to go back. I told one of my buddies where I was going, then I turned around and headed back toward the village.”

His eyes were far away, and his voice kept cracking as he continued talking through his tightly clenched teeth. “There’s no way I could ever describe what it was like, running through the jungle with all the smoke and flames...but I finally found the kid. A little boy, not more than five- or six-years-old. I heard his screams before I found him. I guess he must’ve fallen and then was too terrified to move, ’cause he was just laying there on the ground. He was lit up like a human torch...his skin was actually bubbling under the heat of the napalm that coated nearly every inch of his body. And the smell. You ever smell burning flesh? It gets into your hair and your clothes...no shower in the world can wash it away...” His voice trailed off and he tightened his grip on Hutch even more. Any minute now... “There was nothing I could do—there was nothing anyone could do at that point. So I raised my rifle to my shoulder and I shot him. Just like that—I shot and killed a five-year-old kid.”

He was openly crying now, but I don’t think he even noticed as he continued, “By the time I made it back to my unit, I had second- and third-degree burns over eighty percent of my body. They shipped me back to the States and spent a great deal of time telling me how lucky I was, but I didn’t feel too lucky when they put me in those damn whirlpools and peeled the rotting skin from my body. Or when they took me to surgery and took off all the fingers of my left hand and half my right foot. By the time they were done, there was nothing left of me but a bunch of scar tissue, and this face that scared my kid so bad that my wife took her away and never let me see her again.

“How’s that for luck, Starsky? You wanna know who was lucky? That kid I shot.” As quickly as it had started, his crying stopped. “He was lucky. He didn’t have to live the rest of his life as an ugly monster that people stared and pointed at. He didn’t have to go through his life afraid to stick his head out of his apartment door during the daylight. He didn’t come back to a country that hated him for what he’d done, even though he did it in the name of freedom.” He literally spat out the word “freedom” as if it were something poisonous on his tongue.

He was quiet now, and so was I. What could I say? We stood frozen in place for several seconds, and I made eye contact with Hutch once again. He seemed even paler than before and his eyes were desperate, haunted. I knew he and I were on the same level.

This guy was a victim like so many others. The question was how could we help him when it was down to him or us?

“Joe,” I pleaded. “There are people who can help you. You just gotta give it a chance. One more chance, huh?”

I saw Chastain bend his head down and whisper something in Hutch’s ear, and then he turned his attention back to me. “Say goodbye.”

It all happened in an instant. Hutch went boneless and dropped to the ground. Chastain’s gun went off, the bullet missing Hutch’s head by a hair’s-breadth, but by then I had already reacted. Hating myself for what I had to do, I pulled the trigger.



Epilogue

I stood looking out at the night sky through the greenhouse windows and wondered why some things turn out the way they do. I thought about Joe, about all his suffering and anger, and about a five-year-old kid that didn’t live to see his sixth birthday. I was trying to make some sense out of it all, but all I could come up with was more questions. And to be honest, I wasn’t so sure why Joe’s death was bugging me as much as it was. I mean, the guy had Hutch’s life in his scarred hands. I’d killed others before under the same circumstances and hardly felt an instant of regret. Well, that’s not true. I know the exact number of people I’ve had to kill in the line of duty, and I don’t take that lightly. But still, every now and then, one of these deaths hit me hard in some unexplainable way. Joe’s death should have been just one more.

I felt him behind me before he even touched my arm. “I thought you were going to grab us some beer.”

“Yeah,” I answered, still lost in my own confusion. “Just give me a minute, huh?”

His hand left my arm, but I knew he was still behind me—I could almost hear him thinking. “It wasn’t your fault, Starsk. I can’t help wondering if it was what he wanted.”

I turned to look at him. “What he wanted? Do you think he wanted to live life as some kind of monster? Do you think he wanted to be shunned and humiliated by everyone around him? I can’t imagine the nightmares he must’ve had. I’ll bet the face of that kid haunted him every single night of his life. And for what? To be shot by some cop who couldn’t help him? Is that what he wanted? I know we did what we had to do, Hutch. He would have killed you. But still....”

Hutch sighed deeply as he shifted his weight off his cane and onto his good leg. His bullet wound was healing nicely, and in a few weeks, we’d be back on the streets again. Trouble was, I didn’t know if I had the stomach for it anymore. “You tried to help him,

Starsk.” His voice was low and gentle. “You did everything you could. But he didn’t want your help. Maybe he wanted to die. Maybe he....”

I didn’t have anything to say to that, and I could tell Hutch wasn’t finished, so I just let him talk. “I don’t know, Starsk. Maybe when we left the jewelry store, he really wanted to just get out of there. Take the money and run. I told you he was talking in the car.”

I nodded. “You said in your report that he wasn’t making a whole lotta sense at that point.”

Hutch was thoughtful for a moment. “He kept talking about his ex-wife and kid. How much he wanted to see his kid again. Then, it was just like something snapped, and he just quit—became quiet. I even asked some questions, but he wouldn’t respond. That’s when I grabbed the steering wheel.”

“I just don’t get it.”

Hutch’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know if this will mean anything to you, but right before Joe knocked me down, he said something to me. You remember?” At my nod, he continued. “At first, I couldn’t quite make it out, and I thought he was saying ‘damn you.’ But now, as I keep replaying that moment in my head, the more I’m sure it sounded like ‘Dan two.’ Does that mean anything to you? Was that an army division in Vietnam? A battlefield?”

It took me a couple seconds to find my voice again. “Yeah,” I finally answered. “I know what it means.”

I swung back around to face him, needing the eye contact for strength. “Dahn Tu. It’s Vietnamese...means ‘mercy killing.’ But what did Chastain mean, Hutch? That killing you was merciful, or...?” My voice cracked again and no more words would come.

He reached out to gently touch my hand. “Who knows what he was thinking? He could have pulled the trigger at any time. Or tried to shoot you while using me as a shield. Maybe he just couldn’t see any other way out. Either way, it was *his* choice, not yours.”

I guess he could see the doubt in my eyes because he kept on talking, a little more forcefully this time. “Look, Starsk. You had nothing to do with his tragedy or his addiction to drugs. That happened a long time before you and I came into the picture. The important thing is, you were willing to help. Not everyone wants to be helped, Starsk, as cold and cruel as that may seem. So all we can do is be there for the ones who need us, and do our best with the rest.”

I knew what he was saying was right, but I still couldn’t face that reality. He slung an arm around my shoulders and I automatically accepted part of his weight, as he steered me out of the greenhouse and back into the apartment.

I stopped then and looked at him. It seemed rather harsh, but what choice did I have? Nothing I did now could change things. It was finished, and it was up to me to either dwell on it or move ahead. There were still things that bothered me, but I wasn't ready to hash it all out just yet. Some day soon I knew I would be, and I knew Hutch would help me through it. But I didn't want to think about it any more tonight. Tonight, I just needed to take care of my partner.

I took a deep breath and removed his arm from my shoulders. "Go sit down, Gimpy. I'm gonna grab us a few beers, and then I'm gonna show you how to play Monopoly."

Hutch rolled his eyes at me before he hobbled toward the living room. "Fat chance, mushbrain. I'm gonna wipe up the table with you."

As I headed to the fridge, I couldn't help smiling. Somehow, even though the world was way out of kilter, in that apartment, I could believe everything would somehow be okay. Maybe not tonight, but sometime.

I grabbed the beer and turned to join my partner. "Hey!" I exclaimed loudly, walking a little faster. "You can't wear that! That's my lucky engineer's hat. And what did you do with my railroads?"

Yep. It was gonna be okay.



The End