

# “Burden of Guilt”

by Tibbie B.

“Thirty more minutes,” Starsky said, checking his wristwatch for the fifth time in fifteen minutes. “Just thirty minutes and we’re off duty.”

Hutch cut his eyes over at the impatient man in the car seat beside him. “I told Carol we wouldn’t finish our shift until mid-morning. They know we might be late, Starsk. It’s not like they’ve never gone out with us before.”



“My point exactly,” Starsky came back. “We were late the *last* time we took them out. What if they decide we aren’t worth the wait this time?”

Hutch glanced toward Starsky again, smiling at the genuine look of worry on his partner’s face. “What? And miss out on a fun-filled day at the beach with two terrific guys like us? You’re the one always telling me how the ladies can’t resist that ‘Paul Muni’ charm of yours.”

Before Starsky could reply, the dispatcher’s voice interrupted over the two-way radio. “Attention. Any unit in the vicinity of Sheraton and Third. Please respond. Repeat—Sheraton and Third. A 10-94 in progress at 324 Sheraton Street. Suspect armed and dangerous.”

Starsky stomped the gas pedal to the floor, as Hutch reached for the mic and simultaneously fished the Mars light out from beneath the car seat. “Zebra Three responding, Control,” Hutch answered. “ETA approximately eight minutes.”

“Make it six,” Starsky interjected, jerking the steering wheel sharply to make a quick left onto Sheraton.

“Correction,” Hutch added. “ETA six minutes.”

“Ten-four, Zebra Three. Back-up en route. ETA twelve minutes. Witnesses report customers in the building. Possible hostage situation.”

Starsky shot a look at his partner and mumbled irritably, “So much for bein’ on time to pick up the girls.”



A block from the grocery store, Starsky pulled the Torino to the curb and jumped out. Hutch bailed out, too, and sprinted down the sidewalk toward the crime scene. As they approached the market’s parking lot, both detectives ducked back out of view from the glass storefront. Hutch pulled his .357 Magnum and checked the cylinder. “How do you want to play it?”

“The usual routine,” Starsky answered, checking his weapon as well. “You wanna stroll in the front door while I find a back way in?”

“Fine with me. You played the dummy last time,” Hutch answered, holstering the Magnum and zipping the baseball jacket to hide the weapon.

Starsky gave him a lopsided grin. “Yeah, well I know that part comes a lot easier for you, Blintz, so be my guest.”

Hutch curled his lips in mock disgust, but didn’t argue.

Heading toward the alleyway, Starsky turned back for one last look at Hutch. “Hey—”

Hutch stopped and looked back over his shoulder. With a nervous smile, he tilted his head slightly toward Starsky, acknowledging the silent warning to be careful. “You, too,” he muttered beneath his breath. It was a ritual that often passed between them in those final moments before facing danger.

Starsky nodded back before continuing quietly down the alley in search of a back entrance. Relieved there were no vagrants sleeping behind the buildings, he quickly located the back door of the market, eased it open, and slipped inside. Cautiously flattening himself against the wall, he held his breath and listened for the sounds of what was going down in the front part of the store.

“I said get down! You, there! Keep those hands flat on the floor or I’ll blow your freakin’ head off!”

The robber’s voice was too high-pitched and nervous, riddled with fear. Starsky heard a frightened whimper in reply to the gunman’s warning. From behind, the man appeared to be young, his body as tall and straight as a basketball player’s. His longish blond hair curled in unruly patches along the nape of his neck and around his ears, showing his obvious disdain for barbers. *Why aren’t you out on a court shootin’ a few hoops, kid?*

“I ain’t tellin’ you again, bitch! Either stay down, or I’ll put ya down!” Despite the bold words, Starsky could tell this kid was about to lose it. Probably his first heist. Holdup guys like him were the most dangerous—easily spooked, rarely thinking before pulling the trigger.

Starsky crept forward, stayed low to the floor, and made his way to the swinging aluminum door separating the back of the store from the front. He carefully peeked around the seven-foot panel, getting his first glimpse of the action out front. He waited only a heartbeat before hearing his partner’s noisy entrance.

“Hey...w-w-what’s goin’ on here?” Hutch stuttered.

Starsky peered through the crack in the door, as the jittery gunman swung in Hutch’s direction and pointed his weapon at the detective. He watched as Hutch’s eyes went wide with fear—genuine or feigned, he was pretty damned convincing.

“You! Lock that door behind you and get over here. This is a stickup, and if you don’t wanna find yourself dead, you’ll do like I say!”

Holding his hands up before him, Hutch played the part of the startled interloper. “Sure, buddy, sure. Just don’t shoot. All I wanted was a pack of smokes—whatever you say.”

Seeing the gunman focused on Hutch, Starsky seized the moment and slipped silently through the swinging door, making his way to the cover of a precariously stacked pyramid of huge juice cans at the end of a nearby aisle. Once in place, he began sizing up the location of hostages in relation to the gunman, quickly weighing his options.

There was no one in the line of fire between himself and the gunman. That was good. But immediately to the robber’s left was an elderly woman, sporting a funny little knit cap. To his right was a man about forty, balding and thin, wearing the expression of a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. Probably some unfortunate businessman making a quick stop before work, Starsky figured. If he’d just step away two more feet, Starsky would feel a whole lot better.

But what concerned him most was the frightfully thin young blonde woman who stood to the right of the businessman. She’d gathered a brood of small children around her legs and seemed to be trying to shield them with her pencil-thin body. A cigarette dangled from her lips, and her eyes—the size of saucers—were focused on the scraggly gunman before her. If the thief decided to take a hostage, five would get you ten it would be one of the children. Starsky knew he couldn’t let that happen.

Hurriedly, his eyes traveled to the right and landed on an older man in a jogging suit standing beside the thin woman. Had the old guy not been scared out of his wits, the two of them would have made a comical picture. He was almost half the woman’s height and three times her girth.

In the meantime, Hutch fumbled with the lock and complained loudly, hoping to keep the gunman's attention while Starsky got into position.

“Shut up and get away from that door!”

Hutch locked the door, then turned to face the jumpy young man. “Look, I don't want any trouble, kid, but are you sure you wanna do this? I mean, no one's been hurt yet. Why don't you call the whole thing off?” Hutch cajoled.

“I said shut up and I meant it. I don't need no advice from you.” Hutch noticed fine beads of perspiration covering the frightened youth's face as he thrust the gun even farther out before him. He fidgeted momentarily, but didn't back down from his aggressive stance.

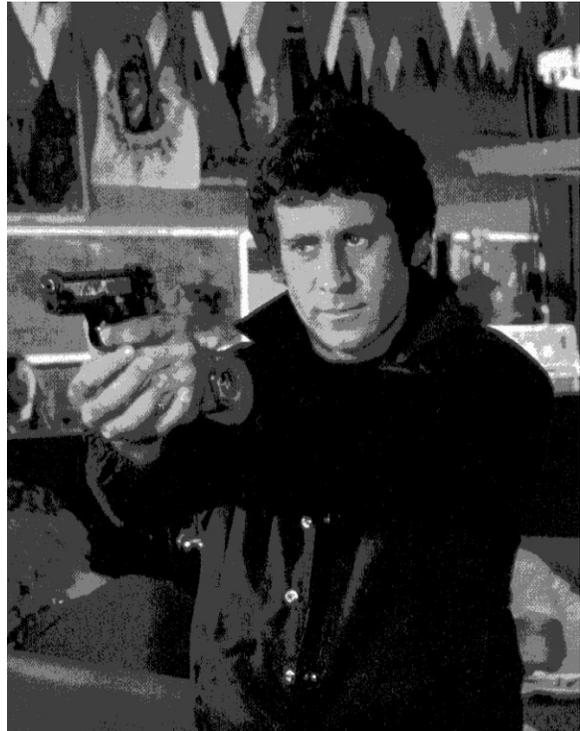
“Okay, I'll do as you say. Just stay calm.” Hutch stepped away from the door and went to stand to the right of the man dressed in the worn out jogging suit.

Starsky crept from behind the tower of cans and silently moved to the next grocery aisle. From here he had a clean shot. He prayed he wouldn't have to take such drastic measures.

“Now, you—behind the register—take the money out and put it in a bag,” the young man demanded, still pointing the gun in the general direction of Hutch's group. “The rest of you, empty your pockets in here.” He tossed a small soiled canvas bag to the businessman, who quickly emptied his pockets into the bag and passed it on.

Seeing the gunman's attention divided between the hostages, the clerk at the register, and the canvas bag, Starsky decided to make his move. Looking past the robber, his eyes locked on Hutch. Intuitively, Hutch looked up and met his stare head-on. Starsky signaled with a nod, then stepped from behind the aisle, his gun held at arm's length before him.

“Police! Drop your weapon and turn around slowly.”



The young assailant spun in place and aimed directly for Starsky, his intention clear.

“Drop it!” Starsky shouted again. The kid’s eyes seemed to glaze over as his finger squeezed the cold metal trigger of the small Beretta. Starsky heard the bullet whiz past his head before instinctively returning fire. He was certain he had a clear shot at the gunman, but then in a heartbeat, the businessman was there—straight in his path. It happened so unexpectedly, there was no time to react. As the slug exploded from the barrel of his Smith and Wesson, time seemed to stop. Starsky believed for an instant he could see it speed through the air, the lead slamming full force into the chest of the thin man in the oversized suit. The man’s eyes sprang wide with shock, then fell as vacant as dull glass, as he crumpled at the feet on the wild-haired robber.

Struck in the shoulder by a bullet from Hutch’s Magnum, the shooter spun and dropped the Beretta before collapsing beside the unconscious man. “Okay! Okay! I give up,” he cried, squirming on the floor in pain. The others, who had taken cover when the gun battle began, slowly ventured out from their hiding places as Hutch reached the downed gunman in two long strides and proceeded to cuff him.

“Oh, God...” Starsky stumbled forward and bent over the fallen bystander, praying it wasn’t as bad as it looked. But one glimpse at the vacuous eyes revealed the gruesome truth. The victim had taken a bullet near the heart. Too near. Still trying to force his own lungs to breathe, Starsky sank to the floor on his knees and hesitantly reached out and checked for a pulse. He knew it was hopeless, but went through the motions just the same.

“Starsk, are you hit?” Hutch asked. Alarmed by the pallor of his partner’s face, he reached out and placed a steadying hand on Starsky’s shoulder, then knelt down beside him. Still too stunned to speak, Starsky could only shake his head. “Are you okay?” Hutch repeated.

Then, turning an ashen face to his partner, Starsky choked out the words, “No. No, I’m not okay. I just killed an innocent man, Hutch.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Hutch countered. Slipping his own weapon back into its holster, he leaned close and spoke as calmly as he could, hoping to fortify Starsky’s quickly deteriorating composure. “There’s a room full of witnesses here who’ll testify that he wasn’t in your range until the last second. I saw it—you saw it.”

Starsky shook his head again, as if disbelieving not only *his* eyes but Hutch’s as well. “What the hell just happened, here, Hutch? Huh? Can somebody explain to me how I shot a guy who wasn’t there a half a second earlier?”

“I...I don’t know, buddy. Maybe he panicked, tried to run for cover and just chose the wrong direction. Who knows what went through his mind? It’s going to be okay, Starsk. Trust me.” Hutch cupped the back of Starsky’s neck and gave a reassuring squeeze before standing up and turning his attention to the crowd of frightened onlookers. Quickly, he scanned the room to make sure no one else had been hit.

Seeing they were only shaken, Hutch flipped open his badge, focusing on the store clerk still behind the cash register, pale-faced and trembling. “Don’t let any of these people leave. We’ll need statements from everyone. I’ll go out and call for back-up and an ambulance.” Before heading for the car, he turned back to Starsky.

“Starsk, I need to call this in. You gonna be okay?”

Starsky looked up with tormented eyes and nodded distractedly.

“I’ll be right back,” Hutch told him quietly. As he headed for the door, he stopped and pulled aside a young bagging clerk. “Listen, how about finding something to cover that man, okay?” he said, motioning toward the corpse.

The pimple-faced young man quickly nodded, untied the string knotted behind his neck, and took his apron to Starsky. “Here, you can use this,” the boy offered.

Starsky closed his eyes tightly, trying to steady his trembling hands, then reached up and accepted the full-length white apron and gently draped it over the dead man’s upper torso, concealing the red stain quickly pooling on his chest. “Thanks,” he whispered.

The young clerk didn’t reply. He just walked away, leaving Starsky to stare down at the covered body and watch the blood begin to seep darkly through the fabric of the snow-white apron.



Starsky slouched in the chair facing Dobey’s desk, staring intently at the ballpoint pen tightly gripped in his left hand. Hutch sat beside him, waiting for the storm to break. Despite Hutch’s efforts to draw him out, Starsky hadn’t said a dozen words since leaving the scene of the holdup. Now they were going to meet with IA to tell Starsky’s side of the story, and Hutch was worried. Knowing his partner’s state of mind, there was no way of guessing what he might say. Hutch only hoped Starsky wouldn’t incriminate himself out of some misplaced sense of guilt.

Hutch had seen the devastation Starsky had endured the last time he’d been involved in an accidental injury to a bystander. As it turned out, Emily Harrison had actually been in league with the thieves he and Starsky were trying to stop. But that hadn’t prevented the detective from blaming himself when Emily was temporarily blinded by a bullet from his gun.

Hutch glanced to his right and watched Starsky’s downcast eyes studying the pen with the same interest one might afford a priceless relic. He was shutting Hutch out, and right now what he *really* needed was an ally. “Starsk, I wish you’d tell me what’s running through that thick head of yours. You know, deep down inside, this isn’t your fault—”

Before Hutch could finish his sentence, the door flew open and Dobey hurried in, puffing for breath and wiping his face with a handkerchief. For once, he didn’t open the

conversation gruffly demanding an explanation for some mess they'd created for him. Hutch could see the worry lines creasing the older man's face.

"Okay, you two. Simonetti's right on my tail, and to make things worse, the mayor's goon, Silverstone, is with him. So we've only got a couple of minutes. Want to tell me what happened?"

Never taking his eyes off the pen, Starsky mumbled, "I killed an innocent bystander, Cap'n. First he wasn't there—then he was. I can't explain it."

Hutch closed his eyes in dismay. *Terrific. If Starsky tells that to Simonetti, they'll have his badge in two seconds flat.*

"Hutchinson?" Dobby turned to Hutch impatiently.

"Captain, Starsky didn't have a choice. The guy shot first. I don't know what made that man jump in front of the shooter, but that's exactly what it looked like to me."



Dobby's brow crinkled uneasily as he considered Hutch's words. "Could he have been in on it? You know, like that woman—what was her name?"

"Emily Harrison," Starsky chimed in, without breaking his concentration on the ballpoint pen. "Her name is Emily Harrison."

"I don't know," Hutch replied honestly. "But it sure warrants looking into. Come on, Starsk, it's a starting point." Hutch bolted from his chair and headed for the door.

"Hey," Starsky said, finally looking up. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

"Simonetti. He's gonna want to hear your version of what went down."

Hutch stopped, running a frustrated hand over his face. "Right. Right, I almost forgot about the inquisition."

In spite of himself, Starsky smiled at Hutch's description of the impending interview.

Dobey's anger flared. "Dammit, Starsky, you don't seem to understand the seriousness of this situation! The mayor won that election last month with promises to—in his words—'clean up the corrupt police department of Bay City.' Much to his disappointment, he hasn't uncovered a single incident of corruption. Silverstone's not going to give a damn about whether this was an unavoidable accident. He'll use you to give the mayor an opportunity to flex his political muscle." Dobey swung his eyes toward Hutch, then back at Starsky. Pointing a finger at them he warned, "So both of you—keep your heads and let *me* handle this!"

Before either cop could argue, there was a sharp rap on the door. Simonetti and Silverstone entered Dobey's office without waiting for a response. Starsky and Hutch both turned a cold stare on the IA investigator, a natural response considering their past dealings with him.

"Well, here we are again," Simonetti smirked. "Looks like you two are never going to learn."

Ignoring Dobey's lecture, Starsky shot back, "Come on, Simonetti, you know it's your magnetic personality that keeps bringin' us back."

"Besides, without us, you wouldn't have any innocent cops to harass," Hutch added.

Seeing the IA investigator was about to rise to the bait, Dobey came around the desk and stepped between Hutch and Simonetti. *So much for his warning. Someday, those two were going give him a heart attack. If they weren't his two best detectives, he'd be tempted to throw them to the wolves and see how they dealt with Simonetti and Silverstone on their own.* But Dobey had seen Silverstone in action before, and knew he was even more of a threat to his boys than Internal Affairs.

"Simonetti, if you can't conduct this investigation without bias, I suggest you step down and let someone else handle it," Dobey said, his eyes challenging Simonetti to deny his personal dislike for Starsky and Hutch.

With a condescending smile, Silverstone intervened. "Now, now, gentlemen, no need for harsh words. I'm here to assure that justice is served and that the mayor acts in the best interest of his constituency."

"Like hell you are!" Hutch spat. "You're here to offer my partner up as a sacrificial lamb for the mayor's political career. Why don't we all cut the crap and get to the heart of the situation?"

Silverstone pulled back momentarily, a little surprised at the vehemence in Hutchinson's voice. One would think *he* was the one in the hot seat right now, rather than Detective Starsky. "I admit that I'm aware of your partner's reputation as a 'cowboy'—yours

too—if that’s what you mean. The mayor *has* made a promise to the citizens of this city to put an end to the police taking matters into their own hands.”

“Everyone knows you two are hotheads, and it was only a matter of time before something like this happened,” Simonetti interrupted. “You went too far this time, Starsky. I’ve finally got enough on you to see that you never wear a badge again.”

“Terrific.” Starsky looked at him from under hooded eyes. “You haven’t even taken my statement, and already I’m judged and sentenced. The mark of a truly professional police officer, Simonetti. Screw the truth—just further the mayor’s career.”

This was going exactly as Dobey had feared it would. He had to salvage the situation quickly, or Starsky wouldn’t only be suspended, he’d be permanently off the force. “I think we need to sit down and follow proper procedure here,” he suggested. “This is getting us nowhere fast. If you don’t think you can do that, Simonetti, I’ll contact IA and have them send someone else.”

Simonetti, his eyes locked with Starsky’s in a duel of wills, broke contact first. Knowing Dobey was within his rights to demand another investigator, he quickly swallowed back the anger rather than risk losing the opportunity to get these two once and for all.

“By all means, Captain. Let’s do it by the book.” Simonetti reached up and straightened his tie, buying a few seconds more to rein in his own temper. This was going to be good. He relished the thought of finally having the goods on Starsky. Knowing how these two operated, Hutchinson would hang himself, trying to prove Starsky’s innocence.

Hutch returned to his chair next to Starsky, and once they were all seated, Simonetti flipped open his notebook and began the interrogation. Hutch covertly watched Silverstone. The man’s eyes narrowed every time Starsky answered a question, scrutinizing each response. Occasionally he’d interrupt and ask a question of his own.

“Isn’t it true you were involved in a similar incident a few years back—shooting an innocent bystander?” Silverstone asked Starsky. The slight upward curl of his lips made it obvious he already knew about the Harrison case and was hoping Starsky would say something to incriminate himself.

“She was part of the gang robbing the jewelry store,” Hutch answered for Starsky. “I’d hardly call her an innocent bystander—she was their lookout.”

“Yes, but she *was* unarmed, correct?”

“Yes,” Starsky gritted out between clenched teeth. “She was unarmed. If you know that much, you also know she survived and recovered completely.”

Disregarding that bit of information, Silverstone pressed on. "Detective Starsky, you do seem to have a history of shooting first and asking questions later. What about young Lonnie Craig?"



"The inquest proved Starsky wasn't guilty of any wrongdoing," Dobey snapped before Starsky could answer.

"Then there was another case when you blew up a car containing the only two suspects who knew where a young kidnap victim was being held," Silverstone continued, ignoring Dobey's response.

"I...I thought they'd killed Hutch. They were fleeing the scene," Starsky tried to explain.

Hutch bolted from his chair. "Why the hell are you bringing that up?" he demanded. "It has nothing to do with this incident!"

"Simply establishing a pattern, Hutchinson," Silverstone answered smoothly. Turning to Simonetti, "I'm surprised your department has allowed an officer with such lack of constraint to stay on the police force, Officer [I'm not sure IA men would be detectives; you refer to him as "Investigator" later.] Simonetti. I'm sure after this is resolved, the mayor will be interested in reviewing the files of *all* Bay City's finest."

Recognizing a slam when he heard one, Simonetti again straightened his tie unnecessarily. "That won't be necessary, Silverstone. Our department is on top of it."

Turning to Starsky he said, "Detective Starsky, you're relieved of duty, pending a Board of Inquiry hearing of this incident. Turn over your badge and gun to me immediately."

Starsky's eyes hardened, and the muscles in his jaw tightened as his steely gaze met Simonetti's head-on.

"If Starsky's going to surrender his badge to anyone, it'll be me!" Dobey barked. "He's under my command. Starsky." When he didn't respond, Dobey repeated, "Starsky!"

Slowly, Starsky shifted his eyes from Simonetti to Dobey, then abruptly yanked the shield from his wallet and the gun from its holster. He popped the clip from the Smith & Wesson and slammed the items down onto Dobey's desk.

Looking past the anger, Dobey saw the hurt in the younger man's face, knowing what giving up his badge had cost him. "You'll be on leave with pay until the hearing," Dobey told him quietly.

“Now, just one minute, Captain,” Silverstone objected. “Why should the city pay a cold-blooded killer—?”

The protest died on his lips as Hutch’s face suddenly loomed only scant inches from his own. “Why you sanctimonious, slimy, little—”

“Hutch!” Hutch felt Starsky’s hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay. Time to go.”

Hutch didn’t step back immediately, enjoying the fear in Silverstone’s bulging, frightened eyes. The man’s breath lodged in his throat as he cringed against the wall, withering under Hutch’s deadly stare.

“That’s all for now Hutchinson. Your shift is over. Go home, get some rest,” Dobeey ordered. “I expect you back here at 0800. Understood?”

Still, Hutch didn’t back away.

“Understood, Cap’n,” Starsky answered for him.

Gripping the sleeve of Hutch’s jacket, Starsky dragged the angry man out of Dobeey’s office.

Not ready to leave, Hutch shouted as Starsky hauled him from the office, “And you couldn’t solve a case if the clues were pasted on your forehead, Simonetti, so don’t think I’m going to stand by and watch *you* crucify my partner with your ineptitude!” An indignant, accusatory finger jabbed the air to punctuate every word.

“Enough, Hutch,” Starsky muttered, giving one last determined yank. As soon as Hutch cleared the door, Starsky slammed it shut.

Infuriated, Hutch turned on him. “Why’d you do that? I wasn’t finished!”

“Yeah, you were,” Starsky answered with a wry grin. “And in about ten more seconds, we’d both have been finished. You said you’d help me get to the bottom of this. He’s already taken my badge and gun. You won’t be much help if you’re on suspension, too, now will ya?”

Beginning to calm down, Hutch nodded, relieved to see that Silverstone had accomplished something he couldn’t. He’d managed to ignite Starsky’s instinct for self-preservation.

“You’re right,” Hutch acknowledged, jerking his jacket sleeve free of Starsky’s iron grip.

Unaware he was still hanging on, Starsky looked down surprised, then straightened the rumpled sleeve. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly.

“I’ve got to talk to all the witnesses and see what we’ve missed here,” Hutch said. “Find out how and why that guy ended up between you and the shooter. Who’s to know if you go along for the ride?”

“Kramer.”

“What?” Hutch asked, confused by Starsky’s reply.

“His name was James Kramer. Thirty-nine years old, an insurance salesman. Wife and a kid,” Starsky answered morosely. When he looked up at Hutch, his eyes were dark pools of grief. “Just a regular guy, Hutch. Tryin’ to make a living, takin’ care of his family. He was somebody’s husband—somebody’s dad.”

Touched by the anguish in Starsky’s voice, Hutch swallowed hard. “Right...” He reached out again, driven by the need to touch Starsky, reassure him that it would be okay. Hutch realized nothing he said or did could change what had happened—make it easier to accept. But he was determined to do what he could to stop Starsky from blaming himself. “It’s hard, I know. But it wasn’t your fault. Anyone in your shoes would’ve taken that shot. And if you allow your guilt to get the better of you, Simonetti will win. Starsk, you’ve got to listen to me. I’m right about this.”

“Maybe I should just go ahead and resign. Maybe I shouldn’t be carrying a gun, Hutch.”

“That’s just about the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard you say,” Hutch answered. “Starsky, you’re the best cop I’ve ever known.” His voice softened as he added, “Now, let’s get out there and find out what really happened.”



The Torino sped through the city streets, the two detectives silent, each mulling over the encounter from moments earlier. They’d questioned the first witness, Agnes French, eighty-one, a widow who lived a block and a half from the market. When she’d moved there with her husband over fifty years ago, it had been a nice neighborhood. All that had changed in recent years, but she wasn’t about to be driven from her own home by a bunch of street hoodlums.

Agnes seldom went out alone these days unless it was necessary. The streets were no place for an old lady, she’d told them. Usually her daughter, Claire (who’d moved to a safer neighborhood years ago) drove her to the market once a week for groceries. But her memory, not being what it once was, Agnes had forgotten the cat’s food. It was just her unfortunate luck to be in the store picking up a bag of kitty chow for her gray and white tabby, Boots, when the robbery took place.

If he lived to be a hundred, Starsky was sure he'd never forget her accusatory voice as she squinted up at him with watery gray eyes and blurted out, "You're the one that shot that poor man in the market, aren't you?"

Starsky's head ducked momentarily before he met her piercing gaze again and confessed, "Yes, ma'am. I'm afraid so."

Hutch had stepped in front of Starsky protectively and presented his badge to her. "We're Detectives Hutchinson and Starsky, Mrs. French, and we'd like to ask you a few questions about what happened this morning."

The old woman, no longer wearing the funny little knit cap from that morning, pursed her lips and lifted her chin defensively. "I've already given my statement to the officer, and I don't know if I ought to be talking to you two. They said there would be an investigation." She peered past Hutch at Starsky and added, "Why'd you shoot that man, anyway? Don't they teach young hooligans anything before they give you gun and turn you loose on the public?"

Although he couldn't see Starsky's face, Hutch instinctively felt Starsky tense behind him. Biting back an angry reply, Hutch's jaw clenched tightly. Instead, he answered for Starsky, "It was an accident, ma'am, as I'm sure you must realize. We just want to find out why Mr. Kramer stepped into the line of fire."



"Well, what happened is pretty simple," she snapped. "Like I told the officer, this one missed the holdup man and shot that poor fellow. You don't have to be a *detective* to figure that out."

"He wasn't that close when I fired," Starsky said in his own defense. "I couldn't have been that far off the mark."

She cocked a reproachful eye at him and asked cryptically, "You Wyatt Earp or somebody?"

"He has the highest marksmanship scores in our department," Hutch answered matter-of-factly. He wasn't exaggerating. Starsky had consistently outscored everyone in the Department for the last five out of six years he'd been there. Hutch was trying to

keep his objectivity intact, but was quickly developing a strong dislike for the old woman.

"That right? Well, everyone makes mistakes." She stepped back and began closing the door. "You'll have to excuse me now. My soap is about to start, and they left us hanging

yesterday, so I sure don't want to miss the beginning." With that, she promptly closed the door in their faces.

Hutch, his lips already forming a protest, felt his temper flash. But before he could speak, Starsky said cryptically, "Nice to know she has her priorities in order."

"Yeah," Hutch growled, following him back down the stairs and to the car. "And such an open-minded lady, too."

That had been more than twenty minutes ago, and Starsky hadn't said another word. Hutch stole a glance at his partner—hands tightly gripping the steering wheel of the Torino, the muscle in his right cheek rigid with tension. Hutch could almost see the wheels turning in his head, replaying the shooting nonstop, blaming himself for something that didn't make sense.

"Starsk," Hutch began softly. "Don't let the old lady upset you. You know how elderly folks are sometimes. They don't always see things clearly."

"I don't know that I agree with you," Starsky answered. "I think they're like kids. They speak their minds and say things that others don't have the nerve to say. Maybe she was just tellin' it how it happened." He turned tormented eyes to Hutch, his voice rough with emotion. "Maybe I did just fire wild, Hutch."

"No!" Hutch said with conviction. "Aw, come on Starsky! You didn't—couldn't miss by that much. Now, you may be willing to take a fall for this, but I'll be damned if I'll stand by and watch you destroy yourself out of some misplaced sense of guilt!" The words had come out sharper than Hutch had intended, but he could see they'd hit the mark.

Starsky looked at Hutch, meeting his determined stare. Despite his ever-increasing feeling of dejection, a ghost of a smile played upon his lips. "Ya really know how to sweet talk a guy, Blondie." Although his words were teasing, Starsky was grateful *someone* believed, without reservation, in his innocence.



The second interview didn't go much better. Although the man who'd been standing beside the young mother in the market at the time of the shooting didn't seem determined to blame Starsky, he did express surprise that the policeman had fired "while the robber was holding a hostage."

"Hold on, Mr. Luponi. Now, think carefully before answering," Hutch encouraged him. "Hodgins, the gunman—did you see him hold Mr. Kramer in front of him like a shield?"

The pudgy little Italian's dark eyes narrowed and he gazed past the two detectives, trying to recapture the image of the incident from memory. Without realizing it, Starsky held his breath. Mr. Luponi rubbed the graying stubble on his chin thoughtfully.

"Hmmm... You know...I'ma not sure. Now that you ask, I'ma not so sure. Right after it happen, I think, Mr. Kramer, he was a hostage. But now...now, I cannot say for certain that he was."

Starsky felt the breath flow from his body, relieved Luponi hadn't immediately declared him guilty. It wasn't the confirmation he'd hoped for, but a small deviation from the resolute testimony the man had given the officer at the scene that morning.

Hutch smiled. Even more encouraged than Starsky, he asked, "Did you see Hodgins grab Mr. Kramer? Or could Kramer have tripped?"

Still concentrating, the little man's bushy brow crinkled indecisively. "No...no...I don't think so. I didn't see the thief reach for him. I guess that'sa why I think earlier that he was already a hostage. It all happen so fast. As you say, 'in the blink of an eye'." It appeared Mr. Luponi was beginning to rethink the entire incident and found himself becoming more confused by the moment.

"I don'ta know. Now I don'ta know anything." He stepped back from the door, clearly flustered. "Please, I need to clear my head and think on this. I'll call you once I am sure."

Disappointed, but not discouraged, Hutch reached into his wallet and took out a card. "Please, if you remember anything—one way or the other—please call us."

The little man's wary eyes darted back and forth between the officers, suspecting they really wanted to hear from him only if he could clear the dark-haired one of wrongdoing.

It seemed that Starsky had read his mind, when he added, "Really, Mr. Luponi. *Whatever* you remember, we want to know. We're just tryin' to get at the truth here. I'm very sorry about what happened this morning. And believe me, I need to know what went wrong."

Less skeptical now, the little Italian smiled and nodded to the two detectives. "I will call. Gooda day, gentlemen." With that, he quietly closed the door.

Hutch turned and descended the steps two at a time, Starsky in his wake.

Neither spoke until they were in the car. "What do you think?" Starsky asked, while focusing on the traffic, then pulling away from the curb.

“I think he’s not as judgmental as the old lady,” Hutch answered honestly. “Maybe when he thinks about it, he’ll have a clearer recollection.” Turning in his seat, Hutch laid a hand on Starsky’s shoulder and added, “We’re going to solve this. I promise.”

Starsky smiled skeptically and gave a quick nod, then drove back to the station in silence.

“What do you say we grab a bite to eat?” Hutch suggested, as the car pulled to a halt in the police parking garage.

“Nah...I’m not all that hungry.”

“Since when are *you* not hungry?” Hutch teased. “We didn’t even have lunch. Look, Starsk, you’ve got to eat. May as well be with me.”

The engine rumbled quietly, and Starsky made no move to cut it off. “I’ll stir up somethin’ at home,” he assured Hutch. “I’m kinda wiped out.”

“We could order pizza,” Hutch countered.

“Thanks, buddy, but I’m just not in the mood for company.” Starsky’s head snapped up, a sick look on his face. “Oh, man—Hutch—I didn’t call Bonnie. How could I forget to call Bonnie and tell her we weren’t comin’?”

“Relax,” Hutch said. “I called Carol when we got back to the station. She was going to explain everything to Bonnie for you.”

Starsky sighed, relieved that Hutch had taken care of canceling their date. “Thanks.”

Reluctantly, Hutch opened the door of the Torino and got out. “Well, if you change your mind about dinner—”

“I know where to find you,” Starsky finished for him.

Closing the door, Hutch stepped up onto the curb and gave the car roof two “all clear” raps. Still discomfited by the thought of Starsky spending the evening alone and miserable, Hutch didn’t move toward the beat-up old Ford until the red car disappeared from sight.



Starsky tossed the *Sports Illustrated* back onto the coffee table and reached for the TV remote control. Flipping through the channels disinterestedly, his mind wandered once again to the events of the day. How could he have been so careless? At the time it was happening, Starsky was certain he’d had a clear shot at Hodgins. Now, in the quiet gray of evening, the insecurities and pangs of self-doubt crept back in, causing him to second-guess every move he’d made.



It had happened so fast. A blur. No time to think it through. Maybe the adrenaline surging through his body had clouded his judgment. Hutch had tried to reassure him. *But, then, he would*, Starsky thought to himself. No matter what—Hutch would stand by him. But that didn't mean Starsky hadn't screwed up. Hutch's loyalty seemed boundless; he'd never give up trying to prove Starsky's innocence. And in this moment of self-recrimination, Starsky found that thought immensely comforting.

Alone with his thoughts, the night seemed to press upon him like a heavy weight. Starsky pushed himself up from the chair and went to the kitchen. He opened a bottle of beer and took a swig, more for something to do than to quench his thirst. Finding it tasteless and dissatisfying, he set the open bottle back in the refrigerator and leaned against the kitchen sink, immersed in thought.

Again, the scene that had transpired in the market earlier that day danced through his mind. Squeezing his eyes tightly shut, Starsky willed the images to sharpen, the events to slow for more careful scrutiny. All he accomplished, though, was a heightened sense of his own anxiety. Reaching for the telephone, he hurriedly punched in Hutch's number, then caught a glimpse of the clock on the wall and slammed the receiver down before it began ringing. He couldn't bring himself to call—not after pointedly refusing Hutch's offer to share dinner and pass the evening. He'd practically been rude to Hutch, and to call now, at 11:30 p.m., was asking too much, even of his partner.

Starsky returned to the living room and dropped back onto the sofa, resting his head on the worn arm, hoping to relax and drift off to sleep. Instead, he felt the oppressive heaviness in his chest again. He rubbed a weary hand against his eyelids and resolved to go on to bed. Before he could rise, there was a soft knock on the door.

Suspicious of having a visitor at this late hour, Starsky automatically reached for his gun. Then, remembering he'd left it on Dobey's desk, retrieved his baseball bat from the coat closet. "Who is it?" he asked, standing to one side of the door.

"Who do you think it is, mushbrain?" came the familiar voice. "Saw your lights on and thought you could stand some company."

Smiling to himself, Starsky opened the door and found Hutch standing there, a huge sack of Chinese food in one hand and a six-pack in the other. "And you just happened to be in the neighborhood?" Starsky asked tongue-in-cheek.



“I heard there’s a Bogie marathon on the tube. Thought we could catch ‘Casablanca’ and share some Chinese food. That is, unless you were on your way to a game,” Hutch said, suspiciously eyeing the baseball bat in Starsky’s left hand.

Looking down at the weapon, Starsky answered self-consciously, “A little late to show up at a guy’s door uninvited, don’cha think?” At the same time, he wondered how Hutch had known how desperate he was for company. Not waiting for a reply, he propped the bat against the wall, liberated the six-pack from Hutch’s hand, and deposited it on the coffee table in front of the TV.

“Don’t give me that line,” Hutch snapped back. “I’ve never known you to turn down Chinese and Bogie in your life, Starsk.” He made himself comfortable on the sofa and began unpacking the white cartons of Szechuan food. By the time he had finished, Starsky’s eyes were wide as he surveyed the extravagant spread on the coffee table before him.

“This looks terrific, but I’m just not hungry.”

“Come on, Starsk, you have to eat something,” Hutch coaxed. “We have Kung Pao Chicken, Moo Goo Gai Pan, mushrooms and bamboo shoots in peanut sauce, fried wonton, vegetable fried rice, sweet-and-sour soup, and your favorite—” he added with a flourish, “a double order of those special egg rolls that have shrimp in them.” He looked up at his partner hopefully, prepared to stay until he knew Starsky was going to be okay.

Starsky didn’t answer at first, just went to the kitchen for a bottle opener, then returned and popped the caps on two brews. He handed one to Hutch, then drew a long swig from his own before speaking. “Listen, Hutch. I appreciate what you’re tryin’ to do, but food isn’t gonna improve the way I feel right now. It’s hard to eat when I’ve got this big empty pit in my stomach, ya know?”

Hutch smiled at him kindly. “Yeah...yeah, I guess I do. Anybody who’d been through what you have today—anybody who gave a damn—would feel the way you do. But you can’t do this to yourself, Starsk. Tomorrow we’ll be back on the streets, knocking on doors, asking questions. Finding an explanation for what happened this morning. I mean, we haven’t even visited with the vic—” Hutch cut his words short, realizing that using the term “victim” wasn’t the wisest choice, considering Starsky’s state of mind at the moment. “We haven’t visited Kramer’s home and talked to his family.”

“Terrific,” Starsky mumbled. “How’s visiting his widow gonna make me feel better, huh? I’ll tell her, ‘Sorry, I accidentally shot your husband while tryin’ to be a super cop’?”

Hutch sighed, a look of impatience beginning to shape the corners of his mouth. “I only meant that we could find out more about him. Maybe he had a history of heroics, or maybe he panicked easily. I don’t know, but it’s worth a try.”

Considering Hutch’s words, Starsky conceded, “I guess you’re right. Besides, I want to pay my respects and see if there’s anything I can do.”

The room grew quiet for a moment, save for the sound of the voices on TV. Hutch, realizing Starsky’s mood was only darkening more, said a bit too cheerfully, “How about that movie now and a little Kung Pao chicken?”

Starsky smiled sadly, recognizing his partner’s diversionary tactic for what it was. “Why not?” he answered, heading for the kitchen for plates and cutlery. When he returned, he stood in the kitchen doorway and watched Hutch for a moment, comfortably sprawled on the sofa, waiting to indulge in the feast on the coffee table. The TV was blaring now, and Kathryn Hepburn and Bogie trudged waist-deep through the dangerous African river, guiding their ailing boat along the route to freedom from the Nazis. Despite the knot of guilt coiled tightly in his belly, Starsky felt a sense of well-being sweep through him. He was grateful for a friend like Hutch. Thankful that no matter what the problem was, he could count on his partner to cover his back.

Starsky strolled back into the living room and handed Hutch a plate. “Looks like ‘African Queen’,” he said, stating the obvious.

“Yeah. But maybe ‘Casablanca’ will be on next,” Hutch answered, scooping large portions of the Chinese delicacies onto his plate.

“Hutch,” Starsky said, barely above a whisper.

“Yeah?” Hutch looked up, their eyes locking. He knew that tone.

“Thanks.”

Hutch just nodded and gave him a quick smile. “It’s going to be okay,” he reassured Starsky.

“I hope so. I really hope so,” was all Starsky replied.

The moment passed quickly, then both men heaped their plates high with more food than they really wanted. They ate and watched the familiar images flicker across the screen, passing the long night together.



Starsky woke with a start and bolted upright on the sofa. The TV was still playing, but the sound had been turned down. The last thing he remembered was lying back on the

cushions, his vision beginning to blur, as the “Maltese Falcon” credits had rolled across the screen. Hutch had been sprawled out in the chair next to the sofa, lightly snoring, an empty beer bottle dangling loosely from his hand. Seeing no sign of Hutch now, Starsky ran a hand through his tangled hair, then stood up and stretched. “Hutch? You here?” he called. No answer.

He stumbled to the kitchen and filled the coffeemaker with fresh water, measured out two hardy scoops of the elixir of life and dumped them into the filter basket. “Hutch?” he called again. As he turned around, Starsky saw the note anchored to the refrigerator by his one and only magnet—a large red plastic tomato. It had been Hutch’s idea of a joke—one more of the never-ending jabs at his beloved Torino. Good-naturedly, Starsky had slapped it on the fridge and feigned naïveté. Hutch had been truly disappointed he hadn’t gotten a rise out of his partner with his little joke.

*“You may have the day off, partner, but some of us still have to work for a living. Will pick you up after my shift and let you know what’s happening with the investigation.”*

*Hutch*

*P.S. STAY OUT OF TROUBLE.”*

Starsky snatched the note off the refrigerator, irritated that Hutch hadn’t woken him before leaving.

“If you think I’m gonna sit around on my butt all day while my career goes down the toilet, you got another think comin’, Blintz,” Starsky muttered beneath his breath. Three short beeps from the coffeemaker signaled the brew was done. He filled a cup and sat at the table sipping it, formulating a plan of action for the day.



Starsky spent most of the day looking into Kramer’s background. He found nothing notable. The thirty-nine-year-old insurance salesman had been married six years and had a five-year-old daughter. He had no criminal record and seemed, by all accounts, to be a model citizen. His wife, Laura, was a fourth-grade schoolteacher who had moved to Bay City from Roanoke, Virginia seventeen months before marrying James Kramer. Not even the DMV turned up anything unusual on the couple. Having located a current address for the Kramers, Starsky headed for Laredo Avenue.



Starsky took a deep breath, summoning the courage to ring the doorbell. It would’ve been easier to wait for Hutch, to have his moral support, but this was something Starsky felt he should do alone. Sooner or later, he had to face Laura Kramer, and in his estimation, the sooner it was over with, the better. Hutch wouldn’t be off duty for

another hour and fifteen minutes, so Starsky figured he had just enough time to pay his respects.

He rang the bell a second time and was just about to leave when the door opened a crack. The face staring back at him was beautiful. Wide, expressive, green eyes perused him. Starsky was struck by the way her dark chestnut bangs feathered back, softly framing her perfectly oval face, drawing attention to those spectacular eyes. “Yes, may I help you?”

“I...uh...that is, I’m Dave Starsky,” he began.

She looked back, apparently unfazed by the introduction. “Do I know you? Are you here to see my sister?”

Regaining his tongue, Starsky tried again. “I’m here to see Laura Kramer. I’m Detective David Starsky,” he said, stressing his official titled, “of the Bay City Police.”

Anger flared in the green eyes, darkening them as realization of his identity came to her in a flash.

“What do you want here? My sister doesn’t want to see you. Haven’t you already done enough?”

“Who is it, Megan?”

Before the woman could slam the door in Starsky’s face, an older version of her, shorter and more rounded in stature, appeared behind her.



“It’s no one, Sis,” Megan lied, starting again to close the door.

“Mrs. Kramer, please,” Starsky said, smoothly sliding the toe of his sneaker into the doorway to keep Megan from shutting it before he could speak. “I’m Detective Starsky. I’d really like to speak with you.”

Laura Kramer went rigid, her expression changing from curiosity to anger. “You have a lot of nerve coming here. I can’t

imagine what you’d have to say to me, Detective.”

“I want to extend my condolences and talk to you about what happened yesterday,” he said quickly, trying to gain her interest in one short sentence. “Please. Please give me just ten minutes of your time.”

Megan turned and looked at her sister, waiting for a signal to turn him away. Instead, Laura hesitated, then stepped back. “Let him in, Meg. I’d really like to hear what he has to say.”

The two women stepped aside and allowed Starsky to enter then showed him to the modest family room where a little girl sat on the floor dressing a Barbie doll. She looked up at Starsky, her green eyes, so much like her mother’s and aunt’s, alight with friendliness. “Who are you?” she asked with open curiosity.

Starsky squatted down next to her and smiled tenderly. “I’m Dave. Who are you?”

“I’m Angie, and this is Barbie. Are you here to play with us?”

“No, I’m here to talk to your mommy,” he answered. “That sure is a pretty outfit you’re putting on Barbie.”

She smiled at him, not the least self-conscious that her two front teeth were missing. He thought it might be the prettiest smile he’d ever seen.

“You must be a friend of my daddy’s,” she said innocently. “Did he come home with you?”

Starsky felt a hard lump rise in his throat, slowly choking off his oxygen supply.

“Enough questions for now, Angie,” Megan said gently, scooping up the little girl and her doll. “What have I told you about being nosy, huh? Grown-ups don’t like little girls who ask too many questions.”

“But—”

“Come on, pumpkin. We’ll make ice cream sundaes while mommy talks to Mr. Starsky, okay?”

“*Okay!*” the five-year-old shouted gleefully, summarily forgetting the stranger and all her questions.

Starsky rose to his feet, struggling to regain his composure. He turned toward Laura, who motioned for him to sit down. “She doesn’t know yet that Jim isn’t coming home. I know I have to tell her, but I haven’t quite found the words yet.”

“I...I can’t imagine what that must be like,” he said, not quite meeting her eyes. When she didn’t respond, he looked up and met her frosty stare head-on. “Mrs. Kramer, I wish I could tell you what happened yesterday. I’m still tryin’ to figure it out myself. Your husband was not a hostage; he wasn’t being used as a shield. I swear to you, if that had been the case, I would never have fired.”

He paused and took a deep breath before continuing. “When I took aim, Mr. Kramer was standing to the side. Then before I knew it, he was in the line of fire. Just all of a sudden, he was there.”

The silence hung uneasily between them. Laura Kramer bit down hard on her bottom lip as moisture began to glisten in her eyes. Starsky hurried on, afraid he’d lose his own composure if he didn’t tell his story quickly. “I don’t know why he moved in front of Hodgins, I just know he wasn’t there a split second earlier.”

“According to the detectives who came here yesterday, you shot him by mistake. They said you missed the robber and shot Jim instead. Aren’t you policemen supposed to know how to handle a gun?” Her voice began to rise as her emotions surged. “Why would they allow you to have a weapon on the street if you can’t hit your target?”

Starsky’s elbows rested on his knees as he leaned forward, hands clasped tightly before him. “That’s just it, Mrs. Kramer. I didn’t just miss Hodgins and accidentally hit your husband. It almost seemed like he ran in front of the gunman.”

Her eyes widened with disbelief. “What are you saying?”

“Well, I wondered if Mr. Kramer—Jim—had ever done anything like that before. I mean, was he in the military, or had he ever been involved with any sort of rescue organization? You know, had he ever done anything to save another person’s life?”

She was quiet for a moment, considering his question carefully. “No...not that I’m aware of. I mean, I know he wasn’t in the military. Jim was a very quiet man, not at all a risk-taker.”

Megan, who had discreetly re-entered the room, sat down next to her sister and took her hand.

Taking another tact, Starsky asked, “Was he depressed or in any kind of trouble?”

“Just what are you insinuating?” Laura demanded defensively. “If you mean had he tried to commit suicide, the answer is absolutely not, Detective! My husband was a happily married man with a beautiful little girl. He had a good job and a good life until he had the misfortune of being in the path of your gun!”

“Laura,” Megan said quietly, tightening the grip on her sister’s hand. “I don’t think Detective Starsky meant to insult Jim. He’s just looking for answers.”

“He’s looking for absolution,” the grieving woman accused. She stood abruptly and looked down at Starsky with fiery eyes, now overflowing with tears. “Well, you’ve come to the wrong place. I’d like you to leave now, please.”

“Mrs. Kramer,” Starsky stood up. “I can’t begin to tell you how bad I feel about this.”

“Well, one thing is certain, Detective Starsky. No matter how badly you feel, it is nothing compared to what I’m going through.”

Starsky wanted to say more, but knew it would only make things worse. “Thank you for seeing me.” He headed toward the front door, shown the way by Megan. He turned and looked at Laura Kramer before stepping through the door. “If there’s anything you need—anything at all…”

Laura did not turn around.

Starsky stepped outside, followed by Megan, who quietly closed the door behind them. “Detective Starsky, I… I want apologize for the way I acted earlier.” She hesitated when Starsky looked up and met her eyes. “My sister and I are very close, and when she’s hurt, I’m hurt. But I realize it took a great deal of courage for you to come here today.”

Starsky smiled self-consciously. “Thanks. That means a lot to me.” He reached into his wallet and took out a card and handed it to her. “If your sister needs anything, please call me at this number. You can leave a message if I’m not there. I’m… I’m so sorry this happened.”

She smiled at him sadly. “I hope you find the answers you’re looking for.”



Starsky pulled up in front of Venice Place just as Hutch was getting out of the beat-up old Ford. “Get in,” Starsky told him. “I’ll drive.”

Hutch got in on the passenger side. “Good timing. Kirk said he’d have the autopsy report for me this afternoon. I was going to pick you up and go over there. I’m not sure what it’s going to tell us we don’t already know, but at this point, we need to check everything.”

Glancing sideways at his partner, Starsky confessed, “I went to visit the widow and her daughter.”

Surprised, Hutch turned to Starsky and asked, “You went over there by yourself? I thought you were going to wait for me.”

“I needed to do it—as much for my peace of mind as for the case. I’ll admit, it was rough. Especially meeting his little girl. She’s a little doll, Hutch, and doesn’t even know yet that her dad’s dead.”

Hutch heard the sorrow in Starsky’s voice and knew what it must have taken for him to face the family alone. He was well aware that Starsky, having lost his own father at an

early age, would empathize with the little girl. Not wanting him to dwell on the child's loss, Hutch changed the subject. "What did you find out?"

"Nothing helpful. Mrs. Kramer's pretty bitter. But who can blame her? Her sister was there with her. I'm glad of that. Nice lady, but she didn't seem to know of any reason her brother-in-law would pull such a stunt."

"I've been thinking, Starsk. Maybe there was something physically wrong with Kramer. You know, like Jack Mitchell. Jack did all sorts of things that were out of character. I'm hoping Kirk will find evidence of something organic, like a brain tumor.

"I suppose it's possible," Starsky agreed. "But that's kind of a long shot. You'd think his wife would've told me if that was the case."

"Maybe. But maybe she didn't know," Hutch speculated. Both men grew quiet, privately theorizing the dead man's motives.



"Sorry, guys, but this man was in tip-top health. I did check the brain for anomalies, but found no lesions, no tumors. If there was anything wrong there, it was psychological, not physical." Clarence Kirk, a stout graying man in his fifties, walked around the table where James Kramer's corpse lay covered by a white sheet. "The bullet severed the artery leading to the heart. That's why he died instantly. A clean shot, Starsky. Quick and painless." The coroner looked up at Starsky's stark white face and realized he should have kept the comment to himself. Obviously, that bit of information hadn't comforted the detective.

"You're absolutely certain there was no medical reason for this man's behavior to have altered?" Hutch questioned.

"Sure enough to testify to it if I had to," he answered. Turning to Starsky he added, "I'm sorry. I wish I could be more help to you. I know you're on the hot seat right now, Starsky. If I come up with anything at all, I'll call you."

Starsky nodded and gave him a quick pat on the shoulder. "Thanks, Kirk. I appreciate that."

As they left the building, they walked past a newspaper stand where the headlines read: "*BCPD Detective Kills Innocent Bystander in Supermarket Holdup.*" Starsky stopped and picked up a copy of the newspaper and stared at it. "*Mayor Vows to Rid Department of Rogue Cops.*"

"Hey, you gonna buy that, buddy, or just memorize it?" the vendor groused sarcastically.

“Starsk, don’t pay any attention to that garbage,” Hutch said, gently taking the paper from Starsky’s hand and laying it back on the stack. He noticed the muscle in Starsky’s jaw tighten and felt his own anger rising in response to the unfair accusations. “This isn’t over yet. That’s just some more of Silverstone’s grandstanding. Kramer may not have been physically ill, but there are a lot of things that could have affected his behavior. I think we’re on to something here.” Even to his own ears, the words rang hollow.

Starsky swallowed hard then turned to meet Hutch’s eyes. “Yeah, well, I hope we find an answer soon. ’Cause if we don’t, I think Silverstone and Simonetti plan to make an example of me.”



The afternoon raced by, leaving time to visit only one more of the witnesses, Denise Guthrie—a young single mother of four, who had been in the store spending her weekly supply of food stamps when the shooting took place. Tomorrow morning was the hearing, and so far, they had zilch. Starsky silently prayed this woman would be able to give them something useful.

“I didn’t see much of anything,” she told Hutch as they followed her into the living room and sat down. “Mikey! You stop hittin’ your brother right now, you hear me? I’ve had just about enough out of you for one day!”

The two detectives sat in the dingy one-bedroom apartment, surrounded by running, screaming children and an atmosphere of hopelessness that both cops could barely comprehend. They saw it every day, but they never got used to it. The twenty-two-year-old woman sitting before them looked much older than her tender years, and the spark of youth had long since fled from her large pale blue eyes. The dark rings beneath both eyes and the haggard condition of her body suggested she was no stranger to the use of drugs as a reprieve from life’s daily hardships. Denise nervously puffed on a cigarette, oblivious to the mess surrounding them.

“Mandy, stop that whinnin’, and quit climbing on me like a little monkey,” she said, peeling the two-year-old from her waist and setting the child back on the floor. Nearby, in a raggedy bassinet, an infant slept through the confusion and noise created by her siblings.

“Like I said, I had these kids with me, and it’s all I can do to keep ’em together, much less pay attention to every little detail goin’ on around me. I was scared he’d shoot one of ’em, so I was tryin’ to keep ’em quiet.” She took another drag on her cigarette.

“You were standing closest to Mr. Kramer,” Hutch pointed out. “We wondered if maybe one of the children broke loose from you, and he was trying to protect them.” Hutch realized he was grasping at straws, but since Kramer wasn’t sick, perhaps he was noble, acting selflessly to save the life of a child.

“Naw, they was scared, too. They may be kids, but they know when somebody means business. I told ’em to stay quiet. And for once, they was mindin’ me. All I know is that man seemed kinda crazy to me. He was standing right beside me one minute, and gone the next.”

Suddenly distracted by one of the boys busy antagonizing a smaller one in the far corner of the room, she shouted, “I ain’t tellin’ you again, Mikey, you quit botherin’ your brother, or I’ll take my belt to you!” She stood up to emphasize she meant business, spilling the two-year-old who’d once again climbed onto her lap. The child hit the floor with a thud and howled with surprise, tears instantly springing to her eyes. The woman scooped her up and gingerly rubbed the back of the baby’s head. “You okay, honey? Hmmm? Mama gonna make it okay,” she crooned.

“Are you willing to testify to that at a hearing, Ms. Guthrie?” Starsky asked anxiously.

She eyed the two handsome detectives suspiciously. “What’s in it for me?” she asked. The two-year-old’s crying had subsided, and she sucked on her thumb contentedly as she was bounced up and down on her mother’s hip.

“An opportunity to tell the truth and maybe save a man’s career,” Hutch answered honestly.

“Cops never done nothin’ for me,” she said bitterly.

“Maybe it seems that way,” Starsky told her. “But we’re out there every day busting our humps trying keep the streets safer for your kids. All I’m askin’ is that you come forward and tell them the truth.”

She was quiet a moment, studying his face, but his entreaty was met with cold silence.

Finally breaking eye contact with the woman, Starsky looked over at Hutch, signaling with the raise of his brow that he believed this was going nowhere. They stood to leave.

“I’ll think about it,” she finally muttered.

Both men paused at the door, hoping she’d say more, but the only sound in the apartment was that of the two bickering children, now moved to the other room.

Denise Guthrie watched in silence as the door closed behind them. Her mind was already made up. She wasn’t going to get involved. The cops had busted Benny seven months ago, leaving her with nobody to help her support all these kids. Sure, he had beat up on her once in a while and occasionally loaned her to his friends when he got drunk, but he’d also given her money for rent and groceries. Having been a runaway at fifteen, she’d never felt like she could count on anybody until Benny came along. Now, she had to resort to turning a few tricks and living on welfare while he rotted in jail just for selling

coke and a few uppers. *Why should I care what happens to a cop?* she thought. It would be a cold day in Hell before she helped him or any other pig.



Darkness moved over the city like a heavy glove, bringing the day to a close. Starsky pulled into the only vacant parking space a block south of Hutch's Venice Place apartment and left the engine idling. Neither man spoke immediately, each lost in his thoughts, replaying the day's events in his mind.

"It doesn't look good, Hutch," Starsky said, barely above a whisper. "In a few hours, I guess they'll be deciding whether or not I can be a cop."

Hutch reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "Starsk, you know it won't come to that," he said reassuringly. "IA has canvassed all the witnesses. I'm sure they've found plenty of people who'll vouch that this was an unavoidable accident."

Without warning, Starsky slammed his fist against the steering wheel. "Damn it, Hutch! What if they didn't? What if the people were scared out their wits, or confused about what they saw, or...or just plain hate cops?"

The frustration and uncertainty in his voice wrenched at Hutch's heart. "I'll tell them what I saw, Starsk. And maybe Mr. Luponi and the Guthrie woman will come through."

"But Luponi is old and confused. I don't think he'll convince anyone of anything. As for Guthrie, there was something there. She hates cops. She won't tell them anything they don't force her to tell."

"Your record speaks for itself," Hutch said.

"Yeah? Well, something tells me that Simonetti will find a way to use that against me," Starsky snorted.

"He hasn't gotten the best of either of us yet, has he?" Hutch grinned at him. "Now, come on in and I'll make dinner."

"Nah," Starsky declined. "I don't think I could handle one of your health-freak dinners tonight, partner."

"Who said anything about health food? We'll order two giant pizzas with everything on them. And I've got two cold six-packs in the fridge. That should meet your junk food quota for the day."

Starsky smiled back, cutting off the engine. The thought of being alone for the night was unbearable. "What *is* this? The condemned man's last meal?" he asked with a smirk.

“Not at all. Call it a pre-victory dinner,” Hutch answered, bounding out of the car and up the walk ahead of Starsky.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to count your chicks before they hatch?”

“Nope,” Hutch countered. “But she did tell me in the long run, the good guys always win.”



Starsky stormed from the municipal courtroom, his face grim, anger and hurt etching deep lines in his handsome features. Hutch and Dobey flanked him on either side, anxious to escape the room before losing their own composure.

Things had gone much worse at the hearing than they could have imagined, leaving them reeling with disappointment and shock. Most of the witnesses seemed confused and unsure of what had transpired during the holdup. None had offered testimony favorable to Starsky’s actions.

Mrs. French remained steadfast in her belief that Detective Starsky was a menace with a gun, whose poor marksmanship caused the death of an innocent man. While Mr. Luponi had waffled and recanted his statement that Kramer was a hostage, he couldn’t account for how the man ended up between Detective Starsky and Hodgins. In the end, the Board



had discounted the old man’s statement as inconclusive. It had come as no surprise to Starsky or Hutch that Denise Guthrie had given a generic version of what she’d seen, never hinting Kramer may have in any way contributed to his own death. Since this wasn’t a trial, and several witnesses were willing to give their statements before the panel, the Board hadn’t considered it necessary to subpoena the rest.

As Starsky approached the Torino and wrenched the driver’s door open, Hutch reached around him and threw out an arm, blocking Starsky’s entrance into the car. “Give me the keys, Starsk. I’ll drive. You’re too upset to be behind the wheel right now.”

“Hutch is right, son,” Dobey agreed. “This isn’t over yet, and I don’t want you going off half-cocked, getting yourself into more trouble.” The commissioner’s words still rang in the captain’s ears. “*Detective Starsky, this Board finds you derelict in your duty, in as much as your rash actions have resulted in the death of an innocent citizen of this city. Therefore, I have no choice but to relieve you of your duty as an officer of the law. You*

*are officially dismissed from the Bay City Police Department. It will be the decision of the District Attorney's Office whether or not to proceed with criminal action against you in the death of Mr. James Addison Kramer."*

Starsky's head snapped up, his blazing eyes boring into Dobey's. "I don't think I'm your concern anymore, Captain. You were in there; you heard what the Board said. I'm not one of Bay City's finest now. No disrespect intended, Cap'n, but I don't have to take orders from you, or Hutch, or anyone else connected with this city. So if you two don't mind, I think I'd like a little time alone to think about a new career."

"Starsk," Hutch groaned. "Please...don't do this to yourself. Hell, don't do it to *us*. You know we won't rest until we prove you're innocent of these charges."

"Starsky, I know you, and I know you're a good cop. You'd never do anything to endanger anyone's life. I'll do everything in my power to see you're reinstated," Dobey assured him. "But you've got to trust me and give me a little time." The captain reached into his back pocket and plucked out a handkerchief, swiping it over his perspiring face. "You and Hutchinson are my best detectives, and I'm not letting them railroad you off the force without a fight!"

His voice thick with emotion, Starsky diverted his eyes from Dobey's before answering. He spoke calmly and deliberately, battling to keep the hurt and humiliation in check. "The way I see it, Cap'n, is that I'll be lucky if firing me is the end of it. I suspect Simonetti and the DA are planning to indict me for manslaughter."

He turned to Hutch, and, in a heartbeat, the expression in his stormy blue eyes changed from smoldering anger to anguish. "Hutch, back off. Please," he said beseechingly. "If you don't, you could be putting your own job on the line."

"Since when do you think I give a *damn* about this job if I have to do it without you as my partner?" Hutch answered heatedly. Their eyes locked in a battle of wills for a long moment before Starsky shoved Hutch's arm aside and quickly slid into the car. Hutch had no time to react before the door slammed shut and the engine roared to life.

"I'll be in touch," he promised Hutch. "Cap'n," Starsky added. "It's been an honor to work with you. Find Hutch a partner he can trust to watch his back. Okay?"

Before either man could respond, the Torino squealed away from the curb and blended into the busy Bay City rush-hour traffic.



Hutch looked at his watch again, then shifted positions to relieve the cramp that was starting to seize his right leg and thigh. "Starsk, where are you?" he muttered beneath his breath. Impatiently, his long fingers drummed the steering wheel. It was dark now, and he'd spent the past two hours sitting in his car in front of Starsky's apartment, needing

reassurance that his partner was okay. Worried about the way Starsky had taken off after the hearing, Hutch had spent the better part of the afternoon searching for him at their usual haunts. Coming up empty, he finally decided to stakeout Starsky's place and wait for him to return.

Hutch rubbed his eyes and leaned his head back to rest against the car seat, telling himself he'd give it thirty more minutes, then start patrolling their beat again, checking with some of the street regulars.

The dispatcher's voice crackled loudly over the two-way radio, snapping him to attention. "Zebra Three, this is Control. Zebra Three, come in please."

Depressing the mic key, Hutch answered, "Control, this is Zebra Three. I read you."

"Zebra Three, see the man at the place called The Pits. He said to tell you it's important and he has something valuable for you."

"Ten-four, Control. I'm on my way. Zebra Three out." Hutch started the car and swerved away from the curb. Wide-awake now, he sped toward The Pits, hoping Huggy's "something valuable" was a lead on where he could find Starsky. If it was about anything else, he wasn't interested.



When Hutch entered the club, he quickly spotted Huggy behind the bar, drawing a couple of drafts from the tap. When the wiry black man looked up and saw Hutch, he nodded and motioned for Hutch to join him.

"What've you got for me, Hug?" Hutch asked without bothering to take a seat.

"Hello to you, too," Huggy jibed. "I see I got your attention with my call."

"Sure did," Hutch replied. "I hope it's about Starsky."

"Ye of little faith," Huggy quoted. "Didn't I tell you, if I turned up anything, I'd call you? And isn't Huggy a man of his word?"

"You've heard from him?"

"Yeah," Huggy answered, leaning conspiratorially over the bar as he spoke. "But let's talk in the back."

Hutch followed him into a smaller room—the one Huggy usually kept closed off for private parties. Slumped over a table in one corner of the room was Starsky, his elbows propped at angles, his chin resting in his hands. It was obvious from the glazed expression on his face, he wasn't feeling any pain.

“He’s been here long enough to get drunk, and you’re just now calling me?” Hutch asked, turning an angry glare on Huggy.

“Hey, be cool, man. He showed up here on foot like that. At least he had enough sense not to drive. I just brought him back here so no one would see him,” Huggy answered defensively.

Hutch turned a penitent face to Huggy. “Sorry, Hug. It’s just, I’ve searched for hours—”

“Forget it,” Huggy answered, cutting him off mid-sentence. “Just take him home, will ya?” Uncomfortable with Hutch’s attempt to apologize, he added, “Drunk cops are bad for business. I got a reputation to protect, man. I’d help you, but Diane didn’t show up, plus I’m down two waitresses. I’ve got to get back out there before my business goes south for the winter. Ya dig?”

Hutch gave him a slight knowing smile, recognizing his friend’s ploy. “Yeah, okay. I’ll see if I can get the big lug onto his feet.” Hutch stopped halfway across the room and turned back to Huggy. “Thanks, Hug. I owe you another one. I’ll take him out the back way.”



By the time Hutch reached the table, Starsky’s head had sunk down lower, his forehead lying flat on the hard surface. “Starsk?” Hutch said, gently touching his partner’s shoulder. “Are you awake?”

“Hmmm? ’Zat you, Hutsh?” Starsky drawled without lifting his face.

“Yeah, it’s me. What do you say I take you home, buddy?” Hutch coaxed.

“Naw...lez have a drink.” Slowly, Starsky turned his face to the side and squinted up at Hutch with one eye. “Don’ ya wanna drink, Hutsh? Iz okay. I mean, iz not like I’m on duty or anything.”

“I think you’ve had about enough, Starsk. Let me take you home, and I’ll make some coffee.”

“No, no, no,” Starsky protested. “No coffee, Hutsh. Whiskey. Thatz what I need. Pour me another drink, will ya? Pour yourself one too, huh? You got time for a drink with your ex-partner, don’t ya, Hutsh?”

Hutch lifted Starsky's arm and draped it over his shoulder, then hoisted him to his feet. "Whatever you say, buddy. But let's just go back to your place to do our drinking, okay?"

Swiveling his head to peer up into Hutch's face Starsky smiled lopsidedly. "Oh, okay...okay...thatz a good idea. Then I won't have to worry about you gettin' home if ya drink too much." Despite his earnest attempt to stand, Starsky's knees folded beneath him, his full weight falling against Hutch. "Uh-oh," he said, giggling drunkenly. "Where'd my legs go?"



"They're there," Hutch assured him. "They just need a little help. Hang on, okay?"

"Okay, Hutsh. Okay." Hanging on as well as his limber arms would allow him to, Starsky tried again to stand, but found his legs as ineffective as two rubber bands. Hutch half-carried, half-dragged Starsky through the crowded kitchen, skillfully avoiding several close encounters with the cook staff, until they reached the back door of the restaurant.

Propping Starsky against the doorjamb, Hutch gave him his orders. "Now, I want you to wait here until I pull the car around. Think you can do that for me?"

Starsky's head rolled forward, his chin dipping down to touch his chest. "Shuuure," he answered, slowly sliding down the wall without realizing it.

Hutch caught him before he hit bottom and pulled him back into an upright position. "Starsky. Starsk, listen to me. Stand right here and I'll be back in a flash." When he got no response, Hutch notched his thumb under Starsky's chin and lifted his face up to see if he was conscious.

"Stand right here," Starsky repeated. "Right here, Hutsh."

"That's right," Hutch answered. "I'll be right back."

"Hey. Hutsh?"

"Yeah, Starsk?"

"You go get the car, and I'll juz wait right here," Starsky suggested, then smiled, clearly pleased with his own cleverness.

“Now why didn’t I think of that?” Hutch said, grinning, as Starsky slowly slid back down to the bottom of the doorjamb. Deciding maybe he should just leave well enough alone, Hutch darted out the back and down the alley to retrieve his car.



By the time they reached the apartment building, Starsky had passed out and was snoring lightly, his head resting on Hutch’s shoulder. Loathe to wake him, Hutch considered trying to carry him up the stairs to the apartment, but thought better of it. The last thing he needed was for both of them to end up in the hospital from falling down the flight of stairs.

“Starsk, wake up, buddy. We’re home.” He lifted Starsky’s head from his shoulder and lightly patted his face. The odor of stale whisky assailed him as Starsky let out a deep sigh.

Scrunching his eyes tightly, Starsky resisted waking, content to stay adrift in the comfort of the alcohol-induced haze, oblivious to the problems that had driven him to drink so much in the first place. “Mmmm,” he groaned, snuggling his head back onto Hutch’s shoulder.

“Starsky, come on, now. Time to go in.” Hutch opened the door on his side of the car, slid out, and dragged Starsky across the seat. Too out of it to care, Starsky didn’t protest. Once Hutch had him on his feet, the two of them staggered up the stairs, Hutch bearing most of Starsky’s weight, forcing him to move, while struggling to keep his own balance. When they finally made it to the landing, Hutch lifted the doormat, located the key, and wrangled the lock open while holding Starsky up with his other arm.

No longer in motion, Starsky’s knees buckled, and his full weight hit Hutch hard as he slid to the floor. “Damn,” Hutch groaned. On surer footing now, he hauled Starsky up into his arms and carried him into the apartment, kicking the door shut behind them.

“The things I do for you...” he griped, while none-too-gently depositing Starsky onto the bed. He quickly removed Starsky’s sneakers and jacket before heading to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. Then, resigning himself to the fact that no matter what he did his partner was going have one *hell* of a hangover in the morning, Hutch decided he’d better stick around. Probably best to let Starsky sleep it off, he figured. He dumped the water from the carafe and clicked off the coffee maker.

Returning from the kitchen, Hutch dragged off his own shoes, sank to the sofa, and lay his head on the armrest. They’d been through a lot of rough times together. They’d get through this one, too, he tried to reassure himself. One thing was certain. If he couldn’t prove Starsky’s innocence and get him reinstated, Hutch’s days as a detective would be over. They were a team. That’s the way it was. The way it had to be.



Starsky turned over, then wished he hadn't, as a throbbing pain rumbled through his head, giving way to a wave of nausea. Lying perfectly still, he rode it out, then slowly opened his eyes. He was in his own bed, fully clothed, the sun peeping through the slats of the blinds. In the distance, he heard Hutch whistling and rattling pots in the kitchen. As the aroma of frying bacon assailed his senses, his stomach lurched, barely giving him time to make it to the bathroom.

Several agonizing minutes later, Starsky, ashen faced and wild haired, appeared at the kitchen door. Hutch looked up from his newspaper and coffee and smiled. "God, you look awful," he said.

"Thanks, for your kind words of encouragement," Starsky answered. Trying not to jostle his aching head, he inched his way to the table and eased into the chair across from Hutch.



"How about some breakfast?" Hutch asked cheerfully.

"You gotta be kiddin'."

Hutch rose from the table and went to the counter where he poured a dark brown concoction from the blender, added a touch of Tabasco sauce, then brought it back and set it down in front of his partner. "My Uncle Seamus's cure for a hangover. Works every time," Hutch said confidently.

Warily, Starsky lifted the glass to his nose and sniffed. His eyes flew open wide, then instantly watered. "What's in here?" he asked, his nose wrinkling in distaste.

"Family secret; I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," Hutch said dramatically.

Starsky glowered back, obviously in no mood for humor.

"Trust me. I guarantee it'll cure that headache."

Desperate for relief, Starsky held his nose and chugged the nasty mixture down as fast as he could. As the last drop of liquid slid down his throat, a fire erupted in his belly, rising all the way to the top of his head. His eyes bulged, his mouth flew open, and he was sure that, like the cartoon character Wiley Coyote, smoke was steaming from his ears and nose. When he tried speaking, the only sound he could elicit was a strangled croak.

Having used the cure himself a few times, Hutch had anticipated Starsky's reaction and was having a laugh at his partner's experience. When he saw the shock in Starsky's eyes morph to rage, he decided maybe that hadn't been a good idea. "Now hold on, Starsk, give it a minute," Hutch cajoled, holding his hands in front of himself defensively.

But Starsky was already out of his chair, springing across the table. Just as he snagged the front of Hutch's shirt, a strange thing happened. The pain in his head and the roiling in his stomach slowly began to subside. Disbelief replaced fury, and he released Hutch's collar.

Confident the remedy was beginning to work its magic, Hutch grinned. "See? I told you it would work."

"Yeah? Well, why didn't you warn me how bad it was gonna taste?" Starsky asked, still a little peeved. He was amazed that his symptoms seemed to be waning with each passing second.

"I knew you wouldn't drink it if I did. It's really a bad dose—I know that. That's why I never use it except as a last resort."

"Oh," Starsky said, considering Hutch's logic. The nausea was almost gone now. "You're right," he finally conceded. "I wouldn't have gulped it down if I'd known I was drinkin' liquid fire. But that stuff really helps." Starsky ran a hand through his hair and realized his scalp no longer hurt. "I never heard you mention your Uncle Seamus," he said as an afterthought.

"He was a Merchant Marine," Hutch explained.

"Oh, yeah? Where is he now? Still at sea?"

"Passed away," Hutch said.

"Did he drown?"

"No; died from a bleeding ulcer," Hutch answered reluctantly.

Starsky grimaced. "Just what I needed to hear."

Hutch tipped his head, acknowledging Uncle Seamus's fate wasn't exactly comforting, but believed using "the remedy" sparingly wouldn't hurt anything. "The point is, we've got work to do, and I couldn't afford to have you lying around here nursing a hangover all day," Hutch said bluntly.

"I'd say it's a little late to try and salvage my job. We fought the good fight, gave it our best shot... Whatever stale cliché you wanna use, the end result's the same," Starsky answered bitterly. "My career as a cop is over. The sooner you accept that, the better off we'll both be."

"Damn it, Starsky! It's not like you to just roll over and play dead! Nothing's over yet. We're going to find out why Kramer stepped in front of that bullet, and we're going to clear your name." Angrily, Hutch jabbed a finger in the air toward Starsky's face. "Now

if you want to sit here and feel sorry for yourself, that's your prerogative, but I'll be out there on the streets solving this! When you come to your senses, let me know."

Not waiting for a response, Hutch rose from the table and stormed out of the apartment, leaving Starsky to decide if his career and their partnership were worth fighting for. Hutch already knew the answer.



In the wake of Hutch's departure, Starsky sat in the empty kitchen considering the events of recent days, replaying the shooting in his mind, remembering each and every conversation with the witnesses. He didn't want to give up his badge. And God knew he didn't want to give up his partnership with Hutch. But what if Kramer had died because Starsky had made a mistake? Maybe his reflexes were too slow; maybe his aim was off. Maybe a man was dead because he used poor judgment. *Maybe, maybe, maybe!*

Starsky reached up and rubbed his aching brow, wanting to clear his thoughts, sweep aside all the self-recrimination, and start over. The one constant in all this was Hutch's faith in him. That had to count for something. *Hell, it counted for everything!* If Hutch hadn't lost faith in him, why had he lost faith in himself? He'd always trusted Hutch's instincts, his judgment. Why couldn't he trust him on this? Why couldn't he just accept that this wasn't his fault and work with Hutch to find out the truth behind what had caused this tragic accident? Had he allowed this burden of guilt to overwhelm him to the point of skewing his good judgment?

The phone rang, shaking Starsky from his troubled thoughts. Snatching the receiver off the wall he answered brusquely, "Starsky."

"Detective David Starsky?" asked the feminine voice on the other end.

"That's right."

"I...I don't know if you'll remember me, but this is Megan Davis, Jim Kramer's sister-in-law," she started tentatively.

"Sure, I remember you." Starsky's voice softened as he recalled the large green eyes that had first stared at him with anger, then later, with pity. "Is there something I can help you with?" he asked, remembering his offer to do whatever he could for her sister and niece.

"No. No, actually, I thought perhaps I could help you," she answered. "I saw you on the news yesterday, coming out of the hearing. I'm really sorry you lost your job," she said.

"Yeah... Thanks."

“Detective Starsky, I can’t just sit by and watch this happen without finding out the truth about Jim,” Megan said, her voice lowered to a whisper.

Starsky’s heart thudded in his chest. Trying to keep the excitement from his voice, he urged her to continue. “If you know *anything* that might help explain why this happened, please tell me.”

She hesitated for a moment, and then went on. “It’s just...well, my sister and I are very close. We share most everything. Several weeks ago, she confided in me that Jim was acting strangely. Perhaps it’s not important, but I thought you should know that something’s been bothering him. Laura even tried to persuade him to see a doctor.”

Starsky felt a kernel of hope begin to germinate. Maybe this was the break he’d been searching for. “Strange in what way?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Probably in ways only a wife would notice. She said he was nervous...restless...like something was troubling him. He refused to talk to her, though, and they’ve always had an open relationship. He was coming home very late some nights, and when Laura asked where he’d been, he’d say he was working overtime.”

“And that’s unusual?”

“Well, the problem was, when she’d try to reach him at the office, they’d tell her he’d left early—didn’t feel well. That’s why she was insisting he see a doctor. But Jim always got angry when she tried to discuss it with him—accused her of checking up on him.”

Megan was being straight with him; Starsky owed her the same consideration. “Look, the coroner said your brother-in-law was in perfect health. So whatever was going on with him wasn’t physical. Could he have been in some sort of trouble?”

“If you’d asked me that same question a month ago, I’d have said no way. But with all that’s happened...I just don’t know.”

“Could he have been embezzling from his employer?”

“I don’t see how. Jim didn’t handle money. He was a sales rep; he sold the policies. He didn’t go out and collect money from his clients or anything like that.”

Stumped for the moment, Starsky was silent. “Okay. I’ll see what I can turn up. You’ve been a terrific help. I don’t know how to thank you,” he said sincerely.

“I just don’t want to see any more lives destroyed by this,” she answered. “I think you were just trying to do your job, Detective, and I believe there’s a logical explanation as to what went wrong that morning. I just hope when you find it, it’s not going to cause my sister more pain. Good luck.” With that, the receiver clicked and the line went dead.

Starsky hung up the phone, his mind racing. For the first time in days, he felt a renewed sense of hope. What was Kramer's secret? What had caused him to behave differently toward his family during the past few weeks? Lie to his wife? If Starsky could find the answers to those questions, perhaps he'd find an explanation to Kramer's actions at the market. But right now, he had to find Hutch.



Hutch sat at the desk trying to make some sense of the jumble of unfinished reports that lay scattered on Starsky's portion of the big desk they'd shared. Starsky hated paperwork, and as usual, he was at least two days behind in his. It seemed strange to sit at the desk without Starsky. Sure, he'd been gone before, but Hutch had always known it was temporary. This time, there was a feeling of finality. Hutch knew without reservation that if Starsky didn't come back, this wasn't something he'd do the rest of his life.

When the phone rang, he picked it up and answered, "Hutchinson."

"Hutch, glad you're there, man," Huggy's familiar voice came back.

"Yeah, Huggy. What's up?"

"Maybe something, maybe nothing. But I'll skip the pleasantries, if you dig, and get right to the point."

Hutch's ears perked up, knowing Huggy had something important to tell him.

"A friend of ours, Fifth Avenue, says he may have something that could help Starsky. I think it's worth checking out."

"Fifth Avenue?" Hutch said, more than a little surprised. "What's in it for him?"

Let's just say the dude's ill-timed decision to do business with the wrong people had a bad outcome. For the past three days, he's been a guest at one of the city's finer detainment facilities."

"What's that have to do with Starsky?" Hutch asked impatiently.

"He said the two of you have always been straight with him. Asked me to get in touch with you. Fifth Avenue was picked up for fencing some rocks he won in a crap game. Turns out they were stolen. They're trying to tie him to the heist. He's in big trouble and says he'd like to make a trade—information about Kramer, for whatever influence you can use in getting the DA to reduce the charges to illegal gambling."

Grasping at straws, Hutch figured any lead worth pursuing. "Thanks, Huggy. Where do I meet him?"

“Same as always—at the stadium. He made bail a couple hours ago and asked me to set this up.”

Hutch hung up the phone and grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair.

“Hutchinson, I need to see you.” Dobe stood in the open doorway to his office, a dour expression marring the features of his big face.

“Can it wait, Cap’n? I just got a lead that could help Starsky. I think it’s a pretty strong one.”

“I’m afraid it can’t. There’s something you need to know. It won’t take a minute.”

Expecting more bad news about Starsky, Hutch reluctantly went into Dobe’s office. Once inside, he was face to face with Simonetti. The man’s smug expression didn’t bode well, and Hutch felt his temper begin to rise before a single word was spoken.

“Hutch,” Dobe began, clearing his throat. “Simonetti here tells me the Department is going to recommend the DA charge Starsky with involuntary manslaughter. I wanted to you to know first and give you a chance to tell him yourself.”

Despite having considered this possibility, Hutch realized he’d never believed it would actually come to pass. “This is your doing, isn’t it?” he accused Simonetti.

A sneer curled Simonetti’s lips. “It’s about time someone got that hothead off the streets,” he said. “Your partner has no one to blame but himself for where he is right now.”

Before Dobe or Simonetti knew what was happening, Hutch lunged for the IA man. A right cross caught the man straight on the jaw, sending him sprawling against the wall, Hutch grabbing the lapels of his dark suit before he could slide to the floor.

“Hutch! Stand down!” Dobe shouted.

Stunned and surprised, Simonetti didn’t have time to react before he found himself jerked up to within inches from Hutchinson’s face, a face contorted with rage and self-righteous indignation. “Now you listen to me and you listen good, Simonetti.” His voice was even and calm as he spoke. “You’ve had it out for Starsky and me for years. You don’t give a damn about whether he’s innocent or guilty. For you, this is just a chance to railroad him off the force. I’m going to prove this was a righteous shooting and get Starsky reinstated. Neither you, nor any of your lackeys are going to stop me. So consider this your last warning. Just back off and let me do my job!” With one final yank on Simonetti’s lapels, Hutch released the man and let him fall back against the wall.

“Captain Dobey, you saw that!” Simonetti said, struggling to his feet. “He assaulted and threatened me. I want to press charges!”

Dobey rounded on Simonetti and bellowed, “Then get a warrant!” He turned back to Hutch and lowered his voice for only Hutch’s ears, “Get out of here before you do any more damage. Check out that lead of yours, but make it fast. I’ll stall him as long as I can.”



The phone rang on Hutch’s desk three more times before Starsky gave up and dropped the receiver back into the cradle. He picked it up and dialed again, this time reaching the dispatcher at headquarters. “Millie, this is Starsky. Can you patch me through to Hutch?”

“Starsky, Captain Dobey left instructions to put you through to him if you called. Stand by.”

In two seconds, Dobey came on the line. “Starsky, where are you?”

“I’m at my apartment, Cap’n. Where’s Hutch? I’ve got a lead.”

“All hell’s been breaking loose here. Don’t come to the station. Hutch is checking out a lead, too, but I don’t know where he is.”

“What d’ya mean you don’t know where he is?”

“I don’t *want* to know,” Dobey clarified.

“What’s goin’ on?” Starsky asked, not liking the frazzled tone of the captain’s voice.

“Simonetti’s in the process of swearing out a warrant for his arrest for assault and battery. Hutch roughed him up right here in my office. Damn fool!”

“What?!” Starsky couldn’t believe what he was hearing, but then reconsidered, knowing his partner’s temper and immense dislike for the man. After all, how many times had Hutch had to stop *him* from taking a swing at Simonetti? *Man, he would have loved to have been there!*

“I don’t know what the lead was, but Hutch seemed pretty excited about it. I suggest you find him—and make it fast. Simonetti is also trying to convince the DA to charge you with manslaughter.”

Starsky’s hand involuntarily flew to the top of his head, his fingers raking through his hair. “Okay...okay...I’ll find him,” he reassured Dobey. “I’ll call Huggy, Mickey, Sweet

Alice. One of them may have tipped him off. But what about Simonetti? How long before he gets the warrant for Hutch?"

"Let me worry about that. You just get a move on," Dobey told him, then slammed down the receiver.



The Torino sped toward the abandoned stadium, Starsky artfully dodging cars, the Mars light clearing his path. A quick phone call to Huggy had provided him with what he needed to know. He just hoped he could intercept Hutch before his meeting with Fifth Avenue ended. Starsky knew Hutch had laid everything on the line, now it was up to the two of them to find the answers to the puzzle before they both ended up behind bars and couldn't do anything to prove his innocence.

Starsky pulled the car into the parking lot and jogged toward the ticket gate. In the distance, he could see the sun glint off Hutch's blond hair and the garish bright-colored, checked sports coat that was the trademark of the fading con man, Fifth Avenue. As he approached, both men spotted him and waited for him to join them.

"How'd you know we were here?" Hutch asked.

"Huggy," Starsky answered. "I hear you've been busy makin' Brownie points with Simonetti," he added, without humor.

"Nothing I haven't wanted to do for a long time," Hutch answered.

"Hey, I don't know what you guys are talking about, but I'd rather not been seen chit-chatting with the two of you. Bad for my reputation, if you get my drift. All I want to know is, do we have a deal, Hutchinson?"

"That depends," Hutch said, turning his attention back to Fifth Avenue. "First, you have to tell us what you have." The man was as tall and thin as a walking stick. Hutch wondered idly if a strong wind could blow him over, or whether he just looked like it could. His dyed wire-thin mustache and outdated sports jacket engendered a look that had probably been stylish when he was a young man in the 1940s, but now, it was only caricaturish and out-of-place. Hutch felt a momentary stab of pity for the older man, then quickly focused on what had brought them here.

"Hear you've gotten yourself into quite a pickle, Starsky," the con man said, glancing at the detective and flicking the ash from his cigarette. He did so with what he considered *flair*, seeing himself as a debonair man of the world. "But the truth of the matter is, your Mr. Kramer wasn't the angel that the media has made him out to be."

"If you know something, spit it out," Starsky said impatiently. "Hutch and I will do whatever we can to get you leniency on your charges."

“Hold your horses,” Fifth Avenue said. “I need more assurance than that.” He was enjoying having the upper hand with these two for once. They were all right, as far as cops went, but he’d never had much use for authority figures. They just didn’t show him the respect he was due. He was an artist, and he had his pride.

“Look, we’re running out of time here,” Hutch told him. “I feel certain we can convince the DA that you didn’t know the diamonds were stolen. We’ll give you our word that we’ll do everything in our power to get your charges reduced.”

A weasily little smile curved the older man’s lips. “Very well, gentlemen. I guess I can’t ask for more than that.” He coughed, something he did a lot these days. *Maybe there was something to this business about smoking being bad for the lungs, after all, he thought.* “Mr. Kramer had a gambling problem. Over the past six months, he’d gotten in over his head with Frank Fontella.”

“The mobster that runs that numbers racket?” Starsky asked.

Fifth Avenue nodded. “One and the same.”

“How much over his head?” Hutch asked.

“About two-hundred grand.”

Hutch looked at Starsky and rolled his eyes. How could Kramer have been in that deep without anyone knowing?

“Is this information a sure thing?” Starsky asked, almost afraid to believe it was true.

“Solid gold,” the old man said, flicking his cigarette again. “The Deacon, Frankie’s muscle, came by looking for Kramer the day before you wasted him.”

Starsky winced at Fifth Avenue’s description of the shooting. “Did he say anything? You know, anything that might be useful?”

“Said his boss was tired of the guy handing him a line and he was running out of time. Asked me to pass the word on. I told him we didn’t run in the same circles, that Kramer was strictly an amateur, while I—well, you know *my* reputation.”

“Where can we find this Fontella?” Hutch asked.

“Has a place down on Forty-fourth and Clark Street,” Fifth Avenue told them. I don’t know how talkative he’s going to be, but I suspect he’s pretty pissed right now, seeing how he won’t be able to collect his two-hundred Gs, thanks to Starsky.” The con man laughed and sputtered at his own joke.

Hutch dug into his jeans pocket and pressed a fifty-dollar bill into the man's hand. "I don't want your money. This is peanuts," Fifth Avenue said, shoving it back into Hutch's palm. "Just remember your promise to speak with the DA."



"You've got it," Hutch assured him, as the two detectives turned on their heels and started back to their cars.

"I take it you didn't enlighten him to the fact that the DA will likely be prosecuting me for manslaughter and arresting you for assaulting a police officer," Starsky said once they were out of earshot.

"Didn't see any reason to bring up something I don't intend to allow happen," Hutch shot back.



Starsky parked the Torino in front of the Tango Club, a sleazy-looking storefront decorated with exaggerated life-sized bad paintings of long-legged, over-endowed women wearing gaudy Latin dance costumes, complete with feather boas and skirts that slit seductively over their right legs. The paintings were done in orange and black, but the colors had long since begun to fade to pink and gray. Trash and empty beer cans littered the sidewalk and the area around the main entrance.

"Classy joint," Starsky remarked, as he and Hutch started toward the front entrance.

"I'm sure the clientele is equally classy," Hutch said.

When they reached the door and tried the knob, it was locked. Certain someone was inside, Hutch pounded on it heavily, waited less than five seconds, and pounded again.

"Maybe they aren't here," Starsky said.

"Maybe they are," Hutch answered, pounding again.

Suddenly the door jerked open and an oversized bald head poked out, towering over the two of them by at least six inches. "Yeah? What d'ya want? Can't you see we're closed?"

Hutch straightened his shoulders, hoping to look a little intimidating, and said, "We're here to see Fontella."

“Oh, yeah? And who the hell are you? *Mr. Fontella* don’t see nobody without an appointment. He didn’t tell me he was expecting nobody.”

“Is that right?” Hutch interrupted, flipping his badge open. “I think he’ll want to make room for us on his calendar.” He glared up at the giant and didn’t blink an eye.

“Cops! You’re all the same,” the man spat. “Think all you gotta do is flash your badge and it’ll get you in anywhere.”

“Doesn’t it?” Starsky shot back arrogantly.

“Excuse me,” Hutch said politely. “What did you say your name was?”

“Maurice,” the giant boomed back.”

“Well, *Maurice*, suppose you tell your boss Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson are here to see him now. Otherwise, we’ll have to insist you all be guests at our place—you know—*downtown*?”



Maurice snarled, then gritted out between clinched teeth, “Wait here,” and slammed the door in their faces.

“Impressive, Hutch,” Starsky complimented him. “Glad to see you haven’t lost your touch since I’ve been gone.”

“It’s only been one day,” Hutch said. “Besides, if you’ve really got it, you don’t *lose* it, Starsk.”

In a few seconds, the door opened wide enough for them to enter, and the big man ushered in the two detectives. “Mr. Fontella will see you in his office.” He steered them through the club, bereft of activity, other than two busty dancers on the stage rehearsing their routine, and a pudgy little man with a broom, lazily pushing trash around the floor. With the lights up, the club looked even more shabby and rundown on the inside than it had on the outside.

Maurice reached over Hutch, his long ape-like arm grazing the top of Hutch’s head, and pushed open the door to Fontella’s office. “Here they are, Boss.” Inside, a second bodyguard, smaller in stature, moved aside to let them enter.

Starsky and Hutch stepped inside the smoke-filled office. The red carpet and red-and-gold striped wallpaper only intensified the claustrophobic ambiance of the room. Fontella, or someone who fancied himself as his “decorator” had adorned the walls with

animal heads fastened to trophy boards, clinging to the wallpaper like grotesque, unnatural growths.

“Geez,” Starsky said under his breath.

“Looks like a safari gone bad, huh?” Hutch whispered back.

“Okay, what do you guys want?” Fontella asked without preamble. The obese man puffed on a fat Cuban cigar and made no effort to rise from the large fake zebra-skin chair behind his desk. “I don’t have time to pussy-foot around with cops. So just tell me what you want and get the hell out. I’m a very busy man, and I got a business to run here.”

“Now that’s not very hospitable, is it, Frankie?” Starsky said. “We just need a little information.”

“I’m not in the habit of helping the fuzz,” Fontella sneered, chewing on the Cuban cigar.

“We just want to talk about one of your regulars,” Hutch said. “Jim Kramer.”

“Who says I even knew him?”

“Come on, Fontella,” Hutch said. “Don’t play games with us. Word on the street is, he was in to you for two-hundred grand.”

“So what if he was? Thanks to Jesse James there, he ain’t gonna be around to pay me either,” Fontella said, nodding toward Starsky. “I saw you on the news, hotshot.”

“Did you threaten him? Threaten his family?” Starsky pressed.

“What if I did? I didn’t kill him. You took care of that. Besides, I already told that other cop everything I know.”

Starsky and Hutch exchanged glances. “What other cop? Someone’s already asked you about Kramer?” Hutch asked.

“Yeah, some stiff in a suit. Came in here, pushing his weight around like he owned the joint. Simons...Simmons—”

“Simonetti?” Starsky finished for him.

“Yeah, that was his name. Simonetti. Real jerk. Thought he was Mr. Tough Guy.”

Realization swept over them like a tsunami.

“Besides,” Fontella groused. “I wasn’t the only one he owed. He was in to Nicky Montel for about fifty G’s. Loser’s probably worth more dead than he was alive.”

“You’re a real gem, Frankie,” Starsky said sarcastically, as he and Hutch turned to leave the office. “All heart, too.”

Starsky paused at the door and leveled a cool stare on the sleazy man. “Oh, one more thing, Frankie,” he said, waiting until he was certain he had Fontella’s full attention. “If my partner and I hear even a *rumor* of you bothering Mrs. Kramer, we’re gonna take it real personal. Understand?”

“Screw you,” Fontella spat back daringly.

“Better listen to him, Frankie,” Hutch reiterated. “One *whisper*, and we’re all over you like white on rice. That’s a promise.” Hutch waited a beat, then added, “Are we completely clear on this?” The icy calm in his voice only increased the weight of the warning.

Fontella chewed the fat cigar nervously, his eyes darting back and forth between Starsky and Hutch. “Okay,” he finally relented. “Okay.”



“You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” Starsky said once they were in the car. Hutch couldn’t mistake the anger that suffused Starsky’s face, and he knew they were on the same wavelength.

“Simonetti had the key all along. Let us go off on a wild goose chase, while he knew there was a connection between Kramer and Fontella. He deliberately kept it to himself,” Hutch said.

“Bastard!” Starsky roared, slamming his fist against the steering wheel.

“Take it easy, Starsk. We’ll handle Simonetti later,” Hutch said, laying a calming hand on Starsky’s shoulder. “Let’s not lose sight of what’s most important here. We still don’t know for sure why Kramer jumped in front of your gun. But we’re on track now. We’re close—I can feel it. I think we should pay Kramer’s boss a visit.”

Starsky took a deep breath, trying to shake off the anger. “Okay. But only if you promise I get the next swing at Simonetti.”



George Gunderson was an average-looking fifty-six-year-old man—the guy with the disturbingly familiar face; the guy you could swear you’d met somewhere, sometime, but could never quite place. He had the unconscious habit of scratching his balding head

with his left hand when he was thinking. George did this so often during their short interview, that Starsky wondered if the craggy-faced man had a perpetual red spot in the center of his scalp.

“Damnedest thing,” Gunderson said. “Kramer was one of our best agents for the first three years he was here. Then about a year ago, I noticed a drop in the number of new accounts he was bringing in. He seemed kind of distracted, but never really talked about any problems.”

“Could he have had financial troubles?” Hutch asked.

“I don’t know,” Gunderson replied. He paused, scratched his head again, then added, “You know, he was getting a lot of personal calls—usually seemed pretty upset when he’d hang up. Could’ve been collection agencies,” the man speculated.

“Or loan sharks,” Starsky mumbled.

“What’s that?” Gunderson said, sure he’d misunderstood.

“Did you know Kramer had a gambling problem?” Starsky asked.

“No...no, I didn’t. Jim didn’t seem the type. Are you sure about that?”

“Positive,” Starsky answered.

“He was a family man. Always worrying about his family’s well-being,” Gunderson pondered. “I mean, he was crazy about that little girl of his. Said he was going to make sure she got a college education. Talked about being able to give her a big wedding some day. I can’t imagine him gambling, going in debt. Jim had a great 401k here, and the maximum life insurance we offer our employees.”

Hutch cut his eyes toward Starsky. The silent communication passed between them like an electric current.

“What happens to the 401k and the insurance now?” Hutch asked.

“Laura Kramer is his beneficiary. The 401k is hers. And since Jim’s death was an...an...accident,” Gunderson said, glancing self-consciously at Starsky, “she’ll also collect the \$200,000 life insurance disbursement.”

The two detectives stood up, abruptly ending the interview. “Thanks, Mr. Gunderson. You’ve been very helpful,” Hutch said.

Surprised, George quickly rose to his feet, too. “I don’t know how I helped, but I’m glad I could be of assistance. Damn shame about Jim.” Again, he blushed and looked up at Starsky uncomfortably.

“Thanks for seeing us,” Starsky said, reaching out and shaking the older man’s hand. “If you think of anything else, please get in touch with us.”

Starsky and Hutch went down the short flight of stairs to the office building’s parking lot and got into the car. For a few seconds, they sat there considering what they’d just learned. Hutch was the first to speak. “It all fits, Starsk.”

“Yeah,” Starsky agreed. “But can anyone really prove it?”

“All the pieces fit,” Hutch repeated. “And the Board will put it together when the evidence is presented.”

“So Kramer got in so deep, the only way he saw out was suicide.” Starsky had put into words what they were both thinking. He shook his head in disbelief. “He used me, Hutch. Why didn’t he just take a freakin’ gun and pull the trigger himself?”

“Because he knew suicide would void the insurance policy,” Hutch began.

“And he wanted to make sure his wife and kid would get the insurance money. He figured if he wasn’t around, Frankie and the gambling debts would disappear from the scene, his family would draw the insurance and the retirement, and Kramer wouldn’t have to face them with the truth,” Starsky finished.

“I’m sure he thought he’d found the perfect way out,” Hutch said. “It probably never occurred to him that Fontella might go after Laura.”

Starsky sighed heavily. “So what do we do now?”

“For starters, we tell Dobey,” Hutch answered without hesitation.

“But if we do that, Laura and Angie Kramer lose the insurance money. They’re probably counting on that money to live on,” Starsky pointed out. “Kramer wanted his daughter to go to college.”

“Starsky, you can’t be serious,” Hutch said incredulously. “I mean, I don’t want to see them lose the insurance money either, but you can’t take the fall for Kramer’s screw-ups. You heard Gunderson. Laura Kramer will still receive his retirement benefits. Besides, insurance fraud is a crime, regardless of the motives.”

Starsky didn’t answer.

“If you think I’m going to sit by and watch you throw your future away because this guy decided to take the easy way out, you’re way off base,” Hutch told him.

“It’s not just the money,” Starsky said. “When we go public with what we found out, Mrs. Kramer and Angie are gonna know the truth—about the gambling debts, the lies, the suicide. Don’t you think they’ve suffered enough?”

“Of course I do,” Hutch said, his voice filled with compassion. “But so have you. Starsk, you didn’t ask for any of this. We were just doing our jobs. We were at the right place at the right time. Kramer saw an opportunity and he took it. It was a cowardly thing to do, but he did it and you’re the one who’s been having to live with the consequences.”

Starsky reached up and rubbed his eyes, willing away the tension headache he felt blossoming. “You’re right. I know you’re right. But that doesn’t make it easy. I just feel like the Kramers have lost so much—I don’t want to take anything else from them.”

Hutch reached over and cuffed him on the back of the head affectionately. Only Starsky would be weighing the pros of turning over evidence that could clear his name against the cons of hurting someone else. “Come on, partner. It’s time to see Dobe. You know we have no choice but to tell the truth.”

Wordlessly, Starsky nodded, conceding the point, then cranked the engine and reluctantly drove toward the station house.



“Come in,” came the gruff reply to a rap on the well-worn wooden door.

Simonetti strode into Captain Dobe’s office, his stiff carriage a visual portrayal of his irritation. “What’s important enough to have me called out of an interrogation, Dobe?”

“Have a seat, Investigator Simonetti,” Police Commissioner Kelly said from the corner.

Simonetti’s eyes flitted first to the commissioner’s face, then took in the solemn expressions of both Dobe and Hutchinson, before coming to rest on Starsky. The four men were seated in a semi-circle around the office.

“What’s this all about? And what’s *he* doing here?” Simonetti didn’t like the looks of this.

Kelly peered over his heavy wire-rimmed glasses at Simonetti, then back down at the papers in front of him. “Have a seat,” he repeated.

Simonetti sat down in the chair nearest him, affecting a more self-assured demeanor than he felt.

“Detective Starsky is being reinstated, effective immediately,” Kelly said without preamble.

“What?” Simonetti sprang to his feet. “You can’t be serious! The Board just suspended him three days ago!”

“I don’t need you to tell me what the Board did,” Kelly snapped indignantly. “I *am* the chairman!” he reminded Simonetti. “We have reason to believe that James Kramer committed suicide by stepping in front of the perpetrator just as Detective Starsky fired.”

“That’s absurd,” Simonetti sneered. “Why would he do something like that? Kramer had no way of knowing Starsky and Hutchinson were going to interrupt that robbery. This is some crazy story they’ve fabricated to justify Starsky’s ineptitude.”

Starsky glowered at Simonetti, but held his tongue. Dobby had warned the two detectives to let the commissioner handle this. Hutch stole a glance at his partner and saw the muscle in Starsky’s right cheek twitch, a telltale sign of what his silence was costing him.

“Well, I disagree and so does the Board. I’m confident when this investigation is complete, we’ll find enough evidence to substantiate this theory,” Kelly said.

Starsky watched Simonetti’s hands tighten into tense fists at his sides. The man was more rattled than he wanted anyone to know.

Kelly cleared his throat before continuing. “Investigator Simonetti, I’d like an explanation as to why you withheld information from the Board at the time of the hearing. It’s come to my attention that while conducting your investigation, you learned of Mr. Kramer’s gambling debts, his involvement with at least two notorious loan sharks, and the fact that he had a large life insurance policy naming his wife as beneficiary.”

For the first time, Simonetti squirmed in his seat and seemed at a loss for words. “I...I didn’t see the relevance...”

“You didn’t see how a desperate man having a motive to stage his own death was relevant?” the commissioner asked incredulously.

“This is all speculation,” Simonetti sputtered.

“On the contrary. It indicates to me your inability see a clue when one spits in your eye!” Kelly’s angry face reddened a half shade as he frowned over his glasses at Simonetti. “Of course, the other explanation is that you deliberately concealed this evidence for your own personal reasons.”

Kelly paused, giving Simonetti an opportunity to respond. When he said nothing, the commissioner continued.

“Captain Dobey has filed a complaint alleging you’ve been harassing Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson for more than two years now, bringing unsubstantiated charges against one or both of them on three separate occasions—none of which were ever proven—consequently interfering with their investigations.”

Simonetti shot an angry glare at Dobey. The big man, his face grim and unmoved, glared back, daring Simonetti to deny the allegations.

Seeing the heated exchange, Kelly hastened to finish. “Investigator Simonetti, as Police Commissioner, I am suspending you one week without pay for withholding information regarding an ongoing investigation, and one week without pay for conduct unbecoming an officer of the law. This reprimand will be noted in your personnel record. I trust we won’t have this conversation again and that there will be no further incidences of this nature brought to my attention. Oh, yes,” he added, “And your charges against Detective Hutchinson for assault are being dismissed.”

When Simonetti tried to protest, Kelly held up a hand, staying him. “Do yourself a favor. Don’t say anything that’s going to get you in any deeper than you already are.”

The older man studied Simonetti from beneath bushy gray brows before continuing, “If you give a damn about your career in law enforcement, I suggest you get over this ridiculous vendetta of yours against these men. They’re good detectives, doing a difficult job. I know their methods are sometimes a little unconventional, but their success rate is the best in the Department. Your job is to root out dirty cops—not get in the way of the good ones who get results!”

Furious, Simonetti stood up. His movements marionette-jerky, he gritted out between clenched teeth, “Will that be all?”

“Yes. You’re dismissed,” Kelly said, meeting Simonetti’s eyes defiantly. The younger man stormed from the office, slamming the door after him. Starsky and Hutch exchanged glances and started for the door, too.

“Starsky!” Dobey said.

“Yeah, Cap’n?” Starsky said, looking back over his shoulder.

“Let it go,” the captain warned.

Starsky nodded, then opened the door. Both detectives strode from the room without another word.



In the police parking garage, an angry Simonetti slammed the car door shut and shoved the key into the ignition. Just as he started to turn the ignition, he heard a familiar voice.

“Simonetti.”

He looked up and found himself staring directly into the stormy blue eyes of his nemesis. Never before in his career had he been reprimanded for doing what he considered his *duty* as an Internal Affairs Officer. *Not until Starsky had gone crying to Dobey.* The hatred boiled up in him like lava in an erupting volcano. He glared back at the detective, not bothering to hide his disdain. “What’s it feel like to have Dobey fight your battles for you, Starsky?” he drawled.

Starsky leaned toward the open window, his face inches from Simonetti’s. “Now you listen to me, you turkey,” he hissed, his voice deadly calm. “I don’t give a damn about what the commissioner or Dobey just said. This is *my* personal warning to you.” Raising his index finger, pointing it at Simonetti’s nose, he continued, “It’s time to back off. It’s over. Hutch and I have had it with your interference and your dirty underhanded attempts to get us fired. From this minute on, the gloves are off.” Starsky’s jaw tightened as he added, “Do we understand one another? Hmmm?”

Simonetti’s lip curled in a sardonic sneer, “Oh, yeah. We understand each other. You think you’ve won, don’t you?”

Despite the man’s bold response, Starsky sensed he was more shaken than he appeared.

“Well, there’s always tomorrow,” Simonetti added as a parting shot. He nervously turned the key, anxious to leave. “There’s always tomorrow.”



Starsky stood up and stepped back, as Simonetti thrust the automobile into reverse and careened out of the parking spot.

As the squeal of the screeching tires died away, Hutch stepped up beside Starsky. “At least he didn’t win this round. And now that he’s been exposed, Kelly will be keeping tabs on him.”

Starsky sighed, and turned to face Hutch, his face still a mask of seething fury. “I wanted to pound him right into the concrete.”

“I know the feeling,” Hutch said, then grinned broadly. “But why play into his hand? It’s better this way. You got your job back, and, with the commissioner’s letter in Simonetti’s file, maybe he’ll think twice about pulling a stunt like this again.”

The anger began to drain from Starsky as he considered the logic in Hutch’s words. “I guess you’re right.”

“You know I am,” Hutch told him. “Now, let’s go have a beer and some dinner.”

The two of them crossed the threshold of the garage entrance shoulder to shoulder, out into the cool dark night that now blanketed the brightly lit city that never slept.



## Epilogue

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Hutch asked.

“Yeah. I wanna make sure they’re doing okay,” Starsky said. “Finding out someone you love committed suicide must be a hard thing to handle.” He rang the bell and waited.

When the door opened, they were greeted not by Laura Kramer, but by her sister, Megan. “Detective Starsky,” she said, smiling at them uneasily. “I’m surprised to see you here. Who’s your friend?”

Hutch stepped forward to introduce himself, but Starsky beat him to the punch.

“This is my partner, Hutch.”

Hutch extended his hand, flashing her his best “wholesome-Midwest-boy” smile. “Ken Hutchinson. Glad to meet you.”

Starsky gave him a quelling look then turned his attention back to the pretty girl before them. “I...uh...I was wondering how your sister and Angie are doing.”

“As well as can be expected,” Megan answered honestly. “Laura’s having trouble accepting all this. But she’s coming around. Of course, Angie’s beginning to realize her daddy isn’t coming home.”

“Do you suppose we could see them?”

“I’ll ask,” she said, stepping back and opening the door wider. “Please come in and sit down.”

The two men followed her into the living room and sat down. Hutch looked around curiously, taking in the photos of family and friends, seeing James Kramer from a different perspective. It made him sad when his eyes lit upon the photo of a little girl, with her arms around Kramer’s neck.

“Who are you?” asked a tiny voice. Startled, he looked down and saw the question had come from a petite child, her dark hair in pigtails, and a light sprinkle of freckles dotting her nose.

“Hi, Angie,” Starsky said from behind them. “He’s my friend. His name is Ken.”

“I remember you,” she said, giving Starsky a gape-toothed grin. “You’re Dave.”

“That’s right,” Starsky said, smiling back at her. “I see you and Barbie are still hanging out together.” He nodded toward the doll clutched in her tiny hands.

She giggled. “We’re going to a tea party. You wanna come?”

“Angie, why don’t you take Barbie to your room and pick out what she’s going to wear to the tea party?” Laura Kramer said, entering the room.

“But Dave just got here. And his friend, Ken, is with him,” the little girl protested.

“Come on, sweetie,” Megan said, taking her hand. “I’ll help you pick out the perfect dress. Okay? Then maybe later, Dave and Ken can think about coming to the tea party.”

“Really?” She turned toward the two policemen, her eyes wide with hope.

Starsky stammered. “We’d like to, but—”

“But we didn’t bring our coats and ties,” Hutch intervened. “A gentleman never goes to tea with a lady without his coat and tie,” he said authoritatively. “Maybe next time, okay?”

The little girl looked disappointed but agreed, nonetheless. “Okay, but only if you promise.”

“Scouts’ honor,” Starsky said, raising three fingers in the traditional pledge.

With that, Angie followed her aunt from the room, leaving the two men to talk alone with her mother.

“Thanks for seeing me, Mrs. Kramer,” Starsky said.

“Of course,” she said, motioning for the two men to sit back down.

Starsky introduced her to Hutch, then found himself at a loss for words. The three adults sat in uncomfortable silence for a few seconds before Starsky found his nerve again and said hesitantly, “I, uh, I just came by to see how you two are doing. To see if you need anything.”

Laura’s hand went to her face, and she unconsciously tucked a stray lock behind her ear before answering, “How do you think I’m doing?” Starsky was surprised there was no trace of sarcasm in her voice; he heard only fatigue and the strain of raw grief. “I was

just beginning to face the fact that my husband was dead, and now I find out he committed suicide.”

Her eyes welled with tears. “I’d like to be able to say I don’t believe it. But deep down inside, I knew something was wrong. Jim and I had been drifting apart for the past two years. He...he wouldn’t tell me what was wrong. I didn’t know about the gambling. I thought—oh, God—I thought he was having an affair.” Now the tears streamed silently from her eyes, leaving tiny tracks down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry you had to find out the truth,” Starsky said sincerely.

“No...no...please. I’m the one who should apologize. I blamed you for Jim’s death, and the press crucified you. I know you nearly lost your job. If only I’d known...” Her voice trailed off momentarily, then she looked up at him again. “I wanted to call you, but I didn’t know what to say.” Her hands lay tightly clasped in her lap.

“Hey, don’t worry about that,” Starsky said sincerely. “I’m just sorry things turned out the way they did.”

Hutch watched his partner struggling for the right words to comfort the woman. He wished he could help, but he knew this was something Starsky felt he had to do on his own.

“I’m really sorry about the insurance money,” Starsky said.

“Insurance money?” she said with a bewildered expression.

Embarrassed, Starsky was hesitant to continue. He looked over at Hutch for guidance. Hutch was surprised Starsky had raised the issue. Perhaps she hadn’t considered the implications of the suicide. Knowing it was too late to drop it, Hutch nodded for him to continue.

“Well, I, uh, we figure since your husband’s death was ruled a suicide, the insurance policy will be void,” he said.

“Oh, that. Detective Starsky, I don’t want any part of that...that *blood* money. I couldn’t spend a penny of it, knowing where it came from. Angie and I will be fine. We’ll draw Jim’s retirement, and I’m a teacher. Granted, they don’t pay teachers much, but I’ll never be without a job.”

Starsky breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad to hear that. But if you ever need anything...”

“Thank you, but I think we’ll be fine.” Sniffing back her tears, she smiled then reached over and laid her hand on his. “I’m so sorry my husband put you through this. He was a good man; he just made some bad choices.”

“I guess we’re all guilty of that sometime in our lives. I’m just sorry your husband’s choices left you and your little girl alone in the world.”

“But, thank God, I still have my daughter. She’s the light of my life. And Meg has decided to move in with us. We’re planning to combine our resources, and she’ll help me with childcare. I miss Jim, but things could be worse.”

Starsky stood up to leave, and Hutch followed his lead. “Remember, you call if you need anything,” Starsky said as they reached the door.

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again,” she said, smiling tremulously. “After all, you both have a date for tea with my daughter.”



As they walked down the sidewalk, Hutch nudged Starsky in the ribs with his elbow. “There you go again, Starsk, getting involved with someone a fourth your age. First, Joey, now Angie. What’s with you and the younger ladies?” he teased.

“Ma always used to say, ‘when ya got it, flaunt it’,” Starsky said smugly, drawing the sunglasses from his jacket pocket and sliding them onto his nose. “Come on, partner. Let’s go to Huggy’s, and I’ll show you the old Starsky charm in action.”



*The End*