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GUARDIAN III

“The Chase”

by TibbieB

*The poor dog, in life the firmest friend,
The first to welcome, foremost to defend,
Whose honest heart is still his master’s own,
Who labours, fights, lives, breathes for him alone.*
~ Lord Byron

Chapter 1

“Come in!” Captain Harold Dobey looked up from the chaos on his desktop, obviously irritated by another interruption in his busy morning schedule. Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson entered the office and casually made themselves comfortable in two chairs located across from the captain’s desk. Uncharacteristically, the two men wore conservative sports coats and ties with their bellbottom jeans, rather than their usual leather jackets and T-shirts. Starsky, the dark-haired member of the duo, kicked back and nonchalantly propped his feet up on Dobey’s desk.

“Starsky, don’t make me tell you again! Get your feet off my desk!” Unperturbed, the younger man shrugged and planted his feet back on the floor, repeating a ritual that occurred between the two men on a regular basis.

“Come on, Cap’n, we were just brilliant in that courtroom,” Hutchinson pointed out. “Can’t you cut us a little slack?”

Starsky smiled broadly, and nodded his agreement with Hutch’s assessment of their testimony against one of the most powerful drug czars on the West Coast. “He’s got’a point, Cap’n.”

“Seems to me, you two are counting your chickens before they hatch,” the black man grumbled.

“No way the judge isn’t gonna give that turkey life.” Starsky straightened up in his chair, as he reached up and tugged at the offending tie he was unaccustomed to wearing.

“Your testimony was pretty compelling—I’ll give you that. But we all know the connections Morrisetti has.” Dobey leaned forward and looked both detectives in the eyes. “To my knowledge, Judge Herbert Brown is an honest man, and he seems aboveboard all the way.”

“But, you wouldn’t put it past Morrisetti to have a federal judge in his pocket,” Hutch finished for him.

“Well, let’s just say, we shouldn’t underestimate him.”

“Brown said he’d announce the sentence at 3:00 p.m. today,” Starsky said. He hesitated for a moment before changing the subject. “Cap’n, what about the time Hutch and I asked for. Ya know...for the Search and Rescue Competition we want Sam to enter?”

Dobey harumphed and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt.

“He’s doing great, Cap’n,” Hutch offered. “Think how well it would reflect on the department to have Sam win a competition like that. I mean, I know he’s not officially part of the LAPD, but look how many times they’ve called on us over the past year when they needed Sam’s help.”

“I suppose he has been good PR for us...not to mention how many rescues he’s been involved in,” Dobey conceded.

“Yeah, he’s a pretty terrific dog,” Starsky bragged. “Gina says our instructor still claims he’s never taught a dog with the natural talent Sam’s exhibited. He thinks Sam hasn’t even hit his stride yet, and could walk away with a first place medal at the regionals. We only need a week. They’re holdin’ the competition in Seattle. We could drive up there in a day.”

“Starsky, I told you it takes more than twenty-two hours to drive that distance,” Hutch interrupted.

Starsky grinned at his partner. “Maybe it’s twenty-two if you’re drivin’, Blondie.”

Hutch rolled his eyes skyward and shook his head. He knew he was in for another rocket ride in the Tomato unless he could wrest the steering wheel away from Starsky and convince him to stop overnight somewhere for a rest. Oh, well, he'd deal with that when the time came.

Dobey leaned back in his chair, swiveling from side to side, letting them squirm a few moments before giving them permission to take the time off. Hell, they'd earned it! And he had no doubt Sam had a better than average chance of cleaning up in the medal department. Still, he didn't want to make it too easy. They were already almost too cocky to take orders. Had to remind them who was boss once in awhile!

"Okay. You've got one week. Since I'm sanctioning this trip, you don't have to turn it in as vacation. I'll write it up as public service."

Starsky and Hutch looked at one another, then back at Dobey, their eyes bugging out at this generous gesture. The best they'd hoped for, was using their vacation time. But they'd discussed it, and decided it would be worth it to see just what Sam could do, when pitted against professional search and rescue canines. This was an unexpected gift.

Starsky was the first to react. "Thanks, Cap'n. You won't regret this. Sam's gonna knock their socks off."

Embarrassed by his own act of generosity, Dobey averted his eyes to the desk. "Just make sure you're back here on time. I'm not taking any excuses if you're not, and I'll retroactively charge the whole time off to your vacation!"

Hutch cut his eyes over at his partner, his lips twitching with a suppressed smile. Dobey didn't fool him for a minute. He was almost as fond of the big, lovable dog as they were. They both stood up and headed for the door, not giving him a chance to change his mind.

END ORR

"All rise," the bailiff announced, as Judge Brown entered the courtroom. Starsky and Hutch stood near the back row of seats, waiting for the judge to hand down the sentence. They had a pretty good idea of the outcome, but wanted to hear it for themselves.

Leo Morrisetti looked back over his shoulder at the two cops. A trim, nice looking man in his mid-fifties, the drug czar lifted the left corner of his mouth in a condescending smirk. The hard glint in his steel gray eyes belied any humor that may have lurked there. Having been out on bail since before the trial began, Morrisetti was dressed in a gray, tailored, Italian suit, the exact same shade as his thinning, well-styled hair. Hutch couldn't help but wonder how the rich and powerful drug lord was going to look in his prison uniform.

The judge cleared his throat and looked out across the crowd before centering his attention on the defendant. “Mr. Morrisetti, some days I regret that the State of California no longer allows me to issue the death sentence. That certainly applies in this case. Not only have you caused the pain and suffering of countless human beings on this earth, you have maliciously targeted our innocent youth. Sending your dealers into our school yards, and along the beaches our children frequent, you have found an unsuspecting market of customers considered off-limits to most of the other criminals in your line of work.

Your abhorrent actions have resulted in the deaths of at least eight high school children; and those are only the ones we have been able to document. Who knows how many homeless street people, both young and old, have used the tainted drugs you’ve distributed, bringing their short, miserable lives to an abrupt, horrible end?”

The judge paused momentarily before continuing. “Through the tireless efforts of our law enforcement personnel, such as Detectives Hutchinson and Starsky, I am at least given the privilege of sentencing you to life, plus 50 years, in Cabrillo State Prison. I am also declaring that you will NOT be eligible to seek parole. I hope you use your time there to reflect upon your deeds, and realize exactly what a despicable excuse for a human being you truly are. May God have mercy on your soul.” The judge slammed the gavel on the desk, signifying an end to the proceedings.

Morrisetti didn’t flinch as the courtroom erupted in a buzz of excited responses. News reporters rushed past the two detectives in an effort to be the first to file their stories and make breaking announcements to their television audiences. Hutch looked at his partner and nodded. Things had gone exactly as they’d hoped. One more scum bag off the streets—and it looked like this one would be permanently.

As the guard handcuffed Morrisetti, the convicted criminal turned and looked at the two detectives. His mouth silently formed the unmistakable words, “You’re dead,” before he was led from the courtroom, amidst the furor of the crowd. Starsky smiled at the judge and gave him a ‘thumbs up’ sign before following Hutch through the heavy wooden doors.

Chapter 2

Sam sat on the bed, his eyes following Starsky’s every move, as he watched him toss socks and underwear into the open duffel bag. The dog was worried. This generally meant ‘The Dark One’ was going away.

Though he recognized Starsky and Hutch by their rightful names, Sam still persisted in thinking of them in the same terms he had the first day they met...Starsky, being ‘The Dark One’, and Hutch, ‘The Light One’. They were unlike any humans he’d ever known. Granted, they were humans, speaking their own strange language, their moods shifting like the sand; but they were different from the others. They’d opened

their hearts and their homes to him, given him a life free of neglect and fear. And when he was separated from them, he was miserable. So, the prospect that Starsky, and most likely Hutch too, would leave him, even for a short while, was very upsetting.

Starsky looked at the dog's solemn expression, almost hearing his thoughts. "Don't worry, Big Dog, you're comin' too. This is our vacation, a chance for you to show those other dogs how smart you are. You know, strut your stuff." He gave Sam a lop-sided grin and was rewarded with a loud, affirmative 'woof.'

After a few minutes of pillaging through the closet, Starsky pulled down a green and white nylon, zippered bag from the top shelf, and threw it on the bed next to his own. This initiated an onslaught of cheerful tail swishing and excited barking from Sam, who recognized the bag as the one that held all his treasures. Inside were his favorite bowl, a water bottle, leashes of varying lengths, assorted chew toys, and a box of giant milkbones.

Opening the bag, Starsky tossed in a plastic bag of kibbles, and three cans of dog food he'd set on the dresser earlier. "Not so worried now, are ya?" He scratched the dog's ears until the canine rolled over on his back, presenting his tummy for a rub. "Listen, ya big goomba, I don't have time to give you a rub down. We still have to finish packing, and gas up the car."

Sam jumped off the bed and disappeared down the hallway. Starsky resumed sorting through his socks, trying to find at least two the same length, not riddled with holes, or long-since-sprung elastic tops.

At the sound of the water turning on in the adjacent bathroom, he looked up from the drawer, and listened for a moment. Dropping the socks, Starsky walked into the bathroom and turned off the bathtub spigots. Used to this recurring event, he casually reached down into the water, and unplugged the drain.

Over the last several months, he and Sam had learned to coexist with their unseen guest, who persisted in turning on the water, and drawing a bath at the most inconvenient times. Starsky looked around the room, uneasily. Although he knew the unexplained presence seemed harmless, it unnerved him every time something weird happened. Aside from this minor inconvenience, it was a great house; lots of character, spacious rooms, and a big, fenced-in yard for Sam to romp in. Still, if the rent wasn't dirt cheap and the dog welcome, he would probably have moved out the first month.

Starsky returned to the bedroom, and picked up where he'd left off with his packing. He looked down as Sam trotted back into the room and dropped a shiny, red ball at his feet. The ball was the big dog's most cherished possession. Sam remembered the day Starsky gave him the ball, and their first play session in the park. It had been a turning point in their relationship. From that day forward, the dog had been devoted to The Dark One, even risking his own life to save Starsky's only days later.

“What’s this? You wanna play ball instead of packin’? Listen, big guy, life ain’t all play, ya know.” The dog cocked his head quizzically, then gave a loud bark. Starsky picked up the ball and tossed it into the air. Sam jumped straight up, all four paws leaving the floor, and caught the ball in his mouth before it even began to fall. He trotted back to Starsky and laid the ball down again. “Awww, come on, Sam. I told you, we got’a pack and gas up the car. And what about eating? Aren’t you hungry? We don’t have time to play.”

At the word “eat” the rottie scooped up the ball, and tossed it into the air, letting it fall to the floor at Starsky’s feet again.

“You tryin’ to tell me something?”

Sam bounded onto the bed, and poked his snout into the green bag. After a few moments of serious rooting around, he finally dug out the bag of kibbles, and turned hopeful eyes to Starsky.

“Oh...I get it. You wanna be fed. You wanna eat?”

Sam ran back to Starsky, picked up the ball again and tossed it higher than before. The man chuckled, then reached down and retrieved the ball. “I know your game now, ya big con artist. You wanna trade your ball for a little grub, right?” Sam chuffed loudly, clearly impressed by his human’s ability to understand the most ancient of languages—”Dog.”

“Okay, but not this food. This is for the trip. We’ll go to the kitchen and scrounge up some dinner.”

In the bathroom, the water faucets in the bathtub came on again. Sam heard it too. He lifted his head and listened, ears twitching. As Starsky walked toward the door, it slammed shut with a resounding thump, startling both man and dog. It wasn’t the first time he’d witnessed this newest phenomena, but it shook him up a bit, just the same. It’d happened three times before--each time, the door slamming only when he approached it.

Starsky watched the dog, interested in his reaction. Sam stood staunchly, back arched, feet planted, and every hair on his broad neck raised defensively. Rather than being reassured by the dog’s reaction, Starsky was more ill at ease.

On the other side of the door, he could hear the water slowly filling the bath. “Sam, Heel.” The dog relaxed his stance and moved up beside Starsky, in front of the door.

“You go first,” Starsky suggested. Sam looked up, not understanding the command, but knowing he would really rather be in the kitchen having dinner. He decided maybe he’d just wait and see what his human did next.

Understanding perfectly the dog's reluctance to enter the bathroom, Starsky reached out cautiously and touched the doorknob. When nothing hideous happened, he gripped the knob firmly, and opened the door in one rapid movement. Stepping inside, he saw the water still running in the tub, stopper in place. Sam peered around the door warily, intending to keep his distance from the spooky bathtub, unless forced to do otherwise. Once again, Starsky turned off the water, unplugged the drain, and went back into the bedroom.

"Some watchdog you are," he grouched. "Come on, let's go eat. What say we leave old Charlie to take his bath in private? Huh?" As Starsky and Sam left the bedroom, they heard the sound of the bathroom door closing again.



Hutch threw the last of his clothes into the duffel bag, and checked the windows, before going out to wait on the front steps for Starsky and Sam. As usual, his partner was late. But Hutch, having learned over the years to expect that, wasn't the least bit annoyed. If he wanted to be somewhere by 10 a.m., he told Starsky they had to be there by 9:30. Worked like a charm. But they weren't on a timetable with this trip. In fact, if things went according to plan, they'd arrive a day before the competition, and have a little time for sight-seeing. He'd visited Seattle before, but this would be a first for Starsky, and Hutch was hoping to show his partner the usual landmarks, like the Space Needle and the famous open air fish market, one of the oldest in the nation. There would be plenty to see and do.

The Torino screeched up to the curb, Sam's head hanging out the window, the perpetual, canine grin greeting Hutch. "Mornin'."

Starsky smiled at Hutch as the tall blond took his place in the passenger's seat. "Sorry we're runnin' a little late. I was waitin' on Huggy's cousin Leon—you know, the carpenter—to come by and give me an estimate on a new bathroom door." He checked the side view and rear view mirrors before pulling away from the curb.

Hutch shook his head in resignation. "Starsky, when are you gonna quit spending money on trying to fix things in that old rattle-trap of a house, and accept that some things just aren't fixable?"

"What do ya mean?" Starsky immediately went on the defensive. "It's fixable. The frame's crooked. Leon said he'll have to put in a new frame and door, then it'll work perfectly." He constantly found himself defending the weird phenomena that continued to occur in the old Victorian home he and Sam shared.

"How many plumbers have you had come there, and tell you there's nothing wrong with the faucets in the bathtub? Hmmm? And it still comes on by itself, all hours of the day and night, doesn't it?"

Starsky shrugged. “Well, yeah...but the door’s a different thing. It just kinda falls shut.”

“Falls shut? Falls... shut? Starsky, what the hell does that mean?”

“Ya know. I open it, and in a few minutes, it kinda closes, real hard-like.”

“Let me guess.” Hutch feigned a studious expression. “It wouldn’t just happen to be the door to the same bathroom with the running water problem, would it? The bathroom where ‘Charlie’s’ body was found floating in the tub?”

Starsky gave him a sheepish grin. “Well, yeah...but—”

“Starsk—so now another one of Huggy’s relatives is gonna rip you off for the cost of installing a brand new door which will, in all likelihood, swing shut on it’s own, exactly like the door you have right now.”

Starsky stared at the road, embarrassed to admit that his partner was probably right.

“How much?”

“Huh?”

“How much for the new door and the installation?”

“Only \$150,” Starsky answered in a small voice.

“What? A hundred fifty dollars?” Hutch ran a hand over his face.

“What’re you gettin’ so excited about? You’re the one who says there’s no such thing as ghosts. If ya believe that, why can’t you come up with a logical explanation about all this? You think Sam and I like livin’ in the house with a dead guy?”

Hutch was quiet for a moment, having no answer. Logic told him the house wasn’t haunted; yet, he, himself, was completely puzzled by the things that went on in the rambling, old, two-story home. He enjoyed teasing Starsky, all right. But when it came right down to it, Hutch had no theories on why the strange occurrences seemed to be commonplace in the old house.

Starsky flashed him a grin. “Hey, ready to set the Search and Rescue world on its ear?” he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

“Yeah, right.” Hutch smiled back, always amused by his partner’s enthusiasm and confidence where Sam was concerned. Secretly, he was relieved to talk about something other than the ‘haunting’ of Starsky’s home. “Don’t forget—we just enter him

in the beginners' competitions. There's no way he can compete with dogs who've been doing this for awhile."

"Yeah, I know, I know. Still, I bet they've never seen a dog as smart as Sam, with only one year in the field," Starsky shot back.

Recognizing his name, the rottweiler popped his head over the back of the seat and nuzzled Starsky before going over to Hutch and repeating the gesture. Hutch, his mood quickly improving, absently scratched the big dog under the chin. "You're probably right about that. Still, don't be disappointed if he doesn't win anything. Sometimes, I think we expect too much from him."

"I guess you're right. Hey, let's just have a good time, okay?" Starsky's boyish grin brought another smile to Hutch's face. He wasn't sure who was more excited about this trip—Starsky or Sam. In any case, Hutch was going to enjoy it.



Felix Pinson had never been a nervous man until he became involved with Lou Morrisetti and his underworld drug machine. These days, he jumped at his own shadow. The money was great—more than he'd ever hoped to see, but now Pinson woke every morning with the feeling that today might be his last. Unfortunately, he'd seen what happened to others who decided they wanted out; and it wasn't a pretty sight. Yes, he was in for the duration—good or bad, there was no escaping the corner he'd unwittingly backed himself into, when he accepted a job with Morrisetti.

The clanging of the iron bars on the conference room door startled Pinson from his inner thoughts, as he watched Lou Morrisetti enter the room, handcuffed, dressed in a drab, gray prison uniform.

"Good morning, sir."

Morrisetti looked back over his shoulder and snapped at the guard, "Get the hell out of here. I want to talk with my attorney alone. It's my right."

The guard scowled at the drug czar, but left the room as ordered, aware that the prisoner was entitled to private conversations with counsel.

"Thanks for coming, Felix." Morrisetti sat down at the plain, wooden table.

"Sure, Mr. Morrisetti. Anything for you. But, I'm afraid I haven't found out anything new yet. I filed the appeal, just like you said." Pinson nervously played with the ball point pen he was holding.

"I know, I know. I'm sure you're doing your best," Morrisetti said magnanimously. "That's not why I asked you to come."

Worried, Pinson looked up at his client, waiting for the other shoe to drop. What now? Thoughts began to swirl in his mind.

Morrisetti glance toward the door, then lowered his voice. “I want you to make arrangements to have those two cops wasted. Starsky and Hutchinson,” he said calmly. “When my appeal comes to trial, I want them out of commission. Make them disappear—now.”

The steel gray eyes penetrated Pinson, leaving no doubt that Morrisetti expected nothing less than complete obedience. “Uh...I...understand how you feel, sir...but...” Pinson chose his words carefully, “don’t you think the judge will know it was you? Could backfire on us, sir.”

Lou Morrisetti looked down at the attorney’s trembling hands. If there was one thing he hated, it was a coward. This despicable excuse for a man was going to balk at burning a couple of two bit detectives. He should have known!

“Now, you listen to me, you low-rent piece of garbage—I said waste ‘em, and that’s exactly what you’re going to do. Regardless of the outcome of my appeal, I want those two DEAD.” His voice was emotionless, and measured. “I don’t give a damn if you pull the trigger yourself, or if you have to hire someone to do the deed, but there will be NO connection with me. Do you understand?”

Pinson nodded his head, quick little jerks, up and down. “Y-y-yes sir, understood. You’ve got it.”

Satisfied with the frightened response from his attorney, Morrisetti stood up and walked to the door. Looking back over his shoulder, he added, “I mean it, Felix. NO connection.” He spoke to the guard through the bars. “I’m ready.”

As the door closed behind his boss, Felix Pinson took a deep, calming breath. This was the worst thing his employer had ever told him to do. Killing cops was a dirty business, one that could cost him his life. Of course, if he didn’t follow orders, it WOULD cost him his life. No doubt about that. Pinson realized he’d better find a professional, someone who would leave no loose ends. Like it or not—he’d do as he was told.

Chapter 3

Starsky sped up the Torino and deftly merged back into the traffic on I-5. Beside him, Hutch was unwrapping the burgers and putting straws into the covered soft drink cups. “I still don’t see why we couldn’t just eat there,” he complained. Sam’s head appeared above his shoulder, the huge nose sniffing delightedly at the aroma of french fries and hamburgers.

“I told you, I wanna save time,” Starsky answered. “I’ve never been to Seattle, and I wanna take in the sights.”

“There’ll be plenty of time. I don’t see what’s the big hurry. I wanna stop tonight and get a room. Just take a leisurely trip and enjoy ourselves—make a real vacation of it,” Hutch expounded. “Besides, too many hours in this car, and my back will be killing me by the time we get there.”

“Awww, come on; quit your whinin’, will ya? I ain’t gonna pay for a motel room when we can drive straight through. I’m not made of money, ya know.”

“That’s a weak argument from a man who’s just agreed to pay \$150 for a door that doesn’t really need replacing.”

Starsky shot him a disparaging look.

From the back seat, Sam woofed, impatiently urging Hutch to get down to the business of unwrapping his burgers. Traveling with the big dog wasn’t a problem, but trying to feed him in a moving automobile was always a bit awkward. Hutch still thought Sam should be restricted to dog food, but the animal was as much of a junk food junkie as Starsky now. Living in the house with Starsky had definitely affected his eating habits. Hutch had all but given up on trying to influence the dog’s diet—or Starsky’s diet, for that matter.

“We’re stopping, Starsky. If you’re too cheap to get a room, you can stay in mine. We’ll just ask for one with two double beds.” Hutch turned around and placed the bowl of crumbled hamburgers on the back seat for Sam.

Starsky guided the car along the highway, whizzing in and out, changing lanes without the slightest hesitation. Hutch tried not to watch. You’d think I’d get used to his driving. Having offered to take a turn at the wheel, and been turned down, Hutch decided to eat his lunch and enjoy it. He unwrapped Starsky’s and handed it over to him first.

“Even if you don’t want to stop overnight, at least think about Sam.”

Starsky looked at him quizzically.

“He needs some exercise,” Hutch continued. “Just because you can ride twenty-two hours straight in a car, doesn’t mean he can.” He knew Starsky’s love for the dog could always be used to his advantage. “Don’t you think he needs a break?”

After a moment’s silence, Starsky nodded. “Okay, you win.” Taking a bite of his sandwich, he turned his attention back to the road. “We’ll stop—but not before dark. That way, we’ll have most of the trip behind us.”

Satisfied he'd won a small victory, Hutch sat back and enjoyed his burger and fries.



The traffic had begun to thin out as they left the noise and confusion of the city behind. With the windows open, and a warm breeze wafting in, the ride was a pleasant one. Neither man felt the need for conversation, but was comfortable breaking the silence whenever some random thought crossed his mind. Despite Starsky's lead foot on the gas pedal, Hutch was enjoying the trip. Still, the events of recent days in the courtroom encroached on his thoughts.

"Do you think Morrisetti's going to try anything?" he asked Starsky.

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. You saw what he said as they were leading him from the courtroom."

Starsky glanced over at his partner, tipping his head to one side, implying anything was possible. "I don't plan to lose any sleep over it. You know every two-bit punk we've ever busted has threatened us. You think this one's different?"

"I don't know, Starsk. Morrisetti can hardly be tagged 'a two-bit punk'. The man has connections, and the money to run his crime machine from prison. All I'm saying is, we'd better be alert. And I'm still not convinced he'll never get out of prison. We both know that with the flaws in the criminal justice system, slime like Morrisetti usually finds a way to circumvent the law."

Starsky considered Hutch's words, knowing his partner had a penchant for looking beneath the surface of things and coming up with some very valid conclusions. "You got a point. Trouble is, we can't be watchin' over our shoulders twenty-four hours a day. If we start that, we may as well go into another line of work."

Hutch's mind wandered back over times and events he'd rather left undisturbed; instances where his partner's life had been at stake, threatened by some freak they'd brought to justice. Gunther, Prudolm, Marcos, Jennings, just to name a few. They'd almost taken Starsky from him, and in the process, taught Hutch a valuable lesson—never underestimate the enemy. He didn't think he could endure going through another close call like those. Maybe it was time to change professions. The thought had definitely crossed his mind more frequently over the past year. Without being obvious, he stole a glance at Starsky, who also appeared distracted by his own thoughts. Jobs could be replaced. Friends couldn't.

Sam lay on the back seat, his head buried in the green and white bag of treasures that Hutch had left open last time he gave the dog a bowl of water. The rottie rooted and snorted his way through the contents, creating an unwarranted amount of noise.

“What’s he doing back there?” Starsky stretched his neck, checking the rear view mirror, but couldn’t see the dog from that angle. Hutch leaned over the back seat and spied Sam searching through the bag for some elusive item, most likely in one of the five major food groups of “Meats”, “Biscuits”, “Rawhides”, “Liver Bits”, or “Beef Jerky”.

“Sam...Sam...”

Ignoring Hutch entirely, the canine continued his desperate quest to locate some missing, precious commodity. “Sam, knock it off, will you? What’re you looking for, anyway?”

The big dog looked up, his teeth clutching the shiny red ball he’d discretely dropped into the bag, when Starsky wasn’t looking. Proud of his success, he promptly reared up on the back of Hutch’s seat and dropped the ball into The Light One’s lap. Hutch smiled and whispered, “Starsk...look. Here’s what all the ruckus was about.”

Starsky looked over and saw the red ball lying in Hutch’s lap, and the huge black and rust colored head resting on Hutch’s shoulder, waiting for him to pick up the ball and throw it. “I don’t think there’s much chance of a game of catch in here, Big Dog.”

Sam glanced over at Starsky, not understanding a word of what he’d just said, except The Dark One’s nickname for him. He impatiently turned his attention back on Hutch, who picked up the ball and handed it back to the dog. “He’s right, fella. There’ll be time, and room to play catch at the motel tonight. I’m sure they have a field or someplace behind the building where we can play.

Sam held the ball in his mouth, disappointed that Hutch wasn’t interested in playing. Using his big paws, he sidled across the back of the seat to Starsky’s side of the car. Laying his head on his other human’s shoulder, Sam dropped the ball into The Dark One’s lap, hoping for more success. Starsky chuckled, impressed by the dog’s persistence. “Uh, uh. No room in here.” He picked up the ball with his free hand, and dropped it on the front seat between Hutch and himself.

Disappointed, Sam hung his head over the seat, peering down at the ball, his hopes of a romp dashed. He loved riding in the car, but a dog could only watch so many trees speed by without wanting to use one of them! With a heavy sigh, he sat back on the seat and tried to look pitiful. Perhaps if he looked really pitiful, they’d change their minds.

“Hey, I forgot.” Hutch reached into the pocket of his baseball jacket and pulled out a shrink-wrapped bag containing a large, imitation bone. “I picked this up at the health food store last night.”

Starsky shot him a look of disbelief. “What? Don’t tell me you found dog treats at the ‘health food store.’”

Sam slid his noggin back over the seat and rested his chin on Hutch's shoulder as he watched him unwrap the treat. "Carrot bone. Made up of compressed carrots, barley, wheat germ, and other healthy stuff. One hundred percent natural ingredients. If he's going to eat snacks between meals, they should at least be something healthy."

Starsky let out a long suffering sigh and shook his head in amazement. "I guess next you're gonna tell me that he's actually gonna like—"

In mid-sentence, Sam's head darted forward, snatching the carrot bone from Hutch's hand. Without bothering to sit down, the big dog chomped and crunched noisily on the bone-shaped, compressed vegetables, smacking his lips and slobbering over the back of the seat onto The Light One's shoulder.

Hutch smiled smugly, and gave Starsky an 'I told you so' look. "You were saying?"



Benny White and Al Bernard weren't the best two hit men on the West Coast, but Pinson had discovered it wasn't easy find someone crazy enough to murder two high profile cops like Starsky and Hutchinson—not even for the enormous fee he was offering.

White and Bernard were as different as day and night, forging an unlikely, but effective partnership. The most obvious difference was in their physical appearances. Where Benny White was a tall, skinny, forty-something man, who wore his frizzy brown hair pulled back in an outdated ponytail, Bernard, only a couple of years younger, was a big-boned, slightly overweight fellow who hadn't had a strand of hair on his head since 1968.

Their clothes and choices in cuisine were as diametrically different as their outside interests. Al Bernard enjoyed spicy pizza and a cold Schlitz, while watching a good, sweaty, wrestling match on the tube. And no one, or no thing would ever convince him what he saw in the ring was anything but the 'gospel truth'. Benny, on the other hand, fancied himself an intellectual, when in reality, he had a tenth grade education. Unlike his odd friend, he preferred fancy foods, the names of which he had trouble pronouncing. He sought his extracurricular activities in more cultural pursuits, such as being a third-rate chess player. He touted this inferior accomplishment as proof of his superior intellect. It was pretty safe to say the only things they DID have in common were their greed, and a total lack of morality.

The red and white Torino was an easy target, even on the busy California expressway. As they crossed over into the less populated state of Oregon, the car could be tracked a full mile down the road.

"Keep a little distance, will you?" White snapped at his partner. "The traffic's thinned out enough now that they might notice a tail."

Al Bernard shot back an annoyed look. “Don’t tell me how to do my job! How many times have we been spotted when I was driving, huh? Besides, these guys may be cops, but they’re cops on vacation. They ain’t looking for no tail.”

“Hang back a little, just the same.” White always had to have the last word. It was one of his more irritating personality traits. Benny White knew he was smarter than his cohort, but he had to admit, occasionally Bernard proved himself to be useful. Their three year association had been quite lucrative. But pulling off this job would put them in another league. No more two-bit hits for them. Once word got out they’d done a couple of cops for Mr. Lou Morrisetti, they’d be able to name their price.

“How’d you find out about the vacation anyway?” he asked, as an afterthought.

“Details, Benny, details. Ain’t you always saying that’s what separates us from the amateurs? I know a guy who works as a janitor at the police station. I gave him a couple of bucks to check the duty roster they post in the ready room every week. These two jokers are taking a whole week off and driving to Seattle. There’s plenty of desolate road on this route, so we’ll just bide our time until there ain’t no witnesses.” An ugly smile twisted Bernard’s lips. “I think our two detectives are about to have a very, very bad accident.”

White laughed sadistically, as he imagined how much he’d enjoy watching two ‘pigs’ rolling down some steep embankment, their car exploding in a ball of fire, as the gas tank ignited. It was a very pleasing image, indeed. They’d used this ploy before, and it always worked great. The bodies would burn beyond recognition, right along with the evidence.

“Yeah...a very bad accident,” he agreed. For once, it looked like his partner had done something right.

END ORR

“Better pull over here, Starsk. Sam’s getting pretty restless.”

Starsky glanced at the rear view mirror and saw Sam pacing from side to side, poking his head out first the left back window, then the right. It had been a couple of hours since they’d eaten their lunch on the run, so it stood to reason the dog needed to make a pit stop. Starsky began looking for a sturdy patch of shoulder to pull over on.

Once they’d rolled to a stop, the dog began barking and bouncing up and down, causing the car to rock from side to side. Hutch opened his door and Sam flew over the back seat, using the blond’s lap as a springboard to the out-of-doors. Before either man realized what was happening, he headed into the woods.

“Sam! Wait up!” Hutch scrambled out of the car and chased after the rottweiler, concerned he’d lose his way in the unfamiliar woods. Starsky was right on his heels.

Hutch came to an abrupt stop when he caught sight of Sam, frozen, hackles raised. A low guttural sound rumbled from deep within his throat. Not more than fifteen feet from the rottweiler stood a skunk, tail raised, and poised for battle.

Hutch lifted a warning hand as Starsky bounded up behind him.

“What the—?”

“Shhhh...” Hutch whispered. “Just back away slowly. We still might get out of this without getting sprayed.”

“What about Sam?” Starsky whispered back.

“Call him, but don't yell. Make too much noise, and you'll spook the skunk. What's that command you give him sometimes to bring him back very quietly? Use that.”

“Okay.” Starsky slowly lowered his body to a squatting position. “Sam, ease back...” he whispered. “Ease back, boy.”

At first the rottweiler paid no attention, being far too interested in this unusual looking animal with the defiant, black, beady eyes. After pretending he didn't hear Starsky for as long as he dared, Sam reluctantly stole a glance back at the two men. He knew his humans expected him to obey when they gave him a direct command, but he suspected this new and exotic creature could be lots of fun, maybe even offer a few surprises. Surely they'd understand how a guy would want to explore the possibilities!

“Ease back, Sam!” Starsky whispered a little more forcefully. Sam knew he'd pushed his luck as far as he dared, and had better shape up and do what was expected. Not wanting the strange animal to have the final word, the dog growled one more time--just for good measure. The black and white critter before him raised its tail a centimeter higher, twitching it back and forth like a warning flag.

“Oh, no...oh no...Starsk. We better back out of here, nice and easy, and let Sam fend for himself.” Hutch slowly stepped back another three paces, snagging Starsky by the elbow and pulling him along with him.

“Wait a minute, will ya? How're we gonna ride in the car with Sam if he gets sprayed?”

“I don't know, but I sure as hell don't intend to get sprayed right along with him,” Hutch whispered back.

“Sam! For the last time, boy, EASE BACK!”

Tucking his tail, the big dog began slowly backing toward his humans, reluctantly giving over to the urgent tone in Starsky's voice. The skunk eyed the unfamiliar foe warily. Finally deciding retreat was his best course of action, he scurried back into the safety of the dense woods.

Both men sighed with relief, and sagged to the ground as Sam turned and trotted back to them, obviously pleased with himself for having shown the skunk who was boss. Hutch reached down and patted the obedient dog. "Good boy, Sam. You had me worried for a minute there." Sam looked up at The Light One, relieved that his friend seemed to have forgiven his momentary lapse in obedience.

"I knew he'd come," Starsky bragged. "Question was, would it be before or AFTER he got sprayed?"

"Let's get back on the road," Hutch suggested tiredly. "I think you've had enough exercise for now, Big Dog." Sam jogged between the two men, pacing his speed to theirs.

As the three returned to the Torino, none of them noticed the light blue sedan sitting in the emergency lane, less than a mile from where they were parked.

"Pass me a Milky Way." Starsky started the car and pulled back onto the highway. "They're in the glove compartment." Hutch opened the glove box and was met by an avalanche of candy bars and snack cakes.

"One of these days you're gonna OD on junk food," Hutch complained irritably, as he cleared the floorboard of runaway candy. "And don't expect me to be there to pick up the pieces. I'll be a robust old man, jogging in the park with beautiful women on either side of me, while you're wasting away in some nursing home, teeth rotted out from too much sugar, your muscles turned to flab by food preservatives, and not a single curly hair left on that hard head of yours." Hutch didn't crack a smile as he painted the grim futuristic picture. He glanced over at Starsky in time to see his partner's Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed hard. It took a concentrated effort, on Hutch's part, not to burst out laughing at the pained expression on Starsky's face.

"That ain't funny, Hutch. You'll stop at nothin' to spoil my enjoyment of a good candy bar, will ya?" Starsky's voice dripped with sarcasm. Hutch could almost see the wheels turning in his friend's head as he envisioned the two of them in the distant future. Slowly, a smile returned to Starsky's face.

"You know I'm gonna be a better lookin' old man than you are. Why should 'then' be any different than now?" Starsky shot him one of his best Starsky grins, and snatched the Milky Way out of Hutch's hand. "So it ain't gonna work, partner. Shut up and have a candy bar."

Chapter 4

The late afternoon sky was a cheerful azure blue as the Torino streaked on toward Seattle. The day had gone well, but both men and dog were getting tired of being confined to the car. They'd entered Oregon a while back, and found the road to be less and less crowded as the miles ticked by. In fact, with the exception of one light blue sedan behind them, Starsky hadn't seen a car in over an hour. The road was buffeted on either side by ancient, giant redwood trees, towering high enough to block out any view of the woods beyond them. Although it was pleasant scenery, Hutch had long since grown bored with watching the trees slide by. Sam was asleep, stretched out on his favorite army blanket in the seat behind them.

"Starsk, I think we should find a place to spend the night. Let's check out the next exit, okay?"

"I've been watching for signs," Starsky answered. "Haven't seen anything in over a hundred miles; not even a gas station. No point in gettin' off the interstate if it won't take us anywhere." Starsky looked up at the rear view mirror. Oddly, he noticed for the first time, that the blue sedan was quickly closing the gap between them.

"Hutch...I think we got visitors."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Starsky nodded toward the mirror. "Take a look behind us."

Hutchinson twisted around in his seat and looked back in time to see the sedan closing in on their bumper. Before he could think about what was happening, the car swerved out from behind them, and came up even with the Torino. Jerking the wheel sharply to the right, Bernard slammed into the driver's side of the Torino, forcing Starsky to grapple with the steering wheel to keep it on the road.

"What the hell?" Starsky shouted. Sam bolted up from the back seat in time to be propelled headfirst into the dashboard when the sedan banged into them for the second time.

"I don't know, but I think it's safe to say this isn't a social call!" Hutch shouted back, as he fumbled at trying to help Sam up from the floorboard.

"Hang on." Starsky glanced at Hutch and the stunned dog. "I'm gonna try and out-manuever this turkey." Starsky yanked the steering wheel sharply to the left, forcing the Torino into the side of the sedan, effectively turning the tables on them in an instant. Caught off guard, Bernard found himself fighting to maintain control of his own vehicle for a few surprising seconds.

But before Starsky could pat himself on the back for that brilliant maneuver, a deafening explosion sounded from below the left, front fender of the Torino. Burning rubber and tread flew up from the pavement, striking the hood and windshield, as the tire disintegrated into a dozen ragged pieces. Starsky felt the car swerve, wrenching control of the steering wheel from his grip. He struggled to steer them back onto the road, but they were moving too fast, and the Ford was careening out of control. He seemed helpless to stop it.

“Starsk, look out!” Hutch shouted as the Torino left the road, crashing through the guard rail, and continuing to speed down a deep embankment toward the bottom of the ravine. Starsky hung onto the wheel, skillfully averting them from head-on collisions with a multitude of trees and jagged rocks, as they sped down the hill. Despite his best efforts, the car lurched forward, gaining momentum. Hutch saw the huge boulder seconds before the right side of the car collided with it, the metal shrieking like a banshee, as the fender and door scraped by. He instinctively threw himself to the left, barely avoiding injury from the impact. Memories of another time, another desperate, wild ride, speeding down a mountain side, rose up to haunt him. The Torino traveled several more feet before coming to rest at the bottom of the ravine, tilted at a 45 degree angle, wedging Starsky’s door against another outcropping of granite rock. Later, Hutch would wonder why the car didn’t roll—end up a pile of twisted metal. Or worse yet, why it didn’t explode upon impact with the boulder, but it was over in the blink of an eye.

The sedan pulled over and screeched to a halt at the top of the embankment. The two hitmen bailed out, and hurried to the edge, to see if either man had survived. “What do you think? Could they survive that?” Bernard asked, dabbing his sleeve at the perspiration beading his top lip.

White drew deeply on his cigarette, his face void of emotion, as he stared at the wrecked Ford at the bottom of the ravine. “Possibly...but I doubt it. Still, we’ll wait and make sure. From what Pinson said, his boss accepts no excuses for failure. If they survived, we’ll just have to finish the job.”

Hutch shook his head, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Starsky was slumped over the steering wheel, conscious, but obviously addled. Hutch reached over and gently shook him. “Starsky. Starsk, you okay?”

The dark-haired man raised his head, and blinked several times to clear his vision before focusing first on his partner, then Sam, who’d been catapulted to the floorboard at his feet. Starsky reached up and rubbed the left side of his face, which was already turning dark, and beginning to swell. “Yeah. My head hurts like hell, but I’ll live. How about you?”

“Just a little shaken up, I think. Looks like you’re gonna have a shiner, though.”

Sam stirred from his place on the floor, and whimpered pitifully before climbing up onto the seat between them. His nose twitched and wiggled, sniffing the air. His

canine sense of smell kicking in, the dog whined, apparently distressed by what he detected.

“Hey, what’s that?” Hutch lifted his head and also sniffed the air.

Starsky noted Sam’s agitation mounting by the second. Suddenly, he realized why. “Gas! It’s gas! Let’s get the hell outta here!”

Starsky could see the door on his side was a lost cause, bashed in where the car had come to rest, partially buried in the dirt, driver’s side down. “We’ll have to get out on your side,” he said, more calmly than he felt.

Hutch had already reached for the door handle on the passenger’s side, but with the first tug, the chrome plated mechanism fell off in his hand. He wasn’t surprised, seeing how the metal had been crushed by the first big rock they’d hit. He assessed the position of the window, which was open only a narrow gap at the top. Encouraged, he tried forcing it down, first using the damaged handle, then by pulling down on the glass. It didn’t budge, apparently caught within the flattened door. Not waiting to consider other alternatives, Hutch slammed his shoulder against the car door, applying his full weight. It didn’t give an inch. “Damn! It’s stuck!”

Now Starsky was alarmed. He checked his side again, confirming there was no escape route there. With the gas fumes growing stronger by the second, they both knew they were in serious trouble. The two men locked eyes solemnly. Starsky looked up at the narrow opening at the top of Hutch’s window and spoke first. “Get Sam outta here.”

Hutch nodded, understanding perfectly Starsky’s train of thought. “Sam...out, boy.” Hutch leaned back and patted the glass, below the opening. Sam whined, looked at both men, and hesitated. “Sam, Out!” Hutch said more sternly. Reluctantly, the rottweiler placed his paws through the gap between the glass and door frame, and wriggled his way out of the car. Once he was clear, Hutch reached beneath the seat and retrieved his Magnum, still in the shoulder holster.

Starsky looked at him, his expression one of disbelief. “What? You gonna shoot your way out? One spark and we’re history.”

Hutch glared back impatiently. “Give me a little credit, will you, Starsky? Do I look like a moron?” Hutch slid the Magnum from the holster, and using it as a makeshift hammer, delivered two hard blows to the window. At first, the glass only buckled and ran in spider web rivulets. He finished the job with two more hardy whacks. Pushing the small sections of broken glass out onto the ground, Hutch cleared their escape route. That done, he glanced over at his speechless partner, before hoisting himself up, and out the window, head-first. Following Hutch’s lead, Starsky retrieved his own revolver from beneath the driver’s seat and tucked it into the back of his waistband. As an afterthought, he scooped up the red ball wedged in the seat crack.

“Come on, Starsk! Get a move on!” Too anxious to wait for his friend to react, Hutch reached in and grabbed Starsky by the jacket collar and began dragging him, headfirst, through the window, away from the danger of the gasoline soaked car.

“I’m comin’, already!” Starsky snapped back, using his feet to propel himself the rest of the way out. Sam stood behind Hutch, barking, convinced the sound of his voice could somehow speed them up.

All three made a mad dash to distance themselves from the car. Stealing a glance over his shoulder, Starsky saw the first tiny flames lick up from under the car’s frame, and climb their way into the back seat of his beloved Torino.

“Oh, no....” The words tumbled from his mouth as softly as a dying man’s final breath. Hutch looked back, and realized the Ford was about to explode. Starsky stood frozen in disbelief.

Hutch gripped his partner’s arm gently, and dragged him another hundred feet before forcing him to the ground. “She’s gonna blow, Starsk. Don’t look...”

By now, the car was fully engulfed in flames that danced ever higher, as the gasoline fed their greedy need for fuel. Both men and the dog were so mesmerized by the impending destruction of Starsky’s car, they didn’t notice the two men standing near the broken guard rail.

When the Torino exploded, chunks of red and white metal flew through the air, engulfed in billowing black smoke. The flames shot higher, giving off a brow-scorching heat. Starsky, mouth agape, eyes riveted to the horrible scene before him, watched helplessly. His stark expression spoke louder than any words. Hutch knew, sensible or not, Starsky thought of that car as a living entity, an extension of his own personality. Sam moved in close to The Dark One and watched silently, sensing his loss.

Looking past Starsky, beyond the flames and smoke, Hutch spotted the two hit men, watching from the roadside above.

Chapter 5

“Starsk,” Hutch said gently. “I hate to say it, buddy, but we’d better get out of here. Looks like they’re not finished with us yet.”

At first, he thought Starsky hadn’t heard him. “Starsk?”

Vacant blue eyes turned slowly, and looked back at him in response. “What?”

Hutch nodded toward the road. In the distance, they saw Bernard and White, and they could tell the two assassins had spotted them too.

“Uh...yeah...right...right,” he whispered back, his voice still distracted.

Al Bernard began his erratic, slipping and sliding descent down the embankment toward them, while White kept vigil topside to ward off any unsuspecting motorists who may happen by. The first crack of gunfire sounded through the air, bringing Starsky back to the present. Hutch pulled him to the ground. “You got your gun?”

“Yeah, right here.” In one fluid move, Starsky reached back and retrieved the gun from his waistband, then quickly checked the chamber.

“Okay, what's your plan?” Hutch asked.

Starsky did a double-take. “My plan? Since when am I the mastermind? Besides, you never like my plans.”

Another bullet hit the ground, considerably closer than the last. Hutch gave his partner a dour look. “Okay. My plan says we head for the trees, find some cover, then make a stand.”

Starsky lifted his head and looked toward the forest. “Gonna be a pretty long sprint before we hit those trees. And these rocks'll be hard to maneuver.” He glanced back toward the stranger half-way to the bottom of the incline. “But it looks like we're runnin' low on time and options.”

Sam remained crouched in a down stay, next to Starsky's thigh, waiting for a signal. His training in recent months had taught him not to react to the sound of gunfire, unless given a direct command. The large, alert eyes watched both men closely.

“I say we split up, then meet just beyond the trees,” Starsky suggested.

Hutch nodded his agreement. “Take Sam with you.”

Starsky looked at Hutch and gave him a nervous smile. “Hey, Blondie...see ya on the other side.”

“I hope you mean that literally, and not philosophically,” Hutch answered dryly.

Starsky snorted at his partner's feeble attempt to lighten the moment. “Sam, come!” Starsky ordered the rottie; then they made a break for the woods.

Hutch fired off a warning round before making his get away too. Whereas, Starsky had fanned to the left, the blond detective went to the right, employing their normal pattern for entering any crime scene where they expected to encounter armed felons. The rocks were steep, and slippery as glass, but the uneven landscape gave the detectives more opportunity for cover. Hutch heard an unfamiliar discharge, and realized

the man stationed at the top of the ravine must be using a long range rifle now. Hutch knew the odds of eluding their stalkers had just dropped drastically.

Starsky swung to the left, Sam close to his right leg. The dog had picked up on this maneuver during their response to several cases over the past year, and would go with whichever cop gave the command. He knew their body language, how they moved, their speed—and he used it to pace his own movements. Despite his uneasiness with each volley of gunfire, Sam stayed as close to Starsky as possible, without tripping, or cutting him off. Crouching and zigzagging, they were making their way across the rough terrain, toward the cover of the trees looming up ahead.

When less than two hundred feet from their goal, a bullet from the high-powered rifle plowed into the granite near Sam's back legs. The big dog yelped, as shards of gravel flew up and struck him in the withers. Starsky turned, thinking Sam was hit, and in doing so, lost his own footing and fell hard against the rocks. The Smith and Wesson flew from his grasp and skittered along the granite slab before tumbling down through a deep crevice between two of the gigantic boulders. Starsky clamored after it, grabbing and clutching, the gun just beyond his reach. Downward it fell, as though suspended in slow motion—hitting bottom, with a clang seconds later. Starsky peered through the crevice, but the darkness prevented him from seeing where the gun had landed.

Seeing his buddy go down, Sam forgot about the pain in his back legs and hastened to Starsky's side. Loyalty overpowering fear, he sprinted across the slippery granite, mindless of the bullets whizzing past his head. Dazed, the detective lay prone on the rocks, trying to suck the wind back into his lungs. His efforts were further hampered by Sam, anxiously nudging his neck and shoulders, urging him to his feet. "Okay boy, okay," Starsky mumbled, still trying to clear his head enough to sit up.

Hutch had disappeared beyond the tree line, making the dog even more uneasy about Starsky being down. Sam scanned the terrain in the direction from which they'd come, and saw Bernard shortening the distance between them. Unsure what to do next, Sam did what any self-respecting dog did when he panicked—he barked.



The excited, familiar bark was his first warning that something was wrong. Hutch lifted his head and listened. Again...more frantic. This time he zeroed in on the direction—behind him. How could that be? How could Sam and Starsky still be out there? He turned and ran back toward the clearing, where the remnants of the car still burned. That's when he spotted Starsky—flat on the ground, Sam positioned between him and the armed man bearing down on them at a moderate speed. Starsky was trying to get to his feet, but seemed to be having difficulty.

"Stay down!" Hutch shouted a warning, as he watched Bernard skid to a stop, and raise his gun to take aim at Starsky.

The dark-haired detective finally sat up, just in time to see the rottweiler charge Bernard, preventing the gunman from firing. Sam went directly for the hand that held the weapon, his massive jaws clamping down with a ferocity foreign to his usually gentle nature. From the roadside, White took aim at the dog who, by now had a firm grip on his accomplice. Before he could pull off a shot, the two toppled to the ground, vying for control of the gun.

Hutch, grateful for the distraction, ran toward his partner, who was sitting up, but still seemed a bit dazed. “Starsky! Stay down!” he shouted again.

Starsky blinked two or three times, refocusing on Hutch, then on the dog. Sam had the hit man pinned down, still clinging to the hand that held the gun. As the dog chomped down, and the flesh around his wrist began bleeding, Bernard screamed, “Get this damn dog off me! Somebody call the bastard off!”

Believing they were out of rifle range, Hutch ran toward them, reaching Starsky just as he got to his feet. “Drop the gun, and I’ll call him off,” Starsky shouted.

“Okay! Okay! Anything you say!” Bernard answered. “Just call him off!” The gun clattered to the ground, next to his head.

“Sam! Bring me the gun!” Starsky shouted. Instantly, the dog ended his attack, but refused to relinquish his grip on Bernard’s bloodied wrist. “Sam! Bring me the gun!” Starsky repeated.

The dog’s frenzied breathing slowed, and his hot breath fanned Bernard’s face for interminable seconds before he abandoned his position on the injured man’s chest, and picked up the gun. As he trotted back toward Starsky and Hutch, a rifle shot rang out from the roadside above. The bullet smashed into the rocks just beyond the dog, before ricocheting up, and grazing Hutch on the temple. Hutch fell back, dropping the Magnum, as the searing pain flashed through his head.

“Hutch!” Starsky, hit the ground, scooped up the Magnum, then turned it on the attacker, and returned fire. He knew full-well White was beyond his range, but rage and adrenaline outweighed logic. He lowered the gun and took aim at the injured gunman lying on the rocks before him.

“You got one chance to call him off,” he said with deadly calm. “Tell him if he fires another shot, I’ll blow you away—right here, right now. Tell him to throw his gun over the side, then you’re gonna climb up that hill ahead of us, and we’re takin’ the car and leavin’.”

Clutching his bleeding wrist to his chest, Bernard remained silent.

“I mean it. Tell him!” The hard lines around Starsky’s mouth, and the fire in his eyes convinced Bernard that the cop meant business.

“You think he gives a rat’s ass about me, pig?” Though no longer a formidable opponent, Bernard hoped he could still bluff Starsky with a defiant attitude.

“I’m willin’ to see. Are you?” Starsky challenged.

Bernard swallowed hard, his bluster fleeing in the face of fear. “He’ll never let you take the car. Hell, he’d shoot me himself before he’d do that!” For once in his life, Al Bernard was truthful. His only chance was to try for a compromise.

As he considered his predicament, beads of perspiration formed on his top lip. “Look, I’m telling you the truth. He’ll never let you drive away from here. The best I can do is try and get him to put the gun down long enough for you to make a run for it.”

On the road above, White held Starsky in his gun site. What was going on down there? He could pick off the cop easily; but then, possibly, the dark-haired pig would shoot Bernard on his way down. Not that he held any great regard for his partner in crime, but the man was very useful to him. It was hard to find an accomplice you could trust, especially, one who willingly did the dirty work. Bernard wasn’t exactly bright—to the contrary. He’d never even questioned White when ordered to run down the steep embankment into the ravine, to face two apparently rough, seasoned cops. Yeah, maybe he’d hold off a few seconds and see what happened next.

Bernard curled his lip in disgust. “You may as well accept my offer, pig. It’s the best one you’re gonna get. Besides, you ain’t gonna shoot me. You’re a cop. You don’t shoot unarmed men.”

Starsky pulled back the hammer on the 44. “Oh, really? And who’s to know you were unarmed? I’ve got your gun right here.” He reached down and plucked the pistol from Sam’s lathered jaws. “I mean, your friend up there just shot my partner. And like Hutch always says, ‘Ya don’t mess with a man’s partner.’”

With his right hand, Starsky reached down and touched Hutch’s face, briefly diverting his eyes from the man on the ground in front of him.

“You okay...hmmm? Answer me. You okay?”

“Yeah...sure...just a graze,” Hutch responded, less than convincingly. Still, Starsky could tell he was alert, and seemed capable of comprehending their dilemma.

Starsky lowered his voice so only Hutch could hear. “Well, partner, I think we got ourselves a situation here. Chances are, he’s right. I don’t believe his partner’s gonna give up the car. Should we go for broke, or settle for getting a head start on foot?”

“A car would be great, but how are we gonna climb out of this ravine and hold a gun on our new little friend here? And what’s to keep his pal from picking us off on the way up.”

Starsky considered the logic in Hutch's statement. Either way, this wasn't going to be easy. “Think you could hold the gun on him, while tie him up?”

“Sure.”

“Okay...okay. Can you make to those trees once we put him outta commission?”

“I told you, it’s just a graze. I can do it.” Hutch met Starsky’s probing stare, hoping to persuade his partner he was telling the truth.

Not completely convinced, but out of options, Starsky looked back at Bernard. Holding the Magnum firmly, he aimed it directly at the wounded man’s forehead. “Tell him. Tell him to put down the gun, before I put a bullet between those beady, little eyes of yours.” Starsky cocked his head slightly, waiting for a response.

Bernard turned toward the road and called up, “Don’t fire! You hear me? Don’t shoot! Put the gun down, or he’ll kill me!”

Although he didn’t drop the rifle, White lowered it from his shoulder, deciding there would be a better time. One of the cops looked injured. He and Bernard could track them down easily, and shoot them in the woods. In fact, the idea of having a little sport with them excited him. Yes, it would be fun to see the fear in their eyes, once they were cornered. More fun than picking them off from this distance.

“Now, take off your belt and throw it over here. Nice and easy.” Starsky kept the Magnum trained on Bernard, who clumsily removed his belt with one hand, then tossed it a foot or so in front of the two cops.

Starsky knelt down next to Hutch, passing the Magnum over to him. “I’ll make it quick. Hang on to his gun too.” He laid the pistol down on the ground next to Hutch, then stood up and approached Bernard. “Roll over, turkey, and put your hands behind your back.”

“But...but...I’m bleeding,” Bernard whined, drawing his injured wrist closer to his chest. “I need to keep pressure on it.”

“I don’t think you’re gonna bleed to death before your buddy gets down here. But if I were you, I’d get to a doctor fast. Sam’s not had his shots. No tellin’ what kinda nasty germs might be creepin’ through your bloodstream already,” Starsky lied. He was rewarded with a look of panic from the gunman.

After binding Bernard's hands securely, Starsky returned to Hutch and relieved him of the Magnum. Then, tucking Bernard's gun into his waistband, he helped Hutch to his feet. The blond wavered slightly, as his surroundings spun like a tilt-a-whirl.

"Come on, buddy. Can ya walk?"

"Sure I can. I told you I'm fine," Hutch grumbled. Starsky still had his doubts. But the important thing now, was to get Hutch out of rifle range.

"Yeah, you look terrific, too," Starsky said cryptically. "Head for the trees. Stay low. I don't trust the creep with the rifle. Sam!"

The dog came to attention, looking up at The Dark One for his orders. "Sam, go with Hutch."

Hutch and the dog took off for the trees behind them, while Starsky kept a bead on Bernard. Once he thought they'd had enough time to make it, Starsky glanced over his shoulder and saw that Hutch and Sam were out of sight. He turned his attention back to the hit man on the ground. "If you're smart, you'll get the hell outta here and leave us alone."

Bernard lifted his head and tried to look over his shoulder at Starsky, but the movement caused pain to shoot up his arm, into his shoulder. "You might think I'm done for, but don't think you can escape, pig. I know my partner, and he won't let you get away. You're both dead men."

"I don't think so," Starsky answered. "You don't know MY partner. We've taken down more turkeys like you than I can count on both hands and feet. You're right about one thing—I don't like to shoot an unarmed man. But if I see you following us, I'll blow you and your pal to kingdom come—gun or no gun. Understand?"

Bernard didn't doubt for a second that the detective would carry out his threat without compunction.

Starsky slowly backed away, holding the gun on Bernard until he could duck behind the protruding rocks, then began zigzagging his way toward the tree line. With the armed hit man still up on the crest above, Starsky realized this was going to be their best opportunity to escape into the camouflage of the woods. He just hoped Hutch wasn't losing too much blood, and wouldn't be too weak to make a run for it.

Chapter 6

Hutch stumbled toward the copse of trees, Sam beside him, measuring his steps to keep up with Hutch's long-legged gait. The injured man swiped at a steady trickle of blood that seeped down his face from the bullet wound. He was having trouble focusing,

but Sam seemed to sense that, and on several occasions, bumped against Hutch's thigh, diverting his path around jagged rocks and small patches of vegetation that clung tenaciously to the precious soil they'd found among the granite crevices.

Just as they reached the shade of the forest, the dizziness engulfed him again and he doubled over, losing the contents of his stomach. Sam stood beside him, waiting for The Light One's next move. Hutch staggered a few more feet and found a soft spot, then sank gratefully to the ground to catch his breath and wipe away the blood with his handkerchief.

Already, the sun was beginning to dip in the west, and Hutch realized with trepidation that he, Starsky, and Sam would be stranded in the woods that night. He just hoped they could avoid being discovered until they found a way out of there the next day.

Starsky broke through an opening in the trees about fifty feet away. Sam barked, alerting him of their location, then plopped down on the ground beside Hutch. Sore from his fall on the rocks, Starsky half limped and half-jogged toward them, not speaking until he was close enough to do so without shouting. He knelt down on the ground in front of Hutch and looked him over quickly, assessing his general condition. What he saw worried him. "How ya doin'?" Huh? You gonna be able to hike outta here?"

Hutch looked up at Starsky, and could see concern etched in his features. "I've been better," Hutch admitted, with a wry little smile. "But everybody knows, I can keep up with you on my worst day."

Starsky knew the boast was for his benefit. "Yeah, well, we'll just see about that, Blondie," he came back. "Sam did a number on that guy, but we still have to deal with his partner. When I took off after you, he was still standing up by the road. But I'd be willin' to bet they'll be on our trail soon."

When Hutch didn't respond, Starsky looked at him thoughtfully, realizing he was probably in pain, even if he didn't admit it. "Hey." Hutch looked up as Starsky cleared his throat self-consciously. "Listen...thanks for comin' back for me. If I hadn't lost my footing back there, you would've been safe in the woods right now instead of bleedin' all over everything."

Hutch looked away, not entirely at ease with Starsky's acknowledgment of the risk he'd taken. "You'd have done the same for me."

"Yeah...I guess I would'a. But, thanks, anyway."

Starsky stood up and pulled Bernard's gun out of his belt and checked the cylinder. Only one round. Damn! He'd hang on to it, though. One shot was better than none.

Hutch looped an affectionate arm around the rottweiler who still sat beside him. “Good boy, Sam. At least you improved the odds. You really came through for us, didn’t you, fella?” The dog licked Hutch’s face, his tail beating a tattoo on the ground beneath him. “Maybe they’ll back off,” Hutch speculated hopefully. “You know, look for medical attention for Sam’s new ‘chew toy’.”

His lip swollen and his face bruised, Starsky painfully mugged a smile, picturing Sam carrying a miniature of the gunman around in his mouth like a big rag doll. “Dream on, partner. These guys are professionals. They’d stab their dear old granny in the back if the contract was sweet enough.”

“Care to guess who’s behind this?” Hutch asked.

“Way I see it, could only be one person.”

“Morrisetti,” Hutch finished for him. “What I don’t understand is, why now? Why not before the trial?”

“Revenge...it has no time limit. It may be too late to keep us from testifying, but that doesn’t mean he’s gonna forget what we did. Besides, ten to one, he’s already filed an appeal.”

Starsky reached down and hooked his hands under Hutch’s elbows, helping him to a standing position. “If you can walk, Blintz, we better get the hell outta Dodge while we can.”

“Right,” Hutch replied, weaving back and forth slightly, while trying to regain his equilibrium.

For the first time, Starsky looked closely at the bullet wound. Even though it appeared to be superficial, there was a lot of blood—enough to make him nervous. He reached into his back pocket and produced his handkerchief, then realized it would be too small for his purposes. Putting the white kerchief back into his pocket, Starsky pulled out his lucky bandanna, which he folded into a long bandage and wound around Hutch's head to curtail the bleeding.

“What are you doing?” Hutch complained, swatting at Starsky’s hands.

“What do ya think, dummy? Tryin’ to stop the bleeding. Don’t wanna pass out while we’re tryin’ to outrun these creeps, do you?”

“My head hurts like hell, Starsk.” He winced as Starsky pulled the bandage tighter and secured it with a square knot. “And my vision’s a little blurry. If it hadn’t been for Sam, I would’ve had trouble getting around those rocks.”

At the sound of his name, the rottweiler stood up and watched the two men with interest, wondering if they were about to embark on some new game, or if this was going to be a work session.

Starsky's voice softened. "Stay close to me, okay? We'll get outta here." He laid an arm around Hutch's shoulders. "We can outsmart these turkeys," he added, with just a little too much bravado.

"Then, I say let's get the show on the road." Hutch tried to match Starsky's enthusiasm and optimism, but wasn't doing such a hot job. "Which way do we go, partner?"

"I don't see as how it matters, as long as we don't go back the way we came in." Starsky looked around, getting his bearings. "Let's head south. Maybe we can double back and come out on the highway further down."

"Lead the way," Hutch answered.

Starsky plunged ahead, taking the lead, seeking the path of least resistance amongst the thickly growing trees and underbrush. Hutch stayed right on his heels, and Sam, only a step or two behind Hutch. The dog periodically looked back, as though checking to see if they were being pursued. All three marched along silently, concentrating on moving fast, and listening for any sound to warn they'd been followed.



By the time Benny White reached the bottom of the ravine, the two cops were long gone. Without a word, he yanked Bernard into a sitting position and untied the leather belt binding his hands behind his back.

Knowing White was furious, Al nervously launched into 'damage control' mode. "Thanks, Benny. Thanks for not letting him shoot me."

"I should've known you'd bungle it. You screw up everything I tell you to do...I should've known."

"Wasn't my fault, Benny," Bernard offered in his own defense. "How was I to know that mutt would attack? You didn't think about it either." Staring down at his bloodied wrist, he continued. "How far are we from a hospital? I got'a have this treated right away."

White glared at him like he'd just sprouted a second head. "What the hell are you talking about? You know we can't leave now."

The look on White's face was dead serious. Still, Bernard was in a good bit of pain, and wanted a doctor to look at the punctures in his wrist. "What if the mutt had some disease? Rabies, even? The cop said he hadn't had his shots."

White stared at him contemptuously, regretting his decision not to let the cop blow away the sniveling fool.

Fear and discomfort prompted Bernard to press the issue. "Come on, Benny, you can't be serious. Let's get out of here, go to a hospital. I need a doctor to look at this." He searched White's face for some sign of compassion, but saw none.

"Out of the question," White snapped back. "Do you have any idea who we're working for? Leo Morrisetti, that's who! If we come back without burning those cops, our lives aren't worth spit. If he didn't kill us, at the very least, we'd never get work in this town again."

"I don't care about that, Benny. We can go east, New York...they always need someone with our talent in the Big Apple."

"No! I'm not telling you again. Now, shut up! I'll bandage you up, and when we're done here, I'll take you to one of the free clinics. We can't go to an emergency room. Too likely that some overeager intern would think it's his civic duty to file a report on it."

Bernard held his tongue. He knew any further argument would just make things worse. You didn't work with a guy three years and not know just how far to push him. He'd seen White's temper first-hand, and wanted no part of it.

"Okay, Benny. But you promise, as soon as we're done here—"

"I said I'd take you and I will!" White shouted. "Now, let me see what all the belly aching's about."

Disregarding Bernard's pain, White yanked the other man's wrist toward him, and began assessing the damage. "This is what you want to risk seeing a doctor for?" He snatched the bloody handkerchief out of Al's hand and quickly tied it around the wrist, covering the bite marks without making any effort to clean or sanitize the wound. "Where's your gun?" he asked, noticing for the first time that it was missing.

Bernard swallowed hard, afraid to admit that a dog had taken it away from him. There'd be hell to pay now.

Chapter 7

Starsky was moving pretty fast, and Hutch was finding it more and more difficult to keep up. They'd been hiking at this pace for almost an hour, when he noticed that their surroundings had taken on a gray hue. The colors around him seemed to be fading into black and white, and his head felt like it had a sledge hammer pounding inside. Hutch knew they had to keep moving, and if he complained, Starsky would insist on stopping to let him rest. At this point, the risk was just too great. Sam, on the other hand, had grown restless and dissatisfied with the slow pace. He forged ahead, taking the lead, but never straying far from the two men. Starsky was content to let him go on ahead, as long as he stayed in sight.

Periodically, Starsky looked back, watching his partner for signs of fatigue. When he noticed Hutch was losing ground, he slowed down and waited for him to catch up.

"You okay?" He could see that the bleeding on Hutch's temple had stopped, but his face had taken on an unhealthy pallor. "Need to stop awhile?" He reached up and touched Hutch's face to check for fever, and was relieved to feel cool skin beneath his hand.

"I think we should keep moving," Hutch answered, with little conviction. "It's nearly dark now."

Starsky thought that odd, considering it wasn't quite six p.m.. The sun wouldn't go down for another couple of hours. But before he could say so, Sam came to a sudden stop about ten feet ahead of them. His early warning radar kicking in, the dog's hackles rose slightly. Starsky put up his hand, motioning for Hutch to wait, then signaled with a finger to his lips, to be quiet.

Sam advanced slowly, snuffing the ground before him. His feet quietly padded over the dense, pine-needle covered ground, as he swung out to the right, circling slowly, and eventually returning to the point from which he started. Cautiously, the dog moved inward with each cycle tightening the circle, making it smaller and smaller with each go round. Still the hair along his neck and shoulders stood straight up, cautioning of some unseen danger. Following instincts inbred since dogs first walked the earth, the rottweiler drew himself up aggressively. Curling back his lip in a show of gleaming white teeth, he growled, warning the two men he'd found his prey.

Starsky eased forward, not knowing what to expect. "What ya got, Big Dog?" Starsky spoke just above a whisper. "A snake?" Since the incident at Dobey's cabin, Starsky's aversion to snakes had intensified ten-fold. The dog chuffed softly, waiting for Starsky to take a look for himself. Beneath the soft cover of the pine straw, Starsky saw a gleaming, silver object. Unsure what he was up against, he looked around quickly and found a dead branch lying where the last heavy wind had blown it from the tall tree just above. Using the sturdy stick, Starsky carefully moved the pine straw aside.

“What the hell?” Even after studying the contraption closer, he couldn’t identify it.

“What is it, Starsk?” Hutch moved up to where Starsky and Sam were hunkered down, staring at the foreign object on the ground. Though his vision was blurry, and the darkness was even closer than a few moments ago, Hutch was still able to see the object of their attention. “I thought those damn things had been outlawed,” he muttered with disgust.

“What is it?”

“Haven’t you ever seen a steel-jaw leg-hold trap?”

“Heard of ‘em, but never saw one. We don’t do much trappin’ in New York,” Starsky answered dryly.

“They’re the cruelest trapping device ever invented by man.” The jagged steel teeth of the trap lay dormant, waiting for an unsuspecting victim to pass too closely. When Sam eased his snout a little closer, Hutch grabbed his collar and snatched him back roughly. “Stay away, Sam!”

“Hey, relax,” Starsky said, laying his hand on Hutch’s arm. “He’s not gonna get too near. Remember, he’s the one who found it and warned us.”

“Sorry, Big Dog.” Hutch scratched the rottweiler’s ear contritely. Sam leaned into his hand, reveling in the affectionate touch. “That trap’s big enough to take his leg off, or even break his neck, if he stuck his head too close.”

“So, what kind of animals do they hunt with these things?” Starsky’s curiosity was piqued by the unusual device.

“You could catch just about anything you wanted with one this big. Most of the time they’re smaller, and they’re used to trap foxes, wolves, beavers, whatever has the misfortune of happening up on it. That’s one of the drawbacks. They’re non-discriminating. Deer, squirrels, rabbits, anything could step on one. My Dad lost a couple of great hunting dogs to traps that someone illegally set on our land.” A look of sadness touched the crystal blue eyes, as Hutch thought of Buddy and Duke for the first time in more than twenty years.

“What would one this size be used for?”

Hutch leaned in a little closer for a better look. “You could catch a bear in one this big. Trouble is, he’d probably lie here and suffer for days before dying. It’s a documented fact that some animals chew off their own limbs to escape. Any self-respecting trapper doesn’t use them at all. There’s really no reason to.”

“Why do they use ‘em then?” A frown creased Starsky’s brow, as he processed what Hutch was telling him. He realized he was pretty ignorant about the whole subject, never having hunted or trapped in his youth.

“Cheaper than the humane traps,” Hutch answered. “Also, there’s very little chance of an animal getting out of one. Most of the people who lay these traps don’t check them regularly, and they want to make sure their catch stays caught.”

Hutch ran a hand over his face. “The thought of what could have happened if you or Sam had stepped on that damn thing turns my stomach.”

Starsky swallowed hard, and looked at the trap again, grateful for Sam’s keen senses. “You think you could trap a man with this thing?” Starsky asked, the wheels turning in his head.

“Sure, if it was camouflaged well enough.”

“You think we should leave it set?” Starsky weighed his words thoughtfully. “I mean, it could slow down those two jokers if they pick up our trail.”

“And, if they miss it, it’ll still be here, ready to spring shut on some poor, unsuspecting animal,” Hutch reminded him.

Starsky thought about it for only a heartbeat, then jabbed the pressure pad on the trap with the end of the branch. The diabolical device slammed shut like the jaws of a lethal predator, crushing the branch as if it was no more than a spindly twig. Startled, Sam let out a yelp, before ducking for cover behind Hutch’s right leg.

Hutch looked at Starsky and smiled sadly. “It might’ve slowed them down, but you did the right thing.”

Starsky recovered the sprung trap with pine needles, concealing the evidence they’d passed this way. “Yeah, nobody, animal or man, deserves that.” He clapped Hutch’s shoulder. “What say we put a little more distance between us and the bad guys, huh? We still have a couple of hours before dark.”



By the time Al Bernard had climbed back up the incline to get another gun from the car, then rejoined White, the two detectives had more than an hour head start on them. White looked up from where he sat loading fresh shells into the magazine of the high-powered rifle. “Took your own sweet time, didn’t you?” he complained.

Ignoring the jibe, Bernard reached into his jacket pockets and retrieved two large bottles of spring water and tossed one to the other man. “I brought back a couple of them

bottles of water you're always sucking on, and these crackers I found in the glove compartment. Thought we could use them on the trail."

Surprisingly impressed that his imbecile partner had thought of something as fundamental as the need for food and fluids, White caught the crackers and water bottle, tucking them into his own pockets. He accepted it without comment, unwilling to give Bernard the satisfaction of praise for thinking on his own for a change. He certainly didn't want to encourage that behavior. He preferred to do the thinking for the both of them.

Bernard opened the cap on his own bottle and took a long, thirsty swig, recapped it, and placed it back into his pocket. "I bet those cops are wishing they had a drink right now." He smiled, picturing the two men stumbling through the woods, dehydrated and tired.

"Finding water is the least of their worries," Benny said sadistically. "The hunt is about to begin—and that means the fun is about to begin." His eyes glowed with an unnatural cruelty. "Did you bring back the flashlight and compass like I told you?"

"Sure, Benny. But I don't get it. What do we know about tracking somebody down in the woods? I've never done a job like this. What if they get away?"

White's lip curled back into a caricature of a smile. "Just so happens the only thing I ever learned from my old man was how to hunt and track. The only time he thought I could do anything half right was when I'd track down an animal and kill it. White's memories rushed forward, melting with the present, the smell of the pine needles and redwood trees transporting him back to his unhappy youth growing up in Oregon.

"You used to hunt?"

"Yeah. My old man lived to hunt. He said the thrill was in the 'chase'. At least he was right about something." A cruel smile twisted his lips. "He taught me a lot about tracking, and living off the land."

Bernard shook his head in disbelief. The two had never shared personal details of their past, and this revelation took him by surprise. This was a far cry from the Benny he knew.

"Just follow me, and I guarantee we'll get them. I'm tired of the same old routine. The chase will be exciting."

"I just hope we catch 'em soon. My whole arm feels like it's on fire," Al Bernard whined.

"Shut up about your arm, will you? I've already told you, I'm not taking you to a doctor until we finish this job. So I suggest you shut your yap and get moving!"

Chapter 8

The two detectives trudged on, Sam in the lead, having earned the honor by proving himself a valuable scout. For the past hour, it seemed to Hutch that an opaque, gray curtain had dropped over his eyes. Images blurred, dissolving into colorless, indefinable shapes. It was getting dark, and he hoped Starsky would soon find a place to hole up for the night. Though his spirit was willing, Hutch wasn't sure he could keep up much longer. For the time being, he just concentrated on staying within arm's length of his partner, but the pounding in his head was beginning to make even that small task near impossible.

Starsky realized that in his eagerness to put as much distance as possible between them and the two gunmen, he was pushing Hutch pretty hard. In the last twenty minutes, he'd watched his partner's face fade to an ashen gray, and his steps grow more labored. But Starsky was spurred on by the reality that all that stood between them and the assassins was one bullet in the gun he'd confiscated from the shooter, and two shells in the Magnum. He wouldn't kid himself. He knew that Hutch was in no condition to fire a gun. So the odds in their favor of coming through this alive were on a downhill slide.

He stole another glance back at Hutch, just in time to see him stumble, and grab for the nearest tree to keep from falling. Starsky quickly reached out and caught him with a steady hand. Wobbly-kneed, and dizzy, Hutch finally righted himself, but Starsky was reluctant to relinquish his grip. "You doin' okay?" he asked.

"Me? Yeah," Hutch lied, unsuccessfully. "Never been better."

Starsky wasn't buying it. He realized Hutch couldn't go much further. "You're a lousy liar, Hutchinson," he said, half-seriously. "Look, I promise I'm gonna find us a place to hide out overnight. Can ya hang on a little longer, till the sun goes down?"

Hutch raised his face, clearly confused by what Starsky had said.

"Hutch? You okay?" Concerned by his reaction, Starsky carefully eased him to the ground. Hutch still didn't answer.

"Talk to me...Hutch?"

"It...it's already pretty dark, Starsk." Hutch looked toward the sky, then around them. "I think maybe we need to stop till morning...that's all," he stuttered, an element of anxiety straining his voice.

Starsky blanched when he realized what Hutch was trying to say. He discreetly looked around them and saw the daylight still plainly filtering through the canopy of trees. A knot of fear pooled in his stomach. Anxious not to alarm Hutch, he lay a

reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Yeah...right...I think you’re right, buddy. I just got’a find us a safe place.”

Starsky had to know. At the risk of scaring Hutch out of his wits, he had to know just how much he could see. “But first, do me a favor, okay?” Starsky held up three fingers before Hutch’s face. “Take a look here, and tell me—how many fingers?”

It seemed a nonsensical question to Hutch, and it irritated him that Starsky was playing stupid games at a time like this. “What? What the hell are you talking about, Starsky? How many fingers?”

“Humor me, okay? Tell me how many fingers you see.”

Hutch squinted his eyes, straining to focus on the pale, blurry image before him. As he began to comprehend his inability to perform this simple task, a myriad of emotions flitted across his face, none of them encouraging to Starsky.

“Two...I...I mean...three...no...” He stuttered, uncertain. Slowly he reached out before him and grasped Starsky’s hand. “Starsk?” His grip tightened. “What...what’s going on? I can’t focus...” His voice diminished with each syllable.

Starsky was silent, not trusting his own voice to speak. In that instant, the reality of just how critical their situation was, began to hit home. How would they get out of these woods with Hutch injured, and gradually going blind? Not to mention staying just a step ahead of two professional hit men? One look at Hutch’s face, and Starsky knew he had to keep his head, or they’d both be dead before daybreak.

“It’s okay...” he whispered, as he pulled Hutch toward him, and wrapped a protective arm around his shoulders. “It’s gonna be okay, buddy. It’s just a temporary thing. You lost a little blood when that bullet grazed you.” When Hutch’s hand tightened on his arm, Starsky knew he wasn’t reassured. “Come on, partner, we’ve been through a lot worse,” he cajoled. “We’re gonna get outta here, I’ll get you to a doctor, and they’ll fix you up good as new. I promise.”

Hutch needed to believe him. He pulled back from Starsky and tried vainly to see his eyes. Hutch knew he could always read the truth in those eyes. “Starsk, I’m going blind, aren’t I?” he choked out.

“No,” Starsky answered adamantly. “I told you—it’s temporary.”

Hutch reached up and unconsciously rubbed his eyes, as if doing so would bring his sight back. “Starsky,” he said soberly, “listen to me.” He looked up and saw the blurred image of his partner’s face. “You can’t get out of these woods alive if I’m stumbling along behind you, slowing you down every step of the way.”

“What are you sayin’?” He already had a pretty good idea where this was leading, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“What I’m saying is, you and Sam should go on without me.”

“No way.”

“Just how do you think we’re going to get out of here?” Hutch challenged.

“Same way we get outta any jam—together.” Starsky’s voice was resolute and matter-of-fact.

Hutch took a deep breath and loosened his iron grip on Starsky’s arm.

“Hey...”

Hutch looked up at him again. “Hey, what?”

“You believe me, don’t ‘cha?”

Hutch nodded, and gave him a half-hearted smile. “Yeah...”

Not satisfied, Starsky pressed further. “Do you trust me, or not?”

Exasperated, Hutch closed his eyes a moment before answering. “Now what kind of a dumb question is that, Starsky? You know I trust you. Think I’d turn you loose with a loaded gun around Sam and me if I didn’t trust you?” Hutch’s lips twitched, almost smiling, but then went somber again. Starsky didn’t laugh.

The silence hung heavily between them. The question still unanswered. When Hutch raised his face, all traces of humor had vanished. His voice raw with emotion, he whispered, “Do you really need to ask?”

Starsky saw the desperation in his eyes, and heard the pain in his voice. Reaching down, he laid his hand over Hutch’s. “If you really trust me, Hutch, you know I won’t let ya down. I say we’re gonna get outta here, and I mean it. Me and Thee. Hmmm?” Starsky waited expectantly.

“Okay...all right....Me and Thee.” Hutch knew it was pointless to argue. Starsky was too stubborn—and they were wasting time. “Just tell me what you want me to do.” There was no doubt in his mind that if anyone could find a way out, Starsky could. And maybe he was right about the blindness. Maybe it wouldn’t get any worse...maybe it was temporary. Hutch pushed back the ensuing panic, refusing to think of the possibility that it wasn’t.

Starsky looked around, noticing for the first time that Sam was no where in sight. “Now where did that big goomba go?” he mumbled.

“What?”

“Sam...where’d he go? I don’t have time to fool around lookin’ for him. Damn!” Starsky stood up, frustrated and torn between his concern for the dog and his unwillingness to leave Hutch alone and unprotected. Sensing Starsky’s dilemma, Hutch spoke the words he knew were rushing through his partner’s mind.

“Go look for him, Starsk. I’ll wait here. You can find him faster without me.”

Starsky hesitated. He knew neither of them would willingly leave the dog behind; but he also knew time was precious, and they had little to spare. He looked around, then back at Hutch, sitting on the ground, looking helpless and scared.

“Starsk. I mean it. Just hurry, okay? I’ll be fine.”

Knowing that indecisiveness was not a luxury he could afford, Starsky quickly pulled the confiscated pistol from his belt and handed it to Hutch. “Okay. Take this, and keep low. If you hear anything, just try to stay outta sight. I’m gonna look around for him, but I won’t go far and I won’t be gone more than ten minutes.”

“Got it.” Hutch nodded.

“And I’m gonna kill that big dummy when I do find him!”

“Hey.” Hutch smiled. “You’re lecturing me about being careful and being quiet. And you’re about to charge out of here like a bull elephant on a tirade. Go easy on Sam. Okay? He’s just a dog, you know.”

“Yeah? Well try telling him that.”

As Starsky set off in search of Sam, he remembered another time when he’d left Hutch alone in the woods. The results had been disastrous. When their plane had gone down in the vast wilderness area of the Klamack forest, he’d been totally unprepared. The experience he’d gained then gave him the knowledge and confidence he’d need to get them out of here alive this time.



Sam wandered ahead, stopping occasionally to sniff some unfamiliar oddity. He sensed that things weren’t going well, that both of his humans were edgy and serious, like sometimes when they were working. Though many humans wouldn’t believe it possible, the dog did comprehend the difference between work and play. He was sensitive to the changes in Starsky’s and Hutch’s moods, intensity, anxiety level—and especially, fear.

The thing that unnerved Sam the most right now was Hutch's strange behavior. The Light One, usually sure-footed and confident, now seemed hesitant and insecure with every step. More than once, the dog had gently guided him around some impediment blocking their way.

So far, it was unclear to Sam what was expected of him. He figured somehow, he'd just know when the time came...like earlier, in the ravine. His heart had pounded fiercely when the armed man had been bearing down on The Dark One. The rottweiler hadn't waited for the command to attack; he'd acted entirely on the need to protect someone he loved. But they hadn't seen another human for over two hours, and he suspected the danger had passed. So why were things still so tense?

Sam tried not to stray far, but when he caught sight of his arch enemy, 'the squirrel', it was hard to remember he had a greater mission. Long ago, he'd declared war on any, and all rodents who dared cross the boundaries into his domain. In doing so, he'd entertained himself endless hours, spying on, and stalking the fast-footed, furry, little creatures, never once successfully bringing about the demise of a single prey. Now he was finding, to his dismay, that they seemed to have free reign in this strange, new frontier. He zigzagged back and forth, his nose to the ground, enjoying the chase, but guiltily knowing his humans weren't going to be too happy if they called and he didn't come. Still, the diversion was too great to pass up!

It had been hours since Sam had eaten the hamburgers Hutch gave him in the car. Between hunger pangs, and his instinctual need to chase the squirrels, the dog was destined for trouble. In the quiet forest, it was easy to detect the rustling leaves as tiny squirrel feet scurried in every direction. Deeper he went, disregarding time and distance.

After aimlessly chasing several admirable foes, Sam zeroed in on one particularly big, fat, gray squirrel. The creature's considerable experience evading larger, cagier adversaries than a domesticated dog gave him the edge he needed to outfox the enemy. Oblivious to the cunning and dexterity of his foe, the rottweiler pursued the rodent with abandon, crashing through the bushes, over rotted, fallen tree limbs, his big paws, plodding along, with little chance of success. The squirrel, tiring of the contest, bounded up a great, old redwood, scampering to the top, ending the competition in the blink of an eye. Sam's skidded to a stop, astounded by his prey's disappearance. His head lifted high, he sniffed the air, trying to pick up the scent. But instead of squirrel, his snout detected the aroma of food—faint, but distinct.

Mr. Squirrel was forgotten, as the rottie followed his nose, sniffing and snuffling out the smell, growing stronger, and more appealing as he neared the source. Finally, the dog broke through to a small clearing. The scent was strong now, as he neared a circle of burned logs and charred rocks, the site of a long ago camp fire. The delicious aroma of cooked meat juices, undetectable by the human nose, still permeated the rocks, but left no tangible traces behind. Sam licked the rocks, but found only a slight memory of the meat juices that had once sizzled over the hot stones.

Disappointed, the dog resorted to exploring the area near the camp site, just in case any precious crumb had been left behind. Less than six feet behind the ancient cook fire was a large, dark aperture in the rock wall. Sam advanced cautiously, not quite certain this adventure was worth the risk. His sensitive nose poked and prodded the dirt, searching for anything that might pose a threat. Heaven forbid he should run into another one of those strange critters with the twitchy tail and unpleasant odor! He detected the scents of squirrel, rabbit, and some creature he couldn't identify. Only a faint whiff of man lingered near the mouth of the cave. The interior of the chamber was cool and very black. Except for a few insects, no living thing appeared to lurk in the darkness.

Satisfied there was nothing warranting his attention, Sam returned to the cook site to take one last tour. At the sound of crunching leaves and snapping twigs, the dog's ears perked. Someone, or something, was approaching the clearing. Sam drew his body up into an aggressive stance, hair raised and muscles poised to spring. His keen eyes strained to see beyond the curtain of vegetation and trees. When Starsky's beloved face appeared through the brush, Sam's long tail swished back and forth like a windshield wiper. That is, until he saw the look on The Dark One's face.

"There you are!"

Uh-oh...Busted. It was obvious that Starsky was NOT happy. Lowering his head, and drooping his tail between his legs, Sam tried very hard to look remorseful and apologetic for taking off on a 'wild squirrel chase'. Of course, that wasn't an easy thing to do, considering the fun he'd had chasing them, and exploring the cave.

"I've been lookin' all over for you, ya big dumb mutt!"

Apparently, Sam decided, the tail drooping thing wasn't working.

Daring to slink forward a couple of steps, the dog chanced a quick glance up at The Dark One's face. Hmm... He sounded a lot madder than he looked. Encouraged by this sign of good fortune, he decided to try a more direct approach. Tail wagging, and tongue lolling, he cantered up to The Dark One, reared up, placing both paws on Starsky's shoulders, and proceeded to give him a thorough face washing.

His anger now a fleeting memory, Starsky took the big canine's head in his hands and brought them eye to eye. "You had me worried," he chastised. "Don't I have enough on my mind without you takin' off for the wild, blue, yonder? Huh?" Again the huge tongue shot out, bathing The Dark One's face with affectionate slobber. Starsky reluctantly chuckled, and scratched the dog's ears before peeling the oversized paws off his shoulders.

Sam trotted back to the site of the old campfire and wagged his tail. He looked at Starsky and woofed playfully, hoping the man would have better luck scaring up a morsel of food than he'd had. "What 'cha got, boy?" Starsky went over to where the dog stood, and saw the remnants of an earlier camper's presence.

What really caught his attention though, was the opening in the rocks about six feet past the timbers and cooking stones. A cave! Knowing how nosy Sam was, Starsky figured the dog had already checked for inhabitants, so he bent over slightly and entered the dark, cool chamber. Without a flash light or lighter, his vision was limited; but he could see enough to know the cave was somewhat dry, and may be a feasible shelter for the night.

Sam stood at the doorway and chuffed softly to get the man's attention. Starsky came back out, then stooped down and patted the dog's head. "I guess you expect me to think this is why you didn't obey me," he said good-naturedly. "You don't fool me for a minute, Big Dog. You were chasing squirrels, weren't you?"

Sam's tail wagged furiously, and with it, his whole back end. Whether Starsky believed he had sought out the cave, or found it by accident, it was apparent he was pleased. Sam saw no reason not to take credit.

"Okay, let's go back and get Hutch. He's all alone, thanks to you. We got'a hurry if we're gonna get settled in before nightfall. So stay close," he admonished the dog. "Heel!" Duly, chastised, Sam fell into step next to Starsky's right leg and stuck close the entire way back.

Chapter 9

As Starsky and the dog approached Hutch's hiding place, Sam trotted on ahead, and enthusiastically greeted his other human. "Where've you been, Big Dog?" Hutch half-heartedly tried to keep Sam from licking him from ear to ear. "Been getting into mischief? Bet you were chasing those poor, old squirrels again, weren't you?" Sam's big mouth hung open, his tongue lolling out one side, giving the impression he was smiling at Hutch's uncanny insight.

"For once, that wild streak of his has paid off." Starsky squatted down in front of Hutch. "He's found us a place to spend the night. It's a cave, and it's pretty close by. We can hike there in less than ten minutes. You up to it?" Starsky reached out and gently touched a fresh spot of blood on the bandanna tied around Hutch's head. This wasn't good. The bleeding had started again, and Hutch looked even paler than before.

Hutch pulled back, sharply drawing in his breath. "Watch it, Starsk, that hurts."

"Sorry." Starsky tried not to sound concerned. "Just wondered if it was bleeding again."

"I don't think so. But..."

"But what?"

“I think my eyesight’s getting worse; so we’d better move fast, while I can at least make out shapes.”

Disheartened by Hutch’s words and the renewed bleeding, Starsky felt a lump in his throat. “Okay. That’s okay. I’ll let Sam go ahead; he can warn us if they try and cut us off.”

“I’ve been thinking, Starsk. It’s still just possible those guys didn’t follow us. I mean, we haven’t seen or heard any sign of them since we left the clearing back there. Sam would have alerted us if they were close by. Maybe this trek through the woods is more than they bargained for, and they decided to call it quits.” Even as he spoke the words, Hutch realized this was probably just hopeful thinking on his part.

“I hope you’re right. But I don’t think we should assume anything yet. Let’s head for the cave, hole up for the night, and then I’ll scout ahead in the morning before we start back toward the highway.”

Hutch nodded. Everything Starsky said made sense, and right now, he’d just have to rely on his partner’s good judgment.

“I’ll guide you through the trees. There’s no trail or anything, so it’s rough to navigate. But that could work to our advantage; harder for them to track us.” Starsky helped Hutch to his feet and waited for him to regain his balance.

The dog, who’d stood by watching, wondered again what was wrong with Hutch. When Hutch seemed to be steady on his feet, Sam eased himself against The Light One’s leg, offering his support in the only way he knew how. In return, he gently patted the dog’s head.

Starsky quietly watched Sam’s noble act of compassion, and the way it seemed to comfort Hutch. His heart swelled with pride and love for this gentle animal, and thought again, how ironic that only a twist of fate had brought him into their lives.

Sensing The Dark One’s eyes on him, Sam looked up, watching for a signal. Starsky gave the dog the command he’d been waiting for, “Sam, Go.” The rottweiler turned and headed back toward the abandoned camp site, his two humans following closely behind. He moved with ease, while they laboriously climbed over jagged rocks, and pushed onward through the heavy undergrowth, Starsky beating the path ahead of Hutch, clearing any obstacles he could in advance. When the men reached their last major hurdle, a gigantic, rotting tree trunk, the dog realized they’d stopped, and came back to wait for them.

“Oh, man, I forgot about this tree. This could be a little tricky,” Starsky said. “It didn’t look that high a few minutes ago,” He ran a hand through his uncombed, curly locks, then walked the length of the tree, starting at the end where the uprooted base was

exposed. Beneath the bare roots, the ground was soft and crumbling, eventually falling off into a steep drop. It appeared to Starsky the tree had been growing along the slope, and as it matured, the soil eroded, until the earth could no longer support its massive weight. Going around that end was not an option. Walking toward the top of the tree, he could see that most of it extended out over the cliff's edge. It was amazing to him that the enormous tree had grown as large as it had without toppling over. Discouraged, he decided there was only one solution.

“All right...okay...I'm gonna boost you up. I want ya to get a good grip, and wait up there till I can get across. Then you can lower yourself down, and I'll help ya to the ground. Okay?”

“Sounds easy enough,” Hutch said agreeably. In reality, he had his doubts, knowing his partner's penchant for oversimplifying things.

Starsky formed a stirrup with his hands and bent over slightly. “Okay, Blintz. Foot here. And up.”

Hutch did as told, and flexed his knees before springing up, then landing in a belly flop on top of the wide tree trunk. Though he hung on for dear life, the slimy lichen growing on the decomposing wood made it impossible to keep from slipping. “Starsky!”

As Hutch disappeared over the top of the log, Starsky made a mad dash to scale the wall of wood, clutching and grabbing for his partner, just beyond his reach. Unable to find anything stationary to hang onto, Hutch tumbled over the other side, heading for a hard fall. Sam stood by watching the humans' antics with interest until he realized Hutch was coming over the tree in a most unusual manner. What fun! Loping up to join in the game, the big dog unintentionally became a cushion between the blond and the hard ground. As Hutch landed ungracefully on the stunned rottweiler, they both began a wild, downhill slide on a carpet of slippery, damp leaves and pine needles.

Starsky's head appeared above the log just in time to see Hutch and Sam—arms and legs flailing—skid another six feet down before colliding with a small stand of pine saplings. Scared out of his wits that they were hurt, Starsky slid over the log and jogged down the incline to where man and dog lay in an undignified heap. Slowly, Hutch raised his head, trying to untangle himself from Sam, who had ended up on top of him, spread-eagle. Sam slipped to the ground next to Hutch.

“Hutch! Hutch, you hurt?” Starsky dropped to his knees, taking Hutch's face in his hands, searching him for any signs of injury. Sam sat up, a goofy expression on his face, wearing a blob of rotted leaf goop stuck to the top of his big noggin like a beanie cap.

“I don't think so,” Hutch answered, reaching up and gingerly touching the already tender wound on his head. “What about Sam?”

Upon hearing his name, Sam pressed his cold nose against Hutch's neck, tail wagging, communicating his thanks for the exciting ride downhill.

"Looks like he's fine," Starsky answered distractedly, running his hands up and down Hutch's arms, then his legs, still not satisfied nothing was broken. "Can ya stand up?"

"Yeah, I think so. Just give me a hand." Holding onto Starsky for support, Hutch rose slowly on shaky legs. "You know, sliding downhill like that's pretty scary when everything is already just a blur. For all I knew, we were headed for the edge of a cliff."

Starsky's mouth went dry. That thought hadn't crossed his mind. He'd been worried about broken bones, while Hutch and Sam could have ended up at the bottom of a cliff. Peering past the stand of saplings, he was stunned to see that some unexplainable phenomena must have enabled Hutch to sense what he couldn't see.

Distraught, Starsky hurried to apologize. "I'm sorry, Hutch. I should've found a better way than to expect you to climb over something that dangerous. Are ya sure you're okay?" Hutch couldn't make out Starsky's face, but he heard the anxiety in his voice.

"Forget it. I'm fine." Hutch brushed himself off, picking dried leaves from inside his collar. Sam continued wagging his tail, a big canine smile animating his face. "This whole damn trip's been doomed from the start," Hutch grumbled. "Let's just get to the cave before it's too dark for you to find your way back there."

Chastened, Starsky brushed as much of the dirt and leaves off Hutch's clothes as he could. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a soft, twelve-foot, nylon dog lead and threaded it through his belt loop, then attached the fastener. "Here," he said, sliding the end with the grip over Hutch's wrist. He placed the soft handle in Hutch's palm. "If you slip again, I got ya, okay?"

Hutch's fingers closed around the leash. "Right," he answered cynically. "This way all three of us do a kamikaze run down the side of the mountain." When Starsky accepted the cutting remark without a comeback, Hutch immediately regretted the thoughtless words. "Look, I didn't mean that, Starsk. My head's killing me, and that fall seems to have made it worse. I didn't mean to take it out on you. None of this is your fault."

"It's okay. I guess I had it comin' anyway. That wasn't exactly a brilliant maneuver on my part."

"You're doing the best you can. That's all either of us can do. I'm just...just tired...that's all." Trying to convey with touch what he couldn't say with words, he reached out and laid a hand on Starsky's shoulder. He felt a little of the tension ease from Starsky's body.

“Come on, Blintz. It ain’t exactly the Hilton, but I think you’ll be able to get a good night’s rest, anyway.”

Totally forgotten by his humans, Sam woofed indignantly. “Sorry, Big Dog,” Starsky said, squatting down to brush the debris from the dog’s head. He looped an affectionate arm around Sam for a quick hug. “Good thing you were down there to break Hutch’s fall. Think I should recommend you to Cap’n Dobe for a medal when we get home?” The rotti barked a little louder this time, giving Starsky’s suggestion his stamp of approval. The dark-haired detective stood up. “Okay, then. Sam, Go!” Starsky reached around and placed Hutch’s hand on his shoulder. “Hang onto me, partner. And don’t worry. If you let go, I’ve still got ya on a leash,” he said, snickering.

“Cute, Starsky...cute. But if you say ‘heel’, I swear, I’ll deck you!” Both men laughed. Beautiful music to the big dog’s ears, as he plunged back into woods and headed toward the old camp fire.

Hutch followed, keeping his hand firmly planted on Starsky’s shoulder, as they followed Sam to the cave.



Al Bernard mopped sweat from his grimy face with the stained sleeve of his jacket. “Wait up, Benny. I need to rest,” he complained.

Benny White knelt on one knee for a closer look at the slight indentation in the mud and leaves, trying to determine if it could have been made by a man’s shoe. The animal tracks next to it definitely looked like dog tracks. It wasn’t much, but the closest thing to a clue he’d found so far. He was beginning to lose his cool. They’d been tracking the two cops for nearly three hours and hadn’t seen them once. He knew one was wounded, and had thought the chase would end quickly. Listening to Al’s incessant bitching was getting old fast. If he didn’t shut up soon, White thought he’d be tempted to put a bullet between the complaining man’s eyes out of sheer need for a little peace and quiet.

“It’s getting dark, you idiot. If we don’t catch up with them soon, we’ll have to make camp.”

“My arm’s killin’ me. And I’m hungry. I still don’t see why we can’t just leave ‘em out here to die. We can still collect our fee. Morrisetti won’t know. By the time anybody realizes they ain’t coming back, the scavengers in these woods will have taken care of the bodies.”

White spun around, roughly grabbing his partner by the front of his shirt, jerking him up, nose to nose. “I’m not telling you again,” he gritted out between clinched teeth, “we’re going to finish this job. There’s more here at stake than money. Morrisetti will

put a price on our heads if he finds out we screwed up. The only way we can come out of this alive is to fix it.”

“Okay...okay...lighten up, will you?” Al held his hands up in supplication. “I’m with you. I’m just sayin—”

“Can it!” White shoved the larger man forward. “I’ll tell you when to stop. And it won’t be before dark! Now, I think they may have gone through here, so get moving.”

Chapter 10

By the time the two men reached the cave, Sam was waiting for them at the entrance. “Watch your head. It’s a little low here.” Stooping over slightly, Starsky laid a protective hand over Hutch’s head, and led him through the narrow opening, into the cool darkness of the interior. He carefully eased Hutch into a sitting position near the cave wall. “It’s not much, but it’s dry, and I think I can hide the opening by covering it with a few limbs. You rest here. I’ll be back as soon as I get this place camouflaged.”

Hutch, his head still throbbing, gratefully leaned against the cool rock wall. The cessation of motion seemed to ease the pain somewhat. He reached up and touched the bandanna, relieved to find that the wound didn’t seem to be bleeding anymore. In some ways, the darkness of the cave was comforting. Here, in this murky underground chamber, he was on equal footing again. He could allow himself the luxury of pretending once he left here, he would see again.

Starsky returned to the mouth of the cave and called Sam, who was still nosing around the cooking stones of the old campfire. When the dog came trotting back to him, Starsky squatted down, bringing them eye to eye. “Sam, I want you to stay here and watch over Hutch. Got it? Protect Hutch.” The dog’s intelligent eyes told Starsky he understood. He stood up and gave Sam the official ‘STAY’ command, and as reinforcement, rewarded the dog with a pat on the head, before leaving the campsite.

Sam posted himself at the entryway, ‘Guardian of the Stronghold’, ready to protect and defend. Full of self-importance, he surveyed the area with a watchful eye, and waited for Starsky to return.



As the final streaks of daylight faded from the sky, Starsky hurried to gather fallen limbs, pine needle fans, and any other brush he could use to disguise the opening to the cave. By the time he’d completed his task, the night and the collection of greenery cloaked their hiding place from intruders. As he and Sam retreated to the safety of their new bunker, Starsky carefully brushed away their tracks with a spray of pine needles. He then closed the last remaining open space with a small seedling and a strategically placed small boulder.

Starsky felt his way along the rock wall until he reached Hutch. In the inky obscurity of the cave, he eased himself down next to the blond. “Hey, how ya doin’, partner?” For a few seconds, there was no response; only Hutch’s quiet breathing.

Starsky figured he’d fallen asleep; then finally, he answered softly, “Great. Just great.”

Hutch sat propped against the cave wall, his thoughts as bleak as the darkness surrounding him. He knew Starsky was waiting for him to say more; hoping he’d say something clever, something funny, something to reassure his partner that he was okay. For the moment, though, words escaped him. The shadowy confine of their hideout was just a taste of what life would be like from now on, if his sight didn’t return. He couldn’t talk about his fear. Starsky had enough to worry about, without dealing with his insecurities right now. His partner’s voice cut through the darkness softly.

“You cold?”

“Yeah, a little,” came the tired response.

Starsky shrugged out of his jacket and laid it over Hutch, tucking it in around his shoulders.

“Better?”

“Yeah...thanks...better.”

Starsky scooted over next to Hutch, shoulders touching. He hoped the additional body heat would offer Hutch the warmth he needed.

Sighing, Starsky leaned back against the wall too, and tried to let the tension drain from his body. He hadn’t had time to think since they’d left the clearing at the bottom of the ravine earlier that day. Was it really only today? As he slowly began to unwind, mental images of the red and white Torino, engulfed in flames, replayed in his mind, churning up feelings of remorse. It didn’t seem right to mourn for a car—he knew that. After all, it was just a thing, not a living being. He tried to shake off the feeling that he’d lost a loved one, but found he just couldn’t.

Sam had positioned himself at their feet, his head facing the entryway, his ears and eyes trained on the opening for early detection of any sound or movement that may pose a threat to his humans. It felt good, being together again. These were the times he was happiest. Didn’t matter where they were, as long as the three of them were together. He’d see that no harm came to them. That was his job, and he delighted in the opportunity to prove his loyalty and love for them. Most people thought dogs incapable of complex thought, but Sam knew better. He remembered things. He remembered life

before these two had found and rescued him from a world of fear and abuse. He would never forget.

Silent moments ticked by slowly, exhaustion overwhelming them all. Outside, a lone owl's call echoed through the night.

"You hungry?" Starsky whispered, feeling the need to hear a human voice...even if it was his own.

Hutch stirred from his revelry. "Yeah. I'd even eat one of those sugar laden time bombs you call a candy bar. Too bad you didn't stuff a couple in your pockets." His voice held a note of amusement that Starsky found comforting.

In a moment of sudden inspiration, Starsky snapped his fingers. "Hey, wait a minute..." Hutch could hear him digging through the pockets of his jeans and jacket. "Ah-hah!" Triumphant, he produced the object of his search. He broke the snack bar into three pieces, then passed one to Hutch, and one to Sam. "We'll have to share, but it's better than nothin'," he said proudly.

Hutch gratefully accepted the food, stuffing half of his portion into his mouth. The moment he crunched down, he realized it couldn't be candy—it wasn't even sweet. "Starsky, what the hell is this?"

"Mmmm...one o' them's gian't mmilkbomes," Starsky mumbled, his mouth full of the brittle snack.

Hutch stopped, mid-crunch, hoping he'd heard wrong. "Starsky, tell me you didn't say what I just thought you said." In the darkness, he could hear Sam and Starsky chomping away on their thirds of the dog treat. The rottweiler smacked his lips in loud delight, obviously enjoying every morsel.

"What? You're always tellin' me how nutritious they are!" Starsky answered defensively. "Besides, you got any better suggestions?"

Before speaking, Hutch swallowed the broken bits of biscuit, already growing soggy in his mouth. "Awww...Starsky, this is disgusting! There's...there's all kinds of...of animal body parts, and bone, and...God knows what else, in these things—some of which are too repulsive to even list on the box."

Not the least bit deterred, Starsky tossed another bite into his mouth. "So? You said the same thing about Spam, but it hasn't killed me yet, has it? Better eat up, buddy. S'all we got. And if you don't eat it soon, Sam's gonna think you don't want it, and consider it fair game."

Knowing everything Starsky had just said was true, Hutch tried not to think anymore about it, and resigned himself to making the best of his lowly meal. Upon

finishing his own, Sam stuck his big nose between the two men and began a sniffing-snorting search for rogue biscuits that just may have escaped The Dark One's notice. Starsky couldn't help but laugh when the wet proboscis wedged its way under his armpit, and up his neck, ending the search with a loud sneeze just below his left ear.

"Knock it off, ya big dummy." He playfully rolled Sam onto his back and patted his belly. "That's all I had. Sorry. I'm not holdin' out on you." Sam flipped himself upright, then proceeded to submit Hutch to a similar search.

"Whoa, boy!" Hutch tried to fend him off. "Hey, Starsk, I think we need to transfer him to Vice. Mahoney could use someone with his talents in their department, don't you think?" Both men laughed, as Sam carried on his fruitless search for more treats. Finally accepting defeat, he returned to his station at their feet and plopped down with a loud sigh.

The cave grew quiet again. Hutch leaned back, praying for sleep. The pathetic dinner and a few good laughs with Starsky and Sam had helped divert his thoughts from the darkness. Now, as the sounds of night once more encroached upon their hiding place, his mind began to wander again.

"Hutch...you awake?"

"Yeah...I'm awake."

"Listen, I'm sorry I made ya eat a milkbone."

"You didn't 'make' me, Starsk. I was hungry, it was food, and you're right—it was better than nothing."

"Hey...Hutch?"

A light smile teased the corners of Hutch's mouth at the child-like quality in Starsky's voice.

"Yeah?"

"Ever notice how every time we take a vacation, it ends up with somebody tryin' to kill us? Think maybe we should give up on vacations?"

"I admit we've had a few 'less than perfect' vacations," Hutch conceded, "but we've had some fun times too."

"Yeah?" Starsky was quiet for a moment. "Name one."

"Well...let's see...How about Dobby's cabin?"

“Are you nuts? What about the rattlesnake in the frig, and those devil worshipers tryin’ to sacrifice us? Is that your idea of a good time?”

“No...I’m talking about afterwards. Remember how many fish you caught? Got’a admit, you did pretty good for a greenhorn.”

In his mind’s eye, he could almost see Starsky’s chest puff out proudly. “Yeah...yeah...I did, didn’t I? Well, maybe that vacation wasn’t so bad.” They grew quiet again.

“Hutch?”

“Mmmm?”

“How's your head feelin'?”

Hutch realized for the first time that the pain had subsided.

“It's let up. Maybe if I can get a few minutes of shut-eye, it'll go away completely.”

Starsky took this as a hint to stop talking, and fell silent, thinking again about the lost Torino.

Minutes later, Hutch whispered, “Starsky? Are you asleep?”

“Nah...too quiet in here. You know me. I need a few sirens and honkin’ car horns outside to sleep good.”

“Yeah...guess you do,” Hutch chuckled softly, and paused before continuing, debating whether to broach the subject that had been eating away at him all afternoon. “Listen, buddy, I’m really sorry about your car. I know how much the Tomato meant to you.”

“Awww...it was just a car.” Wondering if Hutch had been able to read his thoughts earlier, Starsky tried to sound blasé. “I can get another.”

“Yeah. Right.” Hutch was quiet for a moment. “Hey, maybe we can get the Department to pay for replacing it. I mean, after all, this wouldn’t be happening if we hadn’t arrested and testified against Morrisetti, right?”

“You think so?” Starsky asked, eagerly. A moment later, he added, less exuberantly, “But we don’t really know for sure Morrisetti’s behind this.”

“Most likely, he is.”

“Mmmm.... He IS the most obvious choice.”

Starsky mulled this over a few moments, considering for the first time that with his insurance, funding from the Department, and the expertise of Merle the Earl, he may be able to duplicate the Torino. The thought temporarily cheered him, until he remembered Hutch’s blindness.

“Hutch?”

“Hmmm?”

“This blindness thing is only temporary.”

“I hope you’re right. But I suppose there’s the possibility I won’t get better.”

Starsky reached over and patted him on the knee. “Hey...whatever comes, we’ll deal with it. If that means searching the world over to find a doctor that can help you, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“What if I can’t be helped, Starsk?” The vulnerability in his voice cut Starsky to the quick. “What if I can’t be a cop anymore?”

Without missing a beat, Starsky answered in a firm voice, “We’re gonna find you some help, Hutch. But if you can’t be a cop anymore, then we’ll just find a new line of work. So either way, you’re covered, partner.”

Hutch imagined in his mind, the hard glint in Starsky’s eyes when he said that. Determined, unrelenting, and faithful to a fault. Sam inched up between the two men and laid his head on Hutch’s lap. It seemed to Hutch, the dog understood their conversation, and was trying to affirm all that Starsky had said.

Hutch took a deep breath and relaxed. He was in good hands. His two best friends would make sure of that.

Chapter 11

“Benny, I can’t go another step. It’s too dark to keep lookin’ anyway.” Al Bernard tripped over a tree root, nearly falling headfirst. Grabbing for the nearest stationary object, he stumbled into White, almost toppling them both.

“Watch it, you clumsy oaf!” White shoved the other man back, causing him to actually take a dive this time. “We’ll go just a little further. The battery on this damn lantern is about to go out.” He rattled the flashlight, as if doing so could miraculously recharge the failing C-cells.

“How are we going to camp out here? We ain’t got any sleeping bags or nothing.”

“How did you get into our line of work, being such a wimp?” White sneered.

“I ain’t a wimp. I’m just asking a question.”

“Listen, I know what I’m doing. We might be able to slip up on them, now that it’s dark. Don’t forget, the blond one’s wounded. They don’t have a flashlight. and they don’t have any water. I’m betting they’ve stopped somewhere to rest.”

Al Bernard started to argue, then thought better of it. There was something in the tone of White’s voice that implied he’d be wise to stop while he was ahead.



Starsky woke with a start. His surroundings a sea of darkness, he was momentarily confused. He wasn’t sure what had startled him, until he heard the deep growl from Sam, alerting him that something was wrong. The dog crept toward the cave entrance, his body low to the ground. Starsky eased up and crawled along the cave floor, following Sam. As they neared the entrance, Starsky whispered a command to the dog, afraid he’d give away their presence to anyone, or anything nearing their hiding place.

“Sam! Wait!” Starsky whispered loudly. With the moonlight as a backdrop, he could see the dog’s silhouette still advancing toward the camouflaged doorway. “Sam!”

This time the canine halted in his tracks, tossing a look back at The Dark One. Sam fought the primal urge to curl back his lip and snarl at the approaching intruders. Fortunately, his desire to obey Starsky was stronger. Muscles taunt, and eyes wide with anticipation, he waited impatiently for Starsky to give him the signal to launch an assault.

As Starsky eased up next to Sam, he heard the sounds of masculine voices drifting on the cool night breeze. He listened intently, hoping to figure out which direction they were coming from, and how close they were. “Terrific,” he groaned. “I think they’ve caught up with us, boy.” Starsky dropped onto his stomach, pulling Sam down with him as he went. “We can watch ‘em from here. You just put a lid on it, okay?” He felt the dog’s muscles tense beneath his hand, and tried to calm him with a gentle word. “It’s okay, Big Dog. It’s okay.”

Sam obviously didn’t agree with this approach. Nonetheless, he lowered his head and watched quietly as the bushes on the far side of the old camp fire rustled and parted, revealing the two gunmen who’d attacked his humans that afternoon. Starsky’s grip on the dog tightened. “It’s okay,” he whispered soothingly. Sam’s ears pricked, and his body trembled with excitement.

“You said we were gonna stop half an hour ago, Benny. I’m exhausted.”

Starsky saw the dim beam of a flashlight before the two men stepped into the open. The breath caught in his throat, hoping they wouldn't realize that he, Hutch, and Sam were only a few feet away. What if Hutch wakes up and calls me? The thought made Starsky's blood run cold.

"Let me see your hand," the other voice said. Starsky watched tensely as the stout man who Sam had attacked earlier in the day, held out his injured wrist for his companion to see. "The swelling's already starting to go down. I can't believe this is what you've been complaining about all afternoon."

"Oh yeah?" Bernard's voice rose in anger. He was beginning to tire of White's constant bullying and insults. "That's easy for you to say cause you're not the one who's been in pain! I been telling you all afternoon that that damn mutt might'a had rabies, or lockjaw, or some other crap that we don't know about. I bet if he'd nailed you, we'd already be back in LA and you would have seen a doctor!"

"Can you bend your fingers? Can you hold a gun?"

Al reached under his jacket and pulled out his 38. Even though his hand was tender, his beefy fingers easily wrapped around its stock, demonstrating he wasn't out of commission. "Okay, I can hold a gun, but that doesn't mean it's not serious," he argued.

Disappointment coursed through Starsky, realizing it was two against one again. Earlier, he'd thought he'd only have to contend with one enemy.

"Okay. If it'll make you shut up, we'll stop here for a few minutes; then we move on. I still think our best chance is to surprise them while they're asleep. I'm telling you, we better catch them by morning. Morrisetti may already have his goons out looking for us."

"Thanks, Benny," Bernard said earnestly, having won what he considered a major concession. "A little rest'll help. Although, I don't see why we can't just stay here till sunrise..." The bigger man's voice trailed off, at White's look, warning that he should leave well enough alone.

"Hey!" Bernard spotted the ruins of the old campfire. "Look at this! I think they've been here, Benny!"

The taller man walked over to the campfire, squatted down, and cautiously touched the rocks, testing for heat. "I doubt it. This campfire's old. The stones are cold, and there's no sign of tracks around here."

"This looks like a good place to spend the rest of the night," Al said eagerly. "We could get some shut-eye and start out again as soon as the sun rises."

Starsky's heart was pounding like a drum. If Al convinced Benny to stay on until daybreak, they'd most likely spot the opening to the cave. What if he hadn't done a good enough job of camouflaging it? What if he, Hutch, or Sam made a sound and alerted the men to their presence? Next to him, Sam's body still trembled with anticipation. When Al Bernard spoke, the dog recognized his voice and became all the more incensed.

Starsky took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Panicking was the worst possible thing he could do now. He began slowly backing toward the dark end of the cave, quietly pulling Sam along with him. In the inky blackness, he felt his way along, finally locating Hutch. When he reached his partner, Starsky clamped his hand over Hutch's mouth and whispered in his ear. "It's me. Don't move. Don't make a sound. They're right outside. We'll have to be very quiet, and maybe they'll move on. Okay?"

Hutch nodded his head silently, and Starsky removed his hand. Now fully awake, Hutch could hear the voices of the two men. It sounded like they were arguing. Sam circled around to Hutch's left side and nuzzled against his shoulder, happy to see Hutch awake and alert.

Starsky moved his head close to Hutch's again. "They're Morrisetti's men all right. Calling each other Al and Benny. Mean anything to you?"

Lowering his voice to a whisper Hutch leaned in close to Starsky's face. "No. Probably out-of-towners. Could we take them? Right here...right now? I mean, we've got the element of surprise on our side."

"I thought about it," Starsky answered. "We've got three shots, no light, and once they know we're here, we've no choice but to fight our way out. I might be able to take 'em out with three bullets, but it's doubtful, shooting in the dark like that." Starsky felt Hutch's head drop forward, dejectedly. Hoping to ease the tension, he added humorously, "I mean, the whole Department knows I'm the crack shot in this partnership, but even a terrific marksman like me needs a little light." Hutch didn't laugh.

Starsky tried another approach. "Hey, I promised to get you outta here, and I will. I just don't think this is the way to go. If I miss, they've got us pinned down with no way to retreat. And they have a flashlight, Hutch. A flashlight. Kinda tips the scales in their favor." In his mind's eye, Starsky could see the frustration on Hutch's face, the feeling of inadequacy, knowing he couldn't help his partner take out the two gunmen. Starsky reached around and lay his hand on the back of Hutch's neck, giving it a little squeeze. "It's gonna be okay. I promise."

Hutch nodded, silently accepting Starsky's line of reasoning.

While his two humans were engrossed in conversation, Sam eased up and quietly crept back toward the cave opening. He knew Starsky had ordered him to stand down, but like any good soldier, he knew his duty. He'd obey his orders from The Dark One, but he'd also be waiting, ready to spring into action if the gunmen made a move against

his humans. Sam lay down, flattening himself on the cave floor, ears peaked, and eyes sharply focused on the mouth of the cave. He waited patiently...ready...and prepared to kill, if necessary. The minutes crept by slowly.



“Let’s get moving.”

Sam sat up at the sound of Benny White’s voice rousing his partner from his brief rest.

“How far do you think they could have gotten?”

Sam’s head cocked to one side, listening to the voices that posed a threat to his humans. Though the hair on the big dog’s neck bristled, he maintained his post and his silence. One step in the direction of the cave, and he’d take them down.

Hearing the men talking again, Starsky patted Hutch’s forearm, and whispered. “Sit tight. I’m gonna listen and see if they’re leavin’.”

He quietly inched his way back toward the opening, where he bumped into Sam, startling them both. Starsky threw both arms around the rottie, making certain he didn’t dart out of the cave. He could feel Sam’s heart hammering beneath his hand, first rapid, then gradually slowing back to normal.

“It’ll be daylight soon. Let’s hope we run up on them before the sun rises. If we don’t, we’ll lose our advantage.”

“If I don’t get some food in me soon, I’m gonna pass out, Benny...”

Gradually, the voices grew faint, as the two men hiked further away from the campsite. Sam squirmed, letting Starsky know he didn’t appreciate being sneaked up on and held prisoner just when he was getting ready to let the bad guys know who was boss. When Starsky released the dog, he hit the floor of the cave with a thud, before righting himself and sounding off with a big, loud sneeze.

“What the devil were you doin’ up here, Big Dog?” Starsky took the dog’s face in his hands. “What am I gonna do with you? Huh? I thought you were back there with your head on Hutch’s lap. But were you there? No. No, instead, you were up here, gettin’ ready to launch World War III all by yourself, weren’t ya?” Starsky scratched Sam’s ears, then gave him a loving pat on the head. “You could’a given us away, ya know that?”

Since Starsky’s voice didn’t sound mad, Sam took this as a commendation for a job well done and slurped his big tongue over Starsky’s face in response.

“Cut it out, ya big goomba!” Starsky chastised good-naturedly.

The immediate danger having passed, Starsky inched his way toward the back of the cave to let Hutch know the two men were gone. If his estimates were correct, it would be daylight in another hour or so, and the three of them would have to make a break for it. As Starsky filled Hutch in on the plan, he didn't notice Sam slipping quietly out through the camouflaged opening to the cave.

Chapter 12

“I think it's safe to move up a little now. It'll be light soon, and we'll need to make our move.” Starsky took his friend's arm and guided him toward the cave opening.

“So, what's the plan?” Hutch asked, as they inched their way forward in the darkness.

“I thought we'd double back and head for the highway. I'll hot-wire their car, and we'll be outta here before they know what's hit 'em.”

Hutch smiled, pleased with Starsky strategy. He hated that it would mean going right past the burned out Torino, knowing it would be hard for his partner. But he expected no less. Starsky was being his normal, resourceful self, doing whatever it took to get them out of this mess.

When they were a few feet away from the opening to the cave, Hutch eased down into a sitting position, and leaned his back against the cool rock wall. There, he'd wait for sunrise. He hoped that resting the past several hours in the darkness of the cave had given his eyes time to recuperate. He'd spent most of the night awake, staring into the black void, praying things would be back to normal by morning.

Having gotten Hutch situated, Starsky looked around for Sam, ready to let the dog out for his morning constitutional. “Sam? Sam, Come.” He peered toward the dark end of the cave. When the dog didn't come, Starsky immediately turned and checked the pile of brush and limbs that covered the cave mouth. That's when he saw the hole, not large enough for a man, but certainly large enough for a dog Sam's size to slip through. “Damn!”

“What?”

“Sam. He's gone again. I swear, I'm gonna—”

“Going to what?” Hutch asked, in an amused voice. “Starsky, the dog's just like you. He's hardheaded and follows his instincts without even thinking about it. Sam's nothing more than a canine Starsky, especially since he's been living with you. Can't you see the similarities?”

“What? I’m not like that. I think things through,” Starsky argued defensively. Hutch noticed he hadn’t denied the ‘hardheaded’ part.

“All I’m saying is, he thinks with his heart more often than with his head. I wouldn’t be surprised if he took off after those men, thinking he could take on both of them by himself. You saw how riled he was the whole time they were out there.” Hutch’s voice grew more serious, as he considered the implications of what he’d just said. He hoped, at least this once, he was wrong. “Maybe his need to stay close to us will make him turn around and come back.”

Starsky ran a nervous hand through his unkempt hair. “I don’t even know where to look. And besides, we don’t have time. If we don’t make a break for the car pretty soon, they may get tired of looking for us and double back too.”

Hutch heard the anguish and indecision in his partner’s voice. “Starsky, I love Sam just as much as you do—and I hate to say it—but, you’re right. We’ll have to move out soon. His sense of smell is thousands of times greater than a human’s. He can find us, he can track us back to the road. I think we’ll have to go, whether he’s back or not.” In the darkness of the cave, Hutch couldn’t see Starsky’s face, but knew his expression was grim.

“Right...” he finally uttered.

Starsky slipped the shoulder holster back on, and set about clearing the entrance of the cave. The sky was already lightening to a dull gray, in preparation for sunrise. Just as he stacked the last limb on the pile, he heard something crashing through the bushes about twenty feet in front of him. Drawing the Magnum, he pointed it in the direction of the sound, ready to fire, if necessary. Sam’s big head came into sight, as he cleared the bushes and plodded toward Starsky, enthusiastically.

“Sam!” Starsky lowered the gun, holstered it, and stood, feet apart, sternly glaring at the rottweiler.

Oh no, in trouble again.... It seemed to Sam that he’d spent the majority of this trip making his humans angry. At first he approached Starsky cautiously, his head lowered a fraction, waiting to see if he’d be reprimanded. But then, never being one to dwell on unpleasant possibilities, the big dog threw caution to the wind. By now, he’d learned that more often than not, his human was only pretending to be mad. He loped up to The Dark One exuberantly, and gave his body a vigorous shake, slinging water all over Starsky, wetting his clothes and everything else within a two foot radius. Realizing what this meant, Starsky reached for the dog and felt his coat. Sam looked up, his cavernous mouth set in a canine grin, happy to see Starsky didn’t seem inclined to chastise him further.

“You’re wet! Hutch, he’s wet!” He lifted the dog’s head and saw tiny beads of water clinging to his whiskers. “There must be water close by. Is that why you left, Big Dog? To look for water?”

Sam’s whole body wagged, elated that he seemed to have done something good. He didn’t know what the heck it was, but intended to enjoy the praise while it lasted.

“Can you show me where the water is, Sam?” Starsky squatted down to Sam’s level, looking him in the eyes. “Where’s the water, Sam?”

Water. Now, that was a word he knew! How many times had his humans asked if he wanted some water, then lowered a bowl of the cool, wet stuff before him, to indulge? Maybe Starky wanted some water. Well, good! That, he could handle.

Sam barked loudly, turned tail, and tore back into the brush, Starsky close behind. “Wait here, Hutch! Stay in there, outta sight! Sam’s tryin’ to show me where he found the water!” he shouted.

Sam ran ahead, jumping over fallen trees, patches of bramble, and other impediments that Starsky couldn’t maneuver nearly as fast. Occasionally, the dog would look back impatiently to see if his human was keeping up. When he’d lose sight of Starsky, he’d stop and wait, curious as to why humans couldn’t jump and run as fast as his kind could. As Starsky climbed over one last tree trunk and spotted a small, shallow creek, it occurred to him that Sam had led him through the most obstacle-laden, treacherous path to the water, while there appeared to be a fairly clear footpath parallel to the route they’d taken. Had they used the path, they would only been a few hundred yards from the creek.

Starsky leaned over, hands on knees, trying to slow down his breathing. He laughed to himself. What could he expect? Ever since Sam had begun training to compete in the obstacle course sport of Agility, he’d actively sought out the most difficult route to any place he wanted to go.

Once he’d gotten his breath back, Starsky joined the rottweiler, who was now eagerly lapping the cold, fresh, running water, while balancing his two front paws on the rocks along the edges of the creek bed. Starsky knelt down, cupped his hands, and scooped up some of the refreshing liquid to slake his own thirst. After drinking his fill, he splashed water on his face, clearing his mind with its invigorating chill.

“How’re we gonna take some back to Hutch?” he asked Sam, as though he expected a response. The dog cocked his head to one side, trying to understand what Starsky had asked. He recognized Hutch’s name, but couldn’t decipher the rest of the question.

“No canteen, no thermos.” Starsky looked around, then stood up and walked downstream a little way. The creek bed narrowed and became shallower as he went. He

spotted an empty, family-sized, plastic Coke bottle lying beside the rocks, most likely left behind by a careless camper. He lifted the abandoned bottle from where it nestled, half submerged in the water, and emptied the muddy contents. After filling the bottle, shaking it vigorously, and dumping it several times, he decided it would serve his purposes just fine.

Sam stood by, pondering why The Dark One was so intrigued by an old bottle. But then, he was always puzzled by what his humans seemed to think of as their treasures. For example, he thought it especially odd that neither of them owned a ball (with the exception of that great big brown one, that he couldn't wrap his jaws around), or a single rawhide chew-toy.

"This'll work great!" Starsky beamed, filling the semi-clean bottle with the fresh creek water. He bent down and drank thirstily, one last time. "Come on, boy. Let's take this to Hutch, then we're goin' home."



By the time Starsky and Sam returned to the campsite, streaks of pink and mauve had begun to light the sky, making way for sunrise. As the clearing came into sight, Starsky was alarmed to see Hutch sitting on the ground just outside the cave. He eased the Magnum from the shoulder holster and signaled Sam to wait, while he scanned the area for intruders. Not seeing anyone else, he signaled the dog to follow him. Oddly, as he and Sam left the cover of the trees, Hutch seemed oblivious to their presence.

"Hutch?" Starsky slid the Magnum back into the holster and knelt down in front of him. "What's wrong? Why are you out here? Did somethin' happen?"

At first, Hutch didn't answer. He only stared straight ahead, seeming to focus on something that only he could see. "It didn't come back..."

"What? What didn't come back?"

"My sight...it didn't come back. I...I can't see anything now, Starsk. No shapes, no shadows, nothing."

Starsky ran a worried hand down his face. He knew they'd been optimistic to expect any improvement in a few short hours, and kicked himself for not having gotten an earlier start back to the highway. Hutch's impaired vision would, without doubt, slow them down. Sympathizing, Starsky reached over and laid his hand on Hutch's shoulder.

"Hutch, listen to me. I know you're scared right now, and you think this is never gonna get better, but it will. I believe that...and you got'a believe it too. Like I told you last night, once we get outta here, we'll find a doctor who can help you."

Hutch shook his head, a sad smile softening his face. “You know, I'd just about convinced myself that you and I were invincible. Somehow, we've always managed to pull it out in the bottom of the ninth. But this time, I'm afraid our luck's run out.”

“Hey...don't you even think about quitin' on me, Blondie. That ain't your style.” Starsky hoped his voice sounded more reassuring than he felt at the moment. “We just need to move outta here fast, before those turkeys decide to double back, and catch up with us. We got this far without you being able to see too good, so we'll make it back to the highway.” Starsky watched an array of emotions flit across Hutch's face. The smile faded, to be replaced by grim determination.

“I'm not going with you.” Anticipating a storm of objections, his hand closed like a vice around Starsky's forearm. “Hear me out.” True, he couldn't see Starsky's face; but after all these years, he knew every emotion, every inflection, every familiar expression, well enough to imagine the pain in his friend's eyes at this moment. Starsky's false bravado hadn't fooled him for an instant.

“I'll only slow you down, and be a liability to you. If you and Sam leave right now, you have a good chance of staying ahead of them. Your plan to steal their car is a good one, but you'll have to move fast...faster than I can.”

“Hutch—”

“I said, hear me out.” His voice brooked no argument. “I'll hide out here in the cave until you get help and come for me. It's our best chance, and you know it.”

The muscles in Starsky's jaw hardened. Torn between insult and anger that Hutch could think he'd even consider such a course of action, Starsky took a deep breath and answered calmly, “No way. You know I'd sooner cut off my arm, than leave you behind. That ain't the way it works with us, Hutch. You know, and I know, if the tables were turned, you wouldn't leave me either.”

The dark-haired detective rose, bringing Hutch to his feet as he did so. “Now, we went all through this last night, and we're not havin' this conversation again. You said you'd trust me to get us outta here. I don't know why you think you can break your word, 'just like that'.” Starsky snapped his fingers to emphasize Hutch's disregard for his promise. “Don't you have any faith in me? Is that it? Huh?”

“Yes, I do, but—”

“The subject's not open for discussion, pal,” Starsky interrupted, determined to put an end to this lame-brained argument. “Now, let's quit wastin' valuable time arguing, and get the hell outta here before it's too late.”

Not really surprised by Starsky's reaction, but still convinced they'd be better off if he stayed behind, Hutch cleared his throat and made one last effort. "Starsky, you're not being practical. I think this is a mistake."

"Yeah? Well, duly noted. If it is, then it's MY mistake." Starsky's voice went up a decibel, as his patience began to wear thin. He knew every minute counted, and they were quickly slipping away.

"And what if they come back this way? Huh? Ya think that pile of trash I had coverin' the cave last night's gonna fool 'em in the daylight? It won't! You'd be a sitting duck, in that cave, waitin' to be picked off."

Hutch opened his mouth, but was cut short, by Starsky's incensed recitation. "I'll get us back to the road—and when we get there, it'll be all three of us!" He took Hutch by the elbow and decisively marched him from the clearing. "Wait here."

Sam quickly joined Hutch and sat at attention, not particularly wanting to be on the receiving end of The Dark One's tirade. It appeared to the big dog that Hutch had been put into a 'sit stay'—just like in obedience class. Confused by this notion, Sam considered Hutch with serious eyes, wondering why his two humans were so cross at one another. Maybe The Light One didn't like sit-stays anymore than he did.

Starsky scattered the stack of greenery he'd used to camouflage cave entrance, then picked up one of the discarded branches and carefully brushed away their footprints. He quickly scanned the area for any other signs that would reveal they'd spent the night right under the noses of the two gunmen. "No point in makin' it easy for 'em," he mumbled when he rejoined Hutch and Sam.

Belatedly, Starsky spotted the forgotten container of water he'd abandoned at the edge of the clearing a few moments earlier. Retrieving the bottle, he took it to Hutch. "Sam found a creek. And I found this plastic bottle to bring you some water back in." He reached out and took Hutch's hand and wrapped his fingers around the bottle. "It's good, fresh water. Drink some, then we'll move out. Okay?"

Watching Hutch carefully encircle the bottle, his fingers hesitant and unsure, Starsky felt the anger that had been boiling up inside him moments earlier dissipate, leaving behind only regret that he'd lost his temper.

Overcome by thirst, Hutch lifted the bottle to his lips and drank greedily, the cold liquid soothing his parched throat. "Drink all you want," Starsky encouraged him. "Sam and I filled up at the creek."

Once his thirst was quenched, Hutch handed the nearly emptied bottle back to Starsky. Sam moved in closer, bumping Hutch's thigh with his big head. Reaching down, he patted the dog, inexplicably comforted by the animal's touch.

Starsky watched the tender exchange, grateful once again the dog had come into their lives. Ashamed he'd lashed out at Hutch earlier, Starsky offered contritely, "Listen, before we head out, do you need a minute...I mean, ya know...a little privacy..." At Hutch's puzzled expression, he continued, "I could lead you over there behind the bushes."

Hutch scowled. "Good grief, Starsky...we aren't in grade school. For a minute there, I didn't know what the hell you were getting at. Thanks, but I already took care of that while you were gone. I'm blind, not crippled."

Relieved to see a little of the old Hutch spunk surfacing, Starsky grinned. This was a good sign. "Oh. Okay. Just thought I'd ask. So, what you say we get this show on the road?"

Hutch nodded, resigned that there would be no reasoning with Starsky on this issue. Hooked-up to their human leash again, the two men began backtracking their way toward the scene of the accident. Sam forged ahead, happy that he and Hutch had been dismissed from the sit-stay, and that his two friends seemed to have settled their differences. Humans were such strange creatures! If he lived to be twenty, he'd never understand them.

Chapter 13

The two men and their dog traveled as quickly and quietly as possible, making allowances for Hutch, as he struggled to keep up the pace. Starsky kept his partner close, guiding him over and around obstacles, making certain he was safe from the dangers he couldn't see for himself. Fortunately, Sam's sense of smell, and tracking experience kicked in, enabling him to lead the way, pretty much following the same route they'd taken the day before. Starsky recognized various landmarks, the most intimidating of which was the mammoth redwood that had been the source of Hutch's and Sam's rough ride down the embankment the day before. As they approached the fallen tree, Starsky pulled up short, causing Hutch to slam into his back.

"Sorry," Starsky thrust out a hand and caught Hutch's arm, steadying him.

"Why're we stopping?" Hutch asked.

"We're at the big tree you and Sam tangled with yesterday. I wanna see if there's another way around it. Wait here." Starsky approached the redwood, hoping he'd missed something obvious the day before.

Sam ran up and down the length of the tree, sniffing and snorting, his ears peaked and eyes alert, while Hutch stood by impatiently. He knew without him, Starsky and the dog would've been more than halfway back to the road by now.

Starsky scratched his head, studying the situation, convinced there must be a safer way to get Hutch past the tree, other than climbing over it like they had yesterday. As he headed back toward Hutch, Sam sounded off, barking loud enough to alert anyone within a two-mile radius. “Sam! Keep it down, will ya?” Starsky scolded. Not at all repentant, Sam ran up to The Dark One and yapped at the top of his voice again. “Why don’t ‘cha just tell the whole world where we are!” Starsky shushed him with a hands-down signal.

Sam looked up at his human mischievously. “Bwoof,” he answered, with the doggie equivalent of a whisper. Astonished, Starsky turned to Hutch. “Did ya hear that? Huh? I told ya he understands me. I swear, he understands everything I say to him!”

Lifting his brows, Hutch replied, with a smirk, “Only when he wants to. It’s called selective listening, Starsk. Something else he’s picked up living with you.”

Starsky was about to answer with some equally smart aleck remark, when Sam ran back to the same spot in the tangle of dead branch. The dog scratched anxiously around one of the huge limbs that lay half rotted away, until another soft “bwoof” demanded Starsky’s attention.

“Starsk, I think he’s trying to tell you something. He hasn’t steered us wrong so far. Don’t you think you should check it out?”

“Okay. But you stay put. One step in the wrong direction, and you could end up at the bottom of this hill,” Starsky warned.

As he walked toward the big dog, Sam’s head and shoulders disappeared into the labyrinth of branches. By the time Starsky reached him, all that remained visible was the animal’s long tail, swishing back and forth like a windshield wiper, wildly scattering the dead leaves in its path. “What ‘cha got there, Big Dog?” Sam backed out from the tunnel of tree limbs and rotting wood. He looked up at Starsky with excited eyes. His rust colored brows were caked with dirt, as were the corners of his huge, smiling mouth. Satisfied he had Starsky’s attention, the dog ducked his head back into the maze of deadwood, urging The Dark One to take a look.

Bending down on his knees, Starsky grabbed Sam by the hips, and pulled him into the open. “Okay...okay. But if you want me to look, ya got’a move outta the way.” Sam backed away, panting, more from excitement than exertion, while Starsky crawled into the opening, took a cursory look, then backed out. “Good boy! Way to go, Sam!”

“What’s going on?”

“I think Sam’s found us a way to get past this tree. Hang on a minute. I wanna try somethin’.”

Starsky looked down at Sam, making eye contact as he gave a command the dog had learned for traversing tunnels and pipes in his Agility classes. “Sam, Through!”

The rottie scurried into the jumble of limbs and branches, only seconds later, exiting safely on the other side.

“Sam, Come!” Sam scrambled back through, ending up at Starsky's feet. Except for a big blob of dirt perched on the end of his nose, and one large, dead leaf skewered on his ID tag, Sam seemed none the worse for wear.

“All right! Good job!” Starsky praised the dog, before turning to Hutch with an explanation. “There’s a narrow passageway in the branches, right where the trunk of the tree forks. I think we can crawl through. Sam just did. It’ll be tight, but a lot safer than climbing over.”

Hutch listened attentively, as he tried to visualize the structure Starsky was describing.

“I’ll go in ahead of you and clear the path. Ought’a be a piece ‘o cake,” Starsky concluded confidently. Taking Hutch by the elbow, Starsky guided him to the spot they would try to pass through, and eased him to the ground.

“Starsk, I can just climb over the tree like yesterday,” Hutch volunteered.

Realizing all this was pretty hard on Hutch’s pride, Starsky tried to lighten the moment. “No offense, Blondie, but I don’t particularly wanna watch you slalom down that embankment on your butt again,” Starsky teased. “Besides, this way should be faster.”

The tense muscles in Hutch’s face softened, as he imagined what a ridiculous sight he and Sam must have been the day before. Besides, Starsky had enough on his mind without nursing his bruised ego.

Starsky shrugged out of his leather jacket as he talked. “Now, I’m gonna lay my jacket over your head so you won’t get jabbed in the face by anything while you’re comin’ through, okay?”

“Right.” Hutch replied agreeably, thankful Starsky had thought of that possibility.

Draping the jacket over Hutch’s shoulders and head, Starsky continued talking. “I’ll be right in front of you; just keep your hand in contact with my shoe. There’re all kinds of sharp twigs and debris in there. I’ll clear out as much as I can, as we go.” Starsky brought the soft, well-worn leather sleeves underneath Hutch’s chin and tied them loosely to keep the jacket in place. “How’s that feel?”

“How do you think it feels? Like an old piece of sweaty leather, worn by a guy who’s too cheap to spring for a dry cleaning bill,” Hutch bantered.

“Hey! Is that any way to talk about my jacket? Me and this jacket go back a long way, ya know.” Starsky shot back.

True, that jacket ‘s been through hell and high water with you, my friend. Hutch’s mind flashed back on his most devastating memory of the jacket—seeing Starsky sprawled on the floor of the police parking garage, riddled with bullets—his life’s blood slowly draining from his body. During the gut-wrenching time that followed, that jacket had become a symbol to him of his partner’s tenacity...his resilience. Once he knew Starsky was going to survive, Hutch spent weeks finding someone who could repair the jacket, meticulously mending the holes, matching the worn leather so perfectly, the expert stitching barely visible to the naked eye. It had cost him a pretty penny. He could easily have bought a new one for the amount he shelled out for the repairs. He’d presented the repaired jacket to Starsky the day he came home from the hospital. Seeing his partner’s face, his deeply emotional response, had made it worth every cent. Pushing back the memories, Hutch breathed in deeply, comforted by its familiar scent.

“Ready when you are,” he answered shortly, hoping his voice didn’t betray where his thoughts had been.

“Okay. Now, just stay close.” Both men went down on all fours, as Starsky called over his shoulder to the dog, “Sam, Through!” The dog dashed back through the arbor-like tunnel even faster than the time before.

Sam loved this game, and now that his two humans were playing, it would be even more fun.



“I told you we shouldn’t have stopped last night! They’ve doubled-back. I know they have.” Benny White was tired, aggravated, and beginning to worry that the two cops had outsmarted him. It was understandable they could pull one over on his partner—but not him!

“We couldn’t go on after the battery went out anyway, Benny,” Al countered. “By the time we stopped, I couldn’t have gone another step if you’d put that damn gun to my head.”

“Don’t tempt me.” White shoved the Saturday night special under Bernard’s chin. “I’ve taken all the complaining and whining I’m going to from you! You still don’t get it, do you?”

Al Bernard’s eyes were wide with fear, realizing White was dead serious about blowing him away.

“If we don’t burn those cops, Morrisetti will be taking out his next contract on us!”

“Okay...okay...relax, Benny. They can’t be far ahead of us. How could we have missed them? Huh? I know the woods are dense, but you were trackin’ them pretty good until right before we stopped to rest.” Bernard’s hands were shaking as he reached up and eased the barrel of the gun away from his face. “I mean, we didn’t see no signs of them after that. No tracks...nothing.”

Thinking back on the point at which he’d actually lost the trail, White quietly considered the other man’s words. Al was right. The trail hadn’t grown cold until right before they came upon the old, abandoned campsite. From that point forward, he’d seen no trace of the two men, or their vicious dog.

“They’ve doubled back all right. And I think I know where.” The more he thought about it, the surer he was. “Keep moving. We’re going back to that campsite and see if we can pick up their trail from there.” If he was right, the cops may already have reached the highway. Benny White knew if they had, his days were numbered.

Chapter 14

“Captain Dobby, there’s a Mister...Bear?...on line two for you. Shall I take a message?”

Dobby’s brow wrinkled momentarily, wondering why Starsky and Hutch’s friend would be calling him. Perhaps he had a lead on some case they’d been working prior to Morrisetti’s trial. “Put him through.”

“Dobby here. What can I do for you, Huggy?”

“Hello, Captain. I picked up some talk on the street that’s making me very uncomfortable. I tried to contact Starsky and Hutch, but the lady tells me they’re on vacation.”

“I’ll be glad to check out anything you may have for them.” Dobby leaned back in his chair, twirling a pen with the fingers of his right hand.

“Well, it seems that that cat, Morrisetti, has hired a couple of major league hit men do a piece of work on a certain two detectives who helped put him behind bars.”

Dobby leaned forward abruptly, the pen dropping to the desk with a thump. “Is this a reliable source, Huggy?”

“Primo, Captain. This dude don’t give me any jive talk. I’m a little nervous that the dynamic duo may be history if I can’t get word to them, like now. Dig it?”

“They’re on their way to Seattle to enter Sam in some sort of Search and Rescue competition. They probably arrived early this morning. I’ll call the hotel where they’re staying and warn them to stay on their toes.”

“Okay, that’s good. Thanks, Captain.”

“Oh, Huggy...”

“Yeah?”

Dobey cleared his throat, uncomfortable with expressing his gratitude. “I appreciate all you do to help my boys. Starsky and Hutchinson are, well, ahem...lucky to have a friend like you.”

Embarrassed by the unexpected compliment, Huggy didn’t respond immediately. “Yeah...okay. They’re pretty cool. Good to the brothers and the sisters on the street, always remembering the ones nobody else wants to bother with.”

A moment of silence stretched between them before Huggy spoke again. “Later...”

“Right,” Dobby answered, before dropping the receiver back into the cradle. A few seconds later, he leaned forward and pressed the intercom button. “Carol, please get the front desk of that hotel where Starsky and Hutchinson are staying.”

“Right away, Captain.”

As he waited for the hotel desk to ring their room, an easy feeling crept up his spine. Drumming his fingers on the desk, he mulled over the possibilities—and none of them were pleasant. A man like Morrisetti was capable of anything, and had the money and power to issue a death warrant from his prison cell with very little effort. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Hutchinson and Mr. Starsky haven’t checked in, sir. Would you care to leave a message, in case they do?”

Dobey looked down at his watch, then rubbed the brow between his eyes, feeling a headache beginning to blossom. “Yes...yes, tell them to call Captain Dobby. They know the number.” He hung up the phone and quickly buzzed the intercom again.

“Yes, sir?”

“I want to put out an APB on Starsky and Hutchinson...”



When they made it past the fallen redwood, the going got easier. Hutch did pretty well keeping up with Starsky and Sam; even so, he knew he was slowing them down. Once the woods thinned out enough, he gained the confidence to walk close behind Starsky, rather than maintaining physical contact with him every step of the way. Approaching the gutted Torino and the highway, Sam became agitated, somehow sensing what lay beyond the tree line was unpleasant. The dog forged ahead, darting in and out of sight, but never quite venturing beyond voice range.

In his impatience to reach the road, Starsky picked up the pace too, unintentionally widening the gap between himself and Hutch. When Hutch tripped on a rotted stump lying half buried in the ground, he went into a nose dive, ending in a four point landing, his hands and knees bearing the brunt of his weight. Starsky looked back just in time to see him struggling to get back on his feet.

Annoyed at his own thoughtlessness, Starsky rushed back to help him up. “You okay? Awww, man, I’m sorry,” he apologized, brushing the leaves and grime off the knees of Hutch’s jeans.

More frustrated than angry, Hutch pushed his hands away. “I can do it myself!” Starsky pulled back, but tried again to apologize.

“I’m sorry, Hutch. I wasn’t paying attention. Sam’s all excited, and I was tryin’ to see where he was goin’. I think we must be getting near the highway.”

“I’ll try to move faster,” Hutch mumbled, embarrassed for taking out on Starsky his own exasperation at not being able to keep up.

Rather than withdraw, Starsky remained steadfast. Remembering his own experience wearing a blindfold, after Emily was accidentally blinded by a bullet from his gun, Starsky said honestly, “I think you’re doin’ terrific. A hell of a lot better than I could.” He reached down and turned Hutch’s hands palm up. Seeing the raw abrasions, he took out his handkerchief and gently dabbed at them, removing the dirt and debris. “These hurt?”

“Sting a little, that’s all.” When Starsky, applied a slight pressure to stem the bleeding, Hutch instinctively drew back.

“Sorry.” Starsky said softly. Looking up, he studied Hutch’s face, wondering what was running through his mind. Seeing his friend this helpless was hard to take. The abrasions somewhat cleaned, he stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket. A moment of silence passed between them before Starsky spoke again.

“Think you can make it now?”

Hutch smiled contritely, “Yeah...let’s go.” His hand on Starsky's shoulder, he took a hesitant step to follow, then stopped. “Starsk.”

Starsky paused and looked over his shoulder. “Hmmm?”

Hutch ran a hand over his face. “Look, I’m...I’m sorry I keep lashing out at you like that. It’s just...”

“Hey.” Starsky smiled sadly, and rubbed his own tired eyes. “I know.”

As the two men started out again, they heard the big dog barking up ahead. “Damn, I wish he’d keep it down,” Starsky cursed.

“Maybe he’s at the Torino.”

“Yeah, maybe. Looks like the trees are thinning out, so it’s possible,” Starsky told him. “This all looks familiar.”

As they broke through to the clearing, Sam stood before them, wagging his tail; in the background sat the burned-out shell of what had once been Starsky’s pride and joy. Tiny wisps of gray smoke still spiraled upward in various spots, not quite having burned out yet. The smell of charred leather and paint hung heavy in the air. Seeing the car again—beyond salvage, and literally unrecognizable, Starsky felt a lump rise in his throat. He stepped away from Hutch, contemplating looking for his gun among the ruins; but when he approached, he could see it was a lost cause.

Hutch didn’t need his sight to see the pain etched in his partner’s face—he could feel it—filling the air like an electrical charge. Even Sam felt it. The dog slowly approached The Dark One, then sat down beside him.

“Starsk? You okay, buddy? Where are you?” Hutch took a step forward, his outstretched hand groping the air.

“Yeah. I’m here,” came the barely audible reply. Starsky’s eyes were transfixed on the Torino, but his hand reached out and made contact with Hutch’s.

In his mind’s eye, Hutch envisioned the demolished car. One of the most vivid images he saw before the first manifestations of blindness had enveloped him, Hutch knew he wouldn’t soon forget the smoldering automobile. He’d always given Starsky a hard time about ‘the Tomato’, but it had all been in fun. The fact of the matter was, they’d shared a lot of good times in that car, had a lot of memories—some good, some bad; but it had definitely played an important role in their years together. He waited silently, his hand gripping Starsky’s, in a gesture of empathy.

The first to break contact, Starsky gruffly choked out the words, ready to put this scene behind them. “Come on. We got’a make it to the road before those turkeys show up.”

Sam looked up at him with questioning eyes. He thrust his big head beneath The Dark One's hand, offering comfort. It seemed to Starsky the dog felt his grief. "Ready to go home too, Big Dog?" In response, the rottweiler chuffed softly.

Purposely diverting his eyes from the wreckage, Starsky led Hutch past the car, giving it a wide berth. 'It was only a car', he reminded himself. He had more important things to think about right now. It was up to him to get Hutch and Sam away from here safely. He knew making it up that steep hill with a blind man in tow would be no easy feat.



As the two exhausted men arrived at the old camp site where they'd stopped the night before, Benny White wasn't in the least surprised to see the pile of brush gone and the dark mouth of the cave yawning before them.

"Hey, Benny, would ya look at that?" Al Bernard stared into the dark cavern. "How come we didn't see this last night?"

"Because it was camouflaged with this brush, you moron." White gestured with his hand at the randomly scattered branches and limbs.

"You think they were in there the whole time?" Bernard's eyes bulged, astounded by the possibility their prey had been right beneath their noses for two full hours without being detected.

"That's exactly what I think. Damn! I can't believe we were so close!" The artery on Benny White's neck stood out markedly, giving his face an unpleasant purple-mottled appearance.

"So you think they waited until we left and doubled back? Or just went in a different direction?"

"What would you do, Al? Just think about it a minute, if that's not too painful for you?"

White's insult wasn't lost on the other man. Again, he felt his own temper flare, fed-up with the constant barrage of insults heaped on him by his own partner. "I'd head back for the road and try to wave down help," he speculated.

"And that's exactly what they've done. The only question remaining is, how much of a head-start did they get? Did they leave as soon as we did, or did they wait until daylight? In either case, we'd better get our asses back to the road before someone stops to help them.

Chapter 15

When they reached the base of the hill, Starsky took Hutch by the arm. “I’m not exactly sure of the best way to do this, but I think maybe you should go first, and I’ll follow as your back-up.”

“I can’t see where I’m going,” Hutch pointed out unnecessarily.

“As long as you keep movin’ up, I’ll tell you what’s ahead of you.” Starsky saw fear flicker to life in Hutch’s eyes. “You can do it,” he encouraged. “I’ll be your eyes.”

Accepting that they had no alternative, Hutch relented. “So—point me in the right direction.”

Sam clambered up ahead of them, easily negotiating the steep terrain. He watched from the top, as they positioned themselves for the climb. Looking down, the nimble-footed dog wondered why it was taking his humans so long to perform such a simple task. And once again, he was baffled by The Light One’s behavior. Hutch hadn’t acted like himself since they’d escaped into the woods the day before. Sam wasn’t sure how all of this fit together; he just knew he was ready for this adventure to end.

“Okay...there’s a good sized rock to your left, at nine o’clock, that looks pretty stable,” Starsky coached Hutch as they began their ascent.

Reaching out his hand, Hutch’s fingers closed around the rock and tugged slightly, testing to make certain it wouldn’t give way under his weight. Using the chunk of granite, he pulled himself up, listening intently to Starsky’s voice behind him.

“Good...good. Now there’s a bush directly above you, at twelve o’clock. Grab that with your right hand.”

Hutch complied, his confidence building with each move. When his right shoe hit a pebble, he slipped back an inch or two, but was promptly shored up by Starsky’s hand, reaching out to support his foot.

“It’s okay—it’s okay. I got ya. Now, this next part’s gonna be a breeze. Just grab onto the small tree above your head, and pull yourself up with both hands. That’s gonna put you on a less steep incline, and that should make the rest easier.”

As they continued the climb up the embankment, Hutch’s hands seemed to grow more sensitive, seeking out every rock, bush, nook, and cranny that could serve as a handhold or a foot brace. Starsky’s calm, reassuring voice gave him the courage to climb more aggressively. He began to disregard his blindness, rather, focusing on trusting his instincts and his partner. Hutch grappled with a sapling until he had a firm grip. As he pulled himself up, he felt Starsky’s fingers encircle his left ankle, and position his foot

against another piece of protuberant rock to provide stability. The distance climbing up the steep embankment seemed a great deal further than it had when they'd been careening down it in the out-of-control Torino.

As they progressed upward, leaving the bottom of the ravine below them, each movement was easier, more self-assured. Starsky's voice coaxed and encouraged, until they reached the final plateau. "That's it! You did it. We're there. Now, don't move; just hold on right where you are. I'm gonna go to the top, so I can lean down and hoist you up the rest of the way. Can ya hang on right where you are?"

As the sweat ran down Hutch's face, he realized how exhausted he was. With very little rest, and no food, other than the piece of dog biscuit for more than twenty-four hours, his weakened body began to tremble. The exertion from the climb sluiced over him like a wave of warm water.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he answered. "Go ahead. I promise...I won't move."

Starsky climbed the remaining couple of feet, swinging far to the left to avoid bumping Hutch, and breaking his tenuous hold on the outcropping rock. Once he reached the top, he pulled himself up and flopped onto his stomach. Hooking his foot around the damaged guardrail for support, he reached back down over the edge toward Hutch.

"Now, I can't pull all your weight straight up from this angle, but I'm anchored to the guardrail to keep from slipping over the edge. So take my hands, then you push off as hard as you can with your feet, and I'll pull back at the same time. Okay?"

"Yeah...yeah...I understand." Hutch took a deep breath, fighting the lightheadedness that suddenly engulfed him. He had the strangest sensation of being disconnected from his surroundings and the activity around him. Tiny pinpricks of light danced behind his eyelids.

"Ready?"

He could hear Starsky's voice talking to him in the distance, yet he knew Starsky was only a few feet above his head. Taking deep breaths, he concentrated on trying to answer, but couldn't quite form the words.

"Hutch? Hutch, you okay?" After calling his name twice and getting no response, Starsky realized he was in trouble. "Hutch, listen to me. Come on, partner. Reach up and take my hand. I'm right here. Take my hand."

Hutch squeezed his eyes tightly against the flow of perspiration coursing down his face. Again, the lights sparkled, then instantly retreated. Starsky was calling him again, but he seemed so far away.

Sam watched with solemn eyes, as The Dark One grew more concerned. Leaning further over the ledge, Starsky reached down and grabbed both of Hutch's wrists.

"Listen to me, Hutch... Can you feel my hands? Huh? Can you feel my hands on your wrists?"

When there was still no response, he clung to Hutch more desperately, afraid he'd pass out and fall. "I'm comin' back down to get you. Okay? Just hang on, buddy."

Hutch shook his head to clear his thoughts, then turned his face up toward Starsky's voice. For a second, he thought he saw a flash of light, but then it was gone so quickly, he knew he must have imagined it.

"Wait. Give me a minute. I can feel your hands."

Afraid to release his hold on his friend's wrists long enough to climb back down, Starsky gambled on giving him the extra few moments he asked for. "Okay. Take your time. You're doin' fine. I've got a good hold on you, so take your time." He watched as Hutch's breathing slowed, then gradually flowed more naturally. Even better, the trembling he'd felt in Hutch's hands and arms seemed to ebb from his body. Starsky ventured to try again.

"You okay now?"

Still woozy, but feeling more stable than a few moments earlier, Hutch gave an affirmative nod.

Moving his hands down on Hutch's forearms, Starsky got a good, firm grip. "I want ya to take hold of my arms, just like I have yours." Hutch followed his instructions, forming a strong, interlocking connection between the two men.

Starsky gained more confidence, feeling Hutch's hands wrapped around his arms in a better-than-hoped-for bond. "On the count of three, I want ya to push off with both feet, and lean in close to the ground. The incline isn't too steep here at all. Just lean into the ground and you'll be fine. I'm not gonna let you fall, okay?"

"Yeah...okay...push off with my feet. Lean in. Got it."

"That's right. On THREE." Relieved that Hutch seemed more alert, Starsky began to regain hope of getting him back on level ground.

Sam's worried eyes darted back and forth between the two men, their fear and apprehension evident in their facial expressions and body language. The big dog lay down next to Starsky, lowering his head to his paws.

"One...two...THREE!"

Hutch pushed with all his strength, propelling himself up, as Starsky pulled back, dragging Hutch with him, over the edge. With one final thrust, Hutch slammed into Starsky, almost knocking the wind out of him. When Hutch rolled off him, and landed flat on his back next to Starsky, Sam didn't wait for an invitation. He nuzzled his head between theirs and began enthusiastically licking their faces. Neither man had the energy to push him away. They were too busy gulping air into their lungs, and trying to slow their breathing back to normal.

"You okay?" Starsky finally asked, as he sat up and peered down into Hutch's face.

"I think so." Hutch slowly sat up too, rubbing the brow between his eyes. "Starsk, for a minute there..."

"What?"

"I thought—" his words were cut short, as Sam bristled and crouched low, head pointing in the direction from which they'd just come. The deep, guttural sound rolling from the canine's throat was so low, they weren't sure they'd heard it.

"What's wrong boy?" Starsky scrambled to his knees and looked down from the ridge, scanning the area Sam seemed to have locked in on.

"What's going on, Starsk?"

"Dunno. Sam's acting like he sees somethin'." Starsky craned his neck and squinted his eyes, but saw no movement from below. "I don't see anything, Big Dog." Sam maintained his aggressive stance, his eyes glued to the scene below.

"Let's not take any chances." Hutch pushed himself up, rising to his feet. "We'd better hurry and start the car. Could be them."

"Right."

A self-appointed sentry, Sam stationed himself at the top of the high embankment, while Starsky took Hutch by the arm and hurriedly led him to the blue sedan. Trying the handle, he found that the doors and windows were locked. "Damn! Why can't anything be simple?"

"Let me guess," Hutch ventured.

"Right. Locked." Knowing they didn't have much time, Starsky scooped up a rock, and smashed the back window on the drivers side, then reached in and unlocked the front door. Leaning across the seat, he unlocked the passenger's side as well. "Come on, Blondie, get in. When I crank this baby up, I want you ready to take off."

Hutch placed his hands on the car, and felt his way around to the other side while Starsky scooted in on his back on the driver's side. Sam remained crouched on the edge of the ravine, alert to any movement or sound from below.

Starsky groped underneath the dash, trying to locate the starter wires he needed to hot-wire the automobile. He glanced sideways at Hutch. "Got us quite a point man over there."

"You mean Sam?" Hutch turned his head in the direction of the dog, and with the sudden movement, thought he detected a glimmer of light again. "There! I know I saw it."

"Hmmm?" came the distracted response from beneath the dash.

"Light...I...I thought I saw a flash of light."

Starsky bolted upright so quickly, he banged his head against the steering wheel. "What? What are you sayin'? You mean you can see?"

"Look, don't get too excited. I've just seen a couple of flashes of light, that's all." Even though Hutch was downplaying the experience, it was apparent by the look on his face that he was encouraged.

"That's terrific!" Grinning, Starsky grabbed Hutch's face between his hands, yanked him around, and stared into his eyes as if he expected to witness a full recovery at that exact moment.

"Starsk, don't you think you better get this car started? I mean, we can celebrate later. Besides, it was only a couple of flashes of light. Those Bozos could get here any minute, and I'm still in no condition to help you much if they show up."

The thousand-watt grin on Starsky's face quickly faded, as the urgency of their situation was brought to the forefront again. "Oh, yeah. Right. I guess you got'a point." He slid back under the dash, more encouraged than he had been since this whole bizarre trip had begun.

Chapter 16

The brown and tan Highway Patrol cruiser came to a screeching halt after exiting onto the emergency lane of I-5. A tall, lanky young man, wearing a traditional Oregon Highway Patrolman uniform, stepped out of the car and walked up to the LA Police Captain to greet him with a handshake.

"You must be Captain Dobey. I'm Lt. Combs."

Dobey returned the handshake, without a smile. “Nice to meet you,” he muttered briskly. “Listen, I appreciate you meeting me here. As you know, once I left LA, I was out of my jurisdiction. Any sign of my men?”

“No, sir. But there’s a lot of territory to cover between California and Seattle. Parts of I-5 are pretty remote, so I’m not surprised no one has reported seeing an accident. Come on, we’ll take my car.”

As they walked toward the cruiser, Combs continued to talk. “Did you say they were driving a civilian vehicle? A red Torino with a white stripe down the side?”

“That’s right. Detective Starsky’s car.”

“Something that distinctive should be pretty easy to spot. Do you know for sure they were in an accident?”

“No, all I know is, they didn’t make it to Seattle. I don’t know how much your captain filled you in, but I’m concerned they may have been victims of foul play. Starsky and Hutchinson just brought in Leo Morrisetti, a heavy hitter we’ve been trying to nail for years. Their testimony helped send him up for life. One of my sources believes he put out a contract on them.” Dobey had to hustle to keep up with the energetic, long-legged man.

“Sgt. Starsky and Sgt. Hutchinson are the two detectives you’re looking for? I’ve been following that case in the papers. Those guys have moxie.” Combs walked to the passenger side and politely opened the door for the older, higher-ranking officer. “I wish we had more people to spare for the search, but with the budget cut-backs, and hiring freeze, we’re stretched to the limit. Of course, the APB’s out there, so our people have all been alerted; but Captain Benson could only send me here to personally offer my services. I hope you understand.”

Dobey planted himself in the front seat and slammed the door securely. “Look, I appreciate your cooperation, and any help you can give me in locating my men. I’d go out there by myself if I had to, but I want someone with the jurisdiction to arrest and prosecute these creeps if we catch up with them in Oregon.” Dobey reached into his pocket, plucked out a clean handkerchief, and wiped his perspiring face. “If the circumstances didn’t warrant it, I wouldn’t cross state lines and get involved like this. These two are my best detectives, and they’re capable of looking out for themselves. But this is different. They just left on vacation, and have no way of knowing they’ve been marked for a hit.”

After checking both ways for oncoming traffic, the highway patrolman pulled back out onto the road. “Well, Captain, I’ll be happy to assist in any way I can. If law enforcement can’t look after our own, we may as well pack it up and all go home.”

“Thanks, Combs.” Dobby smiled gratefully at the idealistic, young man. He vaguely reminded the captain of a rookie Hutch, fresh out of the academy. “You’re exactly right. We have to stick together. Law officers are a different breed.”

Combs nodded in agreement, his eyes never leaving the road. “I thought we’d just get on here and drive north, the same route they would have taken. We’ll keep our eyes open and monitor the calls coming through. Maybe someone on routine patrol will spot them.”

Dobby sat back, relaxing a little for the first time since Huggy’s call. It felt good to know he was doing something besides sitting behind a desk, waiting for a phone call. If Starsky and Hutch were out there—if they were in trouble—he’d find them. He just hoped he wasn’t too late.



Starsky had wrestled with the wires a good ten minutes, unsuccessfully trying to start the blue sedan.

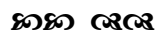
“I thought you used to hot-wire cars with your buddies in New York,” Hutch needed. “What ever happened to those magic fingers you’re always bragging about?”

“Very funny, Blintz. If you think you can do better, be my guest.” Starsky had never had this much trouble starting a car, and it seemed the more he hurried, the worse he fumbled. Knowing the two hit men may appear on the scene any second didn’t exactly boost his confidence. He scooted from beneath the dash and sat up. “I’m gonna check under the hood, in case they took the distributor cap or something.”

“I doubt they thought we’d make it back, Starsk.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. But something’s keeping it from turnin’ over.” The dark-haired detective hopped out of the car and ran around to the front, lifting the hood and checking all the obvious possibilities. At first, everything looked in order. Then, he spotted it. One of the battery cables was corroded, and wasn’t making contact. Starsky fished out his pocket knife and hurriedly scraped the green, powdery substance from around the battery post and the inside of the cable connector. Confident he’d resolved the problem, he reattached the cable and tightened it down.

Slamming the hood down, Starsky glanced toward the edge of the incline and saw Sam still watching the bottom of the ravine attentively. It appeared he hadn’t moved an inch since taking up his post there. Content that the dog would alert them if the situation changed, Starsky got back into the car to try connecting the wires again and jump the starter.



Benny White and Al Bernard left the cover of the trees, zigzagging behind rocks and bushes in a lame attempt to conceal themselves while approaching the Torino. Sam watched them vigilantly, the muscles of his lean body tense. Pressing his body to the ground, the dog blended in with his surroundings and remained hidden from sight.

The two men stopped momentarily when they came upon the smoldering ruins of the Ford, and looked for signs that the two detectives and their 'hell hound' had come back through. White's hunting experience paid off again when he found the imprint of Starsky's Adidas in the ashes near the car.

"I told you they'd come back the same way they went in," he bragged to his partner. "They're already on the highway, maybe even at the car."

"You don't think they took our car, do ya Benny?" Al's eyes bulged worriedly at that prospect.

"Only one way to find out," White answered, nodding toward the steep incline.

"I don't think I can climb with this hand." Bernard shoved his injured appendage in front of his friend's face. "Look how swollen it is."

The area around the puncture wounds was still a little swollen and red streaks extended down into Bernard's fingers. Inwardly White thought the injuries looked painful, maybe even warranting a doctor's attention. But it went against his grain to offer any modicum of sympathy.

"Don't be such a wimp," White scoffed. "The sooner we take these guys out, the sooner we're gonna get out of here."

Pushed to the breaking point, Bernard bristled back at him, "Why can't you go, Benny? Why does it always have to be me?"

"We're both going, you idiot. We'll split up—I'll come up behind the car, and I want you to come up in front of it. That way, one of us will have the drop on them."

Disappointed he'd have to make the grueling climb back up the incline, Bernard lost the spunk to argue. "Okay, I'll go. But I don't like it. What if that dog's waiting up there?"

"You have a gun, don't you?"

"Well, yeah," Bernard hedged.

"Then what's the problem? Use it."

Bernard nodded, short, quick little bobs of the head. A smile slowly crept across his face. “Okay...yeah...I will, I will,” he agreed. The thought of killing the dog made his pulse race with excitement. “He’ll be sorry he ever hurt Al Bernard. He’ll be real sorry.”



Perched on his lookout at the top of the embankment, Sam watched the two gunmen enter the clearing. Although they made a half-hearted attempt to conceal their presence, he spied them immediately. The dog hunkered down closer to the ground and waited to see their next move.

After a few short moments of examining the ruins around the Torino, they stole toward the bottom of the incline. His ears peaked high, sensitive to every minute sound, Sam watched as White branched off to the left, then disappeared among the trees that grew near the base of the ravine. When Bernard reappeared right beneath the dog's vantage point, Sam lost interest in White's whereabouts, focusing on the culprit close at hand. Then, just as quickly, the second man disappeared among the trees too. Sam stood up and leaned far out over the edge of the precipice, but saw no sign of either gunman. Not knowing what else to do, he ran back to the blue sedan to warn his humans.

When Sam reached the car, Starsky's legs were still dangling out the door, as he lay on his back twisting the exposed wires together for the final stages of the hot-wire job. Seeing The Dark One occupied, and believing his mission was too urgent to wait, Sam opted for enlisting The Light's One's help. He trotted to the other side of the car and looked up beseechingly at Hutch, grabbing his attention with a soft, but anxious bark. “Bwoof.”

“Starsky.”

“Hmmm?...what?”

“I think Sam's trying to tell us something.”

Starsky's curly top popped out from beneath the dash again. “Oh yeah?” Immediately alert, he bailed out and started around the car to take a look, almost colliding with the anxious animal in the process. “Did you see ‘em, Big Dog?” Sam whined, then trotted back toward the edge of the ravine. When Starsky didn't follow quickly enough to suit him, the dog came back and prodded him with a soft, but more impatient bark.

“I'm comin', just cool your jets, fella.” Pulling the Magnum, Starsky checked the chamber then leaned down next to Hutch's window. “Stay here, keep your gun handy, and keep low. We'll be right back.”

A worry line creased the blond's already tired features. “Starsk, be careful.”

Starsky patted him on the forearm. “Always am, partner.” Holding the gun up, ready for action, he followed the uneasy dog back to the ridge. Dropping onto his stomach, next to Sam, they both searched the area below for any signs of movement. The dissatisfied rottie inched forward on his belly.

“Watch it, boy. Not so close to the edge.” Starsky reached out with his free arm and pushed the dog back an inch or two. “You’re gonna fall if you aren’t careful.”

Still upset that he could no longer see the gunmen, the dog was not easily deterred. In his opinion, there was nothing to do but go down and roust them out. When Starsky noticed the dog creeping forward again, he grabbed the leather collar and pulled up sharply, bringing them nose to nose.

“No. I don’t want ya goin’ down there. I don’t have time to chase after you. I’ve already had to run you down three times on this trip and my patience is wearing thin. Okay?” Starsky delivered the edict with his best ‘and I mean business’ look, before releasing the dog.

Sam cocked his head to one side, not understanding a single word Starsky had said, except “No”. Sometimes, The Dark One seemed to forget they were from different species, talking to him in ‘human’, expecting him to know all those human words that sounded like a bunch of garble to him. Try as he might, Sam had only been able to master a few key words and phrases, like ‘hungry’, ‘go out’, and ‘red ball’—the important stuff a dog needed to know.

Starsky made one more quick scan of the ground below, then started back to the car. “Stay here and watch for ‘em till I call you, okay? And no runnin’ off.”

Sam saw he couldn’t make The Dark One understand they were down there somewhere. When Starsky got back into the car, the big dog took one last look at the blue sedan before quietly beginning his descent down the steep hillside.

Chapter 17

Al Bernard struggled to climb the incline, clutching at anything he could, trying not to use his sore arm anymore than necessary. Sweating and puffing, he slowly progressed up the hill. Not daring to look either up or down, he did chance a glance to the side to see if White was keeping pace with him. He was a little unnerved that he saw no trace of his partner in the vicinity. What if Benny was leaving him out there on his own? Letting him take a bullet in order to create a diversion? Once this job was over, he was through. White had nearly gotten him killed too many times with his ‘over the top’ actions. With one final push, he heaved himself up and was once again on a level patch of ground.

Huffing from too much activity for his overweight, under-conditioned body, he staggered toward a shade tree, then dropped down on the grass to rest. Suddenly, he had the uncanny feeling he was being watched. Slowly turning around, Bernard came face to face with his worst nightmare. Within a hair's breath, the large rottweiler, teeth bared, and hackles raised, locked eyes with him. Afraid to move, but terrified not to, the gunman felt the sweat pop out on his upper lip.

Sam held his ground, daring the assailant to make a move. His training had ingrained in him the need for restraint, but somehow, he sensed this man was the cause of all their troubles. He knew, with all certainty, that he was responsible for the changes in Hutch. He waited—hoping the human would attack, giving him the excuse he needed.

“N...n...nice...nice doggie. Wanna be my friend, pooch?” Bernard's hands trembled erratically, too much to fire a gun. He clamped down on the revolver, knowing if he raised it, the dog would nail him before he could bring it up to aim. “Where are your friends, pooch? Huh? Where're your lousy, asshole cop friends?” He smiled nervously, his voice dripping sarcasm.

Sam advanced one step, causing Al Bernard's heart to race so fast it seemed to rise up and lodge in his throat. “Whoa...wait...I didn't mean nothin' by that,” he babbled, believing the dog somehow knew he'd just insulted the two detectives.

Sam froze, eyes never wavering from the nervous man's. Bernard swallowed hard, fighting back the fear, realizing he had to act—regardless of the outcome. His heart couldn't take the strain of sitting here, waiting to be torn to shreds. He tightened his grip on the pistol and swiftly brought it up even with the big dog's head. Never having believed himself capable of such lightning speed, he met his adversary head-on.



Starsky grinned from ear to ear when the engine roared to life.

“Way to go!” Hutch congratulated him. “You're not exactly a speed demon, Starsk, but you did get it to start.”

“Course I did. I told ya...magic fingers. Remember?”

“Well, what do you say we get out of here and you save your bragging until we put about ten miles between ourselves and this place.”

“Sounds like a winner to me,” Starsky agreed. “Just let me get Sam, and we'll take off.”

Starsky left the engine idling and went to the ridge where he'd left the rottweiler on guard. As he approached, he saw immediately that the dog was nowhere in sight. “Sam?” He checked in all directions, and called the dog's name again. How could he have disappeared so quickly, without a sound? He knew—somehow he knew...

Something terrible had happened to Sam. The dog had disappeared before, but Starsky had never experienced the indescribable feeling of dread that flooded his senses now.

“Come on, boy. Don’t play games.” The dark-haired detective walked along the ridge a little further, stopping to look over the edge every few feet, afraid he’d see the dog lying at the bottom injured, or worse yet, dead. Following the edge of the ravine further south, Starsky entered a stand of trees that grew all the way down the hillside, dotting the terrain every four or five feet. “Sam, come!” When there was still no response, he gave a shrill whistle. Still, nothing.

Starsky was getting more worried by the second. He knew they had to leave now, or risk losing the opportunity to escape before Morrisetti’s goons caught up with them. He looked around one last time, his heart breaking. “Sam, don’t do this to me. I don’t wanna leave without you.” The seconds ticked by silently. Then, his decision made, Starsky turned to head back to the car, and found himself face to face with Benny White.

“My, my...what a touching scene, detective.” White smiled evilly, pointing the gun at Starsky’s face. “Now, drop the gun and kick it over the edge.”

When Starsky didn’t react immediately, White shouted impatiently, “ Do it now!”

The detective reluctantly eased the Magnum from its holster, and did as he was told.

White smiled, savoring his victory. “That’s better. I suppose you actually thought you were going to get away. Why didn’t you leave while you had the chance? I hear the car running.”

Starsky glared back silently, not blinking an eye.

“You came looking for that damn dog. I would never have guessed you’d risk your life for a worthless mutt.” White chuckled sadistically, making it clear what he thought about Starsky’s loyalty to Sam.

“You lasted longer than I thought you would,” he added.

“Look, I don’t know who you are, but my guess is you have some connection with Morrisetti—”

“Oh, brilliant deduction, Detective Hutchinson; or are you Starsky? I would’ve been very disappointed if you weren’t clever enough to figure out who sent me to kill you. Have you enjoyed our little game of cat and mouse?” White smiled again, thoroughly enjoying himself for the first time since this job had begun. “But the chase has ended. Now all that’s left is the kill.” Growing bored of toying with his victim, White motioned with the barrel of the gun for Starsky to move.

“Now, turn around and walk back toward the car. And don’t try anything heroic. Because, you see, it really doesn’t matter to me whether I shoot you right here, or back up there with your partner.”

“Listen, you better stop and think about what you’re doing here. The sentence for killing a cop is life. They’ll lock you up and throw away the key.”

“You think you’re the first cop I’ve ever burned? Just move, big-mouth. The time for talk is over.”

Starsky didn’t budge an inch. “I’m not goin’ anywhere until you tell me where my dog is.”

“How should I know where the damn dog is? Most likely, my partner killed him. He had a little score to settle. He’s very unhappy about their earlier encounter.”

Starsky didn’t want to believe it, but he knew if Sam was able, he’d be there in the middle of the fray, fighting both tooth and nail to protect him. “I didn’t hear a gun shot,” he said calmly. “I don’t believe he’s dead. In fact, I expect him to come tearin’ outta these woods any minute and rip your throat out.” To his own ears his voice sounded more confident than he felt.

“If he shows up, I’ll waste him right along with you and your partner. So move! No more stalling.”

Starsky held his hands up in front of him, implying he’d do as he was told. As he started to turn and walk ahead of White, he made his move. Lunging forward, he knocked White’s gun hand away, then grabbed the man’s wrist, trying to wrest the weapon away from him. Momentarily thrown off guard, Benny White lost the upper hand and fell to the ground, taking Starsky with him, while still clinging to the gun. Starsky was surprised to discover the lanky man stronger than he’d anticipated. They rolled across the uneven terrain, Starsky’s left hand grappling to gain control of the weapon.

With White beneath him, the dark-haired detective slammed the hit man’s hand against the ground, causing the gun to go off above their heads, before it flew from White’s hand. Catching Starsky off guard for a split second, the gunman heaved up, bucking the cop off him, rolling over and trapping Starsky beneath him. From that vantage point, he freed one hand and punched Starsky in the face. The detective reeled from the blow, and before he could recover, White snarled a hand in the cop’s hair and pounded his head against the ground in three hard, successive thumps.

Dazed, Starsky’s eyes were mere slits, as he struggled to not lose consciousness. He knew if he allowed himself to slip into painless oblivion, he and Hutch were doomed. Seeing he had the upper hand, White loosened his grip on Starsky just enough to reach

for the gun that lay arms length away. Starsky used the moment to turn the tables again, bringing his knee up to deliver a breath-taking jab to White's groin. His opponent gasping for air, Starsky knocked the gun beyond White's grasp and sprung off the injured man, diving to scoop up the pistol before the other could regain his wits.

Puffing for air, Starsky trained the gun on his opponent, gaining the advantage. "Get up!"

Still doubled over in pain, White ground out between clinched teeth, "Go to hell!"

"Starsky! Look out!" Hutch's voice rang out, a split second before Starsky heard the thunder of gunfire explode behind him.

"Headquarters calling Unit 62...come in, 62."

Combs reached down and picked up the mic. "This is Unit 62, headquarters. Come in."

"Ron, is Captain Harold Dobey with you?"

"Affirmative."

"Please relay to him, we received a call from the Forrest Service that a hiker reported hearing an explosion yesterday afternoon and observed a plume of black smoke rising from Sector 22. They just dispatched an air unit to check for possible forest fire. May be a lead on your missing detectives."

Combs cut his eyes to Dobey, who sat stone still, torn between relief at finally having something to investigate, and fear that the explosion could've been the Torino, and with it, Starsky and Hutch.

"Ten Four. What are the coordinates? We'll head there and check it out."

The dispatcher came back with the approximate coordinates and mile marker number. Without a word, Combs flipped on the mars light and siren, and bore down on the gas pedal. Dobey stared straight ahead, trying to keep his imagination in check.

Chapter 18

The gun still pointed at White, Starsky looked over his shoulder to see Hutch standing behind him, holding the confiscated pistol. At his feet, Al Bernard lay in a crumpled heap. As the implications of the scene hit full force, Starsky's mouth dropped open.

“Hutch? How’d you—”

Hutch’s blue eyes, wide with shock, stared back at his partner’s. “I...I can see, Starsk.” As he drank in the amazement reflected in Starsky’s features, a smile slowly spread across his face.

Holding the gun with his left hand, stripping his leather belt off with the right, Starsky prodded White with his foot. “Roll over, turkey and put your hands behind your back.”

Hutch stooped down and checked Bernard’s body for a pulse, and confirmed the man was dead. Dropping the now empty pistol on the ground beside him, Hutch stepped over the body and joined Starsky. “Could you use an extra hand?”

“As a matter of fact, I could, partner. I got’a hand it to ya. One bullet in that gun, and you made it count.”

With a lopsided grin, Starsky passed Hutch the belt and waited for him to bind White’s hands securely. When Hutch finished, he looked up at Starsky, his eyes alert and happy. “I can see. You’re a little blurry, b...but I can see you, Starsk!”

Overcome with joy and relief, Starsky pulled Hutch into a bone-crushing bear hug, then just as quickly, released and held him at arm’s length, needing to see for himself if it was true. For the first time in nearly forty-eight hours, the eyes staring back at him were alive and filled with a mixture of excitement.

Starsky's own sapphire blue eyes glistened with unshed tears. To keep from making a spectacle of himself, he resorted to a lame attempt at humor. “I told ya everything would be okay. Didn't I? Huh? When're you gonna wise up, Blondie, and admit I'm always right?”

Before Hutch could dispute that grandiose claim, a highway patrol cruiser, siren full blast, screeched to a halt behind the blue sedan. Hutch stepped back, arching one eyebrow. “Looks like the Cavalry finally arrived.”

“Yeah. And as usual, a day late, and a dollar short.”

Hutch clapped his partner on the shoulder, good-naturedly, and they walked back toward the highway. Standing beside the cruiser, microphone in hand, was a young patrolman reporting his coordinates to headquarters. Both detectives were surprised when Dobby’s head popped up over the roof of the blue sedan. “Here they are!” he shouted to Combs. Caught off-guard for a second, Dobby almost smiled before his stern, more familiar, ‘all business’ countenance fell back into place.

“Where have you two been?” he barked, hoping they hadn’t noticed his moment of indiscretion.

Amused by Dobey’s pathetic attempt to keep up his tough-guy act, Starsky shrugged casually. “We’re just enjoyin’ the great outdoors, Cap’n. How about you? What’re you doin’ here?”

A smile teased the corners of Hutch’s mouth, waiting to see what excuse Dobey gave for coming to rescue them.

“Can’t I trust you two to stay out of trouble for even a day?” Dobey blustered, his eyes drawn to the bloody bandanna tied around Hutch’s head. Taking in their appearance for the first time, he noticed they were both filthy, especially Starsky. Leaves and other debris clung to his curly head, and smudges of what looked to be soot, covered the front of his shirt and jeans. His left eye was black and puffy. The right one was already beginning to swell shut, matching the purple bruises coloring his cheekbone. Hutch was missing at least two buttons from his shirt. Dried blood stained his face and neck, not to mention a dark bruise that ran from his temple down the side of his face. It was pretty apparent they’d been to hell and back. Knowing they’d expect no less, he criticized gruffly, “You look like a couple of refugees from a garbage dump.”

“We decided to dress casual while on vacation,” Hutch quipped.

“I don’t need any of your smart aleck answers, Hutchinson!” Dobey snapped.

“Got a prisoner over there, Cap’n. And a dead body.” Starsky nodded toward White, lying trussed up a few yards away. “There were only two of ‘em.”

“Captain Dobey,” Combs called from the car. “Two units are on their way here. One can take the suspect into custody. Do we need an ambulance?”

Dobey gave the two detectives the once over again. “Yeah...and a coroner’s wagon too,” Dobey answered, giving them both an ‘I dare you to argue with me’ look.

“I know you seem to have everything under control here, but I want you both to get checked out by a doctor. I’ll take Sam in the cruiser with me.” Dobey looked around. “Where’s Sam?”

Starsky’s eyes flew wide open. “Sam!”

Hutch spun around and looked at him. “Sam? Starsky, where is he?”

Starsky swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing nervously. “That turkey said his partner musta killed him. In all the excitement, I guess I forgot...”

“Let’s not panic,” Hutch cautioned. “We’ll search the area; maybe he’s just wounded—we can get him to a vet.” The blond detective started toward the edge of the ravine.

“Wait, Hutch.” Starsky hurried after him. “You sure you can see well enough to climb down there?”

Dobey stood by, totally forgotten. None of this made sense to him, but obviously, the dog was missing. “What does he mean, ‘can you see well enough’, Hutchinson?”

“Oh, nothing, Cap’n. I was just blind yesterday,” Hutch answered distractedly.

Dobey’s eyes narrowed, even more confused than before. “Wait a minute! Does this have anything to do with that bandage around your head?”

“It’s a bullet wound, Cap’n,” Starsky interjected before turning back to Hutch again. “I’ll find him, Hutch. You better take it easy.”

“Things are just a little blurry. I can see well enough to search for Sam.”

The voice of logic and authority, Dobby stepped in front of Hutch. “If there’s something wrong with your vision, you’re staying here. And that’s an order.”

“But, Cap’n—”

“You and I’ll search the immediate area. Combs and Starsky can take the ravine.” He turned to Starsky. “Do you think he’s down there?”

“I don’t know, Cap’n. He could be anywhere. I guess we’ll start here and work our way to the bottom.”

“I’m coming with you,” Hutch argued one more time.

“I got’a agree with Dobby on this one. Don’t take any unnecessary chances. I’ll find him...I promise.”

“Yes, but—”

“Come on, partner. Have I let you down yet? Hmmm? Stay up here with Cap’n Dobby, okay?”

Knowing he was outnumbered, Hutch reluctantly nodded. The longer he stood there arguing, the longer it would be before they found Sam. And if he was injured, time was their enemy.



Tired beyond words, Starsky pushed on, knowing he wouldn't rest until he found the rottweiler. He also knew Sam well enough to believe the dog would've forfeited his life if he thought he was protecting one of his humans; and that's what scared Starsky most.

He'd lost sight of Lt. Combs. They'd gone in opposite directions, had covered the hillside, and were approaching the bottom of the ravine. Both men called the dog's name as they searched, but Sam didn't respond.

Having finished searching his section, Starsky started back up the incline, discouraged, and clinging to the hope that Combs had had better luck. He hoisted himself up to a level patch of ground, then started for a small stand of trees up ahead. As he passed, Starsky thought he heard a sound. He stopped, straining to hear it again. Nothing. Only wishful thinking on his part, he figured, and continued back toward the road. But before he took more than a dozen steps, he heard the sound again. He was sure of it. A whimper. It sounded like a whimper.

"Sam? Sam, is that you, Big Dog?" Again he heard it, so soft it was barely audible. But this time, he pinpointed the source. Without a doubt, it was coming from a clump of bushes no more than twenty feet from where he was standing. "Bwoof," came the faint reply.

"Sam!" Starsky stumbled over the rocky terrain, running toward the sound. Slipping, he fell on his backside, then scrambled to regain his footing. "Sam!"

Slowly, the massive rust and black head peeped around the bush at Starsky, making another pitiful whining sound. Head down, and tail tucked, the dog slunk from behind the bush, toward The Dark One. Relief flooded Starsky as he ran and met the dog, scooping him up into a jubilant hug.

"Sam! There you are! Man, I thought for sure we'd lost you. You okay?" All smiles, Starsky hugged the dog to him, before trying to check him for injuries. Overjoyed to see The Dark One alive and well, Sam was a flurry of excited tail wagging and slobbery kissing. Starsky's examination turned up nothing more serious than an ugly knot the size of a small egg, which stood out in sharp relief on the top of Sam's noggin. Sam had already forgotten the bump on his head. Perhaps he was a little embarrassed. The human had distracted him with the gun long enough to whack head with a rock. His big tongue snaked out, slurping The Dark One's face in a gesture of affection.

"I knew you wouldn't go down without a fight." He scratched the dog's ears, and patted him on the back, grateful he was really okay. Hugging the dog close again, it occurred to Starsky how much he and Hutch had come to love this big, affectionate critter. "Come on, fella. Hutch is probably drivin' Dobey nuts by now. Let's get back, before they put out another APB on us."

Releasing his hold on Sam, Starsky stood up, and gave the dog one final scratch under the chin. “Heel, boy.” As the two hurried back to where Hutch and Dobey were waiting, they spotted the Forestry helicopter hovering above what Starsky suspected was the wreckage of the Torino. It looked as if the Cavalry truly had arrived now.



When Starsky and the large dog came into view, Hutch’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. Before he could utter a word, Sam broke pace next to Starsky and charged toward him. Like an arrow, the dog gracefully left the ground, and literally flew into Hutch’s arms, knocking the man flat on his back. Starsky walked up beside Dobey, grinning broadly, and together they watched Hutch try to fend off the arsenal of slobbery dog kisses.

“I see you found him. Glad he’s okay.” Dobey smiled, and shook his head in disbelief of Hutch’s tolerance.

“Yeah. Me too. The big galoot took quite a knock on the head. He did it again, Cap’n—he put his life on the line for us. He’s really somethin’.” Starsky’s voice was filled with pride.

“He’s smart, all right.” Dobey agreed, then watched Starsky from the corner of his eye, as he added humorously, “I just can’t figure out why he hangs around with you and Hutchinson.”

“Thanks a bunch, Cap’n,” Starsky answered drolly, letting Dobey enjoy his friendly jibe at their expense.

Dobey slapped him on the back and laughed, his belly jiggling. Turning toward the sound of the ambulance siren, the captain sobered. “Come on. Time for you both to get checked out by a doctor. When that’s done, you’ll want to clean up. God knows, you could use a clean change of clothes.” The Captain wrinkled his nose at Starsky’s grimy condition, drawing a look of reproach and indignation from the younger man.

“I beg your pardon, Cap’n. But I’d like to see how you’d look after two days in the wilds of Oregon, fightin’ off wild animals and crazed hit men—not to mention havin’ your car blown to smithereens and your partner go blind as a bat—and don’t forget that looney-toons dog tearin’ off through the woods every time my back was turned for a second...”

Hutch rolled his eyes heavenward as Starsky droned on. Dobey shook his head in resignation, knowing he wouldn’t hear the last of this story for a long time. Only Combs seemed interested in listening Starsky’s tale of woe.

“And then there was the giant tree—did I tell you about the tree yet, Cap’n....?”

Chapter 19

The ride to the hospital was uneventful, with Hutch protesting all the way. “I don’t see why this is necessary,” he complained only loud enough for Starsky’s ears.

In one of his more philosophical moods, Starsky defended Dobey’s edict. “I think he’s got a point. I mean, you were blind. Then all of a sudden, you can see again.”

“Get to the point.” Hutch’s impatience was outweighed only by his exhaustion.

“All I’m saying is, if you could get it back that quick—no warnin’, what’s to say you might not wake up tomorrow morning blind again?”

Hutch’s brow crinkled in consternation. He hadn’t considered such a possibility. He’d been too happy to see again, to question the how and why. “But you’re the one who said, right from the start, that it was a temporary thing.”

“I know...I know...and I still believe that’s true. Personally, I think the Big Guy Upstairs was definitely along on this trip. But can’t ya just get a professional medical opinion? I mean, I know I’m brilliant, but I’m still a few credits shy of an MD in brain surgery.” Starsky held the serious expression as long as he could, but when Hutch peered at him from under hooded eyes, a look of disgust on his face, he couldn’t stifle a grin.

The ambulance rolled up to the tiny hospital’s emergency entrance and came to a grinding halt.

“Let’s get this over with.” Hutch leaned in toward Starsky, lowering his voice to exclude the EMT. “I don’t know about you, but I think we can still make it to Seattle in time to make the finals.”

Starsky’s brow puckered, betraying his concern that Hutch may be rushing things a little. But rather than shoot down the suggestion, he went along with it for the moment. “I’m ready—just as long as the doc says you’re okay. If not, then there’s always next year. And think how much better Sam’ll be by then. Won’t be any reason for those other dogs to even bother entering.”

Hutch laughed softly, relishing Starsky’s customary optimism.



The doctor switched off his pen light and nodded to the nurse to turn on the bright overhead fluorescent.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Hutch asked warily.

“I’ll admit that it’s remarkable you’re recovering from such a head trauma so quickly, but it’s not unheard of. Have you experienced any vomiting or dizziness in the past twenty-four hours?”

“Some,” Hutch admitted. “I actually vomited only once, right after being shot, but the dizziness lasted until a few hours ago.” He turned to Starsky for confirmation. “Last time was at the top of the ravine, remember?”

Starsky nodded solemnly, recalling his fear that Hutch would take an unintentional nose dive into the ravine.

“Well, that’s a good sign. And did your sight return gradually? Were you seeing glimpses of shapes, or perhaps a flash of light here and there?”

“Yes. In fact, things were still pretty blurry until about thirty minutes ago.”

“I’d say what you’ve described is pretty common in an injury of this nature. Just to make certain we aren’t missing anything, I’ve ordered a series of cranial x-rays and a CAT Scan.”

“Do you really think that’s necessary?” The last thing Hutch wanted at the moment was to be poked and prodded anymore.

“Awww, come on, Hutch. It’s just a little x-ray,” Starsky cajoled. “Don’t give the doc a hard time, okay?”

“Thank you, Detective Starsky.” The doctor removed his spectacles and absently polished the lenses with the bottom of his white jacket. “While the technicians are getting pictures of your partner, I’ll have just about enough time to check you out too.”

Starsky’s smile froze, gradually turning down at the corners of his mouth. “Me? I’m fine, Doc. You don’t need to waste your time on me,” he hedged.

“Awww, come on, Starsky,” Hutch drawled. “It’s just a little check-up. Don’t give the doc a hard time, okay?”

Knowing he’d backed himself into a corner, Starsky glared back at his partner, with an ‘if looks could kill’ expression. “Tell ya what, Blintz. I’ll stay here and get checked out while you go down and have those tests run. Fair enough?”

Hutch tipped his head to the side, conceding the stand-off. Before he could change his mind, he was seated in a wheel chair and whisked off to x-ray.

Turning to Starsky, the doctor smiled. “Your turn....”



The two detectives sat in the out-patient treatment room, Hutch clad in a hospital gown, Starsky still wearing grungy jeans and a filthy shirt. They'd been waiting over an hour for Hutch's rest results to come back. In the background, a nasally voice paged doctors and nurses over distorted intercom speakers. Starsky stared down at the Scrabble Game board spread out on the portable tray table between the two men, while nimbly shifting the ice pack from his right eye to the left. Concentrating, he carefully placed his letters on the board and sat back, a self-satisfied look on his face.

"B-O-H-U-N-K-U-S? Starsky, what the hell is that?" Hutch stared at him incredulously. "There's no such word."

"Sure there is. My Grandfather used it all the time," Starsky replied smugly.

"Oh yeah? And what does it mean?"

"You know, like, 'Get your bohunkus in here now, Davey!'"

"What? What're you talking about? I've never, in my entire life, heard anyone say that," Hutch argued. "What's it supposed to mean?"

Starsky rolled his eyes, implying Hutch sorely lacked a good command of the English language. "It means...well, you know...your butt."

Hutch ran a hand down his face. "I swear, every time I play this game with you, you come up with something more ridiculous than the last time. I don't know why I even bother."

"Awww, you just have your nose outta joint because I wanted to play somethin' besides Monopoly for a change."

Not about to let Starsky skirt the issue, Hutch persisted. "Oh, give me a break!"

"I'm tellin' ya, it's a word. You wanna hear it in another sentence? Fine! 'He sat on his bohunkus all day, while his partner did all the work!'"

"Or," Hutch added, getting into the swing of things, 'His partner kicked his bohunkus out of his hospital room because he couldn't spell his way out of a brown p-a-p-e-r bag!'"

Starsky raised a warning finger, about to deliver a smart come-back, when Dr. Thomas came into their room.

"Good news, Detective Hutchinson. Your tests came back confirming just what I suspected."

“So, he’s gonna be okay?” Starsky asked, forgetting the Scrabble dispute for the moment.

“Yes, he should be.” The doctor pulled up one of the guest chairs, took a seat, and continued his explanation. “You see, sometimes when a person suffers severe head trauma, there is increased intracranial pressure. That, in turn, can cause swelling of the optic nerve. As the swelling decreases, there’s a likelihood that the patient’s sight will return. I feel certain that’s what happened with you, Detective Hutchinson. As I told you earlier, it’s unusual, but not unheard of.”

“So, you don’t think I have to worry about the blindness recurring?” Hutch asked.

“Not really, unless you do something to cause the swelling to return. What I’d like to do is keep you here overnight, and part of tomorrow, and administer an osmotic diuretic. Since the swelling has begun decreasing on its own, I believe the medication will simply help it along. I don’t expect there to be a reoccurrence of the symptoms, except perhaps, a headache and a little residual swelling. I’ll have you moved to a regular room so you can get some rest tonight.”

Relieved, but not happy about having to stay overnight, Hutch pressed the doctor for more information. “So, tomorrow I can go back to normal activity?”

“I’d say ‘limited’ activity. No running, climbing or getting shot again for at least two weeks,” the doctor said, humorously.

“I’ll keep an eye on him, Doc,” Starsky volunteered.

“I’m glad to hear that. Now, I know you said you were on your way to enter your police dog in some sort of competition, and wanted to go on from here. I don’t see a problem with that, as long as you are the one to put the dog through his paces, Detective Starsky.”

The doctor turned to Hutch. “You, on the other hand, will have to be content to cheer them on from the sidelines. Understood?”

Disappointed, but willing to follow any orders that would get him released from the hospital, Hutch agreed.

“Okay.” The doctor stood up. “If you have no other questions, I need to get on with my rounds. I’ll go ahead and sign the release papers, dating them for tomorrow. If, during the night, you develop any of the symptoms we talked about earlier, report it to the nurse immediately. She’ll give me a call.”

“Right, I understand.”

Dr. Thomas walked toward the door, then turned back and looked at Starsky. “The hospital is practically empty right now. I told the nurse, since Detective Hutchinson will be in a semi-private room, to let you use the other bed, if you like. I know you don’t have a car, or anyway to get around, so you’re welcome to stay overnight.”

“Thanks, Doc.” Starsky flashed him a grateful smile.

Moments after Dr. Thomas left the room, Captain Dobby bustled in, his arms laden with shopping bags. “How are you feeling, Hutch?” He dropped the bags onto a night stand next to the bed.

“Better, Cap’n. What’s in the bags?”

“I picked up some clean clothes for the both of you, plus toothbrushes and combs. I know they’ve got a shower around here you can use.” Dobby looked around. “And Starsky, do something about your hair. It look’s like a bird’s been nesting in it.”

Too tired to take offense, Starsky just mumble in response, “Right, Cap’n, got it.”

“I just spoke with the doctor in the hallway. Told me you two want to take Sam and go on to Seattle. Personally, I think you should come on home, but he said there’s no reason to cancel your trip.”

“I think we’ve missed most of the competition, but we’ve come this far, and the exposure should be good for Sam,” Hutch told him.

Looking around, Starsky realized Sam wasn’t with him. “Where’s Big Dog now, Cap’n?”

“In my motel room. I knew the hospital wouldn’t let him come in.” Dobby pulled up one of the guest chairs and sat down. “Okay, here’s what we’ll do. Since all this happened because of Morrisetti, I’m counting the time you spent in the woods and the hospital as duty days. Go on to Seattle, and take an extra couple of days to rest up when you get back.”

Turning to Starsky, he continued. “I know your car was destroyed, Starsky. I’ve rented a station wagon, and in the morning, I’ll drop it and Sam off here. You can use the car to finish out your vacation, and drive back home. Lt. Combs will drive me back to where I left my car yesterday.”

The two detectives looked at each other, surprised, and touched by Dobby’s generous gesture—so much so, Starsky didn’t even grumble at the prospect of driving a ‘station wagon’. The captain stood up to leave. “Well, I’ll see you two in the morning. I’m going back to the motel to feed Sam, and give Edith a call to let her know I’ll be home tomorrow. The motel has a great all you can eat barbeque buffet.” Dobby grinned, before adding, “See if you two can stay out of trouble until morning.”

Hutch was the first to break their stunned silence. “Good night, Cap’n.”

Dobey walked to the door, but stopped at the sound of Starsky’s voice. “Cap’n...thanks.”

The End