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GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB
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“To err is human, to forgive, canine...unknown”

Chapter 1

Starsky revved the engine of the Torino and honked the horn again. Patience had never been one of his virtues, and this morning his partner was pushing him to the limit. Usually, Starsky was the one on the receiving end of a tongue lashing for tardiness. He had no doubt that when they reported in late to Captain Dobey, he'd automatically assume Starsky was the culprit.

Dobey hadn't sounded in the greatest of moods when he called Starsky and woke him an hour ago. He'd made it clear that he expected both detectives in his office on time, not fifteen minutes late, not even five minutes late. There was a shortage of available law enforcement personnel due to the flu epidemic sweeping LA, and every able officer was expected to take up the slack until the crisis passed. This was supposed to be their day off, so Starsky understood why Hutch was running late. He'd probably gotten in from his date only a couple of hours ago, and most likely had barely had time for a shower and shave.

Just as Starsky decided to turn off the engine and go roust out his partner, Hutch dashed out the door, slamming it hard as he ran toward the Torino. He didn't look happy when he opened the door and hopped in on the passenger's side.

“Mornin', Sleepin' Beauty,” Starsky said, pulling away from the curb and easing the Torino into the traffic flow.

“Spare me the humor. I'm in no mood,” Hutch grumbled, buttoning his shirt as the car picked up speed.

So much for the niceties. “Not my fault half the BCPD is out with the flu,” Starsky grumbled right back. “Think I wanna spend my day off with a grouch like you?” He tossed a fresh bakery bag onto Hutch’s lap. “Shut up and eat your bagel.”

Hutch smiled, despite himself. He knew Starsky had gone three miles out of his way to stop at the deli that carried Hutch’s favorite whole-wheat bagels.

“Coffee’s in the thermos,” Starsky added.

“Look, Starsk, sorry I growled at you, but dammit, I’m tired—I only got an hour’s sleep.” Hutch unscrewed the lid of the thermos, poured the steaming coffee into a styrofoam cup, and handed it to Starsky before pouring a cup for himself.

“Yeah, but I bet she was worth it,” Starsky teased.

“Well, yeah—you could say that.” A wicked little smile tugged at Hutch’s lips as he thought about the passionate night he’d spent with Marlene, a beautiful, uninhibited, long-legged stewardess who always made a point of calling him when she was in town. She’d still been cozily nestled in his bed when he left the house minutes ago. Before Starsky’s unwelcome wake-up call, Hutch had looked forward to a leisurely breakfast and a lazy day with the saucy little red-head.

“So, what’s up? Dobeys say what’s so important we have to come in on our first day off in two weeks?”

“Just that McNay, Whitley and Mills all called in sick this mornin’ and that the arsonist hit again last night. I think he’s gonna assign us to the case. Mills and Whitley have gotten nowhere on it. He said the commissioner is breathin’ down his neck.”

“They must’ve hit someone with connections last night. Guess we’ll know soon enough.” Hutch had barely finished the last bite of his bagel when Starsky pulled into the parking garage at the station.

Starsky glanced at his watch and knew they were in for a lecture. “Damn, Dobeys said don’t be late.” They took the stairs two at a time, hurrying to meet with their captain. “Hutch, did you pick up my jacket at the cleaners like I asked? You know I might need it this weekend if Julia has a stop-over here.”

“Yes. I said I would, didn’t I? Why don’t you get a dry cleaners closer to your place?”



Captain Dobeys sat at his desk, overwhelmed by the mountain of paperwork that continued to grow daily with no end in sight. It was bad enough that half his people were out sick, now he wasn’t feeling so great himself, and the commissioner had threatened to have his head if this arson case didn’t break soon.

He'd never admit it, but he hated like hell calling Starsky and Hutch in today. He knew they'd been burning the candle at both ends, giving more than one hundred percent, and he knew they needed a break. But they were his best detectives, so he had no choice. With a short, loud rap on the door, the two young men strolled into Dobey's office and dropped into their usual seats without waiting for an invitation.

"Make yourselves at home," Dobey said, with the characteristic sarcasm he routinely used to maintain his hard-nose image with these two.

"'Mornin', Cap'n," Starsky said for them both. Hutch, who looked like he hadn't slept in days, sat quietly nursing a cup of coffee.

"Good morning. I know today was supposed to be your day off, but I haven't had a day off myself in three weeks, so don't expect any sympathy from me." Dobey snapped, punctuating it with his most stern look before continuing.

"Like I told you on the phone Starsky, the arsonist hit again last night. As you know, until now, he'd only torched warehouses, two of which were abandoned. The third was full of expensive fur coats."

"Cap'n, we aren't arson investigators. I don't know what we can do any different than the team you already have on the case."

"Don't interrupt me, Starsky!" Dobey barked. "Last night, they hit a jewelry store, and the retired cop working there as a night watchman was killed. So now, we're dealing with a homicide." Dobey tugged at his tie, loosening it a little before continuing.

"The store was owned by Frank Bradley, who also owned the furrier—and just happens to be friends with Councilman Marvin Gibbons."

"So the good councilman called the commissioner, right?" Hutch volunteered.

"That's right. Now, I had my butt chewed out early this morning, and I don't plan to let it happen again. Whitley and Mills have been working with the fire marshal on this case two weeks and have nothing. Not a single lead. So I'm reassigning the case to you as of this moment. Whether Jones' death was intentional or not, it's a homicide, and you two are going to handle it." Dobey picked up a file and handed it across the desk to Hutch.

"This is all we have. Just a few statements from people they interviewed in the immediate area. Of course, the fires took place in the middle of the night, and there were no witnesses. If the guard had made it, he might have been able to help us. We're waiting on the autopsy now to find out if he died from the fire or was murdered before the building was torched."

"How about the jewelry store security system?" Starsky asked. "No cameras?"

“The report from the officer who answered the call is not in here yet. Murdock’s out there typing it up right now. I suggest you two start with him. And I want results, so get on it now!”



Following Captain Dobeys instructions, Starsky and Hutch met with Officer Murdock and got a first-hand account of what he’d found at the crime scene earlier that morning. Unfortunately, it amounted to nothing of much use. Their hopes that the security camera may provide a lead didn’t pan out. Apparently, the cameras were disabled before the perpetrator entered the store. The tapes showed a black screen beginning an hour and ten minutes before the silent alarm went off and alerted police.

While Hutch scrutinized the files on the three previous fires, trying to find similarities which may indicate a pattern, Starsky sweet-talked Minnie into pulling the records on all the unsolved arson cases that had occurred in their district over the last six months. Once he had her working on that assignment, he went down to the lab to see if Murray had come up with anything useful from the samples the crime lab boys had collected that morning. There he found out that the fire marshal had dispatched a team of arson technicians who were going over the jewelry store with a fine-tooth comb. He didn’t bother checking on the autopsy, knowing it was too early to expect results.

Both guys hated this nit-picky part of the job, but knew it had to be done before they could hit the streets and start pumping their sources for information. As partners, they’d worked this same routine countless times. It wasn’t even necessary to talk about who would do what. They just did it. By noon, they were on their way to the scene of the fur warehouse fire. Hutch was briefing his partner on what he’d found in the files when the dispatcher’s voice sounded over the radio.

“All units, all units in the vicinity of Twelfth and Montreal, we have a 10-57, shots fired. Any units in the vicinity of Twelfth and Montreal please respond.”

“That’s near Slick Willie’s place,” Hutch said, lifting the mic to answer.

“Control, this is Zebra Three, we are responding. Current location Montreal and Fifth. Do you have an address?”

“Possibly 1236 Montreal. Unconfirmed, Zebra Three.”

“That’s his address,” Starsky said. He hit the gas and made a sharp left turn, as Hutch slapped the red bubble on the rooftop of the Torino. Slick Willie was a small-time drug dealer they’d busted twice before. They’d heard he was out on parole now, but he never stayed out of jail long. Just last week, Hutch had spotted him outside Huggy’s, arguing with an unfamiliar sleazy character.

Starsky brought the car to a screeching halt in front of a rundown 1940's bungalow, just as another round was fired inside the house. Both detectives pulled their weapons and ducked out of sight. Hutch snatched the radio mic to the floorboard as he went.

“Control, this is Zebra Three. We are on location at 1236 Montreal. Shots fired from within the residence. At least one shooter on the scene—”

“Cover me,” Starsky said, throwing open the door of the Torino and dropping to the ground as he rolled out of the car. Knowing Starsky wouldn't wait for back-up, Hutch abandoned the mic and scrambled across the front seat, positioning himself behind Starsky's door. From there he had a clear shot at the house. Starsky crouched low as he ran toward the bungalow in a zigzag pattern, not stopping until he reached the outside wall on the east side. No further sounds came from inside the house.

Hutch watched the windows and back door for signs of movement. Starsky cautiously inched his way toward the back door, and once in position, he motioned for Hutch to join him. Following the same pattern his partner had used, Hutch quickly made his way to the house and flattened his body against the wall on the opposite side of the door where Starsky was waiting.

Once Hutch was in place, Starsky made his move. “Police! Lay down your weapons and come out!” he shouted as he rapped loudly on the door with the gun barrel. No response. Starsky nodded to Hutch, and then, on the silent count of three, they quickly entered through the open back door in tandem. As always, with weapons aimed forward, Hutch went high, swinging from left to right, while Starsky went low, from right to left.

Lying on the floor in a pool of blood were Slick Willie and the man Hutch had seen him with at Huggy's. Both were bleeding from gunshot wounds to the chest; each still clutching his weapon in his fist. The two detectives scanned the room for a possible third shooter, but saw no one.

“I'll go this way,” Starsky said, heading for the left side of the house. Hutch automatically headed for the right.

Silently and methodically, they searched the bungalow, then met back in the kitchen. On the floor around the two bodies, were the spilled contents of a clear plastic bag—a light film of white cocaine powder—evidence of a drug deal gone bad.

Satisfied they were alone, Starsky slid his Smith & Wesson into its holster, and squatted down to check both of the bleeding men for a pulse; as he expected, they were already dead. Hutch shook his head in resignation at a scene they saw all too often. “Looks like Willie and his new friend had a slight disagreement.”

Hutch holstered his gun then picked up the telephone to report in and request a coroner's wagon. Careful not to disturb anything before the crime lab team arrived, Starsky searched the area for clues to find out exactly what had gone down.

Hutch had just hung up the telephone as Starsky reentered the kitchen. Before either could speak, they heard a faint scratching noise coming from the back bedroom. Starsky looked at Hutch, a quizzical expression on his face. Hutch nodded. He'd heard it, too. Quietly, they drew their guns and crept back down the hallway to the bedroom. Outside the door, they listened quietly, and after a few seconds, they heard it again. On Hutch's signal, Starsky kicked the door open, and they both entered the room in the same fashion they had entered the house minutes earlier. Sticking halfway out from beneath a dilapidated cot in the far corner of the room, was a scruffy-looking dog, ears laid back, staring back at them with terrified eyes. Frightened, he tried to retreat beneath the bed, but seemed to be stuck and couldn't move in any direction.

"Aw, jeez, dog, that's a good way to get yourself shot," Starsky said, still holding the Smith & Wesson in front of him. Hutch lowered his own gun, then reached over and laid his hand on Starsky's and lowered it also.

"Starsk, I don't think he wants to hurt us. Look at him, he's scared to death. Besides, he just looks like a puppy to me." Hutch approached the trembling dog slowly, then knelt down to the animal's level, and spoke to him softly.

"Hey, there, boy. You okay? We won't hurt you." The dog's ears perked up momentarily then dropped back flat against his head again. "You're scaring him, Starsk. Come and kneel down here next to me so he doesn't see you as a threat."

"No way. You know me and dogs, Hutch. Oil and water. It's not that I'm scared of 'em or nothin'," he was quick to add, "but I can't say I've ever been on real friendly terms with one, either."

Hutch knew this was true. During the time they'd been partners, Hutch could remember a couple of instances where Starsky had nearly lost the seat of his britches when they were being chased by guard dogs.

"Starsk, you can't judge all dogs by that crazy Doberman of Annie Oats'."

"Oh, yeah? Well, how about those bad-boys that tried to make chop suey outta both of us at Thorne's estate on Playboy Island?"

"Listen to me. I grew up with dogs, and most of them are friendly, even affectionate. You've had the bad luck to run into a few aggressive ones." Hutch felt naturally comfortable with dogs. He moved forward a little, speaking softly as he neared the frightened pup.

"Not too close, Hutch," Starsky warned.

"It's okay," Hutch reassured him, then leaned closer to the puppy. "Come on out, boy. You need some help?" Hutch continued inching forward until the dog was within reach.

He offered his hand, palm up, as a non-threatening gesture. At first the puppy pulled back, but Hutch sat there quietly waiting, and finally the dog stretched out his neck and sniffed Hutch's hand. After a second or two, his ears lifted a little, and his pink tongue darted out to lick Hutch's fingers.

"That's a boy," Hutch said, smiling at the pup. He took advantage of the moment and gently stroked the puppy's head, then scratched his ears, speaking in a soothing voice the whole time. "Come on, fella, let me help you out of there." Hutch took hold of the dog around the shoulders, rotated him onto his side, and then gently pulled him from beneath the raggedy bed. Starsky quickly retreated to the open bedroom door. "That's right, boy," Hutch said as the puppy inched closer to him, tail wagging submissively.

"Come on, Hutch, he could have rabies or somethin'. Watch yourself." Starsky nervously shifted from one foot to the other.

"Oh, God," Hutch whispered. "Starsk, take a look at this,"

"What? Just tell me. I don't need to come over there."

"No, come here. You've got to see this." Finally, Starsky relented and reluctantly came toward Hutch and the pup. Instantly, the dog tried to retreat beneath the bed again, but Hutch blocked his way. Starsky knelt down beside his partner to see what he'd discovered. Hutch pulled the dog's head closer and pointed to a tight plastic band around his neck, deeply imbedded in the skin.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a flea collar, Starsky. It was probably put on him when he was just a little puppy. The skin has grown up around it. I saw this once before on a dog that wandered up to the farm. If this is left on here another month or so, it'll have to be removed surgically. Even if it's removed right now, it's probably going to be raw and sore. I don't see how he can swallow. Poor fella."

"Why would anybody do somethin' like that?" Starsky asked, a frown furrowing his forehead.

"There're all kinds of animal cruelty, Starsk. Take a look at this." Hutch pointed to several little red, oozing blisters on the dog's back and hindquarters. "Cigarette burns." The pup inched closer to Starsky, who in turn, backed up a few inches. "He's not going to hurt you. Just pet him," Hutch urged. "Obviously, he's starved for affection."

"Yeah, well he looks starved, period. Look at his ribs. Man, this dog looks, like he's never had a decent meal in his life. Hutch, you know I don't get along too great with dogs, but there's no excuse for somethin' like this." Despite his apprehension, Starsky leaned forward and patted the puppy's head. The pitiful dog immediately laid his chin on Starsky's knee and looked up with sad, grateful eyes.

Hutch smiled. "I think he likes you, partner."

"Nah, he just heard me talkin' about food." Starsky continued petting the dog's head and scratched his ears as he had seen Hutch do. "Right, boy?"

"I guess we better call Animal Control. He can't be left here. He'll starve to death, or get hit by a car."

"I'll call," Starsky offered. As he left the room, the puppy laid his head on Hutch's knee and waited to have his ears scratched some more.



Mary Peterson was an Animal Control officer who'd seen and done it all. She'd worked for the department twenty-two years and had a natural talent for handling animals. Many people despised her job, and she could understand why. Even her closest friends teased and called her the "Angel of Death." More than four million cats and dogs were put to death in animal shelters throughout the U.S. every year, all because of careless people who wouldn't accept responsibility for their pets.

If she was anything, Mary was a realist. Nothing would please her more than to see her occupation disappear altogether. But that wasn't likely...at least, not during her lifetime. She was well aware that not all Animal Control officers felt the way she did. And only her love for animals prevented her from throwing in the towel. Mary stuck it out year after year, knowing that at least the ones that crossed her path would receive only the kindest, most humane treatment possible—regardless of the of the final outcome. And for the majority, the future was bleak.

When Mary entered the house, a muscular, good-looking young man with dark, curly hair and midnight blue eyes approached her. Mary couldn't help thinking, if she were just a few years younger, he would definitely be her type. But in reality, she was old enough to be his mother. Oh, well, didn't hurt to admire, and he really did fill out those bell-bottom jeans nicely!

"You must be with Animal Control," he said, extending his hand to shake Mary's. "I'm Detective Starsky; I'm the one who called you. The dog's back here with my partner."

By now the house was swarming with police and the crime lab team. A gurney bearing the second dead body was rolled past them, headed for the coroner's wagon. Mary followed Starsky to the back bedroom, where Hutch sat on the floor with the puppy half lying in his lap, looking up with unconcealed adoration. Starsky was surprised how quickly the pathetic animal had attached himself to Hutch.

The animal control officer introduced herself to both detectives, then sat down on the floor next to Hutch, situating herself close to the dog. “And this must be our poor little throw-away,” she said, easing in slowly to avoid startling him.

“Thanks for getting here so quickly,” Hutch said. He knew right away that he liked this lady. It wasn’t anything tangible, just a feeling.

“Not in very good shape, are you, fella?” Mary spoke softly to the puppy. The seasoned Animal Control officer assessed the dog’s condition in seconds. “I’d say he’s about eight to nine months old. He’s a rottweiler—although I can’t say for sure if he’s a mix, or just the mediocre product of a backyard breeder. Tail hasn’t been docked, but the other rottie characteristics are here. Looks like a bad case of malnutrition—at least fifteen pounds underweight—neglect, physical abuse, and probably emotional abuse, too. Never had a chance, did you, little guy?” she cooed to the dog.

The pup raised his head from Hutch’s knee and tilted it sideways, looking at Mary intently, as though trying to understand her words. Mary patted his head and casually let her hand move down to the collar imbedded in the skin around his neck. “Damn!” she uttered with disgust.

“Rottweiler?” Starsky asked, having stopped listening after hearing that word. Obviously, this lady knew about dogs. “Aren’t they dangerous...you know...attack dogs? I’ve heard they’re vicious.” Starsky unconsciously inched back a few steps, then thought about what he was doing and felt downright silly. The malnourished animal sitting in Hutch’s lap couldn’t present a physical threat to anyone.

“They can be,” Mary answered. “But most dogs aren’t vicious unless they’ve been conditioned to be. Don’t get me wrong—I’m not saying that a good dog can’t turn on a person. It’s been known to happen. But in most cases, the dog has been mistreated, teased, deliberately bated...starved. You name it, someone will try it. Unfortunately, this breed has a reputation, like the pit bull and the Doberman.”

“So you think Slick Willie was treating this dog mean on purpose, so he’d be mean?” Starsky was beginning to see where she was heading with this train of thought.

“Most likely. Jerks like him abuse a dog to the point that the animal believes the only way it can survive is to become the aggressor rather than the victim. They train them to kill on command, using live kittens, or rabbits to practice on. That’s also how dogs are trained to fight. Big money in dog-fighting—even though it’s illegal.”

“My God, that’s disgusting,” Hutch muttered, barely above a whisper.

“This dog’s scared of his own shadow. The trainin’ must not have been goin’ too great,” Starsky suggested.

“Early stages. They starve and break them first. Once the animal is totally submissive, then they begin training them to be vicious.” Starsky felt a lump rise in his throat, thinking of a defenseless animal being treated so cruelly.

Mary stood up and took a slip noose from the back pocket of her trousers. “Well, I’ll take it from here, guys. Thanks for calling me. I know this fellow here is grateful, too. No telling what he’s endured during his short life.” Mary reached down and gently slipped the noose over the puppy’s head. He instinctively shrunk back against Hutch’s thigh. All the while, Starsky stood to the side and watched silently. He was experiencing an emotion completely foreign to him—compassion for a dog. He’d never had a dog when he was a kid; had never really had a pet of any sort, unless you wanted to count that pet rock Huggy sold him last year.

“You’ll find him a good home, won’t you?” Hutch asked hopefully.

Mary looked him in the eyes, then turned and looked at Starsky also. “Now, what do you think, Detectives? Should I lie to you like I do dozens of other do-gooders every week and assure you there’s a great home in the country just waiting for this wonderful dog? Would that make you feel better?”

Hutch looked at Starsky, who immediately glanced away, hoping Hutch didn’t suspect how disturbing this whole thing was to him. Frankly, he was surprised himself.

“You guys are cops. You know what this world is like. You see human beings thrown away like garbage out there on the streets. This poor, unfortunate critter can’t expect any better. The rotten thing is, more times than not, the people have done things to get themselves into that situation. This animal isn’t guilty of anything, except being born into a world already overpopulated by unwanted dogs and cats.”

The puppy cringed back, leaning toward Hutch, as Mary tried to coax him to her with a gentle tug on the lead. Trembling, he struggled to stay with his new-found friend. Finally, afraid she would hurt his neck, Mary reached down and tenderly scooped up the ill-proportioned, gangly dog in her arms. Hutch’s face was grim, as he watched the puppy swivel his head back around to keep the man in his view. Starsky felt a lump rising in his throat again.

“Thanks, again, guys. Don’t worry about him. I’ll see he has a good meal and a warm, comfortable bed tonight—probably the first in his life. That’s the best I can promise. Besides, I learned a long time ago, there are lots of things worse than euthanasia.”

She turned and walked to the door with the skinny, frightened puppy in her arms, then paused and looked over her shoulder. “It means ‘kind death,’ you know. You have my word; he won’t feel a thing.”

As Mary and the puppy disappeared from sight, Starsky thought he’d heard a faint whimper.

Then the silence was deafening, despite the activity taking place only a few feet away in another part of the small house. When Hutch finally turned and looked at Starsky, he saw his own pain mirrored in his partner's face.

Quietly, Starsky eased up beside him, laying a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder. "Hey, you okay?" Hutch didn't reply.

"We didn't have any choice," Starsky consoled him. But the words rang hollow even to his own ears.

"Yeah...I know." Hutch stood up and brushed the short, black hairs off his jeans where the dog had rested his head minutes earlier. "Let's wrap up here and get on with the arson investigation," he said, a little too brusquely.

Chapter 2

The two detectives stopped on the way out and made sure the Homicide investigator assigned to the case didn't need anything else from them. Within a few minutes, they were in the striped tomato, headed to the warehouse district.

Hutch used the mic to radio their location, as Starsky pulled the car up to the curb in front of the burned out warehouse. Most of the roof had collapsed, leaving the structure open to the elements.

"Must've been pretty rotten timber to burn so fast," Starsky observed, as he walked around the car and waited for Hutch in front of the building.

"Yeah, not much left, is there?" The two men entered the structure where a door had once stood, now only charred splinters left behind by the fireman's ax. Any evidence of forced entry had been destroyed—if it ever existed. It had been almost a week, but the pungent odor of the burnt timber and animal fur was still strong. They walked carefully through the debris, ever mindful of the weak boards overhead, while looking for clues that could help jumpstart their investigation.

"Man, it stinks in here!" Starsky covered his nose and mouth with one hand for a brief moment, trying to filter out the sulfurous smell, then quickly realized that it didn't help.

"I read the arson investigator's report," Hutch said. "There was evidence of a liquid accelerate found throughout the place, but, he said the fire appeared to have started in the northeast back corner of the building."

Even though they weren't trained in the specifics of arson investigation, both detectives knew the point origin of any fire was the most likely location for clues. Starsky, already ahead of Hutch, turned and proceeded in that direction. It was easy to recognize—the

entire area burned so badly that even the flooring had scorched and buckled by the intense heat. The revolting stench of burned animal hair suggested that a huge supply of fur coats had probably been stored in this room.

“I’ll bet this is it,” Hutch said, squatting down to get a closer look at what was left of the floor. “See this pattern, kind of like the checks in an alligator skin? I read in the report that this is generally how the materials at the point of origin should look.”

Clearly impressed, Starsky squatted down beside him and examined the charred wood. Nearby, small remnants of fabric and hair, partly degenerated to ash, lay scattered about. “Any evidence that might have been here, would’a burned up, Hutch.”

“Yeah, or been collected during the initial investigation. But let’s go ahead and do a walk-through, anyway. Maybe the guy dropped a cigarette butt or a scrap of torn clothing...something. We’re here; we might as well give it the once over.

As expected, they found no new evidence, and left the building frustrated at having wasted their time. By then, it was noon, and Starsky felt his stomach grumbling. The donut he’d eaten hours ago was long gone.

“Where you wanna eat today? You pick.”

Hutch sat gazing straight ahead, not really listening, his mind obviously elsewhere.

“Hey—I’m talkin’ to you, Blondie—I said, where ya wanna eat?”

“I don’t care, Starsk,” he answered distractedly. “I’m not very hungry. Anywhere is okay with me.”

Starsky pulled the car into a drive-in Mexican joint and turned off the ignition. “Hutch—look at me.” He waited until he had Hutch’s attention. “What’s buggin’ you? Huh? Wanna talk about it?”

Hutch knew it was pointless to deny his mind had been elsewhere all morning. When Starsky wanted answers, he was relentless. “It’s just...I was thinking about calling Mary Peterson. Ask about the dog...see if they’ve had any inquiries about adopting him yet.”

“Why do you wanna do that? She already told us how it’s gonna be. Look, I know you feel sorry for him. Frankly, I’m kinda surprised how much this is botherin’ me, too. But what good would it do to talk to her again?”

Hutch rubbed the back of his neck to work out the tension that had been building all day. “None, I suppose. I just hate to think he may be put to sleep. He’s a nice dog.” He paused for a minute, expecting Starsky to argue, but there was no rebuttal.

“I always had a dog when I was a kid, Starsk. They’re great. They’re loyal, they love you no matter what—and they don’t ask for much, just to be loved back.”

“Yeah, well, I never had a pet, so I guess I can’t really relate to where you’re comin’ from. But I do know they’ve gotta be a lot’a trouble. You’re too busy, Hutch. You couldn’t take care of a dog with the kind’a hours we work.” Starsky laid his hand on Hutch’s shoulder. “Listen, partner, it wouldn’t be fair to the dog either.”

“I know...I know, you’re right. It’s just, I didn’t realize how much I missed having a dog around until that big lug laid his head in my lap this morning and looked up at me with those trusting eyes.”

“Yeah? Well, I guess I’ll have to remember to try that next time I want you to do somethin’ for me,” Starsky teased. But he could see even his wisecracking wasn’t enough to improve Hutch’s mood.

“Come on, partner, let’s order lunch. Then we’ll head over to the jewelry store and check it out.” Starsky hopped out of the car. “Whattaya want? Huh? It’s on me,” he added magnanimously.

“Gee, thanks, Diamond Jim. How come it’s always on you when we eat at one of these greasy spoons?” Now Hutch was the one making an effort to lighten the mood. “How about picking up the tab in a *real* restaurant, like The Fountain Bleu, or The Abby? You know, some place that serves *real* food?”

Starsky flashed him a Starsky grin, the kind that lit up his whole face. “Right—got it. You want two bean burritos, two veggie tacos, and an order of chili peppers,” Starsky said over his shoulder as he walked toward the take-out window.

Hutch just shook his head, a slight smile curling the corners of his lips. If Starsky couldn’t cheer him up, nobody could.



When the detectives reached the scene of last night’s fire, they found two technicians from the arson investigation lab still collecting evidence. Starsky recognized them as Bob Jernigan and Gina Ashford. He and Hutch had worked cases with them before. Bob was brilliant at his job, but somewhat a recluse, leaving the ‘people contact’ to his partner, Gina.

With a twinkle in his eye, Starsky approached the attractive dark-haired, twenty-something, female technician. Gina was one of those rare individuals who could keep the mood light, regardless of how gruesome the scene may be. And when the opportunity presented itself, she particularly enjoyed a little suggestive bantering with Dave Starsky. Of course, he was always ready to match quips with her.

“Got somethin’ for me, Gina?” Starsky asked, with a hint of smirk in his voice.

True to form, Gina wasted no time firing back a clever response. “That depends, Starsky. Are you talking about the case?” She smiled suggestively, waiting to see what he’d say.

“Uh, yeah...well, that, too,” was all he could muster for the moment.

Hutch joined them, and having missed the exchange, he couldn’t figure for the life of him why they both were wearing such silly grins. “Hi, Gina. What’s the word here?”

“Good to see you, Hutch,” Gina said, not taking her eyes off Starsky. “Too soon to tell a whole lot yet, but Bob’s collected quite a few samples that may prove helpful. Of course, I’ve taken several shots you may want to examine later on when you look over our test results.” Looking at the Polaroid hanging around her neck, Starsky couldn’t help noticing what beautiful skin she had.

Seeming to have read Starsky’s mind, Gina self-consciously turned her attention to Hutch and continued. “Just as a preliminary, off-the-record comment, I’d say we’re dealing with the same perp here that hit those warehouses down near the docks.”

“Why’s that?” Starsky asked.

“The point at which the fire began looks very similar to what we’ve found in all the other structures. Even though we’ve found small traces of combustible substances throughout the buildings, I believe something much more powerful has been used to actually start these fires. It’s my guess he may be using a small incendiary device to trigger the initial explosion, but it would be premature to speculate on that yet. However, it *would* explain the massive damage where the fires originated.”

“The police report Murdock turned over to us this morning didn’t indicate if anything was stolen. Any sign of burglary?” Hutch asked.

Bob Jernigan joined the group at that point and responded before Gina could answer. “Nope. No apparent theft involved. Come over here and check this out.” The group followed Jernigan to a large display case. Taking out his handkerchief, he wiped the black coating from the glass top of a cabinet that was only minimally damaged. Beneath the newly cleaned glass was an array of expensive men’s watches, from Cartier to Rolex, all neatly arranged and untouched.

“Makes no sense, man. Cool watches like this and nobody even takes one?” Starsky’s face hovered above the glass top.

“Starsk, forget about the watches.” Knowing Starsky’s fascination with watches, especially expensive ones, could distract him from the business at hand, Hutch grabbed the back of his partner’s jacket and tugged him away from the display case. *Sometimes*

you're like a big kid, aren't you, buddy? Hutch's memory flashed back to the time they were trapped in a burning barn, Starsky with a bullet in his leg, and all he thought about was giving Hutch his second most prized possession—his fancy wrist watch.

“Aw, come on, Hutch, wait a minute, will ya?”

Quickly changing the subject, Hutch asked Jernigan, “Could you show us where the guard's body was found?”

Jernigan motioned toward the front door. “Halfway out the door. He was lying face-down, like he was trying to get out. Maybe overcome by smoke. The autopsy should be finished by this evening. Want me to ask the ME to send you a copy of his report?”

“Thanks, but I've already done that,” Starsky replied. “If you guys come up with anything—anything at all--would you give us a call?”

“Count on it,” Gina assured him. “And we expect the same courtesy from you.” Despite her earlier teasing with Starsky, Gina Ashford was a professional who was considered one of the best in her field.



When they arrived at the station, Hutch called the medical examiner to see if the autopsy was finished. “Not all the results are back on some of the tests I'm running. But I can tell you one thing with certainty, Hutch, there was a blow to the back of the victim's skull.”

“What do you mean? Like something fell on him? Or he was deliberately struck?”

“Without a doubt, he was bludgeoned. I can't say yet if that's what killed him. We're checking the lungs now. Even if the smoke got him, I'd call it murder. He couldn't very well have escaped from the smoke if he was unconscious from a blow to the head. Just remember, what I'm telling you right now is unofficial.”

“Thanks. Just get back with us when you're done, okay, Murray? Dispatch will know where to reach us.”

Hutch hung up the phone and looked over at Starsky. “Well, it's murder, any way you look at it. I guess we know now that the guard was either trying to stop the torch, or the guy just got the drop on him.”

“Yeah, well...I doubt that's gonna make his family feel any better.” Starsky stood up and walked toward Captain Dobey's door. “Might as well let Dobey know what we've got so far.”

Hutch followed him into the captain's office. They were both more than ready to call it a day. They finished briefing Dobey and left the station at 4:30—early, in spite of the fact they'd been on the job since 7:00 a.m.

“Wanna grab a bite to eat?” Starsky suggested as he maneuvered the Torino out of the police parking garage.

“No, thanks, Starsk. There's something I have to do. And you can come with me or not...it's up to you.”

Starsky looked over at his partner curiously. “I'm game. What do ya wanna do?”

“I'm going over to Animal Control and check on the dog.” Hutch held his hand up to stop Starsky from arguing. “My mind's made up, so save your breath. I've got to know what happened to him.”

“Okay...I'm in,” Starsky replied, without opposition. “I just don't see the point...”



Exhausted from a busy day, Mary Peterson was putting on her jacket to leave for the evening, when the two good-looking, young cops she'd met earlier in the day arrived. As soon as they spied her, she smiled and waved a greeting, then went over to welcome them to the shelter.

“What are you guys doing here?” Assuming they were just curious about the shelter, she asked, “Come for the grand tour?”

“Well, my partner here refuses to go home without checkin' on Scooby-Doo.” Starsky winked at Mary, amused by his own attempt at humor. Hutch rolled his eyes at Starsky's corny joke.

“Would you like to see him?” Mary asked Hutch.

“If it isn't too much trouble.”

Mary lifted the flip-up counter and motioned them through. “Come on back. The barking's pretty loud, I know. But you get this many dogs in a small area, and it can't be helped, especially this near feeding time.”

Starsky and Hutch followed the Animal Control officer to the holding area, walking past large, galvanized metal kennel pens with concrete floors. Even though the cages looked clean, they were overcrowded and noisy. Dogs of all sizes, breeds, and colors were barking loudly and jumping up against the wire of their pens, as the three people walked past. Some huddled at the back of their kennel runs, frightened by the strangers and by the noise the other animals were making.

Starsky was intrigued by the variety. He knew very little about dogs, but some of these looked like the pictures he'd seen of purebred show dogs. How could that be? Hutch looked from side to side and wondered how many stood a chance of being adopted. He'd had no idea so many were abandoned to the shelters.

Looking around and seeing only a sea of dogs, Starsky asked, "Where are the cats?"

"Oh, they're kept in a different part of the facility. Think how stressed out you'd be if you were a cat in this place," Mary answered. She stopped in front of the kennel where the rottweiler puppy was caged with five other dogs, similar in size. When he saw Starsky and Hutch, he approached the wire and poked his nose through as a greeting. The Animal Control officer opened the door and slipped a lead around the dog's neck and encouraged him to come out, careful not to allow any of the other dogs in his kennel to escape.

Hutch stooped down and held out his hand to the pup. "Hiya fella," he said in a friendly voice. The dog looked at Hutch a little shyly, then ran directly to Starsky, happily wagging his whole body as he went. He nuzzled his cold, wet nose into the palm of Starsky's hand. Startled, the cop jumped back, only to be followed by the excited puppy. His huge head nudged at Starsky's knee as he tried to get closer.

"Hutch! Do somethin'!" Starsky said anxiously. Hutch grinned broadly, watching his tough partner panic at the touch of a wet nose.

"He's in love with you, Starsk," Hutch teased, looking over at Mary, whose lips were twitching with amusement.

"He won't hurt you, Detective," she offered. "Pat his head, or scratch him behind the ear." Mary held the leash, not allowing the pup to pursue Starsky further. Slowly, he regained his composure and actually reached down and scratched the rottie behind the ear.

"Are you sure this is a puppy? I mean, he's kinda big for a puppy. More like a pony, ya know?"

"Actually, in dog years, he's more like a 'teenager'," Mary answered. "At nine months, he isn't quite done growing and maturing. Notice how long and gangly his legs are? He would have started to fill out by now if he'd been properly fed. But you'd be amazed how strong he is, in spite of his malnutrition. This is a very hardy breed. They have strong muscles and can inflict major damage if they bite."

"Terrific," Starsky said, quickly withdrawing his hand from the dog's head. "Just what I needed to hear."

Hutch inched a little closer and began scratching the puppy's ear. The dog turned his massive head and slurped his long, wet tongue across Hutch's cheek. Starsky found this hilarious and laughed at the surprised expression on Hutch's face.

Starsky knelt back down and patted the dog's head. "Good boy," he said, unintentionally prompting the dog to treat him to a big, juicy dog kiss, too.

"Oh, man—don't do that!" Starsky fell backwards, trying to avoid the friendly assault. "Yuck! That's disgustin'!"

The three of them laughed as the puppy proceeded to alternate between his new-found friends, nuzzling each to keep the much-enjoyed ear-scratching ritual going.

The door at the other end of the room opened and a husky, long-haired, young man, dressed in a uniform similar to Mary's entered the compound. Pushing a stainless steel cart filled with feeding bowls overflowing with food and fresh, clean water, he started down the first row of cages to begin the evening feeding ritual.

"Sorry, guys, time for Eddie to feed. I'm afraid we'll have to cut our visit short." Starsky and Hutch reluctantly stood up, much to the disappointment of the pup. Mary gently tugged on the lead. "Come on, big guy." The dog strained against the leash, trying to make contact with Starsky again, whining his disapproval of ending the visit. The two men exchanged glances, neither wanting to admit he was troubled to see the dog's reluctance to leave them. Once the rottweiler was back in his kennel, the three of them returned to the front office and left him to eat his evening meal.

Mary hung the leash on the wall hook, picked up her jacket again, and walked toward the front door with the two police officers. "Thanks for stopping by, fellas. I think he really enjoyed seeing you both."

"Has anything been decided about him, yet?" Hutch asked.

Mary looked around at him, puzzled. "Well, yes. I'm sorry, I thought I made that pretty clear this morning. The dog will be euthanized tomorrow morning."

"Wait a minute," Starsky interrupted. "Just like that? I mean, don't ya have to keep him a few days and try and find him a home first?"

Mary turned to Starsky, surprised by the note of anxiety in his voice. It was the blond one, she thought, who was interested in the dog's welfare. Now Detective "Tight Jeans" was getting involved, too? Somehow, she just didn't figure him for a dog person. She had thought he probably only came along in the first place because his partner had pressured him.

"Well, if an animal is lost and we pick it up off the streets, that's true. We give the owners seven days to show up and reclaim him. But when one is taken from a crime

scene, with no apparent surviving owner, or if an owner voluntarily turns in an animal as unwanted, we're under no legal obligation to keep it the minimum seven days." Mary could see surprise register on both men's faces.

"But that doesn't seem fair," Hutch argued.

"No, it isn't. But the fact is, we have ten times more animals than space. And quite frankly, that poor little guy isn't very adoptable. He's taking up valuable space that a more adoptable animal could be occupying."

"You can't just kill him without even tryin'. I mean, he didn't bite anybody or do anything wrong, did he?" Starsky reasoned.

"No, but that isn't the issue here. These animals *all* deserve a good home. All they want is someone to love them. And unlike most people, when they love someone, it's unconditional, and they're faithful till the end. Unfortunately, there just aren't enough people willing to make a lifetime commitment to care for them."

Tired of making this familiar speech, Mary shook her head. "Look, you two are nice guys, and I know you are genuinely concerned. But unless you want to adopt him yourselves, there's really nothing I can do." As she expected, that suggestion was met with dead silence. She watched the two men look at one another, as if communicating telepathically. Still, she couldn't read their faces.

"Okay," Hutch said quietly. "We understand. Don't we, Starsky?"

"Yeah." Starsky looked down at his sneakers. Mary had known they would react this way. Most people did. All talk and no action. They were indignant when they faced the realities of euthanasia, but not indignant enough to do anything about it.

"We understand," Starsky continued. "Go get him. He's comin' home with us."

Chapter 3

Starsky completed the necessary paperwork and paid the adoption fee, while Mary took the dog to be checked out by the staff vet. "We'll give him all his shots and check him for heartworms, but you'll have to make an appointment to have him neutered later," she told Hutch before leaving with the pup.

Starsky abruptly stopped writing and looked up from the paperwork. "Have him what?"

"Neutered. It's a requirement if you adopt a dog from us. All females are spayed and males are neutered. You don't want him contributing the overpopulation problem, do you?"

Starsky looked at Hutch, a bewildered expression on his face. “It’ll be okay, Starsk. Dad always had our dogs neutered unless they were his champion hunting dogs that he planned to breed.” Starsky wasn’t totally convinced, but thought he’d just have to trust his partner on this one. “It’s not as bad as it sounds,” Hutch reassured him.

“Maybe not to you,” Starsky said. “But the dog might not agree with you on that one.”

Once the paperwork was completed, they sat down to wait on an uncomfortable, utilitarian, wooden bench in the outer office. Neither had much to say, so they sat quietly, each mulling over his own thoughts.

Suddenly, the enormity of what they were about to do hit Hutch full force. *A dog?* Common sense told him he needed a dog like a hole in the head! But right now, all he was interested in was buying the animal a reprieve from the death penalty he was facing tomorrow morning. They’d work out the details later.

Starsky hadn’t considered owning a dog since he was eight years old. The year before his dad died, he had begged, pleaded and badgered his dad to buy him one. The closest he’d come to a yes was his father’s promise to reconsider the idea for little Dave’s birthday. But Michael Starsky was gunned down before his son’s birthday, and Starsky had never asked for a dog again. Then today, that big, clumsy, funny-looking puppy had buried his cold, wet nose in Starsky’s palm and had touched his heart in that instant. The way *he* saw it, they had no choice. He and Hutch couldn’t just walk away, knowing the dog’s fate would be sealed by their lack of action.

Another forty-five minutes went by, before the animal technician came through the door with the overgrown puppy loping ahead of him, looking like he already knew he was being bailed out of jail. Hutch stood up and called to him, “Come here, boy. Come on.”

Eddie dropped the leash and gave the dog his freedom to join Hutch. The pup stopped in front of Hutch and sniffed his thigh, then licked his hand; all the while, his tail wagged back and forth like a giant windshield wiper. Just as Hutch bent down to pet him, the puppy veered away, going straight to Starsky. He reared up, landing both paws on Starsky’s chest, then his huge pink tongue darted out and covered Starsky’s face with wet kisses.



Starsky had trouble concentrating on the road with the rottweiler’s head and front paws hanging over the back of his seat, especially since he kept trying to rest his head on Starsky’s shoulder. The vet had removed the embedded flea collar and replaced it with a wide, soft fabric one that wouldn’t further irritate the dog’s skin. Hutch kept a tight grip on it, trying to maneuver the pup away from Starsky’s side of the car; but every time Hutch let down his guard for a second, the animal would slyly inch his way back to Starsky. Hutch didn’t know whether to be hurt by the slight, or amused by the irony of it.

“Hutch, can’t you keep that big dummy on your side of the car? Huh? I’m tryin’ to drive here,” Starsky complained, glancing sideways at the dog. “Awww, man! Will ya look at that? Hutch, he’s slobbering all over the upholstery. Knock it off, dog!”

“Calm down, will you? It’s only saliva. It’s not going to eat through the seats or anything.”

“Easy for you to say. It isn’t your car he’s messin’ up,” Starsky whined.

Turning a deaf ear to Starsky’s complaining, Hutch suggested, “We can’t just keep calling him dog. He needs a name. Besides, it’ll be a lot easier to train him when he knows we’re talking to him. Got any suggestions?”

“Yeah. I suggest I take the two of you home, and you can pick out a name when you get there.”

“Wait a minute—” Hutch’s eyes went wide at the implication of what Starsky had just said. “Starsky, this dog is staying at your place.”

Starsky’s head snapped to the right, a look of determination set his face. “Uh-uh. No way, partner. It was your idea, so he’s stayin’ at your place.”

“You’re the one who said ‘he’s coming with us’,” Hutch shot back.

“Well, it was your brilliant idea to go to the pound in the first place!” Starsky’s voice went up a decibel.

“Be reasonable, Starsk. I have a ‘no pets’ clause in my lease. He *has* to stay with you!” As Hutch’s temper flared, his voice grew louder. “This is just like you. React without thinking. You never stop and think of the consequences. You just act, *then* expect *me* to clean up behind you!”

“You got some nerve, DOG BOY!” Starsky shouted back. “Look, if you think I’m gonna let you pawn this dog off on me, you got another thing comin’, buddy! And what the hell do you mean you have to clean up after me?”

Just as Hutch started to fire the next volley, the puppy, whose head was resting between them on the back of the seat, whined pathetically. They both turned and looked at the pitiful face, eyes watering, ears flattened against his head in fear. Hutch held up both hands, signaling a truce, then motioned with his head toward the puppy, whose eyes kept darting back and forth between the two men.

Starsky pulled the car over to the curb and stomped down on the emergency brake. “Listen,” he said in a calm, modulated voice, “you know I can’t take this dog. I don’t know anything about dogs. He’s gotta stay with you, Hutch. I ain’t tryin’ to bail on you; I’m willin’ to do my share. I just don’t think I’d know how to handle him yet.”

Hutch was quiet for a few seconds, then reluctantly nodded. “Okay. Fine. I’ll try it. But if Mrs. Frye sees him, I’ll be evicted. She’s not the most understanding landlady.”

“We’ll find him another home before that happens,” Starsky assured him. All smug and satisfied about getting his way, he released the brake and guided the car back into the flow of traffic. The puppy promptly moved to the driver’s side of the seat again and stuck his wet nose in Starsky’s ear. Caught by surprise, Starsky almost lost control of the Torino, swerving into the oncoming lane, which luckily, wasn’t yet congested with evening commuters.



Starsky pulled into his regular parking place in front of Hutch’s house. When the car came to a halt, the puppy took that as his cue to sail across the front seat into Hutch’s lap. Snapping the leash to the collar, Hutch struggled to get himself and the over-eager puppy out of the car. Once out, he walked briskly toward the house, not looking back, clearly upset with how things were working out.

“Hey, Hutch, wait up.” Starsky hurried to catch up with them. “Uh...want me to take him for a walk or somethin’?” he offered, hoping to mend fences.

“Not really.”

“Well...okay. How ‘bout I go down to that pet store on Kilgore and pick up some food and stuff?”

“Suit yourself.”

Starsky started back toward the Torino, then stopped, and turned around. “Hey...how about Sam?”

Hutch stopped fidgeting with the front door key and looked around at Starsky. “What?”

“Sam. You said he needs a name. How ‘bout Sam?”

“Fine. I don’t care,” Hutch snapped back. “Call him Sam if you want to.” Hutch slammed the door firmly, not waiting for a reply.



Once inside, Hutch unhooked the leash and let the dog explore the house on his own. Sam ran throughout the bungalow sniffing, excited by the new sights and scents. Hutch enjoyed watching the pup and was glad to see he wasn’t too frightened to make himself at home. Sam darted in and out of the rooms, briefly exploring each until he disappeared

into the bedroom and didn't come out. After a few minutes, Hutch quietly peeked around the door and saw Sam was sound asleep on his bed, cuddled up comfortably on Starsky's freshly dry-cleaned sports jacket.



Starsky rang the doorbell while balancing a twenty-five pound bag of premium dog food and three large bags of supplies and toys he'd just bought at the pet store. Hutch opened the door, his face not quite as grim as before.

"Good grief, Starsky, what's all this? Did you buy out the store?"

"Nah. Just a few things Sam's gonna need. I said I'd help, didn't I?"

"Yeah...well, if you think buying all this is gonna make me feel better about you dumping him on me, you can just forget it."

"Look, Hutch, I don't wanna fight about this." Starsky followed him into the kitchen and set the bags on the counter, before helping himself to a beer from the fridge. "To tell you the truth, it never occurred to me that you expected me to keep Sam. Honest. I'll help any way I can, so, could we quit with the attitude already? Huh?"

Hutch ran a hand over his face, considering what Starsky had said. In all honesty, he knew he was really the one who'd instigated bailing the dog out of the pound. Finally, he nodded in agreement. "Okay. I admit, maybe it was my idea to go over there. So maybe I shouldn't try to place the blame on you."

Starsky grinned and flung an arm around Hutch's shoulder, giving him a friendly squeeze. "That's better. We'll work it out, Blondie. I won't leave you hangin'. Promise." Starsky's eyes swept the room. "Where is he anyway? Out walkin' himself?" He snickered at his own joke.

"No, he's in the middle of *my* bed, asleep."

Still grinning, Starsky walked toward the bedroom. "This I gotta see."

"You're gonna think it's *really* hilarious when you see he's using your clean sports coat for a blanket," Hutch mumbled under his breath.

Sam bounded off the bed and ran to meet Starsky at the bedroom door, not giving him a chance to yell about the jacket. Sam seemed so darned happy to see him, that Starsky couldn't bring himself to chastise the dog. Nobody except Hutch, when he was pinned under a car at the bottom of a canyon, had ever acted so glad to see him.

"Sam, here, boy!" Hutch called from the kitchen. "Come on, boy. Chow's on!" Hutch clanked a spoon against the side of the new bone-shaped, ceramic bowl, filled with

gourmet dog food, and sat it on the floor next to the matching water bowl. The hungry puppy forgot his excitement over Starsky's arrival and bolted past him to the kitchen. Hutch stood by watching as Sam tore into the food with gusto.

Starsky appeared at the kitchen door. "Man, look at him eat! I think he likes it. The lady at the pet store said it was the best they carry." Sam gobbled the food as though he hadn't eaten in days. They both suspected that until his meal at Animal Control a few hours ago, he probably hadn't.

"Starsky, don't you think you may have gone just a little overboard with all this stuff?"

"Nah. I figured he deserved it. Doesn't look like he's had a great life so far." Hutch looked at his partner, whose face was as eager as a little boy's. *Typical*, he thought. Starsky worked hard at his tough guy image, but Hutch wasn't fooled for a minute. His friend's compassion and sense of *doing the right thing* always won out.

"You can walk him after he finishes eating," Hutch suggested. "We've got to get him into a routine as quickly as possible. A dog should always be taken out after he eats."

"By myself?" Starsky hedged. "I mean, what if he gets away?"

"He won't get away unless you let him. You promised to help out. Now, if I have to get up in the morning and walk him before work, the least you can do is walk him tonight while I go take my shower. I'm bushed and want to turn in early."

"Well, all right." Starsky couldn't argue the logic; still, he was a little nervous.

Hutch headed toward the bedroom. "Use your key to let yourself back in."

"Wait, Hutch. Uh...where do I walk him? And how long?"

"Around the block a couple of times should do it."

"Wait a minute—"

"What now?" Hutch asked, a little exasperated.

"Just...uh...I'll pick you up in the mornin'." He knew Starsky was stalling. "I think tomorrow we should question Frank Bradley first. You know, try and see if he's got a reason to torch his own stores. Could be up to his eyeballs in debt and needs the insurance money."

"Yeah, I thought of that. You're right—we'll start with him." Hutch headed toward the bedroom a third time, but paused. "Starsk? Thanks for the supplies and for walking Sam."

Starsky smiled back at him, midnight blue eyes twinkling. “No problem. See ya tomorrow.”

Starsky looked around just in time to see Sam lap up the last morsel of food from the bowl, and cast adoring eyes up at him. Obviously, a ploy to get seconds. Starsky wasn't sure if the dog should have any more, but Sam looked up at him so pitifully. He smiled down at the dog and scooped another full cup into the bowl.

“Don't tell Hutch,” he whispered conspiratorially. “He can be real uptight sometimes. So I won't tell if you don't.” Sam was too busy gulping down the kibbles to acknowledge whether or not he understood the importance of discretion.

As soon as the dog had emptied the bowl a second time, Starsky snapped the leash onto his collar and started for the door. Sam's ears went flat against his head as he dug in his back paws, apparently frightened he was already going to leave his new home.

“Aw, come on, ya big galoot. I promised Hutch I'd take you out. It's gettin' late and I'm tired.” Starsky gently tugged, afraid of hurting the pup's sore neck. “Come on now,” he coaxed. Sam laid his head on the floor and whined softly. Starsky reached down and scooped the dog up into his arms and carried him out the front door. Even though he was grossly underweight for a dog his age and breed, he still was an awkward armful. Once they were on the sidewalk, Starsky gently lowered Sam to the ground.

“See there? This isn't so bad now, is it?” Sam looked up at him, still unconvinced that this was a good thing. “Now we're just gonna walk around the block a couple of times, then we can both call it a night.”

Starsky started walking slowly, at first sort of dragging the dog behind him. He talked as he walked, soft, encouraging words like “That's a boy... Come on fella...” Step—drag—step—drag. Slowly, Sam's ears perked up a fraction, then he actually began taking tentative steps without being dragged

The evening air was cool and Starsky was beginning to enjoy himself. Sam was responding and Starsky felt really good about the whole situation. Approaching from the opposite direction, was an attractive young woman walking a poodle. When she noticed them and said something cutesy to her dog about the “nice puppy” up ahead, Starsky couldn't help swaggering a bit. Maybe this dog business *was* a good way to meet the ladies!

“Oh, wow,” she gushed, “a rottweiler, right? I haven't seen you guys around here before. He's awfully thin. Has he been sick?”

“No, I just got him from the animal shelter today. He'll look better in no time,” Starsky said nobly.

“You’re kidding. What a wonderful thing to do. You must be a very compassionate guy. Look, Phoebe, isn’t he sweet?” she said, urging her poodle closer.

“I’m a real dog person,” Starsky bragged. “Can’t stand to see an animal in need.”

“I’m so happy to finally meet a sensitive man. Most of the guys I know don’t care about a dog unless it hunts.”

Starsky’s chest puffed out noticeably. “Well...I do what I can.”

The young woman’s eyes strayed from Starsky’s face *downward*, just as he felt a warm sensation beginning at his knee and flowing *downward*. Then she gasped, as she realized that Sam was standing on one back leg—with the other hiked up in Starsky’s direction. A jet stream of warm urine sprayed the leg of his jeans, dripping down to form a puddle on his sneaker.

“Oh, no,” she said, trying desperately to stifle a giggle. Starsky’s surprise was surpassed only by his humiliation. The cocky grin slowly faded from his face as his pants leg became saturated.

“I have to be leaving now,” she said politely and hurried past him with her prissy poodle in tow. As she disappeared into the darkness, he could hear her laughing hysterically.

“Terrific,” Starsky muttered under his breath. “You really know how to hurt a guy, don’t ya?” Couldn’t hold it for even a minute? Huh? Huh? What are you tryin’ to do to me?”

Sam looked up innocently, his big pink tongue lolling out one side of his mouth, then tore out in the direction his poodle friend had gone, dragging Starsky behind him.

“Oh, no you don’t, Casanova. You’ve embarrassed us both enough for one night.” Starsky reached down and picked him up. With the dog’s oversized front paws dangling over Starsky’s shoulder, they headed back to Hutch’s house.



Starsky quietly let himself and Sam into the house. Except for one lamp in the living room, the house was dark. Hutch hadn’t been kidding when he told Starsky he was going to turn in early. Starsky unhooked the leash, draped it over the chair, and then started for the front door. Sam followed closely, his tail wagging happily. Starsky bent down and patted him on the head.

“See you in the morning, ya big dummy. Try to behave yourself, huh? I’m gonna let you by with peein’ on me this time, but it better not happen again. I’ve got an image to protect. You understand?” Sam looked up, his huge black eyes dancing. Starsky couldn’t help but think the dog looked like he was smiling. With a final pat on the head, the detective slipped out, locking the door behind him.

The dog sat in front of the door and waited at least five minutes, expecting Starsky to come back. Once Sam gave up on that notion, he found his way into Hutch's bedroom and hopped up next to the sleeping man. He slowly inched his way across the bed until he was nose to nose with Hutch. The puppy quietly watched his new friend sleep for a while, but soon became bored with that pursuit. His tongue darted out as quickly as a frog's and licked Hutch across the lips.

Still sleeping, a pleasant smile spread over Hutch's face. His arm reached over and embraced Sam, pulling the dog close to his body. Slowly, awareness broke through the fog of sleep and Hutch's eyes flew open, only centimeters from Sam's. Hutch was so startled he rolled off the side of the bed and hit the floor with a loud thump. Instantly, the big dog jumped off and landed squarely on Hutch's chest.

Once the momentary panic passed, Hutch reached up and gave Sam a big bear hug. "What are you trying to do, boy? Scare me to death?" The dog continued licking and nuzzling Hutch until he pushed him off and climbed back in bed. Sam jumped back up on the bed also and laid his head on the pillow next to Hutch's. Within minutes, both were snoring peacefully.

Chapter 4

Hutch slammed the door behind him and jogged toward the Torino. Almost the instant the door shut, Sam let out a loud, mournful howl, piercing the quiet neighborhood. Hutch stopped in his tracks and went back inside to scold the puppy. Seconds later, Starsky looked up and saw him leave the house again. This time, Hutch didn't even succeed in locking the door before another nerve-wracking howl sounded from within, this one louder than the first.

Hutch threw his head back, gazing skyward in a display of agitation. He opened the door and went in for a second time, taking a little longer before coming out again. Starsky was getting a real kick out of watching his partner's yo-yo routine, but when Hutch disappeared back into the house a third time, Starsky was beginning to get a little impatient.

He was just getting out to go see what the hold-up was, when Hutch reappeared with Sam tagging behind him. The look on his partner's face warned Starsky he'd better not say a word. Wrenching open the passenger door, Hutch flipped the seat forward and guided Sam into the back seat.

"Whoa! Wait just a minute now! Whattaya think you're doin'?' You can't bring him with us," Starsky complained.

“And exactly what do *you* suggest we do? You heard him, Starsky. I can’t leave him here, howling his damn head off! All it’s gonna take is one neighbor calling Mrs. Frye, and I’m history here.”

In a show of incredibly bad timing, Sam flew over the back seat, landing between the two detectives, then deposited his oversized body onto Starsky’s lap. His big paws went up on Starsky’s shoulders as he covered his new buddy’s face with wet, sloppy kisses.

“Knock it off, ya big dummy!” Starsky was fighting a losing battle, as he tried to peel the big dog off his chest and face.

“Not so funny when you’re on the receiving end, is it?”

“Aw, come on, get him off me!” Starsky fussed. Hutch finally tugged on the leash and brought Sam to his side of the seat.

“This isn’t gonna work, Hutch. How are we supposed to get any work done with him followin’ us around? Huh?”

“I don’t know! But I’ll tell you this...” Hutch pointed his finger emphatically at Starsky, showing he was in no mood to argue. “We’re in this together, and we’ll have to *deal* with it together. Unless *you* want to take him back to the Pound right now, I suggest you try and cooperate a little.”

Starsky sobered at the prospect of turning Sam back over to Animal Control. He realized Hutch was probably having a rough time coping with the changes the dog had caused in his morning schedule, and figured it was best not to antagonize him any further.

“Okay. All right, I’m sorry. I don’t wanna turn him in any more than you do. Maybe Huggy could help us out for a little while. I don’t think Cap’n Dobey’s gonna put out the welcome mat for him. Do you?”

“No, but I thought maybe we could go straight over to Bradley’s and let Sam sit in the car. That building has an underground parking area, so it’ll be cool enough for him to stay there a little while.”

Starsky tipped his head, acknowledging that that might work. He cranked up the car while Hutch made Sam return to the back seat.

“So, how’d it go last night?”

“Okay, I guess,” Hutch answered, his voice much calmer. “He slept on the bed. Got me up at four a.m. to take him out.” Hutch smiled, glancing back at the puppy who had resumed his favorite position—head and paws hanging over the seat between them. “I woke up and his head was on the pillow right next to mine.”

Starsky smiled, too, imagining the expression on Hutch's face when he opened his eyes, nose-to-nose with Sam. "That'll go a long way with the ladies," he joked.

"Guess we'll just have to have joint custody, Starsk. You can baby-sit when I have company, and vice versa."

Starsky gave him a doubtful sideways glance. "Got it all figured out, don'cha? You know, I hear the ladies go crazy about a guy with a dog," he said, flashing a grin at his partner. He almost told Hutch about the poodle and her good-looking owner, but decided he'd rather Hutch didn't know how that episode had ended. "How about some coffee and a donut on the way?" he suggested, changing the subject.

Hutch rolled his eyes at the mention of the word 'donut.' "Just coffee for me. You know I don't want all that sugar polluting my body this early in the morning. I had a power shake before I took Sam jogging." In return, Starsky gave him a look of disgust. It was too early for a lecture in nutrition, but that didn't slow down Hutch's warning.

"You know, buddy, that stuff's gonna kill you someday. But if you want to stop at the Krispy Kreme, be my guest. I'll check in with the station and let them know where we'll be."

Hutch called in, while Starsky stopped at the drive-through for his calorie/cholesterol/fat-laden breakfast. The dispatcher told Hutch that she was patching him through to Dobey, who wanted to speak with one of them right away.

"Cap'n, this is Hutch. Starsky and I are on our way over to see Bradley. We want to interview him before going any further with the investigation."

"That's fine. I expected he was at the top of your list. But I need you two back here by two this afternoon. The state fire marshal wants to sit down with you for a few minutes and compare notes. He was appointed only a few weeks ago. Name's Jerry Hunter. I told him you'd be here, so don't be late," Dobey said in his usual gruff manner.

"Got it, Cap'n. We'll be there."

Starsky handed a cup of steaming hot coffee to his partner, careful not to allow Sam to get close enough to burn his nose. The curious puppy licked his chops when Starsky pulled out a fresh, warm donut, and was within inches of helping himself when it was yanked out of his range.

"Oh, no you don't, Bozo. This *my* breakfast. You already had your. Besides, didn't anybody ever tell you that dogs don't like donuts?"

"He's a lot like you, Starsk. If it's food—he likes it."

"Very funny," Starsky shot back. "Just keep him outta my donuts."

Starsky finished off the pastry in three bites and maneuvered the Ford back out into traffic, traveling toward 21st Century Towers. The highrise office complex housed, among other things, the corporate offices for Frank Bradley Enterprises.

“Did a little checking and it seems our boy Bradley’s a high-roller, worth several mill. He has his hands in more businesses than the mob,” Starsky said. “We already knew about the fur trade and jewelry, but I found out he also owns an import business for pricey, custom-built cars—from Jaguar to Rolls Royce. Add to that ‘dealer of rare original artwork’ and we got one filthy-rich dude.” Starsky glanced at his partner as he talked. “With his import/export business connections, there’s plenty of opportunity to smuggle drugs in and out of the country.”

“When did you find out all that?” Hutch asked, impressed that Starsky had done his homework.

“After I left your place last night, I went by the station and asked Minnie to run a check. I just lucked out; she’s working second shift this week.”

“Starsky, why is it that Minnie just can’t seem to say no where you’re concerned? Don’t you ever feel just the tiniest bit guilty about taking advantage of her affection for you?”

“Oh, come on, Hutch, she could be my mother.”

“You’ve heard what they say about older women and younger men,” Hutch teased. “You know, Starsk, women don’t even reach their sexual peak until they’re in their forties.” Watching from the corner of his eye, Hutch could see the topic of conversation was beginning to make Starsky uncomfortable. Amused, he waited for a reaction.

“Oh, yeah? For real? And what about guys? I mean, when am I supposed to peak?”

“Hate to tell you this, partner, but it’s come and gone. Age nineteen.” Hutch could barely resist smiling at the expression on Starsky’s face.

“Nineteen? Are you kiddin’! That’s not true. You’re makin’ it up.”

“Absolutely serious. If you’d read something besides comic books and the funny papers, you’d’ve seen some of the more recent studies done by Masters & Johnson. Haven’t you read their new book, “The Joy of Sex?”

“Don’t need to read a book, partner,” Starsky boasted. He gave Hutch a wicked grin and waggled his eyebrows.

Starsky looked at the street sign, realized where he was, and made an abrupt turn into a strip shopping center on the right. The car behind him skidded and blared his horn. “What the hell?” Hutch hung onto the dashboard and braced Sam with his left elbow.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Starsky said when he realized the dog had nearly catapulted over the back seat. “Be right back.” He stomped down on the emergency brake and left the engine running while he dashed into the Junior Supermarket. A few short minutes later, he ran back out carrying a large brown paper bag, which he dropped on the front seat between them. Sam, inquisitive about the contents of the bag, quickly stuck his head into the open top and began snuffling and making loud snorting noises.

“What’s in the bag, Starsk?”

“Just somethin’ to keep him busy while we’re talkin’ to Bradley.”

Six blocks later, Starsky pulled the Torino into the underground parking lot of the 21st Century Towers office complex and located a fairly deserted, cool area to park the car. By now, Sam’s head was completely buried in the bag, and he was busy trying to retrieve the new toy.

Starsky smiled at Hutch with an “I told you so” look on his face. “So what’s in the bag?” Hutch asked again.

“One of those big rawhide chewy things. You know, the ones that look like giant bones. I figure he’ll be quiet if he has a toy to chew.”

Hutch thought Starsky was pretty clever, but to keep his buddy’s smugness quotient at a tolerable level, he decided not to say so. Instead, he rolled his window down a couple of inches to give the dog some fresh air. Starsky did the same, and they both slipped quietly out of the car while Sam wrestled with the large brown bag and its hidden treasure.



Bradley Enterprises was located on the nineteenth floor, and it was apparent the higher the floor, the more affluent the tenants. As they stepped off the elevator onto Italian pink marble floors, Starsky and Hutch looked around in awe. Thick, richly colored, hand-woven, Persian rugs dotted the lobby area. Oversized, dark cherry chairs with matching sofas covered in intricately patterned brocade upholstery were placed just so, providing a place for visitors to wait in comfort. Tall, narrow windows spanned from ceiling to floor, their top panels fashioned of colorful, handcrafted, stained-glass pastoral scenes.

“This must be the place,” Starsky said under his breath.

“Don’t break anything,” Hutch warned him jokingly.

An attractive blonde woman about twenty-five to thirty years old looked up from her desk over dark-framed bifocals, which were perched low on the bridge of her nose. She waited until the two detectives reached her desk before acknowledging them.

“May I help you, gentlemen?” she asked primly.

Both men pulled out their badges and held them up for her to see. “I’m Detective Hutchinson and this is my partner, Detective Starsky. We’re here to see Mr. Bradley regarding a police matter.”

“Do you have an appointment?” she asked coolly.

“Well, no,” Hutch answered, “but I’m certain he’ll see us, since this is regarding a crime investigation.”

“Mr. Bradley is a very busy man.” She opened a black suede calendar book and ran her finger down the page. “No, I’m afraid he has back-to-back appointments all day.”

Starsky stepped up to the desk. “Look, this is official police business. I suggest you buzz your boss and tell him we’re here. He’s likely to be pretty upset if he finds out you turned us away without even checkin’,” he said, irritation obvious in his tone. She reminded Starsky of a mother wolf guarding her pups, rather than a receptionist. And her high-handed attitude was starting to really grate on him.

The receptionist lifted her chin arrogantly. “Sir, I believe I know more about what would upset my boss than you do. And I *know* he doesn’t have time to see you right now.”

Hutch could see the tension building, and decided to try another approach. “Yes, I’m sure you do.” Hoping to soften her up a little, Hutch gave her his most appealing smile, the one that *always* worked with women. “So, when *can* he see us?” He quietly laid a hand on Starsky’s arm, signaling him to back off. The blonde flipped through several pages and finally located an opening in the appointment book.

“A week from Tuesday. We have an opening from eleven-fifteen to eleven-thirty a.m.” She looked up and smiled rather smugly.

“This is ridiculous!” Starsky blustered. “I’m outta here.

Pointing his finger at the woman, he went on. “Let *her* explain to Councilman Gibbons and Police Commissioner Thompson why two of their hand-picked detectives were denied an interview with their close, personal friend, Frank Bradley! Let somebody else catch the creeps that burned two of his businesses to the ground!” He turned on his heel and stormed toward the elevator.

“Good idea,” Hutch agreed, turning and following his partner. He recognized Starsky’s modified-for-the-circumstances ‘good cop/bad cop’ routine.

“Wait!” the receptionist called out. They both pretended to either not hear, or not care--leaving it open to her own interpretation. She rose from behind the desk and hurried after them. “Please?”

Hutch turned around first. Starsky was busy punching the elevator buttons.

“Please, gentlemen. Maybe I was a little hasty.” She was visibly shaken now and Hutch enjoyed seeing her squirm.

“Starsky, hold on a minute.” Starsky’s back was turned, but Hutch was certain there was a mischievous grin on his face. He knew *exactly* what he was doing.

“Perhaps I could interrupt Mr. Bradley. His barber and manicurist are with him right now, but maybe you can talk with him while they are finishing up.”

Both detectives followed her back to the desk, where she picked up the telephone and spoke in quiet tones with her boss. She then led them to a massive, ornate door and ushered them in.

A graying, trimly built man in his late fifties or early sixties was sitting in an overstuffed, dark green leather chair, while another man busily clipped his hair. Seated beside him on a stool, a young woman manicured his nails with quick, efficient strokes of the file.

“Welcome, Detectives. Marvin told me the commissioner was sending Bay City’s finest to handle my case. I trust I won’t be disappointed. I must say, you are prompt.” He smiled and motioned with his free hand for them to be seated.

They introduced themselves, but made no attempt to shake hands with the executive before taking a seat on the sofa. “We almost didn’t get past your pit bull,” Starsky said.

“Oh, you mean Francine? Yes, she guards me with an over-abundance of zeal, doesn’t she? Well, that’s what I pay her so well to do. I’m sure you can appreciate loyalty. I mean, being police officers and all. Now, what can I do to help with your investigation?”

Hutch began by asking him routine questions about any known enemies, recently fired employees, and individuals who would stand to gain from his losses. Starsky occasionally chimed in, but basically Hutch led the interview.

“I honestly can’t think of anyone who has a vendetta against me, but I’m sure you can understand that a man in my position most likely makes enemies every day without even realizing it. I can have my Human Resources person search the employee files and provide you with a list of terminated employees and those recently reprimanded or placed on probation.”

“That would be terrific,” Starsky said.

“What about in your personal life, Mr. Bradley? Are you married, any ex-wives, or maybe a scorned lover?” Hutch asked.

“I’m a happily married man, Detective,” Bradley replied lightly. “A scorned lover, indeed. My wife would have my head, after thirty-five years of wedded bliss. But you can eliminate her from your list of suspects. My wife loves beautiful, expensive things, gentlemen. She wouldn’t bite the hand that feeds her.”

Neither man was sure if he was serious, or just being facetious. Hutch stood up, signaling an end to the interview. “Well, if you think of anyone, or anything, please get in touch with us right away.” He produced a card with his name and the station number printed on it. “You can ask for either me or my partner, Detective Starsky.”

“I certainly will,” Bradley replied without rising. “I’ll have Francine call Personnel right now. They should have that list for you later today. Would you like to pick it up this afternoon?”

“Yes, that would be very helpful.” Starsky and Hutch walked to the door. “Thank you for your time,” Hutch said, politely.

As they walked past Francine to the elevator, the receptionist pretended to be very busy rearranging the articles on her desk. The two detectives stepped into the elevator, and as the door closed, Starsky said quietly, below his breath, “Man, what a bitch.”

“Aw, come on, Starsk. You’re just mad because she wasn’t impressed by the irresistible ‘Starsky charm’.” Hutch snickered at the indignant look on his partner’s face.

“Very funny, wise guy.”

When they were in sight of the Torino, Starsky could see Sam standing up in the front seat with his paws balancing on the dashboard. Once the dog recognized Starsky and Hutch, he began barking and eagerly wagging his tail like some sort of signaling device.

Starsky unlocked the car and saw dozens of tiny pieces of brown paper bag scattered over the seat and floorboard. The rawhide bone was halfway demolished.

“Aw, man, look at this mess,” Starsky grumbled.

“Well, what did you expect, Starsk? You gave him the bag. He’s a puppy. Puppies chew things; that just what they do. At least it was the bag and not the upholstery.”

A horror-stricken look flashed across Starsky’s face. The thought of the dog destroying part of his beloved car was no less than blasphemy! As they both got in, Sam jumped all over them, licking and playfully nipping at their faces. Starsky fought him off long

enough to retrieve the car keys from the pocket of his jeans and insert them into the ignition.

“You better walk him a few minutes,” Hutch said before Starsky could turn the key. “He’s been locked up in this car for a while; he may need to be walked—you know, to relieve himself.”

“Why me?”

“Because I walked him last time,” Hutch answered logically. He knew he shouldn’t give Starsky a hard time, but it was so darn much fun.

“Aw, all right!” Starsky struggled with the enthusiastic, wiggling dog long enough to connect the leash, then got out and walked to the closest exit. Checking all directions, he spotted a small park next door to the complex that would serve the purpose very well. Hutch pulled the car out of the garage and was waiting at the curb when Starsky and Sam were ready to leave.

“Move over,” Starsky said, standing on the driver’s side of the car.

“Good grief, Starsk, just get in. I’ll drive.”

“Uh, uh. You know I don’t like anybody drivin’ my car.” Sam was straining at the leash, obviously anxious to get into the car where Hutch was. “Move over,” Starsky repeated.

Aggravated, Hutch muttered an obscenity, but climbed out of the car and went around to the passenger’s side. “I swear, you are so damned possessive of this—this—hunk of red metal. You act like it’s a living being, instead of...a...machine.” Sam jumped into the back seat and watched the two men with interest.

“You don’t even like my car. You’re always insultin’ it; so why do you wanna drive all of a sudden?” Starsky argued.

Hutch slammed the door and sulked. “Just forget it, okay? I don’t want to drive this...this striped tomato!” he snapped. Hutch knew that name always got under Starsky’s skin, and he was feeling particularly mischievous this morning. “Let’s just go to Huggy’s and drop off Sam. It’s already noon and we have that meeting with the fire marshal at two.”

Starsky put the car in gear and cautiously pulled away from the curb. They drove along for a while in silence, and the only sound was Sam panting loudly from the back seat, his eyes darting back and forth between them. After a few minutes, Starsky glanced sideways at Hutch. “Hey, Blondie...you mad?”

“No. Why should I be mad? Just because my partner, my supposed ‘best friend,’ my *buddy* doesn’t trust me to drive his car?” Hutch concentrated hard to maintain a sulky expression.

“Look,” Starsky said in his most conciliatory voice, “if you really wanna drive, I’ll let ya.”

“No thanks.” Hutch smiled at him now. “I just wanted to see if you’d let me.”

Starsky rolled his eyes at Hutch and shook his head in disbelief. Sometimes he had to wonder at Hutch’s warped sense of humor. Sam seemed to sense the tension had passed and was trying to climb over the seat just as Starsky pulled into his favorite parking space in the alley behind The Pits.

They hopped out of the car with Sam on lead, and entered the restaurant via the back door. Huggy was in the kitchen, giving instructions to his latest new cook when the threesome entered, but stopped mid-sentence when he spied the dog. “What the hell?”

“Hey, Hug,” Starsky said, grinning from ear to ear. “Want ya to meet our new partner, Officer Sam.” In spite of the dog’s wagging tail and friendly face, Huggy Bear took a step back.

“Hey, man, that’s a rottweiler. You know those dogs are killers, don’t you?”

Hutch squatted down and put his arm around Sam’s neck and hugged him affectionately. “Not this one, Huggy. Look at him. He’s a big marshmallow. Come over here and get acquainted.”

Despite Hutch’s reassurance, Huggy wasn’t convinced. “I don’t know, Hutch.”

“Hug, you know I don’t have much use for dogs, but this one’s really nice,” Starsky said encouragingly. “We rescued him from Slick Willie’s. Looks like he was pretty badly abused. He’s really fun when you get to know ‘em,”

When Huggy started showing signs softening up, Starsky went to stand beside him and called Sam. The dog immediately trotted over to Starsky and nuzzled his hand to have his head patted. Huggy smiled at the comical look on the dog’s face. “Go on and pet him, Hug,” Starsky urged. As if he understood the exchange, Sam turned and nuzzled against Huggy’s leg, winning the black man over then and there. Huggy stooped down and scratched the dog’s ears.

Hutch began telling Huggy about how they’d found the dog, his stint at Animal Control, and their decision to bail him out. “Oh, man,” Huggy said when he spotted the raw burn marks on Sam’s back. “What’s this?”

“Cigarette burns. At least, that’s what Mary Peterson thinks—she’s the Animal Control officer who picked him up. We been puttin’ ointment on them,” Starsky answered.

“Some people will do anything, man. This dude’s only a puppy. If I’d been treated the way he has, I don’t think I’d be this cool.” Huggy shook his head in disbelief. “But then, the world’s full of weirdoes and freaks. I know, ‘cause half of ‘em come in here.”

When Starsky and Hutch left for their meeting with the fire marshal, Sam was snarfing down a large bowl of meat scraps that Huggy had rustled up. They knew Sam was in good hands until their return.

Chapter 5

“Starsky, Hutchinson, this is Lieutenant Jerry Hunter, the new fire marshal for this district. I want you two to cooperate with him in any way possible on this investigation,” Captain Dobeý said, motioning for the two cops to have a seat.

Both shook hands with Hunter before settling in their favorite chairs. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m looking forward to our working together,” the distinguished-looking man said as he sat back down. “I’ve only been in Bay City for two months, and this is the first big case I’ve tackled since arriving. You two have the reputation of being the best detectives in our district, so I’m sure if we combine our resources, we can solve this case fairly quickly. That’s why I asked that you be assigned.”

Starsky and Hutch exchanged a look of surprise. During the initial briefing that morning, Dobeý hadn’t mentioned that Hunter had requested them specifically. At first impression, the new fire marshal seemed like a nice enough guy, one that they could enjoy working with. In his early forties, he wasn’t a handsome man, but had an air of dignity about him that compensated for his lack of good looks. He wore his ebony black hair swept back, smooth against his head, emphasizing dark eyes that looked more black than brown. His demeanor was all business, as he moved on quickly with the meeting.

Reaching into his briefcase, Hunter took out a large manila envelope and handed it to Starsky. “I think we need to share what information we already know before taking off in separate directions,” he said. “Captain Dobeý just gave me a copy of everything BCPD has, including the autopsy report on the watchman.”

“That pretty much clinched it,” Dobeý added. “This is now *officially* a murder investigation as well as arson.”

“Cap’n, we checked on the autopsy report and were told it wasn’t back,” Hutch said, directing his attention to Dobeý.

“Just came in a few minutes ago,” he replied, handing a copy to Hutch. “It says the guard died from a blunt trauma wound to the head. There was very little evidence of smoke damage to the lungs.”

“That’s right,” Hunter confirmed. “Meaning he was dead before he could inhale much smoke. This narrows it down somewhat. We can eliminate the probability that this was an act of pure vandalism done by vagrants, or teenagers high on drugs or alcohol. This is an individual who means business.”

“We just came from interviewing Bradley,” Starsky told them. “Seemed more than willing to help with the investigation.”

“One thing we have to consider is that Bradley himself may be responsible. Don’t forget that arson has been dubbed ‘a white collar crime,’” Hunter interjected. “We find that it’s frequently the handiwork of the supposed victim.”

“We thought of that,” Hutch said, “and are checking out that angle.”

“There are several motives for arson,” Hunter continued. “To defraud an insurance company, to put the competition out of business, or to destroy records if the individual is involved in tax evasion or fraud—all common-place when a business burns down. But we also have to consider the more personal reasons, such as good, old fashioned revenge. Maybe a disgruntled employee, or a rejected lover or spouse.” Hunter turned and looked at Dobey. “I realize this is a political ‘hot potato,’ but we’ll have to discretely investigate all these possibilities.”

“Bradley’s already asked his personnel director to draw up a list of potential suspects for us,” Starsky said. “Hutch and I are supposed to pick it up after this meeting.”

“That’s probably where we’ll find the culprit,” Hunter replied. “But it’s still too early in the investigation to completely rule out the possibility the perpetrator may be doing this to fulfill a psychotic need. Pyromaniacs can’t suppress the impulse to start a blaze. Watching the flames and smoke gives them a rush. Nothing excites them more.”

“Is there anything you can tell us about how the fires are being started?” Hutch asked, while glancing over the autopsy report.

“Unfortunately, they’re being started with one of the most common accelerates available—gasoline. If a more unusual substance was involved, we’d have a better chance of tracing it back to the guilty party. But we’ve got your basic ‘Class-A fire’ here, and sometimes these are the hardest to solve. My best team is on-site now, searching for evidence of how he’s actually *igniting* the blazes.”

Hunter looked around the room inviting other questions. “In any case, I believe you guys are on the right track, starting with Bradley’s employees. A wealthy businessman like him has the opportunity to make plenty of enemies. That’s all I can tell you for now.

Copies of our most current lab results and my investigation notes to date are in the file I just gave Detective Starsky.”

“Sounds like we all have our work cut out for us,” Dobey said as he leaned forward and massaged the back of his neck. Hutch figured the captain had probably gotten another call from Police Commissioner Thompson, turning up the pressure.

“We certainly do,” Hunter replied. “Here’s my card.” He stood up to leave. “Please call me if you come up with anything you’d like me to follow up on. I’m going to spend my time this afternoon in the lab. You may have run into my team, Gina Ashford and Bob Jernigan, over at the jewelry store this morning. They’re two of the best people we have. We’re still running some tests and will share the results with you as soon as we have them.”



Sam met Starsky and Hutch at the back door of The Pits. Huggy didn’t seem anxious to be rid of him. “Did you behave yourself, fella?” Hutch asked, reaching down to affectionately scratch the pup’s ear.

“He was cool—unless you want to count those two T-bones he lifted right off the counter for a little snack,” Huggy answered for the dog. Sam swung his head around and looked up at Huggy, appearing to understand he’d been busted.

“Sam, you didn’t?!” Hutch scolded.

Reaching for his wallet, Starsky apologized. “Look, we’re sorry, Huggy. How much do we owe you? I’ll pay for whatever he stole.”

“No sweat, man. What’s a couple of steaks among friends?”

“Thanks, Hug. We didn’t think Dobey would exactly roll out the welcome mat for him,” Hutch said, as he bent down and snapped on the leash.

“Well, don’t let the word out on the streets that this is his home away from home or nothing, but if the little dude needs a temporary hangout, he can hang with Huggy Bear anytime. Uh...but...maybe he could bring his own lunch next time.” Sam rubbed his head against Huggy’s thigh, as if to apologize for the theft.

“Catch you later. Thanks again,” Hutch said, as they went out the back door to the Torino.



The two detectives stepped off the elevator and walked toward the reception desk of Bradley Enterprises. “Miss Personality’s still standin’ guard,” Starsky mumbled under his breath.

“Don’t let your attitude show, partner,” Hutch cautioned him.

The blonde looked up from her desk with a cordial smile. “Good afternoon, Detectives,” she greeted, surprising them both with the complete turn-about from her behavior earlier in the day. “I have the information you requested.” She held a file folder in her outstretched hand.

“Thanks,” Hutch responded, taking the folder. But Francine was focusing her attention on Starsky.

“I hope there are no hard feelings from this morning,” she said contritely. “I was just doing my job. Mr. Bradley becomes very angry if I let people in who don’t have appointments.”

Despite his earlier resolve, Starsky felt himself softening toward the receptionist. “Apology accepted,” he said, smiling back at her. *She really has pretty blue eyes*, he thought, amazed he hadn’t noticed earlier.

Hutch looked on amused, as Starsky’s expression rapidly changed from restrained to surprised, then to pleased.”

“I’d like a chance to make it up to you. Would you care to meet later for a drink?”

“Um...sure...sure. When do you get off?”

“Five. Why don’t we just meet at Mick’s, the little bar and grill across the street?”

“Terrific.”

Hutch cleared his throat, waiting for an invitation, but Francine ignored him. “Later then, Detective.” She smiled sweetly and sat back down at the desk.

“Dave.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Dave. Dave Starsky. That’s my name.”

“Oh, yes. I’ll see you at five, Dave.”

Hutch tapped him on the shoulder with the file folder, signaling he was ready to leave. Neither spoke until they climbed back into the Torino and started out of the parking garage.

“What was that all about?”

“Whattaya mean?” Starsky answered Hutch’s question with a question.

“What ever happened to ‘Man, she’s a bitch’?”

“She came to her senses.” Starsky smirked. Sam flopped his big paw over Starsky’s shoulder and licked his right ear as if to congratulate him. “Besides, maybe she knows somethin’ about Bradley.”

“Maybe. Good thinking, Starsk. I know this is a big sacrifice for you, but see what you can find out anyway. You’re a real trooper,” Hutch teased. “In the meantime, let’s start checking out these possible suspects.”



Starsky ran home in time for a quick shower before meeting Francine at the bar and grill. While getting ready, he thought about the forlorn look on Sam’s face when he drove off and left the dog standing in the driveway beside Hutch. Who would ever have thought he’d be getting attached to a dog? Starsky was having trouble accepting it himself! The funny thing was, the dog seemed to like him just as much as he liked Hutch. Starsky wouldn’t admit it—not even to himself—but he kind of enjoyed it, knowing someone looked forward to seeing him...was eager to please him...cared about him. Yeah, it was pretty nice. He wondered if Hutch felt the same way. But it wasn’t the kind of thing a guy wanted to tell anybody.



When Starsky arrived at the bar, the cute blonde was already there, seated at a private table in the corner. She spotted him and waved from across the room. Starsky smiled, then waved back and made his way through the crowd to where she was waiting.

“Hi, Dave. I’m glad you could make it.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Starsky said, looking around the room at the throng of people.

“You come here often?”

“Pretty often. Being right across the street here, a lot of the office workers from the complex gather here for happy hour. Convenient, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I didn’t even know this place was here,” Starsky replied, unable to think of anything else to say. An awkward silence followed for the next few seconds.

“I, uh, I guess you thought it was awfully forward of me to ask you out, especially after my rude behavior this morning,” Francine said, her face blushing bright pink as she spoke.

“No, not all. I mean, I was kinda rude right back,” Starsky answered, hoping to alleviate her embarrassment. “It’s the job, you know. We have to get answers and we have to get them quick. Somebody’s life can depend on it.”

“Oh, yes, I realize that. Mr. Bradley expects me to screen all visitors, especially those without appointments. I’m surprised he didn’t warn me to expect you. If he had, I would have let you in immediately.” She took a deep breath and paused, as a little frown puckered her brow. “My interest in getting to know you wasn’t my only motive for inviting you here tonight. I asked you because I...I...may be able to help you.”

Not expecting such a revelation without prompting, Starsky was caught off guard for a moment.

“I wanted to give you a name to check into.” Francine looked around the room to see if anyone was listening, then bent her head closer. Starsky obliged by moving closer as well. “I could lose my job if anyone knew I was discussing this matter with you. But she was my friend, she helped me get on at Bradley’s, and I feel I owe her something.”

“You can tell me,” Starsky reassured her. “I’ll be careful with the information and only involve you if it’s necessary.” Now Starsky looked around before speaking. “Francine, a man was murdered last night at the arson site. Whoever’s doin’ this, has no qualms about hurtin’ people.”

“Well, if you promise...”

“You have my word.” Starsky laid his hand over hers as he spoke. Looking into Francine’s eyes, he saw fear.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath before going on. “Her name was Carol Parker. She worked as an administrative assistant to Mr. Bradley. Carol had been with him about a year when she told me about the opening for a receptionist in her office. She said if I was interested, she’d put in a good word for me. She said there was one condition, though. I must never repeat anything that went on in the office—especially if it concerned her relationship with Mr. Bradley.”

Francine paused, looking up at Starsky to see if he was comprehending the implication of her words. “Carol told me that she wanted a close friend in the office because there were people who would like to see her lose her job. Worse yet, they would cause trouble for

her and Mr. Bradley with his wife. At first, I thought she meant that she was being accused of things she didn't do, you know? I mean—with Mr. Bradley.”

“But that wasn't the case?” Starsky prompted.

“No. She and Mr. Bradley were having an affair. She was really in love with him and believed he felt the same. Carol thought it would be safer to have a friend working in the office, someone who wouldn't want to cause her trouble.” Francine shrugged her shoulders. “She was right; I didn't tell a soul. Haven't—until just now. I don't know how it got out, but there were whispers. Mostly speculation, I think.”

“Where is Carol now?” Starsky asked. His hand still laid casually over Francine's. He felt her shiver in response to his question. She turned and looked him in the eyes, and he saw hers sparkled with unshed tears.

“She's dead. They're saying it was suicide—but I know it wasn't.”

“How? How do you know?”

“Carol was pregnant. She would never have killed her baby. I know she wouldn't. Carol was raised Catholic. Not only did she believe suicide was a mortal sin, killing her unborn child would have been, in her mind, an unforgivable sin.”

Starsky squeezed her hand, then reached into the back pocket of his jeans and produced a clean handkerchief. Francine gratefully accepted it and dabbed as inconspicuously as possible at the tears that were now threatening to overflow.

“Was there an investigation?”

“Not really. They said she jumped from a window in her apartment building. The police were told that she had a history of depression—which she did—and her mother confirmed that to be true. I don't know why, but the fact that she was pregnant hasn't been mentioned. I don't think anyone knew except me and, of course, Mr. Bradley. Dave, I believe she was murdered to keep her from having that baby and causing a scandal for her boss.”

“Francine, if that's true and Bradley had her killed, how do you think the fires are tied in?”

“That part I don't know yet. But I feel sure the two things are connected somehow. Anyway, I feel better just having told you. Even if the arson isn't connected to Carol's death, maybe you can reopen her case and see that something's done about it.”

“You feel absolutely sure that your friend didn't kill herself? I mean, what if she told Bradley, he rejected her, and the whole idea of tryin' to raise a kid without his help was just too much for her to deal with?”

“I thought about that. I just can’t see her committing suicide. I know there’s no apparent connection, but promise me you’ll at least check it out without bringing my name into it?”

“Hey, I gave you my word, didn’t I, hmmm?” Starsky smiled at her. “Now you gotta promise me somethin’. Don’t repeat any of this, okay? If you’re right about your suspicions, you could put yourself in danger by repeating what you know. So, will you promise to let me take it from here?”

Francine nodded in agreement, then smiled at Starsky. “Thank you, Dave. If I hear anything else, I’ll let you know right away. And one more thing—would you please call me Fran? All my friends do.”

“Okay, Fran.” Starsky gave her hand one final squeeze. “Now, how about we order somethin’ to eat. I’m starved. Whattaya recommend?”



After taking Francine home, Starsky checked his watch and saw it was only 10:30. He decided to go by Hutch’s and fill him in on this latest development. Hutch had planned to go over Hunter’s file anyway, so they could see how the fire marshal’s investigation was coinciding with what they already had on the case. When he pulled into Hutch’s driveway, the headlights of the Torino momentarily flashed on two people and two dogs standing about fifty feet from Hutch’s house.

Starsky turned off the ignition and hopped out of the car just in time to hear a woman’s light laughter. It sounded really familiar, but Starsky wasn’t sure where he’d heard it before. He crossed in front of the Torino and was about to let himself in through the front door of the house, when he caught a phrase of the nearby conversation. “I think Phoebe and Sam are becoming great friends, don’t you?”

Then he heard Hutch’s familiar voice. “Well, Sam knows a beautiful girl when he sees one. I mean, he takes after me in that regard.” More laughter...

Oh, brother, Starsky thought to himself. *Give me a break.* Then, the memory of Phoebe the poodle and her attractive owner came flooding back, bringing a flush of humiliation to him all over again. *Oh, God, don’t let her tell Hutch about last night.* He quickly let himself into the house and closed the door, hoping she hadn’t recognized him.

Starsky grabbed up the arson file and appeared to be completely absorbed in it, when Hutch and Sam came in a few minutes later. Hutch was grinning from ear to ear. Sam, always excited to see Starsky, didn’t wait for Hutch to unhook his leash before breaking loose and pouncing on Starsky with all four feet. Under the onslaught, Starsky lost his grip on the file and the pages went flying in ten different directions. “Dammit, Sam! Ya big dummy! Get off me! Now see what’cha done!”

Sam quickly drew back as though Starsky had struck him. His ears flattened against his head, he slunk away, hiding behind a chair. Instantly, Starsky regretted yelling at the dog. Anticipating Hutch ribbing him about last night, he'd taken out his embarrassment and anxiety on Sam, when all the dog wanted was to show his affection.

"That's real good, Starsk," Hutch snapped angrily. "Make him think he's back at Slick Willie's."

Starsky felt like a real sleaze. "I didn't mean—"

"Yeah, well, tell him—not me."

Squatting down beside the chair Sam was hiding behind, Starsky spoke softly. "Sam, come on out, fella." The dog only whined and cringed a little farther back into the corner. Starsky reached out his hand tentatively and tried once again. "Come on, boy. I'm not gonna hurt you." No response. He sat down on the floor next to the chair and patted his lap, trying to coax the dog to him. "Come on now, and I'll scratch your ears. I know ya like that."

Sam looked up and cocked his head to one side, then laid it back down. Hutch eased over quietly, slipping Starsky a dog biscuit. "Try this, Starsk."

Starsky held the biscuit out in front of him, close to his knee. Always the chow hound, Sam tried to stretch his neck out far enough to take the treat without actually moving closer to the man. "Naw, you gotta come all the way over here," Starsky said gently. The dog looked up into Starsky's face and saw he was smiling. Slowly, he crept forward on his belly, reminding Starsky of a soldier in an old war movie, crawling from one foxhole to another, behind enemy lines. Then before he knew it, Sam snatched the biscuit and was happily chomped it into tiny bits. Starsky reached out and first patted the dog's head, before pulling him into his lap and hugging him. When Sam reached up and licked the man's chin, Starsky's heart melted.

Hutch watched his partner interacting with the dog and was reminded again that Starsky might be a little rough around the edges, but his compassion and gentle nature outweighed all else. Sam was all wags, as he sat in Starsky's lap being hugged and cuddled.

"So, does this mean you forgive him for hiking his leg on you in front of Phoebe and Janice last night?" Hutch asked, a mischievous smile tugging at his lips.

Starsky turned around, a sour expression marring his face. "You just couldn't let it slide, could ya, Blondie?" By now Hutch had broken down and was laughing out loud.

"Oh, man, Starsk, what I would have given to see that! Mr. Cool... I gotta hand it to you partner, you really know how to impress a lady."

“Very funny, smart ass. Your turn’s comin’! Just you wait....” Starsky tried not to laugh, but it seemed contagious. Sam ran back and forth between them, barking and wagging. He wasn’t sure what all the fun was about, but was determined to be included.

Chapter 6

When Starsky pulled into Hutch’s driveway the next morning, he wasn’t surprised to see Sam trotting along beside him. “‘Mornin’,” Starsky said, not even commenting on the dog’s presence as they climbed in.

“‘Morning,” Hutch answered. He was obviously in a good mood. Sam stopped to give Starsky a sloppy kiss before climbing over the seat to assume his place in the back. This time Starsky took it in stride.

“Where do you wanna start?” Hutch asked, clearly anxious to get on with the investigation.

“I’ve been thinking, maybe we should go ahead and check out Carol Parker’s death. If Fran’s right, there could be a motive for the fires that we just haven’t figured out.”

“True, but I don’t think we should focus totally on that incident without checking out the people I told you about last night—those who were fired from Bradley Enterprises over the past year.” Sam moved to the right and hung his head over Hutch’s shoulder, who absently reached up and scratched the dog under the chin without a pause in the conversation.

“No doubt about it, Starsky, Bradley Enterprises is big business, and they’re pretty cold when it comes to getting rid of people they don’t need anymore. At least three of them had over ten years of service with the company at the time they were terminated.”

“Yeah, I picked up on that, too. I really *was* lookin’ through the file last night before the ‘black tornado’...” Starsky indicated Sam with a nod toward the dog. “...laid into me.”

Hutch grinned, remembering the chaos Sam had created. He opened the file folder to a page of notes he and Starsky had made last night. “Okay, let’s try to question Davis Sims, Derrick Huff, and Julie Alexander this morning. Then we’ll go back to the station and pull the file on the Parker suicide and check that out in the afternoon.” Hutch always liked having a plan.



By noon, the two detectives had met with Sims, an ex-middle manager who seemed pretty happy about receiving an early retirement, even though it had not initially been his

idea. He'd found he could live quite comfortably on his retirement income and bragged about enjoying spending time in his garden.

Julie Alexander was an executive secretary who'd been dismissed when her direct supervisor left the company. Though initially bitter toward her former employer, Ms. Alexander was now working at a job that paid ten thousand more a year than Bradley had. In fact, she seemed extremely happy with the outcome.

"I saw in the papers that two of Bradley's holdings were destroyed," she told them. "I couldn't help thinking it couldn't happen to a more deserving guy. But frankly, I didn't even care enough to finish reading the article."

Their efforts to locate Derrick Huff revealed that the ex-receiving clerk had left Bay City when he was fired for showing up for work intoxicated. Friends said he returned to his hometown somewhere in Texas. Apparently, Huff had family there who wanted to help him get into rehab. It had been simple to confirm he'd left LA at least two months before the first fire. So, they'd eliminated the three employees who seemed to have the strongest motives to cause Bradley Enterprises a problem.

Starsky pulled into the parking lot of one of his favorite delis and turned off the motor. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm starved'." Sam woofed loudly, indicating he agreed.

"Well, at least I can get something here that's halfway healthy. Why don't you go in and get our order while I wait here with Sam?" Hutch suggested.

Starsky was back in a flash with a chicken salad on pita for Hutch, and a triple-decker club with chips for himself. Sam wagged his tail happily and salivated on Hutch's shoulder, as Starsky unwrapped two large kielbasa sausages and placed them on a paper plate for the dog.

"Starsky, you're gonna make him sick, feeding him stuff like that," Hutch complained.

"Hey, I thought you said we have joint custody," Starsky argued right back. "That means when he's with me, he can have real food. You can feed him seaweed biscuits and granola kibbles when he's with you."

Hutch shook his head in resignation., knowing there was no point in arguing with Starsky when it came to food. After finishing their meal, they sat in the shade for a while and Starsky called the station to speak with Minnie.

"Minnie, darlin', this is Starsky. I need your help. Yeah—again." Hutch listened to the pro at work. "Listen, Hutch and I are checkin' into a reported suicide that happened about six weeks ago." Starsky listened for a second. "Right. Victim's name, Carol Parker. Address, Brandywine Apartments, here in the city." Silence again. "Terrific. You're the best. Oh, I don't know..." Starsky looked at his watch. "...about an hour?"

Hutch rolled his eyes, as Starsky looked over at him with a smug expression. “Okay. See you then. You’re a sweetheart. Yeah, I know--I owe ya. Bye.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Hutch said, only half-seriously.

“What? She doesn’t mind,” Starsky defended himself, as he started the car.

“All units, all units in the vicinity Market and Twenty-seventh, reported 211 in progress. Repeat a 211 in progress. All units in the vicinity of Market and Twenty-seventh, please respond to silent alarm.”

“That’s only three blocks from here,” Hutch said, snatching the radio mic off the console. Starsky pulled the car into traffic while slapping the red light on the roof of the Torino.

“Control, this is Zebra Three. Responding to the 211 at Market and Twenty-seventh. We are three blocks from the site. Repeat, Zebra Three responding.”

“Ten-four, Zebra Three. Suspects may be armed and dangerous. Name of business: Kwon Cho Market. Repeat—may be armed and dangerous.”

Starsky expertly guided the Ford through the heavy traffic, using only the red flashing bubble to clear the traffic from his path. He eased the car to a quiet halt in front of the supermarket, just as two black youths wearing ski masks burst through the door. Both were frantically waving pistols in the air, the shorter of the two dragging a terrified Oriental woman along as a shield.

“Damn!” Hutch spat. “I hate when civilians are involved.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think anybody asked us,” Starsky answered, pulling his Smith & Wesson from the holster under his jacket. The two robbers still had their backs to the street and didn’t seem to realize they were headed right toward the two detectives. “How you wanna do this?”

Hutch pulled out his Magnum and quickly checked the chamber. “The hard way, I guess.”

They made eye contact for a split second before executing their move, and Starsky said barely above a whisper, “Hey....” *The unspoken reminder to be careful.*

Hutch nodded “Yeah, you, too....”

Simultaneously, they threw open the car doors and dove in opposite directions, taking shelter behind other cars parked close by. When in place with guns drawn, Hutch signaled his partner he was ready, then shouted, “Police! Stop right there!” The first man whirled and fired without hesitation, striking Hutch in the left shoulder. It happened so quickly, Starsky wasn’t sure he could believe his eyes. Adrenaline pumping, he rose

up from behind his cover and shouted, "Police!" As the gunman quickly turned toward him, Starsky fired three shots in rapid succession, striking him all three times. The second youth quickly shoved his hostage to the ground and threw up his hands.

"Don't shoot, Mister, I give up! I give up!"

"Hutch, you okay? Speak to me, partner," Starsky called out. No response.

"Drop the gun, slowly," Starsky ordered, not taking his eyes off the youth until the gun was safely on the ground. "Now put your hands behind your head and don't even breathe."

Starsky anxiously looked over at Hutch who was lying on his side adjacent to the car. "Hutch!" Before Starsky could shove the assailant to the ground and cuff him, Sam leaped out of the car and ran to where Hutch lay. The bewildered dog lay down, placing his head on Hutch's shoulder. "Stay there, Sam," Starsky told the dog, as he snapped the handcuffs shut and picked up the surrendered gun. Within seconds, Starsky had secured the criminal and was by Hutch's side.

He quickly bent down and eased Hutch onto his back, moving Sam aside in the process. "Hutch, buddy, you okay? Huh? Hutch?" Starsky held Hutch's face between his hands, urging him to open his eyes. He could see where the bullet had entered Hutch's left shoulder, but couldn't tell how bad the wound was.

"Starsk?" Hutch blinked several times, trying to clear his vision, then looked up at Starsky's worried face. At the same time, he felt a wet nose nudging his neck. Hutch was dazed, but conscious. Starsky pulled Hutch into an upright position and braced him against his own body, then used his handkerchief to apply pressure to Hutch's shoulder wound.

"You really gave me a scare, buddy," Starsky said. He watched as Sam inched forward again and laid his head and front paws over Hutch's legs. "Or maybe I should say you gave *us* a scare. Be still now. Help will be here soon," Starsky assured him.

Turning to the crowd that had gathered, he shouted, "Somebody call an ambulance! We've got an injured police officer here! And somebody check on that guy." When the bystanders seemed too stunned to act, he snapped. "Do it! Now!" The store merchant jolted into action, ran back into the store and made the phone call.

Starsky held onto Hutch with one arm and grasped Sam's collar with the other hand, afraid the frightened dog would run off when the ambulance roared onto the scene. "How you doin? Huh?" he asked Hutch every few seconds.

"I'm okay, Starsk. Really...it's not too bad...I'm okay," Hutch reassured him. Sam whined again and moved in even closer, almost covering Hutch's lap. He smiled at the

dog and laid his hand on Sam's head. "Starsky, I think he's even more of a mother hen than you."

"Impossible," Starsky mumbled, a little smile teasing the corners of his mouth. The ambulance cut its siren as it rolled to a stop just feet from where Starsky and Sam stood guard over Hutch.

When the paramedics took over, Starsky put Sam back into the car and joined the other police officers who'd arrived on the scene. He gave a statement to Officer Tate and promised to go by the station later and file his report. Because of the shooting, he knew IA would be involved. The paramedics told him the wounded gunman was in critical condition, but being young and strong, he'd probably survive.

Starsky hurried back to the ambulance before the paramedic could shut the door. "You gonna be okay, buddy?" he leaned in close and asked Hutch.

"Yeah, I just hate like hell that this could slow down solving our case."

"Don't worry about that. There's lots of stuff you can do while I'm on the street," Starsky consoled him. "You aren't gettin' outta doin' your share just because of this."

"Detective, we need to get your partner to the hospital now. You're welcome to follow. We're going to Metro General," the paramedic said, climbing in next to Hutch.

"Right. Okay. I'll see you there, Hutch," Starsky said, as the paramedic pulled the door shut in his face.

As good as his word, Starsky followed closely behind the ambulance as it sped toward the hospital. Subdued and quiet, Sam lay in the front seat next to him. Starsky reached over and stroked the dog's head, wondering if the gun shots and shouting reminded him of his life at Slick Willie's. He could tell the dog was confused by Hutch's absence. "I know fella, I'm worried, too. He'll be fine, you'll see." Sam lifted his head and laid it over on Starsky's knee, needing the physical contact for reassurance.



"Detective Starsky?" A gray-haired woman in her late fifties approached Starsky in the hallway outside the emergency room. Small in stature, but large in presence, Starsky knew without being told that she was the doctor.

"That's right."

"I'm Doctor Anderson. Detective Hutchinson said you'd be taking him home."

"You mean you're gonna release him? He's gonna be okay then?"

“That’s right. Well, actually, I wanted to keep him overnight, but he raised such a ruckus, I believe we would have to tie him down to do so. He should be okay, though—that is, if you or someone responsible will be there overnight in case that wound starts bleeding again.”

“No problem. I’ll stay over at his place and look after him,” Starsky said eagerly, knowing how Hutch detested staying in the hospital, even if it *was* only overnight.

“It was a clean wound, meaning the bullet went in and came right out on the other side. No major arteries were involved, no bone splintering. He is one heck of a lucky guy—if you can say that about being shot, I mean.”

“When can he go? Can I see him now?”

“You can go on in. They’re bandaging it now and we’ll put his arm in a sling to restrict movement. I gave him a shot for pain, so he’s a little groggy. Of course, a nurse will take him out to your car in a wheelchair, but you may have some trouble getting him into the house. I hope he doesn’t live in an upstairs apartment.”

“No, that’s not a problem. And I can handle him. Don’t worry about that,” Starsky said confidently.

She smiled at him. “I’m sure you can.”

“When can he return to work?”

“My, my, you boys must love your jobs,” she said tongue-in-cheek. “That’s the first thing Detective Hutchinson asked me, too. I told him in two days, if there are no complications. He’s restricted from any strenuous physical activity. I’m recommending desk duty for at least two weeks. Just because he’s a healthy, strong young man doesn’t mean he can’t bleed to death,” she peered through thick-glassed spectacles at Starsky’s attentive face.

“Keep that in mind, and see that he does, too. Okay?” she said in a no-nonsense voice. “If he ends up back in here because he’s disregarded my orders, I’m going to hold *you* responsible. Understood?” Starsky nodded agreement and she felt like he was in school again, receiving a dressing down from the assistant principal, Mrs. Brown. When the little woman was satisfied she’d hammered across her point, she handed him a prescription for pain medication and another for an antibiotic, then headed back to tend to other patients in the ER.

“Wait, Doc,” Starsky said, stopping her just before she reached the over-sized swinging double doors. “What about the other guy...the one I shot?”

“Oh, he’ll make it and be around to rob someone else in a few short weeks,” she answered, her sarcasm barely disguised as humor. “You did hit him all three times, but nothing life-threatening.” She then disappeared through the stainless steel doors.



Captain Dobey stood by, holding a bag with Hutch’s belongings as the nurse rolled the wheel chair to the curb. Starsky brought the Torino around to the pick-up area, relegating Sam to the back seat to make room in front for his wounded partner. Dobey stepped back surprised when he spotted the rottweiler in the backseat.

“Starsky, where’d that dog come from?”

“What dog, Cap’n?” Starsky asked innocently. Even though he was a little groggy, Hutch enjoyed the puzzled look on Dobey’s face.

“Don’t get smart with me, Starsky! I can see that dog in the back seat!”

Starsky came around to the passenger’s side to open the door for Hutch. “Oh, *that* dog. Don’t know, Cap’n. Just showed up in the back there all of a sudden,” Starsky teased.

Sam excitedly danced around in the back seat, anxious to greet Hutch, as Dobey helped the injured man into the car. “Stay back, Sam,” Starsky warned the dog. “Stay!” Much to his surprise, the dog obeyed and lay down submissively on the seat.

“How’d you do that, Starsk?” Hutch asked, amazed that the dog had responded.

“It’s a gift, Blintz,” Starsky boasted, reaching over and snapping Hutch’s seatbelt securely. “Thanks, Cap. I’ll be in later to do my report. Just let me get my partner here settled.”

“Just make sure you do! You know Internal Affairs when there’s been a shooting. It should be routine. We already have more than a half dozen written statements from witnesses who confirm the kid shot Hutch before you shot him.”

“Thanks for coming, Cap’n,” Hutch said sincerely.

“Think nothing of it, Hutchinson. And, Starsky—where did you get that dog?!”

Starsky turned to his partner. “What dog? I don’t see a dog. Do you see a dog, Hutch?”

Hutch picked up his cue, never missing a beat. “I don’t see a dog. You see a dog, Cap’n?”

The tires of the Torino squealed as Starsky shot the gas to it, leaving their irritated captain standing on the curb shaking his head.

Chapter 7

By the time they reached the house, the pain shot had kicked in, leaving Hutch drowsy and relaxed—so much so, he couldn't stand on his own two feet and walk from the car to the house. After three failed efforts, Starsky decided he'd just have to carry him. Sam sat patiently in the back seat of the car, watching the two men, sensing that he should be still and wait.

“Hey, Blondie, can you hear me?” Hutch slowly nodded that he could, but didn't do a very convincing job of it. “I'm gonna go open the door, then I'll be back for you. Don't try to get out by yourself, understand?” Again, a slow-motion nod was the only response.

In a few seconds, Starsky returned. First, he draped Hutch's good arm around his neck. “Hang on to me now, buddy. Don't wanna drop you.” Once Hutch responded to that order, Starsky slid his arm under his friend's legs and lifted him out of the car, careful not to cause further pain to the wounded shoulder. Even though Hutch was the larger of the two, Starsky managed to make it from the car to the sofa without too much difficulty.

Sam jumped out of the car without his leash and followed closely behind, timing his steps to stay at Starsky's heels, but not get underfoot even once. He stationed himself beside the sofa like a sentinel and watched with solemn eyes as Starsky laid Hutch down gently, then went to turn back the bedcovers.

When Starsky returned, Hutch was sound asleep. “Okay, ya big lug, let's get you to bed.” He lifted Hutch again and carried him to the bed, then proceeded to remove the sleeping man's shoes. Sam had followed them into the bedroom, watching every move Starsky made. He seemed to sense Hutch was incapacitated and wasn't quite sure what was going on. Finally, he went to the foot of the bed and jumped on, then discretely inched up until he could lay his head on the pillow right next to Hutch's.

“That's a good, boy,” Starsky praised him. “You gonna watch over Hutch while I go get his prescriptions filled?” Sam raised his head and cocked it to one side, listening to Starsky's voice, then gently laid it back on the pillow. “Okay, that's fine. I'll be back in a jif, and I'll stir up some chow for us.” Satisfied that Hutch was sound asleep and that he was in “good paws,” Starsky slipped out of the house and went to the corner pharmacy.



Hutch awoke to the aroma of bacon frying in the kitchen. He knew he was at home, in his own bed, but was still foggy from the pain medication. Then he vaguely remembered waking up during the night with a deep ache in his shoulder. But the minute he stirred, Sam, who had remained on guard throughout the night, had jumped off the bed then returned seconds later followed by Starsky. The dog had sat on the floor next to the bed

and watched while Starsky gave Hutch another pain pill and glass of cool water. Exhausted, by even this small amount of effort, Hutch had quickly fallen back to sleep and remembered nothing after that.

Shaking off the drowsiness, Hutch sat up on the side of the bed for a moment, and discovered his legs were much stronger this morning. He went into the bathroom and washed his face and his one hand that wasn't confined by the sling. When Sam heard him splashing around in the sink, the dog trotted into the bathroom to investigate. "Hi, boy," Hutch said when Sam reared up and placed his paws on the bathroom countertop.

"Hey! You up?" Starsky called from the kitchen. "Bacon's done. Ready for your omelet?"

"I'll be right there," he called back. Seconds later, Hutch came into the kitchen, Sam close on his heels. "I feel like I have a hangover, Starsk. Must be the pain medication." He pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down.

"Probably. You slept like a baby for six hours straight. Then Sam came and got me about three, and I popped another pill in ya. You've been asleep ever since."

"Thanks for staying here last night, buddy," Hutch said earnestly. "I was really out of it."

"Yeah, well, it's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it," Starsky teased. "Besides, I had plenty of help." He nodded toward Sam who'd taken his place next to Hutch's chair. Starsky set a cup of steaming hot coffee and a plate of food on the table in front of Hutch. Nicely arranged on the plate were four strips of crispy bacon, two slices of toast, and a delicious-looking omelet; beside it, a jar of Hutch's favorite jam—boysenberry.

"I found some of that stinky cheese you like so much in the refrigerator and crumbled it up in your eggs."

"It's feta, Starsky, feta—and it isn't stinky. It's a very healthy gourmet cheese made from goat's milk. Do you have any idea what all goes into the making of this cheese?"

"All I know is, I offered some to Sam and he wanted to roll on it...you know...like it was somethin' dead he found out in the yard." Starsky set a plate of scrambled eggs on the floor in front of Sam (sans the cheese), then brought his own plate to the table and sat down across from Hutch.

Hutch considered criticizing Starsky for feeding eggs to the dog, but was too hungry to needle Starsky right then. Having not eaten for nearly twenty-four hours, he tore into the breakfast with zeal. Starsky watched with amusement, waiting for Hutch to make some cutting remark about his cooking. Hutch looked up and saw the expression on his partner's face. "This is delicious."

“Even with the stinky cheese?”

Hutch laughed. “Yeah, Starsk, even with the stinky cheese.”

After breakfast, Starsky took Sam out for his morning run, while Hutch relaxed on the sofa and reviewed the notes they’d compiled so far on the arson case. The phone rang and Captain Dobey’s gruff voice came over the line.

“Hutch, I didn’t expect you to answer the phone. I guess this means you’re feeling better.”

“Still pretty sore, Cap’n, but I could be a whole lot worse. According to Starsky, I slept like the dead last night.”

“Where the hell *is* Starsky, anyway? I’ve already left two messages at his place. I’ve got IA nipping at my heels because he never came in here yesterday and submitted his report on the shooting.”

“Uh, well, Cap’n, he’s on his way in. I think he wanted to stop by his place and change clothes,” Hutch lied. He knew Starsky was in trouble, and he felt responsible. “Don’t come down on him too hard. I was really zonked out on pain medication last night, and he hung around here to keep me from wandering out into traffic.”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job, Hutchinson!” Dobey blustered. Just then, Starsky and Sam came barreling through the back door, while Hutch frantically waived his good arm, signaling them to be quiet.

“No, sir, Cap’n. I’d never do that—”

“If Starsky’s still there—and I have a sneaking suspicion he is—tell him to get in here NOW, or he’ll have the imprint of my size fifteens on his backside for a month!” Before Hutch could respond, Dobey slammed the phone down, to make sure he got the point across.

“He’s such a teddy bear,” Hutch said, as Starsky stood there breathing heavily and sweating from head to toe. “I think you’d better get to the station now, before Dobey blows a gasket.”

“Oh, damn! I forgot to go by there last night and file my report!” Starsky ran to the bathroom, stripping off his jogging clothes as he went. Hutch heard the water in the shower come on, as the bathroom door slammed shut. In five minutes flat, Starsky was on his way to the station.

“I’ll call you,” he shouted on the way out. “Take it easy and don’t do nothin’ physical ‘til I get back!”

“I beg your pardon?” Hutch asked as the front door closed behind his harried friend. Sam ran to the door and barked, upset that Starsky had left without them.



Starsky had just finished typing his report and talking with the boys from IA, when Minnie appeared at his desk with the Parker file in hand.

“Mornin’, sweetheart. I was just comin’ down to see you.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what you tell all the girls, isn’t it?” she jibed good-naturedly.

“Now, Minnie, you know you’re special,” he came back smoothly.

“Ah, if that were only true. You’re a real sweet-talker, Starsky. Even though I know you’re handing me a line, I love to hear it just the same.” She laid the file on the desk in front of him. “Here’s the file on your suicide victim. Looks pretty straight-forward. Of course, I don’t know what it is you’re looking for.”

“I got a tip that this may not have been a suicide. Just wanna check it out. Call it a hunch, but I believe this one may have fallen through the cracks.”

“Well, there doesn’t seem to have been much of an investigation done. Apparently, the officers thought it was open and shut.”

“So I heard. I just wanna see it for myself. Maybe there *was* no reason for an investigation.” Starsky opened the file, then turned to Minnie. “You’re terrific, you know it?”

“Yeah, I’m the Mother Teresa of the BCPD,” she replied cryptically, then patted him on the shoulder before exiting the room.

Starsky looked through the file that contained a picture of Carol Parker, or rather, what had once been Carol Parker. After falling sixteen stories to the street below, it was difficult to tell from her remains if she’d been a pretty girl. Fanned out around her head was a mass of beautiful, long, silky dark auburn hair. She appeared to be very petite and on the slender side. *What a waste*, Starsky thought as he gazed at the photo of the corpse. He read the police report. Cold. Matter-of-fact. Useless.

Name: Carol Lynn Parker
Race: Caucasian
Sex: Female
Age: 27
Height: 5’4”
Weight: 105 lbs.

Marital Status: Single
Next of Kin: Chloris Parker, mother; Timothy Parker, brother
Occupation: Administrative assistant
Cause of Death: Massive internal injuries sustained from fall.

Victim had history of manic depression. Prescription drug, Elavil, found in victim's bathroom medicine cabinet.

That was it. Nothing about the pregnancy. Nothing about the level of drugs in the bloodstream at the time of death.

The next page gave a statement taken from Chloris Parker at the time the police notified her of Carol's death. Mrs. Parker appeared to accept without question that her daughter had taken her own life. No mention was made of interviewing Timothy Parker, or whether he was an adult or a minor.

He thought it was pretty sloppy that no one had contacted Timothy to get a statement. Although Starsky wasn't close to his brother, Nick, he knew that many siblings were close enough to share with one another things they wouldn't dream of telling a parent. He made a mental note to contact Timothy Parker.

It wasn't much to go on. And Hutch could be right—maybe he should be taking a closer look at the list of disgruntled employees, rather than following up on a hunch. He copied down the Parkers' address and telephone number and stuck it in his coat pocket. After one more look at the photo, longing to know what Carol had looked like *before*, Starsky closed the file and went in to meet with Dobey.



Hutch was asleep on the sofa when Starsky let himself back into the house three hours later. Sam had been snoozing on the floor next to him since Starsky left. Before Starsky could get the door open, Sam ran to meet him, rousing Hutch in the process.

“Hey,” he said as he sat up and stretched. “How'd it go with IA?” .

Starsky set two pizzas, one veggie, the other with “the works” on the coffee table in front of Hutch. “No sweat. I don't know why Dobey had his drawers in a wad; all the witnesses' statements agreed, so there wasn't anything to dispute. He shot you, I shot him. Simple. Those goons from IA just need to hassle somebody on a regular basis, and this week it was my turn.” He went into the kitchen and brought back paper plates, napkins, and two ice cold Cokes.

“I've been through this file again, and there are only two more employees who look like possible suspects to me,” Hutch told him. “Both of them still work for Bradley, but may have a bone to pick. One was recently passed over for a promotion, for the third time.

The other filed a sexual harassment suit against her supervisor and lost the case. It's possible they may be pressuring her to resign."

"Well, Minnie had the information on Carol Parker for us. There's nothin' that'll jump off the page at you, but I have this gut feelin' that we need to dig deeper on this one."

Hutch, used to his partner's hunches, had learned to take him seriously. "In that case, let's follow that lead first."

"I'm gonna see if I can locate her brother, Timothy," Starsky said. "I don't know, he may be just a kid. The weird thing is, no one took a statement from him."

Hutch moved the paperwork aside and one-handedly served up two slices of pizza on a paper plate and passed them over to Starsky. Sam moved in on the pizza until Hutch slammed the lids of both boxes shut to keep him out. The disappointed dog turned to Starsky and was rewarded with a pepperoni slice, immediately bringing criticism from Hutch, who worried that Sam was learning bad habits.

As soon as they were finished eating, Hutch reached for his shoes and started putting them on. "I'm ready when you are."

"Whoa. What do ya think you're doin'?" Starsky asked. "You aren't goin' anywhere."

"I'm fine, Starsk. I haven't needed a pain pill since early this morning. Besides, you need someone to watch your back. We don't know what we may be getting into here."

"No way. You're gonna stay here and rest." Starsky stood up and headed for the door. "Sam will keep you company. All I'm gonna do is locate Timothy Parker and talk to him. We don't even have any reason to think he's a suspect yet." Sam's ears had perked up at the mention of his name. He followed Starsky to the door, expecting to go along.

"You stay here with Hutch, Big Dog," Starsky said, unconsciously tagging the dog with a nickname that he'd soon come to respond to as readily as his real name. Sam looked up and wagged his tail. "I said, stay with Hutch. Stay." Starsky pointed in the direction of the sofa as he gave the command. Sam looked at Hutch, then at Starsky, before sauntering back to the sofa. There he resumed his post next to Hutch and lay down.

"Good boy," Starsky praised him, smiling at the dog, exceedingly pleased that Sam had obeyed.

"This is getting spooky," Hutch said, wide-eyed. "I think he actually understands you."

"Just the Starsky charm, Blintz. Works every time," Starsky shot back, before closing the door behind him.



Starsky rang the bell at the modest Spanish-style, one-story house where Mrs. Parker and her son lived. He was greeted by a plump, silver-haired woman in her sixties.

“Yes?”

“Mrs. Parker?”

“That’s right. May I help you?”

Starsky flipped open his wallet and showed her his shield. “I’m Detective Sergeant Starsky with BCPD. I’d like to speak with you and your son about the death of your daughter, Carol.”

“I don’t understand. I gave a statement to the policeman when he came and told me my daughter had killed herself.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know you did, but I just have a couple more questions. More importantly, I was hoping to speak with Timothy.”

“Well, okay. But I don’t know what this is all about. Come on in, Detective. I’ll go get Timmy.” *Timmy*. Starsky was disappointed. He’d hoped Timothy was an adult who could shed some light on his sister’s death. Starsky sat down and waited, taking in his surroundings.

The house was decorated with an eclectic combination of furnishings, ranging from cheap, worn upholstery on the sofa, to a beautiful, old, upright piano, which had most likely been in the Parker family for several generations. On top of the piano was a collection of family photographs. One featured an attractive young woman in her early twenties, her gorgeous auburn hair cascading down her shoulders. The sparkle in her bright green eyes and beautiful smile implied this was a happy time in her life. Starsky felt sad as he gazed at the picture. He was pretty certain this was Carol *before*.

Mrs. Parker returned in just a few minutes. “Detective Starsky, this is my son, Timmy.”

Starsky looked around and was surprised to see that Timmy was actually a man who looked to be in his early to mid-thirties. The detective extended his hand to shake. Timothy had the same dark auburn hair as his sister, but not her good looks. He was tall and gangly, to the point of looking awkward when he walked across the room. He wore heavy, dark-rimmed glasses, which he nervously pushed up on the bridge of his darkly freckled nose before accepting Starsky’s hand. Dressed in black double-knit slacks and a white short sleeved shirt with a skinny black tie clipped on at the collar, Parker looked as though he may have just come in from work.

“Nice to meet you Mr. Parker. Thank you for speaking with me.”

Timothy looked down toward the floor but nodded, “Sure. Mother said you had some questions about my sister.”

Mrs. Parker gestured for Starsky to sit down, then she and Timothy did the same.

“That’s right,” Starsky answered. “I was reviewing the file on your sister’s case and noted that no one took a statement from you at the time Carol died.”

“There really wasn’t anything I could tell them,” he said nervously. “I wasn’t there when it happened.”

“I was just wondering if Carol ever talked to you about suicide.”

“No.”

“Do you know of any reason she would do something like that?”

“No.”

“Would Carol have confided in you if something was wrong?”

Still not looking Starsky directly in the eye, Parker fidgeted a bit before glancing toward his mother. “Uh...no,” he finally said.

Starsky didn’t push; he could see there was no point. Clearly, Timothy Parker was afraid to talk in front of his mother. But the detective in Starsky told him there was more he *could* tell, if he’d only open up.

“What’s this all about?” Mrs. Parker asked. “My daughter suffered from depression. I told her she needed help, but she didn’t listen to me. She never listened to me. Just because I was her mother, I didn’t know anything.” The woman’s voice sounded more angry than remorseful. “I knew she’d never come to any good. She was just like her father. He didn’t take responsibility for anything either.”

“Mother, please,” Timothy whispered, his face betraying his embarrassment.

“Don’t make excuses for her, Timmy. She could’ve been more like you. You’re such a good boy.” She patted her son’s knee. “My son is a genius with the computer, Detective. He’s going to be very successful someday. Carol could have taken a lesson from his example”

Parker stood up, obviously uncomfortable with his mother’s profuse praise. “Mother, I’ve asked you not to talk like that.”

“And why not?” she asked, undaunted by his pleas to stop. “I know you’re going to find a job real soon, then everyone’s going to see what a smart boy my son is.”

Starsky watched the interaction between mother and son, thinking this was a *weird* pair. He decided to get the interview back on track. “So do you work in the computer industry, Mr. Parker?”

“I, uh, I’m kind of unemployed at the moment--”

“But not for long,” his mother interrupted.

“Mother!” Timothy irritably shoved the heavy glasses up on his nose again. “I’ve not worked for the past six months,” he told Starsky. “It’s just a temporary set back. Carol was helping us out in the meantime.”

“Did you know any of Carol’s friends?”

“She never introduced us to her friends,” Mrs. Parker said bitterly. “She was ashamed of her family. My daughter was always trying to be something she wasn’t.”

“Mother, Carol was good to us. Please don’t criticize her. You know that it upsets me.”

Starsky knew he was getting nowhere; Timothy wasn’t going to tell him anything with his mother present. “Well, I won’t take up any more of your time.” He opened his wallet, took out a business card, and scribbled his and Hutch’s home phone numbers on the back before handing it to Parker. “If you think of anything, give me a call. The dispatcher can always get in touch with me when I’m on duty. But I also wrote my home phone number and my partner’s number on the back for you. I’m Starsky, he’s Hutchinson--”

“I still don’t understand why you’re asking these questions,” Mrs. Parker interrupted.

“Oh, one other thing. There wasn’t a note, was there? You know, giving a reason why she’d want to take her own life?” Starsky watched Timothy Parker’s eyes shift downward before answering.

“No. No, not that we’re aware of,” he answered quietly.

“Okay.” Starsky walked to the door where Mrs. Parker was already waiting to let him out. “Thank you both for your time.”

As he walked back to the car, Starsky had a strong suspicion he’d hear from Timothy Parker—soon.

Chapter 8

Hutch was much better by the time Starsky returned. Feeling pretty useless, wishing he could be actively pursuing the case, he decided to call the two possible suspects and set up appointments to meet with them later in the day. He figured by doing that, Starsky would have to cut out the mother-hen routine and let him go along on the interviews.

Sam had been good company all day, sleeping when Hutch slept, supervising when he went to the kitchen and made a sandwich, and barking to let him know when the mailman dropped mail through the drop slot. The dog, Hutch's self-appointed guardian, seemed content just to be near his human.

When he heard the Torino pull up in front of the house, Sam hurried to the front door and waited there for Starsky to come in. He was rewarded with a good petting from Starsky, and the secure feeling that he had "his humans" together and with him again.

"So, did you make contact with the Parkers?" Hutch asked.

"Yeah, pretty weird. Turns out that little Timmy is in his thirties. Also, Mom didn't care much for Carol. Probably why she didn't question if her daughter's death really was a suicide."

"Dead-end then?"

"Hope not. I think the brother knows something, but until I can get 'Norman Bates' away from his mother, he's not gonna tell me anything. I gave him a card; so I hope he'll want to get to the bottom of this bad enough to call."

"I made appointments for us to meet with Jim Harris and Joyce Mangrum around four o'clock over at Bradley's," Hutch told him. "And before you start lecturing me about staying here and resting—save it. I need to get out of here. My shoulder isn't bothering me too bad and I'm going stir crazy."

"You know, you're the most hardheaded person I've ever known. You heard what the doctor said. I don't want her chewin' me out if you tear out the stitches and end up back in the ER."

"My mind's made up, Starsk. We've only got twenty-five minutes to get over there, so there isn't time to sit here and argue with you."

When Hutch went into the bedroom for his jacket, Sam began dancing around anticipating an outing. He'd been waiting all day for his car ride. As far as he knew, this was just another part of his daily routine that he'd begun to look forward to. So what if he had to sit in the car alone for a little while? There was always something interesting to watch through the windows. And sometimes, when his humans weren't close by to scold

him, he enjoyed barking at and unnerving an unsuspecting passerby. Sam decided he'd better go sit in the doorway so they couldn't accidentally *forget* him.

"Uh, oh. Look who thinks he's comin' along," Starsky said when he noticed where the dog was sitting.

"So let him. He's been doing fine in the car. It's pretty cool out there; he should be okay." Starsky didn't protest. He was beginning to get used to having Sam around.



By the time the detectives had met with the two Bradley Enterprises employees, it was time to call it a day. Although he wouldn't admit it, Hutch's shoulder was beginning to ache again. Starsky could see it in his face, and Hutch had been much quieter the past half hour. Sam was in his glory, hanging his front paws and huge head over the back of the car seat. Starsky was getting used to the dog slobber much quicker than he would ever have believed possible. Sam was such an affectionate critter, and he seemed to be as attached to Starsky as he was Hutch. That made Starsky feel pretty good.

"I think we can cross those two off our list," Starsky said, picking up from where they'd left off while walking from the building to the parking lot.

"I agree. Mangrum is too much of an airhead to commit such well-thought-out arson jobs. And I don't think Harris is all that upset about the promotion issue."

"Yeah, he told me he left his last job 'cause he couldn't take the pressure. I don't think he *wants* to be a supervisor."

"You know, Starsk, not everyone wants a job where they have to make decisions and be held accountable for what others do. I think we should follow your instincts and see what we can uncover on Carol Parker."

Starsky hit the gas pedal to speed through the traffic signal a few feet ahead as it turned yellow. The sudden jolt caused Sam to shift, lose his footing, and slide across the seat, colliding with Hutch's left shoulder. Starsky saw it happening, but didn't have time to prevent it. Hutch winced and drew in his breath sharply, causing Starsky to regret his recklessness.

"Sorry, buddy. You okay?"

"Yeah, great," Hutch snapped. "Why do you have to drive this...this...striped tomato like a bat out of hell anyway, Starsky?" Sam inched his front paws back across the seat until he was practically breathing in Starsky's ear. He sensed somehow, that he was responsible for Hutch's anger.

Feeling pretty guilty, Starsky, for once, didn't come back with a sharp retort. "Sorry," he repeated. They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

Starsky pulled up to the house, parking as close to the entrance as he could. He knew Hutch was worn out and the pain in his shoulder was most likely worse since the collision with Sam. Jumping out of the Torino, he flipped his seat forward and snapped Sam's leash on the collar before Hutch even had his seat belt off. "I'm gonna walk the dog, Hutch. You go on in. I'll be there in a minute."

Hutch didn't answer, but went into the house as Starsky had suggested. He knew he'd been a grouch and always regretted it when he jumped down Starsky's throat, but he was tired and his shoulder hurt like hell. All he could think about was taking one of those pain pills and lying down on his soft, comfortable bed. Before he could help himself to either, the phone rang. Hutch considered ignoring it, but after the fifth ring he answered shortly, "Yeah, Hutchinson."

"Hutch?" came the tentative response "This is Gina. Gina Ashford."

Hutch ran a hand over his face. "Oh, hi, Gina. What's up?"

"Is this a bad time? I've been trying to reach Starsky and you all afternoon. I heard you were shot yesterday. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'll live. Right now it hurts like hell, but I was just ready to pop a pain pill when the phone rang."

"Oh, sorry about the bad timing," she apologized.

"It's okay, Gina. Sorry I snapped at you. Seems like that's all I've been doing today. Do you need Starsk? He's walking the dog right now—"

"Dog?" she interrupted. "Starsky has a dog?"

"Actually, I...we...yeah...kind of. It's a long story, Gina. I'll fill you in another time."

"That's fine, Hutch. Well, I guess it doesn't matter which of you I talk to. I just have something about the arson cases that I think may interest you."

"Great. We could sure use a lead. So far, we're batting zero."

"Do you remember yesterday I told you the points of origin at these fires were so badly incinerated that I thought there was the possibility of explosive devices being used to trigger them?"

"Sure. You said you were just speculating, though. Do you have something more concrete now?"

“You bet I do. We found traces of the wiring and some fragments of the casing that contained the bomb. I think it was triggered remotely.”

“That means this is no amateur.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have to be a demolitions expert, but he would need at least a basic knowledge of explosives and have to be bright enough to put the thing together.”

“So, what sort of individual should we be looking for?” Hutch pulled the phone off the end table and lay back on the sofa, trying to find a more comfortable position while he talked.

“Maybe someone with a background in electronics, perhaps a computer technician, or better yet, an ex-military type who worked around, if not directly with, explosives.”

“How sophisticated is the device he’s using?”

“Hard to say, since we were able to recover so little of it. But I would put it on the level with those remote-control airplanes and boats that adult men seem to enjoy playing with so much. I mean, he would have to know how to *build* one, not just how to operate it.”

“This just gets more and more strange,” Hutch said.

“So, have you guys made any progress? Do you have suspects?”

“Well, we thought we did, but so far all we’ve managed to do is eliminate all of our possibilities. Starsky’s working on something though. You know...a hunch.”

Gina laughed softly. “Oh yeah, I know all about Starsky’s hunches. Last time I bought into one of his hunches, I lost a ten spot at Huggy’s, betting on a little brown and white pinto mouse that Starsky assured me was the Sea Biscuit of the rodent racing scene.”

Hutch smiled, easily visualizing Starsky on his knees above the “race track,” cheering his contender on, and practically working himself into a frenzy. “Sorry to hear that, Gina. He has a weakness for fast mice.” This elicited a giggle on the other end of the line. “Fortunately, though, Starsky’s hunches about our cases are usually a hell of a lot more reliable than his gambling savvy.”

“I’m glad to hear that!” she teased. “Well, I’ll let you go, Hutch. I need to clear up a few things here, then head for home. And, frankly, you sound pretty done in, too.”

“You could say that,” he answered, wincing as he tried to shift a little weight off his shoulder.

“Tell Baby Blue Eyes not to bother calling back, since I’ll be leaving here in a few minutes. I’ve given you all I have for now, anyway. But first thing tomorrow morning, I’m going back to the each of the crime scenes and search again for fragments of the triggering devices. Finding that kind of evidence would definitely tie all the fires together. As soon as I’m finished, I’ll give you guys a call, okay?”

“That’ll be fine, Gina.”

“Well, get some rest, Hutch,” she said.

“I will. Thanks for calling, and for your concern.”

“Oh, Hutch--one more thing...” Gina said hesitantly. “Would you mind, you know, letting Starsky know I called? I mean, I know you’ll tell him about the evidence and all, but...just kind of let him know I’m not seeing anyone right now and if, you know...” her voice trailed off, perhaps embarrassed she had started this line of conversation.”

“Be glad to,” Hutch cut in mercifully. He’d never known her to be tongue-tied or at a loss for words. But then, he’d never realized that she was so attracted to Starsky. “Thanks again for calling.”

“Okay, see ya, Hutch.”

“Goodnight, Gina.” The phone clicked softly as she broke the connection.

Before lying down across the bed to rest, Hutch slowly rose from the sofa and went to the bathroom and took the pain pill. Starsky had been right; he really shouldn’t have insisted on going today. Now he was paying for his pig-headedness. He must’ve fallen asleep because the next thing he knew, a cold wet nose nuzzled behind his left ear. He rolled over and was eye-to-eye with Sam. The dog licked out his long, pink tongue, almost scoring a hit on Hutch’s nose. But for once, Hutch was faster than Sam, and managed to bolt upright and dodge him. “Not this time, you don’t,” he said good-naturedly to the pup, then rolled off the bed and went to the kitchen.

Starsky was at the stove, tending two large pots, from which a heavenly aroma wafted throughout the house. “Good boy, Sam. Woke him right up, didn’t ya?” he said over his shoulder when he saw Hutch and Sam come in. “Finally up, huh? Thought I was gonna have to eat this fantastic spaghetti sauce all by myself. This is my grandmother’s recipe. She got it from the Italian family that ran the restaurant below her apartment. This is the real thing, not Spaghetti-o’s,” he bragged.

“Got to admit it smells pretty good.” Hutch breathed in the delicious mixture of herbs, spices, and cheeses. “I didn’t know you were still here.”

“Figured you’d be hungry when you woke up.” Starsky turned up the heat under the tall pot of water to bring it to a boil. “Just gotta cook the pasta and we can dig in.”

Hutch sat down at the table, feeling drained of energy. The pain in his shoulder was gone, though, and he was grateful for that.

Starsky looked up and saw Hutch's pale face. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just a little light-headed."

"You want somethin' cold to drink? Or maybe a wet cloth for your face?"

"I'm fine. Really. Just get that spaghetti ready. It's making my mouth water."

A grin lit Starsky's face when he heard that.

"Oh, Starsk—I almost forgot—Gina called."

"Oh, yeah? What'd she want?"

"Said they've found evidence that indicates our torch *is* using an incendiary device to start the fires."

"Terrific," Starsky said without much enthusiasm. "We got all these pieces to the puzzle, but none of 'em seem to fit together." He continued with the meal preparations while they talked.

"Let's see, what've we got so far? Four fires, two of them at businesses owned by Bradley Enterprises."

Hutch joined in. "One dead security guard—definitely murdered by a blow to the head during the commission of the crime."

Starsky continued, "Yeah, the creep doesn't only get his kicks setting fires, he doesn't seem care if he has to commit a murder or two along the way. Which leads us to one dead woman—possibly suicide, possibly murder. Hell, possibly not even related to the arson cases at all!"

"And let's not forget an assortment of disgruntled employees, none of whom seem to be all that determined to ruin Bradley. We also know for certain that our guy's using electronic devices—which means he's probably not an amateur," Hutch added. "I don't know about you, but I think it's about time to pay our buddy, Bradley, another visit."

"Just what I was thinkin'," Starsky said as he poured the cooked pasta into the strainer. "Hope you're hungry," he added, abruptly changing the subject.

"I think I can force down a little," Hutch answered back, tongue-in-cheek. Sam woofed loudly, signaling *he* was ready.

“Did you feed Sam?”

“Of course I did. You think that big lug would let me forget somethin’ like that? He’s just puttin’ an act to con you out of your dinner.”

Hutch reached down and patted Sam on the head, “I think he’s onto you, boy.” The dog laid his chin on Hutch’s knee, trying his most pitiful look.

Starsky brought the piping hot bowls to the table just in time to witness the exchange. “And you’re always tellin’ me what a sucker I am,” he chuckled.

Chapter 9

Francine Stewart looked up from her typewriter and saw Detective Starsky and Detective Hutchinson standing before her. She tried to hide her pleasure at seeing Dave Starsky again, but the smile on her face prevented her from doing so. She’d hoped he’d call after their meeting at Mick’s, but when he didn’t, she convinced herself it was because he thought it wouldn’t safe for her to be seen with him socially.

“‘Mornin’, Fran,” he said, smiling at her. “How are you?”

“Good morning, Dave. I’m fine,” she said, coyly. “I hope you are, too.” She lowered her voice and looked around to make certain no one was listening.

“Have you found out anything?”

Hutch stood by, silently watching the interaction between the receptionist and his partner. It was pretty clear to him that the girl was scared to talk, but she trusted Starsky enough to give him any information she could.

“I talked with her mother and brother. Not much to go on there.”

“Her brother’s kind of creepy, don’t you think?” Francine whispered.

“Yeah, and her mother’s a real piece of work, too. I’m workin’ on it, though—so is Hutch.”

Francine looked over at Hutch and smiled. “Oh, goodness,” she said, just now noticing Hutch’s arm in the sling. “Were you in an accident?”

“I guess you could say that. I was on the wrong end of a Thirty-eight Special at Kwon Cho Market a couple of days ago.” Hutch smiled back innocently. He loved it when girls made a big deal about his being injured in the line of duty. It made him seem so

darned vulnerable. He and Starsky had learned a long time ago, if you have to get shot, use it to your advantage!

“Oh, wow, I hope it doesn’t hurt too much,” she said sympathetically.

“Well,” Hutch answered pitifully, “it hurts pretty bad—but I still have a job to do.”

Starsky’s eyes rolled back in his head, effecting his best “disgusted” look. He figured he’d better move ahead with the investigation, or Hutch was going to milk it for all it was worth. He knew this, because he’d played the same routine himself many times.

“Fran, we need to talk to your boss again. I wanna give him another chance to level with us about Carol.”

“Oh, Dave, please don’t tell him I said anything,” she whispered anxiously.

“Don’t worry, I have no intention of involvin’ you. We’ve been on the case long enough now that he’ll assume we uncovered it on our own. Don’t get upset, or he’ll suspect you know.”

Francine took a deep breath and calmed herself. “You’re right. Look, he’s in a meeting right now, but it’s due to break up in about...” She looked at the leaded crystal clock on her desk. “...ten more minutes. Why don’t you both have a seat, and I’ll get you a cup of coffee?”

“That sounds good,” Hutch told her. She flashed him a bright smile, and the men went to the waiting area and sank down in two of the fancy leather chairs.

Soon, Francine brought their coffee. She smiled sweetly at Hutch when she handed him his cup. Starsky thought it was pretty amusing that Fran was flirting with Hutch now. She’d been so friendly to him at the bar the other evening, he thought she was really interested in seeing him again. He’d even planned to ask her out once the case was solved. It wasn’t the first time, though, that he and Hutch had met a woman who was attracted to both of them.

“Can I do anything to make you more comfortable?” she asked Hutch.

“I don’t think so, but thanks,” he answered. “I have these pain pills, but I try not to take them unless it gets too bad.”

“I admire a man who puts his duty ahead of his own well-being. But you really should take better care of yourself,” Fran said solicitously. “I can’t imagine working with a gunshot wound. I guess I never realized police officers did stuff like that.”

Hutch smiled at her, basking in the attention.

“You call me if I can get you anything else, okay?” She then turned to Starsky, “I’ll come get you when he’s free, Dave.” Francine returned to her desk and began typing again.

Starsky leaned toward Hutch and said in a high voice, mimicking his partner, “I have these pain pills, but I’m a big, strong, macho cop and don’t want to take them. I’d rather you fall all over yourself waiting on me hand and foot.”

Hutch looked back with a “Who *me?*” expression and said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Starsk.”

Twenty minutes later, Francine showed the two detectives into Mr. Bradley’s office. “Gentlemen, I hope you’ve come with some good news. Have you found the person responsible for these fires yet?”

“No, sir,” Hutch began, “but we’ve uncovered some details we need you to help clarify for us.”

“Of course, whatever I can do. Please, sit down. I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

Starsky and Hutch both sat down across from him. “Mr. Bradley, I’m gonna come right to the point,” Starsky said in his usual blunt, no-frills manner. “So far, the employees who may have had grievances with you have all checked out okay. There’s only one we haven’t been able to question.”

“Well, who is this individual? Perhaps my security people can help you locate him.”

“I don’t think so,” Hutch said. “We’re talking about your former administrative assistant, Carol Parker.”

Starsky watched closely to see Bradley’s reaction. There was only a slight flinch in the muscle of his left jaw. *All those years keepin’ a poker face in the board room really paid off*, Starsky thought to himself.

“I don’t see how Ms. Parker could be involved. As I’m sure you’ve discovered, she took her own life weeks before any of this business started.”

“It’s not Carol we are curious about,” Hutch pressed on. “We thought perhaps there’s someone connected with her, a relative, ex-boyfriend, even an admirer who could be seeking revenge against you for the part you played in her death.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replied smoothly. “I have no idea why Ms. Parker did such a thing. She was a very emotional person—more so than I, or anyone else suspected. But I am not responsible for her actions.”

Starsky looked Bradley directly in the eyes. “Are you sayin’ you didn’t have an affair with her and get her pregnant?” This time, the color drained from Bradley’s face. Apparently, he believed only he and Carol had been aware of her condition.

“Where did you get this information, Detective?” His voice wavered almost imperceptibly.

“We have sources. We *are* the police, you know.” Starsky didn’t blink an eye. He decided to bluff and see just how good Bradley was at the game. “Autopsies give us all kinds of information. Once we have a lead, we can put the pieces together. It was you, all right. Do you wanna tell us your version?” He could see small beads of moisture forming on Bradley’s upper lip. The quiet in the room was almost palpable.

“Mr. Bradley,” Hutch finally said, “it would be much better if you came clean with us. We’re going to find out the truth one way or another.”

Bradley looked from one to the other. “All right, I’ll tell you all I know. But I was not responsible for Carol’s death. I could hardly believe it when I heard what she’d done.” He paused and took a deep breath.

“I was in love with her. I’m fifty-seven years old, and I was in love for the first time in my life. I was old enough to be Carol’s father, but she loved me just the same.” Bradley leaned back in the chair, and looked across the desk, but didn’t seem to see the two detectives. His gaze was focused on another time and place.

“I knew I was risking everything, loving her. You see, my wife could have ruined me, had she found out. She is a powerful woman and has control of a lion’s share of the stock here at Bradley Enterprises. Her family’s money was used to start up this corporation. She wouldn’t have cared that I built it from the ground up.”

“So when Carol told you she was pregnant, you had her killed,” Starsky suggested.

“Absolutely not!” Bradley practically shouted. “If anything, that endeared her to me even more. I admit, I was taken aback at the news, because she had assured me she was on the pill. And I guess I assumed at my age, and never having been able to conceive children with my wife, that I was incapable of fathering a child. When she came to me with the news, I didn’t berate her. On the contrary, I was ecstatic that I would have a son or a daughter to carry on the family line. I simply told her not to tell anyone until I could figure out what to do. She swore to me that it was our secret. I assured Carol that I loved her and that, somehow, she and I and the child would have a life together.”

Bradley paused and was silent for a few moments. “I confess, I didn’t know exactly what I was going to do, but I knew I wanted to make her a part of my life. I had considered confronting my wife and telling her the truth, try and negotiate a divorce settlement that would result in my retaining my fair share of this conglomerate. My wife’s family’s

money may have started this company, but by God, *I* made it the success it is today,” he said emphatically.

“So, did you do it? Did you talk with your wife?” Starsky asked.

“No. I...I was trying to get up the courage. The last time I saw Carol alive, she stormed out of here angry because I hadn’t done so. I pleaded with her to be patient, to give me time to work out the business details. But she was so young, so headstrong, she couldn’t see past her nose. I wanted to provide her and my child with the kind of life they deserved. I didn’t want to throw thirty-five years of hard work out the window. I had already begun consulting with my personal attorney about liquidating some of my assets and formulating a plan to get my fair share of Bradley Enterprises if Margaret refused to be reasonable.”

“Mr. Bradley, do you think Carol killed herself because she didn’t believe you’d leave your wife and marry her?” Hutch asked.

He looked back at Hutch and was silent for a few seconds before answering. “I’ve asked myself that same question hundreds of times over the past few weeks, Detective Hutchinson. That possibility has tortured me night and day. Part of me believes that *I am* responsible, that my inability to confront Margaret drove that beautiful, vibrant, young woman to do something so desperate. Yet, I can’t accept that Carol would murder our child. She knew I wanted that baby. She knew I’d never had a son or daughter—that the absence of children in my marriage has been a source of unhappiness for me.” Unshed tears glistened in Frank Bradley’s eyes.

“I...I suppose someone who loved Carol may want to hurt me, if they knew this and believed I caused her suicide. But until moments ago, I didn’t think anyone else was aware of our relationship. I swear to you, Detectives, I would have taken care of Carol, and I would have married her. It was only a matter of time before I would’ve been a free man.”

Frank Bradley looked drained. The thought flitted through Starsky’s mind that the man looked as though he’d aged right before their eyes with his recounting of the events leading up to Carol Parker’s death. Hutch caught Starsky’s eye, silently signaling that he was ready to conclude the meeting.

“Well, I think that’s all we need to ask you right now, sir,” Hutch said, standing up. Starsky followed his lead. “You’ve been very helpful and we appreciate your honesty.”

“Detectives, unless it’s absolutely necessary...could you...I mean, does my relationship with Carol have to be public knowledge? The arson and Carol’s death are most likely not even related. I’d prefer to avoid a scandal if it serves no purpose.”

“We can’t promise you anything,” Starsky answered. “You must understand, that if it turns out to be pertinent to the investigation, it’ll become a matter of public record.”

“Fair enough,” Mr. Bradley said as he came around the desk and shook hands with them both. They walked to the door together. “Please let me know when you have anything.”

“We will,” Starsky assured him.

Chapter 10

“So, what do you think?” Hutch asked as they were walking back to the car.

“I believe him. Don’t you?”

“Yes. Did you hear the emotion in his voice when he was talking about having a kid? If Carol was murdered, Starsk, it wasn’t by Frank Bradley.”

In the front seat of the Torino, Sam planted his front paws on the dashboard and watched his humans approaching. His tail began its customary frenzied wag, anticipating their arrival. Starsky looked up and saw the dog’s face looming above the steering wheel. “Hutch, do you think Sam’s okay in the car? I mean, I read somewhere about dogs having heat strokes.”

Hutch smiled to himself. *This is the guy who doesn’t like dogs*, he thought. “It’s probably not the best situation,” he admitted, “but if we’re careful to park in a cool place, this time of the year he should be okay.”

Starsky unlocked the car and they both got in. As usual, Sam was all over them, licking their faces and walking on them with his over-sized paws. It didn’t matter if they were gone ten minutes or two hours, he was just as glad to see them. “Knock it off, Sam!” Starsky struggled to get the excited dog off him. When he finally succeeded, Sam moved on to give Hutch the same treatment.

“So, where do we go from here?” Hutch asked, stretching to look around the rottweiler at Starsky.

“I don’t know,” Starsky answered, as he cranked up the engine, “but I think we’re onto somethin’ here.”

Hutch ordered Sam into the back seat, and was dumbstruck when he obeyed. “I believe we’re going to have to install a seatbelt in the back seat to keep him out of your hair while you’re driving,” Hutch said with a deadpan expression. As though he understood what Hutch was saying, Sam flopped his front paws over the seat and rested his head on Starsky’s shoulder.

Starsky looked down at the dog's face, then over at Hutch. "Are you kiddin'? Half the time you don't even buckle your own. How're you gonna make him wear one?" Starsky gave him a lopsided grin before pulling out of the parking lot. "We haven't checked out Carol's apartment," he said, changing the subject. "Maybe we'd find somethin' there to tell us whether or not she had help jumpin' out of that window."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Hutch replied. "Any clues left behind have probably been wiped out by the cleaning crew."

"Good point. But I guess it wouldn't hurt to ask. I got the address from Fran the other night." Since Hutch didn't object, Starsky took that as agreement and headed in the direction of Carol Parker's last residence. They went directly to the manager's office and presented their IDs, asking for permission to search the apartment.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Detective Starsky. That apartment was rented last week. I'd have to get permission from the current resident before letting you go in. I mean, no one told me it wasn't okay to rent it," the nervous manager explained. "Did I do something wrong by doing so?"

"No, not at all," Hutch reassured her. "Ms. Parker's death was officially classified as suicide. We just wanted to double check and make certain nothing was overlooked."

"Well, I had our regular cleaning service come in after Ms. Parker's family removed her belongings. The housekeeper did find a few small items that were left behind. I've been meaning to call Mrs. Parker to pick them up, but quite frankly, it slipped my mind. I doubt she'd mind if you looked through them."

"That would be terrific," Starsky told her. "And when we're done, if you want, we can take 'em over to Mrs. Parker for you."

"Oh, would you? That would be nice. I'll get them right now." The woman went to the adjoining room and returned shortly with a small pasteboard box containing various items. "You can use that desk in the corner, if you'd like to take them out and look at them," she said, handing the box to Starsky.

Hutch followed him to the desk and watched as Starsky began pulling the items out one by one. They found a bud vase with the initials "CP" etched into the glass, one taupe-colored Isotoner glove, a tiny porcelain unicorn statue, one rhinestone earring, and a casual snapshot of Carol Parker standing on a boat dock with Frank Bradley. Nothing unusual. They exchanged disappointed looks.

"None of this is gonna help us," Starsky said, placing the items back into the box.

"We can take this stuff over to Mrs. Parker and see if she can identify it."

“Even if she can’t, it won’t mean anything. Carol was living by herself for quite a while. Her mother might not recognize things she bought after leaving home.”

Hutch looked down, studying the items in the box, when suddenly his eyes went wide. “Unless...” He reached in and picked up the rhinestone earring. “...this is the real thing. If this is a diamond, it could be worth a mint. And either it’s a gift from Bradley, or it belongs to someone else. Either way, if we can locate the mate to it, we might know who killed Carol.”

Starsky clearly followed Hutch’s train of thought. “You mean, if it’s hers, maybe someone stole them, but dropped this one when they killed her. If not, then it belonged to the murderer.”

“Right,” Hutch said, smiling. “Of course, I know it’s a stretch, but we don’t have anything better. And I’m still not sure how all this is connected to the fires.”

“I believe they *are* connected, though,” Starsky said. “Let’s take this earring to a jeweler and find out if it the real McCoy.”

“Good idea. We’d better drop Sam off at Huggy’s since this could take awhile.”



Mrs. Parker opened the door wearing an apron, having just finished placing a roast in the oven. “Now what?” she asked, her voice tinged with irritation.

“Hello, Ms. Parker,” Starsky said. “This is my partner, Detective Hutchinson. May we come in and talk to you for a moment?”

“We’re sorry to bother you again Mrs. Parker,” Hutch apologized, “but we have a few of your daughter’s belongings that were left behind in her apartment.”

“Well, come on in,” she said, stepping aside so they could enter. As they followed her into the living room, Mrs. Parker bent over and picked up a model car that was lying on the floor, then placed it on the coffee table. “Watch your step. Timmy’s been playing around with those cars of his again.”

Starsky squatted down and took a closer look at the radio-control car. “This is pretty neat. A 1965 Mustang, Hutch. Take a look.”

Hutch picked up the car, something tugging at his memory. But he couldn’t quite lay his finger on it. He set the miniature car back on the table. The woman sat down in a chair across from the sofa where the two detectives sat. “Mrs. Parker, would you mind identifying these items and telling us if you know whether or not they were Carol’s?”

Mrs. Parker sifted through the box, picking up each item. “Don’t recognize anything except the unicorn. Carol used to collect them; this was her favorite. I didn’t see it that day I cleaned out the apartment, so I assumed it had been broken years ago.”

For the first time since meeting her, Starsky noticed a hint of sadness in the woman’s voice. “What about the earring?” he asked. “Do you remember seeing your daughter wear a pair like this? Are they a family heirloom you gave her?”

“No, never seen it before. Probably just a cheap imitation, though. Carol never made enough money to afford diamonds.”

“No, it’s real all right. We just came from a jeweler who said it’s a half-carat diamond. He also said it’s a very old piece. That’s why we thought it might’ve been in your family for a long time.”

“Heavens no. Never owned a piece of real jewelry in my life except my wedding band.”

“Do you mind if we keep this for now, then?”

“I guess it’s okay—although I don’t know what good one earring’s gonna do anybody.”

All three turned and looked as Timothy Parker walked into the living room and looked around nervously. “What’s going on here? Why are you cops back? Has something happened?”

“We just brought some of your sister’s things that were left at her apartment,” Hutch answered. “But if you have a moment, we’d like to talk with you.”

“I, uh, I’m kind of…busy at the moment.”

“This is my partner, Detective Hutchinson, Mr. Parker,” Starsky added. “This won’t take five minutes,”

“Well, okay. What do you want to know?”

Hutch started first. “Tim, do you know if your sister was involved with a man at the time of her death?”

“I wouldn’t have any way of knowing a thing like that. My sister and I weren’t very close.”

“Well, if she’d been in some sort of trouble, would she have come to you for help?”

“What kind of trouble?” Mrs. Parker interrupted. “Carol was a good girl.”

“Tim?” Hutch prompted.

“No. No...I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ll have to excuse me now. I have a migraine. I have to go lie down.” He quickly went to his room and closed the door. Starsky and Hutch exchanged glances, then stood up to leave.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. Parker, and for letting us keep this earring. Once we’ve completed our investigation, we’ll return it to you.” Hutch dropped the earring into his pocket as they left.

“Timmy boy’s lyin’ through his teeth,” Starsky said, as they pulled away from the Parker residence.

“Zebra Three, Zebra Three. Do you copy?”

“Control, this is Zebra Three. Go ahead,” Hutch spoke into the mic.

“Zebra Three, there’s a woman calling with information regarding your case. Do you copy?”

“Control, this is Detective Hutchinson. Go ahead and patch her through, please.”

“Hutch? Is that you? This is Fran.”

“Hi, Fran. Yeah, this is Hutch. You have something for us, Fran?”

“I don’t know how helpful it is, but I went through Carol’s desk and found an appointment card for an OB/GYN doctor. The date would be about right to coincide with when she told me she was pregnant. Maybe you can get some information from them.”

“Good work, Fran,” Hutch replied. “Go ahead and give me the name and address and we’ll stop by there.”

“Doctor Phillip Colby, 8840 Dunfries Street. Hope that helps.”

“We really appreciate this,” Hutch said sincerely. “And, Fran...uh, I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Oh, sure...that would be nice. Bye, Hutch. Oh, tell Dave I said hello, okay?”

“Come on, Romeo,” Starsky teased. “You’re on company time.”

“Okay, I’ll tell him,” Hutch said. “Bye.”

Hutch placed the mic back on the console. “Maybe we’re finally going to get somewhere with this case.”

“Yeah, could be. I wanna go see Bradley to find out if he can identify the earring. If he doesn’t know anything about it, then it’s a pretty safe guess that it belonged to the murderer.”

“Maybe between Bradley and Dr. Colby, we’ll turn over a few stones and find some answers,” Hutch agreed.

The doctor’s office was on the way to Bradley Enterprises, so the two detectives decided to stop there first, hoping someone would be available who could answer their questions. The waiting room was crowded with women, most of whom were in various stages of pregnancy, some looking like they would deliver within the next ten minutes, others barely showing at all.

The doctor wasn’t available to see them right away, but sent word out with the nurse that he’d be happy to work them in if they could wait another fifteen minutes. In the meantime, Starsky struck up a conversation with the receptionist, a nice lady in her mid-forties who expressed genuine remorse when he told her that Carol Parker was dead.

“Such a lovely girl,” she said shaking her head sadly. “Beautiful red hair, and what you’d call a ‘peaches and cream’ complexion—nothing like that fellow with her. I swear, he was covered with so many freckles, you couldn’t have stuck him with a pin without popping one.” *The lady has a colorful way with words*, Starsky thought with amusement. Then the significance of what she had just said dawned on him.

“Say that again? There was a guy with her when she came in?”

“That’s right. Last time I saw Ms. Parker, he brought her here. They had a terrible argument right here in the waiting room. They kept their voices down, so I couldn’t hear what it was about, but there was no doubt they were fighting. I still don’t know who he was, or why he came with her that day. There was something about him that made me think they were related, but they didn’t really look alike.” Two lines on the phone began ringing at the same time and she reached for the receiver. “Please excuse me, Detective. I really must answer these phones.”

Starsky walked back to where Hutch sat flipping through a copy of “Working Mother” magazine. It took a monumental amount of willpower on Starsky’s part not to make a wisecrack about his partner’s choice of reading material. Before he could tell Hutch what the receptionist had said, the nurse opened the door and motioned them back. Dr. Colby sat at his desk, dictating notes about his last patient into a small recorder. He clicked it off and stood up to greet them as they entered.

“Come in and have a seat. I’m Dr. Colby. How can I help you?”

Hutch introduced them both and proceeded to tell the doctor about Carol’s death. He told them he hadn’t heard nor seen it in the newspaper, and he seemed quite upset. “This is a tragedy,” he commented. “A very nice young woman, and she was extremely excited

about her pregnancy.” Although they hadn’t told the doctor they suspected Carol Parker was pregnant, he seemed to assume they knew, and neither one of them let on that there’d been no autopsy.

“Doctor, do you know who the man was that brought Ms. Parker here last time?” Starsky asked. Hutch was surprised by the question, since he didn’t know yet about Starsky’s conversation with the receptionist.

“No. I didn’t ask. I knew Carol wasn’t married, so I assumed he may be the baby’s father. But I don’t ask questions that aren’t pertinent to my patient’s health. You know, it’s hard to believe Carol would commit suicide when only days earlier she was ecstatic at the prospect of motherhood. I guess we never know what goes on inside someone else’s mind.” There was a short silence while they were all digested that philosophical thought.

“Well, thanks, Doc,” Starsky said. “We appreciate you takin’ time out of your busy schedule to see us.”

“Is that all? I don’t feel I’ve been of help.”

“You have been,” Hutch assured him. “You told us about Ms. Parker’s state of mind concerning the pregnancy. We needed to know if an unwanted pregnancy could have prompted her to take her own life.”

“In my personal opinion, the answer is no. But then, I’m not a psychiatrist. All I can tell you is, she was one happy young lady when she left here that day.”



As they headed toward Bradley Enterprises, Starsky filled his partner in on his conversation with the receptionist in Dr. Colby’s office. “So it sounds like Timmy brought his sister to the doctor, even though he told us he didn’t know anything about her personal life. I *knew* that turkey was lyin’ to us.”

“So they argued? Do you think he wanted her to get an abortion?” Hutch began theorizing. “Or maybe *he* pushed her out of the window? But why? Jealousy? Maybe he’s a sicko who had a thing for his own sister. Maybe he killed her, and now wants to kill Bradley to keep him quiet. I’ll tell you what, Starsk, this whole thing just keeps getting more and more weird.” Hutch winced slightly and shifted to take the pressure off his shoulder. Although the change in expression was subtle, Starsky could tell he was in pain.

“Hey, you all right? You hurtin’ again?”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Hutch answered lightly.

“How long since you had a pain pill?” He could always tell how Hutch felt by looking at his eyes. It was something Starsky had learned to do long ago, and he was seldom wrong. “Why don’t you let me take you home to lie down for a while. Huh?”

“I’m fine. I wish you’d stop treating me like an invalid, Starsky,” Hutch snapped, a little harsher than he’d intended. Immediately sorry, he added, “We’re on a roll here, partner; I don’t want to miss anything. I promise I’ll take a pill when I get home and can go to bed. The damn things make me feel like I’m sleep walking.”

Starsky decided to drop it, knowing arguing was futile. “Let’s see Bradley, then pick up Sam, and I’ll take you guys home. He’s had enough time to eat Huggy right into bankruptcy. Don’t want him to wear out his welcome or nothin’.” Hutch chuckled at the image Starsky had brought to mind.

Chapter 11

Francine noticed Hutch’s face looked drawn and tired as he and Starsky approached her desk and asked to see Mr. Bradley. Although it was closing time, her boss was still in his office and agreed to meet with them.

“Twice in one day. You must be making progress,” he greeted them.

“Yeah, I think we are. We’d like you to take a look at something and tell us if you’ve ever seen it before.” Hutch dug into his pocket and produced the diamond earring. Frank Bradley’s face turned deathly white, his knees nearly buckling under him.

Starsky grabbed Bradley’s elbow and helped him to the nearest sofa.

“W-where did you get this?” Bradley took several deep breaths to regain his composure. Starsky looked over his head at Hutch and saw his partner was as baffled as he by the man’s reaction.

“The cleanin’ crew found it in Carol Parker’s apartment,” Starsky answered. “We thought maybe you gave ‘em to her.”

“No,” was his only response. They waited for him to say more, but he didn’t.

“Mr. Bradley, what do you know about this earring?” Hutch asked, as he came around and sat in a chair across from the man.

“I-I’ve never seen it before.”

“If you know anything about this and refuse to tell us, you could be charged with obstruction of justice,” Hutch warned gently. “It would be much better if you’d talk with us so we don’t have to officially take you in for questioning.”

“Isn’t the fact that I didn’t give it to Carol answer enough?”

“No, sir,” Starsky replied. “You recognize this earring and it’s evidence to a homicide—”

“You don’t know that,” Bradley interrupted. “You don’t know that this earring has anything to do with Carol’s death.”

“But you do,” Starsky said matter-of-factly.

Bradley stood up, a look of determination hardening his features. “Gentlemen, I have nothing further to say to you at this time. If you have any more questions regarding this earring, or Carol Parker’s death, I suggest you go through my attorney, Marcus Levitt. Francine can give you his telephone number and the address of his practice.” He walked toward the door as he spoke.

Starsky and Hutch were stunned at the unexpected change in attitude, and how quickly Bradley seemed to have recovered from the shock he’d obviously experienced only minutes earlier. When they didn’t immediately get up and follow him to the door, he turned and spoke again.

“You really must excuse me now. I have a dinner engagement at seven and will barely have time to pick up my wife and get there. Thank you for coming by.” With such an curt, direct dismissal, they had no choice but to leave. He promptly closed the door behind them, as they stood there bewildered at the turn of events.

Before either one could speak, Francine asked, “Already through?”

“I guess you could say that,” Hutch answered.



Starsky cranked up the Torino and turned to Hutch. “What the hell just happened in there?”

“I don’t know, partner. Your guess is as good as mine. But Bradley knows where that earring came from, and it’s gonna be the clue to solving this case.”

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut tightly, riding out the ensuing wave of pain. Starsky reached over and laid a hand on his arm. “Hey...you okay?”

“Yeah. I guess maybe you’re right, though. I need to go home.”

“When are you gonna learn to listen to me? Huh?” Starsky chided. “I’m gonna take you home first, then I’ll go pick up Big Dog. That is, if Huggy hasn’t already tossed him out on his ear.”

Hutch closed his eyes and tried to relax, but he was beyond doing that without the aid of the painkillers. Once they arrived home, Starsky followed him to the door. “Go lie down and I’ll bring your medicine,” he said, unlocking the door so Hutch wouldn’t have to struggle with the key one-handedly.

Two minutes later, Starsky came to the bedroom with a pill and a glass of cool water. “I’ll be back in a little while. I’m gonna go ahead and exercise Sam before I bring him back here to feed him. Okay?”

“Sure, Starsk. That sounds fine.” Hutch eased himself down on the bed and tried to find a comfortable position.

“Here, try this,” Starsky said, as he propped a soft pillow under Hutch’s injured shoulder to relieve the pressure.

“That’s better,” Hutch told him. “I’m fine. Go ahead and see to Sam. I’ll probably be asleep when you get back. Are you going on home tonight?”

“Thought I’d just crash here, if that’s okay,” Starsky answered, not liking the pale color of his partner’s face. It seemed wise to stick around while Hutch was taking the strong medication. Starsky waited only a couple of minutes then slipped out quietly, locking the door behind him.



When Starsky arrived at The Pits, he parked in the alley and came in through the kitchen. Huggy was working at his desk in the little office to the left of the cooking area. Sam was lounging at his feet, and neither of them heard Starsky come in.

“Hey, Hug. I’m here to pick up Big Dog.” The minute Sam heard Starsky’s voice he jumped to attention and ran to meet him, his tail wagging so hard it caused his whole backside to wave. “Hi there, fella!” The dog reared up, his paws landing on Starsky’s chest. “Do you always have to jump all over me like that?” Starsky scolded him half-heartedly.

“Starsky, my man. I was beginning to think I was gonna have to make this dude a permanent resident at Huggy Bear’s fine establishment. Where have you guys been? More important, where’s the other half of the home team?” Huggy asked when he realized Starsky was alone.

“Had to take him home and put him to bed. The Blond Blintz finally admitted a bullet in the shoulder tends to slow ya down a little.”

“This has to be a first,” Huggy laughed. “I hope you got it on tape.”

“And he calls *me* hard-headed.” Starsky snapped the leash to Sam’s collar then dug a five-dollar bill out of his jeans pocket and laid it on the desk

“Huggy, thanks for lookin’ after Sam.”

“What’s the bread for, man?”

“Forgot to bring his lunch,” Starsky told him. “We promised we would.”

“Put your money away, brother. Huggy can spring for a couple of burgers.”

“Nah, keep it. He can eat you outta house and home if you let him. Hope he didn’t give you hard time.”

“Not me. He’s cool. But you may want to work on refining his approach with the ladies. I tried to tell him a cold nose in the crotch may not be the fastest way to a woman’s heart,” Huggy said, completely straight-faced.

“You’re kiddin’?” Starsky tried to look shocked, but inside, he was about to lose it.

“One hundred percent serious, my brother. If you don’t believe it, you can check out the waitresses and a cute little brunette named Becky—that is, if she ever comes in here again. I mean you gotta admire the dude’s no-holds-barred approach to ‘winning friends and influencing people.’ Did he get that from the Starsky School of Charm?”

“Sorry, Hug, can’t take credit for it. I’ll ask Hutch when I get home if he’s responsible, though. Thanks again for lettin’ Sam hang out with ya.” Sam licked Huggy’s hand and was rewarded with one more ear scratch before he and Starsky left through the back entrance. Anxious for another car ride, the dog rushed ahead of Starsky, pulling and straining on the leash all the way.

Rather than return to Hutch’s right away, Starsky and the dog headed for the park. A new, bright red rubber ball from the pet store had been tucked under the seat of the car as a special treat to be introduced at some future date. The dog was so energetic and restless from having been cooped up most of the day that Starsky thought this would be the ideal time to bring out the new toy.

Being twilight, the park was almost deserted. The sky was beautiful, tinged with the pink and orange of the sunset, the wispy, gray-blue clouds drifting across the horizon. Starsky had that “all is well with the world” feeling as he parked the car and hooked up the dog’s leash.

The children had gone home to have dinner with their families, presenting a good opportunity to try Sam off-leash for the first time. Starsky hoped the dog wouldn't take off for the great wide open, but Sam was becoming more responsive to both him and Hutch whenever they called him. In fact, Starsky was amazed at the animal's intelligence—he seemed to learn so quickly. There'd been no further discussion about finding Sam a new home, but Starsky knew, when the time came, an obedient dog would be more adoptable and more likely to stay with his new family.

“Come on, boy. Let's play ball.” Starsky took Sam to an open area where he'd have room to run. Deciding it would be safer to try him on leash first, Starsky showed the ball to the dog and teased him a little, holding it behind his back, then flashing it repeatedly to build up the dog's interest. Sam watched intently, making quick little grabs in an effort to steal the prize away from Starsky. Within a few minutes, Sam was so excited, Starsky could barely keep the dog from snatching the ball from his hand.

Sam jumped up and down, wrought with anticipation. “Okay! Okay! You want the ball, Sam?” Sam gave a loud woof in response. Starsky tossed the ball only a short distance. Sam lunged forward and scooped it up in his huge jaws, tossed it into the air, then repeated the motion.

“Bring it here, Sam! Bring the ball!” But Sam wasn't about to let it go that easily. Starsky reeled him in on the leash and tussled with him to get the ball back. Then, with trepidation and concern for the wisdom of his actions, Starsky unhooked the leash and tossed the ball into the air once more. To his astonishment, the rottweiler jumped and caught it mid-air.

“Good boy! Bring me the ball, Sam!” This time, the dog loped to him immediately and presented the ball to be thrown again. Starsky threw it about twenty feet this time and silently prayed the dog wouldn't take off. Sam dashed after it and swooped down on the ball, almost before it hit the ground.

Starsky called him, and without hesitation, Sam barreled toward him like a locomotive, moving so fast that by the time he reached his destination, he slammed into Starsky and knocked him flat on his back. Standing on Starsky's chest with the red rubber ball clenched in his teeth and his big pink tongue lolled out the side of his mouth, he was a humorous sight.

Starsky threw both arms around the dog and wrestled him onto his back, further exciting the puppy. When released, Sam ran at lightning speed in tight little circles around him. Starsky sat on the ground just watching, letting the dog run out of steam. Finally, Sam collapsed in front of him and flopped his head onto Starsky's knees, looking up with mischievous eyes.

“I don't know about you, Big Dog, but I'm ready to call it a day.” The trusting face looked up with affection, hanging on every word Starsky uttered. “Besides, we need to go check on Hutch. He's pretty helpless without us, you know. But don't tell him I said

so, or he'll be really pissed." Starsky started to attach the leash to Sam's collar, but instead, got up and nonchalantly walked toward the car.

"Sam, come," he said confidently, looking over his shoulder at the dog. The rottweiler immediately fell into step behind Starsky, then hopped into the car and they headed for home.



When Starsky and Sam reached Hutch's, they found him sound asleep. Starsky quietly closed the door, to make sure Sam didn't sneak in and wake him later. He'd just finished feeding the dog, and was making himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when the phone rang. "Hello," he answered shortly, grabbing it after only one ring.

"Uh...are you Detective Hutchinson?" a man's voice asked.

"No, I'm his partner, Detective Starsky. Hutch can't come to the phone right now. Can I help you?"

Five seconds of silence followed, then the nervous voice said, "Yes...actually, I think you're the one who gave me this card." Silence again. "This is Timothy Parker, I...I'd like to talk with you about my sister's death. But not like this, not on the phone."

Starsky looked at his wristwatch. "I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"No! I mean...don't come to my house. I don't want Mother to know. She won't understand."

"Okay, then...where do you want me to meet you? A restaurant? A bar? How about The Pits? It's not far from where you live."

"No...not so public. I'm...I'm afraid if we're seen, I'll be killed—just like Carol. I know a place only about five minutes from my house. It's a warehouse that my model car club meets in. I have a key and no one will be there tonight. It's totally private."

Starsky hesitated. What if this was a trap? But Parker sounded scared out of his wits, so, most likely, he was telling the truth. Starsky suspected Parker had the goods on Frank Bradley. Anyone with a grain of sense would be afraid of a man as powerful as Bradley, he reasoned.

"Okay. Give me the address and time. We'll come."

"Thank you...thank you so much. I've wanted to level with you since the day you first came to my home, but I knew Mother couldn't handle the truth. She has a bad heart. Anyway, the address is 2260 Clayburn Street. I'll meet you there in fifteen minutes. I'll unlock the door and wait inside, so you can just walk right in. I'd rather not hang around

outside, since it's not the greatest part of town. But the rent's really low and that's all our club can afford to lease."

Starsky jotted down the address. "Got it. We'll leave here in a couple of minutes. I'm not familiar with this address, so if it takes us more than fifteen minutes, just stay put, okay? It's gonna be fine," Starsky reassured him. "We'll get whoever is responsible for your sister's death, and if we need to, we'll put you in protective custody 'til they're picked up."

"Thank you, Detective Starsky. You don't know what this means to me. Goodbye."

Starsky placed the receiver back on the hook. He went to the bedroom, peeked in the door, and saw Hutch had not stirred. Starsky hesitated to disturb him, but knew Hutch wouldn't like him going alone to meet Parker.

"Hutch?" he called softly. "You asleep?" When there was no response, he entered the bedroom, closing the door behind him to keep Sam from following. Leaning down close to Hutch's face, he asked again, "Hutch, you asleep?" He could hear the even, relaxed breathing, confirming Hutch was out like a light. Looking at his friend's peaceful face, Starsky couldn't bring himself to wake him, knowing Hutch needed to rest—to let himself heal. His decision made, Starsky tiptoed back out and quietly closed the door.

Returning to the kitchen, he grabbed a notepad off the fridge and scribbled a message in case Hutch woke before he got back. "*Hutch—gone to meet Timothy Parker in Model Car Club building at 2260 Clayburn. Has info about Carol's murder. Didn't want to wake you. Be back soon—Starsk.*"

Starsky put his gun and holster back on before shrugging into his jacket. He heard a faint whining sound, and noticed the dog lying at Hutch's bedroom door, his nose wedged in the crack. Grabbing Sam's collar, Starsky led him away from the door.

"Come away from there, Sam. You're gonna wake Hutch." Sam whined louder. In a hurry to get to the rendezvous, Starsky didn't have time to hassle with the dog. He made a snap decision to ensure Hutch wouldn't be disturbed. "Come on, Big Dog. I guess I'll have to take you with me." He retrieved the note to Hutch and added "*P.S. Sam's with me,*" before heading out the door with dog right.



The red Torino pulled up in front of the warehouse Timothy Parker had designated for their meeting. The area around it was completely deserted, with the exception of a lone rusty, white 1966 station wagon parked in the lot. The one and only street lamp flickered erratically, defeating its effort to light the entrance. Starsky felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle. He pulled out his gun and checked to make certain he had plenty of ammunition.

“I’ve got bad feelin’ about this, Sam,” he said, as much to himself as to the dog. “You wait here, boy. If I don’t come out soon, take the Torino and go back to Hutch’s. But be careful with the paint job.” Starsky made the tongue-in-cheek crack in a dead serious voice and Sam listened intently, looking as though he actually understood. Starsky laughed at his own joke and gave Sam a final pat on the head, then got out of the car and entered the building.

The door was unlocked, just as Parker had said it would be. As Starsky stepped through the door, he found the area dimly lit by only a single overhead bulb. He looked around but saw no sign of Parker. “Parker! Tim Parker, are you here?” he called out.

Met by only a spooky silence, Starsky ventured in a little farther. Looking down the corridor, he could see that lighting throughout the structure was minimal. The building had been partitioned into rooms, all different sizes and configurations. He glanced briefly into each of them as he went, and saw most had racing tracks for radio-control cars, assembled on platforms decked out impressively with elaborate scenery, little model buildings, and miniature trees. One room was dedicated to glassed-in display cases, filled with vintage radio-controlled automobiles, from Porsches to Volkswagen Beetles.

Starsky heard a shuffling sound coming from a room farther into the interior of the building. “Parker? That you?” When no one answered, he pulled the Smith & Wesson from its holster and proceeded cautiously, prepared for trouble.

The silence and dim lighting gave the warehouse an eerie atmosphere. The only sound disturbing the absolute quiet was that of his own footsteps. Starsky moved stealthily down the gloomy hallway, continuing to check each room quickly. Progressing deeper into the interior of the building, the lighting became increasingly sparse. Then without warning, a resounding bang pierced the silence, plunging the entire structure into darkness so all-encompassing that Starsky literally couldn’t see his hand before his face.

He fought the overwhelming urge to run blindly from the building. As the darkness became a heavy, suffocating blanket, Starsky tried to remain calm and picture in his mind’s eye the path he had taken to the interior. His sense of direction seemed all out of whack. Had there been windows? He couldn’t remember. All he knew was, he had to get out of here fast. He had to breathe fresh air again. To hell with Parker! He was either dead—murdered by whomever he’d planned to expose, or Starsky had used incredibly poor judgment and allowed himself to be lured in to one hell of a trap. Either way, the detective knew he was in deep trouble.

Starsky stumbled forward, finally locating the wall. From there he began carefully groping his way back toward what he *hoped* was the front of the building, guided by only touch and instinct. It was slow going, but he had just begun to regain his sense of direction when a deafening explosion rocked the building, throwing him backwards. There was no time to consider what had happened before he slipped into the velvet-soft darkness of unconsciousness.

Chapter 12

The telephone rang persistently, rousing Hutch from his deep slumber. He fumbled to reach the phone located on the bedside stand. “Hutchinson,” he mumbled.

“Hutch? How’re you doin’ man?”

“Okay, I guess, Hug. But to tell you the truth, I just woke up and I feel like I’ve got cotton in my head,” Hutch answered, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and coming to an upright position.

“I expected Starsky to answer. Where is he? Said he’d be at your place.”

“Good question. When he didn’t answer the phone, I grabbed the one here by the bed.”

“Man, he left here a long time ago. Said you weren’t doing so hot, so I was just checking in,” Huggy said. He paused for a second, then changed the subject. “Listen, Hutch, I been thinking. You guys planning to make Sam a permanent player?”

“Gee, don’t know, Hug. When we bailed him out of Animal Control, the plan was to keep him just long enough to find a good home. But he’s adjusted so well here, I’m a little reluctant to uproot him. I haven’t discussed it with Starsky, though. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just...you know...I think he’s all right. He even gives Huggy’s place a little class. Not to mention, when he’s full-grown any turkey who thinks The Pits would be an easy mark might think twice, you dig? Just think about it, okay?”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll talk it over with Starsky and let you know.”

After they hung up, Hutch went to the kitchen to scare up something to eat. He really was surprised that Sam and Starsky weren’t home yet. It was already dark out, so their exercise run should have ended an hour or so ago. Upon entering the kitchen, he spotted the note from Starsky propped up against the telephone. Hutch read it hurriedly and was more than a little concerned that Starsky had gone off by himself to meet in such a secluded place. The odd feeling that something was wrong—that he was missing the obvious—came back again, this time more intense. He’d had this same feeling earlier, but couldn’t lay his finger on the source. Hutch read the note again.

“Hutch—gone to meet Timothy Parker in Model Car Club building at 2260 Clayburn. Has info about Carol’s murder. Didn’t want to wake you. Be back soon—Starsk. P.S. Sam’s with me.”

The root of the nagging anxiety began to surface. Something Gina had said on the telephone. What were her exact words when he’d asked her to speculate on the type of

the person responsible for setting the explosives? “*Maybe someone with a background in electronics, perhaps a computer technician,*” There was more. Something about the incendiary devices the arsonist was using. “*...on the level with those remote-control airplanes and boats that adult men seem to enjoy playing with so much...he would have to know how to **build** one, not just how to operate it.*”

Of course! The radio-control car on the floor at the Parker home. His subconscious had been trying to alert him—help him recognize that Tim had the means and the motive to start those fires! And now his partner was involved in a clandestine meeting with this man—with no back-up.

No doubt, Starsky had tried to wake him, but the pain pills had done their job so well, he’d slept right through it. Hutch felt a hot wave of fear course through him, knowing that Starsky and Sam were meeting this madman without him being there to back them up. He had to get there fast.

Hutch threw on his jeans and a jacket, grabbed his keys and Starsky’s note, then rushed out the door. He yanked his left arm out of the sling in order to steer the car, and grabbed the mic with his right hand as he was backing out of the drive. Slapping the red bubble on the roof of the beat-up Ford, Hutch slammed the gas pedal to the floor. It was at least a fifteen minute drive to the address Starsky had left him.

“Control, this is Hutchinson. Patch me through to Zebra Three right now! And send a couple of black-and-whites to 2260 Clayburn. Starsky may be in trouble—I think he’s walking into a trap.”

“Patching you through, Hutch. And it’s a ten-four on the black-and-whites. Standby, please.” Interminable minutes passed before the dispatcher came back on-line. “Sorry, Hutch, Starsky’s not answering my call. But I have the back-up en route.”

“Thanks, Maggie. I’ll meet them there.”

Ten minutes later, the dispatcher came on-line again.

“Zebra Three, Zebra Three. Detective Hutchinson, please respond.”

“This is Zebra Three. Go ahead, Dispatch.”

“Hutch a call was just picked up on the Fire Department side band. A report came in that the structure located at 2260 Clayburn is engulfed in flames—a three alarm fire. Witness reported hearing multiple explosions. Two fire engines were dispatched, but you’ve got a head start on them.”

Hutch felt his heart lurch in his chest. *Damn! Why didn’t you wake me, Starsk? Why did you take off on your own like this?*” Hutch pressed the gas pedal to the floor, with little

effect on the old junker. For once in his life, Hutch felt a keen appreciation for the striped tomato.



The explosion Starsky had heard rattled the foundation of the warehouse, igniting a ferocious blaze near the front entrance. Another smaller one followed, strategically placed to assure the flames would spread from different directions. Parker had escaped through the back entrance, padlocking the door behind him to guarantee the two homicide detectives couldn't follow.

He didn't like killing cops, too risky—but he decided it wasn't much different than killing that night watchman at the jewelry store. Why couldn't those nosey bastards have left well enough alone! Why had they reopened Carol's case? Somehow they'd connected Carol's murder to the fires and the death of the watchman. But how? Things were becoming too complicated. All he wanted was to make Bradley pay for killing Carol. Was that asking too much?

Parker was certain that Bradley would never be convicted, even if he *was* arrested. Money talked—everyone knew that. Poor Carol...poor sweet, gullible Carol. Mother must never find out she was pregnant when she died. Or else she'd remind him that all those bad things she said about Carol were true. But they weren't. Carol wasn't like that at all; it wasn't her fault she'd been seduced by a millionaire.

Right up until the end, Tim hadn't given up trying to convince his sister to go away for a while. She could have blackmailed Bradley into paying for everything, then adopted out the kid and gotten on with her life. With an almost debilitating sense of guilt, he remembered that their last words had been spoken in anger. Carol had told him to butt out! It was her life, she'd said. She knew Frank would marry her, she'd said. But instead, he'd had her murdered. The day of the funeral, Tim had made a solemn oath to his dead sister that he'd make Frank Bradley pay. And he would pay—dearly!

What a shame, he thought, irrationally, his deranged mind flitting back and forth between rage and remorse. *All those beautiful, classic model cars and trucks—all those many hours of hard work with my friends. Up in flames...just like my sister's life. Nothing left but ashes. I had no choice. I had to get rid of those cops before they spoiled everything! If they'd kept digging, they would have found out it was me before I could kill Bradley.* That was the plan...had always been the plan. He would have the satisfaction of watching the man die.

Another small device exploded, igniting a cloud of cinders and sparks that lit up the sky. The roof in the northeast corner of the building began to collapse, the metal girders screeching and groaning as the heat rendered them shapeless. Far off in the darkness, Parker thought he heard sirens. He had stayed as long as he dared, to be certain the two detectives did not escape. It was time to leave.

Parker saw the bright red car still parked in front of the building and heard the frantic dog barking inside. The dog sensed it...he sensed the two men were not coming out, and he was panic stricken by the knowledge.



Starsky's eyes fluttered open, instantly irritated by the dark, caustic smoke accumulating in the ceiling above him. It took a few seconds for his mind to clear enough to realize where he was and what had happened.

Trapped beneath a huge oak, beveled-glass trophy case, Starsky could hear the popping and crackling noises of the fire at the back of the building. As the heavy cloud of smoke grew, it became more difficult to breathe the murky air. It didn't take long for Starsky to figure out he was in serious trouble. In the distance, he heard Sam's frenzied barking, and hoped the dog's natural instincts would keep him from coming any closer to the burning building.

Starsky raised his head and tried to assess the situation. From his perspective, it didn't look good. His lower body was trapped beneath the heavy trophy case. Large shards of broken glass and dozens of radio-control cars lay scattered around him like colorful Christmas ornaments. Since the case covered him from the mid-point of his chest down, he had no way of telling if he was injured. Oddly enough, there was no pain, other than the stinging from minor cuts inflicted by the flying glass. He could feel his legs fine, but was pinned down so tightly, he could do little more than move them slightly, back and forth, from left to right. *Don't panic*, he kept telling himself. *Giving over to the fear will just make matters worse.*

Despite his resolve to stay calm, he could feel the anxiety building. Starsky realized that he'd been foolish, not calling for back-up when he arrived. By the time Hutch figured out where he was, the building would be burned to the ground, leaving him dead, and Hutch on a major guilt trip for not being there when his partner needed him. Yep, he'd screwed up big time.

Another small explosion rattled the building, the northeast, back corner this time. It was enough to convince Starsky he couldn't wait for Hutch—or anyone else—to show up. He'd just have to help himself. Taking a deep breath, he braced both palms against the underside of the trophy case and pushed up, straining and grunting with every ounce of strength he possessed; but it was no good. It weighed too much for one man to lift.

Smoke billowed forth, filling the rooms and corridors, as the advancing fire roared through the building. So far, he'd counted one major explosion, and two smaller ones, each coming from a different direction. Starsky silently prayed there wasn't an explosive device set somewhere in the room with him.

Concentrating hard on the task at hand, he tried again to lift the cabinet, exerting the muscles in his upper body to the limit. It refused to budge an inch. He lay there quietly for a moment, racking his brain for a solution. Nothing.

His desperation mounting, Starsky finally resorted to yelling for help. It only stood to reason that people in the nearby buildings had heard the explosions and called the fire department. If someone didn't find him soon, he'd be beyond reach...maybe he already was. But with typical Starsky optimism, he refused to accept that possibility without a fight. Each effort to call for help ended in spasms of coughing and gagging when the smoke filled his lungs. His throat burned and ached with the effort, and the overpowering smell of the smoke mingled with gasoline fumes was nauseating. After several minutes, he grew tired; and with the ever increasing smoke, found he was too short-winded to continue. The heat from the rapidly growing flames was a constant reminder that the fire would soon engulf this room, too. With every passing minute, his hope ebbed, until there was none left.

Growing dizzy from the smoke and fumes, Starsky realized he was going to die. He'd always been realistic about the risks in police work, but somehow, as partners, he and Hutch had invariably been able to beat the odds. They'd been through a lot together, and as long as they could count on one another, it wasn't so scary. Starsky hated to admit it, but he was scared now; he knew this time, he was on his own.

When a fourth minor explosion ignited in the front part of the building, he closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on other things: people he loved, things he had accomplished in his life, things he would never have the opportunity to do...

Then he felt it. Not the heat of the flames, but the wet coldness of Sam's nose, as the dog nuzzled against his cheek, then licked him across the lips.

"Sam! Oh, God, Sam, what are you doin' here boy? You shouldn't be here." In spite of his protest, Starsky's arm encircled the trembling animal and drew him closer. He could see how terrified the puppy was. Sam moved even closer, pressing his body against Starsky, each comforting the other.

The dog whined pitifully, obviously frightened, but unwilling to abandon his human. Instead, Sam licked Starsky's face, as if trying to console him. Starsky held Sam tightly, drawing solace from his presence, but knowing that he wouldn't keep the dog there to die with him. He'd have to convince Sam to leave before it was too late. He just hoped the frightened dog could find his way back out.

"Sam." Holding the dog's head gently, Starsky drew his face close to make sure he was paying attention. "Sam, go get the ball. You remember your ball? Huh? You wanna play ball?"

Sam squirmed and tried to pull his head back. He couldn't understand what Starsky wanted. All *he* wanted was to take Starsky and get the heck out of this terrible place.

Starsky smiled encouragingly at the puppy, hoping to distract him from the noise and smoke around them. “Sam, pay attention. Go get the ball! Go find the ball! Where’s the ball, huh? Sam, go find the ball!” The wide-set, dark eyes reflected the animal’s fear and confusion. *Maybe he didn’t recognize the word ball.* Starsky decided to try a different approach.

“Sam, where’s Hutch? Huh? Go find Hutch.” Sam’s ears perked up momentarily. “That’s right Sam, go find Hutch.” Sam didn’t know Hutch was miles away. Hopefully he would run out of the building to find Hutch and be too frightened to return.

Sam still wasn’t clear on what was expected, but he did recognize two words—’Hutch’ and ‘ball.’ He cocked his head to one side and listened, trying desperately to understand. Maybe he was supposed to find Hutch. Maybe this was a game. He’d liked the game with the ball earlier tonight. And he always loved the games he played with his two humans. But he didn’t think he should leave Starsky here all alone.



As he neared the warehouse, Hutch could see the bright glow of the flames leaping into the air. He pulled into the parking lot and was disappointed to see the fire engines still hadn’t arrived. The only vehicles were the red Torino and the two black-and-white units. Hutch barely brought the car to a halt before he jumped out and ran toward the four police officers standing next to their cars.

“Where’s my partner? Where’s Starsky?”

“We don’t know, Hutch,” Murphy answered. “We just got here, and there’s no sign of him anywhere.”

“Then he must be inside.” Hutch started toward the building, but Murphy grabbed his arm and stopped him.

“Wait, Hutch. You can’t go in there. The firefighters will be here soon; they’ll handle this.”

Hutch tried to pull his good arm out of Murphy’s grasp, but was unable to break free. He whirled around and glared at the man. “Let go of my arm right now, or so help me, I’ll make you sorry you were ever born.” The deadly calm in his voice left no doubt in the police officer’s mind that Hutch meant exactly what he said. Still, he didn’t release his hold. It was obvious to all four policemen that Hutch was in no condition to attempt a suicide run through the burning building.

“Just calm down, Hutch. Starsky can take care of himself. He wouldn’t want you to try and come after him in this condition.” The last part of his entreaty was drowned out, as another section of the roof collapsed, sending up a cloud of fiery cinders into the sky.

Hutch felt the blood drain from his face, as he watched the structure collapsing around Starsky.

“I’m going in. If the tables were turned, he’d come after me,” Hutch answered resolutely. He pulled Starsky’s note from his pocket and pressed it into Murphy’s hand. “Just in case we don’t make it out, this tells you who’s responsible.”

“Listen, I can’t let you go into that building—”

Hutch stared past the man, no longer listening. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Standing in the doorway of the burning warehouse was Sam. He looked at Hutch and barked excitedly.

“Sam!” With a powerful jerk, Hutch broke away from Murphy’s tenuous hold and ran toward the rottweiler. Once he was certain he had Hutch’s attention, the dog turned and ran back into the building, disappearing in the smoke-filled corridor. Without hesitation, Hutch followed.

Chapter 13

Hutch reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out his handkerchief to cover his mouth and nose. The smoke was so dense, it was difficult to breathe in the murky atmosphere. “Sam!” Hutch blinked his stinging eyes rapidly, searching for a sign of the dog. Finally, he heard Sam bark again, and followed him like a homing beacon.

Hutch stumbled onward, listening for the dog, all the while avoiding fallen, charred debris that littered the hallway. He looked into each room as he went and found some already engulfed in flames. There was no sign of Starsky.

“Starsky!” No response.



Sam barked again. Starsky felt his heart sink. He’d thought the dog made it out safely, but instead, he was coming back. Starsky could hear the ceiling and some of the walls near the back of the building beginning to collapse, and he knew it wouldn’t be long before the fire reached him. He hoped if Sam wasn’t going to escape, the dog would at least make it back to him so they’d face the inevitable together. He knew the puppy must be terrified.

Sam sounded as if he was getting closer with every bark. Then he heard the most welcome sound in the world—Hutch’s voice. “Starsky!”

“Hutch? HUUUutch! I’m in here!”

“Starsky! Keep yelling!”

“Right here! Come on, Sam, bring him here!” Starsky stretched and craned his neck, watching for the two of them.

Sam dashed into the room first, ran to Starsky, licking his face joyfully. Then Hutch stumbled in, pausing at the door to get his bearings.

“Back here! We need some help back here!” Hutch shouted over his shoulder, just in case the firefighters had entered the building behind him. No response.

“Starsk!” Hutch staggered through the murky smoke to where Starsky lay trapped beneath the cabinet. “Are you okay, buddy?” He dropped to his knees and bent closer to see Starsky’s face. “Where are you hurt?”

Overcome with relief at seeing Hutch and Sam, Starsky muttered humorously, “Mostly my pride. I know it’s weird, but I don’t think anything’s broken. I’m not hurtin’ all that much. I’m just stuck under this damn thing and can’t move.”

“We’re gonna get you out of here. The fire department’s not far behind me,” Hutch said more confidently than he felt. Using the handkerchief, Hutch wiped the sweat and soot from around Starsky’s eyes. Sam inched forward and inserted himself between them, then laid his head on Starsky’s shoulder. Neither man rebuffed the dog, each thinking to himself how grateful they were that his loyalty to Starsky had overridden his fear of the fire.

“We’re back here!” Hutch shouted again, still hopeful the firefighters had launched a search for them. In all honesty, he didn’t know if they’d even arrived yet, but he saw no point in alarming Starsky further. Reluctantly, he was forced to consider the possibility that the fire chief may have decided the fire had advanced too far to risk sending in his men. Hutch sobered at the thought. He glanced around the room quickly and spied two galvanized metal ceiling beams that had fallen a little to the left of where Starsky was lying.

“Listen, Starsk, I’m going to use those beams as a cantilever and raise this cabinet off you. Do you think you can slide yourself out from under it when I give you the signal?”

“I’ll sure as hell try,” Starsky assured him. “Anything beats ending up as barbecue. But I thought you said there were firemen right behind you. Hutch, you didn’t come in after me by yourself, did ya?”

“What? You think I’m nuts?” He smiled at Starsky, not convincing him for a second. “They’ll be here. I just don’t think we should wait around, do you?”

Starsky had the uneasy feeling there wasn't any help on the way, but didn't say so. "I'm ready when you are, partner. Sam, move over just a little, boy." He reached down and gently pried the frightened dog off his chest.

Using only one arm, Hutch struggled to position the beams to get the best leverage possible under the trophy case. "Okay, buddy. On the count of three..."

"Wait," Starsky said barely above a whisper. "Hutch...thanks for comin' after me."

"Hey, you'd do the same for me, partner," Hutch answered, then grasped the beam firmly and got into position.

"Okay. One...two...three!" Hutch laid his whole body weight into it, but only succeeded in raising the cabinet about three inches—not enough for Starsky to escape. He carefully lowered the case back down, noticing as he did, that Starsky bit down hard on his bottom lip. After a second foiled attempt, Hutch knew there was no point in trying again. He'd given it his all.

"I'm sorry, Starsk. I'm afraid this is at least a two-man job," Hutch said, his voice edged with defeat.

"Yeah, well, I look at it this way, Blondie...if I don't make it outta this, you're stuck with Big Dog over there. So you better think of somethin' else to try," Starsky said flippantly. But Hutch recognized his false bravado for what it was.

Then, dropping all pretenses, Starsky said quietly, "Listen, Hutch. Take Sam and get outta here. You said yourself the firemen are on their way. No point in you hangin' around."

"You listen to me," Hutch said stubbornly. "Do you think for one minute I'm going walk out of here and leave you? I thought you knew me better than that."

"I didn't mean—"

"The way I see it, we can always count on one thing—each other, Starsk. It always comes down to that. Now is no different. They'll come, all right. And we'll be here waiting—together—all three of us."

Small chunks of the dropped-tile ceiling began raining down around them and Hutch leaned over Starsky's face to shield him from the fallout. He reached out his good arm and pulled Sam close to them. They huddled together, knowing that now their fate rested with the firefighters.

The smoke gradually forced oxygen from their lungs. Their throats and eyes stung from the noxious vapors, and they grew increasingly groggy and lethargic from the lack of air. Soon, the trembling in Sam's body ceased, and he slowly succumbed to the smoke.

Starsky clung to Hutch's good arm like a lifeline, the smoke eventually dragging them down into unconsciousness.

Without Sam's bark to guide them, as he had Hutch, it took the firefighters much longer to find them. The two paramedics with them quickly placed oxygen masks over both victims' faces, but the fire was advancing way too fast to administer any treatment on the spot. With little effort, the firefighters were able to quickly free Starsky from beneath the trophy cabinet. Once that was done, three of them fought back the flames, providing the time needed for the paramedics and other two firemen to escape the burning building carrying Starsky and Hutch to safety.



Hutch woke to the feeling of the cool, fresh, night air on his face. Gasping, he inhaled big gulps of it into his oxygen-starved lungs. The activity around him was organized chaos. Firefighters worked side-by-side, doing their jobs with the precision of a well-oiled machine. Hutch looked up into the eyes of a light-haired, round faced young man dressed in a fireman's uniform. "Welcome back. Just relax—you're going to be fine. . My name's Roy DeSoto and I'm a paramedic. I just need to get your vitals."

Hutch bolted upright, his eyes anxiously searching the crowd for Starsky. He was too disoriented to realize that his partner lay on a gurney less than three feet away.

"My partner. Where's Starsky?"

"It's all right. Your partner's right there, and he's being looked after by *my* partner, Johnny. I just need you to calm down and let us both do our jobs." Roy's voice was mild and reassuring.

Hutch tried to cooperate, but was alarmed when he realized Starsky was still unconscious. "Are you sure he's okay? Shouldn't he be awake by now?"

"Don't you worry about that right now. He's receiving the best treatment available, and we'll be transporting you both to the hospital in just a couple of minutes. Looks like you've already had a bad week," Roy said, gesturing to Hutch's left shoulder and the sling his arm had been bound in earlier. Hutch had forgotten about the gunshot wound and now noted grimly that blood was seeping through his shirt where the stitches had probably torn loose.

Hutch saw Starsky's chest lurch upward as he suddenly gasped in air and began breathing more normally. Before DeSoto realized what was happening, Hutch was off the gurney and at Starsky's side.

"Starsk, can you hear me? Starsky?"

Starsky opened his eyes and tried to focus. “Hutch? Are we barbecue yet?” he asked, barely above a whisper.

“You had me thinking we were, partner. What took you so long to come around?” Hutch’s hand laid protectively on Starsky’s shoulder.

“Well, me and Sam got to the party before you did. We got a head start on the smoke.” As soon as the words left his lips, both men thought of the dog who’d led Hutch to Starsky through the dense smoke and flames.

“Hutch?” Starsky’s eyes reflected his fear of asking the question, but he couldn’t leave it unsaid. “He did make it, didn’t he?”

“I-I...don’t know, Starsk. I was unconscious when they brought us out.”

“Oh, man, we gotta find him, Hutch,” Starsky tried to rise, but was stopped short by the paramedic’s restraining hand.

“Hey, hold it right there. Do you want to do some irreversible damage to yourself? We need to make sure you don’t have any spinal injuries before you try to sit up.” Hutch’s hand gripped Starsky’s shoulder, knowing what the paramedic said made sense.

“Take it easy, buddy. They’ll find him. He was right there with us.”

Johnny stepped around Hutch to gain access to the IV in Starsky’s arm to inject medications, as instructed by the doctor on the other end of the phone line. “The doc has given orders for something to help you breath easier. Might make you a little woozy, so don’t be alarmed.”

Johnny Gage turned to Hutch, who’d continued to hover over Starsky, making it hard for the paramedic to do his job. “Please go back to your gurney so Roy can finish checking you out. I’m taking good care of your partner here, and I know you don’t want to get in my way.”

“Hutch, Hutch... Sam, find...out...” Starsky’s words, already muffled by the oxygen mask, slurred as the medication began coursing through his bloodstream. Hutch found himself being led away by DeSoto.

“Listen, do you know anything about our dog?” Hutch asked him anxiously.

“I’m sorry, I don’t. I remember seeing a big black dog lying there next to you guys, but I don’t know what became of him. We were pretty anxious to get your partner out from under that cabinet. The fire was moving in fast, and we had to get you both out of there quick.” Roy guided Hutch back to the gurney and sat him down.

“I don’t think you sustained any injuries in there, but I still want you to go along to the hospital and let the doc check you out. Besides, they need to take a look at that shoulder wound. What caused this?”

“Bullet. Happened a couple of days ago at a robbery we were called in on. It’s nothing,” Hutch answered distractedly.

“Looks to me like some of your stitches might have torn loose.”

“Is Starsky going to be okay?” Hutch asked, shifting the conversation away from himself. “I mean, what about his legs?”

“We’ll have to see what the doctor says about that. Just to be safe, we’re not going to let him risk complicating things by allowing him to move around.” Roy popped a sterile thermometer into Hutch’s mouth as he talked.

“They’ll take x-rays and probably a few other tests. Johnny didn’t detect any broken bones, but sometimes the injuries are internal, and aren’t easy to diagnose in the field like this. The good thing you can focus on right now is the fact that he’s breathing on his own, plus, I didn’t see any burns more serious than first degree.” Roy removed the thermometer and recorded the reading.

Hutch considered all the paramedic said and was grateful Starsky had survived the ordeal at all. Then he remembered Sam again.

“I, uh, I know you’re not going to understand how important this is, but I have to find our dog. He’s the one that led me back in there to find Starsky. I can’t just abandon him.”

Roy nodded solemnly. “I know how you feel, but I can tell you right now, nobody can get back into that building. We barely got you two out of there in one piece.” Roy saw the bleak expression on Hutch’s face and tried to console him. “Look, I’ll ask around and see what I can find out for you. Okay?”

“We’d really appreciate that,” Hutch said quietly. He dreaded telling Starsky that Sam may have been left behind.

“If it’s any comfort to you, the dog was unconscious, or maybe even already dead, when we found you. He didn’t suffer.”

It wasn’t a comfort to Hutch. And he knew damn well it wouldn’t be comforting to Starsky either. Hutch gazed at the building and watched as a small band of firemen, manned with gigantic hoses, worked in unison to bring the flames under control. He felt an empty hole in his heart as he thought of the affectionate, trusting animal who had probably given his life for Starsky and him. It was hard to believe Sam had been a part of their world for such a short period of time.

Overcome with remorse, Hutch laid down on the gurney and waited to be transported to the hospital in the ambulance with his partner.



Allen Sewell was the last firefighter to leave the burning warehouse. Compassion spurred him to go back when he spotted the big black and tan dog lying in the room where the two cops had been rescued. Being an animal lover, Allen couldn't leave the dog behind, dead or alive. He scooped up the seventy-pound animal and fled, seconds before the remainder of the ceiling collapsed on the burning room. Once out of doors, Allen hurried to the fire engine where emergency portable oxygen tanks were stored.

Allen laid the rottweiler on the ground and stretched him out on his side. "I could use a little help over here," he called out. Firefighter Howard Myers quickly hooked up one of the portable oxygen tanks and joined Allen on the ground next to the dog. Allen pulled the dog's head back, bringing it into alignment with his neck; then reached into Sam's mouth and pulled his tongue out to one side, clearing the air passage. Next, he formed a cone with his hands and encircled the animal's snout. Holding the dog's mouth shut, he exhaled short puffs of air directly into Sam's nostrils. He repeated this three times, but the dog didn't respond. So, Allen placed the heel of one hand on the animal's chest, with the other hand palm-down on top. He pressed firmly, released, paused, and repeated for twenty beats. When he saw Sam gasp for air, Allen motioned for Howard to step in with the oxygen mask.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" the fireman asked.

"Volunteering with the Humane Society," Allen answered. "They offered a course in animal first aid."

Howard shook his head in amazement. "Maybe DeSoto and Gage should take that course, too. Seems like we're always rescuing pets, along with family members."

"I don't think that's a bad idea," Allen said. "In fact, I think I'll mention it to them." Allen lifted the oxygen mask away from Sam's face temporarily and saw that he was breathing even, deep breaths now. "I think he's going to be fine. Wonder if he belongs to one of those cops?"

"Sure does," Howard answered. "DeSoto was asking around about him before they left for the hospital. Let's take him back to the station with us until we can get in touch with them. They'll probably want to take him to a vet to be checked out."

Chapter 14

“You again! What’s with you guys anyway? You go out and get yourselves all banged up just so you’ll have an excuse to see me again? Is that it?” Dr. Anderson teased. “Don’t you have any friends who can play ‘nice’?”

Starsky mumbled something indiscernible, his speech still slurred by the intravenous medication administered at the fire. Using a small penlight, Dr. Anderson checked his pupils. “Looks like you got the worst of it this time, hotshot. And I see your partner busted out my beautiful needlework, despite my warnings to you both.”

“Look, Doctor, don’t worry about my stitches, just find out if my partner’s legs are okay,” Hutch snapped. He knew she was trying to lighten the mood with humor, but right now, Hutch found it downright irritating.

Dr. Anderson became all business as she gathered herself up, squared her shoulders, and stared Hutch straight in the eyes. “Listen, buster, I don’t need you telling me what my priorities should be. I’ll have you know I’ve already reviewed the paramedics’ reports, and contacted our best orthopedic doctor. He’s on his way here, even as we speak. So you can sit your cute little butt back down on that examining table and get out of your shirt *right now*, so I can examine that gunshot wound and see just how much damage you’ve done.”

Stunned by the little doctor’s lecture, he did as he was told. “Sorry, I didn’t—”

“I know you’re concerned about your partner, Detective Hutchinson, but he’s not in any immediate danger,” she said in a much softer tone. Hutch began removing his shirt with the nurse’s help.

“Hutch,” Starsky mumbled under the oxygen mask. But before he could say more, he gave way to a coughing spell. In spite of Dr. Anderson’s warning, Hutch left the table and went to him.

“Yeah, buddy, right here.”

“Hutch, did ya get Sam out?”

Hutch had expected the question and had dreaded breaking the news to his partner that the dog was missing. He searched for the right words, but in the end, resorted to stalling. “Well, I...uh...the firemen were looking for him when we left. You know the paramedic who was taking care of me? He volunteered to find out about him.”

“But...you mean, they don’t even know whether or not they brought him out?” Starsky asked, his voice wrought with worry.

“They kind of had their hands full, Starsk. I’m sure they’re doing all they can.” Hutch reached over and laid his hand on Starsky’s arm.

“They probably don’t care,” Starsky said. “To them, he’s just a dog. Hutch, he trusted us to take care of him. Without Sam, you’d never’ve found me.” Starsky was taken with another fit of coughing and couldn’t say more. Hutch looked around in time to see Dr. Anderson handing Starsky’s chart to two new doctors who had just entered the examining room.

“Starsk, we’ll talk later, okay? Try not to worry. Let these guys do their jobs, and don’t give them a hard time, okay?” Before he could say more, Dr. Anderson commandeered him into another cubicle to repair his stitches.



Hutch lay quietly in his hospital bed waiting for his roommate to wake up. Dr. Anderson had assured him that Starsky would recover within a few days. *Incredible*. That’s how the orthopedic surgeon had described Starsky’s case. Incredible that a man could have a three hundred pound cabinet fall on him, pin him down in a burning building, and come away with no broken or crushed bones. The doctor had said Starsky may be bruised and sore for a few days, but otherwise, he was miraculously okay.

We must live charmed lives, buddy, Hutch thought. They’d cheated death again. According to the pulmonary specialist, Starsky had been in far greater danger of dying from smoke inhalation than from the fire or the fallen cabinet.

Breathing in deeply, testing his own lungs, Hutch could feel the irritation the smoke had caused. He could only imagine how badly Starsky’s chest must hurt right now. Starsky and Sam had been exposed to the noxious smoke far longer than he had. Starsky was sleeping off the side effects of a medicine they’d given him to fight the rib-rattling cough.

Almost as if he could hear Hutch’s thoughts, Starsky opened his eyes and looked around the room. He turned his head to the right and found Hutch staring at him.

“Hey, good to see you awake. Don’t try to talk,” Hutch warned him. “They’ve given you something for the cough. If you talk, you might irritate your throat and start up again. How are you feeling? Just nod. You hurt anywhere?”

Starsky nodded affirmative and pointed to his chest and throat.

“I thought so. But the good news is, no broken bones. I know you’re sore, but it won’t last too long. Right now, they’re watching you to make sure pneumonia doesn’t develop in your lungs.”

Starsky’s eyes showed alarm. Hutch hurried to reassure him “It wasn’t serious enough for you to go on a ventilator. They said the lining of your bronchi is pretty irritated, but there are no signs of lung scorch. That’s good news, Starsk.”

Seeing he had allayed Starsky's fears somewhat, he went on, "The inhalation therapist will be in every two hours to give you a breathing treatment, and the doctor said you should be out of here in two or three days if you behave yourself." Hutch smiled when Starsky rolled his eyes at the 'two or three days.'

"Dobey came by. I told him that we're sure Timothy Parker set the fire, but asked him not to do anything about picking him up yet, since we still don't know who killed Carol. It just doesn't make sense that he did it."

Starsky nodded his head in agreement with Hutch's conclusion. "I asked Dobey to keep it quiet that we're alive, too," Hutch told him. "Do you think Parker believed we were both in the building when he torched it?"

Starsky nodded yes.

"Good," Hutch went on. "He'll slip up if he thinks we aren't on his trail anymore."

Starsky gave a thumbs up to signal he agreed.

"What I don't know is, where he'll go from here. Do you think he plans to kill Bradley?"

Starsky nodded yes again. He waved with his hand to make sure Hutch was looking directly at him. Then he mouthed the word, *Sam?*

Hutch felt a lump in his throat. "Nothing so far, buddy. I asked Cap'n Dobey to get in touch with Roy DeSoto. Maybe we'll hear from him soon."

Starsky nodded, then turned his head away, not wanting Hutch to see how affected he was by Sam's disappearance. He felt a little embarrassed that he could get all soapy over a dog, but Sam had trusted them to look after him. A few short days ago, he wouldn't have believed a dog could be so intelligent, so unselfish, and so giving. Mary had said dogs gave their affection unconditionally, *faithful 'til the end*. Her words rang in his ears. Starsky closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.



"Okay, the doctor said she's going to release you, Hutchinson. But your partner here, is another story." Captain Dobey bustled around the room like a drill sergeant sent in to whip the troops into shape. "Starsky, have you gotten your voice back yet?"

Starsky sat up in bed, feeling infinitely better than he had the night before. He croaked in a raspy, rough voice, "Gettin' there, Cap. Said I can talk a little if I kinda whisper."

Hutch got out of bed and went into the bathroom to change into his jeans and shirt.

"Can't you get 'em to send me home too, Cap'n?"

“Who do I look like to you, Starsky—Ben Casey? What makes you think they’d send you home on my say-so?” Dobby groused.

Hutch stuck his head around the bathroom door. “Oh, I don’t know, Cap’n. Maybe your persuasive way with words?”

“That’s enough out of you, Hutchinson. Now, I notified the press that two unidentified, white male victims were found at the site of the fire, so Parker will assume you’re both dead. I’ve stalled on arresting him, like you two asked me to do, but we’re going to have to take action soon. If he decides to leave town or set another fire, my butt’s in the sling for listening to you two in the first place.”

Hutch awkwardly struggled to button his shirt with one hand until Starsky motioned him over to the side of the bed and finished buttoning it for him. “There’s still a missing piece to this puzzle,” Hutch said. “We don’t have any motive or evidence that Timothy Parker was involved in his sister’s murder.”

“He’s right, Cap,” Starsky whispered. “Somebody killed that girl and sent her brother on a vindictive rampage. Now, we think he may go after Bradley. We wanna put Frank Bradley under surveillance and watch this thing play out.” He finished the last button on Hutch’s shirt, then leaned back against the mound of pillows stacked at the head of his bed.

“We can’t use civilians as bait!” Dobby shouted. “Especially when they don’t even know that’s what we’re doing! Have you two lost your minds?”

“If we’re right,” Starsky told him, “Bradley either murdered Carol Parker himself, or he knows who did.”

“In either case, when he finds out Parker’s coming after him,” Hutch added, “he may be willing to talk in exchange for our protection.”

“We don’t threaten to withhold our protection from tax-paying citizens! Even if he *is* guilty of Ms. Parker’s death, it’s our job to ‘serve and protect’ the public—regardless of innocence or guilt.” Dobby paused for a second and cleared his throat. “Of course, if Mr. Bradley should decide he wants to cooperate, well, we’ll be glad to accept his assistance. Hutchinson, you get over there and see Bradley today. I’ll team you up with Mills until Starsky’s back on his feet.”

Starsky looked like he was about to object, but Hutch beat him to the punch. “No thanks, Captain. I already have a partner.” He didn’t have to look at Starsky to know that he had that smug, self-satisfied look on his face—the one Hutch had come to expect every time he stuck up for Starsky.

“I don’t give a damn about who your partner is! I’m telling you not to go over there without back-up! If Starsky’d had back-up instead of going off half-cocked in the middle of the night to meet an arson suspect, neither of you would be in here right now!” As usual, they couldn’t deny the logic in Dobby’s words.

“Okay. I’ll go see Bradley. I think we should give him a chance to come clean.” Hutch looked at Starsky for approval and received a nod, before heading toward the door. “Where’s Mills?” he asked Dobby.

“Waiting at the station. Have Carlson drive you there since you don’t have your car.”

Hutch paused at the door. “Cap’n, any word about the dog?”

Dobby shook his head. “To be honest with you, I’ve been too busy to track DeSoto down.”



Frank Bradley looked up from his desk, obviously astonished as Hutch entered his office without being announced. Almost subconsciously, he noted the fact that the detective apparently had a new partner.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he asked haughtily.

“Save the indignation, Bradley,” Hutch told him. “You look like you didn’t expect to see me again. Could it be that you assumed my partner and I were killed in a fire last night?”

“I did see there was another fire, but since it wasn’t one of my holdings, it didn’t occur to me that you and Detective Starsky were involved somehow. Is he...is he dead?”

Acting on the premise that the man was involved, Hutch snapped. “Cut the crap, Bradley! We know that Carol Parker’s brother’s been setting the fires. What we don’t know is, why you killed his sister. Did she threaten to go to your wife? Or did she try to blackmail you into supporting her and the baby?”

“I did *not* kill Carol!” Bradley railed. “I was in love with her. I will always love her. Don’t you *dare* accuse me of taking her life, or my baby’s life!”

“Well, if you didn’t do it, who did? I believe you know.” Hutch pointed his finger emphatically at the man as he talked. “And if you value your own life, you’d better level with me now. Parker’s still at large and he’ll be coming after you next.”

Mills hung back near the door. He’d never seen Hutchinson interrogate anyone so aggressively, and it was a sight to behold. He decided to stay out of the way and only get involved if Hutch needed his help.

“Coming after me? He thinks I’m responsible for Carol’s death? Why?”

“Because she apparently confided in him that she was pregnant, and that you were the father.” Hutch regained his composure and backed away from the desk slightly.

“Mr. Bradley, if you know anything about who killed Ms. Parker, you really should tell us,” Mills interjected. “Timothy Parker is hell-bent and determined to have revenge if we don’t intercede. If you know who murdered Carol Parker, you’d be doing them a favor to tell us, so we can offer them protective custody.”

Frank Bradley sighed deeply and leaned forward, resting his head in his hands. “All right,” he said with resignation. “But it was an accident. I swear it was. She never meant to hurt Carol.” A silence fell over the room. *She?*

“I tried to get her to come forward when you found her earring in Carol’s apartment.” When Bradley raised his eyes to meet Hutch’s, they were glassy with unshed tears. “It was Margaret. My wife.”

Once the words were spoken, Hutch realized that at some level, he had already suspected Margaret Bradley.

“She went there to talk with Carol...try to convince her to leave and take the baby with her. I didn’t even know that Margaret had found out about us. She told me that Carol was adamant that she and I were going to marry. My wife became enraged and slapped Carol across the face. They struggled, Carol fell backward and tumbled out the window. Margaret said she tried to grab Carol, but she just wasn’t quick enough.”

Bradley rubbed the palms of his hands against his eyes, trying to eradicate the image his own words had evoked. “I believe Margaret,” he said, his voice flat and dull, devoid of emotion. “She has always been a gentle person, never would hurt even a flea. But she’s also been intensely jealous. I can easily imagine her going there and things getting out of hand.”

Hutch was quiet for a moment, considering all that Bradley had revealed. “Is she willing to make a statement?” he asked quietly.

“I believe so. I’ve been talking with her, trying to explain how much better things will go for her if she turns herself in and cooperates. What will they do to her, Detective Hutchinson? I do love her—that is—in a *companionable* sort of way. I certainly wish her no harm.”

“I honestly don’t know. That’ll be up to a judge and jury. At least she’ll be in protective custody until we can get Parker off the streets.” Hutch turned to Mills and said, “Call for a black-and-white to be dispatched to Mr. Bradley’s residence?”

“No! Wait! I...I want to be there when they arrive. Please...grant me this one request. Please let me have a few moments alone with her.” The expression in Frank Bradley’s eyes convinced Hutch the man was filled with compassion for his wife, and had her best interest at heart.

Hutch ran a hand down his face, considering Bradley’s request. “Okay,” he finally agreed. “We’ll take you there. Then Mills and I will take Mrs. Bradley downtown.”

Chapter 15

Starsky sat up in the hospital bed, fidgeting with the TV controller. Feeling much better after undergoing several breathing treatments, he was restless and ready to escape the confines of the hospital walls. He’d expected Hutch to be back by now, or at the very least, a phone call from him. What the hell was going on? Not a word about Bradley, nor about Parker. And no word from Dobey about Sam. Much more of this and he’d go bananas!

Hutch poked his head around the door, checking to see if Starsky was asleep.

“It’s about time! Where the hell’ve you been?” Starsky snapped, his bad humor more obvious than he’d intended.

“Glad to see you’re back to your old, grumpy, loud self, partner,” Hutch answered, smiling, and happy to see Starsky’s voice was back. He entered the room, closing the door firmly behind him, then produced a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken he’d been hiding behind his back.

“Now, don’t you think you could be a little nicer to the guy who risked life and limb to sneak this past Broom Hilda and her troops for you?” he teased.

“Oh, man, Hutch.” Starsky scrambled to the side of his bed, forgetting to bother with the back of the ill-fitting hospital gown he’d wrestled to keep closed all afternoon. “This is terrific! They’ve been feedin’ me nothin’ but oatmeal and Jello all day. How’d ya know?”

“Well, let’s just say I know you’re one man who doesn’t ‘live by bread alone’.” Hutch rolled the tray-table over and positioned it so Starsky could sit on the side of the bed and enjoy the contraband chicken.

“Biscuits! You got biscuits—and grape jelly! Hutch, you’re the best.” Starsky looked up at Hutch, his face wreathed in smiles. “I’m feelin’ better already.”

Ashamed of his earlier outburst, Starsky paused long enough to apologize. “Look, partner, I’m sorry I jumped down your throat. It’s just, I’ve been cooped up in here, nobody tellin’ me nothin’. I was startin’ worry somethin’ may have gone wrong.”

Without further preamble, he lit into the meal like he'd been starved for days on end. Hutch enjoyed watching Starsky eat with utter abandon, while he briefed him on what had happened with Bradley. Between bites, Starsky asked questions and offered his own opinions. "I don't guess there's any reason to postpone picking up Parker now," Hutch told him.

Starsky looked up from his meal. "I wanna be there, Hutch. I wanna look that sucker in the eyes and show him that in spite of him, I'm alive."

Hutch's eyes met his. "I know, buddy. But I just spoke with the doctor, and he said you've got to stay at least one more day. They're still concerned about pneumonia. I don't think Dobey's going to let us put it off that long."

Starsky knew Hutch was right, but he didn't want to see him go after Parker alone. They'd underestimated the man once. Hutch needed him there to cover his back. Starsky dismissed the fact that Mills would be there as back-up and was about to say as much, when the door opened and Captain Dobey and Huggy came in, laden with gifts.

"Hey, what's cooking, brother?" Huggy said, taking in the picnic spread on the bedside tray. "No pun intended." He chuckled lightly at his own joke, then proceeded to tie a large, brightly colored balloon bouquet to the bottom rail of the bed. "You're looking much better than these turkeys told me, Starsky." He nodded, indicating both Dobey and Hutch.

"Good to see you up, Starsky," Dobey said, setting a large basket of fruit on a table near the door, then helping himself to an apple.

"Thanks, Cap'n. Good to be up," Starsky said between bites.

Captain Dobey turned his attention to Hutch. "Mrs. Bradley just posted bail. Their high-priced attorney practically beat them to the station. Time to move on Parker. I tried to convince them she was better off in our custody until he's apprehended, but they wouldn't listen."

"Cap'n, I wanna be in on the bust. This is our case," Starsky said.

"You're in no condition to be on the streets, Starsky. And don't even think about arguing with me! Hutch, I want you to take Mills and the two officers waiting outside in the lobby over to Parker's place and make the arrest now." Dobey paused and reached inside his coat pocket.

"Here's the warrant. Everything's in order. We'll need more to make the charges stick, but I want that bastard off the streets now. We've got enough to hold him for the time being."

“Right, Cap’n.” Hutch took the document from Dobey, then turned to Starsky. “Sorry, partner. But you know he’s right. Parker could go after the Bradleys.” Starsky was disappointed, but nodded he understood.

“Oh, one more thing before you go,” Dobey said. “There’s something outside here I want you both to see.” Dobey signaled Huggy to raise the blind at the window behind him.

Standing in the bushes just outside the window, were the two paramedics from the night before, Fireman Allen Sewell, and Sam. The dog’s ears pricked up instantly when he spotted his two humans.

“Sam! It’s Sam, Hutch!” Starsky clamored out of bed and rushed to the window. By the time he and Hutch got there, Huggy had the window open so they could reach through and pet the excited, wiggling, seventy -pound dog.

Sewell struggled to keep Sam from scrambling through the window into Starsky’s arms. Sam was so happy to see Starsky and Hutch, he forced his head through the small opening and took turns licking their faces. In spite of his ordeal the night before, the dog seemed no worse for the wear. Gage and DeSoto watched in amusement. To them, it seemed to be a draw as to which of the two detectives was happiest to see the dog.

“He’s a real trooper,” Roy told Hutch. “This is Allen Sewell, the firefighter who brought him out and administered CPR after you left. We’ve been on duty, or I’d have tried to get in touch with you sooner.”

“We can’t thank you enough.” Starsky’s voice was filled with emotion, as he reached through the window to shake Allen’s hand. “We thought he was a goner.” Allen smiled, glad that he’d found the courage to go back for the dog. Sam jerked free and plunged his head between them, demanding Starsky’s attention.

“Your captain tracked us down,” Gage added. “We tried calling your homes; of course, no one was there. We were just getting ready to call the hospital to see if you guys had been admitted, when Captain Dobey contacted our chief and asked him to locate us.”

“We appreciate your taking care of him,” Hutch said sincerely. Sam was still trying to wriggle his way through the window, barely avoiding knocking Gage on his butt in the process.

“I, uh, well, I hate to ask this, but can you hang on to him a little while longer until I make this arrest?” Hutch asked hesitantly. “Starsky won’t be released from here until tomorrow, and I don’t know how long this is going to take.”

Before the firefighters could answer, Huggy piped up from the corner. “It’s cool, Hutch. These guys probably need a break from Big Dog by now. He can go home with me. Huggy Bear and the little dude will get along just fine.”

“Ah, thanks, Hug,” Starsky said, clutching both sides of Sam’s comical face to avoid another wash-down from the giant tongue. “I’ll be outta here tomorrow and I’ll come straight over and pick him up.” Starsky gave Huggy a big grin, then turned back to Gage, DeSoto, and Sewell. “And then I wanna buy you guys drinks at The Pits, and maybe shoot a few rounds of pool.”

“Sounds good,” DeSoto answered, instantly liking this friendly, warmhearted man. He was truly glad that Sewell had gone back for the dog. He obviously meant a great deal to both men. Like firemen, cops laid their lives on the line every single day. If they could do anything to help one another and make life a little easier, then he welcomed that opportunity.



The two black-and-white police cruisers pulled up in front of the Parker home without flashing lights or sirens. No need to tip Timothy Parker off to their arrival. Hutch sat in the front seat of one with Mills, spearheading the arrest. *Starsky should be here*, he thought.

“Okay, let’s make this as quiet and uneventful as possible,” Hutch said, checking to make sure his Magnum was loaded. He placed the gun back into the holster and stepped out of the car, signaling the others to follow.

“Clark, go around back, in case he decides to take off. Johnson, his room is on the south side of the house. Cover that area, in case there’s a window he could use. Mills, you and I will take the front.” Hutch paused and looked around at the group.

“This guy may, or may not be armed. My guess is—not. His weapons of choice are explosives and arson. Just the same, don’t take any chances. I think we have the element of surprise on our side, since he thinks he’s killed the only two people who were getting close to catching him. He nearly killed my partner, and has already murdered one retired police officer trying to make an extra buck as a night watchman. So be careful.” Everyone nodded their understanding then moved into position.

Hutch and Mills gave them a couple of minutes to get situated, then knocked on the front door. Mrs. Parker opened it. “Yes? What do you want now?” she asked when she recognized Hutch.

“Mrs. Parker, is your son home?”

“Just a minute,” she said shortly. “Wait here.” Chloris Parker tried to close the door in their faces, but Hutch used his foot to prevent her from doing so.

“Mrs. Parker, we have a warrant for you son’s arrest. Now I suggest you cooperate, or we’ll have to charge you with obstruction of justice. So please step aside.” Though

polite, Hutch's voice brooked no argument. The startled woman opened her mouth to protest, then thought better of it and moved away from the door, allowing Mills and Hutch to enter.

The distraught woman broke into tears and buried her face in her hands, when she saw her son emerge from the hallway into the living room. "Mother—" Timothy Parker's voice died in his throat as his eyes came to rest on Hutch and Mills.

"No...it can't be...you're dead!" He began backing into the hall. "I killed you...you can't be here!"

This brought a fresh onslaught of tears from his mother. "Oh, no, Timmy. No! Don't say anything else." She ran to her son and threw her arms around him. "It's a mistake...he didn't mean it!"

Timothy wrapped his arms around his mother, comforting her. "It's okay, Mother. I did it for Carol. Bradley murdered her—he had to pay. He got her pregnant, then murdered her."

"Frank Bradley didn't murder Carol. Margaret Bradley went to see her, and there was a struggle. She says it was an accident," Hutch told him. "A formal investigation is already underway, and Mrs. Bradley has turned herself in."

"But...I know he did it! I just know he did," Parker protested.

Mills stepped forward. "Timothy Parker, you are under arrest for the murder of Marvin Jones. You have the right to remain silent; anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law...."



Hutch peeked into the hospital room, checking to see if Starsky was asleep yet. The hour was late, but Hutch had finally finished with the paperwork on the Parker arrest and thought Starsky may have waited up to hear how things went. Hutch could've just called, but he felt the need to talk to Starsky in person. He knew his partner had wanted to be in on the final phase of solving this case, and Hutch felt badly that he couldn't be. Besides, he needed to apologize for overlooking an important clue that might have kept Starsky from being in that booby-trapped building in the first place.

Starsky was lying propped up in bed, reading, of all things, "The Joy of Sex." It was all Hutch could do to keep a straight face, while he quietly eased into the room to catch Starsky red-handed.

"What're you reading there, Starsk?"

Starsky literally jumped, the book flying from his hand and landing in the middle of the bed. He scrambled to retrieve it and slide it under the covers, none-too-smoothly.

“Geez, Hutch! Ya tryin’ to give me a heart attack? Didn’t anybody ever teach you how to knock!”

A smile played at the corners of Hutch’s lips. “I thought you’d be glad to see me.”

“Well, I gave up on you. Don’t you know visitin’ hours ended an hour ago?”

“Yeah. I had to bribe Broom Hilda to let me in after hours, but I wanted to fill you in on the case. I didn’t realize you’d be involved in scientific research, or I would’ve waited until morning.”

“What? Oh this?” Realizing Hutch had already seen the book, Starsky slipped it out from under the covers and tried to play it cool. “I was just curious what kinda quack would’ve come up with this ‘over-the-hill-at-nineteen’ theory.”

“Oh, I see.” Hutch nodded his head knowingly. “And have you learned anything?”

Determined not to let Hutch get the best of him, Starsky shot back, “Yeah. I didn’t know the human body could be twisted into a pretzel and not break anything.” With that remark, they both burst into laughter. They laughed until they couldn’t catch their breath, until tears were rolling down their cheeks. The stress that had been building over the past several days had reached its peak, and at last, they could let it go.

“I’m serious, Hutch,” Starsky said, wiping the tears from his eyes. “I mean, have you looked at these pictures? Notice they’re all drawings instead of photographs? You know why? Because nobody could do this stuff without breakin’ *somethin’*.”

Hutch finally regained control and stopped laughing long enough to reply, “Yeah, I’ve seen it. I’ve even tried some of it. It’s not as easy as they make it look.”

Starsky laid the book on the table. “How did you get hold of a copy of that book here in the hospital?” Hutch asked.

“Well, to tell you truth, I bought it the other day after you were raggin’ me about not reading anything but comic books. It kinda bothered me that you thought I was ignorant or something.”

Looking at Starsky’s face, Hutch could see he was dead serious. “Oh, come on, Starsk, you know I didn’t mean to put you down. I kid with you like that all the time.” Starsky said nothing. “I’m sorry,” Hutch apologized. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Okay?” He felt like a heel for not having realized his offhand remarks were hurtful.

“Yeah, well, I guess it just kinda hit home. I mean, it’s true I *don’t* read as much as you do.” Starsky looked down as he spoke. “Anyway, Huggy went by my place and picked up some clothes for tomorrow. I asked him to bring me somethin’ to read. He said this was the first thing he saw.”

Hutch swiped his hand across his face, imagining that Starsky must have been embarrassed when Huggy showed up with the book.

“He kinda surprised me, Hutch. He didn’t make one single joke about it. In fact, he said he’d like to borrow it when I’m done.” Starsky smiled from ear to ear, letting Hutch know that he was okay with how things had worked out.

Hutch pulled up a chair closer to the bed and sat down. “We took Timothy Parker into custody without a hitch. He was at the house when we arrived, and he didn’t resist. At first I thought I was going to have to take his mother in, too.”

Starsky shook his head in sympathy. “I feel sorry for her, don’t you? I mean, her daughter’s dead and her son’s goin’ to prison. She’s gonna be all alone.”

“Yeah, it’s a sad case any way you look at it.” Hutch was quiet for a few seconds, then cleared his throat before continuing.

“Look, Starsk. I had another reason for coming by here tonight, besides telling you about Parker. I owe you an apology, partner. I had the answer right before my eyes and was too dumb to see it. I could have prevented you from being in that building when Parker torched it.”

“What’re you talkin’ about?” Starsky looked puzzled.

“Do you remember when Gina called and I told you about her profile of our suspect? Computer technician, electronics buff?”

“Yeah.”

“She said something else, and I forgot to tell you. She said it could be someone who built and played with remote-control boats and planes.” Hutch paused and waited for Starsky to see the connection. “Starsk, when we went back to see Parker, I practically tripped over an electronic, remote-control, model car sitting on the floor in the living room. Something clicked in my subconscious, but it just wouldn’t surface. Don’t you see? If I’d made the connection and told you about it, you would’ve known better than to go to the Model Car Club building without back-up. I let you down, buddy.”

Starsky mulled over what Hutch was telling him for only a second. “Aw, come on, Hutch, that wasn’t exactly an obvious clue. I mean, I remember picking up that cherry little mustang and looking at it. I didn’t make the connection either. Besides, you were

taking pain medication and were feelin' pretty lousy at the time. It wasn't your fault I did a dumb ass thing like goin' off without back-up."

"But you weren't the one who talked with Gina. I should've known; I should've put two and two together. You couldn't have, because I didn't tell you. You could've been killed because I forgot to tell you something really important."

Starsky listened, but couldn't find it in his heart to blame Hutch, or be angry with him.

"Hey...listen to me. It wasn't your fault. You're only human. Why you wanna put yourself on a guilt trip, Hutch? Huh? I ain't mad, now, am I?" Starsky smiled.

Hutch was quiet for a moment. "No, I don't suppose you are."

"All right, then," Starsky said. "Subject closed. Okay?"

"Oh, one more thing, Starsk."

"Yeah? What?"

"Gina asked me to discreetly let you know she isn't seeing anyone right now. I think she wants you to call her."

"And you forgot to tell me that? Hutch! How could you? Man, I've been wantin' to go out with Gina for two years! I always thought she was, you know, involved with someone. How could ya forget to tell me somethin' that important? Now I really *am* pissed! You should've told me sooner."

"Calm down. Good grief, Starsk, you can call her when you get home tomorrow. It's not like she's been waiting at the *altar* and I forgot to tell you!"

Chapter 16

Sam sat at attention just inside the front door of Hutch's house, listening as the Torino screeched to a stop out front. Huggy was in the kitchen setting out the fixings for celebratory cookout and didn't hear the sounds the dog's keen ears picked up. As Starsky and Hutch neared the door and Sam could hear their familiar voices, he pawed at the bottom of the door and let out a deafening bark. The sound of the key turning in the lock warned him to back away just in time to keep from getting smacked by the opening door. By the time their beloved faces came into sight, Sam's whole back end was wagging back and forth like a souped-up metronome.

"Sam! Hey, boy!" Starsky greeted, as the dog stood up on his hind legs and placed both front paws on Starsky's chest. After one big, wet kiss he quickly switched over to Hutch

and gave him the same treatment. Elated to see them both, he didn't seem to know who to go to first.

A happy smile brightened Hutch's tired face as he reached out and scratched the dog's ears affectionately and spoke to him softly, "Hey there, fella." Back and forth Sam went between them, overwhelmed with joy to have both of his humans back again. He wasn't about to let either one out of his sight again anytime soon!

"The prodigal son returns," Huggy teased Starsky as he walked into the room. "Good to see you guys in something besides hospital gowns. Man, I think you two have put half of Metro General's interns through med school," he joked with his usual candor.

"Thanks for takin' care of Big Dog, Hug. We went by to pick him up and they said you were already here," Starsky said, never interrupting his gentle petting of the dog.

Huggy handed them each a bottle of brew. "The beer is cold, and the steaks are ready to hit the grill. Huggy's barbecue is guaran—teed to thrill."

"Oh, man, that sounds great. I'm starvin'. How 'bout you, Hutch?"

"Yeah, hungry and tired. I feel like I could sleep for a week." Emphasizing his words, Hutch dropped into the nearest recliner and stretched out.

Starsky plopped down in the middle of the floor and was immediately joined by Sam. He absently scratched the dog's ears. "I'm tired of bein' in bed," he grumbled. "And I'm ready for some *real* food."

The doorbell rang, and Starsky looked over at Hutch still sacked out in the overstuffed easy chair. Seeing Hutch wasn't about to budge, Starsky reluctantly got to his feet. "I'll get it," he said. "You expectin' someone?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, I am. A guest for our little cookout," Hutch replied.

Starsky went to the front door, Sam shadowing his every step. When he opened it, he was greeted with a bright smile from Gina. "Hi, Dave."

"Gina! I didn't know you were comin'. This is a terrific surprise." He stood there holding the door open, flanked on the left by Sam, who'd appointed himself official greeter.

"May I come in? I brought desert."

"Oh, geez, I'm sorry. Of course you can. Come on in." He stepped aside. "This is turnin' into a regular party."

"Hutch said you wouldn't mind," she said tentatively.

“Mind? I’m just sorry I didn’t think to invite you over for dinner myself,” he said, flashing her his best smile.

“This must be Sam,” Gina said. She handed the cheesecake to Starsky then bent down to pet the rottweiler. “I never knew you liked dogs,” she told him. “You know, I used to teach dog obedience. I even considered a career in the canine corps. If you need any pointers on training, or solving behavioral problems, I’m your gal.” Sam was enjoying the extra attention, but stuck close to Starsky’s leg, unwilling to put any distance between them.

“No kiddin’? Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.” Starsky stopped short of saying they would soon be finding a permanent home for the dog. Somehow, he couldn’t bring himself to voice the thought.

“He’s a neat dog. Rottweiler mix, I’d say. And it’s obvious he’s crazy about you. Does he get along this well with everyone?”

“Yeah. Never meets a stranger,” Starsky said affectionately. “He’s really more attached to Hutch than me.”

“I doubt that. I can sense that he doesn’t want you out of his sight right now. Was he with you at the warehouse fire?”

“You mean you haven’t heard? He went out and got Hutch and led him back to me.”

“Wow,” Gina said, impressed by the animal’s natural protective instinct. “And he isn’t trained in rescue work, or search and find? He must be a natural. Sounds to me like he appointed himself as a guardian.”

“A what?” Starsky asked with a quizzical look on his face.

“You know, he’s decided it’s his responsibility to guard and watch over you. Who knows, maybe in a former life, you were life-long friends.”

Starsky thought about it for a second then smiled. “Yeah, kinda like Hutch and me. Maybe he’s *supposed* to be with us.”

With one final pat on the head for Sam, Gina stood up and walked on into the kitchen where Hutch and Huggy were finishing up the meal preparations. Before Starsky could follow her, the bell rang again.

“It’s gettin’ to be a regular Grand Central Station around here,” he mumbled, going to the door with the cheesecake still in hand.

“Cap’n Dobe,” he said, surprised to see his boss standing there when he opened the door.

“Starsky, how are you doing?” Dobe immediately zeroed in on the scrumptious-looking cheesecake Starsky was holding.

“Pretty good, Cap’n, pretty good. You wanna come in? Is anything wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to drop by and check on you two and give you an update on the case,” Dobe said, stretching his neck to look past Starsky into the kitchen. “Having a party?”

“Well, yeah, kinda. Just Hutch and me and Huggy and Gina. Come on in and have a beer.”

“Thanks. I think I will.” Dobe’s face perked up at the invitation. He gave the cheesecake one more wistful glance. “Where’s Hutch?”

“Hutch! Come out here, will ya?”

Dobe hadn’t noticed Sam lurking discretely behind Starsky’s legs. Once Dobe stepped into the room, Sam overcame his shyness and boldly went to the visitor and eagerly stuck his big nose in Dobe’s crotch as a “welcome to my home.”

At first Dobe was too startled to react, but once he realized what was happening, he stumbled backwards in his impatience to get away from the overly friendly dog. “Starsky! What the hell is this dog trying to do! Get him away from me!”

Hutch entered the room just in time to witness the whole incident and was dying to laugh, but thought better of it when he saw the stormy expression on Dobe’s face. “It’s okay, Cap’n. He’s just trying to make you feel welcome.” Hutch grabbed Sam’s collar and pulled the dog away, barely able to suppress a grin in the process. Starsky turned his head so Dobe wouldn’t see how much he was enjoying the scene.

“Whose dog is this, anyway? And I don’t want any of your smart-ass answers either, Starsky!”

Starsky and Hutch made eye contact, each waiting for the other to regain enough composure to answer Dobe.

“Well, he’s kind of ours, Cap’n,” Hutch finally said. “We rescued him from Slick Willie’s. We don’t quite know yet what to do with him.”

“For starters, you could teach him some manners!” Dobe blustered. Gina and Huggy watched with amusement.

“You’re right. Sorry about that Cap’n. Here, have a beer,” Starsky said, rushing to redirect Dobey’s attention away from Sam.

“Thank you, Starsky. Is that steak I smell?”

“Uh, you were going to bring us up to date on the case?” Hutch prompted.

“Yes, I was, wasn’t I? Well, Timothy Parker has signed a confession. He admits to setting the fires, but maintains the watchman’s death was an accident. He claims a falling timber struck Jones on the head and killed him. Of course, we know that’s not consistent with the coroner’s report, but it’s up to the DA to decide what charges to prosecute on.”

“What about Mrs. Bradley?” Hutch asked.

“That one’s a little more complicated. It’ll be hard to determine if Carol Parker had help falling out that window. The case has officially been re-opened. Considering who Margaret Bradley is, it’ll probably never make it to court.”

“If they find any proof, I hope the DA will prosecute, regardless of Mrs. Bradley’s money and connections,” Starsky grouched, disgusted with the inequities in the justice system.

“Don’t hold your breath, Starsky,” Dobey replied. “Now, did someone say there’s a steak in there with my name on it?”

Dobey headed for the kitchen to see if he could speed things along.

“You just had to give him a beer, didn’t you?” Hutch whispered irritably.

“What could I do? He *is* our boss, ya know!” Starsky whispered back.

“Now you’ll have to give him your steak.”

“What?” Starsky exclaimed. “Why my steak? Why not yours? I’m starvin’, Hutch! I been eatin’ that hospital garbage for two days!”

“You’re the one who invited him to stay!”

“No, I didn’t! Listen, Hutch, if anybody should give up his steak—”

Quietly, Sam wheedled his way between the two of them, looked up, and whined pitifully.

“Now look what you’ve done, Hutch. You’ve upset Sam.”

“Not me. You’re the one who invited Dobey in—” A cold nose nuzzling Hutch’s palm brought the debate to an abrupt halt.

“Okay, fella, you win. Starsky and I won’t argue anymore,” Hutch said soothingly.

Starsky bent down close to the dog’s ear. “But if you go in the kitchen and give Cap’n Dobe your ‘nose in the crotch’ treatment again, I’ll split my steak with you, boy. Okay?”

Hutch rolled his eyes, convinced Sam had no idea what Starsky had just told him. The dog cocked his head to one side and looked at his two humans thoughtfully. Starsky smiled at him and nodded—an affirmation to carry out the dirty deed.

“Very cute, Starsky. Like he really understands—”

Hutch stopped short when Sam gave them one final glance. Then, with the determination of a soldier on a mission...the dog marched into the kitchen.....

The End