

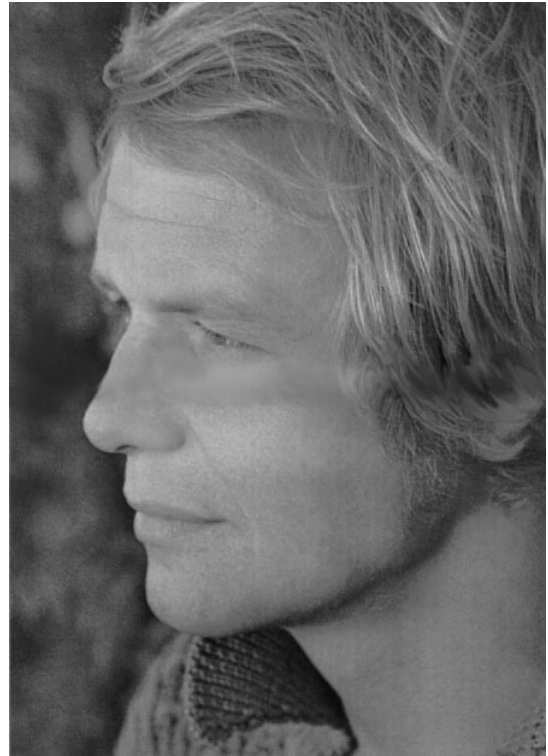
Vigilance

by TibbieB

Chapter 1

Hutch sat in a wheelchair staring out his hospital room window as Starsky's car squealed to the curb. From this angle, Hutch could view Sam's big head through the windshield as the dog rode shotgun in the front seat of the Torino. *Home—I am finally going home.* Well, sort of. At this point, it didn't matter to Hutch that he'd be going to Starsky's home rather than his own. All that mattered was that he'd be out of this damned hospital room and would have a little privacy.

Hutch was sick and tired of nurses and technicians parading in and out of his room at all hours of the night, drawing blood, waking him up to give him a sleeping pill, and walking in on him in the shower. True, he was not happy about agreeing to use the wheelchair for the next six weeks, but a man did what a man had to do when it meant being able to escape from this perpetual funny farm. Hutch had waited all day for the doctor to come by and release him. Worried that he wouldn't be released before Starsky had to begin his next shift, the day had been agonizingly long. Finally, an hour ago, he had gotten his walking papers.



Hutch watched as Starsky rounded the front of the Torino and hurried up the walk to the entrance of the hospital. His belongings were all packed in a plastic hospital bag and waited on the bed, along with the doctor's written orders and the hospital-issued walking cane he would need once they allowed him out of the wheelchair. His spine was healing nicely, but the doctor had warned Hutch that any deviation from his instructions would slow down the healing process, and he would likely find himself back in the hospital, confined to the wheelchair an additional six weeks. Hutch had sworn to follow orders, and Starsky had assured the doc that he would make it his personal mission in life to make certain Hutch did just that. So today, Starsky was taking him to his home to recuperate for the next six weeks.

The stairs at his apartment were off limits, so Starsky's old, partially renovated home with the master bedroom on the first floor would serve as Hutch's home away from home. Starsky had

moved his own things to a second-floor bedroom and installed a temporary ramp over the front steps, providing Hutch easy access to the house.

Starsky had lived there only a few months, but had done wonders with the once dilapidated structure. Once they had decided their dog Sam would be staying with Starsky, Starsky had stepped up the search for a home with a yard. Hutch still couldn't believe his partner's incredibly good luck at having obtained the house at such a bargain.

Starsky was confident he had it all worked out. He would make sure Hutch had everything he needed at his fingertips when he was at work, and Sam would be there to keep Hutch company and fetch things for him when needed. Hutch's mother had initially planned to help out for a couple of weeks, but the rheumatoid arthritis that plagued her relentlessly had flared up, and the trip had been canceled. Starsky had reassured her that with Sam and Hutch's other friends to help him, her son would be well cared for. At her doctor's behest and with these reassurances, she had finally relented and reluctantly agreed to stay home.

Hutch maneuvered the wheelchair back to the bed and began piling his belonging onto his lap, determined to be ready the minute Starsky walked into the room. Starsky popped his head around the door, a silly grin on his face. "Ready to blow this joint, Blondie?" he said.

"Been ready since they woke me at four a.m.," Hutch answered.

"Terrific," Starsky said, taking the handles on the back of the wheelchair backrest and guiding Hutch through the door. "You have the doc's orders there?"

"Sure do."

"The nurse said she'd gone over everything with you, so I've punched your ticket and we're free to go." Starsky's childlike enthusiasm buoyed Hutch's spirits more than anything had since he'd entered the hospital for back surgery.

He knew now the surgery had been unavoidable, his back never having healed from a skiing injury over a year ago. He'd tried everything from massage therapy to acupuncture, but a jump three months ago from a second-story window that landed him seat-first on the roof of a car had clinched it. Hutch had to admit that he and Starsky were getting too old to get away with such dangerous antics. One too many hard landings had finally taken their toll. He'd been in constant pain since that somewhat foolish escapade, and had soon begun to worry he'd become addicted to the prescription drugs that gave him only a short reprieve between doses.

Finally, the doctor had declared surgery his last alternative. Knowing he could not go on the way he was going, Hutch had conceded. He needed relief, and he was hell-bent and determined to never become dependent on drugs to get him through the day. He'd both seen and experienced that life and wasn't willing to go there again.

Convinced the worst of his ordeal was over, Hutch looked up at Starsky and smiled. “I appreciate your doing this for me, Starsk. I know it’ll be inconvenient having me and all my junk at your house for six weeks.”

“Are you kiddin’?” Starsky answered, wheeling him through the door. “You’ll be great company for Sam, and I’m already used to seeing your ugly puss everyday, so it isn’t like I’ll have to go through a period of adjustment or anything.”

They rounded the first corner of the hall and headed for the main elevator. “Besides, I have an ulterior motive. I want you well so you can come back to work and I won’t have to put up with LaMoy anymore. He’s drivin’ me nuts,” Starsky added with disdain.

Hutch shook his head slightly, amused at Starsky’s reference to the rookie who had been temporarily assigned as his partner while Hutch was on extended sick leave. “He’s not so bad, Starsk.”

“Easy for you to say,” Starsky snapped, punching the elevator button with a vengeance. The mere mention of the young detective-in-training brought out the worst in Starsky. “You don’t have to put up with his smart-aleck remarks and constant bragging.”

“You’re right,” Hutch said with a hint of laughter in his voice. “I can’t imagine having to work with someone like that.”

The elevator doors slid open, and an attractive young nurse stepped off. “Oh, Hutch, I heard you were going home,” she said with a friendly smile. “I was just coming up to tell you goodbye.”

“Thanks, Patty,” he answered as Starsky backed the chair into the elevator. “Thanks for all you did for me while I was here. I’m going to miss those great leg massages,” he added, with a twinkle in his eye.

The dimples in her cheeks crinkled as her smile broadened and she gave him a knowing wink. “Not half as much as I am,” she quipped. “Let me know if you need a little in-home therapy,” she offered, the door sliding closed.

Starsky rolled his eyes. “And to think I’ve been feelin’ sorry for you.”

“Well, you know everything has to have an upside, Starsk. I’d say Patty and her world-class leg massages would qualify as the upside of an otherwise terrible experience. Still, I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat,” he added seriously.

Starsky looked down at his friend’s thin shoulders, realizing Hutch was already ten pounds lighter than he should be. Between the constant pain and the meds, Hutch had had no appetite over the past few



months. Starsky felt a huge bubble of compassion tighten his chest, and at that moment, was grateful for the special attention the pretty nurse had shown his partner.

“Not on your life, Blintz,” Starsky teased, glossing over the moment. “I can get a date with a pretty girl without havin’ major surgery to meet one!”

The elevator slowed and made a soft thump as they reached the ground floor. The doors yawned open and Starsky wheeled Hutch into the lobby and through the automatic sliding glass doors. At the curb, Sam watched through the passenger-side window, his tail beating excitedly on the seat beneath him. The big dog had missed his other human, and, could he have spoken, he would have demanded an explanation days ago for Hutch’s absence.

Starsky engaged the lock on the wheelchair to keep it from rolling away, then opened the car door. Before he realized what was happening, Sam bounded out of the Torino, planted his two huge front paws on Hutch’s shoulders, and bathed his owner’s face with wet kisses.

“Oh! Oh! Oh! Sam, no, boy, no!” Hutch complained as he fended off the excited dog. The dog’s weight on his shoulders caused pain to shoot through his back.

“Sam!” Starsky shouted, grabbing the animal’s collar and pulling him off of Hutch. “No, Sam! No! Down, ya big galoot!”

Not understanding what he had done wrong, the dog dropped to the sidewalk, ears back and tail tucked beneath him.

Seeing the confusion in the dog’s eyes, Hutch spoke to him gently. “Sam, come here, boy.” At first he didn’t respond, but held his subservient pose at Hutch feet. “Sam, here,” Hutch said, patting his lap with his hand. “Lay your head here so I can scratch your ears.”

Hesitantly, Sam obeyed and was rewarded with a good ear scratching that caused his tail to wag and his tongue to flop out the side of his mouth.

“That’s good, Sam,” Hutch said. “I missed you, too, boy. But you’re going to have to tone it down a little for the next few weeks. No roughhousing, okay?”

Intelligent-looking eyes gleamed back at Hutch, and he could have sworn the dog understood every word. Eerily, without being told, Sam lifted his head from Hutch’s lap and jumped back into the Torino, taking his customary spot on the back seat. There he waited patiently while Starsky first helped Hutch into the car, then loaded the wheelchair and Hutch’s personal items into the trunk.

“Mom called,” Hutch said, as Starsky pulled away from the curb into the flow of traffic.

“Yeah,” Starsky said, checking his rearview mirror and changing to the fast lane. “I talked to her, too. She’s really bummed out about not coming out here. For once, I agree with your dad, though. She needs to take care of herself.”

“Mmmm... She needs someone to look after her more than I do,” Hutch said. “I remember Nana had the same kind of arthritis. It pretty much crippled her before she died.”

Starsky gave Hutch a sideways glance, a smile playing along his lips. “Nana?”

“Yeah, you know...my grandmother. I called her Nana,” Hutch answered. Noticing Starsky’s smile, he said defensively, “You find that funny?”

“No, no, of course not,” Starsky said, now a wide grin on his face. “It just sounds, you know, kind of funny coming from a guy in his thirties—big tough cop who carries around a .357 Magnum. I guess I’ve just never pictured you as having a ‘Nana’.”

“Oh, really?” Hutch said indignantly. “And just what did you call your grandmother, wise guy?”

The grin slipped from Starsky’s face, his eyes betraying the realization that his answer would quickly turn the tables. “It’s not important what I called my grandmother. Sorry I even brought it up. “Why don’t we just drop, okay?”

Sam’s big head plopped over the back of the seat and came to rest on Hutch’s left shoulder, blocking Hutch’s view of Starsky’s face. Still, Hutch knew he’d hit a nerve.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Fair is fair. I want to know what you called your grandmother, and I’m willing to bet a ten spot that it wasn’t ‘grandmother,’ so you may as well give it up.”

Starsky’s eye lids drooped shut momentarily as he cursed himself for opening this particular can of worms.

“Starsky?” Hutch prodded. “Tell me.”

Barely audible, Starsky muttered, “Grammy.”

“What’s that? I didn’t hear you.”

“Grammy! I called her Grammy. Okay?”

Hutch reached up and absently scratched Sam under the chin before peering around the big dog at his partner. A full-fledged grin on his face, he asked, “You called her ‘Grammy,’ and you have the nerve to kid me about ‘Nana’?”

“Sorry, okay?” Starsky offered, knowing it was pointless to fight a battle he couldn’t win.

Hutch leaned back against the car seat, enjoying the ride home. “Apology accepted,” he said, still grinning from ear to ear. It was great to be out in the real world again.



The journey from the car, up the homemade handicap ramp and into Hutch's temporary bedroom was made without incident. He realized, as Starsky returned to the car to unload the remaining personal items, including a suitcase Huggy had filled with Hutch's clothes from his apartment, that he could be quite comfortable in this old house. It smelled fresh, yet the old-fashioned fragrance of lemon oil permeated the air. He knew Starsky took pride in the ornate woodwork on the staircase and polished the hand-turned spindles weekly with the lemon concoction to keep the wood from drying out.

The house didn't look anything like it had when Starsky first moved in. Having bought it for a practically a song, Starsky had been slowly yet steadily renovating and restoring the old structure. That ridiculous story about the house being haunted had made it impossible for the unfortunate owner to sell it for what it was truly worth. The rumors had definitely been beneficial to Starsky when negotiating the deal. There *were* strange happenings here—that couldn't be denied. But loath to see Starsky miss out on a great deal because of his superstitious nature, Hutch had argued there was a rational explanation for everything that had taken place there. In the end, Starsky's common sense prevailed and he bought the old house. He hadn't regretted the decision a single day.

There were still rooms that needed renovation, like the magnificent old dining room, with its once rich and stylish rose-and-cream silk wallpaper, now hanging in loose strips from the walls. The solid oak floors were scarred to the point that there was no discernible wood grain pattern left in its planks. There were three bedrooms upstairs that remained closed—one with creaking loose boards in the floor, so unsafe the city inspector had nearly prevented Starsky from moving into the house before replacing it. But Starsky had reluctantly agreed to nail shut the door leading to that room to ensure no unsuspecting guest wandered in and plunged through the rickety floor.

Despite all this, in the short time he'd lived in the house with Sam, Starsky had made more progress than Hutch had ever believed possible. Hutch discovered he felt a twinge of envy as he looked around the master bedroom with its disco ball (a housewarming gift from Huggy) dangling from the wide-bladed overhead fan.

Wheeling himself to the window, Hutch raised the old-fashioned, pull-down shade and enjoyed the view of Starsky's neighbor's autumn flower garden. The yellow and rust mums seemed to have their faces trained on the sun, drinking in the warmth that pulsed down on them. Yes, if a guy had to be in a wheelchair for six weeks, this wasn't such a bad place to spend his time.

Hutch turned at the sound of the heavy clicking of Sam's nails, as the dog rambled down the long hallway and into the bedroom, seeming to know instinctively where Hutch would be. Right behind him came Starsky's familiar footsteps.

"Hey, I forgot to tell you, I drove your car over to the station and stored it in the garage," Starsky said, breaking Hutch's reverie.

Hutch looked up, surprised he hadn't thought of that himself. "Thanks," he said. "I guess it wouldn't have been a good idea to leave it on the street that long."

"Not that anyone would want to steal that travelin' rust bucket," Starsky teased. "At least, this way, I don't have to worry about you sneakin' out before the doc says it's okay for you to drive."

Tossing the suitcase onto the bed, Starsky opened it and began hanging Hutch's shirts in the closet.

"So...you hungry? I stopped by the deli last night and bought some terrific cold cuts and homemade sourdough bread. Oh, yeah, and there's beer, sodas—you name it, we got it."

Hutch watched him with a smile on his face. "You act like I'm on vacation here, Starsk. I don't expect you to wait on me hand and foot. Just giving me a place to stay without having to worry about those stairs is enough."

Stuffing folded clothes into the dresser drawer, Starsky answered with a smirk, "You don't have to worry about getting the VIP treatment here, buddy. I'm just making sure you're fed so I don't have to put up with your whinin' later."

"Fair enough," Hutch said, wheeling the chair to the door and down the hall. "Then, I'm ready for a sandwich and a cold drink." Sam fell into step next to the wheelchair, careful to avoid getting in the path of the wheels. Hutch chuckled, knowing he was in good hands.



Chapter 2

In the days that followed, Starsky, Hutch, and Sam quickly settled into a comfortable routine. Rather than finding it inconvenient to have another person living in his home, Starsky enjoyed Hutch's company in the evenings. He looked forward to coming straight home from work, preparing a light meal, then relaxing and briefing Hutch on the day's activities. Best of all, by having Hutch right there with him during his off-hours, Starsky was able to monitor his friend's progress without having to be away from home. Hutch didn't complain, but Starsky knew it must be boring for him to spend the long days with only the dog for company.

"How about another soda?" Starsky asked, on his way to the refrigerator.

"No, thanks. I've had enough," Hutch answered, laying his napkin on the table. "That lasagna was terrific, Starsk. Where did you say you picked it up?"

Starsky plucked another root beer from the refrigerator and popped the top. "Mama G's. New place just opened up about two blocks from the station. They do a lot of take-out, so I thought why not give 'em a try?"

He took a long swig from the bottle, set it on the counter, then began clearing the table. “Figured you could use a break from my cookin’,” he said with a grin.

Loath to criticize the hand that fed him, Hutch replied magnanimously, “Your cooking’s not so bad, Starsk. Maybe a little heavy on the garlic sometimes. But, hey—who am I to complain?”

“That’s a first,” Starsky threw back over his shoulder with amusement. “You never had a problem with criticizing my cookin’ before.”

“Well, let’s just say spending my days in a wheelchair gives me a whole new perspective on things,” Hutch answered honestly.

Starsky flipped the dishtowel over his shoulder and walked toward the table. From the back, Starsky could see that Hutch’s shoulders were still too thin and his posture not the straight arrow it had been before the accident. With this realization, a wave of compassion coursed through him.



Laying a hand on Hutch’s shoulder, he said, “Yeah, I guess it would.”

Sitting down across the table from Hutch, Starsky said, “Look, I’m sorry you’ve been stranded here by yourself so much. But ya know that dummy, LaMoy, just isn’t experienced enough for me to leave him to handle things on his own for long.”

Embarrassed that in an unguarded moment, he had allowed his self-pity to surface, Hutch answered more sharply than he’d intended, “Dammit, Starsky, don’t apologize for doing your job. I’m not a complete invalid, you know. Besides, Huggy has stopped by a couple of times, and I’ve had Sam here for company.”

Hearing his name, the big dog that had been quietly lying under the table waiting for a morsel to accidentally fall his way, poked his head out and looked up at Hutch. His wet pink tongue lolled out one side of his mouth, giving him a comical expression. The tension broken, both men looked at Sam, then at one another, and laughed.

Reaching down to hand the dog a bite of bread, Starsky said, “Yeah, but last time I checked, he was still a terrible conversationalist.”

Sam smacked his lips noisily, enjoying the butter-soaked scrap. Satisfied that he’d accomplished his mission of partaking in the family meal, the dog settled down next to the wheelchair, making it necessary for Starsky to circumvent him with every trip from the table to the sink.

Hutch maneuvered the wheelchair next to the kitchen counter and dragged the dishtowel off of Starsky’s shoulder. “I’ll dry,” he said, picking up the first clean plate from the drain board. He quickly dried the dish and stacked it on the counter.

Starsky gave him an appreciative smile. “Okay, you dry. Wouldn’t want you to get dishpan hands washing, would we?” He knew Hutch couldn’t reach the sink, but couldn’t resist ribbing him.

“Very funny,” Hutch said, shaking his head at the lame joke.

The chore was finished quickly, with Starsky continuing his litany of his rookie trainee’s faults.

When he had rinsed and stacked the last glass on the drain board, he turned to Hutch and said, “Hey, I got an idea. You’re probably sick of watching TV. How about a game of Scrabble?”

Hutch draped the damp towel over the towel rack and backed the chair away from the counter. “Only if you promise not to try to use a bunch of non-existent words again.”

“Are you insinuating I cheat?” Starsky said with feigned indignation.

“I’m not insinuating anything, Starsky. I’m saying you make up words, then insist they’re real when they aren’t,” Hutch answered without hesitation.

Grabbing the handles of Hutch’s chair, Starsky wheeled him from the kitchen into the living room, then positioned the chair in front of the old card table he kept set up in one corner of the room. Sam followed, parking his considerable bulk beside the chair, resigning himself to the fact that there would be no more treats from the kitchen tonight.

“Oh, yeah?” Starsky argued. “Give me one example of a word I used that isn’t legal?”

“Okay. How about *ambulous*?” Hutch came back, his eyes wide with challenge.

Taken aback that Hutch could readily come up with one, but unwilling to show it, Starsky smiled confidently. “*Ambulous* is a word, Bozo. It’s spelled, a-m-b-u-l-o-u-s.”

“Oh, yeah? What does it mean? Use it in a sentence,” Hutch insisted.

“Okay, I will, wise guy.” Starsky took a deep breath then continued. “Even though the piano was heavy, the wheels on the legs made it *ambulous*.” At the conclusion of the sentence, he nodded at Hutch with great satisfaction. “It means *moveable*.”

“Starsky, that’s *ambulatory*,” Hutch corrected him.

Confusion momentarily clouded his eyes. Then, with a know-it-all attitude, Starsky answered, “*Ambulous* is just a variation of the same word. I’m surprised a smart guy like you doesn’t know that.”

Not giving Hutch an opportunity to dispute the absurd claim, Starsky made a quick exit to the coat closet in the entryway to retrieve the Scrabble game.

Hutch, still reeling from Starsky's nonsense, could hear him in the other room pillaging through the boxes and bags stored in the closet.

"Starsky, that's the craziest thing you've said all year!" Hutch shouted over the racket coming from the other room. Starsky didn't answer, and the next sound Hutch heard was a crash of falling debris.

Rolling his eyes heavenward, Hutch waited a beat before calling, "Everything okay in there?" Sam, on the other hand, wasted no time getting to the entryway to personally check out the situation.

Without answering, dog and man quickly reappeared in the living room. Starsky had the Scrabble game tucked under one arm and was carrying a worn and cracked brown leather case with a broken shoulder strap.

"Hey, look what I found," he said, before dropping the Scrabble box on the table. Sitting down across from Hutch, he undid the buckled leather straps that held the old box shut, then gently removed an ancient looking pair of binoculars.

"My Uncle Fred's old binoculars," Starsky explained. "He was a member of the Audubon Society and used these things for bird-watching. I forgot I had 'em." Starsky blew a thin layer of dust off the surface of the binoculars before passing them to Hutch.

"They look like they've seen better days," Hutch commented, as Starsky handed them over.

Sam stepped up and sniffed the strange object, then ascertaining it wasn't edible, plopped back down on the floor beside Hutch's wheelchair. Satisfied the two men weren't going anywhere anytime soon, the dog rested his big head on his paws, sighed deeply, and settled in for a nap.

Hutch popped off the lens caps, lifted the binoculars to his eyes, and turned toward the window to stare out at the street through a haze of dust. Despite the protective covers, years of neglect had allowed errant particles to accumulate on the polished glass. Hutch carefully wiped the lenses on his shirttail and tried again. To his surprise, the scene before him came into sharp focus. "Man, these things still work great."

"Of course, they do," Starsky said without surprise. "They're Ziess. Made in Germany. My Uncle Fred never bought anything but the best. He used to take me on day trips up to the Mohonk Preserve; he loved to watch birds, and he kept a list of the different kinds we saw that day. I remember how he'd lecture me about not touching the lenses and always keeping the caps on them when we weren't using them. He told me, 'Davey, they don't make any better than Ziess. These people have been making binoculars since 1910. You learn how to take care of them properly, and I'll give them to you someday.' I swear, he gave me that same speech so many times that I can hear him sayin' it in my head."

Hutch lowered the lens and looked at his partner, intrigued by the wistful tone in Starsky's voice as he shared this glimpse into his youth.

“When he passed on and I went home for the funeral, Aunt Sara took me aside and gave 'em to me. Said Uncle Fred had told her at least a dozen times over the years, ‘If anything happens to me, see that Davey gets the Ziess. He's the only one who'll show them the respect they deserve’.”

Almost imperceptibly, Starsky's face saddened as he added, “He wouldn't like it if he knew I stuck them in a closet and forgot about them. They meant a lot to him.”

Hutch looked down at the binoculars in his hands. Oddly, they no longer looked old and outdated. They had transformed into a valuable relic from Starsky's childhood. He carefully replaced the lens caps and handed them back to Starsky.

A myriad of expressions played across Starsky's face as he stared down at the binoculars, remembering the man who had once owned them.

Then, his mood lightening, Starsky smiled reminiscently as he told Hutch, “Uncle Fred was a strange old bird. Always had a half-dozen hobbies and projects goin' on. He was some sort of engineer before he retired. Real interesting guy, smart about a lot of different things. Ya know the kind, read everything he could get his hands on; he was always talking about ideas he had for inventions. But as far as I know, he never followed through on any of them.”

“Sounds like a remarkable man,” Hutch said, studying his friend's face. Starsky didn't talk much about his childhood, and what little he did share was mostly about his father and the impact his death had had on their family. There were many gaps in Starsky's early life that Hutch longed to know about, but he respected his partner's privacy too much to pry.

“Yeah, he and Aunt Sara never had kids, so they would invite me over for the weekend sometimes, and I loved to go,” Starsky continued. “Uncle Fred let me help him with whatever project he had in the works at the time.”

Hutch remained quiet, listening with interest to this little slice of life about his friend.

“Course, when I moved out here, I didn't see much of them anymore—just when I'd go home to visit Ma. I was surprised when I found out the old man hadn't forgotten those weekends we spent bird watching. Guess it meant as much to him as it did me.”

“I'm sure it did, Starsk,” Hutch said. “Maybe you should keep them out and use them sometime.”

Starsky looked up from the binoculars with a genuine smile now. “Ya know, I bet we could use these when we're on surveillance.”

“Sure, we could,” Hutch agreed. “If I ever get to go back to work, that is.” The statement came out as an expression of frustration rather than as a ploy for sympathy.

“You’ll be back on the job soon enough,” Starsky said, placing the binoculars on the windowsill.

“In the meantime, I’m gonna leave these right here in case you want to start your own Neighborhood Watch. Who knows, maybe you’ll catch one of my neighbors burying a body in their back yard,” he added with a chuckle.

“I haven’t gotten bored enough to resort to spying on your neighbors, Starsk,” Hutch said, reaching for the Scrabble box.

“Now, if we’re going to play, I want a dictionary. I’m going to check some of those half-baked words you come up with and prove to you they don’t exist.”

“I don’t have a dictionary,” Starsky answered honestly. “Besides, partners are supposed to trust one another, aren’t they?”

Lifting one eyebrow, Hutch replied, “Not when it comes to Scrabble, especially when one of them has a track record like yours.”

“Just throw the dice, Blintz.”



Chapter 3

Hutch sat quietly thumbing through one of the many books Edith Dobej had checked out from the library and brought by the day before. Her visit had been a brief respite from his monotonous routine, but today, he was once again alone with Sam, the large black-and-brown ball of fur curled contentedly at his feet, sleeping.

Hutch sipped the now-lukewarm coffee Starsky had insisted on bringing him before leaving for work. Despite the wide array of reading materials, the time passed slowly, leaving him bored and restless. For the hundredth time, he reminded himself that boredom aside, confinement to Starsky’s home with Sam was far better than spending his days in the hospital.

Suddenly, Sam’s head snapped up, cocking to one side, his ears peaking. The big dog scrambled to his feet and, with a grunt, trotted to the front window.

“What’s wrong, buddy?” Hutch said. Sam reared up and planted his oversized paws on the foyer windowsill, giving a resounding bark.

Dropping his book on the coffee table, Hutch navigated the wheelchair into the foyer and rolled up next to Sam. Across the street, two houses down, he spotted a young woman unloading groceries from her car and carrying them into her house.

“Why are you barking, you big galoot? She’s just one of the neighbors,” Hutch scolded the dog.

Sam’s tail wagged happily as he barked again. Hutch realized the dog recognized the woman. “Why are you so excited? Do you know the lady?” Hutch asked. Sam turned and slurped Hutch’s face with a sloppy dog kiss, then resumed his animated surveillance.

Hutch noticed the Ziess binoculars still sitting on the window casing and, after a moment’s hesitation, picked them up, slipped off the lens covers, and focused them on the source of Sam’s attention.

When the neighbor’s tall, slim figure came into focus, Hutch felt his breath catch in his throat. Long hair, the color of pure honey, cascaded down her back in soft curls. She could easily have been a fashion model with her smooth complexion and well-proportioned body. She lifted the bags from the trunk of the car and moved gracefully toward the open front door of her house. Before entering, she paused and scanned the street and the yards adjacent to her own.

When she reappeared, she moved toward the car, then stopped abruptly and turned in his direction. Hutch watched, as her large expressive eyes seemed to hone in on him. The fine-boned features of her face grew taut with fear. Hutch was certain she couldn’t see him, but she seemed to sense she was being watched.



With a sudden prick of conscience, he lowered the binoculars and ducked back from the window.

“Starsky, you old dog,” Hutch muttered to himself. “You’ve been keeping secrets from your partner.” He shook his head with amusement.

At his side, Sam woofed again, his tail wagging madly. “So you *do* know the lady,” Hutch said. “That mean’s Starsky knows her, too.”

As a reward for that bit of information, Hutch scratched the dog’s ears before lifting the binoculars to his eyes again for one final look. But the beautiful mystery woman had disappeared into her home.

“I think I need to make the lady’s acquaintance, don’t you, boy?” Hutch said, replacing the lens caps and setting the binoculars back on the windowsill. He rolled the chair into the living room, Sam keeping in step beside him. “Maybe she’d like to keep us company during the day while Starsky’s at work. What do you think?”

Sam chuffed in agreement, not at all sure what Hutch was saying, but willing to go along with him, regardless.

Suddenly tired, Hutch rolled the chair to the bedroom, irked to admit he was a long way from being healed. His back ached from sitting up too long, and, despite his resolve to skip his daily afternoon nap, he found himself seeking the comfort of the firm mattress in the cool, dark bedroom. Sam kept in step beside the chair, watching Hutch vigilantly. Just being with Hutch was all the reward he needed.



Laurie pulled the car into the driveway and turned off the ignition. She loved her new home almost as much as she had the one in Denver. Most importantly, she finally felt safe again. She had lived in Bay City for seven months, and Brad hadn't found her. Changing her name and leaving behind her old friends and former identity had been a huge sacrifice, but Laurie knew in her heart she had no other choice. Two years of emotional abuse had finally taken their toll, and she'd realized if she didn't escape, she would go insane, or worse yet, end up dead.

At first, she had believed Brad loved her, but as the weeks went by and he became more obsessive, Laurie came to the realization that it wasn't love at all. Brad was a very sick man, who wanted only to control and dominate her. She'd actually been naïve enough to think that if she told him she didn't want to see him anymore, he would leave her alone. She remembered how he'd laughed, told her he loved her, and if she'd only admit it, she loved him, too. Laurie had been frightened by the madness she had seen in his eyes when he warned her that if he couldn't have her, no one else would.

That was when she had gone to the police for help, but to her astonishment, they downplayed the whole situation—treated her like an over-emotional woman, who was blowing things out of proportion. When Laurie had been adamant they do something, the officer suggested she sign a restraining order. Even as she did so, she felt she would receive little help from the police.

Eventually, Laurie moved to a new apartment—even changed jobs. Nothing worked. When he had shown up at her door at 1:30 in the morning, Laurie called police and had him arrested, but all she succeeded in doing was making him angrier. Back out on the street by daylight, Brad warned if she had him arrested again, she'd be sorry. That was when she began thinking about starting over somewhere else.

It hadn't been easy to leave behind a job she enjoyed and friends she loved, but eventually, fear for her life had outweighed all other considerations. Taking only the possessions she could carry in her car, Laurie had quietly slipped away one night and driven from Denver to Bay City to start a new life.

Laurie opened the trunk, removed two bags of groceries, and headed for the house. Suddenly, she felt the strange sensation she was being watched. Hurrying to the house, her eyes discreetly scanned the bushes around the front door and the neighbors' yards on either side of her. When she came back out, Laura looked both ways before returning to the car. A cold ripple of fear raised the hairs on the back of her neck, as the feeling she was being watched grew stronger.

You're just freaking yourself out, Laurie, she thought, then hurried on to the car to finish unloading her groceries. *Brad isn't here. He can't have found me. I've been too careful. It's only my imagination,* she scolded herself. With that self-reassurance ringing hollow in her mind, Laura hurried into the house and locked the door securely behind her.



“You’ve been holding out on me, old buddy,” Hutch said, spearing the last meatball on his plate.

Starsky looked up, his mouth stuffed with spaghetti noodles. “What ’cha talkin’ about?” he mumbled around the food.

“Your beautiful neighbor across the street. I saw her today. Don’t bother lying and telling me a pretty lady like that’s been living right here under your nose, and you didn’t even know about it.”

Starsky swallowed, a puzzled look on his face. “What pretty lady? And how do you know what’s across the street?”

“The tall blonde with the model’s body. I saw her through the binoculars,” Hutch admitted sheepishly. “Sam was barking, and I was just trying to see why he was so excited. You know, the white-and-gray bungalow across the street, two houses north of here.”

“Ah,” Starsky said, recognition dawning. “You mean *the ice princess*.” Using a spoon to guide more noodles onto his fork, Starsky began winding them into another huge bite. “I know who you mean, but I don’t know her name or anything about her.”

“You’re holding out on me, Starsk. I know you too well. An attractive woman like that, and you want me to believe you haven’t hit on her? Asked her out? Even gotten her name?”

“Nope. None of the above.”

“Why not?” Hutch asked incredulously.

“Believe me, I’ve tried. She won’t even speak to me. I’ve seen her a few times when I was out walkin’ Sam. Stopped and tried to introduce myself—ya know, do the neighborly thing—but she just nodded real curt-like and hurried into the house. Acted like she’s too good to talk to me.”

“Ever occur to you that maybe she just has discerning taste?” Hutch teased. “Maybe thought you were the neighborhood pervert.”

Starsky shot him a disgusted glance, but didn’t slow down the progress of securing the noodles on his fork. “Yeah, right. As if any lady in her right mind wouldn’t be interested in a good-looking guy like me,” he quipped back.

“You know,” Hutch said thoughtfully, “today she acted kind of strange when I was watching her carry in her groceries.”

Stopping to look up at Hutch, Starsky asked, “Oh, yeah? Strange how?”

“She kept looking around like she was afraid someone was watching.”

“Someone was watching, ya big dummy. *You* were watching!”

“She had no way of knowing I was down here with a pair of binoculars, Starsk,” Hutch said impatiently. “I mean, she kept looking around, like she needed to sneak into her own house.”

Starsky was quiet for a second, considering the implications of what Hutch was saying. The woman *had* behaved oddly ever since she’d moved in a few months ago. He had never even seen her speak to any of the other neighbors. Starsky could understand her reluctance to be too friendly with a single, unknown male walking past her house, but what about the Johanssons, the elderly couple who lived right next-door to her? They were always out gardening, but Starsky had witnessed the younger woman walk right past them several times without speaking.

“Maybe she’s a criminal,” Starsky said thoughtfully. “Ya know—on the run.”

Hutch’s head snapped up. “You mean she’s hiding out here?”

“Could be.”

Hutch considered the possibility. He guessed it was possible. He felt a twinge of disappointment before reminding himself that Starsky may be just trying to explain away his punctured ego’s response to the woman’s rejection.

“Starsky, not every woman who doesn’t find you charming and irresistible is a felon.”

“I’m not the only one she’s avoiding,” Starsky said. “She struts in and out of that house without talkin’ to anyone. I’ve seen it with my own baby blues.” He sopped up the remaining spaghetti sauce with the last bite of Italian bread, popped it into his mouth, and chewed noisily, then swallowed before adding, “Watch her a few more days with the Ziess, Sherlock, and you’ll see what I mean.”



The days crawled by slowly. Hutch filled his time with reading, TV, and naps. Although Sam was terrific company, Starsky was right—the dog’s conversational skills left a lot to be desired. When the boredom overwhelmed him, Hutch allowed his imagination to run free and create different scenarios to explain Starsky’s *ice princess* neighbor and her penchant for privacy. He found himself listening for the sound of her car as she left for work in the mornings, returned in the afternoons, and occasionally went back out. He noted that she never went out after dark and never got into her car without checking the back seat first.

Starsky's suggestion that she may be a wanted woman didn't seem to fit this behavior. Hutch was becoming more convinced each day that she was afraid of something—or someone. Memories of Jeanie weighed heavily on him, as he recalled the desperation in her eyes when she had pleaded with him to help her escape Forest. Although Hutch had almost lost his life trying to protect her, he still felt he had failed Jeanie.

He raised the binoculars once again and focused on the woman's eyes as he watched her. Yes, the fear was there—the haunted expression of the pursued prey. Hutch only wished he could talk to her. His instincts told him she needed help. But in his present condition, he could barely help himself. Starsky had threatened him with bodily harm if he tried to take the chair out of the house by himself. They both knew if he accidentally fell, he could re-injure his back, and the past weeks spent in surgery and rehabilitation would all be for nothing. For now, he'd just have to watch from the shadows.



Chapter 4

Starsky tightened the strap on his shoulder holster then slid into the soft, worn leather jacket that fit him like a second skin. “Sure you're gonna be okay here all day and all night? I can ask Huggy to come by and check on you?” he offered.

Sipping his coffee, Hutch looked up and answered with the patience of a grown-up child reassuring an overprotective parent, “Of course, I'm sure. I have a telephone, and I have Sam with me, Starsky. If I need anything, I'll call Huggy, or Dobey, or one of my other friends. I *do* have other friends, you know.”

“I know, I know. But I'm gonna be on this stakeout all night. How many of those friends would you feel comfortable callin' at three a.m.? Huh?”

“I hardly think I'm going to have an emergency at three a.m., Starsk. I'll probably go to bed by midnight and won't even wake up until you get home.”

“Well, ya never know,” Starsky shot back. “You could run outta pain pills, or need some of that sea kelp you're so crazy about.”

Hutch smiled. “Point taken. If I have a lecithin emergency in the middle of the night, how about I contact the dispatcher and have her patch me through to you? Would that work? Or maybe I can pin a note to Sam's collar and send him to hunt you down like one of those keg dogs in the Swiss Alps.”

“Very funny, wise guy,” Starsky said, heading for the door.

Hutch rolled along behind him in the wheelchair, and Sam followed, his tail wagging merrily. The dog enjoyed the good-natured banter between the two men. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but the tone of their voices assured him that all was well.

Starsky opened the door and peered up at dark thunderclouds hanging from the morning sky like giant mushrooms. "Looks like we're in for a storm today. Better let Sam out before it starts."

He turned back and eyed Hutch sitting in the chair, his hair tousled from sleep, his body still too thin from the weeks of pain and physical therapy. Even though Hutch had recently been able to take a few tentative steps using the cane, he still had a lot of healing ahead of him. Sympathy clutched at Starsky's heart, and he wanted with every fiber of his being to close the door and stay home today. He opened his mouth to protest once more, but Hutch, anticipating his words, cut him off.

"Get out of here, will you? Dobby's going to call any second asking where you are, and I don't want to have to lie to him. I'm feeling good this morning, and there's nothing to worry about. I have plenty of leftovers for dinner, great reruns on TV, and Sam the Wonder Dog for company."

At the sound of his name, Sam barked and thumped his tail on the floor.

Starsky reached over and squeezed Hutch's shoulder affectionately. "Just don't try anything crazy, okay? And if you do need help, call Huggy, or better yet, have 'em patch you through to me. I'll try to check in with you around eleven tonight."

And he was gone.



Chapter 5

The day crawled by slowly, enveloped in dark clouds, rolling thunder, and unending buckets of falling rain. Had he not known better, Hutch would have believed they were on the front end of a hurricane. This type of weather wasn't typical for Bay City, or the rest of Southern California, for that matter, and it gave the talking heads on the weather stations plenty to rattle on about throughout the day. Eventually, Hutch grew weary of listening to them, turned off the TV, and settled down in his room with Sam to read. Soon the clatter of rain on the tin roof of the old Victorian lulled Hutch into the gray netherworld of semi-consciousness, and he found the words of the page fading into the background. His eyelids drooped, and he gave over to the delightful, age-old pastime of a rainy-day nap. When he woke, it was dark outside and the wind was howling at a fever pitch.

Sam sat next to the bed, his ample head resting patiently on the mattress, mere inches from Hutch's. Hutch's eyes opened, slowly focusing in the dark room. At first, startled by the moist, warm, not-so-pleasant dog breath and the large, too-close brown eyes staring back at him in the gloom, Hutch jerked back, causing a sharp twinge of pain in his tender spine. Upon seeing Hutch's eyes open, Sam's tongue darted out and licked his master across the forehead.

Wincing, Hutch patted the dog's head. "Hey, boy. Guess I've been asleep for a while. You must be hungry, huh?"

Sam yapped "affirmative" and jumped up and ran to the bedroom door. His big paws did an impatient happy-dance in anticipation of a late supper.

"Okay, okay. Give me a few minutes. You know I'm a little slow these days." Hutch turned on the bedside lamp and discovered the electricity had apparently gone out sometime during the evening. He was mildly irritated by this inconvenience, but knew where Starsky stored the candles and flashlight, and by now, was familiar enough with the house to navigate the rooms in darkness.

As Hutch began maneuvering himself from the bed to the wheelchair, Sam trotted back over and sat down next to the locked wheelchair just as he had been trained to do, offering his heavy body for Hutch to lean against as a stabilizer. The big dog sat steadfastly while the man eased up and moved from the bed to the chair, then the two headed for the kitchen in search of a meal.

Hutch steered the chair through the dark living room, the way lit only by intermittent streaks of lightning that arced across the night sky. Drawn to the window by the keening wind, he watched the tree limbs whip back and forth, some bending to the ground under the heavy downpour. "Looks pretty bad out there," he commented to the dog. "Hope Starsky's somewhere dry."

That's when he saw it. A figure in dark clothing, a knitted cap pulled down over its head, stole through the driving rain and darted under a tree, illuminated only by a flash of lightning. Hutch rubbed his sleepy eyes and looked again, but this time, there was no one there. Perhaps he had imagined it.

His curiosity piqued, he reached for the binoculars on the little table next to the window, and searched the bushes adjacent to where he thought he had seen the figure. Seconds ticked by as he scanned the area with the binoculars, but came up empty. He was about to set them down and go on to the kitchen, when another bright burst of lightning exposed the figure again, this time, lurking beneath the huge sycamore tree that grew at the edge of Johansson's property.

Stealthily, the figure skulked from its hiding place. Hutch watched with interest, straining his eyes in the darkness to follow the apparition as it crept from beneath the tree to a clump of bushes, then from the bushes to the shelter of the overhang of the Johanssons' garage. Finally, the journey ended as the figure stole up against the little bungalow of Hutch's mystery woman. As the figure straightened, Hutch was sure it was a man. He was at least six feet tall and muscular in build.

The dark-clad prowler pressed himself against mystery-woman's house, and then carefully peeked inside the window. Hutch watched in horror as the shadow tried, without success, to raise the window. Not easily discouraged, he quickly made his way around the house, checking each window for entry, until he finally disappeared from Hutch's line of vision.

Realizing what was happening, Hutch lowered the binoculars and backed the wheelchair away from the window. Moving as fast as he could to the phone, he yanked the receiver off the hook before he had come to a complete stop. He hurriedly dialed the precinct, hoping there was a squad car in the area that could respond immediately. But Hutch's heart dropped with a thud when instead of a ring, he heard nothing but dead air.

"Damn it!" he shouted, slamming down the phone. No telephone, no lights, no way to warn the unsuspecting woman of the danger she was in. His mind raced. *Damn this wheelchair! Damn this helplessness!*

Why hadn't he insisted Starsky bring his car to the house rather than storing it at the police parking garage? At least then, he would have access to the police radio. "Damn it, Starsky!" he spat.

Sensing Hutch's frustration, Sam whined and nuzzled his snout against Hutch's arm.

"I can't just sit here and do nothing," Hutch said, more to himself than to the dog.

Another shard of lightning pierced the night sky, followed by an ominous roll of thunder. In that split second, Hutch's mind was made up. Yanking open the drawer of the little table, he grabbed a flashlight then steered the wheelchair to the closet where his shoulder holster and gun hung. Sam followed, knowing from Hutch's sudden change in mood that something was about to happen.

With every muscle in his tender back throbbing, Hutch stretched up and snagged the holster, pulling it toward him until his fingers curled around the handle of the gun. The pain snaked up his spine like a sharp razor. He took a deep breath and rested for only a second, and then backed the chair out of the closet, barely missing Sam's paws in the process.

The dog watched as Hutch held the flashlight beneath his chin, angling it awkwardly toward the .357 Magnum, as he methodically checked the gun to make sure it was loaded and ready to fire. Once satisfied, he laid the pistol and the flashlight in his lap and rolled the chair to the front door.

"Are you with me, boy?" Hutch said to the dog.

Sam barked, his body tense with eagerness. Reading Hutch's body language, he knew something serious was underway. The dog's earlier playful demeanor disappeared as he prepared to follow Hutch into whatever lay beyond the door.

Hutch opened the door and stared out at the pouring rain. The wind had not subsided, nor had the frequency of the lightning. He realized that what he was about to attempt was reckless, at best. But what choice did he have?

He eyed the homemade wheelchair ramp, the water sluicing down it like a mountain stream. He'd be lucky to make it to the sidewalk—much less to the woman's house—without turning over the damn chair. Hutch turned up the collar on his shirt and began rolling the chair out into

the pounding rain. Sam hesitated for only a second, then began the descent down the slippery, wet ramp beside the wheelchair, offering his body as a lifeline for Hutch to hang on to as they slid forward.

The wind buffeted the two, precariously pushing the chair to the right, almost knocking the duo from the ramp, but Sam held steady, digging his claws into the sodden wood for stability. Another flash of lightning split the darkness, and Hutch saw the figure had returned to the same window he had first tried to breach. This time, he appeared to be running something around the edges of one of the glass panes.

Hutch ducked his head to keep the blinding rain from pelting his face. With a new urgency, he finished the descent down the final few feet to the end of the ramp, plunging the chair into a deep puddle where the ramp and sidewalk met. He felt the wheels slip to the side, propelled by the oozing mud accumulated at the juncture. The chair nearly tipped, but at the last moment, Hutch burrowed his hand into Sam's fur, righting himself and the heavy chair.

Summoning strength he didn't realize he had, Hutch struggled to force the chair out of the muddy mess, and began a perilous trek up the dark street between his house and that of the threatened woman. Despite his natural instinct to run ahead and investigate, Sam hung back and kept pace with Hutch.

Although the distance up the street to the other house was not far, the wind and rain slammed against the wheelchair, making it seem endless. Weak from the long days in bed, Hutch struggled to keep moving, his arms growing tired from the strain. Knowing the woman's safety was at risk, he pressed on and finally reached the bottom of her driveway.

Hutch locked the wheels of the chair and raised the Magnum, waiting for the next flare of lightning to illuminate his target. It was only seconds before the intruder came into view.

Blinking the rain from his eyes, Hutch shouted, "Halt! Police! Put your hands in the air *now!*" As the lightning subsided, the intruder receded back into darkness.

Hutch couldn't see whether he had done as he was told, or had fled the scene. He squinted through the pelting rain for any sign of the culprit. When the sky lit up again, the man was less than three feet away, running straight at him with a crowbar raised above his head, his face a grim mask of determination.

Taken completely off guard, Hutch squeezed off only one wild shot before the crowbar slammed down on his arm with such force the gun flew from his grasp. Pain burned through him like hot iron, and he felt the bone in his arm give way under the blow. The breath whooshed from his body, the agony consuming his ability to react. Unable to fight back, Hutch instinctively ducked to the side, unbalancing the chair. Clawing at the air as he went over, he felt the metal contraption tip then crash to the ground, tossing him onto the hard concrete.

Through a haze of pain, he heard Sam's deep, guttural growl—the only warning the assailant had before the dog took him down.

“What—? Where—? Get off me!” the man bellowed, as Sam held him down with massive paws, tearing at the flesh of the wrist that had wielded the crowbar seconds earlier.

Hutch lay on the ground, watching, but too removed from the reality of what was happening to react. The harder the intruder fought, the more ferocious the dog became. Aware that unchecked, Sam may kill the man, Hutch struggled to form the words that would end the attack. Even the roar of the wind and pounding rain could not drown out the sounds of the pleading man as Sam’s teeth savagely shredded his clothes and tore at his skin.

Hutch reached out his good arm toward the huge angry dog. “Sam,” he called, barely above a whisper. “Sam, stand down...enough...enough, boy.”

Darkness swam before Hutch’s eyes, and he knew he was going to pass out. When the dog didn’t respond, he tried again, using the little strength he had left.

“Sam, come...” he whispered one last time before the darkness took him.



Chapter 6

Starsky slammed down the car phone, his apprehension quickly mounting, despite his attempts at rationalization. This was the third time in an hour he had tried to call Hutch. He realized the fast busy signal probably meant the phones were out, but that was no comfort. The prospect of Hutch being alone in the house with no way to call if he needed him put Starsky on edge.

Noticing that LaMoy was watching him, Starsky took a deep breath and said in a calm voice, “Listen, kid, I have to leave for a few minutes. Think you can stay here and keep up the surveillance without me until I get back?”

Irritated about being called “kid,” LaMoy snarled back, “Of course, I can, Starsky. How about giving me a little credit? You know I graduated from the Academy with honors.”

With no concern for the rookie’s ego, Starsky started the Torino and ordered, “You’re right. Get out. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Shocked that Starsky had for once, actually listened to him, LaMoy blinked, then said, “Here? But where am I supposed to wait? It’s pouring rain.”

“I’m sure an honor student like you can find a place to get out of the rain without any help from me,” Starsky answered curtly. LaMoy had hardly closed the car door when Starsky gunned the engine and was gone.



Starsky drove as fast as he dared without using the Mars light. “No reason to panic,” he mumbled to himself. “No reason to blow this all outta proportion. If you show up there with the light flashin’, Hutch’ll never let you live it down.” But that familiar cold knot of fear he always experienced when Hutch was in trouble had already settled deep in his belly.



When he turned down the street and neared the cluster of homes where his old Victorian stood, Starsky realized there were no lights anywhere. He slowed down and pulled the Torino into the driveway. Before he could turn off the ignition, he heard a single gunshot—close, too close—and knew with sinking certainty that it was Hutch’s Magnum. Starsky drew his Smith & Wesson, threw open the door, and spilled out of the car. Keeping his head low, he inched his way to the back of the Torino, straining to see through the pouring rain and darkness.

From the same direction as the gunshot, he heard an urgent cry, “Get off me! Get him off!”

As the sky flared bright with a bolt of lightning, Starsky saw them. Sam was standing astride a man, his great jaws clamped on the victim’s arm. There was no question the dog was in full attack mode.

Starsky was up in an instant, running toward the pair. As he neared, he spotted the wheelchair, and beside it on the concrete lay Hutch, the rain pounding his unmoving form.

Fearing the worst, Starsky’s heartbeat quickened. Ignoring the dog and the other man, he ran to Hutch, dropping to his knees on the driveway. Reaching out, he gently lifted Hutch’s head.

“Hutch! Hutch, you okay?” When Hutch didn’t answer, Starsky pressed his fingers to his partner’s throat and felt a faint but steady pulse.

“Help me!” the man screamed again. “Shoot him! He’s gonna kill me!”

Starsky turned back to the battle going on between the dog and man. “Sam! Stand down! Come!” he shouted.

The big dog immediately halted and released the intruder’s arm.

“Come!” Starsky shouted again. This time, Sam ran to Starsky and obediently sat at attention beside Hutch.

Starsky leveled his pistol on the prone man and walked toward him. “Keep your hands where I can see them!” he demanded. The man groaned and lay flat on his back, his arms splayed out on either side.

“Can’t you see I’m bleeding to death here?” the injured man cried.

The streetlight above them flickered twice then came on, bathing the area around them in an eerie, yellow glow. Starsky stood over the man, the gun trained between his eyes. Under the street lamp, he could see the assailant was in no condition to fight back.

He kicked away the crowbar and reached to his back pocket for his handcuffs. Gone. He must have lost them in the scuffle. Starsky looked around, but did not see them in the anywhere. Frantic to get back to Hutch, he called sharply, “Sam, come!”

The dog looked at Starsky, then down at Hutch and whined pitifully.

“It’s okay, boy,” Starsky told him. “I’ll take care of Hutch. Come!”

Sam reluctantly went to Starsky’s side. “Sam, guard,” Starsky told him. “Stay and guard.”

Sam sat down inches from the injured assailant and eyed him suspiciously.

“If you so much as breathe too deeply, I’ll give him the command to attack,” Starsky warned. “Do you understand?”

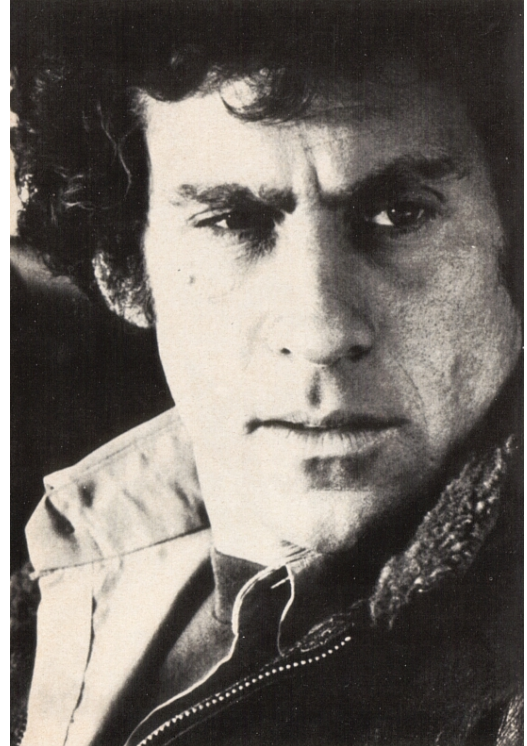
“Yes! Yes! Just keep that damn beast off me!”

As Starsky ran back to the car to call for an ambulance and back-up, lights began to come on in the houses around them. Once he was sure help was en route, he returned to Hutch and crouched on the driveway. His mouth dry with fear, Starsky gently touched his cheek. “Hutch? Are you with me, buddy?”

Hutch’s eyes fluttered open. The first thing he saw was Starsky peering down at him, concern etched in his tired features.

“So, you decided to rejoin the party, huh?” Starsky said, relief coursing through him.

“Starsky? How’d you get here? Sam—” Hutch tried to lift his head to look for Sam, but Starsky gently laid a hand on his shoulder and quieted him.



“It’s okay. I’m here now, and Sam took down the bad guy. Everything is under control. You just need to lie still until the ambulance arrives.”

“He was...he was trying to get into her house...the girl, the one I’ve been watching.”

“Aha, so you *have* been spying on her,” Starsky teased. “It’s okay, buddy; you and Sam stopped him.”

“There was no power, no phones,” Hutch mumbled. He shivered, the cold rain intensifying the throbbing in his arm. His face twisted with pain. Starsky quickly removed his jacket and laid it over Hutch, then leaned over him to block the driving rain from his face.

“You always were a sap for a pretty blonde,” Starsky said, “but this takes the cake. Tryin’ to ride to the rescue in a wheelchair?” Starsky shook his head in disbelief.

With effort, Hutch managed a halfhearted chuckle.

“Yeah...well...what can I say? They don’t call me the White Knight for nothing.”

The sound of the siren drew closer as the two men sat in the pouring rain, and the dog kept a vigilant watch over the intruder.



Epilogue

Hutch sat on the sofa, watching the ball game with Starsky. He awkwardly held a beer in his left hand; his right arm snugly swathed in a cast, rested on a cushion in his lap. Beside him on the sofa lay Sam, his big head planted comfortably on Hutch’s lap.

The Braves had just hit a single into left field with two men on base. The Dodgers were already down two runs, and things didn’t look good for them. Hutch was grumbling about the umpire’s last call when the doorbell rang.

“That must be the pizza,” Starsky said. “I’ll get it.” He slipped his wallet from his back pocket and went to the door.

When he opened it, their pretty neighbor stood there, a large pizza box in her hands. “Detective Starsky?” she said timidly.

“Well, hello,” Starsky said with surprise. “And it’s Dave. Call me Dave. And you are?”

“Laurie. Laurie Tarnowski.”

“Moonlighting as a pizza delivery man?” Starsky quipped.

“Actually, I saw him pull up out front, so I paid him and asked if I could deliver it. I thought it was the least I could do.” She smiled, and Starsky stood gaping at her, still surprised by her unannounced visit.

After a few awkward seconds, she said, “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

Embarrassed by his own bad manners, he stepped aside. “Well, sure. I mean, please come in. Hutch and Sam are in the living room.”

“Good,” she said. “I wanted to come over and thank you for what you did for me.”

Hearing voices in the other room, Sam jumped from the sofa and lumbered to the door to greet their guest. A dog lover, Laurie bent down to pat his head. “What a good boy. And so handsome! I’ve been admiring you from afar for months,” she said.

Sam’s tail happily fanned the air, acknowledging the attention she lavished upon him.

“Starsky?” Hutch called from the other room. “Everything okay?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Starsky answered, leading the young woman into the room. “Meet our new pizza delivery lady, Laurie Tarnowski.”

Surprised, Hutch struggled to sit up straighter, self-consciously reaching up to rake his fingers through his mussed hair. “Oh, uh...I m-mean, hello,” he stuttered.

“Detective Hutchinson, I presume?” she asked.

“Yes...I mean, Ken,” he said. “My friends call me Ken.”

“And you can call me Laurie,” she said. “Although, the name I’ve used since moving here is Barbara Brinson.”

“Have a seat,” Starsky said, motioning toward a chair. Instead, she handed him the pizza box and sat down on the sofa next to Hutch.

Starsky frowned down at the box, then looked up at the pretty girl who had already turned her attention to Hutch. “Would you like a beer?” he asked.

“No, thank you. I can’t stay long. I just wanted to come over and thank you both—or I should say you *all*,” Laurie added, smiling at Sam, “for saving my life. Especially you, Detective Hutchinson—I mean, Ken.”

Hutch smiled a little self-consciously, his eyes crinkling with pleasure.

“I also felt I owed you an explanation,” she continued. “I’ve been hiding out here for months. I haven’t allowed myself to make friends with anyone, so I’m eternally grateful that you were concerned enough to help me, being a total stranger and all.”

“You don’t owe me any thanks,” Hutch said modestly.

“Of course, I do,” she countered. “I mean, there you were in a wheelchair, and when you saw I was in danger, you didn’t hesitate to come to my rescue. These days, most people don’t want to get involved.”

She turned to Starsky. “And I know I haven’t exactly been a good neighbor, either. I’ve avoided speaking with anyone, and I was rather rude the time you tried to talk to me.”

“Really? I didn’t think anything of it,” Starsky lied. “I figured you were just a very busy lady.”

“Well, just the same, I want you to know the whole story.”

She paused to summon her courage before continuing, then told them about Brad stalking her for the past two years and how she had given up her job, her friends, and her home to start over in Bay City.

“But he still found me. I don’t know how, but he did. I’m certain he would’ve killed me this time. When I heard that gunshot, I was too frightened to look out the window. Somehow, I knew it was Brad.” By the time she was finished, her eyes were moist with unshed tears.

“Well, he’s under guard at the hospital now. And once he leaves there, he’ll be behind bars,” Hutch reassured her. “He’s being charged with attempted breaking and entering, assault on a police officer, and failure to obey a restraining order.”

“Yeah, and when we ran a background check on him, we learned his name isn’t Bradley Thurmond, but Nathan Bannister, and he’s been tied to the disappearance of two other women: one in Connecticut, and one in Virginia,” Starsky added. “The FBI has been notified. They’re questioning him later this week in connection with those charges. Once he’s in federal custody, I have a feeling he’s going away for a very long time.”

“I wouldn’t doubt for a moment that he’s capable of murder,” Laura said, her eyes large with fear. “And I would’ve probably been his next victim if you hadn’t stepped in, Ken.”

“Let’s not think about that,” Hutch said, reaching over to cover her hand with his own. “You’re safe now, and I don’t think he’ll ever bother you again.”

She smiled at him sympathetically. “The police officer told me you’ve been recovering from back surgery,” she said. “I hope you didn’t re-injure yourself.”

“No, the doc said I was pretty lucky to take a spill like that and not do any damage, but it’s fine.”

“And your arm?”

“Just a slight fracture. Not a complete break.”

“But enough to get him a couple more weeks off work. This guy will do anything to get out of doing his share of the paperwork,” Starsky complained good-naturedly. “Notice he managed to break his right arm, not the left?”

“Well, if you’d gotten there a little faster, Bozo, I wouldn’t’ve taken that crowbar to my gun arm,” Hutch retorted.

Laurie giggled, sensing that this type of banter was the norm for these two. “Just one other thing, Ken,” she said seriously.

“Yes?”

“I was wondering...once you’re back on your feet,” she asked coyly, “could I take you out to dinner?”

Behind her, Starsky’s eyes rolled heavenward. Hutch smiled broadly, catching his partner’s “why do you always get the girl?” look.

“I’d really like that,” he answered graciously. “That is,” he added, winking at her, “as long as we can bring home a couple of doggie bags for my partners.”



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