

“Coming To Terms”

by *TibbieB*

The pain was more intense now. Mind-numbing, all-consuming fingers of fire licking up his spine, filling his senses. *Damn it, Starsky! If you really want to help me, help me!*

Hutch bolted upright in bed, a heavy sheen of sweat drenching his body. His eyes nervously darting around the dark room, he fought back the anxiety threatening to overwhelm him. Fifteen seconds ticked by, then, beginning to calm, Hutch took a deep breath, leaned back against the headboard, and allowed reality to slowly seep back into his consciousness.



Another nightmare.

After a few minutes, Hutch swung his legs over the side of the bed, sliding his feet into a pair of worn corduroy bedroom slippers. He glanced at the green glowing numbers of the alarm clock perched on the bedside table. *Four a.m. No point trying to go back to sleep.* He had to get up in two hours. Besides, the dream always left him keyed up, unable to relax.

Turning on the lamp, Hutch rose from the bed and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. *Maybe I should try to read,* he thought. Glancing toward the sitting area, his eyes were instantly drawn to the shrouded canvas, propped on a scarred wooden easel tucked inconspicuously into the corner opposite the fireplace. He hesitated, drawn to it. Reconsidering, he turned away and went into the kitchen.



Things were already hectic in the squadroom the next morning when Starsky looked up from the typewriter, recognizing instantly that Hutch was in another of his moods. The third day this week. Despite his certainty of the short reply he'd receive, Starsky smiled and said, maybe a little too enthusiastically, "Mornin', partner."

Hutch just grunted, tossed his jacket over the back of his chair, and headed straight for the coffeemaker. Starsky watched him, worried by the pattern he'd seen emerge since Hutch had returned to work. Most days he was unresponsive, irritable, and preoccupied. The other cops in the department were keeping their distance, reluctant to be the butt of his bad temper. Although there'd been rumors, only Starsky and Dobey knew what

Hutch had been through eight weeks ago; only *they* were aware of the demons he was battling.

It was becoming more and more difficult to come up with an answer when people asked, “Hey, what’s with Hutch?” Starsky could only make so many excuses. He’d blamed it on a romance gone bad, on Hutch’s never-ending car problems, or a number of other lame reasons. Yesterday, he had decided not to bother anymore. Most of the guys were avoiding Hutch now anyway. But Starsky knew he had to do *something*. Hutch was retreating into himself more every day, and it was time for Starsky to intercede.

Hutch sat down at the desk and began shuffling through the stack of papers before him. Starsky watched covertly while tapping out the last few sentences of the report he’d been working on. After five more minutes of the silent treatment, Starsky removed the paper from the typewriter and asked, “Bad night?”

Without looking up, Hutch mumbled, “You could say that.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“What’s to talk about?” Hutch said lightly. “Just a couple of nightmares.”



“Look, Hutch,” Starsky said quietly, leaning forward in his chair. “I think you should reconsider seeing a shrink. You won’t talk to me; you won’t talk to Dobey. Maybe a stranger, someone who’s not part of your daily life...maybe it would be easier for you—”

Hutch looked up angrily. “We’ve been all through this,” he snapped, louder than he had intended.

When Starsky narrowed his eyes, signaling that everyone was watching, Hutch lowered his voice. “If I see a shrink and IA finds out, there’ll be too many questions. They’ll want to know why, and there’ll be an investigation. I can kiss my job goodbye. You know as well as I do, if they find out about Jeanie, about my—my *problem*, I’m out of here.”

Realizing Hutch was becoming more agitated by the second, Starsky said quietly, “Okay...okay...we’ll talk about it later, someplace more private. I just hate to see you like this. Let’s finish up here and get out on the street. We’ve got work to do.”

“Fine,” Hutch answered irritably.

They returned to their paperwork and fell silent again. A few minutes later, Starsky asked casually, “So, will you tell me about these dreams? Granted, I’m no shrink, but sometimes it helps to talk about them, ya know?”

Obviously annoyed by Starsky’s persistence, Hutch fidgeted, not looking up from the reports before him. He knew Starsky would be relentless until he got what he wanted. “You know what your problem is, Starsky? You don’t know when to leave it alone.”

Starsky smiled good-naturedly and agreed, “That’s true. But then, that’s one of the things that make me so lovable,” he added.

Hutch shook his head, knowing when he was beaten. He leaned in a little closer and said, just above a whisper, “They’re crazy. I’m always in a haze, always needing a fix. Knowing they’re after Jeanie, but unable to stop myself from telling them where she is.”

Starsky nodded and waited for Hutch to continue. When nothing followed, he asked, “Do you ever escape? Do you get away from them?”

“Sometimes,” Hutch answered quietly. “But then I’m there again. I’m never really free. It’s like I’m in some sort of time loop and the whole damn thing starts over.”

He stopped short of telling Starsky about his role in the dreams—how Starsky always turned away in disgust—ignoring his pleas for help. What was the point? Starsky had already been beating himself up for not starting the search for Hutch until it was almost too late.

Instead, he changed the subject abruptly.

“Let’s drop it, okay? I just want to finish up these reports and get out of here.”

Realizing he wasn’t going to get anything else from Hutch, Starsky nodded. “Sure. I’m with you.” For now. Hutch was holding something back, and Starsky wasn’t giving up.



An hour later, the paperwork finished, they were dispatched to a jewelry store robbery on Pike Street. In their territory this time, the jewelry heist had the same MO as three others that had occurred in the adjacent districts over the past nine months. At least two perpetrators wearing gloves and athletic shoes had pulled the jobs during the night, using a blowtorch to open the safes. With no witnesses, fingerprints, or easily distinguishable shoe prints, there was little to go on.

“Looks like the same guys, Captain,” Hutch spoke into the car mic. “No clues at this one either. Starsky and I have talked with the owner and two of the three employees, so I don’t know what else we can accomplish here right now. Jacobson is canvassing the

neighborhood, but it happened around three a.m., and there's not much activity on the streets here that time of night."

"What about their security camera?" Dobby asked.

"Same as the others—spray-painted the lens black. Two figures in ski masks went directly for the camera and blotted it out before starting the job."

Starsky slid in beside him and dropped a small black notebook onto the seat, indicating he'd finished interviewing the third employee.

"How much was taken this time?" Dobby asked.

Hutch glanced at his partner, who answered, "Owner estimates around sixty grand." Hutch let out a low whistle before passing on the response.

"Seems like they know who can deliver the most goods," he added.

"Seems," Dobby grunted. "Okay, you two. Wind it up and make sure you complete those reports tonight and get them over to Robbery. Tarnowski and his partner are working this case exclusively. They're on their way to the scene now. The commissioner's getting some heat from the Chamber of Commerce, who are getting heat from the Certified Jewelers Association. You've done what you can, so pass it off to Tarnowski and Lamonda now. Thanks for your help."

"Sure thing," Hutch answered. "Zebra Three out." He placed the mic back on the hook. "Guess that's that," he said to Starsky.

"Yeah, sounds like it." Starsky pulled away from the curb and blended back into the flow of traffic. "What now?" he asked.

"I'm ready for some lunch," Hutch answered. "But for Pete's sake, Starsky, nothing too spicy. I skipped breakfast, and I don't think I could take one of your disgusting chili dogs with sauerkraut, or a greasy burger with who knows what in it."

Starsky feigned a hurt expression and turned innocent eyes toward his partner. "I have no idea what you're talkin' about. I eat perfectly normal 'people' food. You're the one who eats stuff never intended for human consumption."

"How about we compromise?" Hutch said, not really in the mood for any of their usual banter over their eating habits. "Let's just go to Huggy's. I can grab a turkey club there, and you can get whatever weird concoction you want."

"Fine," Starsky said, disappointed Hutch had dropped the subject without a fight. But then, in the last few weeks there seemed to be very little fight in him.

“Starsk, turn around,” Hutch said abruptly.

“What?”

“I said, turn around. Go back and check out that alley.”

Without question, Starsky swung the steering wheel 180 degrees, causing cars in all directions to squeal to a screeching halt to avoid being hit by the swerving Torino. Starsky fishtailed around the corner into the closest alley and drew to a quick stop less than five feet in front of two people—a man and a young girl.



Caught by surprise, the tall black man stuttered, “S-Starsky, Hutch, wh-what...what’s up, man?” His eyes darted nervously back and forth between the two cops as he inched away from the grungy teenage girl beside him.

“Selling drugs to kids again, Keno?” Starsky asked casually. “How many times do we have to tell you that’s a no-no?” he said, shaking his finger reprovingly.

Hutch stepped out on his side of the car, his movements rigid with anger.

“I ain’t usin’,” the frightened girl said timidly. “Really. We was just passin’ the time.” Her dirty brown hair hung in a tangled mass down her back, strands obscuring her pale face. Her clothes were soiled and ill fitting. Even so, Hutch could see from her slim, boyish figure that she was probably no more than thirteen or fourteen years old.

He closed the distance between them in three strides, grabbed the girl’s arm, and pushed up her filthy sleeve. “Not using, huh? So I guess you have no idea how these tracks got here, right?”

Before Starsky knew what was happening, Hutch released the girl and grabbed Keno by the shirtfront, slamming him against the brick wall. “Why you slime bucket! I should tear your freakin’ head off! She’s not even old enough to date!”

The dealer’s hands went up in front of his face, ineffectively shielding himself from Hutch’s rage. With the two cops distracted, the terrified girl dodged past Starsky and ran out of the alley onto the busy sidewalk.



“Hutch!” Starsky grabbed Hutch’s shoulder, stopping him from slamming Keno against the wall again. “Let’s do it right. If he’s carrying, we run him in.”

The hard planes of Hutch’s face didn’t soften, but Starsky’s voice seemed to cut through his fury at some level and his grip on the dealer loosened infinitesimally.

“Come on, partner,” Starsky coaxed. “Let him go. Let me search him.”

Keno’s eyes bulged from his round sweating face, and the breath caught in his throat as he waited, afraid to move a muscle. He’d had run-ins with these two before, but he had never seen Hutchinson this dangerously close to the edge.

Slowly, Hutch released the man’s shirt and let him collapse against the wall with a thump. When he didn’t step back, Keno held his breath. Starsky sidled between them, then shoved the dealer’s face against the wall and began patting him down. When he reached the first pocket of the oversized, raggedy army jacket, his hand stopped, fished in, then extracted two small bags of a white powdery substance.

“And what do we have here?” Starsky said.

“No big deal, man. Just a couple’a nickel bags. I...I was gonna give it to her. The kid’s a user. You know? She needs a G-shot, man, and who am I to deprive a sister in need?”

The muscles in Hutch’s face tightened and he took a step forward, but Starsky intercepted again, staving him off with a hand to Hutch’s chest.

“You’re a real humanitarian, aren’t ya, Keno? Maybe we should nominate you for the Nobel Peace Prize.” Starsky plucked the cuffs from his belt and said, “Now, hands behind you, Dr. Schweitzer. We’re taking a little trip downtown.”

“Aw, man, you got nothin’ on me. The kid didn’t have no bread—no sale went down, man.”

“We’ve got you on possession, and that’s a start, dirt bag,” Hutch said, jerking Keno around and pushing him toward the car. “You’re probably the one that got her hooked in the first place. We’ll see if we can’t give the kid a break today and get you off the streets for a few hours.”

“You don’t know what it’s like, pig!” Keno shouted as Hutch thrust him into the back seat. “That chick’s strung out; two hours from now, she’ll be begging for a fix. I was just trying to help her! You damn cops just don’t know what it’s like.”

Starsky’s eyes met Hutch’s across the top of the Torino. Neither said anything, but Starsky saw—actually *felt*—Hutch’s pain and self-loathing. Starsky opened his mouth to speak, to reassure, but Hutch quickly ducked his head and slid in on the passenger side, slamming the car door behind him.

Back at the station, they turned Kenny J. Willis, aka Keno, over to Booking and headed downstairs to fill out the paperwork. Hutch hadn’t said two words since they’d cuffed the pusher and brought him in. When they were settled at their desks, Starsky decided it was time to break the silence.

“You wanna go look for her?” he asked.

“Hmmm?” Pretending to not understand, Hutch busily inserted the arrest form into the typewriter before looking up. “Did you say something?”

“The kid,” Starsky said. “You wanna go look for her and see if we can get her into rehab?”

“We couldn’t find her now, Starsk,” he answered without making eye contact. “She’s hiding out. She’s afraid we’re going to arrest her. I really blew it back there. I didn’t exactly act in a way to gain her trust, did I?”

Starsky rested his chin in the palm of his hand and studied Hutch’s face. The inscrutable mask that prevented Starsky from seeing what was going on behind those usually expressive blue eyes was snugly in place again. Hutch wore it most of the time these days. It was frightening to Starsky how seldom his partner had let his true emotions show since the incident with Forest and Jeanie Walden. And when he did, they seemed to run rampant, like they had earlier in the alley.



“It was a gut reaction, Hutch,” Starsky said. “Nobody who knew what you’ve been through recently would blame you for reacting that way.”

“Yeah, well, nobody *does know* except you and Dobey, and the people who were directly involved,” Hutch snapped back. “That’s no excuse for scaring the hell out of that kid and blowing the one opportunity we might’ve had to get her some help!”

“Take, it easy,” Starsky, said quietly, knowing Hutch was still uncertain they’d made the right decision by concealing what Forest had done to him. “We can at least put the word

out that we're lookin' for her," he continued, undeterred. "Maybe someone will give us a call."

"Do whatever you want to do, Starsky," Hutch said shortly, striking the typewriter keys harder than necessary. "I don't think it's likely that anyone's going to give her up to the cops. You know how junkies are."

Starsky's brows went up, a little surprised at Hutch's reaction. "I'll put the word out," he said decisively. "Can't hurt." Opening the desk drawer, he pulled out an old scratched and dented address finder, slid the metal pointer down to the correct letter, pressed the lever, and watched it snap open to the name of one of his more reliable informants. While Hutch typed the report and pretended to ignore him, Starsky punched in the first in a long list of numbers he hoped would produce a lead to the pathetic teen they'd let slip away in the alley.

Maybe, he thought, just maybe, if Hutch could help this girl, it would help him, too.



After finishing the paperwork on both Willis's arrest and their investigation of the jewelry heist, they hit the streets again. Hutch was quiet as they cruised the seedier areas of their beat. Even though Starsky didn't mention the girl again, Hutch knew he was watching for her, too.

When Starsky spotted Mickey loitering on a corner in one of the more unsavory neighborhoods, he pulled up next to the curb and stopped. Knowing they'd seen him, the junkie didn't even try to run.



"Hey, Starsky," he said shakily. His eyes darted in all directions, checking to see if anyone was watching; then he stepped off the curb and came toward the car.

"Wh-what can I do for you?" His baggy suit and disheveled hair looked like he'd just crawled out of bed. Starsky knew it was more likely that he'd slept on a bench than in a bed, and that he'd probably worn that same suit for at least a week. The smell of stale beer and sweat mixed with nicotine was overpowering when Mickey leaned into the car window. Reflexively, Starsky drew back and, from the corner of his eye, saw Hutch turn away and stare out the passenger side. This was the first time Hutch had seen Mickey since the day they'd busted Forest.

"I been stayin' outta trouble," Mickey said defensively, not giving Starsky a chance to speak.

“We just wanna ask you a question,” Starsky said. “This has nothin’ to do with that earlier business.”

His hand trembling, Mickey brought a filthy used cigarette butt to his lips and took a drag. “You know I...I always help you when...when I can,” he stuttered. “It’s just...it’s just my memory ain’t so good sometimes, ya know?”

“Yeah,” Starsky said, “but mine is. And you owe us big time, Mickey. We intend to collect on that debt.” He paused, giving the unspoken threat time to sink in.

“We’re lookin’ for a kid. A white girl about thirteen, fourteen years old. Long brown hair and dark eyes, real skinny. She was wearing jeans and a green sweatshirt with white writing on the back. Didn’t get what it said. She was trying to score last time we saw her and might be in pretty bad shape by now.”

“Uh...uh...let me think...” Mickey said, a look of concentration squinting his bloodshot eyes. “Sounds like...sounds like Bobbie. Don’t know her last name. She...she’s been around here for about three, maybe four months now. Can’t say for sure, but I think...I think she might be turnin’ tricks for Dickie Barrows. Don’t...don’t say I said so, though.” Again, the little man puffed the cigarette, then glanced right and left, checking to see who might be watching. “Ya know...ya know, he took over Forest’s girls when—”

His voice died in his throat as Hutch pinned him with an icy stare. “Uh...when...uh...Forest went away.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Starsky said quickly. “But I didn’t know he dealt in girls that young. Can you tell us where we might find her?”

“No, man...I mean I would if I could.”

Starsky grabbed the man’s jacket front and hauled him closer. “You better not be lyin’ to me, Mickey.”

“I mean it, Starsky. I mean, like you said, I owe you, so I’d tell you, but I don’t know nothin’.”

Starsky locked eyes with him for a second, saw the fear and knew he was telling the truth. “Okay,” he said, releasing his hold on the jacket. “But we haven’t forgotten your part in the Forest thing, Mickey, and we’re keepin’ an eye on you. I’d better never find out you aren’t being straight with me.”

He added more calmly, “If you hear anything, or spot her, I want you to get word to me right away. You got that?” Starsky patted the front of the man’s rumpled jacket and waited for an answer.

“Yeah, sure thing, Starsky. I got it.” Rather than stepping back onto the curb, Mickey lingered a moment, his eyes flickering nervously toward Hutch. “How ya doin’, Hutch?” he asked sheepishly.

Hutch’s jaw tightened and he waited a beat before answering. “I suggest you not concern yourself with how I am,” Hutch said, his voice hard as steel, “but how *you’ll* be if my partner here finds out you’re lying to him. He’s still pretty pissed at you, Mickey. And that’s not an enviable position to be in. So I hope—for your sake—you’re telling the truth.”

Starsky wanted to smile at the dark menace in Hutch’s voice. He sounded like the old Hutch—the one who could scare an informant into giving up his own grandmother. But he held his scowl long enough for Mickey to back away from the car.

“I-I am...I swear I am, Hutch. I’ll see if I can find the girl. I promise...I’ll call you if I do.” Mickey turned and hurried down the sidewalk, tossing the cigarette butt as he scuttled away.

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Huggy looked up from the bar and nodded as Starsky and Hutch came through the front door. It was a busy night and the joint was hopping, but he motioned them toward a corner booth, drew two drafts, and went to join them.

“Man, you look like two junkyard dogs let off the chain after a long day in the sun. I thought your shift was over a couple’a hours ago,” he said, setting the beers in front of them and sliding in next to Hutch. “Tell me you’re going home to grab some shut-eye.”



“We’re going home to grab some shut-eye,” Hutch parroted, raising his glass and taking a healthy gulp.

“Yeah, but not before we get somethin’ to eat. I thought maybe you could make us a couple of those terrific burgers, the ones with the onion rings and bacon on top,” Starsky explained.

“When it comes to cuisine—Huggy’s the King,” Huggy shot back. “Whatever your heart desires, Detective Starsky.”

“Geez, Starsky, how can you eat something like that at eleven o’clock at night then go home and go to bed? It’s a wonder your stomach doesn’t disintegrate.”

“Be cool, my brother,” Huggy intervened. “This is your lucky night. It just so happens that Lucinda’s in charge of the kitchen tonight, and you know she has a soft spot for men

with big guns. If you place your order *personally*, she could probably be persuaded to stir up something for the more discriminating taste.”

Hutch smiled. “Lucinda, huh?”

Images of the voluptuous, long-legged Creole woman with sultry brown eyes sprang to his mind. It was a mystery to Hutch how Huggy had managed such a coup when he’d hired her as a short-order cook. Lucinda LaPate had trained with some of New Orleans’ best chefs. Hutch figured there was an interesting story there—a secret, perhaps, that kept Lucinda flying just below the radar.

“Now there’s a lady who really cooks,” he said, emphasizing the word *cooks*. “Maybe I’ll take you up on that suggestion.”

Huggy slid out and Hutch rose from the table, beer in hand, and started toward the kitchen.

“Hey, what about me?” Starsky asked.

“You’re not my type,” Hutch said over his shoulder without stopping.

Starsky was momentarily speechless, then called after him, “Don’t forget my burger—and a double order of fries!”

As Hutch wound his way through the crowd, Huggy leaned over the table and spoke loud enough for only Starsky to hear. “I was trying to get him out of here so we could talk.”

Seeing the tension in Huggy’s face, Starsky knew it wasn’t good news.

“Guess who came in here tonight looking for your partner?”

A thousand possibilities flitted through Starsky’s mind, but he was too tired for guessing games. “Who?”

“Jeanie Walden,” Huggy said without further preamble.

“Jeanie? Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. She worked for me, remember? Wanted to know if I knew where Hutch was.”

“Damn!” Starsky said, slamming his beer down on the table. “That’s just terrific!” Then, reining in his temper, his eyes quickly sought the kitchen entrance, hoping Hutch hadn’t been looking their way.

Seeing the direction of Starsky's gaze, Huggy reassured him, "It's cool. I told Lucinda we needed to talk, and if Hutch came back there tonight to keep him busy for a few minutes. Believe me, the lady's up to the task," he said with a sly grin.

"Whad'ya tell Jeanie?"

"The truth. That I hadn't seen you guys all day. She wanted to know if he was still a cop. Guess she thought he may have split after that scene with her and Forest."

"You know, I really thought she was through with Hutch," Starsky said. "I mean, with Forest out of the picture, she doesn't need his protection anymore. Women like Jeanie are users. She's here for a reason." He paused, thinking about the possibilities. "Did she say why she wanted to see him?"

"Only that she has to talk to him and that it's real important." Huggy met Starsky's worried eyes. "To tell you the truth, man, I almost said he'd gone back to Minnesota. The last thing Hutch needs is to hook up with that chick again."

"You know it and I know it, but the question is, will Hutch see it that way?" Starsky said, his mind racing. "I don't want her comin' back into Hutch's life right now, Hug," Starsky said vehemently. "He's having a hard time getting past all this—the drugs—his relationship with her. He doesn't need her around to stir it all up again. He's not grounded enough yet to deal with it."

"I dig what you're saying," Huggy said, "but, what can we do about it? Hutch is a big boy and he's gonna make his own choices."

"I know, but..." his voice dropped to a whisper as he saw Hutch working his way back toward them. "Here he comes," he muttered.

"Starsky, I told you, man, it's a sure thing. But you gotta have enough cash to make it worth my while," Huggy improvised.

Starsky looked up as Hutch slid back into the booth. "Did you order my burger?"

"Yeah, I ordered your time bomb," Hutch assured him. "But don't expect me to cover for you in the morning when your stomach's a wreck."

Starsky faked a smile, but couldn't for the life of him think of a snappy comeback. He realized he'd suddenly lost his appetite.



Hutch opened the refrigerator and took out a beer. Despite fatigue from the long workday, he was still keyed up and restless. He thought maybe a beer would relax him,

maybe help him sleep without the onslaught of nightmares that had plagued him the past eight weeks.

Although he seldom experienced the craving for heroin these days, memories of the painful withdrawal and the events leading up to it hadn't receded. Hutch knew from working the streets that a reformed junkie could crave the drug for months, so he supposed he was fortunate that any longing for the mind-numbing euphoria was always quickly doused by his own self-loathing. Still the fear lingered, niggling at the back of his mind that the day may come when he'd be overwhelmed by the yearning, his frailty betraying him again, perhaps costing him his life. Or worse yet, costing Starsky his.

Hutch sat on the side of the bed, his eyes instantly drawn to the shrouded canvas in the corner. He took another swig of beer then walked over to the easel. He stood before the draped painting, hesitant to look at it, but then slowly reached out and peeled away the covering. The familiar outline of a man and a woman loomed before him. The two stood in a warm embrace, her face tilted up toward his. His fingers gently caressed a strand of her long hair on her cheek. The faces were blank, but he could see them clearly.



It had begun as a surprise for Jeanie—a portrait of the two of them for her birthday. Now, as he studied the woman's blank face, his mind's eye saw not love, but disappointment and pity. He had failed her completely. She had counted on him to *protect* her from Forest, but instead, he'd served her up like a cheap offering when the agony of withdrawal had gnawed away his last shred of self-respect. *What kind of man exchanged a woman's freedom for a fix?*

And now she was gone. He wasn't sure if what he had felt for her was love, or only passion. Now there would be no opportunity to find out. But he did know he had betrayed someone who trusted him and counted on him. To a man like Hutch, that was the ultimate transgression.

One thought ate at him like a cancer. *What if it had been Starsky they wanted? Would he have betrayed his partner like he had Jeanie?* In the days since he'd returned to work, Hutch had been consumed by the fear that he'd fail Starsky, too. He knew that a street cop who couldn't count on his partner had nothing.

Hutch studied the portrait, then plucked a brush from a jar on the small table beside the easel. He stared at the figures, remembering how Jeanie's body had felt against his, her soft curves, her warm breath caressing his cheek. For a fleeting moment, he imagined he saw passion in her eyes. But the image vanished quickly, replaced once again by hurt and recrimination. Hutch quietly dropped the brush back into the jar of mineral spirits, covered the painting, and retreated to his bed to face another sleepless night.

Hutch was already busy returning yesterday’s phone messages when Starsky came in bleary-eyed and cranky from too little sleep. He’d tossed and turned most of the night. Not from the greasy burger and fries, but from his vivid imagination fabricating scenarios of Jeanie waiting at Hutch’s apartment, and his partner’s reaction to the surprise visit.

“You look terrific this morning,” Hutch said, tongue-in-cheek. “I don’t suppose you could use an Alka-Seltzer?”

“My stomach’s fine, thank you very much,” Starsky came back good-naturedly, glad to see a spark of humor in Hutch’s expression.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Hutch retorted. “So what’s your problem?”

“No problem,” Starsky said, stifling a yawn. “Just had a restless night.” He squinted one eye at Hutch and asked, “How about you?”

“Actually, I slept like a baby,” Hutch lied, picking up his jacket from the chair back. “We’ve got a lead on Bobbie. Let’s go.”

Starsky stopped midway to the coffeepot and turned to follow Hutch from the squadroom. “Hey, wait up! A lead? From who?”



The two men clattered down the stairs to the parking garage. “This may come as a big surprise,” Hutch answered, “but we got a call from your pal, Mickey.”

Starsky slid behind the wheel and started the engine before answering. “Yeah? Guess that’s his way of tryin’ to get back in our good graces. Well, it’s gonna take more than a couple’a hot tips for me not to wanna wring that turkey’s neck every time I see him,” Starsky said heatedly.

“You know what your problem is Starsky?” Hutch said, pushing his shades back up on his nose. “You’re losing sight of the fact that Mickey’s really no different than most of the other people we have to depend on day in and day out. You said it yourself. ‘We work in a toilet.’ You need to lighten up—go with the flow. No pun intended,” he added.

Starsky shot him a cryptic glance. “My, my, aren’t we philosophical this morning?”

“Come on, Starsk,” Hutch said. “I have more reasons not to want to deal with Mickey than you do, but I realize without scum like him, we can’t do our jobs.”

Starsky smiled, tilted his head slightly, conceding the point. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” he said. “Besides, what about me? I’m a fine, upstanding citizen, and you couldn’t get the job done without me, now could ya?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just drive, will you?”

Starsky caught the twitch in Hutch’s lips before looking back at the road. “Fine. But do you mind tellin’ me where we’re goin’?”



Starsky pulled the Torino up in front of the dilapidated mission house, and the two cops hopped out and went inside. Clara Hiberton was a stout, sixty-four-year-old black woman with a face like a weathered fisherman. She’d done her share of drugs, turned tricks, and even spent a little time in jail for passing bad checks. But all that was behind her. Now, she was an enthusiastic born-again Christian who ran a mission in an old storefront at Parkview and Jefferson.

It wasn’t much, but Clara was committed to trying to make up for her misspent youth. Since she had little education, and even less money, her efforts were small-scale but earnest. Starsky and Hutch hadn’t crossed paths with the woman before, but had heard good things about her through Huggy and a few of the street people she’d helped along the way. Mickey’s tip had landed them at Clara’s door.

When they walked in, the woman looked up from where she was scrubbing down the planked tabletops. “Can I help you?” she asked. Her friendly but gravelly voice matched her craggy face. Twenty-eight years of California living still hadn’t completely eradicated the southern Alabama accent that peppered her speech.

“Clara Hiberton?” Hutch asked, taking out his badge and extending it for her to examine.

“One and the same. But I ain’t had no business with the po-lice in a good many years now. You sure you got the right name?”

“Yes, ma’m, you’re the one,” Hutch said. “I’m Detective Hutchinson, and this is my partner, Detective Starsky.”



Clara's full lips blossomed into a friendly smile. "I heard about you boys. Brother Bear said you fellas are okay—for cops, that is," she added humorously.

"We're looking for someone, Mrs. Hiberton," Starsky said, smiling warmly. "Mickey said maybe you could help us."

Sizing him up, she said, "Well, now, Detective Starsky, ya'll can call me Clara." Then she added disapprovingly, "But, if I was you, I wouldn't be braggin' about knowin' Mickey. He ain't got a lot of friends around here."

She walked around the table and wiped her dishwater-rough hands on the front of the red-flowered apron spanning her ample hips. "I'm always glad to cooperate with the po-lice, as long as it don't hurt the folks that comes here for help. They'll stop coming if they think people's gonna give 'em a hard time."

"We're not here to arrest anyone. We just want to help," Starsky reassured her.

"That's right," Hutch added. "A girl. We have reason to believe she has a drug problem and may be in pretty bad shape right now."

"Lordy!" Clara chuckled. "Son, you done described about half the folks that come through here on any given day."

"Yeah, but I think you'd remember this one," Starsky said. "She's young—maybe thirteen or fourteen. Tall, and skinny as a beanpole. Her name is Bobbie."

"Mmm—mmm—mmm," Clara said, shaking her head sadly. "I knows that one, all right. She been kicked by the horse. I seen 'em hooked worse, but not too many young as her. I been trying to talk to her about getting her life right with the Lord, but she ain't havin' none of it. I got to be careful, or she'll turn tail and run out of here and never come back. Somebody's hurt that child, and now she don't trust nobody. What you want with her?"

"We're hoping to get her into rehab," Hutch said honestly.

"Can't force her," Clara said. "And if you try, she'll disappear back onto them streets. Right now, least she comes here for a hot meal and, sometimes, a place to sleep. Been comin' around here now about three months."

"We don't want to scare her off," Starsky said, "but we picked up her dealer last night and we're afraid she may be hurting pretty bad by now. If we could find her, get her some help..." His voice trailed off as the old woman pinned them both with a skeptical look, doubting their ability to accomplish what she and the Lord hadn't so far.

Reaching into his pocket, Hutch pulled out a small notebook, scratched a phone number on a scrap of paper, and handed it to her. "Look, if she comes in tonight, give us a call."

Clara's eyes met his. She saw something there that touched her heart. Pain. She'd known enough of it in her life to recognize pain when she saw it in another's eyes.

"Please," he added.

"We promise, she'll never know it was you who tipped us off," Starsky said. "We'll just show up—say we were checking all the shelters."

Clara pursed her generous lips and considered their words. She was a pretty good judge of character. If she had to bet on it, she'd take odds that these two were playing straight with her. Who knows, maybe they *could* help the kid. If someone had taken this much interest in *her* when she was Bobbie's age, maybe it wouldn't have taken her sixty-odd years to straighten out her life.

"Okay," she said, nodding. "Okay. If the child comes in, I'll call you. But I can't keep her here if she tries to leave. I don't want her to know I'm helping you, or she won't ever come back." A shadow passed over her face. "I really believe she got nowhere else to go."

Hutch let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Miss Hiberton. You have our word."

The old woman smiled again, comfortable she was doing what was best for the girl. "Clara, Detective. Call me Clara."

She chuckled boisterously as Starsky gave her a flirty wink and they strode out the door.



The rest of the day was taken up with routine calls, giving Starsky and Hutch an opportunity to cruise the less traveled alleys and streets of their beat on the lookout for the missing girl. Starsky waited all day for Hutch to tell him Jeanie had called or come by the night before, but when Hutch said nothing, he considered broaching the subject himself.

Since the kidnapping, Hutch seemed to close up whenever Starsky tried to talk about what had happened. Today, he was a little more upbeat, and Starsky hesitated to spoil the mood. He hoped that Jeanie had had second thoughts and decided not to visit Hutch. Maybe this time she was gone for good.

When they returned to the squadroom at the end of their shift, Starsky found a folded note on his desk, with his name scribbled on the front in Dobey's bold handwriting. He opened it and read the brief missive before quietly slipping it into his pocket.

"Want to grab a bite before going home?" Hutch asked.

“I’d like to, but I have to run an errand. I can meet you later at your place, though,” Starsky offered.

“Okay—sure. Say, eight?”

“Yeah, eight’s fine. And after, if you want, we can go back by the mission and check with Clara.”

Hutch nodded. “Good idea. See you later.”

Starsky drove the Torino three blocks to the nearest phone booth. He deposited a dime into the telephone and impatiently waited for an answer on the other end of the line.

“Huggy Bear.”

“Huggy—Starsky. You called?”

“Yeah, Starsky. Listen, I found out where Jeanie’s staying. I don’t know if you really want to get involved, man, but seeing as how you seemed pretty worked up about her being in town, thought I’d pass the phone number on to you.”

So she hadn’t left town, after all. Starsky’s brow beetled momentarily as he considered the possible consequences of butting into Hutch’s personal affairs.

Digging a pen out of his jacket, he answered, “Yeah, sure. Give it to me.” As Huggy recited the number, Starsky scratched it out in the margin of a Yellow Page and tore the sheet from the dog-eared phone book.

“Thanks, Huggy,” he said and hung up the phone.

Starsky reached for another dime, dropped it into the coin slot, and began punching in the numbers. After only one ring, he slammed the phone back onto the receiver. *Was this a mistake? Did he have the right to intervene?* He stood in the phone booth for several minutes, oblivious to the traffic noises around him, struggling to come to terms with what he was about to do.

Hutch was his best friend, but there were some decisions a man had a right to make on his own. On the other hand, if you knew someone you cared about was about to be hurt, didn’t you have an obligation to do whatever you could to prevent it from happening? Starsky vacillated a moment longer, then, for better or worse, made his decision.



Hutch had just removed his shoes and sprawled out on the sofa in front of the TV when he heard a knock on the door.

“Damn,” he mumbled. “What now?” He wasn’t expecting Starsky for another hour. Not bothering to put his shoes back on, he padded to the door barefoot and opened it. “What are you doing here?” he said with surprise.



“I thought we were gonna grab a bite to eat,” Starsky answered innocently.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t expecting you until eight.”

Hutch returned to the sofa and Starsky followed, explaining as they went.

“Well, I finished my errand. And...well I need to talk to you, so I thought I’d just come on over.” He

took a seat in the large round-back bamboo chair near the sofa.

Hutch knew from his serious demeanor that something was up. “Okay,” he said, “talk.”

Starsky leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees, hands nervously clasped before him. “Have you heard from Jeanie?” he asked point-blank.

Hutch didn’t know what he’d expected, but certainly not this. “Jeanie? No, of course not. Why would you ask me that?” His heartbeat quickened as a disturbing thought sprang to mind. “Has something happened to her? Do you know something I don’t?”

“Relax,” Starsky said, hurrying to put Hutch’s mind at ease. “All I know is that she’s in town and was asking around about you yesterday.”

Hutch studied his partner’s face, knowing there was more to the story. Starsky seemed too edgy.

“You talked to her?”

“No. But I thought about it,” Starsky answered honestly.

“If you’ve known since yesterday that she was here, why are you just now telling me?” Hutch questioned.

“To be honest, I was trying to decide whether to ask her not to contact you.”

“What?” Perplexed by such a notion, Hutch asked, “Why would you do something like that?”

“Maybe it’s none of my business,” Starsky explained, “but I’ve been thinking that it might be best if she put off seeing you for a while. I mean, you seem so...down about what happened. I just think maybe you need more time to sort things out.”

Resentment blazed in Hutch’s eyes. All the self-doubt and anger that had been building inside him these past weeks suddenly welled to the surface. “*You* think? Who gave you the right to make a decision like that for me?” he spewed.

“I’m not trying to make decisions for you,” Starsky argued. “I’m just tellin’ you what I think. You haven’t exactly been easy to be around lately, and I believe seeing Jeanie again will only make it worse.”

“So now you’re a psychiatrist?” Hutch said, challenging Starsky’s assertion. “What qualifies you to come up with an utterly *absurd* idea like that?”

Starsky stood up and loomed over him. “I don’t know what you’re getting so sore about!”

“Sore?! I’ll tell you why I’m *sore*,” Hutch said, also rising to his feet. “I’m tired of you butting into my life, okay?” he blurted out. “Ever since I came back to work, you’ve been looking over my shoulder like you think I’m going to lose it!”



Now fuming himself, Starsky roared back angrily, “I guess it hasn’t occurred to you that I might be tired of making excuses for you every time you bite off someone’s head for asking you a simple question! Or coverin’ for you with Dobey every time you oversleep when you’ve been up all night because of those nightmares you refuse to talk about!”

Hutch’s jaw tightened and he jabbed the air with an accusatory finger. “That’s just the type of thing I’m talking about, Starsky! Who the hell asked you to make excuses for me?”

“What do you expect me to do? Tell ’em the truth?”

“I don’t expect you to tell them anything! You’re not my keeper!” Hutch shouted. “At least you’re right about one thing—this really *isn’t* any of your business!”

Realizing things were getting out of hand, Starsky took a deep breath and started over. “Hold it. Hold it right there. Can’t we just talk about this?”

But rage still boiled in Hutch, spurring him on.

“This may come as a surprise to you, but I don’t *need* to talk everything over with you!” His voice rising, he added, “It’s like you don’t think I’m capable of doing anything without your stamp of approval.”

“That’s not how it is, Hutch. I just think you need a little help right now,” Starsky said, still trying to reason with him.

Unconvinced, Hutch flinched away when Starsky reached out a hand to touch his shoulder.

“I saw what those drugs did to you,” Starsky continued. “—what your guilt over Jeanie is *still* doing to you!”

“So—what? Now I’m less of a man than you? I’ve got a news flash for you, buddy,” Hutch added bitterly. “What you did for me in that room above Huggy’s doesn’t give you the right to run my life!”

Starsky’s head jerked back as though physically struck by the words, the anger in his eyes coalescing to hurt.

There seemed nothing more to say. Considering for the first time that Hutch actually resented his attempts to protect him, Starsky answered in a wintry, unwavering voice, “Yeah. Maybe you’re right. You don’t need my help—you don’t need anybody. I guess you’ve got it all under control.”

Hiding the pain in his heart under the guise of anger, Starsky turned away quickly and walked to the door.



The steam that had fueled Hutch’s tirade evaporated. He knew he should apologize, but the words froze in his throat.

Without looking back, Starsky opened the door and said over his shoulder. “Look...I’m pretty wiped out. I don’t think I’m up to dinner, after all. See you at work tomorrow.”

The door closed behind him with a quiet click of the lock, and he was gone.



Long after Starsky had stormed out of the bungalow, Hutch lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. No nightmares tonight. He had to fall asleep in order to dream.

He closed his eyes and visualized the hurt in Starsky's eyes when he'd lashed out at him hours earlier. Just one more thing he'd screwed up. Lately, his entire life seemed a series of bad choices. He turned over and looked at the clock. Past midnight—too late to call and apologize. He wasn't even sure what he'd say if he did call.

Hutch was still irritated that Starsky had considered interfering in his relationship with Jeanie, but had the tables been turned, he realized he would probably have considered the same course of action. They'd always been protective of one another, but since the kidnapping and his addiction to heroin, his partner had become almost obsessive about watching over him.

It all boiled down to one thing—if Starsky didn't think he was strong enough face Jeanie, how could he possibly believe Hutch capable of making the life-or-death decisions they faced on the streets daily?

Restless, Hutch sat up in bed. That was it. That's what had made him so angry. His feeling that Starsky no longer saw him as an equal—a partner he could count on to carry his own weight. In the past, when Starsky had put in his two cents about any woman with whom he was involved, Hutch had taken it in stride. Tonight, he'd flown into a rage because Starsky's interference seemed to confirm his own belief that he'd lost his edge—was incapable of thinking for himself and making sound decisions.



Hutch ran a tired hand over his face. *Damn! Would his life ever get back to normal?* Tomorrow, he would talk to Starsky, try to sort it all out. Maybe he'd jumped to conclusions, misinterpreted Starsky's motives. In any case, Hutch knew he'd acted like a jerk.

Starsky's words rang in his ears: *"Yeah. Maybe you're right. You don't need my help—you don't need anybody."* Not need Starsky? Who was he trying to fool? They weren't only partners, they were best friends. He would always need Starsky. He just hoped and prayed that Starsky still needed him.

Hutch lay back down, his forearm resting over his eyes. Just before the first rays of dawn cast long fingers of light on the windowsill he fell into an exhausted but restless sleep.



Hutch was the first to arrive for work the next morning. Despite little sleep, he'd risen as soon as the alarm clock buzzed, determined to be there when Starsky came in. He

regretted the harsh words between them and knew they had to get things out in the open before the rift could mend. Just as Starsky walked through the door, the telephone rang.

Hutch snatched the phone off the receiver. "Hutchinson," he answered, looking up at Starsky's grim face. Not a trace of emotion showed in the dark blue eyes.

Hutch recognized the distinctive voice and Alabama drawl even before the woman identified herself. "Detective Hutchinson, this is Clara. I'm calling you just like I promised I would."

"I was hoping to hear from you," he said. "Is she there now?" Hutch asked, motioning Starsky toward him. He covered the mouthpiece and whispered, "It's Clara."

"Yeah, she's here. I got her out in the kitchen right now, feeding her a good Southern breakfast. But I don't think she's gonna stick around long."



"We can be there in ten minutes," he said.

"I'll try to stall her," Clara assured him. "But don't expect no miracles."

Starsky, keys still in hand, said, "Let's go. I'll drive."

They hurried down the metal steps to the parking garage, the clanging of Hutch's boot heels the only noise between them. He wanted

to say something, but wasn't sure how to begin.

Sliding behind the wheel, Starsky revved the engine and barely gave Hutch a chance to close his door before they sped out of the garage.

As they rounded the first corner, Hutch looked over at Starsky's solemn profile. "Look, Starsk, about last night...."

"Forget it," Starsky said without taking his eyes from the road.

"I was way out of line," Hutch continued.

Starsky hit the brakes as the traffic signal turned red. "I said forget it. You're right. It was none of my business. We work together, that's all. Doesn't mean we have to be friends."

The light turned green and the Torino squealed through the intersection.

“Damn it, Starsky, don’t say that,” Hutch said, frustrated. He could see that Starsky wasn’t going to make this easy. “Of course we’re friends. We’re more than just friends. You’re more like my brother than my partner. You know that.”

Starsky took another corner too fast, slinging Hutch against the car door. Hutch eyed him quietly, trying to think of another approach. They sped through the streets, the silence hanging between them like icicles.

Finally, Hutch summoned his courage and began again. “Starsk, I don’t know why you won’t at least hear me out.” They skidded to an abrupt stop in front of the mission.



“Look, I don’t wanna talk about it,” Starsky said, shutting off the engine. “We’ve got a job to do. Let’s just do it and keep our personal lives out of it, okay?” The set of his jaw made it clear the discussion was over.

Hutch held up his hands. “Fine...okay...we’ll talk later—”

“Like I said,” Starsky interrupted. “I don’t see that there’s anything to talk about.” Determined dark blue eyes bore into Hutch’s lighter ones. Starsky bailed out of the car and was around the front and onto the sidewalk before Hutch had time to open his door. Having no other choice, Hutch followed him into the mission hall. Clara waited near the door, watching for them.

“She’s still in the kitchen. Good thing she was real hungry. From the way she’s been putting those sausages away, I don’t think she had anything to eat yesterday.”

“What kind of shape is she in?” Starsky asked.

“She didn’t show up here last night, and I can tell, she done found herself another candy man. She ain’t got the shakes this morning.”

“Thanks, Clara,” Hutch said. “We’ll take it from here.”

“Don’t forget. You’re not gonna tell her I called, right?” she reminded them anxiously.

“No way,” Starsky assured her. “As far as she knows, we’re checking all the missions and flop houses.”

Clara gave them a satisfied smile and stepped aside, allowing them to pass. “God bless you, honey. I sure hopes you can help that child.”

Bobbie sat with her back to the door, a mass of tangled, dirty brown curls clinging to her shoulders like a ragged net. Bony arms protruded from the sleeveless blouse two sizes too large. It hung down over dirt-slicked jeans that were cut off above the knees. Diametrically opposite from the oversized shirt, the jeans molded to her tiny form like a diver’s wetsuit.

“Bobbie?”

At the sound of Hutch’s voice, the girl jumped to her feet and whirled to face them.

“You!” she exclaimed, her startled eyes searching the room for an exit that didn’t require running past them. “I didn’t do anything! Why are hassling me?”

Hutch held his hands up and said soothingly, “Just hold on. We’re not here to hassle you, Bobbie. But we *have* been looking for you.”

“I don’t know anything. Just leave me alone!” she said, dashing to the left, trying to make an end run around Starsky. He reached out and scooped her up into his arms and held on as she kicked and wiggled to free herself.

“Let me go, pig!”

The skinny arms flailed, and Starsky dodged her bony fist by a hair’s breath.

“Now, is that any way to talk to your friendly neighborhood police officer?” he said, causing Hutch’s eyes to roll toward the ceiling.

“That’s right, Starsk. Charm her,” he said.

“Let me go!” she screamed, loud enough that Clara came running into the kitchen.

“What on earth is all the hollering about?”

“Miss Clara! Tell him to let me go!” Bobbie screamed.

“Okay! Calm down!” Starsky said, artfully dodging her swings. “If you promise you won’t try to kill me, I’ll let you go.” She continued flapping her arms like a bird trying to take flight.

“At least listen to the man, Bobbie,” Clara urged her. “I don’t see as how you got much choice. They’re both bigger than you.”

“You ratted me out!” the girl accused Clara.

“We’ve been checking all the missions,” Hutch said quickly. “We knew we’d luck out and find you eventually. Miss Clara had nothing to do with it,” he said, covering for the woman.

Clara shot Hutch a grateful look, relieved he’d kept his promise to her.

The girl made one last unsuccessful attempt to break free, then relaxed in Starsky’s arms. She turned a pixie-shaped, dirt-smudged face up at him and smiled beguilingly.

“I bet I know what you want, cowboy. You wanna party, don’t you? Well, you guys don’t have to rough a girl up for that.”

The sudden change in her threw Starsky off-guard. One moment he’d been wrestling with a skinny homeless waif, the next, he was being propositioned by one of Barrows’ teenage prostitutes.

Starsky looked over her head at Hutch, silently pleading for him to say something.

Hutch’s eyes went soft with pity and he shook his head. “No, Bobbie, you’ve got it all wrong. Starsky and I just want to talk with you about your problem.”

“I don’t have a problem,” she said defiantly, “except two cops who keep following me around, giving me a hard time.”



Starsky grabbed her elbow and commandeered her back to the wooden table and chairs and roughly set her down. “How about you just sit there and listen to the man, huh? The tough chick act isn’t gonna get you anywhere with us.”

She sniffed indignantly and eyed them both suspiciously. Finally, seeing no other recourse, she said, “I’m all ears. Say what you gotta say. I

got places to be and important stuff to do.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you do,” Hutch said without a trace of humor. Both detectives took chairs, flanking her on either side. Seeing the situation diffused, Clara discreetly slipped from the kitchen.

Bobbie glared at each man in turn, then leaned back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, a look of resignation fixed on her young face.

“How old are you, kid?” Starsky asked.

“Old enough to know a couple of Johns who are too chicken to ask for it,” she shot back.

“Enough of the smart mouth,” Starsky said. “How about a straight answer? Thirteen? Fourteen?”

She glowered at him, refusing to answer.

Rubbing his chin, Starsky looked her up and down. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll assume you’re only twelve then. I mean, you’re built like a twelve-year-old boy,” he added, purposely baiting her.

Anger flashed in the dark brown eyes. “I’ll have you know I’m fifteen, and a lot of men like *slender* women! So there!”

Knowing what Starsky was up to, Hutch’s lips twitched with amusement. Even the heated exchange between the partners the night before hadn’t spoiled their ability to read one another’s signals. Assuming his good-cop role, Hutch interjected, “I’m sure my partner didn’t mean to insult you. It’s just...well, you are a little undernourished.”

“I eat just fine,” she snapped back. “How about you two just tell me why I’m being held prisoner. Am I under arrest or something?”

“No,” Hutch said. “You aren’t under arrest. Although, you did just proposition a police officer, so we could run you in for prostitution.”

At this, fear crept into her defiant eyes. “I didn’t mean that,” she said. “I was just trying to make him back off.”

“Bobbie, we just want to get you some help,” Hutch said sincerely. “You’re too young to be hooked on drugs and turning tricks on the street to survive.”

“Who are you to judge me?” she said angrily. “You’ve got everything! Look at your clothes, at that car the two of you hotshots breeze around in. You think ’cause you have a badge that makes you better than me. There’s nothing wrong with a girl looking for a few kicks to help her forget her troubles.”

Starsky leaned his elbow on the table, his chin resting in his palm. “The point is, you could kill yourself. If some guy doesn’t beat you to death in an alley, you might OD on some bad smack. Do you really wanna end up like that?”

Before she could answer, Hutch said, “We’re offering to take you somewhere to dry out, find you a nice foster home, maybe get you back into school.”

She laughed cynically. “A foster home? How the hell do you think I got on the streets in the first place? When Social Services took me away from my old lady, they put me in a foster home. That was three years ago. My ‘foster father’ considered me his own private little play toy. It was loads of fun, waiting for him to creep into my bedroom every night after his old lady went to sleep.” Hot tears welled in her eyes, and she struggled to keep them from overflowing.

Hutch swallowed, fighting back the bile that was beginning to pool in his throat. “Did you tell anyone?”

“Yeah, right,” she snorted. “Like who? You think his old lady was gonna take my word over his? When I told him I didn’t like it—I mean I was only twelve—he made me snort a little coke to take off the edge. At first I liked it, but after a while, it didn’t have that much effect.”

Starsky watched Hutch’s face, realizing the girl’s words were cutting him like a knife. Hutch, of all people, knew what it was like to be forced into a drug stupor and have no control over what was happening to him. Starsky could almost read his friend’s thoughts, feel his anguish.

“There ain’t no way I’m going back to that,” she said resolutely. “I got friends here who take care of me.”

“You mean like Keno and Dickie Barrows?” Hutch said.

“Keno won’t even talk to me now—thanks to you!” she spat. “But I’ve got my connections. I don’t need no help from no cops. Besides, I like my life just fine the way it is.”

“What’s not to like?” Starsky said derisively. “I mean, look around you. What fifteen-year-old wouldn’t want to trade high school proms and football games for heroin and sweaty, drunken Johns? You really have it made here, don’t ya, kid?”

“Screw you!” she said, shooting to her feet. “Like I said, I don’t want you butting into my life! I don’t need you, I don’t need anybody!”

The color drained from Hutch’s face, remembering only hours ago saying almost those exact words to Starsky.

Hutch stood up, reached into his wallet, and took out a twenty and a scrap of paper with his phone number written on it. Leaning over, he quickly stuffed both items into the pocket of her shirt.

“If you change your mind, call me. I’ll come—any time of the day or night.”

She looked at him warily. “That’s it? We’re through?”

“For now,” he said, nodding at her. “You may not believe me, but I do know how you feel. All that either of us wants is to help you. Drugs aren’t the answer, Bobbie. They’ll eventually destroy you and any future you may have.”

He sounded sincere, not at all what she expected. She looked at them, puzzled why two cops would care about a runaway. For a moment, she considered going with them, but soul-shattering memories of other promises—those of her foster father, her pimp, her dealers, all the men she’d trusted during her short lifetime—brought her back to cold reality. *There’s always a catch.* There had to be an angle; she just hadn’t figured it out yet. Her chin came up, her eyes hardening.



“Remember—you can call me,” Hutch said, reading the changing expressions on her face, knowing that her decision was made.

“Sure,” she said, patting the twenty that lay against her breast in the pocket of the shirt. “I’ll keep that in mind.” And then she was gone.

As the door swung closed behind the girl,

Hutch looked up, his troubled eyes seeking Starsky’s. They’d failed again to reel her in. Who knew when there’d be another opportunity?

“Are we doing the right thing?”

Starsky shrugged. “Your call. You don’t need my advice.”

Hutch ran a hand over his face. “Dammit, Starsky, don’t give me that. I want to get her off the streets permanently. That’s not going to happen as long as she’s hooked. I’m asking what you think we should do.”

Holding the door open for Hutch to pass through, Starsky considered for a moment, then answered, “Okay. Why don’t we ask around, see where she’s getting her stuff now that Keno’s not dealing to her?”

“I guess it’s a start,” Hutch said. “Problem is, you cut one pipeline, another opens up.”

“Yeah,” Starsky conceded. “Well, if I come up with a better plan, you’ll be the first to know.”

The two of them returned to the car, steeped in private thoughts about the tragic young runaway with nowhere to run.



The day passed slowly with little conversation between the two men. Hutch tried one more time to broach the subject of their argument, only to be cut off again by Starsky. It was clear that this time, comments made in the heat of the moment weren’t going to be so easily forgotten. Eventually, Hutch came to the conclusion he’d be smart to drop it for a while, give Starsky time to lick his wounds. Starsky spoke when spoken to, made the right responses, as polite as he would have been with a complete stranger. Hutch remembered once reading in a paperback novel the phrase, “tension so thick you could cut it with a knife.” He thought that about summed up the atmosphere in the car.



Between routine calls and a trip to the station for a briefing on a young gang member found knifed in an alley the night before, Starsky stopped at a take-out joint where they gobbled down burgers, greasy fries, and milkshakes. Although Hutch normally balked at such a meal, today he thought better of making an issue of something so trivial. He was determined to avoid anything that might make things any uneasier between them than they already were.



Bobbie paced the street nervously, beginning to feel the chills come on. She knew they had nothing to do with the warm, seventy-eight-degree California night. Over the baggy shirt, she wore a raggedy men’s sweater, the elbows eaten away by moths, only one battered white button clinging to the misshapen neckline. She’d found the smelly, long-discarded gray wool garment in a trash bin four doors down from Clara’s. Not exactly

the kind of thing Dickie liked to see his girls wear, but then, Dickie wasn't having chills from not having a fix in over eleven hours, she thought rebelliously.

A thousand tiny imaginary ants swarmed over every inch of her body as the withdrawal began to work its torture on her nervous system. This was the part she never remembered when she was coasting on horse. Her teeth chattered and her muscles cramped, drawing at odd angles, twisting her insides. Beneath the glare of the streetlight, she was certain she could see the hair on her legs rising. She turned her eyes away, dreading the next trick her eyes would play on her. What strange apparition would rise up to threaten her if she didn't get a fix soon?

"Hey, baby, whatchu doin' out here all alone?" said a voice.

Bobbie whirled around, almost afraid to look, but desperate for relief and hoping the voice would be her savior.

"I need help. Can you help me? I need a fix. Just a nickel bag'll do. I'll do anything for it," she babbled desperately. The twenty Hutch had given her long gone, she offered, "I can be a lot of fun. Just get me some junk and we'll party, okay?"

The man's lip curled in disgust. "You done strung out, baby. I don't want no strung out chick." He turned his back on her and strode down the sidewalk into the darkness, leaving her to stare after his retreating figure.

Bobbie sank to the curb, her balled fists pressed to her waist, trying to push away the pain that tore through her guts. She bent forward and retched, the end result being dry heaves. The contents of her stomach having long emptied, there was nothing left but the bitter taste of bile in her throat.

What would she do? She had been in withdrawal before, but never this long. She had begged Dickie for some drugs, but he'd scoffed at her, reminding her she hadn't "met her quota" for the week, and thus, hadn't "earned" it. And to make matters worse, he was still incensed that she'd been there when Keno was busted. He had slapped her around the next day when she'd foolishly told him about her encounter with the two cops. When she described them to Dickie, he'd become enraged.

"You stupid little bitch!" he had shouted. "That was Starsky and Hutch! You don't mess around with those dudes! I swear, baby, if you bring them down on me, I'll kill you!"

To emphasize the point, he had backhanded her across the face, sending her sprawling to the floor. "Now get the hell outta my sight. I don't wanna see you around here again until you have some bread for me. Got it?"

She rocked back and forth, her face resting against her updrawn knees. People passed by on the street without as much as a second glance. One more runaway. *Who cared? Nobody*, she thought. *Nobody except maybe Clara, or those two cops.* Through a haze of

pain, she remembered their offer to help. Bobbie slipped a trembling hand into her pocket and withdrew the scrap of paper with Hutch's and Starsky's phone numbers scrawled on it.

They won't give me what I need. They're cops, she reasoned through a veil of nausea and pain. But they *had* said they'd help her. And there was something about the blond one...something that made her think he understood.

Rising on shaky legs, she hurried down the block to the nearest phone booth, then looked to see if anyone was watching before slipping off her dirty sneaker to retrieve the dime she kept taped beneath the tongue on the left shoe. Her *security* dime, Clara had called it when she'd pressed it into Bobbie's palm with a conspiratorial wink.

"A girl working the streets always needs a way to call for help," she had said. "You just hide this dime in your shoe, girl. Listen to what Clara's tellin' you, now. This dime could save your silly life someday."

It was only a dime, but the smooth, cool piece of silver hidden away in the shoe had given Bobbie an unfathomable feeling of security. This was the first time in the three months since taping it to her shoe that the girl had considered using it. Another spasm of pain ripped through her belly, and she quickly deposited the coin and dialed Detective Hutchinson's number.



Hutch rolled over and answered the phone on the second ring. He'd barely been asleep, just hovering on the edge of consciousness.

"H'lo," he mumbled, without lifting his head from the pillow.

For a heartbeat, he thought no one was there. "Hello?" he repeated, this time with a note of irritability. Sleep came to him in such small doses these days, he had little patience with practical jokers and prank calls.

"D-D-Detective Hutchinson? This...this is Bobbie."

Hutch sprang from the bed and was on his feet in an instant, shedding all vestiges of sleep in one fluid movement.

"Yes, this is Hutch. What is it, Bobbie? Are you okay?"

On the other end of the line, the girl whimpered, but didn't answer him.

"Bobbie, what's wrong?" Hutch felt his heart thumping against his ribs.

"You...you said to call you if I needed...if I needed help. I can't...I can't stand this no more. Nobody'll give me a fix, and my stomach's on fire! And I can't quit puking!"

"It's okay," he said soothingly, stretching the phone cord to reach for his jeans carelessly thrown across the foot of the bed. "Tell me where you are. I'll come get you."

"Will you bring me something? I mean, I could tell you wanted to help me. And...and with you being a cop and all, you must know where to get some stuff."

"Bobbie, listen to me," Hutch said, shrugging into his shirt while maneuvering the phone from one shoulder to the other. "There are other ways I can help you. There's medicine they can give you—"

"No!" she sobbed. "I need a fix! Are you gonna help me or not? You said...you said you would!"

"Don't go anywhere," he pleaded. "I can be there in a few minutes. Just tell me where. I promise, I'll help you."

Bobbie sniffed pitifully, wiping her tears away with the back of her trembling hand. "I'm...I'm at Wilshire and Gordon. A...a phone booth near the Red Cactus."

"I know the place," Hutch said in a calm voice, envisioning the rundown adult bookstore. "Just promise me you'll wait there."

"You'll hurry, won't you? And you won't arrest me?"

"I won't arrest you. You have my word."

"I'll...I'll wait. But you better hurry!"

Hutch quickly finished dressing, then slipped on his holster and gun, concealing it beneath a light jacket. As he reached the door, he turned and looked at the phone, thinking maybe he should call Starsky. Things between them earlier that day had been strained, at best. If he took off on this rescue mission without his partner's knowledge, wouldn't he be reinforcing his thoughtless comments about not needing Starsky's help? His attempts to apologize had fallen on deaf ears. Maybe his actions would speak louder.

It took five rings for Starsky to answer. Once he did, Hutch gave him a quick rundown. "Just wanted to let you know she's asked for help and I'm going to her. I'm picking her up at Wilshire and Gordon."

Risking another angry rejection, Starsky said without reservation, "I'll meet you there."

Hutch smiled to himself. "Thanks, but no point in both of us going, Starsk. I'm taking her to Clara's to get her off the street, then I'll call Dr. Cleeson over at the rehab center and see if they can admit her tonight. I understand there's a waiting list to get in, but I think Cleeson will cooperate."

"Cleeson's a good man," Starsky said, stifling a yawn.

"Yeah, and he's been pretty successful using methadone therapy to ease some really hardcore users through withdrawal. Since he owes us one, I think he'll take her in." Hutch paused, then added, "Bobbie doesn't have anything to hide, so there's no reason for her not to go the easier route."

Starsky was quiet for a moment, knowing Hutch was comparing his own situation to that of the girl. "Good plan," Starsky said, lying back on the pillow. "But call me if you need any help, okay?"

"There's really nothing for you to do, but thanks, just the same," Hutch said. "Hopefully, I'll have her admitted to the center before tomorrow morning. If I'm late, just cover with Dobby for me."

"Right," Starsky said. Then, "Hutch?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for calling."

"Yeah." Hutch hung up, satisfied he'd taken the first step in mending the rift between them.



Starsky dropped the phone back onto the receiver and lay there for a moment, mulling over his conversation with Hutch. Although his partner had insisted he didn't need help, Starsky was encouraged by the fact that Hutch had called and let him know his plan.

In retrospect, he realized maybe he'd overreacted last night. After all, Hutch was still going through a rough time, and his emotions were running high. The last thing he needed was his best friend acting like a spoiled kid whose feelings were hurt.

Starsky threw back the sheet and slipped into his jeans and shirt. It couldn't hurt to cover Hutch's back. Sure, it wasn't necessary, but showing up would prove to Hutch there were no hard feelings.



Bobbie sat on the curb, her head hung dejectedly between her knees. The waves of nausea were coming closer together now, and her legs didn't seem to want to hold her weight anymore.

"There you are," a voice came from the dark behind her.

Expecting Detective Hutchinson, Bobbie turned and looked up, a grateful smile on her face. "I didn't think you would get here so qui—" Her voice died in her throat as her eyes came to rest on Dickie Barrows' angry face.

At 5'5", weighing only 152 pounds, Barrows was a scrawny man by anyone's standards. A pocked face and ferret-like eyes did nothing to improve his sleazy appearance. The unwanted child of a prostitute, Dickie had never known kindness from his mother. And as an adult, he repaid every slight and every slap she had dealt him by wielding a cruel dominion over the stable of young hookers he had gathered from the city streets filled with frightened, hungry runaways.

Plunging his hand into the mass of Bobbie's unkempt hair, Dickie yanked the girl to her feet. As he drew her close to his face, he brought a switchblade up and pinioned it just below her chin.

"You're disgusting!" he spat. "I told you to get busy and bring me your quota for this week. Instead, I find you sitting here looking like a piece of garbage thrown on the curb."

"I'm...sick, Dickie. I c-can't work like this," she stuttered. Her eyes darted right and left, and she prayed the cop wouldn't show up now. If Dickie found out she'd called Hutch, he really would kill her.



"I told you—bring me the money and I'll give you the stuff you need. Don't I always take care of you, baby, when you do what you're told?"

"But nobody...nobody wants to...when...when I'm like this." Her teeth chattered, making it difficult to speak in full sentences.

"Let her go, Barrows," Hutch said walking toward them.

The pimp spun around, holding Bobbie in front of him. With the sudden movement, the knife, still beneath her chin, nicked the delicate skin, bringing a drop of blood to the surface.

“Hutchinson,” he said, surprised. “What the hell do you want? This is between me and my whore.”

“Let the girl go, Dickie. She’s coming with me.” Hutch’s eyes bore into the other man, pinning him like a wolf sizing up his prey.

“We were just on our way home, weren’t we, Bobbie?” Dickie said, tightening his grip around the girl’s waist.

Afraid to say otherwise, she agreed, “Yeah...that’s...that’s right, Hutch. Dickie was taking me home.” Tears glistened on her cheeks. “Everything...everything’s just fine.”

“Let her go,” Hutch said again. He extended a hand toward the trembling teen. “Come here, Bobbie.”

Sobs began wracking her body as she felt the warm drop of blood slide down the curve of her throat. Why was this happening to her? All she wanted was for this pain to go away and never come back again. Maybe the easy way out would be to let Dickie end it right here and now.

Then she focused on Hutch’s face. The cop’s eyes were like calm pools of blue water. Irrationally, she thought maybe she could just dive into them and disappear from the whole stinking world.

Hutch felt the cold metal of the Magnum nestled against his ribs, but knew drawing his gun could only end in tragedy. Even if Barrows didn’t panic and slit Bobbie’s throat, there was no way Hutch could get off a shot without the possibility of hitting her instead of the pimp.

Barrows started backing away, taking Bobbie with him. To Hutch’s dismay, she didn’t fight him.

Hutch took a step toward them. “Bobbie, he’s not going to hurt you with me standing right here. He knows I’m a cop. Come over here, and I’ll take you somewhere they can help you.”

“Shut up!” Barrows shouted.

Bobbie’s eyes locked onto Hutch’s again. The depth of compassion and strength she saw there was foreign to her, but she found it comforting. In that instant, she knew she had no choice but to trust him.

“Don’t listen to him,” Dickie snarled. “I’ll kill you if you leave now. You owe me! You owe me big time. Who took you in and gave you a bed and a hot meal? Huh? You go with that pig and he’ll throw you in the tank. Is that what you want?”

There was more at stake here than one prostitute. His reputation, his ability to control his girls would be ruined if he let her leave.

Hutch's extended hand loomed before Bobbie like the bridge to another life. He nodded at her, almost imperceptibly, urging her to take that one step to safety. It was all the encouragement she needed.

Bringing her heel down hard on Dickie's foot, Bobbie broke free and dove into Hutch's waiting arms. He pulled her into a protective embrace with his left arm as his right hand went to the Magnum, drawing it so quickly, Barrows didn't realize what was happening.

"Drop the knife and put your hands on your head!" Hutch demanded. Barrows hesitated only seconds, then did as he was told.

In that instant, Hutch felt Bobbie stiffen against his side. Her head jerked back tightly, the whites of her eyes narrowed to tiny slits as her body began to convulse. His attention drawn from the man before him, Hutch never saw the small .38 Special that Barrows had pulled from the belt at the small of his back.



"Huuuutch!" Starsky saw the flare as the bullet exploded from the muzzle of the pistol and knew instinctively that his warning was too late. Hutch's head turned toward Starsky just as the load slammed into the muscle of his left shoulder, inches above Bobbie's head. Whether he dropped to the ground as an act of self-preservation, or from the sheer impact of the bullet, Starsky didn't know. His breath caught and his heart went cold with fear, but training and experience overrode emotion, enabling him to act.

"Police! Drop it!" he shouted. It was the only warning he intended to give. When the gunman turned, the .38 leveled at him, Starsky didn't hesitate. He pulled back on the trigger, striking Barrows in the heart with one deadly shot. Beneath the dim light of the street lamp, he saw the shock on the other man's face before his body went slack. The pistol fell from Barrows' hand, and he dropped like a puppet whose strings had been sheared with one decisive stroke.

Still shaken by fear and rage, Starsky kicked the .38 out of reach, checked Barrows for a pulse, and was on his knees beside Hutch and the girl in seconds. When he reached them, Hutch, conscious but confused, still held Bobbie close to the ground, pinned beneath his injured shoulder.

"Hutch! You okay? Hutch!" Starsky tried to gently turn him over, but Bobbie still clung to Hutch like a life preserver. Hysterical sobs tore from her throat, mingled with babbling pleas to spare her life. Carefully lifting the injured arm, Starsky untangled the girl's limbs from around Hutch and drew her close to his own face.

“Listen to me! Listen to me, Bobbie,” he said sternly. “You’re safe; it’s all over. He can’t hurt you anymore. I need you to calm down so I can help Hutch. Okay?” He jerked her chin up to meet her eyes. He only hoped he looked calmer than he felt. “Can you do that for me? Huh?”

She took a deep breath and nodded, her head bobbing up and down quickly. The tears still streamed down her face and she trembled like a victim of hypothermia—partly from fear, and partly from withdrawal. But regaining a modicum of self-control, she backed away, freeing Starsky to tend to Hutch.

Seeing that Hutch’s shirt and jacket were saturated with blood, Starsky snatched a clean handkerchief from his jeans pocket and pressed it against the wound, before trying again to turn him over. The small scrap of cloth did little to staunch the flow of blood. When Starsky finally rolled him onto his back, Hutch groaned.

“Hutch, can ya hear me, buddy?”

Hutch’s eyes fluttered open slowly. “Starsk?” he muttered, still confused. He blinked a few times then mumbled, incredulous, “He shot me. The little bastard shot me.”

Unable to help himself, Starsky chuckled. “That’s what I admire about you, partner. You’re one hell of a detective. Nothin’ gets past you, huh?”

“Ow!” Hutch complained. A spasm of pain contorted his face and he pulled to the right, seeming to think that by moving he could avoid it. “Did you get him?” he asked, his words slurred and his voice strained with the effort.

“Yeah, I got him,” Starsky confirmed, cradling Hutch’s head on his knees while pressing the now soggy handkerchief against the wound. Even beneath the muted beam of the streetlight, he could see the color fading from Hutch’s face. Concerned about the heavy blood flow, Starsky knew he had to act quickly.

“I’ve got to call an ambulance, okay?”

Hutch reached up and grabbed his sleeve. “Wait! Bobbie...what about Bobbie? She okay?”

“She’s fine. Don’t worry about her. Tough kid,” Starsky reassured him. As he talked, Starsky slipped out of his leather jacket, rolled it into a soft cushion, and gently eased



Hutch's head over to rest on it. He then unbuttoned the faded cotton shirt he wore over his t-shirt and shrugged out of it. Balling up the fabric, he pressed it against the wounded shoulder.

"Bobbie," he said. Turning to find her crouched on the sidewalk behind him, Starsky took the girl's hand and placed it over the makeshift bandage. "Hold this here. Keep it snug," he instructed her.

"Like this?" she asked, concentrating to keep her trembling hand exactly as he had positioned it.

Once Starsky was satisfied she could handle the task, he turned back to Hutch. "I'll be right back," he promised.

"Don't worry. I won't to leave without you," Hutch said humorously.



Starsky turned the key in the lock and opened the door to Hutch's bungalow. Because of his daily trips to care for the plants and pick up the mail, it didn't have the stale smell of a place closed up too long.

"Home, sweet home," he beamed, stepping aside to allow Hutch to enter first.

His shoulder heavily bandaged and his arm in a restrictive sling, Hutch smiled and stepped inside, relieved to see something other than the depressing beige walls of the hospital room he'd stared at relentlessly for the past two days.

He took a deep breath and looked around. "And it's great to be here," he said earnestly.

Starsky hurried ahead of him and cleared the sofa, then grabbed a clean blanket from the closet. "I thought you might like to crash here on the sofa for a while—you know, watch a little TV while I go pick up some groceries."

Hutch eased down onto the comfortable, well-worn couch as Starsky stuffed a cushion behind his back with the finesse of a professionally trained nurse, then expertly arranged another beneath the sling to prop up Hutch's arm.

Giving Starsky a teasing smile, Hutch said, "What's with all the pillows? You been taking nursing lessons from some cute little candy striper?"

"Give me a break, will ya?" Starsky retorted. "I just figured you shouldn't move around any more than necessary for a day or two, okay?"

"Look, I appreciate your going to all this trouble, but I'll be okay, Starsk. The doctor wouldn't have released me if he didn't think so. He knows I live alone."

“Yeah, well,” Starsky hedged. “I kinda told him I’d be sticking around for a few days to make sure you didn’t do anything stupid.” He looked up, challenging Hutch to argue the point. “So don’t pull anything dumb that’ll land you back in the hospital, or he’ll have my head.”

Hutch met his eyes, fully aware that Starsky had volunteered to play nursemaid to break him out of the stifling confinement of a hospital bed. It was a running debate between them, which one detested the places most. Unfortunately, in their line of work, they’d both spent far too much time as patients and in waiting rooms.

Hutch relaxed into the soft cushions, happy to be in familiar surroundings, and grateful to Starsky for making it possible.

“Look, Starsk...I just want to say, I’m sorry about before—”

Starsky interrupted, “There’s nothing to apologize for.” He gave Hutch a crooked smile and added. “Now, before we get all soapy here, I’m going after some grub. Be back in an hour.” He turned on the television and offered the remote control to Hutch. “So you surf the channels, or get some shut-eye, or whatever turns you on, and when I get back, we’ll eat.”

Hutch looked at the remote for a second, then reached past it and gripped Starsky’s forearm instead. Understanding Hutch’s need to make things right, Starsky turned his arm and clasped Hutch’s in the age-old symbolic handshake denoting brotherhood. It was a simple gesture, but he knew it communicated the bond of friendship they shared.

Hutch cleared his throat and said, “I’ll, uh, I’ll be fine. Take your time, okay?”



Unsure how long he’d been sleeping, Hutch sat up and listened. There it was again. Someone knocking at the door. The ride from the hospital must have tired him more than he’d admitted. Looking at his watch, he realized Starsky had only been gone forty-five minutes.

“Just a minute,” he shouted, untangling the blanket from around his knees with his free hand. He snapped off the blaring television on his way to the door. His stomach rumbled, reminding him he hadn’t eaten since early morning, and making him glad Starsky hadn’t wasted two hours perusing the junk-food aisle at the market.

“Forget your key?” he called out.

Hutch opened the door and found himself face to face with Jeanie. She looked exactly as he’d remembered her—beautiful and appealingly vulnerable. Although her long blond

hair was cropped just beneath the chin now, her features were the same. Those eyes that had haunted his dreams...why hadn't he been able to capture them in his painting?

"Hello, Hutch. I...I heard about the shooting. I had to see for myself that you're okay. May I come in?" she asked timidly.

"Oh...I'm sorry," he said, stepping aside for her to enter. "Of course, come in and sit down." He followed her back into the living room area where she sat down on the sofa, and he beside her.

"I'm just a little surprised to see you," he explained.

"Yes, I guess you are," she answered. "Maybe I should have called first. But when Huggy told me last night that you'd been shot, I freaked out because I was afraid I wouldn't get a chance to see you again and make things right. I went to the hospital earlier, but they said you'd been released."

"You saw Huggy last night?"

"Yes," she answered. "Well, I've actually been in town for a while, trying to get up enough courage to come see you." She looked down at her hands and appeared to study them, while she tried to gather her thoughts and recall the speech she'd rehearsed in her mind for the past several days.

"Why would you need courage to see me?" he asked, a little troubled that she felt that way. "Are you afraid I'll do something to hurt you again?" Memories of his own demented voice telling Forest about the beach house, begging for another fix, rose up like gorge in his throat.

"Oh, no!" Her eyes flew to his face. "It's not that. I just wasn't sure you'd *want* to see me. I mean, the way we left things... You said, if we were going to end it, we'd end it there. I figured I might not be welcome here."

Hutch sighed and ran a hand through his hair, suddenly feeling very, very tired. He didn't know what to say. He'd thought about this moment so many times, wished for one more chance to see her, talk to her. Now that it was here, his mind was a jumble of emotions.

"Hutch," she began apprehensively. "I've missed you. I was hoping you'd missed me, too."

"Of course, I've missed you," he admitted. "For a while, I hoped I'd hear from you when you got settled somewhere. When I didn't, I assumed you wanted to leave that part of your life behind."

“I felt terrible about what they did to you, Hutch. I didn’t think you’d want me around as a reminder.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said, reaching out to take her hand in his. “I’m the one who let you down. I led them right to you. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself for that.”

Tears sprang to her eyes and shimmered on her lashes. “You had no choice,” she said, sniffing back the unshed tears. “I never blamed you. Don’t you think I, of all people, know how ruthless Ben been can be?”

“But—”

“That’s all in the past,” she said, cutting off his protest. “Can’t we just put it behind us?”

He reached out and took her hand, hardly believing she was there, at that moment, sitting beside him. Maybe he was being given a second chance, after all. Hutch felt a shudder run through his body as he felt the heavy weight of guilt begin to slide from his shoulders.



“Okay,” he said smiling. “If you can, I can.”

She squeezed his hand affectionately and nodded. “I already have.”

Changing the subject he said warmly, “You look terrific. Tell me everything—where you’ve been...what you’ve been doing.”

“I’ve been living in Vegas, working as a showgirl. The money is great and the job exciting, but I miss you, Hutch. I realize now how much I still need you in my life.” She slid across the sofa and lightly brushed his lips with hers.

He felt a familiar stirring in his loins as he wrapped his left arm around her and pressed his lips against hers hungrily. The passion between them was still palpable. The kiss deepened, and he drew her closer until the pain in his shoulder overrode the pleasure, reminding him of the wound.

“I can’t believe you’re back,” he whispered, nibbling her lips and along the curve of her jaw. “Where’re you staying?” He gently brushed a wisp of blond hair behind her left ear, then reached down and kissed the delicate earlobe.

“I’ve been at Jenny’s place since I got into town, but I thought maybe if you want me to, I could stay here with you,” she said, her voice caught in her throat when his lips reached the exposed curvature of her shoulder. “I could look after you until you’re back on your feet, then you can come out to Vegas.”

Hutch paused, then continued his gentle exploration of her neck. “Go to Vegas? What for? I don’t understand. I mean, if you’ve come back here to live, why would we need to go to Vegas?”

Jeanie pulled away slightly, her eyes seeking his. “Wait, Hutch,” she said. “I...I didn’t mean that I was coming back here to live. Only that I’d stay with you a few days until you’re well enough to travel.” She smiled at him brightly. “I have a terrific job in one of the shows. I just know they’re going to give me a major part soon! I think this could lead to my big break.”



Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she spoke. “I mean, you never know who’s sitting in the audience. Hollywood producers scouting in Vegas are discovering showgirls every day. Some are famous actresses now! I just can’t pass up a chance like this.”

Hutch stared at her, trying to comprehend exactly what she was proposing. “You mean you want to *live* in Las Vegas? If that’s what you want, why are you here?”

“I told you,” she said in her most persuasive voice. “I miss you and I *need* you, baby.” She leaned forward to plant another kiss on his mouth. “I need you near me. I want us to be together. I want people to see that I belong to you.”

Hutch’s brow wrinkled with consternation. Still a little shaky on his feet, he stood up and paced the length of the room and back. Then turning to face her, he said pointedly, “You want a career in show business, and you want me to quit my job as a detective to live in Vegas with you?”

Jeanie sighed, realizing Hutch wasn’t pleased with the idea. “Don’t you see? I need to be where I can get exposure and make contacts. You could get a job there,” she reasoned. “What difference does it make where you work, as long as we’re together?”

Sitting down next to her, Hutch answered heatedly, “It makes a difference to *me*. This is my beat. These are my people. More importantly, Starsky and I are partners and we count on one another. I can’t just walk out on all of them. Don’t you think what I’m doing here matters—that they need me?”

“Well, what about me?” she said petulantly. “I need you, too! Ben’s gone, and now you’re gone. I’ve tried it on my own, and it’s terrible.”

Hutch felt his temper surge at the mention of Ben Forest’s name, but resisted from being sidetracked from the issue at hand.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked, her voice pleading for understanding. “There are all sorts of creeps out in Vegas, hitting on me day in and day out. If we were living together, they’d know I was off-limits. I thought you cared about me, would want to be with me.”

Hutch’s mind was reeling with the implications of what she had said. It was finally becoming clear to him what their relationship was all about. “Jeanie,” he said, taking her hand and drawing it to his chest. “I want you to look me in the eye and answer me honestly. Do you love me?”

She blinked the tears from her eyes, then looked away.

Releasing her hand, Hutch lifted her chin until their gaze met. “Tell me. Do you really *love* me? Or are you just afraid to be on your own?”

“I...I never felt safer than when I was with you, Hutch,” she said sincerely. “Isn’t that love? Knowing you can count on someone? I know you wouldn’t have told Ben where I was if they hadn’t used the drugs. And I’m so sorry they did that to you. But with him in prison,” she rushed on, “we don’t have to worry about that anymore. We can be happy in Vegas, you’ll see.”

He cupped her cheek in the palm of his hand, and she stroked her face against it. “Jeanie, I...”

Finding it hard to put his feelings into words, he paused for a moment. “There was a time when I thought maybe we were in love, and that if things had been different, we might have made a life together. But there’s more to love than one person needing the protection of another. I guess it’s in my nature to be protective, and God knows, when we met, you needed someone to protect you from Ben Forest. But let’s be honest with ourselves. If that need hadn’t been the driving force behind our relationship, you wouldn’t have left me as soon as he was out of the picture.”

“I know now I shouldn’t have left,” she interrupted. “We were good together...I need you in my life.”

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that it’s not enough for me. I have needs, too. I want to spend the rest of my life with a woman who loves me for who I am. Someone who accepts that my job is an integral part of my life, and understands that I can’t walk out on my partner and all those people who depend on me. I need to be more than your body guard, and it seems that’s all we had going for us when we were together.”

She stared into his eyes for a long moment, considering what he had said. “What am I supposed to do?” she asked.

Hutch ran his thumb over her lips, then leaned forward and kissed her lightly. “You’re supposed to trust in yourself. You’re one hell of a lady, and I have no doubt you can accomplish anything you put your mind to. Don’t depend on others to take care of you, Jeanie. If you want to be a star, you need to have self-confidence and stand up to people. If you don’t learn to stand on your own two feet, it’ll never happen.”

She smiled at him sadly, then stood to leave. “I think we could have been happy together, Hutch. But I guess we’ll never know. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I don’t understand what love is.”

He stood also and walked to the door with her. “Jeanie, I know this sounds trite, but I really do want to be your friend.”

“You are my friend,” she assured him. “Only a friend can be truthful enough to make a person face things about themselves they don’t want to admit.”

She opened the door and found Starsky trying to balance three bags of groceries while digging in his pocket for the house key. When he looked up and saw her standing there, his face went pale and his eyes immediately flew to Hutch. He could see lines of fatigue on his friend’s face and hoped that whatever had transpired between him and Jeanie wouldn’t mean a setback for Hutch.

“Sorry,” he said, breaking the awkward silence. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“I was just leaving,” she said.

Starsky heard the tension in her voice. He stepped past them both and headed for the kitchen, allowing them some privacy.

“Goodbye, Hutch,” she said, taking his hand in hers. “And this time, it really is goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” he said with a poignant smile. “I’m glad you came back. I needed to see you again.”

“Yeah, me, too.”

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” he added. “Just remember to believe in yourself, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, then walked down the steps and out of his life forever.

At the sound of the door closing, Starsky peeked out of the kitchen and watched Hutch return to the sofa and sit down. Taking that as his cue, Starsky popped the caps off two bottles of Coke, walked from the kitchen, and dropped onto the sofa next to Hutch.

Handing one bottle to Hutch he asked, “You okay, pal?”

Hutch nodded slowly. Starsky thought he’d detected a trace of a smile on his lips as Hutch answered, “Yeah, I’m fine. In fact, I’m probably better than I’ve been in a long time.”



Epilogue

Starsky pulled the Torino up in front of Hutch’s bungalow and hopped out. Whistling as he took the porch steps two at a time, he was looking forward to the evening with relish. It had been weeks since he and Hutch had been out for a night on the town. Early that morning, Marlene and Glenda, two of their favorite airline stewardesses had called the station to say they were in town for a two-day layover. He’d been pleased to find that it had taken very little persuasion on his part to convince Hutch that the only gentlemanly thing to do was to invite them to go dancing. Having heard from Dr. Cleeson last night that Bobbie had completed rehab and been released to the care of a foster family experienced in handling kids with backgrounds similar to hers, had bolstered Hutch’s spirits immeasurably.

Starsky rang the bell, then, without waiting for an answer, tried the knob. As expected, Hutch had left it unlocked for him.

“Hey, Hutch, it’s me,” he called out, closing the door behind him. When no one answered, he called again, “Hutch?”

“Be right out. Just finishing my shower,” Hutch answered from the bathroom.

In the corner, stood the wooden easel Hutch used when painting. Starsky noticed that, for the first time in months, it wasn’t covered with the paint-stained drape he was used to seeing. His curiosity getting the better of him, Starsky inched toward



the corner of the room. Knowing Hutch didn't like anyone to view a "work in progress," he listened for a moment to make certain Hutch wouldn't catch him snooping, then tiptoed toward the easel.

"Help yourself to a brew!" Hutch yelled from the bedroom. Starsky pulled up short, nearly tripping over his own feet.

"Uh, no thanks," he answered casually. "I think I'll wait 'til we get to the club." Recovering his equilibrium, he eased his way across the room and reached the back of the easel.

"Starsky!" Hutch said from behind him.

"What?!" Starsky spun around, wearing the guilty expression of a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Despite the bathrobe and a towel thrown around his neck, Hutch still looked as intimidating as a stern schoolmaster. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Nothin'," Starsky lied, taking a step back from the easel.

"You were going to look at my canvas, weren't you?" Hutch said.

"Well, it was uncovered and all, so I figured it was finished." Starsky gave him a sickly smile, seeing from Hutch's face he wasn't buying the excuse.

"Actually, I'm just getting started. But you can look if you want to," Hutch said, nonchalantly.

Taken off-guard, Starsky just stared at him for a few seconds. "I can?" he asked, disbelieving this sudden about-face.

"Sure, why not? I mean, we are partners and all," Hutch answered magnanimously.

Starsky walked to the front of the easel and gazed at the painting before him. The solid white canvas shown beneath the spotlight, the wet paint glistening like whitecaps on a choppy sea. Wide brushstrokes of shiny white paint completely coated the surface of the canvas, covering whatever had once been there.

Coming to stand behind him, Hutch asked, "So, what do you think?"

Starsky turned his head to one side and studied the canvas. Try as he might, all he saw was white. Deciding this was Hutch's idea of a practical joke, he finally said, "Okay, I give up. What the hell is it supposed to be?"

“I call it ‘A Fresh Start’,” Hutch answered with a smile. He clapped Starsky on the shoulder. “And I think its way past due. Don’t you?”

Starsky considered it another moment, then answered with a grin, “Yeah. I think it’s probably your best work.”

His partner was back.

The End