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GUARDIAN II

The Luck of the Draw

by TibbieB

*With eye upraised his master's look to scan,
The joy, the solace, and the aid of man;
The rich man's guardian and the poor man's friend,
The only creature faithful to the end.*

Anonymous

Chapter 1

“So, what do ya think?” Starsky asked eagerly. “Think Sam’ll like it here? It has a fence and everything.”

Hutch smiled, wondering how Starsky could be so excited about a run-down house with peeling paint and a sagging front porch. “It’s uh... it has...character.” Hutch struggled to find the right words, not wanting to discourage Starsky’s enthusiasm. “Is this the only thing you could find?”

“What? You don’t like it? I think it’s got alotta potential,” Starsky snapped defensively. “Besides, you aren’t exactly out poundin’ the pavement looking for a new pad, now are you?”

“Starsk, you know I can’t break my lease. I told you when Sam came to stay with me that if Mrs. Frey found out, she’d evict me.” It was a familiar argument, one they’d had several times over the past few days. Hutch loved having Sam live with him, but after six months of looking over his shoulder every time he and Sam came or went from the house, it had been almost a relief when the crotchety landlady had finally spied the dog. She’d laid down an ultimatum to Hutch—the dog went, or they were **both** out of there. That would mean forfeiting a five hundred dollars deposit Hutch had scraped together in order to get the lease in the first place. And five hundred dollars didn’t come easy on a cop’s salary.

Knowing that he was in violation of his lease agreement, Hutch saw no point in trying to negotiate with the woman. So now Starsky had decided to move into a house and take the dog to live with him. Who would have guessed that Starsky, who'd never even owned a dog before, would go to such great lengths to provide a home for Sam? Only a few short months ago, they'd never laid eyes on the dog. But rescuing him from the Pound was something neither of them had ever regretted. Already, Sam had put his life on the line when leading Hutch to Starsky, who was trapped in a burning building. As far as they were concerned, 'getting rid' of Sam wasn't an option.

"I said it has character, Starsk. It definitely needs a fresh coat of paint and some new steps on the porch. I hope to God it looks better on the inside."

Sam's large head suddenly appeared over the back seat, slobbering on Hutch's shoulder ensuring he wouldn't be left out of this momentous event.

"Look. Sam likes it, don't ya boy?" Starsky reached over and scratched the big dog's ear. "He's gonna have plenty of room to play ball here."

Starsky threw open the car door, then gave Sam the command to follow. "Sam, heel." The dog quickly obeyed and followed Starsky to the front steps of the ramshackle house. The weeks of obedience training had really paid off.

At first Starsky and Hutch both had believed the dog was too hardheaded to learn. But their friend, Gina, had encouraged the trio to persevere, assuring the two cops that the dog was smart, and would eventually come around if they'd just stick to it. Gina, who worked as an evidence tech for the LA Fire Marshall, had also taught canine obedience classes for eight years, and knew a good dog when she saw one.

Starsky looked back at Hutch with a smug expression on his face when the dog immediately came up along side him and sat down. The two men had alternated taking Sam to his obedience classes. Because Hutch had experience handling dogs, Sam had responded to him much quicker than to Starsky. But in the past couple of days, he'd seemed to comprehend that he was expected to obey Starsky too. Hutch figured it had taken a little longer because Starsky had always pretty much let the big dog get away with anything.

Hutch came around the car and joined them. Bending down and craning his neck, he looked up under the house for signs of the foundation collapsing. Surprisingly, the flooring didn't seem to sag anywhere except the front steps.

"Watch your step now. Huggy has a friend in the construction business who's gonna send a carpenter over to repair the steps." Starsky then turned to Sam and gave him a one-word command, "Okay." The dog bounded up the steps ahead of the two men and sat down at the front door to wait. Starsky praised him, "Good boy. Wait," then used his key to open the scarred and peeling front door which groaned on its hinges when it swung open.

As they stepped inside, Hutch noted that the old house smelled like lemon oil, reminding him of the wooden school building he'd attended in grammar school. The foyer was a cool and dark, with high ceilings and somber wood floors badly in need of a coat of wax. The large front room had three arched doors leading to other areas of the house. It was a pleasant looking room, with classic Spanish architecture. It had probably been quite beautiful in its heyday. Sam planted himself between his two people, determined not to be left behind as they did a walk-through inspection from room to room.

"You know, Starsk, this is actually pretty nice. It's a lot bigger inside than it looks."

"Yeah, I know. A friend of Gina's turned me on to it. Seems the guy who lived here died and it was quite awhile before anyone discovered the body." Starsky's nose crinkled up as he spoke, imagining the odor that must have permeated the house before it was fumigated.

"But, the odor's all gone now," he added, reading Hutch's mind. "It's just that nobody wants to live here when they find out some guy died in here. So, I got a terrific deal. Didn't even have to put down a deposit."

At this, Hutch arched an eyebrow, but refrained from comment.

"Well, it's not like he's still here," Starsky said defensively.

"Natural causes?"

"Nah. Guy was murdered. Case was never solved. Kind of makes the place mysterious, don't ya think? You know, like one of those old Bela Lagoosi movies."

"Lagoosi, Starsk, Bela Lagoosi," Hutch corrected him for at least the hundredth time. "For a guy that loves old horror movies, you sure don't know your actors very well."

"Whatever. I just know it's kind of creepy. But to get a great place like this so cheap, I can put up with a little creepy."

"Have you looked into the case? I mean, it could be interesting to know what actually went on here. It may be haunted," Hutch teased.

He fought back a smile when he noticed a worry line crease Starsky's forehead. "There may be more going on here than the landlord has let you in on." Hutch couldn't resist poking fun at his partner. From their run in with the ballet instructor, Andre Nadassi, who believed himself to be a vampire, and Starsky's near death experience with

Papa Theodore on Playboy Island, he already knew his partner had a healthy fear of the occult.

Sam nudged his way past Starsky. Overcome by curiosity and impatience, he forged ahead, exploring the house on his own. The two men followed the dog from room to room, Starsky jotting a list of needed repairs, until finally they ended up back in the living room.

“Better cut this short,” Starsky said. “Gina’s expecting us at six. Don’t forget, you promised to come over and meet her new roommate tonight.”

“About that, Starsk,” Hutch began, “I’ve been thinking.... You know every time you set me up with a blind date, it turns out to be a disaster. How about making my excuses to both of them? Tell them Dobey called me back in, or I’m sick, or something.”

“Wait a minute, now—you promised you’d at least meet Jackie. You can’t back out on us now. How’s it gonna look? Huh?” Starsky argued.

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea. I mean, what if we don’t hit it off? It could be kind of awkward.”

“No way, buddy. You’re gonna show up if I have to come get you myself! Besides, I told you, she’s a smart lady, and she has a great personality.”

Hutch groaned inwardly. *Not the old ‘great personality’ bit!*

Starsky checked his watch one more time. “Sam, here boy! Time to go!” The dog hurried back and fell into step beside Starsky.

“What does she look like?” Hutch hurried to catch up with them. “Every time I’ve had a blind date with a ‘great personality’, she’s looked like something out of a bad ‘B’ movie.

“Just trust me on this, partner. You think I’d fix you up with someone I wouldn’t want to go out with myself?”

“Well, you’ve been known to do worse things. Yeah...as a matter of fact, I do.”

“Now that cuts me to the quick, Hutch.” Starsky clutched at his chest to emphasize his point.

Hutch peered across the roof of the Torino before getting in. He pointed a finger at his partner. “I’m warning you, Starsk.”

Mischief danced in Starsky's blue eyes. "I'm tellin' ya, Hutch, she's a babe. And she works with Gina as a forensic chemist—which means she's smart. What more could a guy ask for? Hmmm?"

"Great." Hutch opened the door and stepped aside so the big rottweiler could hop into the back seat. "You really expect me to believe you?" Hutch took his seat on the passenger's side and barely had time to close the door before Starsky had the car in gear.

As the Torino sped toward Venice Place, Hutch tried several times to coerce Starsky into letting him out of the night's commitment. But his partner wouldn't give in.

While the two argued Sam watched them intently, capable after all these months of recognizing whether or not they were serious. He'd become used to it—no, he downright *expected* this type of bantering from them. It didn't frighten him like it had in the beginning. He knew them too well now, and instinctively understood that it was harmless. Besides, if things started to get out of hand, he'd create a diversion by sticking his cold, wet nose in one or the other's ear. It worked every time!

"Be there by six—and don't make me have to come after you," Starsky warned as Hutch got out the car and slammed the door.

"If she turns out to be a dog, you're going to owe me big time, pal." Hutch realized what he'd just said and added, "No offense, Sam."

Hutch stepped up onto the curb and watched as Starsky and Sam drove away in the Torino, accepting his fate, and hoping that the evening wouldn't be another classic Starsky catastrophe.

Chapter 2

Stan Bowman lay alone in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. It had been a miserable day. The visit to his father in the nursing home had been both disappointing and stressful. It wasn't easy seeing his old man gaze out at the world through empty eyes, not even acknowledging his son's presence.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the administrator of Shady Meadows had summoned him to the office. He bluntly told Stan that in light of his being three months behind in paying the bill, they would have to transfer his father to a State facility, as an indigent patient. That was the final straw.

After half an hour of arguing, the administrator had reluctantly given Stan thirty more days to come up with the back-payments. It wasn't like he really gave a damn where the old man stayed, but he hadn't given up yet on the idea that his father had been squirreling away some money in a secret bank account somewhere. So he needed to keep close tabs on the old boy, just in case he came around.

Only two years ago, Charles Bowman had been a successful businessman, owner of his own investment firm. As Charles' only child, whose every whim had been indulged, Stan knew he'd someday inherit his father's business. So what was the point of busting *his* ass going to college and working his way up the ladder? Innately a lazy person, he'd been content to wait for his old man to provide a cushy job in the company. He'd intended to make it known that he was the boss's son, a privileged character. Yes...life had been good.

Then, Charles Bowman lost everything. The gambling, his addiction to alcohol...it had all converged and destroyed not only his life, but his family as well. Out of desperation, he'd gone to his old friend, Martin Reynolds and begged him to buy the company; his last chance to get out from under the mountain of debt he'd amassed.

Reynolds had reluctantly agreed; and out of a sense of loyalty to an old friend, had actually given him more than the company was worth. But rather than using the money to make a fresh start, Bowman drove straight to Vegas that night, and lost every red cent in less than twenty-four hours.

When Charles Bowman finally returned home the next night, he couldn't face his wife with the truth. Instead, he went into the library and downed a bottle of thirty-year-old scotch, shirring up his courage for what was to come.

Later that night, Janet Bowman came downstairs and found her drunken husband sitting in the dark, clutching an empty scotch bottle in one hand, and a loaded pistol in the other. He tearfully confessed his foolishness and begged her forgiveness. Then Bowman pointed the pistol at his temple and told his wife goodbye. Seeing what he was about to do, she tried to wrestle the gun away from him and in the tussle, was shot through the heart and died in his arms.

Realizing what he'd done, Bowman placed the gun to his own temple again and pulled the trigger. But death wasn't in the cards for him. Instead, he was condemned to a sentence of silence and solitary confinement in what remained of his injured brain. No one could say how much he understood, whether he could hear them, or if he even recognized that he was still alive. Only the shell of a man, his days were spent staring out at the world with empty eyes, windows to an empty soul.

These were the details Stan Bowman chose to ignore; some thought because it was too painful to accept that his father was a failure, a drunk, and a coward. But those who *really* knew him thought it more likely that he just refused to believe that his gravy train had been derailed.

As the hours ticked by, his hatred for Martin Reynolds intensified. In his warped mind, Reynolds' wealth and power were a direct result of cheating Bowman's father out of his business, when in reality, the entrepreneur had taken a financial loss on Bowman

Investments. It helped, having someone to blame. The frustration and anxiety seemed to subside a little when he concentrated on the hatred. Anything but the truth.

“You’re going to pay, you bastard,” Bowman uttered aloud in the darkness. “You’re going to pay in more ways than one...”



The doorbell rang just as Gina closed the oven door. Starsky and Sam were right on time. Gina greeted Starsky with an affectionate peck on the cheek. She looked past him and realized that Hutch was nowhere in sight. “Don’t tell me he isn’t coming,” she whispered.

“He’s comin’. Don’t worry. I threatened his life,” Starsky whispered back. Sam, who’d been patiently waiting for a morsel of attention, decided it was time to make himself more conspicuous by lifting his head under Gina’s hand, urging her to give him a little pat.

“Hi, Sweetie.” Gina scratched the dog’s ear and smiled at him fondly. “You been a good boy today?”

To Sam, it sounded like ‘blah—blah-blah. Blah blah blah blah blah blah?’ But he had her attention now, and that was all that really mattered. Sam felt like a pretty lucky dog. He had three great people in his life, and that was more than any stray or abandoned animal could ever hope for. He looked around at the sound of another human entering the room. She was a pleasant looking person, about Gina’s size. Her voice had a musical sound to it that he liked. She gave Sam a warm smile then patted him on the head, instantly earning his admiration.

“Hi, David. Where’s your friend?” Jackie looked around the room expectantly.

“He’ll be here any minute.” Starsky hoped he sounded more convincing than he felt. He was actually worried that Hutch may have chickened out. Just then, the bell rang.

“I bet that’s him now,” Gina said. Hutch looked a little nervous as he was invited in, but before he could even say hello, Sam loped to where he stood, reared up, and planted a big kiss on his nose. All four people laughed at the dog’s uninhibited display of affection. Hutch’s eyes widened as he spotted the petite brunette standing next to Starsky. His reaction didn’t pass without Gina’s notice.

“Hutch, I want you to meet my new roommate, Jackie Kent.”

Hutch flashed her his best smile—the smile women found irresistible—the ‘sexy, yet innocent-all-American-boy smile’. Starsky knew that smile. He’d seen Hutch in action too many times not to recognize it.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Jackie,” Hutch said smoothly. Starsky’s eyes rolled back in his head, forcing Gina to turn away to hide her amusement. She knew all too well how charming Hutch could be when he wanted to. If she wasn’t already crazy about Starsky, that million dollar smile would have affected her like it did most of the women who passed through Hutch’s life.

“Come on in guys. How about a beer? Wanna give me a hand, David?” Gina kicked into ‘hostess’ mode, and headed toward the kitchen, dragging Starsky by the hand. Sam fell into step and merrily followed, optimistic he could con at least one of them out of a treat.

Sam sat quietly at Gina’s feet, while she went about the task of arranging cheese and vegetables on a tray. Starsky sat on the counter and talked about the new house, all the while helping himself to the hors d’ oeuvres, earning a scolding slap on the hand. When no treat appeared to be in sight, Sam let out a quiet little woof, just in case they’d forgotten him. It was a somewhat comical sound, coming from a ninety pound dog

“Hey, thought we had a talk about beggin’, Big Dog,” Starsky chastised. Sam stood up, his tail waving like a flag.

“He’s okay.” Gina turned and dropped a cheese cube into the cavernous mouth. Sam swallowed the morsel whole, loudly smacking his lips in the process.

“Have you given anymore thought to the Search and Rescue Program?” she asked Starsky.

“Yeah. I’m interested. You really think he’s got potential?”

“Sure of it. He was the brightest dog in his obedience classes. He’s so eager to please, he responds to praise better than any dog I’ve ever trained.” Gina added little colored toothpicks and a sprig of parsley to the snack tray then asked Starsky to grab the beers. They joined Hutch and Jackie in the den, and found they were already laughing and talking like old friends.

“So how come I never heard of this group?” Starsky asked, drawing the attention of the other couple.

“This is a totally new program. There aren’t very many in existence. The one here in LA is a pilot program made up totally of volunteers. I think Sam is a perfect subject. We’re talking about the Search and Rescue Program,” Gina explained to the others.

“Starsky told me about your idea. I think it’s worth looking into,” Hutch volunteered.

“These people go all over the United States with their dogs to help search for people in disaster areas, to search for lost children, track escaped criminals. Some are even trained to do water searches,” Jackie added. “This program could save hundreds of lives when, and if we ever have another big quake here. Think how valuable they’ll be in searching for people trapped in collapsed buildings.”

Starsky started liking the sound of this. “So, how do we get Big Dog in? And could we just volunteer for assignments here in LA?”

Gina took the beer he offered and settled down on the sofa next to him. “It’s all voluntary, David. You only volunteer for assignments you want to participate in. Sam would be one of the few dogs who could perform with multiple handlers. You, Hutch and I could all work with him. It should be pretty simple since he’s already trained to obey all three of us. And you could quit anytime you like. The catch is, we’d have to work gratis. We wouldn’t even be reimbursed for our expenses. But I believe it would be very rewarding and I think Sam could be one of the best in the business.”

Starsky looked over at his partner. Hutch nodded, silently agreeing to give it a go. He loved Sam and was proud of how far the dog had come from being the abused puppy he and Starsky rescued from the house of a murdered drug dealer only a few months earlier. He knew the dog had potential, and that he loved people. He also believed Sam would revel in the attention.

“Well, if the Blintz is in, I’m in.” Starsky grinned at Hutch, and reached down to scratch the dog’s ear. “How about you, buddy?” Sam woofed loudly, not entirely clear on what Starsky had asked, but from the tone of his human’s voice, he felt sure it must have been good.

The evening passed quickly, coming to an end much too soon. “I hate to break up a good party,” Gina said, “but I know we all have to go to work tomorrow.” Starsky’s arm closed around her tenderly. He didn’t want to call it a night, but he knew she was right.

Hutch stood up first, not wanting to wear out their welcome. “Listen Jackie,” he said quietly, “do you mind if I call you? I had a great time tonight.”

Jackie smiled at him, her blue eyes twinkling with good humor. “I’d really like that, Hutch.”

They walked to the front door, while Starsky helped Gina clear the table. Hutch reached out tentatively and tilted Jackie’s face upward, grazing her lips gently with a soft kiss. He was pleasantly surprised when she responded by pressing back with an unexpected eagerness. Encouraged, he moved closer, his tongue coaxing her lips apart. After a few seconds, Hutch stepped back, not wanting to press his luck too far. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Jackie looked a little breathless as she nodded her agreement. “Good night, Hutch. I had a really nice time.”

“Me too.” Hutch smiled at her then sprinted to the beat up old Ford, ecstatic with the way things had gone. It had been awhile since he’d enjoyed the company of a woman so much... For once, Starsky had been right!



Starsky leaned against the Torino, Gina resting against his chest, his arms casually encircling her waist. It was obvious they were comfortable together. Neither felt the need for pointless chatter. They’d been casual friends a number of years; then Sam came onto the scene, creating the catalyst that finally jump-started their relationship.

“Great evening, David. I think Jackie and Hutch actually liked one another.”

Starsky smiled, remembering the schoolboy expression on his partner’s face when he was introduced to Gina’s roommate. “Yeah, the Blintz was all ready to find fault with another blind date. I had to threaten him with bodily harm to get him over here.”

“I figured as much.” Gina laughed softly. “I hope it works out. Both of them are so nice.”

“Well, if it doesn’t, it doesn’t. We introduced them; that’s all we can do. No matchmakin’, you hear me?”

Gina leaned her head back, resting it against Starsky’s cheek, while gazing up at the stars. “I promise. Whatever they do, it won’t become a problem between us. Agreed?”

Starsky’s embrace tightened, drawing Gina closer to him. He loved the smell of her hair. His lips played along her ear lobe as he spoke.

“Agreed. Now, how about a kiss, then I have get goin’. Hutch and I have to go early tomorrow mornin’ for fire-arm re-certification.”

Gina turned and smiled at him languidly, then moved closer to feel his warm lips against hers. She parted hers willingly, to allow his tongue to enter and deepen the kiss. Within a heartbeat, she had physical proof that Starsky was beginning to enjoy himself. She wanted nothing more than to go with the flow, but reluctantly pulled back and quickly kissed on the tip of his nose. “Home!”

“You really know how to hurt a guy,” he complained good-naturedly. With a final pat on the head for Sam, Starsky slid behind the wheel of the red Torino and cranked up the engine.

“Thanks again for keepin’ Sam. I’m gonna be moved into the house before the end of the week. I promise.”

“No problem. He’s a sweetheart. I think I love him as much as you and Hutch do. I’ll start the process to get him into the program this week. I understand they have a waiting list, so it may take awhile.”

As though he understood every single word, Sam moved closer to Gina and nuzzled her hand with his cold, wet nose.

Starsky couldn’t help but feel a little hurt that the dog was so amiable to staying behind with Gina. In spite of that, Starsky gave her a lopsided grin. “Here’s lookin’ at you, sweetheart,” he drawled, using his best Bogie impersonation before backing down the driveway. In the rearview mirror, he saw them standing together, watching until he drove out of sight.

Chapter 3

Hutch was sitting on the hood of his grungy Ford when Starsky screeched up to the curb the next morning. Hutch didn’t seem to be out of sorts, in spite of Starsky running twenty minutes late and driving like a bat out of hell. He hopped off the car and reached for the door of the Torino as soon as it came to a halt. Starsky prepared himself for a lecture, knowing he deserved it.

Surprisingly, Hutch smiled as he settled into the passenger’s seat. “Good morning, partner,” he said cheerfully.

Starsky plunged headlong into an apology. “Listen, I know I’m late, but the stupid alarm clock never went off.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Hutch brushed off the excuse before Starsky could finish. “Beautiful day, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, beautiful.” Starsky agreed. Caught off guard by the warm reception, he glanced away from the road and looked at his partner’s happy face. *Only one explanation.* “Jackie... Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.” Hutch grinned from ear to ear.

“I hate to say ‘I told you so’, partner. But...I told you so.”

“Yeah, for once you didn’t screw up.”

“Hey, is that anyway to talk to the guy who just fixed you up with a terrific lady?”

Hutch tipped his head to the side, conceding the point. “Okay, I’ll admit it. I like her a lot. And I’m pretty sure the feeling was mutual.”

Starsky’s glanced at him again, considering his next words carefully. “Listen, Hutch. I think you should take it slow. I mean, I’m glad you two hit it off, but there’s somethin’ you should know.”

Instantly, Hutch’s expression turned apprehensive. After what had happened with Gillian, the two friends had vowed to never again keep secrets from one another about the people with whom they were involved.

“Jackie’s just come out of a bad relationship. She was with the guy four years, and she’s kind of vulnerable right now. Gina said she doesn’t think Jackie’s ready for anything serious.” Starsky glanced at Hutch for his reaction before continuing. “All I’m sayin’ is—take it easy, okay? I don’t wanna see either one of ya hurt again.”

Hutch smiled. “Oh. You had me worried for a minute there. She told me about that last night.” He smiled at Starsky. “Don’t you see? That’s the beauty of it. We’ve just met, and already she feels safe enough to open up and be totally honest.”

Starsky nodded. “Got to admit, it’s a good sign.”

“Must be my charming personality that won her over,” Hutch said tongue-n-cheek.

“Must be.” Starsky smirked. “Sure not your good looks or your sense of modesty.” Constantly amazed at his partner’s uncanny success with the ladies, Starsky shook his head and smiled. It didn’t seem to require any effort on Hutch’s part at all.

Starsky whipped the Torino into the parking lot of a McDonald’s. “I don’t know about you, but I need at least three more cups of coffee before we get down to business at the firin’ range.”



Stan Bowman sat in the stolen car outside Parkview Junior High. He checked his watch for the umpteenth time. Two fifty-five. The kids should start coming out any minute now. The anticipation building, Bowman fidgeted with the key chain dangling from the ignition. *Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea*, he thought.

After spending three days watching Martin Reynolds’ home—learning his routine, spying on his family—Bowman had decided the quickest way to get what he wanted was to hit Reynolds where he was most vulnerable. His beautiful fourteen year old daughter, Jenny was obviously the apple of her father’s eye. After watching the family chauffeur drive the girl to school and back every day in the family’s late model Mercedes, an idea had taken root.

So earlier that morning Bowman followed the chauffeur after he dropped Jenny off. The man went straight to a club over on Central that was openly known as a front for a numbers racket. Three hours later, he drove to a swanky neighborhood for a rendezvous with a rich socialite who apparently enjoyed naughty little trysts with the hired help.

Bowman waited, giving them time to hit the sack, then he hot-wired the Mercedes and casually drove away without anyone noticing. He smiled confidently as the picture-perfect neighborhood became only a small dot in the rearview mirror.

It would take hours for the chauffeur to gather enough courage to report the car stolen. Without a doubt, he'd be reluctant to admit where he was and what he'd been doing when the thief made his getaway, and would put off as long as possible notifying his boss or the authorities. Just to be safe, Bowman switched out the license tag as soon as he got home. Then he lay low, keeping the car out of sight until time to be back at the school house.



As Jenny approached the car and spotted the stranger, she was apprehensive. Bowman stood leaning against the back door of the Mercedes. She stopped about three feet from the automobile. "Who are you? Where's Thompson?"

"My name's Stan. Thompson wasn't feeling well. I work for your father, and he asked me to pick you up." Bowman hoped he sounded nonchalant about the change in routine. He smiled at the girl, opening the car door, but not pushing too hard to convince her.

"Look, if you're not comfortable coming with me, just go inside and call your dad. He'll tell you." Bowman reached into his pocket, retrieved a dime, then stepped forward and handed it to the teen. "I don't mind waiting. I work in the warehouse, and frankly, this is a real nice break for me. Take all the time you want."

His suggestion relieved her suspicions about the substitute driver. Surely if he hadn't been sent by her father, he wouldn't be encouraging her to call. And besides, he had such a nice face. In fact, he was quite good-looking, wearing his dark brown hair fashionably long, dressed in clean, carefully pressed trousers and a navy and green plaid shirt. Not exactly normal uniform for a chauffeur, but he *did* say he worked at the warehouse.

"That's okay," she said at length. He held the door open and she willingly climbed into the back seat. Bowman pulled away from the curb and drove in the direction of the Reynolds Estate.

Stan looked into the rear view mirror at the pretty face with large, expressive blue eyes framed by long, curling lashes. Her bouncy, naturally blond hair was cut in the

popular Farrah Fawcett style. Even the navy and white school uniform didn't detract from her good looks. *Fourteen going on twenty*, he thought. Bowman gloated to himself that there may be perks to this job he hadn't considered. Yes, there was more to take into consideration here than just the ransom.

When he took a sudden left turn off the normal route, Jenny sat forward and looked around. "Excuse me. Where are we going? This isn't the way home."

"Just have to run a couple errands for your Dad. Don't worry; he'll let your mother know you'll be a little late."

Bowman glanced at the rearview mirror and made eye contact with the girl, hoping she was convinced. Then slowly, she sat back, seeming to accept his explanation—at least for the moment. The next turn took them into a more secluded, rundown section of the city. She sat forward again.

"Mister...uh...Stan, I think maybe you'd better take me home now, and run Daddy's errands after you drop me off. I have to study for a biology test." Despite her best efforts, Jenny's voice quivered as she spoke.

"Relax. We'll only be a few minutes." He steered the automobile down a litter-strewn, vacant back alley. He'd sought out this area—isolated, abandoned buildings—all scheduled to be torn down soon to make way for government-subsidized housing. The area had been cleared out weeks ago. Warning signs were posted every few hundred feet to keep people out of the area; even the vagrants were gone.

Stan decided he'd found the perfect hiding place. If things went as he planned, he would not only come out of this rich, but he'd use Jenny to lure her father to his death. The girl would have to be killed too; he couldn't risk her identifying him. Glancing at the rear view mirror again, he felt a pleasurable tightening in his groin. With her ultimate fate decided, there was no reason not to have a little fun.

"I want to go home now!" she insisted firmly.

Bowman pressed a button on the steering column, automatically locking the vehicle's doors. He was excited by the look of alarm that sprang to the blue eyes as she began to comprehend what was happening. "Sit back and shut up!" he snapped, dropping all pretenses.

"No! Let me out now!"

Bowman brought the car to a screeching halt, turned, and slapped the girl hard across the face with the back of his hand. Shocked, she yelped as the burning sting of the blow brought tears to her eyes. She drew back, her hand covering to her cheek protectively.

“NOW, do you understand? Another word, and I’ll get out of this car and beat the living hell out of you! And don’t think I won’t. In fact, I really enjoyed that. Maybe I’ll beat the hell out of you just for the fun of it. So shut your damn mouth now!

An eerie hush fell over the Mercedes, except for the quiet sobbing of the terrified girl.

“That’s better,” he said more calmly. “You do what I tell you and in a couple of days I’ll let you go running back to your precious ‘daddy’.” As he talked his voice became louder. “I just want what’s rightfully MINE. And you’re my meal ticket. Don’t give me any trouble and this’ll all be over soon.”

Bowman slammed the car into reverse and backed through the open garage door of what had once been a high rise apartment building. Turning off the engine, he got out and lowered the large, rolling door. He unlocked the car door and yanked the frightened girl out. Twisting her arm behind her back, Bowman pushed her ahead of him toward the stairwell to the basement.

“Nobody can hear you, so don’t waste your breath screaming. The cops cleared everyone out two weeks ago.” The panic-stricken girl stumbled, and he jerked her back to her feet.

“If you try to escape, I’ll find you. I know every nook and cranny of this place. And you don’t even want to know what I’ll do to you then.”

Jenny said nothing. The tears silently streaming down her face, she allowed herself to be commandeered down the dingy, smelly stairwell which reeked of mildew and urine. Never having been exposed to anything so vile in her young, pampered life, Jenny was almost paralyzed by the fear of what was to come.

Chapter 4

Hutch pulled up in front of Starsky’s new home and parked behind a pickup truck brimming over with tools, ladders, and construction-type odds and ends. He was glad to see that Huggy’s contacts had come through. Maybe Starsky and Sam would be able to move in by the weekend as planned.

Poking his head around the door to the master bedroom, he saw Starsky at the top of a ladder, painstakingly painting the narrow strip where the wall and ceiling met. He was wearing Hutch’s old red bandanna tied around his forehead, the same bandanna he’d used as a bandage when the two of them had been stranded in the Klamack National Forest last year. Since that narrow escape, Starsky had decided the raggedy, faded bandanna was his good luck charm, and wore it faithfully whenever an opportunity arose. Hutch smiled, noticing the light sprinkles of blue paint dotting his partner’s face and clothing.

“Starsk.”

Startled by the sound of Hutch’s voice, Starsky almost lost his balance, but grabbed the top of the ladder and righted himself. “Bout time you got here, pal. Half the day’s gone and there’s still a ton of work left to be done.”

“Half the day? Starsky, it’s only 9:30. And you know, this *is* my day off.” Hutch set a box of donuts and a thermos of coffee on a wooden crate near the door. “I guess it’s too late for a coffee break.”

Starsky scurried down the ladder. “Hold on. Those aren’t crème filled are they?”

“Well, only half of them. The rest are jelly. Maybe I can just give them to the workmen.” Hutch made a great show of looking into the adjoining hallway. “Where are they?”

“Give me those.” Starsky snatched the box out of Hutch’s hand. “They can have some after we’re finished.” Opening the carton, his eyes were lit with anticipation. “These chocolate crème or vanilla?”

“Both. I’ll take vanilla.”

Surprised by the uncharacteristic request, Starsky handed Hutch a donut then opened the thermos. The rising steam filled the room with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. Starsky could tell it was his favorite Kona blend, the beans Hutch had bought and kept on hand for special occasions.

“What’s the occasion, partner?”

“Just wanted to celebrate your getting this great place—providing a home for Sam—and introducing me to Jackie.”

Starsky grinned as he poured some of the special brew into a Styrofoam cup and passed it to Hutch. “Now we get down to the real nitty gritty. Your date last night must’a gone pretty well.”

“You could say that.” Hutch’s lips curved upward, turning into a hint of a smile. “She’s fantastic, Starsk. We talked until two this morning.”

“Talked?” Starsky wagged his eyebrows at Hutch.

“Yes, talked. She’s really interesting, and bright. Did you know she’s talked Gina into enrolling in enough classes to earn a degree in forensic chemistry? It’ll mean a big step up career-wise from being a technician.”

“Of course I did. Gina told me all about it. I think it’s terrific.” Starsky poured another cup of coffee and fished out a chocolate crème for himself.

“She’s really quite a girl, Starsk. She’s pretty, fun, and she makes me laugh.”

In spite of his effort to not let it show, Starsky couldn’t help but worry Hutch might be setting himself up for another disappointing romance. He’d stood by and seen his best friend hurt too many times already. He felt compelled to offer some carefully worded warning.

“Hutch…” He stopped, groping for the right words. “I just don’t wanna see you rush into anything.”

“Don’t worry about me; I know what I’m doing.” Hutch’s tone closed the door to further discussion.

“Wait…” Starsky reached out and laid a hand on his partner’s arm.

Already regretting his sharp reply, Hutch smiled reassuringly. “It’s okay, Starsk. I mean it. I’m okay.”

A silent moment passed between them, then Starsky smiled too. “Okay. But I’m here if ya need me.”

Hutch nodded his understanding.

Starsky abruptly changed the subject. “Gina called this morning and said she got in touch with the guy who put together the first Search and Rescue unit here in LA. Said they’re lookin’ for new recruits and are havin’ a meeting tonight at the VFW building on Piedmont and she wanted to know if we could come.”

“Sure. I’m ready to get started. Besides, I miss having Sam around.”

Starsky smiled and nodded agreement. “Yeah, I know what ya mean. I didn’t know I was so used to the big Goomba. It’s only been a coupl’a days and I already miss him.”

As an afterthought he added, “Hey, why don’t you bring Jackie along?”

“Sounds good. I’ll give her a call now. Your phone hooked up yet?”

“Yeah, in the kitchen. Leave your dime on the counter,” Starsky joked, then climbed back up the ladder with a fresh tray of paint.

Hutch went to the kitchen to make his call. Just as he was hanging up the phone, a loud crash and an angry, “Damn!” came from the direction of the bedroom. Hutch

rushed back down the hall to see what all the commotion was about, and found Starsky sprawled on the floor, flat on his back, his face, hair, and a good portion of his body covered in blue paint. The rest of the paint was splashed haphazardly on the walls and the newly polished wooden floors.

“Don’t even think of sayin’ it,” Starsky warned, the paint running in little rivulets down his face. Hutch felt the laughter bubbling up, but fought hard to keep it from erupting as he reached down and offered his partner a hand.

“You hurt, Starsk?”

“Only my pride,” he grimaced. “How ‘bout grabbin’ a towel so I can mop some of this mess off before I traipse it through the house?”

“Sure. But I’ve got to tell you—blue’s a good color for you.”

Chapter 5

“I want to thank everyone for coming out tonight—especially you new prospects. I hope by the end of the evening you’ll know enough about our program to decide whether or not you want to be a part of it.”

The man was short in stature, but stood with his head erect and his shoulders squared, giving him the appearance of being much larger than his actual size. His short cropped hair implied that at some time he had been a marine. “My name is Tom Nichols and I’m the founder of this chapter of the Search and Rescue Dog Organization.”

Starsky, Hutch, Gina, and Jackie sat near the back of the room. Sam was stationed at Starsky’s feet as they listened to the speaker. Sam laid his chin on Starsky’s knee, silently asking to have his ears scratched, which Starsky did without a second thought.

“This is a fairly new organization. We’re one of the first operational units in the United States, so we have an opportunity here to break new ground and become a model for other groups trying to start up. No particular breeds are sought, rather dogs with particular personality traits and higher than usual intelligence.” Nichols paced back and forth in front of the crowd, reminding Starsky of a drill sergeant giving a pep talk to new recruits.

“The dogs are only as good as their handlers. You’ve got to remember that, and if you aren’t committed to this program, get the hell out before you even start. You and your dog are partners. You must think like partners, and communicate using your instincts.”

The two detectives exchanged glances. If anyone understood what it meant to be partners, they did. Sam looked up at them as though he understood that bond as well. He had earned the right to become a member of their partnership when he ran back into the burning warehouse to be with Starsky, who was trapped without hope of escape.

“The first thing we’ll do to determine if your dog is a good prospect is run him through a few tests. The first of which is the ‘Canine Good Citizenship Test’. This indicates if he has the right temperament to work with the situations we’ll be facing.

The dog must be friendly and outgoing, yet not willing to take off with anyone who tries to entice him. He can’t be easily spooked by loud noises, unfamiliar situations, nor scenes where there is a lot of confusion. This test was first developed by the AKC, in hopes of acknowledging the attributes of the ‘perfect dog.’ It works well for our purposes; and tonight, at the conclusion of this briefing, those of you who are still interested should remain to complete an application, and to test your dog. If he can’t pass the test, you’re wasting your time, and there’s no point in going any further.

I assume by your presence here, your dog is obedience trained. If not, he or she is not eligible to participate in the program.

“Cuts right to the chase, huh?” Starsky whispered to Gina.

“I guess he wants to make sure we know what we’re getting into,” she whispered back.

Sam, becoming bored with the ‘ear-scratching’, looked around the room at the unfamiliar people and dogs. Most of the dogs seemed anxious to get up and move around, but were being kept in check by their masters. Some whined, some panted loudly, obviously nervous about their surroundings.

“There are all types of rescue dogs. Some are trained specifically for particular environments, such as avalanche recovery, or water search. Some search for survivors of natural or man-made catastrophes, others specialize in tracking missing persons, while others search strictly for cadavers. My team recently went to Mexico to search for survivors of the quake they had down there last month.” Nichols paused and turned around to look behind him.

“Rex, heel,” he said. A black and tan Belgian malinois shepherd quickly came forward and sat down next to Nichols.

“Good boy,” he praised. “This is Rex. He personally located five children and two adults who were all dug out from under collapsed buildings. All seven survived because of this dog.” Nichols petted the dog proudly.

“People, I’m here to tell you, it’s a great feeling to know that you and your dog have worked together to save the lives of people who may have had no chance to survive

if you hadn't been there." The man's pride in his dog was apparent by the emotion in his voice.

"Do you think Sam could do that?" Jackie asked Hutch.

"Absolutely," he answered without hesitation.

Nichols continued, his voice booming as he became more engrossed in this topic so dear to his heart. "People, our teams are available twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year to respond to local, state, and federal law enforcement, as well as other public service agencies. Even if you cannot commit to being available around the clock, there is a place for you in this organization."

The crowd whispered among themselves, some seeming reluctant to making such a commitment, others obviously gung-ho and excited about the prospect.

Starsky leaned close to Hutch and whispered, "What do you think, partner?"

"I don't know, Starsk. We don't exactly have a lot of spare time on our hands."

"Yeah, but the man says we don't have to commit full-time. I think we ought'a at least stick around and see if Big Dog's up to the challenge. Huh?"

Hutch nodded, convinced it was a worthy cause. Since it was all volunteer, he didn't think they had anything to lose. Jackie squeezed his hand affectionately. "I think you're making the right decision, Hutch. Remember when those kids were being kidnapped and murdered out in Frisco last year? One of these dogs helped crack the case."

"No kidding? I hadn't heard that."

"It's true. I was called in to consult on some evidence found near the body of one of the children. That's how I know for sure they helped. This is a great group, Hutch. I hope Sam can pass the test."



Tom Nichols wound up the introductory briefing and reminded the crowd to remain in the auditorium if they wished to have their dogs tested. In the meantime, someone would be around to provide them with the necessary paperwork.

Some people and dogs dispersed, deciding, for various reasons not to pursue the program any further. Jackie looked around the room and saw about a dozen had remained behind. Some of the dogs were barking or whining. Some strained at their leashes, while others sat quietly and patiently as Sam did. Four individuals wearing name tags and carrying clip boards were making their way to each of the applicants.

Starsky fidgeted with Sam's collar, checking to make sure it was secure, but not too snug. Hutch took on the job of filling out the application and questionnaire all new recruits were required to complete.

"You'd think we were trying to get him enrolled at Harvard," Hutch complained.

"It can't be all that bad. Here, let me help you. I have his medical records right here." Gina produced a large yellow envelope and shuffled through Sam's records to locate the ones they needed. "His shots are up-to-date and he's been neutered. He's on heart-worm preventive medication."

Jackie stood back and quietly watched in amusement as her three new friends fussed over the king-sized, sweet-natured rottweiler. They reminded her of doting parents about to send their five year old off to his first day of school.

Starsky squatted next to Sam, talking barely above a whisper to the dog, while adjusting the buckle on the collar one last time. "Listen, Big Dog, don't embarrass us now. I know you're smart when you wanna be, but I also know you're stubborn as a mule."

Sam cocked his head to one side, listening to the voice he loved so dearly. Try as he might, sometimes he just couldn't quite decipher the secret language humans used to communicate. As usual, he had to rely on the tone of his friend's voice, the movement of his body, even the expression in his eyes. All these things told Sam more than any words could. He was completely in tune with this dark-haired man called Starsky. That much he knew. It was the same with the taller, light-haired one—the one called Hutch. Only Hutch was as precious to him as Starsky.

Sam knew that anywhere they were, he wanted to be. They had changed his life from one of fear and deprivation to warmth, affection, and security. And best of all, a full belly at bedtime. His happiness was complete when either of them walked into a room. A word of kindness and praise from their voices was cherished above all else. It had not been so long ago that he had hidden in dark corners to keep from bringing attention to himself. More often than not, recognition brought with it pain and degradation.

Now these two females had also entered his life. He loved the one called Gina. She was good to him, had taught him things which had brought praise from his two beloved humans. She soothed him with her soft voice and tender hands. But still, she wasn't Starsky or Hutch. Only they could make his spirit soar. The new female had only been with him for a few days. He already liked her very much too. She seemed to want his affection, and he had plenty to go around, so it pleased him to accept her into his heart as well.

“So, you gonna be a good boy and make me proud?” Starsky whispered near the dog’s ear. “And that means no hikin’ your leg on the judge, understand?”

Sam’s response was a wet, sloppy kiss swiping across Starsky’s mouth, bringing a chorus of laughter from the other three.

“Well, I don’t believe it,” came a familiar voice. “If it isn’t Detective Tight Jeans and his partner.” All eyes turned to the short, attractive middle-aged lady, dressed in jeans and an overlarge T-shirt with the message, “Dogs Accept People For What They Are” emblazoned across her chest.

“And is this our poor little puppy from the drug dealer’s house? My, you sure have grown up to be a big boy.” The woman reached down and presented her hand palm up for the dog to scrutinize. He sniffed vigorously, then allowed her to pet him on the head.

Hutch stepped forward and extended his hand. “Mary, Mary Peterson—It’s great to see you.” A warm smile reached all the way to his eyes as he greeted the woman who’d been responsible for Sam belonging to the two detectives. Starsky stood too and shook her hand.

“Come let me introduce you to a couple of good friends. This is Gina Ashford and Jackie Kent. Gina’s been obedience training Sam with us.”

“You don’t have to introduce me to Mary,” Gina interjected. “She’s well-known by all the trainers and animal activists in this part of LA. Heck, she practically wrote the book on obedience and agility. It’s a pleasure to meet the legendary Mary Peterson,” she added sincerely.

The older woman shrugged off the compliment. “Please, don’t go saying things that’ll make these two expect me to walk on water.” She smiled at the foursome, then turned her attention to Sam.

“Well, big fellow, looks like they’ve been treating you well. If anything, you’re getting a little bit of a spare tire through the middle there. What have you boys been feeding him, steak and lobster?”

“Premium dog food—when he’s with me,” Hutch answered, then turned an accusatory eye to his partner, “and burritos and chili dogs, when he’s with Starsk.”

“That’s not fair, Hutch. You know I’ve caught you a bunch of times feedin’ him pepperoni,” Starsky said defensively.

“That’s only because you order our pizzas with pepperoni, and you know I’m not gonna eat that stuff, Starsky...so I give it to Sam.”

“Now boys, let’s not get into a name calling contest. If you ask me, he looks great. Hardly the scrawny, cigarette burned, frightened puppy you took home from the pound that night.” Mary put an arm around each man’s waist, stood between them, and looked up at their handsome faces. *Lord, to be twenty years younger, she sighed.*

“I’m just tickled pink to see you both here! Are you fellows thinking of getting involved with this organization?”

“I’ve asked them to consider it,” Gina answered for them. “Mary, Sam’s an incredible dog. His natural instincts that are sharper than any dog I’ve ever trained. I believe he has the potential to be an invaluable addition to the group.”

“Great. We need as many good dogs and handlers as possible on our team. You know this is a fledgling program, and our success or failure could have long reaching effects on other states considering starting up their own teams.”

Mary clapped her hands and rubbed them together. “Well, I’m here to administer the Canine Good Citizenship Test to your pup—by the way—what’s his name?”

“Sam,” Starsky offered proudly. “I named him myself.”

Mary smiled at the good-looking, confident young man. “Sam it is, then. The purpose of the test is to determine if he has the temperament to work with the general public, as well as with his handler. Who’s going to be the handler?”

Starsky, Hutch, and Gina looked at one another, each hesitant to answer. Finally Starsky volunteered, “It’ll have to be me, Mary. Sam minds me better than Hutch.”

“What?” The indignant look on Hutch’s face left no doubt he didn’t agree. “Starsky, you know you let him get away with murder. If there’s an authority figure in Sam’s life, it’s me.”

“Are you nuts? What?—Ya wanna stand there and make such a bogus statement? Sam and I are best pals and you know it.”

Gina could see they were starting to get riled and thought she’d better step in. “Mary, I think we should all three train with Sam.”

Starsky still looked miffed and glared at Hutch, mumbling beneath his breath, “He likes me best and you know it...”

Hutch glared back and reined the dog in close to him. Jackie stood back and watched in silent amusement while her three new friends vied for the dog’s loyalty.

“All three? But why three?” Mary looked at the trio standing before her. “I can foresee some problems with this dog being confused about his alpha figure. He has to

have someone he's totally loyal to, or he may balk at some of the tasks he'll face in the field."

"That's one of the unique characteristics I've discovered about Sam," Gina continued. "This dog is just as responsive to David as he is Hutch. And, he also obeys me. Because of the guys' work schedules, the dog spends a lot of time with me; so he also follows my commands. Right now he's staying at my place until David gets moved into his new house. Hutch had to give him up because his landlady was threatening to evict them both..."

"Whoa!" Mary put up her hands in front of her. "This is getting as complicated as one of those daytime soap operas. So, who does he gravitate to? When all three of you are there, who does he choose?"

All three were silent. Sam looked from one to the other. He didn't know what was going on, but all of a sudden these humans had gotten awfully quiet. He wondered if Starsky and Hutch were having another one of their serious "discussions."

"I honestly think he obeys all three of us equally," Hutch finally answered.

"This is going to be interesting." Mary looked them each in the eyes. "Okay, I'll talk with Tom and see if he'll go along with Sam having three handlers. But there will be NO competition among you to outdo one another. Understood?" She waited for an affirmative nod from each.

"If it works out, this dog will be breaking new ground. By having all three of you to fall back on, he could potentially be available most of the time, right?"

"Sure," Starsky answered. "And I don't believe Big Dog's gonna disappoint you." Mary was amused at the pride in Starsky's voice. Was this *really* the same young man who had been terrified of an overgrown, traumatized puppy a few short months back? Yes, this was going to be very interesting indeed.



The test turned out to be simpler than they had expected. The most intimidating exercise was a starter pistol being fired near Sam to test his reaction. Had he run for cover or bolted out of the auditorium like several of the other dogs did, he would have been disqualified. Hutch was both proud and surprised at Sam's calm acceptance of the loud noise.

At one point, his laudable performance almost came to an end. Sam was placed in a 'down/stay' position and all three handlers were required to leave the area for a minimum of seven minutes. Had he broken the stay, the judge would have declared him too risky to follow life and death instructions.

Sam wasn't sure what all the hoopla was about; but he'd learned early on in his life with these three humans that he was better off just rolling with the punches. Sure they did weird stuff—or at least it seemed weird to him, but he was grateful for his place in their world and would try to do whatever dumb thing they expected. Besides, more often than not, when he went along with them, it eventually resulted in a treat of some sort. Lord, but he loved those treats!

The loud noise he'd heard so close to his ear earlier had been frightening, but he'd looked at Starsky for reassurance and saw the man wasn't scared. So he just sat there, waiting for the next signal of what he should do.

When a few minutes later Hutch told him, "Sam...down...stay!" so firmly, he thought, "*Heck, why not?*" After all, it was getting late and he was pretty tired. He might even be able to catch a few winks while his humans decided what they wanted to do next.

But when all three of them walked toward the door, he began to have second thoughts. What if they went home without him? Worse yet, what if he never saw them again. In desperation Sam whined mournfully. Starsky instantly turned and gave him a stern look, warning he'd better reconsider his actions. Deciding he'd better obey Starsky, he laid his head on his front paws and waited. Sam watched several of the other dogs get up and walk around the room, even leave the room, searching for their owners. But to him, it seemed the best course of action was to wait and see.

Though they were gone only minutes, to Sam it felt like hours. When his three friends returned, they were smiling at him, obviously pleased about something. Starsky knelt down beside him and took Sam's big head in his hands, praising the dog for obeying and being a good boy. Sam didn't know what he'd done to be blessed with one of those beautiful smiles of Starsky's, but he knew they wouldn't be going home without him.

Chapter 6

Starsky woke to the sound of the phone ringing on the bedside table. "You're not up yet? Starsky, you were due in here thirty minutes ago. You'd better get the hell down here now. Dobey's been out here looking for you twice. Something's going down and he's really worked up."

"Good mornin' to you too, partner," Starsky mumbled, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Don't get your shorts in a wad. I just overslept a little, it's not exactly a national disaster."

"Just get your butt in gear," Hutch whispered into the phone as Dobey's perspiring face appeared at the door a third time. Hutch smiled nervously, "Must already

be on his way, Cap,” he covered. “I’m sure he’ll walk in the door any minute.” He’d kill Starsky later.



The two detectives entered Captain Dobey’s office after lightly tapping at the door. Usually they’d just barge in, but Hutch suggested since they were already in hot water, there was no point in antagonizing their boss any further.

“Come in!” Dobey bellowed. “About time you decided to join us, Starsky.”

Starsky had the decency to blush and mutter an apology; but Dobey ignored him and hurried into an introduction.

“Starsky, Hutchinson, this is Martin Reynolds.” Each detective shook hands with the man.

“Of Reynolds Enterprises?” Hutch asked. He recognized the entrepreneur from his frequent photographs in the Wall Street Journal.

“That’s right,” the man acknowledged.

Dobey immediately cut to the chase. “We believe Mr. Reynolds’ daughter, Jenny was kidnapped yesterday.” He dropped an 8x10 color photo of the beautiful teen on the desk. “He needs our help.”

Starsky hesitated, but knew he had to ask, “Sir, is there any possibility your daughter ran away? Has she ever disappeared like this before?”

“We’ve already covered that territory, Starsky,” Dobey interrupted. “Three young ladies from Jenny’s school saw her get into the car with a strange man. Apparently, he was driving Mr. Reynolds’ car which was stolen sometime yesterday morning.”

“You may as well know that my wife has serious misgivings about involving the police in this matter. But I’m is convinced that we have no choice. I wasn’t born yesterday; and I realize that most of these cases end up with the victim being murdered, even after the kidnapper’s demands have been met.”

Hutch looked up and met Reynolds’ eyes straight on. This was a man who pulled no punches. Hutch felt it only fair to be just as candid. “Unfortunately, you’re right, sir.”

“He’s asked specifically for you two to handle the case,” Dobey volunteered. Starsky and Hutch exchanged glances.

“Let me explain,” Mr. Reynolds began. “I read in the paper a few months back that you were the detectives who solved the Haymes case. You worked with a psychic or some such person.” Reynolds paused long enough to clear his throat. “I don’t believe in all that hocus pocus, but I can’t ignore the fact that you found that girl and you saved her life. If you could do that, you may be my best hope of seeing my daughter alive again.”

Hutch quirked an eyebrow at Starsky, but said nothing.

“It’s true that Joanna Haymes survived, but the credit should go to Collandra, not Hutch and me.”

“From all the reports I’ve seen and heard, you both put your lives on the line for that child, and the gamble paid off.” He turned to Hutch, “I understand you even took a bullet in the process.”

“I was wearing a bullet proof vest,” Hutch modestly pointed out.

“The fact remains, you guys have grit. In my book, that gives you the edge. I’ve gone through my whole life not being afraid to take chances, risking everything—and it’s paid off, more often than not. But this time, the prize is too valuable. I’d give everything I have to see my baby back home safe.” Reynolds’ voice was thick with emotion. Both detectives recognized that making such a statement didn’t come easy for a man like Reynolds.

“She’s my only child, damn it, and I don’t think I could live another day if something happens to her.”

The two detectives exchanged glances, knowing that this man was baring his soul to them and right now, thought they were a lifeline of sorts.

“We’ll do what we can,” Hutch finally offered.

“But you have to understand,” Starsky added, “we don’t know what kind of lunatic we’re dealin’ with here. We can’t guarantee you a happy ending.”

“We’ll be with you every step of the way,” Hutch said, “but you’ll have to do what we tell you. Keep in mind that you may not agree, but we’re going on experience and instinct. We won’t insist on you doing anything that we think will put your daughter at greater risk.”

“Fair enough.” Reynolds sat back down, while Starsky and Hutch took their usual seats and prepared to question the man.

“Who was the last person to see Jenny, sir?” Hutch asked, then took a small spiral notebook from the pocket of his baseball jacket to jot down anything that might be useful.

“As Captain Dobey said, it was some of her school mates yesterday afternoon. That imbecile driver of mine allowed my car to be stolen, and the kidnapper apparently went to the school and picked her up.”

Starsky leaned forward a little, taking control of the interview. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m sure your daughter’s old enough to know better than to get into the car with a stranger. Do you think it coulda been someone she knew? Someone she trusted?”

“I don’t know.” Mr. Reynolds ran his fingers through his hair, as though the gesture would help clear his thoughts. “Perhaps...I mean...we’ve always warned her that something like this could happen; so it would make sense that she perhaps knew the man.”

“Did any of Jenny’s friends give a description of the guy?”

“I believe they gave that to one of Captain Dobey’s officers.”

“I’ve put out an APB for a Caucasian male driving the Reynolds’ Mercedes. Also gave them a description of Miss Reynolds,” Dobey interjected. “For the time being, I’m keeping it all low-profile.”

“Do you think you could come up with a list of people who may have a grudge against you or your family?” Hutch hurriedly scrawled Reynolds’ answers to Starsky’s questions.

“Well, yes, of course; but no one particular comes to mind right off hand. I just assumed whoever did this is after money.”

“I know this may be hard to accept,” Starsky continued, “but most kidnappings are committed by someone on the inside; someone who knows the family routine, can come and go inconspicuously—an employee or even a trusted family friend. So we’re gonna need a list of all the people who work for you, starting with the domestic help.”

“I’ll give you anything you need.”

“I’ve pulled you two off your other cases. I want you to get to the bottom of this.” Turning to Mr. Reynolds, Dobey continued. “These two may be late ninety percent of the time, but they’re still my best detectives.”

Hutch looked up from his note taking. “Have you had any contact from the kidnappers yet? A note? A phone call?”

“Nothing. And that seems very strange to me,” Reynolds answered.

“Actually, it could be a lucky break for us. We’ll get a team over there to tap your phone and post some plain clothes officers at your home and office,” Dobey suggested.

“Mr. Reynolds, I know it won’t be easy, but please try to stay calm. You’ll need a cool head to deal with the people responsible for this.” Seeing the strain and fear in the man’s eyes, Starsky reassured him, “We’ll be right by your side—all the way.”

“Starsky and I will get in touch with some of our contacts on the street and see if these people have been talking about their plans or trying to recruit help.”

Hutch turned his attention to Starsky. “Let’s go over to the school first and see if Jenny’s friends have remembered anything more since the interview last night.”

“Right.” Starsky stood up to leave. “Cap, we’ll meet you at Mr. Reynolds’ home as soon as we’ve finished up.”



The two detectives sat quietly waiting in the principal’s office to interview the three girls who’d witnessed Jenny’s abduction. The door opened and Mr. Cook entered with the three students and made the introductions.

“I’d never seen him before,” Carla began. “He was really cute, though. I can see why Jenny went with him.”

“You think Jenny went with this man because he was nice looking?” Hutch asked.

“Well, no, not exactly. It’s just, he had an honest, harmless looking face.”

“Could you give us a description?”

“I can,” Brenda volunteered. “He had dark brown hair, wore his sideburns kind of long. You know, like Tom Jones. Probably in his late twenties.”

“He had a great smile. And he wore dark sunglasses that made him look mysterious and sexy.” Joyce added. All three girls giggled, then almost immediately sobered when they remembered why they were there.

“He was tall, kind of thin, and he dressed very casual for a chauffeur.”

“Did Jenny look like she knew him?” Starsky asked.

“Not at first; but after a few seconds, she seemed to recognize him, because she got into the car willingly.”

“So he didn’t force her? She didn’t look scared or threatened.”

Carla looked at her two friends then at Starsky. “No, not at all. We talked about that after she left. We figured he must have been a friend or employee of her Dad’s.”

Chapter 7

Jenny opened her eyes slowly; the left one was swollen almost shut from the blow she’d had been dealt the night before while trying to fight off Bowman. She had no idea how long she’d been here. The room had no windows; no opening that would allow her to see the rising and setting sun.

Her mind was numb. Fear and pain were the only emotions she felt now. Her naiveté stripped away, she realized that mostly likely, she’d never see her parents again.

Unable to block out the ferocity of the assault, silent tears coursed down Jenny’s cheeks. This person didn’t care about her father’s money. It was more personal than that. She’d begged for mercy, but he’d been unaffected. Even the sex seemed secondary; revenge—that’s what it had been all about. But why? Her father was a kind man, a fair man. She didn’t remember having ever heard a derogatory word about him from others. It was all so confusing!

Jenny whimpered when she tried sit up, her body aching from the movement. The fourteen-year-old had never known that such brutality existed. She berated herself for having believed that her father had sent this man. Since she was a small child, she’d been warned to never get into an automobile with a stranger. But that *was* her father’s car, and he’d seemed so open and willing for her to check out his story.

At the sound of a key turning in the lock, she cringed against the wall. “*Oh God, please!*”

Stan Bowman opened the door, balancing a tray in one hand, holding a gun in the other. He didn’t really need a weapon. What little fight she had, vanished when he raped her. Bowman felt a sudden surge of power, seeing the look of sheer terror on her face. Her eyes reminded him of an animal trapped in the headlights of an oncoming automobile; knowing what was about to happen, but powerless to prevent it.

“I brought you something to eat.” He set the tray down in front of her. “I’m going to untie your hands now. No fast moves, or I’ll have to hurt you again.”

Jenny drew back, frightened by the threat. She had no desire to eat, but realized she had to keep up her strength if she had any hope at of all of escaping this nightmare.

Bowman cautiously untied her hands, noticing that the ropes had left red welts on the sensitive skin. “After you eat, we’re going to make a phone call to your old man. I’ll let you talk to him. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Jenny slowly nodded yes, afraid to speak, not trusting her voice to say the words without breaking.

“I thought so.” He smiled benevolently, his voice smooth as silk. “I’ll tell you exactly what to say. And you’d better not try anything cute or I’ll have to kill you. I won’t blink an eye either. I’ll cut your throat and you’ll bleed to death before the cops can get here.” He spoke slowly and deliberately, a sadistic smile twisting his otherwise handsome features. “Do you understand?”

Again, the frightened girl nodded yes. Bowman stretched out his hand to gently touch the angry bruise below Jenny’s eye, but she drew back as if she’d been jabbed with a hot poker. “I won’t hurt you,” he cooed.

She scrunched back further into the corner. “Okay. I’ll leave you alone to eat your meal. It’ll be dark soon. Then we’ll make the call.”



Starsky was quiet during the drive to Reynolds’ home. Hutch looked over at his partner, trying to read what was on his mind. It was clear that something was bugging him. Sometimes when he was quiet like this, Hutch would let it go—give him the solitude to work through whatever was eating away at him. But sometimes, it was best to bring it out into the open.

“Starsk, you wanna tell me what’s bothering you?”

Starsky glanced over at his friend, then looked back at the road. He couldn’t hide anything from Hutch. Hell, why even try? He knew better; two sides of the same coin. “Just thinkin’ about Mr. Reynolds and the hell he’s goin’ through. Hutch, why do the bad guys always pick on the innocent? For Christ’s sake, she’s just a kid, not even old enough to be datin’ yet.”

“I don’t know, Starsk.” Hutch answered quietly. “I just know it’s our job to try and save her life. And sometimes, no matter what we do, it just isn’t enough. Maybe we’ll get lucky. But you know as well as I do, she stands less than a fifty/fifty chance of ever coming home. We have to go into this realistically.”

“Yeah, I know.” Starsky sighed and gazed straight ahead.

“What else?” Hutch gently prodded. “We’ve seen a dozens of cases like this. Why does this one seem to have you more...well...disturbed?”

Starsky considered not answering. It was hard to put into words, especially without coming across all soapy. The silence stretched between them for endless seconds before he spoke again.

“It’s just, well...ever since Forest’s goons kidnapped you and shot you up with heroin, I know what it feels like. I mean, I know what it’s like for the family...the not knowin’. All that time you were missin’...I didn’t know where you were, didn’t even know if you were dead or alive. It was...it was terrible.”

Hutch closed his eyes momentarily, remembering the pain and fear of those endless days, hovering between reality and a drug-induced world in which he had no control. If it hadn’t been for Starsky, he may never have been able to find his way back to sanity. He reached over the short distance between them and laid his hand on his partner’s shoulder.

“Starsk, I know too. Don’t forget I went through the same thing when Simon Marcus snatched you. It’s something no one should have to experience.”

Starsky swallowed hard, then looked deep into the clear, blue eyes of his friend and saw his own pain mirrored in them. “Yeah...I guess you do.”

A silence fell over the car for the rest of the drive, each contemplating the ordeal that lay ahead. Finally the Torino drove through the twelve-foot high wrought iron gates and pulled into the driveway of a massive Tudor style home.

No police cars were in sight; Dobey had made certain of that. The team that was busy inside setting up the wire-tap and a command post, had arrived earlier in a plumber’s truck; a precaution to keep from tipping off the kidnappers if they had the house under surveillance

“It’s show time,” Starsky said as they walked to the door and rang the bell.

The door swung open almost immediately answered by a short, portly man dressed in a dark suit. He had a distinguished look about him, and whether he came by it naturally, or was the result of many years’ service as a butler, was unclear. “May I help you, gentlemen?” he droned.

Both detectives flipped open their badge covers as inconspicuously as possible to avoid drawing the attention of anyone who may be spying on the house. The man quickly stepped aside and allowed them to enter without further introduction or conversation. “This way please.” He turned and walked briskly toward the library, assuming they would follow.

Starsky looked around the foyer and at the spiral staircase leading down from the two floors above them. Heavy, ornate carvings embellished the banisters, giving the

structure an even more massive appearance than it actually was. The butler's shoes made a tapping noise as he led them from the marble foyer and down the hall, until reaching the thick, piled carpet that lead off into each of the many rooms.

He opened the door to the library and stepped back. There was a hubbub of activity underway as the two detectives entered the room. Three men were busy hooking up cameras and tape recorders in one area of the room, while another seemed to be calibrating various monitors and meters.

Captain Dobey and Mr. Reynolds sat on the sofa, near the telephone. Reynolds looked at his watch every few seconds, his hand noticeably trembling. Dobey appeared to be deeply absorbed in conversation with the man sitting directly across from him. He was a middle-aged, dapper fellow, dressed in a black suit and wing-tip shoes that were polished so bright you could see your reflection in them. Two more men, wearing navy colored jackets bearing the printed acronym, "FBI," were talking in hushed tones on telephones.

Dobey looked up, saw his men enter, and motioned them to join him and Mr. Reynolds.

"Good. I'm glad you two got here before they called. Mr. Reynolds received a note," Dobey told them.

Starsky and Hutch each reached out and shook hands with Reynolds. "A note? Can we see it, Cap?" Starsky asked.

"Here. The lab's already dusted it for prints. It's clean." Dobey handed Starsky the single sheet of paper which was secured in a plastic zip-locked bag. "They found one print, but it belonged to the kid who delivered it."

Starsky scanned the note quickly, Hutch looking over his shoulder, doing the same.

**"I have your daughter. She is alive and well.
Will call later to discuss demands. No cops if
you value Jenny's life."**

"Cap, did anyone question the kid that delivered this note?"

"Of course we did, Hutchinson! Who do you think you're dealing with? Some green rookie right out of the academy?" Dobey bellowed.

"What'd he say?" Starsky asked, ignoring the captain's indignant outburst.

Mr. Reynolds sat there nervously checking his watch again and again.

“Said a man stopped him on the street where he was skate-boarding and offered him twenty five dollars to deliver it. Kid said he had to come fifteen blocks to get here.”

“I seriously doubt they’d keep her this close to home. The guy most likely just drove around the area until he found someone to do it for him,” Hutch suggested.

“Maybe he could at least tell us which direction the car came from.” Starsky added. “And how about a description?”

“Pretty vague...male, Caucasian, dark brown hair. Had on sunglasses, so we don’t know eye color. Kid guesses about five feet nine or ten—said he couldn’t be certain.”

“Terrific,” Starsky said disgustedly, “that narrows it down to about half of the male population in LA. But it fits the same description the girls at school gave us. The kid still here?”

Dobey nodded toward a skinny, freckle-faced boy sitting in the corner with a skateboard leaning against the side of his chair. “Go ahead and see if you can get anything else from him.”

The two detectives walked over to where the boy was sitting and introduced themselves. “I’ve already told the other officers everything I know,” he began.

“Yeah, we heard you gave them a pretty good description. But we thought maybe you may have remembered something else,” Starsky said casually, trying to keep the young witness from feeling intimidated. “Like, do you remember what direction he came from?”

“Umm...I think he came from the direction where the old movie theater is. I don’t go down that way. My mom told me not to. She said it was dangerous down there. They’re gonna tear down a bunch of buildings or something.”

“Can you tell us about the car?” Starsky cajoled.

“Well, it was black with dark windows, ya can’t see through. And it had a funny the thing on the front.”

“You mean some sort of hood ornament?”

“Mmmm...yeah, I guess.”

“Can you describe it?” Starsky asked hopefully.

At first the boy looked perplexed, searching for the right words. Then Bobby's face lit up. "Oh yeah! I know what it was! One of those hippie things like kids use'ta paint on their vans. I've seen lots'a pictures of 'em. You know...a peace sign."

Hutch smiled at the boy. The kid had just described Reynolds' missing Mercedes. At least they knew the kidnapper hadn't ditched the car. "What's your name, son?"

"Bobby, Bobby Romack."

"Think you could give our artist a description so he could sketch a picture of the man?" The boy cast anxious eyes on Hutch, evidently nervous about the prospect of such a momentous responsibility.

"I don't know. I...I guess so."

"Hey," Starsky encouraged him, "just do your best. That's all anyone expects. Okay?"

Deciding he liked these two cops, Bobby nodded his agreement. "Okay."

Hutch placed a call downtown, requesting that the police artist come to the Reynolds' estate as soon as possible.

"Hutch," Starsky motioned him to one side. "I think I better call Gina and let her know we won't be able to make it to Sam's class tonight. Any message for Jackie?"

Hutch rubbed his forehead, willing away the headache that was threatening. "Only that I'm stuck here too. We were going for coffee after class. Damn, we aren't going to make a very good impression on Nichols, are we? After that speech warning us all about being committed, he'll probably write us off as a couple of losers."

"Hey, it can't be helped. Besides, I think we made it pretty clear that Gina would stand in for us if police business got in the way." Starsky noticed the frown furrow between Hutch's eyes; a sure sign of one of his partner's bad headaches coming on.

"Maybe you're right." Hutch looked over his shoulder at Mr. Reynolds then turned back to Starsky. "One thing's for sure. We aren't going anywhere until we find out what these kidnappers want."

"Kidnapper," Starsky corrected him.

"What?"

"Kidnapper. This is a one man job." Starsky lowered his voice and leaned close. "Note said, *I have* your daughter—not *we have* your daughter. One person."

"You're right. Guess I'm not thinking too clearly."

Starsky added, “This ain’t good news. With only one kidnapper, he’s more likely to hurt her. Nobody watching over his shoulder. And we shoulda heard from him by now. Kid’s been missin’ more than thirty-six hours. I’d be willin’ to lay you odds it’s somebody who’s connected with the family, and—”

“And if she already knows him...he’ll have to kill her,” Hutch finished for him. Hutch squeezed his eyes shut tightly, riding the wave of pain that was quickly building behind his eyelids.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah, just a tension headache,” Hutch answered. As his concern for Jenny Reynolds grew, so did the pounding in his head.

“Give me a minute to call Gina, then I’ll find you some coffee and somethin’ to eat.” Starsky had seen that strained look on Hutch’s face before and knew it signaled an on-coming migraine. “Sit down here and try to take it easy for awhile. We have a long night ahead.”

Chapter 8

Jenny lay crouched against the wall, protected from the cold concrete floor by only a smelly, rough, wool blanket, standard issue from any Army/Navy surplus store. She’d drifted in out of an exhausted sleep over the last several hours. In the dark, windowless room, she had no concept of time. Had she been here hours? Days?

He’d promised she could speak to her father soon; but to what end? She’d waited anxiously, but hours had passed without his return. She prayed a lot, asking God to let someone find her soon. Surely by now they were searching for her. Of course they were...but how would they know where to look? Jenny felt a sob rise in her throat, thinking about her mother and how worried she must be. Who was this man? Why was he doing this to her?

Memories of the physical assault flooded her mind again, threatening her tenuous hold on composure. She forced herself to focus on other things...the upcoming homecoming dance at school...shopping for a party dress...the sweet little Pekinese puppy Daddy had given her for her birthday...anything to fight back the hysteria.



Hutch sat patiently watching the police artist working to create a sketch of the kidnapper based on little Bobby’s description. The boy was trying so hard to remember every detail, and had revised the description so many times that Hutch was concerned he

may be getting confused. He realized this was a lot of pressure for an eleven-year-old kid.

Starsky went in search of coffee and discovered that although the dinner hour had long passed, the Reynolds' cook and servants had all volunteered to stay on duty. A large silver urn of coffee, two trays of sandwiches, and a tray of cookies and brownies were set out on the counters for the law enforcement personnel to help themselves. It was apparent that everyone was buckling down for a long night.

Bobby was finally happy with the artist's rendering and was waiting with Hutch for his Dad to pick him up. Starsky fixed himself and Hutch a plate of food, grabbing an extra cookie for Bobby, then rejoined them in the living room just as the child's father arrived.

"Here ya go, sport," Starsky said as he slipped a large chocolate chip cookie to the tired boy. "Thanks for comin' through like a trooper. There's a nice girl out there somewhere who'll be really grateful to you."

"Aw, it's okay," the redhead said, blushing a dark pink. "Just one thing though..."

"Yeah?"

"Can I keep the money?"

Starsky smiled and ruffled the boy's hair. "Don't see why not; I think you earned it. Now you go on home with your dad, okay?"

"Okay. See ya." He waved goodbye to Hutch and followed his father out the door.

"Here ya go, blintz." Starsky handed Hutch the plate of sandwiches and cup of freshly brewed coffee. "Well, looks like the girls at school saw Jenny leave with the same guy that gave Bobby the note," he said, looking at the drawing on the coffee table.

"Without a doubt," Hutch agreed. He picked up the finished drawing and took it to where Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds were waiting with Captain Dobey. "Could you take a look at this, Mr. Reynolds?" Hutch handed the paper to him.

At first the man's face was blank, but slowly, realization dawned and his eyes went wide with surprise. "My God, I know this man. This is Stanley Bowman, Charles Bowman's son." He handed the picture to his wife.

"Yes, you're right, Martin. It is Stanley."

“What’s his connection to your family, Mr. Reynolds?” Starsky asked. “Does he work for you?”

“Oh, no. I purchased Bowman’s business last year. Bought it because Charles was in debt over his head. He begged me to take it off his hands,” Martin Reynolds explained. “A sad state of affairs. Only a couple of days after we finalized the deal, Bowman went home and killed his wife then shot himself in the head.”

Hutch’s eyes met Starsky’s. “Sounds like a motive to me.”

“And this is Bowman’s son? You think this man could be capable of kidnapping?” Starsky asked.

“I hardly know him. I can’t begin to imagine what he could or couldn’t do. His father isn’t dead, you know.”

“Wait a minute,” Hutch interrupted. “Didn’t you just say he killed his wife then committed suicide?”

“He tried to.” Reynolds shook his head sadly. “Poor Charles. Never could do a good job at anything he started. He’s been in a some sort of vegetative state ever since that night; he’s in a nursing home...have no idea where. I haven’t seen the boy since his mother’s funeral.”

“I’ll put out an APB on him.” Dobby took the sketch and summoned one of the uniformed cops to take it downtown. “Get this out to the TV news agencies too. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone’s seen him.”

“Wait Cap’n.” Dobby looked back at Hutch.

“Maybe we better wait until he contacts Mr. Reynolds.”

“I agree with Hutch. We could scare ‘em off, Cap,” Starsky added. “Maybe we should wait and hear his demands. Once that picture hits the media, he may get desperate.”

“We should hear from him soon. Mr. Reynolds, do you think you can talk with this man without letting on that we know who he is?” Hutch asked.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to get Jenny back in one piece.” Martin Reynolds’ eyes shone with fear, despite his efforts at bravado in his wife’s presence.



Gina and Sam walked out of the VA building and headed for the car, enjoying the pleasant evening air after being confined in class for the past two hours. Sam paced his

steps to walk directly beside her through the dark parking lot, ever vigilant of any strange sounds or sights.

He'd had a good time tonight and gotten a lot of nice attention. The stuff Gina wanted him to do was fun. The stocky man with broad shoulders had talked for awhile, then had gone around the room and collected a piece of clothing from each human. Gina gave him a scarf she wore around her neck sometimes. The man then had each dog and his human leave the gymnasium. After sniffing around out back and leaving his mark a dozen different places, they'd been allowed back in. It soon became pretty clear that Gina wanted her scarf back, and expected HIM to find it.

Some of the other dogs had already lost interest; but he thought this game was fun, and had no problem picking up the scent of Gina's scarf. After sniffing around the area where Gina was sitting, he barreled across the gymnasium floor and headed for the bleachers. It took a little effort, but he soon located the scarf, wrapped around one of the steps in plain view. The best part was the happy look on Gina's face when he barked to let her know he'd found the darn thing!

Yep...all that was missing tonight was his two friends. He wasn't sure who he missed more—Starsky or Hutch. He just knew things weren't quite right when they weren't around. But Gina ran a close second, and tonight he knew he'd pleased her. She smiled at him affectionately when he jumped into the front seat and moved over to the passenger side.

“You were such a good boy, Sam,” she praised. “I wish Starsky and Hutch had been here to see how well you did.”

He only recognized ‘good Sam’, ‘Starsky’ and ‘Hutch’ (although sometimes she seemed to get confused and call Starsky ‘David’, and he wasn't sure what *that* was all about). But he knew from the tone of her voice she was very happy with him. And when Gina was happy, so was he.

She patted him on the head before fastening her seatbelt and starting the engine of the car. Sam reached over and gave her a slurpy kiss on the face then settled in for the trip home. It took so little to make a human happy. Maybe, he hoped, Starsky and Hutch were at the house waiting for him and Gina. *That* would definitely be a great ending to a great day.



As the evening wore on and no call came, the strain began to wear on everyone. Because Martin Reynolds was concerned about his wife's frail physical condition, the family doctor was called. He came by to check on her and prescribed a sedative.

“I think we ought'a hit the streets,” Starsky whispered. “I mean, who knows when the guy's gonna call. It's already 9:30.”

Hutch glanced at the kitchen clock. “You’re right. Maybe someone out there’s heard something. I called Huggy this afternoon, but he didn’t have anything.”

“Yeah, but that was hours ago. What do you say we make the rounds? Dobe can have the dispatcher call us if somethin’ breaks loose here.”

“Okay. I’ll tell them while you bring the car around.”

Starsky fished the car keys out of the pocket of his snug-fitting jeans and headed for the Torino.

Chapter 9

Huggy looked up from behind the bar when the two detectives entered the club. He wasn’t surprised to see them. He’d not had any helpful information when Hutch called earlier, and hoped something had happened to help break the case. Kidnapping was a nasty business, especially when children were involved. Even hardened criminals looked down on people who hurt kids.

“I been expecting you two. What’s happenin’?”

Starsky and Hutch each took a seat at the bar. “We’re hoping you can tell us,” Starsky answered for them. Huggy drew a couple of beers on tap and set them on the counter in front of the two cops.

“I been asking around all day. Everybody wants to know what the dude looks like. Got the sketch?”

Hutch reached into his jacket pocket and produced a folded xerox copy of the artist’s sketch of Bowman. “I think we’ve got a positive ID. We’re holding off on releasing the name in case the guy panics.”

“I dig it. May get scared and waste the kid.” Huggy looked at the drawing, trying to recall if he’d ever seen the man before; he didn’t look even vaguely familiar.

“He doesn’t have a record,” Hutch said, reading Huggy’s mind. “We’re going by the station now to pick up a search warrant and hit his apartment. Thought we’d drop this by for you to show around.”

“Yeah, okay. Check back after and I’ll try to have somethin’ for you.”

“Thanks, Hug.” Starsky tossed a couple of bucks on the bar for the untouched beers.

“Yeah, well don’t thank me yet, Starsky. But I’ll see what I can do.”



The apartment was in a rundown section of the city, the streets crowded with homeless people--some users, some dealers, some just down on their luck and nowhere to go. The front door to the shabby apartment building was jammed and it took several attempts before Starsky finally forced it to swing open. They went directly to the apartment manager, who was less than accommodating, and showed him the warrant.

"I knew that guy was trouble," the sixtyish, balding man said when he reappeared at the door with the keys. "Been here five months and ain't paid his rent on time even once." The man didn't bother putting on his shoes, just padded out into the hall in stocking feet, his huge beer-belly drooping low over the waistband of his jogging pants. Hutch noticed that the grungy undershirt he wore looked like it hadn't seen a washer and detergent for the better part of a month.

"So he's been here five months? Seen him in the last coupl'a days?" Starsky asked. They followed the man up three flights of stairs.

"What do I look like? His personal secretary?" he snapped back sarcastically.

Starsky reached out and grabbed the grotesque man by the waistband of his pants, bringing him to an abrupt halt. When the guy turned, he found Starsky inches from his face, in no mood to argue.

"Listen, asshole, there's a young girl's life at stake here. I don't have time for your bullshit. Just answer the question."

"Okay, okay...calm down. I ain't seen him since day before yesterday. He had some big black car I ain't never seen before, parked in the alley out back. I was takin' out the garbage. Looked like he was puttin' a new license tag on it or somethin'."

"That's better. Now, that wasn't so hard was it?"

"Starsk..." Hutch laid a restraining hand on his partner's shoulder. "Let's search the room. Maybe we'll find something." He turned to the manager. "Step aside. Don't try to open the door until we're sure he's not in there. You could get hurt."

The obese man quickly moved to the other side of Hutch, who was pressed up against the wall left of the door. He waited for Starsky to get into position on the right, then used the barrel of his gun to rap on the door.

"Police, open up!" No response. Again. No sound from within.

"Okay." He motioned for the man to unlock the door.

“You ain’t gonna tear the place up are you?” The manager fumbled around with the key and finally succeeded in unlocking the door. Starsky motioned him back then he and Hutch entered the room, their guns poised. Once they were sure the room was empty, they began a systematic search, all the while ignoring the complaining man who continued to stand in the doorway sputtering about ‘damages’ and ‘rights’.

“Starsk, come in here a minute.”

Starsky followed the sound of Hutch’s voice and found himself in Bowman’s bedroom. The walls were cluttered with snapshots, mostly Polaroids of the Reynolds family.

“Would ya look at this. I’d say Stanley Bowman’s been a busy boy,” Starsky said. As he came closer he could see that the majority of the photos featured Jenny; at home, at school, and many places he didn’t recognize.

Hutch could feel the bile rising in his throat as he looked at the pretty, innocent teen’s photos tacked all over the wall. “This is one sick puppy.”

“Hutch, this kid’s in real danger.”

Hutch took a deep breath and tried to focus. “It’s worse than we thought. Come on, let’s search this room. Maybe we’ll find something to help us figure out where’s he’s holding her.”

“Like this?” Starsky held up a crumpled sheet of paper he had discovered on the dressing table. “It’s a bill from Shady Meadows Convalescence Home. This is probably where his father’s staying. Think he could help us?”

“I doubt it. According to Reynolds, he can’t even help himself.” Starsky tossed the invoice back onto the dresser and began searching the drawers. “You think maybe that’s what this is all about? Revenge, not money?”

“I don’t know, Starsk, but I’m really scared for Jenny. Seeing this room, I’m less optimistic that we’ll get her out of this alive.”

“Look.” Starsky interrupted. He held up a map of the city. “He’s marked off some areas in red.”

“You’re kidding. This guy’s not exactly a pro is he?”

“Could’a left it here to throw us off.”

“He doesn’t even know that we’ve figured out who he is,” Hutch pointed out. They spread the map out on the bed between them.

“This isn’t gonna help much. He’s marked four different areas, all of them large. It could take a coupl’a days to search ‘em.” Starsky folded the map and slipped it into his jacket pocket and continued the search.

Hutch went into the kitchen and found the telephone with a message pad mounted on the wall beside it. “Starsky, he has Reynolds’ name and phone number written next to the phone. It may not help us find Jenny, but it’s a hell of a compelling piece of evidence.”

“Better go ahead and call Dobe and let him know we’ve confirmed Bowman’s our man. Maybe he’s called by now,” Starsky said, joining him in the kitchen.

The call to Dobe was disappointing; no word from Bowman and no sightings from the APB. The captain lowered his voice as he told Hutch that the Reynoldses were both approaching their breaking points. “I hope we get a break before it’s too late.”

“Cap, it could already be too late.”

Dobe said nothing, his silence confirming he had considered the possibility.

“We’re going back by Huggy’s. Maybe he had some luck showing the sketch around,” Hutch told him.

Dobe sighed deeply. “Yeah, okay. Then you two go home and get some rest. I’m going to stick around here.”



The stop by Huggy’s was unproductive. He promised to call if he heard anything and gave the two exhausted cops a couple of burgers on the house before they left.

“Wanna go by Gina’s and see how Sam did?” Starsky suggested as he cranked up the Torino.

“Sure, why not? Don’t think it’s too late? It’s almost midnight.”

“Nah, I told her we’d try to come by if it was possible. Maybe Jackie’s there too.”

Jackie answered the bell and invited the guys in. At the sound of Starsky’s voice, Sam loped into the foyer and greeted both men with boisterous woofs and lots of wet, slobbery kisses. He couldn’t think of a more perfect ending to a great evening.

“Hey, Big Dog. How ya doin’ boy?” Starsky affectionately scratched Sam’s ears and accepted his good-natured nuzzles. Then Sam quickly abandoned him to lavish an equal measure of affection on Hutch.

“We’d about given up on you two,” Jackie said, leading them into the living room. Curled up in an overstuffed chair with a book, Gina looked up and smiled.

“Hope we aren’t dropping by too late.” Starsky gave Gina an apologetic smile before bending down to brush her lips with a soft kiss.

“Not at all. In fact, I would’ve been disappointed if you hadn’t. Any luck on the case?”

“Well, we know who the creep is, but don’t know where he’s keeping the kid.” Starsky thought for the hundredth time how nice it was to have a girlfriend who not only understood what it was to be a cop, but was also interested and knowledgeable about his job. Even more important, she seemed to understand the bond that he and Hutch shared, and didn’t resent their friendship.

When Hutch and Jackie sat down on the sofa, Sam didn’t wait for an invitation before planting himself between them. “How did he do in class?” Hutch leaned forward, trying to see past the dog’s gigantic head. Jackie didn’t seem the least bit bothered by the intrusion.

“I didn’t go along. Had to run some tests for the DA tonight on the Jordan murder case. But according to Gina, he was terrific.”

“You’d have been proud of him,” Gina said. “Tom told me he’d never seen a dog catch on so quickly.”

Sensing they were talking about him, Sam jumped off the sofa and joined Starsky in the large lazy boy chair. His weight triggered the spring mechanism in the chair, and Starsky found himself catapulting backwards until the chair reached an abrupt stop. Sam’s front paws pinned him down while the dog delivered an affectionate face washing. “Knock it off, ya big lug!” Realizing he was fighting a losing battle, Starsky closed his arms in a big bear hug around the wiggling dog.

“I’d say he misses you,” Gina giggled at the comical pair.

“Kind of looks that way,” Starsky agreed. “So, Big Dog, did you behave yourself?”

“He was as good as gold, and I think he enjoyed it just as much as I did.” Gina’s voice was filled with warmth as she bragged on Sam’s performance.

“Tom has a natural talent with the dogs and Sam took right in with him. We started out with scent tracking.”

Starsky continued to absently scratch behind the big dog’s ears while he listened.

“Each trainer had to give him a personal item to hide; then with the timer running, the dogs had to locate them. Sam found my scarf in record time for a beginner.”

“That’s not surprising to me,” Starsky boasted. “You’re a smart dog, aren’t you fella?” Sam’s big pink tongue lolled out the side of his mouth, dripping saliva all over Starsky’s shirt while his tail beat a rapid tattoo on Starsky’s knees.

As his initial excitement subsided, Sam relaxed and settled himself like a heavy wool blanket across Starsky’s torso, resting his massive head on his person’s shoulder. With a deep sigh, he turned his head at an awkward angle to look at Hutch, seeking approval of his decision to stay with Starsky a little while.

“Look at this. I told ya he likes me better,” Starsky gloated.

“He doesn’t like you better, Starsky,” Hutch argued. “He just thinks you’re a big, lumpy bed.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I don’t see him over there resting his head on *your* shoulder.” As the two started their bickering again, Sam came to attention, wondering what happened to set them off this time. He turned his anxious face to Gina, willing her to intercede.

“Poor baby! You guys are upsetting him,” Gina scolded. Sam hopped off Starsky’s lap and went to Gina. Without waiting for an invitation, he jumped onto her lap and began the ‘face washing’ ceremony once again.

“Traitor,” Starsky grumbled.

“Oh I don’t know, Starsk. If I had a choice of sitting in your lap or the lap of a beautiful woman, it would be an easy choice for me,” Hutch teased.

When the four of them began laughing, Sam looked around the room, unsure what was so funny. It didn’t really matter, though. All he cared about was being included in this world where everyone apparently loved him.

Realizing it was getting late and that they could be called back to the Reynolds estate at any time, Hutch reluctantly suggested they call it a night. When Sam saw them preparing to leave, he planted himself squarely in the doorway and refused to move.

The minute the door cracked, he used his nose to open it far enough to barrel past the four people and take a flying leap through the open window of the Torino. Impatiently, the dog poked his head out the window, barking for the two men to take him home.

“Oh no! Sam, you get back up here this instance,” Gina called. Starsky and Hutch followed her to the car, intending to help her coax Sam out. When they arrived, he hopped into the back seat, taking his normal “patrolling” position, obviously ready for action.

Gina marched up to the car. Utilizing the basic lessons in ‘Dog Obedience 101’, she sternly ordered the dog, “Sam—Come!”

Sam lowered his head, not making eye contact with the woman. He knew the drill. He knew he should obey. But knowing and doing were two different things. Gina waited till the count of five, then, again, “Sam—I said come! She didn’t think it was possible for a solid mass the size of the rottweiler to dissolve into a little puddle in the back seat of the car, but before their very eyes, he flattened himself out and tried to disappear from sight.

“Come on out’a there, Sam.” Starsky pulled the back of the passenger’s seat forward, hoping the dog would jump out on his own. No response.

“Let me try again.” Gina came forward, deciding on a softer tactic. She stooped down just outside the car door and coaxed, “Come on, Big Dog, it’s time for the guys to go. You have to stay with Jackie and me a few more nights. They still love you.” No response.

“I’ll handle this.” Hutch forcefully strode up to the car and said in a stern voice, “Okay Sam, this isn’t funny. Come out of there right now.”

Sam’s ears flattened against his head, as his body once more seemed to wilt before their eyes. As a final gesture of dejection, he laid his big head on his front paws and let out a pitiful whine.

Starsky leaned forward and looked down at the woe-be-gone expression on the dog’s face and saw what he thought must be tears in his eyes.

“Oh man, Hutch! Look what ya done now! He’s cryin’. I can’t believe you’d make him cry.”

Feeling lower than low, Hutch leaned in and looked at the dog’s mournful expression. “I’m sorry, Sam,” he mumbled self-consciously, then reached in and tried to pet the dog’s head. Sam inched away from his touch and dropped head down on his paws again.

“I didn’t mean it, boy.” Hutch couldn’t believe he was actually apologizing to a dog. But it was distressing to see the dog so demoralized. “Come on, Sam. Let’s be friends again.”

This time, the dog allowed Hutch to pat him on the head. Sam tried hard not to respond, but couldn't keep his tail from wagging a little. Hutch took this as a sign that most likely, he'd been forgiven. "I believe we've just been given a lesson in 'Guilt 101'," the blonde detective complained.

Starsky turned to the two women and said almost apologetically, "Listen, I think maybe it'll be okay if he comes home with me tonight. Nobody's gonna be around to see me smuggle him in."

"What about your case?" Even as she spoke, Gina knew it was pointless to argue.

"We're gonna mostly be on the street, aren't we, Hutch?"

"Mostly," Hutch agreed, not willing to say anything else to upset Sam.

"Well, it's up to you. If you need to bring him back over, you k

now where the spare key is." She reached up and gave Starsky and quick kiss, knowing his decision was made. "Just try to get a little rest, okay? You look exhausted."

As the Torino pulled away from the curb, Jackie looked at her friend and shook her head.

"Good grief. What a trio."

Gina laughed to herself. "Yeah...aren't they great?"

Chapter 10

"Wake up, Jenny. Time to call your old man." Bowman stood above the sleeping girl, prodding her with his foot. Slowly she came awake, reluctant to abandon the dream world in which she'd never seen or heard of Stan Bowman.

"I said wake up! Don't you want to talk to your *Daddy*?"

Jenny bolted upright. The mere thought of hearing her father's voice again was all the motivation she needed to come fully awake.

"It's almost daylight. We have to make that call now so we won't be seen." He yanked the blurry-eyed teen to her feet roughly. "Now you listen to me, and listen good. You're going to go with me to a phone booth, I'll call your father, and then I'll put you on the phone. You tell your old man to pay the ransom or I'll kill you." Suddenly Bowman grabbed a shock of the girl's hair and jerked her face close to his. "Do you understand?"

Nervously, Jenny tried to nod yes, but his grip was too tight. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes from the pain of his hand wound tightly in her hair. “Answer me! Do you understand!”

“Yes, oh yes...please...” The sob caught in her throat as she tried to assure him she’d follow his instructions.

Afraid to take the car out where it might be recognized, Stan had finally decided they should walk to the nearest phone booth. Unfortunately, that meant going several blocks out in the open; risky, but the only sensible alternative.

Bowman handcuffed the frightened girl’s wrist to his own and headed out while the sun was still an hour from rising. Hoping there would be fewer people milling about, he gave Jenny a stern warning of what would happen if she tried to escape.

“If you don’t keep your mouth shut and do as I tell you, well...I’ll give you more of what you got yesterday.” At the fearful look in the girl’s eyes, an ugly sneer contorted his deceptively handsome face. Frightened beyond reason, Jenny quickly abandoned the vague plan to escape once they were out on the street.

Bowman believed in precise planning; he would collect the money, rid himself of Reynolds and the kid, then make a clean getaway. It would entail luring Reynolds into the abandoned building at the last possible minute before the homemade bomb went off. Making his own escape would be tricky, but he felt confident he could pull it off and be clear of the area before the dynamite exploded.

Sore from the abuse her body had taken over the past forty-eight hours, Jenny struggled to keep up as he dragged her behind him down the dark sidewalk leading away from the deserted buildings. Though she couldn’t see it, she knew there a gun clasped in his hand, concealed in his jacket pocket.

After walking five blocks, Bowman spotted a phone booth. Picking up the pace, he gave Jenny a swift jerk, urging her on. “Move it! What—you got lead in your seat? Move it!”

Once they reached the booth, Bowman stepped inside and used his free hand to dial the Reynolds estate. Before he could finish, something hit the side of the phone booth. At first he thought the girl was trying to escape, then turned and saw a large black man standing just outside the booth. He wore a flashy, white, John Travolta-type suit, complete down to the flared-leg pants. Tightly molding his obese body, the suit made him a caricature of the image he was going for. Beneath the white jacket he wore a royal-purple shirt, the oversized collar open, revealing at least six gold chains of variable sizes dangling around his bloated neck. Likewise, each of his chunky fingers was adorned with rings.

“Hey, what the hell you doin in that booth, man! I got an important call comin’ in there. Get the hell out’a there! You hear me?” The big man strutted around the booth and yanked the door open. Jenny shrank back as far as the handcuff would allow.

“What’s your problem, honky? You deaf?” Once the man was close enough to get a good look at Jenny, he saw she was probably no more than fourteen or fifteen years old. Her bruised face and disheveled appearance made it plain something wasn’t right. When he spotted the handcuffs he blurted out, “Hey man, what is this? You her pimp? I don’t need no sicko around here sellin’ no kid. Get the hell out’a here! I got a big score goin’ down!”

Stan threw the door open and shoved the pistol under the intruder’s chin. “Don’t make me use this, man. How bout you take a hike.”

The black man stepped back, holding his hands up before him. “Okay man, be cool. I just got a business to think about. Be cool.”

“I’m only going to say this once. Get the hell out of here!”

Believing Bowman was crazy enough to shoot him with very little provocation, the black man backed away slowly, then walked as fast as his pride would allow, until he was out of Bowman’s sight.



Hutch’s arm flung out from the bed, searching for the ringing telephone. “Hutchinson,” he mumbled into the receiver.

“Hutch, Dobey here. He called. I want you and Starsky here on the double. Got it?”

“Yeah, sure.” The words brought Hutch suddenly wide awake. “Give us thirty minutes.” He hung up the phone and dialed Starsky, saying he’d be ready in ten minutes.

When the Torino screeched to a halt in front of Hutch’s place, he was already waiting by the curb. It was no surprise that Sam was sitting in the passenger seat, and was none too thrilled about being relegated to the back seat when Hutch got in. Even so, Sam magnanimously dropped his head over the seat and licked Hutch’s ear.

“Hey, big guy. Good morning to you too.” Hutch had been in a rotten mood when Dobey woke him after only a couple hours sleep, but Sam’s good-natured greeting inexplicably improved his disposition.

“Really think he should come along, Starsk? Dobey sounded pretty short on the phone.”

“He’ll wait in the car. It’s not too warm out and I hated to leave him alone after being away from him the last few days.”

Hutch glanced over at his partner with a wry smile on his face. He still found it astonishing that a ‘tough guy’ like his partner could have a heart of gold buried under that rough exterior. This abandoned, abused animal was a prime example of the Starsky he knew. You couldn’t help but love a guy like that. He was a contradiction, never what he seemed to be. Hutch knew, even when he couldn’t count on anything else, he could count on Starsky to do what was right. If that meant caring about a big, ugly mutt that no one else gave a damn about, then that’s what he’d do. If it meant laying his life down for his partner...well, he’d do that in a heartbeat. He’d done it too many times already for Hutch to ever doubt it for a minute.

Starsky’s voice brought him back to the present. “Besides, if it looks like we’re gonna have to stay there awhile, I’ll take him back home and drop him off.”

Hutch knew Sam had missed them. Heck, they’d missed him. Giving Sam over to Starsky’s care because of the landlady’s aversion to dogs had been difficult, to say the least. It would be worth the little extra effort to keep Big Dog with them for the day.

Starsky looked in the rear view mirror at Sam sitting there like the king of the mountain. “Hutch, look at that.”

“What?”

“Look at Sam. He’s smilin’.”

“Starsky, dogs don’t smile.”

“Well, he is. Take a look, will ya?”

Hutch turned and stared at the big dog proudly observing the world from his favorite vantage point; and secretly, he agreed Sam looked deliriously happy.

“What did I tell ya? Huh? He’s smilin’.”

“Dogs don’t smile. I know what I’m talking about. I’ve been around dogs since I was a kid. They can’t smile. They don’t have lips.”

“What are ya talkin’ about? Don’t have lips?” Starsky looked at Hutch like he’d lost his mind.

“They’re not like humans, Starsk. They don’t have lips,” Hutch answered confidently. Since the chinchilla fiasco, Starsky hadn’t been all that sure of himself when it came to his knowledge of the animal kingdom.

He faltered for a split second then argued with absolute confidence, “What do you mean they don’t have lips? What do ya think that is outlining his mouth? If you weren’t so pig-headed, you’d admit that I’m right and that Sam is smilin’.”

“Starsky, just listen to yourself. For Pete Sake, it’s five a.m. and you’re sitting here trying to convince me dogs have lips.” Hutch’s head fell back against the car seat, his eyes rolled heavenward.

“Look! Look now!” Starsky urged.

Hutch glanced around at the dog once more, and could almost see a hint of a smile himself. Fortunately before he had to concede the point, Starsky steered the Torino through the gates of the Reynolds estate.

The sun had just begun to streak the sky with muted shades of mauve and gold when they pulled into the driveway. Starsky produced a rawhide chew-bone from the pocket of his jacket and gave it to Sam to pass the time. The people inside the house were all grim-faced when the two detectives’ entered.

“What’ve you got for us, Cap?” Starsky asked without preamble.

“He let me talk to her,” Reynolds volunteered. “She sounded so frightened. Please, help me find her. Please—we’ve got to hurry before he hurts her.”

The terrified man’s voice trembled with anxiety. Starsky’s heart went out to Reynolds. He wished he could guarantee they’d find Jenny in time. Instead, he could only offer vague reassurances.

“We’ll do our best, sir. You have my word. Hutch and I will do everything we can to bring your daughter back safely.” Starsky’s calm words seemed to help Reynolds maintain his fragile composure.

Laying his hand on the man’s shoulder, Hutch guided him toward the sofa so they could sit down. “What did he say, Mr. Reynolds? Can you remember anything that may help us find out where he’s holding Jenny?”

“He wants two million dollars. He has given us until tomorrow morning. He wants me to personally deliver it.”

“Where?”

“He didn’t say,” Dobby interrupted. “He’ll call again tomorrow morning, one hour before the drop.”

“Terrific.” Starsky’s voice dripped with disgust. “This guy’s stringin’ us along like a real pro.”

“And he’s doing it on purpose.” Hutch spoke before he thought about the girl’s father sitting beside him. He and Starsky had agreed Mr. Reynolds didn’t need to know the details of what they’d found in Bowman’s apartment.

“What do you mean? Have you found something?” Reynolds nervously looked back and forth at the two detectives.

“Uh...well...” Hutch stuttered.

“Only that the guy’s been watching your family for awhile now,” Starsky smoothly covered. “We found evidence that he was keeping track of your schedules and such.” The answer was vague, but seemed to satisfy the overwrought father.

Dobey saw through the ploy and made a mental note to question his detectives in private later.

“Look, Mr. Reynolds, why don’t you and Captain Dobey try to get some rest. You aren’t going to hear from this man again before tomorrow morning, and you both look beat.” Hutch’s plea was well-founded. The last time he’d seen Dobey look this tired was when they’d pulled an all-nighter with Huggy, trying to figure out where Simon Marcus’s cult was holding Starsky.

Martin Reynolds ran a hand over his tired face and considered Hutch’s suggestion. “I suppose you’re right. I’m just relieved to have heard my daughter’s voice.”

“I’m sure you are. Did she sound okay?” Hutch was almost afraid to ask the question, but realized he needed to know the answer.

“Frightened out of her mind; but she’s alive. Right now, that’s all that matters. She kept telling me that she was fine. I didn’t believe her. She’s an incredibly strong child though. Even when she was small, she wouldn’t admit it when she was hurt or scared.” Reynolds’ voice almost cracked as his memory flitted back to a time when Jenny was small enough to sit on his knee. After a moment, he suddenly seemed to realize where he was. “My banker will handle getting the ransom money together. He was alerted yesterday after I received the first note.”

Hutch reached out and patted the man’s shoulder lightly, wanting to offer comfort, but not knowing how. Dobey stepped forward and took control of the situation. “Hutchinson’s right, Martin. Let’s both take a break. I’m sure your wife would appreciate your company for awhile. I’d like to go home and shower, and see my kids before they take off for school.” Watching Reynolds suffer through the long night of uncertainty, had compelled Dobey to see that his own children were safe and sound.

His shoulders drooped from fatigue and worry, Mr. Reynolds excused himself and went toward the master bedroom to be with his wife. As soon as he was out of sight, Dobey turned to Starsky and Hutch.

“Okay, he’s gone. Now level with me.”

Chapter 11

Before Dobey left for home, Starsky and Hutch finished filling him in on what they’d found in Bowman’s apartment. Worry lines creased the veteran cop’s face as he listened, realizing Bowman had some greater motivation than his desire to get rich quick. This was a man with a vengeance. Dobey’s years on the force had taught him that people like Bowman seldom released hostages.

“Cap’n, we can’t let Reynolds deliver the ransom.” Starsky lowered his voice even though Mr. Reynolds had left the room. “This guy’s gonna kill ‘em both. I have a gut feeling about it.”

Hutch felt a chill run up his spine. He felt the same, and hearing Starsky voice it aloud made it all the more valid.

“What makes you think we can stop him?” Dobey snapped, fatigue shortening his patience. “All I can do is suggest he let one of us do it. I can’t exactly order him, you know.”

“Let me do it,” Hutch volunteered. “I think he’d trust me.”

“Hey,” Starsky interrupted indignantly, “Why you? Why not me?”

“Because he said the first time we met him that he trusted us. Remember what he said? He wanted us on the case because of the part we played in getting Joanna Haymes back safely. *I* was the runner.”

“You’ve got a point, Hutchinson.”

“I should do it this time, Hutch.” Starsky felt a cold knot of fear settling in his stomach. The vision of Hutch being gunned down by kidnappers still haunted him at night sometimes. It’d seemed like an eternity before he’d reached his partner and seen for himself that the bulletproof vest had worked—had saved Hutch’s life.

“No, Starsk. I think Reynolds will go along with it if he holds on to the idea we can pull it off just like last time.”

“Starsky, I think Hutchinson’s right. The fewer unknown variables, the more likely we’re going to sell the idea to Reynolds. You two work it out. I don’t really care what you have to do, as long as Reynolds can be convinced to cooperate.”

Starsky’s features hardened, clearly perturbed by the decision Hutch and Dobey had made, despite his objections.

“Now, get your butts out there and see if anyone can give you a lead. Maybe we can still find the girl before time for the drop, and save us all a lot of grief.” Dobey left the room, stopping to tell the officer standing at the library entrance that he was going home for awhile. The other FBI and police personnel on duty had changed shifts hours ago; only Dobey had stoically waited out the long night with Reynolds.

Starsky stormed toward the door too. Hutch had to walk fast to catch up with him. Starsky strode on, almost it seemed, purposely leaving Hutch behind. Once they were in the car, Hutch looked over at his partner’s profile. The grim visage hadn’t changed since Dobey had backed Hutch’s suggestion about the drop.

“Wanna talk about it?” Hutch saw the muscle in his partner’s jaw tighten in response.

Starsky turned the ignition key. He ignored Sam’s cheerful welcome as the dog leaned his head over the back seat and slobbered down the front of Starsky’s well-worn leather jacket. “What’s to talk about? I think you and Dobey already worked it out fine without any input from me.”

Hutch took a deep breath. He hated the tone of Starsky’s voice; that short, terse inflection he only used when he was really pissed. The morning sun was up now, and in the light, Hutch could see the tired lines around his partner’s eyes, remnants of a long night with too little sleep.

Starsky cranked the engine and threw the car in gear, inadvertently squealing the tires as he popped the gears and the car lurched forward. Deciding to give Starsky time to cool down before raising the issue again, Hutch removed the sunglasses from his shirt-pocket and took refuge behind the concealing, dark glass.

“Where are we headed?”

“Got’a stop by my house and see if the plumber showed up.” Starsky answered without taking his eyes off the road.

“How’s it coming along?” Hutch hoped a little polite conversation would lighten the mood. Sam sat down quietly in the backseat, sensing a change in both men’s attitudes when they’d returned from the Reynolds house.

“Fine.”

“What’s left to be done?” Hutch attempted to keep up the light conversation.

“The pipes are leakin’. Huggy has a friend comin’ out today who’s gonna repair the commode and the bath tub faucet. That room still smells pretty bad. Landlord’s supposed to send someone to fumigate it again.” Starsky’s eyes stayed glued to the road. His answers were civil, but to the point.

Remembering the house’s background, Hutch teased, “Must be where the dead body was.”

Without missing a beat, “That’s right,” Starsky answered. “The master bath.”

“Think you’ll feel comfortable using that room?”

“Why not?” Starsky’s eyes stayed straight ahead. He was in no mood for small talk; and he sure didn’t feel like taking any lighthearted kidding from his partner right now.

“I just thought...” Hutch’s smile faded. He knew Starsky was really bugged about his handling of the scene earlier, and until they talked about it, there would be no peace. They rode in silence for a few moments before Hutch broached the subject.

“So, what’s it gonna take to make you talk about this like two adults?”

“Don’t know what’cha mean.”

“Like hell you don’t. Starsk, why does it matter which one of us makes the drop? We both want the same thing...to get Jenny back.”

The muscle in Starsky’s jaw tightened. He didn’t answer. Hutch pushed harder.

“I didn’t volunteer because I thought I could do it any better than you. It just seemed to me that Mr. Reynolds would be more agreeable if we didn’t change from the way things were done last time.”

“Fine,” Starsky snapped. “We’ll do it your way.” Before Hutch could say more, Starsky pulled the car up in front of the vacant house.

On the front porch, Huggy was having a heated argument with one of the workmen. Before Starsky could get out of the car and to the porch, the workman grabbed up his toolbox and stormed away. Hutch bailed out of the car right behind Starsky and Sam.

“What’s goin’ on here? There a problem?” Starsky asked, stepping onto the porch. Sam trotted past him and up to Huggy, to deliver a friendly lick on the hand. In

turn, Huggy gave him the expected affectionate pat on the head. “Hey, Big Dog,” he said warmly, before turning his attention back to Starsky.

“The dude was tellin’ me he wants more money. We had a deal and I said no way—especially for a stupid reason like the one he gave me.”

“Like what?”

“Starsky, believe me, you don’t even want to know.”

“Yeah, I do. What’s the deal?”

Huggy cleared his throat and looked down at his feet. “Claims it’s haunted,” he mumbled.

Hutch’s head snapped up. “What did you say?” He was sure he’d misunderstood.

“I know, it’s nuts, huh? Said one of his crew’s been hearing stuff. You know, voices.”

“You’ve got’a be kiddin.” Starsky couldn’t believe his ears.

“Now why would I want to put you on, Starsky? That’s the only plumber I could find that was willing to work so cheap.”

“Who’s supposed to be haunting the place, Hug?” Hutch asked. If he and Starsky hadn’t just been arguing, Hutch would have enjoyed this opportunity to harass his buddy a little; but he was pretty sure that right now, that would be a very bad idea.

“I don’t know man. I don’t think the dude introduced himself, if you dig.”

Starsky rubbed his tired eyes. This latest kink was too much to deal with right now. Jenny’s fate and Hutch’s safety were his foremost concerns at the moment; and dealing with the house, haunted or not, was just not his top priority.

“Look, Huggy, don’t worry about it. If bad comes to worse, I can stay with Hutch a few days and leave Sam with Gina again.”

“Sorry, Starsky. I’ll keep trying, man. Maybe my cousin Benny can hook us up with someone.” Huggy was surprised at Starsky’s calm reaction to the “haunted house” news. He knew Starsky’s tendency to be a little on the superstitious side and figured he’d be disturbed by the rumors.

“The case is coming to a head,” Hutch explained. “We have less than twenty-four hours to locate the girl before the drop.”

Huggy nodded sympathetically. “You guys do what you have to do. I’ll get in touch with Benny. And Starsky—if you guys need someplace for Big Dog to crash a few days, you know—I mean, it’s okay for him to stay with me”.

As though he understood every word, Sam reared up and placed his paws on Huggy’s shoulders before rewarding him with a big, sloppy, wet kiss.



Back on the streets, the two detectives made the rounds, pumping all their collective snitches, and even some not-so-friendly sources who could, from time to time, be coerced into giving up a bit of information for a good cause. One thing most criminals detested was one of their own harming a child. Starsky and Hutch were hoping to cash in on that sentiment.

The morning rounds proved to be worthless, and around noon, Starsky wheeled into a taco stand and ordered lunch for both of them, without bothering to ask his partner if he had any preference.

“So...what? Is this your way of getting even with me?” Hutch looked up from the greasy bag of fast food Starsky dropped into his lap.

“Don’t know what you mean.” Starsky dove into his own bag and retrieved a beef burrito, unwrapped it and placed it in a disposable pie tin he fished from beneath the front seat. Anticipating lunch, Sam dropped his front paws and head over Starsky’s shoulder, salivating at the aroma of beef and spices.

“Tell me you’re not giving that to Sam,” Hutch said dryly.

“Course I’m givin’ it to him. We can’t very well sit here and eat in front of him, can we?” Starsky twisted around and placed the pan on the back seat. Almost before it left his hand, Sam began gobbling the burrito down, slurping and smacking his mouth in delight.

Hutch cut his eyes at Starsky, in a show of disgust, only to be ignored while Starsky began unpacking his own meal.

“You realize there are beans in that.”

“So? Beans are good for him.”

“Beans give you gas.”

“Maybe they give *you* gas. They don’t bother me, and they won’t bother Sam either.”

“How can you know that for sure, Starsk. They could blow him up like a blimp; they could give him a stomach ache. Are you willing to take that chance? He depends on us to keep him healthy.”

Starsky stopped unwrapping his food and looked up at Hutch. “Look—he’s my dog too! Now you may be able to talk Dobey into goin’ along with your plan for the drop, but I’ll be damned if you’re gonna tell me what I can feed my dog!”

Hutch just stared at him, speechless that Starsky could even link the two unrelated issues. “Starsky, this isn’t about the dog, or the burritos. You’re still pissed because I’m making the drop. Go ahead and admit it. I’ve tried to get you to talk about it all day—now lets talk about it and get the hell over it!”

Hutch’s outburst was met with stony silence. Starsky sat motionless for several seconds then turned and faced his partner. “Okay. Okay, I’ll *tell* you why I’m pissed.” Their eyes locked.

“Seems to me that anytime we have a risky assignment, you put yourself out there. On the line.”

“No more than you do.”

“I don’t see it that way.” Starsky looked down at the assortment of greasy fast food in his lap. “I’m afraid you’re gonna get yourself killed. I keep seeing you flying through that glass door, and thinkin’ you were dead. You know as well as I do, this guy’s sick. I’m worried that when you show up there in Reynolds’ place, Bowman will go berserk and blow you away.”

Hutch reached out and laid his hand on his partner’s shoulder. “Starsk...it would be the same if you were going in.”

“Maybe so. But you didn’t even talk it over with me, Hutch. We’re partners. We’re supposed to discuss things like this before jumpin’ in head-first.”

Hutch stared at Starsky’s profile, aware of the tension in his face. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just wasn’t thinking, buddy. I mean...I really believe Reynolds is going to object to not making the drop himself, and I was trying to follow the same pattern we did with the Hayems case. Okay?”

“Okay. I accept your reasons, but it doesn’t change how I feel about it.” Starsky still didn’t look at him.

“What’s it going to take for us to get past this? We have a job to do, and I don’t want to go into it with bad feelings between us.”

“Me neither.” Starsky’s eyes finally met his. “How ‘bout we draw straws or somethin’.”

Hutch smiled, giving up the battle. “Okay. If that’s what it takes.”

Starsky slipped the straw out of his coke cup, whipped out his pocket knife, and cut it into two pieces, one long, and one short. “Short one goes.” He turned his back and positioned the straws in his hands, concealing the length of each. He held the straws out for Hutch to pick one.

Hutch hesitantly reached out and selected a straw, drawing the short one. Disappointment flashed across Starsky’s face, but he didn’t argue. Hutch had gone along with his suggestion, and now it was settled.

Chapter 12

After lunch, the search resumed. Coming up against a brick wall, both detectives were beginning to accept they would have to go through with the drop. Starsky wasn’t happy that Hutch would be the one coming face to face with Bowman, but he wouldn’t complain anymore. Hutch had gone along with his brilliant idea of drawing straws, and it had backfired. Now he’d have to see it through.

The sun was low in the sky now. The long day had yielded nothing for the many hours they’d spent driving up and down the streets. All their regular sources had turned up dry. Their many calls to Dobby revealed no further contact had been made between the kidnapper and Jenny’s father. The last two hours, they had spent driving in an ever widening loop around the perimeter of Reynolds estate. Sam had already finished devouring his rawhide chew bone, and had even given up his backseat vigil; now he lay sprawled out across the seat sleeping peacefully. Boredom had lulled the trio into complacency.

“Zebra Three, Zebra Three. Please respond.”

Hutch, startled by the sudden intrusion of the dispatcher voice, snatched the mic from its cradle. “This is Zebra Three. Go ahead, Control.”

“See the man called Huggy. He said you know the place.”

“Got it, Control. Zebra Three out.” Hutch’s brows shot upward as he looked at his partner hopefully.

“Maybe we’re finally gettin’ somewhere,” Starsky said, optimistically. He swung the Torino into a U-turn and sped toward The Pits. Sam instantly detected the change and came to attention in the backseat. He didn’t know what was happening, but generally when the guys acted this way, something exciting was underway.

When the car screeched to a halt in front of The Pits, Sam bailed out after Starsky and Hutch, and trotted along beside them into the club. He'd long since become a regular, and no one batted an eye when he showed up with the two cops. Huggy was standing behind the bar, impatiently watching for their arrival.

"Took you two long enough to get here," he quipped. "I must have called a full five minutes ago."

"What've you got for us?" Aware of how little time they had left to locate Jenny, Hutch to got straight to the point.

"Well, I don't know how much help this is, but I may have a lead on your kidnapper. This—ahem—customer, who wishes to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of his business—was in here a little while ago telling me a story I think you'll find interesting."

"So where is this up-standing citizen? How do we talk to him?" Starsky prompted, as impatient as Hutch had been.

"He's not going to talk with you guys. Associating with cops wouldn't be good for business, if you know what I mean. But, he gave *me* the whole story. Seems like about four o'clock this morning, this business man—who shall remain nameless—was waiting for a call at the pay phone on Brockett and 22nd Street, when this dude arrives on the scene dragging some chick, attached to him by handcuffs. Now the businessman doesn't usually interfere in other people's personal lives, but when the dude decides to use the phone booth where his call is supposed to come in, the nameless businessman felt compelled to step in. Only problem is, the dude with the chick went ballistic. Pulled a gun and threatened to blow him away."

"Oh yeah? So what happened then?"

"Well, what do you think happened, Starsky? What would you have done if some freak shoved a Smith & Wesson under your chin and told you to take a hike?"

"Did your businessman get a good look at the girl?" Hutch asked, wanting it to be Jenny. They didn't have time to indulge in wild goose chases right now.

"Yeah. I asked him that. Said she was real pretty. Early teens, blonde hair, face bruised up real bad."

"What was she wearing?"

"Said it looked like a uniform of some type. At first he thought she was a hooker, but close up he could see she wasn't the type; didn't want to be there. She was scared—

crying. My friend may be into an occasional shady deal, but when it comes to kids, he doesn't want any part doing anything to hurt a kid."

Starsky reached over the bar and patted Huggy on the shoulder. "Thanks, Hug. We owe you one."

"One? Are you kidding, Starsky? You guys owe me about a million."



It was fully dark by the time the two detectives and Sam reached the area where the phone booth encounter had occurred. It wasn't much, but it was a starting point. Starsky killed the headlights and moved slowly down the deserted block; the lighted phone booth, like a beacon, stood out grotesquely in the darkness. Starsky slowed almost to a stop, then rolled on by, turning into the first alley on the right. He shifted into park and left the engine idling.

"Now what?"

Hutch looked over at his partner. "I don't know; maybe we should try and comb the area first. If nothing turns up, we can stake out the phone booth. He may come back here to call Reynolds. Or maybe we should go ahead and call Dobey."

"Aw come on, Hutch. You know if we call the Cap'n this place will be crawlin' with black and whites in fifteen minutes. They'd probably come screamin' in here with the lights flashing and the sirens blasting."

"So what do think? God, Starsk, there're a lot of deserted buildings here for two men to cover. I agree that the element of surprise would give us a powerful edge, but do we have time?"

"Too bad Big Dog hasn't finished his search and rescue training, huh?" Starsky grinned at Sam, as the dog's massive head appeared over his right shoulder seeking a little affection. Not disappointing the dog, he reached up and absently scratched him beneath the chin.

"Right. But unfortunately, we're almost out of time, and I don't think Rin Tin Tin here is going to be able to graduate in the next thirty minutes or so. So I guess that just leaves you and me."

Sam turned to Hutch and slurped him across the face, as though trying to convince the detective that he was up to the job. "Knock it off, boy," Hutch said good-naturedly, wiping a slobbery cheek against his shirt sleeve.

"I'm ready when you are," Starsky said. "Usual routine?"

Hutch nodded, pulled his magnum from the holster, and got out of the car. At first Sam tried to follow, but a sharp, “Sam, stay,” from Starsky brought him up short. Instead, he hopped into the passenger seat and watched, interestedly, as Hutch walked a little ahead of the slow-moving car, quietly scanning both sides of the alley for sounds and movement.

Aside from the low rumble from the Torino engine, the night was deadly quiet. Sam moved to the car window and hung his paws out, watching Hutch intently. When the alley dead-ended, Hutch shooed Sam out of his seat and climbed back into the car.

At the next alley, they repeated the pattern. After four unsuccessful runs, Hutch sat back in his seat and shook his head resignedly. “This isn’t working, Starsk. We can’t cover the whole area like this. We need to split up.”

Starsky was quiet for a moment. This just didn’t feel right. His gut instincts told him they should stick together; but Hutch had made a valid point. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. It’s just that this guy’s a nut, and I don’t like the idea of either one of us meeting up with him alone.”

“One of us could take Sam,” Hutch suggested.

“Naw, he might give us away; he’s not trained to track yet. I can see it now. First kidnapper in history to be licked to death by a big dog.”

Both men smiled at the visual image of such a thing happening. Sam, relegated to the back seat once again, wagged his tail, thumping it loudly against the vinyl upholstery.

“Okay. Here’s what we’ll do. Park the car about half-way down; We’ll leave Sam there and split up. You take the east side and I’ll take the west. We’ll start at each end and work our way back up the car.”

“And what’s the plan if we find ‘em, Sherlock?” Starsky asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe, we shouldn’t move in alone. Come back to the car and honk the horn.”

“Oh yeah, right, Hutch. Why don’cha just call ahead and let him know we’re here?”

“Okay, wise guy, how about flashing the headlights once?”

“Not great—but better. If we’re lucky, he won’t see it. Then again, maybe we won’t either.”

“Well then, what brilliant idea do you have?”

Starsky shrugged. “Like I said—great plan, Hutch.”

Starsky guided the Torino down the main street of the district to a point he considered as a half-way mark of the area they planned to search. He turned off the engine and both detectives automatically pulled out their weapons and checked them. As they stepped out of the car, Starsky rolled down his window far enough for Sam to poke his head out and get a whiff of the cool, evening air, but not far enough to jump out and follow them. Hutch did the same.

“Okay, Big Dog, I want ya to be quiet. No barking. No whining, and absolutely—no eating the upholstery. Understand?”

Sam stuck his head out the window, and lifted it for Starsky to pet, all the while his big paws doing a seat dance. “I don’t think he’ll act up,” Hutch said optimistically, but added as an afterthought, “I guess we could have left him with Huggy.”

“He’s okay, Hutch. He’s really a pretty good mutt, you know?”

After one final pat on the head for Sam, Starsky came around the front of the car and joined his partner.

“Okay, now don’t forget. If we spot him, or even anything that looks remotely close to his hideout, we come back here and signal. Got it?” Hutch warned, “No heroics.”

“Got it.” Starsky peeled off to the left, then stopped. “Hutch?”

“Yeah?”

“You know....”

Hutch nodded. “You too, buddy.”

Chapter 13

Jenny lay curled in the fetal position in the far corner of the small storeroom, her quiet sobs barely audible. Hope of being reunited with her family seemed more remote than ever. The detestable, sick man holding her prisoner had promised she would be free soon, but Jenny was bright enough to reason that she could identify him; therefore, she was a liability. Once he had her father’s money, she would be of no further value to him.

When she first heard the stirring outside the locked door, she instinctively withdrew deeper in the shadows beyond the single battery powered lantern. But when the doorknob rattled, she realized whoever was on the other side of the door didn’t have a

key. Someone was there alright, but it wasn't Bowman. Jenny scurried to the door and whispered loudly, "Who's there? Can you hear me? I need help...please."

"Jenny? Is that you?"

"Yes! Oh, yes! Please, whoever you are—please help me."

"Okay...it's okay. Just stay calm. I'm a police officer; my partner and I are here to take you home. Now, back away from the door. I'm going to pry it open. Don't worry, I'll have you out—" The detective's voice stopped mid-sentence. Jenny heard a dull thud as his knees buckled and he fell against the door, dashing her short-lived bid for freedom.



Starsky checked his wrist watch again. He'd finished searching the abandoned buildings on his side of the imaginary divide and had been back at the car for ten minutes. Either Hutch was doing a more thorough job, or he'd run into trouble. 'No heroics', Hutch had warned his partner. Now Starsky only hoped Hutch had followed his own directive.

"What do ya think, Big Dog?"

Sam, who had been sitting at attention next to Starsky, looked at him.

"Think Hutch is in trouble? Hmmm? Should we call in the Cavalry?"

The dog stood up, wagging his tail wildly, always enthusiastic for any suggestion from Starsky.

"I don't know. Maybe we're jumpin' the gun. Maybe we ought to give him a little more time." Starsky hopped up onto the hood of the Torino to wait, while Sam disappointedly sat back down and resumed his watch.



Hutch's first sensation was a throbbing ache coming from the general vicinity of the angry looking lump on the back of his head. As his eyes opened and began adjusting to the dim light in the room, he saw an anxious, young, tear-streaked face peering down into his.

"Oh, thank God. I thought he'd killed you." Jenny's trembling fingers touched his cheek, assuring herself he was real. Hutch's head lay nestled in her lap.

"Jenny?"

“Yes, I’m Jenny.”

“How long have I been out?”

“About half an hour, Detective Hutchinson.”

“How do you know my name? And where’s Bowman?”

“He took your badge and ID out of your pocket when he dragged you in here. I don’t know where he is now, but he was in a rage when he left. Does it hurt much?”

“Yeah. Yeah, right now my head feels like something out of an Excedrin commercial. Are you okay?” Hutch struggled to sit up despite still being a little woozy from the blow.

“I guess so,” Jenny answered quietly, averting her eyes as she spoke.

“Hey,” he said softly, lifting her chin so that her eyes were even with his, “did he hurt you?”

Large tears sprung to the corners of the cornflower blue eyes as she silently nodded yes. Hutch gently pulled her against his shoulder, comforting her as she wept. “It’ll be okay. My partner’s here; he’ll find us.”

Jenny pulled away and looked up at him. “Really? You think Stan won’t find him and hurt him too?”

Hutch felt his heartbeat quicken at the thought that Bowman may have already bushwhacked Starsky, perhaps even killed him. But he forced a reassuring smile as he answered. “No. Not Starsky. He’s pretty quick on his feet. Don’t worry about that.”

She smiled tentatively, wanting to believe Hutch, but afraid to get her hopes up again.

“That’s better,” he said. “Now, my friends call me Hutch. Okay? We are going to get out of here. But I need you to promise me that if I tell you to do something, you’ll follow my instructions to the T. Can you do that for me?”

She nodded agreeably. “Okay, Hutch. Do you have a plan? Is it one we can ‘take to the bank’?”

Hutch looked a little confused. “You know, like Baretta’s always saying?” she explained, a bit disappointed that an LA detective wasn’t hip enough to recognize the trademark words of her favorite TV hero.

“I’m working on a plan,” he assured her. “I just want to know I can count on you when the time comes.”

“Sure you can. And you can ‘take that to the bank’.” An impish smile lit her face.

Suddenly the door flew up and Stan Bowman stepped in, holding a gun in front of him. “So you’re awake.”

Hutch’s arm curled protectively around Jenny’s shoulders. “You’re not going to get away with this, Bowman.”

“How the hell do you know my name? I didn’t give my name to Reynolds.” Angry red splotches distorted the kidnapper’s handsome face.

“We’ve known it since the beginning,” Hutch bluffed. “The whole LA police force is looking for you. Let us go now, and I’ll ask the DA to go easy on you.”

“Damn! Everything is spoiled!” Bowman snarled. He began pacing back and forth like a caged tiger. “I *want* that money! I *deserve* it; Reynolds owes me!”

Jenny drew closer to Hutch, fearing Bowman’s next move. She hadn’t seen him this angry before, and didn’t want to be in his direct path when he exploded.

“It’s too late for that,” Hutch said with false bravado. “Right now you’re facing kidnapping charges. Let us go and it won’t become murder. Harm this child and you’ll never see the outside of a penitentiary again.”

Bowman darted forward, sticking the gun against Hutch’s forehead. “What gives you the right to tell me what to do? You don’t know me—you don’t know anything about me or what her father did to me!”

Hutch held his voice steady, knowing better than to allow his fear to show. “I know if you kill a kid and a cop, your days are numbered. That’s all I need to know.” Jenny held her breath as Stan Bowman cocked the pistol he held to Hutch’s head.

“You think you’re so smart. I’ll show you. I’ll show you all! And just for the record, this *child*, as you call her, was great in the sack. I like it when they fight.”

The only sign of Hutch’s seething anger was the twitch in his left cheek as his jaw tightened. Silently, he vowed to see this piece of garbage put away for the rest of his life. At his side, he felt the girl physically flinch from Bowman’s hateful words.

“The fact is, detective, this building, all of the buildings along this street have been wire for demolition. Convenient, I must say. All they need to go up like a Fourth of July display is a little dynamite—which I’ve carefully supplied. My plan was to wait for

the money, then blow up the whole damn block. If I can't have what's coming to me, then the fireworks show will happen just a little sooner." He stepped back, still holding the cocked gun in front of him.

"I have no doubt you'll get what's coming to you, Bowman," Hutch stated with cold, calculated directness.

"Murder's going to be hard to prove if there aren't any bodies. So don't give me your line of bullshit, pig. You're both already dead."

Bowman focused his attention on the terrified girl. "All because your old man is too greedy to make good on his debts. Well, thanks for the ride, sweetheart. Maybe I should take you along with me for a little entertainment."

"No! I'd rather die. Leave me alone!" Jenny cried. Hutch pushed the girl behind him, blocking her from Bowman's view.

"Look, Bowman, there's no reason to kill the girl," Hutch tried to reason. "Why not let her go. She has nothing to do with whatever beef you think you have with her father."

Stan Bowman laughed. "Don't you get it, man? Even if I can't get my hands on the old man's money, I'll have the satisfaction of knowing I made him pay with his most valuable possession. So don't waste my time with your arguments."

Bowman brandished the gun, motioning for them to turn around. "Face the wall, on your knees. Hands behind your heads." Jenny began crying, but did as she was told. Hutch reached out and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Take it easy. Remember what I told you." He smiled, and added, "And you can take it to the bank."

Trying to be brave, Jenny sniffed back her tears and bent down on her knees.

"Hutchinson, where's your car?"

Hutch hesitated. The last thing he wanted to do was lead Bowman back to his partner's car. Conceivably, Starsky may be waiting there for Hutch to return, and would be a sitting duck for this nut case. At the very least, Sam would be there; and it wouldn't mean a thing to Bowman to put a bullet in the dog's brain so he could steal the car. Hutch had absolutely no doubt that Sam *would* put up a fight if a stranger tried to enter the car without one of the two cops along.

"I took a taxi," Hutch said sarcastically.

"Don't get smart with me, pig. I'd just as well shoot you as blow you up."

Hutch decided the only thing to do was lie, and send him on a wild goose chase. “I parked about ten blocks away, due east. I didn’t want you to know I was here. Was afraid you’d see my car. It’s a beat-up, green Ford.”

“Damn! I thought I’d least get a decent set of wheels out this,” Bowman complained. He stepped forward and fished in Hutch’s pocket until he found a key ring with three keys, one of which was for a Ford. Then he leaned over, buried his nose in Jenny’s hair and breathed in the fragrance of her green apple shampoo. She immediately pulled away, disgusted and frightened by his touch.

“I guess this is so long, sweet cheeks. If you were a little more cooperative, I’d take you with me. But your old man will be on my trail for awhile, and you’ll just slow me down. Enjoy the fireworks, folks, it’ll all be over in a matter of minutes. Maybe you’ll be lucky and the explosion will take you out quickly.” Bowman laughed, very pleased with himself for coming up with a plan that would give him time to escape, dispose of the hostages, and do away with any condemning evidence he may have inadvertently left behind.

The door slammed loudly behind him. Hutch was surprised and disappointed when he also heard the lock tumblers click into place. He’d hoped he and Jenny would at least be able to escape the room, and if lucky, clear the building before the chain reaction began.

Chapter 14

Starsky checked his watch again. He’d been back at the car for thirty minutes now, and was really getting concerned about his partner. Maybe there’d been more buildings to search on Hutch’s side of the divide. Maybe he’d beaten Starsky back, waited a few minutes, then decided to look for him. He’d flashed the headlights twice, but still no sign of Hutch. His instincts were telling him something was wrong.

Jumping down off the hood, Starsky walked across the street, looking up one way and then the other. Naturally, Sam was at his heels, not wanting to miss a single thing.

“I don’t like this, Big Dog. I don’t like it at all.” The dog looked up at Starsky solemnly, waiting for a cue as to what was expected of him. He sensed Starsky was upset; he just didn’t know if Hutch’s absence had anything to do with it.

“Maybe I better call Cap’n Dobey,” Starsky muttered aloud then turned and looked down at Sam. “You think so, boy? Hmmm? It ain’t like Hutch to leave us hangin’ this long. I thought sure he’d come back when I flashed the lights.”

Starsky started back across the street, then caught a fleeting glimpse of movement outside one of the buildings a couple of blocks down. Sam saw it too—stopped dead still, his ear’s pricking up, sensitive to any unfamiliar sound.

Seeing the dog’s reaction, Starsky pulled his revolver and flattened himself against the wall of the nearest building. “Sam! Heel!” he whispered loudly, hoping the dog wouldn’t give them away. Sam obeyed, positioning himself close to Starsky. Silently, they watched. Again, he detected someone, or something, in the shadows, heading away from them. The figure was too short and too dark to be Hutch.

Afraid Sam would reveal their presence, Starsky decided to leave the dog behind. “Okay, here’s a chance for you to show me what ya learned in dog school, boy. Stay! Hear me? I said, Stay!”

Sam dropped into the traditional sit/stay position, reluctantly obeying. For good measure, Starsky also gave him the ‘stay’ hand signal. “Sam, Stay,” he repeated a third and final time, then slipped away into the darkness.

Sam was finding it next to impossible to do as he’d been told. It just didn’t seem right that both Hutch and Starsky were out there having a good time without him. Regardless of the game, he knew he wanted to take part. Finally overcome by curiosity, Sam rose and took one step in the direction he’d seen Starsky go, then thought better of it, and sat back down.



Starsky quietly moved along the storefronts, staying close to the buildings for cover. He hadn’t seen any movement in the shadows for the past few minutes, but was determined to pick up the trail of the elusive figure. Still no sign of Hutch. With every passing moment, the detective’s uneasiness increased.

Without warning, Starsky heard a loud crash and clanging metal, about fifty feet to his left. He turned in the direction of the noise and inched forward, the pistol held up and in front of him, ready for action. The straggly, undernourished tabby cat perched on a lidless garbage pail paid little attention when the cop appeared from around the corner of the building, leveling his gun at the would-be assailant.

Disappointed, Starsky lowered the pistol and returned it to the holster. “Terrific,” he mumbled. “My partner’s missing, and I’m chasin’ an alley cat.”

“Actually, you’re closer than you think,” Bowman said, from behind the detective. “I’ve always hated cats, but I guess I owe this one a debt of gratitude.” Starsky cautiously moved his hand toward the Smith & Wesson.

“I wouldn’t try that if I were you,” Bowman warned. “I’ve already had to teach one cop a lesson tonight. You could easily be number two.”

Despite the threat, Starsky whirled around and glared angrily. “If you’ve hurt one hair on my partner’s head, you’ll answer to me, Bowman.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, *I’m* the one holding the gun, pig—not you.”

“That gun’s not gonna do you any good, turkey, if you’ve hurt Hutch. I’ll take you apart with my bare hands.”

“He’s alive—for now, but he’ll be dead soon enough,” Bowman sneered, “he *and* the little Reynolds bitch.” Starsky took a step forward, but stopped when Bowman cocked the pistol.

“Nah ah...I’m not warning you again. Don’t make me shoot you before you tell me where your partner’s car is.”

“We took a taxi,” Starsky said drolly.

“Very funny. Your partner’s already used that line. Where’s the green ford?”

“Find your own getaway car.”

Bowman’s temper flared. “Look, pig, I’m sick of your smart mouth. Take me to the car now, or I’ll shoot!”

“Okay...okay...” Starsky held his hands out in supplication before him. It seemed wise to bide his time; he’d wait for the opportunity to overpower Bowman and beat the truth out of him as to where Hutch and Jenny were being held. “Follow me.”

The two men walked back toward the Torino. Starsky knew Hutch had deliberately tried to throw the kidnapper off by misleading him about the car. As they walked down the deserted sidewalk, the only sound Starsky heard was that of Bowman’s shoe heels clicking against the pavement.

“When I give ya the car, are you gonna tell me where my partner is?”

“Why not?” Bowman responded. “I think it might be real cozy if I let you join them.”

Starsky stopped mid-stride. “You know if you kill a cop, you’re a dead man.”

“Yeah, so your partner said. Can you tell I’m real scared?”

“Tell me where he is now, or I won’t take you to the car.”

Anger flashed in Bowman's eyes as he jammed the gun under Starsky's chin. "I've just about had it with you. I may just blow your damn head off now and find the car for myself."

The sound was so low, Starsky thought he imagined it. Then over Bowman's shoulder, he saw Sam stealing up behind the man. The hair on dog's back stood straight up like the bristles on a wire brush, ears flattened against his head, giving him a dangerous, sleek appearance. The growl grew louder, and the animal picked up speed, his lip curled back, baring gleaming, white teeth.

Bowman spun around, leveling the gun at Sam's head. "What the hell..."

Sam lunged, distracting the gunman, giving Starsky the opportunity to make his move. Drawing the Smith & Wesson, he shouted, "Freeze, Bowman! Sam, come!" Sam stood frozen, a picture of primal, predatory instinct. "Sam!" Starsky shouted louder. Slowly, reluctantly, the dog began to back down. His need to tear out the enemy's jugular vein was overpowered by his sense of duty to follow Starsky's command.

Bowman's back was still turned to Starsky, afraid to take his eyes off Sam. "Bowman, put the gun down. Slow."

Torn between defending himself from the dog, or the cop pointing a gun at his back, Bowman made his move. No time to think it through, just pure and simple reflex. Thanks to the cop, the dog didn't seem to be as great a threat. Bowman spun around and leveled the gun at Starsky's chest.

Seeing the kidnapper's decision, Starsky shouted once more, "Freeze!" giving his opponent a final opportunity to surrender. Bowman was fast, just not as fast as the detective. Starsky didn't aim for the heart, but when Bowman bolted and became a moving target, the bullet struck only one inch to the right of it.

The thunder of the Smith and Wesson discharging was drowned out by a succession of large explosions ignited in the sector of buildings Hutch had been searching across the street.

Shock and horror flashed across the faces of both men. Starsky witnessed the life slowly ebbing from the other man's face. Bowman had no time to think of anything, as he drew his last breath. He collapsed in a heap at Starsky's feet, his eyes glazed, oblivious to the chain reaction he had ignited with a few sticks of strategically placed dynamite in the expertly wired buildings.

Sam whined and clung to Starsky's side, frightened by the sounds of the exploding buildings and the trembling street beneath their feet.

“Hutch...” Starsky barely whispered. Realizing too late that he’d shot the only man who could lead him to his partner and the young kidnap victim, he dropped to his knees, grabbing the front of Bowman’s shirt and dragging him up, face to face.

“Where is he, you bastard! Where is he!” Starsky shook the dead body violently, willing it back to life long enough to tell him where Hutch and Jenny were. Bowman’s head fell back, exposing his glassy, blank eyes. Starsky slowly released him, too stunned to think clearly what his next move should be. Beside him, Sam whined and nudged at his knee. Starsky laid a comforting arm around the dog and drew him close. “I’ve really done it this time, boy. I’ve probably just signed Hutch’s death warrant.”

Without considering the risk, Starsky made a mad dash to the pile of rubble which had, minutes ago been six large buildings. Sam was his shadow, timing his steps to run along-side Starsky, looking up in anticipation of their next move. Sam’s sixth sense told him something had happened to Hutch—something bad; so there was no way he would allow himself to be separated from Starsky now.

“Hutch! Hutch! Can you hear me?” Starsky ran the length of the sidewalk in front of the ruins. There was no response; only the occasional popping and cracking as the damaged timbers gave way. Remarkably, there was little fire, most likely because the electricity had been turned off and gas lines capped in preparation for the scheduled demolition.

Within minutes, Starsky heard sirens coming toward them. Even so, he couldn’t stand by idly and wait. Hutch and Jenny could be trapped and suffocating beneath the piles of rubble. Starting at the far end, with the last building in the row, Starsky began picking his way through the fallen concrete and splintered timbers, calling out Hutch’s name and Jenny’s as he moved along. Sam followed, uncertain of his goal, only knowing he needed to stick close to Starsky for the moment.

They’d scarcely covered a half of the first building when firefighters began arriving. Starsky turned back and sought out the fire captain in charge of the mission, briefing him on the situation and alerting him of the two victims lost somewhere in the ruins.

Captain Jacobson looked at the destruction before him. He wanted to reassure Starsky his crew would find the two missing victims, but he was an honest and direct man by nature; and it went against his grain to offer promises he didn’t believe he could keep.

“Detective Starsky, we’ll do our best to find your partner, but I’m sure you realize the odds aren’t good, considering the extensive damage we’re facing here.”

“Yeah, I hear what you’re sayin’; but you don’t know my partner. If there’s any way possible to keep them alive, Hutch’ll find it. We just need to get to ‘em before they run out of air.” Sam whined and lifted his head beneath Starsky’s hand, soliciting a pat.

“Is that a police dog you have there, detective?”

“Who, Sam? Nah. He belongs to Hutch ‘n me, but he’s not a police dog. We just started him in search and res—”

Starsky’s words stopped mid-sentence. “Jeez, why didn’t I think of that?” He ran a hand through his hair nervously. “I must be losin’ it.”

“I don’t understand. Losing what?”

“I got’a go, Cap’n. I need to get somethin’ out’a my car.”

Starsky took off at a clip, running as fast as he could to the Torino, Sam hot on his heels. When they reached the car, Starsky dove headfirst through the open window and snatched Hutch’s baseball jacket off the back seat. Sam stood eagerly waiting for the car door to open so he could get in.

Instead of letting him into the car, Starsky dropped to the ground, coming eye to eye with the rottweiler. “Look what I got here, boy. Know what this is? Hmmm? Do ya?” He held the jacket close to the dog’s nose, turning it from side to side, giving Sam an opportunity to find Hutch’s scent. “It’s Hutch’s, Sam. Recognize it?”

Sam sniffed and snorted into the fabric of the soft, over-worn jacket, recognizing the familiar scent of his other human—Hutch. His tail beat excitedly, anticipating Hutch’s appearance at any minute.

Starsky clasped Sam’s collar in his other hand and held the dogs face close, speaking in quiet, even sentences, willing the dog to understand his words. “Take a good whiff, Sam,” he said gently. “Hutch’s life may depend on what you and me do in the next few minutes. Can ya smell his scent on here boy?”

Sam listened intently, cocking his head to one side when he heard Hutch’s name. Starsky raised the jacket to Sam’s nose as he talked to the dog. “Can you find ‘em, boy? Huh? Can ya? Hutch is counting on us to find ‘em. Where’s Hutch?”

Sam sniffed the jacket again; his excitement building as he immersed himself in the familiar, much loved scent. Anxious for any link to his partner, Starsky’s hopes were buoyed when he realized Sam was forming a connection. “That’s right, Big Dog. We’re gonna find Hutch, okay? I know if anybody can, you can,” Starsky encouraged. Sam answered with a resonant woof, before charging off toward the collapsed buildings again, his nose to the ground, spurred on by Hutch’s scent. Starsky gave him his freedom, and followed close behind.

“Wait a minute!” the fire captain called from behind them. “You can’t go back in there! You could get hurt!” His words fell on deaf ears.

Chapter 15

A cloud of murky dust filled the air around them. Jenny woke first. She found herself sheltered by Hutch's body, his weight making it difficult for her to breathe.

"Detective Hutchinson, can you hear me?" She tried to squirm out from under him, but found it impossible to move in any direction. "Detective Hutchinson...Hutch!"

Hutch woke slowly, his lungs sucking in air and dust, setting off a coughing fit. As soon as he caught his breath, he tried to move, but found they were boxed into a small space, framed on all sides by fallen timbers, concrete, and steel girders.

"Jenny? Are you okay?" Hutch blinked several times in the darkness, trying to clear his vision. Through the murky atmosphere he spied a small, weak beam of light; the battery lantern Bowman had left behind. Hutch realized any sudden movement could cause an avalanche of debris to come raining down on them.

"I think so, except I can't breathe. You're...you're... too heavy."

"Oh, sorry. We'll have to take it slow, but I'm going to try and move now. Cover your head and keep your eyes closed. I don't want you to get dust in them. Okay?"

"Okay," Jenny agreed.

Using his back and all the strength he could muster, Hutch slowly lifted up far enough to take his weight off her. He waited a couple seconds to be certain nothing would slide or fall on Jenny, then slowly lowered his body next to hers onto the cold, concrete floor. They both sighed with relief when the rubble didn't cave in and cover them.

"Okay now?"

"Yes, that's much better." They lay silently for a few seconds before Jenny spoke again.

"Hutch, where's your partner? You said he'd find us. Why hasn't he come?"

"He will," Hutch answered with confidence. "You don't know Starsk. He's as hardheaded as an old billy goat. He's probably trying to dig us out with his bare hands

right now.” A smile played at the corners Hutch’s lips, as he saw Starsky in his mind’s eye, doing exactly that.

“What if we run out of air? Or what if the building catches on fire?” Hutch heard the panic mounting in her voice.

“Don’t worry, the building’s not on fire. I’m sure the gas and electricity have been shut off. And we aren’t going to run out of air; there’re plenty of openings for the oxygen to come in.”

Hutch struggled to keep his voice light. He knew Starsky would come—if he could. But the thought that Bowman may have gotten to him worried Hutch more than he wanted to admit, even to himself. “Besides, I’m sure by now the fire department is on its way. Someone will find us soon. I promise.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said, sniffing back her tears. “And I hope Stan Bowman got blown up!” she added maliciously.

Hutch chuckled softly. “Yeah, me too.”

Looking about the dimly lit space, he could see that they only had about three feet of open area above them. So much for trying to dig their way out. They were blocked in from every direction. He just hoped Jenny wasn’t claustrophobic. He’d have to keep her mind occupied until someone found them.

“If he wasn’t blown up here in the building, the police probably have him in custody by now,” Hutch said.

“Soon as we get out of here, I’ll take you back to your folks. They’ve been pretty worried about you.” Hutch looked over at Jenny, but could only see the outline of her face in the shadows.

“I know. I’ve felt really bad about what they’ve been going through,” she said quietly. “When I get home, I’m going to try and make it up to them for all the times I’ve caused them trouble.”

Hutch’s voice was tender as he reassured her. “They talked about you a lot to my partner and me. Your Mom talked about what a good girl you are and how proud she is of you. Your Dad bragged about you being an honor student.”

“Daddy’s probably going to ground me for the rest of my life for getting into the car with a stranger,” she whispered. Hutch could almost make out the worried pucker of her brow. He reached over and lay a comforting hand on her arm.

“Jenny, I promise you, your Dad will be so happy to be able to put his arms around you and hug you, he won’t be mad at all. And your Mom...well, your Mom is a nice, gentle lady from all I saw. I know she won’t be angry either.”

“I hope you’re right,” she answered. A few seconds passed before either spoke again; then she turned her head toward Hutch.

“Tell me about your partner. Is he a good detective? Is he smart like Barretta?”

Hutch smiled in the darkness, wondering what Starsky would think about being compared to the TV cop. Was Starsky like Barretta? He mulled it over a moment before answering.

“I guess in some respects. Starsky’s a streetwise cop. He grew up in New York City, ran with a rough crowd in his earlier days. He’s not scared of anything. I guess that comes from having to fight his own battles his whole life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, his Dad was killed when Starsk was just a kid, and it kind of toughened him. I think that’s one reason he’s a good cop.”

“Have you known him a long time?” she asked.

“Since the academy.” Hutch was quiet for a second. “He’s the best friend I’ve ever had; and no one could ask for a better partner. Actually, we’re more like brothers than partners.”

Jenny could hear the affection in the detective’s voice. “He sounds really special,” she whispered

“We’ve been through a lot together,” he continued. “I can’t tell you how many times he’s gotten me out of a tight spot.” He knew by now Starsky must be going nuts. If the tables were turned, he’d be out of his mind with worry.

Jenny giggled. “Tighter than this?”

Hutch laughed too. “Yeah, believe it or not...tighter than this. That’s why I know he’s out there right now. He’ll move heaven and earth to find us.” Overhead, a beam creaked and groaned, showering small particles of drywall dust down on them.

“Hutch....”

“Hmmm?”

“Would it be alright if I hold your hand? It’s really scary in here.”

Hutch's heart wrenched at the sound of her frightened voice. He could only imagine what she'd been through the last few days...deprivation, fear, uncertainty...rape... "Sure you can. Hang onto me, and we'll get through this together."



Starsky had to make a choice: hang back and help the firemen search the demolished buildings at their pace, or trust his instincts and follow Sam. Based on past experiences, he was usually better off going with his gut feeling. It wasn't a tough decision.

Sam, nose to the ground and tail in the air, relentlessly sniffed and snorted his way through the rubble of the first two buildings. It had been over an hour since the explosion, but debris was still shifting and sliding at the slightest touch. Starsky held his breath a couple of times, hoping he'd made the right choice, and that he and Sam weren't doing more harm than good.

"Hutch, can you hear me? Jenny! Answer me!" Starsky called out every few minutes, hoping one or both were conscious and would answer, narrowing down the search. The air was filled with the sounds of rescue workers and the loud speaker on the fire engine, blaring out orders and directions. It seemed as though every time Starsky looked around, another rescue vehicle of some sort was pulling onto the scene.

Still at the site of the second building, Sam stopped for a moment, then began turning in circles, sniffing the ground. After a few seconds he lifted his head high, sniffed the air, then looked at Starsky anxiously.

"What is it, boy? You got somethin'? Huh?" Starsky squatted down to eye level with the dog. Sam took advantage of the closeness and one more time, buried his nose in Hutch's jacket, which lay draped over Starsky's arm.

Picking up the scent again, the dog dropped his nose to the ground once more, and plowed toward the third building. To Starsky's surprise, Sam bypassed that building entirely, and went to the fourth, his tail wagging furiously now. He zigzagged back and forth, covering the same patch of ground several times.

Starsky watched in amazement until Sam came to a sudden halt, and began clawing at one of larger piles of rubble. After a few seconds the dog stopped, and looked up at him expectantly. When Starsky didn't react immediately, Sam barked at him impatiently, then resumed digging at a frenzied pitch, churning up dust and debris in all directions.

"Hey! Hey, you guys! Get over here! Quick! I think we got somethin'!"

Chapter 16

Several of the firemen working nearest them abandoned their own search, and rushed to where Starsky stood watching Sam dig.

Seeing his men gathering in one area, the fire captain made his way toward the crowd. “What’s your dog found, Detective Starsky?”

Sam was still digging and barking, not the least bit deterred by the humans’ lack of faith in his tracking abilities. Starsky grabbed the over-zealous dog and pulled him out of the way. “Not sure, Cap’n, but he’s picked up somethin’. He’s been following Hutch’s scent.”

“Your partner?”

“Yeah. Sam took a whiff of Hutch’s jacket then took off runnin’ this way like a bat out of hell.”

“I thought you said this dog had just started his training.”

“He did. But the guy who runs the program told my friend that Sam’s a natural. Said he never saw a dog pick things up as fast as this one. Maybe it’s a talent, ya know?”

The captain pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face. “Well, we don’t have anything better to go on. No sign of your partner or the kid.” He turned to the group of men assembled around them. “Come on boys, let’s get organized. We’ll dig here for a little while, and see if we come up with anything.”

Sam wasn’t at all pleased when Starsky pulled him off the mound to make way for the firemen.

“Take it easy now,” the captain told them. “I don’t want this rubble to shift and landslide, trapping one of you. Follow SOP.”

Starsky maintained a firm grip on Sam’s collar while the firemen devised their plan for excavating the area. After spending more than an hour at the arduous task of carefully removing piles of debris, they still had no evidence that Hutch and Jenny were buried there. The firemen’s enthusiasm and hope began to wane, but Starsky’s faith in Sam’s ability to sense his partner was nearby didn’t flag.

Starsky continued to call out to Hutch every few minutes, clinging to the hope that his partner would hear, and give them some sign he was alive. Finally the fire captain raised a hand, signally his men to stop.

“Hey, what are you doin’?” Starsky knew the answer, but pressed Captain Jacobson to put it into words.

“Look, detective, if your partner *is* buried here, we should have gotten some response by now.” The captain forced himself to look Starsky in the eyes. “That is...of course...unless he and the girl are, well, you know...unless they didn’t make it.”

“No!” Starsky closed the distance between them in two forceful strides. “Don’t say it! Hutch isn’t dead!” Anger flashed across his handsome features as he pointed at the work site.

“Now my dog says he’s there. So, he’s there! If you don’t wanna help me get ‘em out, fine. I’ll do it myself. If I have to dig ‘em out by myself, with only Sam’s help, then I’ll do it. Just get the hell out’a my way.”

The fire captain’s face showed no emotion as he held the angry younger man’s glare. He’d seen this reaction many times before when loved ones were missing. People just couldn’t stand to give up hope; and apparently this man cared a great deal about his partner, maybe even considered him family. It would take more than one firefighter’s word to snuff out his hope.

“All I’m saying is, we’ve spent enough time on this site. Your partner and the girl could be somewhere else; and if we don’t get to them soon, we may be too late.”

Starsky’s anger subsided as he considered the captain’s words. What if he was right? What if Hutch and Jenny were suffocating...were injured and bleeding, and he and the fire rescue team were searching in the wrong spot? Before he could respond, Sam broke from his down stay and scrambled onto the remaining pile of rubble and began clawing at the ground and barking. The dog turned and looked at Starsky, pleading, it seemed for the man to understand. *Sometimes you just have to have faith*

That clinched it for Starsky. He snatched a shovel from the closest firefighter, and joined Sam at the dig site. Jacobson watched in silence, his men waiting for a signal from him. Finally, he nodded toward Starsky, and instantly, they fell back into the task of clearing the debris.

As Sam’s enthusiasm inexplicably increased, he dug faster and harder, driven on by some unseen force. Sam was close—Starsky could feel it too. Hutch was nearby.

Sam paused, cocked his head to one side, listening. The firemen didn’t seem to notice, but Starsky did. He knelt down beside Sam and leaned close, bracing himself with the shovel. “Hutch! Hutch! You down there? Jenny? Can you hear me?”

“Starsky! Is that you? We’re down here!”

Starsky dropped the shovel, and threw his hand up, signaling the others to stop digging. He felt his heart jump to his throat at the sound of his partner’s voice. He

crawled along the ground on his hands and knees, listening, trying to pinpoint where the sound had come from.

“Hutch! Up here, buddy. Can ya hear me, huh? Can ya?”

“I can hear you Starsk! I heard Sam barking first! Jenny’s with me. I think you’re pretty close. Can you go for help?”

“Got the whole LA Fire Department here already, partner! Are you guys okay? Are you hurt?”

“I don’t think we are, but it’s really dark down here and I can’t see well enough to tell.”

Captain Jacobson made his way to Starsky and knelt down beside the police officer and his dog. “Detective Hutchinson, this is Captain Jacobson from the LA Fire Department. Can you describe to us which direction our voices are coming from, and whether or not the area you’re in is secure?”

Sam whined loudly, scratching at the ground until Starsky seized his collar and pulled the excited dog back next to him.

“I can’t tell how far, but you seem to be a little to the left—at least that’s where the dust and gravel seem to be coming down from. It’s pretty dark in here though.”

“Did you say Jenny’s with you, Hutch?” Starsky questioned.

“I’m here,” Jenny called up. “I’m here. Please tell my parents I’m all right!”

Starsky closed his eyes and sighed with relief. At least that crazy bastard hadn’t killed them both.

“Detective Hutchinson, do you have room enough to move out of the way if any of this rubble starts to fall?”

Hutch didn’t answer right away. His silence told Starsky that the answer was no.

“Well, that could be a little problem. We’re, uh, we’re pretty much boxed in down here. In fact, we can’t even sit up.”

Starsky didn’t miss the anxious looks the firemen exchanged. “Not good,” Jacobson murmured quietly. He turned to his second in command. “Better keep the paramedics close. This could get pretty hairy. And go ahead and contact Captain Dobey so he can talk to the girl’s parents.”

Captain Jacobson turned to Starsky. "I'm not pulling any punches with you, Starsky. This may not go well."

"What do ya mean? We found 'em didn't we? You just keep diggin', right?"

"It's not that cut and dry," he answered. "If that stuff starts to slide, or if a beam that's holding it up off them shifts, they'll have no protection to keep them from being buried deeper, or perhaps even crushed by the weight. Obviously, they're lying flat, if he can't even sit up. I think we need to take it slow and easy."

"But what if they run out of oxygen before we get to 'em? Then what?"

"Then we try and run an oxygen line down there. But I'm not going to consider doing that unless it's absolutely necessary; increases the possibility of starting a fire." The veteran fireman saw fear cloud Starsky's eyes as he listened.

"Rest assured we've been trained to work with these situations. My men and I will do our damndest to get them out safe and sound." Having said his piece, Jacobson turned his attention back to the pile of rubble before him.

"Detective Hutchinson, we're going to get you out as quickly as we can," he called down, his voice controlled and calm. "It may take awhile, so just bear with us, okay?"

"We're not going anywhere," Hutch called back, his attempt at humor falling flat.

The fire captain began barking orders at his crew as they went into action, each man doing his part with expert precision. Starsky stayed as close as they would allow him, holding Sam at his side, to prevent the dog from forcing his way past the firemen. Sam whined and trembled, struggling to break away from Starsky and be a part of the action; but Starsky refused to indulge him.

"Hey Cap, I can see them!" one of the firemen shouted over his shoulder.

Jacobson and Starsky quickly joined him near the opening. By shining a battery operated search lantern down into the hole, they could barely make out the top of Hutch's blonde head, sprinkled with dust and trash.

"Hey, partner!" Starsky called down. Hutch looked up, trying to see his friend's face, but all he could make out was the bright glow of the lantern. "We're gonna have you out in no time."

"Hutch, are they really going to get us out now?" Jenny whispered.

"Sure they are. I told you Starsky would find us. He's never let me down before, and I knew he wouldn't this time."

While the debris was gradually cleared, Starsky paced nervously, stopping from time to time to lean down near the small opening and reassure Hutch and Jenny. One of the firemen brought word that Captain Dobey was in route with Jenny's parents.

Although the going was slow, it looked like they were nearing the final stages of the rescue. Starsky managed to conceal his anxiety and keep an upbeat appearance, encouraging Hutch and Jenny to hold on a little longer. In reality, he couldn't think of anything much more petrifying than being confined to a space not much larger than a casket, waiting for someone else to dig you out.

"Starsky, are they out yet?" He turned and saw Dobey with Jenny's parents, who were white-faced and wide-eyed, standing behind him. Sam wagged happily, greeting the Captain with a friendly nuzzle to the palm of his hand. Dobey automatically responded by patting the dog on the head.

"Not yet, Cap, but it's goin' fine. Shouldn't be long now."

"I saw the coroner back there with Bowman's body. I'll need you to come by the station and file your report once we're done here. You know they'll be an inquiry."

"Yeah, I know. I'm just glad Hutch is still gonna be around to write up his part."

Then without warning, the crowd of workers and bystanders were startled by a deafening boom. As the steel girders groaned and timbers cracked and snapped beneath their weight, an ominous rumble echoed from below. Dust and smoke belched up through the opening, sending the firefighters clambering back from the edge.

Chapter 17

Starsky went numb with fear, sickened by the reality of what was happening. He turned to Dobey, hoping for reassurance, but saw in the other man's face a reflection of his own dread and panic. Without thinking of the consequences, Starsky charged toward the opening, hell-bent and determined to do *something* before it was too late; but Dobey reached out and snared him before he reached the edge.

"What the hell are you doing? Let me go! Hutch is down there!"

Starsky tried to wrench free of Dobey's grip, while Sam barked and ran along the edge of the gaping hole that seconds earlier had been the excavation site.

"You're only going to make things worse. Stay back here out of the way," Dobey tried to reason. "Let the rescue team do their jobs. You're not going to be any help to them if you fall in and kill yourself!"

The dark-haired detective was only vaguely aware of a woman's hysterical sobs in the background, and a man's anxious voice trying to calm her. Somehow, Dobby's words broke through the haze clouding his judgment. He knew his boss was right. So Starsky stood by helpless and dazed, while the firemen sprung back into action, working quickly to re-clear the area where Hutch and Jenny were seen before the cave-in.

Captain Jacobson knelt down next to the opening, still partially blocked by the shifting debris. "Detective Hutchinson! Jenny! Can you hear me? Are you okay?" Silence. The workmen waited quietly for a sound, any sign the two were still alive. Jacobson turned and faced Dobby and Starsky, then shook his head resignedly.

Starsky broke loose from Dobby's hold and strode purposefully toward Jacobson. "Lemme try," he said, kneeling down next to the fireman.

"Hutch! Hutch, answer me, buddy! Can ya hear me?" Still no response. "Hutch! Hutch!" Silence.... Raw desperation coursed through him like a shock wave.

Dobby came up behind Starsky and laid a comforting hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Starsky?" came the soft reply from beneath the rubble—not from Hutch, but Jenny.

"Yeah, Jenny, it's me! Are you okay? What about Hutch?" Starsky called back excitedly, then looked over his shoulder and smiled at Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds

Jenny's voice was distant, but clear. "I'm fine, but I don't know about Hutch! He doesn't seem to be conscious! Please help us, Starsky! I can't tell if he's hurt, or...or dead. Please help us!"

Starsky's heart pounded in his chest, a million different thoughts crowding his mind. In the chaos, only one seemed clear; he would get them out—at any cost. "I will, Jenny," he called down to the frightened teen. "I promise."

When Starsky's eyes met Jacobson's, the fireman knew he was in for an argument. Even if Hutchinson was dead, there was still the girl to consider. He knew though if he didn't let Starsky to do *something*, he'd have a fight on his hands.

"I'm goin' down there."

"I can't permit that, Starsky. You're not a paramedic. You wouldn't know what to do once you got there."

"I'll go down first and clear the way. Send your man down behind me." Starsky didn't blink an eye.

“I’m sorry,” Jacobson answered. “I can’t let you risk the girl’s life. I don’t need to remind you that your partner may already be gone.” He saw the pain flash in Starsky’s dark eyes.

“He’s not dead. I’d know if he was.”

Jacobson considered that a strange statement; yet, somehow, he believed it.

“Look, I’ll send my men down first. Once Ms. Reynolds is out, if your partner is still trapped I’ll let you go down and help with the rescue.”

Starsky knew he really meant that if Hutch was dead when they got down there, they’d let him help bring up the body. He wanted to punch Jacobson in the mouth, but he knew it wouldn’t change things. And deep down inside, he knew the seasoned firefighter was right. Jenny’s well-being had to be considered first. Hutch wouldn’t have had it any other way.

He bit back the angry retort burning in his throat, gave a curt nod, and stepped back out of the way. Sam rubbed up against Starsky’s thigh, offering the only comforting gesture he knew.

“Starsky?” Jenny’s voice drifted up through the remaining tiny opening. “Are you coming after us?”

Starsky looked at the fire captain, waiting for the okay to answer her question. Jacobson waved his hand, signally him to go ahead. Starsky bent down close and called back to her.

“That’s right, sweetheart. The firemen are comin’ down first, and I’ll be right behind ‘em. You hang on okay?”

“Okay,” she answered, her voice trembling. “Hutch still hasn’t woke up,” she added, a sob catching in her throat.

Starsky choked back his own fear and answered her. “That’s okay. Don’t worry about Hutch. He’s a real tough guy. Just do what the firemen tell you and you’ll be fine.” He slowly backed away as Jacobson’s men came forward with their equipment and finished widening the opening enough to be lowered into the shaky pile of rubble that had once been a building.

Jacobson held his breath, watching the two paramedics descend, finally disappearing from view. Several times, bits and pieces of debris shifted and broke loose, raining down over their helmets and protective gear. While he waited, Starsky paced back and forth impatiently until another firefighter approached and laid a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Starsky?”

The dark-haired detective turned and found himself staring into the face of Johnny Gage, the paramedic who’d been instrumental in saving both his and Hutch’s lives only months earlier. Recognizing the man immediately, Sam ventured forward, wagging his tail shyly, hoping for a little attention. When Johnny reached down to pet him, Sam licked his hand affectionately.

“I heard from one of the guys Hutch is down there. Is that right?”

Starsky nodded. “They won’t let me go in,” he complained.

“I know. But I figured you were up here giving Captain Jacobson a hard time, so I went ahead and brought you some gear.” Gage extended a helmet, protective jacket, and boots toward Starsky. “He’ll let you go in as soon as they bring the girl up. He’s a good man, Starsky. He wouldn’t lie to you.”

For the first time since the cave-in, Starsky managed a meager smile. “Thanks. I appreciate that.” He accepted the gear and shrugged into the jacket, the sleeves hanging at least an inch too long on each arm.

“Hutch isn’t dead, Johnny. I’d know it if he was.” Starsky plopped down next to Sam and proceeded to removed his addidas and replace them with a pair of overly-snug boots. Complaining about the size was out of the question. He wouldn’t put it past the fire captain to use the ill-fitting gear as another excuse to keep him topside.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine soon as we get him out of there,” Johnny answered, not quite meeting Starsky’s eyes.

Before they could say more, Starsky heard Mrs. Reynolds gasp and run toward the crowded opening where her daughter was being raised to the surface. “My baby!” Tears of relief coursed down the woman’s face as she and her husband hurried to embrace Jenny as soon as she was released into their anxious arms.

Starsky quickly made his way to the two paramedics and began pressing them for answers before they had even briefed their boss on the situation below.

“How’s Hutch? Did ya find him? Is he okay?” As tenacious as a bulldog, Starsky didn’t wait for them to answer, but headed toward the hole himself.

“Hold on!” Jacobson grabbed his arm. “Wait and see what my men have to say. Look, I know you’re anxious, but quit running off half-cocked before you get yourself *and* your partner killed!”

Starsky glared at him, anger snapping in his dark blue eyes. “The girl’s safe! I’m goin’ in!”

Johnny calmly placed himself in Starsky's path and turned to the paramedic who'd just come from below. "What did you find down there, Larry?"

"The man's unconscious. He's wedged beneath one of the beams. We were afraid to move him till we got the kid out. Looks like he was trying to keep stuff from falling on her when the slide started." The red-faced, perspiring firefighter stopped and caught his breath. "Joe took his vitals. Heartbeat's good. Breathing's a little shallow. There's a gash on his forehead. No other apparent wounds or abrasions; but the light's pretty bad down there."

Larry turned to Starsky. "You're his partner, right?"

"Yeah. I'm goin' down there and get him out."

"That could be tricky. If we aren't careful, we can bring the whole place down on him. There's only room for two of us at a time."

"So which one of ya's goin with me?" Starsky asked, undaunted.

"I will," Johnny offered. "Cap, Roy's not on duty yet. I arrived early and just came along as a back-up. These guys are pretty beat; their shift ended three hours ago. Let me go down with Starsky. I can vouch that he's capable of taking care of himself."

Starsky looked at the paramedic with an expression of gratitude that he could never convey with mere words. Captain Jacobson, ready to say no, seemed to waiver, weighing Gage's words.

"I'll vouch for him too, Jacobson," Dobey added. "He and Hutchinson are my best men. If anyone can get Hutch out of that hell-hole, he can."

Knowing he was out-numbered, and beginning to believe that Starsky could, indeed save his partner's life, Jacobson nodded his approval, then turned and cautioned his own man. "Gage, if you see that it's too unstable down there...well, just use your usual good judgment."

Satisfied the show was finally getting on the road, Starsky reached for the repelling rope; but Johnny stopped him short. "Better let me go first."

He moved in closer so only Starsky could hear his words. "Listen, I vouched for you. Now all I ask is that you do what I tell you, okay? I wouldn't try to tell you how to conduct a drug bust, and I don't think you should assume you know how to conduct a rescue. All we both want is to get Hutch out of there in one piece—okay?"

Starsky nodded solemnly, understanding the wisdom in Gage's logic. "You got it. Just tell me what to do."

Johnny smiled, got a firm grip on the rope, then began backing into the dark hole. Soon the flare of the lantern attached to his belt disappeared into the darkness. "Wait till I yell before you come down. Don't want you landing on my head."

Starsky got into position and waited for a signal from Johnny. Sam ventured toward him sheepishly, expecting a reprimand, but unable to resist the temptation of putting himself as close to Starsky as possible.

"Go back, Sam." Starsky's voice was firm, but not reproachful. Sam's ears instantly drooped, but he continued to slink forward.

"No. I said no. Stay."

Sam dropped into a down stay, watched sadly as Starsky slowly lowered himself into the opening.

Chapter 18

Starsky flicked on the small light on the front of his helmet, as well as the battery operated lantern hanging from his utility belt before lowering himself further. He listened nervously to shifting and sliding debris, as he felt his way through the booby-trapped obstacle course. He heard Johnny's voice warning him when he was about to touch bottom. Following the paramedic's instructions, Starsky managed to light in a small patch of temporary flooring without landing on Johnny's head. He was instantly aware that he had touched down within inches of Hutch.

"We're in, Cap," Johnny spoke into the radio. "I'm about to check out the victim."

Starsky unhooked the safety cable and twisted around on his knees to face his partner. "Hutch! Hutch! Can ya hear me, buddy?" He carefully reached out touched his partner's face. "Hutch, wake up. It's me. It's Starsk."

When there was no answer, he turned to Gage, concern etched in his features. "Let me try to lift that beam a little, Johnny. Maybe you can slide him out."

"Not yet. I want to check him out before we move him."

With a great deal of shuffling and climbing over one another, the two men managed to exchange places. Johnny set about taking Hutch's vitals. "Larry was right. He looks in remarkably good shape."

"What's going on down there, Gage?"

“He looks pretty good, Cap, but he’s still unconscious. BP is 119/60, pulse 65, and breathing seems a little shallow, but not enough to cause concern.” Johnny used a small pen light and checked Hutch’s pupils.

“It’s not stable enough down here to examine him further, Cap. I think it should be safe enough to move him, but he’s trapped under a beam or something. I’ll get back with you in a minute about our next move.”

“Ten-four. Standing by.”

“St...St...Starsky?” The voice was weak, but definitely Hutch’s.

“Hutch...I’m here, buddy.”

Gage moved aside, clearing Hutch’s line of vision so he could actually see his partner’s face. “I’m here, Hutch. You’re gonna be fine.”

“What happened? Everything was okay, then...then.... Jenny, where’s Jenny? She okay?”

“They took her up first,” Starsky told him. “She’s gonna be fine, Hutch. You saved her life, ya know. She’s up there with her parents.”

“Don’t try to talk anymore, Hutch,” Johnny said, carefully feeling for broken bones. “Starsky and I are going to get you out of here, alright? We just need to have you hang on a little while. Do you hurt anywhere?”

“Just my head.”

“Thank goodness,” Starsky joked. “At least nothin’ vital’s injured.”

Hutch managed a half smile, acknowledging Starsky’s nervous attempt at humor.

Starsky looked at Gage. “You got a plan?” Looking around them, he felt like they were sitting in a house of cards. One wrong move and they could all be buried.

“Can’t believe you brought this big lummoX along to help you,” Hutch chuckled and nodded in Starsky’s direction. “Talk about a bull in a china shop...”

“Well, he’s the only one crazy enough to follow me down here,” Johnny joked back.

Johnny pressed the key on his walkie-talkie. “Cap, do you read me?”

“We read you, Gage. Go ahead.”

“Okay, Cap. We’re going to try and move the patient from beneath a beam now, and send him on up. He’s regained consciousness and isn’t complaining of any pain. No apparent broken bones or spinal injury.”

The paramedic shined his lantern in all directions, considering their options. “Starsky, I don’t think there’s enough room to get any extra help down here. I guess your idea is worth a try.”

“Whatever you say. I just wanna get us all out’a here; the quicker the better.” Starsky knew without being told that it was risky. But he was ready to try anything if it meant escaping this underground tomb.

He leaned down close to Hutch’s face. “We’ll have you out’a here in no time, Blondie. You owe me a dinner, and I intend to collect.”

Hutch’s lips curved up in a half smile. “Well, if you think I’m taking you to one of those greasy spoons you call a restaurant, just leave me where I am, pal.”

“I know this great little place where we can have the best chili-cheese-dog you ever tasted. And they don’t serve no seaweed burgers. So let’s get this show on the road.”

Blue eyes met blue. *Get the show on the road. Thanks for being here, Starsk. I won’t let you down, buddy.* No words necessary.

Starsky looked around, not happy with the instability of their surroundings. “What do you think, Johnny? How about I get under here, lift this beam, and hold it in place while you slide my partner out’a here?”

“Starsk, are you sure you can hold up all that weight?” Hutch objected.

“Hey, you sayin’ I’m a wimp?” Starsky put his shoulder beneath the beam and with a grunt drove his full weight upward. The beam groaned and shifted slightly, raining down dust, wood splinters, and debris. But Starsky pushed on relentlessly, finally raising the beam enough for Johnny to drag Hutch from beneath it.

“Got him, Starsky. You can relax.”

Starsky began lowering the beam slowly, then paused, and held his breath as a large chunk of concrete cascaded down one side, landing near Hutch’s head.

“Easy...easy...you’ve got it,” Johnny coaxed. “Now...”

The beam stayed in place. All three men breathed a sigh of relief. Johnny clicked the radio again. “Uh, Cap, we’ve freed Hutchinson and will send him up in the harness. Stand by for my signal.”

“Whenever you’re ready, Gage. The ambulance is standing by.”

Starsky crawled over to where Hutch sat, dabbing at the trickles of blood dribbling down his forehead.

“Hey, you gonna be alright? It’s startin’ to bleed again.” Starsky reached out and gently touched the gash on Hutch’s head.

“I’d say this is the least of our worries, Starsk. Let’s hope this booby-trap doesn’t disintegrate before we can get out of here.”

“He’s right.” Johnny peered at the mountains of demolished walls and ceilings, checking for potential weak spots. “We’ll get Hutch out first, then you and I’ll go.”

“Wait just a minute now,” Hutch interrupted. “Who says I get to go first. You guys go first. I mean, you’ve already risked your lives just coming down here after me.”

“You’re in no position to argue, Blondie. We’re the rescuers, you’re the res-cuee. Got it?”

“Starsky—”

“Listen, I’m in charge down here and you’ll both do as I tell you,” Gage ordered. Both heads snapped around in surprise. Johnny self-consciously cleared his throat, unaccustomed to using such a high-handed approach with the victims he rescued.

“Hutch, you’ll go first. Since there aren’t any broken bones, and you aren’t in pain, do you think you can wear this harness?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure I can,” Hutch answered soberly.

“Okay, then. Starsky, you can reach him better, so give him a hand, and make sure it’s secure. Try not to move around much,” Gage cautioned. “This place is liable to collapse any minute.”

Starsky did as Johnny instructed, buckling the harness strap securely around Hutch’s chest, careful not to dislodge any of the extruding debris crowding them on all sides. “I don’t like this,” Hutch mumbled. “I don’t see why—”

“Yeah, well, shut up and do as the man says, Turkey.” Starsky pulled on the rope, checking to make certain it was secure. “That feel okay? You sure you aren’t hurtin’ anywhere?”

Hutch laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. A moment of understanding passed between them. “I’m fine. You and Johnny just hurry and get out of here, okay?”

Starsky nodded then gave him a cocky little grin. “Hey, you don’t think I’m gonna miss out on the best chili-cheese dog in the world to hang out in this dump, do ya?”

Johnny spoke into the small radio, “Okay, we’re ready. Take him up, Cap. Nice and easy.”

The two-way radio crackled and popped. “You got it,” came the reply.

With a sharp tug on the rope, Hutch began the slow ascent to the surface, looking down at the two men he was leaving behind.

Starsky saw the concerned expression on his partner’s face and called up encouragingly, “See ya topside, Blintz.”

Pieces of plaster and wood showered down in his wake, forcing the two rescuers to turn their faces away to avoid injury to their eyes. The rope momentarily halted when it caught on a sharp stick jutting out from the side of the wall.

“Hold it!” Hutch shouted. The firemen immediately stopped winding in the rope until he could work it free. Minutes seemed like hours, each piece of sliding debris, a potential land mine. It wasn’t until he reached the surface that Hutch realized what a frightening ordeal he’d experienced.

When the firemen hoisted him out of the hole, Hutch heard the sounds of the timbers creaking and groaning below. He allowed himself to be seated on the waiting gurney, but resisted their efforts to make him lie down. He was far too busy craning his neck for a glimpse of the other two men emerging from the darkness.

Hutch watched from a short distance while the harness was lowered again for the two men remaining below. But as the minutes ticked by with no sign of Starsky nor Gage reaching the surface, he realized something was wrong.

“What’s happening? Why aren’t they out yet?” He pushed away the paramedic who was taking his blood pressure and demanded answers. “Somebody tell me why they aren’t out of there yet!” His voice was loud enough to draw the attention of the rescue team.

“Calm down, Hutchinson. They know what they’re doing.”

Unwilling to sit and wait any longer, Hutch got off the gurney and pushed his way back to the group gathered at the opening of the hole. Dobey saw him approaching and went to meet him.

“Hutch, get back over there. There’s nothing you can do here.”

“What’s going on, Cap? Where’s Starsky? Where’s Johnny? It’s been fifteen minutes since I was brought up. I want some answers.”

Dobey sighed heavily and rubbed his tired eyes. He knew Hutch wouldn’t back off until he knew the truth.

“There was a minor landslide down there just as Starsky started up. It’s nothing to get upset about—”

“What do you mean a minor landslide? Are they hurt? Are they trapped?”

“They’re okay. It’s just that they’re going to have to clear the passage from that end. It may take a few more minutes. Nothing to get all worked up over.”

The sudden drain of color from Hutch’s face alarmed Dobey. He motioned for the paramedic to give him a hand, and tried to guide Hutch back to the gurney.

“I knew I shouldn’t leave them behind! We’ve got to do something, Cap!”

“Look, Hutch, I know you’re upset, but dammit, get back over there and let these guys look after you! I just spent two hours fighting that hotheaded partner of yours to keep him from diving headfirst into that pit. Now I don’t have the energy left to fight with you for another two!”

“But—” Hutch tried to argue, but he was drowned out by a cheer from the crowd as Starsky’s dark, curly top appeared at the rim of the opening.

When he cleared the pit, Starsky’s eyes searched the crowd until he saw his partner, irritably fending off all attempts by a paramedic and Dobey to commandeer him back to the gurney. Sam was running in circles around the three men, barking his fool head off. Grinning from ear to ear, Starsky gave his partner the thumbs up signal then turned to watch Johnny clear the entrance of the hole too.

Starsky wasted no time getting to where Hutch now sat, surrendering to the paramedic who was trying to clean the bleeding gash on his forehead. Sam danced around Starsky’s feet, joyful at having both his humans back safe and sound. Starsky reached down and petted the dog, then looked at Hutch with mischievous eyes.

“Didn’t anybody ever tell you you’re *supposed* to cooperate when people are savin’ your life? Let these guys do their job, will ya?”

Satisfied Starsky and Gage were safe, Hutch relaxed and sat still while the paramedic finish bandaging the wound on his head. It was then he realized he hadn’t seen Jenny and her parents.

“What about the girl? Is she okay?” he asked the fireman.

“She’s fine. Already on her way to the hospital to be checked out.”

Starsky stood to one side, waiting until the decision was made that Hutch didn’t need to be transported to the hospital. His vitals had gone back to normal and the head wound was mostly superficial, not requiring stitches. Once the paramedics turned their attention to Johnny Gage, Starsky and Sam joined Hutch.

“I thought we’d lost you, pal,” Starsky whispered, smiling slightly, trying to conceal the emotion in his voice.

“Are you kidding? You can’t get rid of me that easy.” Sam pushed in closer, rearing his paws up onto the gurney, to give Hutch’s face a good licking.

“Hey, Big Dog. Guess I owe you one,” Hutch said, reaching out to scratch the dog’s ear.

“I guess we both do,” Starsky agreed. Reaching out and curling his arm around Sam, he pulled the happy dog close to them. “No doubt about it, Big Dog; I’d say you earned yourself steak dinner tonight.”

Epilogue

“Just put it down here...no, here...on second thought, maybe over here would be better.” Indecision crinkled Gina’s brow as she changed her mind for the third time. Starsky and Hutch had moved the sofa so many times, they were both ready to throw up their hands in surrender.

“Well, it’s your place,” she conceded. “Where do *you* want it?”

Hutch rolled his eyes in exasperation, willing Starsky to take control of the situation. He wasn’t sure who’d appointed Gina “director of the move” to Starsky’s new home, but at this rate, it was going to take days!

Before Starsky could answer, Sam bounded onto the sofa and plopped down, heaving a loud sigh. “I guess that settles it,” Starsky said. “We’ll leave it right here.”

Hutch perched on the arm, waiting for Gina to change her mind again. Except for a couple of dark bruises and a few minor scrapes and scratches on his face and hands, there were no obvious signs that he’d been virtually ‘buried alive’ only two days earlier.

Quietly Huggy peered around the door, hoping he’d timed his visit to avoid moving the heavier pieces of furniture. “Hi, Huggy! You’re just in time for a beer,”

Jackie said, spying him from across the room. Carrying a tray of ice cold bottles of brew and a bowl of corn chips and salsa, she joined the others.

“Just here to deliver a little housewarming gift; one that no respectable, bachelor pad should be without.” With a flourish, Huggy stepped from behind the door carrying a large, silvered, disco-ball. The gaudy, sphere glittered beneath the ceiling light, it’s tiny mirrored scales winking, and casting colored beads of light on the walls.

Starsky’s reaction was something akin to awe, as he reverently reached out and touched one of the mirrors. “Aw, geez, Hug, ya shouldn’t have.”

Hutch glanced at Jackie, who was smiling at Starsky’s childlike response to the garish prop.

“This is terrific, Hug.” Starsky exclaimed, “Just what the place needs—right Hutch?”

Hutch tried to hide his dismay at the idea of a mirror ball hanging in the ceiling of his partner’s living room. Good grief, wasn’t the flashing traffic signal light in the corner enough? Just how much could a man take?

“Actually, Starsk—”

“Actually, it makes an interesting conversation piece,” Gina smoothly interjected.

Taking the hint, Hutch politely changed the subject. “Huggy, I thought your cousin, the plumber, was going to take a look at that faucet in the bath tub. It’s still not working correctly.”

Huggy shrugged, avoided meeting Hutch’s eyes, and mumbled, “He already came out. Says there’s nothing he can do about it. It’s not a plumbing problem.”

“What do ya mean, ‘it’s not a plumbin’ problem? He calls a faucet turnin’ on all by itself not a plumbin’ problem?”

“He checked it out, Starsky,” Huggy hedged. “He even put a new fixture on and tried it, but the same thing happened. This isn’t a job for a plumber, if you dig.”

“Well, I don’t dig. Just what are ya tryin’ to say?” Starsky pressed for an explanation, but Huggy was evasive.

“That’s all I know, man. Leroy says there’s nothing no plumber can do about *that* problem. Sorry, Starsky, but that’s the way it is.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Huh? Do I need to get some other kind of repairman out here? I don’t understand what’s goin’ on.”

“I think he’s trying to tell you it’s the ghost,” Hutch suggested. Aside from the almost indiscernible twitch at the corners of his mouth, the blonde’s expression was strictly deadpan.

“Aw come on, Hutch, don’t give me that. You don’t even believe in spirits and stuff. Stop tryin’ to make a fool out’a me.”

“No...he’s right, man.” Huggy reluctantly met Starsky’s astonished glare. He’d hoped to avoid this conversation entirely, but resigned himself to having to be the one to tell Starsky what people were saying.

“It took me calling in a lot of favors just to get Leroy out here. This place has a rep. Nobody wants to come near it.”

Starsky’s looked from Huggy’s face to his partner’s, then back again. “Hutch put you up to this, right?”

“Don’t be paranoid. I didn’t put him up to anything. But I did do some checking on this place. I’m not sure you’ll want to know what I found out.” Hutch managed, with great difficulty, to maintain a serious expression.

Starsky swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple noticeably bobbing up and down. “Go on...”

“Seems that the guy who died here drowned in the bath tub. He was fully clothed, so it’s on the books as an unsolved homicide. Someone apparently slipped up behind, overpowered him and held him under the water until he drowned.”

Starsky’s face went from skeptical to deathly white in two seconds flat. Still unwilling to accept this wasn’t just another of Hutch’s pranks, he quickly recovered and assumed an attitude of total indifference. “Yeah, right—and I suppose Abe Lincoln’s ghost can be seen strolling up and down the hallway at midnight too, huh?” he said drolly.

“I’m serious, Starsk. I pulled the report on this place and that’s what the autopsy showed. It was ruled a homicide by asphyxiation, but no suspect or motive was ever discovered. Maybe Charlie—that was his name—is just trying to finish his bath.”

Hutch didn’t dare chance a look at Jackie, for fear he’d lose it and burst out laughing. He almost felt sorry for Starsky; but everything he’d just told him was the truth. Of course, there was a logical explanation; there had to be. He just didn’t exactly know what it was yet. Still, he’d have a little fun with his partner in the meantime.

“I still say you’re makin’ this up. You tryin’ to scare me or somethin’? Huh? Is that it? Cause it ain’t gonna work.”

“Okay. Al right. Believe whatever you want.”

“I know there’s no ghost in this house,” Starsky told them adamantly.

“*How* do you know?” Huggy asked. “Maybe Hutch is right. Maybe the dude doesn’t know he’s dead.”

“I know cause of him.” Starsky pointed at Sam, who had made himself quite comfortable. The 110 pound dog took up at least half of the sofa. Laying on his back, all four paws extended above him, he resembled an armadillo who’d met an untimely end while tangling with an eighteen-wheeler on the highway.

“I’m not following you. He’s not exactly intimidating, unless the ghost is afraid Sam will roll off the sofa and land on him,” Hutch countered.

“Well, everybody knows dogs have a sixth sense,” he explained smugly. “If there was a ghost here, Sam would know it.”

As though on cue, the dog’s head snapped to attention, his peaceful slumber, and dreams of dancing soup bones disappearing in a blink. Ears peaked high, the rottweiler cocked his head at an awkward angle and listened. Slowly the hackles on his muscular back rose, as a low guttural sound rumbled from deep within his throat. Spellbound, the five humans watched as Sam quietly abandoned the sofa, and on silent paws crept to the bathroom. As he pushed the door open with his huge snout, the sound of running water could be heard drifting back to where they stood.

Finally breaking the silence, Hutch turned and smiled cheerily at Starsky’s wide-eyed, almost comical expression.

“You know, I think you’re right, Starsk. Dogs really *do* have a sixth sense.”

Hutch affectionately slung an arm around Starsky’s shoulders and beamed, “Happy housewarming, partner!”

THE END

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