She was beautiful. No doubt about it. Starsky had been watching her ever since he and Hutch had arrived and she didn't seem to be with anyone. Hutch was tired tonight; they'd had a rough week. He just wanted to relax, drink a few beers, and listen to the music.

But Starsky was in the mood to dance, and if a beautiful girl was in the mood to dance, too, that only made it better. He picked up his empty glass. "Ready for another one?"

Hutch shook his head. "Not yet."

Starsky headed for the bar. The girl had given her order and was waiting for the bartender to fix it for her. He stood behind her, trying to think of a good opening line, but when she turned to watch the dancing, their eyes met and he just smiled. "Hi."

She smiled back. "Hi."

"I'm Dave. You here with anyone?" Oh, for Pete's sake, he heard Hutch's voice inside his head. Is that the best you can do?"

"Stacy," she said in answer. "No, actually. I'm not with anyone." The bartender brought her drink -- something that looked like orange juice with red dye in it. She paid the man and stirred until the red and orange blended.

"What's that?" Starsky asked.

"A sloe screw," she said and laughed. "Sloe gin and orange juice."

Starsky grinned back. "I won't say it," he said.

"Good. Because I've already heard it."

He ordered a beer, and when it came, he gestured to the dance floor. "Care to dance?"

"Sure."
She was a good dancer, fluid and relaxed, and seemed to enjoy it. Starsky certainly did. And when the next song turned out to be a slow one -- the Bee Gees' "Too Much Heaven" -- he held his arms open invitingly, and she accepted the gesture. She tipped her head back a little to look up into his eyes and Starsky was definitely interested. Her eyes were a deep, dark brown and a little almond-shaped. American Indian, perhaps, or Hispanic. Lovely, he thought.

"I didn't ask you if you were with anyone," she said after several moments.

"My partner," he said.

"Your partner?"

Starsky gestured toward the table in the corner where Hutch was sitting. "We work together," he said.

She looked over toward him. "He's cute."

"Thanks a lot," Starsky said, pretending to be wounded.

She laughed, a musical sound. "Not as cute as you are," she said, snuggling a little closer.

The song ended, and they retrieved their drinks. Starsky invited her to sit with him and Hutch and she accepted.

"Hutch, this is Stacy."

Hutch nodded, smiled, but didn't turn on the Nordic charm and try to steal her, as Starsky expected him to do. *He really is tired*, Starsky thought, feeling a little bad that he'd almost coerced Hutch to come to the disco tonight. He was certain now that Hutch would have preferred to go home and relax.

They chatted for a while, though Hutch didn't join in much. His mind seemed to be far away. When Stacy excused herself to use the ladies' room, Starsky leaned over the table. "You okay, buddy?"

"Fine. Why?"

"You're awful quiet. You didn't really wanna come here, did ya?"

"No, it's okay," Hutch said. "Just not in the mood to party, that's all. I told you I just wanted to have a few beers. Don't worry about it."

"We don't have to stay."

Hutch grinned wickedly. "You're kidding, right? You've managed to latch on to the prettiest girl in the place, and now you're saying you don't want to stay? Right."

"Well...."
"Have fun, Starsk. Honest. I'm fine."

Stacy was on her way back and Starsky rose as she approached. Another slow song was playing, and if truth be told, he desperately wanted her back in his arms. He ignored Hutch's knowing grin as he took her hand and led her out to the dance floor.

"Your friend's not dancing," she said.

"He's tired," Starsky said. "We had a tough week."

"Why aren't you tired?" she asked, tipping her head a little to one side.

"I am," Starsky said. "But I forget about it when I'm dancing with you."

"I think you're flirting with me."

"I think you're right." Starsky grinned at her.

Suddenly, a gunshot took out the mirrored ball over the dance floor and several women screamed. The music came to an abrupt halt. Starsky reflexively pushed Stacy behind him and reached for his gun.

A man was standing in the doorway, holding a Magnum. In the sudden silence, he pointed it at Starsky. "You, pal. Hands where I can see 'em."

Starsky held up his hands.

"Okay," the guy said. "Everybody lay face down on the floor." When the people stayed where they were, he barked, "Now!"

All over the dance floor, people were lying down. Starsky looked around wildly for Hutch, but he couldn't see him in the dim light.

The gunman ordered the deejay to turn up the lights.

"I -- I can't," the deejay stammered, sweat pouring down his face. "We don't have any more lights."

"Figures," the gunman growled. "Okay, then, everybody in the place, on the dance floor, and I want your hands where I can see them."

It was a slow night and most of the patrons were already on the dance floor when the gunman entered. It was crowded with everyone there lying down -- everyone but Hutch, which terrified Starsky -- and the gunman, covering them with the Magnum. He made a quick circuit of the room to make sure no one had hidden in the booths or behind the bars. The disco was built in the round, with tables and booths surrounding the sunken dance floor. The bar was along one wall, the deejay booth along the opposite wall, with the door on the north. The gunman stood there looking them over thoughtfully for several minutes, while a couple of the women quietly sobbed
and Starsky's eyes searched desperately for Hutch. It was too dark to spot him if he'd been hurt by the intruder and if he hadn't, where the hell was he?

Finally, the gunman came forward and jerked Stacy up by one arm. "You. Come with me."

"Hey," Starsky protested. "No way, man, she didn't do nothin'."

The gunman studied him for a moment. "Open your jacket."

_Dammit_. Starsky had hoped to conceal his holster and maybe find a way to get his gun out and do something when the gunman's attention was elsewhere. But with that cannon pointing at him, he had little choice. He held his jacket open.

"Thought you was goin' for a gun earlier," the guy said, yanking it free and stuffing it into his own jacket pocket. "Anybody else feel like a hero?" He walked among the people lying down, not bothering much to avoid stepping on hands or kicking some of them and dragging Stacy by the arm as he went. He returned to his post in front of the door. "Now, I'm gonna take all your money," he said. To Stacy, he ordered, "You do it. You go through and you empty every wallet, or you're toast, got that?"

Stacy was trembling and too pale, and she met Starsky's eyes with a plea in her own. He tried to indicate to her that he was trying to think of something, but he wasn't sure she got the message.

"Before you do that," the gunman said, "go into the bathrooms and make sure nobody's hiding in 'em. If you ain't back in exactly one minute, one of these good people's gonna die. Maybe your curly-haired friend there. How would ya like that?"

Stacy's eyes widened even more and she shook her head. "I'll be right back." She poked her head into first one restroom, then the other, and came back. "No one in there."

"Okay, then, sweetheart, start collecting wallets. Jewelry, too, if they got any."

Stacy turned to go, but the gunman grabbed her arm and whispered something in her ear. She nodded.

_Hutch, where the hell ARE you?_ Starsky couldn't imagine, unless the gunman had somehow hurt him and that Magnum was Hutch's.

~*~*~*~

Hutch had recognized trouble when the gunman came in the door, but he hadn't been able to catch Starsky's eye and warn him with a look. He'd decided this was one time Starsky and Hutchinson weren't going to go it alone -- he'd never forgotten the shootout in the Italian restaurant when he'd damned near lost Starsky because he couldn't get backup. So, he'd quietly slid down under the booth, and while the gunman was visually casing the joint, Hutch had slithered out the exit unseen. He'd managed to get to the car and he placed a call that officers needed assistance but units needed to come Code 1: no lights, no sirens. He didn't want to spook
the crazy man inside who was wielding a gun bigger than his own and might kill an innocent patron if he panicked.

Hutch sneaked back up to the door and laid his ear against it, trying to hear what was happening. There was a foyer between the outside and the inside doors, and it buffered the sound. All he could hear was a muffled voice. He couldn't understand the words. While he waited, he tried to come up with some kind of a plan.

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Stacy moved around the dance floor, apologetically taking people's wallets and watches. She looked over her shoulder occasionally at the gunman, who impatiently motioned for her to hurry up. When she reached Starsky, he hissed, "Can you see Hutch?"

She shook her head. "I don't know where he went." She took his wallet, too, but left his police ID in his other hip pocket. When she returned to the gunman, she turned her back to the people on the dance floor and leaned forward as she dumped the loot into a pillowcase the man had produced from under his jacket. In a low voice, she said, "The curly-haired one's a cop. His partner was in here, too, but I don't know where he went. Tall, blond hair, wearing a tan leather jacket with a green T-shirt underneath."

"Shit," the gunman said. "How could he a' got out without me or you seein' him?"

"I don't know," she said. "But you can bet he went for help. We gotta get outta here fast."

"Okay," the gunman said, raising his voice and grabbing Stacy's arm again. "Everybody kiss the floor, 'cause we're leavin', and if anybody tries anything, they're gonna die. I'm takin' this chick with me for good luck."

Starsky involuntarily half-rose, and found himself staring down the barrel of the gun.

"I don't think so, pal," the gunman said. He drew the hammer back.

~*~*~*~

Outside, the first units were arriving just as Hutch heard the gunshot.

Inside the disco, Starsky had rushed the gunman when it became obvious he was going to shoot him anyway. As he ran toward the man, Stacy knocked his gun arm up into the air, causing the shot to fire harmlessly into the ceiling. Her movement momentarily broke Starsky's concentration and he lost his balance, allowing the gunman to easily sidestep his rush. Before he could recover from that, the gunman cracked him on the side of the head with his Magnum. Starsky crashed to the floor and lay unmoving, his head bleeding from the force of the blow. The patrons were screaming in fright as the gunman grabbed Stacy roughly by the arm, ordering her to carry the bag of loot. He hurried her to the back exit, his Magnum pointed at her head.

When he heard the shot, Hutch flinched. *God, please let him be okay.* He didn't dare just charge in there. If he startled the gunman, he might shoot someone else in fear. He thought for a few
seconds about how to approach the problem, knowing if he opened the back door, the light from the streetlight would frame him in silhouette, making him as vulnerable as a rookie in his first firefight. Starsky's life and the lives of the other people trapped inside might depend on his levelheadedness.

Just as he had a plan formulated, the back door crashed open and the gunman crossed into the alley, dragging Starsky's dance partner out with him as a hostage. They almost ran into the tightly strung blond who was about to open the door a crack and creep in low.

The gunman pulled up short and pushed the Magnum more forcefully against his victim's head. "Don't make a move, man, or I'll blow her head off!"

Hutch froze in his crouch.

"Put your gun on the ground and kick it away," the gunman ordered.

Hutch reluctantly obeyed, making sure to kick the gun in the opposite direction from the criminal looming over him. He could hear the sound of patrol cars coming up the alley from both sides.

The gunman tightened his grip on Stacy. Hutch could see, even in the artificial glow of the streetlight, that Stacy was turning red in the face. He assumed it was from fear.

"You back off and get them to back off, too. If you don't, I'll kill her. I'm gettin' out of this alley and she's comin' with me."

Hutch held his hands up in a conciliatory gesture. "Be cool, man. Everything's okay. Just let her go and we can talk about this."

"You cops are all the same. Anybody follows me and she's dead. You got that?" he snarled at Hutch.

"Yeah, okay, but don't hurt her. No reason anyone needs to get hurt. Is everyone all right inside?" Hutch's heart was pounding. He had to know if Starsky was hit. Memories and images of that nightmare in the Italian restaurant kept coming unbidden to his mind.

Hutch held a hand up to ward off the approach of two uniformed officers coming from one end of the alley.

"Your buddy in there ain't feelin' too good. You let me outta here now and you can go see to him." He could see by the look on Hutch's face that his words had the desired effect.

"Okay, okay. You got it. Just don't hurt her." Hutch's mind was screaming with the need to rush in and make sure his partner was alive. He knew he couldn't stop the gunman from taking Stacy with him so Hutch decided he'd better let him go and hope the uniforms could apprehend him outside the alley before he could really make a run for it.

The young man backed toward a black El Camino with darkened windows. Hutch yelled for the uniforms to stay back and let him out of the alley. The gunman pushed Stacy into the car on the
driver's side and climbed in after her. The engine roared to life and he peeled out of the alley, past the retreating patrol car and into the night. Hutch told the uniforms to keep back out of his sight, but to follow him. He grabbed his Magnum and rushed inside the building.

Hutch frantically looked around in the near darkness. He could make out a group of people standing around and looking at something on the floor and his heart nearly stopped. "Starsky!" he shouted. When the group collectively turned toward his shout and he heard no answer from his partner, Hutch knew where to find him.

Rushing through the group of people, he found Starsky lying unconscious on the floor. "Oh, my God!" he said as he knelt beside his friend and quickly assessed the situation.

"Starsky?" He shook the still form and got no response.

"Somebody turn on the lights!" he ordered. The deejay was standing next to him and he repeated that there were no lights. Hutch looked at him with determination and said, "I'm a cop and my partner here needs help. Get out the front door and let the other cops in. Tell them to call the paramedics." While he was talking, he felt Starsky's pulse and found it rapid but strong. He put his hand on Starsky's chest and detected quick breathing. When he reached to feel Starsky's head for injuries, he was sickened to run his fingers into the sticky wetness of blood in the curly hair and along the side of his face lying against the floor. He put his hand down on the floor into a small puddle. He shouted again, "Get some damn light in here!"

One of the patrons mercifully piped up and said, "He didn't get shot. The man hit him on the head with his gun. He was trying to help that poor girl."

Hutch was at least relieved to hear that his worst fear, that Starsky had been shot in the head with a Magnum, was unrealized. "Is anyone else hurt?" Hutch asked. Murmurs to the negative came from the onlookers.

Hutch holstered his gun and sat on the floor next to Starsky. He patted his friend on the cheek and tried to bring him around with no luck. The front doors flew open in a few moments and cops swarmed the place. Two uniforms rushed to Hutch's side with flashlights and he was finally able to get a visual on Starsky's condition.

Using one of the flashlights, he was checking Starsky's pupil reactions when the paramedics entered the disco and headed for their patient and his anxious partner. One of them put a hand on Hutch's shoulder.

"Let us check him out," he said.

Hutch nodded and said, "I think he's been out for about ten minutes. His pupils are equal and reactive and he hasn't had any trouble breathing. I couldn't bring him around."

The paramedic used his penlight to check Starsky's pupils himself. "Good job," he pronounced. "You a cop?"

"Yeah. Your patient's my partner. His name is Dave Starsky."
"Dave?" the paramedic called. "Dave, can you hear me? I want you to wake up now."

The other paramedic had checked Starsky's blood pressure and other vital signs, pronouncing them acceptable for transport. Starsky moaned quietly just as they were putting him on the stretcher. One of the paramedics produced some smelling salts, which he passed under Starsky's nose. That caused some sputtering and Starsky's eyes opened slowly. He realized he had been out and tried to sit up suddenly, having not been strapped onto the gurney yet. The paramedic pushed him down.

The darkened room was a swirling cloud of sound and shadowy color. Starsky mumbled, "Hutch?"

"I'm right here, buddy." The blond took one look at his friend and said, "Turn him on his side, he's gonna be sick."

Starsky didn't miss his cue. As they turned him on his side, he heaved. When he was finished, he collapsed onto his back, groaning and asking for his partner.

"I'm still here. They're gonna run you over to the hospital and have that hard head looked at, buddy."

Starsky closed his eyes and accepted his fate with a non-argumentative nod. He had no energy to fight a trip to the hospital. His head felt like a tiny army of miners was inside it, hard at work tunneling with dynamite.

~*~*~*~

As the El Camino streaked down the road, the fleeing robber ditched any signs of pursuit. He pulled the stolen car onto a predestined street and parked it behind a green station wagon, also stolen for this purpose. The young couple switched cars and took off down the street at a slower clip.

"You were great, baby!" Mark Katz declared.

Stacy returned the compliment by slugging him in the arm. "Are you out of your freakin' mind? You almost killed a cop, idiot!" She was shaking with rage. The redness in her face that Hutch had mistaken for fear was manifesting itself as anger.

"He was comin' after me, I had to do it."

"Bull! I'da never signed on for this little charade if you hadn't promised me no one would get hurt. Damn you!" She was furious. "Killing a cop is just about as stupid as it gets." Stacy shook her head and pulled her arm away from Mark when he reached for her in an attempt to soothe her feelings.

"Don't," she snapped.
They drove on in silence for ten minutes, when Stacy finally said, "Mark, you scared me witless in there. No more gunfire. I'm not gonna help you anymore unless you swear to me that no one else will be hurt."

"Don't be mad, huh? I didn't hurt him that bad. He's just gonna have a lump on his head," he pleaded with his girlfriend.

"You don't know that. He went down hard." Stacy had liked Dave and she was feeling terrible that he had been hurt.

Mark said, "Okay, baby. I promise."

Stacy and Mark had pulled this same stunt in several discos and nightclubs in Arizona before they took their act on the road to Bay City. They would hock the jewelry outside of the city, use the credit cards a few times each before they could be cancelled, and spend the cash on important items like cocaine and marijuana. Stacy knew that the big city cops in this town were going to work hard on the case with Dave being hurt. She was voted down when she suggested they keep driving, taking the act to Vegas. Mark said that in a couple of nights when the heat was off a bit, they'd pull another Bay City job. This had been the second one so far.

~*~*~*~*

Starsky slipped in and out of consciousness a few times on the way to the hospital. His eyes were open when they pulled him from the back of the ambulance and Hutch was right by his side. He had ridden in the front of the ambulance, a compromise with the paramedics.

"Hey," Starsky said tiredly.

"Hey, yourself. How you doing?" Hutch squeezed his shoulder as they walked in through the double doors.

Starsky quipped, "I'm fine, but you shoulda told me you had an identical twin."

Hutch laughed at him. "He's my evil twin. You don't want to mess with him."

"I thought you were the evil one." Starsky closed his eyes and pasted a small smile on his face. "I'm okay, buddy. No big deal."

"Yeah," Hutch replied.

"Where's Stacy? She okay?"

Hutch swallowed and answered, "Uh, the gunman got away and he took her hostage."

"What!" Starsky shouted, immediately flinching from the pain it caused in his head.

"Settle down, Stark." Hutch put a reassuring arm on his shoulder. "I think there's about fifty cops on it now. They'll take care of it. I had to make sure you were all right. I thought he shot you."
Starsky shook his head. "He tried, but Stacy stopped him. Then I saw stars and down I went."

Hutch squeezed Starsky's shoulder gently. "We'll find her, Gordo."

They sat in silence, waiting for the doctor to come and examine Starsky. A nurse had already been in to take his vitals and start a chart on him. After a few minutes, Starsky said, "Where were you? I thought that guy had gotten to you. He was carrying a Magnum."

"I saw him and his cannon so I got down on the floor before he saw me. Then I slunk out the back and called for backup. Sorry I had to leave you behind in there, buddy. After Giovanni's, I swore we were never gonna be in that position again. I almost lost you that night."

Starsky nodded. "Thanks. Good thinking, Blondie."

The doctor came in to do the exam and Hutch was ushered out to go answer the usual barrage of hospital questions about his partner. At least he felt sure Starsky was going to be all right. He was bound to have a wicked headache in the morning.

A few hours, four X-Rays, one prescription, and a promise from Hutch to keep his partner under observation for the next several hours later, the doctor agreed to release Starsky. His mild concussion should have kept him in the hospital overnight for observation, but the darker half of the dynamic duo was adamantly against it. He wanted to sleep in his own bed.

Hutch helped him up the stairs since the world was still spinning a little. They finally got him settled into bed at around three in the morning. Hutch was still exhausted and feeling the effects of too little sleep and too much stress. Still, he kept vigil over his strong-willed best friend as he had promised. By the time he was able to just let Starsky rest, he was nearly unconscious from fatigue. He called them in sick and crashed hard on Starsky's couch.

~*~*~*~

Other than a nasty headache and a rapidly blackening eye, Starsky was none the worse for wear when he woke up the next morning to the smell of sausage cooking. He staggered into the kitchen and found Hutch making omelettes.

"Mornin'," Starsky said, making Hutch jump and drop the spatula.

Hutch made a face at him and took the spatula over to the sink to wash it off. "You shouldn't be awake yet."

"Who could sleep with all this cookin' goin' on?" Starsky said, peering into the skillet. "Looks good. You feel all right?"

"Very funny." Hutch elbowed him out of the way and returned to his cooking. "How do you feel?"

"Like a truck hit me."
Hutch grinned over his shoulder. "You look like hell." He reached out and touched the bruise under Starsky's eye. "Nice shiner."

"Thanks." Starsky got himself a cup of coffee and plopped down at the table. He'd popped a couple of aspirin already.

"Good thing the guy clonked you on the head," Hutch went on with a wicked light in his eyes. "You might've gotten hurt otherwise."

"Ha, ha," Starsky said sourly. "Ain't we gonna be late, Galloping Gourmet? By my watch, we were supposed to be at work half an hour ago."

"We're sick," Hutch said.

"You are, anyway."

"I called us in," Hutch said, expertly sliding the omelettes onto two plates and placing one in front of Starsky. "You're sick and I'm taking care of you. Eat."

"Since when do you get a day off when I get bashed on the noggin?" Starsky inquired around a mouthful of omelette. "I mean, it ain't life-threatening."

"No, but Dobey knows what went down and he's okay with it."

"What about Stacy?" Starsky demanded. "We gonna leave her in the hands of that creep?"

"I told you, Starsk, half the force is on this thing. We've got a good description and a big double handful of witnesses who can ID the guy when we catch him."

~*~*~*~

Stacy checked her new look in the mirror of the motel bathroom. Mark had already finished his own makeup job. "What do you think?" she said, coming out and presenting herself to him.

"Good. You don't look a bit the same," he said.

Stacy had put her hair in a French braid and put on a pair of hippie-style tinted glasses. Her makeup, in contrast to the way she'd worn it a few nights ago at the last job, was almost garish. Her clothes -- low-slung hip-hugger jeans and a baggy Mexican shirt -- completed the transformation.

Mark had shaved off his mustache and sideburns and used an actor's makeup kit to add some width to his nose and a scar to his forehead. He'd been pulling jobs like this for a couple of years before meeting Stacy and coming up with the "hostage" routine, so he was practiced in the art of changing his looks. Stacy's long hair and innate acting ability made her a good partner for him.

"I think we're ready, babe," Mark said. "I'll drop you off a couple blocks away, and it'll go down around 10:30 this time. Okay?"
"Okay." Stacy was still unhappy about what had happened the last time, and she didn't make any attempt to hide that fact. But Mark had promised solemnly that last time had been a colossal screw-up, and it wouldn't happen again. She just wished she knew what had happened to Dave. He'd been bleeding pretty badly when she last saw him, and she'd worried ever since that he might have been seriously hurt.

This disco was bigger than the last one, and much more crowded. Stacy walked in and looked around worriedly. There were too many places to hide, too many people. She was afraid Mark wouldn't be able to keep control of the crowd here as he had at other places they'd hit. All the others had been smaller.

She made her way to the bar and ordered her usual drink. When it came, she sipped it slowly -- she didn't dare let herself get intoxicated, or she wouldn't be able to play her part -- and wandered around, swaying a little to the music, hanging around the dance floor, waiting for someone to ask her to dance. It was important that she blend in.

It didn't take long. A guy with a Mike Brady perm, a gold polyester shirt unbuttoned almost to the waist, and enough gold chains to add several pounds to his normal weight showed up less than five minutes after Stacy arrived. At least Dave's curls were real, she thought, repulsed.

"Hey, pretty lady. Here all alone?"

Stacy smiled brightly, though inside she was thinking, Is that the only line any guy can think of? "Yes, I am," she said. "I'm Stacy."

"Brad," he said. "Want to dance?"

"Love to."

At least he was a decent dancer and he didn't try to pull her too close too soon. Stacy flirted and danced and actually almost enjoyed herself until it began to get close to 10:30. Mark never showed up exactly on the dot of the time he gave her. The idea was to surprise her, just a little, so she'd have less trouble acting surprised. This time it was closer to eleven when Mark burst in and fired the warning shot that never failed to get the crowd's attention. Stacy's nerves were strung to such a high pitch by then, she really was surprised and frightened. Some of the fright was due to the last club and the way it had turned out.

"All right, everybody on the dance floor!" Mark ordered, brandishing the weapon. There were so many people in the bar that they wouldn't all fit, even standing up. There was no way they could all lie down, as Mark always insisted they do. Stacy stood there with Brad, trembling all over. She had a terrible feeling about this job.

Mark walked back and forth between the entrance and the dance floor, gazing over the crowd. Finally, he gestured to Stacy with his gun. "You. With the glasses. Come 'ere."

Stacy started forward, but in the crush of the crowd, it was difficult to get through. Everyone was half-frozen in shock and fright, and they weren't moving out of the way for her.
"Come on!" Mark said impatiently. "Hurry it up."

Stacy squeezed past a very overweight man and was almost there when a burly, muscular guy well over six feet tall grabbed her and shoved her behind him. "No way," he snarled at Mark. "Whatcha think you're gonna do with her?"

"None of your business, pal," Mark said, pointing the gun at him. "Now let her go."

"No."

Without so much as batting an eye, Mark pulled the trigger and the big man crashed to the ground, blood seeping out of a hole in the center of his chest. Stacy's heart seized up in her own chest and the room swayed before her eyes.

Mark strode forward and grabbed her arm, dragging her with him to the door. "Anyone else feel like bein' a hero?" he inquired into the absolute silence following the gasp that had greeted the shot.

No one spoke.

"I didn't think so. Now," he said to Stacy, who was staring at him as if he were a stranger, "you go clean out their wallets, sweetheart. Make it fast, too."

Stacy jerked her arm away. "No."

Mark stared at her. "I don't think you heard me, girl," he said after a moment. "I said, go clean out their wallets. Now."

"No."

His grip on her arm tightened painfully and he shoved the gun into her ribs so hard it hurt. "I don't know what you think you're pullin', but you better not push me," he hissed. "Now get your ass in gear and do as I say."

Stacy reluctantly moved away from him and started collecting the valuables and money. Her anger burned and she was also afraid. Mark had just shot a man down in cold blood. The level of his crimes had just escalated, and she was his accomplice. She desperately tried to think of a way to get out of this ugly situation.

As she passed through the crowd, Stacy repeatedly shot angry looks back in Mark's direction. He was growing impatient with her lack of speed. "Hurry up, man. We don't got all day!" Mark shouted at her.

"Keep your shirt on, there's a lot of people here," Stacy boldly snapped back at him.

The patrons shakily gave up their belongings to Stacy, hoping she would hurry and finish so the crazed man with the gun would leave them alone. Stacy realized she should hurry. If the cops came in response to a report of a gunshot, she stood a good chance of being discovered. Mark
might even point her out to them. She decided she'd better play along with this one and get out later.

When she finally returned to him, he grabbed her by the arm and led her away declaring, "I'm takin' her with me. Anybody moves for five minutes and I'm gonna blow her head off!" He dragged her from the building, struggling adequately to fool the frightened bar patrons.

Back in the green station wagon, Mark headed for the area across downtown where he had stashed the next stolen vehicle, a faded yellow Chevy Nova. In his opinion, so far, Bay City hadn't been much of a challenge.

~*~*~*~

At 11:45 pm, Starsky's phone rang. Hutch was still there and he grabbed it quickly. Starsky was already sleeping in his room.

"Hello?"

"Sergeant Starsky?" Hutch recognized the voice of one of the night shift dispatch operators.

"No, this is Hutch. That you, Nancy?"

She was flattered that the handsome blond detective recognized her. "Yes, it's Nancy."

"Starsky's still feeling a little under the weather. Can I help you?" Hutch didn't want to waken his partner if it wasn't necessary. Starsky's headache had grown progressively worse over the course of the day.

"I just dispatched all units in the vicinity to the Stayin' Alive disco at 218 8th Street. They had a robbery there a little while ago and a man was killed. The robbery sounds like the same M.O. as last night's."

"Thanks, Nancy. We'll go over there."

The dispatch staff had standing orders to call Starsky or Hutch anytime something broke or happened on one of their cases. They didn't care if they were on or off duty, or what time of day it was. They always wanted to know.

Hutch hung up the phone and quietly went into Starsky's bedroom.

"Hey," Starsky said softly.

"Hey. Phone wake you up?" Hutch asked as he sat on the edge of the bed next to Starsky. He reached a hand over and felt Starsky's forehead for fever. Hutch had detected his partner's rising temperature earlier in the evening.

"I'm fine, Blondie. Who was it?" Starsky did his best to deflect attention to the phone call.

"You feel a little warm still, Gordo," Hutch announced.
"Come on, Hutch. Was that about Stacy or the case?" Starsky was just as stubborn as his partner.

"Yeah. Another disco was hit. This time the guy killed a patron. I'm going, but I think you should stay here." Okay, Starsky, your move.

"I'm not stayin' here. So what if I have a little fever? I want to help Stacy. I promise you can be Nordic Nurse later." Starsky was already up and starting to shrug his way into some clothing. Hutch watched him move. Since he didn't seem to be too debilitated by either the headache or the fever, he nodded his agreement.

"Okay, but I'm driving."

~*~*~*~

In the yellow Nova, Stacy was still fuming. "You shot that man! How could you do that?" She smacked Mark on the forearm.

"Cool out, baby. He was gonna be a hero." Mark's attitude about murdering someone was cold.

"I want out, Mark," she stated coolly.

"You're too far in now, baby. Don't do the crime, if you can't do the time," Mark sarcastically singsonged the last part of his statement.

Stacy sat and stared at him, her mouth open in shock. What could she say? He had the gun. She suddenly realized she really didn't know him well. What seemed to her to be gradually escalating violence over the past two months might just as easily be his normal pattern. Stacy hadn't thought much about where Mark came from and what he was like before she knew him. As the car pulled up into the alley behind the sleazy motel where they were staying, Stacy was overcome by a desire to go home.

~*~*~*~

The coroner was wheeling out the body of the felled disco patron just as Starsky and Hutch walked into Stayin' Alive. Starsky thought it was an ironic name, given the evening's outcome. He saw a swarm of uniforms interviewing witnesses.

Starsky put a hand up to stop the gurney, and then lifted the sheet to take a look. "What a mess. Looks like a single large caliber gunshot wound. Like from a .357."

Hutch had called ahead to notify the senior officer on site that he and Starsky were coming to the scene. Several key witnesses had been asked to wait for the detectives and they were seated in a large booth near the bar. The senior officer on duty pointed them in the right direction. The detectives paused to look at the tape outline on the bloodstained dance floor on their way back to the booth.

Showing their badges and introducing themselves, they asked if someone would start and describe the action.
"I'll start," a young lady in a red disco dress offered. "Sharon Wazysky. I was pretty close when...." Her thin voice faded out and she shivered at the memory of the man being shot.

"Take your time," Hutch said.

She nodded and wiped her red nose. Her makeup was smudged from tears already shed. The man sitting next to her took off his coat and draped it over her shoulders. Then he gave her a reassuring one-armed hug. Starsky guessed the man might be her boyfriend.

"Thanks, Carl."

"He, he was trying to get this girl to come over to him. The big guy grabbed her by the wrist as she passed, and he pushed her behind him." Sharon stopped talking and looked at Carl.

"He challenged the guy. Poor bastard. He was just trying to do the guy thing, you know? Demanded to know what the gunman was gonna do with the girl."

Another man piped in at this point, "Yeah. That's right. When the gunman said to let her go, the big guy just said, ‘No' to him. The guy just shot him. Cold. Just like that."

Hutch was making notes in his notebook. Starsky was listening intently, though his head was pounding and he had broken out in a sweat from his fever. Sharon looked at him closely.

"You all right, Officer? You look kinda pale?"

Hutch looked up from his notebook and noticed Starsky's condition. He was right. Starsky should have stayed home. The one witness in the booth who had yet to say anything said, "I work here. Let me get you a soda or something. Maybe it'll help."

Starsky started to decline, but Hutch interjected. "Thanks. Not a cola though."

She slid out of the booth with a smile, touching the blond on the shoulder as she passed him. Hutch smiled almost imperceptibly at the irony of meeting attractive women while he was working and too busy to flirt.

After stealing another glance at his now scowling partner, Hutch asked, "What happened after that?"

Carl said, "He shoved her around a little. Said stuff like, ‘go clean out their wallets, now.' She refused a couple of times."

The other man said, "That seemed sorta funny. It almost seemed like he knew her, but she was in here for a long time before he came."

The waitress returned with a glass of lemon-lime soda for both Starsky and Hutch.

"Thanks," Starsky said for both of them. "You ever see her in here before tonight?"

She answered, "No. Never."
Hutch continued, "Can one of you describe her?"

Carl answered him. "She was young, maybe twenty-five. Five-five, I'd say. Pretty. Had on a lot of makeup though. She had her hair up in a kind of a bun."

Sharon glared at him. She was not thrilled that her boyfriend had been checking this other girl out that thoroughly. "It was a French Braid," she corrected. Carl shrunk a little under her disapproving gaze. "Her hair was dark and so were her eyes. Kind of hard to tell that because she was wearing rose colored glasses. Almost like a flower child look, you know? Baggy yellow shirt and hip-hugger jeans. I got a good look at her in the ladies room."

The other witnesses agreed with the description. "What happened? Did she do what she was told?" Hutch asked.

They all nodded the affirmative. "She went around to everyone and collected their money and valuables," the other man said.

"Your name?" Starsky asked.

"Oh, sorry. Brett Cey. That's c-e-y."

Hutch turned when he heard a sound behind them. Another man was being led over by one of the uniforms. This one had the look of a typical lounge lizard. He was heavyset, with a bad perm and he wore a tacky gold shirt unbuttoned enough to show the top of his less-than-trim midriff. He was wearing gold chains and a large gold zodiac symbol of Taurus the Bull. Hutch almost couldn't disguise his smile.

The uniform said, "This is Brad Avalon. He danced with the young lady who did the loot collecting."

Brad nodded that it was true. "Yeah, I danced with her. That creep took her out of here. You guys gonna go after him?"

Starsky sighed. His head hurt and he was really not in the mood to deal with any macho trips from the bar patrons.

"You catch her name?" he asked curtly.

"Yeah, I did. Her name was Stacy."

Starsky and Hutch looked at each other. "Did you say Stacy?" Starsky asked slowly.

Brad nodded. "Yeah. That's what she said."

Starsky glanced at his partner again. "You're sure of that?"

"I told you I was," Brad said, a little impatiently.
"What was she drinking?" Starsky asked. That earned him a strange look from both Hutch and Cey.

But Brad shrugged. "I dunno. It was orange juice mostly, with some kinda red stuff in it."

"Sloe screw," said the woman who'd gotten Starsky and Hutch the sodas. "I waited on her."

Starsky was too pale and the sweating was worse. Hutch hastily thanked everyone and told the uniformed officer to get names and phone numbers. He took Starsky by the arm and steered him to a chair a little away from everyone. "You look like hell," he said, his tone gentler than his words.

"What's the chances of the same M.O. and a girl with the same name who drinks the same drink?" Starsky asked, wiping his forehead on his sleeve.

"Not much," Hutch said honestly. "You think she's in on it."

Starsky nodded. "Don't you?"

Hutch wet his lips. "Yeah. Didn't want to say so, but yeah." He studied his hands for a moment, then added, "Something just occurred to me. Don't know why I didn't remember it before."

"What?"

"When the guy came out of the disco the other night with Stacy, I asked him if anyone inside was hurt," Hutch said, lifting his eyes to meet Starsky's. "He said, 'your buddy in there ain't feelin' too good.'" He paused to let that sink in. "How'd he know you and I were together, unless Stacy told him? You were dancing with her when he arrived."

Starsky stared at him in dismay. "Oh, brother," he said with a groan, dropping his head into his hands. "She is in on it."

~*~*~*~

The morning sun was peeking through the ragged blind on the window of the latest sleazy motel, and still Stacy hadn't closed her eyes. Every time she did, she saw that big man lying there on the dance floor, his eyes open with a look of pained surprise in them, and that awful, spreading bloodstain on the front of his shirt. A complete stranger who had innocently tried to help her, and he'd died. Because of her. Because of Mark. Because of this whole sorry, sordid mess she'd gotten herself into.

The mess she didn't know how to get out of.

Mark slept beside her, heavily, replete with the beer and the bag of dope they'd bought with the loot last night. She'd hardly touched it, and Mark had been angry at first, then he'd tried to make up, apologizing for having "hurt" the big man and swearing it was just nerves that made him pull the trigger. The place was too big, he'd said. There were too many people. He just "freaked out."
Nerves. Sure. Just like the other disco, the one where Dave had gotten hurt, had been a "colossal screw up" that would never happen again.

If this was life in the Golden State, Stacy wanted no more of it. She wanted nothing more than to go home, try to make up with her parents, try to start over and do it right this time. She should never have run away, never have taken her sister's ID, never....

Mark stirred and rolled over, reaching for her. His touch repulsed her now, when only a couple of months ago it had excited her. He was good-looking in a dangerous sort of way. He'd promised her they'd only pull enough of these jobs to get themselves "a grub stake" and then they'd find somewhere sunny and warm to stay.

No one was supposed to get hurt.

Stacy slid out of bed and went in to take a shower. She dressed quietly, brushed her hair and put it up in a ponytail. She stared at herself in the mirror. She was only 18 and already she'd probably ruined her life. She was an accessory to murder.

~*~*~*~

"I can't believe we got no leads!" Starsky spluttered, slapping a file down on the desk and barely missing Hutch's half-full Styrofoam cup of coffee.

Hutch rescued his coffee, took a sip and made a face before answering. "We've got a couple of descriptions," he said. "We've got the police artist sketches of Stacy and the guy. We've got her fingerprints from the glass she was using at that last club."

"And she's got no record, so the fingerprints don't mean squat."

"No, but if there's a next time, we'll have them to show a pattern."

"Terrific," Starsky grumbled. "That's just terrific. So what do we do? Sit around and wait for 'em to pull another job?"

"No," Hutch said. "We hit the streets and we work the case and maybe we break it before they have time to pull another job."

Starsky picked up the police artist sketch of Stacy and stared at it glumly. He had been the witness who guided the artist in making this sketch. There was a second one, of Stacy in her "flower child" look. And although the two sketches had superficial differences, anyone could see it was the same girl. At least, Starsky could see that. He hoped a jury could, too. "She seemed so nice," he muttered.

But Hutch had heard him. "I know, buddy," he said, understanding. "It's a shame. But you gotta - -"

"Don't tell me what I 'gotta,'" Starsky snapped. "I'm a cop. I know my duty."
Hutch lifted his hands in surrender. *Okay, he's having one of 'those' days. Funny, I thought cynicism and bad temper was my job.*

The scanner behind them crackled. Most of the time, cops in the squad room ignored it. Unless they were cruising the streets -- or they heard one of the dreaded calls like "shots fired" or "officer down" -- the calls didn't concern them.

"PD, EMS, three-car accident, Wallis and 18th. Injuries sustained. Hit and run. One of the victims matches the description of suspect 'Stacy' from the 2-11 at Stayin' Alive. Zebra Ten, Baker Six and Baker Eight, please respond."

Starsky lifted his head and stared at Hutch. Without a word exchanged, both grabbed their jackets and ran.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

None of the injuries were serious at the scene. Abrasions, bumped heads and a broken arm. The ambulance attendants were loading up the last of the four injured victims when Starsky and Hutch squealed to a stop. A couple of tow trucks were hooking up to the two cars that had not fled the scene, and uniformed officers were taking statements from the drivers. Starsky flashed his badge at the nearest one. "Where's Stacy? The suspect we have the APB out on."

"Already left in the ambulance," the officer said without looking up. "She was hurt pretty bad. Jumped outta the car when the guy she was with drove off after the wreck, according to one of the other drivers."

"Where'd they take her?"

"Memorial."

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

Starsky and Hutch had to wait while the emergency room personnel finished working on Stacy before they could talk to her. Finally, the doctor gave them a room number and they took the elevator up to see her. A uniformed officer was on the way to guard her if the two detectives decided to place her under arrest.

Stacy was lying on her back, wide-awake, staring longingly toward the window and crying quietly when they walked in. She turned her head and her eyes fastened on Starsky.

"Dave! You're okay! Wow, that's some bruise."

Starsky flushed uncomfortably. "Yeah."

"How'd you know I was here?"

Starsky pulled his badge out of his pocket and her face went a shade whiter. "We gotta ask you some questions."
"Oh yeah, you're cops." She wiped a tear from her cheek and nodded. "I'm ready."

"We have a description of you from some of the folks who were in Stayin' Alive a coupla nights ago," Starsky said, watching for her reaction. "Were you there?"

She nodded again. "Yeah."

Starsky produced the sketch of the armed robber. "Do you know this guy?"

She barely glanced at it and by now the tears were flowing so hard she had trouble answering. "Y-yeah."

Hutch touched Starsky on the arm and they glanced at each other. "Stacy, we have to place you under arrest," he said. "You have the right to remain silent --"

"I know all that," she interrupted.

But Hutch finished reciting the warning anyway. They didn't want any screw-ups on this one. When he finished, he said, "Do you want to talk to us, or do you want a lawyer?"

She opened her mouth, but just then the uniformed officer knocked and poked his head in. "Hutch? Where do you want me?"

"Just hang out in the hall for now, Rob," Hutch said.

Rob nodded and shut the door.

Stacy closed her eyes as if in pain and asked, "He's here to guard me, isn't he?"

"Yes," Hutch said.

She wet her lips, opened her eyes and took a deep breath. "I want to talk to you. I want out. I want to get away from Mark."

Starsky glanced at Hutch. "Okay." He got out his notebook. "So, talk."

"My name is Stacy Cunningham. I'm from Albuquerque," she said. "I ran away from home --"

Starsky's eyebrows climbed. "How old are you?"

"I just turned 18," she said.

Starsky gulped and Hutch hid his smile. "Go on, Stacy," Hutch said.

"I ran away from home," Stacy continued, "because I wanted to be an actress and my folks wanted me to go to college. That was so stupid," she added, as if to herself. Taking another deep breath, she said, "I stole my sister's ID--she's a senior at Texas A&M--and I hitched rides as far as Tucson. That's where I met Mark. He was so sweet and exciting at first, and--" She had to pause to regain her composure.
"Take your time," Hutch said. Starsky seemed to have been struck dumb.

She nodded. "He talked me into doing these jobs. We did a couple in Phoenix and Tucson, and then we came here. He promised me no one would get hurt. And he said we'd only have to do it a few times, till we had some money to hold us over until we could find a place to live and jobs. I don't know what I was thinking!" she added violently. "School will be starting in a couple of weeks and I won't even be there, and I was going to be head cheerleader this year and -- "

"You're still in high school?" Starsky demanded. This time Hutch couldn't hide the smile, but he wiped it off as quickly as he could. Starsky wasn't looking at him anyway; he was looking at the girl.

"Yeah. I'm a -- I mean, I was going to be a senior."

"Wanna sit down, buddy?" Hutch asked solicitously.

Starsky shot him an ugly look. "No, I do not."

Stacy seemed not to have heard them. "Then when Mark hurt you," she said to Starsky, "I realized I didn't want to be here. I tried to get out of doing the job at that last place, but Mark...scares me. Then he -- he k-killed that poor man and -- " She broke down and Hutch patted her hand.

"Take it easy," he said gently. "What can you tell us about Mark? Do you know his last name?"

"Katz," she said. "He's 22 and he's from Phoenix. Or at least, that's where he was living last. We were staying in a motel called Shady Nook on Marshall."

Hutch nodded. "I know where that is."

"Room 19," she said. "He's probably not still there. We've been moving to a different place every day. But he was planning to hit a place called -- " She stopped and frowned. "It was a strange name for a bar. Named after a song. I can't remember...."

Starsky and Hutch waited.

"Fever," she said at last. "That was it. I knew it was something that made me think of the Bee Gees."

"When?" Hutch asked.

"Tomorrow night," she said. "I don't know if he'll go ahead without me or not. But when we got in that wreck and he was going to drive away, I just jumped out of the car. I want to go home so bad," she finished, tears coursing down her cheeks again.

~*~*~*~
Though the Bay City Police Department rallied throughout the next day trying to find Katz, they were also prepared for the possibility they might find him that evening raiding Fever. Stacy was correct; Katz had abandoned their hotel room. He had also switched to yet another stolen vehicle since he had crashed the other one, or he was not driving. None of their leads turned anything during that long day as it spun toward the inevitable confrontation. Stacy's information clearly pointed to a violent, sketchy man with an ego large enough to assume he could do that job on his own.

Dobey wanted the club to be closed to patrons for the night, but was quickly convinced of the impossibility of that plan. If they hoped to catch Katz before he left town, they had to do it tonight. A public closing of the club, or even any attempt to keep it open, peopled only with cops from the BCPD, would undoubtedly cause Katz to panic and run.

During the late afternoon, a fleet of unmarked police vehicles was placed into position around the club. Plain-clothes officers slowly trickled into the dance club, hoping to avoid detection in case Katz was watching from somewhere.

Starsky was amused by the name of the club. Somehow, he thought it seemed appropriate. Not only was he still recovering from the concussion he sustained at the beginning of this case, the mysterious fever he had developed was much worse and he was sure he had the flu. In addition to his pounding head and fever, he felt like he'd been run over by a truck that then backed over him for good measure.

While under other circumstances Starsky might have slunk home to bed; content to moan about how bad he felt, he wanted to resolve this case. Pulling together his reserves, he did his best to get through the day so he could be part of the bust that night. The thing most constant in his mind was how to keep his worsening condition a secret from Hutch. During any day, Starsky never realized how often his partner touched him, or he touched his partner. Dozens of times a day, one of them reached out to pat the other on an arm or shoulder. Their hands or fingertips brushed as they exchanged file folders, paperwork, pencils, and coffee cups. They frequently held doors open for each other, the one holding the door briefly touching the other on the back as he passed. Struggling to stay just out of Hutch's reach all day was a challenge, but he knew if Hutch got close enough, he'd feel the heat radiating from him. Although he believed he'd given an Oscar winning performance so far, his partner knew exactly what he was doing.

About seven that evening, Hutch announced it was time to go home. "Come on, buddy. Time to call it a day."

Starsky was incredulous. "Call it a day? You've gotta be kidding. We need to head down to that club."Hutch stood up from his chair, slinging his jacket over his shoulder. "Nope. The only place you're headed is bed."

"Ha, ha, Blondie," Starsky stood up and headed for the door. He wanted to get to it first so he could hold it open, but Hutch was faster. When he reached the door, Starsky took a small step back as Hutch opened it.

Hutch stared at Starsky's face. He was pale, but his cheeks were flushed. He had known how sick the man was for hours now.
Starsky took a breath and rushed past his partner to the hallway.

"You know you're not fooling me, don't you?" Hutch asked him with a sly smile.

"Don't know what you're talkin' about, Blondie. Let's just hit it, huh?"

Starsky was just past Hutch's arm's length, but the taller detective's longer stride allowed him to close the gap without Starsky noticing. He reached out with one hand, stopping Starsky's progress by taking hold of his arm. In one smooth move, he turned Starsky toward him, the shock of discovery registering in Starsky's eyes.

"Buddy, your head is still killing you and that little fever you had yesterday is not so little anymore. Quit trying to pull one over on me." The concern in Hutch's eyes was clear.

Starsky sighed and his shoulders slumped. "Okay, busted. Please, Hutch. This case is important to me. I want in on the action tonight." He knew Hutch's job was to protect him, even from his own stubbornness. "Come on, huh? We can't even be on the inside. Katz might recognize one of us. He would me for sure."

"You need to be in bed, and if you're not better tomorrow, you need to go back to the doctor."

Starsky thought he saw something in Hutch's expression that meant he was softening. He pushed. "Tomorrow, okay? I don't feel that bad."

Hutch shook his head. He put his index finger up, a sure indication Starsky was about to receive a lecture or orders from the blond. "All right. But you stay back where I can keep an eye on you, and you promise me you'll tell me if you need to call it a night."

"Hutch...."

"Oh, no. Promise, or you're not going."

"Who the hell are you to tell me I can't?" Starsky was getting angry. Maybe being angry would help.

"I'm your partner and I'm not about to let you go out there tonight and get your head blown off because you're sick. That's who."

Starsky could see he had lost -- better to capitulate. "I promise."

Hutch nodded, satisfied that he had won. Secretly, he doubted anything would have kept Starsky away from that club short of handcuffing him inside the Torino. "All right then. Let's go."

When they got into the car, Hutch insisted on driving. He also laid down the rules that they were going to be staked out around the building at the rear and side entrances. Part of their work that day had involved following up on similar crimes with police departments from the other cities where Stacy said they had pulled their robbery-with-hostage scenario. Hutch knew that Katz always entered through the front door like any other patron. He was counting on their position
away from the front to keep them safely out of any heavy action. That should let Starsky be part of the bust but keep him out of harm's way. The one thing Hutch hadn't counted on was that Katz might change his MO. Especially now that he was operating without Stacy.

~*~*~*~*

While he usually hit the clubs after ten, this time he decided to go in a little earlier. The club was full, with a line of people waiting outside the front entrance behind a velvet rope. Fever was another large club and it had a bouncer who stood ominously in the entrance alcove. He was the arbiter of who went in and who languished on the sidewalk in the rope line.

When Katz approached the club and saw the bouncer, he decided he'd better find a way around him through another entrance. He never gave a thought to the futility of trying his scheme in a place with a bouncer in front. Katz had decided that this time he was going to use a real patron and take her with him. What he did with her later was up in the air.

The front door bouncer was effective, but he couldn't be everywhere. The club got hot and stuffy with so many people dancing. People often propped the side and back doors open. They would mill in and out to get fresh air or to smoke cigarettes or marijuana.

Katz slunk down the side alley where he could hear music drifting through the partially open door. Starsky was alerted to his presence by the soft sound of his approaching footsteps. He was staked out behind a dumpster on the other side of the alley. Hutch was waiting by the back entrance. He had taken a position behind some barrels at the corner of the building. That gave him a secluded spot from which he could see the back door. He didn't like being so far from Starsky and he didn't like it that he couldn't see his partner. Hutch did take some comfort in the fact that he could hear what was happening in the alley.

Katz had changed his appearance again, using his makeup kit to apply a dark goatee and he was wearing a longhaired wig. The dark hair was gathered in the back in a ponytail. He didn't look much like his description and the two cops in line in the front of the building hadn't noticed him. Starsky thought he recognized him as he approached the door, though. He and Hutch were the only two Bay City cops who had gotten a good look at him. His disguise was enough to fool most people, but Starsky knew he was right when he saw Katz reach behind his back and under his shirt to pull out the Magnum.

Starsky drew his weapon and said, "Police, freeze!"

Katz froze in his tracks.

"Drop the gun and put your hands up, Katz," Starsky said in a low, commanding tone.

Katz did as he was told. He stared at Starsky as he approached, thinking the man looked a little unsteady on his feet. Maybe he could take advantage of the situation. Then, he realized that Starsky was the man he had knocked out at the club the other night. He could see the shadow of the shiner his handiwork had left on the detective's face. That gave him a glimmer of satisfaction.
Starsky wavered a little as he approached Katz. He was feeling terrible and the alley was starting to spin a little. He knew he should call for Hutch, but he was not thinking clearly. "Turn around and put your hands on the wall." He kicked the suspect's gun away as he approached, reaching behind him for his handcuffs.

Katz had his head turned to the side, watching Starsky. When the detective hesitated a step, shaking his head in what looked like an effort to clear it, he took advantage of the lapse in concentration.

Bringing his elbow back to connect with Starsky's gun arm, Katz caused him to drop his weapon and he heard the sound of it skittering along the alley pavement. The sudden movement caught the already dizzy detective off guard. Katz spun around and attacked. Starsky was losing the fight. A strong punch drove Starsky to the ground, where Katz continued to kick and punch him. Already close to passing out, Starsky was no match for him. Katz was so intent on hurting Starsky, he never heard the sound of the approaching blond tornado.

The sounds of their struggle had carried back to Hutch's position. When he cautiously peered around the corner of the building, he saw the fight. Even in the dark shadows of the alley, he could see that Starsky was in trouble.

Hutch tore down the alley and caught Katz in a flying tackle. He scuffled with him a minute, then got the upper hand. Pinning him to the ground, Hutch twisted his arms behind his back and cuffed him. While he was busy cuffing Katz, Hutch was also trying to coax a response from his partner who hadn't moved from his position on the ground. The commotion had finally drawn the attention of some of the other cops, so Hutch turned over their prisoner and went to Starsky's side.

"Starsk? Wake up, buddy," he said to his friend while he tried to waken him by gently shaking his shoulder. Starsky moaned a little and then sat up suddenly. He put his hand up to his forehead as he leaned harder on Hutch.

"Need an ambulance, Hutch?" one of the uniforms called down the alley.

The blond answered, "Yes."

Starsky answered, "No."

Hutch started to protest, but Starsky said, "I'm not hurt bad. Just my pride. Get me home, will ya?"

Considering the request, Hutch looked Starsky closely in the eyes. They looked clear, but feverish. He held up one finger and said, "How many fingers do I have up?"

Starsky quipped, "One, Mom. Now can we get out of here?"

He called back to the uniform, "No thanks. We've got it."
"All right, Starsk. I'll take you home, but the first sign of distress and your butt's gonna be at Memorial so fast you won't be able to say 'but, Hutch.' You got that?"

"Yeah, okay."

Hutch helped his partner up to his unsteady feet and down the block to where they left the Torino. As they walked along, Starsky leaned on him more heavily than Hutch would have liked. He had promised Starsky a trip home, not to the hospital, though, and he was going to try to stick with that promise.

Starsky was fading fast by the time they got back to his place. Hutch held onto his arm as they went up the stairs, and when Starsky would have detoured to the kitchen, he firmly steered him to bed.

"You're going to bed, Superman," he said firmly. "No arguments."

Starsky didn't put up a fight. In fact, when Hutch had him lying down, he gave a long sigh and said, "That feels good, Blintz."

"I'm going down to the 7-11 to get you some orange juice," Hutch said. "I'd better not find you out of bed when I get back."

"You won't," Starsky said. His eyes were already so heavy he was having a hard time keeping them open.

Hutch was back in 10 minutes and Starsky was sound asleep. Hutch decided to leave him alone instead of waking him up and making him drink the juice. Sleep was probably the best thing for him right now. He laid his hand against Starsky's forehead and it wasn't quite as warm as it had been before. So he covered him up and tiptoed away.

Starsky woke up once in the night, so thirsty he could barely swallow. He kicked the covers off and got out of bed, but before he'd made it all the way to the kitchen, Hutch was awake, too.

"Get your butt back in bed," Hutch ordered from behind him, badly startling him.

"Geez, Hutch," Starsky complained, one hand on his chest. "Give a guy a heart attack, will ya?"

"What do you want? I'll get it for you."

"A drink."

"Fine. Go to bed. I'll bring it to you."

"I'm not that sick -

"I'm in charge around here," Hutch said, softening the words with a smile. "I'll decide how sick you are. Now scat!"
Starsky shrugged and went back to bed. Hutch brought him a large glass of orange juice and stood over him until he'd drunk it all.

"You're gonna make a terrific mommy someday, partner," Starsky mumbled sleepily as he scooted down and closed his eyes.

Hutch snorted. "Stuff it. See you in the morning." He stalked out of the room, pretending to be very annoyed, but Starsky knew better and grinned to himself as he drifted off.

He was feeling much better in the morning, and with some fast-talking, convinced Hutch to let him go down to the station to question Katz.

"All right," Hutch said at last, wagging his finger at him, "but as soon as we're done, you're going home. Understand?"

"Okay, okay," Starsky said impatiently. "Can I dress myself, or am I too sick?"

Hutch threw his hands into the air and stalked away again.

~*~*~*~*

Katz was sullen and refused to answer any questions. Starsky was playing good cop, mostly because he wasn't quite up to his usual rabid bad-cop self, but it was also partly because Hutch was so truly angry at Katz for having hurt Starsky twice that he didn't have to do much acting to be "bad cop."

"Look, you scum," Hutch snarled, his face only inches from Katz's, "we have witnesses who can finger you at both discos. We have Stacy's testimony. And then there's the both of us, who can ID you, even if all the other witnesses flake out. You ain't got a prayer, pretty boy, so you might as well face it!"

"I want my lawyer," Katz said. It was the only thing he would say during the entire hour they'd been in the interrogation room.

"Mark," Starsky said placatingly, "we've got your rap sheet. It's as long as my arm. You're gonna take a hard fall, any way you look at it. But it could be a little less bruising if you-

"I want my lawyer."

Starsky sighed and glanced at Hutch. "He wants his lawyer."

"I heard."

~*~*~*~*

Katz was assigned to an overworked, underpaid public defender who tried to talk him into accepting a deal in exchange for exonerating Stacy, but Katz wouldn't go for it. Stacy's public defender was unceremoniously dismissed by her parents, who came to Bay City as soon as they could get a flight. They hired a good lawyer, who worked out a deal for her with the D.A. that
got her a sentence of probation in exchange for her testimony. Her clean record up until then helped, and both Starsky and Hutch told the judge how helpful and cooperative she'd been.

As they left the courtroom after Stacy's sentencing hearing, she reached out and touched Starsky's arm. "Dave?"

He stopped and turned toward her.

She flushed. "I'm sorry. And I don't know how to thank you -- both," she added, glancing at Hutch, "for what you did for me in there."

"I'll tell ya how you can thank us," Starsky said, smiling down at her. "Go back to school and break all the boys' hearts and get good grades. And write to us from COLLEGE."

She smiled. Without the makeup and the outrageous outfits, she looked like a high school girl, and Starsky had asked himself a dozen times how he'd missed noticing how young he really was. "I'll do that," she said. "I promise. My folks have said they'll let me minor in drama as long as I major in something 'to fall back on.'"

"That's a good plan. Have you thought about what that'll be?" Hutch asked.

She shook her head. "Not yet. But I've got a whole year to think about it." She gazed up at Starsky for a moment thoughtfully. "I kinda wish I really was older," she said softly.

"Me, too," he answered, and meant it. He gave her a very chaste and big-brotherly kiss on the cheek. "Now, scat," he said with a grin. "When we see you again, it better be on the silver screen."

She giggled, waved, and went back to her parents.

"That was a close call," Starsky said in a low voice as they walked away.

"You mean Stacy getting off so lightly?" Hutch asked, too innocently.

"No, I do not," Starsky growled. "I mean, me thinking she was -- you know. Older."

"She's 18," Hutch said, still innocently. "That's legal."

"Barely!"

"Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades," Hutch said, dodging just in time to avoid the playful blow Starsky aimed at him. "Besides," he went on, "I was there. You'd have had to get rid of me before you could've compromised her virtue. Or yours. If you have any."

"I've done that before."

"What? Compromised your virtue?"
This time, Starsky was too quick for him and managed to get in a solid whack on the rump before Hutch could get out of reach. Laughing, they headed for the car.