



All that Glitters

by

Rae

Summary: There's another serial killer on the loose. Things are starting to add up for Starsky and he doesn't want to believe what he's thinking.

Categories: Slash

Genre: Action/Adventure, Romance

Warnings: Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

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Act I: Innocence

Chapter 1

Dead kids were the worst. None of the usual self-preservation techniques worked when you stood over the naked body of a child and looked at the ligature marks around her neck and her wrists. At the hand-shaped bruises on her thighs. At the strange symbol carved into her chest. At her wide-open eyes that seemed to follow you as you moved. Like a portrait. A self-portrait.

"Oh, God," Starsky said.

Hutch looked at the circle of uniformed men standing by the body, at the one who was trying not to lose his lunch, at the two who were trying not to cry, at the one who didn't bother to try.

The medical examiner said flatly, "Bag her. I'm done." When no one moved, he stood up and put a hand on the shoulder of the nearest cop. "It's okay, now, Martin. She needs to go home."

Martin nodded and unlocked his knees. In silence, the men did what they had to do, and the girl was finally covered and carried gently to the waiting coroner's wagon.

Starsky watched the men work, and Hutch watched Starsky.

"When we get this guy," Starsky said, "you better keep me away from him."

"I will."

Hutch put a hand on his shoulder, but Starsky shrugged it off and turned away. When they caught the guy, Hutch wondered how he would keep himself away. He indulged himself in the fantasy that he wouldn't.

"Let's go," Starsky said. "We got work to do."

Away up the trail, the three riders who'd found the girl's body stood with their horses, waiting not too patiently, talking quietly. One of the horses tried to eat a bush, and the woman holding his reins started to stop him, and then shrugged.

"Oh, go ahead, Rocky," she said to the horse, but looking at Hutch. "It's been a long day for you, hasn't it?"

Hutch apologized for making them all wait so long. Griffith Park had hundreds of miles of bridle trails, and dozens of riders. These three had been the lucky ones who'd had their afternoon ride ruined. Three blondes. Leggy and athletic, suntanned and blue-eyed. They wore wide hair bands and trendy warm vests against the February cold snap. Their fingernails were all beautifully manicured. They probably didn't tend to their horses' needs themselves, not with hands like those. They were

out riding fancy-looking horses in the middle of the day in the middle of the week instead of having to earning a living.

Starsky barely managed a civil greeting. This case was getting under his skin, way too deep, way too painfully. If three pretty ladies and their horses couldn't distract him, what chance did Hutch have to do it?

He smiled at the one with the dark chestnut horse and asked her name. She batted her eyelashes at him a few times and gave it to him like it was a secret family recipe.

"Jenny," she said. "Jenny Lovett." She spelled it out, and said it again, pronouncing slowly: "Love-it."

Hutch smiled back, but he couldn't drum up any kind of enthusiasm for flirting. Not with the sounds behind him of someone putting a thirteen-year-old girl's body into a coroner's wagon.

"Can you tell us exactly what you saw?" Starsky said, pencil ready.

"We already told those officers over there," Jenny said.

"Yes, we know." Hutch interrupted whatever Starsky was going to say, because whatever it was, it wouldn't have helped. These women seemed to have no sense of tragedy. "Please, can you tell us again? And say your names for us again, too?" Starsky wrote them down.

The one in the middle ran her hand up and down her horse's nose over and over, tracing a white snip on his muzzle. The horse began to nibble her fingers.

"I'm Jenifer, too," she said, and pushed her fingers in at the side of the horse's mouth. She looked at Hutch, and licked her lips. "But I'm Jenifer March. Only one n."

He glanced over at Starsky and got a minute headshake and a tiny lift of an eyebrow in return. The third girl, more perceptive than her friends, seemed to notice, and, surprisingly, to interpret the exchange correctly. She took a small step forward, and her horse followed, nudging at her shoulder.

She put a hand out, and Hutch shook it formally. Starsky took his turn, and she spoke to him.

"I'm Melissa Ames." She made eye contact, and spoke directly, without any of the flirtatiousness of the others.

"Would you start from the beginning for us?" Starsky said.

Hutch knew Starsky was thinking the same thing he was: Don't alienate the ladies. Smile for them. Be gallant. But dial back the charm. Don't encourage them. He couldn't believe he wanted to avoid the promise these girls clearly had to offer, but their timing was dismal. Two months ago he and Starsky would have been all over them—maybe even have taken riding lessons. But now? Sorry, ladies. Not a good time. Why was he even thinking like this? He was as bad as the girls, letting his mind wander, not thirty feet away from a murdered child.

"We were actually riding on that trail up there," Melissa said to Starsky, pointing, "and Jenny said she thought she saw someone lying on the ground." Jenny nodded confirmation. "So we came down that embankment to see if we could help. We thought someone had fallen off their horse."

The broken branches and the hoof prints disturbing the rocky dirt showed where the horses had cut down the slope from the upper trail to the one they now stood on. Probably they'd destroyed any evidence there might have been near the body, but there was nothing to be done about that now. It was pretty steep, and Hutch figured they all must be accomplished riders to have handled that kind of drop. Maybe horseback riding would be fun. Maybe he could resurrect his childhood Grandfather's-farm skills, and if Starsky learned how to ride, they could go on a packing trip

somewhere . . . He pulled himself back from the daydream. Why was he having such a hard time focusing?

". . . it was a kid. We kind of freaked out, though. We were pretty sure right off she was dead. We didn't think she'd fallen off a horse, because she was, well, you know, naked. You never see kids that age riding up here on their own anyway. Someone would have been with her."

One-n Jenifer spoke up. "We thought maybe somebody had gone for help, but no one came. So Melissa rode down to the stables and called the police, and brought them back up here." She looked at Starsky as if she expected some kind of congratulatory compliment for Melissa, but he missed the cue. Hutch smiled at her, though.

"Good job," he said obligingly.

The girls all nodded.

"We stayed here and made sure no one came close," Jenifer said.

"Yeah, and it took forever for the cops to get here," Jenny said. Her friends glared at her. "Well, it did. Can we go? I'm tired of standing around here."

Probably she'd gotten the message that there would be no offers of drinks later, nor dinner or anything else, and she'd lost any little bit of altruism she might have harbored toward the dead child. What was with these women? They acted like finding a dead body was something to be expected during a midmorning ride.

"The horses need to be watered," Melissa said.

Even that one was more concerned about her horse. What kinds of lives did they lead that dead kids were so damned inconvenient?

Starsky double-checked the spellings of their names, noted their addresses and phone numbers, thanked them, and turned away without smiling. Hutch raised a hand in farewell, and watched as they swung easily up onto their horses and rode off. Starsky barely gave them a glance. Chances were good he hadn't given a thought to riding lessons or camping, or anything else. Hutch hurried to catch up.

The medical examiner was waiting for them, impatient, preoccupied.

"What've you got, Ed?" Hutch said.

He was about their age, but he looked older, like he knew things he didn't want to know. He pushed a thin strand of his wispy brown hair off his forehead with the back of his wrist.

"Caucasian female. Looks like she's eleven or twelve. Wasn't killed here. She's been dead less than twelve hours. It was on the cold side last night, though, maybe forty-five degrees. I'll get you a better estimate later. Cause of death is probably strangulation, most likely bare hands. I'll tell you for sure later." He put his head back and stared, unseeing, at the tops of the trees. "Looks like the same guy. Same ligature marks, same MO on the body dump. And that carving, that's the same." He looked back at Hutch, and then at Starsky. "Hate this shit. You get this guy."

"Workin' on it," Starsky said.

They shook hands with Ed, and headed back to Metro.

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Back in the car, Starsky was on simmer. It wouldn't take much for him to boil over. Hutch didn't

know whether to smother the flame or to stoke it. In the long run, getting him to erupt now might be better.

He said, "I think I'll give one of those girls a call. You got one you like? I'll take Melissa." He smirked. "You can have the two Jennys. If you can handle 'em, that is."

Starsky, about to turn the ignition, dropped his hand, sat back, and glared. "Is that all you can think about? Getting laid?"

"What, like you weren't?"

Starsky looked at him like he was crazy. "No, *I* was thinking about a dead twelve year old lying in the dirt behind me." The muscles in his forearms bunched up. "I was thinking about getting my hands on the sick fuck who gets his kicks from kidnapping teenage girls and raping them and killing them. I was too busy thinking about what kind of a person gets any kind of pleasure out of that. I was too goddam busy thinking about what the hell that thing is he carves on their chests, and what the hell he's thinking when he does it, and why. And how in God's name are we going to stop him. And I *can't believe* you're . . ." He stopped, breathing hard, clenching his fists. "Oh." He opened his hands, and took a long breath. "Okay." He sat back. "Sorry. Thanks."

"Sure, buddy." Hutch put a hand on Starsky's knee and gave it a squeeze.

Starsky gave a little choking humorless laugh, and started up the car.

"Let's go find the bastard."

Chapter 2

Two days later, on Friday, Dobey ordered them to take the weekend off.

"I'll take you off the case if you don't," he said when they started to argue. But he said it quietly, which somehow gave it more weight.

"But Cap," Starsky started.

"You two are wrecks. Look at you, Starsky. You never even shaved today. And you—" He turned toward Hutch and shook his fist at him. "You're supposed to be the one with some sense around here. You look like you've slept in the same clothes for three days."

Starsky slumped in his chair like a little kid getting the what-for from his mother. Hutch almost smiled, except he felt kind of the same way.

"We will, sir," he said, and waited for Starsky to protest. He was faintly surprised when he didn't.

"You're no use to me or to those girls if you end up dead because you're too damn tired to pay attention."

"We will, Captain," Hutch said.

"And get some decent food in you. And some sleep."

"Yes, Captain. We will."

"See that you do. Both of you."

"What are *your* plans for the weekend, Captain?"

"This isn't about me, Hutchinson." He stood up and walked over to the door that led to the squad room. "Go on, get out of here. Now."

Starsky stamped to his feet, and his chair tipped up behind him. Hutch reached out a fast hand and grabbed it before it fell. Starsky pushed past him and left the room.

Dobey put a hand on Hutch's arm, holding him back.

"I'm worried about Starsky," he said. "He's let this thing wrap him up too tight. Try to get him to relax a little, will you?"

"I'll try."

Hutch wanted to ask Dobey again what he was doing to take care of himself, make sure he was getting some rest of his own, but he didn't quite have the nerve, considering the I Dare You glint he saw in Dobey's eyes. He nodded once, and went after Starsky.



It took a while, but Hutch finally tracked Starsky down in the morgue. He was talking to Ed, the medical examiner.

"Starsky, ready to go?"

"Almost. I wanted to go over some of the autopsy findings with Ed one more time. These kids have to have more in common than their age and how they were killed."

He had some files open, and the photographs of four dead girls spread out over one of the steel tables. He'd perched himself on a tall round stool, and was staring intently at the pictures. Hutch felt a churning in his gut, like a fist grabbing something inside and twisting it. He looked at Starsky's

face, at his eyes, and he knew that it was the same way Starsky felt at that moment. He looked at Ed, feeling helpless—it was how they all felt. He pulled up another stool, took a breath, and began reading aloud from the nearest chart. It was dated almost three years earlier.

"Subject is a female Caucasian. Eyes: blue. Hair: brown, wavy. Age approximately thirteen years old. Raped anally. Cause of death: strangulation. Naked body found by a horseback rider near a bridle trail in Rancho Palos Verdes. Where are her clothes?" He looked up. "They were all raped. Why that way?"

"Good question," Starsky said. "Don't know. Same as the kid this morning." He paged through another chart. "That neighborhood is full of horses. There are trails all around and between the houses there."

"How do you know that?" Ed asked.

"I got a pal who lives down there. Jimmy Golden. He's got a couple of horses. Rides all the time." Ed's eyebrows rose. "The actor?"

"Yeah. We grew up together."

"Wow." Ed grinned. "Can you get me his autograph?"

"Nope, but I'll see if I can swipe his toothbrush for you."

"Or his car. Doesn't he have a '56 Thunderbird?"

"Mmmm, the Little Bird. Yeah, he sure does."

Hutch rolled his eyes. "You and cars. You go nuts every time a moth lands on the damn Torino." He ignored Starsky's attempts to protest.

"Yeah," Ed said. "But a '56 *T-bird*, man. That's the bee's knees."

"Oh my God," Hutch said, but he laughed, too.

"What kind of man doesn't like cars, anyway? Huh?"

"I like cars fine, Starsky. I just don't like yours."

"You take that back."

"Ladies, ladies, no catfighting now." Ed clicked his tongue in mock disgust.

Hutch grinned for a moment, but when he turned back to the files, the grin died.

Starsky pounded his fist on one of the charts. He flipped it around so Hutch could read it. ". . . Caucasian female, twelve years old. Eyes: blue. Brown curly hair, chin length. Cause of death: manual strangulation. Nude body discovered on a riding trail in Rolling Hills Estates area." He stopped, and looked at Ed. "This one is from about a year ago." He looked at the dates on the last chart. "And this one's from eight months ago. Why's he speeding up all of a sudden?" He closed his eyes for a moment. "Any more found on riding trails?"

"These two don't specifically say riding trails, but this one was found off Euclid Boulevard in Upland. I scrounged up a map." Ed pulled it down off a crowded shelf, and opened it out flat. "San Bernardino County . . . here it is, Euclid Boulevard. Hey, guys, this bit here where the body was found is called the Bridle Trail."

Hutch reached for the third chart and scanned it. "Caucasian, blue eyes, short brown hair, age eleven. Found in a dry wash in Topanga Canyon." He looked at Ed. "There's plenty of horseback trails up there."

"Why do you have this one from San Bernardino? That's out of our jurisdiction."

Hutch said, "We asked the medical examiners in neighboring counties to send over any files that show a similar MO, and that's what we got. We haven't been able to figure out what it is or what it might mean. We've been looking at the charts for two days."

"It looks like a zero with a line through it." Starsky tapped one of the photos. "Any ideas?"

"Nope." Ed shoved a book at him. "I've looked through a few resource books, and I was thinking maybe it's some kind of Indian symbol, like Hopi or Zuni."

"Isn't a thunderbird an Indian symbol?" Hutch said.

Starsky flipped through the book. "Yeah, here it is." He held the book up so Hutch and Ed could see it. "It looks like an actual bird. Means unlimited happiness."

"Yeah, unlimited happiness. Especially if it's a ragtop."

Starsky grinned, and Hutch groaned.

"Maybe it's *phi*, like *phi beta kappa*," Hutch said.

"So what's that mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's a college dropout, or didn't make the frat he wanted."

"Why kill girls?" Ed said.

Hutch shrugged.

"Can I borrow this book?" Starsky said.

"Sure," Ed said. "Don't lose it, though. I'd never be able to replace it."

Hutch protested, and tried to get the book out of Starsky's hands. "You're not taking that home. We're supposed to relax this weekend."

"I will! It won't take anything to look through the damn thing."

Hutch relented. "All right." He pulled the charts back into a pile and pushed it toward Ed. "You ready to hit the road, then?"

"Let's go up and call the MEs back," Starsky said. "We should even go statewide. See if there are any more unsolved cases with similar shit. There's almost a three-year gap between the one in Palos Verdes and the one in San Bernardino. Maybe he filled it up somewhere else."

"Or maybe," Ed said, "there are a lot of bodies no one ever found."

"Shit," Starsky said.

Starsky wasn't going to relax all weekend. Who was Dobey kidding? At least if Starsky made the calls now, he'd feel like something was being done over the weekend even if he wasn't the one doing it. Hutch nodded, and the look of thanks that Starsky gave him back made him feel better.

They thanked Ed, told him to have a good weekend, smiled when he laughed, and left him alone with the charts.

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Before either of them had a chance to make the first call, Starsky's phone rang.

Hutch looked up when he answered, expecting it to be something to do with the case, but Starsky

smiled. Something about the smile—the lack of tension, or the way he sat back in his chair and sprawled out his legs—made something inside Hutch unlock and relax a little, without really knowing why. He listened to the delight in Starsky's voice as he talked, accepting some kind of offer. Did he have a date, then? Hutch felt distinctly disappointed, and then ashamed of himself for it.

Starsky said, "See you tonight, then," and hung up the phone.

"Who was that? Joanie?"

"Joanie? Who's—? Oh. No, it was Jimmy. He wants to take us to the Magic Castle tonight. His treat. You didn't have any plans, did you?"

The disappointment evaporated fast, though. "No. I figured on a pizza and beer in your living room. He's not a member of the Castle, is he?"

"I don't think so. Didn't ask. Maybe he knows a member. Who cares, anyway? You got a clean suit? He says to dress up. They don't let you in if you don't meet their dress code."

"The Magic Castle, huh? Always wanted to go."

"Pays to know me, huh?"

"Says you."

Hutch found the phone list of the surrounding police and sheriff's departments, and they divvied up the numbers and made the calls. Dobey came out of his office to find out why they weren't gone like he'd ordered them, but he calmed down a little when Hutch said they were making some last calls, and why, and that they were heading out soon. Starsky told him they were going to the Magic Castle.

"I'm impressed. Who'd you have to pay off to get in?" Dobey smirked a little, like maybe he wasn't entirely joking.

"No one, Cap. I'm shocked you'd say such a thing." Starsky grinned. He pulled open a drawer and shoved his pad of paper inside. He slammed the drawer shut and stood up, stretching his arms and head backward. "Jimmy Golden's taking us."

Hutch saw his shirt pull tight across his chest, and got a glimpse of his belly between the top edge of his jeans and the bottom edge of the shirt. It took a second for him to realize he was staring, and then he looked away fast. When had he started noticing the way the hair grew downward over the flat skin, and when had he started wanting to follow its path? He swallowed, embarrassed with himself, and thrust the thoughts away.

"Say," Dobey said, "can you get his autograph for Edith?"

"Nope, but maybe I can get some hair from his hairbrush."

Dobey scowled, then grinned. "Have a good time. And get some rest!" He disappeared back into his office.

"Come on, slowpoke," Starsky said to Hutch. "What are you waiting for anyway?"

As Hutch came up beside him, Starsky threw an arm over his shoulder, and Hutch caught the scent of him: tired sweat, old-coffee breath, nearly-gone aftershave, unwashed shirt. He took a deep breath. Starsky smelled great.

Chapter 3

Something about dressing up, and having Starsky pick him up with a flourish, got Hutch keyed up. Not to mention going to the Magic Castle, not to mention with a movie star. He tried to find his cynical detachment, but it had fled, and he gave up looking for it.

In his suit and tie, Starsky nearly knocked him over just by appearing at his door.

"Wow, you look good," Starsky said. "I should take you out more often."

"Might hold you to that," Hutch said, and lifted an eyebrow to show that he was joking, even while it ran through his head that maybe he wasn't joking, and that he didn't really understand why he thought so.

Starsky stuck his elbow out gallantly. Hutch took hold of it without thinking, and allowed himself to be escorted to the Torino. He wished for the hundredth time, or maybe the thousandth, that the Torino would stay dead next time it was killed, and then felt guilty for the traitorous thought. And, for the first time ever, he wished he had a decent car of his own so that they could have gone to a place like the Magic Castle in some kind of grown-up style, and not in a Campbell's soup can.

The drive downtown on surface streets seemed to fly by. It was a little oasis in time in which Hutch could sit next to Starsky, like he did every day of his life, and just listen and look, and feel good for a change. Starsky had obviously decided to try to leave the dead girls and the whole investigation at home for the evening. Hutch knew him well enough to know that the case was never far from his thoughts, but at least he looked like he was enjoying himself, hands bopping on the steering wheel to whatever current hit was playing on the radio, chatting away about nothing at all.

"Never been on a date with two guys before," Starsky said.

"Are we calling this a date?"

"Sure. What else is it? Plus, we ain't paying. We're the girls."

"A threesome?"

"Now you're getting kinky."

"Oh, like you never had a threesome."

"Oh, like you have."

"Nope."

"Well, believe it or not, me neither."

"You ever wanted to?"

Starsky looked at him sideways, eyes flashing in the oncoming headlights. "You offering?"

"Uh . . ." If he spoke, he'd stutter. He was sure his face had gone red, too. Sometimes, lately, Starsky could make him feel like he was back in tenth grade.

"Relax, Blondie. You know I like my sex one on one."

Hutch could think of nothing to say at all. But somewhere down deep he noted that Starsky had said "one on one," and not "only with girls."

Starsky apparently couldn't come up with anything witty either. It was one of the few things they never talked much about, and it felt a little too much like quicksand.

Starsky threw him a branch by changing the subject.

"Think we'll see any celebrities?"

Hutch took hold of it gratefully, and pulled himself out of the danger zone.

"Probably. It's Friday night. I've heard Cary Grant is a regular. Johnny Carson, too."

"Hope we don't look like country bumpkins out with their big city cousin."

"You look fine. No one will know."

Starsky grinned without taking his eyes off the road. "Gee, thanks." He turned right into a wide entrance that bore no sign.

They climbed the steep drive to the old mansion, and pulled up at the entrance behind a Lamborghini and in front of a Mercedes 240D. The valet, straightfaced and respectful, opened Hutch's door for him, then went around and took the keys from Starsky, climbed in, and drove the Torino away.

The massive front doors really did make it feel like they were entering a castle. The antique Victorian house towered above, its turrets, curved outer walls, and angled rooflines, the twinkling lights and shadows all adding to the fairytale effect. Hutch felt like he used to when his dad would take him to the circus. He let the mood wash over him, and smiled.

"There's Jimmy," Starsky said.

The entrance hall looked like a Victorian library, with bookshelves lining every wall, and comfortable-looking chairs and sofas. There was a small crowd there, but Jimmy made his way easily to where they stood and shook hands with both of them.

"Great to see you, again, Hutch," he said. "Glad you could make it."

Why did it seem like that wasn't entirely true? Something about the way his smile didn't quite show up in his eyes? Or was Hutch just feeling a little paranoid, the way he often did around Jimmy? He forgot the notion, though, when Jimmy clapped him on the back and pointed toward the reception desk.

When it was their turn, the beautifully groomed receptionist looked them over, nodded and smiled her approval, and asked for the member card or guest pass and identification. Jimmy explained to Starsky that everyone got carded, and that a friend who was performing in the Palace of Mystery had given him the pass.

Hutch wondered why he didn't have his own membership, and why, when he could surely have had his pick of a dozen gorgeous women, Jimmy had chosen to invite Starsky and himself.

You think too much, Hutchinson. Relax, will you?

He tried to let go of the faint stirrings of doubt and unease. This was not a night to worry and reflect and suspect. They were guests of a great guy, a good friend of Starsky's, at the exclusive Magic Castle. Starsky was happy. That was all he needed to think about.

The receptionist told them to go to the Golden Owl lurking on one of the bookshelves, and to say "Open sesame."

It seemed silly, but fun, when the bookcase slid apart at the magic words. When they passed through the opening, it was like stepping through the looking glass into a different world. One that existed on the same plane, but one that Hutch had never been fully aware of, and certainly never a part of. Everywhere were lush appointments in deep rich velvets, subtle lighting, and fancy carved moldings. His world, left behind for the night, was full of drugs and scum, pain and anger, dead

children and broken families. This world was all glitter and glam, tailored suits and gold cufflinks, cocktail dresses and diamond bracelets. No two worlds could be farther apart. This was the kind of place where his parents would feel at home, but where he no longer fit in.

Starsky seemed completely comfortable, as if he'd been to the Castle dozens of times, and was not only one of the In Crowd, but was the center of it all.

Jimmy led them through the Grand Salon, introducing them to people here and there, nodding and smiling to others.

"Come on," he said. "I want you to meet Irma."

"Who's Irma?" Starsky asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"You'll see."

The twisty corridors were lined with movie posters and memorabilia from magic shows. Starsky wanted to stop and look at every one. Jimmy humored him for a while, and then, finally impatient, dragged him along to a small and comfortable lounge, where a baby grand piano stood silent. An empty birdcage hung above it to the right, and a large brandy snifter full of dollar bills stood next to the empty music holder. There was no one seated on the bench.

Jimmy handed Starsky a dollar. "Go put this in the snifter and ask Irma to play a song you like." He gestured to Hutch without looking at him, and they sat in some soft leather armchairs around a low round table.

"Irma?" Starsky looked, but there was still no one there to play a song.

"Just do it. Go up and say, 'Irma, please play' whatever you want."

Starsky looked at Hutch. He grinned and shrugged, put his dollar in the tip snifter, and said gallantly to the empty bench, "Irma, please play . . . um . . . Blue Moon."

As he turned to join Hutch and Jimmy, the piano began to play the song. None of the guests seated in the lounge looked up at all. Hutch grinned.

"Aperitifs?" Jimmy said. "What'll it be? How about a Kir?"

Now Starsky looked a little uncertain, so Hutch came to the rescue. "Sounds good," he said.

"Uh, sure," Starsky said. Jimmy went over to the small bar to order. Starsky looked at Hutch, and dropped his voice. "What's a Kir?"

"You'll like it. It's sweet and spicy."

Starsky lifted an eyebrow.

Starsky's song ended, and a woman in a green dress and big hair went to the piano and stuck a bill in between the bars of the empty birdcage. The cage suddenly moved up and down excitedly, as if its invisible occupant were hopping around inside. The woman asked Irma to play some song, and got back nothing but a little trill of the high treble keys.

"Irma doesn't know the song," Jimmy explained to Starsky, handing out the drinks. Behind him the woman thought a moment, then asked for "Stormy Weather" instead, and Irma began to play. "She has a pretty good repertoire, but she doesn't know everything."

"How do they do that?" Starsky asked Jimmy.

"Do what?"

"Make the piano play like that?"

"Davey, 'they' don't 'make' it do that. It's Invisible Irma. Don't insult her."

"Oh, sorry." He grinned, and turned toward the piano. "Sorry, Irma."

In mid-song, Irma hit a couple of low notes, as if to indicate absolution. Hutch laughed.

They listened for a few moments to the music and the murmur of voices around them. Then Jimmy began telling them about the new movie he was starring in, and, for the first time, was producing as well.

"Lot of work. You have no idea. This is the first evening I've had off in weeks."

Hutch watched him while he talked about casting, location scouting, hiring the crews. It all sounded so strange and foreign, yet it went on around them all the time. He and Starsky—all the Bay City police—were always running into location shoots. In their world, everything to do with the Hollywood scene was a minor—and sometimes major—annoyance, but that scene *was* Jimmy's world. He probably never gave a thought to the real life going on around him.

He was certainly a beautiful man, with his perfect coloring under those blond curls that were cut a little too long, in his dark blue suit that moved easily over his body. He sat relaxed in the chair, sipping at his drink, amusing them with anecdotes, shocking them with scandalous gossip. He made everything interesting and funny, but Hutch began to notice that Jimmy rarely spoke directly to him, even when he asked him a question or responded to something he said. Instead, the guy's focus was all on Starsky, and he only gave a glance at Hutch once in a while, as if remembering to include him for form's sake. Hutch had to wonder if he'd really meant for both of them to accompany him tonight, or if he'd only asked Starsky, who had automatically included Hutch without thinking. Hutch started to feel a little like a fifth wheel. He was going to enjoy himself even so. And probably he was completely off his rocker anyway.

Starsky finished his Kir and set the empty glass down, giving Hutch an appreciative nod.

"Ready for dinner?" Jimmy stood up. "Bye, Irma."

Irma gave a little double trill of the upper keys in response, and they all smiled.

The dining room, not far from Irma's piano lounge, was large and artfully lit—it made everyone in there look good, look happy. The women glowed, and the men seemed bigger than life. It was odd to see people he recognized but didn't know. As they moved to their table, people looked up at them and smiled, and even whispered a little. Hutch felt self-conscious, but at the same time a little bit exceptional, as if some of Jimmy's aura had rubbed off on him and Starsky. It made them equal. Equals. If he were honest, he had to admit he was used to approving stares, and he and Starsky usually turned heads wherever they went, but this was different. By being with Jimmy Golden they were elevated to some kind of star status. He was ashamed to realize that he liked it.

Starsky, used to being out in public with Jimmy, didn't seem to notice in the least. Typical Starsky, not to know the effect he had on anyone. He sat himself down with controlled but visible excitement, nodded congenially to the host who'd seated them, and looked at the oversized menu with serious interest.

"What do you recommend?" Starsky asked Jimmy.

"Well, you're the big eater, Davey. You'd like the Festal Board." He pointed to a huge buffet table, laden with thirty or more different dishes. "All you can eat."

Starsky looked over the offerings. "I might faint."

"Not until you've finished."

"Of course." He looked at Jimmy, and Hutch saw something pass between them, a memory maybe, something they both understood, something that didn't include Hutch.

Jimmy saw Hutch watching, and sat back.

"Hutch, you look like the prime rib type. Can't do better than that here."

Hutch, on the verge of deciding on the prime rib, chose the salmon and wild rice instead.

"Good choice," Jimmy said without emphasis, and turned back to Starsky.

Throughout the meal, Starsky kept trying to keep Hutch involved in the conversation, and Jimmy kept trying to keep him out of it. Hutch began to feel amused instead of annoyed. He gave up trying to convince himself that he was imagining things, that he was just jealous of Jimmy, God help him.

Over dessert and cognacs, Starsky mentioned horses, and how they'd been investigating a case that seemed to have some connection to bridle trails, and then told Jimmy that Hutch had done a lot of riding as a kid.

"Is that so?" Jimmy said, looking straight at Hutch for the first time all evening. He looked him over—speculatively, Hutch thought. "I have a mare that could carry you. You should come out with me some time. What do you say?"

Starsky smiled, looking pleased with himself and with Jimmy. Hutch couldn't stop himself from wondering why Jimmy would want to spend time with him alone. He surely knew Starsky didn't ride. Might be interesting to see how the man ticked on his own turf, and away from his old chum, Davey.

"Sure, that'd be great," he said. "I'm pretty rusty, though."

"So we'll take it easy. It'll be fun. I'll call you this week." He looked at his watch. "It's time for the show, fellas. All set?" He paid the dinner bill without fuss, and ushered them out of the dining room.

The Palace of Mystery was an intimate-sized theater, hung with red velvet and gold tiebacks, and already more than half full. They made their way to comfortable seats near the center front—Jimmy somehow managing to sit between them—and settled, waiting for the show to begin.

"Wait'll you see this guy," Jimmy said to Starsky.

"This guy," Dan McBride, turned out to be amazing. Hutch watched closely, and never could see how any of the tricks were done, not even when, apparently empty-handed, he put a small rabbit into the hands of a volunteer from the audience. The woman, standing not two feet from the magician, obviously didn't see how he did it either, and looked like she didn't want to give the bunny back.

When the performance was over, and Dan had finished his bows, Jimmy said, "Come on, we're meeting him for a drink, and then he wants us to go to one of the close-up galleries with him. He's got a friend performing."

The winding up-and-down halls were confusing. Hutch lost track of where they were and how they'd gotten there. Here and there were alcoves where people sat chatting, or archways leading off into new directions of mystery. Every wall was covered with portraits and posters showing magicians at work. Every room they saw was set differently, with a unique ambience in each. Over all of it was a pleasant creepiness, a slightly off-center festiveness, that showed in the eyes of all the guests, all the performers. Everyone was there to have fun.

In the Close-Up Gallery, Dan's pal Adrian invited them to sit right up front, across the table from him. The other guests gathered around to watch. He did card tricks, coin tricks, some classic sleights of hand, and some things Hutch had never seen, nor even imagined. Not once, even when Adrian

asked him to hold the cards, did he ever see how anything was hidden or produced or exchanged.

Afterward, back in Irma's lounge, with large brandies warming in hand, Adrian talked about the art of illusion.

"It's all about misdirection and manipulation," he said. "I manipulate you into looking here," he waved his left hand, "while I do something else here, with the hand you aren't looking at."

"What if I know that," Starsky said, "and I watch your right hand anyway?"

"That's the whole art of it. I know there are some who'll do that, so I have to have yet another method for misleading you." He held his left hand out to Starsky, palm up and empty. "Give me your hand," he said.

Starsky held out his left hand, and Adrian took it in his right, gently, as if it were fragile, and looking intensely into his eyes, turned his left hand over, open-palmed. Into Starsky's hand dropped a silver dollar, out of nowhere. Starsky laughed, delighted, and several people sitting nearby applauded.

Hutch looked at Jimmy for a moment, and saw that he was staring hard at Starsky's hand, the one that Adrian had held so carefully. He turned a blank gaze on Adrian's face and Hutch watched, fascinated, as he put on a bright smile over the mask he'd just worn, and congratulated the illusionist warmly. Hutch tried to convince himself that what he'd seen on the actor's face had been another illusion, something to do with the subtle lights and shadows in the lounge, and not what he'd really seen: a moment of such intense hatred toward Adrian that it was amazing Jimmy hadn't had an aneurysm. No one else had seen it; no one else had been looking at Jimmy. Everyone had been watching Adrian instead. What the hell was going on? Something definitely was. But how much of it was real, and how much of it was conjured up by Hutch's own miserable confusion?

Dan, relaxing back in his chair, was discoursing on the psychology of the audience's participation.

"The audience knows they're being deceived, and they enter into it willingly. It's like watching a movie. You know it's not real, but you willingly suspend your disbelief for the sake of the entertainment. It can't work without that most necessary ingredient."

Jimmy nodded agreement. "The actor's craft isn't much different from the magician's. We have to be able to convince you, even for a moment in time, that what you're watching is real, that the character we're portraying is as real as you are, yourself. That what the character is feeling is exactly what you'd feel in the same situation."

"Isn't part of the point, though," Hutch said, "to lift your audience outside themselves? To give them an experience they could never really have, and never honestly want to have? Who'd want to be hunted down like a deer in a forest, and tortured and left to die?"

"Ah," Jimmy said. "You're a fan."

"Well, I did think you did a great job in *The Hunted*. Very convincing crazed murderer."

"It's all about illusion," Jimmy said modestly. "Camera angles, lighting. I can't do it in a void."

"Still, good acting is good acting." Hutch could be a little manipulative when he wanted to be, too.

Starsky smiled at him. Jimmy noticed, his eyes narrowing by a fraction. Then he smiled, too, looked at his watch, and sat up straight.

"I've got to hit the road, I'm afraid. Early morning meeting tomorrow."

"What, on a Saturday?"

"No weekends off for producers."

Everyone took the last swallows of their brandies, and stood up, smiling, shaking hands, clapping shoulders. The two magicians excused themselves, and Jimmy led the way back to the main entrance, Hutch thinking he might never have found his way out on his own. He had a little fantasy that there were well-dressed rich folks wandering around in the dim passages for days—weeks, maybe—before finally making their way back, starved and haunted, to the Golden Owl.

Outside in front of the Castle, they waited for their cars to be brought up from the distant lower lot, and made small talk.

"Get your boots polished," Jimmy said. "I'll call you about that ride." He shook hands with Hutch, smile bright, eyes warm and friendly.

Hutch felt sure he'd imagined everything, and felt kind of idiotic about it. Jimmy's handclasp was strong and gracious, and Hutch returned it, thanking him for a great evening.

Jimmy turned to Starsky. "Don't work so hard, Davey. You look tired."

"Got the weekend off. I'll sleep for most of it."

"See that you do." He kissed him on one cheek and then the other, gave him a quick hug, and winked at Hutch over his shoulder. His T-bird was brought around, and he climbed in with a wave, and drove off.

Hutch tried not to analyze that wink, but he couldn't help it. No one else could have seen it, it had only been meant for Hutch. What the hell did it mean? Maybe nothing. Maybe something. No way to know what. He let it go.

"Great car, huh?" Starsky said, gazing after it like he was a teenager with his first crush. "Even *you* gotta appreciate *that* car."

"She's a beauty, Starsk," he said dutifully.

He got into the Torino with a smile, waited while Starsky paid the valet, and for the first time all evening, truly relaxed. He hadn't even realized how tense and watchful he'd felt, and he still didn't understand what had made him feel that way.

Starsky, luckily, was oblivious.

Chapter 4

The weekend of relaxation Dobey had ordered lasted all the way until 10:30 Saturday morning, when he called and ordered them back in. There had been another murder during the night.

Hutch allowed himself a long moment of feeling sorry for himself and for Starsky, and to mourn the loss of their lazy day on the beach, and the movie and late pizza. At least they wouldn't have to argue about whether to see the new French subtitled film versus whatever old black and white was playing down at the Pavilion. Hutch wouldn't have cared what they saw, but he'd been prepared to argue anyway, for form's sake.

And then he felt ashamed of the self-indulgence. Another child was dead, for God's sake. What difference did anything else make in the face of a thing like that?

But the look he saw on Starsky's face when he came to pick him up at Venice Place—that was what he'd wanted so much to avoid. Jaw tight again where last night it had been relaxed. Lips pressed together where last night they'd been curved into smiles. One night hadn't been enough time off from this sort of horror. No amount of time could have been enough. Not for them, not for anyone.

Dobey didn't look like he'd even had a single night off. He looked bad, really, and Hutch and Starsky exchanged a look that meant, *Okay, we don't bait him, not anymore. He doesn't need any shit.*

He called them into his office, and pointed to a box of donuts. "Help yourself," he said. "Not many left, though."

He looked strange in jeans and a big denim shirt. He seemed younger dressed that way instead of in his weekday plaid jackets. Hutch had a sudden image of him on stakeouts with his old partner, Elmo, of how he might have looked back in the day, how he might have felt about his job. He wondered where Dobey would be now if Elmo hadn't been murdered. Hutch couldn't imagine where he'd be himself if he ever lost *his* partner. He didn't dare look at Starsky at that moment.

Starsky dug around in the donut box, and Hutch went back out to the squad room for coffee. When he returned with empty mugs and a full pot of fresh brew nearly spilling out onto his hands, Starsky stood up fast and grabbed the tilting pot, and shoved the newest chart out of the way. Dobey made some room for the mugs, Starsky filled them and handed them out, and Hutch grabbed the last donut. No one so far had said a thing about the new case.

Hutch licked some sugar off his fingers, and swallowed some coffee. Starsky drained his mug and refilled it. Dobey sat back and made his chair squeak. He was never going to have it fixed. Hutch had given up wishing for that a long time ago.

Someone had to say something. Hutch opened his mouth, but Starsky beat him to it.

"Give it to us, Cap," he said. "Get it over with. Same?"

"This one's a little older than the others, almost fifteen, but there are similarities. Lisa MacIntosh lives about a mile from the barn. The body will be sent here for autopsy because of the investigations you've already got going on the other ones. The commissioner wants you two to head up the investigation, coordinate the teams."

"Us?" Starsky said. "What'd *we* do?"

"Impressed him somehow. Don't ask me. He asked, I agreed."

It was the second murder in only four days. This was a serious escalation. Not a good sign.

Dobey said, "They haven't moved the body yet, but the detective says it looks like the same guy. Some differences—straight hair, her age, clothed—but there's the kicker. Same carved circle with the line through it. That's never been released to the media. No one knows about it."

"What the hell is that, anyway?" Starsky said. But he obviously didn't expect an answer. "I haven't looked at the book Ed that gave us yet. I'll do it after we talk to him."

"What book?" Dobby asked.

Starsky explained Ed's theory that the carving could be some kind of Indian symbol.

"Where was this body found?" Hutch thought he should have used her name, but he wasn't ready yet. He needed her to be just a body, at least for now. He tried, unsuccessfully, not to imagine her face, her wide-open eyes. Were they blue? According to their files, the other girls had all had blue eyes.

Dobey said, "Her body's behind some stables up near Rolling Hills. Parents said her horse was having a baby and she'd stayed in the barn all night to watch."

"Who found her?"

"Friends came to see the foal. The girl's blanket and flashlight were by the stall, the horse and baby were fine, no sign of the girl. They figured she'd gone to the bathroom or something and went looking. Found her around back, behind a tractor."

"Horses again. This guy has something to do with horses. Is he a farm hand? An owner? A trainer?"

Hutch said, "I'll comb the files again, look for some kind of common link."

"I'll call Jimmy and see if he has any ideas. He's hooked into that whole horse community. Or you can ask him when you go riding."

Dobey lifted a brow. "You ride?"

"Used to."

"Jimmy invited him to go out riding this week."

"I'm not going. I'll fall off."

"Oh, come on. You won't fall off."

"Where are you going to ride?" Dobby said.

"I didn't ask." Hutch looked at Starsky. "Where does he keep his horses?"

"There's a big community barn in Palos Verdes near his house."

"Not far from Rolling Hills. That's two found in almost the same area. Why'd the guy choose the same spot twice? How'd he know the girl would be in that barn at that hour? We need to know more about the locations where he leaves the bodies."

"Guess we go for a drive." He pushed his chair back and got to his feet.

Hutch called Ed in the morgue and told him they'd stop in later. Dobby told them to keep in touch and said he'd call ahead to let the team know they were on their way, and to hold off on moving the body. Starsky put the empty coffee cups on the counter next to the coffee pot. To Hutch's surprise, considering the grim mood, he saw him flirt with one of the civilian aides, and got the full brunt of the lascivious grin Starsky kept on his face when he turned away from her and looked straight at him. He felt the burn in his face and rubbed at it, pretending his eyes itched.

"Saddle up, pardner," Starsky said.

Chapter 5

The barn was busy with Saturday riders, but no one was riding. Everyone was standing around in groups looking shocked, their riding clothes still clean, their boots still shiny. All the horses stood in their stalls, heads out, interested, maybe hoping for the occasional apple or carrot, and not getting any. Two teenaged girls stood close to each other in front of one of the stalls, red-eyed and subdued, talking to a uniformed officer.

"This place is nicer than my apartment," Starsky said, low-voiced. "I should rent a room here."

"It would cost you more than your apartment and mine combined," Hutch said.

"Really? What's it cost to keep a horse?"

"You thinking of getting one?"

"Hell no. Look at those choppers. Look at those toes. They're all yours, pal."

"I'm guessing at least four hundred a month for full board in a place like this."

"Four hundred! That's practically my apartment *and* my car payment." Starsky shook his head slowly. "Unbelievable. What do they eat, anyways? Steak and lobster?"

Hutch tried not to laugh. It wouldn't be appropriate in that place at that moment. But he couldn't help being glad that Starsky seemed to have found a way to back off emotionally from the investigation. He guessed he should thank Jimmy's night out for that, at least.

They walked down the wide aisle between the rows of stalls—Starsky avoiding the horses, and Hutch rubbing a few of their noses—and stopped near the two girls. The officer looked up, and they identified themselves, explaining why they were there.

One of the girls started to shake visibly, and the other put her arms around her, pulling her close. Hutch felt his throat tighten. Starsky turned away and looked into one of the stalls. He didn't seem to notice it was empty.

The officer said, "Why don't I show you guys around to the back?"

Hutch nodded, and the officer beckoned to one of the other uniforms and asked her to stay with the girls until they got back. She took up a stance nearby, like she was prepared to defend the girls with her life and nobody better think of messing with them.

They trudged past the small groups of onlookers, enduring the stares and hearing their silent accusations all the way around to the back of the main barn. Hutch pulled his jacket around himself and fought the urge to stand close to Starsky the way the two girls had stood close to each other for support, for comfort.

Behind the barn a gravel path led them past a huge muck heap. Starsky wrinkled up his nose, but Hutch welcomed the smell of it, and the memories it dragged up for him. In the time it took them to cross the few yards to where the body lay, he climbed up the ladder in his grandfather's loft, calling out a taunt to his sister below. He ran across the hay-strewn boards through the slanting dust-filled sunlight, and up to the top of the stacked hay bales. He felt the scratchy ends of the stalks on his shins, and carefully avoided the spot where he knew Red Mama had hidden her kittens. She didn't welcome visitors. He had a scar on the back of one wrist to prove it. He rubbed at it now and it brought him back abruptly, as if he'd fallen out of the loft onto the hard dirt floor far below. But this beautifully styled and well-designed stable yard was as similar to the old falling-apart barn of his childhood as was his car to the sleek expensive cars they'd seen the night before outside the Magic

Castle.

The officer who'd shown them around to the back introduced them to Tilson, one of the investigators, and Ames, the photographer, who stopped taking pictures so they could take a look for themselves. At first Hutch thought it couldn't be the same killer. This girl was too old, too tall, hair too long, too—clothed. But there on her chest under her torn shirt, above her bra was that strange symbol carved into her skin. It had to be the same guy.

Starsky said, "Look at the blood, Hutch. This time he did it before he killed her."

"Hands and feet are still tied, too," Hutch said, choking on the words. He looked at the flat blue nylon rope the killer had used, and at the knots. "What is that, a lunge line? It's got to be twenty feet long. Starsky, look. He used a quick-release."

"A what?"

"It's for tying up a horse. It's a safety knot. You pull that end there—" he pointed to the loose end, "and the knot comes free right away. You can do it with one hand, and if the horse panics or fights the rope, you yank that end and it's undone." He looked more closely. "He tucked in the end through the loop, though, so it couldn't be pulled by mistake. See?"

Starsky looked carefully and nodded his understanding. He turned to Tilson. "Was she raped?"

Tilson had a notebook in one hand and an empty evidence bag in the other. He stepped back onto the path. "Can't tell yet if she was raped. Her pants are on but unzipped. He mighta pulled them back up."

"Not his usual M.O.," Starsky said, and got down on one knee a foot or so away from the girl's head. He reached forward as if he wanted to touch her, and then let his hand drop on his thigh.

"Nope. He's getting disorganized. Impulsive. Couple of weird things with this one," Ames said. "Look here."

He pointed to a spot on the girl's scalp where it looked like handfuls of hair had been pulled right off her head. Then he pointed a few feet away to where a tuft of brown hair lay on the grass next to the gravel pathway. A ground breeze lifted a few strands and played with them. Ames took some pictures, and gestured to Tilson to bag the hair up for evidence.

"Jesus," Starsky said. "He pulled out her hair?"

A rolling in his stomach set Hutch to grinding his teeth. He really didn't want to offload his breakfast in front of these upscale cops. It had been a long time since he'd had that happen at the scene of a crime, and he'd seen bodies a lot more mangled and desecrated than this girl's was. What was it about the hair?

"Seen enough?" he said quietly to Starsky. He sure had, himself.

"Yeah." Starsky stood up and turned toward him.

"One more thing," Ames said.

"What?" Hutch wished he didn't really have to know.

"There's some tissue under the girl's fingernails. She scratched the guy." He started to put away his camera. "We might be able to get a blood type, too, if we're lucky."

Then they had to find someone to match it to.

"Better go interview the friends, now," Starsky said.

"Nothing I'd rather do less," Hutch said.

Ames nodded.

"Thanks," Starsky said.

"For what?" Ames said. "This is supposed to be a thankless job."

Nobody smiled.

Chapter 6

The two girls were still holding onto each other inside the big barn, but someone had dragged up a bale of hay for them to sit on. It must have been a scratchy and uncomfortable seat. On either side of them, horses had their heads out, standing quietly, ears moving, as if offering their support too. Halfway down the aisle a stable hand with a wheelbarrow and a pitchfork cleaned stalls, his face red and glistening. He tossed the dirty bedding at the wheelbarrow, but he kept missing his aim because he was watching the girls instead of what he was doing. Each time he missed, which was almost every time, he muttered, "*Mierda*," scraped up the mess, and tried again.

Starsky lifted his chin in the man's direction, and Hutch turned to look. They'd question him later.

The uniformed officer assigned to stay with the girls was still nearby, still protective. She was a big woman, almost as tall as Hutch, solid and tough. He had to peer surreptitiously at her badge—he'd forgotten her name.

"Thanks, Dayton." He put a gentle hand on her elbow and tugged her a few steps away. "Keep your eye on that guy up the aisle. Let me know if he takes off, okay?"

She nodded once, eyes serious. She said nothing, just oriented herself so she could see the guy and still watch over her girls. For a moment Hutch imagined coming face to face with her and her cubs in the deep forest. He'd step right off the trail and let her pass, hands up in surrender. He didn't think his own mother would protect him with her life, but he believed Dayton would, no questions asked.

He turned back to Starsky, who'd already made lifelong admirers of the girls. Starsky had some pretty impressive tricks up his own sleeve when it came to wowing the ladies. They were telling him the names of their horses. Hutch watched, amused, as Starsky reached up under chin of the nearest horse and gave it a friendly scratch, like it was something he did daily. The horse half-closed its eyes, and let its ears drop in ecstasy.

I'd like to get some of that for myself popped into Hutch's brain. A little shocked, he batted the thought out of his head like it was a line drive to left field, where it belonged.

"Hey, Hutch, come and meet my new pal. His name's Jonah."

Starsky stood unmoving as Jonah dropped his head and began to nibble, and then flat out pull, on his jacket. His brown leather jacket that now had big chopper marks along the front zipper panel. Hutch watched some very faint and tiny stress lines grow near the outsides of Starsky's eyes. The only other time he'd ever seen Starsky look like that had been once in the very early days of their partnership, when a woman they'd just questioned suddenly announced that there wasn't enough time to get to the hospital. She'd sat right down on the floor of her front hall, drawn her knees up, and suggested to Starsky that he might find some towels in the bathroom across from the kitchen.

Jonah, though, wasn't about to have a baby, so Hutch decided he'd step up and rescue his partner yet again. Starsky, who never believed even Hutch could see when he was in full panic status, stepped away, but casually, like he had horses chomping on him every day. Hutch took over scratching the horse's head. Starsky's shoulders came down a little, and the nearly invisible lines smoothed over. Hutch watched him with a flicker of amusement as he tried not to kvetch over his bitten jacket.

Starsky backed himself out into the middle of the aisle, gave Hutch the tiniest of nods, and walked off toward another small group of people over by the open tack room door. Hutch watched him for a few seconds, wanting to avoid the interview with the girls. He didn't like making them go through it again, but it had to be done.

"Can any of you tell me who found the—Lisa?"

For a long moment, neither girl said anything, and then, like a dam bursting, they started to talk at the same moment, words tumbling out so fast that Hutch couldn't figure out what they were saying. He let them go anyway, until they slowed and calmed down a little on their own, and then he began his questions.

They'd stayed in the barn to see the foal's birth. They'd left around two in the morning to get some sleep. Lisa had been in the stall with the mare and foal, and had said she'd see them later. No, they didn't need a tissue. No, they didn't know anyone who had it in for Lisa. She was just a kid, a great kid. No one would have any reason to hate her. And no, they hadn't seen anyone they didn't know.

The coroner's team appeared from around the corner of the barn, guiding the gurney with Lisa's body toward the waiting ambulance. The black plastic looked anonymous, and the girls looked at it without expression. Hutch wondered if they would ever come back to this barn, ever enjoy themselves there again, ever feel good about riding. But then one of the girls turned to Jonah, and the horse dropped his head, bending his neck around her. Her friend put a hand on her back, and left it there, not moving. Maybe they'd be okay, the three of them.

He looked at Starsky, and Starsky looked up the barn toward the ineffective stable hand.

"You want good cop or bad cop?" Hutch said as they met up. They walked down the aisle to talk to him.

Starsky couldn't raise a smile. "Good cop. I want to be good cop."

Hutch nodded.

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Three quarters of an hour later they were back in the Torino. Silent, both of them staring straight ahead. Even the car seemed quieter than usual and took the curving roads between the close-packed mansions carefully. Hutch wanted coffee. There had to be an upscale coffee shop somewhere in the neighborhood, but he couldn't summon up the energy it would take to suggest they go find one. Starsky had both hands on the wheel, gripping it like it was a venomous snake that he had to keep hold of and wished he didn't.

"Cross off the stable hand, I guess," Hutch said.

"Goin' on gut, or you got a reason?"

"He doesn't have the right kind of energy."

"Or the brains."

"Unless he's the world's best actor."

Starsky drove, silent again, and Hutch looked down the manicured bridle paths between the houses, or at the wide median with a well-worn trail up the middle. This was nothing like the flat open farmland where he'd grown up. Horses. These focus neighborhoods that were built for the highbrow equestrian set . . .

"I think I'll go for that ride with Jimmy," he said suddenly, though he'd decided before that he wouldn't. "Maybe he can help us somehow. He's one of them. Maybe he even knows the guy and doesn't realize it. The guy has to be one of these rich horse people."

Starsky took a hand off the wheel and started to rub his face with it. Then he sniffed it and grimaced, and put it back on the wheel.

"I'll take a nap by the pool while you go riding."

Hutch would have preferred the nap and the pool, but there was some appeal in a trail ride. Riding had been his childhood passion, and he had understood why those girls had turned to their horse for comfort. He'd done the same, more than once.

"My horse's name was Buddy." He didn't know why he'd said it out loud.

"That picture on your bookshelf—is that him?"

Hutch nodded, though Starsky wasn't looking at him. He felt a strange sharp grief in an old forgotten place. He hadn't thought about Buddy in a long time, Buddy who'd been the first of many losses. In some ways, maybe the worst.

"My first friend," he said. "Every night after dinner I'd run the mile over to my grandparents' house to say goodnight to him. All the horses, the cows, the chickens—they'd all be asleep, but he'd lift up his head and look at me, and make this low sound in his throat." He stopped, and looked at the eucalyptus trees in the front yards as they drove. The pungent scent came in even though the windows were closed.

Starsky kept his eyes straight ahead, like he knew if he turned, Hutch would clam up.

"What happened to him?"

"My dad sold him when I went to college. Sold him like he was property, like a *thing*. I always felt like I'd betrayed him. I did betray him. I shouldn't have let my dad sell him. I should have found a way to keep him."

"Was there a way?"

"I don't know. Looking back, probably not."

He remembered that first night after Buddy had been sold, how empty and lost—and how guilty—he'd felt. What had the horse thought, being sent off like that, with no explanation? What had become of him? Hutch had cried that night, and his sister had stood next to him, silent, with her hand on his back, not moving. That part he didn't want to tell Starsky. It embarrassed him, even though he knew Starsky would get it. Not think less of him for it.

"I had a dream about him one night about ten years later." He still remembered the dream—one of those clear sharp ones, the kind he always woke up from not knowing if it had maybe been real. "I think that was the day he must have died. I know it sounds silly."

"No."

They stopped at the bottom of the steep hill, at the stop sign that signaled the border between the beautifully manicured estates and the mundane grimy boulevard that led back into the city. Two worlds, not colliding, but existing side by side in tacit understanding of the meaning of boundaries. The rich folks on the hill could come and go between both worlds, but the common folk had no business in that upper class domain.

"So," Starsky said, "you think of me as your substitute horse?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You call me 'buddy' almost every day."

That floored Hutch for a second. He'd never once thought about that. He had to laugh, though. It broke the mood.

"I guess so, come to think." He reached over and slapped Starsky's thigh twice, flat-handed, the way he'd always slapped Buddy's neck. Buddy had always responded with a big shake of his head.

"You're my horse, Starsky. But Buddy didn't have curly hair. Same color, though."

And then, to his shock, he had a kind of flash fantasy of riding Starsky, riding him hard, straddling him, moving his body in the ancient rhythm, feeling the muscles moving and bunching between his legs . . . He drew in a sharp breath and turned his face away. He opened the window, but the cold blast didn't help much. What would Starsky think of that? How much less would he think of him if Hutch told him that?

"You didn't betray him, Hutch. There wasn't anything you could have done."

"No." What about betraying yourself? What was he supposed to do about that?

"Hey," Starsky said. "You want to go get some coffee?"

Hutch put his head back against the seat.

"Yeah, buddy." He smiled around the word. "I really do."

A few moments later he had a feeling that he'd missed something, that something significant had just come to him, something about hair. But it had gotten lost inside the distraction of that fantasy ride he'd taken . . .

He pointed out a corner that not only had a coffee shop, but also a parking space right in front. He let the lost thought slip away.

Chapter 7

It was amazing how many cops wanted to be on the Task Force. How many were willing to come in off leave, cancel their family vacations, give up their nights and weekends. It took Minnie the better part of a day to set up duty rosters and schedules. She'd commandeered a windowless room in the bowels of Parker Center, and got it filled up with phone banks, stacks of notepads, pencils, folding tables with uncomfortable chairs, some blackboards and corkboards, and two large coffee pots. Even a color television and a short couch in a corner. Someone had brought donuts, but neither box had anything left but crumbs and smears of red jelly. Hutch wished he could revisit the distant past when red smears didn't all remind him of blood on children's corpses.

Simmons and Babcock had come in on their days off and were calling the police and sheriff's departments in neighboring states, looking for any similar cases or connections. Hutch nodded to them, and got a quick wave back from Babcock. Simmons was talking on the phone and scribbling notes, and never looked up.

Bernie Glassman and Linda Baylor had teamed up and gotten together more than a dozen uniforms who'd volunteered to do door-to-doors in the neighborhoods where the victims had lived or been found. Dobby was briefing them all up front near the bulletin board.

Four civilian aides had set themselves up in a corner and started going through all the files and notes, looking for common threads, and making lists of names, addresses—any details they could dredge up. One of them said she'd try to find out more about the locations where the bodies had been found. Maybe somewhere in there was a recognizable pattern, or something—anything—that could give the investigators some lead to follow.

The noise level in the low-ceilinged room was distracting at first, but soon became background hum. After the first two days, Hutch had started to feel like they'd been there for years and would be there for years yet, until they all went insane from sheer proximity and disappointment.

Starsky started bopping a pencil on the edge of his coffee cup, faster and louder, and then suddenly slammed it down on the table. He looked at Hutch sideways for a second, and then full on.

"I gotta get this guy."

"We will, buddy."

Starsky gave him a small secret smile, and for some reason Hutch felt his neck get warm. He turned away and rubbed at his chest for distraction.

"No. I mean *I* gotta get him. Let's go somewhere. We ain't doing anything here. We're sitting here doing nothing, waiting for the next kid to get killed. And that one's gonna be on us. On me. We have to get this guy."

"Why are you taking this so personally, *partner*? We all want this guy."

"I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. It's just . . . I don't know. I got this *feeling*, but I can't get hold of it. I feel like I know something I don't *know* I know. I can't explain it." He scraped his chair back and went off toward the coffee pots.

Hutch knew exactly what he meant, but he had no idea what they were supposed to do differently. They had no crystal ball, no ESP, no psychic . . .

Starsky came back and handed him the coffee cup. Hutch took a swig and handed it back.

"Maybe we should talk to Joe Collins."

"Collandra? I thought he moved to Phoenix."

"That's why God invented the telephone, Starsky."

He thought that would get snicker at least, but Starsky just looked thoughtful.

"Don't psychics have some kind of range or something?"

Hutch gave him the Look, and Starsky grinned.

"Worth a call, don't you think?" Starsky said. "I'll see if Minnie can track him down."

He reached for one of the phones, and it rang under his hand. He looked at Starsky, and felt a few hairs on the back of his neck respond in an almost primeval way. *If that's Collandra, I'll . . .*

"If that's Collandra," Starsky said, "I'll eat my badge."

It wasn't Collandra, it was Jimmy Golden. He had a good phone voice, very rich and deep. Hutch wondered who'd taken the call at the switchboard, and if she'd known who she was talking to. He grinned into the phone.

"Hold on a sec," he said. "Starsky's right here."

"I was calling you, actually."

Hutch raised an eyebrow at Starsky, and whispered, "It's Jimmy." Starsky held out his hand for the phone, but Hutch shook his head. "He wants to talk to me."

Starsky looked mildly surprised. Hutch allowed himself a small smirk.

"We're on hiatus tomorrow," Jimmy said. "Lost our location. I was thinking, how about that ride?"

"Tomorrow?" Hutch felt suddenly less than enthusiastic. What if he really did fall off? In front of Jimmy. "Sure, I think I can get away." He covered the phone again. "He wants to go riding tomorrow."

Starsky nodded. "I'll go square it with Dobey. Tell him you're going to pick Jimmy's brains. He'll go for it."

Hutch took his hand off the mouthpiece. "Sounds good. What time?"

By the time Starsky came back, Hutch had settled on the time, had promised to drag Starsky along too, and hung up the phone.

"I better not fall off," he said.

"Jimmy'll take care of you. You worry too much."

"Yeah, says the guy who'll be sound asleep poolside while I meet my doom in some lonely canyon. Again."

"Yeah, right. No radio either." Starsky rolled his eyes and went silent for moment, probably thinking about all the ways Hutch could get into trouble on a horse in the hills. Without backup. "Stop worrying. Jimmy won't let anything happen to you."

They needed the break. Hutch began to look forward to it. Starsky looked a little less tired, and when he slapped Hutch on the shoulder twice, Hutch knew he was thinking about Buddy and wanting him to know that. It made him feel good. He took the coffee out of Starsky's hand, and finished it off.

Over in the corner, one of the civilian aides said, "Oh, my God," loud enough to shut down the buzz in the rest of the room. Starsky looked at her, then back at Hutch fast, hope flashing across his face.

The girl stood up and waved to them, and Hutch began to feel that same kind of flooding hope that she'd found something important.

She didn't have an ID badge on, and Hutch didn't know her name. She was small and cute, and luckily had red hair, so he could call her that and get away with it.

"What've you got for us, Red?" He saw Starsky grin.

"Yeah, *Ellen*, did you find something?"

Hutch put a hand on her shoulder, and leaned over her, hoping Starsky noticed that she smiled up at him and didn't move away.

"Look at this!" Her hands were shaking. "I know what that symbol means." She showed them the photos of all the carvings, all the black and white stark images of the cut flesh on the chests of all those young girls. Then she pointed to a page of a book lying flat on her table. "Look. It's the Greek letter *phi*."

"That's what Hutch said. Maybe the guy's in a fraternity."

Ellen shook her head. "No, it's the Golden Ratio. It's da Vinci."

"Da Vinci?"

"Don't look at me that way, David. You know I go to night school. And this semester is Art History, and last week we studied da Vinci." She smiled, a big wide mouthed smile. Her hands stopped shaking.

David? You know I go to night school? Hutch suddenly realized he was jealous. Of Ellen.

Starsky was asking her questions. Hutch had missed something while he'd taken a side trip to Crazyville. He dragged himself back.

"It's a mathematical formula that has to do with aesthetics," she was saying. "It's called the Golden Ratio. Da Vinci said that perfect beauty relied on it. He called it the Divine Proportion." Her voice rose a little when she realized everyone was listening to her. "*Phi* is the symbol used for the Golden Ratio. And that," she tapped one of the photos, "is the Greek letter *phi*." She sat back, grinning, pleased with herself. "He's saying his victims symbolize perfection to him in some way."

Starsky looked stunned. He bent down and kissed her full on the mouth, and everyone clapped and cheered. Hutch made himself join in. She shoved Starsky away and then took a few modest bows, smiling widely.

"Trip to the library?" Starsky said to her. "See if you can find out anything else about it, so maybe we can figure out where this guy's head is at."

Ellen began to gather up her materials.

Hutch nodded agreement. "Good work, Red."

"I'll keep digging," she said. "Maybe I can find more about it. There's something to do with Aristotle, too, but I can't remember. Something about ethical behavior."

As Hutch and Starsky moved away, some of the detectives crowded around the table to try to see what she'd found. The buzzing of voices rose, and then seemed to stop abruptly as the door swung shut behind them.

"Golden Ratio," Starsky said. "That was impressive, huh?"

"Yeah, impressive," Hutch said. "Let's get out of here."

"She's a *natural* redhead, too. Case you were wondering."

"I wasn't."

But he *had* been wondering if Starsky knew that about her, and more, wondering why he cared.

Chapter 8

From the road, all Hutch could see of Jimmy's house were the red Mediterranean-style roof tiles, and beyond those, the glittering blue of the Pacific. There was no way to tell how big the house was, but as soon as they'd parked in the low-key driveway, it was clear this was no bungalow. The sweeping circular drive that led down to the outdoor courtyard that led to the ornately stained-glass double front doors kind of gave it away.

Jimmy came to the door himself, tethered by a long telephone cord, and the phone in his left hand. He had the handset tucked between his shoulder and his ear, and seemed to be listening attentively while he gave Starsky a one-armed hug and Hutch a handshake. He waved them in, mouthed "Sorry," and disappeared into a large-windowed room off to the right. The phone cord trailed behind him, and caught under the door as he closed it. It disappeared suddenly as if yanked.

It seemed a little anticlimactic.

Starsky said, "Come on, I'll show you around. Can't believe you've never been here before."

"Never been invited before." It was a sore spot with him, but he tried never to let on to Starsky that he felt left out sometimes. Mainly because he was embarrassed by it. Not like he didn't have friends, too. Just none that were that famous, that attractive, and who knew more about Starsky than Hutch did, and for longer.

Hutch's resurrected old riding boots clicked on the marble expanse as Starsky, in his silent sneakers, led him across to the bank of windows that let in all the early afternoon sun. Steam rose from a hot tub over to the right. The pool beyond the patio shimmered and seemed to fall off the far end into nothing.

"It's an infinity pool," Starsky said. "Supposed to look like it meets the sky." He pointed to the right where the eastern end of the pool was hidden by the house itself. "You can't see it from here, but there's a waterfall at the other end. You can hear it from Jimmy's bedroom."

How in God's name did he know? Hutch wasn't sure he wanted the answer to that.

"No ocean view?" That probably sounded snarky, but Starsky seemed oblivious.

"Oh yeah, come over this way."

Starsky led him off to the left, giving him time to study the nouveau art, recognize a few signatures, and feel a little overwhelmed by the sheer size of the house. He'd grown up used to having everything he wanted, but this was a level of wealth even his father had never known. His father had never owned a Picasso, nor a . . .

"Is that a Remington?" He was sure it was.

Starsky took a look. "I guess."

Hutch leaned in. It was a bronze cowboy on a bucking bronco, and certainly was a Remington, but he couldn't tell whether the sculpture was an original or a reproduction. He was willing to bet it was an original.

"Check this out, Hutch." He led the way down a short hall.

Hutch followed him to another huge room with nothing but windows on three sides. French doors were tastefully offset so that the stunner of a view was unimpaired by hardware or visible lines. On the one solid wall were oversized framed photos, closeups of flowers and shells—a spiraled cross

section of a nautilus, the spiral pattern of the seeds in a sunflower, and a distant spiral galaxy. The furniture was sparse and light colored, all the seating facing the view. The tables and lamps were all glass and nearly invisible. The Pacific seemed to be a fourth wall in this room of shimmering lights—reflections off the water that danced everywhere in the room.

"Oh, my God."

Starsky grinned. "Nicer than Amboy's even, huh?"

"Well, Amboy's taste was a little less, uh, refined."

"There's a stair over there that goes down to the beach. Too cold for that but the pool's heated. We can have a swim when you get back if it warms up later." Starsky poked him in the shoulder.

"Assuming you make it back in one piece, of course. Maybe you'll need the hot tub, though."

Hutch was pretty certain of that outcome.

Starsky said, "You gotta see this. Come on."

He headed back across the room, through a nearly hidden door, down the wide hallway, and through another door on the street side of the building. It was like stepping into a completely different house. This room was dark, with red leather and art deco floor lamps, heavy tables, over-stuffed armchairs. And books. Shelves and shelves of books. Straight ahead, opposite the doors, a glass-fronted case was lit from inside.

"Is that—?" Hutch said, moving closer.

"Yep, that's his Oscar."

"Huh."

"That all you got?"

"What else should I say?" Probably there was something, but he didn't know what it was.

Starsky seemed disappointed. He obviously felt a little proprietary, comfortable in this movie set of a house, happy for his friend's success. There was no sign of envy or of anything at all other than simple pleasure and pride, and uncomplicated delight for his friend that Hutch had an uneasy feeling he should have for Starsky. Jealous of Ellen, jealous of Jimmy. He needed help.

On a low shelf was a row of photo albums bound in leather. Hutch pulled out the nearest one and flipped through some of the pages. He put a finger on one of the pictures.

Starsky leaned over his shoulder to look, and Hutch tried not to notice how his own insides responded to the contact. "That's me and Jimmy when I first moved out here. We were around thirteen."

Hutch looked with interest. Two scrawny boys sitting on a picnic table, their long bony arms draped over each other's narrow shoulders. The sun off the beach sand had made them both squint into the camera. They had on swimming trunks and nothing else but toothy grins. Jimmy's hair was short, a buzz cut, but Starsky's was long, a riot of curls blown down over his forehead by some errant breeze. If Hutch squinted, he could almost pretend the photo was one of himself and Starsky at that age.

Starsky closed the book before Hutch was finished looking, and pointed to one of the trophies on a lower shelf. It was silver, and topped with a horse and rider.

"Hey," Starsky said, "look at the engraving. He won this in a polo match in San Bernadino. Maybe he knows someone out there we could talk to, get the lay of the land up there."

Hutch looked at it, then again, more closely. "Look at the date. Isn't that around the same time the girl was found?"

"Jeeze, maybe the killer really is someone Jimmy knows. I thought you were joking when you said it, but maybe he does." Starsky stepped back, turned away. "That'd be weird."

"Maybe I know who?" Jimmy said from the door. He crossed over to them and spent a moment staring blank-faced at his Oscar. He had on his riding clothes: slim jeans and high boots, an open-necked flannel shirt, and a down vest.

Hutch thought he should have brought along a jacket, too. Too late now. The exercise would keep him warm, though. He hoped.

"We're working on those murder cases," Starsky said. "The girl who was killed at that barn the other night. It's starting to look like the killer has some kind of connection to horses."

"I've been following that on the news. Horrible." He rubbed at his eyes, like he was rubbing away an unpleasant vision. "You think I know who the killer is?"

"No, moron," Starsky said. "You don't know you know him."

"Can you tell me anything about him? Maybe I do know him, or I could help you figure out how to identify him." He started to move toward the doorway, Hutch and Starsky following.

Hutch glanced at Starsky, wondering how much he shared with Jimmy on a regular basis.

Starsky said, "Hutch can tell you. I'm sick of the whole thing." He made some shooing motions.

"Get going. You're interfering with my poolside nap."

"Too cold out," Jimmy said. "You're not going to want to stay outside."

"I'll find somewhere for a snooze."

"You didn't bring a jacket?" Jimmy said to Hutch. He eyed him for a second. "I'll lend you one. Meet me out front." He went out of the room, and off down the hallway.

"See, told you he'd take care of you."

"Yeah, well, wish me luck, and no low branches."

"Have fun. Don't let him talk your ear off."

"Should I tell him anything about the murders? If he asks? Should I try to find out if he knows anyone we could take a look at?"

"Yeah, I tell him stuff about cases sometimes. Ask him if he has ideas on the whole horse connection. Think of him as the press, though—I don't tell him anything we don't tell the public. But he knows to keep his mouth shut. I trust him."

"Okay, if you say so." Hutch had a sudden strong urge to back out of this insane ride. "Off I go then. Don't get sunburned."

"Not likely."

Starsky turned left into the glass-walled room where Hutch turned right toward to the front door. He caught a glimpse of him in silhouette, the sun streaming behind him, and wished he could paint him like that with his hair all lit up, and the light making his eyes glint and shimmer. He gave a wave, and went out to meet Jimmy.

Chapter 9

Hutch had to admit the Little Bird was a swell car, even with the top up in late February. Even in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the country, people turned to look at them as they drove toward the stable where Jimmy said his horses were.

"I thought you had your horses in Palos Verdes?" Hutch said as they got closer to the barn.

"This *is* PV. This is where they are."

"This is where the last victim was murdered. I thought it was Rolling Hills Estates." Hutch had a little bit of an urge to jump out of the moving car. This was supposed to be a day off and here they were at the scene of one of the murders. "I didn't know this was *your* barn."

"What are you talking about?" Jimmy turned into the wide parking lot and pulled in next to a little silver Mercedes. "What victim?"

"Starsky and I were here last week. The girl that was murdered behind the barn? Right over there." He rubbed at his face.

"Damn. I didn't know. I haven't had time for riding in weeks."

To the left of the barn there were riders working their horses in the wide arenas, and someone was having a lesson on the end of a lunge line, feet out of her stirrups, arms out straight from her sides as the horse circled under the instructor's control.

Jimmy stepped out of the car, and Hutch decided to cope with being back at the crime scene. He stepped out too, and stood looking around for a moment, trying to pull himself out of detective mode. They went into the barn, and it took a moment for Hutch's eyes to adjust to the drop in light.

It all looked normal, the way it should always have looked. No flashing police lights, no chattering static from radios, no weeping teenagers creating an odd horror vignette in the perfectly manicured stable yard. There was no sense of any tragedy here, recent or otherwise. Like nothing bad had ever happened and never would. It didn't seem right, but what else could they do? Be miserable forever?

Just inside the wide barn doors, Hutch spotted the stable hand they'd questioned the week before still tossing manure into what looked like the same wheelbarrow. His aim was a lot better now—no misses, no muttered swears. He patted a horse affectionately when he went into a stall, and the horse turned to nuzzle him. He looked up and saw Hutch, waved and nodded without glancing at Jimmy, and continued his work. Why didn't he acknowledge Jimmy? He must have known him pretty well. Maybe he was shy.

Away down the aisle, past Jonah's stall, two horses stood facing each other but about ten feet apart. They were in crossties, fully tacked up, halters on over their bridles, but at ease with heads low, each with a hind hoof tipped up at rest. Buddy had only ever rated a rough rope tied around a fence post. No fancy crossties across a wide spotless aisle in a barn fit for humans to live in. Two girls, maybe in their early twenties, who'd been sitting on a bench side by side and casually chatting, spotted Jimmy and Hutch and stood up quickly, each one going to one of the horses. Hutch didn't recognize either of them. He hadn't seen them at the barn the day of the murder. As he and Jimmy neared, the horses lifted their heads and put their weight back on their hind legs. To Hutch it looked odd, as if all four felt like they'd been caught doing something wrong and were hoping it hadn't been noticed.

Jimmy walked up and greeted the girls, thanked them for having the horses ready on time, gave each of them a dollar bill. They took the money without expression, barely thanking him. Hutch thought, *Jeeze, pal, how 'bout at least five bucks—not like you can't afford it*, and wondered if that's what the

girls were thinking too. Then he had the uncharitable thought that Jimmy probably never even gave them tips at all unless someone else was there to see him do it. He was all smiles, though. Handsome, friendly. Neither of the girls looked straight at him, and they spoke to him in low voices. They unclipped the horses from the crossties, took off the halters, handed over the reins, and withdrew quickly without ever looking at either Jimmy or Hutch. Hutch couldn't remember a time in his life when girls had avoided looking at him and flirting with him, much less with someone like movie-star Jimmy. The staff here sure didn't seem too enamored of the guy.

Jimmy, seemingly oblivious, said, "I hope you don't mind going western style. I figured since you hadn't ridden in a while you'd feel more comfortable."

That was certainly thoughtful. "It's fine. It's what I'm used to." Hutch patted his horse's neck and then gave her a scratch on her withers under the pommel. That had been Buddy's favorite spot. The horse half-closed her eyes and began to nibble at the bottom edge of the jacket Jimmy had lent him.

"Mabel's a good old girl," Jimmy said. "She'll take care of you. She's got nice short canon bones." He leaned over and ran a hand down the horse's near foreleg. He straightened up and the horse sidestepped away from him. "Close-coupled, too. She's a good strong mare—she can take your weight even though she's on the small side. Retired polo pony. Watch your legs, though. She's sensitive. Turns on a dime."

Hutch checked the girth and found it loose, and Jimmy waited while he tightened it up and then checked the length of the stirrups. They were too short, so he let them down a couple of holes, relieved they had simple buckles and not the complicated laces of Buddy's saddle. It all felt familiar, like no time had passed since he'd last tacked up Buddy, and he was glad to look competent, at least on the ground.

Jimmy pointed to the mounting block without expression, but swung himself up onto his big gelding easily, like Maverick, or Little Joe. His horse flicked his ears, and Hutch thought he saw a flash of white show in the horse's eye, but he stood stock still, almost tense, as Jimmy mounted. He almost seemed afraid of Jimmy. But Jimmy gave him a pat and spoke to him gently, and didn't smirk or say a word when Hutch chose to make use of the mounting block. Mabel stood rock steady and Hutch was able to get himself onto her back without feeling too clumsy and out of shape.

The winter rainy season was almost over and had turned the canyon beyond the stables a lush green. Once out from under the shade trees near the barn, Hutch found he didn't need Jimmy's jacket after all, so he took it off awkwardly while trying not to drop the reins, and tied it like a bedroll to the front of the saddle. Mabel turned her head around, making a big U of her neck, and sniffed at the toe of his left boot. Hutch patted her, scratching at her crest. No mane. Polo ponies got their manes shaved, he vaguely remembered. Good thing he had a western saddle with the built in safety horn. He hoped to God he wouldn't have to make use of it. Mabel wasn't all that tall, barely sixteen hands, but she was muscular and strong and Hutch felt pretty high up. He found he had to look up to Jimmy, though, and he felt somehow at a disadvantage because of it.

Okay, Mabel, he said to her silently. Please don't make me look like a greenhorn in front of Mr. Fucking Goddam Perfect Golden Boy.

But he had already forgotten Jimmy's offhand remark about Mabel's sensitivity, and gave her a kick the way he'd always had to do with Buddy. Mabel erupted like some kind of living volcano, seeming to go first straight up as if on rockets and then straight forward like Wile E. Coyote without, Hutch was sure, ever touching down. Caught utterly by surprise, he was still in the air—left well behind—when she shot forward, and when he came down she was already twenty yards up the trail without him.

His own athleticism and an old body memory of how to fall off a horse safely almost kept him on his feet when he landed, but the rocky entrance to the trail betrayed him, and he stumbled on a stone. Of course he landed flat on his butt with a loud "oof" that he would have paid someone good money to erase, but Jimmy heard it and didn't even try not to grin widely.

"Well, you got that over with good and early." He turned up the path to retrieve Mabel from where she'd stopped to partake of some kind of scrubby unappetizing-looking bush. He caught her easily without dismounting, and led her back to where Hutch had got himself up and almost dusted off. "Okay? No broken bones?"

"Nah, and if you don't tell Starsky, not even any broken dignity." He caught a flicker of something strange in Jimmy's eye, and wondered why. Why did the guy go cold for a second when he mentioned Starsky? The same come-and-gone hardening of the skin around the eyes that Hutch had seen at the Magic Castle when that magician had taken hold of Starsky's hand. What the hell was that about? Was Jimmy jealous of *him*? Why not? He was jealous of Jimmy.

The mounting block was too far behind them to go back and use it, but he found a suitably-sized rock and Mabel repeated her stock-still, well-trained position while he climbed back on.

"Thanks, Mabel. Really appreciated that." She flicked her ears at him, and this time he tried just squeezing a little, his lower legs held uncomfortably away from her sides. She moved off sweetly, like an innocent angel.

The rest of the ride turned out to be very pleasant. Jimmy regaled him with insider tidbits about movies he'd worked on, and who was sleeping with whom to get where, and even offered to fix him up with some young starlet Hutch had only barely heard of. He pointed out certain mansions nearly hidden in the hills and told him who lived in which ones, and what they liked to do behind closed doors when the photographers weren't around. He kept to a nice walk or an occasional jog, and politely asked if Hutch would care for a canter on a flat bit of trail. Hutch half expected him to turn it into a race, but Jimmy held back and didn't seem to want to make any kind of competition out of the ride.

Jimmy never asked any questions about the murder, though he'd seemed interested back at the house. And he kept up such a constant soliloquy that Hutch never had a chance to ask him anything. It seemed odd. People always wanted to know about the dark side of human life, and often drilled him and Starsky about their work, especially about murders. Jimmy apparently had no interest at all. He was only interested in himself. There was no room in his elite world for dead children.

By the time they got back to the barn an hour or so later, Hutch felt relaxed and capable again, and had started daydreaming about buying a couple of horses and riding off into the sunset somewhere with Starsky. Except he couldn't imagine that Starsky would enjoy himself in that fantasy as much as Hutch would. Worth a try, though . . .

They dismounted outside the barn—Jimmy springing off easily, Hutch grunting a little and moving carefully—and turned the horses over to the waiting girls who'd been cleaning tack and giggling about something. The horses treated them like long lost herd-mates, nuzzling and pushing at them. Hutch felt a little envious, remembering how happy Buddy had always been to see him. Funny he would still miss that after all these years. Jimmy turned away as if caring for his own horses had never crossed his mind. He probably didn't think of them as friends at all, but as possessions that made him look good and gave him entry into the high-status equestrian world. He hadn't told Hutch the gelding's name, nor used it. Hutch gave Mabel two affectionate slaps on the neck and thanked her for the ride. He nodded to the girls, but they were already tending to the horses and didn't see. He turned to follow Jimmy out to the car.

During the short drive home Jimmy kept up his patter about his life and lifestyle. Hutch, tired of it, couldn't wait to get back to the house so he could ease into the infinity pool with Starsky, and then the hot tub where his battered muscles could relax. With luck and a long enough soak he wouldn't have to walk like an old bowlegged cowhand the next day.

But when they got back to Jimmy's mansion, Starsky and the Torino were nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 10

There was no note, no nothing. Jimmy pressed a button on a wall near the door to his office and asked whoever answered if Starsky had left a message. Hutch could hear the voice through the intercom: *"No, no dejó ningún mensaje. Lo siento."*

"No importa. Gracias."

Jimmy's accent was good. Hutch felt tempted to speak to him in Spanish, see if he really was fluent. Then he had a sudden thought out of the blue: maybe it would come in handy some day if Jimmy didn't know Hutch spoke it like a native Mejjicano. So he said, "Anything?" and lifted an eyebrow. Why did he feel like he'd suddenly gone under cover?

Because Starsky's disapp . . . not here. Left you stranded out in the hills. And Jimmy . . . Jimmy was always under cover, it seemed to Hutch, but now he looked wary. Careful. Hutch tried hard not to, but against his will he felt himself switch to high alert. Starsky wouldn't have left him here without any explanation.

But he had.

Jimmy offered Hutch the use of the phone, and went out to see if the gardeners knew anything. By the time Hutch had checked with Dobey and then Huggy, and was starting to have distinct and unpleasant sensations deep in his gut, Jimmy came back shaking his head. One of the gardeners was indignant because Señor Golden's amigo had flattened a section of white impatiens near the top of the drive.

"Some pendejo in a big carro rojo," Jimmy quoted, laughing. "I think he got fired for yelling at me as soon as I turned around."

It didn't seem to bother him that one of his staff might have gotten fired for caring about his boss's property, and it definitely didn't bother him that Starsky had flattened those flowers, much less that he'd left without saying a word.

"I guess I need to call a cab," Hutch said.

"Absolutely not!" Jimmy punched a button on the intercom. "Maria, send Del around with the town car, would you? Right away." He turned to Hutch. "Starsky'd never let me forget it if I let you take a cab home. Have you ever ridden in a Bentley?" Hutch shook his head faintly. "No? What do you drive? You look like a Mazda kind of guy. Am I right? Please don't tell you me you have a Coke can like that thing Davey drives."

"No." Hutch had to smile. At last some common ground. "Sorry to disappoint, but I drive an old LTD."

The intercom beeped twice.

"Well, at least you can go home in style today. I can't imagine what bee got under Davey's bonnet, but tell him to call me later, will you?"

"After I kill him, you mean?"

Jimmy went still for the slightest of moments, so briefly that Hutch was almost sure he'd imagined it, except that he was more sure he hadn't. For a millisecond, Jimmy had looked absolutely furious. But that couldn't be right. Furious about what? At whom? And why? Then his trademark golden smile was back like it had never been gone, all shiny teeth and sparkling friendly eyes, his hair backlit by the sun.

"Yeah," he said jovially. "After you kill him."

Jimmy walked out to the car with him and introduced him to Del. He accepted Hutch's genuine compliments about the car and told him to stop with the *schmaltz*. He waved away Hutch's attempts to thank him for the afternoon's outing and the ride home, offered to call him again the next time he had a day off, smiled and shook hands, and as soon as Hutch was in the car, he turned abruptly and walked stiffly back into the house, hands held in fists at his sides.

Hutch had a sudden clear awareness that what he had just seen was Jimmy out of character—himself, the real Jimmy—and out of camouflage. Hutch's scalp contracted. For such a controlled and skilled actor, it was odd that he would have let such intense and incongruous feelings loose in front of Hutch of all people. The guy was so tightly wrapped—why had he let himself slip like that? Surely he was himself around Starsky. But if he was, what the hell did Starsky see in the him? He was unhinged. Or Hutch was. That wasn't entirely out of the question either.

Del asked for his address, and Hutch gave him Starsky's, because that's where his car was. He gave up wondering why Starsky had split like that, and instead asked some questions about the Bentley, and then how Del liked his job and what his duties were, listening for undertones and not hearing any. To his surprise, he enjoyed his chauffeured drive back to the city.

φ

The Torino was parked at an awkward angle in front of Starsky's place, almost touching the driver's side of Hutch's LTD. Hutch ran up the steps, tried the door, and finding it locked, dug out his key. He pushed the door and nearly banged his head against it when it stopped short, held open only three inches by the inside chain.

"What the . . ." Starsky had to know Hutch would come straight here, so why had he barricaded himself in? "Starsky, open the door." This was getting weirder and weirder. "Come on, Starsky. Open the door." He peered in through the narrow gap. "I can see your leg, you moron. Open the goddam door!"

All that happened was that Starsky moved his leg out of view. Hutch couldn't begin to imagine what the hell was going on.

"Starsky!"

Had he said something—done something—to piss Starsky off? He couldn't think what, and he hadn't had a hint of anything when he and Jimmy were leaving for the trail ride. Starsky had been Starsky—relaxed, looking forward to an afternoon off, probably planning to flirt with Jimmy's house staff, have a swim, be lazy. There hadn't been any indication of anything else going on in his head. Something must have happened while Starsky was alone in that house. Hutch couldn't conjure up a single theory as to what.

"Starsky! Open the door or I'll break it in."

"Go away, Hutch."

"The hell I will. Open the fucking door."

He saw a brief flash of movement, and then Starsky was there, inches away. Hutch wanted to reach in and grab hold of him, drag him through the gap so he could look in his eyes, touch his face . . . tell him that whatever it was, he was there for him. *Whatever* it was. All he could do, though, was step back and wait for him to take the chain off. But Starsky stood there without looking at him through the opening.

"Please, Hutch. I'm all right. Would you please go home? I'll call you later. I swear. Please."

Something in the sound of his voice, the way he said "please" like that . . . Hutch didn't think he'd ever heard that tone in Starsky's voice before. It knocked the anger out of him, and filled the space where it had been with some kind of silent nameless dread. Something bad had happened, and Starsky wasn't going to let him help.

"Okay." What else could he say? Or do? "Okay." He turned to go down the stairs, expecting the door to open wide, for Starsky to say "Wait." But all he heard was the quiet click of the closing door, and the sound of everything Starsky hadn't said.

He had to crawl into the LTD from the passenger's side because of the way Starsky had parked. Once in, he couldn't bring himself to drive away, so he sat there until it got dark, and when no lights went on in Starsky's apartment, and when he could no longer wait for food or a bathroom, he stretched and groaned, turned the engine, and drove home.

He waited all night, trying to sleep on the couch so he'd be near the phone, but Starsky never called.

Chapter 11

Dobey caught him at the coffee pot and gave him the eye.

"You look like hell," he said. "You got the same bug as your partner?"

"Bug?" Hutch felt like he'd missed a memo or something. He drank some coffee and tried to wake himself up.

"He called in sick. Don't tell me . . . what's her name this time?"

"No, uh, he's sick. I was up late, uh, going over the case files. And I'm saddle sore." Very saddle sore. Not to mention his ass felt broken in three places from where he'd landed on it. He stopped himself from rubbing it gently. "Maybe I'm coming down with something, too."

He turned away and made a show of putting sugar and powdered cream in his coffee, trying to stall for time. He hoped Dobby'd never noticed he usually drank it black. He'd have to dump it out later and start over. Dobby was no fool, though. He stood there, saying nothing, until Hutch ran out of things one could do to coffee, and had to look up.

He tried out a small cough and a hand to his chest, but Dobby stared him down. All Hutch could think to do was pick up his cup full of cream and sugar, step around Dobby, make sure he didn't make eye contact, and head for his desk. It was a long walk, those twenty steps, with Dobby's X-ray vision burning a hole in his back.

He pulled some files out of his stack and tried to look at them, but once Dobby had finally gone back into his office, Hutch couldn't stop himself from calling Starsky's number again. It rang and rang, like it had all the other ten times he'd called it since six a.m. Frustrated, he slammed the handset onto the phone, and tried to concentrate. He couldn't do it. He dialed again. This time he got a busy signal. Maybe Starsky was calling him, or, more likely, he'd taken his phone off the hook. It was a message, as clear as if it had been written: "I'm still here. Stop calling me."

Fuck you, Starsky. And the horse you rode in on.

Horses . . . Hutch got an idea. An idea that made his stomach lurch as if he really did have the flu. He tried hard to keep it from evolving into a hunch, but it mushroomed against his will. He'd have to follow it up. What choice did he have?

He stuck his head inside Dobby's office and told him where he was headed. "If Starsky calls, tell him I'll bring him some soup on my way back."

Dobby made a sound behind his teeth and told him to get the hell out of his office.

φ

Hutch pulled the LTD into the shady parking area near the Palos Verdes Stables away from the two XKEs and the four 280Zs parked near the front of the barn. Getting out of the car wasn't easy what with every sore muscle stiffened up during the drive, and he had trouble standing up straight once he'd gotten himself out. It was a school day, and he hoped to God no one who'd seen him and Starsky here the previous week would be there at that time of day. But he was ready for that, if it happened.

He found the two pretty stable hands he'd met the day before more or less where he'd last seen them, but with two different horses in the cross-ties, and English saddles on fold-out racks. The taller one wore a red quilted vest and was slim and athletic looking, with long arms and legs, and straight light

brown hair. She had it tied back in some kind of thick elastic band and it swung around as she moved. Long straight hair, tied back. Something about hair . . .

As he approached, she spoke to her companion, and he saw them both tense up and look past him down the aisle. Were they looking for Jimmy?

He introduced himself, because Jimmy hadn't done it the day before, saying only that his name was Ken, and deliberately forgetting to mention the part about being a cop.

They didn't tell him their names, and he thought that was a little strange.

"We remember you," the taller one said. "Is Jimmy here? He didn't let us know you were going out again."

"We're not. I'm here on my own." He'd made up a couple of suitable stories on the way over, covering all the bases he could think of, and started his patter without a second thought. "I'm planning to move my horses over here from the barn up in San Bernadino. I just bought a house in PV."

The girls changed their attitudes immediately and visibly, relaxing and animating at the same time. Did they dislike Jimmy that much?

"Oh you'd like this barn. Everyone's really nice. Almost everyone, anyway. We have a great staff, here, too. There are clubs for the kids, and trail rides every weekend, and there are exercise rings all around the neighborhoods. Sometimes folks trailer their horses up to San Bernadino to ride up into the hills up there, too. You've got some good shows at your barn. Why'd you want to move way down here? I don't even think there are any stalls open right now."

"No," Hutch said, improvising. "I'm on a waiting list." He asked their names.

"Julie," the taller one said.

"And I'm Becky," the other girl said. She was shorter, as slender as Julie, with the same long hair in a similar ponytail, but it was darker and thicker, and her vest was dark green. "We were at your barn a couple of months ago. Jimmy took his string up for a polo match and we groomed for him. Mabel did great. Practically won the whole game for the team."

"I thought she was retired."

"She was, but Jimmy likes to play, and she's his best, so he keeps her in shape."

"How many horses does Jimmy have?"

"He's got the six polo ponies, plus his two endurance horses. Not that he ever does any endurance riding."

Hutch pounced on the tone in her voice. "He doesn't pay much attention to them, then? I thought he was really into it."

"He barely ever rides," Becky said. "And when he does, he barely ever even acts like he knows he's on his own horses."

Julie gave her a sideways look and Hutch saw the tiny nod Becky gave her in return. He moved off onto a different path.

"How many horses do you each take care of?" He put on the wide beguiling smile that rarely failed him, and that didn't fail him now. "I don't suppose you'd have room for two more, would you?"

"Well," Julie said, leaning her shoulders back a little so that her small high breasts tightened the

fabric of her red vest. She tipped her head sideways and looked up at him from under her lashes. "What would it be worth to you, to give us that much extra work?"

"I think the question is, what do I have to do to make it worth it to you. Both." He had a few tricks of his own, and he decided to pull out the stops. He leaned against the vertical metal bars of one of the stalls, showing off his long legs, and he stretched back a little so the entire length of his body was in full and easy view. He put one hand in his pocket, and scratched himself absently on his belly with the other, above the buckle of his belt. "I'd be happy to *pay* you extra, of course."

Becky ran her eye up and down his body, and he saw her check his left hand. He'd made sure, ringless as it was, that he'd left it plainly visible.

She said, "We aren't supposed to take tips, but we could maybe barter with you. You know, *barter*." She seemed to have forgotten that he'd witnessed them both taking tips from Jimmy not twenty-four hours earlier.

The girls glanced sideways at each other, their secret language not that secret to Hutch. Julie said, "We'll work *something* out when you get your horses down here, won't we, Beck?" Becky nodded agreement to her, with her eyes on Hutch.

"Are these Jimmy's horses, too?" He stood up straight and went to the nearest horse's head. It was a strong-boned bay, well groomed, no stray hairs around the muzzle or in its ears, coat flat and shining.

"Yeah, we're taking them out for some exercise. He never does it himself." Julie went back to work brushing the bay, and Becky put her saddle on the horse she was going to ride.

"Too bad you can't come out with us," Julie said. "Jimmy'd never know. He doesn't care."

"No, thanks. I can't really stay. I, uh, I have to go find the manager in a few minutes." He thought for a minute. He needed to know something, and he couldn't figure out how to ask it. *Hell, Hutchinson, just ask. They're not going to know why you want to know.* Then he said slowly, "I noticed something kind of strange yesterday. Mabel and Jimmy's horse . . . they seemed like they were afraid of him. That can't be right though, can it?"

Both girls stopped working for a moment and had another silent conversation. Then Becky said, "How well do you know Jimmy? Are you good friends?"

"No, he's a friend of a friend. He offered to take me out, show me how great the riding is around here." He grinned. "I don't even like him, to tell the truth. He's kind of a pompous ass. Good to know I won't have to see much of him around here."

"He's a real good rider," Julie said, "but he's, well, he's pretty mean to his horses when he thinks no one's looking. It's like he sets them up to fail at something he wants them to do, and then he'll beat them for not being able to do it. It's really sick."

"Yeah, he brings them in soaking wet sometimes, and more than once he's had that big strong chestnut of his shaking on his feet. None of his string likes him, and they're all as sweet as can be. Professionally trained, beautiful horses, and he treats them like they're cars. Demolition vehicles at that. He never even calls them by name, or pets them unless someone's looking."

"We heard he killed his own dog once. He'd run over him with the car by accident and instead of taking him to the vet, he ran over him again. Can you believe that?"

Hutch was starting to believe more than he'd ever wanted to about Mr. Oscar Winner Jimmy.

"We don't know if that's for real, Julie."

"It's true. You know it is."

"You don't like him much either, I see," Hutch said.

"You won't tell him what we said, will you?" Becky'd apparently thought better of being so forthcoming. "We'd get fired."

"Can't have that, can we? Who's going to take care of my horses if you ladies get fired?"

"Who's going to take care of *you*?" Julie said.

"He doesn't need to bring his horses here for that, though, does he?" Becky said.

So now he had to figure out a way to extricate himself.

"Is that the manager up there?" he said suddenly.

They both looked up the aisle where he was pointing.

"I didn't see anyone," Becky said.

"I'd better go catch her then. You girls have a good ride. See you soon, I hope," Hutch said, backing away.

He turned fast before either of them could say anything, and jogged up the aisle, turning once to smile and wave at them before he went around the corner at the end of the barn.

It wasn't until he'd grunted and groaned his way back into his car that he realized that once again he hadn't gotten the telephone numbers of some attractive and obviously interested women. Hadn't once looked forward to telling Starsky he'd found a couple of fit and willing girls or where they'd take them for their double date, or what they might do with them after . . . What the hell was wrong with him?

But now he had something a lot more troublesome to think about. He sat for a moment, wondering how much nerve he really had, and how worth the risk was that he was thinking of taking. But he knew he was going to do it, and he'd have to deal with any consequences. Sometimes you had to do something you'd give anything at all not to have ever thought of.

Then he sent up a prayer that he wouldn't end up spending that night in jail.

Chapter 12

There was a conversation going on in Hutch's head, and he was having trouble keeping track of which voice was which: *This is the stupidest thing you've ever done. Then don't do it. I have to do it. Find some other way. If you can think of some other way I'll be happy to try it. There's no other way. You really don't have to do this. Yes I do.*

Yes, I do.

He knocked on the big fancy door of Jimmy's mansion. It felt like jumping out of a plane knowing your parachute wasn't going to open.

A short woman in a dark dress opened the door. "Sí? May I help you?"

"You must be Maria," Hutch said, with all the charm he could gather, and she smiled back at him in response. "I'm Ken, friend of Jimmy's. Del drove me home yesterday."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Ken. Mr. Jimmy is not at home right now."

That shut off at least one of the voices in his head. His heart slowed down to around two fifty.

"I know. I'm sorry to be a bother, but there's a book I wanted to borrow. Jimmy said to stop by and you'd let me in to get it."

"He did not tell me this." The open smile in her eyes closed down a notch.

He thought fast. "I'm sorry to have troubled you. I'll call him later and come back another day when he's here. It's . . . it's a long drive, and I was coming back this way today anyway . . ."

Surely she wouldn't want him to have to call and tell her boss she hadn't let his friend in . . . *come on Maria come on Maria . . .* He smiled as fetchingly as he could.

She succumbed. He couldn't help but feel a little smug. *If you got it, flaunt it.*

She opened the door and stepped away, the smile in her eyes back in place. Now he had to get rid of her so he could go search the library on his own.

"I know you're very busy. I can find the book and let myself out." She seemed too sharp to fall for that, but his luck held—the phone rang. She became a little flustered. He nodded reassuringly. "I really don't mind."

"Pero . . . Mr. Jimmy would not like it if . . ."

The phone rang again and she looked toward the room off the front hall.

Hutch tried a half-wink, to make him her partner in crime. "I won't tell him if you don't." The phone rang again.

She nodded and turned away from him finally, waving him in, closing the heavy door. It made a dull sound, and he figured that was what the door of his prison cell would sound like later that day. But if there was a God anywhere in the universe, Maria would never dare tell her boss she'd let someone she'd never met into his private library, and left him there alone. Now if she would give him enough time to find what he was looking for. Whatever that was.

The library was dark and he couldn't find a wall switch. Table lamps would have to do. He turned on one near the door, and could see that there were photo albums all over the table. One chair was pushed back and away from the table. Apparently no one had been in the room since yesterday. The album Starsky had shown him was still there, open to a different page. His heart revved back up

again. Starsky had left him a clue. Whatever he'd found there had driven him out of the house. He hadn't even cared whether Jimmy might have found out what he'd seen. So what had he seen?

It wasn't photos, it was news clippings.

The first article dated back to about the time Starsky and Jimmy must have first met, back in their early teens. Before he'd finished reading it Hutch had gone cold, and his heart had seemed to stop.

The article recounted an unsolved case in a Bay City neighborhood where a lot of pets had gone missing over the course of a few weeks. Dogs, cats, even someone's two rabbits. The bodies had been found at the back of a weedy empty lot, laid out in neat rows, so badly mutilated that the journalist had chosen not to describe the conditions of the animals. All he would say was that everyone in the neighborhood was devastated, of course, and they felt unsafe in their homes. The children were all terrified, and what kind of monster could do such a thing . . .

The next article made him feel like he was in one of his old recurrent dreams, the one where he was deep underwater and trying to get to the surface and knowing he wouldn't make it before he had to breathe. He knew now why Starsky had run and why he had barricaded himself into his apartment—and why he'd locked Hutch out.

A picture of a girl, about twelve or thirteen, smiling into the camera. A school picture, maybe. According to the story, she'd been strangled, her body left near the back of a vacant lot, naked, and with odd scratch marks on her torso. There was no description of the marks, but Hutch was sure he knew what they looked like.

He didn't read any of the other articles, just flipped through page after page, numb and shaking. There were thirty-seven murders spanning almost twenty years, all their naked young bodies left out in the open, at first in vacant lots in downtown Bay City and later moving farther out of the city into the hills, and finally, near riding stables or bridle trails. All young girls aged eleven to the early teens, with flat chests, or the hints of just-starting-to-develop breasts. And all of them . . . Hutch swallowed hard . . . all of them with short curly dark hair. The last article in the album was dated only a few months before, a girl who'd been murdered in San Bernadino and whose body had been left near a riding trail. There were still quite a few blank pages waiting to be filled.

Hutch looked at the picture of young Davey and Jimmy, the one Starsky had shown him the day before. He'd said it was soon after they'd met, when they were both thirteen. Davey with the smooth flat chest and the mass of dark curls. All the pictures in that book were of Starsky alone, or only the two of them together, always close, always with their arms around each other, always grinning. Hutch felt like the room was spinning around him. *Oh my God*, he thought over and over. *Oh my God. Oh God, Starsky*. No wonder he'd had to get out of there.

And then: *I knew there was something about the hair*. There was some kind of bitter satisfaction in the realization.

He gathered the photo albums and put them back in a neat row on the low shelf where they'd been. If Jimmy knew what they'd seen, if he found the albums out on the table . . . Surely he wouldn't hurt Starsky, would he? But they needed time to figure out what do. How to do it. They needed a warrant. They needed to make sure Jimmy didn't run. Or kill anyone else while they gathered the proof they needed.

Just above the photo albums something else caught his eye and he blinked. A book bound in dark red leather with gold printing: *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle. He heard Ellen's voice in his head as if he were standing right next to her in the crowded Task Force room: There's something about ethical behavior, she'd said, something about Aristotle. He took the book out of its place and opened it to

the first few pages.

He tried to read some of it but the words seemed to swim on the page. It had to do with the middle path between overindulgence or excess, and self-renunciation or deficiency. He paged forward and found a passage about ethical behavior and equilibrium being essential for good health. Virtuous behavior created the ability to make good judgments.

How did that fit in? Why had Ellen thought it was connected? He flipped through a few more pages, and there it was in the second section, Book II: The Golden Mean. It said that Aristotle believed that ethical behavior is relative to and relies on context. One's character relied on one's equilibrium, but the equilibrium a person strives for is dependent on that person's context. It wasn't a constant. As far as Hutch could tell on such a fast reading, you could interpret ethical behavior in any number of ways according to the Golden Mean.

He put the book back in its place and scanned the titles near it, hoping he wouldn't find what he was looking for. But it was there on the same shelf. A book of drawings by da Vinci. It opened to the page he'd known it would, the page most often visited by its reader. The famous drawing of the human body's proportions. The perfect proportions for perfect beauty, the Divine Proportion.

Phi, the golden ratio.

And the symbol for *phi* was an O with a vertical line drawn through it.

There was something else . . . He pulled out the photo album again, the one with all the pictures of Starsky. On the cover, carefully hand-drawn in black ink, was the same symbol.

Perfection, to Jimmy, was right there between the covers of an old photo album.

Chapter 13

Somehow Hutch got the book put back on the shelf, and himself out the door without ever seeing Maria or anyone else. The half hour drive back to Bay City was a blur of whirling ugly thoughts and horrible images. He drove on autopilot and by the time he parked the LTD where it had been the day before next to Starsky's car, he realized he had no memory of any part of the journey. The Torino was in the same position. Had Starsky stayed home all night alone? Why hadn't he called like he'd promised?

Hutch turned off the engine and sat for a moment, breathing deep, finding his center. Only long years of practice made it possible, but once his breathing slowed and his heart rate dropped, and the pounding in his head receded, and he found he could hear something other than the rush of blood in his ears. See something other than the faces of all those dead girls that looked like Davey Starsky.

He got out of the car, went up the steps slowly and knocked on the door. He reached for his key, ready this time to break in if he had to. He had the key almost into the lock when the door opened wide, barred by Starsky himself.

"What?" Starsky said. "Leave me alone's not in your dictionary?" His face was a cold mask.

"Let me in, Starsky, or I'll—"

"You'll what? You'll huff and you'll puff, and you'll—"

"I know why you're doing this. Please let me come in. I have to talk to you."

"You talk too damn much. Go away."

Hutch tried not to let that hurt. "Starsky. I know what you know."

Starsky went absolutely still, as if he'd been flash frozen.

"I went back there. Just now. I went back to Jimmy's. Starsky, *I saw what you saw.*"

Starsky slammed the door in his face.

But he didn't bolt it, didn't put the chain on it. Hutch waited, slowing his breaths, counting them out. Then he put his hand on the door and went in, and closed it gently behind him.

Starsky stood in the middle of the room facing the door, hands pulsing closed, then open, then closed. Hutch hoped he wasn't going to get slugged. He stood there, too, and waited.

Starsky moved finally, relaxing his hands and dropping his gaze. He took a few steps back, turning away. Then he seemed to sort of crumple from inside, like he'd lost his whole support structure. He stumbled to the couch and slumped on it, arms slack, head back. He turned his face up to Hutch's and stared at him, and Hutch thought he could almost feel the force of the stare inside his head, in his core. He would have preferred a punch in the gut. It would have hurt less.

"Why did you go back there?" Starsky's voice was so flat and empty that Hutch had to swallow a few times, and blink away the hot prickling under his eyelids. "Why did you do that?"

"And if I hadn't?" He pushed the coffee table out a little with his leg and sat on it in front of Starsky where he could look at him, watch his eyes. "Were you going to stay in here, hole up until I forgot about the whole thing? Then what?"

Starsky blinked hard himself, and rubbed at his face. He looked horrible—unwashed, unshaved. He had on the same clothes he'd worn to Jimmy's house, and he smelled like he'd run in three

marathons. But he didn't smell of alcohol, and there were no empty bottles around. Just an untouched slice of pizza on a paper plate, and an unopened bottle of root beer on the kitchen table.

"Okay. You take a shower. I'll make us something to eat. Then we'll talk." Starsky didn't move.

"You'll feel better, I promise. Come on." He leaned forward and took hold of one wrist, tugged on it.

"Don't make me pick you up and carry you. You know I can do it." He stood up, hoping he looked menacing.

He saw the tiniest lift to the right corner of Starsky's mouth. It was enough.

Starsky bent his elbow and pulled against Hutch's hand on his wrist until he was standing right in front of him, almost nose to nose. Hutch wanted to wrap him in his arms, pull him in, hide him from everything he was going to have to face. But Starsky wasn't some fragile flower that needed protection. Why did Hutch feel like he needed to do that? Maybe it wasn't for Starsky, maybe it was for himself. He had to do something. So he put his arms up, expecting Starsky to duck under and escape, but instead he took hold of Hutch's shoulders.

"What am I gonna to do with you?" Starsky said. "Huh?" Then he put his arms around Hutch and gathered him in, and Hutch was the one who ended up feeling comforted and protected.

φ

An hour later, Starsky looked a lot better, on the outside at least. He hadn't eaten much, but some color was back in his face, and most of that awful tenseness had gone from his body.

He sat across the kitchen table from Hutch, staring at nothing, or maybe at images only he could see and wished he couldn't.

"This can't be real," he said. "This is *Jimmy*, for God's sake." He closed his eyes. "Why did you have to go back there."

"You know why. I went because you bolted, and then you shut me out. What did you expect me to do?"

"That's not what I meant. I ain't blaming you. I just . . . I have to . . . Oh, damn it, Hutch. There has to be some other explanation. I've known him since we were thirteen. I *know* him. He's just interested. He's just following the cases. Remember that summer I read every book I could find on unsolved murders? That's all he's doing. He's interested because I'm interested."

"Starsk."

"*You* know him. Hell, you spent the whole afternoon with him yesterday. Does he strike you as, as, someone who could do . . . *this*?"

In fact, Jimmy had always been pleasant enough whenever they'd crossed paths, at least until that night at the Magic Castle, and now Hutch knew that he hadn't imagined the vibe he'd sensed throughout that whole evening. Yesterday he'd behaved like the model host. Other than nearly boring Hutch to death, he'd given no hint of anything other than affable charm.

"Starsky." Hutch tried to think of something useful, anything useful. "Remember the other day how you said you felt like you knew something but you couldn't put your finger on it?"

"No. This can't be it. I can't believe this. I don't believe it. We're going to have to do some more digging. Ask him if he has any ideas. He could help us find the murderer. He probably knows more about it than we do."

Starsky didn't seem to realize what he'd said. "Come on." Hutch looked at his hands. "You left his

albums out. I looked at all of them." He looked into Starsky's eyes. "You know what you saw. Why else did you run like that?"

Starsky stayed silent for so long that Hutch thought he might not answer at all. When he finally did speak, Hutch had to lean forward to hear what he said.

"Because, if it's true, then what it means is that all these years, all these past twenty years, I've been friends with a monster, *loved* a monster, and it means I never saw what was right there in front of me. Right in front of me." His stare turned bleak and Hutch wanted to cry.

"Right in front of you, like where I'm sitting right now?"

Starsky didn't seem to hear him, or maybe he didn't want to answer. "What kind of a man doesn't know what his friend really is? What kind of *detective*? You're my best friend in the world and I love you and how do I know you—" He stopped, and suddenly stood up and began to pace in the small kitchen. "All those girls. Did he kill them because of me? Why? What did I do to make him want to do that?" Hutch started to make some kind of protest but Starsky stopped him with a look. "Hutch, you don't know. Me and Jimmy. We . . ."

He trailed off and Hutch had an urge to bolt the way Starsky had yesterday. There were things he didn't need to know. Didn't want to know.

"I'm sorry, Hutch. I'm sorry, but I can't do this. I need some time. I just need some time."

"We might not have a lot of time. If this thing is true, and even if it's not what we think, there's a killer out there and we need to get him."

"I know. Just give me today. Please. I need today."

"You aren't thinking of confronting him? Tell me you won't do that."

"Hutch."

"Tell me you aren't going to do that or no deal. I'm not letting you out of my sight if you don't tell me you won't see him."

"I won't."

"Look at me and promise me that." He waited.

Starsky looked up, made eye contact. "I won't go see him." Then he looked away.

Hutch let out a long breath. "Okay then. You call me if you need me. I'll be at Metro. I'll cover for you. You call me, okay?"

Starsky nodded. It wasn't easy, but Hutch left him standing by the window, still staring at nothing. He closed Starsky's door and paused, feeling strongly that he shouldn't leave. Inside he heard a sudden crash and then a cry—a low anguished cry that got inside Hutch like a some alien tentacle that twisted itself around his heart. He figured he'd better get used to it. It probably wasn't going to let him go any time soon. He went down the stairs.

No judge was going to issue a warrant based on what they'd found as visitors in the house of a friend. Jimmy could say what Starsky said, all innocence and shock. "I was just interested, Your Honor. My best friend is a homicide detective. I have a fascination with serial killers. I played one, once, you know—The Butcher in *The Hunted*. I researched for the part, and well, I got interested. You know how it is . . . That symbol on the album cover? It's the symbol for the Golden Mean. It's sort of my trademark. It's a coincidence, of course!" And the judge would nod and smile back and deny the warrant and imply that they should be ashamed of trying to smear the name of such a fine

upstanding citizen . . .

Hutch drove to Metro and sat outside for a long time, trying to go in and tell Dobey what they'd learned, to go back to the beginning and look at the files with this new knowledge, to find something solid to hang a warrant on. And to keep himself from turning around and driving away somewhere where Starsky wasn't going to have to arrest his oldest friend for rape and for murder.

Finally, slowly, he began to understand what he had to do, and how he could save Starsky from a lifetime of guilt and regret.

So instead of going inside, and instead of fleeing to some balmy paradise in the middle of the South Pacific, he drove back to Palos Verdes, and parked his car down the road from Jimmy Golden's swanky driveway.

Chapter 14

The only problem was, he couldn't tell if Jimmy was inside or not. It was nearly dark, but movie producers worked all hours, and Jimmy had said he was usually going flat out until late into the evenings. Hutch picked up the radio handset and raised Dispatch, though he was nearly out of range, and would have been out of jurisdiction if not for the fact that he and Starsky were in charge of the multi-county-wide investigation. He could barely hear the officer at the other end, but he asked for an Attempt to Locate on James Golden. He described the Thunderbird, gave the first three letters of the license tag, and told Leon to look up the rest of the registration because he couldn't remember it.

"Tell them to try the bungalows at the Beverly Hills Hotel, too, and Soundstage 157, the one he's using at Universal. Don't bother with his house because I'm staking it out myself." He thought for a moment. "Tell them if they find him not to approach. Just let me know where he is, and don't lose him."

"You mean *Jimmy* Golden? *The* Jimmy Golden?" the dispatcher said.

"Yes, *the* Jimmy Golden."

"Far out! What's he done? Gambling? Not drugs, no way. Prostitution—"

"Leon, just do it, wouldja? I don't have a lot of time here."

"Jeeze, Hutchinson, *sorry*." Leon went pseudo-formal. "Right away, *Sergeant*. Ten-four on that ATL. You got it! Sir!"

Hutch faked a laugh, thanked him, and signed off. He wished he'd thought to get something to drink, something to read. Someone to talk to. *Oh God, Starsky*. He wondered if they would ever be able to really talk again.

The car windows started to get a little foggy. He rolled down the one on his side. It was practically silent out. No voices, no traffic, no crickets or dogs barking. No nothing.

Eventually the quiet and the boredom, the stress and the lack of sleep all conspired against him. His head fell back and he slept.

He had the dream, the one where he was swimming frantically underwater, going up or down—he couldn't tell. He had to breathe but he couldn't get to the surface. In his ears there was a dull tapping sound, metal on metal, and someone saying his name. *Hey, Hutch, wake up . . .*

"Starsk?" He blinked and rubbed his face, looked to his left where the sound had been, the voice in his dream. At eye level, three inches from his nose, the shadowy barrel of a gun, and someone saying his name. He woke up fully, then, and took a deep reflexive breath. "What the . . .?"

"Hello, Hutch. Fancy finding you here outside my house," Jimmy said. He pushed the gun inside the car, right up against Hutch's left ear. A small caliber semi-automatic, not a heavy revolver like Hutch's Python. A gentleman's gun. Maybe it would jam. "Wakey, wakey. Come on out of there, now. I'll make you some coffee. What do you say?"

Hutch squinted in the light from the street lamp. He wanted to turn his head, but with the barrel of Jimmy's gun against it, it seemed like a bad idea.

"No thanks, I'll, uh, I guess I'll get on back to the city. Rain check?"

Should he reach for his own gun? Also a bad idea. The ignition—could he start the heap of a car and get away before Jimmy could react? If he could duck down and to the right and floor the gas pedal?

Maybe if he'd been driving the Torino . . . maybe he'd stop bitching about that damn car. Surely Jimmy wouldn't shoot him in this quiet street. He should just drive away . . . he started to reach for the ignition but Jimmy just pressed the gun harder into his ear. He dropped his hand.

He was stiff from sleep, his right arm tingling. Rookie behavior, falling asleep on a stakeout. *Nice work, Hutchinson. Commendations for you, Detective, you fucking idiot. Sorry, Starsk, but I think we can put an end to that nice river of denial you were floating away on . . .*

"Could I please have your gun?" Jimmy said.

"Not a chance."

"Are you sure? Because I could say, 'oh dear, officers, I heard a sound and came running out and found my friend shot. Oh, my God, who could have done this!'" He paused, maybe expecting Hutch to say something, or even applaud. He went on without the accolade. "And anyway, even if I don't shoot you here and now, I have a few things up my sleeve that you might like even less. And maybe some things Davey might not appreciate much either." He grinned widely. "If you get my drift."

Hutch hesitated, but it wasn't going to do much good to resist. Even if Jimmy didn't know how to shoot a gun, he couldn't very well miss with the thing right against Hutch's skull. Besides, in a small honest corner of his mind, Hutch really wanted to *know*—and maybe he could get Jimmy to tell him—*why*. So he handed his gun over, against every instinct and all his training. Jimmy put it in his jacket pocket, and thanked him as if it had been all Hutch's idea.

"Get out of the car, now, please, Hutch."

He leaned down so Hutch could see his face. There was a dark smear of something on the left side of his chin, and on the fingers of his right hand, the fingers that were wrapped around the gun. Blood? *Please Jimmy, not Starsky's blood*. There'd been plenty of time since Hutch had left Starsky's place. But it couldn't be Starsky's blood. Jimmy would never hurt the object of his obsession. He tried to keep reminding himself that serial killers killed other people, not the ones they obsessed over. He took another deep breath.

"Well, okay, maybe I will take that coffee after all." He showed his empty hands, and pulled the latch on the door. Gave a shove with his shoulder, smiled apologetically, shoved again. The door wouldn't open. Jimmy pulled back the gun's slide dramatically. Now there was a bullet in the chamber, and Hutch instinctively flinched, leaned to the right, put a hand up in front of his face. As if that would stop Jimmy's bullet.

"Okay! Okay! I'll have to get out the passenger's side." He was getting sick of having to do that.

It seemed kind of ignominious, scrambling across the front seat. Jimmy held the gun inside the car until Hutch had gotten out on the far side, then trained it on him, arm steady as a gatepost, while he walked around the front end to join Hutch.

"You should really lock up, you know. Even here in PV cars get stolen. Even cars like yours." He held out a hand. "Give them to me and I'll lock up for you."

For a moment Hutch wanted to refuse. If Jimmy had the keys, he'd move the car and no one would know Hutch had been there. Well, Leon the dispatcher knew, but he'd only think Hutch had followed Jimmy somewhere and hadn't called it in. But he would move the car one way or another . . . after . . . and besides, the keys were still in it.

"Give me the keys, Hutch, or I'll take them anyway."

"They're still in the ignition."

"Well, go get them, then. I'll wait."

So Hutch had to slide back into the car to get the keys, then back out again, and handed them over.

Jimmy took them without a word and locked up the car. Then he slung an arm around Hutch's shoulder, like he'd done with Starsky in all those old pictures, except Hutch was pretty sure he hadn't also stuck a gun into Starsky's side while he did it. They crossed the road and walked down the drive like they were just returning from a friendly stroll, and Jimmy politely held his free hand out toward the house. An invitation to enter. Hutch went up the marble steps, waited by the door while Jimmy opened it for him, and stepped inside. No sign of Maria or Del or anyone else. Jimmy switched on a lamp. He had on black jeans, a black turtleneck, black shoes. His hair glowed in contrast in the hall lights. The smears on Jimmy's face and hands weren't red, weren't blood, but Hutch couldn't look away.

Jimmy touched his own face. "Do I have peanut butter on me?" He looked at his hands. "No, and no jelly either. But you knew that, right? You want to know why I'm all messy, don't you?" He smiled widely, a guileless, happy smile, his eyes lighting up like he was going to bestow a wonderful gift on Hutch. He took off his jacket and draped it over a chair in the hall. Hutch heard his Python bump against the wood.

"Oh wait, I almost forgot. I think I need . . . yes, I do. Please give me your handcuffs."

Well, Hutchinson, ya didn't quite think this through, did ya? He didn't move, so Jimmy reached around him and pulled them from his hip pocket. "How about turning around for me while I slip these on you?" When Hutch still didn't move, Jimmy brought the gun up, smile still perfectly in place. "Put your hands behind you, really, or I might have to take my lead from that ridiculous movie of Cronenberg's and . . . well, never mind. Just do as I say. This is getting a little annoying."

Hutch had no idea who Cronenberg was, but he had a feeling he wouldn't want Jimmy to take that lead. He put his hands behind his back and let himself be shackled. There wasn't going to be a way out of this now, so he figured the best he could do was go along and try to twist Jimmy into some kind of knot. It looked now like he was never going to leave Jimmy's house alive. He'd meant to save Starsky from a nightmare and all he'd done was guarantee him a lifetime of them.

"Okay, then," Jimmy said. "Come with me, Hutch. I'll give you the grand tour."

He gave directions as if they were driving in a city where Hutch was unfamiliar with the territory: "Down this hall, go down those steps, that door there. . . here we are." He opened the door and pushed it wide. "Come on in, have a seat." He gestured toward a big leather couch by a low rough-hewn table.

The room was smallish and seemed to be made out of living rock, as if mined from the hills under the house. Except that this house was built on a sandy peninsula, and these granite rocks had to be fake. Sconces made to look like real torches with real flames cast a dim flickering glow just above head height and threw shadows on all the furnishings.

"Oh, wait," Jimmy said. "I have to show you something before you sit."

Hutch thought he might have to sit anyway, but Jimmy poked him in the shoulder with the gun, so he told his knees to toughen up, told his stomach to stop acting like a baby, told his head to stop making his vision gray out.

Jimmy was acting like a kid showing off his new bike. "Come see this!" He pushed Hutch the ten steps or so across the room to a section of the wall that looked particularly solid. "Stand right there and say 'open sesame' like at the Castle." He grinned, and when Hutch said nothing he said it himself

and pressed an almost invisible button at waist height. A door-sized panel swung outward, revealing a very well stocked wet bar, but one set into the dark reaches of a fake stone cave. "Look at this! See, I designed it so the water in the sink comes out like a waterfall. Cool, huh? Davey and I never imagined we'd have a place like this." He looked at Hutch with one eyebrow lifted, like he expected a shower of applause. Hutch, hands cuffed behind his back, couldn't have obliged even if he'd wanted to.

We? We'd have a place like this?

"I modeled it," Jimmy continued, "on one of the rooms in the Madonna Inn up in San Luis Obispo. The Caveman Room, of course. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"You would love it. They try to make you think you're someplace you're not. Well, I guess I should say you would *have* loved it." He looked down as if embarrassed to have forgotten Hutch would never have the chance to go the Madonna Inn, nor anywhere else after tonight. Then he brightened. "I might take Davey up there to cheer him up. He'd like the Antique Cars Room, wouldn't you say?" He seemed to turn inward, maybe remembering—or imagining—something, but then he looked up again. "That one has two beds."

What did that mean to him? Hutch was stunned at the level of disintegration he was watching. Jimmy should have won dozens of Oscars if this was what he hid every day of his life. The man was on some kind of inner trip. Staying silent seemed to be Hutch's best course of action at the moment. Best to just try to get a step or two ahead somehow.

"You're not much of a talker, are you, Hutch? Are you always so quiet?" Hutch shrugged and Jimmy said, "Okay, then, come in here and check this out. Maybe you'll recognize this." He moved a few feet to the right and opened another door, this one of heavy dark-stained wood. It had an old-fashioned doorknob of clear red glass. Jimmy turned it and waved Hutch in.

Bright fluorescent lights hummed on overhead and Jimmy said, "God, I love this room. You recognize it, don't you?"

Hutch wasn't all that sure he didn't. In this room there were shiny white walls and floor, a stainless steel tray like they had in emergency rooms, and a steel table like the ones in the morgue. On a high side counter that held an industrial sized sink, a row of instruments...huge round bowl, scissors, scalpels...

"Jesus Christ, Jimmy, what the hell is this?"

"Oh, come on, you must recognize it. You said you were a fan. I'm disappointed." He waited, grinning, lifting his chin and an eyebrow. "No idea?" Hutch shook his head. "You're going to feel silly...okay... It's the set from *The Hunted*. It's The Butcher's Chamber. I had to buy it all from Universal, and they really gouged me, but no one had a clue why I wanted it. No one ever has a clue. Well, until it's too late, anyway. Davey thinks it was self-indulgent. He's probably right."

Hutch started to feel very peculiar. The room seemed almost like it was moving. He tried to back out and nearly bumped right into Jimmy, who simply stepped back and let Hutch lose his balance.

Without his hands free, he was unable to catch himself. He ended up on his already sore butt, this time with his right knee bent at an uncomfortable angle, and Jimmy hovering above him patting his face and asking him if he was okay. The whole helpful effect was shattered, though, because he kept the gun pressed tight to Hutch's temple the entire time.

"No, I'm not okay, you fucking lunatic. What the hell do you think you're doing anyway? Are you

crazy? What the hell is this?" Maybe it wasn't such a smart way to talk to a psycho who was holding a gun to your head.

For a moment Jimmy's happy grin went away, replaced by The Butcher's dark grimace.

"Now," Jimmy said, "I know you're jealous of me so I'll let it go, but really, I don't like being spoken to like that."

Hutch felt abruptly sick in a way he'd never experienced. It wasn't only in his belly; it was in all of him, his arms, his legs...It must have shown on his face.

"If," Jimmy said solemnly, "you ruin my three thousand dollar carpet, I'll probably have to lop off one of your fingers."

"We can't have that. It would make more of a mess." Hutch thought he sounded okay, and not as if he was about to swoon like a maiden in one of Starsky's old Bela Lagoosie movies. He hoped Jimmy still had a sense of humor somewhere in his repertoire.

Jimmy laughed, full and rich, a deep belly laugh. He wiped grandly at his eyes, though there were no tears. He took Hutch's elbow and helped him up with some difficulty. "That was seriously brilliant, Hutch. I'm going to have to use that someday in a scene." He led Hutch back to the seating area and pushed him gently onto the nearest chair. He stepped back.

"Jimmy, where's Starsky?"

The warm humorous light left Jimmy's eyes as instantly as if he'd turned off a pair of spotlights.

"You," he said, voice low and steady, "do not get to say that name ever again. Ever." Then he blinked, and Hutch watched him pull friendly old happy Jimmy the Generous Host back on, like a costume. He smiled, a little sadly. "Why on earth would you ask me that? Davey's fine as far as I know. I haven't seen him since yesterday. I didn't know we were going to have a party or I might have invited him. Maybe I'll give him a call. Later." He half-turned away. "Can I get you anything? Something to drink? How about that coffee? Or, I have a 1967 Bordeaux I've been saving...No? If you change your mind—"

"Now what?" Hutch said. Not that he really wanted to find out.

"Well, I happen to know you enjoy looking at other people's photo albums and scrapbooks, so I thought I might show you some things you didn't see earlier that you might like almost as much."

So that's what had happened. Maria had ratted him out, and Jimmy, who knew Starsky and how he worked, and therefore also knew how Hutch worked, had expected him, watched for him.

And all Hutch had been afraid of was getting arrested for trespassing.

If Jimmy didn't know Starsky had looked at all the albums, too...

"I'll pass, thanks."

"Really, Hutch, you don't think you have any choice here, do you? At all?"

He reached under the coffee table and pressed yet another hidden button, and a drawer slid out from one end. Jimmy rummaged around a little and took out an old beat up cigar box, and set it on the table. He pulled a chair over so he could sit right next to Hutch. He turned and looked up, watching Hutch's face as he opened the lid. So Hutch had a second to prepare, and meant to keep his face bland and expressionless, but it turned out to be impossible. He leaned forward without meaning to, because he couldn't take in what he was seeing.

The box held what seemed to be dozens of plastic bags, like small sandwich bags, all with the tops

folded over and taped down, each one labeled and marked with some blocky childish writing.

Each one contained a small curl of dark brown hair.

"Pretty great, isn't it?" Jimmy said. "I've got all of them nicely organized in order, first to last. See?" Hutch tried to nod but he felt paralyzed. "No one's ever even noticed that I take the hair. Can you believe that? You're the only one who knows, how do you like that?" He gave Hutch a congratulatory punch on the shoulder. "Well, I know, too, of course."

He reached into a pocket and pulled out another small bag, and Hutch felt his heart stop, and then start again, racing faster than he thought anyone could survive. But the hair in that one— *Oh God, Jimmy. What did you do?*

"I didn't have a chance to put this one away yet so you're getting a sneak preview. Look at this one. Blonde hair, like yours. Her hair was too long though, so I had to cut off a lot more than this. They'll probably notice that. I don't think they've found her yet, though, because I didn't see anything in the papers." He put the bag neatly in place, in front of the last row to the right. "Did you?"

"Jesus, Jimmy."

"And get this. I doubt they'll even think of me anyway because—you'll love this—I didn't make love to her, and I didn't give her the beauty mark. They'll never realize it was me, such a different M.O. Brilliant, right?" He took hold of Hutch's eyes, smiling and nodding. Then he squinted a little.

"Really, you don't look so good there, man. I'd better get you some brandy or something . . ."

"You better let me the hell out of here is what you better do."

"Oh, now, even you can't honestly believe I'm going to do that."

"Starsky won't let you get away with this."

"Didn't I tell you—? Oh never mind. It doesn't matter anymore." Jimmy seemed to try a few of his stock "it doesn't matter anymore" expressions and finally settled on one that made him look at least ten years younger. Hutch had to make room for some admiration alongside his horror. The guy really was an incredible actor. Again Jimmy went on blithely. "And anyway, how's he going to find out? Are you going to tell him? I don't think so. And I'm not going to." He tucked the box back into its drawer. "I'll be playing the role of Comforter to the Bereaved. We'll sit shivah and have some nice cold cuts and baked goods, and I won't leave him alone until I'm sure he's okay. Don't worry, I'll take care of him."

"Jimmy."

"Yes, Hutch?"

But Hutch couldn't come up with anything else to add. He felt like his brain had just left on the last flight out and the rest of him wasn't even at the gate yet.

Jimmy went on with his near-soliloquy. "You know, I should have used you in my movie. Why didn't I think of that? You could have been cast as Officer with No Lines Number 2. Perfect for you. You'd barely even have to act. You really don't talk very much."

Hutch swallowed a few times. Silently said his mantra a few times. Took a few breaths. Smiled.

"I was in a movie once," he finally said. "But they cut my part. I was, uh, I was devastated." Was that meant to earn some kind of sympathy vote? He guessed anything that might create some kind of bond, however far he had to reach for it, was worth a try.

"Oh yes, that unintentionally hilarious Western that Davey told me about. He said, 'Just between you

and me, Hutch shouldn't give up his day job,' and we laughed about it." He put his head back. There was no sympathy there. "Oh, don't look so insulted. Just because someone looks good doesn't mean they can act. It's not for everyone." He patted Hutch's knee. "He did think you were a good cop though. Always said so. Said you always talked a lot, talked his ear off sometimes." He paused and examined Hutch's face. "I'm not seeing that side of you."

Well at least Jimmy had sort of said he looked good. Hutch still had no brilliant ideas for what to do next. So he said, "Do you want me to talk now? What do you want me to say?"

"I have to feed you your lines, too? Oh, come on, I shouldn't have to do everything."

"Then you keep going, and I'll ad lib."

"You want me to talk about Davey, don't you? You want to know why."

"Yes, Jimmy. For God's sake, tell me why."

Jimmy laughed. "Sorry, but I think I've probably talked enough. And anyway, if you can't figure it out for yourself, why should I just hand it to you? Some detective you are."

He suddenly yawned, wide-mouthed, with sound effects. Hutch, of course, yawned too, and felt ridiculous.

Jimmy went on without a missing a beat. "It's almost midnight. I should get you squared away before it gets light. I'm not going to get much sleep tonight. I have to take a meeting at seven a.m." He stood up, and put a hand under Hutch's elbow. Hutch grunted a little and Jimmy grinned. "You sure are saddle sore, aren't you, Hoss? I'd give you a massage but I'd have to charge extra for the middle of the night visit, and anyway, I don't think there's enough time. Sorry about that, chief." He looked Hutch straight in the eyes. "Davey loves my massages." He watched carefully for Hutch's reaction, and seemed disappointed when all he got back was a blank-eyed stare. "Well, I guess that's it for you, then. Cut and print. That's a wrap." He actually giggled. "Cut. That's funny."

Hutch thought he should see his life flashing before his eyes, or wonder what it would be like on the other side or how much pain and terror he'd have to endure to get there. Or that he should rush Jimmy and take the bullet to the head—it would be better than obediently doing whatever Jimmy had planned—but all he could really think about was how he'd never asked Starsky if there was any chance, ever, if Starsky had ever thought that maybe someday...

And worse, that Starsky was going to spend the rest of his life thinking this was all his fault.

And then, he thought, *This is your fault, Starsky. This is a guy you've known practically your whole life. You're always talking about how well you know him, how much you trust him. How you and he...Damn it, Starsky. You should have known, and you should have done something. That girl, that blonde girl, she's on your head, too. They all are. And now you'll never know I wanted...* He stopped, a rush of guilt for his ugly thoughts making his face hot and his throat ache.

And of course he'd made Starsky promise not to go to Jimmy's tonight. Whose fault was that?

"Jimmy, wait. You don't want to do this."

"Sure I do." Jimmy pushed the gun into the middle of Hutch's back and gave a shove with it. "Just not here on the carpet."

"Starsky's going to find out sooner or later, and how do you think he'll feel about it? What do you think he—"

The pressure of the gun against his spine lifted suddenly, and before he could think or react, Jimmy hit him with it on the back of the head. Hutch stumbled forward and nearly fell, but Jimmy grabbed

his hair and pulled him back and up. He cried out, flashing back instantly to Forrest's goons holding his head back the exact same way, and he instinctively struggled, hurting his wrists and shoulders, and feeling like handfuls of hair were coming straight out of his head...like the girl at the barn, her hair on the ground lifting and moving lazily in the breeze...*oh God, Jimmy, please don't...*but Jimmy kept pulling until Hutch finally stopped thrashing. When he let go, the relief was intense. Hutch badly wanted to rub the spot where it throbbed. Why couldn't the guy have been short and out of shape? Why'd he have to be Hutch's height? Have Hutch's strength? Not to mention his gun. *Jesus Christ, Jimmy...*He turned around so he could see Jimmy's face, and tried to keep from showing what must be on his own.

"I told you not to say his name, Hutch, and now you've pissed me off."

"It must have really pissed you off that first time Starsky introduced me to you." His erratic breathing made it hard to get the words out. "Hey Jimmy, I've got a new pal, and guess what, he's as good looking as you are, and I think I like him better, and I'm going to be spending practically all my waking hours with him.' You must have loved that, hey Jim?"

Maybe he'd gone insane, or maybe now he was pissed off, too. Pissed off was much better than scared shitless. He tried to slow his breathing, but his voice had sounded high and tight even to himself, and he could hear his heartbeat in his own ears.

Jimmy leaned forward, close enough for Hutch to smell his aftershave. Something light and fresh. He was pretty sure his own smell wasn't quite as pleasant. Didn't insane murderers sweat? Even Jimmy's breath didn't stink.

"Please go into my chamber, you fucking asshole."

"Ah, may I assume I have now met the real James Golden?"

"You don't have any idea who that is, but if you like, yes, you have now met the real me. And it's actually Goldblatt, but if you tell anyone I'll have to kill you." He chuckled, but went on without pointing out the irony. "I sometimes pretend to be something I'm not. It's called *acting*, you idiot. So far, no one's complained." He pushed Hutch the last few steps into the room with the long steel table and sharp steel knives. "Well, here's a problem I didn't expect. I like to see my girls on their backs, but with those cuffs behind you, how will you do that? Hmmm." He stood still a moment, tapping his fingers on the butcher's table and bopping the gun on Hutch's shoulder blade in a counter tempo. "Okay, then. I guess we'll have to make a small adjustment to the placement of the restraints."

In some still-functioning part of his brain, Hutch went on the alert, and felt himself pull together as his scattering wits began to focus inward again. He let go of his wildly spinning terror, and suddenly felt like himself again.

"What did I do with your keys?" Jimmy said, patting himself. "Did you see where I put them?"

"I'm supposed to be the prop master, too? Do I have to do everything around here?"

Jimmy stopped fishing in his pockets and looked up. And then he laughed, this time hard enough to make himself cough so that he had to put a melodramatic hand to his chest.

"Now that's funny. I sincerely wish we could have gone for another ride, maybe even dinner. I should have gotten to know you better. All these years and I never made an effort. Never knew I should have. That night at the Magic Castle, I knew something was going on, the way you looked at . . . well, anyway. I wish I had more time to spend with you. You're one funny guy." His face suddenly changed. "Davey's really going to miss you." Then it changed again. The guy's facial range was unbelievable. "Do you have any last words for him, Hutch? Or would you like me to choose

something for you? Maybe something from *King Lear*?"

"How about *Camille*?"

"Oh, that's perfect. Davey played *Camille* once, you know. Back in high school. He was hysterically funny. That's when I first knew . . . well, never mind. Very appropriate." He held up Hutch's keys and jingled them. "Now, let's see, how can I do this properly?"

Hutch had always assumed that Starsky'd been joking about *Camille*. That he'd wanted to make Hutch laugh in a bad situation. It made him smile now, and Jimmy saw it.

"What? What's funny?"

"Nothing. Forget it. Let's get this over with."

Jimmy seemed surprised. "Why would you want me to hurry up and kill you? That doesn't make any sense at all. Don't you want to drag it out? See what knowledge I might decide to share, tell you where all the bodies are and where your final resting place will be? Maybe you'd even get rescued. Or maybe you still want me to tell you *why*." He took hold of Hutch's arm and pulled him over to the table. "Could you please lean over and put your forehead right down on the table? A little farther to the left, there, like that, and your feet, move them over this way . . ."

He gave a shove with one foot so that Hutch's feet were too far under him and the only way he could keep from falling backward was to bend as far forward onto the table as he could. It was an awkward position, as Jimmy intended, and he didn't see how he was going to be able to twist away when Jimmy unlocked the first cuff. And the gun digging into his left kidney, that was a deterrent, too. Jimmy was right handed but he must have moved the gun to his left so he could manipulate the key in the lock more easily. A missed opportunity.

What was a kidney? He had two of them. He wasn't going to lie placidly down on the goddam table like a steer walking obediently into the slaughterhouse. He'd rather—

The left cuff opened with a small snick. Hutch's arms fell like two dead weights, his left coming to rest next to Jimmy's. *Inside* Jimmy's left arm. Without any conscious thought, Hutch ducked his head down and swung his left arm out, then up fast, and at the same time swept to the left with his right arm—the handcuffs still attached. The momentum carried him on and around so that he ended up behind Jimmy. The gun went off on its way past, near Hutch's left ear. The sound of it nearly stunned him senseless, and the heat of it made his skin and scalp contract. He punched his right fist into the side of Jimmy's head and the empty left cuff arced around and slammed into his face. As he stumbled, Hutch hooked one leg out from under him and shoved high on his back. Jimmy went down hard and Hutch heard a horrible melon sound as his head hit the floor. Hutch went right down with him, yanking the gun straight out of Jimmy's flailing hand. His left ear rang, but Jimmy lay under him, not moving, and Hutch put a shaking knee into the small of his back and the nose of the gun against the base of his skull.

Where were the keys? He looked frantically around, trying to spot them, afraid they were underneath Jimmy, but finally he found them half hidden under his own right leg. He grabbed them, and found he had to switch the gun to his left hand, too, and then that he had to put it down if he had any hope of getting the cuffs off his own right wrist and onto Jimmy. So he shifted forward and leaned his full weight onto his left knee and pressed it onto Jimmy's neck where, if his spine broke by mistake, Hutch would feel no guilt.

"Thought you were a good enough actor to take down a real live cop?" Jimmy didn't answer. The truth was, he almost had been good enough. "Who's not talking now? Huh, Jimmy?" He took some deep ragged breaths. "Got anything you want me to tell *Starsky*? Huh? What's that? I can't hear you,

you fucking maniac." Hutch couldn't tell if Jimmy was out cold, or just playing a Dead Guy. *Great, now I'm talking in capital letters like Jimmy.* Or maybe Jimmy really was dead. That would be better all around. For everyone. He felt for a pulse, hating the feel of Jimmy's skin under his fingers, and disappointed to find it strong and regular. He could hit him again, finish the job. It would be so easy. Who would ever know? He jerked his hand away, and wiped it off on the knee of his jeans.

He felt his breathing and heartbeat slow down some, but his hands were shaking so badly that he could barely get the cuffs off and then put one of them on Jimmy's wrists. Then he realized that unless he could attach him to something that wouldn't move or break, he'd be stuck there babysitting until Maria and Del showed up in the morning, or else he'd have to manhandle him back out through the hallway and up the steps to the room near the front door where there was a phone. And if he'd been Jimmy, he would not have cooperated with that.

He could see nothing in the stripped down room that would do the job. Just the table and the narrow metal legs under the sink and countertop. They wouldn't hold for long but they'd have to do, so he dragged Jimmy's dead weight in short jerks across the floor, brought his arms around behind him, and attached him, one arm around the nearest leg under the sink and hands together behind him. It looked awkward and uncomfortable. Even if he struggled, he'd never get enough leverage to bend the steel leg. Might break his own arm, though. One could hope.

That still didn't feel like nearly enough. There must have been something in there somewhere he could have used to bind his legs—Jimmy needed something for tying up his victims. He couldn't see anything, though, and taking the time to search seemed like a bad idea. Jimmy could wake up at any moment.

He stood up, breathing harder than he ever did at the end of his morning runs, and sprinted for the phone.

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Hutch tried not to wince while the paramedic stuck a scope into his still-ringing left ear. He tried to ignore the throb of the swelling bruise on the back of his head where Jimmy had tried to scalp him. For some reason his right knee kept sending him emergency signals, and he couldn't remember how it had gotten twisted. He told the medic, who promptly cut right up the leg of his jeans so he could examine it. Hutch had liked those jeans.

At least he'd stopped shaking by the time the cavalry had arrived.

Jimmy's beautiful house was now full of uniforms and detectives, a crime lab team, and the ambulance squad, everyone tracking dirt all over the three thousand dollar carpet and scratching up the imported marble floors. Hutch sat in the same chair he'd sat in next to Jimmy less than an hour before, and watched the lab guys take apart the table with the hidden drawer, though he could certainly have told them where the open sesame button was.

What they found in there alongside the old cigar box had left most of them speechless, and to Hutch's great satisfaction, one of them had upchucked on the carpet. Even Hutch, who had an idea of what to expect, still went dry mouthed and queasy. He watched one of the lab guys open it up—another photo album, as shabby as the cigar box, and over-filled so that the spine had separated. In it, dozens of photos, some old black and white ones fading slowly to gray, others on Polaroid film, and all of them pictures of Jimmy with his arm slung around the shoulders of young girls, each one age twelve or thirteen. They all had light eyes and a lot of dark curls, and on each little face, a sick terrified little smile. *Come on Davey, say cheese for the camera! Smile!* Hutch could see one of the color photos in the lab guy's hand. The child had tried her best to do as she'd been told. So had the

next one, and so had all the others. He could imagine how quickly the thrill of having Jimmy Golden offer them a ride on his horse, or some ice cream, or even an autograph, had turned to stark fear.

Some of the early black and white pictures had companion photos, the same girl mounted on the same page, nude and on her back on an unadorned wooden bed, and tied to the headboard face up, knees drawn to her chest so that her small skinny bottom and her vulva were directly in front of the photographer. In the later color Polaroids, the girls were tied the same way, but on the Butcher's table in the Butcher's chamber. He could see the steel legs of the counter that he'd cuffed Jimmy to. He had trouble swallowing, and wished he could get some water from the fancy bar. He felt a cold line of sweat drip down his back.

From away down the hall he heard a scuffle above the nearby din and tensed instantly. *Now what?* He tried to breathe. Then he heard a voice yelling, "Get the hell out of my way! *Hutch!* I'm a cop. Get out of the way! *Hutch!*"

Someone said, "It's his partner. Let him through."

Hutch stood up and turned toward the door, but there were too many people in the room and he couldn't get past them. So he yelled back "Starsky!" and waited. Starsky burst through the people clogging the doorway like he was the blade of an icebreaker, and everyone parted to let him in. As soon as he saw him, Hutch felt all the crawling in his belly evaporate, like the way he'd felt when Starsky had held his hands in that hospital bed and willed the pain out of his chest. Just seeing him this time did the job. He wanted to grab him, pull him in tight right there in front of everyone...And then he knew that what he really wanted to do was kiss him, hard and full, no holds barred. And that realization made his stomach go light again, but so differently now, so completely different...He watched as Starsky plowed his way through the crowd like he didn't even see that there was anyone else in the room.

Starsky pulled himself up short right in front of Hutch and stared at his eyes, searching them.

Hutch wanted to touch him, take his hand, but something in the way Starsky stared at him—it was like the cuffs were still on him. He couldn't move.

"You okay?" Starsky said.

"I'm fine."

"Is he dead?"

"No."

Starsky nodded once. His throat moved twice as he swallowed.

And then he turned and left.

Act II: Guilt

Chapter 15

Starsky knew he hadn't been an easy child. He knew exactly why he'd gotten exiled to California. What he'd never told his mother was that it had always felt like a reward, not a punishment. Because if he'd never come to Bay City, he'd never have met Jimmy Goldblatt. He'd known in some small hidden part of himself that he wouldn't have become the man he was if not for Jimmy's uncomplicated and continual delight in his presence. No one back east had ever cared about him in quite that unreserved way, right from the instant they met.

And if sometimes he'd floundered in Jimmy's shadow once the lights got bright around him, that was his own problem, because it never seemed to occur to Jimmy that Starsky might want something else for himself.

And if sometimes he saw a strange fleeting look in Jimmy's eyes, an odd glitter when he wasn't really quite looking right at him, well, he'd always figured Jimmy still sometimes wanted...

"Oh, *God*, Jimmy," he said to the shadows that flew past the car's windows. "Is this what you always were? Even when we..." He couldn't even let himself think the words.

Eventually he'd found a path for himself that hadn't been cleared first by Jimmy Golden, and that path had led him straight to Hutch.

And now here he was, alone and driving too fast in the dark on a deserted byway that he didn't know, on no sleep and an empty belly, looking backward in time and forgetting to watch the lane ahead. Images came to him, not of the dark road, but of familiar faces like a dream sequence in an old black and white movie, or like photographs on the pages in an old album . . .

"Look what I got," Jimmy said. "My mom gave it to me."

He set the camera on a flat rock and pulled Davey back, yanking at his arm so he would sit down on the picnic table. He flung a sun-warmed arm around Davey's shoulders and said, "Smile! Say cheese," and they grinned like idiots until the timed shutter finally clicked. Jimmy shoved him sideways into the sand and poked him and tickled him until he got mad and started to wrestle.

It wasn't the first time they'd played the game, the one where Davey was always an American spy, and Jimmy was always the evil Russian inquisitor sent to torture the location of the secret spy encoder out of him. The poor dumb spy always had to try his very best to escape, but when he did, he always ended up overcome by the incredibly strong and limber torturer, and also somehow always ended up squashed flat on his back with the devil on top of him, laughing in his face.

This time he felt something pressing into the top of his thigh, and it hurt a little.

"What ya got there, Jimmy? A gun?"

A second after that he realized what it was, and a second after that he was standing up in the sand, hands in front of him in mock surrender, trying to pretend he still thought that what he'd felt really was a gun stuck into the waistband of the torturer's swim trunks.

And less than a second after that, he found he had a gun of his own and that Jimmy wasn't fooling. Wasn't fooled.

Starsky blinked over scratchy eyes and wondered where the hell he was and how he'd gotten there. Not just there on that road to God knew where—but there in time and space, in that life. He felt like

he didn't exist anymore, because everything that had ever kept him attached to himself didn't exist, had never existed. He'd been tossed overboard, and there was no one left on the boat to bring it around to rescue him.

Somewhere off to his right he could see the first faint glimmer of dawn. So he was heading north. He started looking for signs, but it was a good twenty miles before he saw one. Shit, he was almost to Lompoc. He rubbed at his eyes. It was time to find a gas station and something to eat. And to pull himself together. Somehow.

"I'm Hutchinson. Ken. I think we met the other day. It's Dave, isn't it?"

Dave looked up from his book. He didn't really want to put it down—Rosemary had just gotten suspicious of her traitorous husband and his deal with the sweet little old couple next door—but he remembered this guy from Goals of Investigation, and that he'd liked him right off. So he stuck a napkin in the paperback to mark his place and gestured to the other side of the booth.

"Yeah. Hutch, right?"

The guy gave him a pained kind of grin, like he didn't really want the nickname, but knew it was inevitable.

"Right." He had trouble squeezing in so Dave pulled the table a little closer to himself to give him more room.

"I just ordered. You want something?" He looked around for the waitress. "They got excellent meatloaf here."

"I'll have a salad," Hutch said. "Maybe some fruit."

"Fruit! That's not lunch." He tried to talk the guy into some fries at least. "My ma would tell you to khap a nosh." He stopped a moment and smiled at the thought of her telling Blondie here that he needed to eat more. It was what she always said to Jimmy whenever she visited.

"I eat! I like to keep the arteries clear, you know?"

When their food arrived, Dave leaned across the table and speared one of Hutch's tomatoes.

"Delicious," he said, though it tasted like plastic.

As they ate, Dave looked at the way the overhead fluorescents made Hutch's eyes shimmer, and how his hair didn't fall forward when he put his head down. How he looked like he could fell a tree with his bare hands and drag it home without breaking a sweat. And then he found himself wondering what kind of gun Ken Hutchinson carried in his pants. He was a little shocked at his depth of disappointment when the guy started talking about the wife.

Dave found he'd eaten the excellent meatloaf without tasting a bite.

"You should come over sometime with your lady," Hutch was saying. Dave hadn't heard the part about where Hutch lived with the wife, so he'd have to embarrass himself and ask again later. After, that is, he found a girl to take along. He never had a problem in that department, but for some reason, the whole idea wasn't too appealing.

The waitress cleared the table and Dave forgot to flirt with her.

Hutch said, "My treat," and took out a wallet fat enough that Dave decided to let him pay.

"Thanks," he said, and stretched out a hand. Hutch took it and Dave felt something odd, something new, and couldn't think of anything impressive to say. So he smiled. "See ya, Hutch."

Hutch grinned back. "See ya, Starsk." He turned and left the diner.

The guy was straight as an arrow. Dave decided to avoid him.

A deer appeared in the racing headlights, and Starsky swore, wrestling hard with the steering wheel, fighting the car, fighting the road. He pulled off onto the shoulder and came to a shaky stop, his heart thudding and his chest heaving like he'd just run three blocks after a mugger. He gripped the wheel as if he were still trying to get back control over it, until his hands hurt and he had to let go.

Someone in a long black Buick pulled up next to him and leaned across to roll down his window. Starsky flexed his hand and rolled his down as well.

"Everything okay?" the Buick's driver said. "Need some help?"

"No." He took a breath. "Thanks. I almost hit a deer." He rubbed his face. "Missed it."

The guy in the car nodded. "You're lucky. You could have been killed." He started to roll the window back up.

"Hey," Starsky said. "Know where I can get some breakfast? And some gas?"

"Follow me."

So Starsky found himself in a roadside diner just south of Lompoc, having breakfast with some guy he didn't know and would never see again, who talked about his wife and kids and not getting enough exercise and how he was thinking of giving up the life on the road and settling down. Maybe get a dog, even. The guy didn't ask any questions, and Starsky didn't offer anything other than a nod or a laugh or a grin. By the time they finished eating, Starsky realized this man had brought him back to himself just by having stopped to help a stranger on the side of the road. Someone had still been on the boat after all.

The waitress came to clear the table, and Starsky didn't think to flirt with her.

"Thanks," he said to his new friend, and realized he'd never learned the guy's name, nor given his own. "My treat." He brushed away the man's protests.

He went back out to the car, swung a wide arc in the dusty parking lot, and headed for home.

Chapter 16

The problem with getting hauled back into your life by some do-good stranger was that now you had to live it. Starsky wished the guy could have thrown him a line a little closer to Bay City, because by the time he got back to his place he felt like roadkill, and he was pretty sure he smelled like it, too.

Shower first, then a week asleep, and maybe he could wake up on the other side of this whole nightmare.

A week. Try a lifetime.

He didn't know how to get through this. He needed what he didn't have, and what he didn't have was why he needed it.

I'm thinking in circles, Hutch.

He left his clothes in a pile on the floor, turned on the shower and stepped in without waiting for it to get warm. The spray stung him, shocked him, made him gasp, and then the sudden warmth on his head...it felt like blood in his hair, on his face. He rubbed frantically at his head, stared at his hands, blinked blood-warm water out of his eyes—and backed away from himself so that he almost fell out of the bathtub.

Shit oh shit I can't do this Hutch I can't do this.

He sat on the floor until he started to shiver. Then all he could think was that he might not make it to the bed before he fell asleep, and that if only he really could sleep, he didn't care where he did it.

But when he finally lay in bed, covered and not quite warm, he couldn't get his muscles to relax and his brain wouldn't let him go. Bits of memories shoved themselves in and out of his head . . .

"Come on Davey, smile!"

"Jesus, Jimmy, how many pictures you need? They're all the same anyway."

"Hey, Starsk, Vanessa's out of town. You a Yankees fan? I've got two tickets."

"Dodgers, partner, but twist my arm."

"Taste it, Davey . . . it's so good . . ."

"Oh man, that's awful. I might faint . . ."

"Not yet . . . God, not yet . . ."

"Promise me you won't go there tonight."

"I won't go there tonight."

"Okay! If that's what you want, then okay. I'll leave you alone."

"Aw, come on, Jimmy. You know that's not what I meant."

"How much should I tell Jimmy if he asks about the murders?"

"I trust him . . . He'll take care of you."

Oh my God. The muscles in his stomach clenched and it was all he could do not to draw his knees up like a baby.

How could I not know? How could I be so fucking blind? I almost got you killed.

He threw off the covers and sat up, fists pressed to his eyes.

You almost got yourself killed, you fucking idiot. Why did you go back to his house? You made me promise not to, and then you went yourself. Why did you do that? How could you be so stupid? You almost got yourself killed.

There was no chance of sleep. He thought of drinking himself unconscious but he knew better than to believe that would work. Or help. He got up and began to wander around his apartment but it wasn't big enough and he felt trapped. Too tired to go back out, too tired to sleep.

He turned on the television, hoping for some mindless rerun. Instead, on every channel there were news anchors with big Breaking News screens behind them. And under the Breaking News, two photographs, one of a light-haired woman in her early thirties, and one of Jimmy and his brilliant golden smile.

Starsky discovered he was sitting on the floor, knees bent, with no memory of getting there. The familiar face of the anchorman on the Channel 2 broadcast looked grim.

"...the body of Melissa Salisbury, the woman found dead early this morning on a riding trail in Palos Verdes Estates. Police have stated that it does not appear to be the work of the Bridle Path Killer. No word yet from the coroner's office as to how she was killed, but early reports indicate that she may have been strangled. Police are questioning actor Jimmy Golden, who was arrested last night after a scuffle with a police officer, and who lives less than four miles from where the body was found. Golden keeps horses at the Palos Verdes Stables, where Salisbury also boarded her horse, and police appear to consider him a suspect in last night's murder. Stayed tuned to this station for more news as we have it."

The news was replaced with a morning talk show—already in progress—and Starsky watched unseeing while Julia Child dismembered a dead animal with joyous sweeping blows.

He felt his brain shut down. All he was left with was the look on Hutch's face as he'd turned away and left him standing there, injured, in Jimmy's house.

He tried to imagine where Jimmy was now, how he was acting. All he could think of was the black and white picture on the black and white TV screen. It was as if he couldn't remember what he really looked like at all.

Scuffles with police officers. Bridle Path Killer. He almost felt a laugh try to begin.

His head back against the front of his couch and fell, finally, asleep.

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He woke with the kind of startle that meant he'd heard something. He straightened up fast, ignoring the stiffness in his neck, reaching for his gun, finding nothing but bare skin. He rolled left and came to his feet like a cat, ready for—

"It's me! Starsk! It's just me." Hutch sat in Starsky's chair, hands up like a perp at the end of an alley. He looked like he was either trying not to piss himself, or worse, trying not to laugh. "I'm sorry, buddy."

"Jesus Christ," Starsky took a few gulps of air. "If I'd had my gun . . ."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Starsky slumped on the couch. "What are you doing here?"

Hutch looked down. "Watching you sleep."

"Hutch."

"I don't know. You took off again. I came to see if . . . I don't . . ." He stopped for a moment, and looked back up. "I'm sorry, I only . . ."

"I'm the one needs to be apologizing."

"Maybe we both do. I don't . . . I can't—"

"I know. Me neither."

Hutch looked up. "I know one thing. We need to do this together. Just don't take off on me again. I don't think I can handle—"

"I won't."

He'd said it too fast. He hoped he could keep his word. He still just wanted to get out of there, and he didn't understand why, when all he could think about was Hutch and how much he wanted to go to him—crawl across the floor and kneel in front of him—and beg him to forgive him, offer to do anything, anything to make this up to him, what he'd been through, what his stupid blind trust in Jimmy had almost done to him.

He stayed where he was, and stared at his knees. Because what *he* knew way down deep, and maybe not even all that deep, maybe right up there in the front of his brain where all the crap he ever thought about hung around and bugged the shit out of him, what *he* knew was that what they'd lost, both of them, was trust.

"You think this is your fault, don't you?" Hutch said.

"Got it in one."

"Starsky, this is Jimmy's fault, don't you get that?"

"And don't you get that I should have known? I'm not a kindergarten teacher, for God's sake. I'm a detective. A *homicide detective*. Maybe it's Jimmy fault that he is what he is, or his mother's or his goddam Uncle Stewie's, but what kind of cop am I that I didn't see what was going on right in front of me for twenty fucking years." He stood up, suddenly unable to sit still. He began to pace again, because it seemed to keep him from going off the deep end. "And then what do I do? I sit here on my ass, paralyzed, and let him go out and kill someone else. And he almost killed you, too. And you think that's not my fault?" He wanted to punch something. Someone. "Whose fault is that? Huh? Tell me whose fault that is."

"Well, it's not mine, pal. I can tell you that."

"What? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Hutch got up and stood in the middle of the floor. "What do you want me to say? What do you want me to think?"

Starsky wilted. "I don't even know what I want me to think. I don't know what I'm supposed to say." He sat back down on the couch, and put his head back.

"This is where we're supposed to be partners. Not where we're supposed to shove each other away." Hutch came over and sat next to him. "I need you, Starsky. Don't bug out on me. I need us to talk about this."

"I don't think I can. Not yet. I want to."

"So what do we do?" Hutch stretched out his hand, and Starsky wanted to take it, wanted to take it

and pull it to his chest. He tried, but he felt like his own hands were cuffed behind him. He couldn't move. Hutch dropped his hand and looked away.

"I don't know." It wasn't good enough. "I don't know."

"Do you want to see Jimmy?"

Starsky felt a sick flutter in his belly. "No."

"Have you read the papers?"

"No. I saw the news this morning."

"Do you want me to go see him?"

He looked at Hutch full on. "I want you to stay the hell away from him."

Again he felt the strong need to flee. It must have been obvious that he could barely sit still, because Hutch leaned over, started to move toward him, put his hand out again . . . and Starsky stood up fast and ended up in his bedroom, without realizing he'd moved at all. He found a shirt and a pair of jeans, fumbled them on, breathing hard again like he was running.

Hutch came to the door and watched him. "You're *leaving*?"

Starsky couldn't stand the tone in Hutch's voice. It reminded him of the songs of whales calling to each other across hundreds of miles of empty ocean.

"It's not you I'm running from."

"Then who?"

"Myself." He turned away and put his hands on the top of his dresser. He wanted to pound on it.

Hutch took a few steps forward and Starsky could feel the space between them grow warm.

"I'll go with you, then."

"You can't. Don't you understand . . .?"

"I'll go with you."

Starsky turned around, meaning to shove past him, hit him if he had to, but Hutch grabbed him hard, bruising his arms. He said it again, almost whispered it. "I'll go with you."

Something broke inside Starsky. He reached out wildly, and Hutch took him in, gathered him in.

"Let me go with you. Please."

Starsky nodded.

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Hutch went out and brought back every newspaper he could find. He read the headlines out loud: "'Actor James Golden Arrested, Held Without Bail'...'Golden Charged: Thirty-Six Counts of Rape and Murder'...'Golden Accused of Kidnapping and Attempted Murder of Police Officer'...Hey! They spelled my name wrong...'Hollywood Reeling at News of Jimmy Golden's Arrest'...'Here's a good one, I'm Innocent, Says Oscar Winner Jimmy Golden, It's All a Mistake'...Can you believe this?...'Fans Plan Candlelight Vigil In Front of Bay City Courthouse Tonight At 9 p.m.'...'Hollywood Rallies In Support of Fellow Actor Jimmy Golden'...I can't read any more of this." He tossed the last one on the pile of other papers.

Starsky sat in front of the television and turned the dial, looking for news reports. "They're all saying

the same thing. Let's get out of here. I gotta get out of here."

So Hutch called Dobey and told him Starsky was all right, and they were back on the job. Starsky could hear the rumble of Dobey's voice from across the room.

Hutch hung up the phone, and tried to convince him that they had to see Jimmy. For one thing, Dobey said that he'd told his attorney he wouldn't talk to anyone but Starsky. Starsky felt himself flush as Hutch repeated Dobey's report, and tried some of Hutch's deep breathing. It didn't help much.

"For another," Hutch said, "he's pleading innocent on all charges. I want him to look at me and say that to my face."

"He won't."

"I know."

"I keep thinking how could he look the same in all those news pictures. He looks like he did two days ago. Nothing's changed for him."

"Stop trying to figure him out. You'll make yourself crazy."

"—er."

"Huh?"

"Crazy-er."

Hutch looked up fast and caught the tiniest glimmer of a grin that Starsky let show on his face. When he responded with an all-out grin of his own, Starsky felt something shift inside him, like when a dislocated shoulder's been put back in place. The sudden loss of excruciating pain—it did something to you. He smiled back.

"Hutch."

"Yeah?"

"I got something to say, and I want you to listen, not say anything till I'm done, okay?"

The smile died, but Hutch nodded.

"Don't worry, Blondie. It ain't bad news. Just listen, okay?" Maybe he'd be able to say what he wanted to say more easily if he got up and moved while he spoke. "This whole thing is bad and it's not going to get better for a long time. Maybe this is the worst thing that's ever happened to me, but it isn't about me. It's about those girls, and it's about Jimmy. And it's about us. Because no matter what happens, you and me? We're still us. I know, it don't make sense."

Hutch opened his mouth, then shut it again. Starsky stopped his pacing, and fluttered a go-ahead hand at him.

"You and me, Starsk. There's nothing that matters to me more," Hutch said. "When you turned away from me at Jimmy's, I think that was the worst moment of the whole...thing."

Starsky stopped in front of him, stood over him in his chair. He reached out and touched his hair. "I got a lot of sorries for you, but maybe that one's the biggest. I'm sorry. I don't know why I did that."

"Don't."

"I gotta say it." He pulled the coffee table over so he could sit face to face. "I guess I thought I didn't know you either, that you and Jimmy—you were like Jimmy—no, that's not it. It was me, I didn't see *him*, so maybe I wasn't seeing you. And that's not it either. I *know* who you are, Hutch." He

couldn't look away from the still-raw burn of Jimmy's gun on Hutch's face. "But here's the one thing I did figure out. It's, I...I gotta make sure you know how much I love you. And I'm sorry. I won't run out on you again."

"Starsk."

They way he said it, something about the way it sounded. Different, softer but stronger, or something...different—but, more than anything, it was how Hutch looked when he said it. Starsky's face went hot and his brain went electric. He had to have imagined it, but a thought took hold in him, and for the first time since the whole mess had begun, he felt like he was walking in daylight.

He put out a hand, tentative, palm up. "God knows this isn't a cowboy movie," he said slowly, "and I still got no cowboy boots, but I..." It seemed crucial that he get it right, say it right, but all he could do was look down and hope Hutch would understand what he was trying to say.

"I'll give you mine," Hutch said, and took hold of his hand. "Will that do?"

Starsky smiled. "I guess it'll do." He got up, and pulled Hutch up with him. "Let's go see Jimmy."

It wasn't until he got the door open and they'd started down the stairs that he realized he hadn't let go of Hutch's hand.

Chapter 17

"I love how they twist the news," Starsky said, once they were in the car. "'Scuffle with a police officer.' That's what they call resisting arrest these days?"

Hutch didn't answer, so Starsky turned to look at him and nearly sideswiped a guy on a bicycle.

"What's the matter? Do you need me to pull over?"

"No," Hutch said, but it sounded like he was being strangled, so Starsky pulled over anyway.

"What is it, then?" Starsky turned sideways, put a hand on his arm. "What the hell's the matter?"

"Just go. I'm fine."

"You're so fine you look like you got mime face on you. You're pale as a ghost. Give, Hutch. What don't I know?"

"It's nothing. Delayed reaction. Please, just go. Let's get this over . . . let's go." He made a go motion with his hand.

Starsky tried to lean forward, to get a look at his face straight on, but Hutch turned away.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Jesus, Starsky, can't you for once do what I ask? Just go, will you please?"

"All right!" He pulled back out into the downtown traffic, but the crawlies had returned to his belly, double time, and his hands felt slippery on the steering wheel. He'd missed something. Something huge. *Okay, Hutch. What don't I know?* He tried to stop worrying about it. But then his brain jumped back to Jimmy and that was just as bad.

He started getting little adrenaline zings every few seconds. What was he supposed to say when he saw Jimmy?

And then he had a bad thought. Had Jimmy told Hutch . . .

"Did Jimmy say something to you? Is that it?"

"Can you please drop it?"

"No, I can't drop it. I can't believe you'd even say that to me now."

Hutch stayed quiet for so long that Starsky started to feel like he was the one needed to pull over. But then he said, "There's more to what happened at Jimmy's. I'll tell you about it. I was going to, but then, you were . . . I was . . . I was going to, and I will. But not now, okay? Trust me on this, will you?"

Trust.

Who do I trust?

"Okay." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Okay."

So they began to strategize about how to deal with Jimmy, and by the time they got to the county lockup and parked in the lower level, Hutch had got some color back in his face, and all the little adrenaline zings Starsky couldn't stop were at least predictable and manageable. And then he realized why Hutch had gone weird. He must have been having the same goddam zingers, maybe even worse. *What did Jimmy say to you?*

Oh, my God. What did Jimmy do?

He looked at Hutch, and found that he was looking right into his eyes.

What did Jimmy do to you?

Hutch blinked and gave him a small humorless grin, like he knew Starsky'd figured it out, or at least had finally realized something worse had happened than a scuffle with a police officer. He opened his door and started to get out, and Starsky put a fast hand on his arm, gripping tight.

"You tell me now, Hutch. Tell me now."

"I...can't. After we see Jimmy. I promise. I can't now. You'll understand why later. Let go, Starsk. Please."

Starsky hesitated for a long moment. Too long. Then he nodded. He got out of the car and felt old.

They went through the doors in silence and then through the familiar motions—showing their badges, turning over their weapons, signing the form acknowledging that they understood the dangers of entering the facility, nodding to the officers they knew, walking through the gate and listening to it clang shut behind them—all without talking to each other, without looking at each other. Starsky felt like he was watching a movie that he'd already seen. He knew all the lines, the locations, the sets, the actors, but he couldn't remember any of the dialogue. He had a moment of panic, like in the dreams he had sometimes where he was supposed to do something important but he'd forgotten—or had never known—how.

An officer outside the interview room said that he'd tell Jimmy's lawyer they were here. They sat on an uncomfortable bench and waited, and didn't once look at each other. The space between them seemed like a solid entity. Impenetrable. Cold. It didn't make any sense when only an hour before they'd...

The guard beckoned to them. He said that Jimmy had waived the right to have the lawyer present while they talked to him, and that the lawyer had left under severe protest. Then he made some crack about arrogant big shots . . . Starsky clenched a fist, and then somehow managed to let it relax by his side. Hutch straightened himself like he was about to go into the arena with a lion. But by the time they got to the door he seemed fine, acting like this was any routine interrogation.

Starsky thought he was the one with a good reason not to want to see Jimmy. What was Hutch's? Maybe he didn't want to know.

At the door, Hutch stepped back so Starsky could go in first, like it was his right, and Starsky took a breath and went in. Jimmy sat at the wide table, legs shackled to each other, hands shackled to the table.

"Davey," he said. "I'd give you a hug, but as you can see, I'm hobbled."

He didn't look at Hutch, didn't acknowledge his presence. Starsky wanted to grab him by the throat and tear out of him whatever the hell he'd done to Hutch. The dead girls had become shadowy somehow. Secondary. What had he done to Hutch?

He felt a small weight on the back of his shoulder. Hutch's hand, steadying him. It brought him back, and he yanked a chair over, sat down hard. Put his hands on the table.

"Why?" It was the word in his head that he couldn't get rid of.

"I didn't think you'd come if I didn't say I wouldn't talk to anyone else. I wasn't sure you would anyway." Jimmy smirked. "But here you are. I wanted to see you."

"You see me. Cut the crap and tell me why. I gotta know."

"Why what, exactly?"

Deep breathing wasn't going to help. Why had he agreed to come? *Who the hell are you?* is what he wanted to ask. He thought Jimmy might not understand the question.

"Tell me why you killed those girls, and let me get the hell out of here."

"Don't you know?"

I think you meant, "I didn't."

"No. Do you?"

"What kind of a question is that? Don't they give you training in the interrogation of suspects?"

Starsky didn't know how Hutch could sit so still. He looked like he was listening to a John Denver song about mountain lakes. Maybe he was doing that thing where he imagined he was really sitting by the water. It was convincing anyway, and Jimmy had begun to slide tiny sideways glances in Hutch's direction.

"You aren't a *suspect*. We got you cold. You know that."

Jimmy sat back, as far as he could anyway. He looked shocked.

"Davey, you don't . . . Oh, my God, you think I did this. Davey, it's *me*. How can you believe that nonsense. I was set up. Come on."

A minute before, he'd practically confessed and now he was set up? "You're saying you were framed." Starsky shook his head and looked at Hutch, then back at Jimmy. "Someone framed you for murdering more than thirty-five girls. You were framed for assaulting Hutch."

"Maybe it's him," Jimmy said, finally looking in Hutch's direction. "*He* set me up. You *know* me. Somebody framed me. Maybe it was Hutch."

There weren't a lot of ways to respond to that. Starsky felt like he needed help closing his mouth.

"How can you sit here and say that to me? What the hell is going on in your head?"

He watched as Jimmy swapped one facial expression for another. Had he always done that?

Jimmy said, "This is so unbelievable. I can't believe this is happening to me. You have to help me, Davey. I need you, can't you see that? You have to help me. I— I'm in trouble. I'm really scared."

Maybe he was one of those people who had different personalities. Like that girl Sybil in the miniseries who'd been horribly abused and she coped by splitting apart. Maybe that's what had made him such an incredible actor. He just called up the right personality for whichever character he was playing. But he hadn't been abused. He'd had a great childhood. His parents had adored him, had been so happy to have—wait. He'd been adopted when he was three. Starsky had forgotten that. Maybe there was something there to explain . . . *this*. But plenty of people were adopted and didn't turn into serial killers.

"I don't know why you did this, and I don't know why I never knew what you really were, and I don't know what that says about me, but I do want to help you. I'll try to help you. But you gotta cut the crap, because I see you *now*. I see what you are. What you always were. You do need help and I'll do whatever I can for you. But it ain't the kind of help you think I'm going to give you."

Jimmy smiled and shook his head a little, exactly the right amount, and then he looked woeful. He leaned forward in his chair and the chains on his legs clinked.

"I wish you wouldn't say 'ain't', Davey."

Starsky blinked. He stared at Jimmy, right into his eyes. "Hutch, get me out of here." He sat back. "Get me out of here. Now."

Hutch got up and knocked on the door, and as soon as it opened, Starsky stood up fast and pushed past him. Behind him he heard the chair he'd kicked away crash into something, and he heard Jimmy call his name, but he kept going, all the way to the gate. He retrieved his gun and, without waiting for Hutch, almost ran out of the building. By the time he got to the car he was shaking so hard he couldn't unlock it, and just as he was about to start blindly pounding on the car's roof, a quiet hand took the keys from him and opened the door.

"I'll drive," Hutch said. "Go on. Get in."

So Starsky went around to the other side, waited for Hutch to unlock the passenger door from inside, and got in, and all he could think of the whole time was that he should never have promised not to run again.

Chapter 18

Starsky picked up a stone and threw it into the waves like it was a piece of his past. He watched it sink, threw another. There was no one else on this bit of coastline. It was like they were on the edge of the world, and if they took even a few steps more, they'd fall right off. He'd stood on the crumbling edges of canyon cliffs that had felt safer.

He'd listened in near silence as Hutch had told him the whole story. His rage at Jimmy had nowhere to go. He needed to strangle the guy. He turned around to glare at Hutch and then he let him have it.

"You say you're embarrassed? You *should* be embarrassed," he said. "If you hadn't been so incredibly stupid you wouldn't have had to go through all that. You never heard of a warrant? Oh, right. You didn't think we could get one. You forget how to do a stakeout? How to investigate a crime? You forget how to be a cop? Huh? You'll be lucky if you don't get written up. You might as well have just walked into his house and bent over for him. Saved you both a lot of time and trouble. What the fuck were you thinking?" He knew he was over the top. He couldn't shut himself up.

Hutch sat on the sand and Starsky wished he'd get up, take a swing at him, do something other than stare at his own feet.

"I was thinking," Hutch said, tight-voiced, "that I could watch him and make sure he didn't go out and kill someone that you'd end up claiming all the blame for."

"That worked real well, didn't it?" Starsky tried to stop shouting. "That worked so well you handed him your gun and followed him into his house like a dog."

Hutch stood up and started to walk away down the beach.

"Where the hell are you going?" Starsky ran to catch up. The sand squeaked and cracked under his feet. "What are you doing?"

Hutch swung around to face him. "I kind of thought maybe you'd take this a little differently. Maybe I wouldn't have told you what *Jimmy* did to *me* if I'd known you were going to blame *me* for the whole thing."

Starsky felt his rage run away from him like the waves that ran off the beach into the ocean. He stopped dead. Hutch kept walking. "Hutch, wait. Wait."

Hutch stopped and turned fast, but he stared off somewhere in the long distance, and Starsky couldn't get him to look at his face.

Hutch finally brought his focus back and stared hard at Starsky's eyes. "It doesn't occur to you that I might need . . ." He put a hand to the back of his head and touched it carefully, then dropped his hand.

"Hutch. I'm an idiot. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, I get it. I know how bad this is for you. But . . ."

"I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. I don't . . . I can't think straight. I can't wrap myself around any of this. I'm screwing up. I know I am."

"Then work with me, partner. Not all your friends aren't what you thought they were."

"What? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know what that means. You said it yourself. You don't trust yourself anymore, so you don't

trust me either. I get it. It even makes sense. But it still . . ."

"Hurts?"

Hutch dropped his eyes. "Yeah. It hurts, Starsk. I wish I could say it doesn't, I wish I could be above it. Be there for you all the way. But there's a part of me that's almost glad about this because it's like every time I thought something bad about him . . . now I know I was right all along, not just—" He dropped his voice so low that Starsky could barely hear him. "—jealous." He looked up, looked at Starsky's face, and his eyes tightened. "But you and Jimmy, all these years." He sat down suddenly and started sifting sand through his fingers. "I always felt—it sounds so stupid, like high school—I felt left out. You and him. He knew you in ways I never did, and you were so, I don't know, comfortable with him. I've been sure there was more . . . and I . . ."

Starsky felt like his heart had simply stopped beating.

"There was."

Hutch swallowed and closed his eyes like he was getting ready to take a punch in the gut.

"You don't have to . . ."

"I think I do."

Starsky opened his mouth and nothing came out. So he walked back down the beach to the water's edge and stood there. He heard Hutch's footsteps crunching behind him, felt his fingers brush against his shoulder, and then Hutch's arms came around him from behind, and he leaned back against him.

"When you do that," Starsky said, "something happens inside me. Like that song."

"What song?"

"Something about feeling your arms around me like the sea around the shore."

He straightened, and Hutch let him go. He turned around.

"What happens inside you," Hutch said, "is what happens inside me."

Starsky reached out and touched his face. "If I tell you about me and Jimmy—" He watched Hutch take a step back, and felt colder than the wind off the sea. "If I tell you, promise me you won't—"

"Run? That's your defense mechanism, not mine." He sat down again as if to prove he wouldn't take off. "Just tell me."

So Starsky sat next to him, close, knees touching. But he looked straight ahead, out to the horizon where it was starting to go pink and orange just above the water.

"That picture you saw. That's the first one Jimmy took of us like that. That's all he wanted to do was take pictures of us the same way all the time, arms over each other's shoulders. He took dozens. Maybe hundreds." He watched a gull run into the water and then skitter back out again. "I thought he was stupid, wasting all that money on film. And every time after he took his pictures, he would start to tease me, try to get me to wrestle with him. Tickle me, poke me in the stomach. He had a game he always wanted to play. He already knew he was going to be an actor, and I thought he was, you know, practicing. Role playing. But I always played along. I liked it."

He didn't know if he could describe how it had felt. He went on anyway, and Hutch stayed quiet, letting him talk. He wanted to see Hutch's eyes, but he knew if he looked at him even once, he'd never be able to tell him the rest of it, and he had to now. It was too late to change his mind.

So he said, "He liked to make me pretend I was a spy, and he was some kind of evil torturer. I can't

believe I never thought anything of it. I guess maybe he was already sick, and I never gave it a thought. Why would I? And then one day, he was tickling me, making me crazy, and I realized he was . . . turned on."

He tensed, waiting to feel Hutch pull away, but he didn't move, didn't say a word.

"And then I realized . . . so was I." Hutch still didn't make a sound. "We were thirteen. I was pretty much always turned on. But that day it was different. It felt different. I don't know, real. We were at the beach." He looked around him, expecting to see the picnic tables, the trashcans, his bike lying in the sand next to Jimmy's. "We rode our bikes home like we had banshees after us. I pedaled standing up the whole way." He almost laughed. It had been funny then. Maybe it still was, or would have been. "We went to his house because his parents weren't there, and we didn't even make it to his bedroom. I never once thought it was wrong or bad or anything, just that it was incredible."

He felt himself grow hard, the past suddenly stronger than the present. It shamed him in ways he could never have imagined, and he groaned aloud without meaning to. He pulled his knees up. If Hutch saw him like that—

"Starsk."

Oh God, Hutch, don't. Don't say anything, please. He felt thirteen again, out of control, needing what he could never really have.

Some kind of compulsion kept him going. Like an out of tune car engine that kept turning over even after you tried to shut it off.

"We did it all the time. All the time, whenever we could, wherever we could. For two years I couldn't think of anything but him. All the time. And then we tried out for that school play, and for some reason the drama teacher thought it would be funny if I played Camille."

Hutch moved beside him, and drew a short breath. Starsky nodded without turning his head. "You said he told you that was when he first knew, right? But I don't think you know what he meant. There was a girl, she was in charge of costumes, and she helped me put on my dress back stage. I don't remember now exactly what happened, but we ended up making out, and of course Jimmy caught us. Seems kinda like a bad romantic comedy with a warped plot line."

It was getting dark. Somehow that made it easier. He realized his arousal had ebbed, and he could stretch his legs out again. He was thirsty, though. He wasn't used to talking like this. It felt weird, talking the way Hutch said that Jimmy had talked to him, one long monologue like he was the only one who'd been given any lines.

But he went on. "The next thing I knew, Jimmy shows up with a girlfriend. He was all over her. So me and the costume girl—her name was Eleanor—me and Eleanor, we started going out, too, and Jimmy never said a word about it, and he never touched me again." He stared out over the water, thinking about all the things he couldn't see that were out there under the surface. "And I never saw him with that camera again either. But nothing else changed. We acted like none of it had ever happened. I was glad. Relieved. By then I'd started to realize a few things about myself and about girls. And I was glad it was over, glad we never talked about it." He sat for a while, breathing in and out, trying to match the rhythm of the waves. "I wonder . . . if we had talked . . ."

"Don't do that to yourself, Starsk."

"No."

"So I guess we know what the trigger was, then. And the why is pretty much a given."

"So it *is* my fault. All of it."

"You aren't serious?"

"What else am I supposed to think?"

"That Jimmy was the world's greatest actor, probably from the time he was still in diapers, and you were a kid with none of the experience you have now. You never had any reason to see anything other than what he showed you. I've known the guy for years, too, and I never saw anything. Every time I had a hint, I explained it to myself some other way. So what's my excuse? Why am I not to blame? What about his teachers? His parents? The people he's worked with? Gonna need a pretty big firing squad for all of us blind fools."

"But the other day, once I *knew*, I bugged out and gave him time, and he killed that girl. He took you riding and I left you there alone with him, and then I went home and froze, and he goes right out after you leave and finds a girl with hair like yours and kills her. I don't know why he didn't go after you, kill you. Why didn't he ever try to kill you before? If he had, I don't know what I would have done." *I'd have killed him. I know I would have.* "And then you show up on his doorstep and he was probably pissed off you didn't come over earlier, save him all that effort."

"Yeah, that was a dumb move, I give you that. Let's beat the crap out of me for a while. For a change. I'll start."

Starsky almost laughed. At least he felt like maybe someday he might laugh again.

"Why girls? If he was trying to kill me over and over, why not boys?"

"I don't think he was trying to kill you. I think he was trying to . . . have you. Maybe he was ashamed that he wanted a boy. Maybe he was trying to prove he was normal somehow, because they were girls."

Starsky made a sound that hurt the back of his throat. "That made him normal?"

"In his mind maybe it did."

"Well, some prison psychiatrist is going to have the assessment interview of his life."

"At least we're done. We don't have to see him again. I doubt we'll even be allowed to."

Starsky finally turned to look at him, but then he turned away again. "I guess."

"You don't *want* to see him again, do you?"

"No. I don't know. I told him I'd try to help him."

And God help me, I still love him. Or what I thought was him.

"You don't owe him anything, Starsky."

"Maybe it's not about what I owe him."

Hutch turned to him now, and put a hand on his arm, gripping him tight. "You didn't kill those girls. It's not your fault that he did."

"I know that in my head. I'd say the same to you. But in my heart . . ."

"And I know *that*. To be honest, I'd feel the same way."

Hutch's hand was still on his arm and Starsky thought he was going to have five finger-shaped bruises. He welcomed the pain of it, the comfort of it.

"But that isn't what I meant."

"What, then? Yourself?"

"Hutch. It's about what I owe you."

Hutch dropped his hand away as if Starsky had suddenly caught on fire and burned him.

"You don't owe me anything!"

"I owe you everything." He stood up and started to brush sand off himself. He reached a hand down for Hutch, pulled him up when he took it, and pulled him in to himself once he was upright. "Maybe someday I can make you see that."

Hutch held onto him like he might blow away in the wind, and they stood like that almost without moving until, without warning, Starsky's belly rumbled.

Hutch began to laugh, and Starsky pulled back, indignant.

"So I'm hungry. What are you gonna do about it?"

"How about we go to my place and I scramble us up some eggs?"

Starsky started to grumble something about eggs being breakfast, not dinner.

"Thought you said not to let you talk me out of eggs next time I suggested them."

"Okay, okay. Eggs it is." He put a hand out and Hutch dropped the car keys into it.

It wasn't until he'd pulled out of the parking area by the beach and onto the 101 that he realized Hutch hadn't said a word about what Starsky had done with Jimmy all those years ago.

His stomach growled again, and Hutch reached over and patted it.

Chapter 19

Starsky threw the *Times* on his desk. "I don't understand how someone can plead not guilty with the amount of evidence there is against him."

"This is America," Hutch said. "You can plead not guilty even if you're caught red handed by twenty-three witnesses."

"Twenty-three?"

Hutch grinned. "Or twenty-two, even."

"Why does he keep asking to see me?" Starsky knew there was no answer to that. Or that the answer was so obvious it didn't need to be given. He was starting to feel like the whole case was about someone he didn't know, a stranger. It was a relief.

The mail delivery girl came in with her rolling basket, and stopped at his desk. She paused, and he looked up, grinning. "Got anything for me, sweetheart?" He couldn't think of her name.

She handed him a single letter, and seemed to be waiting for him to say something or do something. Maybe if he hadn't looked at the return address he might have.

"Thanks," he said, without looking up again, and barely noticed as she moved on. He held the envelope in his hands, staring at it without seeing it. He hadn't answered any of Jimmy's letters, so why did he keep sending them?

"What've you got?" Hutch said, and Starsky tossed it to him. Then he got up and went to the water cooler. He stood there for a minute trying to pull himself together, and then drew himself a cup. He drank it down and refilled it. Drank that, too. The cup ended up a crumpled ball inside his fist.

So much for relief.

He looked across the room at Hutch, trying to telegraph a "sorry," and then he pushed through the squad room doors and left.

It wasn't more than a few seconds before he heard Hutch behind him.

"Come on," Hutch said. "I'll buy you a coffee."

"I think I need something a little stronger than that."

Hutch nodded and put an arm over his shoulders, and Starsky tensed without thought. It was like his body remembered something his mind had tossed out. How many times had Hutch done that, and he'd never thought anything of it? Was he always going to think of Jimmy now, every time Hutch touched him in some way that Jimmy had?

Hutch dropped his arm away. "I'm sorry. I didn't think . . ."

"It's okay. Forget it." Then he put his arm around Hutch and gave him a squeeze. It felt normal. Right. At least he hadn't lost that.

He pushed the down button on the elevator. He had no idea where he was going, though. He never did anymore.

One minute life seemed to be getting back to normal, which mostly meant trying to solve crimes committed by people you didn't know and arresting people who hadn't almost murdered your best friend. And then it would rearrange itself into something unrecognizable, like it was someone else's life and he was an outsider watching himself acting a part he'd never auditioned for and didn't want.

Maybe if Jimmy would leave him alone he could start acting like himself again.

The elevator arrived and they stepped in and Hutch pressed the button for the garage level. It was empty, so Starsky let his face relax. He was tired of keeping a fake smile on. No one bought it most of the time anyway.

"Did you bring the letter?"

Hutch patted himself. "Right here. Do you want me to read it?"

"No. Just give it to the DA."

"Maybe you should read them. Maybe it would give you some kind of insight into what's going on with him."

"Or maybe it will drive me crazier than I already am."

The elevator opened into the parking garage. Where were they planning to go anyway? They stepped out, and just stood there.

"How about if I read them first?"

"You want to take all this on yourself, don't you?"

"I wish I could. I wish you didn't have to take any of it."

Starsky wished they were somewhere alone, somewhere private. He tried to stuff the thought—the need—somewhere deep, but something must have shown in his eyes, because he saw a flicker in Hutch's. Some kind of reflection of what Hutch must have seen in his. He swallowed and looked down at the cement floor.

But that couldn't be right. He didn't trust his eyes anymore, his instincts. Nothing he thought was real could possibly be real. Nothing ever had been. He'd been a fool for a very long time.

Hutch took a breath and let it out. He seemed almost—disappointed. But by what, Starsky couldn't figure out.

Maybe he should read the letters. Maybe Hutch was right and they would find something in them that would help him make sense of it. Some of it anyway. If that were even possible.

"Okay. You read it to me."

Hutch smiled. "Where to, then?"

"How about back to the beach? It's finally warm enough."

Hutch had once said something about negative ions kicked up by waves, and that's why people felt so relaxed after an afternoon spent by the ocean. Starsky had laughed it off as another one of his nutty health fads, but he was starting to realize that beach time did seem to make him feel better. If it wasn't ions, it was something, and whatever it was, that seemed to be where he wanted to go, where they seemed to be most able to talk. Where he felt most free of the rest of the world.

So they went to Venice and left the Torino at Hutch's. The short walk to the sand didn't take long, and once at the beach they took off their shoes and ambled along at the edge of the light surf. When Starsky looked out at the water, when he couldn't see anything but water and sky, that's when he felt like maybe he could somehow come back from this mess. As long as when he came back, Hutch was still standing there.

He could smell coconut suntan oil and fishy seaweed. With the rainy season over and the mid-March warmth, people had come off the boardwalk and were sunbathing, wading. Shouting and laughing.

Playing. He remembered playing on the beach . . . He thought of suggesting they find somewhere else, but it seemed silly to want—what? What did he want? He thought he knew, but he couldn't let that idea in, that idea he'd gotten back at his place when he'd promised not to run out on Hutch again. When he'd told Hutch he loved him. He'd meant more than that, hadn't he? He was starting to understand that he definitely did. He looked back out at the empty distance.

"We're gonna get fired, we keep buggin' out without a reason." That wasn't what he'd wanted to say, but he couldn't say that.

"We have a reason, and Dobe's cutting us a lot of slack. We need it."

"Yeah. When'd you get your psych degree, huh?"

"Still working on it."

"Got that letter?"

"Yeah. You ready?"

"Don't let it blow away."

There was very little wind, barely a breeze, and Hutch made a face at him. He took it out of the envelope and held onto it carefully, though, and glanced over it once quickly. He looked up with eyebrows lifted, and when Starsky nodded a go-ahead, he began to read.

Dear Davey,

I know you aren't getting my letters and calls because you haven't answered any of them. I keep trying, but I think there's something wrong with your machine. You might want to check it. And you should tell your captain that you aren't getting your messages from the switchboard. I'm expecting to hear from you, so you can tell me when you're coming. I need you to bring me some things.

Had Jimmy always been so demanding? So peremptory? So psychotic? He didn't seem to have any idea of what was really going on. Or was this all part of his latest act? His newest character?

The past few weeks in jail haven't been easy. I don't understand why they won't set bail. I'm no flight risk. Where could I possibly go? Everyone knows me. I can't exactly hide anywhere. And you can vouch for me. I'm sure you have, but they aren't listening.

I've been spending my free time (and I have a lot of it, I can tell you) writing a screenplay about a man arrested for a murder he didn't commit. I think I can bring some extra truth to it, now I've been in that position.

Hutch made a sound in his throat, and Starsky shook his head in amazement.

Maybe it will be a TV Movie of the Week and I'll star in it as well as direct it. I want to put in some things, though, that they won't allow on network TV. The inmates here are—

Hutch said he couldn't read the next bit, and Starsky wondered if that was because it wasn't legible, or if he just didn't want to. And then he figured, *if Hutch don't want to read it, then I don't want to hear it*, so he lifted his chin and Hutch went on.

You really have to get me out of here, Davey. I started smoking again. I know you don't like that. But when you come, bring me some Marlboros. I can use them for other things than smoking, you know, like bribery and protection. You can't believe how things work around here. My attorney gave me some money for the canteen but I had to give most of it to Raoul to keep him from—

Hutch looked up. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

"What is it? What did he say?"

"I think maybe he knows now just what it is he did to those girls."

Starsky rubbed at his face. He wanted to put his hands over it, block out the images that kept flooding him, but how did you block out images that were inside your head?

Hutch said gently, "I'll just read the next part, okay?"

"Does he say anything about the case?"

"No. He keeps telling you to visit him, bring him stuff, do things for him, get him out."

"Jesus. Maybe I should go. Maybe I should act like I think he's innocent. Maybe he'll say something we can use."

"We don't need any more evidence. His fingerprints were all over the bags of hair, and they were able to match enough of the—"

"Trophies." The word tasted horrible.

"Yeah. Trophies. With enough victims to prove his guilt in enough of the murders to put him away for ten lifetimes. Not to mention the photos. The photos or the hair—either were enough. We got both. And the Task Force is still interviewing friends and family. Someone will remember seeing him near where at least one of the girls disappeared. No one would forget seeing Jimmy Golden."

"Maybe he disguised himself. He knows how."

"Maybe he did. We still have him on the hair trophies and photos. Stop worrying. You don't need to see him. Don't let him manipulate you."

"I'll have to see him at the trial."

"That's different."

"I don't know why but I feel like I should go."

"And *I* know you shouldn't. And I know why."

"Why, then? He was my friend. He was my first real friend, my first . . . oh, shit. How can I abandon him?"

"Starsk, the friend, the boy, the . . . lover—*that* Jimmy doesn't exist anymore. You can't do anything for *him*. He's gone."

"He was never really there, was he?"

"Yes. He was. But this guy, this Jimmy, that's not him. You have to try to get that inside you. Until you see that, you're never going to be able to let go of the other one."

"Every single thing he did, everything he was, it was all an act. Just magic, illusions . . . and even when I was looking right at him, I never saw how he did it. Or even that he was doing it at all. How do I deal with that?"

"Nobody saw it. Nobody."

"I was his closest friend. I should have seen."

"So let's say that's true. How could you have?"

If there had been a way, he didn't know what it was.

"I—"

"Exactly." Hutch looked down at the letter. "Do you want to hear the rest?"

"I guess so."

"He has some stuff in here about the way people treat him, like worse than shit because they think he thinks he's above everyone else." Hutch gave a dry little laugh. "Who says criminals aren't smart, huh? And there's some stuff that makes no sense. I think it must be about something he wrote to you before because he seems to think you know what he's talking about. It's more about the other inmates and that he's asked for a private room. Private room, I love it. Where the hell does he think he is? Anyway, here's the rest."

"No. Forget it. I don't need to hear it after all."

"Okay." Hutch folded the letter and put it back in the envelope, folded that and put it back in his pocket. "How about that coffee now?"

"Sure."

Hutch started to get up, but Starsky put a hand on his arm.

"Wait. There's something I want to know."

"Okay."

But then he couldn't frame a question that would make sense and still get him an answer. He looked out across the waves to the sky. Hutch stayed quiet beside him.

Finally, Starsky took a long breath. "You've never said anything about what I told you. About me and Jimmy."

"Did you want me to?"

"I thought . . ."

"What? That I'd be horrified? Disgusted? That I'd put in for a new partner?"

"Well . . ."

"I'm still here."

"But . . ."

"So what more do you need to know, buddy?"

He sounded angry. Starsky wished he'd kept his own damn mouth shut. He was afraid to look at him.

"Hutch."

"You're the worst kind of idiot, do you know that?" He pushed Starsky's hand off his arm. Starsky hadn't even realized he'd put it there.

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that. I'm really getting sick of saying it's okay."

"I'm s—"

"Yeah. You're sorry. I'm sorry. The only one who's not sorry is the only one who should be. Can we please get back to some kind of normal life? I can't do this anymore."

Starsky felt like he was on a roller coaster that had no safety bar and no brakes. He knew that once again he was missing something obvious, though it was probably right in front of him like everything else he didn't see.

Hutch got to his feet and walked off up the beach. Starsky didn't move.

The tide was coming in. It pulled the sand out from under his feet with each wave, and then put it back with the next. Pretty soon he'd have to move, or he'd be soaked. Or he could sit there and let the tide take him. He could float away and let it take him to some private island where he could sit and stare at the sky and the water.

He knew he wasn't handling any of this very well. They were only into the first few weeks of a long haul with Jimmy's case and he wasn't doing anything right. What was wrong with him? Maybe he really did know but he couldn't face it.

Might as well say it, then, if only to himself. He'd lost his self-confidence, his nerve, and a cop who'd lost his nerve was no cop at all. And if he wasn't a cop, he was nothing. And without Hutch, he was less than that. He'd been stupid. The worst kind of stupid, and Hutch had finally walked away. But he still didn't know what was going on inside Hutch's thick skull. He wasn't exactly being up front himself.

So what then? Confront him? Have it out? That could only end badly. They weren't ready for that. He wasn't, anyway. How could he put out there what he was so unsure of? He wasn't making any sense even to himself.

He moved back a few yards to get out of reach of the tide.

Maybe he should put in for an extended leave. Let Hutch get a new partner who would actually watch out for him, work with him the way Starsky wasn't. Who would protect him the way Starsky didn't anymore. That was his best course right now. Then he'd have time to think everything through, get his head back on straight. Before he got anyone else killed.

With that decision came a strange sense of relief, like the calm after long weeks of Santa Ana winds. And right after that came the certain knowledge that there was no way he was letting Hutch out of his sight. No one else was going to protect him and work with him and...love...him the way Starsky did. So that brilliant plan died an unmourned death before it had even had a chance to take a breath.

How long had he been sitting there alone, staring at the sky? It had to be at least an hour. He decided to get up and go find Hutch. He had no idea where he'd left his sneakers. He'd find them, and find Hutch, and get him to deliver on that coffee, and he'd pull himself together and...

In front of his face appeared a Styrofoam cup. Something inside it smelled good. He took it, and felt a hand on the top of his head. He twisted under it so he could look up. Hutch's face blocked the sun, and he appeared almost in silhouette. Starsky couldn't see his eyes.

"Some cop you are," Hutch said. "Didn't even hear me coming up behind you." He sat down in the same spot he'd been before.

"I thought you went home."

"I did. I called Dobey. I came back."

"You called Dobey? Why?"

"Told him we needed some time off. We aren't doing too well. Either of us. We need to take a few days. Pull ourselves together."

Starsky started to laugh.

"What's funny?" Hutch looked like he wanted to laugh, too, but didn't get the joke.

"I just got done deciding not to decide to ask for some leave. I thought you'd finally had enough of

me, and I've certainly had enough of me. So I decided I should float off on a kelp bed, and stop pretending I was still your partner."

Hutch definitely wasn't laughing now.

"You don't get to decide a thing like that on your own, *partner*," he said.

"That's why I didn't decide it." He lifted the lid off the coffee and took a careful swallow. It wasn't too hot after all, and it tasted good. He took another swallow and handed it to Hutch. "I decided to stop fucking up instead."

"And I decided to stop trying make you get it together when you can't. It's not fair to ask you to. It's not like all that happened is you lost your favorite shirt."

"So how long do we have, and where are we going?" He stopped. "We *are* talkin' 'we,' right?"

Hutch's eyes suddenly lit from within him somewhere, and Starsky realized how long it had been since he'd seen that kind of smile.

"I have an idea, but I doubt you'll go for it."

"Give me a hint."

"It begins with a P."

"Pasadena?"

Hutch gave him the look. "You want to go to *Pasadena* on your leave?"

"No." He took the coffee out of Hutch's hand and finished it off, and gave the empty cup back to him. "I give up." He braced his hands on his knees to show he was ready for anything.

"Pine Lake."

"No!" He wasn't ready for that. He would never be ready for that.

"Aw, come on, Starsky. If we see the big bad wolf we'll hide behind a rock and pretend we didn't."

"I got a better idea."

"All right. What is it?"

"We save that leave for after...Jimmy...and right now we go back to work." He swallowed. "I need to go back to work." *Or I might never go back to work again.* The thought came and went, but it no longer scared him because it no longer seemed like a real option.

Hutch stayed quiet a long moment and piled up a few shells and pebbles.

"Okay, I'm in."

"What do we tell Dobey?"

"We tell him we had a great time, we feel better now, thanks for letting us go."

Starsky grinned, and got up. "Where are my shoes?"

They were up by the boardwalk, and they were full of sand. It didn't matter. It didn't matter at all.

Act III: Judgment

Chapter 20

If Hutch had expected everything to get back to normal right away, he'd have been disappointed, but he'd been around the block enough to know it just wouldn't. Not for a long time. At least not everything.

Sometimes he had glimpses into the past when he and Starsky were halves of one whole, like if he felt thirsty, Starsky would drink something. Or if Starsky got hurt, Hutch had to take extra aspirins. Now it was just one big ache, and aspirin didn't begin to cut it.

The night before, when he'd had the first floating distant thought that if he could only get hold of a small bag of heroin maybe he'd get some...relief, he'd scared himself so bad that he'd called one of those hotlines, terrified the whole time that they would know who he was—trace his call, but the voice on the other end only asked him gentle questions. She let him talk, and, eventually, let him hang up. The craving passed but the memories didn't: the first sudden ecstasy, the immediacy of it that was beyond orgasmic, and the driftaway after that into what he thought heaven must feel like. He remembered the bliss. And he also remembered the agony. And Starsky's hands on his face, the feel of his body wrapped around him, the look in his eyes while Hutch pleaded and bargained for the kind of help Starsky would never give. Hutch thought he'd be willing to go through the screaming horror again just to be held like that, to be looked at like that.

God, Starsky. Just look at me. See me. Please.

He felt utterly stupid.

He looked up from the papers on his desk. How long had he been staring at them? Starsky was sitting across from him, watching him. What did he really see? Hutch gave him half a smile that had nothing to do with happiness, and Starsky pushed his chair back and went to the file cabinets. That seemed to be his current favorite defense. Anything he didn't want to deal with, go to the water cooler. Go refill his coffee mug. Go make a copy of something that didn't need to be copied. What didn't he want to deal with now?

He came back and said he wanted to go see Jimmy's mother, and when Hutch didn't answer, he turned and walked out of the squad room.

Hutch cornered him next to the candy machine and told him he thought it was a bad idea.

"She's not the bad guy," Starsky said. "She's alone with this. She must be a mess."

"She's got friends. She's got other people to help her."

Starsky looked at him like he was a green alien. Hutch guessed he deserved it.

"Her husband's dead and her son's a murderer. Her friends seem to think she must be the world's most horrible mother for creating such a monster." He looked at his hands for a moment as if he wasn't sure he recognized them. "I know how she feels."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't see the way some of our so-called brother cops look at me. And I doubt you've heard the rumors going around. No one's about to say them to you. They don't seem to have a problem sayin' 'em to me, though."

Hutch felt his face get hot. He rejected the first thought that came to him—no one knew what went

on inside his head, so how could there be rumors about it? But then he realized what Starsky meant. Starsky had enough shit to deal with; he didn't need his friends and colleagues giving him a hard time. He thought going on a rampage wouldn't be a bad idea.

He pointed his finger at Starsky's face. "You tell me who's saying what, and I'll take care of it."

"No, Hutch, no. That won't help. I can handle it." He handed Hutch a bag of peanuts. Hutch took it, looked at it without seeing it, handed it back. "She's like family to me. Come with me."

Hutch didn't want to go, but he wouldn't say no. If Starsky asked him to, that meant he wanted him there. Needed him there. So he would go. And then he started to wonder why he felt so resistant. It wasn't his usual attitude and he didn't understand it. No wonder Starsky kept staring at him. He probably thought he was demented.

"She won't want me there." He wished he hadn't said that. He wished he'd said yes right away.

Starsky looked at him sideways. "You don't have to."

Hutch dropped his shoulders. "No, you're right. She needs all the support she can get."

They went back into the squad room and Starsky dialed her number. Hutch looked around the room at the other detectives who had suddenly gone silent or who suddenly had something to do somewhere else in the building, and he realized he'd had his head in the sand. How could he have been so oblivious? It seemed to be going around.

Jimmy's mother—her name must still be Goldblatt—lived out in the Valley somewhere. Reseda, maybe. Not too far, anyway. Hutch didn't pay much attention to where they were going and let his mind wander. Lately they seemed to have run out of things to talk about except whatever case they were working on, or where to go for lunch. In between, in the silences, Hutch did a lot of thinking—which so far hadn't been very productive—and avoided thinking about a lot of things, which had been pretty damn counterproductive. Time was passing, the early summer heat and his inability to let go of his humiliation both abetting his rising depression.

He thought about Jimmy more often than he wanted to. He should have asked to see the police psychologist, but there was an element of shame in needing to, and Starsky hadn't, so neither had Hutch. Maybe some things were better buried, but there could be no such burial while this *thing* hung over them. That's what he called it. This *thing*. It was too big for a name like the papers had given it. The Bridle Path Murders. Every time he heard that he had to fight down nausea. And to call it what it really was seemed to make it too important, too . . . real. The press was calling it the crime of the century, the biggest trial in United States history. He guessed they'd forgotten about the Lindbergh baby, and Leopold and Loeb. Maybe they'd make a movie out of it. *The Murders that Shocked Hollywood*. No, that was stupid. *The True Story of the Beloved Actor Who Had a Compulsion to Kill Little Girls Who Looked Like the Boy He Couldn't Have*. No, that was too many words. How about just *Psycho II: Jimmy*. Yeah, that was more like it.

Now he'd named it and he'd tried so hard not to, but it didn't seem to make a difference after all. It wasn't any more real named than it had been a moment before. And how was he all that different from Jimmy? He wanted the same thing. Couldn't have the same thing.

So who would play who? Someone like Mel Gibson for Starsky. Maybe Jon Voight for himself. And Jimmy? That could only be Redford. Except for the height difference and Jimmy's curls, they could have played twin brothers. Why hadn't they? Jimmy would say they simply had never found the right vehicle.

He looked out the window for a while. Gated neighborhoods separated by stretches of empty brown

land with the occasional cornfield or cow barn. He had a sudden longing for a simple life out in the country somewhere, or maybe the desert, where they could find a way to live without being dragged under by the past. And not spend the present just waiting for the future to fall on them. Then he heard the "they" in his thoughts and he wondered if there was ever going to be a "they" again. He felt lonely. He wanted Starsky to say something, tell him it was all gonna be okay, that he could relax and let his guard down, and not be as frightened of himself as he'd been of Jimmy. He wanted to hear Starsky say . . . *what, Hutchinson? You want him to say what exactly? You want him to say to you what you can't say to him.*

Starsky drove in silence. They were almost to the exit for Tarzana. Hutch tried to reel his thoughts in.

The Task Force members had finished their jobs and disbanded. The DA and Jimmy's legal team had deposed him and Starsky. Subpoenas had already been served. The jury selection was underway. Why couldn't he relax and let the whole business just flow around him? Meditation wasn't working. He wasn't trying hard enough. Maybe a two-day fast . . . No. This wasn't a good time for another challenge.

Starsky took the exit and pointed off to the left.

"That's where Callendar was staying."

"What?"

"Weren't you listening?"

"No."

"I said that's the road to Helen Yeager's place."

"Oh."

"You want to call this off?"

"No."

Maybe he was in worse shape than Starsky. It was starting to feel that way.

Starsky turned off the boulevard onto a side road full of smallish well-kept houses behind white picket fences and tall screening junipers. Starsky's white picket fences . . .

"Not much of a neighborhood for the mother of one of the richest men in the world," Hutch said.

"Her choice. He wanted to put her in a Beverly Hills mansion. She wouldn't go. Her sister lived down the street back when she moved here and he could never talk her into leaving even after her sister moved away." He turned into a driveway and almost hit a man standing in the middle of it.

"What the hell . . .?"

The driveway was full of photographers. They looked more like they were having a block party than trying to get news copy. Some of them were sitting on the path beside the drive or sitting in their cars, some had soda cans and sandwiches—they all had cameras—but as soon as they saw the Torino they woke up and mobbed it.

Hutch and Starsky turned to look at each other, both frozen for a moment. Hutch saw Starsky reach for the gearshift—flight instinct taking over—and then, instead, he turned off the ignition.

"You ready for this?" he said. He reached for his shield and opened his door.

Hutch put his head back, took a couple of quick breaths, and got out, too. Before he could even pull

out his badge, there were cameras in his face, flashes in his eyes, and six microphones in front of his mouth.

The questions were buzzing sounds—*Aren't you Detective Hutchinson? . . . What's your relationship to Mrs. Goldblatt? . . . Did Jimmy kill those girls?*—and he swatted them away with his hands.

"Get out of here, all of you!" he finally yelled. "Can't you leave the lady alone? You're not going to get anything here. Go home."

Nobody listened to him or to Starsky, who was saying more or less the same thing, but with less printable language.

They pushed through the small mob, and as they approached the front door, it opened up for them, and then slammed shut behind them as soon as they stepped through.

There was no one else there, just Jimmy's mother, alone in a badly defended fortress. She stepped forward to Starsky, and as soon as he put his arms around her, she began to cry. He held onto her, pressing her head into his shoulder with one hand, encircling her with his other arm, and looked helplessly at Hutch over the top of her head.

Hutch didn't feel any less helpless. He stood still, waiting, looking around at the small hallway. There were pictures on a side table but it was dark with all the curtains drawn, and he couldn't see the images. Shiny floors, tasteful antiques, expensive carpet. A few knickknacks here and there. Through a door to his left he could see new-looking sofas and a huge console television. More photographs on the walls.

Starsky said something in Mrs. Goldblatt's ear, and she nodded and stepped back, wiping at her eyes. Starsky put his hand to the side of her face, drew his thumb across under her eye and bent down to kiss her cheek. She gave him a watery smile and then turned to Hutch, extending her hand.

She had perfectly groomed dark hair with very little gray, expensive well-cut clothes that fit her as if made for her. They probably had been. She must have been older than she looked. She wasn't tall, but she held herself in a way that made her seem like she was. She was still beautiful, and Hutch could see what a knockout she must have been as a young woman.

Starsky introduced them.

"Please call me Irene," she said to Hutch. She gestured to the sitting room. "You boys go sit while I fix my face. I'll be right back." She disappeared down a short hallway.

Hutch sat in a comfortable blue and white easy chair and tried to clear his mind. Starsky wandered around the room looking at the pictures and books.

"This isn't where Jimmy grew up. I've only been here a few times."

"I wondered. I thought he lived near where Aunt Rosie lives."

"Yep. Same block. It's not so bad being here."

"Did you think it would be?"

"Yeah. It would have been worse in the old place." He looked around the room. "Am I ever going to feel normal again?"

"I think so." It was just a small lie. "Give it time."

"Irene won't. Ain't enough time in the universe for her."

"No."

"What the hell do I say to her?" He picked up a blue enameled menorah, looked at it for a moment, put it back down.

"Maybe you don't. Just let her talk."

"Yeah." He looked at a framed picture on top of the television. "Look at this." He brought it over to Hutch. "That's Jimmy and his dad the night of the Oscars. Louis looks so proud. I bet Irene's glad he never knew about this. Jimmy seems so . . . I don't know. Normal. How could he do that all those years." He returned the picture to its place and set it down. "We had a big party, remember? He was so happy. We all were. Remember?"

"I wasn't there."

"Oh yeah." He sat down on a couch that matched Hutch's chair. Pulled a pillow out from behind him and put it next to him. "Why didn't you go?"

"I didn't want to. I didn't think he wanted me there."

"Was he jealous of you? Did I never see that, either? Is that why he . . ."

"Oh, Starsk. Why do you keep doing this?" He wished they were somewhere else so he could move over and sit next to him, shoulders touching, knees pressed together. He could almost imagine the feel of it. Almost remember it.

Irene appeared at the doorway holding a tray full of china cups and cookies.

"Oh, God," she said. "You two look . . . for a minute I thought . . . oh." She set the tray down on a side table, and stood for a moment lost somewhere in her memories. Starsky seemed frozen for a second, then he got up and went to her.

"Let me get that," he said. He carried the tray over to the coffee table and put it down. He took his seat on the sofa, and Irene sat next to him, smoothing her gray skirt, crossing her ankles. She had perfect posture.

Irene turned to look at Hutch. "It's just that for a moment, from the back the two of you, I thought, it was like...oh."

"I'm sorry," Hutch said. "This has to be very hard for you."

She nodded, and then rallied. Hutch was suddenly glad he'd come to meet her.

"I know," she said, "that everyone thinks we abused Jimmy, neglected him."

"I know you didn't," Starsky said. "I was there."

"You weren't there when he first came to us. We didn't know anything about his birth parents other than that they were very young, only twenty, and that they were both Jewish. That's all they told us." She poured tea and handed it out without asking if either of them wanted it, or offering milk or sugar. "They didn't tell adoptive parents anything back then. They still don't, but I think it's getting better. We don't know if there was mental illness. We don't know why they gave him up, and why not until he was almost three. All we cared about was that we were getting a child, we didn't care about anything else. We didn't ask. Didn't think of asking. I don't think I'd have cared if they'd said he was a Martian."

She stared into the past and her teacup started to tilt. Starsky took it from her and set it down, but she left her hand in the air where she'd been holding it. Hutch started to think maybe she needed more help than they could give her.

Starsky looked at Hutch like he was about to panic, but Hutch didn't know what to do, either. Irene

started talking again, so he just sat back and listened.

"He didn't talk at all for months. He never smiled or laughed, just watched everyone with his beautiful eyes. When he finally did it was full sentences, like he'd been talking for years. He'd been perfectly able to talk, he just didn't until he felt like it. And toilet training. He just refused. He wet his bed for years, well past the time he should have stopped. We did what the doctors told us: no liquids after dinner, make him change the bedclothes, punish him. It was very wrong, but we didn't know any better then." She finally put her hand down on her lap. "And, oh, God."

She looked at Starsky and put her hand to her chest, and Hutch had a panicked moment when he thought maybe she was having a heart attack. But she said, "Oh, David, my little cat. We thought she fell off the roof but now I think, I always wondered, but a mother doesn't think things like that about her child, you know? I never got another cat. I told myself I couldn't bear to replace Tillie, but I think I knew I couldn't risk another animal's life. How could I have thought that? Oh, my God."

"Irene—"

"I knew there was something wrong with him."

"Please, Irene." Starsky leaned toward her, tried to take her hand.

"If I'd done something, told someone . . . Louis thought I was imagining things, so I stopped saying anything to him."

Hutch said, "No one would have listened to you. Back then, you'd have been the crazy one, the one who needed help. You probably still would." Neither of them looked at him or said anything in response.

Irene just continued as if he hadn't spoken, still looking at Starsky. "After he met you he got . . . better. All the things he did that scared me, they all just stopped when he met you." She put a hand on Starsky's face, and he closed his eyes. "You made him normal again. If it hadn't been for you, I think he might have done more, done worse, sooner."

Starsky had gone pale under her hand. She didn't seem to notice that his hands had begun to shake. Hutch thought he should say something more, break them out of whatever torture chamber they'd locked themselves into. He'd never felt quite so incredibly incapable.

"I think," Starsky said, "that if it hadn't been for me, none of it would have happened at all." His voice was almost unrecognizable.

She took her hand from his face and put it over his hands instead. "Don't think that way. He was on that path long before you met him. Even before we met him. And David, I *know* what you were to him."

Starsky stared at her. "What are you saying?" He looked at Hutch, and then back into her eyes.

"You know what I'm saying, dear. And you know you had nothing to do with what happened...after. You were just a child, a normal child. You could never have imagined...that. No one could have."

Starsky's hands opened and closed inside Irene's clasp.

"And neither could you."

Hutch didn't see them move, only saw that one second they were a foot apart, and the next they were clasped so tight together that in the dimly lit room they seemed like one being. Maybe in a way they were.

Irene began to cry again, deep painful cries that Starsky seemed to take into himself like physical

blows. He held her, speaking to her so low that Hutch couldn't hear what he said, and finally, bending his head into the side of her neck so that his face was hidden.

He watched Starsky hold Irene and felt an odd uncomfortable sensation that he had trouble identifying. It was like he wasn't there in the room, but was somewhere else, was someone else. As if his own body, even his own consciousness, had slipped away and he could only stand by and watch a scene that he had no personal connection to. Everything seemed like a movie to him now. He hated the feeling, but he had to give a small internal laugh at the irony of it. *Jimmy, you son of a bitch. How many lives have you fucked over? And then . . . Is this what it was like for you? Were you always watching yourself acting in a never-ending movie?*

Hutch sat there, trying not to make any noises that would disturb them, bring them back too soon from where they needed to be. He listened to a clock ticking somewhere, not in the same room. Outside he heard someone shout, and then responsive laughter. He caught a faint odor of a chemical sweetness. Not perfume. There were no flowers in the room. No lights on anywhere. A faint background hum—air conditioning and maybe the refrigerator. No dust in the still air. It was neither hot nor cold in the house. Just dim, quiet. Everything seemed muffled. Far away. It was how he felt himself. Muffled and far away. He had to find a way back. For both of them. All of them. It had to be him. Starsky shouldn't have to be the one. But he still had no idea how. Or if it were even possible.

Irene had gone quiet in Starsky's arms. She must have been exhausted. Starsky said something, and she nodded and sat up and back. Starsky looked shell-shocked but calm, his face dry. Irene looked awful, though, blotchy and red. Hutch, finally thinking of something he could do, spotted a box of tissues on the table behind Starsky, and went to get it. When he handed a tissue to Irene she started to weep again, but Starsky waited for her, and wiped her face when she stopped. Hutch had never seen him this gentle and careful with anyone before. He treated her almost like a small child, but at the same time with such a depth of respect and caring—it was a shattering combination. If Hutch could, if Starsky would let him, he would do the same for him. His throat ached. He swallowed a few times until it stopped.

Finally she straightened herself, and Hutch watched as she struggled to get herself back into some kind of control. She dabbed at her face.

"Thank you, dear," she said.

"No." Starsky patted her hand, and then glanced at his watch. "Can I use your telephone, Irene? I'll pay for the call. It's long distance."

"Don't be silly, dear, of course you can make a call." She didn't question why he wanted to call someone at that moment.

He gave Irene a small squeeze on her shoulder, then got up and went out of the room. Who the hell was calling?

Irene watched him as he walked away, and then turned to Hutch. "Thank you for being there for him," she said. "He needs you."

He'd arrested her son for kidnapping and murder, and she was thanking him.

"I'm sorry you have to go through this," he said. "If there's anything I can do for you . . ."

"You're doing it." She leaned forward. "I'm so sorry for what Jimmy did to you."

Hutch felt humbled. And she didn't even know the half of it. "Please don't. It was just my job." That didn't sound right. "I mean, it was what I had to do. It had to be done. Someone had..." *God, get me*

out of here, now. "I mean, I was just..."

She came to his rescue. "I know, dear. I understand, and I don't blame you. Please know that."

She understood a lot more than that, Hutch thought. He looked at her eyes and saw that she did. She took hold of his hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'm so glad David has you, dear." She sat back and touched her face. "I must look dreadful. Please excuse me for a moment."

Hutch wanted to beat himself over the head with a baseball bat. He settled for pounding his fist onto his thigh a few times, but it didn't help.

Starsky came back from wherever he'd been. "Where's Irene?"

"Bathroom, I think."

"I just called Ma. She says Irene can go stay with her until this is all over. I hope she'll go."

"Starsk, that's a great idea."

"I wish we could all go." He slumped onto the sofa. "The airfare's gonna break me. Don't say anything to her, okay?"

Jimmy had more money than God, and Starsky would go broke trying to give the guy's mother some respite from the agony her son had caused her.

"I'll help you."

"Oh, no, you won't."

"Please let me—"

Irene came back in and sat in a straight-backed chair. Her face was still pale, but she was steady and calm, and she smiled. "Let you what, dear?"

Starsky said, "I called my mother, and she wants you to go to New York, Irene, to stay with her, just for a while."

"Oh, David, no, I can't leave. I have to be here in case . . ."

"In case what? You need to get away. The press, your neighbors."

"I have to be here in case Jimmy needs me. I have to be at the trial."

Starsky opened his mouth, and closed it again. He seemed to be struggling to find the right thing to say. "No way, you don't. You don't have to do anything for him."

"I'm his mother." She looked at Starsky and said it again.

He almost glared back, but then he nodded.

"You could go for a week. Let her feed you, fuss over you. Come back for the trial."

Irene smiled. "I think maybe you should go. Let her feed and fuss over *you*."

It was a good idea, and for a bad moment, Hutch thought Starsky might agree. And then he felt selfish and guilty for wanting him here, needing him here.

"Do this for me, will you?" Starsky said gently. "I need you to be okay."

"I'm okay, dear."

How could she be? Hutch didn't believe her, and neither did Starsky.

"Just for a week. Just a week."

"Let me think about it." She stood up, and seemed to want them to go.

Starsky got that look that came over him when he was going to dig his heels in.

"Either you go to New York for a week, or I'm going to stay here with you. You need someone here. The press is—"

There was a sudden loud crash in the front hall. Hutch stood up fast, and Starsky took two quick steps to Irene and pulled her down to the floor. She made a sound of protest as he dropped down, covering her with his body to shield her.

"What the hell was that?" Hutch half-crouched and made his way to the front hall. One of the sidelights next to the front door was shattered, and a large oval rock lay on the tile floor. He could hear shouting outside, and there was a huge scuffle going on. He yelled over his shoulder, "Someone threw a rock. I think the press guys have got him. Where's the phone?"

"In the kitchen. Back this way."

Hutch found the kitchen and the phone and dialed the operator, trying to calm himself, to lower his voice. He gave his name, his precinct and badge number, asked for emergency backup, and hung up.

Outside, someone in a t-shirt and running shorts had a guy in a bear hug, struggling hard, his head thrown back to keep the guy from bashing him in the forehead. Everyone else was taking pictures and yelling questions. No one was helping the captor keep hold of the apparent rock thrower. In some other circumstance it could almost have been comical, except that nothing about any of it was funny. Hutch thought he should probably go out and break it up, arrest the rock thrower. Before he could summon the energy or the will, three police cars arrived, sirens wailing.

Starsky told Irene to stay down until they had the guy in custody. Hutch watched from the window, giving a play-by-play as the police took over from the captor and put the guy in cuffs and then into a squad car. Two of the officers approached the house. He opened the door and let them in.

Starsky helped Irene up, and she smoothed her blouse and skirt, and sat a little suddenly on the chair she'd been in before.

The officers introduced themselves as Brand and Dickenson, and asked Hutch if they had seen the garage doors. Starsky stayed with Irene inside while Hutch went out with them to see what they were talking about. In huge black letters on the white doors someone had spray-painted THE MUMMY. So that had been the burst of laughter he'd heard from inside. But then the guy had gotten carried away, Dickenson reported, and, too full of his success, had thrown the rock. The crowd of reporters had done nothing but watch and take pictures, but a neighbor had been out for a run and had tackled the guy.

"We'll post someone here, ma'am," Brand said. "It won't happen again."

Irene pushed a wisp of hair off her forehead. "Thank you, officer, but it won't be necessary." She put a hand on Starsky's arm to still his protests. "I'm going to go visit a friend in New York."

Starsky smiled for the first time in weeks.

Chapter 21

"Permission to treat this witness as hostile, Your Honor?"

There was a ripple of surprise in the courtroom.

District Attorney Reynolds had explained to Starsky that he wanted to cover all the bases. If the jury assumed Jimmy's friend would testify only in his favor, they wouldn't believe what he said. And with a hostile witness designation, he could ask leading questions, help Starsky to focus.

Starsky had understood the psychology and was ready for it. He looked uncomfortable and a little strange in his dark blue suit and white shirt, with his tie cinched up tight. He also seemed older, and something else Hutch couldn't quite figure out.

The judge granted permission.

Starsky hadn't been able to stand the thought of looking at Jimmy while he testified against him, so Hutch had promised to do it for him. His own testimony, delivered in dry, unemotional police-speak, was over, so he was just a spectator now. He wasn't sure it was better—listening to testimony with Starsky banned from the courtroom, and then not being able to tell him anything anyway. The prosecutor had been clear on the meaning of sequestration of witnesses who were as important as they were. He'd been adamant: Don't work together. Don't go out for a beer together. Don't call him on the phone. Don't talk to him at all. Take no chance of tainting his testimony by telling him what other witnesses had said. Give no one a chance to even think that that had happened. Don't give the defense a shot at a mistrial.

Hutch never wanted to go through a week like that again. If he hadn't already known how entwined his life, his whole being, was with Starsky's, he sure knew it now.

He also knew that he didn't like Vice. A week over there, and he couldn't wait to get back to Homicide. Simmons and Babcock had kept him apprised of the gossip in the squad room, and he knew they'd been running interference, setting a few of the guys straight in not-so-friendly terms. Babcock had told him that morning that when he and Starsky got back where they belonged, there would be no more trouble from their "quote friends unquote." Hutch had smiled and said they knew who their friends were. Simmons had whacked him on the shoulder, and they'd gone off to work.

He tried to pay attention to Starsky's testimony, but he'd heard it all before. And it still...hurt...to hear it. He let his mind wander and felt guilty for it.

The prosecution had made good use of the work the Task Force had done. Its members had tried to spend as much time as they could in the courtroom. They'd done an absolutely amazing job. Hutch had listened to the results of their efforts every day, all that week, and felt humbled.

The testimony from the other witnesses had been shocking, even though he'd known what most of it would be.

Jimmy's two stable grooms, who had each glowered at Hutch while they described the way Jimmy had treated his animals.

And then former dates, one after another, who described what going out with Jimmy was like. How he always wanted to masturbate on them, or have anal sex—but never vaginal—forcing them when they said they wouldn't do it.

Two of them told how, a few months before his arrest, he had wanted to use a scalpel to carve some strange symbol on their chests and had offered them money to let him do it. Neither of them had

agreed, but he had tied them up and done it anyway, and raped them both. Reynolds showed photographs of both women, the scars clearly visible on the skin above their breasts, the uneven circle with a vertical line through it.

Neither of them, nor any of the other women who'd testified, had ever reported his behavior. They had all experienced the thrill—and later, embarrassment—of being his date, or his hooker, and they all thought no one would have believed them anyway. Some of them said that if they'd thought there were others, maybe they would have come forward.

And maybe no one else had noticed, because no one said anything, at least to Hutch, but all of them were tall and slim, and every one of them had deep blue eyes and a lot of curly dark hair.

Carving his phi symbol into dead women had apparently lost its kick—at some point he'd started needing to see the blood. Those women had no idea how lucky they really had been. Jimmy had started to unravel not long before the night at the Magic Castle, and if Hutch hadn't forced his hand, it couldn't have been much longer before Jimmy would have come apart one way or another.

Maybe he'd made sure, consciously or unconsciously, that the photo albums had been where he knew Starsky would eventually see them, look at them. Understand them. But why? Hutch doubted he would ever know the answers.

Starsky went on carefully responding to questions. He was doing well, staying calm, answering only what he was asked, not adding anything. When the defense attorney cross-examined, and pushed him hard, his voice stayed steady and even. He occasionally looked at the jury. Often at Hutch. But never at Jimmy.

He hadn't heard any of the other testimonies, and Hutch hoped no one would tell him about the women who'd dated Jimmy.

Hutch could see most of the side of Jimmy's face, and all of it when he turned to whisper something to his attorney. So far, Jimmy had kept his hands quietly folded in front of him on the table, and had kept his eyes demurely lowered, his face calm and bland. He had on a well-fitting light gray suit, and his hair was new-cut and combed back. Hutch, still trying unsuccessfully to cope with his own turmoil, thought inconsequentially that if Jimmy's hair had been dark, it would have looked like Starsky's. Why hadn't he noticed that before? That's what it all came down to, and that was what would nail Jimmy in the end. Hair.

Somewhere to the left was Irene. He'd wanted to sit with her, but if he had, Starsky wouldn't have been able to see him. She'd joined a support group she'd found, and she always had someone with her now. He looked over at her once or twice, and caught her eye. She nodded and smiled, but he still felt like he was letting her down.

Hutch listened as the DA asked his questions, and he heard the tension in Starsky's voice as he answered. The jurors listened attentively, as they had throughout the trial. They'd seen the pictures, heard what Jimmy had been accused of doing to the victims, what he'd allegedly done to the detective who'd arrested him—from the detective who'd arrested him and who knew there was no "allegedly" about it. They'd all seen Hutch sitting in the third row back, and they glanced at him or Jimmy whenever Starsky said either of their names. It was more than uncomfortable.

Three hours later, when Starsky was looking like he'd about had enough, and when Jimmy looked like he was fighting to keep his eyes open, the judge ordered a recess for lunch. Hutch decided to leave fast, get out of there before Starsky got anywhere near him, because if that happened, there'd be no way in hell that Hutch would be able to leave him.

Jimmy was cuffed and taken away. He slid a glance at Hutch as he went, lifting his hands as if to

make sure Hutch saw the handcuffs. There was something odd and disturbing in his eyes, and Hutch had no idea what message he was trying to send.

Jimmy never glanced at Irene. Hutch made his way to her and took her and her friend to lunch, as he had done every day that week. He'd heard some hair-raising stories, and he now knew some pretty funny things he could use in future to blackmail Starsky with.

If he ever got a chance to be funny again.

After lunch, Starsky was called back, reminded of his oath, and reseated in the witness stand. He looked a little better, like he'd had something decent to eat. Huggy must have come by and slipped him a sandwich.

The afternoon dragged on and Hutch's back began to protest, but Starsky had it much worse. Hutch never even considered leaving.

Around four, when the spectators were becoming restless, Jimmy had begun doodling on his legal pad, and Starsky had been avoiding Hutch's eyes for over an hour, ADA Reynolds straightened his spine.

"The prosecution rests, Your Honor."

"You may step down," Judge Wilson said.

Jimmy looked up as Starsky stood. Hutch tried to watch him, but he had to see Starsky's face, see his eyes, so he broke his promise and instead watched Starsky fight with himself, and win. He never looked up, never looked at his old friend. He never looked at Hutch either, just pressed on past him, and on out the doors at the back. Hutch turned back to Jimmy and saw the half smile, the glint in the corner of his eye, the look he gave Starsky's back as he passed, and Hutch felt cold inside himself. In a flash of insight, he knew what Jimmy's little looks and glances at him had meant: *Watch your back, pal. Look what your boy does to his friends.* Hutch felt a sudden weird connection to the man, a frightening understanding. Maybe what he really meant was, look what Starsky's friends do to *Starsky*.

He found Starsky outside, swamped by reporters, trying to be polite. Hutch saw his clenched-teeth nods, and heard his tight-voiced "no comments," and hurried to extricate him.

Starsky latched onto him like he was a lifeline, and let himself be towed to the LTD.

Parking had been impossible again, and in the time it took them to fast-walk the three blocks to where Hutch had parked the car, Starsky said only, "That was—"

At the car, he clamped his jaw down tight like he was fighting not to heave, and for a second, Hutch thought he might lose the battle.

Hutch unlocked the door and opened it for him, and waited while he lowered himself in, the way a very old man gets himself into a car. He went around to his own side. Starsky usually opened it from inside, but this time, he found the door still locked. Once in, he had to yank twice before it would close, but Starsky said nothing, just sat with his head back, staring at a tear in the roof lining.

"You hungry?" Hutch said. A week apart, and that was all he could think of to say.

Starsky pointed across the street to an upscale-looking bar. "Thirsty."

"Too close. People will be coming out soon."

Starsky nodded. "Anywhere, then."

"Where's your car?"

"Left it at Huggy's. He drove me over this morning. Said anyone trying to keep under the radar shouldn't arrive at their destination in a parade float."

Hutch laughed. *God, I missed you*, he wanted to say. He didn't know why he couldn't.

So he drove them to Huggy's, like The Pits had some kind of homing beacon, or a tractor beam. It felt right, anyway. As soon as they stepped through the door, Starsky seemed to relax a fraction, and Hutch felt better.

Huggy saw them come in, and, stopping to pull a pitcher of beer and to grab three mugs, came up to them grim-faced.

"How'd it go?" he said to Hutch. And to Starsky, "You look like you could get rolled by a three-year-old."

Starsky tried a small smile, and accepted a mug of beer. He took a long swig. Nobody said anything, but Hutch gave a nod and a half smile to Huggy, to let him know it had gone well. Or had seemed to, anyway.

"Could use a whiskey, Hug," Starsky said.

Hutch returned Huggy's questioning glance with a small shrug. Hard liquor wasn't Starsky's usual choice. In fact, Hutch couldn't remember the last time either of them had drunk anything more than a beer or two. Even after Terry had died, after Gillian had died, and they'd drunk themselves stupid, it had only been beer. Starsky didn't even like whiskey.

Huggy went and poured the drink, brought it back, set it down, watched while Starsky stared at it. He looked at Hutch, and waited with him, silent. Finally, Starsky picked up the glass and tossed the liquid back in one smooth motion. Immediately, his face crunched up and he gasped and choked as the vapors hit the back of his throat. He struggled to catch his breath for a moment, and then he began to laugh.

He looked at Hutch. "God, I missed you," he said.

Chapter 22

Hutch pleaded with Starsky to stay away from the courtroom during the defense phase.

He got into the Torino and barely waited for Starsky to get behind the wheel before he started in again. "Why do you have to be there? I thought we were done with this."

I need us to be done with this.

"I don't know. It's a compulsion or obsession or something. I hate not knowing what's happening."

"Irene promised to call you every night."

"Not the same." He pulled out of his driveway and headed toward Metro. "Why don't they go with an insanity plea? How can he possibly think he can get away with a straight 'I didn't do it' defense?"

"He doesn't want anyone to think he's crazy."

Starsky stopped for a red light and tapped a beat on the steering wheel. "Maybe we could go for an hour or two. Check on Irene. See how it's going."

"I think you need a new obsession."

Starsky looked sideways at him. He'd been doing that a lot lately.

"Like what?"

Was it crazy to think that that might be a come-on? Probably. But not definitely. What if Hutch were to say, "Like...me"? What kind of look might he get if were to say that?

But he just couldn't take the risk. It was too huge. Sometimes you couldn't go back once you'd crossed a line. And sometimes grown men could act like schoolgirls. He was one of them. He felt like an idiot. Again. He was starting to wonder what not feeling like an idiot had ever been like.

So instead he said, "Fishing?"

"Oh, please. That the best you can come up with?"

"Uh, horseback riding."

"No!"

Shit. It had just slipped out. That whole fantasy really needed to be put out to pasture. Chalk up another taboo to Jimmy.

"Bonsai."

"Gesundheit!"

"No, mushbrain. Bonsai."

"What's that?"

"You know, the miniature trees."

"Oh. Nah."

"Why don't you do more with your photography? You could have a show. Sell some of your work."

"Yeah. I guess."

Maybe he wasn't ready yet. Maybe until the trial was over there wasn't room for anything else in his head. In either of their heads.

The radio crackled, then squawked. "All units, a report of shots fired at 1437 West Alameda."

Hutch spoke into the handset. "Zebra 3 responding, ETA two minutes."

Starsky had flipped on the siren and was already making a skidding U turn, and Hutch banged his head on the dash when he bent down to grab the MARS light.

"Ow!" He put the light on the roof and rubbed at his forehead.

"Sorry," Starsky said, hands moving fast to turn the car. "I'll kiss it and make it better later."

What did he just say? Hutch saw his hands frozen in midair and put them down.

Starsky grinned without taking his eyes off the road.

As they approached the Alameda intersection, Starsky turned off the siren, and Hutch retrieved the MARS light.

"Are we at the right place?" Starsky said.

The street was dead quiet. No sounds, no screams, no people. Starsky cruised past the address and Hutch tried to see in the windows.

Hutch picked up the handset. "Zebra 3 to base. We are at that location. We don't see or hear anything. Can you confirm address, 1437 West Alameda."

"Zebra 3, address confirmed. Caller is still on the line in a back room, says there's one gunman holding two of her coworkers and a customer hostage. It's a jewelry shop. Says he keeps yelling something about rubies. She doesn't think he knows she's there. She thinks she can unlock the back door."

"Copy that. You got backup coming?"

"Backup on its way. Please stand by."

He looked at Starsky, lifted an eyebrow, saw the nod of agreement.

"Sorry, can't hear you, Dispatch..."

Hutch dropped the handset on the seat and got out of the car. He took his gun out and put it into the waistband behind his back. Not for the first time, he considered that it might be time to buy a smaller weapon.

Starsky started to drive off slowly, then stopped. "Hey," he said, leaning across the seats.

Hutch jogged a few steps to catch up and stuck his head through the open window.

"Yeah?"

Starsky looked at him hard, no grin in sight. "Don't get killed."

Hutch reached his hand in and Starsky took it, squeezed it once. He nodded and let go.

Hutch turned away, heart thumping, face burning.

He went into the shop without looking around, going straight to one of the glass-topped counters. He peered into it for a moment. Out of the corner of his eye he could see two people sitting on the floor and staring wide-eyed at him, and the feet of another sticking out from behind the other counter. He couldn't see the gunman.

He said, "Anyone home?" and turned slowly to his left. One of the women on the floor started to say something and the other one put a hand on her arm and shook her head.

The gunman came around in front of the counter and pointed a small revolver straight at Hutch.

Hutch faked a startled jump. "What the hell—" He put his hands in the air to show they were empty.

Once a gun was staring at him, it wasn't much of a stretch to act scared. What Hutch didn't expect, though, was the sudden reminder of Jimmy's gun telling him that his life was over.

Jimmy's gun hadn't made him sweat like this, though, and that had seemed a sure thing. This situation looked much more manageable, and yet his body reacted as if it this were a far greater threat. His hands had behaved until after he'd taken Jimmy down, but now they shook so badly that he was sure they wouldn't work when he needed them to.

And he'd thought Starsky was the one who hadn't been functioning.

And yet, he found himself assessing the situation anyway. Maybe he was on autopilot. The guy with the gun looked vaguely familiar, but Hutch couldn't place him. He was twenty-five at the most, with nice clothes and a good haircut. He didn't seem to be a junkie looking to score. Not wasted, not strung out. He seemed more frightened than his hostages. What the hell was he doing, then?

Hutch decided to ask him.

"What do you want?" He could hear the shake in his voice but it would probably help more than hinder. This kid didn't seem to be interested in aggression or a display of dominance. He wanted something. Needed something.

Behind the counters, Hutch saw the slightest movement of the swinging door to the back room. Starsky's signal that he was in position. Hutch felt himself calm down, felt his brain kick into gear. His hands stopped shaking.

The boy with the gun said, "I want my ruby. That's all I want." He waved the gun at the women on the floor. "I told them, but they said she isn't here." He looked down at whoever owned the legs behind the counter. "*He* called my Ruby 'it' like she's just a *thing*."

"Who is Ruby?" Hutch said. "Where is she? I'll help you find her."

"I don't know." He said each word deliberately, as if he thought Hutch was the stupidest person on the planet. "That's why I'm here. I thought . . ." He looked around, unfocused. "I thought, I don't know. I was supposed to be here." He pointed at the woman nearest him on the floor. "*She* said they don't sell rubies here. What did she mean?"

"I might know where Ruby is. Can you tell me your name? I can try to find her and tell her where you are."

The man's face changed in an instant from angry to hopeful. He let his gun arm drop a little.

"Really? Can you tell her it's Jeremy? That I waited for her but she never showed and I thought maybe she'd be here . . ."

"Okay, Jeremy, I think I know where Ruby is. Would you like me to take you to her?"

"Yeah, yeah, let's go. I—" Jeremy looked blankly around at the women on the floor. "What about them?"

"They can stay here, can't they? They should probably stay here, don't you think?"

"Okay," Jeremy said. "Yeah. They should stay here."

"Jeremy, put the gun down first, okay?"

Behind him, Hutch saw the swinging door open, saw Starsky move up behind Jeremy in silence.

Jeremy looked at the gun in his hand, looked at Hutch, looked at the women.

"Oh, God," he said. "You're lying, aren't you? You can't take me to her, can you?" He raised the gun, and Hutch moved fast, no thought, no plan, just an adrenaline surge that sent him rocketing forward, that barreled him into Jimmy and started him pounding into his face—

Jesus Christ, he thought, his mind screaming. *Stop! This isn't Jimmy. This isn't Jimmy.*

Jeremy fell under him, the gun skittering across the floor, and something grabbed his fist in mid-flight.

"Hutch," Starsky said quietly. "Don't."

Hutch found he couldn't stand up, so he let himself fall back and sat down hard on the floor. He put his arms on his knees and sat there trying to catch his breath. Starsky picked up Jeremy's gun, cuffed him gently, and rounded up the women on the floor. He sent them into the back room and then checked whoever was lying behind the counter. Hutch heard a male voice groan, and the legs twitched and disappeared. A second later their owner stood up slowly and followed the women through the door to the back.

Jeremy lay on the floor, face down. Hutch couldn't move. His gun was digging into the small of his back but he couldn't move. Starsky squatted down in front of him.

"You okay?"

Hutch dropped his eyes. He felt Starsky's hand on his face, but he couldn't look up.

"I'll be right back," Starsky said. "Don't move." He disappeared. Hutch heard him a moment later telephoning dispatch, giving the all clear. Then he was back, reaching down a hand.

Hutch took it and pulled himself upright. But the place was filling up with cops and all he could do was squeeze Starsky's hand twice.

"We'll talk later," Starsky said.

Then he turned to one of uniforms, and began to tell him what had gone down—how the girl who'd called in had unlocked the back door, that he'd shoved her out into the alley, and waited for Hutch to talk the guy down. That Hutch had done everything, and that all that had been left for Starsky to do was to cuff the guy and get the rest of the hostages, all unharmed, out safely.

Hutch felt like he was someone else listening to the report. He had to find a way to make that stop.

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They didn't get back to Metro until nearly three. Dobby cornered them as soon as he saw them, and ordered them into his office. He pointed at one of the chairs in front of his desk until Starsky sat in it, and then he pointed at the other. Hutch sat.

Dobby went around to his side and took his own chair, still saying nothing.

Hutch looked sideways at Starsky, and caught him looking sideways back. They both looked straight ahead before Dobby looked up.

"I don't know what it is with you two. I really don't. How many times have I told you: no private parties. How many times have you ignored a direct order? You were told to wait for backup."

"There was static on . . ."

"Don't give me that bullshit, Hutchinson. Who the hell do you think you're talking to?"

Hutch lowered his eyes.

"Did you file your reports?"

"Not yet," Starsky said.

"Well you can add this. Jeremy Newsome is your bad guy, age twenty-three. Turns out his girlfriend, Ruby Pelham, is one of the identified victims of one James Golden. Can you beat that?"

Hutch heard Starsky make a sound like he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

"That's a bit of a stretch for a coincidence, don't you think?" Hutch said. He felt a little like there wasn't much air in the room. Jimmy was everywhere.

"Yes, but it's not as crazy as it looks. Ruby worked at that fancy riding stable up in Griffith Park, near where that girl was found on the trail in the hills. They lived near there, and they'd just gotten engaged. They were supposed to buy a ring at that store you were in, but she was killed the day before. She was at a polo match and never came home. The coincidence is that you two were the responding officers. That's what I keep thinking about." He checked some notes. "She went missing eleven months ago, and her body was found three days later in a horse paddock up near Thousand Oaks. All the usuals. Anal rape, and that *phi* symbol. Here are the pictures."

Starsky's mouth was open in disbelief. Hutch discovered that his was, too. He shut it. Neither of them looked at the photographs. Neither of them needed to see pictures of Ruby to know what she'd looked like. Dobby picked them back up and returned them to the file folder.

"Here's the kicker," Dobby continued. "This weekend would have been their wedding. Apparently Jeremy seemed fine, even went and sat calmly in the courtroom almost every day, until yesterday when he suddenly started talking about finding Ruby, like he forgot she was dead. But then he showed his brother a gun, wouldn't say when or where he'd gotten it, then he just took off. They thought he was going to kill himself."

"Didn't they call it in?" Starsky said.

"Of course they did. What do you think they got?"

"Call us back," Hutch said, "when it's been twenty-four hours."

"Right."

So Jeremy had been in some kind of psychotic hell, looking desperately for his Ruby and wanting desperately to die.

"Maybe he *was* trying to commit suicide," Starsky said. "He was waving a gun around, firing shots, but nobody got hurt. Maybe he thought the cops would take him down."

"If we'd waited for backup..." Hutch said.

"Right, again," Dobby said. "If you'd waited for backup we'd have another dead body." He glared at Hutch.

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir. That is, uh..."

Starsky still looked grim. He started to say something, but the phone rang and Dobby picked it up, listened for a moment, said "Thanks," and hung up.

"Well, that was the court clerk. The defense attorney rested his case and closing arguments are done. The jury's deliberating."

Hutch looked at Starsky again. His face was blank, as if no one had said a word. Dobby looked at

Hutch. Hutch lifted an eyebrow and shook his head.

"So the both of you are in deep shit. You write your damn reports and then you're suspended for the rest of the shift. Without pay! Get the hell out of here."

Starsky beat Hutch to the door by a fraction of a second.

"And Hutchinson, Starsky—"

They turned at the same moment, and Hutch almost tripped over one of Starsky's feet.

Now what?

But Dobey just said, "Good job today. Both of you. Now get out of my sight!"

Hutch closed the door quietly behind them.

Chapter 23

The gates of the old zoo looked solid, well chained and locked.

"Why here, for God's sake?" Hutch said. "And how are you going to get in, anyway?"

"Same way I got in when I came here to meet Prudholm. Same way we got in last time we came here." He turned to face Hutch and held up his right arm. "See? Nothing up my sleeve." He held up his left. "Nothin' up there, either." He gave the chain a small tug and it fell off the gate and clattered on the pavement. "Magic."

Hutch couldn't believe he'd said that. Starsky must have seen it on his face, because he said, "Oh, shit. Inappropriate, right?"

Since when had Starsky started to act normal? Hutch had missed the moment. He pushed the gate open, waited while Starsky drove the Torino in, and then closed it behind the car. He put the chain back on, and put the broken padlock through the links. It did look secure to the casual eye. He got back in the car.

Starsky drove up the narrow footpaths like he knew where he was going, and finally stopped near the old bear cages. He turned the car off and got out. When Hutch didn't, he went around and opened the door for him. When he still didn't, Starsky grabbed hold of his arm and dragged at him until he finally stopped resisting and let himself be pulled out.

"What are we doing here?" Hutch said. He felt his throat closing a little, and his mouth felt sticky.

"Remember how screwed up I was after the whole Marcus thing?"

"Of course."

"Those nightmares, and how I kept thinking I was back down there in the caves." He touched the right side of his face where the faint scar was. He pointed. "See down there? Remember I told you that's where I was coming out when that asshole shoved the torch in my face." He pointed a little farther up the hillside. "Over there is where they put the bear in with me." He moved back and shaded his eyes with his hand. "I can't see where they had me first, where I was blindfolded and my hands were tied and they kept chanting 'Seemoan' at me."

How the hell was he doing this, like he was telling the story of his most recent birthday party? He was fine now. Or was he? Maybe that's what this was about. Maybe he was still as fucked up as Hutch. Or worse. Why wasn't he worse?

Do you want him to be? Is that your problem?

"Starsk." He put a hand on Starsky's arm.

"It's okay, Hutch. Just listen." He paused for a few seconds and looked around carefully. "What I'm getting at is you made me come back here, remember? And after we came back, and you made me walk through it all again and show you everything they did, all that shit stopped. The nightmares and the weird feeling that it was happening again all the time. It all stopped. And that corner up by the old food concessions? You dragged me back up there, too, and then you let me go ahead and shoot Prudholm. And then you let me cry." He stepped away from the rusty railing. "Come on. This way."

Hutch remembered. *Turnabout's fair play, I guess. But I don't need to do this. I don't want to do this.*

Starsky led the way up the path to the right. When Hutch saw where they were headed, he stopped dead. "Oh, no," he said. "Oh, come on."

It was the round platform where Marcus's followers had tied Starsky up for their sick sacrifice. The bones of the old structure still stood there, gray metal pipes against blue sky. It looked innocent, nothing worse than a derelict cage with no walls. His heart began to race. He could almost see the dark shape of Starsky's body, the strain in his arms as he tried to talk Gail out of what she'd meant to do, the sudden glitter of the first morning sun on her knife...

God, Starsky, why are we here?

"We're here," Starsky said, as if he'd heard the question, "because I think I know what's happening to you. You're having flashbacks, and you feel like you're someone else, right? Same thing that happened to me. We should be doing this at Jimmy's, but there's no way we'd get in there now. So I thought, if we can't go to where you almost got killed, then we'll go to where I almost got killed."

Hutch walked slowly onto the platform. "So now you're the big smart psychologist." He tried to grin but he couldn't do it. "What do we do then, Doc?"

"First we find somewhere to sit down."

Off to the left were some old benches. They didn't look too sturdy, but they didn't creak or collapse when Starsky sat on one, so Hutch sat next to him.

"You don't need to do this, Starsky. I'm fine. Let's just go, okay?"

"Not a chance. Not until we get it all out."

"Get what out? There's nothing to get out."

"No?" Starsky put his hands out in front of him, palms down, fingers spread. "Do this, then."

"What? No."

"Come on, Blondie, lemme see your hands."

Starsky's were steady. Hutch's, when he did as Starsky asked, were doing a fine impression of a leaf in a breeze.

"What do you want, Starsky? What am I supposed to do here?"

"We think we know each other inside and out. Right?"

"I did." *And there's still something you don't know. Another thing you're not seeing that's right in front of you. Why can't you see it? See me.*

"So did I." Starsky rubbed at his face. "Thought I knew myself pretty good, too. Thought I knew a lot of things. Turns out, I don't. I didn't like finding that out."

"That's what this is all about, then? "

"What do you think this is all about exactly? I ain't playing any more guessing games."

"This is still about you not knowing about Jimmy, and blaming yourself."

Irene, that day at Irene's place. That's when Starsky had started to feel better. He'd stopped blaming himself after that day, but maybe Hutch hadn't stopped blaming him. Was that what he was supposed to say? Out loud?

"That's it? Still? That's all you think this is?"

"What else is there?"

"Are you serious?"

Hutch stood up and began pacing up and down the path. Starsky stayed still, watching him. It felt wrong. Starsky was the one who always had to be in motion. This was all out of whack. He turned and went back to where Starsky sat, and stood over him, shading him. Starsky looked up and waited.

"What then?" Hutch said. "You want to talk about how I can't think straight, can't work straight? How I keep going over and over how stupid I was? How Jimmy's hand felt in my hair?"

Starsky said, "How did it feel?"

"What, like you don't know?"

He heard the small sound Starsky made when he said that. He didn't know why he'd said it. Hadn't thought it first. It just fell out of him. It lay on the ground where it had fallen, and he wanted to grind it under his heel.

"Tell me what you mean by that," Starsky said, so low and quiet that if Hutch had been a foot farther away he wouldn't have heard it.

"I don't know. I don't know. I didn't mean to say it."

"You said it. Now tell me what you meant."

Hutch backed away a few steps, and the sun fell on Starsky's face. He squinted, then put a hand above his eyes.

Hutch turned his back on him. "Figure it out for yourself." *Then maybe you can tell me.*

This wasn't going right. This couldn't have been what Starsky had expected, what he'd wanted to do here.

He felt a huge shove from behind and he stumbled forward, nearly falling. He tried to turn but Starsky shoved him again.

"*You* figure it out, you son of a bitch," Starsky said. "*You* figure it out and then you come talk to me." Starsky took off running, head back, his feet pounding onto the cracked surface.

Hutch thought about what that whole scene must look like from above. Down the hill, the red car gleaming in the sunlight. A few hundred yards up the path, a man running as if a bear were chasing him. Somewhere in between, some kind of alien monster who looked and dressed like Hutch, standing there trying to figure out what his next line was supposed to be. He wanted to yell "Cut!"

Cut, Jimmy said behind him. *That's funny.*

Hutch turned fast and took a swing at him, aiming for his face. The force of the blow, with nowhere to land, spun him around and he stumbled and went down hard. He ended up on his knees, his hands flat on the rough path.

Jimmy grabbed his hair and tried to pull his head back. Was Jimmy working for Forrest? That made no sense. He kicked out at him and heard the sound of his boot against Jimmy's face. He could smell Monk's aftershave and his own rank body odor, and his hair stank of sweat and worse . . . Where was Starsky? Why didn't he burst through the doors and shove all those people out of his way, come and grab him, get him out of there . . . He tried to turn out of Jimmy's grasp, but he couldn't get free of the hand in his hair. He cried out and tried to keep Monk from yanking his arm out straight, from tying something around it...it hurt...The needle went in and Hutch stopped trying to get away, and waited for that supreme warmth to spread from his arm to his heart, for his muscles to relax in ecstasy, for his brain to fly him off somewhere blue and yellow. And when it didn't, he wanted to cry or scream—or kill...Jimmy and Monk and...Starsky.

Oh God, Starsky, no, no, I don't mean that.

"I don't mean that, Starsky."

"I know. Come here, babe, it's okay."

Then he was somehow lying half on Starsky, half on the ground in an old abandoned zoo, looking up at his face, grabbing at his shirt.

"You have to help me, Starsky. Please."

"I will, Hutch. I am."

"I'm a mess."

Starsky laughed, but not like he thought it was funny. "Yeah, you are. So'm I. So what do we do about it, huh?"

When he brushed the hair off Hutch's forehead, Hutch felt undone. He waited for his gut to seize up, for his muscles to cramp, for his bladder to let go. He pulled his legs up, ready to fight the agony. Starsky held on to him, wrapped his body around him, pushed the hair out of his eyes, told him he was okay.

And when the pain didn't happen, he opened his burning eyes and found that Starsky's eyes were looking into his, seeing him the way he'd ached to be seen. He almost put his hands in Starsky's hair, to pull him down, to kiss him, to take him...

"I can't."

"What can't you? You can do anything. Say anything, Hutch. Say what you need to say. I'm right here. I ain't going anywhere."

"I—" And still he couldn't. Instead he let go and turned away, sat up. He looked at the old cage, where Starsky had almost died. "I hate him. I hate Jimmy. What he did to you."

No. Because it was him with you and not me. That's what you want to say.

Starsky moved a little, stretched his legs.

"He never did anything to me, Hutch, except . . . what he did to you, yeah, I guess you could say he did *that* to me. And I hate him for it, too." He got up and walked down the path and sat on a low stone wall. Hutch followed him slowly, still a little dazed and unsteady, and sat next to him. "I thought at first he wanted to kill you to get you out of my life so he could have me back. Or something like that. But now I think it was to hurt me in the worst possible way. He knew there was nothing he could do that would hurt me worse than taking you away from me."

Hutch found he was holding his breath. He let it out, took another. He wondered if Starsky could actually hear his heart. He wished his body would stop shaking. If it hadn't been so hot out, he'd have claimed he was shivering. But that wouldn't fool Starsky anyway.

"He told me," Hutch said, "how he'd take care of you after he'd killed me, help you through the loss."

"He didn't know I'd seen the pictures and the articles. He thought he'd get away with it."

"No. I don't think so. I think he knew he wouldn't. I don't think he cared. Or maybe it's what he wanted."

"He wanted to hurt me. I wish he'd just taken it all out on me. Not on all those poor girls."

"Yeah. But you were the only thing he could focus on. Without you he'd never have been able to pull

off being normal."

"No. He learned how to behave like a normal person when he was so young, way before I met him. It was no effort for him. It wasn't any different from us just going about our lives. We don't think about how we're acting, we just do what we do." He stopped. The skin around his eyes tensed. "So why'd he come apart? Why now?"

"Maybe he saw something in you changing. Maybe he got scared."

"Changing? I wasn't changing. Not as far as he was concerned anyway."

"You started taking me along whenever he asked you to go somewhere. And maybe he realized—"

"Realized? What was there to realize?"

"When's the last time you went out on a date? With a girl? When's the last time I did?"

"Jesus. He thought that you and me were...Oh, my God."

"Is it such a shock, that he might think that?"

"No, I guess, no. I guess not." Starsky was practically stuttering. Surely the whole idea wasn't brand new to him? "Now it makes more sense."

"So he probably did think he could just get rid of me, and everything would go back to normal. You'd still be his, his, I don't know what to call it."

"I was never his...whatever. Not for twenty years, anyway. How could he stand to have me around all that time, if that's what he wanted? What he thought." He made a sound in his throat, not quite a laugh. "Why do I keep asking the same damn questions over and over? It ain't like I don't know the answers. Same answers, every time."

"He managed by transferring you onto all those girls. Maybe to him they really were you."

Starsky picked a small stone out of the wall and tossed it in the air a few times. Then he threw it as hard as he could. It bounced off a corroding lamp post and disappeared somewhere off behind it.

"Why didn't he kill you that day out on the trail ride? Why did he even ask you to go? I still don't get it."

"He couldn't do anything, not out there. There'd have been no way to cover it up. He just hoped Mabel would toss me, and she did. Best he could do."

"So he killed some poor woman as a substitute for you, and probably started trying to figure out how to do it for real."

"That's what keeps squirreling around in my head. I keep telling *you* not to blame yourself, yet I blame myself for her death." He rubbed his face. "And, I don't know how to say this without it sounding really shitty—," he put a gentle hand on Starsky's arm, "—but yeah, I blame you for her death, too."

He watched Starsky's face go pale.

"*You* blame me?" He stared for a long moment at something up high in one of the big eucalyptus trees. "So there we have it. That's what wrong with us. We're blamin' each other for something we say the other isn't to blame for. That makes a whole lot of sense, don't it?" He stared at his hands. "I feel okay most of the time now, but then all of a sudden I get so mad. At you. At myself. I hate what he did, but I don't think he could help it. I don't think he had a choice. He's the one to blame, but it just isn't that simple."

Hutch tried to make some sense of his swirling thoughts. He tried to put them into some kind of language that would convey what he felt. Then he decided to just start talking, and stop trying to be so careful.

"What I get so crazy about is that I do keep wondering how you could have missed all the signs in him." *And all the signs in me. Why can't you see what's going on in me? I'm right here in front you.* "And more, it's about, I guess, that you loved him. I *know* you couldn't have known. I wouldn't have. No one would have. And I get mad at myself for even thinking any of that. I'm sorry for being so angry. I really am." He waved away Starsky's protests. "What are you supposed to have done, anyway? The fact is we wouldn't have gotten a warrant, and all we could have done was watch him. You couldn't be the one to do that. How could you? Why should you? I shouldn't have let you even think of it. He was your friend. Dobey would never have allowed us to investigate him."

"When's that ever stopped us before?"

Hutch saw the first glimmer of returning humor. The color came back into Starsky's face in a rush. And Hutch felt something seem to click inside himself—like a switch—turning off all the doubts, all the self-hatred, all the pain. He looked at his hands. They were calm and quiet.

"Well, it didn't. We found out what he was doing, and we took care of it. Not too well, but we did take care of it."

"Okay, then." Starsky bumped against Hutch's shoulder. "Want to know what I keep getting mad at you for?"

"I don't know. Do I?"

"Probably not, but I'll tell you anyway. It's that you made me promise to stay away from Jimmy, and then you went right over there on your own, like you thought you were—what was it you said Marcus called you? The White Knight. You were some kind of White Knight, and you walked right up to him and gave him the chance he needed." He sat up straight, breaking the contact with Hutch's shoulder. "Why did you make me promise to stay away and then go on your own? And I sat in the dark all that night by myself, and I didn't even know what was happening. I didn't know I needed to go charging to *your* rescue. I should have known. What the hell do you think my life would be worth to me right now if he'd killed you? Why did you do that?"

"The obvious answer? To protect you. The real answer? Maybe it was to remind you who I really am. I guess I thought you'd forgotten. I wanted to be the White Knight, it's true. I didn't think of it that way, though."

"Worked real well for ya, didn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah. Rub it in some more. Oh, yeah, that feels good."

Starsky turned to look at him, and saw that he was smiling. "Hutch!"

"Okay, folks, this is the 'black humor' portion of our road to recovery."

Starsky laughed. Hutch suddenly felt a sense of liberation, like the first moment when he realized a bad headache had gone.

"He can't hurt us anymore," Starsky said. "No one can hurt us anymore."

Hutch finally let himself believe him. "Can we go now?"

"Yeah. Next time either of goes to the zoo, it's gonna be to see the monkeys."

"Deal."

"You okay? I mean, really okay?"

"Yes. Really okay. You can send your bill to Jimmy."

Starsky stood up and held out his hand. Hutch took hold of it, and they walked to the car that way. Hutch realized he wasn't watching from outside anymore. He could feel Starsky's hand in his, feel the sun beating on the top of his head, feel the ground under his feet. Starsky had come to the rescue and had somehow put him back inside himself.

Chapter 24

At ten to six on Friday, when they thought they'd gotten off easy with no arrests all day, and therefore no paperwork to deal with, the radio squawked.

"Zebra 3, Zebra 3." A female voice. Gloria was on duty early.

Starsky looked at Hutch and squeezed his eyes shut. "We ain't here. Don't answer it."

"Seriously?"

"You want to take a call ten minutes before end of shift?"

"Zebra 3, Zebra 3, please respond."

"Shit." Hutch picked up the handset. "This is Zebra 3's answering machine. Zebra 3 can't come to the phone right now. Please call back later, preferably after six."

Starsky put his head back and groaned.

Gloria's tinny-sounding voice came back without humor. "Funny, Detective. I have a message for you from Captain Dobey."

"Okay, okay. Hit me with it."

"He said the jury is coming back and to get your, um, *selves* back to the courthouse."

Starsky picked his head up fast and turned the key in the ignition.

"Roger that, Dispatch," Hutch said. "We're on our way. Thanks." He put the handset on its hook and stared straight ahead as the Torino roared to life.

"How do you think it'll go?" Starsky said. His voice sounded tight, a little strained.

"Been a long stretch, hasn't it?"

"Yeah. Long and horrible."

"Well, it's almost done. I'll buy you a beer after."

"Either way?"

"Either way."

"And a burger?"

"Yes, Starsky, and a burger."

There were no parking spaces in front of the courthouse. They had to find a garage, and then had to go up three levels before there was an open slot. And then they sprinted.

Then they had to shove their way through reporters and onlookers, and had to show their badges to get through the police cordon. And again at the doors, and again outside the courtroom.

There were no seats, and not much standing room, but they found a spot, and stood, breathing hard, straining to see over the heads in front of them. Hutch felt like he was at a football rally or a parade, and for a bizarre moment he expected to see cheerleaders and a marching band. He felt the press of the people around him, smelled body odor and cheap aftershave and someone's flowery perfume, and then the back of a hand pushed up hard against his. He looked at Starsky, saw his tight-jawed glance and his nod, and pressed back.

The judge nodded to the jury foreman who stood up and tried to still the paper in his shaking hands. "On the charge of kidnapping and unlawful imprisonment of a police officer, we, the jury, find the defendant guilty."

There was a huge uproar, through which the shouts of the bailiff's "Order!" and the judge's pounding gavel were barely heard. Long seconds passed, and finally the crowd quieted. The press of Starsky's hand changed to a hard grasp, a kind of agitated grab, and Hutch held on tight. No one could see their two hands in that crowd, and, anyway, no one was looking at anything but the defendant at that moment.

The judge spoke. "If there are any more outbursts, I'll have the courtroom cleared."

The sudden hush in the room almost felt like a vacuum had sucked all sound away. He stopped breathing. Starsky's grip on his hand became painful.

The judge picked up his gavel, and the rising voices all around them instantly silenced. The foreman never looked up from his paper.

"On the count of aggravated rape of a minor person, we, the jury, find the defendant, James Golden, guilty."

The courtroom remained silent as the foreman read off charge after charge of the rapes and murders of all the girls identified by their hair samples and photographs, all eleven of the ones the prosecution had been able to prove beyond any shadow of a doubt.

Finally, he looked up at the judge.

"On the eleventh count of murder in the first degree, we, the jury," the jury foreman took a breath, and everyone in the courtroom did the same, "find the defendant, James Golden, guilty."

He dropped his hands, and the paper fluttered to the floor.

The crowd erupted, and Hutch lost track of Starsky. He made his way out against the shove of bodies, and finally found him sitting alone on the wide expanse of marble steps in front of the courthouse. There were no photographers there; they were all still inside.

Hutch sat down next to him.

"Now what?" Starsky said.

"Now we get our lives back."

"He'll get the death penalty."

"Maybe."

"Irene—"

"We'll take care of her, Starsk."

She was going to be very well off. All of Jimmy's assets would be hers now. Starsky would worry over her anyway.

"We're never going to be able to go under cover again. Our pictures are plastered everywhere."

"Least of our problems." Hutch looked around at the empty steps. It reminded him of the weird emptiness after Marcus's followers had kidnapped Starsky, and how they had all disappeared. He felt no internal response to the memory, just a kind of calm void. He was grateful for that. "How are you doing?"

"I don't feel anything. I thought I'd be really—" Starsky made a kind of helpless gesture with one

hand.

"You've already felt it all."

"I've got a whole new understanding now. I never thought about the families of all the people we've arrested. What they go through."

"I never thought about it either. They don't have a class for that at the academy. Too bad we had to learn it this way."

"Yeah. And there's still the sentencing. I can't even think about that."

"Whatever happens, it'll be okay."

"If he gets the death penalty—"

"There hasn't been an execution in California in a long time."

"Still." He took a huge breath and let it out in a long rush. "I don't think I'll feel like it's really over until after he's sentenced." He looked at Hutch. "Then maybe we can get on with . . ." He looked away. "Maybe we can have . . ."

Hutch felt a new kind of flutter in his belly. "More?" He tried to keep the leaping hope out of his face, just in case he was still...mistaken.

But Starsky looked back at him, into his eyes. "Yeah," he said. "More."

He got up and put a hand out. Hutch took it and grunted to his feet, and reluctantly let it go.

"Hungry?"

"Ain't I always?"

"You haven't been, not for a long time."

"Well, I am now."

The spark he'd thought was lost found its way into the deepest center of himself, set itself up and began to make him wild. He welcomed it in. It felt amazing. He looked at Starsky, and saw that it was there in his eyes, too. He smiled.

"Come on, then," he said. "My treat."

φ

Huggy was waiting for them at The Pits, told them the whole verdict thing had been televised, and then turned off the TV behind the bar.

"Made up a new special just for today," he said, handing out plates and pints of beer. "I calls it the 'We're Back In Business Boys and Girls Special'."

Starsky looked at the double cheeseburger and fries on his plate. "Huggy, this is a cheeseburger and fries."

"Yeah, but see, there's two burgers in there together." He picked the top bun off Starsky's sandwich. "See?"

Starsky ate a French fry. "Delicious," he said.

Huggy nodded modestly and went off into the kitchen.

Starsky demolished his burger.

"So are you," he said to Hutch when he'd finished.

Hutch nearly choked on the last of his own Special. He looked at the glint in Starsky's eyes. Nothing could have made him feel better. *Except for one thing, and maybe that's not so far out of reach as you thought.* He smiled and said nothing, just lifted an eyebrow and tried to look delicious.

Starsky bumped his knee under the table, and then he sat back and laughed.

Chapter 25

District Attorney Reynolds had told them it could be weeks, even months until sentencing. Jimmy could afford a lot of appeals, and they all figured he'd push it out as long as he could. Reynolds also assured them he had no grounds for any appeals at all. There had been no errors, no screw-ups, no nothing. They just had to try to be patient. It could still be a while until the final curtain.

Hutch took the news in silence. Starsky got up and walked out of the DA's office.

Two days later, Reynolds called and said Jimmy had waived his rights to appeal and had asked for early sentencing. He hadn't given a reason. Hadn't asked for his lawyers to hold a press conference, or even to issue a statement. He had only asked for one thing, that his Oscar be given to Starsky.

Starsky stared at the statue where it sat on his coffee table. "He thinks I need to be reminded every day how he played a part from the moment we met? That I need to remember he was so good at what he did that he snowed me for all those years?"

He took a long pull from his beer and went on. "You know I've never asked him for anything. Never let him give me anything. I let him pay when we went out to dinner or something, that's it. I never asked him for money or help when things were tight. He always tried, though. He even tried to buy me a house. He said if I didn't have to pay rent, I wouldn't have to work so hard and we could spend more time together. It made me feel good, that he wanted to do that for me. He was so mad when I kept saying no. Couldn't understand why I was so stubborn."

"Well, it is *so* hard to imagine."

He looked up at Hutch and managed a small grin. "Those aren't actually the exact words he used." He turned the beer bottle in his hands, looked inside it with one eye, and then drained it. "He wanted to pay for the Torino, too. I never told you that. Except he wanted it to be a Mustang. Maybe I would have bought a Mustang if it hadn't been what he thought I should get. Pretty juvenile, huh?"

Hutch shook his head. "No. It isn't."

Starsky knew that Hutch had more money than what he earned. He'd never asked him for anything either, unless it was for his birthday. Or Christmas. Starsky's sense of honor was what Hutch most admired in him. It always had been. He expected everyone around him to live by the same code, and when they didn't, it always hurt him. It was a lot to live up to.

"I never wanted him to think I was just one of his entourage, just there for what he might give me, or do for me."

"I know."

"When we were looking for the killer, and we didn't know it was him, remember how bad I wanted him? Remember how you kept saying we all did, and I kept saying, no, *I* had to get him?" Hutch nodded. He remembered. "Maybe I really did know." He looked up, his eyes so hurt that Hutch wanted to go kill go Jimmy with his bare hands. "I can't grieve for him. For Jimmy Goldblatt. He's gone and I can't grieve for him. All I see now is the monster, the sick sadistic monster that I wanted to put away so bad I couldn't think of anything else. Because he's still here, and I can't let him go."

"You will, Starsk. Give it some time." Hutch leaned forward. "You can let yourself grieve for the boy, the man you loved. But the one who did these things, who's still here, that's not your friend. Forget *him*. Grieve for what you lost. It's okay."

"Yeah." He seemed to go inward for a few moments, and Hutch wished he could find a way to go

after him, pull him back. But then Starsky looked up and smiled. It wasn't much of a smile, but it was a start. "Yeah. You're right." He pushed the statue away with his foot. "Get it out of here, Hutch. I don't want it."

Hutch couldn't think of what to do with it. It had to have some intrinsic value, and it definitely had historic value. So when he got home he wrapped it up in a towel and stuck it in the farthest corner of his closet. He hoped someday he'd forget it was there.

Two days after that, on Thursday, Dobey called them off a stakeout and told them to go to the courthouse, and said he didn't want to see them again until the following Monday. Starsky started the Torino up before Hutch had a chance to acknowledge the order, or to say thanks.

Hutch hoped it was the last time he would ever see that look on Starsky's face.

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The judge glared around the room.

The jury foreman swallowed. Hutch could barely hear his next words, but he cleared his throat and began again, louder, steadier.

"The jury has unanimously voted to recommend the death penalty..."

Nothing the judge nor the bailiff and court officers did could quiet the crowd. Starsky pulled hard on Hutch's wrist and dragged him backward through the crush and out the doors. When he let go, the wrist throbbed for a moment or two, but Hutch forgot about it in the push to get through the bodies shoving back against them, pushing them back in when all they wanted was to get out. It was like a rip current, and it separated them within seconds.

By the time he made his way back to the Torino, Starsky was already inside, hands tight on the wheel, staring at...something. Hutch couldn't see what was holding his attention so acutely, and he had a wild panicked moment when he thought maybe it was a bomb or worse, until he realized that whatever Starsky saw and heard was inside his own head. Hutch was pretty sure now that he knew what it was. He climbed in and slammed the door shut, and Starsky never moved.

Hutch waited. He watched the skin over Starsky's knuckles turn white.

He reached out a tentative hand.

"Don't," Starsky said.

Hutch withdrew. He waited.

"You drive," Starsky said.

"All right."

He got back out and went around the front of the car. It faced outward in the parking space for a fast take-off, like always.

He opened Starsky's door and waited. He stood, one hand on the top of the raised window, the other on the roof of the car. He looked around the garage. Still no sign of anyone returning to their cars. He waited.

It was quiet there, almost cool, with a light eddying breeze that kicked up small debris and dust. In the distance, he could hear a jet overhead, and the occasional blare of an angry car horn. There were voices down in the street, faint and unintelligible. A car door slammed. A squeal of tires from somewhere above made him look up, automatically tensing, and a moment later a car passed on its

way down and out of the garage. It left a bitter burned oil smell behind. Some birds flew up near the ceiling. Small birds. Sparrows, maybe. Starsky made no sound. Hutch waited.

Finally, he bent down and took a look inside the car.

"Oh, Starsk."

Starsky had leaned forward and put his forehead down on his hands. As Hutch watched, his back went rigid and his shoulders began to shake. He still made no sound.

Hutch let down onto one knee, balancing himself against the open door, left hand on the inside arm rest.

"Starsk." He put a light hand on the back of Starsky's head. "Starsky."

So fast that he didn't really see the movement, Starsky turned to him, twisting sideways and forward, and put his arms hard around Hutch's neck. Hutch felt the side of Starsky's face rough and wet against his own, the fast pulse in his neck just on the other side of his own skin, the clutch of Starsky's hands on the back of his jacket. He dropped his arms, and pulled him in tight.

"It's okay now. It's all over now." And then, because it was what he would have done if it had been one of his girlfriends in his arms, he kissed the side of Starsky's face. And because it seemed right, he did it again.

Starsky made some kind of sound, and lifted his head back a little. Hutch felt his own pulse pick up—the way Starsky turned to look at him, the way his breath stopped, and then restarted, something about the smile that finally began to form somewhere deep inside, somewhere behind his eyes.

And then there was something about the way Starsky kissed him back, in the same place, in the same way, so that Hutch felt a brainless need to turn his head and offer his mouth.

Without warning, he overbalanced and fell backward, pulling Starsky with him out of the car and on top of him. He bashed his head on the door on the way down, and Starsky bashed his on the cement floor, and lay still a moment.

Legs tangled, one of Starsky's still twisted up under the steering wheel, arms under each other and bent at wrong angles, and footsteps coming, voices chattering. People were finally leaving the trial of the year, and there they were, lying on the floor of the Bay City Courthouse parking garage, lying on God knew what, laughing a little hysterically, and unable to stop.

Under the door, up by the front of the car, Hutch saw two pairs of feet, one wearing nice brown medium heels, and one wearing men's black oxfords. The feet stopped and turned toward his face, so he stuck a hand out and waved up at them. The low heels turned sharply away, and the oxfords followed, a little reluctantly, Hutch thought.

Starsky lost it.

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In the end, Starsky wanted to drive after all, and once he started, it took a while for him to stop. Hutch stayed quiet and watched the road rush toward them in the headlights. The only thing Starsky said, somewhere a little north of Malibu, was, "Thanks."

They drove up the coast past Ventura, and finally pulled off into a deserted parking lot facing the ocean.

The beach was serene and lovely, the wind off the water strong and cooling. It felt good on Hutch's

scalp. They found a huge tree trunk blown onshore and leaned against it facing the not-quite setting sun.

Starsky slumped against the tree, head back, hands loose between his legs. Hutch lost track of time, and started to drift, the tumbling turmoil he'd lived with for months finally dissipating on the wind. He stopped waiting for Starsky to say something. Maybe there wasn't anything left to say, or any real need to say it.

When Starsky finally did open his mouth, what he said wasn't anything like what Hutch expected. He said, "You kissed me."

Hutch turned to stare at him. "I did not."

"Yes, you did."

"You kissed me back."

"Thought you didn't."

"Okay, I did, then."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"No."

"Okay." Starsky tapped his fingers against his knees. "You still think I'm not a very good kisser? Huh?"

"I still don't really know, do I?"

"No."

"Anything *you* want to talk about?"

"No."

"Hungry?"

"Yeah."

In the hour it took to drive back to Huggy's, Starsky only said one thing.

He said, "You talk too much."

Hutch had said nothing at all.

Act IV: Sentence

Chapter 26

Things happened fast. One minute they were at Huggy's trying to unwind and regroup with one beer inside and another at hand, and the next, they were out in the alley shushing each other and laughing. Until Starsky took that step forward and put his hands over the line. Hutch grabbed hold and followed, and things happened fast.

They sprinted for the Torino, tripping over each other's feet, holding each other up.

"Get the hell in the car!" Starsky shouted.

"It's locked, moron."

"Oh."

Hutch watched open-mouthed as Starsky jumped from a standstill up onto the hood, pounded the two steps across, and landed next to Hutch.

"Get out of the way."

Slow on the uptake, Hutch didn't move, so Starsky had to lean into him to get to the lock. Hip hard to hip, thigh hot on thigh. Starsky couldn't get the key in the lock.

"Let me do it. Your hands are moving funny."

"My car. I can do it."

"Hurry up."

"I'm hurrying." He yanked the door open hard and Hutch knocked into him trying to get around it as it swung wide. Starsky got trapped against the doorframe.

"Ow."

"Sorry."

"Get out of the way."

Hutch backed up, pulling on Starsky's belt.

"Hurry up."

Starsky ran.

Inside the car alone, Hutch thought that the four seconds it took Starsky to get back around to his side, into his seat, were too long, too cold.

Starsky dropped the keys. Hutch reached across to pick them up, hand to knee, face to blue sneaker. He tried to breathe, but Starsky's hand in his hair, tugging in his hair, took the oxygen out of the space under the steering wheel. He hit his nose on the gearshift when he surfaced.

He shoved the key in the ignition on the way past. Shoved it hard. It slid right in. He swallowed.

"Drive," he growled.

"Where?"

"Starsky, just drive."

Hutch's place was closer. Starsky screamed the car around a too-tight corner and Hutch flew left. Starsky threw an arm out to steady him. Hutch braced a foot on the floorboards and one hand on the dash.

"Don't get us killed!"

"I won't." Starsky eased off the accelerator.

Hutch looked at Starsky's hunched up shoulders, at the intensity of his hands on the steering wheel. He took a breath and looked at the speedometer.

"Don't get us pulled over."

"I won't!" He eased off some more.

"Hurry up!"

"Can't have it both ways, Blondie."

Hutch bent down to the floor in front of him and picked up the Mars light. He held it up to Starsky like an offering to a god.

Starsky didn't even turn his head; he just flipped on the siren. Hutch rolled down his window and stuck the light on the Torino's roof. He left his right arm out there, hooked onto the roof, tight, like a wrestler's hold on an opponent's neck. The air felt good on the side of his face, under the arm of his open jacket, pushing at the sweat under his arm. He could smell it.

His left hand was free, and began to wander.

Starsky made a kind of strangled sound, and Hutch went hot again.

"*You'll* get us killed," Starsky said.

Hutch withdrew his hand, and put his head back.

"Just drive."

How long did it take to drive three miles of city streets at two in the morning with lights and siren? With Starsky at the wheel, not very long, but it seemed like some kind of slow motion effect, like when the shark first spots the swimmer. Hutch tried to count seconds in case maybe that would make them pass faster. He had a word stuck in his head: hurry. It wouldn't get out. He left it there.

Starsky dragged the Torino around in a tight U and slammed it to an angled stop in front of Venice Place. He made no attempt to straighten its body along the line of the curb.

He banged off the siren. "Get out!" he said. "Wait. Get the light."

Hutch pulled it in. "You want me to close the window?"

"Jesus, Hutch, close the window and get out."

Hutch also took a second to lock his door, and slammed it shut. Pulled the handle to check that it held. Felt the grab on the back of his jacket, the yank and the drag, and he turned around fast.

"What the hell are you doing?" Starsky said. "Come on. Come on."

Starsky tried to go up the stairs at the same moment Hutch did, and they got trapped in some kind of farce, each trying to get by the other, or to get the other to go up first. Hutch felt the first stirrings of hysteria, somewhere deep down underneath the folds of his intestines, bubbles of it rising up into his stomach and out into the lower reaches of his throat. He choked on it, and then let it out in a wild laugh, and Starsky stopped dead in the water.

"You wanna talk about this first?" he said, breathing hard.

"No."

"Sure?"

"Open the door, Starsky. Open the damn door."

Starsky pushed past him and nearly fell up the stairs. He reached over the door for the key, neglecting to give Hutch the Look, to brandish the key in his face. He pushed the door open with his foot, dropped the key on the floor, shoved Hutch forward, and kicked backward. The door slammed shut.

Starsky put his hands on Hutch's face, one on each side. Hutch felt his breath on his nose, took in the beers and the burger. He tried not to give Starsky the benefit of his own late night dinner, but Starsky leaned in closer.

"Hutch. Look at me."

"I am."

"No, *look* at me. This is your last chance."

"Last chance for what?"

"Last chance to say no before I do to you what I want you to do to me."

"You talk too much."

Starsky put his mouth on Hutch's, sudden and hard, teeth to teeth. Hutch heard himself make a sound like a moan, felt the vibration of it in his tongue. He opened his mouth to Starsky's and took in the feel of him, the taste of him, heard the sound he made. All Hutch cared about was getting his hand in between Starsky's legs. He wanted to know how different it might feel to hold Starsky's cock in his hand, how different from his own, or how much the same. Where did he plan to put it? Where was Hutch supposed to put his? He didn't know. It didn't matter. Anything. Do anything. He needed Starsky's shirt off, needed his own pants off, needed his cock out so it could unbend. He wanted Starsky's hands on it, he wanted Starsky's mouth on it. He wanted his mouth on Starsky's, too, and on his chest, on his belly, on his ass. He had to get rid of his clothes.

"Gun," Starsky said distinctly. He let go of Hutch's face.

What?

"Oh. Yeah." It wasn't easy getting the holster unclipped with his hands so busy elsewhere. He watched Starsky take off his own and put it on top of Hutch's on the coffee table. "Take your shirt off."

He wanted to say it again. He wanted to say it until it was done, but Starsky's tongue in his mouth made it difficult. He stopped for a second to concentrate on that. He could feel and hear the sound of his day-old beard scraping against Starsky's. Starsky's hands pushed up under his shirt, lifting. He raised his arm and pulled away long enough to let him yank it off over his head.

"Take *your* shirt off, I said."

"Tryin'!" Starsky sounded like he was having trouble breathing. "Let go for a second."

Hutch wanted to, but he found his hands wouldn't let go, so instead he tugged at the bottom of Starsky's shirt, pulled it off over his head, and once it was off, let them make their way straight to Starsky's belt.

We're doing this, we're doing this kept repeating in his head.

"Wait," he said, breathing hard.

"What? Why?" Starsky's eyes and hands were all over him, like he'd never seen or felt skin before. "Why?"

Hutch's skin felt electrified. He took hold of one of the roving hands. "I've been wanting this for a long time." He smiled in response to Starsky's grin. "A long time. I want to take it slow. Savor it."

"Oh, well." Starsky looked around like he was trying to locate his shirt. "I'll just run out for a pizza, then. What do you want on it?"

Hutch let his hands wander back over to Starsky's chest. He gave him a small shove and made him step backward through the front room toward the bed. He shoved him again, then again. Starsky let him do it.

"How about, uh, sausage and meatballs?"

"Good choice," Starsky said, "but I got a better idea."

"Oh yeah? What would that be?" He ran his hands up Starsky's arms to his shoulders, then back down slowly, slowly, looking from one to the other, and then back to his face, his eyes. He took hold of his hands, brought them up to his own chest. Starsky pulled against them until he let go, wanting to know what Starsky planned to do with them, with him.

"First," Starsky said conversationally, "you gotta get out of those jeans. They're killing me to see them, but they must really be killing you." He scrabbled his fingers at the location where they were definitely killing Hutch. The jeans got suddenly tighter.

Hutch groaned. He couldn't help it. "Good idea."

Feeling frantic and trying not to look it, he tore at his own belt, at his zipper. Starsky took his hands away and stepped back, watching. Hutch had never felt so awkward getting undressed before. As long as he didn't trip over himself, fall over. He got his pants down around his ankles, and then had to bend over to take off his shoes. Why had this never seemed like such a huge problem before? Maybe he'd always remembered to take his shoes off first. Maybe his brain wasn't working the way it usually worked. It didn't matter. It only mattered that the shoes came off so the pants could come off so Starsky could do whatever he was going to do to him.

I'm going to do to you what I want you to do to me...

"You all set?" Starsky stood there, arms folded, head back a little. Hutch couldn't take his eyes off the place where the jeans were tight enough to show every vein in Starsky's cock.

"Almost." Hutch thought his own voice sounded funny. A little too high, kind of tight.

"What do you need?"

"What do you think I need?" He reached for Starsky's belt. It came undone easily. So did the top button at his waist. "I need you naked." Now his voice had gone low and throaty. He had trouble with Starsky's zipper and he couldn't stand the wait any longer, so he slipped his hand in and felt around for what he wanted. Starsky let out a sound that was half grunt, half moan. It did things to Hutch's insides and made his cock jump. "Uh, Starsky, did you know you aren't wearing any underwear?"

"Yeah, I know that. Be careful with that zipper, will ya?"

"You do it. I might—. You better do it." He didn't know what was taking so long. "Hurry up." He

didn't think he was being clear enough. "You really have to hurry up."

"You sure are hard to please. Hurry up. Wait. Slow down. Hurry up. Don't get us killed. Getting a little confusing here."

He got his fly open, and Hutch, hands already inside the waistband, pushed back and down, so the jeans came off. Starsky's cock freed itself and Hutch swallowed. His hearing seemed to go off, overwhelmed by the sound of all the blood in his head rushing out and down. He wondered if cocks ever exploded, and hoped his wouldn't be the first. And still there were shoes.

Starsky said, "Wait a sec." He kicked off one sneaker and then the other. "Okay. Go ahead."

He put a hand on Hutch's shoulder to steady himself so he could pick up a foot. Hutch bent down and dragged one pantleg off, and figured that was good enough. He got up and shoved at Starsky's shoulders again until he finally bumped into the edge of the bed and sat on it. So then he was face to face with Hutch's erection, and Hutch froze.

"Well, now," Starsky said, "I see how we got our reputation."

Hutch felt like he was strangling or that he would strangle Starsky in another second, except that it would sort of defeat the purpose. He put his hands on top of Starsky's head, wanting to push him down, to get him to stop talking and start doing.

But he said, "What reputation?"

"You know. You always go high and I always go low."

Hutch nearly choked.

Starsky bent forward, and when Hutch felt the first flick of his tongue on the end of his cock, he thought all the bones in his legs had suddenly dissolved.

"Oh, God."

"You like that, huh?" Starsky sat back. "Want me to do that again? Or am I goin' too fast for you?"

"I—"

"Because, you know, there are a lot of other things I could do right now if I'm going too fast."

"Starsky—"

"I have some errands I could run, and I haven't done any—"

Hutch found that if he shoved his fingers in Starsky's mouth, Starsky would not only stop talking, he would also suck on them and twirl his tongue around them. Bite just a little on the sides of them.

Hutch got lost in his head, thinking, *If he does that to my cock, I'm probably not going to be able to stand up.*

He wiggled his fingers and Starsky put his head back, letting them go.

"Do that to my cock, Starsky. Please. Do that."

"If you're sure . . ."

"You're having fun killing me slowly, aren't you?"

"You said you wanted slow, babe. I'm givin' you what you want."

"What I want. God, what I want..." He let his knees unlock and bend, and as he slipped down, he pushed against Starsky's chest. Starsky leaned back, rested his hands on the bed, put his head back,

and Hutch saw his throat move as he swallowed. He put a finger on the hollow just below the that, where he could see the pulse, and traced down the center of his chest, down to where the hair on his belly just started to turn into the hair around his cock, just to there. Starsky's cock, right there. What he wanted he could have. He bent forward, and looked up to find Starsky's eyes watching him, grabbing hold of his, and he turned his head a little so he could see his face as took him.

The moment Hutch felt the first touch of cock on the end of his tongue Starsky opened his mouth, too. Hutch, smelling the sweat and musk of him and his tongue tasting the bitter saltiness, feeling the amazing softness of the skin, saw Starsky's tongue moving over his own lower lip, like he and Hutch were one and the same, moving in the same way, doing the same thing.

Do to me what you want me to do to you...

Hutch let go of Starsky's eyes, and slid Starsky's cock into his mouth.

The first thing he did was almost gag, but Starsky put a gentle hand on his head and pushed him back a little. The pressure on the back of his throat eased up.

"Take it easy, partner. We got all afternoon here, remember? All night."

Hutch wanted to nod but with his mouth full of Starsky, he couldn't manage it. He wanted to tell Starsky that he had his cock in his mouth.

What did he need?

I'm going to do to you what I want you do to me.

It should have been easy. Hutch knew what he liked to have done to himself. He should just do that. He thought it should be easy.

Starsky pushed himself up off his hands and sat up, folding himself forward. He put his hands on Hutch's back and started moving them slowly down his sides and then back up, wide slow circles that on the upswing reached under and flicked over Hutch's nipples. The first time he did that, Hutch nearly collapsed, but then Starsky started talking again, and Hutch couldn't help but listen.

"Hutch, you have my cock in your mouth, did you know that?"

Hutch made a sound he didn't think he'd ever made before. Had never needed to make before.

"You can suck on it, suck on it, yeah, like that, oh, God, Hutch, you can suck on it like that."

Starsky's fingers suddenly flexed around Hutch's upper arms. He could feel the nails digging in, scraping his skin. He tried a few circles with his tongue. He explored the opening with it, the softness of the skin around it, the hardness of the ridge, of the vein underneath . . .

"That's it, that's good. Oh, God, that's good."

Starsky bent forward as far as he could, over Hutch's head. He stretched his arms, and Hutch couldn't figure out what he was trying to do, but the problem was, he couldn't breathe all folded up against Starsky's groin. He lifted a hand and pushed at whatever he could, and Starsky lifted off him. Grabbed hold of the hand, pressed it against Hutch's face.

"Feel that?" He took Hutch's finger and traced the tip of it across Hutch's upper lip. "Feel that? That's your mouth on my cock." Hutch's arm muscles started to vibrate. "You can do anything you want to it, you know." He lowered his voice to a near whisper. "Do anything you want to *me*. Do to me what you want me to do to you."

The sound of his voice, the words he was saying, what he was doing with his hands on Hutch's face, on his lips, on his eyelids . . . Hutch started to lose his sense of himself again. But now it felt

different. Now he could feel what he felt and watch what he was doing at the same time. It seemed crazy. Starsky had finally made him crazy.

Everything Hutch did with his tongue and his teeth, everything he touched with his hands—he heard sounds he'd never heard anyone make, and every sound made his balls throb, made his cock ache in ways he'd never known. He wanted to put it somewhere, inside something, make it move, make it come. He began to make sounds of his own, sounds he had no control over, nameless aching sounds. And each of those made Starsky tighten his fingers, made the muscles in his thighs twitch and tighten.

"I know you," Starsky said. "I know you."

Hutch's face burned. He tried to take Starsky farther into himself. He needed to take him, all of him. But Starsky pushed his head back, making him let go of his cock. Hutch felt the loss of it, wanted it back, but Starsky suddenly moved his hands up Hutch's arms, made the hairs seem to catch fire, grabbed his face, and leaning back, pulled him up and over himself.

Hutch, letting himself be pulled, felt Starsky's strength, felt the power of him, in him. Felt the end of his cock touch Starsky's, felt himself begin to drown in his need to hold them together. He lay on top of him, breathing hard, and put his mouth on Starsky's, open, breathing into it. His hips moved without his meaning for them to, up and down, like he had no control over them. They had to move. He felt his cock slide along Starsky's.

Starsky began to run his hands up Hutch's back, down his sides, down to his ass, squeezing, his fingers flirting with the tops and insides of his thighs.

Mouth still on his, Hutch tried to say what he felt. It came out in a moan, almost a cry. All he could say was, "Please."

Starsky sounded like he was having trouble forming words, too, but he said, "Roll over." He lifted himself as best he could and tried to push Hutch's weight off. "You gotta help me out here, Blondie. Can you move?" He grinned and licked Hutch's lips, sucked the lower one into his mouth, let it go.

"Not if you do that."

So he could still talk. That was something. He let himself fall away off Starsky's body, felt the air hit his skin, cold and unwelcome. So now he lay on his back, erection huge and almost painful, and watched, his breath catching in the back of his throat, as Starsky sat up and moved himself around. One leg of his pants was still attached, but he seemed not to notice, or he didn't care. It made Hutch want to laugh. It made him want to tell Starsky he loved him.

But then Starsky grunted, stopped, yanked at the jeans, got them off, shoved them away. He turned himself so he was side by side with Hutch, half on his knees, and facing Hutch's feet so he could put his mouth in the right place, and Hutch could still reach out and run his right hand up between Starsky's legs, up to where his hand fit perfectly between them, to where he could hold onto Starsky's cock and feel his balls resting in the palm of his hand, where he could see Starsky lean down and take him into his mouth.

"Oh, God, Starsky, oh, fuck." His hand tightened around Starsky's cock and moved forward and back with the same rhythm that Starsky was using on him. He felt like his hand was on his own cock, like Starsky's was his own.

He felt himself slip into that space where there was no going back, the space that was nowhere in his head, all in his cock. His balls tightened and pulled in, and he felt Starsky's do the same in his hand. His left hand wandered across his own chest. He brushed it over his nipples, one and then the other,

and then reached across himself to Starsky's back, down low at the base of it, just above the swell of his ass.

He moved his right hand faster, gripping tighter, making small primitive sounds over and over like there were no words, no formed thoughts that would ever come out of him, ever again. Starsky began to move his mouth and tongue over him, around him, and made sounds in the back of his throat that Hutch could feel in his veins. He needed to move, to shout.

Starsky suddenly jerked hard once, twice in his hand, and then went utterly still, stopping everything, so that Hutch felt like screaming. He felt the moment that Starsky began to come, felt the whole world become nothing else, just that Starsky was coming in his hand, because of him, for him, and as it ended, felt him begin to move again, mouth and tongue, faster, sucking harder. Hutch's thoughts disappeared into white as his own orgasm began.

He meant to say "yes" or "oh, God," but what he said was "Starsky," over and over and, even as the orgasm crested and ebbed, he found he couldn't stop saying it. Starsky collapsed on his legs. Hutch let his hand flop down where it could still touch Starsky's skin. His breaths began to slow, his heart to calm, his muscles to relax.

He closed his eyes.

Epilogue: Release

"I want to tell you something," Starsky said.

His mouth was full of toast, and a few crumbs flew out. He hadn't wanted dinner, just something—anything—fast. So Hutch had made a mountain of toast and a pot of coffee. He didn't think he was going to need the caffeine, but it couldn't hurt.

Hutch watched Starsky's mouth moving, and wanted to touch it. He sat back in his chair, feeling the press of it on his skin. Everything that touched him, that he touched, seemed to arouse him.

"Yeah?" He felt no flutter of alarm. It was a relief to hear those words and not think his world was about to come to an end. "What is it?"

Starsky took a swig of coffee and looked down. Hutch's eyes followed his. He was going to have a hard time keeping his eyes on Starsky's face when there was all the rest of him right there to look at. To taste.

Starsky looked up and caught him leering. He raised an eyebrow, then pushed his chair away from the table and leaned back so that he was in full view.

"That better?"

Hutch nodded, mute.

"I want you to know that I've wanted this for a long time, too. That first time we met, in that diner, that was the first time I'd ever thought about being with a guy since...Jimmy. When you talked about your wife, I just sort of stuffed it. Never let myself think it again." He smiled. "I decided I was going to stay away from you. That I'd just be asking for trouble if we got to be friends."

"That didn't last too long, did it?"

"Nope. Couldn't do it. I was pretty good at the suppression thing."

"I didn't know. I never knew."

"Yeah, see, that's what I was thinking about. You never knew I'd...that Jimmy and I—shit. Why can't I just say it?" He shook his head. "I never knew, no one ever knew, about Blaine. I didn't know you wanted...what I wanted. And you didn't know I've had you in me from day one."

"Day one, huh?" He grinned.

"First second I saw ya." Starsky grinned back, and it did something to Hutch's inner core.

"Everyone has something to hide."

"If we don't want anyone to know something, then how can anyone know it?"

"They can't. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"I think I finally get it." He put his coffee mug to his lips, but instead of drinking from it, he ran his tongue around the rim. "So, when did you first figure out you had the hots for me?"

Hutch tried to pull his mind off his cock and back into his mouth so he could answer. "I don't know. I don't think there was a single moment. Sometimes I saw you look at me, and I would get this little thing in my belly. It scared me. I would just step on it and keep going."

Starsky traced the fingers of his right hand up and down his own thigh, lightly, up and down. Hutch swallowed. Starsky grinned.

"So, when did you stop, uh, stepping on it?"

"One time about seven or eight months ago you were wearing that red shirt. You stretched your arms up and it reminded me of those crazy longjohns you had on up at Pine Lake. It kind of hit me. I think I've probably had you in me all along, too, but I didn't recognize it." He looked up. "Sometimes we don't see what's in plain sight even in ourselves."

"Weird. But true."

"I think it was the longjohns." He thought about the way Starsky had looked in them and his cock suddenly awoke. As soon as it did, Starsky saw it, and his came to life as well. Hutch licked his lips. "Yeah. It was the longjohns. Still took me a while to figure it out, though."

"So that's why you wanted us to go up to Pine Lake when you got us that leave." He shook his head. "I still have 'em, you know. I can go get them . . ."

"No, I'd only want to peel them off you." He sat up. "What do you say we pretend I just did that?"

"Oh, so you're into pretending?"

"Not anymore. Not about how I feel about you."

"We're going to have to get pretty good at pretending in public."

"Not until Monday." He had a thought, and grinned. "I want to tell you something, too."

"Oh yeah? What is it."

"Turns out you *are* a pretty good kisser."

Starsky got up and walked around behind him. Touched his hair, ran his fingers through it, down around his ears, down his neck. Hutch felt his thoughts start to fragment. Then Starsky leaned over him and kissed him, upside down.

"I always thought *you* would be."

"You weren't disappointed, were you?"

"Well, I might need to do a little more research. Got any plans for the weekend?"

Hutch leaned back and looked up. Starsky touched the front of his throat and then let his hands wander downward.

"I've got a lot of plans," Hutch said. "You have no idea how many plans I have." He stood up, turned around, kicked the chair out of his way. "Want me to tell them to you?" He touched his finger to one of Starsky's nipples, and watched his face, heard his breath catch. "First I plan to—"

Starsky's eyes seemed to lose their focus. "A little less planning, a little more doing would be good."

"You're the talker, buddy. Learned it from you." He was losing his focus, too. Or rather, his focus was moving downward. Again.

"It's a variation of Starsky's Law. Remember?" Starsky moved in, put his mouth an inch from Hutch's. "Talk a lot, get a lot."

Hutch closed the small space between them. "I've got what I want." He touched his mouth to Starsky's. "Now I'm going to make sure you get what you want."

Starsky didn't answer. He opened his mouth to Hutch's, and took hold of his hands.

He made it pretty clear what he wanted, without saying a word.