

# The Nightmare II: “The Jacket”

*by The Blintz*

I sat alone in the waiting room, staring at the bloodstains on my clothes and on my trembling hands. This couldn't be happening. No way. Not to him. Any minute now, if I screamed loudly enough, he'd come bounding into my bedroom and wake me up. He'd tell me to stop hollering, take a deep breath and tell him all about it. By the time I was finished, the terror would be behind me and I'd feel quite silly for letting a stupid dream turn me into a scared little child. He'd just flash that crooked smile of his, pat my shoulder a few times, offer to tuck me in, and I'd drift back to sleep to dream no more.

So, taking a deep breath, I called out his name, hoping to summon him from his resting-place on the sofa. It was little more than a choked whisper as it slipped past my lips, and anyone passing by would probably think I was just mumbling to myself. Even so, my voice sounded hollow, unnatural as it reverberated around the empty room. Receiving no response, I catapulted off the sofa and began pacing the small room like a caged animal. I stopped at the window and looked outside, surprised to see that it was still daylight. The sun seemed to be mocking me, shining down on the earth with a beauty and delicacy rare for this part of the city. Everything it touched seemed to glow with vibrant life, a stark contrast to my once vivacious partner who had already taken on the gray hue of the dead. Standing there a moment longer, I recalled the nightmares that had plagued me for the last several months. He had told me that I needed to trust myself like he trusted me. I slammed my fist against the windowsill as anger and helplessness welled up inside me. And I couldn't help but wonder how he would feel about trusting me now.

My nervous energy had quickly burned itself out, and I sank back down onto the couch, burying my head in my hands. By this time, I was pretty sure that I was, in fact, not dreaming. I really was sitting in the waiting area of the Emergency Room staring at the crimson stains on my hands and clothes. I was covered in his blood, yet I was still praying, hoping for something to make it all go away. But, deep down I knew that it would be a very, very long time before anything was right again. And I knew with perfect clarity, that if he didn't make it, neither would I.

I thought I had dispensed with the childish notion that this wasn't happening, that it was all a dream, until I felt a gentle pressure on my shoulder. And I heard a calming, soothing voice utter the words I'd been dying to hear.

“Are you alright?”

But, something was wrong. That voice. Although it was a very pleasant voice with just the right inflection of caring and concern, it wasn't the voice I'd been praying I would hear. And when I looked up, hoping against hope to meet the sapphire gaze of my closest

friend, I saw, instead, a pair of hazel eyes belonging to a nurse who looked frazzled and exhausted.

“Yeah,” I lied fluently. “I’m fine. Can you tell me anything about my partner?” Anxiety drove me to my feet and I subconsciously grabbed her arm to keep her from running away before I had the information I needed.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, and I could see the genuine compassion she felt for me. “We’re still working on him. I just came out here to see if you wanted this.” She held up a white plastic bag that was closed at the top with some kind of drawstring. “It’s his personal effects. We salvaged everything we could, but some of his clothes we just couldn’t save – there was just too much blood...”

Her voice trailed off in sympathy as I nodded mutely and took the bag from her hand. Unable to speak around the lump in my throat, I turned away from her and sank back down onto the couch I’d been occupying since I had arrived here. I felt her hand on my shoulder once again and I looked up, surprised to see her face sliding in and out of focus through the mist in my eyes.

“We’ll let you know something the minute we have anything to tell you. I promise.” And, with a slight squeeze of her hand, she was gone.

I sat for a long time staring at the bag in my hands, unable to find the courage to open it. I knew that when I opened that bag it would mean death to my desperate hope that this was all a dream. But I also knew that if I sat there much longer, the whole hospital would be swarming with other cops and friends as word of what had happened spread through the precinct.

So, with only the slightest hesitation, I resolutely undid the drawstring and peered inside. My mind went into automatic detective mode and I mentally inventoried the sack.

One pair of blue Adidas.

One rawhide necklace.

One pair of crummy blue jeans.

One brown leather jacket.

One brown leather jacket complete with three perfectly round bullet holes surrounded by his blood. My trembling hands pulled the jacket from the bag and I involuntarily clutched it to me, imagining that I could still feel his warmth there. I bowed my head and that’s when I caught it. The warm smell of leather. They say that the sense of smell is the most powerful when it comes to sparking memories, and in that quiet waiting room, I found that to be true.

My mind drifted back to the day he'd bought that jacket. We were so young back then. So innocent, still believing in our ability to save the world...

*He had been teased one too many times about that huge white sweater with the big, black stripe and decided his image needed a little updating. So, he had enthusiastically dragged me to every clothing store in town one Saturday afternoon, trying on every type of outerwear known to mankind. I had given up hope about five stores before he did, but finally, at the last place we stopped, he spotted this jacket. He tried it on and modeled it in front of the three-sided mirror, turning this way and that. He told me it made him look like James Dean, really cool and street wise, and he was sure the girls were gonna love it. I just rolled my eyes and shook my head. James Dean or not, I was just glad he was getting rid of that awful sweater.*

*As I recall, he wouldn't even take it off long enough for the cashier to check him out. He just grinned at her, ripped off the tag and gave her his best Bogey impression. "Sorry, sweetheart, but this jacket's walkin' with me." And then, when we were back in the Torino he held the sleeve up to my nose and invited me to smell him. Under any other circumstances I would most likely have made some snide remark about just how honored I felt that he would allow me to smell him, but on that day I couldn't do it. He was just so happy in that uniquely exuberant, joyous way of his that always tugged at my heart. So, I inhaled deeply of the rich new leather smell, and a memory was born.*

My mind snapped back to the present and I realized that I had his coat pressed against my face, my nose automatically registering the different layers of scents woven into the fabric.

The faint smell of stale sweat...

*I remembered a steep stairwell, a desperate climb to the roof of a ratty apartment building, and a partner who shot the only man that could have saved his life. He killed his chance for life on that dark rooftop in order to save me. And, as he collapsed into my arms, his eyes rolling up into his head, I felt a grief so profound I thought I would never in my life experience that intensity of emotion ever again. Until today, when I ran around the front of his car to find him slumped against the rear wheel, his blood already staining the pavement around him. In that moment, I knew what powerlessness was all about. If there had been a way, I'd have turned back time and somehow prevented it from happening; I'd have done more, found a way to protect him from the bullets that were taking him away from me. But there was nothing I could do, and that knowledge left me empty and cold.*

Perhaps the strongest scent wafting up from the cloth was the sickly sweet smell of blood. His blood...

*I shuddered involuntarily as I remembered a bathroom in the courthouse. He had gone to use the facilities, one of his more useful superstitions, but he hadn't returned. I went to look for him, but instead of finding him, I found a bathroom that looked like a*

*slaughterhouse. The stench of blood was overwhelming and I stared in horror at my partner's name written on the mirror in a big, bloody scrawl. I don't remember how long I stood there in terrified disbelief, but the smell finally got to me and Dobby found me retching my guts up into the nearest commode. Thankfully, we found out a short time later it wasn't Starsky's blood at all, just that of some poor animal. But you never forget that smell.*

*I remembered another time, when an old enemy of mine trapped him and me in a dilapidated barn. We had arranged a diversion so the little girl who had stowed away with us could get free, and that's when Starsky got shot. I carefully cut up his pant leg and examined the small, round hole in his calf, fashioning a partial tourniquet to stem the flow of blood. And, once again, the distinctive smell of blood assaulted my nostrils, only this time, there was no doubt that it was his. It was a little ironic; the only reason he had been shot was because he was my partner. Bagley, our tormentor, didn't know Starsky from Adam's house cat. He was after me, and because of that, my partner was wounded. But Starsky had refused to leave me alone, sticking with me to the bitter end, no matter what the outcome.*

Somehow, I forced my mind back to the present and looked down at the jacket in my hands, scrutinizing every tiny detail. Every rip, every tear, every stitch made to repair it – each one seemed to spark yet another memory of how much we'd been through and how he'd always been there for me.

It was while I was examining the soft leather that I saw the water marks on the left shoulder. Pain gripped at my heart as I remembered the scene just like it was yesterday...

*The woman I loved was dead on the floor. My best friend was trying to tell me the truth about what had happened, and I had repaid him with a punch in the mouth. But, instead of knocking my head off, which is what he should have done, he just offered to let me hit him again if it would make me feel better. I had my hands dug deeply into the lapels of that jacket, hanging on for dear life, when his words finally got through to me and I realized that he was the one person on the face of the earth that I could trust completely. And he had wordlessly wrapped his arms around me and let me melt into him, sobbing out my grief and anger on his shoulder. When I had finally gotten myself back together, I looked up at him and saw the tears in his own eyes. While I was grieving for Gillian, he had been grieving for me, being there for me like no one else in my life ever had.*

I heard a commotion in the hallway followed by the unmistakable voice of Captain Dobby demanding to know how Starsky was doing and what was going on. I grabbed up my precious treasure and ran for the men's room, tightly locking the door behind me. I wasn't quite ready to face the erstwhile sympathy of my friends.

Leaning against the bathroom wall, I allowed the waves of emotion to wash over me, giving myself over to their intensity. I embraced the jacket fiercely hoping to find some solace in the well-worn material. But all I felt was guilt, grief, and despair. My best friend and partner was dying, and there was nothing I could do. If only I'd stood and

faced the gunmen like he had, maybe he'd have been spared. The truth of the matter was that Starsky had been gunned down in cold blood right in front of me, and I had done nothing to stop it.

That revelation sapped the strength from my knees and I slid helplessly down the wall. And there I sat. Detective Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson, the White Knight, sitting on the cold, uncaring floor of the Emergency Room bathroom hugging a tattered, bloodstained leather jacket to his chest. I knew I wouldn't have much more time to myself; Dobey was already here and I was sure that others weren't far behind. And I'd be damned if I'd let them see me lose it. I had to keep it together – for my own sake as well as Starsky's. The men who shot him were still on the loose, and as long as they were still out there walking around, I had a job to do.

Finally, my tired brain had latched onto a purpose, and I pushed myself up off the floor. Turning toward the sink I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and I froze. The face staring back at me was familiar, yet strange. The eyes were sunken, haunted, the features etched in grief. The face staring back at me was the face of a man on the edge, barely in control of his seething emotions. It was at that precise moment that I realized I was no longer a cop. Sure, I still had my badge and my gun, and I would do everything in my power to keep them. But, so help me, if I ever found the men who did this to Starsky and somehow managed to catch up with them, all bets were off. I would do what had to be done, no matter what the consequences.

I laid the jacket down on the counter top and splashed cool water over my face. Reaching for a paper towel, I saw a slip of paper sticking out of one of the pockets. At first, I was hesitant to look at it; I guess I felt like I was invading his privacy. But my curiosity overwhelmed me, and I gently plucked the paper from its resting-place, my hands shaking as I unfolded it.

It was a receipt from the nursery near Starsky's place...

*I'd been feeling a little down and out of sorts ever since that whole business with Rigger had gone down, and being reinstated into the force hadn't really cheered me up. Then one morning, as I was getting ready for work, Starsky had barged into my living room carrying a beautiful, delicate African Violet. I was speechless. He just grinned at me and told me that maybe adding another specimen to my jungle would brighten me up a little. Then, in that casual, no soapy scenes way of his, he had proceeded to raid my refrigerator, happily munching on some leftover Chinese food for breakfast. He had tried to antagonize me for a few minutes, complaining about the lack of meat in my choice of entree, but I finally managed to distract him from his feast long enough to lay my hand on his shoulder. He'd looked up at me then, our eyes met, and words were no longer necessary.*

My heart broke. Tears sprang unbidden to my eyes, and as much as I fought it and tried to contain them, a few escaped from between my lashes to land once again on the shoulder of that jacket. I wanted to scream, cry, lash out at something, break something,

but instead, I just quietly buried my face into the familiar material and struggled for control. Just then there was a pounding on the men's room door, and I heard Captain Dobby calling my name.

"Hutchinson? Are you in there? Are you alright?"

Taking a deep, calming breath, I once again caught the unmistakable fragrance of leather mingled with the scents that represented the very essence of my partner. And somehow, it comforted me. Even though Starsky was physically lying on an exam table somewhere in the hospital, I could feel his presence with me, radiating from within the folds of the jacket I held tightly in my arms. It gave me strength, and with that strength I found the courage to hastily dry my eyes and open the bathroom door. And I knew that no matter what awaited me on the other side of that door, I could face it. We could face it, together. Because I realized in that moment that Starsky would always be with me, no matter what happened today in the hospital. He was as much a part of me as I was of him, and I would always carry him in my heart.

### **EPILOGUE – September 28, 2040**

"Man! I had no idea Grandpa had so much stuff!" complained Tessa, a beautiful young woman with long, golden hair and sparkling, crystal blue eyes.

"I know what you mean," replied her father, David, who was fighting a losing battle with a very large, overstuffed trunk. "If he'd really loved us, he'd have left all this junk to someone else!"

Tessa smiled lovingly at her Dad. She knew he had loved Grandpa as much as she had, maybe even more. She was too young to remember the days when Grandpa Hutch was still a detective on the police force with his partner, Uncle Dave, but every now and then she'd persuade her father to tell her one of the many stories that had become legend in the precinct in which they had served.

Nonetheless, she had many fond memories of her Grandpa and his partner. They had always treated her special, and she had always felt treasured and loved when they were around. But now, Grandpa was gone. The doctors said he had died of old age, and had assured Tessa and her father that he had not suffered. He'd gone to sleep one night and had never awakened.

But Tessa knew differently. Just two months ago, she, her father, and her Grandpa had stood at a graveside in a quiet little cemetery along with a multitude of other mourners. Grandpa's longtime friend and partner, David Michael Starsky, had been laid to rest next to his loving wife of fifty-two years. Through her tears, Tessa had watched her Grandpa's face and, as they lowered the beautiful mahogany casket into the ground, she had seen the light go out of her Grandfather's eyes. Her mourning had escalated, for she knew that she had not only lost a dear friend, she had lost her Grandpa as well.

And now, here they were, just she and her father, trying to sort through the huge collection of ‘stuff’ that her Grandpa had accumulated in his lifetime.

“Well,” her father began, interrupting her train of thought. “I think that about does it. Would you mind going up there one more time to make sure we got everything? The real estate people are coming tomorrow to show the place and they want it spic and span.”

Tessa obediently climbed the stairs to the old attic one last time, brushing a stray tear from her eyes. She was really going to miss this place, still so full of vibrant memories of times spent with Grandpa Hutch.

She made one last sweep of the now empty, dusty room and headed back down the stairs. On impulse, she headed one last time into her Grandfather’s bedroom. She was sure it had been thoroughly cleared out the day before, but something compelled her to open the closet door for a perfunctory inspection. Just as she was about to close the door, something caught her eye. Hanging in the back of the closet was a well-worn garment bag with a single hanger suspending it from a hook in the wall. Muttering to herself - “Wonder how we missed that?” – she snatched it off the hook and carried it down the stairs to her father.

“I found this in the bedroom closet,” she said, thrusting the garment bag into her father’s hands. “But other than that, I’d say the old house is finally empty.”

David took the garment bag and tugged forcefully on the zipper that was all but rusted shut. As the material fell open, he saw an old, tattered brown leather jacket hanging from the single hanger. It was only after he had pulled the jacket from the bag that he noticed the bullet holes in the back surrounded by what appeared to be dried blood.

Tessa watched her father with growing interest, but she became alarmed when she saw the color drain out of his face. She was beside him in an instant, helping him to take a seat on an old dining room chair that was sitting in the driveway, waiting to be loaded onto the van.

“What’s wrong, Daddy?” she asked, concern etched into her features. “What’s the matter?”

Her father looked at her blankly for a few moments, and then began to speak. “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe he hung on to it all these years. It’s like holding a piece of history in your hands. And they said he threw it away...” He looked down at the jacket in his hands as if it were a rare treasure.

“Threw what away, Daddy? What are you talking about? Who’s jacket is that and why did Grandpa have it hanging in his closet? Tell me what’s going on!”

David instructed his daughter to pull up another chair and she sat beside him, curiosity sparkling out of her eyes. Reaching up, he cupped her face in his hand and noticed for the thousandth time how much she resembled her grandfather. Not wanting to keep her waiting any longer, David began to speak.

He told her a tale of two men, one mortally wounded, the other never giving up on his friend. He told her of how the wounded man had actually died, how the nurses and doctors fought to resuscitate him in vain until the other man had burst through the doors of the hospital. At that very moment, the injured man's heart had resumed its beating, almost as if he depended on the other man for life itself. He told her of a legendary bond between two detectives that astounded their peers and superiors alike, and how that bond had saved them time and time again from those who would have destroyed them.

He told her about this jacket, how Starsky had been wearing it on that fateful day. Supposedly, the nurses had given it to Hutch along with a few other things, but no one had ever seen it again. Everyone just assumed that Hutch had thrown it away; after all, it was of no use to anyone. It hadn't been in great shape before the shooting and afterward it was just plain ruined.

He told her how Starsky had survived the attack and how Hutch had tracked down the man responsible, putting him away for many years. Somehow, Starsky had come back full force, and the two men had remained partners until they retired. According to all who knew them, there had not been a pair of detectives before or since that could hold a candle to them.

Suddenly, David stopped talking as fleeting glimpses of an old memory tugged at his mind...

*Years after the Gunther hit, Starsky had been seriously wounded again. Hutch had been inconsolable, no doubt reliving the hours of agony and uncertainty he had faced alone all those years before. David was just a young boy, not more than five or six years old, but he well remembered the raw grief that was apparent on his father's face.*

*On one particular night, Hutch had disappeared after dutifully picking at his dinner, leaving David and his mother to sit helplessly at the dining room table. On impulse, David followed his father up the stairs and found him in the bedroom, sitting on the king-sized bed, staring at an old garment bag. As David looked on, fascinated, his father had pulled a brown jacket from the bag and buried his face in it, breathing deeply of its scent. Somehow, even though he was young, David had known he was intruding into something very personal and private, so he crept away from the door, leaving his father to his suffering.*

"Daddy?" Tessa unknowingly interrupted his train of thought. "What are you thinking?"

David smiled at his daughter. “I was thinking about Grandpa Hutch and Uncle Dave and about how much they meant to each other. I wonder if they ever truly realized how lucky they were to have found each other...”

And, suddenly, he understood. His father did know what a rare gem he had found in Starsky. He had cherished that gift of love, even going so far as to hang on to a blood stained jacket so that he would never take that friendship for granted. Yes, David understood, and with that understanding came the realization that Tessa had been right all along. His father had not died of old age or any other malady. When Starsky died, he had taken half of Hutch’s heart with him, and a man can’t live with just half a heart. So, even in death, the legendary bond had not been broken. Starsky may have gone first, but Hutch had found a way to join him.

He had died of a broken heart.



*The End*