

Uncertainties

By Keri Mera

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They came out of nowhere. A silent menace, creeping from the shadows, faces in darkness, guns drawn.

He smiled grimly as he watched them emerge. He'd been waiting for hours, knowing they would come. Once, they'd taken him by surprise, but not anymore.

He gripped his gun with determination. "Hold it!" he yelled and jumped out. Crouched and took aim. "Stop right there!"

The shadowy figures froze.

"Drop your weapons!" he shouted. The gun in his hand was steady, a firm ally in his battle to keep his partner safe. "Back away. Slowly."

One by one, they withdrew into the night, silent as ghosts, leaving no traces. Like mist dissolved in darkness.

Safe. He'd be safe now. Until the next time. There was always a next time.

Because they were everywhere. In the shadows. In the light of day. In basements and alleys. In cars and restaurants. At police stations and hospitals. They could be anywhere, they could be anyone.

He had to be vigilant, constantly alert. If he relaxed his guard for only an instant, they'd get past him and finish what they'd started.

Wearily, Hutch put the gun down. For tonight, at least, they'd both be safe.

PART 1: SUMMER

Chapter One

Night had fallen over the sprawling City of Angels. A sea of light rippled across the basin, spreading in waves from the center and casting an orange glow on the starless sky as LA performed its daily miracle of transforming itself from hectic working city to a place of vibrant night life.

At Memorial Hospital, Dr. Mahendra Patel watched the twilight transformation from the window of his dimly lit office with his usual mixture of clinical detachment and childlike fascination. This place, still so new to him, was

different from anything he had known before. The smog of Los Angeles, its vast carscapes, the pulsating life of a seaside city...nothing could compare to it. Even the dry desert heat was entirely unlike the sweltering monsoon summers of his native Madhya Pradesh. And London, where he had trained and worked as a doctor for so many years, might have been on a different planet.

Patel checked his watch. It was almost nine p.m., long past the end of his shift. Two continuous days on call, staff shortages, four emergency operations, and the complicated surgery on the car-crash girl had drained him. She might still lose her leg, despite everything he had done to save it. She was sixteen years old. It hadn't even been her fault. Drunk driver.

He sighed and put away the report he had been working on. A yawn threatened to unhinge his jaw, and he ran a weary hand through his thick black hair. He really should be going home and catching up on some sleep.

He picked up his jacket and walked to the door. Hesitated. Returned the jacket to its hook and retraced his steps to the filing cabinet. Feeling ridiculously like an addict unable to resist the lure of the bottle, he extracted a bulky, much thumbed medical file.

Det. Sgt. David M. Starsky.

Patel suppressed a smile. And wondered again at the source of his enduring fascination with this case, its many unusual aspects documented in a medical file that read like a success story from one of the cheesy novels he used to see in airport shops.

He settled back at his desk, opened the folder and leafed through the familiar contents. An entire life was laid out in medical notes. Childhood ailments, chicken pox, sports injuries. A sprained ankle. A viral infection. The effects of a two-year stint in the Army and Viet Nam. And after that, injuries sustained in a car bombing. In a shooting. In a knife attack. Injection of a progressive type poison. A head injury. A concussion. Burns and blunt trauma sustained during an abduction. Another gunshot wound. Cracked ribs from a car crash. Another concussion.

An impressive collection for a man in his early thirties. Evidence of a life lived fast and furious.

Patel turned to the latest episode in the saga, but he didn't need to read the words. He had written them himself, right after the grueling six-hour surgery he'd performed on a body so mutilated by three bullets that his frantic efforts had seemed nothing less than desperate.

But the patient had defied all expectations. He had survived massive injuries, a cardiac arrest, coma and infections. The man shouldn't be alive, but he was. He had not only pulled through, but was improving. Remarkably so.

Patel pulled out the latest X-rays and test results. The shattered ribs had knitted well. The torn tissue and muscles were healing. There was increasing lung capacity, improved flexibility in the right arm.

The term *miracle patient* flashed through his mind again. A much overused expression, in his opinion, and he pushed it away, as always. Instead, he looked for the medical explanation.

The patient was young, tough, with an unusually high pain threshold, an exceptional capacity for healing, and a passionate, almost ferocious will to live. He also boasted an extensive social support network, a life with everything to live for, and not least, a healthy dose of luck.

Good sound reasons, but not enough. Patel knew there was something else at work in David Starsky's remarkable recovery, something much less tangible. A trump among the lousy hand of cards dealt out by fate. A trump by the name of Ken Hutchinson?

Patel allowed himself the smile he had suppressed before. At first, he hadn't paid much attention to the tall, incredibly blond policeman. Then he'd seen the man in action, had witnessed him go from cold despair to frenzied action, from naked fear to a sudden wild, blazing hope, from pure terror to delirious joy. This was more than dedication to police work.

After the patient had regained consciousness, Patel had begun to take a closer interest in both men. There was something intriguing about the way they interacted.

For instance, he didn't think it was common practice for a police officer in this country to spend days and nights at the bedside of an injured colleague, holding his hand and threatening the medical staff with a hand gun when asked to leave. Nor did he think that taking on an increasing portion of the nursing tasks was part of a police partner's job description.

The patient, there was no doubt, was thriving under his partner's care. Thriving in a way that should be impossible after the injuries he had sustained.

Patel couldn't quite figure it out. Maybe a miracle after all?

On impulse, he closed the file, left the office, and took the elevator to the seventh floor.

He shouldn't be involved in the case at all anymore. He had played his part in the operating theater. The aftercare of patients wasn't usually a surgeon's concern, and he'd had to fight hard to be given overall charge of the case in the face of stiff competition from more senior doctors equally fascinated by the conundrum presented by David Starsky.

Far from the hectic surroundings of the Emergency Department, Ward 16 was an oasis. All visitors had left and the lights were dim. No, not all visitors. The glow of light and the muted sound of voices spilling from the partially open door of Room 720 told Patel that at least one visitor had again successfully resisted his removal.

A passing nurse flashed him a smile. "Evening, Dr. Patel. Yeah, he's still in there." She jerked her head to indicate the room.

"No sprinkler party tonight, I hope?"

"Oh no! After you told 'em off the other night, they've been on their best behavior. Although—"

"Yes?"

"Hutch brought in some food again today. He said he had your permission."

"He had my permission the first time, too. He even showed me the recipe to make sure I approved of all the ingredients for the dish he was planning."

They shared an amused look.

"Quite a pair, huh?" she said, then added, "If you want to have a word with them, better make it quick, 'cause I'm gonna throw him out in a minute."

"Make it three, please."

"You got it."

She hurried on, and Patel approached the room. The voices had increased in volume.

"Will you hold still, for Chrissake? How can I do this when you keep bouncing around like that?"

"Well, get on with it. What's takin' you so long?"

There was a hint of impatience in Hutchinson's mellow timbre, a touch of annoyance in Starsky's deeper bass. Starsky and Hutchinson at odds? Intrigued, Patel moved closer.

"This wasn't even my idea," he heard.

"Well, it has to be done. I'm already lookin' like Huggy during his hippie phase."

"Yeah, this jungle sprouts like weeds."

"Jealous, huh?"

"What? Of this bird's nest? You've gotta be kidding."

That was the problem with Americans, Patel thought. They spoke an incomprehensible version of English. Weeds? Bird's nest? The problem was compounded by the fact that these two had evolved an entire subspecies of communication, like a secret code unknown to all but themselves. Half the time, Patel had no idea what they were talking about.

He knocked perfunctorily and entered. "Good evening, gentlemen."

Two heads came up in unison, one blond, one dark, and two pairs of eyes, both an astonishing shade of blue, turned to him. Identical smiles spread over faces already alight with the joys of good-natured banter. Two voices spoke up at the same time.

"Hi, Doc!"

"Doctor Patel...."

Hutchinson put aside the pair of scissors he'd been wielding, and Patel smiled with sudden understanding when he saw the cropped head of hair his partner presented. Curly chocolate-brown snippets covered the towels draped over the shoulders of the pajama-clad figure in the bed.

On the table by the window sat the remains of what looked like a beef casserole alongside a near empty bowl of tomato salad and a stack of empty plates and glasses. An esoteric jumble of clutter crowded other surfaces—lurid get well cards, books, magazines, vases with flowers, a copy of the *LA Times*, a portable radio turned low, a teddy bear, playing cards, a small leafy plant in a pot, and—a new addition—a chess board displaying an ongoing game of chess.

There was a lot of hard living going on in this room.

Patel cleared his throat and strove for a stern expression. "When I said you could drop in outside visiting hours, *Detective*, I did not mean to imply that you could spend half the night in this room. You could not have found a more convenient time for this hairdressing session?"

"It was his idea," grumbled Hutchinson and waved an accusing forefinger. "He talked me into it." He gathered up the towels and brushed a few wayward snips of hair from the bed. "But I'm done now."

Starsky ran an exploratory hand over his shortened mane. "You're done? But this side's still longer than the other."

"Let's see. Hm, yeah, you're right, that doesn't look even. And there's something funny about the other side, too. You know, I think maybe I shouldn't have taken quite so much off the back—"

"Hu-utch!" Starsky yelped and clutched at his curls. "What've you done to me? You want the nurses to fall over laughing when they come in tomorrow? Oh no, don't put the scissors away! You can't leave it like this. It's a crime against fashion."

"*Fashion?* What the hell do you know about fashion?"

"A lot more than you give me credit for, nitwit. I'm Tyrone, remember. I've an image to keep up." Starsky turned beseeching eyes on his doctor. "Doc, do something. Don't let him leave until he's done this properly."

Patel exchanged a glance with Hutchinson, making a mental note to find out what a tyron was. And why the bizarre accent?

Hutchinson had disposed of the towels. He reached out and ruffled the still abundant mop of hair fondly. "Hey, don't worry. You look great. Honest. What else do you expect from Mr. Marlene?"

Starsky looked unconvinced and Patel hastened to reassure him. "It is true. He has done a very professional job."

Starsky rolled his eyes. "Turkey!" he said and slapped his partner's leg. Patel noted in passing that Hutchinson had lost no time in reclaiming his customary spot on the edge of the bed. Since moving the patient to this ward, Patel had yet to see them sitting on separate pieces of furniture when a single one would do. They were certainly an unusually tactile pair.

Not for the first time, Patel wondered at the precise nature of their bond. Partners. Best friends. Or was it more than that? Were it not for the large number of attractive young female visitors to this room, and the fact that both men seemed to have a ferocious reputation for the ladies, he might almost have jumped to the conclusion that....

Hurriedly, he said, "Well. How are you feeling today? Did the therapy go to plan this afternoon?"

"Yeah." Starsky's face lit up. "Sally is...well, she's a sadist, really, but she sure knows her stuff. She got me started on weights today. And look, I can stretch my arm right back now." He strained to demonstrate, oblivious to the quick flash of alarm on his partner's face.

"Excellent. *Excellent*. I take it you want to go ahead with the next step in the program tomorrow?"

"You bet."

A quick look passed between doctor and patient before Patel pointedly glanced at his watch. "Good. I believe it is time for your medication, David. And you, Detective—"

"When are you gonna call me Hutch?"

"*He's* Hutch. *I'm* Starsky," Starsky interjected straight-faced, and his partner almost cracked up. Patel eyed them for a moment, then decided to let it pass.

"—and you, *Hutch*, should have left this ward hours ago."

"I'll be just a minute. If I don't pack up the food, this glutton here is likely to polish it off overnight and give himself an ulcer."

"Hey! Am not!"

"Are too."

"Am *not*!"

"Are *too*. Quit arguing." Hutch gathered up the dishes and stowed them in a battered cardboard box.

"No more than a minute," Patel warned. "Or you will be in trouble with Gabriella. I will see you tomorrow."

"Night, Dr. Patel."

"Yeah. 'Night, Doc."

Patel shut the door behind him, but not before he had caught a glimpse of the two heads bent close together again, the blond strands mingling with the dark curls.

The image stayed with him long after he had returned to his office.

oooOOOooo

It was eleven p.m. and Room 720 was dark and silent.

Patel had left. Hutch had left. Gabriella had checked him over and left. Even the joyous warmth that had run through Starsky's veins just moments before had left.

He was alone.

The sweetness of Hutch's parting kiss lingered on his lips. He thought he could still feel the warmth of Hutch's hand on his arm, his fingers playing through his hair, hear the soft voice in his ear, saying goodbye.

God, he hated it when Hutch had to leave.

He turned awkwardly and shifted his bruised body into a more comfortable position, not bothering to stifle a grunt of pain.

It didn't matter. There was no one to hear or see if he gave in to the agony. Funny how the pain always struck when Hutch wasn't there. Almost as if it knew it had no chance to get at him when Hutch was standing guard.

Nights were the worst. The long, long hours alone in the dark room, the only sounds the occasional voices floating in from the hallway. When dreams of alien landscapes and fractured memories ambushed him from hiding places deep down inside him. When Hutch was so far away.

Why couldn't they put in a second bed and let Hutch move in?

Don't be an idiot. This isn't a hotel.

He sighed.

Hutch would be halfway down to Venice by now, in his latest battered Ford, the windows rolled down to let in a cooling night breeze, and the radio on. He'd be tapping his fingers to the music, or maybe humming along. But there'd be no outright singing. Not yet. Hutch wasn't ready for that yet.

Starsky stared into the darkness and smiled at the vision that played out in his mind. He could see Hutch park, get out, walk up the stairs with the cardboard box of empty dishes under one arm and maybe a bag filled with milk, bread and fruit in the crook of the other. Could see him open the door, unload the food, shed his shoes and jacket. Head for the shower.

He watched Hutch's glorious body glisten under the warm stream. *Oh yeah.* He squeezed his eyes shut and saw those big hands run over the smooth chest and arms, the hard legs, soaping, rubbing, rinsing. Maybe Hutch would jerk off in the shower, thinking of him.

God, how he longed to be there, in the shower with Hutch, taking care of him. Letting Hutch take care of him, too. And not like he did in the hospital, where *taking care* meant helping him dress and pee and brush his teeth. Taking care of something a lot more rewarding.

With his left hand, he felt for what had been the pride of his manhood. Nothing. No life down there. He sighed again.

Patel had explained—at length, patiently, repeatedly—that the effects of the drugs would wear off when he stopped taking them, and that there was no reason why Starsky shouldn't regain a fully active sex life.

But Starsky was worried. What if he never got it up again? He'd be no better than a sexual vegetable. And where would that leave Hutch?

The only way to find out was to wean himself off the drugs he didn't absolutely need.

The pain dug in with sharp claws, and he let out a low groan. Almost whimpered when the claws settled in for a long, slow torture session.

Hutch. Think of Hutch.

Hutch would have finished his shower by now. He'd be walking around the apartment, his damp hair sticking up in spikes, a towel wrapped around him. Or maybe without anything wrapped around him at all.

God, he missed Hutch when he wasn't there. Missed him so much, in fact, that he hardly recognized himself for the same tough guy who'd once valued his independence and self-sufficiency above all.

When had he become so...*needy*?

He'd been vegetating in the hospital for almost three months now, three endless months. Sometimes, he could hardly remember a life outside the hospital walls. The only constant in this life of uncertainties was Hutch.

Hutch. What would I do without you?

Life without Hutch. A terrifying thought. At least the night would end, and the next morning, Hutch would be there again—for a few minutes or maybe half an hour—before rushing off to work. He knew Hutch needed that morning fix just as much as he did.

Starsky twisted under the sheets and cautiously leveraged himself over to his other side. The bed, which during the day always seemed more than wide enough to accommodate both Hutch and him, now seemed narrow and confining.

Hutch. Always there. Always ready to pull him out of whatever gloomy corner he found himself stranded in. Always ready with a comforting touch, a helping hand, a diverting anecdote—whatever the situation demanded. And for Hutch's sake, he tried to put a brave face on things. He really did.

But sometimes, the effort was more than he could sustain. Sometimes the pain, his helplessness, his fears of an uncertain future, the sheer misery of it all ganged up on him and spilled over in helpless anger. And then he took it all out on the one person he loved above all.

Hutch took it all without blinking an eye. He was unrelentingly cheerful, irrepressibly buoyant. And so full of joy and gratitude.

Except for once, weeks ago now.

Starsky shifted uncomfortably when he recalled that day in June. He had just been moved to his new ward, and he felt like shit. He was in constant pain. Couldn't sit up yet, couldn't breathe properly, couldn't feed himself, couldn't even stay awake for long. And Hutch was ecstatic to see him out of the ICU. Jubilant. Going on and on about the great progress he was making until he couldn't stand it anymore. So he'd flared up—if croaking in a strained whisper could be called flaring up.

"Stop it!" he'd interrupted Hutch. "Will you just *stop it*? I don't understand you. How can you tell me I'm doin' great? Just take a look at me. I can't do a thing for myself. I need a bedpan to shit. You have to fuckin' feed me. I may be a cripple for the rest of my life. So will you just shut up about my great progress!"

That was the only time he'd seen Hutch crack. The blood had drained from the pale face, and he'd looked bleak, all the joy replaced with undisguised pain and sorrow. He'd scraped the chair back and bolted from the room without a word.

At first, Starsky didn't get it.

Then Minnie had shown up and set him straight on a few things. Told him a little about the days he'd spent in the coma. Told him about all the things they'd kept from him. The doctors' fears that he might never wake up. The possibility of paralysis. Brain damage. Permanent disability. Told him quite sharply to lay off Hutch.

The revelations had jolted Starsky from his funk. *Paralysis? Brain damage? Why hadn't anybody told him that before?*

God, Hutch, why didn't you tell me?

You woulda looked after me, wouldn't you? Even if I was a vegetable in a wheelchair, you'd still look after me. And die a little every single day.

No wonder Hutch was over the moon with joy at his progress.

"Go find him, Minnie. Please. He's around here somewhere. I know he is. Please find him for me. Tell him...tell him I wanna talk to him."

Starsky sighed again when he remembered the soapy scene that followed.

He thought of that day as his turning point, the kick in the ass he'd needed to throw himself at recovery with everything he had. That was the day he promised himself that even if he never regained what Gunther had taken from him on that fateful day in May, he'd make damn sure he'd get as well as he possibly could. For himself. And for Hutch. Especially for Hutch.

The strategy had paid off as weeks passed and he slowly grew stronger.

Annoyingly, so did the question lurking in the back of his mind. The all-important question that had haunted him ever since he'd surfaced from the coma and learned the extent of the damage inflicted by Gunther's goons. The question he hadn't discussed with anyone yet. Not even Hutch.

Will I get well enough to go back to work?

The question hovered on the fringes of his mind every minute of the day, every sleepless night.

Will I get well enough to go back to work?

It was a question he couldn't bring himself to ask although it was on his tongue every time Dr. Patel dropped by for a visit, every time he saw a specialist, every time a new consultant made his rounds.

Will I get well enough to go back to work?

After three months in the hospital, *The Question* was burning a hole in his heart, and Starsky was desperate for an answer. But he didn't ask. Couldn't ask.

What if the answer was no? What if...?

Starsky clenched his hands to fists. Bit back his frustration. No. Better to live in uncertainty and hope, than to know a truth that would crush everything he was, everything he'd ever wanted to be.

The fire in his lungs flared up without warning, hot and sharp, and sent a spasm of pain through his tortured body. He moaned again. His hands clawed at the sheets as his breathing turned ragged.

This wouldn't do. He'd never get any sleep this way. And tomorrow, Hutch would take one look at the shadows on his face and know he'd skipped his pain pills again. And then there'd be hell to pay.

Starsky gave up and reached blindly for the button. It seemed to take forever for Gabriella to come to the door.

"Bad?" she asked sympathetically.

"Yeah."

"Here you are. Take two. I'll get you some water." She helped him drink and lie back down. "Dr. Patel said you could cut down on them. He didn't say you should go cold turkey."

"Was okay yesterday."

"So long as you tell me when it's not okay."

"Okay." He gave a smile his best shot.

She noticed. "Good. Try and get some sleep now. Good night."

"G'night."

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Hutch woke from tangled dreams to a new morning. Feeling drained and disoriented, still half asleep, he reached blindly across the bed. The space beside him was empty. Had been empty for months. The ache that followed was as sharp-edged as on the first morning.

Wearily, he disentangled himself from the sheets. He couldn't understand it. He went to bed at a reasonable hour, his workload was lighter than it had been in years, he didn't run any marathons—why was he always so damned tired?

When he went into the kitchen, he noticed he'd left his gun on the table again. He frowned. He thought he'd hung it up, in its holster, in the wardrobe where it always lived at night.

Hutch shook his head, strapped on the holster, and returned the Python to its home. Sometimes he wondered why he wore the thing at all. No one shot at him these days, and no one had shot at him for, well, months now. Not since... *then*.

His jacket wasn't where he thought he'd left it, either. It lay crumpled on the couch, when he could have sworn an oath that he'd hung it over the back of the chair. That, too, had happened a few times lately.

He shrugged. Maybe he was getting absent-minded from too much paperwork and not enough action. If Starsky was there, he'd be giving him a good ribbing for getting scatterbrained in his old age.

Starsky...

Damn, he missed Starsky. Which was ridiculous given that he saw him regularly three times a day. But it wasn't enough.

Without Starsky, his world was askew. The only place where it was tilted at its correct angle was in Room 720. Hutch wished he'd never have to leave the room, wished he could move a mattress in and crash on the floor instead of having to tear himself away at the end of each day.

At least Starsky was safe at Memorial. After the assassination attempts in the ICU and the parking garage, hospital security had much improved. Hutch had personally seen to that.

Sitting at his kitchen table, he dug into a bowl of cereal topped with slices of fresh fruit. Since Starsky had to stick to a reasonably strict diet, it had seemed like a good time to resurrect his own health-conscious eating habits.

Hutch added his breakfast dishes to the growing pile in the sink. The place was a mess. Between hospital visits, work, and looking after two apartments, there was never enough time for housekeeping. He hadn't had a cleaning lady in over a year and couldn't afford one now. Starsky's disability payments wouldn't stretch far, so his own salary would soon have to sustain them both.

As he took the car north through the stifling heat, Hutch thought of the day ahead. Today, he'd be handing his Gunther report over to the DA, and that meant the case was finally out of his hands. Months of meticulous work had paid off in the form of a case file that would frustrate even James Gunther's army of fat-cat lawyers.

On the down side, Dobby was already urging him to take a temporary partner and get his ass back on the streets. So far, Hutch had successfully resisted the move. Starsky was an integral part of how he worked. He couldn't imagine going back into the war zone that was LA's seedy underbelly and functioning normally in the absence of his partner. Still, he knew he couldn't postpone the moment for much longer.

He was late for work again, but the detour to Memorial was hard-wired into his routine by now. This morning, Starsky looked groggy and fuzzy around the edges. A couple of nurses were busy in his room, and Hutch didn't prolong his stay. A brief touch, a few words, a half-crooked smile from his partner—and Hutch had to rush away again, promising to be back at lunch time.

Dobby's voice assaulted him as soon as he walked into the squad room.

"Hutchinson! My office!"

The room felt stuffy, even at this early hour, the ceiling fans fighting their usual uphill battle to stir the air. Hutch shed his jacket, followed his captain and closed the door behind him.

"Sorry I'm late, Capt'n."

"It's not that. Have a seat." Dobeey looked tense and preoccupied and not in the mood for chit-chat.

Hutch still wasn't used to sitting in Dobeey's office without his partner perched on the arm of his chair, needling their boss with irreverent comments and injecting his unique insight into the cases they handled. He took the seat reluctantly.

"Here, take a look at these." Dobeey thrust a stack of photos at him.

Hutch quickly scanned the images. Three bodies, almost unrecognizable, sprawled in grotesque postures on the seats of their burned-out car. He looked up questioningly.

"Two kids saw the car go up in flames last night," Dobeey said. "On the canyon road. Three white males in their twenties or thirties. We'll get the report sometime this morning. The M.O. matches the car bomb attack last month."

"Another revenge killing? If this is connected to the Willowby Street shootings last week, we may well have a gang war on our hands."

"My thoughts exactly. And we're talking big-time organized crime here, not Crips and Bloods. Here, check this out."

The close-up showed a face frozen forever in a silent scream, the glint of gold a startling counterpoint to the fire-blackened skin.

"Damn," Hutch said, his mouth suddenly dry. He stabbed at the photo with a finger, hunting for the name. "Delgado! Vega Delgado. Goldentooth." There was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "He was one of Gunther's men in Colombia."

"In charge of his drug operation. Yes, that's what R-and-I came up with last night, only it took them three hours. We'll know more when we get the M.E.'s report, but I'd say it looks pretty much like him. Not many guys walk around with six gold front teeth."

Dobeey fixed his detective with a hard stare. "You know what this means, don't you? Delgado was part of Gunther's overseas ops. Now he's back in LA. That can only mean one thing—he was here to try and take over Gunther's turf, or what's left of it."

"We always knew there was a danger of that," Hutch pointed out. "Where there's a power vacuum—"

"—someone will try and fill it. I know. The point is, if the M.E. confirms it's him, we finally have a lead on who was behind the shootings last week."

Hutch took a deep breath and frowned at a spot on Dobeys desk. "I don't know. Delgado may have arranged the hit, but I don't think he was behind it. He was a small fish." He looked at Dobeys again. "The man in charge of Gunther's Colombia ops is a shady character who calls himself El Tiburón. That's Spanish for Shark. No one seems to know his real name. He's a wild card, but from what I've heard, he's not someone we should underestimate."

"Is there any possibility that Gunther is behind all this?"

"No!" Hutch said with certainty. "He can't be. Security around him is too tight. I've made absolutely sure of that. No, I'd say that this is an attempt by Gunther's former associates to cut themselves a slice of the pie."

"Them and a couple of other gangs. We don't even know who they all are. So far, they've hashed it out between themselves, but it's only a matter of time before the violence spills over and they start terrorizing ordinary citizens. The commissioner has already hinted that it's time to take action before the press goes wild with this."

Dobeys paused. "I want you on this case, Hutch. You're an expert on Gunther now. You've even identified Delgado, and he was only a name in a file before."

Hutch was silent. Oh yes, he wanted the case. He wanted to chop the remaining fragments of Gunther's empire into tiny slivers and feed them to the vultures. If Starsky was there...

If Starsky was here, we would be all over this case already. And we wouldn't share it with anyone. But without Starsky...

He couldn't do it without Starsky. He tried a stall. "I still have the case files to finish for the D.A. today—"

"Well, finish them," Dobeys boomed, "and then get back in here. We're setting up a task force. Headed by Lt. Reynolds. I want you to be on it." He paused and softened a little. "As a member of a team, you wouldn't have to take a temporary partner."

The specter of Starsky hung like an invisible presence between them.

"Are you gonna tell him about this?" Dobeys added in a much lower voice. "The Gunther connection, I mean."

"I have to," Hutch said with a hint of reluctance. "He wants to know everything that's going on. He's read most of the Gunther files and probably knows as much about the case as I do. If anyone has a right to know, it's him. Anyway, if

/ don't tell him, one of the other guys will for sure. All they ever talk about is work."

A sheepish expression climbed across Dobby's plump features, and he said, almost too hastily, "How's he doing anyway?"

"He *is* getting better. All the doctors say so. But he's still in so much pain..." Hutch concentrated on keeping his voice level. "He wasn't feeling well this morning. I'll find out more when I see him at lunch time."

"Tell him, Edith and the kids send their love. Tell him, I'll drop by this afternoon if I can."

"Thanks, Capt'n. He'd like that."

"And now get outta here and finish that damn paperwork!"

Chapter Two

Lunch traffic was unexpectedly light, so he arrived at Memorial earlier than usual. Normally, the door to Room 720 stood open in a welcoming manner, Starsky eagerly awaiting him, sitting up in bed or in his wheelchair ready for an outing to the hospital cafeteria.

Today, the door was closed. Karen, seeing him approach, hastened out of the nurses' station to head him off.

"Wait a minute," she said, taking his arm. "Don't go in yet."

Hutch's breath froze in his lungs. "Why not? What's going on?"

He'd spoken to Starsky on the phone only an hour ago and he'd sounded so much better.

"Just give them another minute," Karen said. "Henry's in with him right now."

A hollow sensation rippled through Hutch's stomach. He hadn't been shut out from Starsky's room in weeks, no matter how many doctors, nurses and orderlies were in with him. Something was wrong. There'd been a setback.

"What's going on in there? What's wrong with Starsky?"

"Nothing's wrong. Relax. You can go in. Just wait a moment."

Hutch hardly heard her through the rushing sound in his ears, the pounding of his heart. He tore his arm from her grasp. "What the hell is going on? I'm going in there!" He rushed to the door and wrenched it open.

"Dammit, Hutchinson," Starsky growled. "Couldn't ya have waited *one* more minute?"

Hutch froze in mid-stride, awestruck.

Starsky was on his feet, standing unaided. One hand gripped the bed rail for support. The other rested lightly on the back of the chair.

And he was dressed. Not in pajamas, but in his normal clothes, complete with faded jeans, black T-shirt and familiar tan leather jacket. The orderly was still tying the laces of Starsky's sneakers.

Hutch's jaw dropped as he gazed at his friend, mesmerized and too overcome to move or speak. For a moment, he just stood and drank in the wonderful sight.

Starsky was pale and drawn, and he had lost so much weight that the once snug-fitting pants hung loosely on him. But...standing there, standing tall, dressed in familiar clothes, eyes sparkling under the cropped thicket of curls, and wearing his widest grin, he looked...so normal. Like a vision in his mind. Like a dream from the past.

It had been so long, so long...

Hutch finally remembered to breathe. He walked forward, never taking his eyes off Starsky. Henry was on his feet, keeping a light supporting hold on his patient's arm.

"It's okay," Hutch said to him, looking only at Starsky. "I'll take it from here."

Henry's hand withdrew and Hutch's took its place. Behind him, he heard Henry exchange a few words with Karen, then the door closed and they were alone in the room.

For a long moment, they simply stood, inches apart, and gazed into each other's eyes from a familiar angle. A gleam of delight danced in Starsky's eyes.

"You like my surprise?"

Hutch swallowed hard. Then he wrapped both arms around Starsky's thin body and pulled his lover close.

"Best surprise ever," he whispered into Starsky's ear. "Best goddamn surprise."

Starsky relaxed against him, cautiously, as if testing if their bodies still fitted together the way they used to. Sighed a little when he found that they did. He leaned into Hutch, allowing his partner to take some of his weight.

Hutch soaked up his lover's closeness like a dry sponge plunged into water. "So, when did this happen?" he murmured into Starsky's curls.

"I've been practicing with Sally for a coupla weeks now. Didn't want to say anything until I could do this on my own."

"Is that what Patel meant yesterday when he said...?"

"Yeah. For a second there, I thought he'd let the cat out of the bag."

"You scared me half to death, you know."

"Sorry about that. You're early."

"And the clothes?"

"Huggy brought them over the other day. I was worried you'd notice they were missing."

"Never even noticed he was in your apartment at all."

"I got so tired of wearing stupid pajamas all the time, y'know. I just wanted to feel *normal* again."

"You've never been normal in your entire life," Hutch teased, savoring the feel of Starsky tall in his arms. "So don't start now."

Starsky swayed a little, and Hutch's hold around him tightened. "You okay?"

"Can't keep doing it for long yet," Starsky said regretfully.

"You want to sit down for a while?"

"In a minute. There's something I wanna do first. I been waitin' a long time for this."

Starsky pulled back and caught Hutch's eye, grinning with anticipation. He brought his hand up to Hutch's cheek, and Hutch leaned into the touch and closed his eyes.

He wasn't surprised when Starsky's lips brushed against his own. It was the softest of touches, a feather-light caress, causing a small flutter in the pit of Hutch's stomach. When the lips drew away, Hutch felt their absence like a chill after an unseasonable spell of sunshine.

Then the lips were back, this time eager, hungry. An insistent tongue probed, demanding entrance, rough with need and longing. Hutch's capitulation was immediate. His lips parted to welcome the intruder in.

The kiss that followed was sweet, and wild, and wonderful. The tingle in Hutch's stomach exploded outward and raced through his body, into his fingertips, down to his toes. And he felt alive, alive, alive.

Long weeks of pain and fear and misery dissolved, and for a glorious minute, the present overwhelmed all else. They hadn't kissed like this since...

Since *before*.

A moan erupted from his throat as they broke apart. "Starsky...Starsky..." All rational thought took flight from his mind. He clung to his lover and covered the beloved face with desperate kisses from mouth to jaw and throat and back to the warm intoxicating lips.

Starsky arched into him as they fell into another kiss. He groaned into Hutch's mouth. "I want...Hutch, I want..."

Hutch held him tight. "I know. Me, too. Maybe soon. Soon." Every cell, every fiber in his body trembled with a glorious, almost forgotten, overwhelming sense of aliveness.

God, I love you. I love you...

They stood together, arms wrapped around each other, until Starsky drew away and looked his partner in the face.

"Patel wants to talk to us tonight," he said. The long lashes dipped and came up again, revealing a glint of uncertainty. "The results of the chest scan are in, and he says there's something he needs to discuss with us."

"With *us*, huh?"

"Course with *us*. You're my next of kin. He knows he has to keep you in the loop. He even said he'd make it late so that you could definitely be here."

"He knows us too well." They gazed at each other. Finally, Hutch said, "Whatever it is, we'll cope with it. You know that, don't you?"

Starsky nodded. And kissed Hutch again.

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"So, David," Patel deposited a stack of files on the bed and drew up a chair. "I hear that your surprise was a success this morning?"

Hutch felt a huge grin splitting his face. "It sure was." He flashed a quick wink at his partner. Starsky was back in bed, pale and exhausted from the exertions of the day, but looking profoundly pleased with himself.

Patel nodded, looking just as pleased. "Excellent. *Excellent*. Well, I think I may have a small surprise for you, too."

Starsky's hand on Hutch's arm tightened a fraction, then relaxed. Both gazed at Patel in expectation while the medic took his time to locate the relevant part of his paperwork.

"Yes," he said, leafing through the pages of a thick report. "Hmm, yes." He cleared his throat and turned a page, not in any apparent hurry. Hutch wrestled down the urge to grab him and throttle the information out of him.

"The latest test results," Patel finally ventured, "show a continuing healing trend. The results from the chest scan in particular are very encouraging." He paused, upping the tension another notch. "I have conferred with my colleagues, and we are in agreement that you are ready for the next step in the treatment."

Starsky's hand on Hutch's arm trembled almost imperceptibly. Excitement flooded through Hutch.

"Unfortunately," Patel looked down at his notes, then back up at his impatient audience, "you are making such good progress that we are going to have to part company with you sooner than we expected."

The breath escaped from Starsky's lungs and his fingers dug into Hutch's arm, hard. "I'm gonna get out of here?" he said. He turned to Hutch with a blinding smile, pale cheeks flushed with a rush of joy. "Hutch! I'm gettin' outta here!"

"Well, they probably feel that you've hogged this nice comfortable room for long enough," Hutch said. "There's a waiting list for rooms like this, you know."

The words did nothing to disguise his own elation. Starsky was leaving the hospital. Starsky was coming home. His hand found Starsky's and gave it a brief squeeze.

"Now," Patel said briskly, "I have brought some brochures of physical rehabilitation clinics that would be suitable. I would recommend one of these three. All three provide an excellent range of therapies. The Merriweather Nursing and Rehabilitation Center is the best for inpatient care, in my opinion. They specialize in pulmonary care and..."

The bottom fell out of Hutch's joy with a crash, and he thought he could hear Starsky's drop at almost the same time.

"I thought..." Starsky said in a small voice, "I thought you meant I could go home."

"Oh, David, I am sorry. I thought you realized—" Patel looked annoyed with himself. "I really should have made that clearer. No, David, I am afraid going home is out of the question at this stage. You have made great progress, but you are still far from well enough to manage on your own."

"But—"

"David, be reasonable. You must realize that you need fulltime care for a good while longer."

"How much longer?"

"It is hard to say. It depends on many factors. But you are looking at three months at the very least."

"Three *months*?" Disappointment pooled on the drawn face like rain water on an open road. "But I don't wanna be stuck in another clinic for three more months." Starsky looked down at his hands. "I just wanna go home."

Hutch's heart went out to him, even as he wrestled with his own profound disappointment.

"Hey, buddy, c'mon," he said. "You're getting out of the hospital! That's the most important thing. You gotta have some rehab, you know that. At a clinic, they can give you specialist treatment so you can get better as fast as you can."

The words sounded hollow, even to his own ears. "It's only for a few months. Let's take a look at these brochures, huh? We'll pick a place where I can come and visit you every day, and we'll get you a nice room and move all your stuff in and you'll feel right at home...."

"Actually," Patel said a little awkwardly, "your medical insurance probably won't cover a single room. You have needed one up to now to ensure the fastest recovery, but at the therapy clinics, there are usually three or four patients to a room. But," he added hastily, "I can put in a request for a twin room. They may stretch the rules a little."

Starsky was silent. He hadn't yet looked up from his hands. Hutch took in the slumped body, the dejected expression on a face so alive with joy just moments before.

The seed of an idea stirred inside him, sparked into life by a sudden flash of inspiration. It grew, filled out, and broke the surface. And Hutch suddenly knew exactly what he had to do.

He reached out and tipped the downcast face toward him until the blue eyes came up and met his own. "You wanna go home?" he said. "Then we'll make sure you will."

He turned to Patel, his voice alight with eagerness. "If I understand correctly, a rehab clinic offers therapy and fulltime care. Is that right?"

"Basically, yes."

"So apart from the therapy, there's nothing the clinic offers that couldn't be provided at home?"

"That is essentially correct. However, I must point out that David's medical insurance does not stretch to cover private home care—"

"Let's forget about the insurance for a minute. What about the therapy? Could he go to the clinic as an outpatient?"

"Certainly. Many patients do when they are well enough to live at home. But that does not solve the immediate care problem. I do not know if you are aware of the prohibitive cost of private nursing."

"We don't need a private nurse. I'll do it. I can take care of Starsky."
Excitement seeped into his voice as the idea took root and sprouted branches.

"Do you know what you are proposing?" Patel said. "How do you think you will manage? You have a fulltime job."

"I'll quit. I'll take extended leave. We'll work something out."

"I do not think you realize the full extent of what is required." Patel shook his head. "David still needs around-the-clock care. He needs help with bathing, dressing, personal functions. He needs someone with dedicated nursing skills."

"I have nursing skills. First responder training, anyway. And I've been a medic under cover often enough to know the basics. And I can learn. If you tell me what's needed, I'll learn how to do it."

Patel sighed. "Hutch, it is not that simple. Someone needs to be with David at all times, at least in the first few weeks. It is a job for a team, not for a single person."

"I can do it. If that's what's needed, then I can do it. I *want* to do it. I'll drive Starsky to his therapy sessions and appointments and everything. Whatever's necessary. I'll keep in touch with you, of course, and...D'you think it can be done?"

"Well, if that is really what you want, then in theory, yes, I do not see why not—"

"And it wouldn't compromise Starsky's recovery, *not* being in a clinic?"

"Not if he received the care he needed."

"And if he did, you'd say yes?"

"Well, yes—"

"No!"

The sound exploded into Hutch's happy world like a shot. Starsky. Who, he suddenly realized, had been abnormally quiet throughout the exchange. Hutch looked at him.

The expression on Starsky's face was dark and distant. He was avoiding Hutch's eye.

"No!" he repeated, looking straight at Patel, his voice low and firm. "No home care."

He reached out, picked a glossy brochure at random from the pile. "Here. I'll go to this one, whatsitcalled, the Merriweather place. I'll be fine there. It's not too far away and Hutch can visit."

"Doctor," Hutch said, not taking his eyes off Starsky's profile, "do you think we could we have a minute in private, please?"

"Certainly." Patel reached to gather his papers together. "It is a lot to think about, and you do not need to make a decision straight away. I will leave you these brochures. Think it over for a few days. Then we will talk again."

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When the door had closed behind Patel, there was a long, uneasy silence. Starsky twisted the brochure in his hands and carefully avoided Hutch's gaze. His face was dark with an emotion Hutch couldn't identify.

"So. What's the matter?"

The dark expression was a closed door, shutting him out. "Nothing's the matter. I just think I should do what the doctors say. If they think a rehab clinic's a good idea, then I'd better stick with that."

"Hm. That's not what you said the other day when you were trying to get me to smuggle in a piece of chocolate cake from downstairs. *They don't know what's good for me*, were your exact words if I remember correctly."

"Yeah, well, this is different, don't you think?"

"You wanna know what I think? I think that Patel just gave the go-ahead for you to go home and that for some reason you've suddenly gone off the idea."

"Well, it's a harebrained idea anyway."

"What is? You going home?"

"No. You quittin' your job so you can look after me."

"Oh. And I thought it was one of the best ideas I've ever had."

"Well, forget it. It ain't gonna happen. I don't want it, and that's final."

Hutch took a good look at the stubborn set of Starsky's face. Quietly, he said, "You want to tell me why?"

Starsky bent the front page of the glossy brochure back and forth into a dog ear, looking everywhere but at his partner. "Well, you can't just give up a perfectly good job and start a new career in nursing," he said darkly. "Especially now that Dobey wants you on his special task force."

Hutch wasn't taken in. "I'm not giving up my job. I'll get leave of absence. Dobey'll understand. You don't seriously think he's gonna fire me, do you?"

Starsky stirred and shifted awkwardly, trying to find a more comfortable position, and for once, Hutch didn't rush to his side to assist him. Hutch simply looked at him.

"C'mon, Starsk, talk to me. What's bothering you? I thought you'd be pleased. I thought you wanted to go home. This is the only way we can make that happen. You know I'll take good care of you."

Starsky's head came up, and Hutch knew he'd hit a nerve.

"Yeah, you'll take care of me. That's just it." Frustration seeped into Starsky's voice. "You heard Patel. I need help with so many things. You'd have to be there the whole time, and do everything for me and—"

"I *want* to do it."

"Well, I *don't* want you to."

"Why not?"

"It ain't what you signed up for!"

"*What?*"

"It's too much. It's not what we had in mind."

"Starsk," Hutch said, exasperated. "What the hell are you talking about? You're making no sense."

"You're my partner, dammit!" Starsky shouted. "You're not my nurse, or my housekeeper, or my cook." He balled his hands to fists. Frustration radiating off him like heat from a bonfire.

"Hey, hey, what do you mean?" Hutch wanted to reach out, bridge the sudden gulf between them, knowing that he was missing something vital, and scared by the sudden total collapse of their intuitive connection. "Course, I'm your partner. That's not gonna change."

Starsky sank back against the supporting pillows, exhausted, left hand pressed against his injured shoulder, struggling for control. "We're partners," he whispered. "Equals. But now I can't even...and maybe I'll never..."

He took a breath that brought a flash of pain to his features. "I already depend on you for so much. I...*need* you. God, you have no idea how much I need you. And now...now you wanna look after me fulltime, too. Give up your job and do everything for me. Help me wash and go to the bathroom and clean up my puke and—"

"But that's what we do," Hutch broke in. "We've always looked after each other. And I remember a few occasions when you were helping *me* in the bathroom and cleaning up my puke!"

Their eyes met, and for the briefest moment, the memory of two days and nights of agony and insane cravings hovered between them like a specter from a nightmare.

Starsky shattered the memory with a wave of his hand. "That was different."

Hutch's heart ached. "Was it? What are you trying to say? That things have changed, now that we're more than friends? That the day we became lovers, we signed away the right to take care of each other as we've done for years without even thinking about it?"

He studied his partner intently. Saw that he wasn't getting through. He tried again. "When I came home from the hospital after that plague virus, you moved in with me to look after me and we never even discussed it. It just happened. Because we both wanted it, and needed it."

"It's not the same," Starsky whispered. "That was—what? A coupla days? A week or so? We knew you were gonna be all right. But this...It's not your job to spend your life lookin' after a cripple."

"No more than it was your job to help a junkie through withdrawal."

A heartbeat's silence. Two.

"You were not a junkie!"

"No, and you're not a cripple. You'll get better, too. We know that."

"This is different! It's—"

"How? How, dammit? Because we're lovers now?"

"No! Because we're *equals*. 'Cause we've always been equals. That's what our partnership's based on. And now all that's fucked up."

Starsky's left hand stirred the air in agitation, while the right one clutched the brochure in a death grip. "You'd have to be the strong one all the time. You'd have to carry everything. I...I'd have to depend on you for everything. And I couldn't do anything in return. Don't you see? That's not the way we work. It would change things. We'd lose something important."

He swallowed, then looked at Hutch with fear and open vulnerability. "We wouldn't really be partners anymore."

A small light went on in his head when Hutch finally realized what Starsky was so desperately afraid of losing.

Equilibrium. Give and take. Equals in everything that matters. One of the foundations of what makes "us".

A swell of immense relief lifted Hutch's spirit. "Starsk, you numbskull, is that what you're worried about?"

The blue eyes flicked at him, confused, flicked away.

"Aw, Starsk, don't you realize—" Hutch stopped and searched inside himself for the right words. He had to get this right, and he only had this one chance to do it. He reached out and put a hand on Starsky's arm. Fixed the blue eyes with his own. "*You're* the strong one in this partnership. You've always been the stronger one. You're my anchor, my harbor. Without you, I'd be lost. I depend on *you* for everything. That's never going to change, even if I had to clean up your puke for the rest of my life."

Starsky looked at him as if he'd grown an extra eye, and Hutch laughed.

"You're the strongest person I know," he said. "You've come through so much in your life—and you never gave up. Damn, Starsk, you saw your dad get killed. You lost your home and your family. You've lived through the nightmares of war and it couldn't break you. You were abducted and tortured, for Chrissake, and it's only made you stronger."

"Hutch—"

"The things you've seen and gone through would've destroyed most people. They would've destroyed *me*. But you've just come out stronger every time. You kept this partnership afloat when I was ready to give up all hope."

"Hutch—"

"So I'll help you get washed and dressed for a few weeks, and I'll cook for you and drive you to rehab and clean up your puke. But that doesn't make me the strong one. Understand? We're not going to lose anything that's important. We'll always be partners—in every way that matters."

Starsky's resolve wavered. Hutch saw it in the softening hue of his eyes, the flicker of emotion on his face. He gazed at his lover longingly.

"Aw, babe, I want you home so bad," he said. The need in his voice was thick enough to cut in slices, and it drew Starsky's eyes to his face like a magnet. "I want you with me. I want you back in my life, in bed beside me. I...I want to run my hands all over you. I want to hold you in my arms any time we want. We could never do that if you were in a room with three other guys. We couldn't even touch. Not for three whole months."

Hutch caught hold of both of Starsky's hands. Looked down, looked back up. "I miss you so goddamn much. Every minute of the day. Sometimes, at night, I wake up and I reach for you before I remember. I just want you back...and sometimes it feels like it's never gonna happen. And now Patel says you can go home, and this is the only way—"

Starsky groaned. "God, Hutch. You sure know how to make a guy feel wanted."

"Damn right. I want you. I want you home. With me. Where you're safe. Where we're together."

Starsky blinked back some treacherous moisture. He disengaged his hands, hooked an arm around Hutch's waist and leaned his head against his shoulder. "Damn, Hutch, how do you always do this? Talk me into doin' stuff—"

Hutch pulled him close. "Is that a yes I hear?"

"Well, I guess so."

"Hey, try not to sound too excited."

They pulled apart. Hutch's gaze fell on the brochure his partner was still clutching. Gently, he extracted it from his grasp.

"We're not going to need this now."

"Won't be easy."

"We'll manage."

"We don't know if I'll ever be well again."

"Aw, Starsk. You'll get better. Everyone says you will. Won't be long and you can do your own cooking and clean up your own—"

"If I hear the word *puke* one more time, I'll—"

"Puke?"

"Yeah." Starsky managed a weird little half-smile, and Hutch realized that his partner was hovering on the edge of complete exhaustion. Pain lurked in the depth of the dark eyes, in every hollow of the pale face.

Heart aching, Hutch helped his lover to lower the bed. Against the white sheets, Starsky looked thin, almost frail. But it was true: he was still the strongest person Hutch knew.

Starsky's eyelids drifted shut. Hutch let his fingers trail through the curly mop, feeling full of joy and pain and all kinds of other emotions he couldn't identify. Finally, he dropped a kiss on the cool forehead, gathered up the pile of brochures, and tiptoed to the door.

"Hey."

The faintest sound. Hutch turned around. Starsky's eyes were closed, but his fingers moved on the sheet. "Love you." The fingers relaxed.

Hutch swallowed thickly. "Love you, too."

He stood for another minute, gazing at his sleeping friend. Then he turned and left the room in search of Doctor Patel.

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"That's it, that's it. Careful with that, careful."

"Damn, this thing's heavy. Someone gimme a hand here, quick!"

"Rob! Watch out at the corner there."

"It's okay. I got it."

A new voice joined the fray. "Hutch, ma man, how's things? Looks to me like you're almost done."

Hutch looked around. "Hey, Huggy. Gimme me a moment. I'll be right there. Sims, if you move that over, maybe we can fit this...yeah, that's it. That's great." He straightened up and dusted his hands on his jeans. "That was the last box. Thanks, guys. I could never have done this without you."

"No problem, Hutch."

"Glad we could help."

"Let us know if you need a hand with anything else, okay?"

"I'll do that. Thanks for everything. See you in The Pits tonight. Drinks are on me."

When Menendez, Stanton, Babcock and Simmons had piled into their separate cars and driven away, Hutch trudged back up the stairs, Huggy at his heels.

"So that's the end of Venice Place, huh?" Huggy said and let his eyes flick around the empty apartment. "Nice pad, I always thought."

"Yeah, well, Starsky's is slightly bigger, and it's much quieter and less smoggy out there, so we decided we should just let this place go."

Hutch took a final look around the empty rooms, hefted the remaining bag and the guitar in its case, ushered Huggy out and locked the door of his Venice Place apartment for the last time, surprised at how little regret he felt at losing what had been home to him for more than three years.

"Did you manage to get everything into the shed?" Huggy asked.

"Just about. Thanks for letting me have it. The piano and the bed were the worst. The rest was almost all boxes. When you think about it, you don't really need much stuff. That carload there is all I'm taking with me just now."

Huggy grinned. "Hutch, the minimalist. But what about your plants?"

"I've given a lot of them away, and the others are on Starsky's balcony."

They stood beside Hutch's loaded Ford and watched the stream of traffic flowing by. Finally, Huggy said, "Dobey kick up much of a fuss?"

Hutch took a moment to reply. "Not exactly. Once he got over his surprise, he couldn't have been more helpful. He said I should take three months' unpaid leave, and then we'd review the situation."

"Brother Dobey," said Huggy. "You realize, of course, that this means your cohabitating is now officially condoned? Very crafty of you. Some folk mighta raised an eyebrow if you suddenly set up house together. But under the circumstances—"

Hutch laughed. "Starsky said much the same thing the other day. Everyone's treating us with kid gloves right now. Even the rumors have stopped. The guys at the station are bending over backward to do what they can to help."

"And your folks? How'd they take it?"

A dark cloud drifted over Hutch's sunny skies. "Not half as well as Dobey." He shrugged. "No big surprise there."

Relations with Duluth had been strained for years, marred by incomprehension and disapproval of Hutch's choices in life. His latest decision had done nothing to improve the situation.

"My mom's worried about what the neighbors will think—"

What happened to David was terrible, yes, but...can't just give up your apartment and move in with him...two grown men in such a small place...sending out very wrong signals...

"...and my dad thinks I've committed professional suicide."

Totally irresponsible...putting your job on hold in order to...consider the damage that will do to your career prospects...told you before...you never listen to me, never have done...hope you know better than to come crawling to us for money when yours runs out...

Hutch sighed. His parents were still in the dark about the dramatic turn his friendship with Starsky had taken the previous year. One day, he'd tell them, or they'd figure it out, and that would surely hammer the final nail into the coffin of their understanding.

He shook off the thought and glanced at his watch. "I'd better get going. Minnie and Linda are coming around Starsky's in half an hour to help me clean up the place."

Huggy winced. "That bad?"

"No," Hutch said sternly, "not bad at all. I'll have you know that I've kept the place in pristine condition. But the ladies insisted. Said a guy couldn't be trusted to get it right." He grinned at his friend. "Want to come and help?"

Huggy aimed a patented gargoyle look at him. "Nice try, Hutchinson, but I'll give that gracious invitation a pass. In case you'd forgotten, I have catering for a houseful of people to organize. Just remember to give me at least a day's notice."

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Hutch walked down the hallway with purpose and a bounce in his step. Burst into the room without knocking and made Joan and Anita jump.

"Tomorrow!" he said, and was rewarded with a whoop from the occupant of the bed.

"Tomorrow what?" Anita asked.

"Tomorrow, Hutch'll come and spring me," Starsky interpreted, looking as eager now to get home as Hutch was to have him there.

"Yeah," Hutch confirmed. "Patel just told me. He said he couldn't think of any other tests to torture you with and he'd better let you go before he invented a few new ones. He said I could pick you up tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow *morning*?" Anita squeaked and leapt from her chair. "I gotta tell...ooh, I gotta go. See ya, Starsky."

"So do I," said Joan and followed her to the door. "Bye, Dave, see you soon."

"Scaring my visitors away again, are you?" Starsky grinned when the door had closed behind them. "Why were they in such a hurry all of a sudden?"

"No idea. Maybe they're due at work?" Hutch moved around the bed and settled in his usual spot. "Ready to get outta this place?"

"You bet. Sally says I'm ready for the stairs now, 'cause I was tellin' her, no way am I gonna get to my own front door on a stretcher!"

"Okay, Superman, have it your way. But don't complain if you end up all sore on your first day of freedom."

"Won't."

They grinned at each other.

"Well, your place is ready," Hutch related. "That fancy mattress arrived yesterday, and then Stanton and I lugged the new couch up the stairs. Almost killed us in the heat."

"Damn, everyone's been so helpful. We should throw them all a decent party or something. We can always say it's for your birthday on Tuesday. C'mon, whadda ya think?"

"Mm, yeah, I'll think about it." Hutch cleared his throat. "Um, what else is on your wish list? Since it's your first day out, I'm open to reasonable suggestions."

Pepperoni pizza? Burger and fries? Burrito with all the trimmings?

"Just you," Starsky said, managing to combine a suggestive leer with a distinctly yearning look. "In all your glory. Lookin' like a million bucks."

"In all my glory?" Hutch smiled and ran a hand through his hair. "Is that your not too subtle way of telling me to get a hair cut? Well, if I do—and mind you, I'm not saying I will—I'm getting rid of this damn thing at the same time."

"Aw, no, Hutch, I like the caterpillar. I fell in love with you wearing it."

"I know. That's the only reason I haven't shaved it off yet. But hell, I'm gonna have to have a say in *something* in this partnership. And I'm putting my foot down and making an executive decision about *my* mustache!"

"Oooh, I love it when you go all masterful on me."

"Good. Just remember that when I have to come down hard on you for not finishing your broccoli and Brussels sprouts."

"Hu-utch! You're not gonna feed me Brussels sprouts, are you? Aw, c'mon, you can't torture an injured man like that."

"Just wait and see what else I've planned. Salad, yogurt, fruit. Tofu. Goat's milk! I even got out Abby's old health shake recipes. This may be my only chance to get you to eat a healthy diet. Thought I'd make the most of it."

Starsky groaned and buried his face in a pillow.

Chapter Three

That night they were lying in wait for him in the darkness of the trees. They always came at night. And they always knew exactly where to find him.

He took cover behind a wall and peered out at the shadowy figures moving soundlessly toward him, like darkness taken shape. He didn't even know who they were. All he knew was that they were after him.

"Stay back," he called out. "Don't come any closer. I'll shoot if I have to." He cocked the gun, and the dark assassins hesitated, uncertain.

"You're not going to get him," he shouted. "He's safe now. I won't let you have him."

They melted into the night, waiting their chance, another night, waiting for him to relax his guard. He couldn't fight them. They were dark and slippery and impossible to pin down. They came and went like shadows. All he could do was hold them off. He mustn't let them near, he must never let them get past him.

Once, in a fatal moment, his attention had wavered. He'd been too slow, too careless. Never again. He'd stand watch all night if he had to. But not tonight. They wouldn't be back until tomorrow.

Hutch yawned, holstered the gun and went inside to get some sleep.

oooOOOooo

"...not going to work if you guys all park outside. He's not blind. You better go round to Hill View Avenue. And remember, an hour! Two at the most. Huggy has the key."

Hutch put the phone down for the third time in as many minutes and went back to shaving. He ran the razor over his stubbly cheeks, humming. Today was the day he once believed he'd never see. Starsky was coming home.

He took his time over the task, and when he was done, he put the razor down and inspected his reflection in the mirror. The short hair and bare upper lip still rather startled him—as if he was looking at an old forgotten picture of himself. He was paler than he remembered. Leaner. The youthful look marred only by the shadows under his eyes.

Some damn strange dreams he'd had that night.

Still humming, he looked around the apartment. Everything was ready, everything just right—the couch, the new air conditioner, the handrails in the bathroom, the prescription drugs, the food.

Hutch hadn't been entirely truthful about the contents of Starsky's fridge which, beside the health options, also housed moderate amounts of Starsky's favorite snacks. Hutch had long since given up on the hardline approach to eating where Starsky was concerned. A common sense nutritional balance was all he could reasonably expect to achieve.

He checked his watch. Still too early, but damn, maybe he'd just drive down to Memorial and see what he could do to speed things up.

He was humming all the way to the hospital.

"Hutch!" Gabriella looked up, looked up again—a perfect double take. "Good God, Hutch, is that you?"

"Um, last time I checked. Does it make such a difference?"

"Like day and night, Hutch. Day and night. Go in and see what Dave thinks."

"How's he?"

"High as a kite. He was ready to go a couple of hours ago. We're still waiting for the paperwork to come back from Admin, but then you're free to go."

Hutch opened the door of Room 720 and peered inside. Starsky sat by the window, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that looked two sizes too large for him, a bag at his feet and a cardboard box filled with the accumulated belongings of three months on the table in front of him.

At the sound of the door, he looked up with a hopeful smile on his face. The smile hovered there for a second before it crumbled into an expression of pure open-mouthed astonishment. Priceless! Hutch slipped inside and leaned against the door, grinning. This was even better than he'd imagined.

Starsky closed his mouth with a snap. Awkwardly, not taking his eyes off Hutch, he levered himself out of the chair, holding onto the table for support. Found his crutch by blindly groping for it. Took a few halting steps in Hutch's direction until they stood face to face.

"Hutch," he said, awed, eyes roaming over Hutch's face. "You look...*damn*, you look—"

"Like a million bucks?" Hutch joked.

Starsky reached out and ran his fingertips over Hutch's denuded upper lip. "More. A lot more." He took a careful breath. "I'd pay top price for you."

"You don't have to," Hutch said quietly. "You already own me."

"Good thing, too, 'cause I could never afford you." A small grin appeared and demolished the stunned expression. "And now kiss me with those delicious lips of yours. I've never been kissed by a man without some furry growth on his face before."

Hutch complied eagerly, but when Starsky was about to launch into a more thorough investigation of the possibilities afforded by the absence of the furry growth, Hutch pulled back and laughed.

"I thought you couldn't wait to get home. Looks like I was wrong."

"Nah. I just like to get my priorities right."

"Well, *my* priority is to get you out of here. C'mon now. Paperwork's done, you're all packed up, wheelchair's here, sit down already and let's go."

Starsky took a final look around the room, now as bare as on the day he'd moved in. "Feels kinda strange leaving this place," he said. "Been in here for so long. I've forgotten what it's like out there."

Gingerly, he lowered himself into the wheelchair, and Hutch pulled the door open and propelled the chair into the hallway. Starsky looked eagerly right and left. "Did you see anyone when you came in?"

"Anyone like who?"

"Anyone we know. I thought...well, I thought maybe someone'd come and see me off," muttered Starsky, looking sheepish.

"Hey, am I no one?"

"Part from you, I mean. I thought maybe Dobby would be here. I haven't even said goodbye to Dr. Patel. Or to Gabby. Karen! Karen, have you seen Gabriella? Or Henry? No? Damn." He sank into a gloomy silence.

"C'mon, Starsk, be fair. You can't expect everyone to drop everything just 'cause you're leaving the hospital."

"Yeah, I know. It's stupid. It's just...I thought at least Huggy'd make it. Or Minnie."

"Huggy has a lot on his plate today. Someone's landed him with a catering gig at short notice. He's trying to be in three places at the same time. And Minnie's probably on duty right now."

"Yeah. You're right."

"Cheer up, 'cause I have a surprise for you."

"The Torino, huh?"

"Uh—"

"Aw, Hutch, don't look at me like that. It was obvious from the way you kept changing the subject every time I asked about her."

Hutch made a wry face and pushed him through the door to freedom. A wall of thick heat rushed to meet them, and Starsky gasped under the assault. A deep blue sky arched above and a hot wind with a taste of desert sand raked over them. Starsky leaned back in the chair and turned his pale face to the sun, soaking up the heat.

"God, this feels wonderful." He closed his eyes in bliss, then opened them and looked around expectantly. "Okay, where is she?"

"You may be looking for the wrong color car. Merle did a great spray job, but you know Merle. He couldn't resist."

"Wha...what're you sayin'? Aw, you're kiddin', right? He didn't really...?"

Hutch accelerated the chair rounded the corner where the Torino stood to best effect, sleek and bright and waxed to a high sheen. The candy apple gloss reflected the sun. Starsky's mouth fell open for the second time that morning.

"She's lookin' great," he said softly as Hutch wheeled him to the passenger door. He ran a hand over the smooth finish. "She's healed a lot faster than me."

Hutch bit his lip. He still couldn't look at the car without unleashing images he knew were branded on his soul forever. *Starsky lying motionless with his head in the wheel well. Blood pooling on the tarmac, dark red...So much red. So much...*

He clamped a lid on the memories and told himself to get a grip.

"You had me worried there for a moment," Starsky was saying, still admiring the paint work. "Hey, can I drive?"

Hutch shook his head regretfully. "Not yet."

"New Torino, new Hutch," Starsky grinned. "What next?"

Hutch grinned back as the bubble of joy resurfaced. "New hair cut, same old Hutch."

oooOOOooo

Starsky wished the journey to Oakhill Drive didn't have to be over quite so fast. He wasn't in the mood to go home yet, to exchange one set of rooms for another. He wanted to ride around town for a while, check out their favorite haunts, maybe drop in on Huggy.

He hadn't realized how much he'd missed it. Cruising through downtown LA, in the Torino, with the windows open and his partner by his side—God, he'd missed it! Here, out on the streets where they belonged, he could almost imagine that he'd finally woken from the nightmare of the past three months.

But Hutch seemed eager to get him home, and Starsky gave in reluctantly. LA would still be there tomorrow.

The stairs to his front door had never felt steeper, despite Hutch's help on one side and the handrail on the other. Every step was a mountaineering effort, every breath a reminder of the barely healed lung tissue in his chest.

Hutch's worried eyes were on him. "You okay?"

"Lemme just...catch my breath."

"You sure about this? It's not too late to get a—"

"No!" Starsky gritted his teeth. "'T's only a few steps. I can do it."

Hutch tightened his arm around Starsky's waist and together they tackled the next step.

They were halfway up the stairs when they heard the sound—a tinkle of glass touching glass, followed by a murmur and a low, abruptly stifled giggle.

"Hutch." Starsky stopped, cocked his head. Listened. Looked at Hutch to find a telling half-smile hovering on the full lips. And he knew. "Hutch, you bastard."

The remaining steps seemed to melt away, and then he was at the top, the door opened, and people spilled out, and he was surrounded by a crowd. Eager faces beamed at him from all sides, hands reached out to welcome him in. Everyone wanted to touch him. A brush on the arm. A cautious pat on the shoulder.

"Good to see you, Dave."

"Starsky, you're looking great."

"Welcome home, man."

Everyone was there. Huggy, Anita, Diane. Dr. Patel, Gabriella, Henry. Half the precinct, it seemed. Dobey, of course, and Edith. And many others—friends, colleagues, neighbors—all squeezed into his small apartment, smiles on every face....

Starsky hardly managed to take it all in. The banner that read *Welcome home, Dave!* The mouthwatering array of dishes crowding the surfaces. The party balloons dancing on the end of their strings, jostling each other in mid-air. The voices swirling all around him.

"Couldn't you guys have kept the noise down?" Hutch. Right beside him, as always, holding onto him, the widest grin splitting his face. "He could hear you all the way down the street."

It was overwhelming. And wonderful. And almost too much to take in. He swayed, and immediately, the strong grip around him tightened. A path fell open before them and firm arms steered him to the couch.

With a grateful sigh, he sank into the cushions. By some unseen signal—probably given by hawk-eyed Hutch—the eager crowd fell back and gave them a little breathing space. Starsky leaned back and gazed around, overcome and strangely lost for words.

"Nice couch." *Oh, great. Very profound.*

"Yeah, your old one was murder on my back. This one folds out to a proper bed."

Damn, Hutch looked so happy.

And he wasn't the only one. Dobey, a compact shape in the wicker chair, was beaming all over his chubby face. And Huggy, the epitome of laid-back cool, looked like an excited kid on Christmas morning.

Starsky found Edith on his left, and beside her Elena Ramon. Jackson perched on the arm of the couch, Molly and Kiko wide-eyed on the floor beside him. And then there were the Martyns from next door and the Rosenthals from down the street and, oh, so many others....

Someone pressed a glass into his hand. Champagne? Had they all gone crazy? Starsky looked up, confused, to find his doctor smiling at him.

"That's all right. We can make an exception once in a while."

Diane and Linda began to dish out the food. A plate containing a selection of enticing items appeared before him, but Starsky was almost too distracted to devote much attention to it. There was so much to see, to rediscover.

People sat and perched on every surface. Others stood in groups around the room, in the kitchen, on the balcony. Some of the girls had settled down on the carpet, balancing their plates and glasses on their knees.

The buzz of people eating, talking, laughing filled the room. Starsky couldn't get enough of it. There was Mike Stanton sharing a joke with Chrissie, Sims and Babcock chatting up Huggy's waitresses, Dobey in earnest conversation with Patel.

Starsky leaned against the cushions and soaked it all up, content for once to be a spectator, not the usual life of the party.

Minnie was bearing down on them. "Move over, Hutch," she said with a commanding jerk of the head. "Give someone else a chance. You'll have Starsky all to yourself soon enough."

Hutch grinned, squeezed his arm and got up to make some room.

"This was s'posed to be a small welcome home party," Minnie giggled into his ear when she had made herself comfortable. "For a select few. But then word got around and before we knew it, everyone wanted to come."

Edith nodded and leaned closer. "It was Hutch's idea. But he only went ahead when Dr. Patel said that you could stand a little excitement."

That's my Hutch. Starsky looked around and found him deep in conversation with Rob Menendez—probably catching up on the latest case news.

Their eyes met across the crowded room and locked, and there was a small, still moment that held only the two of them. The sounds of talk and laughter faded to a distant drone until they were alone with own other as if trapped inside an air bubble submerged under the sea.

Hutch. I'm gonna get you for this!

A small, secret smile curved the corners of Hutch's mouth. *Any time*, the smile said.

For the shortest moment, a heartbeat only, the connection hummed between them like a living, growing thing, strong and vibrant, holding them together. A lifeline. A tether not even death had managed to sever.

Starsky felt suddenly light-headed, disoriented. He reached out blindly, found Edith's arm. The bubble burst, and the world rushed back in. He tossed a reassuring look at Hutch, and Hutch winked and returned his attention to the conversation.

Menendez never even noticed that he'd lost his audience for a minute or two.

An hour or so later, the party came to a sudden, smoothly rehearsed ending. Joan had just cut up the cake and distributed it around when Starsky became aware of Gabriella's searching eyes raking over him. He observed with interest as she relayed a meaningful look to Hutch and Patel. Saw with amusement as Patel whispered a few words into Dobby's ear. Almost laughed out loud when Dobby made a big show of checking the time and heaving himself out of the wicker chair.

"Okay, guys. Eat up. Time to get back to work. Lunch break's over. Come on now, everyone."

"Gabby, Henry," Patel said. "We are due back at the hospital at two."

"Dios mío!" Elena Ramos put down her cake before she'd even tasted it. "Almost two o'clock already. Chicos, eat up, we have to run."

"C'mon, girls, gimme a hand with these dishes." Anita started grabbing plates. "Can't leave this mess for Hutch to clear. Huggy, you can dry."

oooOOOooo

When the last visitor had departed amid promises to call and visit, Hutch closed and locked the door and went to sit on the couch beside Starsky. Starsky leaned against him and put a hand on his leg. A deep saturating silence fell on the apartment, broken only by the monotonous whirr of the air conditioner.

For a while, neither spoke, and Hutch let his mind drift for a while, enjoying the moment of peace.

"That was wonderful," Starsky finally said and looked at him. Weariness hung around him like a heavy drape, but it couldn't smother the brightness in his eyes. "How did you know this was just what I needed? It's almost like it's *my* birthday tomorrow. And I don't even have a present for you."

"I already got my present," said Hutch and kissed Starsky on the temple. "Best present in the whole world."

A memory surfaced in Hutch's mind of his previous birthday. *God, only a year ago.* A year ago, the universe had been a different place, and he had been a different person—jaded, pushed to the limit, torn apart by powerful, frightening new feelings. Craving Starsky's love and terrified of losing it at the same time. The very fabric of his life had begun to disintegrate around him, and everything he'd done had only succeeded in widening the gulf between him and the man he loved.

He remembered the disastrous birthday bash he'd thrown in a desperate attempt to fill the void with noise and people, and to find an escape from a reality he no longer knew how to handle. Remembered getting riotously drunk and ending up in bed with a woman whose face and name had left no traces on his memory.

Was that really only a year ago? So much had happened in just one year.

First Kira. And the loss of Starsky. And all the despair and grief that followed.

And then—unlooked-for, un hoped-for—Starsky's love, freely given, and the overwhelming joy of a new beginning.

And then, the five seconds that changed everything again. *Starsky, get down!* Machine-gun fire, blood, Starsky dying in his arms, the light going out in the deep, blue eyes. *I love you, don't leave me. Never leave me...*

And finally, survival. And recovery. Months of watching his lover claw his slow, torturous way back to life and a semblance of health. And through it all, Starsky's love that kept Hutch afloat in the maelstrom of fear.

The entire universe had changed in just one year. *He* had changed. The old Hutch—the control freak, the burned-out cynic with the questionable taste in practical jokes—was a thing of the past. Starsky was right. New Hutch, indeed.

"Rough year, huh?" said Starsky, who could read his mind like no one else.

Hutch looked at him. "Happiest year of my life." His voice felt rough in his throat. "Fucking best year of my life."

"You're weird, ya know."

"Yeah, and *you* are overdue for some pills." Hutch looked his partner over and saw that he was fading fast. "How're you feeling?"

"Tired."

"Wanna lie down for a while?"

"Kay."

On the threshold of the bedroom, Starsky turned and looked back. Hutch watched him gaze around the room taking in the details, the balloons, the couch, the survivors from Hutch's greenhouse.

"Home." Starsky said softly. He turned to Hutch with a smile that made Hutch's heart go limp. "*Our* home now."

Hutch locked both arms around his partner, and Starsky sagged against him. "C'mon," Hutch said with a small catch in his voice. "Time to get some rest."

"You're not really going to sleep on that couch, are you?"

"Well, I think maybe at first—"

"Lemme rephrase that. You're not sleeping on that couch!"

"Just kidding, Starsk."

In the bedroom, Hutch helped Starsky strip down to briefs and T-shirt. Starsky sank into the familiar pillows with a groan and allowed Hutch to pull the light cotton sheet up to his shoulders. When Hutch moved away, Starsky reached out and snagged a piece of the fabric of Hutch's shirt. Looked up at him with his dark, expressive eyes. The eyes of his lover.

"Stay," his lover said.

Hutch took less than five seconds to discard his shirt, step out of his jeans, and crawl under the sheet from the other side of the bed.

Holding his breath, he slipped in behind Starsky—slowly, cautiously—until their bodies touched all along their lengths. Some of the stiffness seemed to ooze out of Starsky's abused body as Hutch draped an arm over him and molded himself around him.

Hutch took a deep, deep breath. He'd forgotten what it felt like to have Starsky in his arms like this. His warmth. His scent. The wiry curls tickling his cheek. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead against Starsky's shoulder.

Starsky, Starsky...

Starsky's heartbeat felt reassuringly strong under his hand.

Something inside Hutch stilled. Starsky. Here with him. Safe. Starsky was safe.

Now it was up to him to make sure that he'd always be.

PART 2: FALL

Chapter Four

These nights, the shadows were thin. Insubstantial like smoke on the water. But he knew they were there. They were always there. Always hovering at the edge of the darkness, always just out of reach.

They were watching, patient, abiding their time.

They knew they couldn't get him now. He was safe. But they hadn't given up. They never would.

As time went by, they started creeping closer again. A little closer every night. Dark shapes almost indistinguishable from the darkness of the night. Their eyes were on him, burning with desire. Watchful and alert, observing his every move, probing for weaknesses in his defenses.

One day, they'd leave the shadows and surge forward. He had to be prepared for that day. He must never let them take him by surprise again.

Keeping him safe was the most important task in the world.

oooOOOooo

Starsky wasn't sure when he first suspected that something was wrong.

At first, in the days and weeks after his homecoming, he was still floating too far out on a sea of drug-induced haziness to notice much beyond his own immediate needs. Getting stronger, becoming mobile, relearning how to take care of himself, took all of his attention.

And at first, everything seemed to be working out all right. After a few days of adjustment, they settled into an easy routine dictated by the demands of his medical plan, and soon, the days became an endless round of exercises, therapy sessions and doctors' appointments.

While he was in the Merriweather Center struggling with weights a two-year-old could have tossed around, or trying to swim more than a few yards in the pool without drowning, or shuffling around the exercise room, Hutch tackled the endless list of chores—shopping, laundry, visits to the bank, the pharmacy, the garage, the hospital—before rushing back to pick him up after his last appointment.

On some days they got back to Oakhill Drive and simply collapsed on the couch.

"Jesus, Hutch," Starsky groaned one day after a particularly heavy session. He shifted his sore limbs into a more comfortable position. "I swear a double shift at work followed by an all-night stakeout would feel like a vacation right now."

Hutch agreed. And for him, though he never complained about it, there was always more to do when they got home. Cooking, cleaning, helping his incapacitated partner with a hundred different tasks. The massage alone took an hour each evening.

Through it all, Hutch was the rock in his ocean of uncertainties. He was patient, caring, devoted. And although he knew Hutch so well, Starsky was often amazed how someone so tough and hardnosed on the job, someone not exactly unknown for a tendency to irritability, could be so consistently gentle and tender, encouraging and supportive with his injured partner.

The medical profession had lost a great doctor when Hutch decided to pursue a career as a cop.

Then why couldn't he shake the feeling that something wasn't right? He was missing a vital clue, and for the longest time, he simply couldn't put his finger on it. Hutch looked pale and exhausted all the time. How much longer could he keep going? He hadn't had a day off in weeks. Months, really.

"Neither have you," Hutch reminded him when he voiced his concerns.

"Yeah, but—"

"I love doing this, you know that."

"At least go out for a walk once in a while, or hit the beach or...or go running or something. Have a drink in The Pits. Check in with Dobby. I'll be fine for a couple of hours on my own, you know that. You don't have to sit with me every minute of the day."

"I know I don't have to. But I want to."

Starsky couldn't think of anything to say to that. And on a very selfish level, he was secretly glad when Hutch declined the department's invitation to take part in the annual baseball match against Vice in favor of taking him to a secluded beach for the afternoon. Or when he refused Minnie's offer to spell him so he could have the chance to meet Menendez and Stanton for a drink.

Because in the end, simply being together beat any other option hands down. Sometimes when they lounged on the couch in the evening, watching a Bogart movie, or the news, or one of those wildlife documentaries Hutch could never get enough of—Starsky propped up on cushions with his feet in Hutch's lap and Hutch's warm hands anchoring his legs—Starsky thought he had to be the luckiest man alive. And something in Hutch's smile told him that his partner probably felt much the same way.

oooOOOooo

It wasn't all smooth sailing.

Within the first few days of living together, Hutch discovered that Starsky was skipping his pain meds again.

"They mess with my head," Starsky said heatedly when Hutch called him on it. "And other parts. Patel said I could cut down on them."

"Cut down, yes. Cut out, no! You still need them, dammit! You're still in far too much pain."

"I'm done with the damn things!" Starsky shouted. "They fuck you up. I don't like taking them."

"I don't care if you like it or not. You *gotta* take 'em," Hutch shouted back.

Starsky sighed and caved in. "It's not just that," he said. "It's...I'm worried I'm gonna get to like them too much."

There was a pause, and then Hutch's eyes opened wide.

oooOOOooo

Then there was the constant worry about money. Hutch tried to keep it from him, of course, but Starsky knew anyway that money was tight.

Dobey had been unable to procure anything but unpaid leave for Hutch, which meant that, far from of living off Hutch's salary, they had to rely on Starsky's disability check instead.

And Hutch's savings.

Which were steadily dwindling. Not least because of Hutch's insistence on getting nothing but the best quality food available.

"We can't go on like this," Starsky admonished one day as he watched Hutch unpack a bag full of delicacies—wild salmon, veal, crab meat, exotic fruit and imported health foods—to complement the more ordinary staple foods. "You're spending a fortune on luxuries. We can't afford it."

"They're not luxuries," Hutch countered. "They're part of a well-balanced diet. You need protein to build up your muscles. And fiber and vitamins for general health and fitness. You don't like health shakes, fair enough, but I noticed you didn't say no to a second helping of grilled salmon the other day."

"Well, you know, it was *good*."

"And full of protein!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"C'mon, Starsk, don't look so glum. I'm only trying to find food that's good for you and that you actually enjoy eating. Okay, so you can't stand bananas, but you like avocados and kiwis, don't you? And passion fruit." Hutch grinned. "Can I help it that you have unexpectedly expensive tastes?"

Starsky grimaced and looked away. There was a small silence while Hutch finished putting the groceries away and Starsky struggled with the decision he knew he had to make.

"Hutch, I been thinkin'."

"You know you're not cleared to do that yet. Maybe in another month or so—"

"Hutch!"

"Yeah?"

"We have to sell the Torino."

"Over my dead body!"

"Damn, Hutch, we have to. We don't need two cars right now, and no one in his right mind is gonna pay you much for yours. We need the money."

"Starsky, we're *not* selling your car. And that's final."

Starsky sighed and slumped lower into the cushions, dejected. Hutch put aside the lettuce he was washing, dried his hands on a towel, and came over to sit down beside him.

"Hey, why're you so worried about money all of a sudden, huh? We'll manage with what we have. Trust me. And when all else fails, I have a few bonds we can sell. They're worth a coupla thousand."

"It's just—" Starsky shrugged helplessly. "We're living off your savings. I had savings, too, you know. And then I went and blew them on a skiing trip. You were right at the time. Shouldn't have done that."

Something on Hutch's face changed and softened. "No. I was *wrong*. I wouldn't have wanted to miss that trip for any amount of money in the world."

Memories swept over his features like clouds passing rapidly across the sky. "Remembering those days was all that kept me going when you were in the coma. The memories of Lake Mirror Falls and Aspen got me through an entire night. They kept me sane."

Starsky took in Hutch's eyes then, all light and warm. And he knew he'd been right about living life to the full and not waiting until later. They almost didn't get a later.

"Aw, Hutch, look—"

"So listen. We're not selling the tomato, is that clear? We'll manage. We're not going to run out of money any time soon, I promise."

"Unless I develop a taste for caviar and champagne." Starsky laughed.

But he knew the laugh didn't make it all the way to his eyes.

oooOOOooo

And then there were the nights when even the pain pills proved powerless against the monster in his chest as it struck without warning and ripped through his body with claws so sharp he couldn't even cry out, could only whimper with agony. When he clung to Hutch and begged for the torture to stop. When Hutch held him tight, and Hutch's hands on his skin, warm and firm and comforting, and Hutch's voice in his ear, low and deep and soothing, were his only defenses against the creature that had taken over his body. When Hutch was the only one who stood between him and the darkness of his mind.

And the next morning he'd surface from the nightmare to find Hutch's arms still locked around him like a shield against the pain, and Hutch, hollow-eyed and haggard, his face etched with a different kind of pain, watching over him with fierce determination.

That was when he knew he was safe again, protected in the circle of Hutch's arms; and the absence of pain was like a gift, a drug, a small piece of heaven after a night spent in hell.

oooOOOooo

But there were other nights, too. Nights when the monster in his body lay curled up, asleep, and even their soft laughter and whispered words couldn't rouse it.

In one of those twilight moments when they lay wrapped around each other—not to keep the demons at bay, but because it felt so damn good—Starsky let his hand trail down Hutch's naked torso, over the curve of his hip and the flat, smooth stomach into the top of Hutch's pajama bottoms.

Hutch gasped and twitched a little, but before Starsky's exploring fingers could connect with their target, Hutch had clamped a hand over his and stilled the motion.

"Don't," he whispered.

"Why not? I wanna make you feel good."

"No, don't. I...I can't."

"But why not?" Starsky said, surprised. "I can't get it up yet, but that doesn't mean you have to live like a monk."

Hutch pulled away abruptly and rolled over, away from Starsky. "I said I can't. Understand? Just leave it."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"Dammit, Starsky, what do you think it means? It means I can't get it up, either. Happy now?" Hutch threw the covers back, swung his legs out of bed and stomped away to the window.

Starsky went very still. "Okay," he said. "Okay."

A great sadness welled up inside him. "It's the scars, isn't it?" he said. "Can't blame you, really. I'm not exactly the same guy you fell in love with last year."

Hutch turned around so fast, he almost tripped. One look at the appalled expression on his face and Starsky knew he'd screwed up. Damn! Damn those misplaced insecurities. Where the hell had they come from?

"Is that what you think?" Hutch said in disbelief.

Cursing himself for a fool and wishing he could haul the words back in, Starsky pushed the sheets aside and scrambled to his knees. "Hutch, no, I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that. I know that ain't true."

"Damn right, it ain't true! How can you even *think* a thing like that?"

For a moment, the silence strained and stretched between them. Hutch stood beside the bed with a thundercloud on his forehead, glaring at him like an angry Norse god. Starsky shuffled closer and reached out tentatively.

"Then why? What's wrong?" He found Hutch's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I don't know. I can't. I've tried, but—" Hutch's belligerent stance wavered. "I haven't...I couldn't, not since—" He pulled roughly out of Starsky's grasp and stepped back. "I just can't, okay?"

"Hutch, what d'you mean, you haven't?"

"I mean exactly what I said. I haven't. Not since...*Gunther*. I just can't. Not while you—"

It was Starsky's turn to be appalled. "You mean you can't because *I* can't? Damn, Hutch, that's takin' empathy a step too far, don't you think?"

He looked at Hutch. The chiseled features wore a stark, forbidding expression. In the semi-darkness of the room, the golden head glowed dark, like burnished brass. *Thor*, he might have thought a year ago, or *Odin* or one of those guys, but this time, he only saw *Hutch*.

He held out an arm and said, "C'mere." Hutch stepped forward, and Starsky wrapped his arm around Hutch's waist and pulled him close. Kneeling on the high bed, he was almost level with the sky-blue eyes that looked so troubled just then. He had to do something to take that look away. An idea began to take shape.

"Come back to bed," he said. "Please?"

Reluctantly, stiffly, Hutch lowered himself onto the mattress and rolled over on his side, facing away. Starsky spread the sheets over them both and burrowed close. For a while, they simply lay, sharing warmth and closeness. Starsky ran his hand up and down the long flank until the tense body relaxed a little. He placed a soft kiss on Hutch's shoulder. When the move met with no obvious resistance, he did it again, a little higher up. Hutch sighed.

Growing bolder, Starsky aimed for the sensitive area just below Hutch's ear and left a trail of moist little kisses. Hutch emitted a small sound like a moan. Encouraged, Starsky did it again, then coaxed Hutch to roll onto his back. The blue eyes looked up at him, no longer troubled, but filled with such longing that Starsky decided it was time to step up the pace.

"'M gonna kiss you now. That okay?"

There was a soft snort in the darkness. "What's this? The seduction of Kenneth Hutchinson?"

"Mm hm, you got that right. 'M gonna seduce you tonight."

"Starsk, I can't."

"Yes, you can. I know you can. Just gimme a chance. I may be a little rusty, but I still know my way around you. You'll see."

"You shouldn't—"

"Shhh. I'm fine. Don't worry 'bout me. I'm perfectly all right. Just want you to feel good."

To forestall further protests, Starsky bent over the beloved face and took the full lips between his own. He sucked a little on the bottom one, gently bit down on it. The lips parted and their tongues met in a hesitant encounter that quickly deepened into something intense and hungry.

Starsky pushed his fingers into the golden strands and tilted the fair head for better access, and Hutch groaned as his own hands came up to steady him and pull them closer together. Ignoring the small stab of pain in his chest, Starsky sprawled on top of Hutch and things quickly got out of control.

Using hands and lips and tongue, he made Hutch moan and writhe beneath him. As his lips explored the smooth expanse of Hutch's chest—always one of his favorite playgrounds—the sensitive nipples responded to the caress of his tongue with gratifying speed. He wasn't surprised when his leg brushed against a sudden hardness further down.

That's my Hutch. Knew you could do it.

He broke away and cautiously maneuvered himself down. Felt a sense of great satisfaction when Hutch shifted his body up and spread his legs, clearly eager and willing now. Starsky settled between them, a perfect fit.

This is where I belong.

Hutch's cock pressed against his cheek, and he deeply inhaled the familiar scent before licking his way up the length of the fully erect shaft. He felt Hutch shudder under his touch. Felt his own heartbeat racing powerfully in his ears.

God, I love this part of you. I've missed this part of you.

He homed in on Hutch's special spot at the base of his cock and nuzzled the place with lips and tongue in a way that never failed to drive Hutch wild. A sound escaped Hutch's throat, somewhere between a sob and a whimper.

"Starsky...Starsky..."

Haven't lost my touch yet.

Feeling smug, he did it again, only more so. Was rewarded with another ragged plea.

Hutch's hands closed around his head, fingers tangled in his curls. Hutch's breath came in short, sharp bursts. His guttural moans grew desperate. Now was the time.

Starsky wrapped his hands around the base of the shaft and closed his mouth around the smooth, delicate head. *God, wonderful.* The taste of Hutch, the smell of Hutch. The texture. He couldn't get enough of it, let his tongue roam over the delicate tip, hungrily, again and again, let his teeth scrape lightly over the sensitive skin. Then got down to do some serious sucking.

Hutch suddenly shuddered and gasped. Starsky felt his hands tighten painfully around his head, as the body beneath him trembled like the ground during a movement of the San Andreas Fault. Then, in a massive upheaval, Hutch erupted, flooding Starsky's mouth, a convulsive outpouring, and Starsky swallowed the familiar taste as fast as he could, mourning every spilled drop.

Then it was over, and Hutch went slack beneath him, hands still tangled in his hair, head thrown back, and muttering the same words over and over.

"I love you, I love you. Love you so much."

Starsky swallowed hard. It took so little to make Hutch happy. He found he didn't mind not being able to participate fully in the action yet. Suddenly feeling stiff and achy, he let go of the softening organ and crawled up into Hutch's arms. Hutch kissed him on the forehead and drew him close.

"Thank you," he whispered after a while.

"Wasn't much. I wish I could—"

"Shhh. You don't know what you're saying. It was wonderful. *You are wonderful.*"

"Mm hm, I know."

"And so modest." Hutch nuzzled his shoulder. "You okay?"

"More'n okay. Missed the taste of you."

"But you—"

"I will. Soon. This one was for you." Starsky burrowed closer and made himself comfortable. "Anyway, I'm sure it was good for me."

"Oh?"

"Uh huh. Just think of all that protein."

oooOOOooo

After that, Hutch seemed a lot more cheerful. He smiled more, laughed more, even began to crack his seriously unfunny jokes again. Starsky took that as a sign that Hutch had finally accepted that his partner wasn't going to die on him, that he was here to stay, getting better and stronger all the time.

Suddenly, there were improvements almost every day. He knew it when his therapist, Bruce Aldwin, added another small weight to his dumbbells. When he managed to swim the length of the pool without having to grab onto the float. When he first walked up the steps to his front door without feeling out of breath.

Starsky knew that Hutch saw it, too. Every day, there was something new they were able to do together. Going out for a meal, meeting Sims and Babcock for a drink, working out together in the gym. As the fall days shortened and the hot, dry Santa Ana winds raked across the city, Starsky felt for the first time in months that their lives were settling into something approaching normalcy.

And then it all fell apart on the day *The Question* finally reared its head. The question that was always on Starsky's mind, haunting his waking moments and sleepless nights. The question he still hadn't dared to ask. Couldn't ask.

Will I get well enough to go back to work?

What if the answer was no? What if...?

He couldn't face it. And Hutch never brought it up either, although he had to be just as impatient for an answer. Hutch's future depended on that answer as much as his own. But they never spoke about it. Maybe Hutch couldn't face the certainty of knowing any more than he could.

So Starsky pushed the question away and concentrated on the job at hand; recovery, rehabilitation, return to a degree of independence. But all the time, the question was lurking just below the surface of his mind.

Will I get well enough to go back to work?

The question was beginning to consume him.

In the end, he didn't even have to ask. Bruce Aldwin told him—out of the blue, in passing almost. Quite unaware of the impact his words were having on his patient.

Starsky was still reeling from the shock when he discovered something that swept even *The Question* and its answer clean from his mind. He discovered that his instincts had been right—something was very wrong, and it turned out to be Hutch.

Chapter Five

Hutch was happy.

There could be no other word for the state of warmth and lightness in his heart. He shouldn't be, given the circumstances, but there it was—he was happy. He wasn't even sure when he had first realized it. The notion had crept up on him from out of nowhere.

Humming softly, he set the coffee machine in motion, popped some bread in the toaster and got out a tray and breakfast dishes.

Living with Starsky had turned out to be everything he'd dreamed it would. They were together. They were safe. Starsky was getting better. Nothing else mattered. At times, he still felt overwhelmed with gratitude and wonder at the miracle of Starsky's return.

Hutch whistled as he sliced a couple of peaches into chunks, added them to two bowls of cereal and emptied a carton of yogurt over the mixture.

He liked looking after Starsky. Caring for him wasn't a chore. Hard work, maybe. Exhausting. A trial of his patience at times. But never a chore. And never boring. Whether it was a sudden inclination toward healthy eating—*'I wanna get better, Hutch. And Bruce said that ain't gonna happen if I don't eat right.'* *'I've been telling you that for years!'* *'Yeah, but it all makes a lot more sense now, you know?'*—or the revelation that certain types of exercise—like swimming—could actually be fun, Starsky was always good for a surprise.

Hutch thought that even after a lifetime of living together, his partner would still find novel ways of amazing him.

The toast popped up. Hutch retrieved the slices, spread butter on them, poured the coffee with a flourish, piled everything onto the tray and carried the load into the bedroom.

In the weeks after his homecoming, Starsky had needed all his help through a series of setbacks—an allergic reaction to a new prescription drug, a period of dizzy spells, a bout of bronchitis. Now, of course, he was well enough to fix his own breakfast, but somehow that small service in the morning had never lost its appeal.

"Morning, sleepyhead," he said and deposited the tray on the shelf behind the bed. "Time to rise and shine."

An unintelligible mumble greeted that announcement. There was no other discernable reaction from the curled up figure under the sheets.

"Wake up, lover boy," Hutch said and gave the nearest curl a playful tug. "You have a full schedule today. Gym, therapy, appointment with the district nurse. Dentist in the afternoon."

Starsky groaned and pulled the covers over his head.

Allowing his comatose companion a few more precious moments of slumber, Hutch slipped back out, retrieved the paper from the landing, and crawled back into bed with it. While Starsky began the arduous journey from oblivion to consciousness, Hutch leaned back against the headboard, grabbed a mug of coffee from the tray and shook open the paper.

What he saw made him sit up and forget about the coffee.

"Damn," he whispered. Quickly, he scanned the article on the front page, then turned to the more detailed account on the inside pages.

"Wha's wrong?" A disheveled head of hair emerged from the sheets and a set of blue eyes gazed blearily in his direction. "Wha...?"

"There's been another hit," Hutch told him. "In the Soho on Elm Street. Five people killed and eleven wounded."

"What!" Starsky emerged from semi-drowsiness with a snap. "Lemme see."

He pulled himself into a sitting position—cautiously, stiffly—and leaned close to catch a glimpse of the page. Hutch shifted the paper for better access and together, they read what meager information the journalist had been able to glean from the police spokeswoman and the evidence on the ground.

"Jesus," Starsky said when they were done. "They fired right into the crowd? That's more than a revenge killing. This thing's gettin' outta control fast."

"And look who the place belongs to—the Andreotti family."

"With known connections to the East Coast."

"Only two weeks after the shooting in the Northern Lights."

"Where they went after the owner, just like—"

A meaningful look passed between them.

"This ties right in with the car bombings," Hutch said.

"And the four bodies they found..."

"Definitely a pattern here."

"Couldn't mean that this...?"

"No, because last month—"

"Oh, yeah...but then..."

"Exactly."

"Damn. And look, just five days earlier—"

"Same weapon, anyway."

"I wonder if..."

"The Cohen connection?"

"Hasta be. Who else?"

The glance they shared contained a world of information. Hutch smoothed the paper and took another look at the grainy picture of the chaotic interior of the club with its overturned tables and blood stains on the floor.

He shook his head. "Gunther's Colombia outfit, the East Coast mob—"

"And the big unknown factor. Just great."

Starsky reached for Hutch's mug, drained it of half its contents, returned it to its owner. "The task force will be under a lot of pressure to come up with answers. I wonder who Dobby's gonna put under."

"Probably Sims and Babcock. Maybe even Rob and Mike."

"Gonna be risky at this stage."

"Yeah—"

They exchanged another look. *If we were on active duty now...*

Hutch shook off the thought. "Maybe they put someone under weeks ago and we just don't know about it."

"Dobey's gonna have his hands full no matter what. He'll be in the firing line of the press if he doesn't come up with the goods."

"Oh, yeah, listen to this." Hutch turned back the pages. "The editorial's already screaming for blood. Says here... 'Our city is under attack, innocent people are dying, and what are the members of our valiant police force up to in the meantime? Pontificating on the need of affirmative action and attending ceremonial functions. When are we going to see action?' And there's a picture of Chief Ryan in a tux addressing a delegation of fat cats at the mayor's annual dinner party."

Hutch looked up. "With that kind of pressure, Dobey's forced to work a miracle."

"Let's get on the phone and find out what's happening."

"He won't tell us anything new. He's already hinted that he can't give us any more inside information. We're not on the force anymore."

"Nah, you just gotta catch him at the right moment. Leave it to me. I'll wheedle it outta him."

Hutch grinned at his partner. "I bet you will. You just turn those puppy dog eyes on him and he'll melt on the spot." He reached for the tray. "But that's not the priority right now. The priority is to get you to your therapy session on time, so eat up, drink your coffee and get out of bed."

"Yes, Mom."

Later, when Starsky had headed off to the bathroom, Hutch recalled their conversation thoughtfully. He wasn't sure he liked the ease with which they'd slipped right back into detective mode. He thought they'd outgrown the urge.

Soon, they would have to start thinking about the future. He wondered what kind of a job would give him the opportunity to look after his still recovering partner *and* earn a reasonable living? And what kind of a job would Starsky be able to hold down?

Soon, they'd have to make all sorts of decisions. But whatever the answers, Hutch was in no doubt that detective work wouldn't be featuring high on their list of possible career options. The sooner they got that urge out of their systems, the better. He folded the paper and put it away.

In the bathroom, Starsky launched into the opening bars of "Singin' in the Rain". Hutch winced as Starsky's voice soared into a warbling falsetto. Starsky's lungs appeared to be in great shape that morning. He collected the tray with the remains of their breakfast, deposited it in the kitchen and went to bang on the bathroom door.

"You ready, Maestro? C'mon, let's go. You'll be late again."

oooOOOooo

Despite his best intensions, the hit on the Soho was on Hutch's mind all day. He was still thinking about it in the evening, when he was in the middle of dinner preparations and the phone rang.

Starsky was dozing on the couch and Hutch, who was in the process of manhandling a heavy pot of spaghetti from cooker to sink, managed to snag the receiver after only two rings. "Yes?"

A hesitant voice replied. "Ken?"

Hutch almost dropped the pot. "Rachel?" They hadn't heard from Starsky's mother since she'd walked out of the hospital almost five months earlier.

"I need time to think," she had said to Hutch after discovering the special place Hutch occupied in her son's life and bed. *"This isn't easy for me. You have to understand."*

She'd walked away, and they hadn't heard from her since.

They hadn't heard much from Rose and Al, either, since Rachel had dropped the bombshell. Al had been on the phone once, and Hutch still felt bile rise in his throat when he recalled the rant. *"...perverts...not welcome in my house...you're all sick...should have seen it years ago...make sure you stay out of my neighborhood..."*

Hutch had relayed a much-edited version of the diatribe to Starsky.

Rose had called a few times, had even visited Starsky in the hospital once or twice, each time clearly and agonizingly torn between her love for the nephew she'd fostered and her allegiance to sister and husband.

And Nick...Nick had problems of his own. Nick, as Hutch had gleaned through police channels, was currently in the loving care of the Mexican justice system, awaiting trial on smuggling charges.

They didn't talk about it much, but sometimes, Hutch caught his lover gazing at his family pictures, and then the whole complex jumble of grief and anger and guilt bubbled up and escaped from the secret storeroom in his heart like a genie from a jar.

Rachel's voice floated through the cable and jerked Hutch back to the present. "Ken, how is...how's Davey?"

Somehow, Hutch managed to bottle his resentment and rein in the roughness in his voice. "He's better. He's getting much better." He looked across at Starsky who had sat up and stared at him with wide, hopeful eyes. Hutch's heart went out to him. In a softer voice he said, "He's out of the hospital now. He's home."

"I know. I...I spoke to Edith. Is he there? Can I...speak to him?"

"One moment."

Hutch deposited the pot he was still holding and carried the phone to the couch. "It's your ma," he said unnecessarily. Starsky took the phone.

"Ma?"

Hutch went back into the kitchen and rescued the pasta. While he worked, Starsky's voice floated in and out of his consciousness.

"It's okay, Ma," he heard. "It's all right. I understand." And then, "Don't cry now, Ma. It's okay. We'll work it out." And finally, "Yeah. Love you, too."

Starsky put the phone down, looking dazed and excited and troubled all at the same time.

"Nicky's smuggling trial has brought up a few unsavory details of his activities in New York," he said when they sat in front of steaming plates of Spaghetti Bolognese at Hutch. He shrugged. "I guess that's put our own shortcomings into perspective."

He put down the fork and rested his fingers on top of Hutch's hand. The blue of his eyes darkened another impossible fraction. "She should never have said what she said to you in the hospital. But it was hard for her, finding out that her son's been shot and almost died, and then that he's queer, and then that her other son's a criminal, all in the space of a few days."

"I know."

"She hasn't really accepted it." Starsky waved his free hand to indicate Hutch, him, the apartment, everything. "But she's tryin' to build bridges. She can't afford to lose both sons."

"It's a step forward," Hutch agreed.

"I think she's still hoping I'm going to outgrow this. She thinks it's just a phase. Or a case of finding the right girl." The rugged features opened up into a breathtaking smile of pure, uncomplicated joy, and Hutch's stomach did a little flip-flop. "She has no idea."

Hutch leaned toward him and they shared a tomato sauce-flavored kiss of affirmation.

After that, Rachel called occasionally, and although Al never came along, Rose took to dropping in for visits.

They never heard from Nick.

oooOOOooo

Rachel's call had an electrifying effect on Starsky, and for a few days, he talked about little else. But Hutch knew better than to assume that the call had chased

all thoughts of the Soho hit from his mind. How could it, when his own thoughts constantly revolved around it?

It was late in the evening and he was sitting at the table with his check book, bank statements and a pile of unpaid bills, trying to make sense of their dwindling financial resources, when he heard the rap on the door.

Menendez and Stanton stood on the doorstep. Hutch took one look at the bandage on Stanton's arm, the dark circles under Menendez' eyes, the crumpled appearance of their clothes, and pulled the door wide to let them in.

"We have some bad news," Menendez said and fell onto the couch with a groan. "We thought you should hear it from us, and not find out from the papers in the morning."

Drawn by the voices, Starsky appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, instantly wide awake at the sight of the two weary men. He walked into the kitchen without a word, extracted a few cans of beer from the fridge, and wordlessly handed them around.

Menendez and Stanton took theirs gratefully. Exhaustion of the kind intimately familiar to both Hutch and Starsky sat on their faces—the result of too many double shifts, all-night stakeouts and the frustration of the hunt gone wrong. Starsky and Hutch exchanged a look.

"What happened?" Hutch asked quietly when they were all seated.

"The undercover op went wrong," Stanton said wearily and took a long, hard pull from his beer. "The whole thing was a shambles from start to finish. And now we have two cops dead, and one in the hospital."

"Oh God," Starsky said, horrified. "Not Simmons and Babcock?"

"No, no, they're okay," Menendez hastened to assure them. "Reynolds had to pull them in, but they're okay. No, this was a different team, two cops Chief Ryan brought in from the Fifth. Adrian McMillan and Pete Lameunier. I think you know them."

"Adrian?" Hutch exclaimed. "Course, we know him. We met him at the forensic seminar a coupla years ago. He'd just made detective. Jesus, he's dead?"

"Shot in the chest and stomach. They took him to the hospital, but he died on the operating table."

A wave of nausea welled up inside Hutch, and he swallowed hard, twice. Indistinctly, he felt Starsky's hand on his knee, a gesture of reassurance. *Not me, babe*, the gesture said. *It wasn't me.*

But it could've been. It could've been us. If we'd been on active duty...

With difficulty, he focused on his visitors. "And Lameunier? We've heard of him. I don't think we've ever met."

"Shot point blank in the head," Stanton said, sounding dog-tired. Even his usually springy blond hair lay flat and lifeless. "He must've died instantly."

"He was married with three kids," Menendez supplied darkly. Starsky's hand tightened on Hutch's knee. Menendez had three himself. This one hit close to home. Bitterness flavored Menendez' next few words. "They were both good cops. But they didn't have a snowball's chance in hell."

"What happened?" Hutch said again, acutely aware of his partner's presence beside him. *Safe. You're safe. It wasn't us.*

"McMillan went under as a new recruit in the Sugarhill gang," Menendez told them. "You know, that off-shoot of the East Coast syndicate run by the Cohen twins? They had to place him quickly and there wasn't time to get him a really convincing cover, but Ryan wanted to use him because Adrian already had some connections to the gang. It was their only way in. Lameunier was his outside contact."

"Dobey was dead set against it." Stanton set his empty can on the table and leaned forward, suddenly energized. "He said it was a suicide mission. He said the Cohens would spot McMillan for a cop from two miles away. But Ryan had the final word."

"Adrian could have refused the assignment," Hutch said.

Stanton snorted with disgust. "A direct request from the Chief of Police? Come on! Adrian must've thought this would make or break his career. And we don't know what means Ryan used to persuade him. Fact is, he agreed to do it. So they got him in under the flimsiest of covers."

He stood abruptly, started pacing, emotion working in his face. "All he was supposed to do was get some information on the third gang—who they are, set-up, numbers, that sorta of thing. Then he was s'posed to get the hell outta there. But what the *fuck* did he do? He arranged to meet Lameunier while he was still under. Probably thought he could go back in and get more."

"Mike, siddown," Menendez said wearily. "There was nothing you could've done."

Starsky and Hutch shared a look.

"Mike and McMillan were at the Academy together," Menendez explained. "Mike thinks we should've brought him in sooner."

"Yes, we should've!" Stanton roared. "To hell with Ryan and his ego trip. Two cops are dead 'cause he wanted instant results. If he hadn't muscled in on Reynold's operation, maybe they'd both still be alive."

"We got the call at noon," Menendez related, looking at Hutch, and then at Starsky. "We were the first on the scene, but by the time we got there, Lameurier was dead and McMillan was cornered in an alley with no cover to speak of. Looks like the Cohens got suspicious of McMillan and had him followed when he went to meet Lameurier. What they didn't know was that Lameurier spotted the tail and put out a call for backup before he went in to help his partner."

He heaved a deep sigh. "A whole crowd of cops responded, but we couldn't get McMillan out before they shot him. Officer Kim Richards took a hit in the leg. He's in the hospital, doing all right. And Mike here got winged when he tried to get to McMillan."

"You okay?" Starsky asked.

"It's nothing. Just a crease." Stanton gave a dismissive wave of the hand.

"And the Sugarhill killers?"

"We shot them," Stanton said, expressionless. "All three of them. They're dead." He walked back to the chair and fell into it, grimacing when the movement jarred his injured arm. His youthful face looked drawn and grim.

"I want to get those bastards," he said. "All of them. But we can't go ahead with the Shark operation now, cause Dobey pulled Babcock and Simmons off the job. He said he wasn't gonna lose two more men to another shaky setup. So all our work was for nothing."

"At least we know now that the Cohen twins were behind the Soho hit," Menendez took up the thread again. "We also have evidence that the Shark is back in LA. He must've decided to deal with the situation in person—"

"But the fact is, we know fuck all about the third gang," Stanton interrupted. "There's no recognizable M.O., no trace on the weapons, no word on the street. Nothing. Whoever they are, they're running a damn tight operation."

"What about the snitch network?" Starsky asked. "There's usually *someone* out there who's ready to spill the beans for the right price."

"Course we've tried that," Stanton said wearily. "They've all clammed up completely. The snitches in town are petrified of getting pulled into this war and ending up on a slab in the morgue. Everyone knows what happened at the Northern Light. There's real fear out on the streets. A lot of the smaller fish are lying low or have cleared out of town. The gangs have LA by the throat. No one's talking to the cops right now."

Menendez heaved himself off the couch. "Look, we better go. Got some sleep to catch up on."

"We appreciate you coming around to tell us," Hutch said. His eyes sought Starsky's and a look passed between them. Starsky nodded minutely, and Hutch dug into his wallet for a bill.

"Toward the collection for their families," he said as he held it out to Stanton.

"You don't have to do that. No one's expecting you to. I mean everyone knows that you—"

"Take it," Starsky said from the couch. "There's not much else we can do to help."

Hutch nodded, and Stanton reluctantly took the money. "Okay."

When the partners had dragged themselves to their car and driven away, Hutch came to sit beside Starsky. For a while, neither spoke, and memories filled the space between them.

"I'm glad you weren't on the task force," Starsky finally said. "You would've wanted to go under, and then maybe that would've been you they took out."

Good, Hutch thought, relieved. *Good.*

He said, "I might just give Huggy a call, tell him to keep his ear to the ground."

It was just an inquiry, he told himself. The last thing they needed was to get involved in LA's latest gang war.

oooOOOooo

Three days later, Hutch came home from a shopping trip to find Starsky in a clinch with a tall, slim, long-legged young woman with a waterfall of jet-black hair falling in disarray around her shoulders.

Hutch felt his eyebrows climb into his hairline. Then he closed the door with his foot and carried the bags into the kitchen. When he turned, he saw Starsky looking at him with a sad little smile. He didn't relinquish his hold around the slender form in his arms.

"It's okay," he said soothingly, and for a moment, Hutch wasn't sure if he was speaking to him or to her. "You're gonna be fine."

Her shoulders shook under Starsky's hands and Hutch realized that she was crying.

They broke apart. She wiped a sleeve over her face, turned and fled, bumping into Hutch on her blind way to the door.

"Chrissie," Hutch said, astonished, belatedly connecting the disheveled, distraught woman with the cool, efficient cop he'd come to know and appreciate. He reached out to steady her.

She stared at him with red-rimmed eyes. "Hutch. Aw, damn, Hutch—" Fresh tears fell from her eyes, and she tore from his grasp and rushed out the door.

"Chrissie, wait—"

"Let her go." Starsky's hand on his arm held him back. "She'll be okay."

They watched as she threw herself into a beat-up Chrysler and pulled away, tires screeching, tears still clinging to her face. Hutch turned to Starsky, a dozen questions on his lips.

Starsky shrugged. "She needed a hug."

"Yeah, but—"

"She was there when McMillan was shot," Starsky explained, "and it's brought back all sorta memories of the shooting. You know, flashbacks, nightmares, that sorta thing."

The shooting? Good God, he meant *his* shooting.

"She's seein' Aaron Winstein," Starsky added. "The shrink over at Vice? He thinks it's delayed shock. Post tremendous stress symptoms—"

"Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome," Hutch corrected automatically.

"Whatever. He's told her to come and talk to me. He thinks she thinks she didn't do enough to save Adrian—you know, that if she'd acted faster, then maybe he'd still be alive. Damn, she's only a rookie. She's been on the force for less than a year and she's already seen four cops gunned down. Winstein must've thought it would be a good idea for her to hook up with the guy she did save. I told her she did a damn good job on me."

Hutch took a shaky breath. "A paramedic couldn't have done it better," he said. "If she hadn't been there—"

"That's what I told her. Of course," Starsky's look softened, "we both know that nothing would've worked if *you* hadn't been there, but, yeah, she did a first rate job."

"How do you know?"

"Dobey told me."

"Oh."

"Look, don't worry. She'll be all right. I think what she needed most was a talk and a hug."

"What do you mean, she'll be all right?" Hutch said, piqued. "Because you gave her a hug? Come on, Starsky, it's not like you to be so...*dismissive* about a thing like this."

"I'm not. I mean it. I *know* she'll be all right."

Starsky seemed to think that was the most obvious thing in the world. Hutch shook his head as he watched Starsky settle down on the couch. "How the hell can you be so sure about that?"

"She's a survivor. I know she is." Starsky shrugged. "It's something we picked up in 'Nam."

Hutch held his breath. Viet Nam. Starsky never talked about Viet Nam. And he had never asked. It seemed, well, kind of *voyeuristic* to probe into a past filled with memories better left undisturbed. It was a topic pushed back so far into the past, and so far removed from Hutch's world, that there was no overlap between his and Starsky's experiences. It was the only part of Starsky's past Hutch knew almost nothing about. He sat down next to Starsky and gave him his full attention.

"Some guys," Starsky said, "went to 'Nam, went through hell, saw the horrors, and came back fucked up. And some guys went through the same hell and somehow managed to cope. We got real good at telling types. By the end of our first six months, we could tell right away if what a guy went through would break him or not. And you know, we were almost always right."

He looked away, looked back at Hutch. Smiled. "Remember what you said to me in the hospital when you were tryin' to get me to come home with you? You see it, too. It's the same thing."

"You're a survivor," Hutch said, his throat tight.

"And so are you."

"You don't know that."

"Oh yeah. I knew it the moment I met you."

Hutch didn't know what to say. Starsky sounded so sure.

"And so's Chrissie," Starsky went on. "She's strong. She won't let this destroy her. She'll deal with it, and then she'll move on."

Hutch realized there would never be another opportunity quite like this. He had to ask. "Starsk? About 'Nam—" Starsky looked at him. "You said about the horrors...I mean when you were in 'Nam—"

He broke off and shook his head. He couldn't do it. He couldn't ask. Starsky had never talked about it, and he had no right to pry. He was startled when he felt Starsky's hand on his cheek. Looked up to see a small, warm smile on the face he knew so well.

"Hutch. You dimwit. Why don't you ask? You can ask me anything in the world. You know that." He stroked Hutch's cheek with his thumb. "You want to know what I went through and what the damage was, right?"

"It's just that...I read it in the papers all the time, and when they interview veterans, and every time I see Jonny and Ben, and I hear of the nightmare they lived through...but I didn't go, and I never know if you...and it's so long ago now—"

"Hutch, listen to me. I was okay. I really was. Yes, it was tough. We saw terrible, unimaginable things. We saw so much death. Whole families butchered, and dead babies, and...and once we came across a whole village burned to the ground. There were bodies everywhere. Shook me up bad. I was only a kid. I just about puked my guts out. Had nightmares for a coupla years."

Memories drifted like dark shadows over Starsky's face. "I saw my share of horrors, but really, I got off lightly. I wasn't tortured, or blown up, or injured like some of the guys. I had to come back to LA for all that." His hand went to his chest, rubbing absently.

"The worst time was at the end of my first year when the VC ambushed us during a night patrol. They killed our squad leader and took five of us prisoner. They held us for over a week. We were tied up and blindfolded most of the time, and I can't say they were very generous with the water rations. Things didn't look so good for while..."

"Did they—?"

"No, Hutch. They questioned us, kinda vigorously I have to admit, but we weren't tortured or anything." He paused. "In fact, we got lucky. We broke out and got away. We killed four of them, and two of ours were wounded, but I was okay. Just scratched. Honest. We even managed to get some useful intelligence back to headquarters. But I've never liked forests very much after that."

Starsky grinned, then turned serious again. "On the scale of the whole war, it was just a scuffle. I was in 'Nam before the whole thing escalated. I was already back stateside when the Tet Offensive started."

"I'm glad you got out when you did."

"Yeah. So am I. But it wasn't all bad, y'see. I learned so much out there. About myself, how far I could push myself. I gained a lot of confidence." Starsky gave a small laugh. "Wanna hear something funny? I used to have a chip the size of Brooklyn Bridge on my shoulder 'cause I didn't go to college. I wanted to be a cop, like John, but I thought I couldn't 'cause my grades weren't up to scratch. John always told me I'd make a good cop, but I only believed it after I got back from 'Nam and realized that he was right."

"He was."

"Well, you know the rest. I came back and drove a cab for a while and even picked up a few college credits, but all the time, I already knew I was gonna go back to LA and apply to the Academy. So you see, if I hadn't gone to 'Nam, maybe I'd never have realized that I had it in me to be a cop." He grinned. "And then we'd never have met."

Hutch looked at his friend and shook his head at the idea of self-assured, devil-may-care Starsky harboring feelings of insecurity because of a perceived lack of formal education. Starsky with the quirky mind and the lightning fast mental reflexes, who could outwit the brightest minds in the entire police department.

You just don't know, do you? You've no idea how special you are.

He said, "You planned that escape from the Viet Cong, didn't you?"

"Uh, how did you know that?"

"Lucky guess." Hutch hesitated. "Will you tell me about it sometime?"

"I will. Tomorrow." It was a promise.

A little later when they were in the Torino en route to the beach for a quick afternoon swim, Hutch cleared his throat, stared straight ahead and said, "Starsk? Can I ask you something else? You said I could ask you anything."

"Uh, sure."

"What did it feel like to be hugging a beautiful young woman again, huh?"

A chortle came from the seat beside him. "Jealous? You're jealous!"

"Not for a second. But seriously."

"Seriously? Soft and round and kinda...*yielding*, if you know what I mean." Starsky tossed a patented Starsky grin at him. "Lucky for you I like my squeezes tough and muscular these days."

Hutch grinned back. "That so?"

"Uh huh."

oooOOOooo

For some reason, Hutch couldn't get the Viet Nam conversation out of his mind. He thought about it again as he sat in his car on a warm, sunny November afternoon, waiting to pick up Starsky after his therapy session. Starsky's notion on survivors was...intriguing, but the longer Hutch thought about it, the clearer became the central flaw in the theory.

No one could be a survivor forever. Everyone had a tipping point. A relentless barrage of adversity would eventually grind down even the most resilient of minds.

Even Superman had an Achilles Heel.

Hutch was still pondering the issue when he saw Starsky emerge from the main door of the Merriweather rehab block—and every thought in his head vaporized instantly at the sight of his partner.

Starsky looked shaken and dazed. He stood just outside the doors, a hand on the frame, as if all his strength had suddenly drained clean out of him.

Hutch was out of the car and by his side in seconds.

"Starsk. What's wrong? What happened? You look as white as a ghost."

"Hutch—" Starsky clutched at him with both hands, eyes dilated, looking wild.
"Hutch, they said—"

Oh God. Bad news. They must've told him that...

"Come and sit down before you fall over. God, you're shaking. Here, sit down." Hutch manhandled his partner to the car and deposited him in the passenger seat. Starsky wouldn't let go of him, so Hutch crouched before him in the open door and caught him by the arms.

"Starsk, calm down. Whatever it is, we'll cope with it. We'll manage somehow. Please calm down. You're scaring me."

Starsky's eyes looked huge in his face, and an eerie light flickered in their depth. "Bruce," he said. "He thinks—" He swallowed, his fingers digging painfully into Hutch's shoulder. "He says he thinks—"

"Easy, easy now. Slow down."

"He thinks I can make a full recovery." The words poured out in a rush. Two seconds went by before Hutch's brain caught up.

"Wh...what? But...Starsk, God, Starsk, that's wonderful! That's—"

"He says the tests show I'm doin' better than expected, and all I need now is exercise to strengthen my muscles, and to get my flexibility back, and stamina, of course, but if I go on like this, he says he sees no reason why I shouldn't—"

"Starsky—"

"...regain full strength in this arm, and he says I should start joggin' again. And swimming is good exercise, too, to increase my lung capacity—"

"Starsky!"

"... 'cause I've lost about 10 percent, he said, but I can recover that with exercise, and there's no reason why I can't get back to normal, and then he said—"

"Starsky, stop! Stop it. Calm down. Breathe."

The flow of words dried up, and Starsky sagged into the seat, eyes fixed on Hutch.

"And then he said...I should give it a few more months before—" his voice fell to a whisper, trailed away.

Hutch shook his head, bewildered. "Before what?"

Starsky focused on him with wonder and a sudden blinding blaze of joy in his eyes. "Before I apply for reinstatement."

The words hit Hutch with the power of a punch to the gut. The ground beneath him tilted, and he swayed, unprepared for the sudden powerful surge of fear in his heart. Reinstatement. Good God. Reinstatement! His mind reeled.

I didn't think. I never thought. God, reinstatement! I didn't think this would ever be a possibility.

Starsky's next words echoed his thoughts. "I didn't think I could. I never dared hope. There was so much damage...But Bruce thinks I can make it. He thinks it's a goal I should work toward."

Hutch forced himself to look at Starsky, forced himself to open his mouth and utter the words without stammering. "Right. Then that's what we'll do."

"You mean...you think he's right? You think I can do it?"

He wants it. My God, he wants it. How could I not have realized?

Something inside Hutch clenched up tight at the naked hope reflected in Starsky's eyes. His fingers tightened on Starsky's arms.

"Yes, I think you can," he said. Amazement welled up inside him and lent his voice true sincerity. "I think you can do anything you want."

"Even...go back to work? Be a cop again?"

He quit before, because of me. He'd do it again. Say just one word, tell him I can't see him get hurt again, and he'll drop the idea and never mention it again. And we'll do something else. Something safe.

Hutch hesitated. Took another look at the breathless anticipation on his partner's face. And knew he couldn't do it.

He's lost so much. And fought so hard to regain it. How can I deny him this ultimate triumph?

I said I'd do anything for him. Now's the time to prove it.

He punched his fears into submission and made the only decision he could.

"Yes," he said firmly. "You can do it. If anyone can, it's you."

Chapter Six

That night they came with reinforcements. Five, six shadows almost invisible against the backdrop of the night. They spread out and advanced toward him.

"Stop!" he yelled. "No further." The gun wavered between the targets on the right and the left.

They slowed, then stopped. Then advanced a little further.

"I know what you're thinking," he shouted, his voice cold in his throat. "You think he'll be an easy target now. But you're wrong." He raised the gun and aimed. "I won't let you have him. As long as I'm here, he's safe. Remember that."

Again, they left. They always did, but each time, they came a little closer before they finally withdrew.

He would have to step up his vigilance. He'd failed once in his duty to keep his partner safe. He wouldn't fail again.

oooOOOooo

Starsky was running hard. He was going at a good speed, effortlessly, intoxicated with the sense of freedom, the breeze in his face. His body felt sleek, strong, tireless; his legs were moving fluidly like well-oiled pistons. He felt he could go on running forever, in rhythm with an inner harmony. He wasn't even breathing hard.

A sound broke into his harmony—a shout, then a yell—and he lost the rhythm. His step faltered. The last thing he remembered before the dream fractured and slipped from his mind was a profound sense of loss, even though, at that moment, he couldn't have said exactly what he thought he'd lost. Then the frayed remnants of the dream were gone, and he was awake.

The room was dark; it was the middle of the night. Groggily, he reached for the alarm clock. 02:16. What the hell had woken him at this time of night? Groaning softly, he turned and reached an arm out for Hutch. The other side of the bed was empty. Hutch had gone.

Then he heard the sound again, muffled this time, but unmistakably coming from just outside the apartment. Puzzled, Starsky maneuvered his legs out of bed, heaved himself to his feet, and went to investigate.

The front door stood ajar, and as he watched, it opened and admitted Hutch.

"Hutch?"

Hutch came in and closed and locked the door behind him. He was fully dressed complete with jacket and holster. The Magnum was in his hand, safety catch off. Starsky switched to high alert.

"Hutch, babe, what's wrong?"

"They're gone. It's okay. They're gone. They won't be back tonight." Hutch's voice sounded strained, hoarse. He stepped into the room, placed the gun on the table.

"Who? Who's gone?"

"They."

"Who're *they*? Hutch, what's goin' on? Who was there?"

A look of confusion climbed across Hutch's face. "They're different ones each time. I don't know who they are. They're...after us."

Starsky went to him, reached out a hand, perplexed. Something didn't make sense. Who'd been out there? And what was the matter with Hutch?

"Hutch, what were you doin' out there?"

Hutch looked blank. Starsky frowned. He coaxed Hutch to sit down on the couch where the street light filtering through the balcony doors illuminated Hutch's face. Hutch didn't resist. He seemed only partially aware of Starsky's presence.

"Hutch, look at me. C'mon, babe, look at me." He cupped both hands around Hutch's face. Hutch blinked slowly and turned his gaze in Starsky's general direction, dreamily. His eyes were glazed, unseeing.

That's it. He's asleep. He's dreaming.

As if in response, Hutch closed his eyes and sagged sideways.

Starsky's mind raced. What were you supposed to do? Nicky had sleepwalked when he was a kid. What had Ma always said? "*Don't wake him,*" she'd said. "*You'd only confuse him. Help him back to bed, and he won't remember anything in the morning.*"

"Okay, Hutch, come on now. Time to go to bed."

He tugged on Hutch's arm, and Hutch rose obediently and allowed Starsky to steer him to the bedroom. Starsky peeled the jacket off his shoulders and helped him strip off holster and clothes. Then he pulled back the sheets and Hutch lay down.

"That's right, Blintz. Close your eyes and get some rest."

Hutch closed his eyes immediately, rolled over and started breathing deeply and regularly.

Starsky lay beside him for a long time, wide awake, staring into the darkness and listening to his lover's even breaths. And wondering.

What happened? What the hell just happened?

oooOOOooo

Over the next few days, Starsky watched Hutch with the veiled attention of a mountain cat stalking its prey. He watched Hutch not with the eyes of a friend or partner, or even a lover, but with the eyes of the detective he'd once been. And saw what he'd missed before, absorbed in his own needs and hopes.

The signs were all there. Had been there all the time. Small clues, unconnected events, easily explained, easy to dismiss in isolation. The new heavy locks on the doors and windows. The cars Hutch never left out in the open at night. Hutch's unrelenting, almost obsessive protective routine. The way he kept tabs on his partner's every movement, never let him leave the house alone, always walked him right up to the rehab door, never once arrived late when picking him up again. Like a shadow.

Or a bodyguard.

Seemingly unimportant details suddenly added up to more than the sum of their parts. The dark smudges under Hutch's eyes, the wary look in his eyes, the weight he'd lost and never regained. The way he jumped at every sound.

The signs were all there. And Starsky suddenly understood. The happy, smiley Hutch was a fake. Under the façade lurked nightmares that Hutch himself seemed unaware of.

Starsky wanted to slap himself. *I knew something was wrong. And I thought I could cure it with a blow job. Idiot!*

He needed answers. And advice. When Hutch left the apartment on an errand, he picked up the phone and dialed.

"Dr. Patel? It's Dave Starsky."

"Oh hello, David. Good to hear from you. What I can I do for you?"

"I'm due for a hospital checkup on Friday morning. Can I come and see you for a moment afterward? I need to ask you something."

"Of course. Go to the reception and someone will show you to my office. Is everything all right? I heard you are making excellent progress."

"Yeah, I'm okay. It's not me, it's Hutch. I'm worried about Hutch."

oooOOOooo

"Sleepwalking?" Mahendra Patel gazed at his visitor with surprise. "Indeed. And you think it has happened before?"

They were in his small, cramped office with the distant view of the sea. Patel was at his desk, but his visitor had abandoned the only other chair in the room in favor of pacing restlessly between desk and window. Five steps to the window. Five steps to the desk. While the doctor in Patel was focused on his visitor's tale, the surgeon in him couldn't help assessing the movements' ease and fluidity with a critically appraising eye. He didn't like what he heard, but he certainly liked what he saw.

"Three times in the last five nights," Starsky said, unaware of the probing eyes. "And before that—" He shrugged. "I just don't know."

Five steps to the window. "For the first few weeks, I was too drugged up at night to notice anything much. A bomb could've gone off beside me." Five steps to the desk. A frustrated wave. "For all I know he did it every night."

Five steps to the window. A fist smacked into the palm of the hand. "Goddammit, Hutch was walking around out there on the street, asleep. With a loaded gun!" Five steps to the desk. "He said there was someone trying to get us. But when I checked, there was never anyone out there. He must've dreamed it all."

Five steps to the window. "A coupla nights ago, I tried hiding his gun, but he got up in the middle of the night and started lookin' for it." Five steps to the desk. "He got real upset when he couldn't find it. In the end, I had to wake him up, but he was completely confused and had no idea why he was up." Five steps to the window. "And the next morning, he couldn't remember anything at all."

Five steps to the desk. Stop. "Doc, what's going on with Hutch? He's never sleepwalked in his life. Why now? And what can I do to stop it?"

Patel shook his head. "David, I am sorry. I wish I could help, but this is not my field. You should talk to Dr. Hanlon at the Merriweather Center. She is an excellent psychiatrist."

"You're a doctor. You must know *something* about sleepwalking. Dr. Hanlon doesn't know Hutch half as well as you do. She's only met him a coupla times. Please, Doc. All I need is some information. Is it serious? Why's he doin' it? What can I do when it happens again?"

Patel nodded. "All right. First of all, do not worry too much. Sleepwalking is not a serious disorder. Many people sleepwalk, mostly children, but adults, too. In many cases, the tendency to sleepwalk wears off by itself. There is not much anyone can do. Make sure he gets a lot of rest, and try to reduce anxieties and stress. Keep knives and sharp objects out of reach at night. Sleepwalkers are prone to unintentional self-injury."

He paused. "When it happens again, do what you did before—do not wake him. Help him back to bed and do not worry if he is unresponsive to verbal stimulus."

"He wasn't unresponsive," Starsky said. "I mean he did respond to me. He talked to me and answered my questions. At first, I didn't even realize he was asleep."

"Indeed? Interesting. Most sleepwalkers tend to be incoherent and do not interact. But you two have an unusually close rapport. Maybe that is why Hutch responds to you even while he is asleep."

Starsky nodded thoughtfully.

"Sleepwalking is often a symptom of stress," Patel continued. "Hutch has been under a lot of pressure since you were shot. Add to that the burden of caring for you single-handedly—"

His visitor was pacing again, emotion working on his face. Five steps to the window. "I should never have agreed to it. I should've realized—" Five steps to the desk. "But he wanted it so much. And he says he loves looking after me. I know that's true." Five steps to the window. "And he's gettin' a lot more rest now that I'm so much better. It's not all hard work." Five steps to the desk.

"David, please take a seat. It is good to see you so active, but you are making me nervous."

"Sorry."

His former patient dropped into the chair. "I knew something was wrong the whole time," he said grimly. "I just couldn't put my finger on it. And now I don't even know how to fix it." Troubled blue eyes fixed on him. "Tell me what I can do."

"There is not much you *can* do. Unless you can remove the source of his anxiety. I take it you haven't told Hutch yet?"

"I can't tell him. Not until I know how to handle this." Starsky was on his feet again. Five steps to the window. "He hates losing control. If he knew he's been walking around asleep with the safety catch off his gun—" Five steps to the desk. "He'd go ballistic."

Five steps to the window. A frustrated thump against the window sill. "And I can't tell his doctor, either, 'cause she'd put it on Hutch's medical file and it would end up on his police record. And *that* would mean compulsory visits to the shrink. Hutch would kill me."

"It might do him good to talk to someone about it."

"He doesn't need a shrink for that. He can talk to me. We've never needed a shrink before."

"Maybe he cannot talk to you."

Five steps toward him. Standstill. "You mean because I am the problem?"

"No, I mean because he may be unaware that there *is* a problem."

"No." A determined stare. "No shrink! Hutch would never go for it."

"All right. But if the symptoms get worse, I would strongly advise a consultation with an experienced psychiatrist. The problem may lie much deeper than you think."

"Okay. *If* he gets worse. But really, he should be gettin' better now, shouldn't he? I mean, he's not gonna have to worry about me so much anymore. Or about the future. He can relax now 'cause we know I'll make a full recovery."

"Ah, so Bruce told you."

"Yeah, a few days ago." A wide infectious grin chased the concerned expression from the rugged face. "You should've seen Hutch when I told him. He was so happy. He was ecstatic! D'you think maybe it'll just take a few more days to sink in?"

"Yes, that is certainly a possibility. Nevertheless, you should keep an eye on him, but I do not need to tell you that. You are probably doing that already."

"You bet."

They smiled at each other, and Patel was again struck by the man's rough, masculine charm, so much more pronounced now that the mask of pain had dissolved and the thin body was beginning to fill out with healthy muscles in all the right places.

"Thanks, Doc," Starsky said, relieved. "You've taken a load off my mind." He walked to the door. Hesitated. Turned and walked back.

"There's one other thing," he said, and Patel, who had risen to see his visitor out, relaxed into his chair again. "Bruce said—" Starsky sat down on the edge of the chair and took a deep breath. "He said there's a chance I can try for reinstatement."

"Reinstatement? You mean return to your former job?"

"To active duty, yeah. D'you think he's right? D'you think I can?" Hope and excitement gleamed in his dark eyes, the longing unmistakable. "I gotta know."

Patel weighed his words. "David, I have observed your progress for six months now and you have astounded everyone with your progress. If you had asked me three months ago, or even two, I would have told you not to be over-optimistic. But now, I am not so sure."

He held up a hand to forestall the exclamation he saw hovering on his patient's lips. "But I would advise you to think carefully about pursuing that option. The effects of the damage will always be with you. Given the right exercise and diet, you will regain much of your stamina, but it is inevitable that you will tire more quickly, and take longer to recover."

"Okay," Starsky said softly.

"You may feel residual pain and stiffness for many years to come."

"Okay."

"And you cannot sustain more penetrative trauma to the chest. You cannot take another bullet."

"No. I guess not."

"This means that the work you have been doing will present an added degree of risk. You need to be aware of these risks before you make a final decision."

Starsky was silent, and Patel wished he could find something encouraging to add.

"David, let me ask you something," he said. "Strictly in the capacity of a...a friend, you understand, not as your doctor."

"Off the record, you mean? Sure."

"Why do you have to go that way? You have years of experience and knowledge in your field. Surely there must be many suitable occupations for former police officers that do not present the danger of getting shot."

"Like what? Security guard? Instructor at the Academy? Paper pusher? That's what most disabled cops end up doing."

"Well, what about teaching? That can be a very rewarding job."

Starsky shook his head. "Nah, I'm not a teacher. I don't have the patience. I wanna *do* things, you know, not teach others how to do them." He added in a small voice, "All I've ever wanted to be is a cop."

"Does it mean that much to you?"

"It means everything."

"Why?"

"*Why?*"

"Yes. Why is being a police officer so important to you?"

Starsky looked taken aback, as if the answer to that should be obvious. "It's a good job," he said. "A worthwhile job. We make a difference. Sometimes."

"There are many worthwhile jobs out there, David. What makes this one so special?"

Starsky got to his feet, walked to the window, stared out at the street below. "I've never really thought about it," he said. "I guess it's everything. The whole package." He paused, thinking. "It's the action. The thrill of the hunt. The unpredictability. The excitement when you know you're on the right track."

He turned to face Patel. The rugged features grew animated, lit up from inside as the words to his answer fell into place.

"The job combines everything I love doing," he said. "It's never the same. Each case is different. And you need to draw on everything you have to get the job done. Your strength. Your wits. Your instincts. It's like...I dunno...an all-round workout. As a street cop, you gotta be fit in every way. You have to think on your feet. You can never let yourself go complacent."

"When we're out there on the streets or undercover, Hutch and me, we're autonomous. We're in charge of the show. And we get results. We're good cops."

He was fired up, full of enthusiasm. Passionate. Patel had never seen him like that before.

"No other job can buoy you up or crash you down like police work. It's like...like spicy Chinese. Once you've had it, everything else'll taste bland. There's no other job like it."

"And...?" There was more. Patel was sure of it.

"It's also..."

"Yes?"

Starsky's voice was soft and wistful. "It's also the only job where Hutch and I can work together the way we do. As partners."

Ah!

Starsky looked up, a distant look in his eyes. "When Hutch and I work a case together, something weird happens. When it comes to the crunch, I know exactly what he's thinking, which way he's gonna dive, which of two guys he's gonna tackle. It's...hard to describe. It's like we're reading each other's minds. Together, we can take on just about anything. We get the job done. 'Cause we're good at it. We *were* good at it."

He paused. The fire in his eyes died down; the light faded from the animated face. "I was a good cop," he said softly. "And now I don't know if—"

He pushed himself away from the window. "I gotta go. I've taken up too much of your time already. And Hutch'll be waiting downstairs. Thanks for your help. Thanks for seeing me."

"David."

"Yeah."

He had to say it. He couldn't let his favorite patient walk away like this.

"I think you can do it. Despite everything I have said, I believe that if you really want it, if it means that much to you, you can do it."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." Patel walked him to the door. "And do not worry too much about Hutch. The problem may only be temporary. But keep an eye on him. Let me know if there are any changes. Perhaps this would be a good time for you to go away for a while. A break would be good for both of you."

"A vacation. Good idea. That would take Hutch's mind off things. Thanks, Doc. I knew you'd have the right answers."

Patel watched until the lithe leather-clad figure had disappeared through the door at the end of the hall. Then he went back inside and sat down at his desk, thinking. He picked up the phone.

"Mandy? Patel here. Do we hold the medical file for Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson? Yes? Please pull it and have someone bring it down to my office. Thank you."

oooOOOooo

"Huggy, I need your help."

Hutch had dropped him at The Pits on his way to the bank, promising to join him shortly. That gave Starsky just the opportunity he needed.

"Hey, man, you gotta ask? Just name it." Huggy arranged his long limbs on the opposite seat in the booth and pushed one of the soda bottles toward his friend.

"It's kinda embarrassing—"

"You need money."

"Uh—"

"Don't worry 'bout it. I offered it, and I meant it, and I don't mind you takin' me up on it."

"Yeah, Hutch said...Thanks, Hug. Look, we don't have much in way of security. There's the Torino, but Hutch is kinda welded to it right now. He won't even *discuss* selling it—"

"Starsky, I don't need no security from you. I know you're good for it."

Starsky dredged up a weary smile. "Never borrow money off your friends. That's what my Ma always used ta say. Not if you want to keep them. I know you offered to help us out, and we really 'ppreciate it, but fortunately we're not completely without resources. I was thinkin' of a business deal, kinda."

He picked up the bottle and took a swig. "See, we have this old house we bought a coupla years ago. No bank will lend us money on it, but you could maybe get a coupla thousand bucks for it—"

"You bought a house?" Huggy interrupted, saucer-eyed. "You mean, you *two* bought a house together? A coupla years ago?"

"Don't look at me like that. It's not what you think. I talked Hutch into it at the time. Thought it'd be a good investment."

Huggy rolled his eyes. "I can just imagine where this is goin'. And?"

Starsky shrugged. "Hutch wasn't very, um, impressed when he saw it. It needs a lot of work. Yeah, I know, don't you start. I've heard it all from Hutch already. It wasn't one of my best ideas, I admit it. We tried selling it again, but even with the best offer, we would've lost a big chunk of our investment. So we decided to hang onto it and wait—"

"So? So you still own it? Whereabouts is this mansion of yours?"

"Out toward Long Beach. Not far from the harbor."

"Long Beach, huh?" Huggy said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. We've had the water and power disconnected, and it's probably in pretty bad shape. I haven't been out that way for months, what with all this—"

"Hey, man, I understand."

"It's just...we gotta get away for a while. Hutch needs a break."

"*Hutch* needs a break? I swear, sometimes I don't know who's lookin' after who, with you two."

"We look after each other, Hug."

"Don't I know it."

"Thing is—we gotta have the money right away. I was thinkin', if we make the house over to you, maybe you can give us a thousand bucks for it. It'll be worth

at least that much. Here's the key, if you're interested. The address is on the label. Go on down, take a look."

Huggy nodded pensively and pocketed the key. "Yeah, I might just do that. I need a coupla days to get the money."

"You should check out the house first."

"That's okay. I can advance you a thousand up front. That's really all I can spare right now, anyway. Then I'll check it out and see how much we can get for it. Leave it with me."

"Thanks, Huggy."

"Sorry it took so long," a mellow voice floated over them and a familiar weight pressed into the booth beside him. "You wouldn't believe the traffic at this time of day. It's getting worse every day. It took me almost fifteen minutes to get back. What's up?"

Starsky turned to him. "Well, I have a proposition for you."

Chapter Seven

The first night, they found a campsite near the beach, less than a hundred miles from LA. A world away from LA.

At first, Hutch hadn't been too thrilled with the idea of a vacation, and Starsky had been forced to play his trump card. "Patel thinks a break would be good for us. And Bruce says I need to get away from the smog and air out my lungs."

Hutch hadn't needed further convincing. They'd packed, piled the Torino with everything from guitars to travel sets of chess and monopoly, canceled two weeks of therapy sessions, retrieved Hutch's camping gear from storage, and set off north, toward Santa Lucia and San Simeon, with only the vaguest notion of where they'd end up staying that night.

By unspoken consent, they made no plans in the days that followed, simply drifted, making their slow way north, hugging the coast. Places to stay were plentiful—campsites, motels, cabins, once a converted trailer with a breathtaking view of the cliffs and bays.

They never drove for more than a couple of hours each day, often stayed two, three days in one place, then moved on at a leisurely pace. At some places, the Torino sat gathering dust for days.

By Thanksgiving, they hadn't even reached San Simeon yet.

"At this rate, it'll be Christmas before we get to 'Frisco," Starsky commented as he turned over the steaks they were barbecuing over an open fire on the beach.

"Okay by me," smiled Hutch, and maybe, Starsky thought, that was exactly what they should be aiming for.

Unseasonably warm days alternated with near-freezing nights. During the day, they explored hidden bays and coastal inlets, dipped into the cool waters of the Pacific, went for walks on near-deserted stretches of beach, and explored isolated coastal hiking paths. Starsky's complaints about the outdoor nature of their pursuits sounded unconvincing even to himself, and he knew he couldn't fool Hutch with his grumbles, either.

In the evenings, they found a restaurant or diner or maybe a bar, and once they ended up at a disco where Hutch obliged the local girls with a twirl on the dance floor while Starsky watched from the bar, tapping his foot to the music and enjoying the sight of his partner's lean body gyrating to the music.

And at night, they slept, really slept. A deep sleep, undisturbed by drugs or pain or nightmares.

Starsky watched Hutch lie back and unwind. Noted with pleasure as the sun brought out the familiar golden tan and bleached the platinum hair to white gold. Felt his heart skip a beat when he first heard the deep, sonorous rumble of Hutch's laughter ringing out over the empty beach. Caught his breath as he watched the lean, tan body running toward him, the long legs eating up the distance between them.

Hutch, God, Hutch, you're gorgeous...

And Hutch watched him just as keenly, making sure the activities would stretch Starsky, but not overtire him. But every day, they walked a little further, climbed a little higher, pushed the limits another few degrees. Hutch relaxed as Starsky thrived. After a few days, Hutch even let him share the driving.

It was a footloose, carefree, Bohemian existence. LA, and everything it stood for, lay light years away. Hutch didn't sleepwalk once, and Starsky congratulated himself on his strategy. The sooner he got better and back to work, and life returned to normal, the better for both of them. That was the only goal worth working toward.

oooOOOooo

At the end of the first week, Starsky woke to the early morning light to find that something was different. He lay very still, trying to figure out what it was. A quick check confirmed that Hutch was there, right beside him, curled up under the sheets—so that was all right.

What else could it be?

He rolled onto his back, and it struck him. He wasn't feeling any pain. The familiar aches and twinges he was used to waking up to weren't there. Experimentally, he twisted his shoulders in a way he knew he shouldn't. Nothing. Stretched sideways in a maneuver that had always made him wince. Nothing.

Instead, he felt something else, an almost forgotten sensation. At first, he could hardly believe it. It had been so very long.

Hutch. I gotta wake Hutch.

Elation and anticipation raced through him as he scooted closer to his sleeping companion.

"Hutch. Wake up." He ran his hand over the bare, sun-bronzed shoulder, shook it a little, unable to wait, knowing that Hutch would want to know and share in this new development. "C'mon, Blintz, show me those big blue eyes."

Hutch came out of deep sleep not with the panicked jerk he'd perfected over long months of caring for an invalid, but gradually, languidly. Another by-product of their current carefree existence. Starsky leaned in and kissed him, and was rewarded with a delicious sleepy smile. "Mmmm, Starsk—" Then, belatedly, "Anything wrong? You okay?"

"Oh yeah, I'm okay. Nothing's wrong. On the contrary." Starsky pressed closer. "Something's definitely right."

Their bodies connected, and Hutch's eyes opened wide with surprise and understanding, all of him instantly awake. "Starsk!"

"Uh huh. Feel that?"

"Hard not to."

"Hmm. I think *hard* is the operative word here."

Hutch actually giggled. "Well, let's do something about it, shall we?"

He reached out for his lover, his hands hot on Starsky's skin, and Starsky moaned at the simple touch. Every part of him suddenly seemed to stand to attention. His own hand reached down to check out the exciting new development. Hutch slapped his hand away.

"Oh no," he whispered, a devil's grin on his face. "No touching. That one's mine. All mine!"

"O-okay. But...hurry!"

But Hutch took his own sweet time, starting with a leisurely exploration of the scarred landscape that was Starsky's chest. Starsky squirmed as Hutch's lips traced the outlines of each individual scar, tonguing the shallow ridges and leaving a trail of small kisses. Each touch sent a tingle of pleasure through his body, and he arched into the touch, desperate for more. Desperate.

Every fiber in his body seemed to have suddenly become hypersensitive and responsive to the smallest stimulus. Parts of him that Hutch had touched a

hundred times in the past months to bathe and dress and massage him suddenly burst into life, on full alert, screaming for attention.

Hutch's tongue found a nipple and played with it for a while. Then he gently bit into it and scraped the sensitive nub with his teeth. Starsky choked. His body jerked and his fingers dug into Hutch's shoulders, holding on with everything he had. Hutch's hand moved over his chest, found the other nipple. Tendrils of fire shot through Starsky as his lover brought him to a frenzy with his expert fingers, tongue and lips.

Hutch's hands were everywhere, stroking, caressing, reviving forgotten places on his body only Hutch knew how to bring to life. With his heightened senses, Starsky thought he could feel every bristle of Hutch's jaw as it rubbed against his belly, acutely aware of every square inch of skin he possessed, awakened, brought to life by Hutch's kisses, Hutch's tongue on his skin.

And still, Hutch hadn't touched him *down there*. And he needed it, so bad.

"Touch me, Hutch. God, please, touch me. Hutch, please—"

The words caught in his throat. He was shaking, chest heaving, oxygen running short in his lungs. Hot waves of pleasure built up inside him, one after another. Hutch took him close, brought him back, took him to the edge again, until Starsky was ready to weep with frustration, whimpering, reduced to pleading with his tormentor.

"Please, Hutch! Touch me. Oh, God, touch me now. I c-can't...I'm gonna...Please, now!"

And then he felt Hutch's tongue circling around the tip of his desperately straining cock, and his whole body jolted as if electrified. He almost came right then. He arched up, convulsively, and his hands clutched at the sheets. A strangled groan reached his ears. He sounded like a creature in pain. Only it was the most delicious pain, the most wonderful torture. Hutch's mouth on his cock, his tongue seeking out the hidden places of him no one knew better than Hutch.

"Hutch—"

Oh God, it felt good. It felt so good. So wonderful. No one but Hutch could make him feel this way.

And finally, *finally*, Hutch sucked him into his warm, wet mouth and took him inside himself—and Starsky jerked with the shock of that devastating touch.

He thought he cried out. An avalanche of sensation rushed over him.

The world wavered out of existence, the ground dropped away. All sense of time and place melted away as he fell, in freefall, into the embrace of pure heat and pleasure. An inferno of pleasure.

Fire danced all around him, licked at his skin, his balls, his cock. He was alight, burning. Hutch was burning him up.

Hutch was killing him...

oooOOOooo

"Starsk. Hey, buddy, you okay?"

He opened his eyes. The world was back; he was no longer falling. Hutch had caught him. He wanted to laugh and cry and shout. Instead, he barely managed to prop his eyes open.

"Welcome back." Hutch hovered above him with an amused expression on his flushed face. "What happened? Where did you go?"

Starsky looked up at him. Every bone in his body had been replaced with putty. He wasn't even sure if he could make his tongue work. "I...don't know. I think I lost it for a minute."

"Yeah, I think you did." Hutch kissed him joyfully. "Must've been one hell of a trip. You okay?"

"I think I'll never *not* be okay now."

Hutch gathered him close. "That's good," he whispered. He closed his eyes, and Starsky pulled together every ounce of his strength to lean over and plant a kiss on his shoulder.

"Okay," he said. "Your turn now."

Hutch laughed a deep golden laugh. "I'm done. I'm good." The glow on his tanned features deepened. "I...came when you did."

"Aw, Hutch, no! I had plans for you!"

Starsky turned in his lover's arms. A profound sense of well-being percolated through every cell in his body. He hadn't felt this alive, this truly and utterly at peace with his body, for so long. The sensation roused him like a drug. His exhaustion fell away from him like a dropped shirt. He felt he could do anything, take on anything.

He started nibbling on Hutch's earlobe. "I want you," he whispered into the shapely ear. "I want to feel you inside me. I want it so bad."

"No, babe, we can't do that yet," Hutch said gently. "We have to wait a while longer before we do anything acrobatic."

"Why? I'm not that fragile anymore. I'm almost back to normal. Okay, I still get tired and have to rest a lot, but I'm up for it." Starsky raised himself up on an

elbow, gazed at Hutch earnestly. "You don't have to be so careful around me anymore."

"Okay, maybe soon," Hutch relented and hauled him back down, and Starsky decided to let it go. For another day or so.

"Very soon," he said and settled down, using Hutch's shoulder for a pillow. "Cause we have a whole six months' catchin' up to do."

oooOOOooo

The next few days passed like a haze burned away in a hot midday sun—the days full of gentle activities, the nights full of slow, cautious lovemaking as they embarked on a journey of rediscovery of each other, exploring the possibilities offered by Starsky's accelerated recovery.

By the end of the second week, they were both bursting with newfound energy, at peace with the world, and desperately in love with each other. The lingering unease in Starsky's mind faded in the presence of the light in Hutch's eyes. Starsky relaxed.

He felt as if he could suddenly see Hutch again—not his friend, partner, caregiver, chauffeur, masseur, and all the other hats Hutch had been juggling lately—but *his* Hutch, golden Hutch, the man he'd fallen in love with almost exactly a year ago.

And now he felt as if was falling in love with him all over again.

It was their last evening away. They'd finally reached San Francisco, where they'd thrown financial caution to the wind and booked themselves into a hotel with a stunning view of the Bay and the Bridge.

Hutch was sitting in an armchair by the window with his eyes closed, plucking a tune from the guitar and humming along, when Starsky came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around him. He stopped short in the middle of the room, struck by the view—Hutch's tall, slender body sprawled at ease, the muscular arms cradling the guitar, the glint of sun on the golden hair, the relaxed face, the beautifully shaped lips...

"Hey, what're you looking at?" Hutch had his eyes open and was grinning at him. "You checking me out?"

Starsky realized he'd been staring. He grinned back. "Yeah. I could look at you all day. You're so beautiful. And all mine. Why's that, Hutch? You could have had anyone."

"Don't want anyone. I just want you."

"Yeah, and that's the weirdest thing. I mean...how did you fall for someone like me?"

"What d'you mean, someone like you?"

"Well, look at you—all tall and tan and gorgeous, like a young god. You should be out there with some blond chick with long legs and big boobs. Instead, you fall for a hairy guy with a Jewish mother and a serious five o'clock shadow."

Hutch grinned. "It was the five o'clock shadow that did it." He leaned the guitar against the wall. "What's all this, anyway? You're not fishing for compliments, are you?"

Starsky grimaced. "Hardly. Not while I'm wearin' this crazy Frankenstein patchwork here." His hand went to his chest, an almost unconscious gesture. The scars had healed into interlacing ridges of puckered flesh and discolored skin only partly obscured by a patchy regrowth of the formerly luxuriant fur on his chest.

Hutch frowned. He unfolded his long limbs from the chair, walked over to Starsky, and reached out to place his fingertips on the top scar, the one that ran from chest to collar bone. "You still worried about that? You want to know what I see when I look at you?" He kissed the scar lightly. "I see the most beautiful man in the world."

"Yeah, but you're in love. That doesn't count. Love makes you blind."

"I wish I could show you what I mean."

"Hey, it's okay. I'm dealing with it. Least this way I can be sure I'll turn every woman's head when I take off my shirt on the beach next summer." The small flippancy foundered at the trace of bitterness in his voice.

When he turned to pick up his T-shirt, Hutch stopped him with a hand on his arm. "No, wait. Stay there. Sit down."

"What? Why?"

"I got an idea. I want to draw you. I want to show you what I see when I look at you."

"Draw me? What, like this? You crazy?"

"No more than usual." Hutch cast his eyes around the room, energized. His gaze fell on the bed. He pulled away the top cover and mussed the sheets a little. "Here," he said. "Sit down here. No, *lie* down here. And take off that damn towel."

Bemused, Starsky sat on the edge of the bed. "You really want to draw me?"

"Sure do." Hutch went to the door. "I'll go get my sketch book from the car. Don't go away. Lie down there and make yourself comfortable."

Feeling self-conscious, Starsky dropped the towel and stretched out on top of the sheets. Trust Hutch to come up with another harebrained scheme. He seemed to be full of them lately. Starsky toyed with the idea of foiling the plan by getting up and putting some clothes on when Hutch returned, looking purposeful, the sketch book under his arm.

"Okay," he said in his best business voice. "I want you to lie down like *this*, and turn your head like *that*. Good. Lift your chin a little. Yeah, that's good."

He went away and started fussing with the lights, and Starsky watched with amusement as he turned on all the lamps and dragged them from their homes to new locations closer to the bed until Starsky found himself bathed in a glow of electric light and Hutch was satisfied with the result.

"And now don't move."

Hutch brought his chair forward, sat down, rested the pad on his raised knee and started sketching.

At first, Starsky felt just a little silly. There he was, naked and completely exposed, in front of his fully dressed partner who scrutinized his every body contour as if he were a prime specimen on an examining table.

"Hey," he said, "shouldn't I have at least a fig leaf or something? I mean I don't have any scars down *there*."

No response.

Starsky tried again. "Promise me you won't let that sketch fall into the wrong hands. Imagine Dobey seeing that lyin' around."

No response. Hutch wore an expression as if he were chewing over a particularly complex case file and didn't even look up. But Starsky didn't give up so easily. "You should get naked, too. Then at least I'd have something to look at."

"Stop fidgeting, will you?" was all he got in return.

Starsky made a face, sighed and fell silent. This was going to be a long, boring session.

But after a while, Starsky found to his surprise that he was beginning to enjoy himself. He had Hutch's undivided attention, and the way Hutch's keen eyes raked over every inch of his naked body made him feel unexpectedly excited. As he watched Hutch's hand move deftly over the paper, outlining the shape of his body and limbs, he could almost imagine Hutch's fingers brushing lightly over his naked skin instead.

The thought was immensely arousing. A small shiver of erotic pleasure traveled down Starsky's spine and right down to his toes. He felt his lips twitch into a smile. Maybe posing for Hutch wasn't such a crazy idea after all.

Another part of his body nodded agreement.

"Um, Hutch?"

"Hmm?"

"You said don't move. What about...uhm...?" He glanced down at his unruly cock.

Hutch looked up, followed his glance, and broke into the widest grin. "Perfect. Hold it like that. Don't move."

"Hold it?" Starsky said, outraged. "How do you expect me to—"

"Well, do your best, will you? This is brilliant."

When Hutch finally put down the pad, Starsky flopped onto his back, exhausted.

"C'mon, let's see it," he said, and held out a hand. Hutch acted shy for a minute—Starsky had been expecting that—then came over, sat down on the edge of the bed and held out the pad.

Starsky took it eagerly.

What he saw made the flippant comment on his lips die away, and for a timeless moment, he was utterly lost for words.

The drawing showed him sprawling languorously on the bed, dressed only in his necklace of coins, crowned with a halo of lively curls, and with all of his assets on full display. One arm pillowed the curly head, the other rested lightly on a shapely thigh, the fingers almost, but not quite touching the nest from which rose a shaft of impressive dimensions. The network of scars spidered across his chest like a living thing, each individual ridge lovingly drawn, every puckered mark clearly defined.

Hutch had hidden nothing, airbrushed nothing away.

An aura of power radiated from the drawing. Of masculine strength and rugged, handsome beauty. The drawing was an ode to Starsky's body, a love song to every scar, a declaration of love and physical attraction.

But that wasn't all. There was the smile. Not the wide beam showing a full array of teeth or the lopsided grin that Starsky was accustomed to seeing in snapshots of himself, but a seductive, inviting, almost secretive little smile. A smile full of trust, and love, and a promise of eternity.

Starsky couldn't imagine smiling like that at anyone other than Hutch. He blinked at the sudden moisture clouding his vision.

"Damn," he said, his voice rough. "You must really love me."

"I think I've loved you forever."

Starsky pulled him down on top of him and kissed him on the mouth. "Eleven years and counting."

"No," Hutch said. "Forever."

Chapter Eight

They arrived back home in the afternoon of the following day after a long, hard drive straight down from San Francisco.

Leaving California's coastal beauty for LA's smog-bound freeways hadn't been easy, especially for Hutch. But after two weeks of sunshine, fun and carefree living, the weather was turning chilly, their funds were running low, and Starsky was ready to go home.

Secretly, he knew, so was Hutch. The big lummoX might pretend to be Minnesota's answer to Daniel Boone, but Starsky had never been fooled by that act. Hutch was as much a city boy as himself, however much he enjoyed spending his spare time communing with the great outdoors.

"Home, sweet home," Starsky said wearily and set down the two shopping bags Hutch had allowed him to carry up the stairs. Then he watched with amusement as Hutch dumped the last of their gear on the floor and made a beeline for the balcony to check on his plants—watered in their absence by Emma Martyn from next door.

Starsky stowed the perishables in the fridge and started sorting through the mail Emma had piled on the table for them. Hutch came in and joined him, and for a few minutes, only the sound of ripping envelopes and rustling paper filled the room.

"Letter from Kathy. Letter from Bill. Postcard from Linda from Hawaii," said Starsky and put those in a separate pile. "And there's a note here from Huggy saying to call him the minute we get back. Sounds urgent."

"It's probably about the house," Hutch said distractedly, sorting through a fistful of letters. "Maybe he's discovered it's fallen down and not worth a cent. I wonder..."

Hutch was silent for so long that Starsky looked around at him and raised an eyebrow. Hutch returned the glance, looking worried.

"I wonder if we did the right thing after all." He held the letters out to Starsky. "Our latest bank statements. We're \$500 overdrawn. And there're three reminders for overdue bills." He paused. "I'm beginning to think we were a little hasty when we sold that house so cheaply."

"A thousand was all Huggy could scrape together at short notice. It wasn't the time to haggle over the price."

"Then maybe we shouldn't have gone on vacation."

"Aw Hutch, don't say that. That vacation was just what we both needed. And it's not as if we've been livin' it up."

"Yeah, I know." Hutch reached for his jacket.

"Where're you goin'?"

"To the bank. See if they'll give us a loan."

"I got a better idea."

Hutch stopped in the doorway, turned around. "Yeah?"

Starsky smiled. "Yeah. Relax, it's easy. You get on the phone to Dobby right away and tell him you'll be back at work on Monday. We'll get the first paycheck next week. The bills can wait that long." He grinned at Hutch. "It's time you got back on the streets. Clean up the city. LA's fallin' apart 'cause you're on extended leave."

Hutch stared at him. "Back to work? But I can't. What about you?"

"Well, what *about* me? Hey, I'm doin' all right. I can manage on my own now. You don't have to spend every minute of the day lookin' after me."

"Maybe not every minute, but I'll be damned if I leave you alone for the entire day."

"You said you'd get a three-month leave of absence. That's what we agreed. We always knew you'd be goin' back."

"But not yet. It's much too soon. You still need help with all sorts of—"

Starsky suppressed a spark of irritation. "Hutch, I'm doin' fine. I'm mobile. I can take myself to the clinic and the gym. I can fix my own meals. You don't need to wait on me hand and foot anymore."

"It's not just that." Hutch threw his jacket on a chair and stalked back into the room, every movement screaming his protest. "What if something happens to you while I'm away?"

"What d'you think is gonna happen to me?"

"You could have a setback or breathing problems or another allergic reaction or something. What would you do then?"

"I'd get on the phone and call for help," Starsky said reasonably. "I'm a big boy. And I won't have a setback. Not anymore. You've seen how much I can do now. And you were happy enough to let me do it when we were away on vacation."

"That was different!" Hutch said sharply. "That wasn't in LA. And I was with you the whole time. What...what if you get attacked or have an accident or something?"

"Why on earth would I get attacked?"

"You did before, didn't you?" Hutch threw out.

"That's when I was a cop." Starsky felt his own temper rising. This was simply ridiculous. "No one's gonna attack me now. But look, if you're that worried about my safety, maybe you should help me get my gun back, on a personal license, if necessary. Then at least I can protect myself."

"Your *gun*? You haven't handled one since...*Gunther*. You can't go out there with a gun! You haven't had any practice."

Starsky bristled at the peremptory tone. "Well, then I'm gonna get some, go up to the range and put in a few hours each week—"

Hutch's voice rose. "You're in no shape to—" He broke off. Started again in a lower, tightly controlled voice. "It's too soon for that. You could damage something."

"I got shot over six months ago," Starsky said, exasperated, his own voice rising. "When I was shot in the restaurant, I was back in training after two *weeks*."

"That was *before* Gunther, dammit!"

"And stop sayin' that, will you!"

"Saying what?"

"*Before Gunther*. You say it all the time. *Before* Gunther. *After* Gunther. *Since* Gunther! Gunther's become your only point of reference. You have to stop sayin' that. He's not the dividing line in our lives."

Hutch stopped short. "It's just...It was such a close call. It's changed so much."

"We've had plenty of close calls before, and they've all changed something. But we've never said "before Forest", or "after Humphries", or "since Bellamy" before." Starsky started pacing the room. "Gunther's name is in the air all the time, d'you realize that? And he'll be with us for so much longer. We still have to go through the trial, and it'll be months before the case goes to court. D'you want us to live with that man in the room all that time?"

"Okay, okay! I won't say it again."

Starsky stopped in front of Hutch. "We've gone through all this shit before. Plenty of times. Dammit, Hutch, you almost died on me a few times, and it's never stopped *you* from gettin' back into training as soon as you possibly could."

"This is different!" Hutch shouted. "Closer than anything that's happened before. You have to give it more time. It's too soon. You've only been out of the hospital for a few months. And you've come so far in that short time. You've recovered so well—"

Starsky's patience snapped. Suddenly, without warning, everything about the situation—Hutch's obsessive protectiveness, Hutch's unrelenting vigilance, Hutch's insistence on reining him in at every opportunity—came together and combined to make him blow his top.

"And that's enough for you, right?" he lashed out. "C'mon, say it. 'Cause that's what you're thinkin', ain't ya? I'm not dead. I'm out of the hospital. I'm here with you and functioning. And that's enough for you, right? That's all you've ever asked for."

Hutch recoiled, his face chalk-white. Starsky ignored it. "Well, it ain't enough for *me*, you understand? It ain't enough!"

He stalked to the window, turned, stalked back. Frustration bubbled inside him. Goddammit, he'd been treading on egg shells around Hutch for far too long, tiptoeing around the issue. Chafing at Hutch's leash with no relief in sight. It was time to spell it out, tell Hutch where he stood.

"I want it all, Hutch," he said. "I want everything Gunther took away. I want it back. I want my life back." He walked up to Hutch until they were face to face. "I want to go back to how things were before. *Before Gunther*, Hutch, d'you understand? I don't want to go through the rest of my life knowing the bastard had the power to turn our lives upside down and take away from us what we loved doin'. I don't want to give him that satisfaction. I want to try for reinstatement, and I gotta start preparing for that."

Hutch grabbed him by the arms. "You're not ready for that yet!" he shouted.

"If you had anything to say about it, I'd never be ready!"

Hutch's voice turned dark and dangerous. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

Starsky shook off Hutch's restraining hands. "That if it was for you, maybe I'd never be ready to do things on my own. You just want to keep me here, safe at home, under constant supervision. Never let out on my own. Locked up if you had your way—"

"It's not safe out there!" Hutch yelled.

"No, it's not safe," Starsky yelled back. "It's not safe anywhere. But what do you wanna do about it? Huh? You wanna wrap me up in a blanket? Never let me

out of your sight? Lock me in this apartment every time you go out? To keep me safe?"

"Dammit, Starsky—"

"Life ain't safe, Hutch. There ain't no safe place anywhere. You of all people should know that. Dammit, Bellamy got me in my apartment when I was asleep in my own bed. Not even a police garage is safe. And you were right there, five feet away when it happened, and there was nothing you could've done. Nothing, you understand? You can't be with me every minute of the day. You can't keep me safe forever."

He found that he had Hutch's arms in a vice-like grip. "You gotta let me take my life back." He shook Hutch a little. "You have to let me go!"

Hutch's eyes flashed dark with anger and frustration and something else cold and desperate. He broke Starsky's hold by stepping away from him.

"All right," he said. "All right. If that's what you want. You got it. Go and take your life back. Don't let me stand in your way any longer."

He turned, grabbed his jacket and slammed out of the house.

oooOOOooo

The door fell shut behind Hutch. Two seconds later, the phone rang. Starsky cursed and yanked the receiver from its cradle. "What?" he barked.

"Starsky, is Hutch there?" Huggy, sounding harassed.

"No, you've missed him." Outside, Hutch's ancient Ford sputtered to life and screeching away. *Damn!*

"Where the hell have you been? Didn't you get my note?"

"We got back less than an hour ago. Where's the fire anyway? You don't sound like yourself."

"In case you hadn't heard, the city's gone up in smoke while you were away. Look, I got something for Hutch he should hear right away. It's from one of Hutch's snitches."

Hutch's snitches? That hurt. It had always been *their* snitches before.

After the hurt came the anger. *Hutch's snitches, goddammit!* Furious, Starsky gripped the phone. "Well, Hutch ain't here. But I am, in case you hadn't noticed. Used to be you'd talk to either one of us when there was a crisis."

"Hey, hey, keep your shirt on. I'm an innocent party here."

With difficulty, Starsky wrestled his anger to the ground. "Sorry, Hug, it's been a long day. Tell me what you've got and I'll see what I can do."

"Well, I'm not sure—"

"Goddammit, don't you start, too. It's not enough that I have Hutch in my neck all day, tryin' to rein me in? I'm fine. I'm better. I can handle a simple phone call!"

"Okay, okay. But it's gonna be more'n just a simple phone call."

"Yeah?"

"Okay, listen. This guy's been tryin' to get a hold of you. Goes by the name of Jarvis Belltower."

"Never heard of him."

"He said you'd say that. He told me to tell you that you'd know him as Sly Jarvis."

"Sly? Course I know him. We had, uh, dealings with him a coupla years ago. I thought he'd cleared outta town."

"And now he's back. And he has information he wants to unload to Hutch. But listen to this. This turkey's scared! Dead scared. He won't say what about, but my guess is he's gotten himself involved in this gang war."

"Wait, wait a minute. Why'll he only talk to Hutch? He could've gone to Rob and Mike, or Sims and Babcock, if he's that scared. You know they can all be trusted."

"Hutch put out word on the street months ago that he'd pay top price for every piece of information on Gunther. Sly must've heard about that. I guess he's just after the best deal."

Gunther. Would the man never cease to haunt them?

"He's been lyin' low for five days, waiting for you guys to come back," Huggy went on. "But he's gettin' kinda desperate. I got a call from him a minute ago, and he said they're after him and they're gettin' closer. And before you ask—no, I got no idea who 'they' are."

Starsky frowned. "Okay, where's he hiding? We'll go and see him as soon as Hutch is back."

"How long is *that* gonna take?"

Starsky sighed. Some of his anger evaporated when he thought of the furious Hutch who'd torn out of the apartment. He didn't think Hutch'd be back any time soon.

"I don't know," he said into the phone. "Could be a while."

Huggy mercifully refrained from mentioning the obvious. That if Starsky didn't know, then something strange was going on. Instead he said, "That might be too late. Belltower's gettin' antsy. He says if I can't get a hold of you, he'd clear outta town today, lie low. He says he can't risk hanging around any longer."

Starsky thought that over. "Okay, gimme the details. I'll go and see him."

"You sure?"

"Yes, dammit, I'm sure."

oooOOOooo

As Starsky put the car in drive, he experienced a twinge of a bad feeling. What if Hutch came back, saw his note and went ballistic? Hutch wouldn't even be able to reach him. The Torino's radio, another casualty of Gunther's assassination attempt, had never been replaced.

Starsky suddenly realized that he hadn't been out of the house on his own in over six months. Someone had always been with him. Hutch had been adamant about that. And here he was taking the Torino across town in solo pursuit of a criminal investigation.

Hutch'll be mad as hell...

Yes, but what else could he do? If Sly had information on the gang war, the opportunity was too good to pass up. And since Hutch wasn't there and the matter couldn't wait and the damn snitch wouldn't talk to anyone else...

Who're you kiddin'? You want to do this. You can't wait to get back out there, on the streets, pretending you're still a cop.

Starsky quashed the small inner voice. Fueled by a rebellious mood, he aimed the Torino in the direction of the garment district and put his foot down. He'd show Hutch what he was capable of. If Hutch couldn't be swayed by arguments, maybe a small demonstration would do the trick.

He pushed the nagging doubts aside and concentrated on the job on hand.

Sly Jarvis. Starsky remembered him well. Sly was a first-rate slimeball who would sell his own grandmother to the devil. They'd used him twice, reluctantly—each time because he held information no one else, not even Huggy, had been able to come up with. He never wanted money, just information, presumably to sell to an even higher-paying clientele. He was a slight, pinched-looking little man with the most perceptive mind and a shrewd gleam in his eyes. Few men had ever been more appropriately nicknamed.

Starsky took the Torino into Gervais Street and parked it around the corner from the address Huggy had provided—one of the seedier apartment buildings

where rooms could be rented for a day or an hour, where shady deals of all kinds were transacted, where people came and went at all hours of the day, no questions asked, complete anonymity assured.

No hiding in the sewers for Sly. He liked a reasonable amount of comfort, even when he was on the run and scared out of his wits. He also knew that sometimes there was no better place to hide than in a crowd of people.

Starsky climbed the creaking stairs to the fifth floor, stopping only once to catch his breath. Dark, dank hallways with peeling paint and cracked linoleum floors lead to flights of flimsy doors from behind which emanated sounds and smells familiar from many similar visits to equally seedy apartment blocks. A fleeting memory from months ago shot through his mind—walking down just such a hallway, Hutch's movements a mirror image of his own, gun in hand, heightened senses on full alert, the only known factor in the situation the partner by his side.

And here he was without a partner, a badge or even a gun. Damn.

Well, he'd get the information from Sly and be gone in less than ten minutes.

Starsky knocked on the door of Room 531, twice, pause, twice. No reply. He knocked again, no reply. He tried the handle and the door opened. Every cop instinct roared awake inside him. He flattened himself against the wall, let the door swing all the way back.

The room was empty. A dim light filtered through two small, grimy windows and illuminated an unmade bed, a table, and two rickety chairs. A half-open door showed the crumbling fittings of a bathroom. The only other door had to be a connection to the neighboring room.

Sly's escape route.

Starsky sighed, went in and closed the door behind him. "Sly. Come on out, it's me. Starsky. You wanted to see us."

The connecting door led to another similarly furnished room. This, too, was empty. The exit door opened onto a passage at right angles with the first. At the far end, a second set of stairs descended to street level. There was even a fire escape located conveniently close to one of the windows.

Sly had all the angles covered. Starsky retraced his steps. By the time Sly had sneaked around the corner and back into the door of number 531, Starsky was in position behind it, waiting.

"Hutch? Starsky? That you?"

"Hold it right there! Don't move."

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot! I don't know nothin'!"

"Relax, Sly, it's me."

"Starsky!" The thin wiry man collapsed onto the bed, hands shaking. "You almost gave me a heart attack. For a moment I thought—"

Starsky closed the door. "Maybe you should just open the door like normal people do when someone knocks."

"I...Well...This city ain't safe right now, and I thought—"

The pinched face looked shrunken and unhealthy. The face of someone who had survived on a starvation diet of take-outs for too long. Folds of skin sagged from sallow cheeks onto a wrinkly neck. The grey eyes flicked around restlessly. At that moment, Sly Jarvis looked anything but sly. In fact, Sly looked old. And terrified.

"Huggy said you had information for us."

"Yeah, I—" Sly jumped up and walked to the window, peered out nervously. "Look, I gotta get outta here. They're lookin' for me. They're getting closer. I gotta get outta here."

"Sly, calm down. Who's looking for you?"

"Just...a buncha guys. Look, I got stuff. Good stuff. About the shootings in town. I can tell you who's behind them. But it'll cost you."

"You want money?"

"A deal. I wanna make a deal. I want witness protection. I want your word that you'll get me to a safe place where they can't get at me."

"Who're they?"

"I'll tell you. But first get me outta here."

"You gotta give me some answers first."

"I'm not sayin' nothin' until I'm in police custody."

Starsky sighed. What had Sly gotten himself into that had put him in this state? He wished Hutch was there. Together, they would've had the information out of him in no time. Hutch did a mean "bad cop".

He tried the reasonable approach. "You don't seriously expect me to mobilize the cops unless I get some information first, do you? You know you gotta gimme something."

"You don't understand," Sly pleaded. "Every snitch in town is scared outta their skins. Cops are all over them, but no one's talkin'. I'm riskin' my life here tryin' to help you guys out."

"Oh, come off it. You're in this for your own ends, and we both know it. You think we can get you a special deal? Well, think again. Hutch and me, we're not even on the force anymore. There ain't nothin' we can do for you right now." He walked to the door. "I got better things to do. I'm outta here."

"No, wait! Okay, I...I'll tell you. But if they found out I was talkin' to you—"

"If who found out?"

"Well, I—"

"Who?"

"If I tell you—"

"*Who?*"

"Vic Monte and his gang."

Vic Monte! *Goddammit, Vic Monte?*

"You saying Vic Monte's involved in the gang war?" Starsky said, incredulous. "He left the state years ago. There's no evidence that he's back."

"He came back after your partner removed James Gunther from the scene. They were rivals for years. It was the perfect opportunity for Vic to try and take over his turf."

"How d'you know all that? You that close to him?"

"I've had...dealings with him," Sly said, not looking at Starsky.

Shifty.

"Dealings, huh? You got anything to substantiate what you've just told me? I need details. I can't take you into police custody on the strength of your say-so."

"You promise to take me in? You promise you'll arrange witness protection for me?"

"I promise I'll do what I can. That's the best I can do for you. Now spill."

Sly swallowed, then accepted the inevitable.

"Right, okay. I-I been working for Vic Monte for a coupla years now. Just doin' odd jobs for him, that's all. I never got involved in nothin' heavy. I never killed no one!"

"Save it for the lawyers, Sly. What d'you have on him?"

"He's plannin' something big. And he has help. Last week, this guy came to see him. He said he had a business proposition for Vic. I was right there when it happened. I heard the whole thing."

"A guy? What kinda guy? He have a name?"

"Some drug dealer from Colombia. I don't know his name. I swear, I don't. No one ever said his name."

"Well, dammit, what did he look like?"

"Uh, tall. Dark hair. Mid-thirties. He had a couple of dogs with him, real vicious brutes. Oh, and he was wearing this necklace with three long teeth on it, or grizzly claws or something—"

"Shark teeth," Starsky said with a sinking heart. "There're shark teeth, and he's known as the Shark. What the hell did he want from Monte?"

"A deal. He wanted Monte's help to track down a shipment he sent to Gunther in May. Heroin. Worth millions, he said. He said it went missing in the confusion of Gunther's arrest, and he hasn't been paid for it yet. He said one of Gunther's men must've seen an opportunity to do away with it when Gunther was arrested. The problem is that he can't trace 'em, 'cause the cops moved in and demolished Gunther's network, and a lot of the information got lost or ended up in the hands of the police."

Once started, Sly didn't seem able to stop. The words gushed out like water from a high-pressure hose. "This guy, this *Shark*, he said the shipment hasn't hit the streets yet. He said that means the guy who took it hasn't had a chance to shift it yet. It's probably sittin' in a warehouse somewhere, hidden away. He thought Vic might have a few leads since this is his home turf and he knows all about Gunther's organization, and who ended up in jail, and who's still around."

Sly came up for air. "And in return he said he'd help Vic clear the region of the Sugarhills. Y'know, the Cohen gang from the East Coast?"

Jesus Christ. Jesus. Starsky's head spun. This was gold, pure gold. He'd hit the jackpot.

"Okay, I'm with you," he said, careful not to let his voice and face betray his elation. "But that doesn't explain why Vic Monte is after you."

Sly squirmed a little. "Well, y'see, it's because of the Cohen twins. I done business with them before, when they tried to get a foot into LA three years ago, and..."

"Is there anyone you haven't done business with?" Starsky stopped abruptly. "Oh, wait. Don't tell me you went to the Cohens and spilled the beans? You did? You told them that Vic Monte and the Shark are ganging up on them? Dammit, Sly, these guys have some of the most powerful organized crime outfits in the country behind them and you tried to play one against the other? That wasn't very clever of you, was it? Those guys are way out of your league."

"Starsky, I had to. I had to warn them, didn't I, after everything they did for me? I'd have gone to jail three years ago if it hadn't been for Elijah Cohen."

"How touching. C'mon, spit out the truth. Eli Cohen pays his snitches a better rate than Vic Monte does. That's the real reason, ain't it?" Starsky turned away, disgusted. "No wonder Monte is after your hide."

He paced to the window, his mind working furiously. Vic Monte and the Shark. Joining forces. Bad news. Bad.

Especially for the Sugarhills. And for the beleaguered police force fighting to stem the tide of escalating violence.

"Why the hell didn't you go to the cops sooner?" he said and turned around.

"Can't trust them. Half of 'em are on the take—you know that. They're just as likely to sell me out to Monte than any one of his own goons."

"Come, Sly, that's a pathetic excuse. You could've gone straight to Captain Dobey. You know he can be trusted. Why come to us? As I said, Hutch and me ain't even on the force anymore."

A ghost of the familiar sly look slithered across the narrow face. "I heard what happened to Lionel Rigger. I figured I'd be safe with you 'cause you wouldn't let anything like that happen a second time."

Starsky stiffened. "You figured that, huh? Okay, you wanna know what / figure? / figure you've had several irons in the fire and were waiting for the best offer to roll in. Hutch offered top price for information on Gunther, so you thought you'd cash in on that. And now your other deals have fallen through, and you've realized you're runnin' outta time and the dogs are at your heels." Starsky shook his head regretfully. "/ figure you're losin' your grip."

Sly shifted uncomfortably, and Starsky took pity on him. "Okay, this is what we'll do," he said. "I'll take you to the station right now and introduce you to a coupla detectives you can spill your story to."

Sly came alive. "No, no. Oh no!" His hands flapped in rejecting movements. "I ain't leavin' this room until the cops get here. How're you gonna protect me out there? Look, you don't even pack a gun. Anyone could take potshots at me. Oh no, I'm safer in here on my own than out there with you. I want a police escort when I leave this place. Coupla black-and-whites, real officers with guns, ya know."

"Suit yourself. I'm gonna go downstairs, make a coupla phone calls."

oooOOOooo

Starsky saw them walking through the door the moment he set foot in the lobby. They had *hit men* written all over them. Three—big men, burly, but light on their feet like true fighters. They moved with an air of menace and single-

minded purpose. They didn't even bother to conceal their weapons. There was no doubt in Starsky's mind that these had to be Monte's men.

Starsky backtracked hastily. They hadn't seen him yet. Maybe if he was quick...

Cursing the broken elevator, he raced back up the stairs, not stopping for breath this time. A man and a woman came downstairs toward him.

"Go back upstairs," Starsky hissed at them. "There's gonna be trouble. Go inside your room, lock the door, and don't come out until the police give the all-clear. Hurry!" They gasped, turned and ran back upstairs, Starsky at their heels.

Room 531 was locked. Starsky banged on the door and rattled the handle. "Sly! Open up! You gotta get outta here right now. They're here."

There was no reply. Starsky darted around the corner to Sly's second entrance door. This, too, was locked.

Two seconds later, there was a thud and a crash and the sound of splintering wood, followed by a terrified squeal. Dammit, they'd come up the stairs behind him and kicked in Sly's front door. Starsky's hand went inside his jacket, an unconscious movement, going for the gun, forgetting. Coming up empty. He flattened himself against the wall and peered around the corner.

Doors were opening up and down the hallway, and curious faces peered out. Halfway down the passage, an elderly man shuffled from his room, oblivious to the commotion, and proceeded to lock his door with slow, clumsy movements.

Starsky cursed. "Close your doors and don't come out," he hissed to the curious faces nearest him. He ran toward the man. "Sir. Sir? You gotta get back inside. Sir?" The man looked at him with confusion and apprehension.

I don't have time for this, Starsky thought. He grabbed the keys from gnarled hands, succeeded in unlocking the door again, and pushed the startled man inside. "Stay in there. There's trouble out here. The police'll tell you when it's safe to come out."

A shot rang out behind him, like the sharp crack of a whip, and another. A high-pitched scream. Starsky raced back down the narrow hallway—all the doors now firmly shut—and skidded to a halt beside the splintered door. His breath came in sharp, rough-edged bursts. He ignored the sudden burning pain in his chest, crept up to the opening, knowing there was nothing he could do to save Sly. No badge, no gun, no backup...

The third shot followed almost instantly. There was a thud as of a body hitting the ground. Starsky closed his eyes briefly. *Dammit, Sly, why didn't you go to the cops sooner?*

He couldn't help Sly now. Sly was beyond all help, and the next priority was to get Sly's information to safety. If his killers saw him and connected him in any way to Sly, his own life wouldn't be worth a dime. But it was already too late to

cover the endless distance to the stairs. Heavy footsteps neared the door. He wouldn't even make it to the corner.

Starsky looked wildly around for a hiding place. Nothing. Only the long, narrow hallway with doors firmly shut on either side. He wouldn't find any shelter there. And running was not an option, only an invitation for a bullet between the shoulder blades.

At the last moment, Starsky turned and leaned heavily against one of the closed doors, shoulders hunched, head down, fumbling drunkenly with the keys in his hand, pretending to look for the right one. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw the three men stepping from Sly's room and striding down the passage toward him, the one at the front holstering a still smoking gun. Starsky slowly backed away with what he hoped was a convincing look of terror on his face.

They barely glanced at him, mistaking him for a resident. The first, the gunman—a solid mass of a man, white-blond, pale-eyed, with a near albino-like complexion—rough-shouldered past him, then almost as an afterthought grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed him against the door frame.

The pain was excruciating. Fire exploded in Starsky's chest, and he fell on his knees, gasping with pain. Boots with metal toe caps aimed and found their target—once, twice, again—as Starsky curled up on the floor with his arms over his chest, trying to protect the most vulnerable part of his body.

Then they were gone and their footsteps faded away at the end of the hall. The whole encounter had taken no more than ten seconds.

Starsky lay still for a long time, drawing ragged breaths. The passage was eerily silent; everyone was lying low, riding out the storm. He couldn't expect any help from that quarter.

Using all his strength and determination, he pushed himself to his knees, and then to his feet. Black dots darted before his eyes. He leaned against the wall, pressed both hands against his chest, and forced himself to breathe—deeply, slowly, steadily. Gradually, the black dots faded and his vision cleared.

He staggered down the passage to the door of Room 531, holding onto the wall for support. Sly was in the back room, beneath the open window that lead to the fire escape. He was lying on his back on the bare floor, arms thrown wide. Blood seeped from a wound high on the right shoulder, another from a hit in the right thigh. Minor injuries.

Starsky dropped to his knees beside him, mindless of the puddles of blood on the floor. Reached to check for a pulse. Then noticed the tiny, neat, bloodless hole in Sly's head, singed black around the edges.

Sly had been killed with the single shot to the temple, execution style.

His many escape options hadn't done him any good in the face of Vic Monte's swift, cool retaliation. For once in his life, Sly had been too sly for his own good.

Outside, the welcome whine of approaching police sirens sounded. Someone, presumably the manager, had called the cops. Starsky crawled to the wall and slumped heavily against it. The fire in his chest and shoulder flared up and radiated out until it engulfed his entire body. For a moment, the world went grey around him.

The next thing he knew was a familiar dark face peering anxiously at him from a short distance away. A hand gripped his shoulder.

"Starsky? Starsky, are you all right? What're you doing here? What the hell happened?"

The world wavered back into existence. He reached out, grabbed the uniformed figure by the arm. "Jordan," he croaked. "Help me up and take me to the station. I got information for Captain Dobey."

oooOOOooo

Letting Officer Tom Jordan drive the Torino to the station was Starsky's only concession to the blurry dots in his line of vision. The last time he'd been there, they'd had to take him away in an ambulance. He'd always known that if he ever returned, he would walk through the main doors unaided and with his head held high.

News of his imminent arrival had already filtered through the building. An entire welcoming committee had lined up at the door—Dobey, Minnie, Menendez, Babcock, and all the others still at work this late in the day.

Starsky looked around in vain for Hutch.

"I gotta make a phone call," he said when they'd installed him at his former desk—hastily cleared of all signs of someone else's occupancy.

"I've already tried Hutch at home," Minnie said. "He's not in."

Terrific. "Try Huggy's, will ya? And his car. Maybe he has the radio on."

"Starsky, what happened?" Dobey said beside him. "What were you doing there? We're gonna have to take a statement from you."

Oh yeah. Of course. This wasn't his case. He wasn't the detective in charge; he was just a witness. Starsky looked around the squad room. More than six months, and somehow it felt like yesterday that he and Hutch had played a game of ping pong in this very room.

"Nice color scheme," he said, and they all looked at him as if he'd just landing from the moon.

The pain in his chest settled down to a dull ache as he relaxed into the familiar surroundings. It felt good to be back amid the sounds and smells of the squad room, the ringing phones, the bustle of cops coming and going, the sense of

action and purpose. He soaked it all up, suddenly aware of how desperately he missed it all.

Eager faces surrounded him. "Tell us what happened."

So he told them.

No one interrupted. And when he was done, there was complete silence—for about three seconds. And then everyone started talking at once.

Vic Monte. In league with the Shark. It answered many questions, and posed so many new ones. Within minutes, the room was abuzz with energy. Dobey stood in the center of the room, gesticulating and issuing a stream of orders. Menendez and Stanton left at a run to check out the crime scene. Babcock started tackling a stack of files on the hunt for further information. Everyone else seemed to be on the phone, talking urgently.

Starsky suppressed a stab of envy and concentrated on the statement Simmons was trying to take from him.

"You couldn't have saved him," Simmons said with reference to Sly, mistaking the look. "Don't feel bad about it. He'd still be alive if he'd come to us sooner."

"Did he say how Vic Monte found out about his double-dealing activities?" Babcock interrupted from across the room. "And why the Cohens left him out to dry?"

"No," Starsky said. "I wish I'd asked. There was so much more he could've told us."

"You already got more than we did in weeks of chasing snitches across town."

Dobey finished bellowing instructions and fell back into the chair beside him. "Good work, Starsky," he beamed. "But where was Hutch?"

Yes, where was he?

"I gotta go home," Starsky said, struggling to his feet. "Hutch'll be hopping mad when he finds out." The adrenaline was wearing off, and he suddenly had a very bad feeling in his gut. Hutch wouldn't just be mad, he'd be furious.

Minnie appeared beside him. "I've just reached Huggy," she said. "He said Hutch called him not fifteen minutes ago. He told Hutch where you went, and Hutch is on his way there."

Worse and worse. Hutch would find a crime scene full of cops, a hornet's nest of residents clamoring for a view, a splintered door, and a dead man lying in his blood. And then Jordan would fill him in on the details.

Furious wouldn't even start to cover it.

A wave of dizziness swept over Starsky, and he fell back into the chair, gritting his teeth against a sudden searing pain in his chest. For a second, he thought he'd faint, and it took every ounce of his willpower to stay upright in his chair in the presence of all the people in the room.

Can't do that. Can keel over in the middle of the squad room.

How was he going to get out of there without losing face?

I'm not leaving this place in an ambulance again!

He'd have to wait and hold out for Hutch. Hutch would know what to do.

oooOOOooo

By the time the swing doors burst open and Hutch tore into the room, Starsky was holding onto his act with every fiber of his body. He looked up, relief already sprawling warm and heavy in his gut, when he caught a glimpse of the look in his partner's eyes—and all thoughts of his own predicament spilled from his mind like water from an overturned tumbler.

Hutch looked...*wild*. Not on the outside, not for anyone else to see, but Starsky read the raw panic in his eyes as clearly as words written on paper.

Starsky remembered that he had Sly's blood all over him. He remembered their quarrel and the terrible things he'd said to Hutch that afternoon. He remembered Hutch's unresolved fears and sleepwalking nights. And he suddenly understood, in the flash of that single glimpse, what he should have known all along—that whatever the problem was, he hadn't solved it. He'd made it worse. Maybe much worse.

He remembered a lot of things in the flash of that moment. Hutch's patience. Hutch's selflessness and dedication. His ceaseless efforts to keep his partner from harm through the long months of his rehabilitation.

He remembered everything Hutch had done for him. Without Hutch...He wouldn't be alive without Hutch. He would've died, right there on the tarmac, if Hutch hadn't held him with his hands, his eyes, his soul. He would've drifted out on a strange ocean if the power of Hutch's love hadn't pulled him back to shore, back home.

He owed Hutch everything—his life, his recovery, his newfound well-being.

And how had he repaid him? By playing on Hutch's worst fears. By going out, against Hutch's advice and better judgment, to prove...what? That he could still hack it as a cop? That nothing had changed?

He felt a complete heel. He wanted to tell Hutch. Tell him everything. Apologize.

The room was full of people, and all he could do was lock onto Hutch with his eyes. He put everything into that look—his love, his regret, his reassurance.

I'm okay, don't worry. I'm fine.

I'm sorry, Hutch. I really am.

The harsh sheen of panic in Hutch's eyes softened, and Starsky knew he'd been understood. Pain clawed through his chest again and he sagged. Another thing Hutch saw and understood without the need for words. He crossed the room in four strides.

"Captain," he said, his eyes fixed on Starsky, "can we talk to you in private for a minute?"

Starsky almost moaned with relief. Trust Hutch to do the right thing.

Dobey appeared surprised. "Sure. Come into the office." He got to his feet, pushed the door open.

Four feet. *C'mon, Starsk, you c'n do it.*

He heaved himself to his feet. The walls wavered and loomed toward him. Faces distorted to Halloween masks. For a second, he thought he wouldn't make it, and create an embarrassing scene, instead.

A familiar touch on his arm steadied him. Just one touch, no more. The world stopped spinning long enough to allow him to walk through the door to safety without losing face.

Voices floated up behind him.

"See ya, Starsky."

"Good to see you back, Dave."

"Don't be a stranger now."

Then the office door closed behind them, shutting out the world. The pain flared up, a red-hot iron pushed right through his chest. His vision narrowed to a point of darkness, the walls caved in, and he fell. Forward, onto his knees, into Hutch's ready arms.

The last thing he heard was Dobby's gasp of surprise. Then something powered down in his mind, and he went away for a while.

oooOOOooo

A gruff, anxious voice filtered through the fog in his mind when he floated back to reality. "I'm calling an ambulance." Dobby's voice. He couldn't have been out for long then.

"It's okay. He'll be okay." A familiar, beloved voice. Sounding firm and steady. *Hutch.*

Warm, sure hands roamed over his body and eased the agony in his chest. Expert fingers probed his rib cage and stomach for damage. Hutch seemed to know exactly what to look for.

Starsky surrendered to those knowing hands with gratitude.

"We better make sure. Dammit, one moment he's perfectly all right, he's sitting there, chatting away, and the next—" There was the sound of a phone being picked up. Dialing. "I'm calling the hospital."

No. No hospital. Please, Hutch. Not the hospital.

"I don't think that's necessary, Capt'n." Hutch again. Sounding cool now, and calm, and completely in charge of the situation. "It's just a dizzy spell. He's had them before. He's gonna be all right. Just give him a minute."

God, Hutch, I love you.

I'm so sorry...

"C'mon, open those eyes," Hutch's steady voice floated through the clouds in his mind. "Look at me." A warm, familiar hand was on his cheek. "C'mon now, Starsk. You're scaring the captain."

"Hutch, I really think it would be better—" Dobby again.

"Hear that? You better come around or he'll have the paramedics in here in no time, and they'll take you away on a stretcher in full view of everyone."

Okay. Okay then. He blinked. Blinked again. Light rushed in, assaulting his senses. He opened his eyes.

He was on the floor, right in front of the desk. Hutch crouched beside him, one arm hooked securely around his back. Dobby concerned face hovered above, some distance away.

"Can you sit up? Come on, let's get you in a chair."

Strong arms hauled him to his feet. The next moment, he was sitting, firm hands anchoring him in place. "You feeling better now?"

From somewhere, he found his voice again. "'M fine. 'M okay." The world wavered and settled into place. He looked at Hutch. Reached out with a shaking hand. "I'm okay. I'm fine."

"What happened?"

"Vic Monte, Hutch! It's Vic Monte."

"No, to you."

"Nothin'. Nothin' really. They kicked me a coupla times. No damage, I swear. I'll be all right."

"We'll see. Capt'n, can I trouble you for some water? Thanks. Here, take these." A couple of pills appeared in his palm. Hutch still carried a supply of his pain pills? He hadn't known.

He swallowed the pills.

"Now drink." A plastic cup of water pressed against his lips.

He drank.

"I'll take him home now," he heard Hutch say. "We'll come back for his car tomorrow. Don't worry, Capt'n. He's fine."

oooOOOooo

Hutch took him home. He got Starsky down the elevator and into his car, held him steady on the endless journey home, got him up the stairs and into the apartment. He was cool, calm, efficient, handling the crisis like the pro he was.

Too cool. And too calm. And far too distant given how close they were physically. It was nothing Hutch did or said. Starsky felt the distance on an entirely different level, removed from word and action. He felt it soul-deep.

It wasn't what he'd expected. Recriminations, yes. A lecture on the pitfalls of overconfidence, yes. An angry Hutch, yes. But not this cool, calm, distant person who looked like Hutch, but didn't behave like him.

Hutch maneuvered him into the bathroom and the shower. He removed the blood-stained shirt and dark, blood-encrusted pants. Very gently, he turned him around and inspected the body of his lover for bruises. Nodded when he had satisfied himself that the damage was minor.

"I'll be fine, Hutch," Starsky kept repeating. "I'm okay now. They didn't have time to do any damage. They were in too much of a rush."

He realized he was babbling, pleading for a reaction from Hutch.

"Talk to me, Hutch. Say something."

"Hold still," was all Hutch said. He stripped and stepped into the cubicle with him, just as he had done in the days and weeks after his homecoming when Starsky had still needed all his help and support. He didn't need it now, but he didn't protest when Hutch slipped back into his role of caregiver as he soaped and washed the blood off his hands and arms and face.

Hutch was all gentleness. But distant. Completely detached.

"I'll be all right. You'll see. I'll be okay tomorrow," Starsky said while almost falling over with fatigue. "I know I will."

Hutch simply nodded.

Starsky cursed himself, his impulsiveness, and every one of his actions that day. Everything had been perfect until he'd gone and shattered Hutch's newfound peace of mind with his self-indulgence and utter disregard for his lover's needs and wishes. And here was Hutch, picking up the pieces, as always.

"Sorry. Sorry, Hutch—"

Hutch got him out of the shower, dried him off. He wouldn't let him to do anything. Starsky let it happen, passively allowed Hutch to dress him in pajama bottoms and walk him to the bedroom and get him into bed. Didn't protest when Hutch started probing the tender areas on his chest and stomach with deft, sure movements again.

"That hurt?"

"A little."

"And that?"

"Just sore, that's all. No big deal."

"And here?"

"No, that's okay."

"Turn around."

He did as he was told. Hutch ran his hands over his back, probing, checking. His fingers found the place where the door frame had slammed into his shoulder. He started massaging the spot, quietly, carefully, without saying another word.

"Hutch—"

"Relax now."

"Hutch, listen—"

"Not now. Tomorrow."

Starsky gave in. He gave in to everything—the exhaustion, the softness of the bed, the wonderful, wonderful sensation of Hutch's expert hands on his back and shoulders as they eased the pain from his stiffening muscles.

He didn't want Hutch to stop, wanted to protest when the hands withdrew and pulled the sheet up to his neck.

"Hutch—"

"Get some rest now," Hutch said in his detached, faraway voice.

Drowsiness robbed him of the last of his resistance.

"I thought I could do it," he whispered. "But you were right. I can't."

"Go to sleep."

"I'm so sorry—"

"It's okay. Go to sleep."

So he did.

Chapter Nine

They were all around him, taunting him with words and leery faces. A dark mass of shadowy figures, moving indistinctly in the twilight of a crescent moon.

He screamed defiance at them. "Stop! Stop right there. One more step and I'll shoot."

They laughed in his face. "You can't keep him safe forever. One day, we'll get past you. You can't shield him for the rest of your life."

The gun in his hand wavered. "I can try. And I will. I won't let you have him."

They were empty words, and he knew it. They advanced toward him, fearless now, sensing his terror. "Two seconds is all we need. We did it before. We'll do it again. There's nothing you can do to stop us."

He took a step back, raised the gun at the same time. "I won't let you." A whisper. A promise. "I'll never let that happen."

They crowded close, too close, a dark mass of indistinct shapes. "Fool. Don't you understand? You can't stop us. We're too strong. There are too many of us. You can't hold us back forever."

They flowed around him like a powerful current sweeping past a rock in a stream, and he was helpless against them.

"We want him," they chanted. "We'll take him. One day. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe today!"

oooOOOooo

Starsky jerked awake, bolt upright, yanked from deep sleep to full awareness in a split second. The bedroom was dark and silent. The echo of a scream reverberated around his head like the fading remnants of a nightmare. Not his nightmare. Hutch's.

He reached across the bed. Knew even before he felt the empty space that Hutch was gone. Knew in an instant that something was desperately wrong. Hutch was out there. Again.

A powerful swell of urgency assaulted him and swept every trace of the dream from his mind. He leaped out of bed. Found and yanked on a pair of jeans over the pajama bottoms. Lost precious moments locating and pulling on his sneakers. Snatched up a shirt, and hissed when the movement sent a stab of pain through his chest.

He ignored it and threw himself out the front door.

Hutch, you damn fool. Why didn't you talk to me? Why do you think you have to carry everything on your own?

He looked wildly up and down the dark, empty road, let instinct and a deep-rooted awareness of Hutch guide him to the left, uphill, past dark, sleeping houses, through the chill November night.

Hutch! Where are you?

A sound on his left. A familiar silhouette against the night sky. The soft sheen of platinum reflected by the glow of the last street light. Up there on the path up Oakhill Ridge, the shrub-covered hillside where children played during the day.

Aw, babe, what're you doin' out here?

He hurried to catch up, took the incline like the sprinter he'd once been, hardly aware of the labored breath in his lungs. Sand crunched under his feet. Thorny bushes scraped against his legs. He was only yards away.

"Hutch!"

Hutch whirled around. Saw him. Knew him. His gaze flicked past Starsky, eyes suddenly alive with horror.

"Starsky, get down!" A yell of terror, impossible to disobey.

Starsky dropped immediately. So did Hutch. Two seconds later, Hutch was on his feet again, the Magnum solid in his hand. Starsky scrambled around, crouching low among the thorny shrubs, frantic to catch sight of their attackers. He couldn't see anyone. *Damn. Not again!*

As he watched, Hutch braced himself and aimed, the gun gripped tightly in both hands, arms outstretched. He fired two shots in quick succession. A yell erupted from his throat, a terrible scream full of grief and panic. "Starsky!"

Two more shots.

"STARSKY!"

Two more.

"STARSKYYYY!"

The echo of the shots faded. Then an eternal moment of silence.

In that deep, endless silence, Starsky finally understood. Hutch was reliving the shooting. *His* shooting. *Oh my God.*

He scrambled to his feet, lurched across the dusty ground toward the dark figure. The figure unfroze, turned and stumbled toward him.

"Starsky?" The bright blue eyes looked wild with terror.

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm right here."

"Starsk? Starsk? You're...you're not...?"

"I'm okay. Honest, I'm fine. They didn't get me. Listen to me. They didn't get me."

"Y-you're ...you're okay? You're...not—"

"No, I'm not hurt. I'm perfectly all right. They missed me by about a mile."

Starsky reached out cautiously, unsure what his touch would do to the troubled man, locked up in a six-month-old nightmare.

Hutch's eyes flicked over him, confused. "You're all right? But...they shot you. I-I saw you. They...You...you were lying there. You were so still. And there was so much blood. So much. I-I knew you were...And I thought—"

Hutch was shaking, and Starsky couldn't wait any longer. He wrapped his arms around his friend and pulled him close.

"Hutch. Hutch, I'm here, I'm fine. You're dreaming, Hutch. It's only a dream."

Hutch didn't seem to hear him. "You died," he choked out. "Oh God, Starsk, you died. I-I felt it. I knew it when you d-died. It hurt so much. I thought I'd die, too. But then you came back, by some miracle. You died, and you c-came back. And...and then they said coma, and paralysis, and brain damage. They said you'd never be the same again."

The words poured out like a flood held back too long, riding on a chaos of disconnected thoughts. "D'you have any idea what it was like? Sitting in that hospital, praying for you to live? To wake up? D'you have any idea?"

"Hutch, listen. You're dreaming—"

"And then you did. You woke up, and...and you recognized me...God, Starsk, I swore an oath I'd love you, I'd do anything if you'd just stay with me. I'd keep you safe. I'd do everything in my power to keep you safe. But how can I do that? How...*how* can I keep you safe?"

"Please, you gotta wake up now!" Starsky shook the unresponsive body. Hutch didn't hear him. His hands were digging into Starsky's shoulders, fierce, insistent.

"I have to know where you are, you understand? I have to know you're safe. All this time, I always knew where you were. In the hospital, and then at home, with me. I always knew you were safe. But now you're well again, and ...and you go away and...I don't know where you are anymore. And I-I can't do it. Not knowing—"

Starsky hugged him fiercely, pulled the fair head into the crook of his neck. "It's all right. Everything's gonna be all right. I promise it's gonna be all right. Just let's get you home, huh? Please, Hutch."

Hutch's arms were around him, frantic, holding on with a desperate grip, oblivious to the words. "Yes, it was enough," he choked out. "You were right. It would've been enough for me. Just to have you back."

He took a shuddering breath. "But now you want to go back to work, out on the streets again. And...and they'll find you. One day...And I can't protect you all the time. One day, they'll get past me, and then—"

Starsky realized that this was worse, much worse than he'd imagined. He locked his arms around his friend, not knowing what else to do.

"Cause how can I protect you now?" Hutch cried out, anguished. "I can't hold them all back. They're like a flood. How can I hold back the flood? How can I keep you safe? God, what do I have to do to keep you safe?"

He sagged. "I can't do it," he whispered into Starsky's hair. "I can't lose you again. Starsk—God, please, Starsk. I can't lose you again. I just can't."

Starsky held him close and said the only words he could. "You won't," he said. "You won't lose me. I promise. You don't have to do it anymore. Not ever again. You're not gonna lose me. I promise."

He stroked the beloved face with one hand, brushed the blond hair from the dusty, sweaty face with the other. Breathed in the wonderful scent that was uniquely Hutch. There was nothing in the world he wouldn't do for Hutch.

"I'll be safe, I promise you," he whispered in his ear. "They're never gonna take me away from you." He pulled Hutch closer. "I promise."

oooOOOooo

He finally managed to get Hutch back indoors. Hutch came willingly, but dazed as if wondering, on some deep level within his subconscious mind, what on earth he was doing on Oakhill Ridge in the middle of the night.

Starsky practically had to manhandle him through the door and into bed. Hutch never really woke up, simply slipped from one dream state into another. Even in repose, he looked exhausted, drained. Troubled still.

Starsky sat beside him for a long time, stroked the fair forehead, now smudged and dusty, and watched his lover sleep. His mind was in uproar.

He never did keep anything from me. He never knew himself. All the things he couldn't tell me...couldn't tell himself...

He looked at his sleeping friend and frowned. Then he went to the bathroom and got a wet cloth. Careful not to wake the exhausted man, he cleaned the dust from Oakhill Ridge off the accessible parts of Hutch's face and disinfected the cut on his left hand.

When he was done, he went into the living room and started pacing, thinking of everything Hutch had let slip in the frenzy of his nightmare.

I thought he wanted it as much as me, getting back to where we were before. But all this time...

Starsky stopped inside the bedroom door. The body huddling under the sheets looked tense and restless. Patel had been right. The problem lay much deeper. It wouldn't just wear off.

For a second, he wondered if he should seek advice from someone. A professional like Patel, a friend like Huggy or Dobey. Then he discarded the idea. They wouldn't really understand. The one person who would understand was the one person he couldn't ask.

No, this was something he had to figure out for himself.

He started pacing again. The shooting. The key was the shooting.

The shooting was Hutch's last straw. But he couldn't admit to it. Not to me, not to himself.

When the bullets had ripped him apart, the damage to Hutch had been just as great. But Hutch's wounds were all inside, and it wasn't easy to tell how much healing he had done. Now it was obvious that while he had been recovering, Hutch hadn't been keeping up.

Maybe he just needs more time.

More time? More sleepwalking nights? More terror borne of uncertainty and fear?

Can't do that to him.

A sharp stab of pain through the chest reminded him that he, too, had been pushed to the limits of his endurance that day. His left hand went to his chest, rubbing absently.

I thought I could do it. I thought I was ready. Hutch was right. I'm not. Maybe I never will be.

Maybe it was time to look reality in the eye. He'd fainted, and that was the truth of it. After no more than a five second encounter with a guy who, a year ago, he could've felled with his left hand tied behind his back.

What if it happened again? When it really counted? When Hutch relied on him to pull his weight?

Starsky balled his hands to fists. The truth, he thought. At least be honest with yourself.

I can't back him up properly anymore.

The realization hurt more than all the past months of physical agony put together. It hurt.

He recalled the promise he'd made to Hutch on that dusty hillside in the darkness of the night. There was only one way to keep that promise.

Winching at the pull of overstretched muscles, Starsky went to the cabinet in the living room. The top drawer contained documents, papers, receipts, his check book, and, among other paraphernalia, his badge.

He took it out and examined it in the light of dawn. It was the new badge, less than a year old and still shiny. Both folder and ID were missing—the badge was the only part of his shield that had been salvageable from his torn, blood-soaked leather jacket. He'd never asked what had become of the jacket.

For a while, he cradled the small piece of metal in his hands. He remembered the day he'd received his first badge. Thought of the many years of carrying it with pride. Thought of everything it stood for, what he'd stood for.

The badge was worthless without its case and ID. The badge was worthless anyway. He'd been holding onto it for purely sentimental reasons.

We've had so many near misses. We both almost bought it. So many times. But we never thought of quitting. And when we did, it wasn't because we couldn't hack it anymore.

A memory welled up from a source so rich in memories. A beach. Two badges thrown in unison.

We quit once, out of guilt, out of disillusionment with the brass. It was a gesture. A finger in the face of authority. I think we both knew—even as we threw our badges into the sea—that we would end up going back.

This was different. This was for good.

Clutching the small object, he tiptoed into the bedroom and gazed at the sleeping man in the bed. A hot wave of love and tenderness welled up inside him and warmed his soul like a soft downy quilt.

I told Patel being a cop meant everything. Wrong. Hutch means everything.

He recalled their vacation, their foot-loose trip along the coast. Remembered the joyful, happy, carefree Hutch. The Hutch he loved so much. Less than an hour in LA, and all that happiness had been ripped apart like a stick shelter in a hurricane.

It's in my hands. I have the power to stop it.

He had to give up his dream. And he had to do it now, before Hutch woke up and tried to talk him out of it. It was six in the morning. Dobey started work at seven. He could just make it.

He found a piece of paper and a pen and scribbled a few words.

H. Gone to see Dobey. Don't worry, I'm fine. Back around 8. Love you, S

He pinned the note to the doorframe where Hutch couldn't fail to see it if he woke up before he got back. He wasn't happy about leaving Hutch, but this was something he had to do in person. Harold Dobey deserved that small courtesy. He picked up the badge, shrugged into his jacket and walked down to the LTD.

oooOOOooo

Harold Dobey hadn't started work at seven. In fact, he hadn't been at home at all that night. Nor had the majority of the members of his task force. Half the team had spent the night trawling the city for further evidence based on Sergeant Starsky's discoveries, the other half had worked their way through a stack of case files pertaining to Vic Monte's past activities. And Dobey sat in his office, trying to piece together the whole picture from a handful of jigsaw pieces.

Gunther's old link to Colombia. The Shark. The Sugarhill gang. And Vic Monte. Who would have thought?

And who would've thought that after all the efforts put in by the task force over the months, the man responsible for the breakthrough was an ex-cop on disability leave who'd been out of commission for over six months?

Starsky had done it again. The swell of pride in Dobey's chest was one of the things that had kept him going through the night.

Starsky was special. Always had been. The grin, the swagger, the easy-going charm. His incredible ability to bounce back from traumas that had other cops in and out of psychiatrists' offices for years. His dedication to the job. His sense of justice and fair play. The sheer decency of a man who was and always would be a natural cop.

They both were. Not being on the force had never stopped either of them from doing what was necessary.

Dobey rubbed his tired eyes. He could hardly wait to see his top team of detectives back at work, back on the force where they belonged. He smiled a secret smile as his tired mind conjured the image of the two young men sitting just feet away on the other side of the door, engaged in one of their interminable squabbles, or in deep discussion of a case, or with an intense focus on a piece of evidence. Or maybe even plotting another practical joke to play on their captain. He couldn't wait for that to happen.

"You got a minute, Cap?"

He looked up, startled. The face in the door would have been another flashback to a time gone by if it hadn't looked so subdued.

"Starsky," he said, surprised, coming out of his chair. "What're you doing here so early? Are you all right? You're supposed to be at home and resting."

"I'm okay. I'm fine." The curly-haired figure advanced into the room. "I just needed some rest."

"Siddown. Siddown. Good to see you on your feet again." His former detective took a seat, and Dobby sank back into his own protesting chair. "I gotta say, Starsky, it was a pleasure to have you back in here yesterday."

A smile that could only be described as strained made a brief appearance, then vanished. "There's something I gotta tell you."

"What is it? You remember anything else Sly said?"

"No, nothin' like that. Here." His detective pulled an envelope from an inside pocket of his jacket and placed it on the desk between them. "I've come to give you this. It's my resignation."

"What! What do you mean, your resignation?"

"I mean I'm not applying for reinstatement. I know I said I would, and I know you're counting on me to come back on active duty when I get cleared, but things have changed."

"But Starsky—"

"I wanted to tell you in person, not on the phone. I'm off the force as of today. If you could have the paperwork sent to me, I'll sign the necessary forms and return them to Admin."

"But *why*? You're doing so well—" He broke off, remembering the relapse of the day before. "Surely, by the time you face the review board—"

"Look," Starsky said. "We both know the review board's never gonna pass me fit. Last year, they retired Bert Shearwater and he only had a broken ankle, for Chrissake."

"And major trauma from being held as a hostage for three hours," Dobey reminded him. "Shearwater didn't want to be passed fit. He wouldn't have come back on active duty if we'd doubled his salary."

Starsky shrugged. "Still, I gotta face facts. I mean, you saw what happened yesterday. I was out there for a coupla hours, and that took everything out of me. I can't pull my weight anymore. That means I can't back up my partner properly. He needs someone good, someone he can rely on. What if he gets hurt 'cause I don't have it in me anymore? I can't risk that."

"Starsky, you still have months of rehabilitation ahead of you. You *will* get better. Dr. Patel thinks you'll be as good as new—"

"Patel also says I'll never regain the stamina I had before. Cap'n, let's be honest with each other. I can't hack it out there anymore. I'd rather quit now before I become the cause of another cop's death."

"You're almost back to normal. You can't give up now."

"I'm not givin' up. I'm movin' on."

Yeah, and I'm Santa Claus. "You're doing this for Hutch, right? It's Hutch who can't hack it anymore."

The open face closed like a door. "Hutch is fine. In fact, he'll be comin' back to work soon."

Loyal to a fault, Dobey thought. "There's always a place for you here, Dave," he said. "There's still so much you can give to this place. We need men with your experience, you know that."

"Riding a desk, you mean? Watching the action from the sidelines? I couldn't. I couldn't stand it, seein' every day what Gunther took away from me. Knowing that once I—"

Starsky faltered, shrugged, and produced an unconvincing imitation of a mischievous grin. "I'd feel like you would if you were on a diet and someone was eatin' chocolate cookies next to you all day. No. It has to be a clear break."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Haven't thought that far ahead yet. We'll think of something." He got up, took a look around the room, a farewell look. Turned back to the desk.

"Cap'n, I got a favor to ask before I go. When Hutch comes back on duty, he'll need a new partner. He won't want one, but he'll need one anyway. Will you—" A small catch. "Will you make sure he gets someone good? He needs someone he can rely on, someone experienced. Someone he can trust."

Hutch doesn't trust anyone, Starsky. Only you. Don't you know that?

"I'll make sure he gets partnered with the best detective I can find."

"And when...*if* he decides to take the Lieutenant's exam, will you support him and back his promotion? You know he's ready for it, and he deserves it."

"Starsky, you don't need to ask me these things. You know I'll do everything I can to help my officers."

"Course, Capt'n. I know that. I just...needed to hear you say it. Look, I better get back now. Thanks for everything. You've always been more'n our boss. You've always been a friend to us."

"And I hope you will continue to look at me as your friend."

"Course, Cap'n."

"We'll miss you, Starsky."

Starsky nodded once. A world of information was contained in that nod. Acknowledgement. Agreement. Regret. Longing.

"Thank you. See you around, Cap'n."

Starsky walked out and closed the door with the softest of clicks. Dobey thought it felt like the end of an era.

oooOOOooo

When Starsky got back, the note on the door frame was gone, and so was Hutch. Starsky pursed his lips, thinking. He looked at the crumpled sheets in the bedroom, took in the dust they'd tracked into the house the night before, considered the Magnum in its holster, dangling undisturbed from the hook in the wardrobe where he'd hung it the night before. Remembered the stranded Torino and that Hutch had had no transportation.

Following a hunch, he left the house and took the short path up to Oakhill Ridge.

Hutch was sitting on a log just out of sight of the street, at almost exactly the spot where they'd found themselves only a few short hours earlier. At first, Starsky couldn't make out what he was doing. Then he saw that Hutch was

sifting sand through his fingers. The pale grains slid from one hand to the other, again and again, like water poured from one cup to another.

Hutch didn't look up when Starsky sat down beside him. For a long silent moment, they sat side by side, not touching. Finally, Starsky took a deep breath.

"I can be a real bastard sometimes," he said. Hutch would know what he meant.

"You and me both, buddy," Hutch said quietly. He continued staring at the grains of sand in his hands.

Starsky glanced at him. "What're you doin' up here?" he asked.

Hutch took a long time to answer. "I woke up, saw this." He indicated the cut on his hand, the dust stains on his pants.

"So you decided to come out here and get to the bottom of it." *C'mon Hutch, talk to me.* The monosyllabic Hutch was beginning to worry him.

Hutch looked up briefly. "I thought it was a dream—" Then looked away again.

Another long silence ensued.

"What happened last night?" Hutch finally said in a toneless voice.

"You don't remember?"

Hutch shrugged. He still wasn't looking at Starsky, his eyes firmly fixed on the small pile of sand in the palm of his hand. "I fell apart?"

"Well..."

Hutch produced a tired smile. "You don't have to tell me. I think I know." He took a deep breath. More time passed while Starsky hunted for the right words to say.

Hutch beat him to it. "You were right, you know," he said. "I've been trying to shield you from the world. But you don't need shielding. I have to learn to let go. And...I will. It's just...so difficult, you know."

"Yeah, I know." Starsky turned to him, reached out and put his hand on Hutch's arm—a bridge between them. He smiled, and his heart was light and free when he told Hutch the news. "But you don't have to do it anymore. I'm not goin' back. I told Dobey this morning. He's making out the paperwork for my permanent discharge."

"What!" Hutch's head came around with a snap.

"I'm not trying for reinstatement. I'm not going back on active duty."

"What!?"

"Hutch, we're off the streets. For good. Well, at least I am, but I'm hopin' you won't go back, either—"

"What the hell're you talking about?"

"Hutch, listen to me. I'm not goin' back. You were right. I saw that yesterday. I've been chasin' a pipe dream. I'll never be well enough to really hack it on the streets again. I've realized that now."

"So you just went ahead, without even discussing it?" Hutch said, rattled out of his pensive mood. "Didn't you think your partner should've been told first? That should've been *our* decision."

"It was."

Hutch gave a start. Starsky placed his hands on either side of Hutch's face and anchored the blue eyes with his own. "I want you to look me in the eye and tell me you're not glad I made that decision."

Hutch's eyes were as bright and open as the sky on a crisp fall morning. They couldn't hide the truth from him anymore. Starsky smiled and nodded. "Thought so," he said, lightheaded with the knowledge that he'd made the right choice.

Hutch tore his eyes away. "But you've worked so hard to go back to work," he said, his voice a complex fusion of anger, disbelief, wonder. Relief.

Starsky pulled their foreheads together. "I've worked hard to *get better*. For *us*. Not for the job. I realize that now."

"You're doing this for me, aren't you?"

"I'm doin' it for both of us. C'mon, let's face it. How likely is it that the review board will let me go back? You saw me yesterday. I...can't pull my weight anymore."

"You have to give it more time—"

"Hutch, don't. It's better this way. I'm glad I found out now, and not later." He let go of Hutch, leaned back to get a good look at him. "I've made my choice. I'm not goin' back."

"You really mean it?"

"Yeah, I really mean it."

"But...what're you going to do instead?"

Starsky shrugged. "I was thinking maybe I should get a job for the time being, save up some green. Then look around for something I really wanna do. Maybe go back to college and finish that degree."

Hutch blinked at that.

"You should take the lieu's exam," Starsky added. "Get off the streets yourself."

"You have it all figured out, haven't you?" There was a bitter flavor to Hutch's voice, and a sharp edge.

"Nah. Haven't really thought about it. Let's go home and toss a few ideas around, huh?"

They looked at each other. Hutch's eyes were all over him, searching, making sure. Slowly, the sharp gaze softened, grew warm and deep. Starsky's last lingering remains of regret evaporated. *The right choice. No looking back.*

"I love you so much," he said, his throat tight. "You know that, don't ya? I don't say it much, but—"

"Yes, I know." Hutch's hand came up, burrowed into the thick curls, pulled their heads together. "I know."

They kissed, a furtive brush of the lips, not daring to do more, out there on the open hill. It was enough. A small charge of electricity ignited between them. Starsky felt the tingle all the way into his fingertips.

He looked at Hutch. Saw a corresponding gleam of heat sparking in his lover's eyes. And something else. A look he hadn't seen in Hutch's eyes since...*before.*

Hutch wanted him. Bad. Needed him with a sudden powerful urgency.

Starsky swallowed thickly. The look in Hutch's eyes did something unexpected to his insides. A rush of heat poured over him. Love and want. Need and desire.

Hutch's hunger fed his own sense of urgency. He was on his feet, pulled Hutch up, as well.

"Let's go. Home. I want you. All of you. And I can't wait any longer."

oooOOOooo

He didn't have long to wait.

They barely made it through the front door when Hutch was on him, pushing him up against the wall, tearing at his clothes. Kissing him with a ferocity Starsky hadn't encountered in a lover before. Not even in Hutch. Not even *before.*

It drove him wild.

Hutch's muscular body pinned him to the wall with fierce strength. One hand gripped the back of his neck; the other tore at the waistband of his jeans. Hutch's mouth was on him everywhere. There was nothing of the gentle, protective Hutch in the hungry creature he'd suddenly become.

Starsky couldn't get enough of it.

He twisted his head to give him better access. Struggled to push down his jeans. Helped to strip off Hutch's. And for all Hutch gave him, he gave back just as good. He locked their mouths together with bruising intensity, pulled him into a punishing kiss. Gripped Hutch's ass and ground their cocks together.

He was rock hard already and so was Hutch.

His roughness was fuel on Hutch's fire. All of Hutch's self-control went out the window and his own barely lasted long enough to steer them to the bedroom.

Hutch's breath was hot in his ear. "I want to love you. You know how. Let me, please—"

"God, yes—"

Already hot and slick with sweat and desire, their bodies connected. Hutch's hands closed around Starsky's straining erection—those wonderful, large hands that could handle a gun, an injured partner, and his lover's cock with equal expertise—a firm grip, nothing gentle about it.

"I'll love you so good. So good. I'll be careful—"

Starsky let out a low groan. "No, don't. Don't be careful. I can take it. I want it...want you so much."

Every cell in his body was tingling, crying out for Hutch. He barely remembered what it felt like to have Hutch inside him. He wanted it so much he almost couldn't get the words out when he reached for the jar and shoved it clumsily into Hutch's hand. "Do it, Hutch. Do it now. I been wanting this forever."

A small stab of pain in his chest warned him that there'd be a price to pay for all this later. Another part of him knew that the price of a little pain would be well worth paying. He needed this. He needed Hutch.

He ran a hand over Hutch's back and the long smooth flank, hot and moist with sweat. So hot. God, so wonderful. Lust and love combined into an almost unbearable sense of anticipation. He'd been waiting for this for far too long. Months. A lifetime.

"Turn over, babe. I want—" Hutch's voice was rough with need. "Want to see you."

Starsky's heart pounded powerfully against his chest. Hutch knelt before him, looking down at him with eyes that were dark with passion, his fair face flushed

with an almost unearthly joy. He was the most beautiful thing Starsky had ever seen.

He rolled onto his back, pulled up his legs. Dug his fingers into Hutch's arms, impatient, and unwilling to wait. "Now, Hutch. Need you now. I'm ready—"

And finally, *finally*, Hutch sank his shaft inside him—and a wave of pleasure exploded inside Starsky. Heat flooded from the tip of his cock to deep within his groin. He moaned, a wild animal sound of want and need and rapture, and the sound seemed to draw Hutch in, deeper.

Starsky pressed against him, matching his rhythm. He fixed his eyes on the naked, sweat-glistening body that hovered above him, head thrown back, a look of pure ecstasy on the face of an angel.

The look propelled him to the edge. Now. It had to be now. He wrapped his legs around Hutch. Arched his hips and pushed back hard against him. Almost cried out when a spasm of near painful pleasure tore through him.

And then Hutch was inside him, all the way, moving, filling up every part of him. There was no longer any distance between them. They were so close, so close. He knew Hutch felt it, too. Could see the sweet agony in his eyes.

Heat washed all over him. All of his insides were turning to fire. He was full of Hutch. They were one.

I love you. I need you. There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you. Just don't stop what you're doing.

Never stop.

PART 3: WINTER

Chapter Ten

A gust of wind, heavy with precipitation, roared around the corner and almost tore the car door from Hutch's grasp as he jumped out of the Ford, hugging a cardboard box full of books and files to his chest. He slammed the door shut and ran up the stairs into the shelter of the landing. The front door opened magically before him and he stumbled into the welcome haven of his home.

"I heard you coming from two miles away," Starsky explained, closed the door against the weather and relieved his partner of the box. "When are you gonna get that exhaust fixed? You're waking up the entire neighborhood in the mornings."

"Hm, nice to see you, too," Hutch said and planted a kiss on Starsky's cheek before hanging his damp jacket on a hook and kicking off his shoes.

Starsky deposited the box on the table and disappeared into the kitchen. The smell of potato-and-onion pie wafted through the apartment.

"Well?" he called out.

Hutch ambled in and leaned against the counter, subtly checking his partner over for signs of stiffness and fatigue. Starsky was wearing his rattiest, most distracting pair of jeans that hugged his contours in all the right places and really didn't leave much to anyone's imagination. He moved with ease and fluidity. There was even a hint of the familiar swagger as he crossed the kitchen and bent over to poke the contents of the oven with a fork.

Hutch blinked and tore his eyes away. "Well what?" he said.

"What's he like?"

"Who, Vanderhoff?" Hutch shrugged. "He's okay, I guess. I only talked to him for a few minutes. He comes with the highest recommendations of the DPD. An arrest record as long as my arm. He was the arresting officer in the Norris bank robbery ten years ago. Dobey's pulled out all the stops to get him to come to Metro." He shrugged again. "I could be doing worse."

"Hm. So why'd he put in for a transfer if he's such a hotshot?"

"He said he'd cleaned up Detroit and needed a new challenge."

Starsky snickered. "He really said that?" He removed the dish and started spooning the contents onto two plates.

"Yep. He said Detroit was getting dull and LA had all the action."

"A thrill seeker? Just watch he doesn't do anything stupid."

"He's been on the force for twenty years. He knows the ropes."

"Twenty years!" The spoon stopped in mid-air. "He's an old fossil! How's he gonna keep up with the action when things get tough?"

"He's ten years older than us. That hardly qualifies as decrepit. And he looked pretty fit to me."

"Probably needs a walker to get around," Starsky muttered darkly and carried the plates to the table.

Hutch smiled. "I'll be fine, Starsk. Quit worrying."

"And how come he's still a sergeant at his age? With an arrest record as long as your arm? Someone who's cleaned up Detroit single-handedly should've been kicked upstairs by now." Starsky sat down, stabbed his fork into the nearest potato and forked the hapless vegetable into a mush.

"Maybe he's not cut out for a lieu's job."

"Maybe he's not the brightest bulb in the box."

"Hey, cut the guy some slack. Why're you so set against him? You haven't even met him yet."

Starsky rolled his eyes. "I can't wait."

Hutch sighed and rubbed his neck, then walked over and sat down in front of his own steaming portion. "Look, you think I'm happy about this? I didn't want a new partner, either, but there're too many raids for the guys to handle. On top of that, Operation Blue is due to go ahead in the next few days. Dobby needs everyone on the streets now."

Starsky relented. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

"And he sure as hell won't let me go out there without any backup."

"He better not." Starsky looked up and pointed his fork at Hutch. "And that new partner of yours had better come up to scratch."

"He'll never be my *partner*, you know that. It's only temporary. Coupla months tops. The next exam's in March. If I pass, I'll be off the streets by April."

"*If* you pass? Course you'll pass. I'll stand behind you and make sure you read every damn page of your prep materials."

"Goofball. We both know I won't get much studying done with you hovering behind me."

Starsky grinned and the moody expression melted from his face. Hutch saw it with relief. "So what did you do all day?" he said.

"This and that. Gym and pool in the morning, appointment with Bruce in the afternoon, and then I met Mike and Chrissie at the shooting range for a session."

"Oh, yeah? How did that go?"

"Okay. Better each time. You never forget how to shoot, do you?" Starsky shrugged. "I just needed some practice."

"Hm. Say, Mike and Chrissie? They're hanging out together a lot lately, don't you think? Is there something I should know?"

"Ha, you've finally noticed! Yeah, they've hit it off. I think Chrissie got tired of waiting for you to notice her charms."

Hutch opened his mouth, couldn't think of anything to say, and inserted a forkful of pie, instead.

"She's planning to take the detective's exam as soon as she's finished her two years," Starsky related. "Mike's tryin' to talk her out of it, but she's pretty much made up her mind."

"She's doing all right then?"

Starsky smiled and nodded. "Yeah. She's doin' great."

Just like you said she would.

"I better get started on these," Hutch said when they'd polished off their plates and attended to the chaos in the kitchen. "The exam's only five weeks from now and I haven't really done much."

"Yeah, okay."

Starsky disappeared into the bedroom with the employment section of the *LA Times*, and Hutch sat down on the couch, pulled his study materials and a notebook from the box, and arranged them in a neat row on the coffee table. Feeling unenthusiastic, he selected a hefty tome entitled *The Legal Dimension of Policing in the State of California*, turned to page 46 and started reading.

Ten minutes later, he realized that he was still on the same page and hadn't taken in a single word. Annoyed, he put the book aside and picked up the *Law Enforcement Procedures Manual*, instead.

This, too, failed to make his heart beat faster.

Hutch made a face and let the manual rest in his lap. Somehow, for the first time in his life, studying was a chore. He simply couldn't focus on the stuff.

His eyes strayed to the bedroom. Through the gaps on the bookshelf, he could just make out the figure of his lover sprawled on the bed, engrossed in the paper, one jeans-clad leg propped on the knee of the other and a bare foot conducting an invisible orchestra to the tune of some inner music audible only to Starsky.

Starsky. Always on his mind. Always a part of him, even when they were apart.

Which was a good thing, since being apart had become the norm lately. Hutch still hadn't adjusted to that new, unsettling state of affairs. After months of spending one hundred percent of their time in each other's company, that percentage had dropped dramatically since Hutch's return to work.

And it wasn't just the hours. He and Starsky had worked in tandem for so many years. Their work as cops had been defined by each other. Now, for the first time, they were pursuing radically different career paths.

The dynamics of their lives were changing. It was inevitable, but that didn't mean that Hutch liked it.

If we weren't together in every other way...

At least that, Hutch thought, relieved. In fact, in many ways, they were closer than ever. Their lovemaking had really taken off after that wild, almost desperate encounter three months before.

Hutch remembered the day with perfect clarity. He remembered waking at dawn to find Starsky gone—again—and a memory of disaster lurking on the edges of his mind. Remembered tracking the memory to Oakhill Ridge and unearthing demons he hadn't known were sheltering inside him. Remembered finding Starsky beside him who, with just a word and a touch, had taken his upside down world and set it on its feet again.

They'd gone home and made love. Hutch had been wild, out of control. He'd let go for the first time in months. His need had been so great...All the restraints he'd imposed on himself and his partner had collapsed before it. And Starsky had urged him on with a total disregard for his so recently healed, recently abused body. Starsky's need had been as great as his own.

And after Hutch had given his partner everything, all of himself, Starsky had turned the tables and selflessly returned the favor. And, oh God, it had been so good to feel that closeness between them again, to feel Starsky moving inside him with sure thrusts, bringing him to ecstasy with his unique fusion of power and tenderness...

Hutch found he was staring into the distance with what had to be a very sappy grin on his face.

And after that, they'd talked. Really talked. About everything, starting with the day of the shooting. Together they'd hauled the demons from their hiding places and watched them shrivel in the light of day. The wounds that had been festering inside him for so many months were washed clean and Hutch, too, had finally begun to heal.

Looking back, Hutch realized that he'd been living with a crippling fear in his heart for months. It had quietly expanded inside him until it had reached a critical mass on the day Starsky had conjured the specter of reinstatement. One word. *Reinstatement*. It had put the terror of hell into Hutch's soul.

The events of that fateful November day had merely been the final straw, the inevitable tipping point where Hutch's defenses had caved in under the devastating weight of fear in his heart.

Hutch gazed out of the balcony doors, lost in thought.

The fear, he knew, would always be there. He would never *not* be afraid. For Starsky's safety. Of losing him. But the greatest terror of all had been laid to rest—of seeing Starsky back on the streets, facing guns and knives and explosions and all the other dangers lurking in the cesspool in which they'd spent their working lives.

Starsky had given up his dream. For him. And he had accepted the sacrifice. Sometimes, he felt bad about that, but the overwhelming relief at Starsky's decision dwarfed his sense of guilt. Because Hutch was certain that Starsky had made the right decision.

In turn, Hutch had conceded a number of smaller points. Starsky now had his gun back, and regularly visited the shooting range for practice. He came and went under his own steam, pursuing his own activities. Hutch had gone back to work and often had no idea of his partner's precise whereabouts, but he felt more relaxed about that now. It was no longer fear he experienced when he thought of Starsky out on his own. Wistfulness, maybe? A hint of regret?

Since they no longer spent their days together, they made a point of keeping in touch by phone, instead. Or rather, Hutch did. Starsky rarely called him at work, and only if absolutely necessary. Hutch wondered about that sometimes.

In fact, Starsky rarely talked about police work at all anymore. He used to be a sponge when it came to soaking up the details of current case developments. No visitor had been safe from his inquisitions. Hutch longed to discuss his work with Starsky, but his partner seemed to have lost interest even in the escalating gang war that ravaged the seedier parts of the city.

He'd also stopped dropping by the station for an update or a chat. In the past, an injured Starsky had to be tied to a chair to stop him from haunting the corridors of Metro. Now he found reasons for avoiding the place.

Hutch thought back over the weeks. The departmental Christmas party. Joan's promotion bash. The impromptu celebration following the arrest of Pietro Leoni, Vic Monte's deputy. Starsky had been conspicuous by his absence.

Experimentally, he called out, "Hey, Starsk, wanna meet up for lunch tomorrow and meet Vanderhoff? You could come by Metro and pick me up. Dobey's been complaining he hardly sees you these days."

"Count me out," Starsky's voice drifted back from the bedroom. "I gotta go see a man about a job."

Right. Hutch leaned back, thoughtful.

So Starsky was on an avoidance trip. Hutch had no idea what to do about that. He hoped it would wear off once Starsky found employment of his own.

He'd imagined, naïvely maybe, that Starsky would always be there, ready to dispense advice and suggestions and supply the deep intuitive insight that Hutch had come to depend upon. What if he wouldn't? Hutch couldn't imagine going through years of police work without being able to discuss his work with Starsky.

Hutch shook off the thought, forced his mind back to the procedures manual, and tried to concentrate.

Small sounds drifted from the bedroom—the faint creaking of the bed, the rustling of the newspaper as Starsky turned the pages. Out of the corner of his eyes, Hutch saw his partner stretch luxuriantly, graceful as a panther, and roll over onto his side, presenting his best asset.

Hutch gave up and threw the textbook down. He walked to the open doorway, leaned against the frame, and let his eyes rake over the relaxed form encased in body-hugging jeans and T-shirt.

"Care for some company?"

Starsky flopped onto his back and aimed his widest grin at him. "Thought you'd never ask."

So much for studying, Hutch thought as he joined his partner on the bed. Tomorrow, he told himself. Definitely. He'd put his head down and get serious about studying. No more excuses.

Then Starsky pulled him into his arms and kissed him—and the exam and the textbooks in his cardboard box and the whole sordid workplace without a Starsky in it went clean out of Hutch's mind as he plunged into his lover's orbit.

oooOOOooo

When Hutch walked into the squad room the following morning, Dan Vanderhoff was installed in what had been Starsky's chair, surrounded by five or six officers who were hanging on his every word.

"I dived and fired and got one in the leg," Hutch heard him say. "They knew they didn't have a chance. They couldn't get past me, and they wouldn't have dared to shoot their way out. So, hey presto," he snapped his fingers, "I had them trapped. They knew the game was up."

He leaned back expansively, hooked his thumbs behind the lapels of his suit. "By the time the rest of the team finally got to the scene, I had them handcuffed and ready to be taken away. And that was the end of it."

He was a big man, muscular, with sandy-colored hair and sideburns, and blue eyes set in a large florid face. An expensive-looking suit jacket stretched tight across his beefy shoulders; a fashionably wide tie strangled the powerful neck with a noose-like grip.

"Hey, Hutch," he said and looked up with a broad grin. "You ready to show me some action?"

Hutch forced himself to smile back. "Ready when you are, Vanderhoff."

"Call me Dan, will you?" Vanderhoff dismissed his audience with a wave of the hand and got to his feet. Despite his bulk, he carried his weight well on a large frame that topped even Hutch's lofty height. "Less of a mouthful." He grinned again.

Hutch saw his eyes roam up and down his own casual outfit composed of cords, green turtleneck sweater, and black leather jacket, and suppressed a grin of his own. It seemed Dan Vanderhoff had old-fashioned ideas about what constituted appropriate clothing for a detective.

Dobey maneuvered his bulk out of his office and presented a new badge and ID to his newest detective. "I want you out on the streets today," he said. "Check out your new beat. Get your bearings."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Hutch, go show him around, introduce him to your snitches and anyone else you think is important. And fill him in on Operation Blue. When the bust goes ahead, I want you both fighting fit for it."

"Will do, Capt'n." He looked at Vanderhoff, "C'mon. We'll take my car. That'll give you a chance to look around and get a feel for the place."

As they cruised down North Street, Hutch kept a close eye on his temporary partner. The ruddy face was set into lines of easy concentration. Quick blue eyes roamed right and left, taking in the neighborhood—details, layout, street names. They were the eyes of a detective, trained, alert and watchful.

Vanderhoff picked up the ins and outs of the Zebra Three beat in a remarkably short time. He asked all the right questions, came to all the right conclusions. When they ran into a couple of punks hassling Fat Rolly, recently paroled, Dan Vanderhoff defused the situation with little more than his bulky presence, an authoritative stance, and few choice words of warning.

Hutch relaxed a fraction. "I better fill you in on Operation Blue," he said when Vanderhoff had taken down everyone's details and they were cruising the streets again. "The shipment's due to arrive any day, and we gotta be ready for it."

"The sooner the better," Vanderhoff said. "I'm itching for some action." He gave the bulge under his arm a meaningful pat.

Hutch resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "We've planned this bust for weeks," he began. "It's our big chance to do some serious damage to the Shark—"

"This Shark," Vanderhoff interrupted smoothly, "he's an off-shoot of the Medellin cartel, right? He supplied drugs to James Gunther, right?"

"That's right. After we arrested Gunther, he disappeared for a while, but now he's back in business. He's reopened his old supply lines, and it's only a matter of time before he floods the streets with heroin."

"And he's teamed up with the Monte gang against the Sugarhills. I know. We heard about all that weeks ago."

"You can take the Sugarhills out of the equation now," Hutch said. He pulled up at a red light and looked at Vanderhoff. "The bodies of the Cohen twins were

found floating in a sewage tank in a waste treatment plant in Santa Barbara a coupla weeks ago. They'd been shot and dumped, along with a few key members of their gang."

"That so?" Vanderhoff said, impressed. "The Shark doesn't do things halfway, does he? He reminds me of Nelson Corletti. When I was undercover in the Corletti gang in '69—"

"Actually, we think it was Vic Monte who masterminded the strike. He's the brains of the outfit. He also knows this city like his own backyard." Hutch checked his mirrors and accelerated over the intersection. "The upshot is that we don't have to worry about the Sugarhills anymore."

"Yeah, but look, your troubles are only just starting. With the Cohens out of the picture, what's to stop the other two from taking over LA? Mark my words, between Monte's connections and the Shark's muscle, you're heading for major trouble. They could bring the city to its knees."

He's quick. He may be an insufferable show-off, but he knows his stuff.

Hutch relaxed a little further. "Exactly," he said. "That's why we gotta strike now before they have time to regroup. Neither of them's in peak shape right now. The Sugarhills didn't exactly go quietly, and we took advantage of the situation and landed a strike against Monte recently. But right now, our main target is the Shark."

Vanderhoff raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"He's expecting his first major drug shipment from Colombia," Hutch explained. "Weapons and explosives, too. A whole truck load full of gear is due to arrive. It's a perfect opportunity. Two of ours went undercover to get the goods. Simmons and Babcock? You met them yesterday."

"A tall blond and a short dark guy? Kinda rough-looking?"

"That's them. They were under for weeks, and it took a lot out of them. But they got great results. Locations, times, names, even keys to the warehouse. Reynolds pulled them in yesterday 'cause we were worried they'd get their cover blown. We have the docks and the warehouse in Baird Street under constant surveillance. Now all we gotta do is get everyone in place so we can move at once when the stake-out teams report activity."

"Big operation, huh?"

"Our biggest strike against the drug trade since we closed down Gunther's operation last year," Hutch said. "The Shark needs this shipment. That's why this bust is so important. If we can intercept the delivery *and* take down a few of his men, maybe we can finally get on top of this gang war."

"What about the man himself? You should always go for the biggest fish, I always say."

"We don't expect him to be there. He has his hired hands to do the dirty work for him."

"All right, fill me in on the details then."

"Sure," Hutch said, and he did.

oooOOOooo

The call to action came sooner than expected. They'd just finished lunch at the El Chaco, where Dan Vanderhoff had amazed Hutch by putting away two massive taco portions and an astonishing amount of Coors, when the radio erupted into a distorted squawk.

"Zebra Three, come in. Come in, Zebra Three."

Hutch reached for the mike. "This is Zebra Three. Go ahead, Mildred."

"Switch to Channel One. Stand by for patch-through from Lt. Reynolds."

Crackle.

"Hutchinson? Reynolds here. Operation Blue has the go-ahead. I repeat, we have the go-ahead for Operation Blue. Zebra Six has just called it in."

Today? Shit, too soon.

"The delivery must've been brought forward," Reynolds said. "But we think we can still intercept it. Rendezvous at the corner of Baird and Saints and proceed as planned. No lights and sirens on approach."

"We copy, lieutenant," Hutch replied as Vanderhoff switched on the siren and slapped the Mars light on the roof. "Zebra Three responding. ETA...ten minutes."

A path cleared for them through the afternoon traffic. Hutch passed the mike to Vanderhoff and stepped on the gas.

"The truck's about to leave the docks," Reynolds' distorted voice came over the air-waves. "Lopez and O'Leary are right behind it. Wallace and Baylor are in position, and Menendez and Stanton are on their way. But we can't get hold of Aston and Pirelli. Or Simmons and Babcock. It's their day off. And I'm stuck on the other side of town. It'll take me at least half an hour to get there."

Damn.

Another crackle, an indistinct mumble at the other end, then Reynolds' voice again, loud and clear this time. "Hutch, it's your show now. Do the best you can. Call for backup only as a last resort. I'll try and get there as fast as I can. Good luck. Reynolds out."

"Looks like you're getting your action at last," Hutch said to Vanderhoff as he took the LTD into a tight left-hand turn. "The bad news is we're a few guys short. We didn't expect this to happen so soon. Stroke of luck you've started work today."

Vanderhoff pulled out his gun, checked it over and pocketed a couple of extra clips. "Yeah," he said, his expression inscrutable. "Lucky me."

oooOOOooo

Linda Baylor had already fastened her Kevlar vest when Hutch—Mars light removed and siren muted on approach—pulled up behind her blue Dodge.

"Hey, good to see you guys," she said, looking tense and alert and very much ready for action. "For a minute there I thought Wallace and I would have to run the show on our own."

"How much time we got?"

"Five minutes max. Lopez just called. Get this—he saw six guys get into the back of the truck. Plus the driver and the ones already inside, that makes at least ten. And I bet you there're even more inside. You guys better get your vests on."

Wallace, his not insubstantial girth quivering with the effort, trotted toward them from the car, making urgent gestures.

"They've just turned into Hobard. They'll be here any minute. Whaddo we do? We wait for the others?"

"We can't wait any longer if we want this bust to succeed," Hutch said. "We're relying on the element of surprise. That building's a warren. There're too many exits for us to cover. Our best chance is to proceed as planned and take them by surprise when the truck arrives."

Vanderhoff spoke for the first time. "You're not thinking of going in there with only half the team, are you? That's crazy. We're hopelessly outnumbered. "

"But we're in the stronger position," Wallace countered. "We may not get them all, but we can sure put a dent in the organization. Anyway, the others won't be long." He looked at Hutch. "But it's your decision. You're in charge."

Three pairs of expectant eyes turned to Hutch. He hesitated for only a moment.

"We're going in," he said. "We can't afford not to. We have to be in position by the time they drive in through the gate. Dan and I take the side entrance, you take the back. All we have to do is hold them until the others get here. Then we can put out a general call for backup."

"This is totally against regulations," Vanderhoff objected. "It's lunacy, four of us against ten armed felons."

"Six," Linda corrected. "Lopez and O'Leary are right behind them. And you heard Hutch. This is our only chance. We gotta be in place before the truck arrives or we can kiss all our hard work goodbye. C'mon, Wally, let's go. Good luck, guys."

oooOOooo

They went in, Hutch in the lead, Vanderhoff a disgruntled presence behind him.

They slipped up the backstairs and down a long passage to the loading hall. A swing door gave access to a narrow metal walkway two floors above the ground. They crept noiselessly along, backs pressed against the wall. Took up position behind two steel beams that afforded a view into the hall below.

Cranes, forklift trucks and conveyor systems dominated the floor space, recalling a time when the warehouse had been used to supply engine parts for the aerospace industry. An array of multilevel walkways hugged the walls, connected by stairs and ladders. Wooden boxes cluttered the space beside the gate.

Hutch and Vanderhoff crouched, guns drawn, with only seconds to spare before the crunch of tires on gravel announced the arrival of a vehicle. The massive gate slid open, and an unmarked truck with a canvas-covered top rolled into the enclosed area. Two men emerged from a side room and pushed the gate shut. Several others descended from the back of the truck.

Within seconds, the hall was full of people.

Hutch waited for just another moment to give Lopez and O'Leary time to get into position. He looked across at Vanderhoff, trying to catch his eye—a reflex, an action as unthinking as breathing as he sought that small connection he'd always shared with Starsky in similar moments of impending action.

His temporary partner was oblivious to the glance. He had his eyes fixed on the truck. A thin film of moisture glazed his face.

Hutch experienced a small sharp pang of regret at the realization that he would never share that look with Starsky again. He took a deep breath and inched out from behind the steel beam, the Magnum held firmly in both hands.

"Police! Freeze!" he roared and aimed the gun, cocking the weapon audibly. "Drop your guns and put your hands in the air! We have you surrounded."

On the floor below, Wallace and Linda stepped forward, guns cocked, arms rigid, blocking the way out the back. Lopez and O'Leary burst through the door in the gate and covered the front. Ten feet on Hutch's right, Vanderhoff raised his gun and aimed it at the men below.

There was a second's stunned silence in the bay below, followed by a howl of outrage. The cluster of men around the truck broke apart. A few figures froze. Others scrambled for cover. A few made a run for it.

"Hold it!" Hutch fired a warning shot over the fugitives' heads, and another. Two of the running figures stumbled to a halt. Two others gained a side door and disappeared from view.

Damn. Hopefully, the others had arrived to cover the exits.

Hutch kept his weapon trained at the suspects below while Wallace, Linda, Lopez and O'Leary moved in to disarm and handcuff the men.

There was a distant sound on his right, coming from the passage at the back. Hutch held his breath and listened hard. Then he heard it again. It was the sound of heavy boots racing up metal stairs.

The two that got away. They must've found the exits blocked.

Maybe there was still a chance to get them.

Hutch tossed a glance at Vanderhoff, a quick once-over to see if he shared that assessment. Vanderhoff's attention was on the suspects in the hall. He didn't look up.

"Dan!" Hutch called out. Vanderhoff looked up, and Hutch jerked his head in the direction of the noise. "They're coming up the stairs. They must be heading for the fire escape at the back."

A look into the hall below, but the others had the situation under control.

"C'mon," Hutch shouted. "Let's go." He moved away, paused only when Vanderhoff caught him by the arm.

"What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

Hutch hardly spared him a glance. It was blindingly obvious what they had to do.

"Down here, the way we came," he said and propelled Vanderhoff in the direction of the swing door. "The storage room. You saw it when we came up. You go left, I go right, we trap them before they reach the exit. Go!"

"Yeah, but—"

"Go, dammit! They're gonna get away over the roof."

Vanderhoff moved away, and Hutch started running. He bypassed the stairs, continued down the passage and into the maze of back rooms. He reached the entrance to the storage room just in time to see the two men pounding across the wooden floor toward the window.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Police!" He fired another warning shot. They kept on running. One man pulled a gun, fired blindly in his direction. Hutch pressed himself against the wall. Aimed with care and fired again. One of the running

figures screamed and fell, clutching his leg. The other stopped abruptly, hands in the air, only feet away from freedom.

Holding the gun with rigid arms, Hutch advanced cautiously into the room. He risked a brief glance at the only other opening where Dan Vanderhoff should have made an appearance by now. Where the hell was he?

"Drop it!" he yelled. "Drop the gun! Get on your knees and put your hands behind your heads."

He slapped the cuffs on; a nearby metal shelf provided a convenient means of attachment. Hutch hastily examined the leg wound—only a flesh wound. He ignored the man's whimpers, the other man's curses. Glanced at the second door again. No Vanderhoff.

What had happened to him? Hutch approached the open door with caution, back against the wall, and peered down the dark and empty passage.

"Dan," he called out in a low voice. "Dan, you okay?"

Silence.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

At the same time, somewhere below, in the main part of the building, a whole volley of shots went off. So there were more. Hutch cursed under his breath. Nothing more dangerous than a trapped criminal. Sounded like they were trying to shoot their way out.

Leaving his captives secured to the shelf, Hutch retraced his steps to their starting point. Vanderhoff was right there, on the walkway, crouching against the wall, mere feet from where they'd split up. He held his gun in a tight two-handed grip. Sweat beads were rolling down his temples.

Hutch bent down and gripped him by the shoulder. "Hey, what happened? You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I'm okay. I'm fine." The northern voice was rough, belligerent. "A bit rusty, that's all. This is not the way we do things in Detroit, you know." He wiped a hand over his sweaty forehead, avoiding Hutch's gaze.

Hutch blinked. "What? I thought you did this every day. You were telling me...And your file said—"

"Fucking hell, but not like this," Vanderhoff roared. "Outnumbered and with no backup. We do things properly. We follow procedure. We don't go on suicide missions."

Hutch crouched down beside him and took a good look at the man's face. He took in the dilated pupils, the slight tremor in his hands, and bit back the sharp retort already hovering on the tip of his tongue. Instead he said, "Look, it's

okay. Don't worry about it. Everyone freezes now and again. Happened to me once, too."

"To you?" The voice dripped resentment. "The great and famous Ken Hutchinson? Who took down the mighty Gunther? You've gotta be kidding."

Shots rang out again, too close for comfort. Hutch stood, hauled Vanderhoff to his feet. "We can't stay here. C'mon, we have to get down."

He started running down the walkway toward the nearest ladder, Vanderhoff like a shadow behind him. A bullet whizzed past Hutch, and he dropped, pulling Vanderhoff down with him, seconds before a whole barrage of bullets punctured the space above them.

Shit. Where had they come from? Where the hell were they?

Hutch returned fire, gained enough breathing space to allow both of them to crawl forward and into the shelter of the rail-mounted movable crane. Hutch's mind raced. They had to be on the level above, shooting from the catwalk.

If only he could only reach the stairs...

He looked at Vanderhoff. "Cover me. I'm going up."

Vanderhoff nodded, tense, and clutched his gun. "Sure," he said. "Sure."

Hutch gripped his arm. "You okay with that?"

Vanderhoff nodded again. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay. Go!"

Hutch ran, making for the narrow alcove beside the stairs. A bullet ricocheted off the wall on his right. He threw himself into the welcome safety of the recess, flattened himself against the wall, chest heaving.

There was no answering fire from behind the crane. Hutch cast a cautious glance back the way he'd come, couldn't see a sign of Vanderhoff. A passing bullet almost took his nose off. He jerked back.

And still, there was no response from Vanderhoff, no reaction, no cover fire. Hutch risked a second look.

Vanderhoff wasn't there. He actually wasn't where he'd been only moments before.

Vanderhoff had gone.

Hutch's stomach turned. Dan Vanderhoff had left his position although he'd been in a perfectly safe spot, perfectly covered, ideally situated to provide cover for his partner. *Why? Why?*

There was no time to ponder his partner's actions. And no chance to reach the catwalk now.

The main passage on the left, his only escape route, was alive with the shouts and gunfire of those still holding out against the police. He wouldn't be able to get out that way. And as he listened, there was the sound of someone running, fleeing the chaos in the back building. Coming toward him.

Above him, the catwalk shook under the tread of heavy boots. They were coming down. And when they reached the walkway, they'd have him cold. There was no place for him to go. And no way back, either.

Trapped. Vanderhoff had left him stranded.

In a mere second, the roles reversed as Hutch turned from hunter to hunted.

Forget about Dan. He ain't coming.

He was on his own. And he had to act. Now.

Hutch rolled out of the recess, into the open, the surge of adrenaline like fuel in his veins. Came to his feet, raised the Magnum. Saw a man pounding down the passage toward him, head thrown back like a deer running from danger. Heard the others above and behind him, closing in.

"Police! Freeze!"

The man kept on running. Was almost on him. Hutch saw his eyes, dilated with fear. He saw the gun hand, saw the gun coming up as if in slow motion. Saw his face...

Knew his face. Knew it with startling, instant recognition.

Hutch reeled. Time slowed endlessly.

He knew the face. He knew the man. A memory of terror sliced through his gut.

A squad car in motion. The dull thud of a collision. One look and a flash of sudden understanding. A screamed warning.

Get down. Get down. Get down. *Starsky, get down!*

And a face, glimpsed in that second of terror, the face of a man holding a gun, a squad car in motion, that face, forever engraved on Hutch's memory, haunting his nightmares—the bright May morning, the car, the gun, the face...

He would never, never, never forget that face. The face of the man who had shot his partner.

And now he was here. The man he thought he'd never see again. He was here, running toward him, his gun hand coming up...

Hutch screamed—a voiceless scream, a wild, defiant sound in his throat. He fired.

The running figure stumbled. The face distorted into a grimace. The gun went off, and a piercing pain exploded in Hutch's vision.

He fired again.

Red erupted from a torn throat and sprayed in a wide arc over the walls of the passage. The body jerked, fell, limp as a puppet without strings. Crashed forward, arms flung wide. Jerked again. Lay still.

I got him. I got the sonavabitch.

The breath exploded from Hutch's lungs, the pain behind his eyes suddenly hot and fierce and blinding. He fell to his knees. The footsteps and voices on the stairs behind him collapsed into a single rushing sound.

He hardly even felt the bullets as they slammed into him from behind.

Then he was down. Metal grating dug into his cheek. His fingers couldn't feel the grip of the Magnum anymore.

What the hell...?

In the far, far distance, muffled through walls of cotton, he thought he heard Linda's high-pitched voice yelling his name.

Shot. They've shot me.

So much for a partner who watches your back...

The irony of that was overwhelming. He was still contemplating whether to curse his fate or to laugh out loud when rough hands seized him, hauled him upright.

"It's him." A hard voice. "I told you it was him. I recognized him right away."

There was a flare of sharp-edged agony. Of confusion.

Where are you, Starsk? I could use a little help here.

A brief moment of clarity when he remembered that Starsky wasn't there, didn't know, wouldn't come.

More sounds. Unintelligible words. Movement. An explosion of pain.

And then darkness.

Chapter Eleven

"One more go?"

"Okay. One more."

They faced each other squarely, circling slowly, eyes on each other's every move. Starsky feinted left, then right, but John Babcock wasn't taken in. He stepped forward quickly, dropped to a knee, grabbed his opponent's wrist and pulled, reaching to force Starsky down over his left shoulder.

Starsky hooked his arm around Babcock's waist and pushed back against him. They grappled. When Starsky pushed forward, Babcock rolled him over his hip and followed it down into an attempted pin. Starsky twisted, broke the hold, slid free of Babcock's grasp and stood.

He faked a knee drop, ducked behind his opponent and reached to encircle his shoulders and neck with his arms. Babcock tried a hip toss, but Starsky countered into an armbar takedown, bringing his opponent to the floor. Before Babcock could roll and slide away, Starsky had reached under his arm, locked him in a half-nelson, and pinned his forehead to the mat.

"Okay, okay," Babcock panted. "Give!"

Starsky let go, got to his feet and extended a hand to pull his opponent up.

"Great session," Babcock said and wiped the sweat off his forehead. "You're giving me a real run for my money lately. It's those damn fast reflexes of yours. I guess you're pretty much back to normal, physically, huh?"

"Getting there," Starsky grinned, pleased with himself. "I still got a way to go. But at least I can hold my own now."

They walked to the changing rooms, picked up their towels, and headed for the shower.

"You do this with Hutch a lot?"

"Haven't for a while, but we used to. He taught me that nifty move I used on you earlier. He was collegiate champion, did you know that?"

"No, I'd no idea. I'm just an amateur myself."

"You two should get together some time. He's much better than me. I'm not really a challenge for him. Especially right now."

Hutch still couldn't bring himself to wrestle Starsky in earnest. Except, of course, in bed. They'd done a fair bit of wrestling under the sheets lately. Starsky suppressed a grin and tried to think of something else.

"How's the job hunt going?" Babcock asked as if on cue.

Starsky's elation seeped away. *Lousy*, he thought.

"Okay," he said. "I got a few possibles. I had an interview at LA Cabs this morning. They want me to start next week."

"Cab driver, huh?" Babcock said vaguely and started rinsing the soap off his chest.

"It's only temporary until the fall semester starts." Starsky turned the water off with a forceful twist, secured a towel around his middle and marched from the shower. He yanked open his locker, pulled out a few clothes, then sat down on the bench, a T-shirt gripped in his hand, and stared at the opposite wall.

Why the hell was he feeling so defensive about it? Surely, driving a cab was as valid an occupation as patrolling a beat.

He sighed. Finding a job, even a temporary one, was turning out to be more difficult than he'd expected.

A year ago, he'd gone through the exact same motions—newspaper ads, interviews, application forms—and at the time, job hunting had almost been fun, a break from the cop routine. Because he'd been doing it together with Hutch. In fact, it had never occurred to them to look for separate jobs.

"We work together," they'd told recruitment managers more than once. *"We're partners."*

Not anymore. This time, he was on his own. Hell, he'd even give the porn outfit a try again—gladly—if only it meant he'd be working with Hutch again.

But that would never happen now. Hutch was still a cop, and about to take the lieu's exam. Once he got his promotion, both their professional lives would be irreversibly changed, and apart.

No more partners on the job. They were partners in every other way. That was enough. It had to be enough.

Except...

Starsky wiped the thought from his mind before it could take shape. Reminded himself, again, that all this was for the best. That there was no other way.

He thought about his latest job interview. The guy had been eager to take him on. Great. Back to driving a cab. That would thrill Hutch no end. But then, Hutch hadn't been very enthusiastic about any of his partner's recent career suggestions.

"How about truck driver?" Starsky had suggested not long ago.

"Long-haul, you'd be away for days on end."

"Security guard?"

"Night work. We'd never get to see each other."

"Bouncer?"

"Ditto."

"Pastry chef? Forklift operator? Car salesman? Deep-sea diver?"

"I rest my case."

"Huggy needs someone in the kitchen—"

"Peeling potatoes? Starsky, you've gotta be kidding. You're wasted on that kinda work." Hutch leaned forward and pointed a Hutchinson finger at him. "You need something stimulating, something that makes use of your little grey cells and holds your interest for more than a couple of hours."

Read: No partner of mine is going to earn his living doing unskilled labor.

Starsky shrugged. "I'm open to suggestions. But for your information, there ain't many stimulating jobs out there they'll let you do without a degree or years of training and experience."

Hutch's voice went soft and low. "You have training and experience. Plenty of it. You don't need to be a street cop to use them. Listen to me. You can work for the police as a consultant. You can teach at the Academy. You can get work in Juvie or Support or Intelligence or Admin. There are a hundred different places where they'd be thrilled to have your skills and knowledge."

Starsky turned away. "No," he said, his voice rough. "I'm outta police work. I'm not goin' back in."

He didn't tell Hutch, couldn't tell Hutch that it would break his heart to go back, only to be involved on the fringes of the action. All or nothing. He couldn't settle for anything else.

All of which meant that it was already the middle of February of a brand-new decade and he still hadn't made much progress on the job front.

"Wow," Babcock said behind him as Starsky shrugged into his leather jacket. "Great jacket."

Starsky snapped out of his reverie.

"Hutch gave it to me for Hanukah," he said and smiled. Hutch had to have splashed out a couple of weeks' worth of paychecks on it. It was black, with a stylish cut that fitted him like a well-worn glove. It wasn't quite like the jacket he'd lost to the shooting, but close. Better, even.

"I thought Hutch didn't believe in rampant commercialism."

"Euphoric sentimentalism," Starsky corrected, grinning. "Yeah, Hutch had a hang-up about Christmas for years. But not anymore. This time, he threw himself right in. You should've seen him: he went wild with the decorations. We ended up with fairy lights strung all around the house."

Babcock shook his head. "You guys are weird."

Indeed.

Starsky remembered that he had so much to be grateful for—Hutch, his life, his recovery. What the hell did it matter what kind of a fucking job he did?

As they walked to the car park together, they heard the radio squawking in Babcock's grey Chevy from a distance of several yards away.

"What is it now?" Babcock grumbled. "It's my first day off in weeks, for crying out loud. Can't they at least let me go to the gym in peace?"

He jogged ahead, swung the car door open, and picked up the mike. "This is Zebra Five, come in." A distorted babble erupted in response.

Starsky gave him a grin and a farewell wave, and turned away. He'd almost reached the Torino when he heard Babcock's voice behind him soar into an outraged "What!" followed by a stunned "Fucking hell!"

Starsky looked back at him and was just in time to see the blood drain from his face and the hand on the mike tighten to a white-knuckled grip.

"Yes," he heard him say. Saw the brown eyes come up and aim straight at him, pinning him with a horrified look. "Yes, he's here."

Starsky stopped dead in his tracks.

More static from the radio. "Yes," Babcock said in response, wide eyes fixed on Starsky. "I...I'll tell him. We'll be right there."

An icy wave of premonition surged up inside Starsky. *Hutch*. He was beside Babcock in an instant, hand gripping the door.

"Hutch?" A breathless whisper.

Babcock looked at him with dismay.

"Missing," he said, stunned. "Operation Blue went down ahead of schedule. They don't know what happened yet, but a coupla perps got away, and they took Hutch with them." He added, white-faced, "They think he was shot."

Starsky's world shattered into a million pieces.

oooOOOooo

No journey had ever stretched longer than the drive across town to the crime scene in Baird Street, although Babcock drove like a man possessed.

Starsky had abandoned the Torino—useless without Mars light, siren and radio—without a second thought. He gripped Babcock's mike in a hard fist while Mildred filled them in on the situation.

"Reynolds was shot," she informed them. "He's in the hospital. And O'Leary's got a concussion. They've arrested eleven suspects. Four were killed—"

"*Hutch*," Starsky croaked. "What about *Hutch*?"

This isn't happening, he told himself sternly. This can't be happening. Not now. Not after everything we've gone through.

"We don't have any details yet, honey. The guys at the scene will tell you more."

Baird Street was a scene of controlled pandemonium, the access road crowded with unmarked cars, uniforms, black-and-whites. An ambulance crew still tended to the walking wounded. There were guards stationed outside the large nondescript warehouse. Police tape kept the curious and inquisitive at bay.

Planted squarely in front of the gate, drawn up to his full height, was Chief Ryan at his most imposing, addressing an eager press corps. Snatches of his statement drifted right across the street.

"...weeks of hard work have paid off...the dedication and commitment of our courageous men and women...proud of what we have achieved here...as the Chief of this police force I can confidently say..."

Starsky ignored the crowd, the Chief, the press. He ducked under the cordon—the uniforms didn't dare stop him; they all knew him, and once he'd outranked them all—and homed in on the voice of his captain.

Dobey stood on the second level of an intricate set of gangways that ran all around the sides of the hall. His furious bellow carried clear across the space. "What do you mean, no one saw what happened? We had fifteen officers at the site. How could they possibly get away?"

Starsky bypassed the forensic teams busy on the ground floor, made for the nearest ladder, Babcock a mere foot behind him. Flew up the steps and exploded onto the scene.

Every head in the group swiveled to face him as he rushed up. Familiar faces, colleagues and friends—Dobey, Menendez, Stanton, Wallace. There was only one unknown face in the group—a red, beefy one, topped by a mop of ash blond hair. The man gazed at him with astonishment.

Starsky ignored him, too. "Cap'n—"

"Starsky. Babcock. Where've you been? We've been looking for you for hours."

"Cap'n, what happened? Where's Hutch? Mildred said...he's been shot?"

"We're not sure." Dobey suddenly looked and sounded a hundred years old. "Linda saw him get hit, but she couldn't see where, or how badly he was injured."

An icy hand reached inside Starsky's chest and locked a tight fist around his heart. "Tell me what happened," he whispered.

"We don't know yet. We think that Hutch was in a shootout with three suspects and that he killed one of them. The other two managed to get out the back. We think they must've taken him. They had an escape car waiting in the alley."

Facts. He needed facts. The switch to detective mode was instant, effortless.

"What was the make and number? Which way did they go? Did anyone go after them?"

Menendez spoke up, distress in his voice. "It was a beige Ford, but I didn't get the number. There were perps coming out of every hole at the time, and Mike and I had our hands full. They were gone in seconds."

"How d'you know they had Hutch? Did you see him?"

"I saw them push him into the car. I'm sure it was him—the hair, you know. I think he must've been unconscious." Menendez gestured helplessly. "We were taking down a couple of suspects and couldn't get away. I'm sorry, Starsky. There was nothing we could do."

Starsky met his eye. "It's okay, Rob. It's not your fault."

He wanted to shout for answers, shake the men and knock the answers out of them. Years of training paid out as the professional inside him smoothly took over. This was not the time to lose it. He needed every ounce of his self-control if he wanted to get to the bottom of this.

"How did it happen?" he said, and somehow his voice came out steady and tightly contained. "How did they get their hands on him?"

"That's what we were trying to figure out," Dobey said. "Seems that no one really saw what happened."

"Linda saw it happen. Where's she? Why isn't she here?"

"She went in the ambulance with Lt. Reynolds. She'll be back as soon as she can."

"Someone must've seen *something*. What about his backup? What about his partner?" Starsky swiveled and faced the only stranger in the group. Took a step toward him and leveled a piercing look at him. "Where were you when Hutch was shot?"

The large man frowned at him. "I don't believe we've met. You are...?"

Dobey stepped in. "Vanderhoff, this is David Starsky, Hutch's former partner. Starsky, Dan Vanderhoff."

"A civilian?" Dobby's newest detective said in disbelief. Starsky saw his eyes sweep up and down his exterior, sizing him up. Starsky stepped back and returned the scrutiny. What he saw failed to impress him. This sweaty, red-faced giant with the crumpled suit and the belligerent expression was the hotshot from Detroit?

"Vanderhoff, tell Starsky what you've told us just now," Dobby said.

"Yes, sir," Vanderhoff said, shifting his gaze to Dobby. "But as I said, I don't know what happened to Hutchinson. We got separated after we arrested the two suspects at the back of the building."

"The two that made a run for it, you mean," Dobby clarified.

"Yes, sir. We got them just as they reached the fire escape. We gave warning, and when they didn't stop, Hutchinson fired and got one in the leg. They stopped, and we moved in and arrested them."

"Go on," Dobby said.

Vanderhoff cleared his throat. "I was still securing the suspects when we heard shots downstairs. I remember saying to Hutchinson we should go and check it out, but when I looked up, I saw him rushing out the door and heading back the way we'd come, in the direction of the loading hall."

"Whadda you mean, you saw him rushing out?" Starsky interrupted.

"I mean he left the room at a run," Vanderhoff said, briefly glancing at him. "I assumed he'd seen a suspect and gone after him."

He returned his gaze to Dobby. "I tried to follow him, of course, but at that moment the suspects we'd heard below came running up the stairs and cut me off. I got off a coupla shots at them, but they managed to get past me and run upstairs."

Starsky listened with growing amazement. What the hell was the man talking about? Hutch wouldn't rush off like that and leave his partner to an uncertain fate.

"Then what did you do?" Dobby asked.

"I was going to follow Hutchinson, but the suspect he'd shot in the leg...he was in a bad way. I knew I had to do something to stop the bleeding." Vanderhoff paused. "I did what I could for him, and I was still there when Officers O'Leary and Lopez came up the backstairs. We joined up and proceeded into the loading hall, but we couldn't see any sign of Hutchinson. All we found was the dead body at the end of the walkway."

"And you think that was the perp Hutch went after?" Dobby said.

"I assume so. But, of course, I can't be sure."

Starsky had heard enough. "You're saying Hutch ditched his backup to follow a perp across the building? Without a word to his partner? That's ridiculous. Hutch would never do that."

"Why wouldn't he?" Vanderhoff said and turned to him, suddenly fired up. "He flaunted all the other rules in the book. He went ahead with this bust although we were half a team short. He went in without proper backup. And then he left his post and risked both our lives to go on a wild goose chase after two perps in a totally different part of the building. I'm telling you, that's not the way we do things in Detroit!"

"You're not in Detroit now!" Starsky countered. "Whatever he did, he would've had a damn good reason for it. And talking about backup—where was Hutch's, huh? What took you so long to catch up with him? How long does it take to handcuff a coupla perps?"

"I already told you I had to—"

"Your first duty is to your partner! You're s'posed to watch your partner's back. Or is that something else you don't do in Detroit?"

"Look here, I don't need to take advice from a civilian—"

"If you'd done your job properly, you wouldn't have to—"

"Gentlemen," Dobby said. "Please."

Starsky pulled back and forced his temper under control. Dobby was right. This wasn't getting him anywhere. He turned to the others. "Where's the guy he shot?" he asked. "Where did it happen?"

"On the walkway up there," Stanton said and pointed. "The body's still there. We think they must've taken the emergency stairs to the ground floor. There's an unmarked door leading from the depot to the alley."

"Show me."

oooOOOooo

Starsky stood at the foot of the catwalk stairs, motionless, and took in the scene. The walkway, the stairs, the body, the gun. And the blood.

The place was awash with blood. It pooled in the shallow indentations of the metal mesh, caked the sides of the wall, the handrail, the gangway. Congealed drops still clung to the metal where blood had dripped through the grating to the floor below.

"We don't know yet whose blood that is," Menendez hastened to point out, "but we think it's probably his."

Starsky shifted his focus to the body. It lay on its side, the neck twisted unnaturally where the Magnum had blasted a massive hole through the throat. He stepped around the body, crouched and turned the head toward him.

He saw a fleshy face. Thinning blond hair and sideburns. Dead eyes looking as cold in death as they had in life.

The world froze around Starsky. The voices behind him muted to a great stillness. The room wavered out of existence as the cold eyes drew him in and took him back in time to a forgotten place, a lost moment of his past.

And he remembered. The eyes, the gun, the speeding car. The flashes of light, the staccato burst of gunfire.

He remembered everything he'd forgotten in the turbulences that followed, in that endless second that felt as long as a lifetime. A second so long, he'd had all the time in the world to see, to know, to understand. To weigh the options, the consequences. To make his decision.

He remembered that he'd tried, in that endless second, to get at his gun, his only defense. Remembered that he'd known, almost immediately, that he wouldn't make it.

Remembered turning away from the danger, toward his partner, toward Hutch. Remembered an eternal moment of fire and darkness and falling, the rush of confusion that followed. Remembered the moment of profound relief when, suddenly, Hutch was there, holding him, and the light was back, and he'd known that he'd made the right choice.

And now the man who'd pulled the trigger lay dead in a pool of his blood.

Starsky swayed. Darkness fell over him like a nightmare.

God, Hutch, what have you done?

Is he the reason you were shot?

"Starsky," Dobby's voice reached him through an ocean of water. There was a hand on his shoulder, shaking him. "Starsky, are you all right? What's wrong? Do you recognize him? Can you identify him?"

Starsky clenched his shaking hands to fists. Looked up with an effort and forced himself to form coherent words.

"No," he said. "I can't identify him." The words sounded alien, not his voice at all. "But I recognize him. He...shot me."

"What?"

Starsky looked down at the body. "It's Gunther's assassin. He pulled the trigger on me...at the station last year."

Dobey looked poleaxed. "Are you sure?"

Starsky closed his eyes for the briefest of moments. "Cap'n, I only saw him for a second, but believe me, I'd recognize his face anywhere. This is the guy in the passenger seat of the black-and-white. He was holding the gun. He's the one who shot me. I swear it's him."

"And do you think Hutch recognized him, too?"

A heavy weight descended on Starsky's chest. He took a slow, painful breath.

"Course he did," he whispered. "That's why he killed him."

oooOOOooo

He threw himself into action. It was the only thing to do.

An hour later, he had the place staked and the sequence of events memorized. He'd checked out the building, the body, the weapons, Hutch's Magnum. He'd spoken to every officer in sight, asked every question he needed to ask. He'd followed Hutch's movements right across the building.

He felt frozen, numb. Still disbelieving. But his mind was working furiously.

What happened? What happened here, Hutch?

"He's gotta be alive," Babcock assured him for about the fifth time in as many minutes. "I mean why would they wanna take a dead cop with them?"

"Why would they wanna take a live one?" Dobby countered, frustrated. "What good is Hutch to them?"

They were down in the hall where the crime lab team was getting excited over the contents of the truck—packages of heroin and cocaine, crates filled with rifles and ammunition, boxes of explosives.

The small group clustered around Dobby had more important business to attend to.

"The two guys Linda saw on the catwalk must've run right around the hall to get at him," Menendez said and pointed to the narrow gangway high above the floor.

"Almost looks as if they were targeting him," Wallace agreed.

"Exactly. They wouldn't have done that if they'd just tried to get away."

"Looks like they went after Hutch for a reason," Dobby said. "Could be they want to use him as a bargaining tool. Or maybe they think he knows too much."

Starsky gave a start as a memory stirred in a recess of his mind.

Huggy on the phone. *"Hutch put out word on the streets months ago...he'd pay top price for every piece of information on Gunther..."*

Sly in his dingy apartment room. *"...shipment worth millions...went missing in the confusion of Gunther's arrest...cops demolished Gunther's network...information ended up in the hands of the police..."*

Information in the hands of the police. Of course!

His head snapped up. "Cap'n—"

"Harold? A word with you." Chief Ryan, having dismissed the press, was bearing down on them. His eyes raked over the small group of men, stopped when they fell on Starsky.

"Harold, what is this man doing here? This is a closed crime scene. The place is off limits to the general public, and that includes former officers."

"Cap'n, listen. I know why they've taken Hutch."

"Mr. Starsky, we realize that you're concerned, but that doesn't give you the right to barge in on a criminal investigation and—"

"With all due respect, sir, my partner's missing, presumed shot. So yes, I'm a little concerned. If that doesn't give me the right to—"

"He's not your partner anymore. He's Det. Sgt. Vanderhoff's partner if I am not mistaken."

Dobby waded in. "Chief, if you'll let me handle this."

"Cap'n, listen to me—"

"No, Starsky, you listen to me. The Chief is right. You shouldn't be here, and I shouldn't have encouraged you to stay. I wasn't thinking. You're not a cop anymore."

"Then reinstate me! Hire me on a temporary basis. Lemme do desk duty or research or something. I don't care. Just don't shut me out."

Dobey looked pained. "I'm sorry, Dave, but I can't. You're not cleared for duty. Look, you know we'll do everything, and I mean *everything* we can to find Hutch."

"If you want to find Hutch, you *have* to let me stay." He was shouting, pleading. "I'm your best chance of finding him. You know that!"

"Starsky, my hands are tied. You've resigned from the force. It pains me to say this, but you're no longer a part of this team."

Starsky swallowed his fury. "Will you at least listen to what I have to say?"

Dobey glanced at Ryan, came to a decision. "All right. What've you got?"

Starsky took a deep breath, looked his captain in the eye. "I know why they took him."

"Why?"

"The shipment the Shark's lookin' for. Remember what Sly Jarvis told me? The Shark thought one of Gunther's goons did away with it after Gunther's arrest. To make an easy buck for himself."

"Yes?"

"The shipment hasn't hit the streets, right? So the guy who took it hasn't had a chance to shift it. Maybe he got arrested or killed. Or maybe he's lying low. So the stuff must still be under wraps in a warehouse somewhere. Only no one knows where."

"Yes?"

"Don't you see? They took Hutch, 'cause they think he knows! They think he has the information the Shark's lookin' for."

The others exchanged glances. Then Dobey said gently, "Starsky, look—"

"No, Cap'n, listen. Hutch is a mine of information on Gunther. You know that. He knows more about Gunther's connections than anyone else in this city. Dammit, he's a walking dictionary on Gunther! You know it. Everyone on the street knows it. And the Shark must've realized it, too."

"But Starsky," Babcock objected, "if Hutch knew where the shipment was, we'd have confiscated it months ago."

"I'm not sayin' he knows where it is or who took it." Starsky felt like punching something. What was wrong with them all? Why couldn't they see what he meant? "But he knows the names and faces and movements of everyone

Gunther's done business with in the last coupla years. Hutch is the Shark's best chance of gettin' a lead on the guy he's after!"

"You're saying they took Hutch on a hunch?"

"They must've. Maybe one of them recognized him and realized he'd be useful. The Shark knows the shipment hasn't been found. If it had, the word would be all over the street. He must think there's still a chance to recover it."

He looked impatiently from face to face, willing for the idea to sink in.

"Well, that was the reason he made that deal with Vic Monte, wasn't it?" Dobey said thoughtfully. "Information. He wanted help tracking the shipment. Maybe Monte wasn't as much help as he thought he'd be."

"All he needs is a list of likely candidates," Menendez agreed. "Names, connections, that sort of thing. Then all he has to do is follow up the clues, track down the right guy and lean on him 'til he squeals."

"Exactly," Starsky said. "And if that's true, then Hutch must be alive. He wouldn't be any good to them dead."

"He was shot," a voice reminded him. "For all we know he could be dead alrea—"

Dan Vanderhoff never finished the sentence. Starsky was up close and in his face before the last syllable faded, ignoring the fact that the blond towered over him by half a foot.

"*No one* asked you for an opinion, *hotshot*," Starsky hissed into his startled face. "So shuddup, will ya!"

"He was shot. That's all we know," Dobey said sharply. "Until we have evidence to the contrary, we're operating under the assumption that Hutch is alive. Understood!"

Starsky cast him a grateful look. "Cap'n, listen," he said. "I know Hutch. He'd play his cards right. He'd string the Shark along with a story to gain some time." He hauled some air into his lungs, giddy with hope. "He's alive. I know he is. We just gotta find him."

Chief Ryan stepped forward. "Mr. Starsky, we appreciate your input, and I promise we'll take your suggestion seriously, but now I must insist you leave the premises. You know that we can't involve a civilian in a criminal investigation."

Starsky felt as if he'd been slapped in the face. He looked at the six men—Ryan's business-like expression, Dobey's grim face, Vanderhoff's angry frown. The others shuffled awkwardly.

"I'm already involved," he said darkly. "I was involved in this case long before I got shot. All right, I'm leaving. I'm taking Hutch's car. You can reach me on his radio."

He turned to go, and DobeY stepped in his path.

"Wait," he said. "We're having a debriefing in my office in thirty minutes. I want you present at that meeting. In the capacity of special temporary advisor." He caught Ryan's eye and held it. "I'll clear it with the Commissioner if I have to."

Ryan pursed his lips with displeasure. "It's your case now, Harold. You're in charge while Lt. Reynolds is in the hospital. It's your decision."

oooOOOooo

"All right. Yes. And the weapon? I see. B negative? Downstairs, too? Okay, keep me informed." DobeY put the phone down and glanced up.

"That was forensics," he told the detectives assembled in his office. "They've analyzed blood samples from the scene. Some of it was Hutch's." He flicked a glance in Starsky's direction. "They've discovered traces of it near the side door, as well. That confirms what Menendez saw."

The phone rang again. DobeY snatched it up. "Yes. Already? License number? Okay, bring it in and do a full forensic on it."

"They've found the car," he told his detectives. "Less than two miles from the scene. It's probably stolen and won't give us any clues. They'll have switched to another vehicle."

It was late afternoon and they were gathered in DobeY's office. The entire task force, it seemed, was crammed into the small room. Simmons was there, too, fuming to have missed the action. Half-drunk cups of coffee and greasy sandwich wrappers littered the desk and surfaces.

Starsky barely managed to rein in his impatience. Every fiber inside him was screaming for action. Time was ticking by, Hutch was injured and missing, and they weren't one lousy step closer to finding him. But he knew that DobeY was right. They needed to get their facts straight before leaping into action.

There was a perfunctory rap on the door, and Linda burst into the room.

"Sorry it took so long," she said breathlessly. "But I couldn't leave his wife sitting there on her own while Reynolds was under the knife."

"How's he?" DobeY asked.

"Not too good. He's lost a lot of blood. He'll be in for at least a coupla weeks. They've saved the leg, but they can't say yet if he'll recover the full use of it."

Her eyes roamed over the assembled team, and her gaze fell on Starsky. The breath caught in her throat, and her face collapsed into an expression of raw, undiluted grief.

"Starsky! God, Starsky." She was beside him with two strides, words tumbling from her lips. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry! I wanted to stop them, but I couldn't shoot 'cause they were right beside him, and I might've hit Hutch. I was too far away, on the other side, a level down. I had to run right around to get to the nearest ladder, and by the time I got up there, they'd gone and—"

Starsky was on his feet, his hands gripping her shoulders. "Linda. Linda, calm down. Calm down. It's not your fault. I'm sure you did everything you could."

"He had no chance," she said, distressed, as if she hadn't heard. "They had him trapped. They came at him from both sides. He had nowhere to go. I just can't understand how he could've gotten himself into that situation."

"Linda, sit down," Dobey said. "Tell us what happened. Tell us *exactly* what you saw."

She bit her lip and pushed her long hair back from her face. Absently, she accepted the chair Stanton gallantly vacated for her, sat on the edge and leaned forward, her smooth face creased into a frown.

"I was on the walkway," she said. "The first level up, just left of the gate. I don't know where Hutch and Dan were at the time. I had my eyes on the two perps on the catwalk. They were shooting at everything and everyone."

She breathed in carefully, drummed her fingers on her leg. "I was trying to get closer to them when I saw a movement on the next level up. I looked up and saw Hutch making a dash from the crane to the end of the walkway."

"From the crane?" Starsky frowned. A distance of a hundred feet, more. No cover to speak of.

Too far. Too exposed. *He'd only have done that if...*

"I guess so. There was nowhere else he could've come from." She shook her head. "He must've been trying to intercept those guys, and he would've done it, too, if this other perp hadn't suddenly rushed at him from the side passage."

Starsky experienced a moment of ridiculous relief. "The man he killed came from the side passage? You mean Hutch couldn't've seen him before?"

Good God, Hutch, and I thought...

"Not from where he was. The guy came straight at him. He never stopped. I could tell he was going to fire. Hutch had no choice. He had to shoot."

She gripped Starsky's hand, the distress in her voice painful to hear. "They both fired at the same time. I didn't see what happened to the perp, but I-I saw

Hutch go down. And...and then the other two came down the stairs behind him and...there was nothing I could do. I-I yelled at them to stop, but...they just kept on going and then...they shot him."

Starsky closed his eyes for the briefest of moments. Linda's agitated voice rang in his ears. "I just don't understand why Hutch did that. He was completely exposed. Why didn't he wait for Dan to back him up?"

"Vanderhoff wasn't with him at the time," Dobby told her. "They got separated. Vanderhoff was at the back of the building when it happened."

She frowned. "But I saw—" She shook her head. Turned around and scanned the room until her gaze fell on the man sitting directly behind her. "I *saw* you. You were on the other side of that crane. Why didn't you follow Hutch? You could've given him perfect cover fire."

Every eye in the room turned to Vanderhoff. The rushing sound in Starsky's ears became deafening.

"You're mistaken," the northerner said coolly. "You heard the captain. I was in the backroom at the time, saving a suspect from bleeding to death."

"He was," Lopez confirmed. "At least that's where he was when we hooked up with him."

"Oh, c'mon, man," Linda cried. "What're you talking about? 'Course you were there. I saw you!"

"You got your facts mixed up, ma'am," Vanderhoff said sharply. "I don't know who you saw, but it certainly wasn't me."

Linda opened her mouth in outrage, closed it, opened it in a prelude to a heated response.

Dobby pre-empted her. "Linda, you saw Vanderhoff in the loading hall at the time Hutch got shot? Are you sure?"

"Course I'm sure." Her eyes flashed emerald fire. "I'm not blind. He was on the same level as Hutch, but on the other side of the crane where the swing doors are. I only caught a glimpse of him, but I'm *not* mistaken." She turned to Vanderhoff again. "I saw you, clear as day. Don't tell me that wasn't you."

"You calling me a liar?"

"Yes, damn right I am!"

Vanderhoff lurched from his chair. "I don't have to take this. I didn't come to LA to get insulted. I'm outta here." He tried to push his way past Stanton. "Damn, I need a drink."

Dobey stopped him with a single look. "You're not going anywhere, Sergeant. Sid down!"

Vanderhoff sat back down, a low, dark cloud on his face.

"And now tell us what really happened," Dobby ordered. "You *were* there, weren't you? What went wrong? Did you freeze? That's what happened, wasn't it? You should've followed Hutch to the crane, but you didn't. 'Cause you froze, right?"

The others in the room shifted uncomfortably. Freezing was something every cop dreaded, something many cops experienced at some point in their careers. It could happen to anyone, even the best.

But Starsky wasn't convinced.

"No," he said slowly. "That's not it. There must've been someone else up there. If Vanderhoff was by the swing doors, he couldn't have covered Hutch. He'd have been too far away. But *someone* must've." He looked at Dobby. "'Cause Hutch would never have made a move like that unless he knew someone was covering his back."

"There was no one else," Linda said. "I would've known. After I saw Hutch, I circled around to get a better view of the second level—that's when I saw Vanderhoff—and I'm absolutely certain there wasn't anyone else up there."

Starsky stiffened. "You mean you saw Vanderhoff *after* you saw Hutch?"

A spine-chilling possibility surfaced from a deep, dark corner in his mind. He looked at Vanderhoff. Saw a flicker of unease on the ruddy face, the shift of the eyes. And he knew.

Starsky's blood turned to ice. *OhGod-ohGod-ohGod.*

He was out of his chair so fast, it overturned behind him, and had the beefy northerner hauled up by the front of his shirt before the shifty look had time to crumble from his face.

"You didn't freeze, did you?" Starsky choked out. " You—" The sudden surge of fury almost strangled the words in his throat. "You *left* him! You left him to his fate!"

He shook the man. "You were there, behind the crane, with Hutch, weren't you? You should've given him cover fire. But when Hutch made his move, you decided to get your own skin to safety. You were on your way out the back when Linda saw you!"

He tightened his grip. "And when Lopez and O'Leary came upstairs, you told them you'd been in the backroom all that time. You left Hutch to the wolves. You couldn't handle the action. Goddammit, you fucking lost it!"

"Starsky, let him go." Menendez and Babcock pushed between them from either side. "C'mon, let go of him."

"Hutch relied on you to back him up!" Starsky roared and shook the man, hardly aware of the restraining hands, helpless anger like a bitter taste on his lips. "He got shot 'cause you weren't there!"

"He went at them like a madman," Vanderhoff roared back, unable to keep up the pretense. "With no regard for his or anyone's safety. We should've retreated, but he decided to go after them. It was suicide."

"It wouldn't have been if you'd backed him up properly."

"There was nothing I could've done. They were shooting at us from above. It was madness to go after them. I had to get out or we would've both been killed."

"You let him down. You let down your partner!"

"My partner?" Vanderhoff taunted, now beyond all caution. "From what I've heard, *my partner* ain't exactly the most reliable backup, either. He let you get shot, didn't he? You almost died, 'cause he didn't back you up. He got down and let you face the music. And you're surprised I take precautions to—"

A crimson haze descended on Starsky's vision. The world narrowed down to just two things—his fist and Vanderhoff's chin.

The two connected with a sharp and extremely satisfying crunch. The northerner went down like a felled oak, almost taking Babcock with him.

"Starsky!" Dobby yelled and rushed forward. Starsky heard him from a far, far distance. He stood over his opponent, and he knew that at that moment, nothing—not Dobby's commanding voice, or the hands on his arms, or even Hutch himself—could have stopped him from throwing himself on the man and pounding his ruddy face into a pulp.

Babcock stepped between them. "Wait a minute," he said and crouched down beside the dazed man. "What was that?"

He slipped a hand into the inside pocket of Vanderhoff's rumpled jacket and, with the dexterity of a pickpocket, extracted a flat leather-bound metal flask.

"I felt this when he knocked into me," Babcock explained and straightened up. "Didn't think it was a gun."

Vanderhoff scrambled to his feet unaided, his eyes on the bottle. He reached out as if to snatch it back, thought better of it and stepped back, rubbing his chin. A sullen look creased his face.

Dobby took the bottle from Babcock, unscrewed it. Sniffed the contents. "Whiskey," he said. He shook the bottle. "Empty."

He fixed Vanderhoff with a terrible stare. "How much of this have you had today?" Vanderhoff didn't reply. "All of it?" No reply. A defiant look.

Beside him, Mike Stanton shifted on his feet. He started to speak, broke off, shuffled uncertainly. Dobby rounded on him.

"If you have anything to say that might throw a light on this matter, Sergeant, feel free to share it with us."

Stanton's young face looked apologetic. "I don't wanna get a senior officer into trouble," he said, "but I saw him take a swig from that bottle in the john this morning." He grimaced. "Looked like it was full at the time."

Dobby glared at Vanderhoff. "Well? How much have you had?"

"I've done nothing to be ashamed of. I—"

"Answer me, Sergeant!" Dobby roared and took a step toward him. "How much have you had since this morning? All of it?"

Vanderhoff raised his chin defiantly. "Okay, I have a drop now and then. I need it to keep me on my toes. A lot of cops do."

"This is a half pint of scotch you've had since this morning. That's hardly just a drop."

"A man needs a little support now and then. How else can you function out there when you're looking death in the eye every day of your life?"

As Vanderhoff reached to tuck his shirt into his pants, an unmistakable tremor shook his hands. Starsky saw it with horror, saw the meaningful glances pass between the other officers in the room. Bile rose in his throat again, overwhelming all other senses. He wanted to grab the man again, punch the defiant look from the florid face.

He didn't. He didn't do anything. He stood completely still and let Dobby handle the situation. He couldn't even bring himself to look at the man again. If rage and fear and helpless frustration didn't already fill every part of him, he might even have felt a small amount of pity for the man.

"So you needed a little support," Dobby said. "Is that what happened at the warehouse today? Is that when you needed a little support, too?"

Vanderhoff opened his mouth, closed it. Folded his arms.

Dobby's voice turned dark and dangerous. "That's what happened, wasn't it? You needed a drink to keep you going, but the bottle was empty. And when your partner relied on you to back him up, you lost it. That's what happened, wasn't it? Answer me!"

"I have nothing to say. What's the point? Looks like I've been judged already."

A terrible silence ensued.

"IA will conduct a full investigation into this matter," DobeY finally said. "They'll decide if disciplinary action is required. Babcock, take this." DobeY passed him the bottle with a look of distaste as if it were a blood-encrusted murder weapon. "Go home, Vanderhoff. You're on suspension until further notice."

Vanderhoff's face looked pale and furious as he marched to the door, a path opening before him where the others stepped quietly aside. At the door, he paused briefly as if searching for something to say, then marched from the room without a word and closed the door forcefully behind him.

For a long moment, the silence weighed heavily on the room.

"Classic case of burnout, if ever I've seen one," Menendez finally said. "That man's been on the streets too long. Amazing no one has realized that before."

"Maybe someone has," Stanton muttered under his breath. "Maybe that's why he was forced to transfer."

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A confusion of voices erupted as everyone started talking at once.

DobeY allowed the commotion for only a minute before he stood and faced his team. The noise in the room died away until he had everyone's attention.

"Let's recap and break this up," he said. "We all got work to do. We shouldn't forget that Operation Blue was highly successful, much more successful than we'd hoped. We have eleven of the Shark's men behind bars, including two of his lieutenants, and we've confiscated drugs and weapons worth millions of dollars. Four of his men were killed. We've crippled his organization, maybe permanently so. I want to thank you all for your efforts and commitment that have made this possible. Good work, everyone."

He cleared his throat and let his eyes roam around the room, taking in every face.

"But this isn't yet cause for celebration. Two of ours were injured in the shootout. Lt. Reynolds was shot in the leg, and Sgt. O'Leary sustained a concussion. We also have one officer missing."

He paused again. "You've all earned yourselves a day off, and I'd give it to you if I could. Those of you who've been on duty since last night—go home, get some sleep. Come back when you've had some rest. Everyone else stays and helps in the search for Sgt. Hutchinson. I want statements from everyone involved, including Det. Vanderhoff. I want a thorough interrogation of our eleven suspects. I want ideas and suggestions—anything at all, no matter how far-fetched. Most of all, I want action. Understood?"

Nods and choruses of "Yes, sir." "You got it, Captain." "We're on it, Cap'n."

"That's all I have to say. Dismissed."

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When the last officer had filed out of the room, only Starsky remained. Dobey's dismissal, after all, no longer applied to him. He walked to the desk, leaned both hands on it, and stared at his former captain.

"You promised," he said very, very softly.

Dobey looked everywhere but at Starsky.

Starsky's gaze bored into him. "You promised. You promised to find the best partner for Hutch. Someone who'd keep Hutch *safe*. I trusted you."

"Look, Starsky, I tried," Dobey said. "I bent over backward to get Hutch the best possible match—an experienced officer with an excellent street record and a high success rate. There was nothing to indicate he would be anything less than perfect."

"One day, Capt'n!" Starsky roared and slammed his fist on the desk. "One *fucking* day, and he leaves Hutch up shit creek!"

"We still don't have all the details. They were the Shark's men, and Hutch has a personal score to settle with them. Maybe he—"

"Don't say it! You know it ain't so. Hutch is far too professional to go off half-cocked after a perp. Remember Gunther? Hutch had every reason to knock his teeth down his throat. But he didn't. And he didn't this time, either."

Starsky glared at his captain. "Hutch is out there, missing, 'cause he had a backup he couldn't rely on."

"The DPD praised him in the highest terms. How was I s'posed to know he wouldn't come up to scratch?"

"He's a drunk! He's a liar, and a coward, and a drunk. He lost it, 'cause he needed a drink so badly. Don't tell me that's something Detroit's never figured out."

"You're right," Dobey said, looking grim, and reached for the phone. "You're absolutely right. I'm going to find out right now why we were sent the DPD's reject under the guise of a transfer. And I promise you, heads are gonna roll over this."

"That's not doing Hutch much good right now," Starsky said quietly. He went to the door.

"Where're you going?"

"Out to find my partner. And don't give me any shit about not being a cop anymore. I still got contacts on the street, and you can't stop me from shaking them down for information."

"I wasn't going to," Dobey growled. "You got a gun?"

"At home. Got it back on a special permit."

"Wear it," Dobey ordered. "And keep in touch."

Starsky nodded mutely, walked out and shut the door behind him.

Chapter Twelve

Hutch was falling through darkness.

He'd been falling forever, it seemed, endlessly through a dense, dark night. The falling wasn't the problem. Nor was the darkness. The problem would be the impact.

Dark shapes drifted around him like shadows. There were hands on his arms, his back. He wanted to brush them off, but something was holding him down. He couldn't move.

Distorted voices swirled through the fog in his mind.

"Don't look too good...we don't do somethin', he gonna bleed to death..."

"...need him alive...no good to me dead...stop the bleeding...stitch him up...do what you can..."

The voices made no sense. Another dream, he thought. Sleepwalking again?

Hands touched his face, his head—and a powerful pain ripped through his skull as if someone had driven a blade through his eye.

Hutch screamed. Red hot fire exploded all around him, burning, blinding. The edges of reality slipped from his grasp. He couldn't hold on.

He let go and fell back into darkness.

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The room lay in semi-darkness, illuminated only by the dim glow of a street light that filtered through the sagging blinds and cast long shadows across the dusty floorboards, the sagging couch, the cluttered table. On a building across the street, a neon light flickered erratically, bathing the ceiling in alternating hues of red, white, and yellow. The fumes of cheap liquor permeated the room.

"Ginger. Ginger, listen." Starsky shook the figure sprawled in the only armchair. Lanky blond hair with inch-long roots hung in disarray around a slack face that might once, a hundred years ago, in the freshness of youth, have turned heads on the street. "Call me if Leon gets in touch or if you find out where he is. Call me if you hear anything at all. Did you get that, Ginger? Call me, or Huggy. Or Captain Dobeey at Metro headquarters."

"Sure, Sh-Shtarshky." Glazed blue eyes struggled to get a fix on her inquisitor. "I geddit. Call you or Hutsh. I geddit."

A gin-laden breath wafted over Starsky. He turned his head and let the boneless figure slump back into the chair.

This was hopeless. More than hopeless, this was desperate. He was scraping the barrel.

He crossed the tiny apartment and let himself out. Descended the stairs to the street and stood in the entrance, staring blindly into the night. Lurid outlines of naked legs and breasts blinked neon red from the stripper's bar across the road, trying to lure in a late night customer.

Starsky stood, hardly aware of the chilly night air, the empty street, aware only of the lump of ice in his gut, the taste of despair on his tongue.

Three days had passed since Starsky's world had fallen apart. Three days and nights of searching, hunting, threatening, pleading. Shaking down every snitch he knew in town. Calling in every favor ever owed to him. Three days of running on adrenaline and little else.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Three days and three nights of absolutely no progress at all.

Starsky rubbed his hands over his weary face. He'd done everything, been everywhere, talked to everyone. Dobeey was doing everything in his power. Every detective in the department was out there, following up every clue, checking out every lead.

Nothing. There was nothing. The clues turned up useless information; the leads lost themselves in dead ends. The Shark and the remnants of his operation had crawled somewhere deep underground, and only an elaborate undercover op would have any hope of digging him out. And there wasn't time for that.

No time for many things—food, sleep, rest. No time for fear even. Time only for the familiar old routine, the familiar nightmare—searching for Hutch. On the streets, in the alleys, following up every wisp of a rumor. And when that yielded nothing, back to R and I for information, the squad room for research, Dobeey's office for consolidation. He knew the routine by heart.

What else could he do? What else could anyone do?

This is gettin' old, ya know, Hutch. This is gettin' real old.

They didn't even know if Hutch was still alive.

He squeezed his eyes shut. The fear he'd held back with iron determination for three days and nights seeped through his crumbling defenses and swamped his mind with darkness. His resistance faltered, and for a single, brief, terrible moment of weakness, David Starsky was alone in a small purgatory of his own—in darkness, in silence—and desperately, overwhelmingly, powerfully afraid.

What if...?

God, Hutch, what if?

A memory, a tightly guarded demon of the past, exploited the lines of his weakness to assault him with another, even more horrifying possibility. Four years ago...another drug dealer out for information...using the ultimate form of torture to make Hutch speak...

Nausea welled up inside him, sharp and bitter. His stomach heaved.

Oh God, not that. Please not that. Not again.

Please don't let that happen to him again...

He leaned his forehead against the wall. The stone felt cool and dry and reassuringly solid. He stood for a long moment, gathering strength for the hours to come.

He wouldn't give up. He *couldn't* give up. He never would.

Starsky opened his eyes, pulled himself together with a tremendous effort. Dragged a hand over his face and hauled in a deep, shuddering breath. Stepped out of the entrance into the chill wind.

Time to get back to it. There were still so many places to try.

He walked toward the LTD double-parked on the street. Passed the dark entrance of another building and caught a glimpse of two shadows and the glow of cigarettes sheltered behind cupped hands.

A movement behind him, and there was nothing he could do, no time to do it, no time at all before he felt the hard edge of a gun digging into the small of his back, and even the breath inside him froze.

"Move *one* muscle, pig," a low voice hissed into his ear, "and you're the deadest pig in town."

Arms came around him, patting him down, taking his Beretta as he stood motionless to the pressure of the gun against his back.

A grey Chrysler screeched to a halt beside them. They pushed him inside, roughly. A hand on his head forced him to the floor, pressed his face to the mat. One man on either side of him. The sound of the engine revving. The gun against the back of his head.

"One false move, and I swear, I'm gonna blow you away."

The car jerked away from the curb.

Starsky remembered to breathe.

The whole incident had taken no more than ten seconds.

oooOOOooo

They drove. No one spoke. The car wound its way through the downtown streets. Now and then, the gun pressed hard against the back of his head—a reminder of its presence.

Starsky lay with his nose pressed to the floor and his mind working furiously.

Who were they? Why had they taken him? What was the connection to Hutch's disappearance? There had to be a connection. Two abductions, almost identical in nature, within three days of each other—that couldn't be a coincidence.

The Shark. It had to be the Shark.

He thinks I know something Hutch doesn't?

His mind made an effortless jump to another, numbingly terrifying possibility.

Unless Hutch wasn't talking. Unless I'm their second choice.

Which could mean only one thing. That Hutch was already dead.

The darkness he'd known before was nothing compared to the pit of despair that opened before him now. For an eternal second, he stood on the brink, swaying with the terror of that possibility.

The cold metal of the gun pressing against the back of his head brought him back from the edge.

A possibility, he thought. No more. Just a possibility. One among many.

I'd know if he was dead. I'd feel it.

There was hope. There was still hope. He had to cling to that thought. He had to believe in hope.

The car slowed and descended a ramp. Sudden darkness. A garage? A basement? Starsky tensed in expectation of their arrival.

The car stopped. Firm hands gripped his arms as they hauled him into the dim light of an underground passage. They pushed him forward, through a door, up a narrow flight of stairs. Concrete walls, no windows.

Who were they? What did they want from him? Why hadn't they bothered to secure his hands?

Three floors up, another door. A carpeted hallway. Wooden doors on either side. Pictures of rolling hillsclapes and flocks of sheep on the walls. An ornamental table with a vase of flowers.

Surreal.

The passage was flooded with light, their bulbs concealed behind tasteful lamp shades, and Starsky saw his abductors clearly for the first time. There were three. A tall one, olive-skinned—*Mexican? Colombian?*—was holding Starsky's Beretta. The driver, short and heavily muscled, prodded him along with a gun the size of a small cannon. The third, black with a luxuriant afro, armed with a semiautomatic pistol, brought up the rear. They moved with confidence and purpose, didn't waste one unnecessary word.

Professionals.

A door on the right. The tall one pushed it open, stepped inside. The short one ushered him in with a nudge of the gun, never leaving his side. Afro fell behind, took up a position outside the door. *Guard duty.* The door closed.

The room was empty and brightly lit. Starsky took in the layout with a flick of the eye—a large room, three windows, two floors above the ground. A desk on the left, table, chairs, and a solid wooden cabinet on the right. Assorted other furniture. *A living room? An office?*

Outside the windows lay what appeared to be a residential area with neat wooden houses set back from the road, tidy lawns, trees illuminated by street lights, cars parked in driveways.

None of it made any sense at all.

The tall one stepped to the nearest window, peered out and gave a bark of annoyance at something visible only to him. For just a second, the short one's attention wavered.

And Starsky saw his chance.

He hit out, caught Shorty on the side of the face, knocked the gun aside. Followed it up with a knee to the groin and a punch to the belly. Shorty grunted and doubled over. The gun clattered to the ground.

A second later it was in Starsky's hand. He fired. The tall one crumpled against the wall, clutching his shoulder.

Gotcha!

Starsky fired again, fell, rolled. Gained the shelter of the heavy wooden cabinet.

The door burst open. Yells filled the room. "Drop it! Drop the fucking gun!"

Another voice roared above the din. "Don't shoot him! Don't shoot! Unharmmed, he said."

A bullet whizzed over the cabinet and buried itself in the wall above Starsky's head. And another. They were aiming high. Shredded plasterboard rained down all around him.

Starsky pressed his back to the wall, his shoulder to the furniture. Gripped the gun, an unfamiliar type of Magnum, with both hands. Breathed in and out, deeply, steadily. Jumped forward, crouching, arms outstretched, and fired two more shots in quick succession.

There was a yell and a curse from the door.

Starsky fell back into the safety of his wooden shelter. He hastily opened the chamber. Three bullets left. *Damn.*

He had to get out. He had to get to the window before any more of the Shark's men arrived on the scene. Cautiously, he peered around the edge of the cabinet.

A bullet whizzed past him, no longer aimed high. He jerked back.

They were between him and his only escape route. He would have to make a run for it. He closed his eyes, forced his mind into a small still moment. The image of Hutch surfaced.

I'm sorry, Hutch. I gotta do this. I gotta at least try. This may be our only chance.

He opened his eyes. Gripped the gun. Pushed all thoughts of Hutch aside.

He jumped and hit the ground running, the gun raised in readiness. Slammed into someone crouching out of sight just around the corner, and knocked the man to the ground. A gasp of surprise. Afro. Starsky's right hand grabbed a handful of the man's black hair, jerked his head back. Set the gun to his temple.

"One move," he snarled, "and you'll regret it forever."

"So will you if you don't drop that gun."

Starsky's head whipped around. The tall one was on his knees beside the desk, aiming Starsky's Beretta directly at his head. Blood seeped through the fabric of his shirt, high on the left shoulder.

"Drop it!" he repeated.

Starsky's left finger tightened on the trigger. He shook the dark head with his other hand. "You shoot me, and your pal's a goner, too."

A long silence. They stared at each other over the Beretta held in an unwavering hand, eyes fixed on each other, unblinking.

Stalemate.

oooOOOooo

Hours seemed to pass. Minutes, more likely. Seconds even. They stood tense, eyes on each other's every breath, each willing the other to drop his guard first, to make the first mistake. A second's inattention, a blink of the eye, and it would be all over.

Voices sounded in the passage outside. The door slammed back again and the room filled with people.

"What in the name of the Almighty is going on in here?" A firm, cultured, suave voice filled the room. An American voice without a trace of an accent.

Starsky didn't move. Didn't take his eyes off the tall one. Kept a punishing grip on the other's thick hair.

"Put down the gun, Fabricio," the man said behind him. "I said put it down."

Another long moment passed during which neither man moved or took his eyes off his opponent. Then, slowly, the tall one called Fabricio breathed out, relaxed, and lowered the Beretta.

"Can't I leave you alone for one lousy minute without you roughing up my guests?" the newcomer said sharply just outside Starsky's field of vision.

"It's his fault," Fabricio said as he clambered to his feet. "He started it."

"Dammit, man, you sound like my five-year-old. What do you expect if you bring him here at gun point? Didn't I tell you he's here at my invitation?"

"But, boss, that's what we always do when you say to invite someone...Holy Jesus, he got me in the shoulder! And he's knocked Bastiano unconscious."

"Idiots. I told you to watch out. He's dangerous."

Starsky still hadn't moved. His eyes didn't leave Fabricio; his hands didn't relax their hold. He felt Afro shake with the strain of holding his position.

"Mr. Starsky. Please let him go." Out of the corner of his eye, Starsky saw the man move forward, into his line of vision. "I assure you, you're quite safe. This has been a very unfortunate misunderstanding."

Starsky took his eyes off Fabricio and shifted them to the newcomer.

He saw a man in his late fifties, tall, well built, with steely grey eyes and grey, almost white hair. Trim, fit-looking for his age. A commanding presence, completely at ease despite the armed gunman who had taken over his office. Elegant in a dark three-piece suit.

Starsky had never seen the man before. He gripped his weapon tighter, flicked his eyes around the room. Five against one. Not good.

In a single swift movement, he pushed Afro away, took a step back, and leveled the gun at the tall, patrician figure, instead. Afro inched away and got to his feet, rubbing his neck.

The newcomer didn't seem fazed.

"Mr. Starsky, I must apologize for the behavior of my men. They're not used to civilized company."

Starsky's aim didn't waver. "And you are?" he growled. Whoever it was, it certainly wasn't the Shark.

"Monte," the man said, looking him straight in the eye. "Victorio Monte."

Vic Monte. Starsky felt himself go cold inside.

Monte indicated the man by the door. "And this is Whiteboy, my second-in-command."

White-blond hair. Nearly colorless, ice-cold eyes. Translucent white skin. Armed with a 9mm semiautomatic.

Starsky felt himself go even colder. A memory rushed at him, of rough fists knocking him down, metal-tipped boots slamming into him. He eyed the man keenly, saw no hint of recognition in the pale blue eyes. Thanked his stars that Whiteboy had been riding too high on a cloud of adrenaline to memorize the face of a mere resident unfortunate enough to cross his path in the passage of a seedy apartment building.

Monte nodded at Fabricio. "Give him back his gun."

"But, boss—"

Whiteboy stepped forward, and Fabricio took a hasty step back. "The boss said to give him back his gun." The surprisingly deep voice carried the merest hint of a threat. The voice of a man who knew how to get what he wanted.

Fabricio seemed to know that, too, and he held the gun out grip first.

Starsky observed the power play with interest. Vic Monte could afford to be affable because terror of his lieutenant kept his people toeing the line. A classic

set-up. The muscle and the brain. Because there could be no doubt as to who was the real power in the organization.

He shifted the Magnum to his right hand, took the Beretta with his left, never taking his eyes off Monte and Whiteboy.

"And now get out, all of you," Monte ordered. "And take Bastiano with you."

"But, boss—"

"Get out!"

In seconds, the room was empty except for Starsky, Monte and Whiteboy.

Vic Monte walked to the table and sat down with his back to the wall.

"Please, Mr. Starsky, take a seat. We need to talk. And you may want to consider putting your artillery away. I promise you'll come to no harm and you're free to go as soon as this whole matter is settled."

Starsky's eyes flicked to Whiteboy, who had taken up a position beside the door, a few feet behind his boss. Bodyguard? Or warden? After a moment's hesitation, he lowered both guns a fraction, walked stiffly to the chair Monte indicated and sat, keeping both men in his line of vision.

"What do you want?"

"Ah, coming straight to the point. I like that." Monte smiled and leaned back, utterly at ease. "The situation is this: I believe you're looking for information, and I think I can help you."

Starsky's fingers tightened ever so slightly. "I don't make deals with the mob," he said.

"Of course not. But I haven't forgotten that I owe you. Four years ago, you took a bullet meant for me. That's a debt I have been meaning to repay. When I heard about the assassination attempt on you, I thought I'd left it too late." Monte inclined his head. "But you're tough. Here you are, back in action. So this is my chance at last."

"I don't take favors from the mob, either." Starsky rose.

"Not even if it would save your partner's life?"

Slowly, Starsky sat down again. His heart started pounding powerfully in his ears, but his voice came out cool and steady. Indifferent, almost.

"He's alive then?"

Monte smiled. "Oh yes, he's very much alive."

The pounding in Starsky's ears grew deafening. *Alive. Alive. He's alive.*

With an immense effort, he kept his face immobile and his eyes on Monte. "He was shot. How badly is he hurt?"

"A crease to the head, or so I'm told." The smooth voice held a trace of amusement. "And a few bruises where the bullets hit the vest."

Vest. The bullets hit the vest. He wasn't hit.

He's alive. God, he's alive...

He blinked. Breathed in, slowly and steadily. Breathed out again.

"Why are you holding him?" he asked. "What do you want from him?"

"What makes you think *I* have him?"

"You or the Shark. Comes to the same thing. We know you're in league with each other."

The bushy eyebrows lifted a fraction. "I see you've done your homework. But your information isn't quite correct. Tibo and I have...collaborated, but we're not 'in league with each other', as you put it."

"You joined forces against the Sugarhills."

"And rid LA of one of the most violent gangs operating on this continent. I believe we've done the city a favor. No, we don't work together, but it suited me to let the Shark believe so. You know what they say. Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer."

"Why tell me all this? What do you want from me?"

"Want *from* you? I want to *help* you. I want to help you save your partner. I owe him an even greater debt than you. If it hadn't been for his quick thinking and decisive action that night, neither of us would be alive today."

"Gangster's honor? Don't make me laugh."

"A code of honor, Mr. Starsky, as old as the Cosa Nostra. Call me old-fashioned, but I've always believed in paying my debts."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't expect anything from you. After all, you're the one with two guns in your hands. If you wanted, you could blow us both to kingdom come and add another feather to your cap. But then you'd never find out where the Shark is holding your partner." Vic Monte paused, smiled. "You follow your own code of honor, Mr. Starsky, and you know very well that shooting us won't serve your

purpose. I suggest therefore that the time has come for you to put your weapons away and show a little goodwill."

Starsky sat motionless for a long moment, struggling with his conscience, and every value he'd ever held dear. Then, slowly, he placed the Magnum on the table in front of him and returned the Beretta to its holster.

"What did you have in mind?" he said, his voice rough in his throat.

Vic Monte smiled again, a feral smile that came nowhere near his steel-grey eyes. "Tibo is determined to pry some information from your partner. The issue, I believe, is a missing goods shipment. He's suffered heavy losses in the police raid three days ago. He needs to recover that shipment urgently to pay for new supplies and recruit new members."

"Get to the point," Starsky growled.

"The point is, Mr. Starsky, that he will stop at nothing to get the information he wants. I understand the cartel has perfected a few highly effective torture methods."

They stared at each other.

"I'm meeting the Shark tomorrow at the place where he is lying low," Monte continued. "I believe he wants to show off his interrogation technique to me. He has no idea, of course, that there's a prior connection between his captive and me."

Monte locked eyes with Starsky. "I can get you inside the building. I can give you details on the set-up, the layout, and the number of men. I can tell you where in the complex you can expect to find Sergeant Hutchinson. Everything else, of course, would be up to you."

"What's in it for you?"

"A distraction," Monte said simply. "I need you to create a diversion. That's all I'm asking in return."

The situation suddenly became crystal clear. "You're planning a strike against the Shark?" Starsky said, incredulous. "And you want me to do your dirty work for you? You must be outta your mind if you think I'll help you take over where Gunther left off."

"I can assure you that isn't part of the plan. Drugs aren't my field, and I've no intention of re-opening Gunther's channels to the cartel. I'll leave that to others. But I can't deny that there are certain other...*business opportunities* worth exploring. The Shark is vulnerable right now. The opportunity to strike is too good to miss. The only matter that complicates the situation is the presence of your partner. The last thing I need is to end up with a dead cop on my hands."

Monte fixed Starsky with a hard look. "You're going to have to decide what's more important to you—stopping me from eliminating Gunther's sidekick, or saving your partner's life."

Starsky sat quite still, but not because he needed time to decide. He held Monte's gaze.

"How will you get me in?"

Monte nodded as if he hadn't expected anything else. "You'll go in as one of us. Tibo won't know the difference. He's rather an amateur in these matters."

"Your men ain't gonna like it," Starsky pointed out. "Especially Fabricio."

"Fabricio is not a fool. He'll do as he's told."

Starsky didn't doubt it. Vic Monte didn't give the impression of a man who allowed disobedience or disloyalty. Sly came to mind, Sly who had misjudged this particular gangland boss so badly. No one else would dare make the same mistake. Unlike the Shark, there was nothing amateurish about Vic Monte.

"You're not quite what I expected," he said.

"Good. Doing the unexpected has kept me alive and a step ahead of my rivals. And the cops, I might add."

Starsky nodded. "There's something else you gotta do for me."

"What's that?"

"I need more ammo for the Beretta." Starsky placed the gun on the table. "That shouldn't be a problem for you. I bet you have an entire ammunition stockpile hidden away somewhere."

Whiteboy frowned and spoke for the first time. "Monte, you're not thinking of arming him as well? It's bad enough to have a cop along on the ride. But taking an *armed* cop along is asking for trouble."

"Well, we can hardly let him go in there empty-handed if we want him to succeed, can we?" Monte gave his visitor a calculating look. "He won't be any trouble. We have a deal. I trust he'll stick to it."

He gestured at Whiteboy. "Go, get him three clips. And a hat and a pair of sunglasses. No need for anyone to recognize him before the show starts. He also needs a place to stay for the night. Take him to a room on the top floor and make sure he can't get out."

He stood. So did Starsky. They eyed each other warily.

"After this, we're even," Monte finally said. "The next time we meet, we'll be on opposite sides of the law again."

Starsky gave a small bitter laugh. "You've nothing to fear from me. I'm not a cop anymore."

It hurt to say that. It would never stop hurting.

Vic Monte looked him up and down. "You'll always be a cop," he said. "It's in your blood. You're a cop when you're off duty in a restaurant, and you're a cop when you're retired on disability. You'll never stop being a cop."

He paused. "If I didn't know that, I would've tried to recruit you long ago."

oooOOOooo

They moved as one, a group of muscle-bound heavies surrounding their lord and master as he strode up to the derelict building and the unassuming side door, Starsky in the novel position of being undercover without, strictly, being undercover.

He didn't think he looked particularly out of place among them. They all wore hats and sunglasses. They all walked with the same powerful swagger, light on their feet, watchful, eyes everywhere. Like cops.

Maybe I've missed my calling, he thought grimly. How's that for a career move, Hutch? Muscle man in Vic Monte's gang?

The thought of Hutch made his heart clench tight. *What if...?*

With an immense effort, he forced the thought away, locked down the bulkheads on his hopes and fears. He mustn't let himself think of Hutch. He mustn't let his fears cloud his judgment.

Two of the Shark's toughs, both heavily armed, opened the solid metal door and stood back to let them in. A cursory glance at their visitors, not a flicker of suspicion. Five seconds and two muffled pops later, both lay dead, felled by the silenced gun held in Whiteboy's cold, indifferent hand.

And then they were inside, and moving along a dark, narrow basement passage past dark, dusty storage rooms, leaving the bodies in a pool of blood beside the door.

Monte stopped at the foot of a set of stairs, glanced around to make sure they were alone.

"That's the way to the hangar," he said, nodding at the passage before them. "And this is where we part company. From here on, Mr. Starsky, you're on your own."

His men surrounded him—Whiteboy, Fabricio, Bastiano, Afro, two others. Not everyone looked pleased with the arrangements. But there were no protests.

"Let me give you one final piece of advice," Monte said. "Watch out for the dogs."

"Dogs?"

"Pit bull terriers, to be precise. The shark of the canine species, they say. Fitting, don't you think? Our friend Tibo keeps five or six of them. And not as pets, if you get my meaning. One of my men has had an intimate...*encounter* with one of them." A beat. "The doctors think the leg will have to come off."

Terrific.

"Good bye, Mr. Starsky. It has been a pleasure meeting you. Remember, if you're ever tempted to cross the line, there's always a place in my organization for men of your ability."

Starsky smiled a grim smile. "I appreciate the thought. But as you said, the next time we meet, we'll be on opposite sides again."

He watched Vic Monte and his men until they'd disappeared around the first bend in the stairs, and the sound of their footsteps had faded into the distance. He stood still for a short, intense moment.

He was about to break his promise to Hutch. *I'll be safe*, he'd said. *I'll always be safe.*

He'd been wrong to make such a promise.

In fact, he'd already broken it.

Chapter Thirteen

In his dream, Hutch was home again, awake in bed, but with his eyes closed, still drowsy from a night of heavy sleep. He lay at peace, wrapped in a delicious state of semi-awareness somewhere between sleep and reality. A ray of morning sunshine sneaked through a gap in the blinds and tickled his face. Beside him, a warm body pressed close, an arm draped loosely over his chest.

Hutch smiled and opened his eyes—and the illusion shattered like brittle glass as pain exploded inside his head—and he remembered.

He wasn't at home; he was locked inside a bare room in a long abandoned building, held by a man with all the charm of a psychopath, and guarded by a pack of vicious dogs.

Slowly, cautiously, Hutch rolled over and leveraged himself into a sitting position. Nausea rushed up inside him again, and he managed to grab the bucket with barely a second to spare.

When he'd finished retching, he pushed the vile-smelling container away and slumped against the wall. The room went into a spin again, and Hutch blinked a few times.

At least he could see straight again. The last time he'd opened his eyes—hours, days ago?—the explosion of fire and light inside his skull had nearly blinded him. Now the pain had settled down to a low, dull pounding behind his eyes, like brass bells tolling endlessly, each stroke jarring his brain.

His hand explored the bandage that seemed to cover most of his head. He'd been lucky, damn lucky. Half an inch to the left, and the bullet would have taken a fair chunk of his brain with it. As it was, it had gouged a bloody trail across his scalp and liberated what felt like a gallon of his life blood. His sweater, now ripped and filthy, was encrusted with it.

Hutch leaned back against the wall. Winced when the movement recalled the crushed muscles in his back where the force of the bullets had driven the vest's protective material deep into his skin. But he wasn't complaining. The vest had saved his life. A few bruises were a small price to pay for survival.

Survival. Yes, but to what end?

Hutch's eyes roamed around the room again. It was a cubicle a few feet across, with concrete walls and a solid door securely locked on the outside. A single window, its shattered pane boarded up with thick wooden planks, looked out onto what appeared to be a large, enclosed factory hall—desolate, littered with debris, and obviously long unused.

Once, the small room might have been a supervisor's office. Now, the only objects in the room were a stained old mattress, the bucket, and a plastic bottle containing a few inches of water.

Hutch reached for the bottle and gulped down a few mouthfuls of the warm liquid before returning his attention to his surroundings.

The room was cool and dim, the only illumination the faint light creeping in through the gaps between the planks. For once, it was very still outside.

Hutch already knew that the state of tranquility wouldn't last. The slightest sound, the smallest movement could set them off. Even asleep, they were restless, on constant alert and ready to erupt into action at the slightest provocation.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, Hutch forced himself to his feet, holding onto the wall for support. He swayed dangerously for a moment. Then, feeling light-headed, but determined, he shuffled to the window, put an eye to the largest gap, and peered out at his wardens.

They were aware of him at once. The silence broke apart as they exploded into a frenzy of barks and movement, snarling at him through the gaps between the boards, fangs exposed, claws scrabbling at the wood.

There were five of them—pit bulls with something else indefinable in their genetic make-up, muscular brutes, not exactly large, but massive, and bred to viciousness. Every amiable dog instinct had been trained out of them. They were weapons, pure fighting machines, aggressive, with canines and jaws like steel traps. That morning, Hutch had watched them tear a hunk of meat to shreds. They didn't bite chunks off; they sunk their fangs into the flesh and tore at it until the meat yielded or the bone snapped.

Even the Shark's men had a healthy amount of respect for them.

Hutch turned his attention to the abandoned hall. The only exits were a gate at the far end, a door to some unknown part of the building somewhere on his right, and a row of shattered windows set ten feet high in the brick walls.

There could be no escape that way. Even if he managed to break free from his prison, the dogs would see to it that he didn't make it out of the building alive.

The high-pitched barks and growls sent flashes of fire through Hutch's tortured head. A wave of dizziness washed over him, and he struggled to stay upright.

How long had he been there? Two days? Three? He wasn't sure. Somewhere in the long, dark hours of his unconsciousness, he'd lost all sense of time.

He tried not to think of Starsky and what he had to be going through right now.

Instead, he forced his attention back to his cell. The Shark's men, he noted, had been sloppy when securing their prisoner. They'd taken his belt, but left his shoe laces. They'd removed the bullet-proof vest, but dropped one of its buckles on the floor. They'd boarded up the shattered window with thick, solid planks, but had neglected to remove the splinters of glass still caught in the edges of the frame.

Amateurs, Hutch thought. Presumably, they didn't think they had much to fear from an unarmed, injured cop. He eyed the window thoughtfully and tugged on one of the larger fragments of glass protruding from the frame. The shard was solidly cemented and didn't budge, but maybe if he...

His pounding head forgotten, Hutch picked up the buckle and used the metal edge to scrape at the rock-hard putty that held the shard in place.

Their biggest mistake had been to leave his hands free.

For a while, Hutch devoted all his energy to the task. But as he worked, his mind kept straying to the moment of his capture.

They'd taken him on a whim, that much was clear. They'd seen him, recognized him, and grabbed the opportunity. Admirable work, really. Obviously, at least one member of the Shark's team had his wits about him.

There wasn't a shadow of a doubt in Hutch's mind why the Shark might want him. In fact, he could hardly believe that he hadn't thought of it sooner.

A small piece of putty crumbled away. Encouraged, Hutch brushed it away and renewed his efforts.

What if he *had* realized sooner? Would he have handled things differently? Did he have only himself to blame for his current predicament?

Carefully, Hutch trawled through his memories of the raid, the unfolding events, the confusion of the bust. He scrutinized his actions, his decisions. Analyzed their outcome. What should he have done differently? Where had he gone wrong?

But no, he'd done what he'd had to do, and to the best of his abilities. Fate, or misfortune, had placed him in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Except...

Hutch's hands stilled as he recalled the hectic minutes on the upper walkway. The shots from behind, from above. Their exposed position. The welcome safety of the lifting crane. The partner who should have covered his back, but had failed to do so.

Dan had let him down. Deliberately. Why?

Hutch thought of the moment he'd found the man cowering against the wall, paralyzed by fear. He should have seen it then, should have known that his partner couldn't be trusted. But the idea had never entered his mind.

Now he realized the truth. Vanderhoff had lost it. And when Hutch's move had drawn the perps' fire, Vanderhoff had seen his chance to make his dash to safety.

That would never have happened with Starsky.

The idea of Starsky freezing or losing it was plain ludicrous. Starsky didn't know the meaning of the word cowardice. Fear, yes. But even that had never stopped him.

Hutch's heart warmed at the thought of his partner's daredevil approach to life.

He returned to his task, brushed more crumbs of putty away and wriggled the small, sharp fragment in its setting.

In his mind, he saw how the action would have unfolded if Starsky had been there instead. He would have reached the recess under Starsky's cover fire, then would have covered his partner as he joined him. Between them, they could have handled the threats from either side and might have succeeded in taking down some or even all of the perps, maybe even without spilling a single drop of blood.

Anything was possible when he and Starsky worked together.

Starsky. How're you coping, buddy? Moving heaven and earth to find me?

Knowing his partner to be out there, looking for him, gave Hutch an unexpected surge of strength. No doubt half the force was already on his trail. All he had to do was hold out until the cavalry came riding in.

Another piece of ancient putty broke away. The shard moved freely now. Hutch pushed it back and forth, back and forth. Another tug, a careful twist, and the piece of glass came free in his hand. He brought it up and examined it closely. It was longer than he'd expected, almost five inches long; most of it had been buried invisibly within the frame. A razor-sharp edge ran along one side of the triangular shape that came to a jagged point at the tip.

Hutch ran his thumb over his improvised weapon, experimented with different handholds. Finally satisfied, he slipped it carefully into the back pocket of his pants.

Just in case the cavalry didn't make it in time.

oooOOOooo

Outside, the dogs erupted into a sudden wild show of barking.

"*Silencio! Silencio*, you brutes. Quiet!" A man had entered through the side door and stepped into Hutch's field of vision. The noise level dropped abruptly.

"*Echate! Blanco, echate!* Down, I said. Rubio, down! Now stay!"

Hutch angled for a better look. Only two men dared approach the dogs. One was the Shark who, Hutch knew, liked to terrorize his surroundings by walking around with a couple of vicious dogs on a leash. The other was Digger, their handler, a man with hands the size of shovels, and bully written in large letters all over his pockmarked face.

Earlier that day, Hutch had seen him knocking the old man Reggie around—Reggie who had changed the dressing on his forehead and brought him food and water.

Digger was bad news. Even the dogs cowed before him.

"Okay, Rico, bring him in," Hutch heard him say in the fluent, but accented Spanish of an American who had spent much of his life on the Latin American subcontinent. "Watch out for Moreno. He's in a vile mood today."

"Just keep those damn dogs away from me," another voice growled in the clipped vowels of Colombia. "They're giving me the creeps."

Digger sneered. "Scared? You should be. They maim first and ask questions later. Haha!"

The men approached the door of his prison, and Hutch stepped back hastily. If they found him on his feet, there'd be no more going easy on him. He scurried

to the mattress, slumped down with his back to the wall, wrapped his arms around his knees, and braced himself for the encounter.

A moment later, a key turned in the lock; the door opened. A broad, athletic-looking Latino stepped into the room and leveled a gun at Hutch. Behind him, Hutch was shocked to see not Reggie, but a boy, fifteen at the most, rake-thin with dirty brown hair and the pinched look of someone who hadn't eaten a nutritious meal in a long time. A purple bruise adorned one side of his face.

What the hell was that child doing there?

The boy was holding a greasy paper bag in one hand and a plastic bottle of Coke in the other, almost dropping both when Digger roughly shoved him into the room. He looked scared to death, but whether it was fear of the prisoner, or of Digger, Rico or the dogs, Hutch couldn't say. Maybe it was fear of all of them.

"Hey, look, the pig's awake," Digger snarled and aimed a kick at Hutch's leg. "High time, too. I'm fed up waiting hand and foot on a goddamn cop. If I was in charge, I'd just let him rot in here."

"The boss has plans for him. He'll have our hides if we let him kick the bucket before he's had a chance to sing." The man called Rico jerked his head, and the boy slipped forward and put the bag and bottle on the floor beside the mattress. As he bent down, the sleeves of his grimy baseball shirt rode up, and Hutch caught a glimpse of his arms, and the telltale marks on the pale skin—familiar, too familiar marks.

"Now take out the bucket," Rico told him in English. The boy obeyed, giving Digger the widest possible berth.

The dog handler dug out a packet of cigarettes, and both men lit up.

"How much longer is this gonna take, anyway?" he growled as they waited by the door, dragging on their cigarettes, ignoring Hutch as if he wasn't there. "We been cooling our heels in this godforsaken place for days. And while I'm stuck in this filthy hellhole, you guys are having all the fun upstairs."

"Not that much fun." His companion shrugged. "No booze."

"Fuck the booze. It's the chicks I wanna lay my hands on. You think I don't know that you guys have a stable full of broads stashed away upstairs while I gotta make do with that skinny kid?"

"Three," Rico corrected. "That's all. And they belong to the boss."

"I know you're getting your share of tits. Villar got to spend a whole night with them. He wouldn't stop talking about it. Smug bastard."

"That was his reward for bringing in the pig. You gotta admit that was one great stunt. And a good one in the eye for the fuzz."

"He got lucky, that's all. So the pig knows something, huh? Okay, what're we waiting for? Let's make him talk. He's awake now, ain't he?" He moved into the room and landed another well-aimed kick at Hutch's leg. "Can't wait to get my hands on him."

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," Rico warned. "The boss said not to touch him until he says so. He has other business to take care of first. There's going to be some sort of action tomorrow when the others come back."

Digger swore. "You guys are getting all the juicy jobs up there. And I can't even have a little fun with the cop." He leaned out of the door and yelled in English, "Alf! Hurry up. What the fuck's taking you so long?"

The boy, Alf, slipped back inside with the empty bucket, and the dog handler reached out and clipped him gratuitously across the back of the head.

"Don't worry," Rico said, ignoring the boy. "You'll get your chance. The boss said when he's taken care of everything else, it's the cop's turn. And when he's done with him, we can do with him what we like."

"That's more like it. But remember, I'm first in line for that hot ass of his. Then you guys can have him."

They laughed and pushed Alf out of the room ahead of them. The door closed; the key locked him in. The voices faded away.

Hutch let out a careful breath and leaned his pounding head against the wall, dazed by what he'd heard, and grateful it hadn't occurred to them that their prisoner might understand. His Spanish was rusty, but once it had been pretty near fluent, and Hutch had had no problems following the conversation.

He shivered in the sudden evening chill. Tomorrow, Rico had said. Some sort of action. And after that his break would be over.

Hurry up, guys, and get the troops in. I'm running out of time here.

He thought about the Shark's odd assortment of men—Colombians, Anglos, refugees from Gunther's empire, and new recruits. Seasoned criminals all.

But then there was Alf, underage hustler and junkie. And Reggie, his mirror opposite—dark-skinned, grey-haired, stooping—skilled in first aid and probably kept on for just that reason. Both scared, both clearly outside the Shark's main circle, but somehow caught up in his net of power nevertheless.

And then there were the women. Hidden away in a back room somewhere, treated no better than sex slaves. Hookers, most likely, who'd gotten themselves in too deep.

Hutch shook his head. This wasn't getting him anywhere. He pulled the paper bag toward him, unrolled the top, and eyed the contents—a stale roll with a greasy slice of cheese—with disgust. Then he pulled it out, shrugged, and sunk his teeth into it.

If he wanted any chance of getting through this alive, he'd need all the strength he could get.

oooOOooo

That night, the temperatures plummeted, and Hutch shivered in his small concrete cell that stored the cold like a refrigerator. He slept fitfully, curled up on the thin mattress in the pitch darkness, the dogs' growls and restless movements outside his cell weaving themselves seamlessly into dreams of a nightmarish quality.

The next morning, his limbs were stiff with cold, and his fingers refused to obey the commands of his brain. Finally, cool daylight began to seep through the broken windows in the hall, and the small room gradually grew lighter. Hutch rubbed his cold fingers and swung his arms in an effort to get warm.

An endless day stretched before him.

No one came near his cell all morning, and the only sounds were the dogs fighting each other over a scrap of meat. Feeling some of his strength returning, Hutch paced up and down his cell and waited, powerless to do anything else.

Time crawled.

Once, he caught a glimpse of a bored and frustrated Digger taking angry potshots at some unfortunate creature just outside the hall.

And once, much later, Hutch heard a muffled groan coming from one of the side rooms, followed by a low, breathless plea—a young voice, quickly silenced. A few moments later, Digger stepped into view, buttoning his pants. He strode down the length of the hall and disappeared through the side door.

Hutch could see no sign of Alf.

Hours went by. Nothing else happened. They seemed to have forgotten him. Not knowing when and if he'd be fed again, Hutch started rationing his last few mouthfuls of Coke, limiting himself to a single sip at a time. He was trying hard to hold onto his hopes, but they were slipping from him, slowly, like water seeping away through his fingers, impossible to hold.

Just when he was beginning to think that maybe they weren't going to come that day, the dogs went wild, footsteps approached, the door slammed open, and the dog handler pushed Reggie into the room.

The old man's face was closed and carefully guarded, but the smell of fear was something Hutch had learned to recognize in its many different odors. He'd been right. Reggie was scared.

What did he know? What did he fear? Hutch wished he could ask, but Digger's angry presence made that an impossibility.

Reggie removed the bandage, inspected his stitches, cleaned the wound, applied a gooey ointment from an unmarked tin, and taped a patch of dressing in place—all without saying a single word while Hutch gritted his teeth against the pain, and Digger cast a menacing shadow over the proceedings.

"Thanks," Hutch said when Reggie was done.

Digger exploded like a powder keg on too short a fuse. "Shut up!" he roared. "Shut up!" He knocked the old man aside and aimed his gun straight at Hutch's forehead. "Just shut the fuck up!"

The gun trembled in his meaty hand as the man's entire being seemed consumed by some deep boiling rage. Hutch sat completely still, hands held out at his sides, not moving a muscle. Not looking at Digger, not doing anything that might make the man snap. Hutch's eyes were on the gun, and Digger's finger already tight on the trigger.

Outside, the dogs gave a single collective bark, then fell silent.

"Digger." A shadow filled the door.

Hutch recognized the man at once. Two straining dogs on a leash, the macho stance, the necklace of sharks' teeth gleaming on a hairy chest framed by a shirt open to the navel. The tangle of black hair around a face bronzed to leather. The air of barely contained animal power. Only the eyes came as a surprise—cold reptilian eyes of a most unsettling shade of green.

El Tiburón. He was the image of a playboy. A playboy with power at his fingertips. The most dangerous kind.

The Shark advanced into the room, his eyes on Digger. A smile creased the leathery face, the indulgent smile of a proud owner watching the antics of a favorite pet.

Digger, the pit bull. How apt.

"You want to blow him away?" El Tiburón said to him in flawless English. "All right, go ahead. Blow his head off."

Digger swallowed, desire burning like wildfire in his face. For a moment, the gun wavered dangerously in his hand as if he might take the invitation at face value. Then he lowered the weapon reluctantly. "Sorry, boss."

"Patience, my friend, patience." A shark's smile. "You will get your chance. Trust me." The newcomer turned to Reggie. "How is he? Will he survive the trip?"

"He's alive. But he needs food and water if y' wanna keep 'im that way."

"Go, get him some, then."

Reggie climbed stiffly to his feet and shuffled out the door without a glance at anyone.

"Don't get too comfortable in here, cop," the Shark said, looking at Hutch for the first time. "We are not running a hospital. The only reason we have patched you up is that I need you alive for a while longer."

"What do you want from me?" Hutch said and struggled to his feet, ignoring Digger's growl and the waves of pain racing each other through his head. If he had to meet the Shark face on, he'd be doing it eye to eye.

"My merchandise. Shipped and delivered, as agreed. Still part unpaid. I want my payment, or my goods back."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Don't play dumb. I know you are sharper than that. You know exactly what I am after."

"I've no idea what you're talking about."

The dogs growled and strained on their leashes, and their master looped the cords around his wrist and hauled them back with a hard hand.

"I know what you are thinking," he said. "Stall for time, give your cop buddies a chance to catch up with you." He gave a short bark of a laugh. "Forget about that. We are in the desert, miles away from the city. No one knows we are here, and no one will ever think of looking for you here."

"Everyone leaves clues," Hutch said. "We have half your men in custody. As soon as they realize how deep in shit they are, they're going to sing like canaries."

"My men can tell you nothing. They have no idea I had this place up my sleeve. Not even my deputies know about it. My brother discovered this place years ago. He has used it as a hideaway many times. Believe me, I could let you rot in here, and they would never even find your body."

"Don't underestimate my *cop buddies*," Hutch said coldly. "They'll turn the state upside down if they have to, 'cause kidnapping a fellow officer is something that really pisses them off."

"I am trembling," the Colombian mocked. "Too bad we are not staying long enough to put LA's finest to the test. We are leaving tonight. You better prepare yourself for a little trip."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To a safe place across the border. I have friends there who are only too willing to fill the gaps in my organization. And then later tonight, I expect you to share your knowledge on the business dealings of a certain James Gunther with me."

"I'm telling you, you got the wrong guy," Hutch said. "I don't know anything about Gunther."

"Then you will soon wish you did." The Shark smiled a feral smile. He paced the cell, allowed the two dogs within an inch of Hutch's legs before hauling them back.

"You know," he said conversationally, "you did me a favor when you removed Gunther from the scene. I should be grateful to you. But I wish you hadn't taken out Lev Brodowicz. He was my finest shot."

"Brodowicz? Gunther's hit man? He's dead?"

"Very dead, thanks to you."

I got him, Starsk. The low-life who shot you. I got him. He's dead.

"You want to wipe that smirk off your face. I promise you, come tonight, you won't find much to smirk about."

The Shark seemed to have time on his hands. He was relaxed and chatty, and in no apparent rush. He also liked to hear himself talk.

A nameless fear crawled down Hutch's spine. For a man who'd just lost most of his best men and a second shipment of merchandise, a man forced to hide in a dilapidated desert outpost with the sorry remnants of his organization, the Shark was very upbeat. Too upbeat.

Hutch remembered the action. *Some sort of action.* There might never be a better opportunity to find out more about it.

"Why wait until tonight?" he said. "What's keeping you? "

"An old friend of mine is dropping by." The Colombian smiled sardonically. "You may have heard of him. His name is Monte."

Monte!

"Yes," El Tiburón said, his voice dripping disdain. "Good old Monte. Good old stupid Monte. Who takes me for an upstart. Who thinks I am his ticket to some easy drug money. Who thinks I will take the fall for his shady activities. Who still believes he is the one who is running this show. Well, not anymore."

"You're trying to lure him into a trap," Hutch said, a shot in the dark.

"See. I knew you weren't dumb."

"He's gonna expect that."

"On the contrary, it is the last thing he will expect. He knows I have lost men in the raid. He thinks he has nothing to fear from me now. I told him I want to

make a deal, and he jumped at the chance, just as I knew he would. Of course, he thinks he can dictate the terms."

The Shark's lips curled with contempt. "He thinks he has it all worked out. But he is just an old man. He is past his prime. I will show him how things are done nowadays. I am going to teach him some respect."

Was he serious? Did he really think he could pull the wool over Vic Monte's eyes? Or was he simply deluded? Or power mad? Or both?

"He thinks he knows it all, but he has no idea that I have an ace up my sleeve." El Tiburón stopped pacing and faced Hutch. "Industrial grade explosives, rigged up in the backroom and ready to go." A flash of anticipation lit up his face. "He won't know what hit him."

"You're planning to blow him up?"

"Quick and simple. The solution to all my problems. I eliminate my last rival, and get rid of a bunch of useless hangers-on at the same time."

Hutch blinked. "You don't mean Alf and Reggie?" he said, incredulous.

"Don't give me that look. What is a snot-nosed kid and a decrepit nigger to me? They are more trouble than they are worth. Of course, I will be sorry to see the girls go. But I can't be saddled with them anymore. They know too much."

He was mad. Quite mad. Hutch was surprised that he hadn't recognized the glint of a deranged mind in the startlingly green eyes before. He swayed a little, glad to have the solid wall behind him.

The Shark checked his watch. "You are lucky I don't have the time to deal with you right now. Although, believe me, it wouldn't take long to make you spill your guts. Digger here is very good at making people talk. Most of the time, you can't get them to shut up once he has got them going. That not so, Digger?"

The big man grinned eagerly. The Shark nodded at him. "Why don't you show him what I mean?"

Digger's fist slammed into Hutch's face with lightning speed and the full force of his pent-up frustration. Followed it up with a powerful blow to the stomach.

Hutch fell without a sound. He was on his knees, doubled over with his hands on the floor, head down, gulping for breath. The room raced around him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Shark pull his gun on him. Realized that fighting back was out of the question.

He shook his head, pushed himself upright, back onto his feet.

Digger punched him again. Hutch went down again. Got back up again. He tasted blood, felt more of the stuff trickling down his face. Slowly, he turned and faced his attacker again, a small defiance.

"Trouble keeping him down?" the Shark snickered. "Maybe you need some help?"

Digger threw his victim a look full of such venom that Hutch braced himself. Digger's fist came at him again, a vicious hook to the jaw.

Hutch crashed into the wall and went down. For what seemed like an eternity, he lay quite still, his cheek pressed against the concrete floor, eyes closed, and concentrated on breathing. Deep, ragged breaths. In and out. In and out.

Then he opened his eyes. He pushed himself to his knees and crawled to the wall. Slowly, he pulled himself upright until he stood swaying on his feet again. A spasm of pain lanced up inside him, and he clenched his teeth when the room wavered dangerously around him. He straightened up and wiped the blood out of his eyes. Reached for the shard in his pocket. Saw Digger coming at him again, murder in his eyes.

The Shark stopped him with a single gesture. "That is enough. I don't want you to kill him yet." He checked his watch again. "Let's go."

The door slammed shut. Hutch stood, dazed and shaken, for another long minute, his back against the wall, hands flat against the surface, fighting to cling to consciousness. His breathing sounded harsh and alien in his ears.

The door opened again. Rico. And Reggie, bearing food and water. Reggie wordlessly led him to the mattress, and Hutch finally allowed himself to collapse. The world went grey to the soothing touch of cool water as Reggie cleaned the blood from his face.

oooOOOooo

It was late afternoon, and Hutch's hopes were running thin.

He was on his feet again—there was no other way. He'd be damned if he gave in to them. He'd be damned if he gave up.

He stood by the window and watched the narrow strips of light and shadow advance across the room. Soon, the sun would drop. And then they'd come for him and haul him away, across the border to Mexico. And Digger would finally get the chance to finish what he'd started.

Hutch's hands went to his face again. He felt bruises, bloody gashes, a split lip. There seemed to be no broken bones, although his jaw felt as if Digger had lifted it out of its hinges.

He knew he shouldn't have done it. He shouldn't have provoked Digger. Tonight, there'd be hell to pay. Hutch let his hands sink. Took a deep, deep breath.

It was time to face facts. He'd been missing for four days. If the police hadn't found him by now, chances were they never would. Not in time, anyway.

For the first time since his capture, Hutch admitted to himself that things looked bad. Very bad.

He thought of the shard in his pocket, his only defense, and felt a bitter laugh rise up in his throat. *Pathetic*. He sighed and leaned his forehead against the rough planks. When he closed his eyes, he saw an image of Starsky swim into view.

Starsky. My love, my heart, my soul. God, Starsky.

Hutch shivered and clenched his hands to fists. He couldn't deny it any longer. He was scared.

Not of death, exactly. Or of dying. Of torture, yes. Of pain. Of the slow descent into an animal world of agony, of having all traces of his humanity stripped away by the merciless hand of pain. He knew all about the torture drug dealers knew how to dish out.

But most of all, he was scared for Starsky. Of leaving him. Of leaving Starsky behind.

He would have to stall for time. Plead ignorance without appearing too convincing. Talking was not an option. He was a dead man if he talked. He was a dead man if he didn't.

They'd find his body in a shallow grave somewhere. Maybe they wouldn't find his body at all. But Starsky would never stop searching, never stop hoping. He would know—oh, yes, he would know! But he would never accept that knowledge, not without proof.

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut. *I'll do everything to stay alive, I promise you, Starsk. I promise I'll hold on for as long as I can. I won't go down without a fight.*

Outside, the dogs went berserk again. They'd been restless all afternoon, endlessly snapping and growling and jumping at the smallest sound. Now they were rotating with canine frenzy. Someone was approaching. They were coming for him. His time had run out.

Hutch straightened and steeled himself. He could see the dogs through the gap that afforded the widest view of the hall. They were going wild at something or someone just outside his field of vision.

And then he saw him.

Starsky.

On the far side of the hall, beneath the shattered windows. Clearly visible against the backdrop of the wall. He was moving with feline stealth, gun in hand, eyes fixed on the growling dogs held back by nothing more than training and obedience.

Hutch's heart stopped. His mind stopped. The breath in his lungs stopped.

Starsky. Here.

God, Starsky, how did you find me?

Then another thought, quick as lightning, more urgent than the first.

And where are the others? Where are the troops?

He watched, his heart in the grip of paralysis, as Starsky advanced into the hall, alone. Something in Starsky's stance—the rigid set of his jaw, the tenseness of his body, the way he gripped the gun, focused, alert, and with just a smallest hint of desperation—tipped him off.

And Hutch knew, suddenly, without a doubt—although he had no proof, no evidence, only what his heart told him, and his instinct, and his eyes, his knowledge of the way Starsky moved under tension and when he had his back to the wall—he knew that there were no troops, no backup, that somehow, *somehow*, Starsky had found him and had come to get him. Alone.

No, he thought wildly. *No. No.*

There was no time to think, to do anything, even if he could have, because at that moment, Starsky stepped across some invisible line, and the dogs were off like greyhounds at a race, covering the short distance in seconds.

The Beretta roared—one, two, three shots in quick succession. Three dogs dropped and lay motionless. The other two hurled themselves at Starsky. The black one went for his legs, the brown one for his throat.

A scream was wrenched from Hutch's throat. He saw Starsky's foot come up and kick the first dog in the jaw, saw his right arm shoot out and block the move of the second. Saw the brute clamp its jaws around the arm, instead.

Thrust into the role of helpless spectator, Hutch saw the first dog renew his attack, saw the other hanging from Starsky's arm, holding on furiously.

He saw Starsky's gun hand come up again. Another shot and the black fell in mid-leap as if it had run into a glass wall. Deliberately, calmly almost, Starsky placed the gun against the pack leader's head. For a second, they seemed to stare each other in the eye as Starsky prepared to fire and the pit bull hung onto his arm with all its tremendous strength. Then Starsky pulled the trigger and the dog went limp.

Starsky pried its jaws from his arm and pushed the dog away, and Hutch saw what had been obscured before—that Starsky had his leather jacket wrapped tightly around his arm to form an impenetrable layer like a protective sleeve used in dog training.

He knew. He must've known. How the hell did he know?

Hutch saw him throw the shredded jacket aside. But before he could breathe a sigh of relief, he realized that the dogs had been nothing but a prelude to the horrors yet to come.

Digger stumbled in through the side door at the same time as Rico came crashing through the gate at the end of the hall, shooting before he even knew what he was shooting at.

Shooting at Starsky.

Hutch screamed again as every nightmare, every darkest terror from the deepest abyss of his soul turned to stark, overwhelming, horrifying reality.

Starsky. In danger. Under fire. Again.

Not a dream this time. Not a nightmare. Reality.

No! Please no. God, please. Not again.

He'll get shot. Again. He can't take another bullet. He can't.

Starsky wasn't even wearing a vest.

Hutch moaned, limp with fear. The action turned to slow motion, creeping, every step, every smallest movement burning itself onto Hutch's soul like brand marks.

He saw Digger pull a hand gun from his belt.

He saw Rico stand and aim.

He saw Starsky, exposed in the center, making a frantic dash for cover.

Heard the shots echo wildly in the enclosed space. Heard his own scream painful in his ears.

Saw Starsky fall...

Time stopped. The world stopped turning. Even the fear in his heart turned to ice as Hutch finally accepted the inevitable. *They* had finally won. Hutch understood now the futility of his actions. Trying to keep Starsky safe...it was an impossible task. They were always stronger in the end. They always did win in the end. He'd been a fool to think that he could keep his partner safe. There was nowhere safe. They were everywhere. It was happening again—right now,

in front of his eyes. Starsky was going to die. And this time, he couldn't even be with him, to hold him in those final minutes. This time, nothing would pull Starsky back from the brink. Hutch was helpless, powerless. All he could do was watch. And he would. To the end.

He saw Starsky fall. Saw him down, on the ground. Saw him roll, nimble as a cat, into the shelter of an oil drum. Saw with disbelief as he rose to his knees and got off two more shots. Saw him come to his feet—smooth and agile and whole and unharmed—and stand tall, the gun in both hands, facing down the threat from across the hall.

Hutch reeled. A dream. He'd seen this in a dream. Starsky. Shot down. Rising like a phoenix.

But this was real. This was reality.

Hutch forgot everything around him as he stared at the wonderful scene in awe. Starsky looked wild and tough and full of life. Invincible. Like an avenging angel.

Starsky had risen from the ashes—sleek and strong and powerful. And beautiful, so beautiful.

Tears swamped Hutch's vision. When had this happened? When had Starsky been transformed like this?

His partner had dropped behind the oil drum again and was frantically reloading. The counter-fire from Rico had stopped abruptly. But Digger was alive and furious, and creeping along the edge of the wall until he was on a level with Hutch's cell, coming around Starsky's back.

But Starsky had seen him, too. He abandoned his useless shelter, raised his gun again. Got off a single shot, aimed with cool precision.

Digger gave a grunt, stumbled backward and crashed against the door of Hutch's prison. He collapsed and slowly keeled over sideways. Injured, not dead. Through the gap in the boards, Hutch saw him move, saw his hand reach for the gun again, saw him raise the weapon. Saw Starsky racing across the hall toward them, unaware, no cover at all.

Hutch came around with a snap. The glass shard appeared in his hand like a magic trick. The next second, he was on his knees, had pushed his arm through the gap in the boards—a tight squeeze, the splintered wood tearing bloody gashes into his skin—and pressed the sharp tip hard against Digger's jugular vein. The man stiffened with surprise.

"Drop the gun," Hutch roared through the gap and pushed the shard deep enough to draw blood. "Drop it!"

The angle was awkward, the shard already slippery with Digger's blood. Hutch wouldn't be able to hold him long. He dug the point in deeper. "*Now!*"

The gun clattered to the ground. Moments later, Starsky skidded to a halt beside the door, kicked the gun out of reach. He hauled the dazed man up, slammed his fist against the side of his face.

Digger fell in a heap.

"The key," Hutch croaked. "Front pocket of his pants." He could hear the remnants of his terror like a physical obstruction in his throat.

"Hutch!" Starsky's voice, filled with terrors all of his own, reached out to him.

The door slammed open, and then he was there, Starsky was there. On his knees beside him, hands reaching out, the shadows of four days of hell in his eyes. "Hutch. Hutch."

Hutch felt himself enfolded. He reached out to touch, to connect, to reassure, all the pain and recent misery swept away with one stroke. "Starsk—"

Starsky's hands roamed over his bruised face, his hair, his forehead—touching, connecting. Dark eyes full of a wild mixture of fear and relief raked over him.

"God, Hutch—"

Hutch sunk his hands into the mane of curly hair. Pulled the dark head toward him. "I'm okay, I'm okay. Really, I'll be okay—"

He'd been afraid for Starsky for so long, he'd forgotten that it worked the other way around, too.

Starsky hauled him into a rough, powerful embrace. Hutch felt Starsky's heart beating through two layers of cloth, felt his own heartbeat slowing gradually, very gradually to a less frantic rhythm. A moment only, then Starsky pulled away and looked at him with eyes still dilated with an unnamed fear.

"They didn't...?"

Hutch understood at once—everything those two words implied, the many things they might have done, but didn't do. Something inside him melted. He shook his head, even managed a smile.

"No," he whispered. "They didn't. I'm fine, I'll be fine. I swear."

Starsky exhaled slowly. Blinked hard, once, twice, his eyes never leaving Hutch's face. His fingers tightened around the back of Hutch's neck.

Hutch was suddenly overwhelmed with a hot rush of love. *Goddammit, Starsky, you're amazing.*

He wanted to crush his friend in his arms and squeeze the breath out of him. A faint groan coming from outside hauled him back to the present with a jolt. Their eyes met, a glance only—and they were on their feet and beside the semi-

conscious man. Hutch grabbed his arms, Starsky his legs. Together, they hauled the man inside and locked him in.

Starsky pocketed the key, caught Hutch's arm, and jostled him toward the gate. "C'mon, let's get outta here. Vic Monte is planning an attack on the Shark. I don't wanna get caught in the middle."

"Vic Monte? No. It's the Shark who—"

They stared at each other. Realization dawned.

"Come *on!*" Starsky insisted as Hutch stooped to snatch the Browning from Rico's dead hands. He pulled on Hutch's arm, towed him to the gate and into the open.

And Hutch stopped dead in his tracks.

Before him stretched a vast deserted airfield. Ancient maintenance huts sagged on unsteady foundations, their shattered windows gazing blindly at the surrounding wasteland. A control tower squatted forlornly on the far side of a set of intersecting runways, their cracked surfaces buckled in the heat of many summers, weeds pushing through the crumbling asphalt. The rusting remains of vehicles and machinery littered the ground.

Behind him, his prison was revealed as a vast aircraft hangar complete with tool and storage sheds in various stages of dilapidation. At the rear rose a sprawling office block, its façade cracked and crumbling, all the windows boarded up.

All around, the arid terrain of the Mojave's outer fringes stretched into the distance under an endless washed-out winter sky. There were no signs of human occupation, no cars, lights, signposts pointing the way to the nearest place of habitation.

"Where the hell are we?" Hutch stared wildly around.

"Haven't a clue."

"Didn't you see?"

Starsky shook his head. "Nah. Blindfolded all the way," he said. He shrugged. "We're gonna have to hoof it. Sharko's cars are all locked up in a shed somewhere. C'mon. There has to be a way outta here somewhere."

Hutch hesitated. He thought of the boy, barely older than Kiko. Reggie, the reluctant collaborator with the streak of common decency. The girls inside the building, caught up in a war not of their making. He took a deep breath, reached out and caught Starsky by the sleeve.

"We can't," he said. "We can't leave now. The Shark's planning to blow up the building. A lot of people are going to die."

"We'll call the cops. They can deal with it."

"There's no time for that. We don't even know how far it is to the nearest road. By the time we get to a phone, it may be too late. We gotta do something *now*."

Starsky stared at him. "*We?*"

There was work to be done, lives to be saved. And he couldn't do it alone. He had no choice. Hutch struggled with the concept for just another moment. He looked up and into Starsky's astonished face.

"Yes, " he said. "*We*."

Starsky stepped close to him then. Hutch held him at bay with his eyes and a hand placed on Starsky's chest.

"One condition," he said.

"Yeah?"

"You promise me that the next time I tell you to get down, you'll trust me and do *exactly* as I say."

Starsky's eyes were on him, deep and wide and blue. His hand came up and covered Hutch's, a connection between them.

"I promise."

Sounds drifted from the hangar behind them—a door falling open, footfalls, voices. They'd waited too long.

They exchanged a final look—everything was contained in that look. Hutch nodded.

They started running.

Chapter Fourteen

Time speeded up in a peculiar, almost surreal fashion.

In the shelter of a corrugated iron shed and the gathering twilight, they brought each other up to speed in rapid-fire shorthand—the Shark, Vic Monte, Reggie, Alf. The girls. The back room filled with explosives.

"He's planning to get rid of the evidence," Hutch whispered fiercely. "Witnesses included." All of his pain and exhaustion had vanished magically. He felt alert, alive, energized as if riding the crest of an amphetamine rush.

Across the yard, the hangar reverberated with shouts of disbelief and a stream of outraged Spanish. Two voices. They'd found Rico dead, Digger locked up, and the prisoner gone.

"If Monte acts fast, he may not get the chance," Starsky whispered back, leaning close. "I wonder what he's waiting f—?"

On cue, the sound of a single shot ripped through the twilight like the crack of a whip, followed almost immediately by a whole barrage of gunfire, muffled by walls and distance, but powerful, and overwhelming in its intensity. Monte had finally made his move.

The attack lasted a minute, maybe less, before it stopped abruptly. A dense, spine-chilling hush followed.

Then a single scream shredded the silence—a woman's voice, high and full of terror. The scream went on and on. Next, the shooting started up again, drowning out the voice. And finally all hell broke loose when someone returned fire with an automatic machine-gun.

"Christ," Starsky said stunned, his right hand digging into Hutch's shoulder. "It's World War Three in there. Monte's surprise attack must've backfired. Someone's still shooting back."

"Let's hope Reggie and the others have the sense to stay out of the firing line," Hutch said. "C'mon, we gotta get in there."

Starsky had his arm in a grip. "No way," he said. "We can't get involved. There're too many of them. There's nothin' we can do to stop them."

"I know. And I don't care if the thugs in there end up murdering each other. But we gotta do something about the explosives. Vic Monte doesn't know. If the Shark is dead and they're on a timer, they could go off any moment."

"T'rrific!" Starsky released his arm.

Hutch leaned forward to catch sight of the hangar. "They've locked the gate. We can't go back in that way."

"The side door then. Where we went in."

"Okay, let's go."

They sprinted across the yard and around the side of the building, hugging the hangar wall. It was almost dark. A dim crescent moon hung in the eastern sky, too faint to shed much light on the surroundings.

Hutch was glad of the darkness, their only asset. That, and the fact that neither party would expect them anywhere near the building.

They went in, moving noiselessly through the unlocked door into a silent, unlit basement passage, past two dark, still bodies that guarded the entrance even in death. Starsky stepped over them without a second glance. Hutch eyed the bodies, grimaced, and followed.

Concrete steps materialized in the dark. Two flights. Ground floor. A hallway. Doors right and left, leading to rooms that might once have been offices or function rooms. Another passage. More doors. A defunct set of elevators.

They bypassed the side passage, followed the main hallway to the building's entrance hall. They moved slowly, warily, alert for any sound or movement. But there was no one around. No voices, no foot steps. The place seemed deserted. Only the occasional muffled shot told of the ongoing battle somewhere on a floor above.

The entrance hall was a dark cavern-like space, filled with debris, empty boxes, and a battered reception desk sitting forlornly in the middle of the dusty room. Thick sheets of plywood sealed the main entrance doors. Here, too, darkness reigned, the only source of illumination the faint twilight creeping through the cracks in the boarding. A wide wooden staircase with a once attractive, now cracked and peeling handrail curved to the upper floors.

An eerie silence permeated the place. Even the noises drifting down from above seemed muted and far away, unreal almost.

"Where's everyone?" Starsky whispered, staring around the hall, tense as a coiled spring and with his eyes everywhere. "I thought they'd be all over the place. What's goin' on up there?"

"They must've dug themselves in for a long shootout," Hutch whispered back, no less tense. "Maybe they're all upstairs, or at the back of the building. It's a big place. They could be anywhere."

"Well, I think it's fuckin' weird."

The next moment he jumped about a foot when an ear-splitting yell echoing down the stairwell from the floor immediately above.

They froze into statues, listened hard.

Two shots rang out directly overhead, followed by another yell, and then two sets of feet came thundering down the stairs toward them, taking the steps three at a time.

They unfroze with a snap and made twin dives for cover behind the old reception desk. Three seconds later, two men came hurtling downstairs at top speed, raced past the desk, and disappeared in the direction of the basement stairs. A door slammed shut in the distance. Then everything was quiet again.

Slowly, Starsky and Hutch emerged from their shelter, looked around, looked at each other.

"They're gone," Starsky said. "I wonder if those were Monte's men."

"One thing's for sure—the action's upstairs."

"Yeah. C'mon, time to check it out."

They took the stairs one step at a time, cautiously, with their backs to the wall and their weapons held in ready hands, every sense on high alert.

As they climbed silently higher, Hutch had a sudden sharp recollection of another action only days ago—another building, another surreptitious move into enemy territory—eerily similar, but with one fundamental difference: the partner by his side.

Hutch glanced at him. Starsky had stopped a step ahead of him, listening intently as a short burst of gunfire terminated a momentary lull in the action, then subsided. Starsky returned the glance, nodded once and moved forward, stealthy as a cat, dangerous as a tiger.

An irrational, totally inappropriate surge of ridiculous joy lifted Hutch's heart. This felt right. This was the way it should be. Starsky and him, together on the job.

Together, just about anything was possible.

oooOOOooo

On the third floor, they came across another body. It lay sprawled across the landing, a gun still clutched firmly in a lifeless hand, eyes the color of marble staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

"Whiteboy," Starsky said with a curious hardness in his voice. "Monte's deputy."

Hutch raised an eyebrow, and Starsky gave him a small tight smile. "Tell you later," he said.

He looked up the next flight of stairs. At the top, the way to the upper floor was unexpectedly barred by a door. A solid metal door.

The door was locked.

They looked at each other, looked back at the door. Hutch swore.

"So that's how he was going to do it!"

"What?"

"The Shark. He had it all worked out. Somehow, he's managed to lure Monte upstairs and trapped him behind this door! And all his other undesirables are probably in there, too. With the door locked and the windows boarded—"

"—he would've had plenty of time to set the timer and make his getaway," Starsky completed, wide-eyed with sudden understanding. "Together with a select few of his men."

"And his dogs."

"And you."

"Yeah."

"Dammit. At least that explains why there's no one around. The whole action is behind this door."

"All over the top floor, probably." Hutch kicked the door in frustration. "How the hell did Monte fall for this? How did the Shark get him up here without arousing his suspicion? It's such an obvious trap—"

"Monte was here before," Starsky told him hastily. "Three days ago. There's no reason why he would've been suspicious the second time around. Especially if there were women and kids around. He said it's just living quarters up there and bedrooms and stuff—"

"Okay. So the Shark got Monte and his men up there. Then he must've planned to walk out under some pretext, lock the door and—"

A volley of automatic gunfire erupted on the other side of the door, sending vibrations through the wall, and they ducked instinctively.

"Yeah, but some of his men must still be inside," Starsky said as they straightened up again. "Or who else is Monte shooting at?"

"I guess there wasn't time to get everyone out. Monte must've spoiled his little plan when he suddenly started World War Three in there." Hutch thumped the door again. "But *someone* got out. Someone locked this damn door."

"I bet you it wasn't the Shark," Starsky said darkly. "Cause he would've been Monte's first target."

"No," Hutch said to him urgently. "On the contrary. I bet you it *was* him. The man's a control freak. He'd never have trusted anyone else with the key. Somehow he must've got away just as the shooting started. Maybe he smelled a rat. The man has amazing instincts. Maybe he sensed something was wrong."

"So he got himself out and sacrificed the rest of his men to Monte? Charming!"

"And that's not the worst. There's nothing to stop him from going ahead with the original plan."

Starsky gaped at him. "You think he'll blow up the building with his own men still inside?"

"I'm telling you, he's insane. He doesn't give a shit about his men. They're expendable. Believe me, he'll do it. We gotta get everyone out. And fast." Hutch gave the door another hasty scrutiny. "Too strong to break down. We need tools. Or the key. Or maybe we can break through the boarding."

Starsky touched him on the arm, nodded at the door with a meaningful look. A sudden disturbing silence had descended on the upper floor. The shooting had stopped.

They stood motionless with their ears to the door. Then they heard a faint sound coming from upstairs, a moan or a whimper. Then small movements and voices, faint and indistinct.

Someone was still alive in there.

"We better hurry," Starsky warned. "If we can't get them out, maybe we can find the stuff and defuse it before it goes off. If there's a timer, at least we'll know how much time we got."

"Okay, where? Not up here—"

They traded another look. Both spoke at the same time. "Downstairs!"

They moved as one, raced back down the stairs—Hutch in the lead, Starsky three inches behind him—no time for the slow approach anymore.

The floor below consisted of a row of dark and dusty offices with sagging chipboard doors and rusting hinges. Only one door was closed and locked. Hutch kicked it open with a single well-aimed application of his foot.

The room was empty except for three items. A stack of explosives piled high against the wall. A detonator. And Alf.

Alf lay on his side on the wooden floor, gagged and tied hand and foot with a single length of rope. His eyes looked huge and terrified in the thin grimy face. Hutch was by his side in a second and pulled the filthy cloth from his mouth.

"It's okay," he said to the boy. "You'll be okay. We're gonna get you outta here."

A pocket knife materialized over his shoulder, smoothly like a scalpel presented to an operating surgeon. He took it from Starsky's hand and started sawing through the rope, keeping up a stream of reassurances. Alf followed his every move with his eyes, but he didn't respond.

Traumatized.

"Hutch." A tense voice behind him, urgent.

He looked around. Starsky was standing very still, gazing at the complex arrangement of explosives and detonator from a respectful distance. Wires trailed over the top, a spaghetti arrangement of green and red and yellow.

"TNT," he said. "'Bout a hundred pounds."

Enough to bring down Metro headquarters.

Hutch got to his feet, approached with caution. Then he saw why Starsky looked so edgy. There was no evidence of a timer or fuse or trigger.

"It's a remote," he said, his mouth suddenly dry.

Starsky nodded grimly. "He could be triggering it at any time."

Of course. The Shark wouldn't leave the action to a timer. He'd want to be in control. He'd want to see the results of his handiwork, to make sure it worked. Maybe even to get a kick out of it.

Hutch's mind raced through the options, discarded them as quickly as they appeared. Cut the wires. Disable the detonator. Disconnect the blasting caps.

"Forget it," Starsky said urgently, reading his mind. "We can't. This is nothing like the stuff on the *Amapola*. We touch this, we die."

He backed away. Hutch caught Alf by the arm, hauled him to his feet. "Can you walk? C'mon. We gotta get out of here."

They half walked, half carried Alf downstairs, by some miracle not encountering anyone, and rushed him through the darkness away from the building.

"That's far enough," Hutch decided when they'd reached the shelter of a sturdy-looking storage shed. "Stay here," he told the boy. "You'll be safe here. Keep your head down. Whatever you do, don't go back inside."

Alf nodded mutely, his huge eyes fixed on Hutch's face. He seemed confused and not fully aware of the situation. He still hadn't uttered a single word.

There was no time to worry about Alf. Starsky was already halfway back to the building. Hutch squeezed the boy's shoulder and hurried to catch up with his partner.

oooOOOooo

They'd almost reached the door again when Hutch glimpsed a movement in the dark, on his right. A man. No, two. Two men, coming up at an angle from behind, striding purposefully toward the same door. The metal of their guns glinted in the moonlight.

Starsky was two steps ahead, unaware.

Hutch moved quickly. He seized Starsky around the shoulders, hauled him sideways and down into the dense night shadow of the building. Followed him down, never letting go. He felt the darkness envelop them both in a protective sheath, felt rough ground under his knees, a solid wall hitting his shoulder.

Starsky went with him soundlessly. He broke their fall with his hands, pressed himself close to the ground, allowing Hutch to pull his long legs fully into the narrow strip of blackness. Then they froze, squashed together—Starsky half beside, half beneath him—and not daring to breathe.

Five feet away, the door opened from the inside. A man stepped out. The three shadows converged; voices exchanged urgent words in indistinct Spanish. Hutch could barely make out what they were saying.

"...Rodriguez...Vargas...killed them when they came in."

"...the others still up there...Villar and Tonio...go upstairs and check if...?"

"No time for that...probably dead by now...must get moving."

"...Digger?"

"Leave him...injured...no good to me now."

The shadows moved from the door into the open. One of them came so close, Hutch could have reached out and touched the cuff of his pants. He lowered his head and rested his forehead on Starsky's shoulder, hoping their pale faces wouldn't reflect the moonlight.

"No sign of the cop?" the first voice said, clearly audible now. A familiar voice. The man himself.

"None. They'll be long gone. We'll never find them in the darkness."

"Chinga a su madre!" the Shark hissed. "I'm going to fry that two-faced double-crossing bastard Monte! He's killed my dogs. My men. And now he also has the cop. Hijo de puta! I'll make him pay big time for this. I'll rip the bastard into a million pieces. Goddammit, he'll wish he'd never crossed me."

"What are we gonna do, boss?"

"We're leaving. Julio, go get the car. Monterro, you come with me. I have a job for you. We'll meet around the back in five minutes. And then we'll show Monte a fireworks display he'll remember for the rest of his short life!"

The other two laughed. The men moved apart. One hurried away into the darkness. The other two exchanged a few more words just inside the door. Hutch couldn't make out what they were saying.

He shifted minutely, acutely aware of Starsky's body pressed against him, the pounding of Starsky's heart under his hand, the scent of Starsky and night air and sweat and gunfire residue an intoxicating aroma in his nose.

Another small eternity went by before the shadows retreated and the door fell shut, and they were finally alone in the darkness.

Starsky groaned and relaxed into a relieved sprawl—a sweet, boneless weight in Hutch's arms. When he twisted around and gazed up at him, Hutch had to fight a sudden desperate craving to haul his partner close and kiss him senseless.

He battled the urge away. Pushed himself to his feet, pulled Starsky up, as well.

"Christ, that was close," Starsky whispered and dusted his scraped and bloody hands. "Can't believe they didn't see us. They almost stepped on us! Okay, quickly—what did they say?"

In flying haste, Hutch translated what he'd heard. "He's gonna cut his losses and make his getaway. *After* he's blown everyone to pieces. Even Digger." He looked at Starsky. "We're not gonna have time to break down that door."

Starsky looked grim and gorgeous and full of determination, all at the same time. "Then we have to stop him," he said. "Before he gets away."

Hutch experienced another vivid moment of profound satisfaction. They were on the same page. As usual. He pulled on Starsky's arm. "They're meeting outside the hangar. They'll be gone in a few minutes. We gotta hurry."

"It's too far. We're not gonna make it!" Starsky protested.

Somewhere in the darkness, an engine sputtered to life and the powerful beam of headlights slashed a bright path of light through the night. The light flicked in their direction, angled and swept away from them as the car accelerated around the corner.

"They're picking up some gear, I think. But they must be coming back this way. There's no other way out."

"Hutch, we can't shoot at a moving car. We might miss him in the dark. What if he has his finger on the trigger? He could detonate the stuff even if he's injured. We gotta take him out with the first shot."

On the other side of the building, the car squealed to a halt, engine idling. The hangar gate rattled open—a sharp, clear sound in the darkness.

"Then maybe we have to get him away from the device." Hutch started pulling Starsky along. "I got an idea. Remember what you told me about your escape from the Viet Cong? How you tricked the guards so you could take them out? That's what we'll do. He'll fall for it."

Starsky stopped and put a painful grip on Hutch's arm. "What the hell are you talking about? In 'Nam, we had to use Billy to lure them in, or I'd never have gotten close enough."

"He still wants me," Hutch said urgently, his eyes all over Starsky's face, willing him to understand. "He's crazy enough to take that chance."

Understanding sparked in Starsky's eyes, followed by an instant, vehement reaction. "*You?* You're out of your mind! He's gonna kill you."

"No, he won't. He wants me alive. Starsky, this is our only chance. We *have* to take it."

In the distance, the engine revved again. A car door slammed. And another. A reverse gear screeched.

"It's way too dangerous!" Starsky lashed out. "He could shoot you. Injure you. Run you down. It's three against one. What if he succeeds and captures you?"

"He won't capture me. That's where you come in, remember? To make sure he doesn't."

Hutch reached for him, and Starsky pulled away angrily, out of his grasp.

"What if I can't? What if I'm too far away? You'll be completely exposed. If I miss, or if I misjudge the situation for just *one* second, you're toast."

There were a hundred different answers to that. *You're not gonna misjudge the situation. You're a dead shot. You've been training for weeks. A few minutes ago, you shot Rico straight through the heart.*

He didn't use any of them. He reached for his partner again, looked into the rebellious face, and said just one thing.

"I trust you."

They stared at each other. Around the corner, the car gathered speed. Something subtle shifted in Starsky's face. Hutch saw it, knew what it meant. He pulled his partner away.

"C'mon. This way."

oooOOOooo

Hutch crouched behind a small clump of shrubs, a stone's throw from the boarded entrance door, surrounded by blackness.

Somewhere out there in the darkness was Starsky, watching over him. The knowledge was deeply comforting in the brief seconds as he was poised to step out into the open, for the Shark to catch that vital glimpse of him.

To his left, the car's headlights swept around the corner. Hutch pushed Rico's Browning into the waistband of his pants, pulled the sweater over it. Got into position.

Show time.

The action that followed was short and sharp and to the point.

The car accelerated down the drive, making for the access road. Hutch jumped up, flailing as if startled by the light. He ran, stumbling, skirting the edge of the light. They couldn't fail to see him.

The car roared toward him. Hutch veered away onto rough ground, heard the car fish-tail to a halt behind him.

Three men jumped out, doors flying wide. Light spilled from the car. Their yells carried across the open plain.

"It's him!" "Get him, go!" "This way!"

"Don't kill him! I need him alive."

Hutch swerved and veered back onto the road. He stumbled a little, drawing them closer. Feet pounded the ground behind him, right and left.

"Stop! Stop or I'll shoot."

A warning shot whizzed above his head. Hutch angled back toward the car, aimed straight for the beam and on toward the corner formed by the side of the building and the maintenance shed. Allowed them to close in on him.

"We got 'im! He's trapped."

"Cover that side. Don't let him get away."

Hutch skidded to a halt and turned to face them, his hands out—a gesture of surrender. The headlights threw a blinding glare over the scene. All he could see were dark shapes surrounded by light. He blinked, blinded.

The shapes walked toward him, guns drawn.

"Don't move," the Shark warned. "We have you covered." Then in Spanish to the man on his left, "Go get the ropes from the car."

The man lowered his weapon, stepped away. The other two closed in on Hutch.

Three things happened in quick succession.

Starsky yelled, "Police! Freeze! You're surrounded!" and stepped from the darkness. Two men froze in mid-motion. The Shark's gun hand jerked a fraction, a micro second's hesitation.

And Starsky shot him.

The leathery face melted into a look of utter surprise. A red mark blossomed on the bare chest. The Shark tottered. Starsky fired again. And again. He didn't stop firing until the body had folded completely and lay crumpled on the ground.

At the first shot, Hutch had gone sideways, into the shadows, and whipped out the Browning.

"Drop your weapons!" he roared at the two others who stood paralyzed and watched open-mouthed as their boss went down in a hail of bullets. Two guns clattered to the ground. "Get on your stomachs and put your hands on your heads!"

They complied with almost comic speed and eagerness. Hutch wasn't surprised. Starsky looked scary just then as he stood over the body of the drug lord, with the gun still pointed straight at his head as if daring the man to get up and threaten his partner with torture again. In the harsh glare of the headlights, Starsky's face looked grim and forbidding, and Hutch saw that the action had taken everything out of him.

He experienced a small moment of unease. Later there'd be hell to pay for what he'd put Starsky through these past minutes.

"Hey," he called out softly, his gun on the perps, but his eyes on the tense, still figure of his partner. "You wanna come and give me a hand here?"

Starsky straightened slowly. He lowered the Beretta and came over, not looking at Hutch.

"What took you so long?" Hutch said lightly, striving for levity. "I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind and gone home."

"I couldn't get a clear shot at them," Starsky said distantly, in no mood for jokes. "I had to angle around and wait until I was sure I could take out all three, if I had to."

And he would have, too, Hutch thought. The two captured goons would never know how close they'd come to joining their boss in the netherworld.

Together, they secured the scene; the ropes meant for Hutch now came in handy for use on their two unusually cooperative captives. When they were done, they walked to the spot where the drug dealer's body lay twisted on the ground in a widening pool of blood.

"Damn," Hutch said, looking down at the bullet-riddled body. "You weren't taking any chances, were you?"

"Not this time." Starsky still wasn't looking at him. "Not with you."

He crouched and quickly searched the body. Straightened up with two sets of keys in his hand. Hutch observed the familiar movements with a curious fascination. He put a hand on Starsky's shoulder, a brief touch.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm okay. Where's the remote?"

"Here. He left it on the front seat." Hutch showed him the small transmitter, a boxlike device no bigger than a transistor radio, and with a range of probably no more than a few hundred yards.

"All right," Starsky said in a voice devoid of all feeling. "Let's go and stick these thugs in with the other heavyweight."

They frog-marched their men into the hangar.

"And now let's get up there and get those people out."

oooOOOooo

The door yielded to the first key Starsky inserted into the lock.

Beyond it lay a battlefield.

It was even worse than Hutch had feared. There were bodies everywhere—in the hallway, the make-shift bedrooms, the improvised cooking area. The meeting room where it had probably all started was thick with blood. Trails of bullet holes in the walls told of a prolonged exchange of fire. The grim scenes were eerily illuminated by dim bulbs powered by a portable generator.

They had their weapons out and advanced cautiously. But the caution turned out to be unnecessary. The guns had fallen silent; the sole surviving Colombian—barricaded behind a store room door and dripping blood from two gun shot wounds—gave himself up with something almost resembling relief.

While Starsky secured the man, Hutch checked the bodies in the front rooms for signs of life. All were definitely dead. Five men—the latest casualties in a war that had already taken so many lives.

"That's Bastiano," Starsky said in a chill voice beside him, nodding at one of them. "Monte's man. I don't recognize the others. Monte must be holed up somewhere else."

Together, they moved down the hall, in search of survivors. The first few rooms contained nothing but signs of a sustained struggle and bloodshed, but the third door on the left was closed and barricaded on the inside.

"Reggie?" Hutch called out in a low voice. "Reggie, you in there? Open up. It's safe now."

He heard voices inside, movements. The door opened a crack and Reggie's furrowed face appeared behind it. One glance and he pulled the door wide.

The room was as dim and bare as all the others. Hutch saw a couple of mattresses on the floor, a few clothes and personal items scattered about. A dead man lay twisted on the floor, a sheet draped over him.

Two women in mini skirts and leather boots crouched in the corner as far from the body as possible, arms wrapped tightly around each other. Their white, mascara-smudged faces were rigid with terror.

A third, a diminutive brunette, stood squarely at Reggie's shoulder, brandishing a gun almost too large for her to hold. Despite that, she handled the weapon with the determination and ferocity of a fast learner in a tight spot.

"Stop!" she yelled when Hutch stepped inside, and brought the weapon up. "One more step and I'll blow your head off."

Hutch didn't doubt it. "Police!" he said. "Put down the gun, ma'am. You are not going to need it anymore. It's all over now."

He reached out, took the AK47 from her reluctant hands and slipped the safety on. "Reggie, is everyone all right here?"

The old man nodded slowly. "Yeah, me and Georgina here, we're awright. They weren't shootin' at us. We got away and laid low in here." He nodded at the two women still clinging to each other in shock. "They're a little shook up. And I dunno where Alf is. He tried ta run away, but Villar caught him, and I dunno what happened ta him."

"Alf is safe. Don't worry about him. He's outside."

"The bomb!" Georgina interrupted and caught Hutch by the arm. "Villar said there's a bomb in the building. We have to get out!"

"It's taken care of, ma'am," Hutch said calmly and disengaged himself. "You're in no danger. But I have to ask you to stay in here until we've checked the other rooms. Close the door, stay quiet and don't come out until we tell you it's safe."

He pulled the door shut and turned to Starsky, who had followed the brief exchange with impatience and something else dark and indefinable lurking in the depth of his eyes.

"I think I know where Monte is," Starsky said as soon as Hutch had closed the door. He nodded at the room at the far end of the hall. Now Hutch heard it, too. A dull thud as if someone was kicking a piece of furniture around.

He started moving toward it, stopped only when Starsky blocked his way, a dark frown on his face.

"I better go in alone. If Monte is still alive—"

"Out of the question," Hutch interrupted sharply. "Are you crazy? He's as likely to blow you away as any of Sharko's goons. C'mon, let's get this over with."

He stepped around Starsky, not waiting for a reply, knowing his partner had no choice but to follow. Together, they approached the door, giving the rooms on the right and left a rapid check as they passed.

The last door was firmly closed. Inside, another small sound confirmed the presence of at least one more survivor. As they got into position—a familiar motion as unthinking as breathing, Hutch before the door, Starsky with his back to the wall beside it, the gun held in a firm two-handed grip—the memory of a hundred forced entries just like this one flashed through Hutch's mind. They exchanged a final glance. Starsky nodded.

Hutch kicked in the door, slamming it wide open. They exploded into the room with twin movements. Hutch went high, Starsky went low.

"Freeze!" Hutch shouted.

"Police!" Starsky yelled.

"Hold it!" a third voice roared almost simultaneously. "Don't move!"

Everyone froze.

An eternity flashed by.

Hutch took in the situation with a flick of the eye. Two bodies. Three survivors. One—tall, dark-haired—had a Magnum directed at them. Another—black, with a huge head of hair—was on his knees, a gun wavering erratically in a blood-covered hand.

The third lay slumped against the wall. Deathly pale, eyes half closed. Breathing with difficulty. Blood oozed through the layers of a once elegant, now torn and bloody three-piece suit.

Desperados. Injured, cornered, dangerous. Capable of anything.

This didn't look good.

Beside him, Starsky shifted almost imperceptibly.

"Fabricio," he said to the tall one. The two men eyed each other uncertainly. Then, to Hutch's vast surprise, both lowered their weapons—slowly, warily, not taking their eyes off each other—and relaxed a fraction.

Across the room, the kneeling man followed their example.

Another endless moment of timelessness crawled by until Hutch, taking his cue from Starsky, finally did the same.

The tension eased at once. Fabricio stepped aside, revealing a view of night sky where he had succeeded in ripping the plywood from the window leading to the fire escape. They'd only been moments away from making their way to freedom.

The man in the grey suit stirred. "Mr. Starsky," he said in a strained whisper. His gaze shifted to Hutch. "Sergeant...Hutchinson."

He coughed. Blood spilled in bright frothy bubbles over his hands pressed firmly against his side. "Looks like...your mission...was more successful than mine."

Starsky acknowledged him with a small nod. "Monte."

So this was Vic Monte, the elusive head of one of LA's most secretive gangland families. Hutch gazed at him with interest. Few outside his immediate circle had ever laid eyes on him, and even fewer had had occasion to report his description to the police. It seemed that he and Starsky were privileged to be among the few exceptions.

Monte struggled for breath. "I miscalculated," he whispered. "I under...estimated the little rat. He had a...trick up his sleeve." He paused, exhausted. Pain washed over his features. "Never saw it coming."

He slumped down further. His companion with the big hair leaned closer, applied more pressure to the wound. Monte's lips moved again. "What happened? Is he...?"

"He's dead," Starsky said. He was still standing at precisely the same spot, his eyes on Monte, the Beretta held loosely at his side.

"How?"

"I shot him."

A ghost of a smile flitted across the drawn face. "Good," Monte said. He caught a ragged breath. "Someone said he...planted a bomb?"

"One hundred pounds of TNT," Starsky said evenly. "There's no danger now. We've disabled the trigger."

"Looks like...I'm in your debt...again." The words came in short, sharp bursts, separated by interminable pauses. "Whiteboy? Ba...stiano?"

Starsky shook his head, and Monte sighed and closed his eyes. A small spasm shook his body, and more blood welled from the hidden wound.

"He needs a doctor," Fabricio said urgently. "Or he'll die."

Hutch spoke for the first time. "We'll get you an ambulance as soon as we can."

The grey eyes opened again and turned to him, assessing him. "No," Monte said. "No ambulance."

He gestured, and Fabricio went to him, bent down and hooked an arm around him. With the help of his two men, Monte struggled to his feet. His already ashen face seemed to pale another shade, but he clung to his consciousness with an immense effort. "We'll make our own arrangements."

He locked eyes with Starsky, his hands clenched to fists against his side. Pain distorted his voice. "We had a deal. I hold you at your word."

The three moved to the open window. Hutch felt the situation sliding from his grasp, like a slippery trout wriggling out of his hold.

"That deal was never made for this situation," he said. He raised his gun again, aimed it at Monte.

Starsky stepped between them. In the light of the single bulb, his face looked as pale as Monte's.

"Let them go," he said. A bottomless, soul-deep weariness swept over his features like surf washing over a sandy beach. It lingered briefly at its furthest extent, then retreated, leaving behind a smooth, clear surface. "There's no other way."

Hutch watched the transformation with awe. He looked at Starsky, and Starsky looked back at him with a warm, steady light in his eyes, and the connection was back, and Hutch knew he was forgiven.

He lowered the gun and nodded at Monte.

"Go," he said. "You have five minutes. If we find you anywhere near the place when we come out, the deal's off."

oooOOOooo

They herded their small group of survivors into the bathroom, the only room on the floor with a proper lock. It was a tight fit. Including Alf, the room contained five people.

"Sorry, ladies," Hutch said wearily when Georgina protested. "We don't have a choice. You're accomplices and witnesses. We can't let you wander around the building while we're gone. We'll come back for you as soon as we can."

He locked the flimsy door, and then Starsky shut the metal door on the landing and locked that one, too.

Then they marched their last captive downstairs to the hangar to join his three colleagues in Hutch's former cell. They'd accumulated quite a number of perps,

Hutch thought wryly. He blinked. Weariness assaulted him with an unexpected force like a gust of wind slamming into a climber on an exposed mountain ridge, and he stumbled. Immediately, a hand shot out and caught him by the arm.

"Hey, you okay?"

The moment of weakness passed. Hutch nodded. "Yeah. I'm okay." He looked into Starsky's worried face, and smiled. "Tired, that's all. C'mon. Let's get out of here."

On the way to the door, they passed the small sad corpses of the five dogs—victims, too, in more ways than one. Three steps farther on lay the torn remains of Starsky's leather jacket. Starsky picked it up and shook it out.

"I hated to do that," he said mournfully. "But what else could I do?"

"Nothing," Hutch said. "You had to do it. We'll get you another one. Damn, what's a jacket? When I saw that dog hanging from your arm, I thought—Christ, I thought—"

"You saw me?"

"Everything. Every damn move you made. In slow motion. While I was stuck in that room and couldn't do a thing."

"Aw, Hutch, I'm sorry. I know I promised I'd be safe, but I had to come. I couldn't just let them—"

"I know." Hutch touched him on the arm, a gesture of reassurance. "I understand. I'd have done exactly the same."

"And Monte?" Starsky said with a flicker of hesitation. "The deal?"

"That, too."

"You mean you're not mad?"

"About what? Rescuing me? Doing what you had to do?"

"Letting him go."

"What else could we have done? You were right. A deal's a deal."

"You're a cop," Starsky said. "You'll be the one in trouble for not bringing him in."

"Is that why you wanted to go in alone?"

"I don't have a job to lose. You mention this in your report and IA will have your guts on a platter."

"Then maybe we shouldn't mention it." Hutch shrugged. "*We entered the room and found evidence that one or more suspects had succeeded in escaping through the window. At the time, we were unable to pursue.*" He paused. "As far as I'm concerned that's all that needs saying. If we'd gotten there two minutes later, that would even be true."

Starsky stared at him. "That's it? You mean you're not giving me a hard time over this?" He shook his head in amazement. "I dunno. Somehow I thought you'd have a lot more to say than that."

I would have. A long time ago. I'd have gotten on my high horse and given you a lecture on moral integrity and the slippery slope to corruption and bribery.

"That was before," he said. Starsky would know what he meant.

I'd have made a deal with the devil himself if it could have bought your safety.

They walked through the building in silence. As they stepped over the two bodies in the basement passage for one last time and through the side door into the open, Hutch experienced a moment of complete and profound detachment, powered by the sudden realization that it was all over, that they were alive, and safe, and free, and had even managed to salvage a few other lives from the wreckage.

The thought was overwhelming. Exhilarating. The frantic, adrenaline-fueled action of the past hour was over, the pressure was off, and life suddenly looked very, very beautiful.

Beside him, Starsky kicked at an empty tin can, idly, lost in thoughts of his own.

"Met your partner," he said apropos of nothing.

"Yeah?"

"Mm hm."

They shared a look that told Hutch more than a ten minute soliloquy. Starsky knew. He'd weighed Dan Vanderhoff and found him wanting.

"He's not going to be my partner any longer," he said.

"After *one* day?" Starsky grinned. "That's gotta be a new record."

"I don't care if Dobey kicks up a stink. No way am I gonna—"

"Relax. Dobey's way ahead of you. I was right there when he let loose on the phone to Detroit to whoever sent that glowing report on Vanderhoff, and tore him a new asshole. Turns out the brass in Detroit's suspected all along that Vanderhoff's a soak and can't pull his weight anymore. But they didn't want to ruin his career prospects, can ya believe that?"

"A soak?"

"Drunk, wino, boozehound, guzzler. Whatever you wanna call it."

"Explains a lot," Hutch said thoughtfully. A sudden sadness washed over him. Vanderhoff had been a great cop once, one of the best. "He tell you what happened?"

"We figured it out." Starsky's perceptive eyes were on him. "Don't feel too sorry for him. He had it coming. He knew he had a problem. He should've known better than to drag a fellow cop down with him."

"Yeah, I know. But—"

Starsky shook his head, reached out as if to touch Hutch on the arm, then hesitated. "You know the guy you shot?"

"Yeah?"

"I doubted you. Vanderhoff said you went after a perp. That you went in without looking, without backup. I told him you'd never do that. But when I saw that it was Gunther's hit man...And that you'd taken him out..." He looked away. "I believed it. I doubted you."

"You thought my need for revenge was stronger than my need to stay alive?"

"Yeah. But only for a moment. Even before Linda told us I already knew you wouldn't have done that."

"Damn right I wouldn't have. I shot him 'cause he would've killed me if I hadn't. I didn't even know it was him until the last second."

Hutch guessed that he'd reached some kind of closure on something, but he wasn't entirely sure on what exactly. He wished they could sit and rest for a while and maybe talk and sort through the tangled events of the last few days. Even better would be to sit in simple silence, to share the breathtaking feeling of being alive, and at peace, and together. He wanted that more than anything else.

But they couldn't. Not now. There was still so much to do.

"We better find out where the Shark has parked his wheels," he said, "and go looking for a phone." He was struggling to hold his weariness at bay. Suddenly, he felt totally and utterly drained. "We can't use his escape car. It's evidence."

"Monte's second car must still be out front," Starsky said. "Let's take that."

"One of us ought to stay."

Starsky waggled a forefinger at him. "Oh no. No way. I'm not letting you out of my sight again. See what happens when I do. As soon as I turn my back, you get yourself into trouble."

Hutch reached out then and let his hand rest lightly on the side of Starsky's face. Starsky gazed at him bright-eyed, and unashamed of it. The next second, he'd launched himself at Hutch and was squeezing the breath out of him.

"Oof," said Hutch and wrapped his arms around him.

"Don't ever pull a stunt like that on me again, you hear me?" Starsky's muffled voice came from somewhere in the vicinity of Hutch's neck.

"Worried about me?"

"Maybe just a little."

"Turkey."

"Mushbrain."

They held onto each other, breathing each other in, sharing a few precious heartbeats before breaking apart reluctantly.

Starsky dragged the back of his hand over his face. "C'mon, let's get that car on the road. And don't worry about them." He waved a vague hand. "They'll be all right for an hour without us."

"Okay."

"Just so that you know—I'm drivin'!"

"Okay."

"And no smart-ass comments from you."

"Okay."

"Damn, I know we're in trouble when you go monosyllabic on me."

"Big words, big words. Get a move on already. I wanna go home."

oooOOOooo

By the time Harold Dobey arrived on the scene, the situation was firmly in the hands of the San Bernadino PD.

Captain Fotheringham's call had dragged him from deep sleep in the small hours of the morning. By the time he'd negotiated the long miles through the foothills of the Sierra and coaxed his aging Chevy down the bumpy road to

Sevenmile, it was almost three a.m., and the airfield was a beehive of cops, firefighters, bomb squad experts, and paramedics.

He parked well out of the way and surveyed the scene. Patrol cars, ambulances, coroner's wagons, a fire engine and assorted other vehicles clustered around a spectacularly unremarkable four-story building illuminated by a couple of powerful spotlights.

Dobey fought his way through the crowd, eyes right and left. He homed in on the first group of uniforms, whipped out his badge.

"Captain Dobey from the LAPD. Where are my men?"

One of them nodded at a spot well outside the perimeter of artificial light. Dobey squinted into the shadows.

And then he saw them. They sat on the ground with their backs against a low stone wall, taking no notice of the commotion around them. Hutchinson was leaning ever so slightly against his partner, and Starsky had an arm draped casually around him, but Dobey suspected that the arm was probably all that was keeping his blond detective upright.

They looked like a couple of survivors from a disaster zone—wrapped in blankets, grimy, hollow-eyed, utterly exhausted. Starsky looked as if he couldn't recall the meaning of sleep, and the dark-ringed eyes in his pale face gave him an almost zombie-like appearance. But it was Hutch who drew his eye. Dobey didn't think he'd ever seen a filthier person, not even Cal when he came home from an afternoon's football practice on a muddy field.

Dirt, blood, and bruises seemed to cover every part of Hutch's face. His clothes were ripped and filthy. A four-day stubble adorned his chin. Even his hair, normally a bright beacon in the night, was dark with grime and dust. The only clean thing about him was a square of white gauze on the side of his head, secured by strips of adhesive.

They were the most beautiful sight Dobey had seen all week.

"Hi, Cap'n," one of the disaster victims said as he hastened over, and aimed a most unsettling lopsided grin at him.

"Captain," said the other, lifted a weary hand about a foot off the ground and let it flop down again.

Dobey couldn't decide if he wanted to hug or punch them. Hope had been a sparse commodity in his chest after they'd found Hutch's LTD abandoned on Albert Boulevard and no sign of Starsky. Relief didn't even come close to what he was feeling at that moment.

"Starsky. Hutch." The bellow, his customary defense against emotions a police captain could seldom afford to display in public, deserted him at the critical moment. "Thank God, you're alive!"

His two officers struggled to their feet. Dobey saw it with a sense of tremendous relief. Bruised and weary they looked, but they were still standing. Or swaying, rather. He noted that Starsky didn't relax his hold around Hutch.

"Are you all right?" he said. "Siddown. Siddown, for Chrissakes, before you fall over."

"We're fine, Capt'n."

"Dammit, you had us chasing you all over LA. Both of you. Starsky, what happened? How did you get here? We thought you'd disappeared into thin air. And then we thought...But we didn't even know if..."

He sat down on the low wall beside them and wiped a hand over his face. This was getting embarrassing. "Well?" he barked. "I want to know what happened. And that means *now!*"

Starsky and Hutch exchanged a glance, and hastened to fill their captain in on the situation. It was a long story. Dobey listened, not interrupting, while he felt his mouth dropping open a little further with each new twist in the tale.

"But before we could get to a phone, we ran into a highway patrol, and they radio'ed the local sheriff's office," Starsky concluded the report. "Twenty minutes later, the cops and paramedics were all over us."

"And the bomb squad," Hutch added. "They weren't very pleased with us."

Starsky almost giggled. "Oh yeah, they couldn't believe we'd left nine people locked up in a building rigged with a hundred pounds of TNT." Despite his exhaustion, he looked wired, strung high like an over-tuned fiddle.

"What else could we have done?" Hutch shrugged. "It was safe enough. We had the remote with us the whole time."

Dobey realized there were a hundred questions left to ask. They'd barely skimmed the surface.

Beside him, Hutch stirred and looked at him. "Cap'n, I gotta ask a favor. The boy. Alf." He waved a vague hand in the direction of the black-and-whites. "Can you call Perkowitz? Ask her if she'll take on his case? He's on the edge. Strung out. He needs help. It's urgent."

"Leave it to me. I'll take care of it."

"And Cap'n, 'nother thing," Hutch said, slurring his words with fatigue. "Have someone check out the movements of Vega Delgado 'round the end of May. See if he leased or bought any storage space in the garment district, or if anyone saw him there around that time."

"Delgado? Goldentooth? Gunther's dealer in Colombia? But he was killed in the car bombing in August last year."

"Yes, I know," Hutch said patiently.

But Starsky was already far ahead of him. "The shipment?" He gripped Hutch's arm excitedly. "You mean you know where it is?"

"Well, not exactly. But I know Delgado used to have a couple of drop-off points near Bailey's. He wouldn't have had much time to hide the stuff. So maybe it's still in the area somewhere."

Dobey caught up belatedly. "You think Delgado took Gunther's shipment? And you've known that all along?"

"Nah. Figured that out while I was here. Too much time on my hands, I suppose. See, Delgado was in LA at the time the shipment disappeared. He had a meeting with Gunther around the middle of May, and I know he was still in town when we arrested Gunther. We had sightings of him after that, but he kept slipping through our fingers. I've always wondered why he hung around when every other crook in the organization was getting the hell out of the country."

Hutch paused and gathered his thoughts. "Delgado had motive and opportunity. I'd say it's worth checking out."

"Maybe that's why he came back in August," Dobey speculated with rising excitement. "To retrieve the stuff. Only he got killed by the Sugarhills before he could shift it. Yes, I agree. It's worth checking out."

Starsky produced his widest, wackiest grin. "See, Cap'n, I told you Hutch would know."

"We haven't found the stuff yet," Hutch cautioned. "I could be wrong."

"Nah, I bet you're right." Starsky snickered. "Can ya believe it? The Shark's been lookin' for the guy all over LA, and it turns out one of his own goons did the deed. He'd be furious if he knew."

"He's dead," Hutch reminded him sternly.

"Oh yeah. That's right." The grin this time was nothing short of manic.

Dobey resisted the urge to bellow some sense at his detectives, recalling his doctor's orders to practice a more laid-back approach to work. Easy to say for the man, he thought. He didn't have a couple of brilliant-but-infuriating detectives to manage.

He cleared his throat. "You'd better ride in with me and put all that in a statement."

"We'd love to, Cap'n," Starsky said, untruthfully, "but I really should be gettin' Hutch home. He hasn't eaten properly in four days!"

Dobey's gaze traveled from one to the other. He sighed.

"You look terrible," he admitted. A careful understatement.

"Hungry, he means," Starsky amended.

"I could murder a steak," Hutch agreed.

"And a beer."

"Followed by a shower."

"And another beer."

"And about twenty-four hours of sleep."

"Uninterrupted."

"And maybe a coupla days off work."

"Or maybe a week or two?"

"Knock it off, you two," Dobby interrupted. "First of all, you have to take Hutch to the hospital and have him checked over. Especially that crease."

"I'm fine," Hutch protested, coming alive. "The paramedics have been all over me already. They said the wound's clean. It's healing. Cap'n, I don't wanna go to the hospital tonight. That would take hours. You know what it's like in there. I just wanna go home and crash."

Dobey considered. He eyed his detective and his former detective, both clearly eager to get away, clearly averse to the idea of kicking their heels in a hospital waiting room. He took in their closeness, the way Starsky hovered protectively near his partner. He nodded. Some things never changed.

"All right. Let me make a couple of calls. Maybe the local hospital can take you." He held up a hand to stop the words of protest he saw hovering on Starsky's lips. "No discussion! Hutch needs X-rays and a proper checkup. And you know as well as I do that we need the evidence on file for the prosecution."

He softened when he saw the two resigned faces. "But after that you can take him home. I'll find someone to drive you. Hutch, take a few days off. I'll send someone around to take a statement from you. Try and stay out of trouble until then."

oooOOOooo

Hutch retained few memories of the rest of the night—the bumpy ride to the San Bernadino Community Hospital, the brightly lit examining room, the probing fingers on his face and back. He thought he recalled a nurse's hand guiding him firmly to a shower, a spray of tepid water struggling to wash the

layers of grime off his skin. Then more probing fingers, more needles pricking his skin, more lights flashed into his eyes.

Hutch let it all happen passively, absently, conscious only of Starsky's familiar presence throughout. His most vivid recollection was that of the journey home, of lying curled up on the back seat of a car with his head in Starsky's lap and Starsky's hand on his forehead. He liked that.

The sun was coming up behind them when the bemused uniform from the SBPD dropped them off in Oakhill Drive. Starsky wouldn't allow him to do anything. He steered Hutch up the stairs, fed him pizza and salad and orange juice, ran him a bath.

"I've already had a shower," Hutch reminded him groggily.

"You didn't do a very good job. What you need is a good soak. It'll make you feel good. Trust me."

With infinite care, Starsky stripped him of the borrowed scrubs and helped him into the tub, keeping a steadying arm around him. Then he ran the sponge over his head and back and arms and shoulders, soaping and rinsing, mindful of the bruises on his face and back, and the gash on the side of his head.

There was something oddly familiar about the tenderness of the action buoyed by a swell of relief and gratitude. Hutch knew it well. In just this way, he had once taken care of Starsky, in the days after Starsky's homecoming.

It was the perfect role reversal.

He lay back, closed his eyes, and surrendered to his partner's ministrations. It felt wonderful not to have to be in charge, to let go and allow the burden of responsibility to rest on someone else's shoulders for a while. And who more capable than Starsky?

Hutch opened an eye, drowsily watched his partner wield the sponge, totally absorbed in his task. Something shifted and realigned itself inside him.

Not a role reversal at all. Just the normal state of affairs. They'd always done that, through the years. Whoever happened to be the stronger at any point in time—physically, mentally, emotionally—took care of the other.

In the past—*before* Gunther—they'd been evenly matched at the task, taking turns as required. Not that anyone was counting. Now it seemed that they were evenly matched once again. It was a wonderful, liberating thought. It had been so long. *Too* long.

"C'mon, let's get you out of the tub," Starsky said into his ear, a small grin in his voice. "Before you fall asleep in there."

A strong arm helped him to his feet; a towel materialized around him. Vigorous hands rubbed the water from his shoulders and arms and legs.

Some of Hutch's exhaustion melted away, and he remembered that Starsky, too, had been pushed to the limit in the past few days. He reached out, stilled his partner's hands, locked eyes with him.

"What about you? You sure you're okay?"

"*Me?*" Starsky said. "I'm not the one got shot and punched and locked up for four days with only dry bread to eat."

"Oh, you've been lazing around the pool all this time, I suppose?"

"Quit worrying, I'm fine."

He *looked* fine. More than fine. He looked like the Starsky of old—lean, mean, strong. Gorgeous.

Hutch couldn't help himself. He reached out and pulled the perfect body close, very close. Starsky melted against him. Hutch's hand came up and curled around the back of Starsky's neck. Their lips met in the softest of kisses, lips barely grazing each other.

In a moment of curious timelessness, Hutch memorized—in no particular order—the softness of Starsky's skin at the nape of his neck, his incredibly long lashes, the sandpaper roughness of their stubbly chins as they grated against each other, the sapphire blue of Starsky's eyes as it darkened to a hue of purest midnight black...

Hutch kissed him again, eagerly this time, and moaned with disappointment when Starsky pulled away with a small laugh. "Hold it, Romeo. We'll have lots of time for this tomorrow. Right now I think it's time to tuck you into bed."

"Hey, I'm up for it."

"Mm hm, I know. C'mon, this way."

"What're you smiling at? You don't believe me? You'd be surprised—"

"Course I believe you! That's exactly why we're going to the bedroom."

"I'm serious, y' know."

"I know. Lie down already, will ya? I'll be right back."

Hutch's head hit the pillow. The mattress was a haven of pure luxury, and every cell in his body capitulated before its softness. Blankets came around him, warm and almost indecently comforting. The blinds went down and blocked out the morning sun.

He was vaguely aware of the sound of the shower running. After a while, the sound stopped. The bathroom door opened and closed. The mattress dipped as a warm, still slightly damp body smelling of sandalwood soap and shampoo

crawled into bed beside him and wriggled close. An arm snaked around his middle, holding him fast. Secure.

"Sleep tight, Hutch."

That was the last thing Hutch remembered.

Chapter Fifteen

"...And then he said they'd be damn lucky if they got away with less than twenty years. *Beat in the eggs and vanilla until smooth.* Unless, of course, they walk on a technicality. We didn't exactly do things by the book. *Blend in cornstarch to prevent coagulation.* Hutch, what's coagulation? No, wait, it says here...Ah! But even Chief Ryan said we did the best we could under the circumstances. You should've seen his face when Dobey told him the search teams found three million bucks' worth of horse at Bailey's! *Check the temperature of the oven and make sure that—Ow! Dammit! Hot!*"

Starsky was a whirlwind of activity. He hadn't stopped bouncing with energy for days. On the quest for an outlet, he'd already turned the apartment upside down in a wild cleaning frenzy, tackled a mountain of laundry, hauled bags of groceries upstairs, cleaned the spark plugs on both cars, and even fixed the dripping faucet in the bathroom.

Now he was in the middle of trying his hand at a challenging cake recipe courtesy of Emma Martyn, involving marzipan, cream cheese and liberal quantities of rum. He was juggling the ingredients, whisk, and measuring spoon in the manner of Julia Child, while keeping up a stream of excited commentary. Or, as right now, jumping up and down with his burned fingers tucked under an armpit.

Hutch watched the small tribal dance for a moment, rolled his eyes, and returned his attention to his book. Heaven knew how he was going to get any studying done with these constant domestic upheavals around him.

The cake was in the oven and beginning to emit an enticing aroma when Hutch became aware of a sudden abrupt silence in the room. He looked up. Starsky stood at the sink, a washing up sponge in one hand and a dripping plate in the other, and stared blankly ahead.

"Damn!" he said.

"What's wrong?"

Starsky turned to him with dismay. "I completely forgot about the job!"

"What job?"

"The job they offered me at LA City Cabs. I was supposed to sign the contract on Wednesday, but something, uh, more important came up." He let the plate slide back into the water and wiped his hands on his jeans.

"Something more important, huh?"

"Uh huh." Starsky flashed him a grin and reached for the phone book. "I'll have to call them up and explain. Maybe it's not too late."

"Driving a cab?"

"Yeah. So what? You got a better idea? I'm not exactly rolling in offers."

He dialed, and Hutch leaned back and watched him through half closed eyes.

Three days had passed since the action at the Sevenmile Airfield, and life was settling back into familiar patterns. Hutch's bruises were fading, his headaches were on the retreat, and the gash on his temple was healing nicely. Everything considered, he felt pretty good, no doubt helped in large part by the fact that Starsky was dancing attendance to his every need.

His *every* need.

Luckily, their needs fairly often coincided. Hutch smirked.

He was still off-duty, and installed on the couch in the company of all his books, ostensibly to put in a concerted effort to get up to speed for the Lieutenant's exam. But his mind was wandering. Again.

Across the room, his partner was sweet-talking a receptionist with liberal doses of "darlings" and "shweethearts".

"The manager was out," Starsky said when he'd put the phone down. "But his secretary gave me an appointment for tomorrow afternoon. They're still lookin' for someone, she said, so I guess I'm still in the running." He reached for his car keys.

"Where're you going?"

"To the store. I need more eggs and sugar. And I meant to take that wonky spare tire to Merle's before he closes. Hey, how about some of Huggy's special chicken stew for dinner? I can pick some up on the way back."

Hutch laughed. "What are you trying to do to me? Stuff me? I've already had a week's worth of steak, and veal, and broccoli cheese casserole. I'll be rolling to work next week."

Starsky grinned and dropped a noisy smooch on the top of his head. "Just makin' sure you got everything your pretty little heart desires. What d'you need before I go? Cushion for your back? More tea? 'Nother sandwich? No? Sure? Okay, I'll be back in an hour. Don't let anyone kidnap ya while I'm gone!"

When the small tornado called Starsky had breezed out of the apartment and the Torino's growl had faded into the distance, Hutch gave up the pretense, tossed the book aside, and fell back against the cushions with a sigh.

For a few minutes, he simply sat staring at the ceiling and soaking up the silence. He needed a moment's peace—not to study, but to think. To understand. To make sense of the conflicting emotions that had been pulling him in different directions for the past three days. He had a decision to make. And now was the time to make it.

The ceiling offered no solutions, and after a few more listless moments, Hutch abandoned the couch and started pacing, up and down the length of the small room. Once, twice. Then, feeling hemmed in, he pushed the balcony doors open and stepped outside. A warm sun enfolded him and the assorted plants struggling for space on the narrow ledge. Hutch hunkered down and absently pinched a few yellowing leaves off the umbrella plant.

The fact was, he *did* have a better idea. A much better idea. He just needed to come to terms with it.

He cast the leaves adrift in the breeze and watched them spiral to the ground. With great deliberation, he turned his mind to the events at Sevenmile. Not to the long days of his imprisonment, and the pain and the uncertainties, but to the moment of his rescue, and the subsequent action.

He thought of the moment he'd first seen Starsky in the hall, facing down the pack of dogs. When he'd seen Starsky under fire again. Going down. Rising like a phoenix from the ashes.

He thought of the mind-spinning action that had followed, their frantic efforts to salvage something from a situation that couldn't be described as anything other than desperate. He recalled the fire in his veins, the sense of rightness in his heart when they'd come together like a set of precision gears, smoothly, effortlessly, to work as a team again, as partners.

Something had changed at Sevenmile. A shift in attitude. Not a gradual erosion, either. More like the complete collapse of the rock edifice of his resistance.

Crouching among his plants, Hutch trawled through his memories of the past years. He thought of their eight-year partnership, the ups and downs of his ten-year career as a cop. He thought of the triumphs and setbacks, dangers and injuries, frustrations and achievements. He thought of the fears and thrills and joys. He thought of all the reasons why, over a decade ago, he'd decided to be a cop. Not a lawyer or a doctor or a businessman, but a cop.

He'd loved his job. He'd loved the action, the chase, the fast-paced life. The brain work, too. The hunt for the truth, the gradual piecing together of a larger picture from a handful of scattered jigsaw pieces. The buzz of success when the answer suddenly clicked into place. The sense of doing a job worth doing.

Once, he'd loved being a cop.

He loved it still.

Yet here he was cramming for an exam that would get him off the streets for good because going back into action was impossible without Starsky. Because he needed Starsky. Wanted Starsky. Wanted him out there with him, doing what they did best.

Hutch's thoughts homed in on Starsky. He recalled with an aching heart all the crummy jobs his partner seemed ready to settle for. He understood now. If Starsky couldn't be a cop, he didn't really care what he did.

And that college course. He knew Starsky wasn't looking forward to it. It meant three years of being stuck in a classroom, and that wasn't really Starsky's thing.

Starsky was a cop. His instincts and reflexes were all cop. He was good at it. He thrived on it. They both did.

Hutch hadn't dared to imagine what it would be like to have Starsky back to his normal self—strong, healthy, capable of anything. Now there was no need to imagine it. He'd seen it with his own eyes.

He still couldn't believe that he'd failed to take in the enormous strides his partner had made in the past few months. He'd been blind. But the miracle of Starsky's survival was already so much more than he'd once dreamt possible. To have it all...that had always felt like asking for too much.

Starsky did, the voice in his head reminded him. He wanted to have it all.

And he could've had it, too, if I hadn't stood in his way.

Hutch realized that when he took his fears out of the equation, the bottom line was simple.

He didn't really want to be a lieutenant. He wanted to be a cop, hands-on, working the streets, dealing with people, not with case files. He wanted to work with Starsky as his partner, wanted to recapture, if only for a little while, what Gunther had tried to rip away from them.

Starsky had wanted it all. Now Hutch found that he would contend himself with no less.

But it wasn't his decision. It wasn't even Starsky's.

oooOOOooo

The ICU of Memorial Hospital no longer held any demons. There were no flashbacks, no haunting memories of endless hours of waiting, of the strangling despair in his heart. It was just an ICU. Hutch loitered in the waiting area until he saw the familiar dark-skinned, white-coated figure of his favorite surgeon walk down the hall toward him. He hastened to meet him halfway.

"Doctor Patel." Hutch shook the outstretched hand eagerly. "Thank you for seeing me."

"It is my pleasure." The slender surgeon's hand crushed his own with surprising strength, and perceptive brown eyes looked him up and down before homing in on the gash on his forehead. "You are looking...colorful. What happened? A run-in with a lamp post?" He steered Hutch in the direction of his office.

"A run-in with a drug dealer and his goons," Hutch said wryly. "Luckily, Starsky got there in time to make sure they didn't get to finish what they started."

"I am glad to hear that." Patel pointed his visitor to a chair and settled behind his desk. Hutch took in the weary movements and the tired eyes, and felt a flash of empathy. Police officers weren't the only ones working overtime in this city.

"You didn't seem very surprised when I called you yesterday," he said.

Patel leaned back in his chair and smiled. "I thought I would see you here before long," he said. "In fact, I was expecting to see you sooner."

Hutch raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? You mean because of the sleepwalking?"

"Ah, David told you."

"Yes, he told me everything. But I'm fine now. That's not why I'm here. I gotta ask you something."

A smile sparkled in the bright brown eyes. "Yes, that is the reason most people come to see me."

Hutch grinned at him. Then turned serious.

"Doctor, I know you're no longer in charge of Stars...David's case, but you know his progress better than anyone. I know you've kept in touch with the Merriweather doctors and his therapists. I think you're the best person to answer this question for me."

"Yes?"

Hutch took in a breath and looked Patel straight in the eye. "In your medical opinion, what is the chance that Starsky will pass the police physical if he applied for reinstatement?"

There, he'd said it. He'd said it out loud and the world was still turning, and his heart was still beating, and somehow it was a lot easier to say than he'd feared.

Patel nodded thoughtfully, not taking his eyes off Hutch.

"He can do it," he said. "I told him so months ago."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"I see." Hutch looked away from the probing eyes, bit the inside of his cheek. Looked back up. "Doctor, I need to ask you a favor. Will you...would you contact Dr. Shepardson, the police physician attached to the review board, and find out how likely it is that he'll declare Starsky fit for active duty, based on his progress to date and provided he passes the physical?"

Patel pressed his long fingers together to form a steeple.

"That won't be necessary," he said, "because I already have. He said the review board would be "damn stupid"—his words, not mine—not to reinstate him. The city, he said, could not afford to turn away good cops like Sergeant Starsky."

Hutch swallowed a sudden surge of emotion.

Everyone knew. Everyone except me. I was the only one to stand in his way.

Some partner...

"He also told me," Patel continued, "that the question was moot as Sergeant Starsky had resigned his post in November."

Hutch looked away. "He did it for me. He quit 'cause I couldn't hack the thought of seeing him back in danger."

"Yes, that is what I thought." Patel eyed him critically. "What has changed? I assume you would not be here if something had not changed."

"I realized I was wrong," Hutch said simply. "I let my fears stand in the way of what he wants."

"What about you? What do *you* want?"

"I want what he wants."

"Why?"

"*Why?* Because I realized that he could get into danger no matter what I do. No matter what either of us does. We...*attract* danger." Hutch shrugged a little wryly. "Our captain would say we have a knack for getting into trouble."

"And that is a good enough reason for going back into police work?"

"Maybe not. But it's what we know, and what we're good at. It's a job we love doing. Especially when we're working together." Hutch still found it hard to believe that this overwhelming truth had eluded him for so long. "I guess now you're probably going to try and talk us out of it, right?"

"On the contrary," Patel said carefully. "I believe I am glad that you have come to that decision."

"You're kidding. Really? Why?"

"I am not sure if I can explain." Patel stopped and gathered his thoughts. "David's case was special in many ways, and not only from a medical point of view. I have taken a somewhat...proprietary interest in him. In both of you, to be quite honest. And I have developed a few, well, *unusual* ideas about you."

"What do you mean, unusual?"

This time, Patel was silent for so long that Hutch was beginning to think he hadn't heard the question. The slender brown fingers toyed absently with the chestpiece of his stethoscope, and a small distracted frown creased the smooth forehead. But when Patel finally looked up, his gaze was as piercing as the tip of a scalpel.

"I want you to understand that everything I am going to say to you now is strictly off the record. Please forget for a moment that I was David's doctor last year. I am already stretching the rules by talking to you so openly."

"Don't worry," Hutch smiled. "I didn't come here for medical advice. I came to hear your personal opinion."

Patel nodded acknowledgement. "In that case let me get straight to the point. You know the meaning of the term symbiosis, don't you, Hutch?"

"Symbiosis? Sure. That's when there is some sort of give and take between two different organisms."

"Yes. Symbiosis, or more precisely mutualism, refers to the close and mutually beneficial relationship between two dissimilar organisms, which may even depend on each other for their survival."

He cleared his throat. "What I am going to say to you now may sound strange to you. I am from India, as you know. Where I come from, we believe in an underlying order in nature we call Dharma. It means *the right way of living* or *the proper way of doing things*. It is a belief in a natural harmony that opposes the forces of chaos that are all around us."

Hutch arched an eyebrow, a little taken aback by the direction in which the conversation was going, and Patel shrugged apologetically. "I am not a very religious man. As a scientist, I find many religious ideas difficult to accept, but as a human being and a Hindu, I believe in the forces of order and chaos locked in a continuous battle. I see chaos in my own work every day—diseases, injuries, death—and it is my duty as a surgeon to impose order on that chaos as best as I can."

"Okay. You're saying that cops and doctors have a lot in common."

Patel smiled. "Exactly. We are both trying to keep chaos at bay. It is a calling. But I think that for you and your partner, there is an added dimension because you are exceptionally close to each other." He produced a small embarrassed shrug. "I could not help noticing that you two have an unusually strong, uh, *bond* between you. You know what I mean, don't you?"

Hutch eyed him sharply. His connection to Starsky, that warm, vibrant link, had lived inside him for so long and become so much a part of him that he sometimes forgot how strange it must appear to everyone else.

He wasn't entirely sure he understood it himself.

"Yes," he said. "I know. I mean I know that Starsky and I...that there's something weird between us. Are you saying it's some kind of symbiosis?"

Patel spread his hands. "I am not sure. I cannot explain it. The connection you have defies explanation. But I believe that it is a powerful source of strength that allows you to overcome what I am tempted to call impossible odds."

"Uhm, doctor—"

Patel held up a hand. "I know, I know. This sounds highly unscientific. I would not bring it up if I was not convinced, as a doctor and a surgeon, that David's remarkable recovery would not have been possible without you. In fact—" He hesitated. "Sometimes I even wonder if David would be alive at all if it was not for the powerful bond you share."

Hutch shifted uncomfortably. They'd never told anyone about the strange events surrounding Starsky's brief flirtation with death. The powerful flow of energy linking them as Starsky lay dying in his arms. The sharp tug on Hutch's soul in the moment of Starsky's death. Starsky's confused memories of currents pulling him out to an eternal sea. Of the link connecting him to the shore like a lifeline. The beacon of light guiding him home.

The connection was always there. Always with him. Growing stronger all the time. Deeper. More powerful.

He didn't think about it much. It wasn't something you could think about often and hope to maintain a mental balance.

How much did Patel know? How much did he guess?

"What are you saying exactly?" he said roughly. "Just give me the bottom line."

"I am saying that you have something extraordinary between you. Together you are strong. You are—how do you say in English?—more than the sum of your parts. But I think that this strength may also be your weakness because you need each other, like organisms in a symbiotic relationship."

Need. We need each other. Is that the nature of our connection? Dependency? Being chained together by some cosmic force, without our consent? Tied to each other for our survival?

If that were true, we'd hate each other...

Hutch looked up. "We love each other," he said, making sure that Patel understood exactly what he was talking about. "We need each other, too, but what ties us together is not need. It's love."

"I know." A small smile sparked in the surgeon's usually so serious eyes. "I think maybe that is precisely what makes your bond so powerful." He leaned back and treated Hutch to another penetrating look. "A connection like yours is a gift. But gifts like that often come with their own obligations."

"A price tag, you mean? I know what you're getting at. You think that going back is the price we have to pay."

Patel nodded. "You are good at what you do. You are a force for good. In a small way, your work, like mine, helps to keep the universe in balance. Maybe you are meant to do what you are doing. Maybe it is your purpose to go back."

Meant to do... Huggy had said that months ago. Right here in the ICU, as a matter of fact. *We were meant to go back after the Lionel case.*

Hutch considered Patel's uncharacteristic side trip into the metaphysical. He wasn't at all sure what to make of it. Dharma? Forces of order and chaos? The balance of the universe in the hands of cops and surgeons? That sounded indeed like so much psychedelic mumbo jumbo.

But he had too much respect for the surgeon to voice his doubts. And who knew? Maybe Patel was on to something.

Instead he said, "You'd say we're doing the right thing, then?"

"Only you can decide that," Patel said carefully. "But consider this: without you, David would not be where he is today. You have to use the gift of his recovery in the best way you can. What you accomplish together is too valuable an asset to waste."

Hutch nodded slowly. Patel was right. He'd seen it with his own eyes.

He got up and extended his hand again. "I don't know how to thank you for everything you've done for us."

Patel took the hand into another punishing grip. "There is no need to thank me," he said. "I am a doctor. This is what I do. David was always more than a patient to me. And you were always more than a visitor. Between the two of you, you have given hope to many patients in this hospital."

Hutch smiled. "Bye, Dr. Patel."

"Goodbye, Hutch. Give my regards to David. And remember that I do not want to see either of you in this hospital again!"

oooOOooo

Hutch's next stop was the police headquarters, Dobey, the commissioner's office, and Minnie Kaplan's desk in R-and-I. When he left, a substantial form filled out in Minnie's neat handwriting and countersigned by his captain left with him.

As the LTD sputtered its way up the hill to Oakhill Drive, Hutch imagined his partner's face when he set eyes on the form, and a spark of anticipation jumped inside him.

There was no sign of the Torino outside their home, and Hutch had time to arrange the small pile of paper to best advantage on the coffee table where Starsky couldn't fail to see it when he got in. Then he settled down and waited.

Only minutes later, the roar of the Torino shook the driveway. Something about the sound of the footsteps stomping up the stairs told Hutch that Starsky was not in a happy mood. The assessment was confirmed moments later when Starsky marched in, slammed the door behind him, and threw bag, jacket and keys on the wicker chair on his way to the fridge, giving the innocent piece of furniture a vicious kick for good measure.

"So, how did it go?" Hutch enquired mildly from the couch.

"It didn't." A pause while Starsky yanked a carton of juice from the fridge, took a long swig straight from the container, replaced it, and slammed the fridge door shut. "The pompous jerk who thinks he runs the place said he wasn't gonna take on anyone who'd already demonstrated his complete lack of reliability before he'd even signed the contract. And then he gave me a lecture on work ethics, and punctuality, and commitment, and shit."

"Didn't you tell him there was a good reason you couldn't make it?"

Look at the form. Come over here and look at the form.

"Course I did. I told him the whole story."

"And what did he say?"

Just look at the form on the table, will you?

"He said he'd heard a few creative excuses in his time, but this one was a fuckin' dime novel all in itself."

"You could get Captain Dobey to give him a call and sort things out."

C'mon, Starsk, look at the damn form!

"Too late." Starsky suddenly grinned, a transformation that stopped the breath in Hutch's throat, and the heartbeat in his chest. "I told him to stick his stupid

underpaid job up his oversized ass and find himself another moron to boss around."

"Hm, and did that make you feel better?"

"It sure did." Starsky flopped down on the couch beside Hutch. He still hadn't so much as glanced at the table.

"There are other jobs."

Starsky sighed. "Yeah. I guess it's back to the *LA Times* employment section."

"Well, you might want to consider the proposal on the table."

"On the table?" Starsky leaned forward and eyed the form. Frowned. Reached out and pulled the stack of paper toward him. Turned the first page and took in his name spelled out in Minnie's slanting script.

Hutch watched him eagerly. He saw recognition and sudden understanding in Starsky's eyes, followed by a spark of profound longing. The next second, all that was swept away and replaced by something Hutch hadn't seen directed at him in quite that form in well over a year.

Anger.

Not irritation, or annoyance, or resentment born of frustration, but blind, desperate, furious anger.

"What the hell is this?" Starsky said in a low, dangerous voice. "Is this a joke?" He was suddenly on his feet facing Hutch, the form gripped in a balled fist, and his voice was choked with fury. "Is this a goddamn fuckin' joke?"

Hutch was completely taken aback. He came to his feet in slow motion, his brain a sudden vast empty space. He had to hunt for the words in a recess of his mind.

"N-no," he stammered. "No joke. Why do you think—"

"Then why're you doin' this to me, huh? Do you think it's funny? Are you getting some kinda kick outta this?"

"No, it's—" Hutch was lost. This wasn't going at all the way he'd planned. "I thought you wanted this."

"And we've already established that I can't have it," Starsky lashed out, his anger a solid buffer before him. He flung the form away from him, and it hit the edge of the table and flopped onto the floor. "So why bring it all up again?"

He turned away, walked to the fridge, and gave it a resounding thump that made the contents rattle.

"Because things have changed," Hutch said, suddenly finding his powers of reasoning again. "Because you *can* have it if you still want it."

Starsky whirled around. "We made a fuckin' decision!" he shouted.

"No, *you* made a decision," Hutch shouted back.

"And *you* agreed with it. You wanted it!"

"And now I've changed my mind 'cause neither of us was happy with that decision."

Starsky breathed out slowly. His anger seeped away like water on sandy soil, and his shoulders sagged. He turned away, took a deep breath.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, look, if you really wanna go back on the streets, Dobey'll find you someone suitable. Just because Vanderhoff was a catastrophe doesn't mean there ain't someone out there you can work with—"

"Stop right there," Hutch said sharply. "Let's get something straight. There's only *one* person in the whole world I can work with." He shook his head. What was wrong with Starsky? He was missing the point entirely. "Starsky, do you even realize what this is?"

He bent down, retrieved the crumpled pages from the floor and held them out to Starsky. "It's an application for your reinstatement. Complete with Dr. Shepardson's recommendations and Dobey's approval. All it needs is your signature."

"Exactly." Starsky shrugged. "That's just what it is. An application. The review board is gonna throw it out without even blinking an eye." He turned to walk away, but Hutch wouldn't let him, and stepped close to block the move.

"Don't you know me better than that?" he said. "Do you really think I'd have gone ahead with this if I didn't already have a pretty good idea of the outcome?"

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean that I have it from the commissioner himself that if you get in shape for the physical and you pass the interview with the shrink, then it's pretty much a foregone conclusion what the answer's going to be."

"You can't be serious."

"Hey, there's a recruitment crisis on, you know," Hutch said with a grin designed to lighten the mood. "The city can't afford to turn away good cops just because they score two seconds slower in the endurance race."

"You mean they'll let me back in 'cause they have some kinda quota to fill?"

"No, you moron! They'll let you back in because you are a damn good cop! The review board isn't just looking at physical fitness. They're looking at the whole picture. At your experience, your commitment, your past record." Hutch grabbed his partner by the shoulders and shook him. "Dammit, Starsky, what's so difficult to understand about that? Patel says you'll be fit for duty. Shepardson supports your application. The commissioner is behind you, not to mention Dobey and all the guys in the department. Heaven help me, the mayor is planning to give you a commendation for your services to the city."

He came up for air. "They all believe in you. What more do you need to convince you?"

"The mayor and the commissioner believe in me? Well, that's just swell!" The grim lines were back on Starsky's face. "Who gives a monkey's ass about the mayor and the commissioner? They're not gonna be the ones out there on the streets with me, are they? That job goes to only one person, and that's my partner."

"Your p—?" Hutch suddenly remembered that he hadn't actually clarified where he stood himself. He'd thought that would be obvious. Then he realized that he'd wrecked that possibility a long time ago. No wonder his sudden about-face was hard for Starsky to swallow. Maybe Starsky even thought the whole idea was a brainchild conceived by the mayor and the commissioner.

He was going to have to spell it out.

"Listen to me, mushbrain," he said. "I want you back! I want us both to go back out there on the streets and do our job. You and me together, do you understand?"

"*You want this?*"

"Yes. I want this. I want it above all. I can't make it any clearer than that. I want it, and I know you want it, too."

Starsky turned from him abruptly. He walked to the balcony doors, wrenched them open and stepped outside. Turned again, walked back in, and faced Hutch. "What exactly are you sayin'?"

"That we can go back to the way things were before. That we can retake what Gunther tried to take away from us. We can do it, and I think we *have* to."

"You wanna turn back time and pretend nothing has happened?"

"Yep."

"That's what you're saying now." Starsky stopped in front of him, frustration etched into every line on his face. "Dammit, have you forgotten what happened last year? You fell apart on me, Hutch! 'Cause you thought I was in danger. What happens the next time a perp pulls a gun on us? Huh? How're you gonna handle it? You're gonna fall apart again? Or do something desperate to keep me

safe? Only to end up living through another set of fuckin' nightmares? 'Cause I'm tellin' you, we can't go through all that again."

Hutch flinched. "You're forgetting one thing," he said.

"Yeah?"

"It's already happened. I saw you. In the hangar." He'd seen Starsky attacked, shot at, outnumbered. He'd seen his darkest nightmares come to life.

"Yeah, and you're gonna see it again," Starsky said sharply. "Cause it *will* happen again if we go back on the streets. And maybe the next time, I won't be so lucky. Then what will happen? You'll come apart again?"

"I don't know," Hutch said honestly. "I can't guarantee it won't happen again. But I'm willing to take the chance. Are you willing to take it with me?"

"Goddammit, Hutch, will you stop torturing me? Why are we even talking about it? You know better than anyone that I'm in no shape to work the streets again. I don't care what Patel and Shepardson say. I know I'm not your best backup option anymore. You saw what happened when Sly got killed."

"Good God, Starsky, that was months ago. You have no idea what you're saying. Last week, I saw you in action. You were amazing. You were in your element! You should've seen yourself. If you had, you wouldn't spout such nonsense."

"That was different. That was because—"

"Because I was in danger."

"Yeah."

"And afterward? When I was out of danger? When we took down the Shark and his thugs, and got Reggie and the others to safety? What about that?"

"Okay, dammit. Yes, we got them out. We were lucky. But that doesn't change the fact that I'll never be the way I was before." Starsky looked away. "I'll never be one hundred percent again."

Hutch laughed, a deep sonorous sound that made Starsky's head snap up.

"You've never been one hundred percent in your life," Hutch said. "You've always given at least a hundred and thirty. No one will have a problem if you give just a hundred and twenty from now on."

"You're crazy."

"No, you are. You know what your problem is? Your standards are too damn high. Just look at some of the other guys in the department. Half of them

haven't seen the inside of a gym for years. Compared to them, you're Muhammad Ali."

Starsky rolled his eyes. "Oh, thanks a bunch."

"Okay, lemme ask you this—do you think you can take on Wallace?"

"Wallace?" Starsky said, outraged. "Chrissie could put him on the floor, and with one hand."

"How about Mike then? Or Babcock? They're both pretty tough guys."

"Babcock?" A thoughtful look traveled over Starsky's stubborn features. "Actually, in the gym the other day—" He broke off. "Fact is I can't take on a real heavyweight anymore."

"What, like Digger, you mean?"

"Aw, c'mon, he was injured—"

"Or maybe like Dan Vanderhoff?"

That brought Starsky up short. "Who told you I—"

"Oh, word travels fast." Hutch grinned at him. "They say it took four officers to pry you off him."

"Exaggeration. Pure exaggeration."

"Anyway, look at it this way. We're not taking down rival drug gangs single-handedly all the time, are we? And we're not running after purse-snatchers forever, either. Things were changing already. Even before you got shot, we were already doing more brain work than leg work. For one thing we can never do any real heavy undercover work again. Not around here, anyway. Our mugs have been in every paper. We're far too well known for that now."

Starsky stared at him. "Do you know what you've just said?"

"No. What?"

"You said 'Even before you got shot, we were...' et cetera, et cetera. Hutch, that's the first time you've ever managed to say that without choking."

"Have I?"

"Mm hm."

"Fact is, no matter what happens, there will never be a better backup option for me than you. You're the best. And twenty years from now, you'll still be the best. Will you finally get that into that thick skull of yours?"

"Well—"

"Great. So can I stop massaging your ego now? It's damn hard work, and I'm not used to it."

Starsky snorted. His eyes went to Hutch's, and they were deep and dark and very, very serious. He reached out, with hands and eyes, and held Hutch captive on the spot.

"Okay. So you want us to go back. Out on the streets. Because we've weathered yet another storm." His hands closed around Hutch's wrists. "We were lucky this time. Damn lucky. One day, our luck's gonna run out. If we go back, we'll be asking for it. We're not invincible."

He stepped closer, and his hold tightened painfully. "One day, Hutch, one of us is gonna take that bullet, and there'll be no survival, and no recovery. Can you live with that thought? Can you tell me honestly that you can go out there and face the next madman who's waving a gun around, and not be scared shitless of that possibility?"

The prophetic ring to the words should have made him shiver. Starsky was right. It could happen again. Any time.

"I've been scared of that possibility ever since we walked out of the Academy gates in our new uniforms," Hutch said. "I also walked out of those gates proud to be a cop. As did you. We wanted it—risks and rewards and all. We still want it." He paused. "Maybe one day, we'll both be ready to pack it in. But not yet."

The uncertainty in Starsky's eyes flickered, and a spark of the earlier longing reignited in their depths. "You sure 'bout this?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Under one condition."

"I know. Get down when you say so."

"That a deal?"

Starsky hesitated for only a moment. Then he put both hands around Hutch's face and pulled him into a deep, vibrant, joyous kiss.

Hutch took that as a yes.

oooOOOooo

Things became a little frantic after that, and Hutch lost track of the precise order of events.

One moment they stood in the middle of the room, locked in a smoldering kiss, the next Hutch found himself on the carpet beside the couch, with Starsky sprawled on top of him, covering his bare chest with kisses.

Somewhere on the way down, it seemed, they'd also managed to lose a good part of their clothing.

A small part of Hutch's mind reminded him of the open balcony doors, the proximity of the Martyn's house, the unlocked front door. Then Starsky kissed him again, and Hutch's world expanded to infinity, but filled entirely with Starsky, and there was no room left in that universe for anything outside the exciting, achingly beloved presence all around him, the heat of Starsky's hands on his skin, the intoxicating taste of Starsky on his tongue.

Always so close. Always.

Rough, strong hands held his face, but the lips on his mouth were soft, God, so soft, so sweet. So wonderful. Hutch's eyes closed as he invaded the warm depths of Starsky's mouth with his tongue. Wouldn't let him go until his chest was burning with lack of oxygen, and they broke apart, gasping for breath.

Starsky tugged on his cords, quickly and efficiently pulled the pants off him. Slipped a hand into Hutch's briefs and liberated his rapidly swelling cock. Hutch arched into the touch, an instant prisoner of those knowing hands. Groaned with elation when Starsky bent down and sucked him deep inside himself. Almost whimpered when he started doing that thing with his tongue that never failed to bring him to his knees.

How Starsky knew with such certainty how to strip him of his sanity along with his clothes, he'd never know. Sometimes all it took was a single touch, a flick of that agile tongue *just so*—and he was lost.

The shudder of his release forced a moan of pleasure from his lips. He reached for Starsky, blindly, glad to have the solid floor beneath his back, Starsky's reassuring weight on his legs anchoring him to the world.

God, Starsky, what're you doing to me? I'm a mushball in your hands.

Starsky panted a little, and Hutch finally opened his eyes. His partner knelt above him, his hand cradling his own still unrelieved arousal—and the sight of the gloriously naked body surrounded by a golden halo of sun beams was almost enough to make Hutch weep with joy. So much beauty, so much love. All for him.

What had he done in a previous life to be given so much in this one?

Deep blue eyes gazed down at him, the love and desire on the familiar features merging into an unspoken question, and Hutch nodded. A fresh thrill of anticipation raced through him.

"How d'you want me?"

"Turn around," Starsky said with a strangled sound in his throat and pulled him up. "On your knees. Spread 'em. Wider. Yeah, that's it. God, you're hot. You're so hot. So beautiful..."

Starsky was on his knees behind him, his muscular torso covering Hutch's back. The familiar hands roamed over his hips, the curve of his cheeks. Reached around and took him in hand again with a touch that was both firm and tender, and Hutch's cock, despite its recent exertions, rose to the occasion.

The jar of lube appeared in Starsky's hand as if by magic. When had he gone to get it? Hutch couldn't recall the brief absence. He felt the pulse of Starsky's heart beating against his back, strong and fast, as the expert hands prepared him for the wild ride to come. He hugged the arm of the couch and hung on for the journey.

"My Blintz. My blond lion. You're so beautiful. And all mine. I can never get enough of you."

Starsky entered him with a single, smooth motion, and Hutch jerked and gasped at the sudden explosion of warmth in the pit of his stomach. The breath caught in his throat, escaped in a ragged groan of exquisite pleasure.

Starsky, Starsky...

Starsky uttered a small sound behind him. Just one. A single soft moan of "Hutch..." The sound contained everything Hutch ever needed to know—all the love and want and need one man could have for another. And more.

Then Starsky was inside him, moving with strong, sure thrusts, slowly at first and deliberate, knowing exactly how to play him, how to bring him to a frenzy again, until Starsky filled every part of him, and Hutch wanted to shout with happiness and the ecstasy of their closeness.

Nothing in the world could compare to the joy, the shocking sense of rightness, of being bonded to Starsky in this primeval way. He started rocking to Starsky's rhythm. Together they moved in a dance as old as the world, as new as each day, while the connection between them resonated bright and clear like the strings of a classical guitar played by a master musician.

Hutch came first, with a choked cry, and a soaring sensation in his gut as if he'd just launched himself off a mountain cliff. Behind him, Starsky gave a shout and a final thrust. For a moment, he went completely rigid. Then a tremor traveled through his body from head to toe that Hutch felt as if it were his own, and he collapsed against Hutch, his arms clasped around Hutch's waist, his cheek pressed against his back, and heaving deep desperate breaths.

They stayed like that—still connected, still one—for what seemed like an eon. Hutch wanted the moment to last forever, but when his legs began to wobble under their combined weight, Starsky peeled away with a small moist sound and pulled him back down on the rug.

The loss was almost unbearable. Hutch turned and wrapped his arms around his lover, hungry for more of that intoxicating touch, the source of all life in his own personal universe. They lay, limp and exhausted, eyes closed and their chests rising and falling in unison.

"You know," he mumbled into the wiry curls after another small eternity, "we're getting too damn old for making out on the floor like this. How about next time, we try and take it to the bedroom?" His hand became active without any input from his brain, roamed over Starsky's hot skin, his back, the perfect curve of his ass.

Starsky laughed, a deep sound that rumbled right through the floor boards. "Good thing I vacuumed."

He lifted his face to Hutch's, and they shared a long, lazy kiss.

Then Starsky propped himself on an elbow and gazed down at him, letting his eyes wander all over his face, a slow, leisurely exploration. His left hand came up and smoothed the short hair from Hutch's forehead.

"What made you change your mind?" he said.

Hutch looked back up at him, lazily, deliciously relaxed, and utterly at peace.

"I realized I can't let fear rule our lives. *Destroy* our lives. I had to find out what I really wanted, not what my fears dictated I should want."

"And?"

"And I realized I wanted to go back. Not just because you do, but because I do, too." Hutch reached up and traced the scarred ridges spidering across his lover's chest with his fingers. "When you were in the hospital, Huggy said something weird to me. He said he thought we had to go back after Lionel. Because it's what we're meant to do. And Patel said something similar."

"And you believe that?"

"I believe going back is the right thing to do. 'Cause we both want it. I think we *need* it, too. We still have so much to give."

Starsky gazed at him for a moment. Hutch folded an arm under his head and watched him watch him.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"You. Not wrong, just...different. You've changed."

"Changed? How?"

"I don't know. You're—" Starsky shrugged. "It's like you've grown, or something. Know what I mean?"

Hutch looked up into the deep, blue eyes—eyes he knew so well, eyes that were like a bottomless well brimful of love. Love for him, and love of life and living. And something else, too. An ancient joy and a new kind of wisdom, with roots

that went down deep, deep. It was the look of someone who had taken a short stroll through hell and come out on the other side tempered by its heat.

He guessed that there was probably a matching look in his own eyes.

"Yeah, I know." He brought his hands up and tangled his fingers in Starsky's long curls. "I guess maybe we've grown up a little."

"Grown up?" Starsky pouted. "I don't like the sound of that. You mean we have to act all mature from now on? That's not gonna be much fun."

"No, silly." Hutch grinned up at him. "You know what I mean. We're pretty good cops. We can't let fear of the future stop us from doing what we're good at."

"See," Starsky said and kissed Hutch on the nose, "I always knew you were a survivor."

"Took me long enough to realize it, too."

"But you did. That's the most important thing." He began to disentangle his naked limbs from Hutch's, then stopped. "Hey, does that mean we can still play tricks on Cap'n Dobey?"

"Goofball. Hey, where do you think you're going? Get back here." Hutch encircled his partner's slender waist with both arms and pulled him back down on top of him.

"I gotta go to the gym," Starsky informed him earnestly without putting up too much resistance. "Get ready for the physical."

"I have a better idea," Hutch said and wrapped his legs around him to prevent another escape attempt. "I still got a few days off work. Why don't we drive up to Lake Mirror Falls tomorrow? I'm sure Brian's not using the cabin at this time of year. We'll put an intensive fitness regime together." He grinned. "After you've rowed me across the lake a few times, you won't need the weights in the gym anymore."

"Row you across the lake?" Starsky laughed and tickled him. "You can do your own rowing. Or better still, we can share."

oooOOOooo

That night, they were waiting for him again. Shadows out of darkness. Shapes without form. They stepped forward and faced him across a twilight chasm. The familiar chant started up again.

"We're going to get him. He will never be safe. One day, we'll take him away from you, and you can't stop us."

He stood tall, at ease. "I'm not afraid of you anymore," he said.

"You'll be afraid for him every day of your life."

"Maybe. But it's not going to stop us anymore. We won't live our lives in fear."

He took a step toward them, the gun held loosely by his side. They took a step back. Light spilled from a doorway behind him, throwing his shadow far across the chasm. A familiar presence emerged and moved to stand beside him, shoulders touching.

"Things are gonna change around here," he said to the shadows. "We're back, and maybe now we'll come after you, instead. Maybe it's time for you to start being afraid."

He sensed their uncertainty. They retreated another step, their outlines blurred into the darkness behind them.

"We can wait," they said with one voice. "One day your power will fail. You can't always win. Remember, one day!"

He took another step toward them, and the familiar presence beside him did the same. The shadows retreated before them, turned and dissolved in the cool night air. A parting shot rang out.

Then they were gone.

oooOOOooo

Hutch jolted from his sleep. Remnants of his dream chased the edges of his consciousness. Outside, the Rosenthals' ancient Dodge backfired again.

Relieved, he sank back into the pillows. He was in bed, at home. Not outside, not sleepwalking.

Beside him, Starsky slept. He sprawled with childlike abandon, relaxed, limbs at odd angles all over the place. As usual, he was taking more than his fair share of the space. His silken lashes threw long shadows over his cheeks.

Hutch watched him breathe for a moment. A long moment. He could watch Starsky no matter what he did, but he loved watching him when he slept. When the normally so animated face was at rest and the rugged features softened to an ethereal otherworldly beauty.

It had been a dream. Not a nightmare, just a dream.

Hutch traced a fingertip down the ridge of Starsky's nose, brushed his thumb lightly over the sensuous lips. Starsky mmm-ed contentedly. He didn't wake up.

They'd left, Hutch thought. The shadows from his dreams. They'd left for good. He didn't think they'd be back.

Starsky mumbled something in his sleep and reached out for him. Hutch wriggled close, put an arm around him, and went back to sleep.

EPILOGUE: SPRING

"How do I look?"

"Delicious enough to eat."

"You mean you can't tell I got the hangover from hell?"

"Well, if I can't, I'm sure Dobby can."

"That's 'cause he was there and is probably hung over just as bad. Damn, I wish I hadn't had that sixth glass of punch."

"Seventh. I counted. And I told you not to mix beer and vodka with all that champagne."

"Hey, wasn't my fault they all wanted to toast me one by one—"

"Just don't say I didn't warn you."

"Aw, come on, you didn't exactly stick to mineral water yourself. If you had, the Torino wouldn't be sitting behind The Pits, and we wouldn't be going to work in this rust bucket of yours on my very first day back at work."

Starsky relaxed in the passenger seat of the rust bucket and stretched his arms above his head. Despite his grumbles and the after-effects of their wild celebration the night before, he felt fantastic. He was in great shape, and he knew it. Two months under Hutch's relentless training whip had them both in peak condition. A few drinks couldn't put a dent in that.

"It was worth it," he added. "I mean, you don't get reinstated every day."

Hutch pulled the LTD into an empty space outside Metro's main entrance and switched the engine off.

"No, you don't," he said softly. "Have I told you that I'm proud of you?"

"Only 'bout five or six times since the letter arrived."

They grinned at each other.

Starsky climbed out, slammed the door, and eyed the building as if he'd never walked through its front doors before.

A part of him still couldn't believe that he was really here, back on duty, on *full active duty*, after almost a year of disability leave. Another part of him knew

that within days, hours possibly, he'd feel as if he'd never been away. Their next case was probably already waiting for them on Dobey's desk. He could hardly wait to get his hands on it.

He glanced at Hutch. His partner stood, one hand on the roof of his car, the other shielding his eyes against the sun as he scrutinized the building with much the same searching look. The early morning rays danced over his tanned face and bright hair. He looked relaxed and eager. Excited, almost.

Hutch had come a long way since May last year.

A liquid warmth traveled through Starsky's veins and flooded his heart with a sudden rush of emotion.

Dammit, Hutch. If I'd known twelve years ago that love could feel this way, I'd have jumped your bones on our first day at the Academy.

Ten years wasted. It was incredible.

But maybe they'd needed it. Needed the time to grow the connection that made their special kind of love possible. Starsky was in no doubt that the relationship he shared with his friend, partner, lover, and soulmate was a rare and precious thing. Worth being nurtured for ten years.

He returned his gaze to the building. Rubbed the back of his neck where the lingering effects of the lethal cocktail of booze had made their temporary home.

"Remind me to give Huggy's a wide berth for the next few days," he said. "I think the man has it in for me."

"Talk about the devil. Look, there he is."

Starsky looked. Huggy was just getting out of his dented Studebaker, parked five cars behind the LTD.

"So he is. What's he doing here at this time of day? He must've been waiting for us. Hey, Hug, what's up? You in need of a dedicated police officer? Or is this a social visit?"

Huggy ambled up, in no apparent hurry.

"Both," he said by way of greeting. His brown gaze took in first Hutch, then Starsky. "I got news of your pal Vic Monte. Thought you'd want to know. A friend of mine dropped by after you guys left last night. He says Monte's on his feet again and back in business."

Starsky exchanged a meaningful glance with Hutch. The news of Monte's shooting had been all over the city, but he wondered not for the first time how much Huggy knew or guessed about the precise circumstances of Monte's escape from Sevenmile.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "He's a tough bastard."

"Apparently he's shifted his base out of LA down San Diego way. But that doesn't mean he's not planning to have his fingers in a lot of LA pies." Huggy pointed at a spot halfway between Starsky and Hutch. "You better watch out for yourselves. He's not done with you."

"You came all the way to Metro at eight in the morning to tell us that?" Hutch said. "Why didn't you just phone?"

"'Cause I also wanted to give you this." Huggy reached inside his pea-green jacket and extracted a slim envelope. He held it out to Hutch, withdrew it before Hutch could take hold of it, and presented it to Starsky, instead.

The look on Huggy's face suddenly reminded Starsky forcefully of Sly. "What is it?" he said suspiciously and took it.

"Surprise. I wanted to give it to you last night, but seein' as we were none of us too clearheaded in the end, it kinda slipped my mind. Go on, open it. It'll sweeten your first day back at work."

Starsky ripped the envelope open. It contained a check for \$9,487.84 made out to David M. Starsky. He gaped at it and passed it wordlessly to Hutch.

"It's for the both of you," Huggy said, "but I could hardly put Starkinson on the check. I didn't think it mattered, seeing as you're an item." He lifted his eyebrows meaningfully.

Starsky recovered from his shock. "Okay. You wanna tell us what this is all about? You knock over a liquor store and this is our cut for keeping our paws off you?"

"You get yourself into trouble, Hug?" Hutch asked, worried. "Who's after you? Why do you want us to look after this for you?"

"Relax, officers. It's nothing like that. That there green's all yours. To fritter away as you see fit. To stake in the great casino game called life. To establish the foundations of a well-earned retirement fund. To—"

Hutch moved in on him in a threatening manner. "Okay, spill, or I'm letting Starsky loose on you. I wouldn't recommend it. I don't think you've seen him in action lately."

"Hold it, Hutchinson. Keep your shirt on. It's all perfectly legit. This here," Huggy indicated the small piece of paper with an elaborate flourish, "is the honest proceeds of a real estate transaction negotiated by yours truly on your behalf. It's the full amount minus my, uhm, broker's fees and the money you owe me for the bar tab for the last two months."

A small light went on in Starsky's head. "You've sold the house? You crafty old devil! Why didn't you tell us?"

"I just have, haven't I?"

"But this is way too much," Hutch objected. "No one with two brain cells between their ears would've paid this much for that old shack."

"Wasn't an old shack," Starsky muttered.

"Was, too," Hutch muttered back. "That old sh— that *house* wasn't worth a fraction of this." He waved the check in front of Huggy's nose.

"Ah, but you haven't counted on the superior negotiation skills of Huggy Bear Brown." The smug look and theatrical bow were pure Huggy—until he added, sober-faced, "Or on the fact that the port area of Long Beach is earmarked for some serious development."

"You mean—?"

"That's right. Hotels, office blocks, shopping centers. You name it. They wanted to throw some serious money at me end of last year, but I thought I'd hold out for a while and see what turns. About a month ago, they came back with an offer that was just too good to refuse."

Starsky laughed. "Huggy, you're a champion." He cuffed his friend on the shoulder. "Jesus, almost ten thousand bucks! It's like winning the lottery."

"So what you gonna do with it?" Huggy said, rubbing his shoulder.

"Dunno. Buy Hutch a car that runs?"

"I got an idea," Hutch said slowly.

He looked at Starsky. Starsky looked back at him. A small spark ignited between them. Starsky felt a slow smile stretch the corners of his mouth.

"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

"Uh huh." Hutch raised an eyebrow. "Think we should?"

"Yeah, well, it's time for a change."

"I mean I really love what we got, but—"

"Was never meant to be permanent."

"And I think we're ready for it."

"Especially your plants—"

"May raise a few eyebrows."

"Nah. They're used to this sorta thing from us by now. And who cares, anyway. Right?"

"You doin' it again," Huggy complained, looking back and forth between them. "You wanna let the uninitiated in on what you two dudes are talking about?"

Starsky turned to him with a feeling of buoyancy in his chest. "Hutch thinks since it's the money from the house, maybe we should use it to buy a place together."

"Bigger apartment," Hutch clarified.

"Small house maybe."

"With a greenhouse."

"And a garden."

They gazed at each other again.

Huggy contorted his mobile features into an impossibly wide grin. "You gonna make it permanent, is that what you're saying?"

"Well, seein' as we're already living in symbiosis—"

"Living in *what*? I think the expression you're lookin' for is living in *sin*."

"Well," Starsky said deadpan, "I'd make an honest man of Hutch tomorrow, but the world ain't ready for that kinda thing yet."

Huggy eyed them sternly. "You wanna be careful who you say that sort of thing to. Look, I gotta go. Time to hit the sack. Unlike you two bright-eyed bundles of energy, I need my beauty sleep. I been up all night." He yawned.

"Thanks, Huggy. You done good."

"I know. Look, about Vic Monte. You better watch out. I mean it. You ain't seen the last of him yet. He's up to something. I can tell."

"Don't worry, Hug. We'll be fine."

"But keep your ear to the ground, will you?" Hutch said.

"Don't I always?"

They watched as Huggy folded his lanky body into his car, inched the vehicle out on the street and cruised away.

Around them, the place came to life as weary-eyed officers on night shift trudged from the building and a fresh troop of day cops arrived to take their

place. Starsky watched the familiar bustle, no longer with a yearning heart, but secure in the knowledge that he was once again a part of it.

"I can't wait to get my teeth into an ordinary, straightforward murder investigation," he said. "Or maybe a nice robbery."

"Let's go already or you'll be late on your first day back at work. Dobey would have a fit, and we'd both end up on desk duty."

Hutch slung an arm around his shoulders and steered him to the entrance.

"I've changed my mind," Starsky said as they jogged up the stairs. "Forget about the murder case. What I really want is to check out our beat and let everyone out there know we're back."

"What I really want is to hear Dobey yell *both* our names. I've had it with sitting in his office on my own. Trying to wind him up is tough work without a partner to back you up."

"Aw, Hutch, you don't need me for that. I know you can handle him all on your own."

"Sure I can. But it's no fun."

The third floor was abuzz with cops coming and going. Starsky plunged into the familiar bustle with a sense of homecoming. And something else. A sense of fulfillment, of having come full circle.

Up yours, Gunther. You've tried to take us out how many times? Failed how many times? And we're still here, still putting scumbags like you behind bars.

And there was so much to look forward to. Starsky thought of the check in Hutch's pocket. Maybe now they'd get a place together, a real home.

Life was sweet. Very sweet.

It wouldn't last, of course. Couldn't. But for today, at least, everything was right with the world.

He put a hand on Hutch's back, a small connection in the bustle of the station. Together they walked through the doors into the squad room.

Dobey stood waiting for them in the middle of the room, tapping his foot. "Starsky! Hutchinson! You're late! My office!"

Laughter bubbled up inside Starsky, a small avalanche of joy. He looked at Hutch.

The smile on Hutch's face was one of pure bliss.

— End —