

**Summary:** An AU version of The Set-up. Starsky is shot and badly injured instead of Durniak. Hutch is on his own to solve the complicated case but that little voice in his head sounds a lot like his partner.

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## All for Joey's Sake

by Dawnwind

The heavy door of the big rig clanged shut, plunging the back of the truck into semi-darkness. A single bulb swinging on a long cord illuminated the interior, creating a chiaroscuro effect over the metal flooring. There was no place to sit, except for maybe a stack of boxes labeled Gala Apples. Hutch took a deep breath, estimating how long it would take to get from Barstow to Bay City. Probably close to two hours. Too long to be stuck inside this damned metal box.

An abrupt lurch signaled that the truck was moving again and Hutch leaned against the cold sides of the behemoth, glancing over at his fellow passenger.

Joseph Durniak.

The mob boss' face was unreadable in the low light, impassive as a statue. He gestured to the rust flecked floor. "Here or on the boxes?" Durniak lurched forward as the truck picked up speed, walking like a sailor getting his sea legs.

"Boxes?" There was less chance of his feet going to pins and needles that way.

"You and Little Davey been partners for seven years," Durniak mused, settling on the floor against one of the boxes. "Did you know him when he first got to California?"

Hutch shook his head; *he should be the one asking questions here*. He sat on the floor near the older man. The boxes would have been more comfortable but he didn't want to tower over Durniak. It was drafty and colder than Hutch had expected. Of course, Barstow in mid-January wasn't exactly balmy. Downright chilly, to be specific.

"Met him at a bar." Sudden recall supplied a youthful Starsky just back from 'Nam with long dark curls and an angry, restless intensity with amazing clarity. "We were both enrolled in the police academy. Same year your son went to college."

"1968? You're been reading up on me," Durniak said with a certain sardonic amusement. The light bulb over head swung in wide arcs, causing weird shafts of black and then sudden brightness.

"Just some basic facts," Hutch said cautiously. "And Starsky told me a little."

Durniak nodded, the shifting shadows giving him a harlequin mask, first the right half black, then the left half of his face. Hutch found it disconcerting. Although he was grateful that the D.A.'s office had had the forethought to provide some light, he wished the light bulb wasn't quite so mobile. It was like watching some crazed German horror movie of the late thirties, great swatches of shadow that obscured the truth.

"Nosferatu."

"What?" Durniak regarded him with a lazy half smile.

He was going to be a tough nut to crack. Would a life-long mobster tell the truth, even on the witness stand? "Nosferatu," Hutch repeated. "A German vampire movie Starsky likes."

"I've seen it." Durniak nodded.

"You said..." Hutch started. He didn't want to sound like he was interrogating the man. That wasn't his place. He and Starsky were supposed to transport an important witness for the D.A. from one place to another to avoid any factions out to prevent the man from testifying, not find out what he had to say ahead of time. Still, it wasn't often that he had the opportunity to get a glimpse into Starsky's childhood. "You said that Starsky wouldn't like to hear what you had to say on the witness stand."

Durniak inclined his head with an aura of inscrutability. "Davey loved his papa, as all boys do, but they had a difficult relationship, nonetheless. And I think that he never could reconcile his father's opposition to what I did with the friendship between myself and Avraham."

Hutch nodded, not wanting to interrupt.

"I first met Avraham when he came to New York, straight off the boat from Poland. He and Rula lost a child in the ghetto in Warsaw during the early part of the war, but had managed to escape, so they were anxious to start a new life." He smiled fondly, the play of light and dark giving him a vaguely sinister expression. "Little Davey was born eight months later--the kid couldn't even stay inside his mama for nine whole months."

"That's Starsky, all right." Hutch laughed.

"But life came hard to Avra--he worked for my father's automat company for a couple years," Durniak paused, lost in thought. "He learned English well enough, and he was a wiz at numbers. My old man made him an accountant right away. When Avra realized there were two sets of books..." He shrugged philosophically. "He left and went to another firm, but it closed. I'd taken over the company by then, branched out into cigarette machines and pinball, you know?" He mimed pulling back a lever, mouthing a soft "ping."

"An easy way to launder money," Hutch said dryly.

"Ah, you understand. Avra needed a job--and we were still friends. His son Nicky and mine, Julian, were close in age. We saw each other often." Durniak stretched out his legs and tugged his jacket collar closer. "He tried to pretend that it didn't matter. He was keeping the legitimate books, and that's what counted."

"But eventually he wanted out?" Hutch guessed.

"I didn't have him killed, if that's what you're thinking," he retorted, a flash of anger infusing his voice with ire. "Not me. He was my friend and I was..." The old man rubbed his forehead. "There was a hole in my life when Avra died. Truly."

"But you didn't change your ways. Do you know who did kill him?"

Durniak produced a roll of peppermint Lifesavers from his jacket pocket and held it out.

Hutch took one to be polite, although he preferred cherry.

"I do. I was always fairly certain, and I got proof after the fact. There were people inside my own organization who..." He sucked noisily on his candy. "...Who didn't like Avra's--let's call them politics. Didn't appreciate that such an upstanding, religious man knew about the double ledgers, and were always afraid that he would talk to the authorities."

Hutch closed his mouth over the Lifesaver, the bright flavor like a spark on his tongue, stitching this information into the quilt he'd made of Starsky's life. There were patches missing, things Starsky had never revealed, things Starsky probably never knew.

"Did you kill the bastard?" he asked, after swallowing the burst of peppermint.

Durniak raised a sardonic eyebrow. "I am not sure how far immunity from prosecution extends," he said obliquely.

Hutch took that as an affirmative. "Which is why you paid for the funeral."

"I take care of family, and the Starskys were always family, even before." He turned to look straight at Hutch for the first time, the light bulb at the farthest diameter of its arc so that he was all in darkness. "Did Davey tell you I almost married his mother, God rest her soul?"

Hutch fought to maintain a neutral expression. He didn't want to give Durniak the satisfaction of knowing that he'd caught him by surprise. No, Starsky had definitely not told him that. "When was that?" he asked carefully. "How soon after Avraham died? Was it to keep her silence?"

"You think you can read me that easily?" the old mobster snapped. He bent his knees, planting his feet on the floor to avoid sliding as the truck went around a bend and started down an incline. "I'm not a library book you can skim for information and then toss aside, cop. I loved Rula. Always did, right from the day I met her. But she was married, and I married Julian's mother soon after. We were not meant..."

"So when you asked her, she rejected you?" Hutch guessed astutely from the flash of anger on Durniak's face. "She wouldn't marry a man in your line of work?"

He'd met Rula Starsky twice before she died from a stroke only a month ago. Starsky looked just like her, same bright blue eyes, same curls--which on her had gone slate gray. Hutch had found Rula a reserved woman, quiet and severe, Starsky's complete opposite, despite the similarity in their looks. She'd become increasingly religious once her children had grown, and had disapproved of everything about Starsky's life--his job, that he hadn't settled down with a nice Jewish girl, that he didn't keep kosher. It was quite easy to imagine she'd turned Durniak down.

"She is--" Durniak sighed, ducking his head over his knees for a moment.

Hutch wondered if he was praying. He looked up, watching the light bulb sway slowly over to the right wall and then back to the left before Durniak raised his head.

"She was a woman of great principle," Durniak said after a very long pause. "She kept her own council and we respected one another."

"What did you think when she sent Starsk-Davey to her sister in California?" Hutch asked, more out of curiosity than to probe. It had always seemed like a desperate thing to do, send a thirteen year old all the way across the country on what--according to Starsky--had been a moment's notice. Rula had never brought her eldest son back, something that Starsky still resented her for. He'd loved his mother, that was obvious. Hutch had seen the way Starsky smiled when she used to call, but it was apparently a love that had settled in and matured from the angry teenager who'd been shipped off to relatives in 1958.

"She had her reasons," Durniak said evasively. "She and I were..." He frowned and flicked at something on his jacket. "Were trying to decide where we--perhaps it's better to say who we were to one another. Whether things would work out. Davey did not approve."

"Yet, even after his mother said no to you, she didn't bring Starsky back home." Hutch felt the metal floor rumble as the gears shifted and pictured Starsky in the cab, wrestling with the complicated gear levers beside the steering wheel. What must he be thinking, trying to guess what Hutch and Durniak were discussing?

"He had made friends in California." Durniak shrugged. "It was safer."

"Safer for whom?" Hutch asked, suddenly on the alert. "You or him?"

Durniak crooked his head, his face in complete darkness as the light bulb reached the zenith of its parabola. "Possibly all of us."

"Because you had Avraham's murderer killed?" Hutch asked into the sudden brightness of the bare bulb shining right in his eyes. "Or because you knew who he was all along?"

"If I told you everything, what would the grand jury have to ask?" Durniak countered, sounding like a teacher scolding his pupil. "I will ask you a question. Once Davey knew who was to testify, did he begin to dig into the past?"

"We didn't know," Hutch said, recalling the short list of possibles they'd been shown by the Federal Marshal's office. "Not for sure anyway. Starsky's always been--" Curious was the wrong word, that was for sure. More like obsessed with learning the truth about his father's murder in 1957. He'd collected boxes of old clippings, gotten copies--Hutch was never quite sure how--of the police investigation back then, but had never quite dug deeply enough to find any new evidence. Durniak's change of heart to testify after all this time, about any number of mob related subjects, not specifically the decades old murder, would be a game changer of major proportions. "Starsky really needs to know more, to close that part of his life. It's like a gaping hole in him, and why he became a cop, I think, so he could...."

"Stop people like me?" Durniak sounded slightly amused.

Hutch was having a harder time reading the man than he'd expected. Usually, he was a good judge of character but Durniak put up a wall that was insurmountable, only revealing chinks and glimpses into his motives.

"Davey always was a stubborn kid, jumping in with both feet, without weighing the pros and cons. Got him into deep water." He shook his head, peering at his watch. "How much longer do you think?"

"We're in heavier traffic," Hutch said as the brakes made the metal rig shudder and groan. "Must be getting close to the city now." Which made any more questions all the more precious, since he'd lose his unexpected view into Starsky's past. "What made you agree to come forth? Immunity?" Could the feds give him immunity for murder? Even if he'd only given the order to someone else, as Hutch suspected.

Durniak tapped a finger on his chest. "Lung cancer," he said sardonically. "I made it through a tour of duty in the South Pacific, been shot three different times, and stabbed once, but there's no assassin tougher than the big C."

Hutch was momentarily stunned. Not the first time a terminal illness altered a person's outlook on life. "S-sorry to hear that." Except, deep down, he really wasn't. Durniak was scum, and should have been locked away years ago.

"No you're not," Durniak smiled, climbing slowly to his feet just as the truck bumped over something in the road.

Entering a parking lot, maybe. The truck came to a complete stop.

"You seem to be an upstanding man, Sergeant Hutchinson. A good friend to my Davey."

Hutch bristled at the possessiveness of the phrase, but didn't say anything. Starsky was certainly not Durniak's boy.

"You're protective of him." Durniak turned away, facing the doors of the truck. From outside, they could hear the sound of someone unlatching the lock. "Which is probably your greatest asset, and his. Something that will set him in good stead in the coming days. He'll need your support, I suspect."

"What exactly do you plan to say?" Hutch blurted out, not expecting an answer.

The big doors swung open, letting in the gray Bay City light--smog filtered sunshine--which threw Durniak into silhouette. All sinister darkness.

"Possibly the truth," he said. "Possibly a bombshell." And stepped down out of the truck.

Hutch stood very still, his belly clenched in sudden dread, although he wasn't absolutely sure why.

"Blintz?" Starsky banged on the metal floor. "What'er you waiting for? The feds had sandwiches delivered. Come on."

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Getting Durniak settled in the Fremont Hotel in downtown Bay City took the better part of the afternoon and evening. Very few people were supposed to know where the mobster was hidden, which cut down tremendously on how many feds Starsky and Hutch had to deal with. Starsky liked it better that way. Besides, the clandestine nature of the case with the necessity for passwords and secrecy appealed to Starsky's inner kid. He got a kick out of playing spy.

The only trouble was that this wasn't make-believe, and dealing with Joe Durniak was dredging up feelings he'd have rather left buried. He was glad that Hutch was there to act as a buffer. He'd give anything to find out what Hutch and Durniak had talked about but there was no way in hell he was asking about their discussion in front of Durniak.

Durniak claimed fatigue and went to sleep early. He was snoring almost instantly.

A low level pressure settled in the back of Starsky's skull, like the threat of a tropical storm. He longed to crawl into a bed and sleep away the next twenty-four hours. Too bad for him he was on duty. And he had the first watch since Hutch had let him sleep in that morning.

*Sleep in.* That was a laugh. He'd seen dawn coloring the eastern sky ten miles out of Barstow this morning. To quote the Grateful Dead, "*What a long, strange trip it's been.*" That the words were from the song "Truckin'" actually made him smile.

Hutch looked over at him, the dim lighting in the hotel room softening the furrow between his eyebrows, removing the little tell-tale signs that he was exhausted too. There was something in Hutch's eyes that Starsky was suddenly sure he didn't want to know.

"Whadda you want?" Starsky asked softly, sitting across from the bed on an upholstered chair. He held up the deck of cards they'd carried with them during the week long trucker assignment. "Poker or blackjack?"

"I'm tired of both." Hutch kept his voice low, pulling up a chair next to the tiny end table. "What about gin?"

"Gin it is." Starsky shuffled quickly and dealt out five cards each. He wasn't thrilled with his hand. "What aren't you telling me?"

Hutch made a show of studying his cards, mouth pursed. "Starsk..."

"Rip that band-aid off quick and just tell me," Starsky said harshly. "Ain't going to hurt any less if you do it slow."

"I don't know." Hutch actually looked like he was considering the pros and cons between fast or slow instead of answering the question.

*Damn him.* Starsky grit his teeth and put a pair of twos on the table. "You're trying my already frayed patience."

One corner of Hutch's mouth turned up in a kind of 'gotcha.' He frowned just as quickly. "Your friend Joey--"

"Ain't my friend," Starsky growled.

"Has lung cancer," Hutch continued as if he hadn't been interrupted.

"Shit," Starsky whispered, looking over at the slumbering man. Had his mother known, before she died? The sharp pain of mourning that hadn't left him since the last night of Chanukah came on even more strongly than usual. He didn't let it show, had been trying to rein in his emotions for so long now that it was habit. Still, he felt like his life was spiraling out of control. Everyone from his past seemed to be dead or dying. God knows, he couldn't specify how he felt about Durniak into words, but there had never been much affection between them.

Starsky dropped his cards onto the table, not in the mood anymore. "Must be why he decided to testify."

"I think so." Hutch peered at him.

This close, Starsky could see how deep the damned furrow was between Hutch's eyebrows. Hutch was worried about him. Well, he shouldn't be. "Stop lookin' at me like I should be psycho-analyzed."

"This has to be bringing up all manner of..." Hutch blew out an elongated breath as if giving Starsky time to fill in the blanks. "Memories."

"Nope," Starsky said, deliberately nonchalant. "Why don't you get some shut-eye, blintz? I'll relieve you at two a.m., say?"

"Starsk..." Hutch started, then stopped himself. He shrugged and nodded. "I'm sleepy. Two a.m., wake me."

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Starsky knew Hutch's patented "don't eat breakfast in a hotel routine. " He'd heard it before, but it always managed to send a shiver down his spine. Not like he wasn't already on edge. Felt like they were all poised on the blade of a knife waiting to be sliced and diced.

Nagging dread weighed down his belly.

Once breakfast was over, the tension in the room mounted. Hutch ducked into the bathroom to change from his waiter attire back to what Starsky privately thought of as his lumberjack jacket, leaving Starsky alone with Durniak. How was he going to get through the rest of the day on too little sleep and too much stress? The van wasn't supposed to pick them up for the Grand Jury until three. He was jumping out of his skin already.

"The courthouse isn't far from here," Starsky said, glancing at Durniak. He still didn't have a clue how he felt about the man. Memories of childhood kept welling up, blasting him with emotions that he found increasingly difficult to suppress. In the hours between three and seven a.m., he'd dreamed of his father's murder: of sitting on the stoop with Nicky in the unbearable heat and humidity of an August evening in New York, waiting for his father to come home from work.

The sound of the gunshot had sent ice through his veins, obliterating the heat. He'd known right then, known in a way he could never explain, that his father had been shot down in the middle of the street. Nicky had jerked like he'd touched a live wire, but Davey had dashed down the metal fire escape, his red Keds pounding on the rusty rungs, and jumped the final five feet to the sidewalk. He'd fallen, ripped a hole in his jeans, he found out later, not noticing at the time in his terrified haste to find his dad.

Avraham Starsky lay in the crosswalk, one hand still clutching a sack from Nussbaum's grocery, slick red blood obliterating the neat white shirt and conservative black tie he'd worn to work that morning.

In his dreams, Starsky always ran to him, pulled his father into his arms and saw the familiar blue eyes look back at him. Avraham would impart some Torah inspired wisdom and live--but only in Starsky's memories.

In actual fact, twelve year old Davey had skidded to a halt inches from the pool of his father's blood while Mr. Nussbaum, who had been a medic in WWII, pressed his grocery apron over Avraham's chest to staunch the gore. Mrs. N had called an ambulance.

Avraham died five minutes before it arrived.

By that time, Rula Starsky had been brought into the street by Sadie Mann and Davey's Grandma Zalinsky had hugged Nicky to her ample bosom. Davey never moved. Never went to his father nor his mother. Never said a word when the morgue wagon came to take his father to Silverstein's Funeral Parlor.

He'd waited while his mother and relatives sat Shiva for his father, expecting a miracle. Surely the God Avraham prayed to every day in the synagogue would not allow him to be shot down in the street like some common criminal?

When Joe Durniak came around, with his expensive suits and vengeful sadness, Davey had vomited over the side of the fire escape. He'd refused to eat the man's polite offerings of cold cuts and spice cake. Davey had even committed the ultimate sacrilege--at least in his mother's eyes--of skipping out during his father's funeral. The sight of the coffin, the insult of Durniak comforting Rula Starsky had been the final straw. Davey sat outside Beth Shalom during the rabbi's eulogy, unable to accept the idea that his father was gone forever.

He'd cried, drying his eyes on his brand new black tie--just like the one his father had worn the day he died.

"Starsk?" Hutch said a second time.

Starsky only really knew it was a second time from the slight concern in Hutch's eyes. "You all right?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" Starsky asked a little too defensively. He stomped ruthlessly on his grief, pretending he hadn't lost his parents nineteen and a half years apart.

"I've shaken your perception of yourself," Durniak said with a slight tilt of his head.

Starsky swallowed forcibly, his throat so tight he could barely breathe. He was keenly aware of Durniak's scrutiny. The old man was merciless; it was what had gotten him to the top of the pile. He dealt with his enemies immediately, no dilly-dallying. He'd seen little Davey's weakness very early on and eliminated him--banished the thirteen-year-old boy to the west coast, away from his mother and brother. Rula Starsky might have said it was to keep Davey away from gangs, but Starsky always knew better. It was to keep Davey and Joey apart. That she had spurned Joe Durniak's marriage proposal had been Starsky's one final salvo at the man.

He wanted to throw that in Durniak's face, spit on him and grind him into the dirt. Instead, he had a job to do: protect the enemy.

Suddenly Dobby was there, announcing that fifteen incendiary bombs were about to go off in the hotel, giving Starsky a way to escape. He was glad to run, to let the adrenaline power his legs and obliterate everything else but keeping Durniak safe.

With no time to think or discuss an alternate plan, Starsky and Hutch hustled Durniak down the freight elevator to the service hall in the back of the building.

A tall man in an ordinary suit rushed up as they exited the elevator. "Oliver, FBI. A man with a rifle has been spotted. You're to go out the front. There'll be a car waiting for you."

Hotel employees watched nervously, their faces white with strain when Starsky, Hutch, and Durniak race-walked across the lobby. Starsky had one hand firmly on Durniak's left arm, navigating him past clumps of guests and increasing numbers of cops.

The old man kept up, his breathing loud and labored in Starsky's ear.

*Lung cancer.*

Starsky swiveled his head, watching for a predator with a rifle or any other sign of danger.

Sirens impinged on all sides, filling the air with too much noise and fear. The sounds should have been comforting. Starsky was a cop, sirens meant back-up and support, but his internal alarms were much louder and they were telling him something was very wrong.

He wanted to tell Hutch to stop, to take a moment to think the situation through. Analyze. That was what Hutch was good at!

He glanced at his partner as they barreled through the front doors of the hotel, caught Hutch's eyes for a brief second. There was no time for words, but he sensed Hutch had grave concerns himself.

Cops and civilians crowded the loading zone. His heartbeat slamming loudly in his ears, Starsky saw a black and white at the curb and started toward it, dragging Durniak along. The people milling around parted, letting them through. For one moment, Starsky thought maybe they'd make it through this. They'd hole up in Dobby's office until the Grand Jury at three....

The pain was unearthly, squeezing him in a vice between one breath and the next. His entire left side locked up and he faltered, hanging onto Durniak's arm in desperation.

The old man wasn't strong enough to remain standing with that kind of weight and he crumpled, both of them going to their knees.

Starsky heard the retort of Hutch's weapon, but it seemed too little, too late.

"Starsk!" Hutch cried out, covering his partner with his body as a second and third shot whizzed by above their heads.

Blackness encroached, tunneling Starsky's vision. He fought the pain in his side, focusing on the building across the street as his strength drained away. He caught the bright flash of a rifle barrel, just for a moment, his eyesight splintering. One rifle or two? He couldn't tell, couldn't breathe right anymore.

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Out of the corner of his eye, Hutch saw Starsky jerk as he uselessly squeezed the trigger in the direction of the shooter. The distance was too far even for his high-powered hand gun, but the instinct to protect was too strong. Was Starsky shot? Fear coursing through his veins, he turned to cover Starsky and Durniak with his body as two more shots came within inches of them. The glass doors behind him shattered. Time crawled, seconds turning into impossibly long moments.

"Starsky!" Hutch shouted over the pandemonium around them. People were screaming and crying, the cacophony an annoying distraction when all he wanted to do was get to Starsky. Protocol be damned, going after the shooter was secondary in his mind.

There were other cops already racing toward the street and the building beyond. For some reason, the grassy knoll flitted in Hutch's brain. He didn't stop to try to tease that one out, almost pushing Durniak aside to get to his partner.

"Oh, my God! Davey's shot!" Durniak's face was bluish. He struggled to breathe, his chest heaving.

Hutch didn't have time for him. He knew he should have, but he didn't care. He scrambled over the old man's legs to Starsky, aware of the press of bodies around them: too many cops, guests, hotel employees, and feds.

"Hu'sh!" Starsky jabbed an insistent finger at the hotel across the street. "Saw 'im, man with a gun!" His breath whistled in his throat and he coughed, harsh and ragged. Grimacing, Starsky gave Hutch a feeble push in the right direction. "Go get 'im, I'll watch..." He pressed a hand under his leather jacket but Hutch could see the spreading stain of red on his blue t-shirt.

Rebelling against this directive, Hutch didn't move, his guts heaving. How could Starsky...?

"I've got this," Durniak said grimly despite his wheezing. He pulled his tie over his head and wadded it against Starsky's side.

With one look back at them, Hutch took off past the tangle of police cars, stalled taxis, and unmarked black sedans. He shut down the fear for Starsky's life, darted across the street and into the lobby of the Webster hotel fast enough to qualify for an Olympic medal. There were blue uniforms everywhere and a wild eyed hotel manager jabbering excuses why they couldn't mob his establishment.

"Hutch!" Bert, an older officer Hutch had known for years, directed him to the elevators. "The ninth floor--but no one's seen the shooter. He must have gotten out before we arrived."

Hutch pushed past a couple of businessmen, commandeering the elevator, the bright red mark on Starsky's shirt flashing like a beacon in his mind's eye. Please, God...where the hell had it all gone wrong?

He could hear the wail of an approaching ambulance through the walls of the hotel. There'd been three shots--was Starsky the only one hurt or had there been others? Should he have stayed with his partner or...? He felt like a fraud for wanting to run back and check on Starsky instead of investigating the crime. "Which room?" he asked, as the elevator doors slid shut.

"912." Bert stabbed the correct button. Neither of them said a word on the ride up. Bert pointed down the corridor on the ninth floor. "Door was open when we got here, gun on the window ledge."

Hutch jogged down to 912, passing a clutch of nervous guests.

"I heard the shots," a blond woman said quietly, stopping Hutch in his tracks. She was petite, her blue eyes stretched wide with shock.

He leaned one hand flat on the wall next to room 910 to catch his breath. "Did you see anything? Anyone?" he asked, fishing his detective badge out of his pocket to prove his identity.

The woman brushed her bangs out of her eyes to examine the ID, then peered at Hutch, chewing on her bottom lip. "I think..." She sucked on her lip as if about to cry. "Last night I had a drink at the bar downstairs. A guy with curls sat down on the stool next to me." She shrugged miserably. "Cute, I thought. What did I know?" She held up her key with the room number printed on the keychain. "I saw his key, knew what room he was in, on the same floor. So I talked to him, just chatted. Two lonely people new in town, I thought."

Impatient, but trying not to interrupt, Hutch nodded. "Did you get a name? Did you see him again this morning?" He kept envisioning the blood on Starsky shirt spreading wider and wider. How much blood volume did a man have, and how much could he lose before...?

"Terry," the woman said, clasping her hands together nervously. Her bottom lip was chewed raw and there were tears in her eyes. "Like mine. I'm Terry, too. Teresa. He must be Terrence, I guess."

About ready to erupt, Hutch had to force an unnatural calm on himself. First rule, don't antagonize the only witness. He glanced up, saw the very competent Bert looping crime tape over the doorframe of room 912 with another officer taking the names of the other guests in the corridor. "His name was Terry?" he repeated. "Curly hair--how tall? Did you notice eye color?" He bounced lightly on his toes, feeling the pull of Starsky from this far across the street. Were the paramedics there yet?

"Um." Teresa rubbed a tear from her eye. "He shot someone, didn't he? I never...met a killer before."

"No one's dead yet," Hutch said more abruptly than he meant to. *Please God, no, not Starsky.*

Teresa reared back with a gasp, her face blotchy and frightened.

Hutch tried to relax. "I'm sorry," he said gently. "But every moment is important to find the gunman. Did this Terry run down the hall after the shooting? Did you hear anything else besides the shots?"

"I had just gotten out of the shower when I heard shots," she whispered. "I had on a towel, so I couldn't...I thought I heard feet running, but I don't know. I just...I never talked to anyone who shot someone." She hiccupped and began to sob.

"Teresa." Hutch patted her gently on the shoulder, beckoning Bert over. "Teresa...can you tell me your last name?"

"Hanley," she said between sobs.

"This is Officer Mayer." Hutch indicated Bert. "He'll stay with you until a sketch artist can come by so you can give a full description. Can you do that?"

"Yes." Teresa pushed her blond bangs out of her watery eyes, straightening a little with her important job.

"Come on, Miss Hanley," Bert escorted her down to the elevator where the other guests were headed. "I can get you a cup of tea on the city. How about that?"

Hutch ducked under the crime tape and stood on the threshold of 912 to get the lay out. A typical hotel room, oriented to the right, with a king sized bed and a bedside table along the right wall. The bed had either not been slept in or this Terry was very good at realigning the coverlet and pillows. There was a large, ugly painting of an anonymous beach with a moon shining on the water above the bed. A dresser along the left wall with a TV on top. Beside the dresser was a small desk with a lamp and a pad of stationary, the hotel logo printed at the bottom. The only thing out of place was an expensive looking silver case lying open on the desk. The case was lined with foam rubber: cut outs in the padding showed exactly where the pieces of a high-powered rifle would be packed.

The rifle was still balanced on the edge of the window, pointing straight at the Fremont across the street.

Hutch didn't touch the gun. Shoving his hands in his wool jacket pockets, he stared down at the crowd of people still out in front of the other hotel, his belly in knots. An ambulance obscured his view of where he knew Starsky and Durniak had last been. But if the ambulance was still there, then Starsky must be, too. Was he worse? What was going on?

Hutch had the ridiculous urge to shout Starsky's name out the open window. No one would have heard him way over there, but he was frantic. He needed to know what was going on with Starsky. Needed to see his partner.

The cops and hotel guests clustered around the ambulance parted to allow a blue uniformed medic to back up. He steered a gurney around to the rear doors of the ambulance, holding an IV bottle aloft. Hutch caught a quick glimpse of Starsky's dark hair before the gurney was loaded inside the rig. A second medic slammed the doors shut and ran around to the driver seat to start up the ambulance.

When the long red and white vehicle drove away, Hutch felt his heart rise into his throat, fear choking him. Everything was falling apart but he had a job to do. He was supposed to be a detective, investigate the shooter. All he wanted to do was be with his partner. It wasn't until he realized that Durniak was still huddled on the curb, hunched over a portable oxygen tank, that he decided what he had to do. If he couldn't be with his partner, he could still guard Durniak. The man looked like he needed to be in a hospital--preferably the same one where Starsky was. Hutch turned away from the window just as a second ambulance pulled up to the Fremont.

Durniak had been the target of this attack, not Starsky. There was no other explanation. Sure, he and Starsky had enemies, but there were probably any number of mobsters who had reason to want Durniak dead.

"Hutch?" Ed Fleming, a plainclothes from Metro pushed under the yellow tape.

"Ed!" Hutch hid all his worry, nerves and anger behind a calm exterior. "I need to get back to the..." He thought fast. "Other crime scene at the Fremont. We've got a name and a partial description of the shooter. Male, Terry, curly hair."

Fleming nodded. "I talked to the manager downstairs. Nobody was registered in this room. At least we have that much." He glanced around the room, centering on the rifle. "I'll take over here."

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The ambulance had transported Durniak to Memorial by the time Hutch got back to the Fremont. The hotel guests had gone, as well as most of the hotel employees. Although the place was still ringed with cop cars, there was only a single uniformed cop guarding the blood stained cement until the lab techs could come take their samples. A guy in hotel livery was directing taxis to pick up their fares at the far end of the curved drive. He kept glancing at the blood on the portico with wide, horrified eyes.

Hutch knew how he felt. He stood exactly where he had when the shots fired, his breath tight in his chest. So close, and yet he'd been spared. Memories of Starsky laid out--at Giovanni's, on the rooftop of Bellamy's tenement--assailed him. How many times could Starsky be seriously hurt before he cashed in his chips?

"Hutchinson!" Dobey's familiar voice boomed in his ear, startling him.

Hutch turned fast, the sudden movement almost giving him whiplash. There was a corresponding cramp of pain across his shoulders and up the back of his neck. Even worse, he could feel his cheeks flush with shame.

"What the hell happened here?" Dobey snapped, rubbing sweat off the back of his neck with a big handkerchief. "I heard the shots but you'd already gone."

Unsettled, Hutch didn't know where to start, the whole situation too raw to unravel just yet. Belatedly, he saw that Dobey seemed almost as worried as he was. "I don't...."

"There wasn't any bomb--at least nothing went off fifteen minutes after the call," Dobey said in a distracted voice, regarding Starsky's blood with sick fascination. "We've had the hotel evacuated, searched most of the rooms already. It was a diversion."

Hutch tried to get himself to focus, think of anything else but what was happening to Starsky. "When we got Durniak downstairs, there was a fed..." The name came to him in a flash, "Oliver. He directed us out front, said there was a car waiting."

His mouth tight with strain, Dobey shook his head. "No one authorized that. As far as I know, there were only five special agents in the hotel and two were coordinating the search for the bomb when I went up to tell you to get out."

"No Oliver?" Hutch asked hollowly.

"Sipowitz, Lyons, Marx, Gregory, and Heidegger. Sipowitz and Lyons were the ones who met the truck when you brought Durniak in."

The acid in his gut about to spill over, Hutch had to swallow against the bile in his throat. "This completely staged?" he whispered. "Some fuck--" He didn't even care that he'd cursed in front of his superior, "orchestrated this whole thing to get at Durniak, and Starsky's paying the price?"

"Looks like it," Dobey said grimly. "What did you find over there?" He shaded his eyes, looking up at the hotel.

It was obvious which room the shots had come from. Flemings stuck his head out the window as if eyeballing the distance between the two buildings. Turning away from proof that the investigation was progressing, Hutch gave Dobey a brief review of the facts, anxious to be at the hospital.

"Who's with Durniak right now? I should...."

"Wilkins went in the second ambulance," Dobey explained with a sigh. "The old man was barely conscious, labored breathing. You take over, guard both Starsky and Durniak until we can get a handle on this mess."

Hutch didn't have to be told twice. He pelted into the parking lot, intent on Starsky's red and white car even before Dobey had finished his sentence.

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What had started as sick fear during the conversation with Dobey grew into raging fury by the time Hutch arrived at Memorial Hospital. Durniak had to know who was gunning for him. The bastard knew who had killed Starsky's father nearly twenty years ago and never said a word. Now, the same morning that he was going to talk, shots were fired. What else did he know that someone was willing to kill to keep secret?

"Mr. Starsky is in surgery," a middle aged nurse said tartly. "We can give you a call when he is in recovery."

"I'll be in the hospital," Hutch told her, his head pounding with the difficulty of riding herd on his temper. He wanted to lash out--hit someone, but the nurse was surely not the right person. "In Joe Durniak's room."

"I'm not privy to individual patient's rooms..." she started, taken aback.

Obviously, he hadn't managed to keep the testiness out of his voice, but Hutch couldn't care less. "How long until the surgery is over?" he asked, clenching his teeth. "I--" Thinking of Starsky riding in the ambulance without him, bleeding, and then alone in the ER, when Hutch should have been there to--what? Support his friend? Comfort him? Whatever it was he should have done, Hutch knew that he had failed, and it was tearing him apart. "I want to know how David Starsky is doing. He's--he's my friend."

Her stern, pinched expression softened and she reached up to touch the starched cap atop her elaborately ratted hair-do. "My name is Eulalie Smithers. Call this desk in an hour and I'll see about getting you in to see him as soon as possible after Dr. Johnston is finished."

Instantly contrite about his attitude, Hutch extended his hand. "Detective Ken Hutchinson, ma'am. It's been one hell of a morning. Can you tell me how Starsky was when he...?"

"The bullet wound was in the lower region of the abdomen and he was being transfused when the team wheeled the gurney past the desk," she said crisply. "Dr. Johnston is a fine surgeon. Your friend should recover well."

"Thank you." A small portion of his anxiety about Starsky lessened, but the anger at Durniak resurged with shocking suddenness. "I'll call," Hutch said, stalking downstairs to the private room guarded by Herb Wilkins.

The balding man stood up as Hutch approached. "How's Starsky, Hutch? I saw him for a couple minutes in the ER. Told me to tell you not to..." He grinned ruefully as if not sure how to finish.

"What'd Starsky say?" Hutch asked eagerly. "Word for word, Herb, I know what he's like."

Herb chuckled. "Guy was obviously in pain, bleeding, and he grabs my arm. Insists I tell you not to get all twisted around like a pretzel blaming everything on yourself. That he was going to pull through."

*That was Starsky all right.* Hutch swallowed, the pain of not hearing those words for himself hard to bear. "I need to question Durniak, find out what he knows about this."

"Old man's doing better with one of those whaddaya call 'em tubes up his nose to breathe with." Wilkins tapped his upper lip.

"I just want some answers," Hutch growled, shoving the door open. "So he'd better have enough breath to speak." He walked in, wrapping himself in the anger like armour.

Durniak had clearly been dozing but he sat up when the door slammed against the wall with a loud crack. "Hutchinson!"

"What the hell do you know about that shooting?" Hutch exploded. "Who's after you? How many people knew you were on your way out here?"

"The feds," Durniak responded as if he'd already thought about the implications. "You told me yourself that Davey and you didn't know until a couple days before I arrived. So there's either a leak in your department, the Grand Jury, or the feds."

Presented with that hypothesis, Hutch wanted to refute the claims. "You don't think it's old enemies out to eliminate you before you testify?" he countered stubbornly.

Durniak took a slow pull on a bent straw poking from a water glass. He looked gray and tired but determined. "More'n half of my enemies went to their graves years before I did. I haven't had

much to do with the..." The corners of his mouth twitched up in an ironic smile. "Criminal side of the organization in years. Semi-retired, playing with the grandchildren. Schmoozing with what's left of the old gang, and there aren't many." He shrugged. "Why do you think you haven't read my name in the papers lately?"

"Better security?" Hutch suggested, his entire revenge motive punctured. Weary disenchantment set in. How was he supposed to know who to fight? If not old colleagues out to keep their past deeds buried, then who?

"As I am sure you are aware, with all your copious records on every aspect of my life--" Durniak inclined his head to look up at Hutch, his eyes hard and shrewd despite his infirmity. "Sit down, I'm not looking up at you the whole time."

Hutch sat reluctantly, willing himself to be patient.

"As you know, I turned Automated Incorporated over to Julian two years ago, and the kid's already branched out to England and Japan." He took a wheezy breath and coughed into his fist. "Julian's trying to go legit with expansion, and I don't blame him. The world of the mobster ain't what it used to be."

"In what way?" Hutch asked snidely. "It's always been corrupt, illegal, and dangerous."

"We had pride in what we accomplished. Morals and a code of honor!" Durniak tapped his chest. "Maybe not the same ones you did, but we protected our own, managed our way of life. I took out the putz who killed my friend Avra. And I cared for his wife and sons." He grimaced. "These hoodlums today, dealing in drugs that kill the young, don't instill a sense of...family. They're just gangs roughing up the competition and killing whoever gets in their way."

"Doesn't sound any different to me, than what you did," Hutch crossed his arms, staring at his adversary. He'd almost wanted to be sympathetic to Durniak when they were riding in the truck. Had been interested in his side of Starsky's story. Now, there was no question, he abhorred the sort of man Durniak was, no matter how much he might have helped the Starskys. And he resented that the man still had influence on Starsky's younger brother Nick. This had been a bone of contention for Starsky for many years. Hutch hadn't met Nick yet, and didn't really want to. He was proud that Starsky had broken free from the stranglehold Durniak had on the family and had changed his fate to become a cop.

"I didn't expect you to see my side of things," Durniak snapped. "Will you listen to my suspicions?"

"I have to."

"Carlson Waters was the first fed who came to me--" Durniak waggled his hand. "After a series of phone calls and letters, sniffing at each other like a couple of dogs. We met in Connecticut, out of my normal haunts."

"Wise," Hutch conceded.

"With Julian working to bring the corporation into a new era, I was willing to testify for immunity from prosecution to protect my kid. Do you understand that?" He glared at Hutch for a moment, pugnacious and belligerent. "Waters died in what was reported as a car accident the day before I started across the country. What do you bet that it wasn't?"

He snorted indignantly. "So you can see why I have some reservations about the feds and their version of protection. I asked for you and Davey specifically."

Surprised, Hutch didn't let it show on his face, going into detective mode instead. "Where and when was Waters' car accident?" He dug into his jacket pocket for a pad of paper and a pencil. As usual, he didn't have a pencil and his pad was in his leather jacket, not the red and black checked lumberjack coat he'd been wearing for a week.

"Manhattan. I doubt you can find anything new on that front. Drunk driving--the other idiot, not Waters." Durniak sucked on his straw again. "I'm hungry and that nurse has yet to bring me anything to eat." He glanced at the door as if hoping she'd arrive. "Waters was dead on the scene. A little too convenient, if you ask me, but the NYPD is as corrupt as they come, so I'll bet there were some greased palms somewhere along the way. And if the command to bump him off came from the feds, internal coercion."

Was Durniak paranoid or perceptive? Hutch didn't know anyone on the police department in a state all the way across the continent. He certainly hoped there wasn't that kind of police corruption, but he'd read books like *Super Cops* and *Serpico*. It was no secret that the NYPD had had some trouble. "Do you have actual facts, Joe?"

"We friends all of a sudden?" The old man gave Hutch an enigmatic smile. "My mouth is dry. Look in my jacket pocket. I still got some of those Lifesavers. And then tell the nurse I need my lunch."

Hutch did as he was asked, pondering what Durniak had said--and what he had not said. The man was crafty and evasive. How could he maneuver through Durniak's traps to get to the truth and still avoid asking whatever questions the Grand Jury would?

"Two things and I'll leave you to your late lunch," Hutch proposed as a candy-striper who wasn't twenty-years-old carried in a tray and placed it on the bed table.

"Looks like pablum." Durniak poked at the lumpy mashed potatoes. He forked up a bit of creamed corn and looked straight at Hutch, his dark eyes probing. "What was your question?"

"Questions," Hutch specified, to be completely clear. "Who did Waters report to and who investigated his car accident."

Durniak nodded as if satisfied. "As good a place as any to start." He tasted the creamed corn and then the potatoes, alternating between the two for a few moments.

Hutch hadn't eaten in so long, he couldn't recall exactly. Oh, yes, the sandwiches Sipowitz and Lyons had supplied the night before. He wasn't hungry anyway--but his mind strayed to Starsky,

happily wolfing down all of his turkey sub and then half of Hutch's in the FBI offices before they'd driven over to the Fremont Hotel.

"Buddy Greggs." Durniak waved the fork at him. "If you don't have anything to write it down with, memorize that name."

"Buddy Greggs," Hutch repeated dutifully, fear for Starsky raising once again. Was he out of surgery yet? How long had it been since he talked to Eulalie Smithers? "Greggs with two Gs?"

"That's the way I would spell it."

"And who exactly is this person?" Hutch asked, feeling like he was pulling teeth.

"Special Agent Bertram 'Buddy' Greggs," Durniak said acerbically. "Not Waters' superior, more a...fixer. Out of the usual channels. Difficult to pin down, no dossier on him, no fingerprints."

"What?"

"Ask Little Davey about the guys who were special services. Spooks. They took chemicals and sandpaper to their fingerprints to wear down the ridges." Durniak rubbed his own fingertips together with a frown.

"How do you know about this Greggs?"

"You have your informants, so do I. The problem was that I was leaving when I got the information. Almost didn't go, but..." He mimed a set of scales weighing the evidence. "I'm an old man who is dying. What difference does it make when I go, before or after the Grand Jury." The jovial mask came down and his voice hardened to steel. "But shooting Little Davey, that's a whole different matter. So I am telling you what I know."

Hutch wasn't about to thank him because by his estimation, the whole thing was Durniak's fault anyway. "So you were suspicious enough of the FBI to check up on them? Why didn't you say anything to me in the truck?"

"You had to earn my trust. And I don't give it out easily." He looked tired and old once more, the brief declaration of anger taking its toll. "I have two granddaughters, Acacia and Dahlia. They don't know what I used to do, they just see old Papa sitting in the sun eating fruit, but even they see how suspicious I am. Dahlia, she tells me that when I go talk to the judge to confess my sins..." He coughed discreetly and ate a few cubes of green Jello.

Hutch waited, thinking of Starsky, wondering where this was leading. He didn't want to trust Durniak, really didn't want to be in a position of having to rely on a criminal. However, at the moment, it was the only information--however nebulous--that he had.

"She thinks the Grand Jury's like going to confession," Durniak said, finishing his Jello.

"Dahlia informed me that I should trust someone, and the only person in law enforcement I was willing to give my trust was my old friend Avra's son--Davey, and by extension, you."

"How do you know Dav-Starsky and I aren't corrupt?" Hutch asked obliquely. He resented having to deal with this man, hated to have to spend all his time talking to Durniak when he wanted to see his friend.

"I kept watch, got reports. You two may not win too many awards, but you have what it takes to fight back." Durniak peered into his coffee cup, made a face and drank some with a grimace. "Why can't they make a decent cup? Enough to make a man sick."

"I'll start poking around about this Greggs," Hutch said. "But first I need to check up on Starsky, see if he's out of surgery."

Durniak nodded, his dark eyes hard as obsidian marbles.

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Starsky lay like a corpse in the recovery room, pale as amber, still breathing through the ventilator tube taped in his mouth. Nurses were at his side constantly, taking vital signs and injecting drugs into his IV lines. Hutch hung back for several long minutes, watching and waiting, afraid to come closer.

"You can sit with him." A pretty Asian nurse with a name tag that read "Wanpen" pulled up a chair. "The doctor will be pulling the breathing tube out soon. Don't worry about that." She gave him a little nod and scurried away to a patient in a curtained cubicle next to Starsky.

"Hey," Hutch said softly, hiding his trembling hands in his pockets. "Starsk..." What did he say? That he would have rather stayed with Starsky than go after the shooter. Starsky wasn't a stickler for regulations, but even he would have chastised Hutch for not acting like a cop.

Hutch sat down, examining the IV fluids, the breathing machine and the various other tubes sticking out of his friend. All things he had seen before--the last time Starsky was shot, just over a year ago. Starsky had recovered from that far more quickly than doctors had expected. There was no reason to believe he wouldn't do the same now. Still, Hutch's fear ran deep.

"I-uh--" He summoned a smile and patted Starsky's lax hand, straightening out the curled fingers, and nearly had a heart attack when Starsky flexed his fingers in response. Slipping his hand under Starsky's, Hutch squeezed. Starsky squeezed him back. "You're waking up!" Hutch said with delight.

Should he call a nurse? Tell someone? The sounds of the recovery room, the raucous monitor alarms, the beeps of IV pumps, and swoosh of the ventilators all died away when Hutch saw Starsky's eyes open. Much of his guilt and fear melted away at the sight of those sleepy eyes looking back at him.

"Good to see you up and around," Hutch joked nervously.

Starsky blinked slowly and raised the arm with an IV in the crook of the elbow. He grimaced with the movement and let it drop, searching Hutch's face for answers.

"Shot in the belly," Hutch said. "The shooter got away, but you were right, he was in the hotel across the street." Hutch took a grateful breath, feeling complete finally. How would he get through this investigation when half of himself was in the hospital?

Starsky nodded, trying to lick his dry lips around the ET tube. He pointed at Hutch with a raised eyebrow.

"Me?" Hutch tapped his chest with a tight laugh. "Don't worry about me, pal. You get better."

"He's awake!" Wanpen exclaimed from behind Hutch. "That's good. I have to take his blood pressure again." She held up the arm band, obviously quite aware that every five minute vitals seemed obsessive. "You can talk to him again when he's in his room upstairs."

"I'll do that." Hutch gripped Starsky's hand, waiting until Starsky looked right at him. "Waiting for you, you know. I don't like driving the Torino. I expect you to get better quick."

Starsky's lips curved into a lazy smile, apparently fully confident that he would be.

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Hutch typed up the report on the shooting, the chase across the street to the other hotel and finding the rifle on autopilot. The FBI was hounding him for a "debriefing" that he had managed to avoid so far, but would probably have to show up for in the morning. Four different police beat news reporters had tried to worm their way in for a quote or exclusive since he arrived, and he'd finally had to tell the sergeant at the main metro desk to keep the reporters out.

"He's been transferred to the fifth floor," Eulalie Smithers said sweetly over the phone. "Your friend is a strong fellow--looks like he's stable and had no complications."

"Thanks," Hutch hung up, wishing like hell he'd actually been able to speak to Starsky.

He'd called the hospital twice since he left. Starsky had been successfully extubated but that didn't dispel Hutch's concerns about his partner. It flitted through his mind that he was exactly the wrong person to head up this investigation because he had such a personal stake in the case, but he was the only one available. The other two detective duos at Metro were both involved in a complicated serial murder investigation that spanned across half of Southern California. It was he--and Ed Fleming--to the rescue. Fleming was a good man, but he wasn't a detective.

Hutch wasn't always sure what status the gold shield got him in the long run, but he was the detective in charge of this case. In the years since he joined the Bay City Police Department, he'd taken classes and tests to earn the honor of being called detective. He was supposed to be able to deduce connections from the clues and not just infer guilt based on circumstantial evidence. He was definitely not supposed to sit around on his duff like a college student ditching class.

So what exactly did he know and what was supposition?

Hutch made two columns, putting his own observations in one and what Durniak had told him in another. Who was this shooter Terry? What name had he registered into the hotel with? Would

he really have given his real name to a stranger in a bar? That seemed a no-brainer, and Hutch felt a modicum of confidence flow back into his belly.

*"That would be a big fat no," Starsky said emphatically. "Terry ain't the guy's real name. An' you know what I'm bettin? This Terry and that Buddy whatever his name is are connected somehow."*

Gulping a startled breath, Hutch looked around wildly. What the hell? He could hear Starsky's voice so clearly, so...realistically. Was he losing it?

The other two cops in the room, John Cordoba, an old fogy nearing retirement, and Sadie Klein from records were chatting quietly over a file.

*"Hutch, you look like crap," Starsky said into his ear. "What you need is food--I know you always want that healthy shit that Abby forced on you, but you need something that sticks to your ribs. A burger and fries. Eat!" Starsky seemed to be channeling his Jewish mother.*

Hutch's stomach rumbled on cue and he laughed, still very disconcerted with Starsky as his conscience. On the other hand, he was so glad to have his buddy with him, so to speak, that he'd do anything to keep the little voice talking. "Guess I'll have a burger," he said out loud.

*"Good." Starsky waited until Hutch had put on his coat and strolled out with him. "And then we need talk to someone in the Bureau. They're all assholes there, but one of 'em must have half a brain and can clue you in about that Buddy...."*

"Greggs," Hutch finished, nodding. It felt decidedly weird and yet right to have Starsky with him. Was this all some kind of bizarre manifestation of his stress level or did he really know Starsky so intimately that he could conjure up exactly what Starsky might say in a given situation?

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He chose a place he and Starsky often went to. The bowling alley was quiet with that mid-week, most commuters were on their way home and no one wants to bowl on a Wednesday evening kind of feel. He'd always thought it was weird to eat at a bowling alley, but the restaurant attached to the lanes made really good food.

Hutch ordered a beer and burger from Starsky's favorite waitress but she seemed distracted, her eyes wide with anxiety. He hunkered down in a back table, watching her walk away with a sense of unease. Was there just tension in the air or was it something more? Starsky-in-his-ear had been silent since they arrived. Hutch was still uncertain whether he wanted the voice back, but he felt lonely without Starsky's chatter. The only sound in the place was the rumble of heavy balls rolling down the two lanes actually in use. Hutch heard the clatter of bowling pins falling and some man yell, "Strike!"

"How are you, Diane? Is everything all right?" Hutch asked when she arrived at the table with a frosty mug. Starsky always flirted with the busty red head when they ate at the Mar-Lin-Do Grill.

"Oh, Hutch, I heard about Starsky." She twisted her fingers, her green eyes filling with tears. "It's so awful! How is he doing?"

"I saw him just after surgery and the doctor told me that he should make a full recovery." Hutch took a long, satisfying drink of beer.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Diane bit down on her forefinger, worrying at the cuticle. "I mean more than what the papers say."

"We were guarding a man who may--or may not have been a target." Hutch considered what to say and wished Starsky were back telling him what to do. "Can't give you any more than that. Except that I'm not looking forward to talking to the FBI in the morning. Seems I have to be debriefed."

"That sounds scary!" Diane dabbed at the tears in her eyes. "I'll send Starsky some flowers."

"He'd like that."

Diane pursed her lips speculatively, tapping her fingers on her order pad: the nails were all chewed to the quick. She lingered so long that Hutch realized she might have something more to say.

"Diane?" He patted the chair next to him. "Something on your mind?"

Glancing at the door as if checking for new customers, Diane hesitated before sitting. "I maybe shouldn't tell you this but..." She bit her lip.

Hutch could see pink lipstick on her top teeth. "You know something about this case?" he asked cautiously.

"My sister is an FBI agent," she said quietly. "She was at the hotel this morning."

"Oh." Hutch extended the single syllable out beyond the sound of two letters, hoping for more. He hadn't seen anyone who looked like Diane at the Fremont, but then there had been dozens of law enforcement surrounding the place by the time he'd departed. It was quite possible he would not have noticed.

"She's my twin," she added. "Identical. We--I can tell when she's hurt, or even scared. She was working in the kitchen there, undercover, you know? And mid-morning, about ten--I got this terrible fear and horrible pain." She touched her left arm. "It kinda washed over me in a rush, you know?"

In a way, Hutch did. He suspected it was the way he felt when Starsky was hurt--and they didn't even have the intense bond of twins. He and Starsky operated on a very similar psychic level despite that. This little voice in his head was an added dimension.

"So you got in contact with your sister?" Hutch asked hesitantly.

"Ask her name, you big lug. Be sensitive," Starsky said.

Hutch could almost feel the elbow in his ribs.

"Dinah phoned me after," Diane said. "Her superior called her out of the kitchen and she walked through the lobby just as the shots were fired. One grazed her arm."

Damn! He'd forgotten to ask Dobey about any other victims.

"I'm so sorry!" He rubbed her hand sympathetically. "Was Dinah hurt badly?"

"No, no--more like a big scratch than anything else." Diane sucked in a shuddery breath. "It's just so weird, knowing two people who were shot this morning--at the same time."

"*She's a contact,*" Starsky reminded. "*We should talk to Dinah.*"

Hutch almost smiled, getting more used to his partner talking to him from afar. "Was she put on medical leave?"

"Yes, I think so." Diane got up abruptly as more customers walked in. "I'd better get your burger before it goes cold."

"Do you think I could talk to Dinah? Not on company time?" Hutch asked, a feeling of urgency taking hold.

Diane looked momentarily nonplussed. "Sure, I guess. We live together. Starsky's even met her, you know, that time he came to a barbecue at my apartment complex."

The twins! Hutch suddenly recalled Starsky suggesting a double date with a pair of red haired twins, but he'd just gotten over both Abby and Gillian and hadn't paid much attention. He was still barely in the mood to invest in another doomed romance.

"*I didn't know she was a fed!*" Starsky muttered.

"Here's my address and phone number," Diane scribbled on the back of an order form. "I'll tell her you'll be coming by."

"Thanks." Hutch glanced at the address. Within walking distance of Mar-Lin-Do. "She might be able to give me some...insight. A different perspective on the whole incident. I appreciate this."

"I'd better get back to work. Your burger will be here in a minute."

Hutch wolfed down his dinner with renewed enthusiasm. Now he was getting someone. Even if Dinah--he tried in vain to recall Diane's last name, didn't know this Buddy Greggs, she might know someone who did. And could possibly poke around in the FBI more easily than he could.

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Starsky woke staring at the ceiling. White, boring acoustical tile instead of his own bedroom ceiling. Not the mirror from his old place, not the textured stucco of his new one. He was in a hospital once again.

He remembered the ambulance ride through the city, and had even been conscious for the painful but ultimately boring exam and stabilization in the ER. Since then, it was a blur--with Hutch's face hovering over him throughout.

He'd been so sure Hutch was here. He could remember talking to him. Hutch had been eating a burger, in fact, at Mar-Lin-Do. Starsky's mouth was too dry to water and with the way his belly ached, it would be some time before he could muster up an appetite for any kind of food. However, a burger sounded good in theory.

Diane Heidegger had been in the dream, too. Weird. It had been so real; he could have sworn he and Hutch had discussed aspects of the case.

"Good evening, Mr. Starsky, I'm Greta." A nurse slipped into the room bearing a syringe and a cup of ice.

Starsky welcomed the relief that the narcotic she undoubtedly carried would provide, but it would limit his lucid moments. He sucked on the ice gratefully after she took his temperature. "Did my partner, Ken Hutchinson, visit? Tall, blond guy, kind of clumsy?"

"I haven't seen any visitors." Greta injected the narcotic into Starsky's IV line. "The morphine will make you sleepy," she added. "But maybe when you were in recovery?"

That had to be it. Starsky was extrapolating something Hutch must have said when he was still half in anesthesia and spun it out into a full fledged dream. Weird, because he still had the scent of that burger in his nose.

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"Dinah?" Hutch held up his ID when a mirror image of Diane opened the door of 230 San Gabriel, Apartment C. Same red tresses, ocean green eyes, and well-filled bra on a statuesque figure clothed in a flower splashed yellow t-shirt and blue jeans.

"Ken Hutchinson," Dinah read, her eyes shifting up to Hutch as if to confirm who he was. "Diane told me you'd be coming by." She stood awkwardly back from the door, cradling her left arm.

There was a bandage wrapped around the bicep, but no sling. Hutch glanced at her injury. "How bad?"

She shrugged and then winced ruefully. "Enough to hurt my pride. I'm a tough gal; I got through Langley with flying colors only two years ago and not much more than a bruise." She waved him inside with her right hand. "But your friend Dave. He looked bad. I saw him just as the paramedics were bundling him up."

"You saw him?" Hutch inhaled, grateful for any information on that moment in time that he had mostly missed. "Was he conscious?"

Dinah dimpled. She and Diane really were mirrors--Diane had a dimple on the right, Dinah's was on the left. "He was swearing a blue streak, even though he looked hurt pretty bad." She rubbed her belly in sympathy.

"Speaking of tough, he's a champion..." Hutch let that hang.

Dinah nodded somberly. "What kind of hostess am I! Can I get you anything? I was just about to..." The shrill shriek of a tea kettle cut her off. "Get some tea," Dinah finished with a chuckle.

"You're the one who was injured." Hutch turned toward the sound. "Let me."

"Thanks." Dinah smiled gratefully, every feature so like Diane's that Hutch had a sudden moment of *déjà vu*.

Which one was he speaking to now?

*"Gets you every once in a while, doesn't it?" Starsky said into his ear. "Even weirder when the two of them are standing side by side like any one of my wet dreams."*

Hutch was very glad he was already walking into the kitchen to rescue the screaming kettle so that Dinah didn't see him snort in reaction to Starsky's earthy sensuality. He lifted the pot off the stove, turned off the gas, and glanced around the cupboards for the tea.

"There's tea bags on the shelf beside the stove, plus sugar if you want that," Dinah called out. "Cups in the cabinet above the counter and milk in the fridge. And if you could get me some aspirin on the...."

Hutch saw the bottle of Bayer on the countertop. "Found it!"

Gathering the tea things onto a tray that already held a plate of chocolate chip cookies, Hutch carried the tray into the living room. He set it on a small round table where Dinah was sitting.

Hutch poured out two cups and they both prepared their tea the way they liked. Dinah nibbled on a cookie while her tea cooled, looking speculative. Hutch blew on his tea, waiting her out. The last thing he wanted to do was seem to be aggressive or impatient, even though he felt like the sand was dropping through the hour glass. Every moment they didn't solve this shooting was more time for Terry-whoever-he-was to get away scott free.

"Diane said you wanted to ask me something about this morning? Off the record?" she asked finally. "I don't want to be caught telling tales out of school, so to speak. No names on official documents, you know?"

"You're anonymous, as far as I'm concerned," he assured, settling into a straight backed chair. "I have two questions, but first--what did you see and hear, as an agent?"

"What did you see?" she countered. "Because my superior, Special Agent Marx told me that the BCPD has made the accusation that someone was posing as a Fed."

"Yep." Hutch drank some tea to sort his response.

*"Tell her about that fuck Oliver," Starsky muttered. "He wasn't no real G-man, that's for sure. Lead us right into the cannon fire."*

"Captain Dobe called us with word of a bomb in the building and that we were to get out with...."

"The protected witness," Dinah prompted.

"Did you know who he was?"

"No." Dinah finished the cookie and took a second. "It was a need to know basis and I didn't need to know. I was just back-up support for the back-up. I assembled your tasty breakfast."

*"I'd love a cookie," Starsky put in. "But you'll probably say some guy at the chip factory ground up his wife and dipped her in chocolate."*

Starsky was going to drive him around the bend and Hutch couldn't even tell him to shut up.

"Good to know." Hutch didn't feel the need to explain that he hadn't eaten any of the food. "We took...Mr. D down the freight elevator. There was a tall man, said he was Oliver from the FBI. Told us to go out front, that there was a car waiting for us."

"I don't know any Oliver." Dinah frowned. "The field agents in and around the building were Marx, Sipowitz, Gregory, Lyons, and me."

"Gregory?" Hutch latched onto that oh-so similar name to Greggs. Belatedly, he recalled Dobe naming the five feds in the hotel, too. "Is he..." How did he put it so she wasn't instantly suspicious? Dinah was watching him with wide green eyes. She knew something was wonky, but was willing to listen to him first. "Does he usually work in your offices, here in Bay City?"

"No." She picked at her cuticle, exactly the way Diane had. "He's a--liaison, I guess, from the New York branch, brought out because of the protected witness. We were supposed to coordinate with him."

"What's his full name?" Hutch asked, ice water freezing muscles, making it hard to breathe. God, no--

*"A fed shot me?" Starsky cried. "Not to mention her?"*

"Bert Gregory," Dinah said. "Albert, I think."

"Damn," Hutch whispered, almost sick. He gulped tea just to defrost his frozen chest and belly. "Did you see him at any time right before, during, or directly after the shooting?"

"What are you saying?" Dinah gasped, pulling her injured arm into herself. She knew exactly what he meant, but she obviously didn't want to accept it.

"*Rat bastard*," Starsky said fast and low.

"Was this Greg--" He almost said Greggs but switched to the name she knew the man by. "Gregory there at any time? Did you see him?" His voice felt raw with the stress of holding back his anger.

Hutch saw her FBI persona slip into place like a shield. Dinah straightened, going inward, rewinding the scene in her head. Her green eyes moved to the left and then right as if tracking the movements of invisible people. "Marx called me out of the kitchen," she said tightly. "It was the end of my shift anyway. I knew that some of the cops were fanning out to search for the bomb, Sipowitz and Lyons, too. Marx told me they'd gone upstairs. To look for you, I thought."

She slurped some tea noisily, making Hutch think of Starsky.

Starsky obligingly blew a raspberry, but of course Dinah didn't hear that.

"Then I saw you three walking across the lobby--Starsky on the left and you on the right of an old man. Marx and I were by the registration desk with the hotel manager. I'd just started for the front door, only seconds behind you, when the shots rang out." She pointed with her right hand as if the Webster hotel was clearly visible from her apartment.

"The shooter was in the other hotel," Hutch confirmed, his heart going triple time.

"Yes." Dinah nodded, still obviously internally reviewing the incident. "I don't know where Gregory was. I never saw him--but, I didn't *see* Sipowitz or Lyons either, not until later."

Hutch wanted to reach out and shake her. "When did you see Gregory? When was the first time that day, when was the last time?"

Dinah gulped air as if coming out of the water and swiped her long red hair behind her ear. "I saw him at about-oh-eight thirty that morning. He had a cup of coffee in the dining room. Looked--you know, energized? Ready to face whatever we were up against." She shook her head, still not ready to believe something bad about a fellow FBI agent. "That was the last time today. When I heard the shots, Marx went for his weapon as the guests and employees all dropped to the ground. I saw Starsky get hit--he and I were hit within seconds. The pain went through my arm."

"There were three bullets," Hutch said, seeing the scene from her point of view. Even seeing himself pull his own Magnum, firing off useless shots. He'd bent over Starsky and been told in no uncertain things to go after the shooter.

"*It was your duty*," Starsky whispered fiercely.

"Fuck duty," Hutch said. Too late, he realized he'd spoken out loud.

Dinah closed her eyes, her face too pale as if she was about to pass out. "Sometimes I say the same thing at night, to get myself to sleep." She stuffed the last cookie in her mouth.

"You think Gregory is...involved. Or dirty," she stated through the crumbs.

"I know he is."

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"Missed Edith's fine lamb stew, and all this coffee is playing havoc with my indigestion," Dobey grimaced, taking the last gulp from his cup. He leaned back in his office chair, rubbing his belly. "I probably won't sleep, either."

Hutch could sympathize with Dobey. The burger and fries had tasted good on the way down, not to mention the cup of Darjeeling with Dinah, but now his belly was percolating with acid. "What do we know, Captain?"

"The shooter was registered at the Webster hotel as Buddy Terry."

Hutch grimaced, gesturing for Dobey to continue. That made a fourth name for the mysterious fed--or maybe just a third. Terry/Buddy Terry--not Terrence. Bertram "Buddy" Greggs and Bert Gregory. Maybe his legal middle name was Terry, or was any combination of the three names really who he was?

"Paid in cash for one night--he was not, however, registered in room 912. He was supposed to be in 908, two doors down." Dobey grumbled, rubbing his furrowed brow with meaty fingers. "How did you know?"

"The room looked didn't look slept in," Hutch said. "I just spoke to--" He hesitated in giving Dinah Heidegger's name. "A source who told me unconditionally that there was a Bert Gregory working with the feds at the Fremont, and he had come specially from NYC to monitor the situation with Durniak."

"Yes." Dobey peered into his cup as if hoping there was still coffee inside. "That one I know."

"You know him?" Hutch shouted, jumping out of his chair in front of Dobey's desk. *So close, so very, very close!* "What does he look like?"

"Hutchinson!" Dobey said sternly. "What the heck does this have to do with the shooting?"

"I think he's the assassin. Captain, what does Gregory look like?" He was sure he knew--tall, with curly hair.

"He's about your height, with light brown curly hair. What proof do you have?" Dobey asked with icy calm. "He was working with Special Agent Marx. Sat in on a strategy meeting with us--and the DA, Clayburn."

"That means he was privy to every single plan we made," Hutch whispered, horrified. Was Starsky still in danger? Durniak must certainly remain a target. "Captain, does this Gregory know where Starsky and Durniak are?"

"I haven't spoken to him since early yesterday morning, in the Fremont hotel coffee shop." Dobby rapped a fist on his desk. "Hutchinson, tell me exactly what is going on!"

Hutch took a deep breath to slow his galloping heart, wondering where Starsky's voice had gone. He'd gotten used to the whisper in his ear, like a teasing conscience.

"Durniak told me about a rogue agent named Bertram "Buddy" Greggs," Hutch started, filling Dobby in on the aliases, as well as the supposition that the shooter Terry and Gregory/Greggs were one and the same man.

Dobby listened in silence, his normally warm brown skin going ashy with shock. "This is unconscionable."

"I don't trust any one of the feds we worked with now," Hutch said softly. "This is some vast reaching conspiracy, like a shadowy company inside the Bureau. We have to get Starsky and Durniak to safety immediately."

"Without the other feds knowing ahead of time," Dobby said grimly. "There's an agent guarding Durniak's door--"

"Then it may be too late," Hutch said softly, imaging both Starsky and Durniak laid out in their hospital beds, drugged or suffocated by a convenient pillow. He felt sick to his core. "Captain, we have to get them out of there. There's no way of knowing how far reaching this conspiracy is."

"As much as I dislike sounding like a fool who believes in the whole grassy knoll malarkey, we can at least alter the situation until there's time rethink." Dobby nodded, his brow dark as a thunder cloud. "You go to Starsky's room, I'll get Durniak. Are they on the same floor?"

Hutch stood, impatient to be gone. He no longer missed Starsky's little voice; he was desperate to hear his partner again. "Durniak's on the third, Starsky is on the fifth since his surgery."

"We'll meet in the front, the lobby will be deserted after visiting hours." Dobby jammed a trilby hat on his head with determination. "No heroics, Hutch, but use your authority and shove that gold shield in the face of anyone who gets in your way."

*"Is that an order?"* Starsky asked cheekily.

"Thank God," Hutch said, running down the corridor to the front doors of Metro. He'd parked the Torino in Starsky's usual place, smack in front of the building. Gave the day a modicum of normalcy. "Where the hell have you been, Starsk?"

*"I'm always with you,"* Starsky said. *"I know what you do, babe."*

"That's good to know, because sometimes I can't read my own mind." Hutch shoved the keys into the lock, clumsily swinging the door open. Everything was too slow, too slow. He needed to be at Memorial already, needed to be there to save Starsky. "Are you all right, Starsk? Anyone there seem out of place?"

*"I can't see what you don't, Hutch," Starsky said, sounding further away than ever. "It's the unknown."*

"Damn!" Hutch rammed his foot on the accelerator, the Torino practically soaring away from the curb at top speed. In his rear view mirror, Hutch saw a plain sedan pull out of the Metro parking garage, but it was too dark to see who was driving. Didn't matter, he recognized Dobe's car. They raced down Washington far above the posted speed limits in the direction of the hospital.

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Hutch slowed to a walk as he approached Memorial Hospital by way of the ER. Dobe peeled off to the left behind him, as if they were not together. They were in luck: a large group of very inebriated men were clumped around the admitting desk, arguing with a harassed looking gray haired nurse.

Hutch strode confidently past the desk without stopping, pretending he had all the right in the world to be there after visiting hours. He didn't look back to ensure that Dobe made it through. Hutch ducked into the stairwell and trotted up five flights. Truth be told, he couldn't care less about Durniak. If it came down to a choice between who to save from a murderer, Hutch would choose Starsky. That was the plain truth.

He was only starting to sweat when he hit the fifth floor, a testament to his jogging regime. Which room, which room? He'd never asked when he called earlier. Damn!

Hutch wanted to avoid running into any of the nurses. Luckily, it was a different shift now, so even if he saw a lady in white, she couldn't possibly be anyone he'd spoken to earlier in the day. He stood in the corridor about twenty feet from the nurse's station peering at the lone woman there in hopes of some revelation to where Starsky was.

This late at night, the hallway was nearly deserted, all the patients tucked into their beds and sleeping.

Two nurses walked out of a room behind the desk carrying medications in small cups. "I've got the suppository and morphine for Mrs. Jones in 520," a young blond said. "And then I can go on a break. Can you cover me, Maxine?"

"Sure, I'll help you with the suppository. My assignment's easy tonight. Only six patients, and that cop in 525--he's gorgeous!" Maxine said, walking with her friend down the hall in the other direction.

*Starsky!*

With a grim sense of relief, Hutch looked at the patient room directly across from the stairwell door. Room 525.

"Excuse me--"

Hutch froze, watching as a tall, curly-haired man dressed in surgical scrubs walked up to the nurses' desk. "The surgeon sent me up to look for...."

Hutch didn't waste a moment; he dashed across the linoleum and ducked into 525. The room was dim, with only a low watt light right above the bed shining on the patient. "Starsk!" Hutch hissed.

"What? Starsky grimaced, squinting. He immediately started to climb out of bed and swayed drunkenly. "Whoa...the drugs are doing a number on me."

"The shooter could be on his way right now," Hutch said urgently, grabbing Starsky's arm. As with most post-surgical patients, he was linked to an IV pole by plastic tubing. There was also a good chance that Starsky might not be able to walk after abdominal surgery that morning.

"I dreamed you were coming," Starsky said, but he didn't pause. Moving with careful determination, he swung his legs over the side of the mattress and stood on wobbly legs. "Damn that hurts. Not sure how fast I'll be."

"All I care is getting out of here," Hutch whispered, gathering up the IV bag. He'd try to remove the needle in Starsky's arm when they had more time. If that curly haired man was Terry/Gregory, they had very little. At least he and Starsky were together. "Lean against me for now." Hutch pulled Starsky close, one arm around his waist.

He could feel Starsky trembling with pain and fatigue. This wouldn't last long. Either they had a shootout in the hospital corridor which would endanger countless other lives, or they got away scott free. There was no halfway.

They staggered to the door and Hutch peered out, holding his breath. Beside him, Starsky was practically panting, his rib cage heaving against Hutch's. He never complained or said a word.

There was no one in the hall, but that was no guarantee of success. Only that Curly Terry hadn't put together the clues Hutch had.

"This has to be done tonight!" Curly insisted loudly, out of Hutch's eyeshot.

"You'll have to come back," a nurse said from the desk area. "His surgeon didn't write an order for a transfer and without an order, my hands are tied."

"Which damn room is he in?" Curly demanded.

"He's not thirty feet away," Hutch whispered into Starsky's ear, keeping the IV bag above his shoulder. "The stairwell door is only six feet. Can you make it?"

"Just watch me." Starsky nodded once, bracing himself against the doorframe when Hutch swung the door open.

It seemed almost too easy. For mere seconds, Hutch and Starsky were out in the open, visible to anyone who looked down the hall in their direction. Hutch was sure every footfall echoed like thunder--and suddenly, he was easing the door shut behind them. Starsky was pale and sweaty. He used the stair railing for support, guarding his belly with one hand.

"Piece a' cake," Starsky muttered, gasping. "Next time you get gut shot, I'm--" He chuckled hoarsely, a wheezy kind of laugh that almost did Hutch in. "Takin' you on a hike through the hills," he finished, his lips bloodless. "How'd I look?"

Ghastly went through Hutch's mind. "You look terrific," he said instead.

"Don't you forget that," Starsky said through clenched teeth.

"Let's dispense with this." Hutch tugged at the tape holding the IV needle in Starsky's arm and pulled the whole assembly out. A perfect round drop of red blood welled up in the tiny puncture site. Hutch dug a tissue out of his jacket pocket and wadded it over the wound. He dropped the IV bag on the landing without a second thought.

"I've bled worse." Starsky pressed the tissue against his skin, breathing heavily. He put a foot down on the riser below and nearly pitched forward.

Hutch latched onto his arm, holding him steady and they managed four more steps together. Two more to the midway point--this was far too slow. How much longer before Curly and the wonderfully obstructive nurse figured out Starsky was no longer in his bed?

"Got t'rest," Starsky muttered. He closed his eyes, letting Hutch take all of his weight. "Where're we going anyway?"

"Dobey should be with Durniak on the third floor. But there is no way you'll make it there like this," Hutch said quietly, thinking ahead. "If we get to the fourth floor in one piece, I'll find you a wheelchair."

"Hate wheelchairs." Starsky sneered without opening his eyes.

"Too fucking bad, Starsk. I'm making an executive decision here." Hutch hitched Starsky down two more stairs in one go. He felt like a heel, but they had to hurry. A glance at Starsky's abdomen sent his heart into overdrive. There was a spreading red stain on Starsky's blue and white sprigged hospital gown.

"Durniak didn't tes--" Starsky took a shallow breath and the muscles around his jaw practically spasmed. "Testify yet?"

"He kind of fell apart after you were shot," Hutch said quickly, getting them down another two stairs by sheer will. Only four more to go and they were on the fourth floor. Would that be any better? Starsky was barely alert.

"Good." Starsky opened his eyes, the pain etched in tight lines around his pursed mouth. "I wanted t'hear him. Slow down."

"Come on, you whiner, we're almost there." Hutch basically picked Starsky up and deposited him down the last two steps. His biceps were straining and there was sweat rolling down his spine to the small of his back. They had to make it!

"This ain..." Starsky wheezed between words, "Ain't whining, asshole. Just..." He pressed his hand more firmly against his belly. "Statin' facts."

"Nevertheless," Hutch announced when they'd gained the landing. "We're here. Now stay put while I find you a wheelchair."

"Fuck wheelchairs." Starsky jutted out his chin stubbornly as if he'd proved his point. He tilted against the wall like a fence post blown over in a strong wind.

Hutch opened the hallway door a crack, expecting some kind of fallout in the form of security guards or angry medical staff. Had the fifth floor nurses realized Starsky was missing yet? Would Curly be on the hunt now? Had Dobey gotten to Durniak safely? A thousand questions swirled through his brain. Was there an easily available wheelchair in sight?

Miraculously, there was. A trio of wheelchairs were clumped together to the left of the door, one holding a pile of folded blankets. Hutch only had to reach out his arm, latch onto the nearest chair and pull it to him. He dumped most of the linens onto another wheelchair and guided Starsky into his chariot. After swathing Starsky in a blue blanket, he pushed the chair into the fourth floor corridor with the confident air of someone secure in his own skin, without a care in the world.

"Slick," Starsky said from the covering folds. "You ever... play spy versus spy when you were a kid?" He grunted on the last word, but clearly sitting was much easier on his incision and breathing than climbing stairs had been.

"My mother didn't let me read MAD magazine." Hutch pressed the elevator door, glancing over his shoulder. No nearby nurses station on this floor. The only person in sight dressed in medical attire was walking down the hall completely consumed by the chart he was reading. Was it really going to be this easy?

The elevator doors slid open quietly and Hutch pulled the wheelchair aside to let out a tired looking nurse pushing a woman with a face like an apple doll. Neither the nurse nor the old woman glanced at Starsky and Hutch when they wheeled onto the elevator.

"You were born for this," Starsky deadpanned. "Even without--" He heaved in a breath and stifled a moan. "Sneaking around as a kid."

Hutch had poked the lobby button but the elevator jerked to a stop on the third floor. Damn! Were they busted even before they reached the ground floor?

His heart speeding up, Hutch turned his face from the opening, pretending to confer quietly with his patient. Starsky sucked in his bottom lip, ducking so that the blanket over his head hid his face. Hutch didn't take a breath until he recognized the drab brown shoes of one man and the hospital issue slippers of the other.

*Dobey and Durniak!*

"Captain," Starsky said formally, a wheezy chuckle escaping.

Hutch almost wanted to smack him, relief and over-the-top tension playing havoc with his nerves.

"Am I glad to see you two!" Dobby exclaimed, wiping a large hand over his sweaty forehead.

"The guard at my door was not too happy to be relieved of his duty," Durniak said dryly. "I think he's calling the FBI headquarters now."

"Which is why we need a secure place to stash the two of you," Hutch said, regaining his equilibrium as the elevator descended. Starsky, if not Durniak too, needed medical care. Then there was the problem of who to trust should Durniak have to testify in the next day or two.

"Captain?" Hutch said, wanting to toss the whole mess in his superior's lap. "Where to now?"

"Do you know of any doctors you trust?" Dobby asked, glancing at Starsky.

"I'm fine," Starsky insisted, even if the bloody spot on his hospital gown was quite visible. "But if Joey needs a good doctor. What about Franklin?"

"I've gotten my second wind back, Little Davey," Durniak said testily, smoothing his hair down.

Hutch glanced up as the indicator light on the elevator illuminated L. It was now or never. What if hospital security had mounted a search for them? "He's at Bay City General. That's a good idea."

Hutch grasped the handlebars of Starsky's wheelchair, ready to charge any phalanx of blue uniformed security guards. The doors opened to reveal a quiet, dimly lit lobby. This area was on the opposite side of the hospital from the ER bay, and there was no one in sight.

"Good." Dobby walked briskly across the small seating area by admitting and out the sliding doors with Durniak close behind him.

"Keep an eye peeled," Hutch said low to Starsky, pushing him through the lobby. He couldn't get over how easy this had been. Where had Curly gone? Why wasn't there a hue and cry over Starsky--and Durniak's--disappearance?

They'd just stepped onto the automatic sensor to activate the sliding doors when a voice called out from the overhead paging system. "Security to the fifth floor! Security to the fifth floor, patient missing from 512."

"Nurse must have checked in the room because it's about time for meds," Starsky said tightly, both hands pressed against his belly.

Hutch didn't say a word, but his guts clenched with dismay. He hated knowing that Starsky was hurting, even if he didn't say so aloud. "Your car is across the parking lot, in that dark corner. Dobe and I took two cars, and parked about two aisles away from each other."

"I can see them." Starsky pointed to the two older men hurrying to Dobe's sedan on the south end. "But who is that?"

Hutch had to focus to see a blurry man-shaped shadow move past the Torino and off into the darkness. Damn! Who was that? Could Curly have possibly gotten out of the hospital before they did? Or was it some random individual taking a leisurely stroll through the parking lot late at night?"

"Seems unlikely," Hutch said before he realized he hadn't voiced any of his suppositions. He watched Dobe and Durniak get into their car. Even yards away, he could hear the engine start up as Dobe backed out of the space.

Hutch broke into a run, pushing the wheelchair faster, sudden dread flushing adrenaline into his veins.

"It's dark, it's late--" Starsky coughed as if trying to cover up a groan of pain from the bumpy ride. "And there ain't any other cars around. Why'd--"

The explosion was deafening, a flame-hot fireball lighting up the sky. The concussive force pushed against Hutch's chest like a physical hand. He went to his knees, frantic to keep the wheelchair upright. Grabbing at Starsky, Hutch practically pulled him into his arms.

"Are you all right?" Hutch shouted. There was a roaring, crackle in his ears, but muffled as if his head was wrapped in cotton-wool.

The Torino was burning, a giant bonfire of bright red metal on the north end of the parking lot. The heat was incredible. Hutch's face felt flushed and sore, like he'd stayed out in the sun too long, even though they weren't that close.

"My car!" Starsky wailed, pushing against Hutch with surprising strength. "He bombed my car!"

"Starsky, forget the car!" Hutch yelled, jerking the wheelchair back. "We've got to get out of here."

A sturdy sedan swung around in the lot, coming straight at them. Even though Hutch knew who it had to be, he couldn't help the instinct to reach for his gun, his already racing heart accelerating.

Dobe pulled up within inches of Starsky's toes and Durniak shoved open the door. "Get in!" he cried.

"What about my car!" Starsky protested, gesturing wildly back at the conflagration.

"Get in, dammit." Hutch basically tipped the wheelchair forward, dumping Starsky into the back seat and scrambled in behind him. It was quite possible that Curly/Terry/Gregory would see them escaping, but there was nothing Hutch could do about that. They needed to get to safety, and quickly.

Starsky lay against the backseat, grey faced and grim. "Who are these guys?" he grunted, running out of air too quickly to finish the sentence. He heaved in a painful gasp, "And why are they doing this to you, Joey?"

"I've been thinking about this," Durniak said soberly as Dobey whipped the car past the hospital entrance and out onto the street. "It's quite possible they are after us both."

"Why?" Dobey grunted at exactly as Hutch asked the same question.

"What do you know that you didn't tell me?" Hutch snarled, leaning over the seat to poke Durniak's shoulder.

"This is--not something you should be privy to." Durniak turned enough to look at Hutch in the dim interior of the car.

"Too late!" Hutch felt like outside forces were closing in on them, changing the rules of whatever fucking game they were playing and messing with his ability to deal with any given situation. "How are we supposed to fight back, investigate, if we don't know the entire story?"

"Hutchinson," Dobey warned.

"Does it have to do with my father?" Starsky asked very softly.

With his ears still ringing from the explosion, Hutch barely heard him. He slid back in the seat to stare at Starsky. "What?"

"Joey," Starsky said, his breathing so ragged that he could have been chasing a fleeing suspect. "Who killed my father?"

"Is that relevant now?" Durniak retorted wearily.

"If it's what started this whole fucked up situation, yeah," Hutch spat, squeezing Starsky's arm. Starsky was scaring him. Usually so strong, he was visibly fading, no matter what kind of front he put up. Hutch was uncomfortably reminded of Starsky dying from Jennings' poison. Death was not in the cards this time!

"You never told me," Starsky whispered. "And I never asked, but I listened, Joey." He paused, obviously raw and hurting. It took a moment before he'd gathered enough strength to speak again. "Nobody...paid attention to me back then. I...was just some kid, alone. And damn, I hated you."

Hutch heard the passion in Starsky's voice, the renewed fervor. Starsky gripped his hand tightly, as if hanging on for dear life.

"I h-heard you and ma...talking about the cops. That my papa had...."

"Davey," Durniak said abruptly, hard as stone. "Don't."

"What?" Dobey overlapped Durniak's command. "What does this have to do with your father?"

"Hutch." Starsky released Hutch's hand, giving him freedom. "Tell him."

"I don't know the whole story," Hutch protested, his mind reeling. Starsky's papa had--what? What would cause Durniak to go after his killer, and then pay for the funeral? What would cause some black ops assassin to come after Starsky nearly twenty years later simply because Durniak was going to testify to a Federal Grand Jury?

"This is a private matter," Durniak said savagely.

"Couldn't be that private if you were willing to testify in exchange for immunity from prosecution," Dobey stated, changing lanes to take a left.

Durniak sat in stubborn silence.

"Starsky's dad was gunned down in the street in 1957," Hutch said, staring at his partner. Starsky was an insubstantial blob wrapped in dark shadow, only the occasional streetlight the car passed providing any kind of illumination. Hutch caught sight of Starsky's strained face, slack mouth and overly bright eyes, possibly filling with tears. "Looked like a mob hit."

"It was meant to." Durniak didn't move. The words seemed to be summoned out of him against his will.

"Why didn't I know this?" Dobey smacked the steering wheel with the palm of his right hand when he'd stopped at a red light. "When were you going to fill me in, Starsky?"

Hutch gasped as disconnected ideas bubbled up, taunting him. The man worked reluctantly for a mob, had even tried to quit, but was drawn back into that world. He'd been respected, even loved by Durniak. Would Durniak have so trusted him if he...? "Durniak told me that people in his organization were afraid he would talk to the authorities. Avraham Starsky was either informing to the feds or the NYPD."

Durniak moaned as if he'd finally felt the bullets hit.

"And you knew from the start," Hutch said fiercely, not sure who he was talking to.

"Not--" Starsky heaved in a pained breath. "From the start. Maybe Joey did, I dunno." He shifted in his seat, a muted sob escaping. "I learned part when Ma was sitting Shiva."

"And the rest?" Hutch asked, scared out of his mind at the sound of Starsky's rough breathing. Had pulling him out of the hospital made him worse? Couldn't be helped--Curly would have killed him had he stayed there.

"After Ma's funeral." Starsky wet his lips, panting. "I found stuff--papers...."

"The FBI approached him in '56," Durniak began, his head down, the darkness swirled around him like a shroud. "Because they knew he'd been involved in my organization--but they were trying to bring down Cassavetes."

"Dominic Cassevetes?" Dobby asked, slowing the car to a stop.

They'd reached Bay City General; Hutch could see the familiar exterior of the building.

No one made a move to get out, waiting to hear the end of the story.

"Avra's contacts figured this would...be advantageous for me, as well." Durniak coughed softly. "And I could see his reasoning. I knew when and where Avra was talking to them. Avra said it was his duty to get rid of a really dangerous man. That he was performing a--what do you call that, Davey? A mit--?"

"Mitzvah," Starsky said sotto-voce, fading on the last syllable.

"J. Edgar Hoover was a bastard of the first watch. He used Avra and then tossed him away like garbage once they had an in with Cassavetes. Took two years after Avra died but they brought down Cassavetes' whole operation."

"Which opened up business ventures for you," Dobby growled.

Durniak inclined his head, not disputing this.

"So you knew this!" Hutch couldn't do anything with the anger that boiled up, choking him. Couldn't slug the old mobster, couldn't loom over him poking his index finger into Durniak's chest as he would have some other place but inside a car. He shoved the door open, furious. "You used Avraham just as much as the feds did."

"I cannot argue points that were--" Durniak glanced into the back seat, his expression guarded, the garish light from the ER entrance limning the side of his jowly face. "Significant twenty years ago. Times have changed, attitudes..." He shrugged. "Davey needs medical attention."

"You have no...right--" Starsky snarled with far more strength than Hutch thought he had.

"Avraham was killed by Giovanni Buchairelli, one of Cassevetes' hitmen imported specifically for the hit," Durniak said quietly. "Although men inside my organization were not sorry to see him eliminated."

Starsky lowered his head as if in prayer just as a nurse came out through the sliding ER doors.

His brain about to shut down, Hutch climbed out of the car.

"Do you need some help?" the nurse asked, shivering in the cool January wind.

"We need to speak with Dr. Franklin, urgently," Hutch said, the brisk air tempering the heated flush on his cheeks. "No one else."

"He's with a patient. I can call Dr. Po." She pointed back inside the building. "Does someone in the car need medical attention?"

"It's Franklin only." Hutch pulled out his wallet and flashed the gold badge at her. "Very discreet, very important. Get him out right now." Hutch squinted to read the name on the small pin over her left breast pocket. "Please, Miss Tyler?"

Miss Tyler nodded, obviously confused. "Wait right here." She hurried back into the hospital.

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Starsky floated through the next hour or so. During the car ride, the pain had gotten so bad that he was sure he would pass out, but sheer will kept him going. He would see this through if it killed him.

Franklin hadn't been happy with Hutch's demands, but he knew what needed to be done and had tucked the injured and exhausted in unused rooms on a quiet floor. Morphine, oxygen, and IV fluids gave Starsky the boost he needed to wrestle with the truth behind Durniak's stories. He didn't know where Hutch and Dobey were presently, and suspected he only had a short time alone. He hurt all over in an unfocused way and the morphine made it harder than usual to marshal his thoughts in a coherent manner. None of that mattered.

The answers to the questions surrounding his father's murder had always been just out of reach, between snatches of overheard conversations from his childhood to bits and evidence gleaned from different sources during his years as a cop. For a while, he'd almost been afraid to keep seeking the truth. Durniak was right when he'd said there were things Davey didn't want to hear. The problem was--Starsky was now a man, and a detective, and whether or not he wanted to hear what his father did, he had to resolve the issue in order to solve the crime.

He truly didn't know what to believe anymore. Avraham Starsky had been a hard man to warm up to. Often emotionally distant and cerebral, he'd disciplined with a firm hand, usually five to ten thwacks on the butt with his belt. He'd also loved his family, obviously enjoying days at Coney Island with his sons and kicking a ball around in the game young Davey had scorned--that Polish Futbol--nothing like good old American baseball or football. Starsky never had the mathematical smarts to impress his father, but he knew that Avraham loved him in his own way. This long after the fact, Starsky found it difficult to remember anything but the punishments and anger. The rare good times were far more fleeting.

What saddened Starsky deep down was that Avra had been trying to atone for the mob's crimes on his own. It now made some kind of sense that he'd been distant to his family. He'd been conflicted with his work for Durniak, and felt he was a turncoat for ratting on the same people he was friends with. Even if Durniak had condoned the behavior and possibly encouraged Avraham's actions.

Starsky had seen this Buchiarelli's name in old reports of mob related murders. The man had died in his native Sicily in 1969 but the US justice system had never been able to extradite him back to New York for a full investigation of his crimes.

It all hurt too much, and not just because Starsky had been shot in the belly only this morning. Avraham had been exactly the same age that Starsky was right now when he died.

Thirty-two.

He'd lived through a world war, been persecuted by Nazis and lost a child before coming to America. That should have amounted to something more than feeling like he had to take a job with a corrupt company to feed his family.

Starsky shifted to get more comfortable in the bed, but his fresh incision sparked with pain when he moved. He turned his head away from the door and overhead light, tears brimming in his eyes.

*Stupid.* Stupid to cry twenty years after the fact. He wanted that anger back--the rage that had fired his twelve-year-old breast and allowed him to resist Durniak when all around him were seduced by Joey's charms.

His mother had clung to the mobster. He had seen the fear in her eyes that she was alone and unprotected without Avraham in the house. Joey had been Rula's savior. She might have married him, if not for religious differences and pressure from the family. Starsky didn't quite know all the reasons behind her refusal. He'd simply savored the victory in the battle and hadn't looked any further behind the curtain. Being banished to the west coast had solidified normal teenaged anger into a rage that burned until he was seventeen. It was no wonder that Rula couldn't cope with her eldest son. Had she continued her...he didn't even know what to call it...affair with Durniak? Attraction to Durniak? Starsky didn't think his mother would have allowed the man to court her when there was no chance of marriage, but Nicky had told him that Joey was often around in those days. The man had been like a second father to Nicky.

Damn, he was tired. Completely drained of energy, but far too wired to sleep despite the morphine. Seeing the Torino blow up didn't help. He could see feel the shocking heat and force of the explosion.

"Starsk?" Hutch whispered from the door.

"I'm awake." He was of two minds--he didn't want the intrusion but felt safer with Hutch around.

"You need to sleep." Hutch dropped heavily into a bedside chair, his utter fatigue audible.

"I can't," Starsky admitted, blinking to dispel the last of his tears. He brushed the moisture away with the back of his hand. "Thoughts are zipping around my brain like lightning. It's all too much."

"You want me to recite the penal codes?" One side of Hutch's mouth twitched into a half-hearted smile. "That used to put you right to sleep when we were at the academy."

That brought forth a pleasant memory that forced a few of the unsettling ones further into the back of Starsky's brain. He lay for a long time, very glad of Hutch's presence to ward off what haunted him. "Hutch," he said at last, gingerly touching the reinforced bandages on his belly. "How were you and your dad?" It hurt to talk, to stay awake, but he needed something good to cling to. The past was far too scary on the same day he'd been shot, threatened and watched the car go up in flames.

"How were we?" Hutch frowned. The overhead light made his hair gleam like a halo.

"Was it easy...being with him?" Starsky hesitated. Hutch's father had divorced his mother by the time young Kenny was twelve. He knew there had been some adversarial years. "Did you love your dad?"

Hutch shrugged thoughtfully, touching the skin above the V of his shirt. "He was my dad. I loved him, and then mourned losing him to a different wife and other kids. Grew up some and saw him as a man. Flawed, like I am, which brought us around to respect and love."

"I'm not sure who..." Starsky grunted, the pain in his abdomen increasingly hard to bear. "Mine was anymore. I wanted a ...perfect family, y'know? Like on *Father knows Best*." He kept seeing Avraham raging, belt wrapped around his left fist, and shouting in Polish. Davey had hidden in the closet until it was over. The highs--family picnics and Sabbath dinners--had been wonderful. But the rest of the time, his parents yelled at each other, tempers frayed from emotions fraught with dynamics Davey hadn't a chance of understanding. "It's like a kaleidoscope." He held up the hand without an IV, turning it slightly to make the colored shapes and mirrors shift in the imaginary cylinder. "I saw one thing then and another now. I don't even know which is right."

Hutch rubbed Starsky's shoulder with a surprisingly cold hand. "Just pare it down to the most basic tenet. Did you love your father?"

"I loved Papa," Starsky said sincerely. "I didn't know him at all."

Hutch reached over to push the call button. "The nurse will give you something to get you to sleep."

"We don't even know what happened with that--" Starsky tried to recall the assassin's name, "guy, the shooter."

"Which is why I'm staying right in this room with you," Hutch vowed. "And Dobey is next door with Durniak."

"Good." Starsky looked over at Hutch and then deliberately closed his eyes so that the last thing he saw before he slept was his partner.

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Hutch dreamed. He kept running, trying to pull Starsky out of the burning Torino, a submachine gun in his hand like on the old *Untouchables* TV series. Mysterious men and women with dead eyes and curly wigs marched unceasingly toward him. Then suddenly, he and Starsky were

flying in Snoopy's Sopwith Camel wearing WWI leather aviator helmets. The wind was buffeting them on all sides. Hutch was eating freeze dried tuna casserole with peas and mushrooms while one of Huggy's cousins pointed out Hearst Castle down below.

Hutch felt the rattle of the bi-plane's engine under his feet, a clanking like a cart full of metal pots filling his ears, and the engine misfired. He gasped, afraid--there was too much, too many things to go wrong. The plane dipped toward earth, losing altitude, the propeller stuttering to a stop. Hutch grabbed Starsky's arm, looking wildly around for a parachute. The grinning pilot handed him an umbrella laughing like a maniac.

"Mr. Hutchinson?"

Hutch jerked awake with a gasp, his heart racing. "Wha...?"

Only a nurse. A pretty one, at that, with deep brown eyes, chocolate smooth skin and a frothy halo of dark curls. The white cap was perched precariously on top of her 'fro. "I'm Clarice," she said, revealing a gap between her front teeth. "It's seven-thirty. Captain Dobey is asking for you."

"Overslept?" Starsky muttered from the pillow.

Rolling his head to get the kink out of his neck, Hutch glanced at his partner. "No comments from you. You get to wallow in bed while I have to work this morning."

"You get vitals, too," Clarice said cheerfully to Starsky. Wrapping the blood pressure cuff around Starsky's arm, she said, "The cafeteria is open downstairs. Your captain went down there."

Hutch was surprised that his stomach rumbled ominously. From hunger or anxiety, he wasn't quite sure yet. "Is there anyone with Durniak?"

Clarice nodded, pumping a small bulb to inflate the cuff around Starsky's arm. "An Officer Bert Mayer?"

"Good man." Hutch relaxed a little, regarding Starsky with a critical eye. He looked pale, tired and achy, but those were survivable.

"Go on," Starsky spoke around the thermometer Clarice had placed in his mouth. "Give me the play-by-play later on."

"Don't talk with the thermometer in your mouth," Clarice chided.

"Hutch." Starsky waited until she retrieved her property. "I want to go to the deposition."

"Dr. Franklin will have something to say about that," Hutch said, glad it was not in his hands. They were still in a heap of danger, and the last thing he wanted was for Starsky to go traipsing around--again-- so soon after abdominal surgery.

"I want to be there," Starsky said with such vehemence that Clarice backed away slightly, her eyes round. "My temp's normal, isn't it?" he snapped.

"Yes," she replied, writing down the number on her notes. "Thirty six point seven Celsius, or in old fashioned Fahrenheit, ninety eight, just about on the nose. Blood pressure normal, heart rate a little rapid, but I'll bet you'd like some pain meds."

"Not morphine," Starsky grunted, pushing himself upright in the bed. "I want to stay awake."

"Give him what he needs," Hutch said, leveling a rigid forefinger at his recalcitrant partner.

Starsky gave him an unapologetic grin despite the tight jaw and pain lines across his forehead.

"Clarice, are you taking care of Durniak, too?" Hutch asked.

"My brother is a lieutenant at Sutter precinct." Clarice dimpled, marking off a few more notations on her notes. "So the force had already checked me out, and given me the all clear. It's not the first time I've been roped in for the high priority patients."

"Clarence Carter," Starsky said, nodding. "He's a good man. You two look alike."

"Twins," Clarice said. "I'll get your Tylenol with codeine. Should bring your heart rate down." She whisked out, toting her equipment with her.

"Listen to the medical professionals, Starsk." Hutch frowned, his stomach still in knots. Coffee would be a disaster under those circumstances. Maybe some oatmeal. "I know you want to hear what Durniak has to say but--"

"Hutch, it's important." Starsky whispered softly, hands wrapped over his belly. "You know what *your* dad did before he moved out. You know why--"

"It still rips half of your heart away." Hutch sighed, understanding totally. "I'll see what I can do. But if Franklin says no...."

"Go find out when the Grand Jury convenes." Starsky waved him out. "I got more sleep in my future."

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Durniak looked pretty rough in Starsky's opinion. His eyes were red rimmed and his breathing sounded like a train coming down the tracks. However, sitting in a wheelchair, he still carried himself with an old fashioned dignity.

"I loved your mama," he said simply.

"I know," Starsky admitted despite his own reservations. He'd always known. Rula could never keep an emotion off her face if she tried. When she sat Shiva on Avraham, Davey had watched her, afraid, because what he'd seen in her eyes was not grief but relief. Had life with Avraham been so bad? He didn't want to believe that, but as an adult he knew how complicated even the

best relationships could be. Look what happened with him and Helen, or Hutch and Abby. "She'd have gone with you, but there was me and Nick."

"Exactly." Durniak nodded, glancing out the doorway. "Hutchinson and Dobey will come soon to take me to the courthouse. Apparently, the room and floor has been changed for safety." He looked down at his gnarled hands lying limply in his lap. "I never wanted to cause you harm, Davey. What I did... What I used to be involved with, obligated a skewed set of morals, one I adhered to, to the letter. But ultimately, one that cost me family and loved ones."

"Then why did you do it?" Starsky almost didn't know what he was asking. Why had he been a mobster? Or why had he colluded with Avraham to rat on his own kind?

"At the time, I felt that I had no choice." Durniak raised his arms as if in surrender, the veins stark against his frail skin, like purple tracings on a roadmap. "I am certain you will never understand my choices, but truly, I understood yours. You were protecting your mama." He hitched a breath that didn't seem to satisfy. There was an odd color to his skin, almost grey-blue. "You were your father's son..." He sucked in air hungrily. "In so many ways. You have strong principles, which I..." Durniak slowed, pressing a hand to his chest, his lips blanching. "Admire. I suspect that the facts of this case will never..." He hunched over, holding tightly to his left arm. "Come to the surface. Follow the fed, Greg...."

"Joey!" Starsky shoved back the covers, mindless of the strain on his incision. *Damn!* Despite his best intentions, he couldn't make it out of bed. The pain was too bad. "Joey!"

The old man crumpled in on himself, clutching his body. His breathing hitched and caught, frighteningly irregular.

"Clarice!" Starsky yelled. "Somebody come now! He's dying!"

Hutch was the first through the door, with the nurse and Dobey directly behind him. "What the hell?" Hutch grabbed Durniak's shoulder before he tumbled out of the chair.

Clarice took one look at the old man and smacked a blue button on the wall. She yanked a green rubber bag attached to the wall by a long plastic tube, but it didn't reach Durniak's face. "Get him on the floor. He needs oxygen." She shucked the top blanket off Starsky's bed with a single motion and flipped it onto the linoleum.

Hutch and Dobey transferred Durniak down to the improvised bed and Clarice covered his face with the oxygen mask, pumping the bag like a bellows. Two more nurses rushed in. "He's diaphoretic, with a weak pulse and respirations are about four or five," Clarice said quickly.

Immediately, the room was crowded with medical staff, a large code cart. Doctors shouted orders while working on Durniak, and the nurses drew up medications, tossing the wrapping and used syringes on the floor.

Starsky sank back into his pillows, feeling his own heart bang painfully against his breastbone. He'd hated Joe Durniak since he was twelve--possibly before that if he was brutally honest. He'd hated the hold the man had on both his father and mother. It had been an untenable situation

from the get-go, impossible to escape from unscathed. That Durniak was the last to go of the participants involved was hard to believe.

"Is he having a heart attack?" Dobby broke the silence, watching the gruesome tableau with rapt fascination.

"He was grunting, sweating and clutching his arm," Starsky said, unable to take his eyes off Dr. Franklin hunched over the body, performing CPR. "I thought he had lung cancer."

"He was weak," Hutch said absently, edging around the group on the floor to sit on Starsky's bed. "This was all too much stress on him...."

"Graciella, is there a pulse?" Franklin took both hands off the patient, eyeing a nurse checking heart rate and breathing with her stethoscope.

"Nothing." She shook her head, sitting back on her heels.

Starsky felt his own heart skip a beat, the odd thought that his mother and Joe left the earth just one month apart.

"It's been twelve minutes," Clarice called, pointing at her watch. "How long do you want to keep doing this?"

"No heart rate, no respiratory drive despite epinephrine, sodium bicarb, atropine and compressions." Franklin bowed his head for a moment, his shoulders curved in weariness. "I'll call time of death at--" He looked down at his own wristwatch. "Oh, nine-fifty a.m."

"That's when you were shot." Hutch stared at Starsky, his eyebrows raised. "Yesterday."

Much more slowly, the medical team cleared away the signs of Durniak's demise. First the code cart. The oxygen mask was tucked away and a gurney brought in to transfer the body down to the morgue. Franklin and Clarice conferred over the code blue sheet for a few minutes while the room cleared out.

*The body.* A person reduced to an object. Usually, Starsky could suck up any empathy for the many corpses he'd seen in his career, but every once in a while, the connection to him was too strong. Helen had been like that; he'd been unable to reconcile the vivacious woman she had been to the lifeless body he saw on the slab.

Durniak had died right in front of him. One minute warning him about Gregory, the next moment dead. It was like some surreal movie he wanted to change the ending of. What was that weird ass movie Hutch had taken him to? *Un Chien Andalou*. Bizarre stuff that made no sense. Starsky had wanted to leave, but Hutch kept telling him it was symbolic of man's inhumanity or some shit like that.

Well, Starsky hadn't understood a moment of it--just like now. Who the hell dies right before he is to testify to the Grand Jury? What happened to all the cases that were supposed to be wrapped up because of Durniak's statement?

What happened to Davey Starsky? He had no ending, no finale scene to resolve the conflicts and questions that had plagued his life.

"What happens now?" Hutch asked as if he'd heard Starsky's inner monologue. "If we can't trust the damned G-men assigned to Durniak, what about the judge? Who do we talk to?"

"Right now." DobeY cleared his throat, glancing at the janitor who walked in. DobeY shook his head slightly, waiting until the man swept the floor and bundled the blanket into the laundry bin. DobeY didn't speak until the janitor was gone. "I have to call Special Agent Marx and the D. A. Clayburn. Until I get some kind of..." He shrugged, obviously as shaken as Starsky and Hutch were. "Resolution, this is an open case."

"This whole thing seems like some kind of--" Starsky pursed his lips together. He didn't feel well at all. "Secret society--spies skulking around...."

"Which means we may never get to the bottom," Hutch said ominously. "You should ask for an autopsy on Durniak. What if he didn't die naturally?"

"You just said he was weak and under stress!" Starsky protested, wanting nothing more than to pull the covers over his eyes and hide out for about ten years.

"Get some rest, Starsky," DobeY said flatly. "I'll be back with answers, come hell or high water." He clenched his right fist as if threatening the world. "If Clayburn won't talk to me, I'll take it straight to Judge McClellan. Hutchinson, stay with your partner."

"I was planning on it, sir." Hutch nodded. He dropped into the bedside chair, regarding Starsky quizzically. "What did Durniak say?"

Starsky closed his eyes and used his forearm to shield himself from the light on the panel above the bed. "Said to follow some G-man named Greg."

"Fuck!" Hutch violently raked his fingers through his hair.

"What?" Starsky asked, keeping his movements to a minimum. He opened his eyes to look at Hutch, his hand up as shade.

"I feel like we're going around in circles. Everything points to this bastard," Hutch explained. "He may or may not be the curly haired man who had tried to kill us last night. Might or might not be a Fed--or some special forces assassin who variously uses the aliases Buddy Greggs, Terry and Bert Gregory."

"Where'd you get all that?"

Hutch gave a quick run-down of everyone he'd talked to while Starsky was in the hospital. Mentally sifting through the information, Starsky felt like he was slogging through sticky mud. The pain in his belly made it difficult to think and the damned case was too confusing, with too many loose ends.

"So this guy..." He hated feeling so handicapped. Even names were hard to remember. "Buchairelli took out my father in 1957--" He had to pause to get past the gruesome memories of that hot afternoon. "For Cassevetes. Then Joe prospered from the FBI's shakedown of Cassevetes in what--'59? He's the top of the mob for years, until about 1970, or so."

"Sounds about right." Hutch nodded. "Fast forward to 1975 when Joe was approached by another fed to testify for immunity from prosecution. He agrees because he says it will help Julian make Automated Inc legal and above board."

"Julian," Starsky said, digging his fingers into his palm. Sometimes one pain helped alleviate another. The kid had been a nerdy whiner when he was in grade school. Must have grown up better than expected.

"But this guy Waters dies in a car accident a day before Durniak was to come west to testify." Hutch absently scratched his leg. "He's very suspicious, but decides to go ahead with the plan because he thinks the two of us are the most trustworthy cops he knows."

Starsky grimaced. "That ain't saying much for the NYPD."

"No." Hutch rubbed Starsky's hand. "You're cold and need to sleep, slugger. I'll call that pretty Clarice, get you something."

"Not yet," Starsky said irritably. "Hutch, why would Joey come all the way out here to testify? Why not in New York?"

"For safety reasons?"

"That magazine--Newsweek did an article on him a couple months ago," Starsky mused. Seeing Joe's face staring up at him from his mailbox, from the grocery store magazine rack and the newsstand near Huggy's had been unsettling. He'd been plagued with old anger and nightmares. His mother had even called him up midweek to mention the article. "You think that had something to do with his renewed fame-o-sity?"

Hutch chuckled quietly at Starsky's new word but didn't comment. "I think the old man really did have a change of heart," he said. "He's got cancer. He talked to me about his grandchildren, how he wanted to live up to their image of him--not as a mobster."

"And my mother died," Starsky whispered, giving into the pain, the old hurts and the aching grief of her passing. He would not let himself cry, though, not in front of anyone, not even Hutch. "He loved her. When it's all said and done, the old shit loved her and I think she loved him, too. Maybe more than she loved my pop."

"Starsk." Hutch didn't say anything more, just sat holding Starsky's hand.

"Avraham was like some old Biblical figure." Starsky could see his father standing in front of him, clear as day. Avraham's proud, hawk-like face with the black beard, a sharp prow of a nose and bristling dark eyebrows, crowned with a no nonsense yarmulke on his smooth black hair. It should have been frightening, but instead all he felt was abject sadness. "Tryin' to do the right

things for all the wrong reasons. I think he was trying to prove to ma that he was the better man." He swallowed against the bitter gall in his throat. "Can you give Clarice a call?"

Hutch pressed the button and leaned his head against Starsky's shoulder.

Starsky wanted to tell him that hurt, but it didn't really because Hutch's skin was warm and it was a connection to life.

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Dobey arrived at Starsky's house at ten-thirty on Friday, as he'd said he would, carrying a leather case.

Hutch let him in the front door and watched while Starsky cautiously lowered himself onto the couch in his living room. He still had that stiff, "I hurt" expression whenever he moved, but he was a damned sight better than the night they'd escaped from the hospital. Feeling like a combination security guard and nurse, Hutch handed Starsky a cup of water and a Tylenol with codeine. Starsky closed the pill in his fist but didn't toss it into his mouth.

"Spill, Captain," Starsky urged. "Who's this guy and was there some double cross going on in the bureau to off their star informant?"

"After a lot of hemming and hawing, Lt. Marx informed me that Bert Greggs isn't a special agent at all," Dobey announced with a loud harrumph. He eyed Starsky critically. "Did the doctor actually release you?"

"Never mind about me!" Starsky shifted gingerly, and gulped some water.

"You were supposed to take the pill with that," Hutch said, sitting down next to him. Starsky had insisted on being leaving the hospital AMA as soon as he could walk upright. Hutch didn't like the situation one iota, but there was nothing new about that with all that had gone on this week.

Starsky shook the fist with the Tyco in a mock threat but obediently swallowed the pill with another drink of water.

"So if he's not a special agent, what is he?" Hutch asked.

"There lies the problem." Dobey frowned. "Nobody without grade A clearance, which is mostly the president and a few military generals, can access information about certain employees of the FBI. And this Greggs is one of them."

"Hutch, you mentioned something about special forces the other day," Starsky said suddenly.

Hutch snapped his fingers. "Actually, Durniak told me to ask *you* about them."

"What special forces?" Dobey asked. "You mean--Army trained snipers and the like?"

"Shadow company," Starsky said, sounding more tired than he had one moment ago. "Spooks. They ain't normal. They live so long on the fringes of the Army, without a regiment or squadron

to back 'em up that most of 'em go rogue after discharge." He coughed, pressing on his belly. "If the government got this Buddy whatever the hell his name is on the payroll as an assassin, then we're screwed. Ain't no way we'll ever find out who he is."

"There were no fingerprints in room 912 at the Webster hotel," Hutch said.

"Guys learn to sand their fingerprints down smooth," Starsky put in tonelessly, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together. "Doesn't last forever and hurts like fire, so they have to do it before every job. A professional from the word go."

"Even when he relaxed just a little, and talked to the woman at the bar, he was hiding in plain sight." Hutch had read the crime scene reports yesterday while Starsky had a series of x-rays and blood tests. Once cleared of any infection or bowel perforation, Starsky had signed the get-out-of-the-hospital-against-orders papers and bugged out. Franklin hadn't been happy, but he'd obviously understood the need for haste. "No prints on the stock of the rifle, the door handle or anywhere in the vicinity. The lab crew even dusted the section of the bar where Teresa Hanley said he'd sat when they chatted. Nada." He glanced down at the copy of Newsworld on the coffee table, Joe Durniak scowling from the cover. "Captain, did Miss Hanley work with a sketch artist? Are there any pictures of this Terry? Can we prove he's the same person as Greggs/Gregory?"

"Our own piece of hard evidence, such as it is." Dobey opened his briefcase and removed a sketch of a man with luxurious curls, a sharp, straight nose, slightly squinty eyes and a firm chin. "This is the man Miss Hanley described, and the man I met with in the hotel coffee shop who said his name was Bert Greggs."

"It's the man I saw asking for Starsky's room in the hospital," Hutch confirmed, clenching his jaw. Damn--how did this guy slip so easily through the cracks?

"So what now?" Starsky asked. "Why did he try to kill Joey? What's their reasons--"

"A knot we can't possibly untie," Hutch said fiercely. "Who does he report to?"

"So he goes free, protected by our own government, to kill again whenever someone cloaked in miles of red tape with eyes only clearance gives him the order." Dobey shook his head. "I don't think we're going to win here. The FBI shipped Durniak's body back to his son Julian this morning, and the police commissioner personally came to my office to take all the files we had. I kept this one sketch to show you--and that could mean my badge if anyone else knew about it."

"Mum's the word, Cap," Starsky intoned.

"This case is officially closed." Dobey lumbered to his feet with a grunt of displeasure. "I promised Edith I'd get home early today. She's making pecan pie as a special treat."

"Thanks, Cap," Starsky waved him out the door.

"That's it?" Hutch asked rhetorically, feeling cheated. "Nothing to show for it except a picture of a guy who looks vaguely familiar. Like I should have known him from college or the academy--a deadly imposter."

"My ma used to say 'who told you life was fair, '" Starsky said, examining the sketch. "I never saw this guy. Not once, but he was the catalyst that changed just about everything I ever knew about myself."

Hutch kept going over those first few moments, when he'd hesitated, caught between an injured partner and dashing after the sniper. Until Starsky gave him the push and sent him on his quest. If he had been faster, could he have nabbed Terry in the stairwell, or behind the Webster? Had this all been preordained for failure on their part? "If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't even have run across to the other hotel at all. I keep thinking maybe I saw him, out of the corner of my eye or disappearing into a crowd of guests," he confessed. "You kept me sane, Starsk. I could hear your voice."

"I was under anesthesia, dummy," Starsky scoffed.

"I was glad to have you there, in whatever capacity," Hutch said honestly.

"Who'd a thought that Joey, ma and pa could be so Shakespearean? Stripped to the bone, this has all the classic elements of murder." Starsky let out a sigh. "Passion, greed and power. A mysterious killer and conspiracy. Kinda like life, it ain't fair and there's no--resolution." He frowned, glanced up at Hutch and seemed to make a decision.

"What?" Hutch asked, wanting more. Needing to arrest somebody for all this misery. He took the picture of Greggs/Gregory/Terry and folded it in fourths. He had to let it go or the questions would plague him for months.

"I didn't go to my dad's funeral because Joe was there," Starsky said, flipping the Newsworld magazine over to hide Durniak's face. "I need to go to Durniak's. It's the finale. I'll talk to Nicky, maybe shake Julian's hand. Make some kinda peace with it all. I want you to come, too."

"Be glad to," Hutch said, something more important pushing out the need for revenge.

Starsky grinned, one that went all the way to his bright eyes for the first time in days. "I'll show you the old neighborhood, our old building. 48th Street and the local deli which still has the best pastrami in the world. Just you and me, Hutch--putting in new memories."

"Me and thee, buddy." Hutch closed the deal with a squeeze of Starsky's hand.

FIN