Summary: An old acquaintance bearing a grudge against Hutch escapes from a mental institution. Before killing Hutch, he plans to torment his imagined nemesis by killing two cops -- and the third victim he has in mind is Starsky.

Story Notes: Copkiller is the first story in the Copkiller Trilogy.

Teri White published her first Starsky & Hutch novel, Promises to Keep, in 1979. Teri, a well-known Star Trek (TOS) author, was the first fan writer to break away from Trek and write a story in a different fandom. Teri went on to write a number of highly respected novels and short stories in Starsky & Hutch.

Categories: Gen

Genre: Action/Adventure, Series, Zinefic

Warnings: No Warnings Needed

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Intro

Archivist's Note from Copkiller's First Archive Posting in 1995:

Teri White was one of the first of S&H's fandom's classic zine writers to give us permission to post all her fanfiction to the Archive. Her only caveat was that we include the art as well. With permission of those artists, that has been done. I never anticipated how much time it would take to bring Teri's stories to the Net, but finally, Teri's work will be seen by fans of Starsky & Hutch all over the world. And what a treasure trove it is. It is with great respect and appreciation that we present the zine, Copkiller.

As usual, there are many people to thank when a zine has been translated for the net. Classic Starsky & Hutch fiction, in particular, starts on paper, has to be scanned or typed, proof-read and corrected, turned into html, proof-read again, then set up on the Archive. Many people are involved in this labor of love. I want to thank, in particular, Cindy L. who did the scanning, Anne, for providing unlimited technical expertise and for having to live with the havoc Starsky & Hutch has caused in our lives. I especially want to thank Ruth Kurz for granting us approval to post her art. And of course, many thanks to Teri for graciously allowing us to bring her work to a whole new audience.

Enjoy.

Flamingo
COPKILLER

by

Teri White

Artwork by Ruth Kurz

Editing & Proofing: Ellen K.

Published as a zine in 1979 By Teri White
Dedicated, with love,  
to Kenneth Hutchinson  
and David Starsky

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination--what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth--whether it existed before or not.  

JOHN KEATS
For technical help given unstintingly, I thank:

Lt. Thomas D.--Cleveland Police Dept.

Denise J.--Psychologist

Karl K.--Former Firefighter

Robert L.--Registered Pharmacist

Cover and all art by Ruth Kurz; special help by Fritz K

Editing and proofing by Ellen L. K.

Inspiration by Paul Michael and David, as always

********************************************************************

When constabulary duty's to be done,
The policeman's lot is not a happy one.

W.S. Gilbert
CHAPTER ONE

The bus from Minnesota arrived at six a.m.

Louis, carrying everything he owned in a brown shopping bag, was the first one down the steps. He walked into the depot and stood still for a moment, giving his cramped muscles a chance to loosen. Hunger and curiosity vied with one another for his attention. Attempting to satisfy both urges, he stopped at the newsstand long enough to buy a morning paper and then headed into the coffee shop for breakfast.

The only other customers at the moment were two drunks waiting for their favorite watering hole to open for the day, and a red-eyed patrolman ordering two coffees to go and wishing it were eight o'clock so that he could go home.

Louis sat down at the far end of the counter, away from the drunks; he found such people distasteful and had an almost morbid fear that they would speak to him. But the two men only glanced at him without interest and returned to their conversation.

The waitress strolled over to take his order before he was ready and she stood there tapping the counter with her fingers. Louis did not allow her displeasure to force him into a hurried decision. He studied each item listed on the grease-spotted menu and considered the many choices carefully. Finally he ordered scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee. It was the same breakfast he'd had every morning for the past five years.

The waitress, now intent upon pulling off an irritating hangnail, delivered his order in a bored voice to the short-order cook. Louis watched the huge black man crack a couple of eggs onto the grill. Then, afraid that his staring might anger the cook, Louis opened the newspaper.

The headlines were all about people and places and things that meant nothing to him, and by the time he'd reached page three, Louis was bored. He was also a little disappointed. Somehow, he'd thought that the newspapers in Los Angeles would be more exciting than those in Minnesota. He had been expecting stories about movie stars and the beautiful people who were supposed to live in California. Instead, it was the same old stuff about the government and crime and all those other things that he didn't care about at all.

But when he reached page four, he forgot his boredom. The picture was right in the middle of the page, as if to be sure he wouldn't miss it. In fact, the black-and-white photo seemed to leap from the paper at him and the effect upon Louis was the same as it would have been if a savage blow had been delivered to his solar plexus. His stomach muscles tightened in reaction and a cold, sick feeling overwhelmed him.

A cup of coffee appeared on the counter in front of him. His hand trembled as he lifted the mug and gulped the hot liquid desperately. It burned his mouth, but he was hardly aware of the pain.

As the warmth of the coffee spread through him, the cold nausea was slowly dispelled. At the same time, Louis was imbued with a sense of quiet understanding. This, then, was why he'd felt
himself being drawn to Los Angeles. This explained the strange aura of missionary zeal that had motivated his journey westward. The knowledge calmed him almost immediately; even the headache that had plagued him for weeks and weeks seemed to ease.

The waitress slammed a plate down on the counter. Louis wanted some ketchup to put on his scrambled eggs, but before he could ask her for it, she was gone again. The only bottle he could see was way down the counter where the drunks were sitting. He decided to skip the ketchup. It didn't matter anyway. Nothing mattered now but the picture in the newspaper.

Not lifting his eyes from the page, Louis began to eat, taking forkfuls of egg into his mouth, chewing, swallowing, moving like an automaton, completely oblivious to what he was eating. In the hospital, meals had been an important part of the daily ritual. The dining room, not the treatment complex, was the center of life. Even those persons who could not or would not feed themselves came into the dining room three times a day. Each item on one's plate was significant and subject to much comment.

Already it was different for Louis. Now, having seen that picture, eating had become a mere biological necessity. Stoking the furnace, as his mother used to say. Something done only in order that he might have the required strength to complete his mission.

His mission.

Louis liked the sound of that word. A mission. It was an important word. It made him feel important.

When the waitress, acting out of some heretofore-undisplayed sense of duty, poured him more coffee, Louis roused himself enough to thank her. Sipping carefully, he read the caption beneath the photo:

**L.A. COPS NAB SUSPECTED DRUG DON**

Louis read slowly, one finger moving beneath the words. Although he wasn't stupid, reading was hard for him and always had been. Not like for Marcie. Everything had come easily to Marcie. She had been the smart one in the family. The blessed one.

He pushed the thought of Marcie away quickly.

After a moment, he returned his attention to the paper. Making an effort, he worked over each word carefully, his lips moving silently.

Local detectives David Starsky and Kenneth Hutchinson are shown here leaving the Federal courthouse after attending a preliminary hearing for accused drug dealer Barney Fields. Fields, thought to be the power behind drug operations in four western states, was arrested by the two officers three days ago, culminating an undercover operation of nearly three months.

Louis took a break from the effort, sipping more coffee before going on.
Charges against Fields include drug trafficking, attempted bribery of public officials, and attempted murder. The last-named charge is a result of the shooting of Det. Starsky at the time of Fields' arrest. Injuries to the officer were described as minor.

That was the end of the story.

Louis expelled his breath in a long sigh and looked at the picture again. Kenny hadn't changed much. He was older, of course, with some lines on his face that hadn't been there before. But his head still had that vaguely arrogant tilt, and he wore a too-familiar smirk on his face. Kenny had always been stuck-up, thinking he was better than anybody else, and it looked like he still thought so.

For just a moment, Louis was tempted to rip the picture from the newspaper and tear it into little pieces. He wanted to wipe out Kenny's stuck-up smile once and for all.

But he didn't do that. Instead, he did what Dr. Goldbaum had taught him. Took a deep breath and counted to twenty. That helped. Then he drained the coffee.

His attention shifted from Kenny to the other man in the picture, the one wearing a sling on his arm. He checked the caption again, looking for the man's name. David Starsky. A cop, too. Kenny had one arm draped across the guy's shoulders. David was smiling, but not at the camera; he was grinning at Kenny. They didn't even seem to know that their picture was being taken. It looked like they thought nobody in the world mattered except the two of them.

**Stuck-up bastards.**

Still, he couldn't help feeling a little bit sorry for this guy, David. He wanted to warn the poor dumb bastard not to be friends with Kenny. People who tried to get close to Kenny Hutchinson always got hurt sooner or later. David would get hurt, too.

But most of his sympathy evaporated as he continued to look at the picture. David was probably just like Kenny. *Holier than thou,* he thought bitterly. *Just like when we used to play King-of-the-Mountain back home, and I would be trying really hard to win. But Kenny would never let me. He used to let the little kids win sometimes, but never me. Never me. I really wanted to win, so I could stand on top and be the king. But Kenny... he was always trying to make me look bad. Oh, he used to fool people, 'cause of his pretty-boy looks. But he was mean inside. And I knew it. I always knew, even before Marcie.*

"You want something else, mister?"

From the tone of her voice, Louis knew that the waitress had asked the question several times before he'd heard her. Struggling to concentrate, he shook his head. "Uh-uh," he mumbled. "Thanks." He pulled a couple of crumpled bills from his pocket and tossed them onto the counter. It was the last of his own money. From now on, he would be living on Dr. Goldbaum's dough. He hadn't even counted that cash yet, but he knew there was a lot of it. A whole lot. "Keep the change," he said.
The waitress only glared at him as she picked up the bills.

Louis carefully folded the newspaper so that he could see the picture. Trying to decide just which way to go and what to do first, he paused on the sidewalk just outside the depot.

It was not yet seven o'clock and already the city was enveloped in heat. The people on the sidewalk constituted an uneasy blend of the night just ending and the day about to begin. A tired hooker made her way toward bed, finally alone. Her red-and-black satin hot pants outfit might have looked exotic and tantalizing the evening before. Now she was wrinkled and sweaty and the effect was only pathetic. A grey-suited junior executive, already damp under the arms, was trying to find a taxi. His attention wandered for a moment as he watched the hooker cross the street, dodging cars. He licked his upper lip thoughtfully.

There was a police car parked by the corner. The cop who had been in the restaurant earlier was leaning against the car, sipping coffee, watching the passing parade listlessly. His partner sat behind the wheel, his head back against the seat, his eyes closed. He had a toothache and felt like hell. He was also afraid to go to the dentist.

Louis walked over to the car. "Excuse me, officer," he said deferentially.

The cop, fleshy and irritable, rubbed a handkerchief across his face. "Yeah?"

"Where would I go to find a detective?"

"A detective?" The officer refolded the handkerchief and wiped his face again. "What you want a detective for? Something happen?" He hoped not. In less than an hour, this shift would be over and he could be on his way home. Home, where a fan and lots of cold beer waited.

Louis shook his head. "No, no, nothing like that." He held up the folded newspaper. "I just want to find him," he said, pointing at Kenny's picture.

"Yeah?"

Louis felt obligated to offer an explanation. "He... he's my cousin. I lost his number and I just got into town... ."

"Yeah?" the cop said again. He leaned forward to look more closely at the picture. "Oh, him. Hutchinson."

"You know him?"

"Sure." The cop, whose name was Riley, cleared his throat and spit. "A hot dog," he muttered.

"A what?"
Riley remembered suddenly that this guy was a relative. "Nothing," he said quickly. "Yeah, I know Hutchinson. In fact, I was partnered with him for a while when he was still in uniform. Back before he teamed up with Curly there and they formed the famous vaudeville team of Starsky and Hutch." He chuckled at his own joke, then glanced at Louis to see whether he’d taken any offense at the crack that might be passed along to Hutchinson--or worse, to Starsky.

Riley didn't like Starsky and he knew that the feeling was mutual. Their animosity stemmed from an incident nearly four years earlier, something that might have happened to anyone, in Riley's opinion. Hell, anybody could make a mistake, couldn't they? Even a smartass detective could doze off on a 3 A.M. stakeout. Riley's particular misfortune had been to fall asleep when he was supposed to be watching the rear door of a store while Ken Hutchinson was inside. While Riley caught his forty winks, the man they had been waiting for arrived and went in. Caught unawares, Hutchinson had barely avoided being shot. Sure, it had been a close call, but Hutchinson didn't get too upset about it. He wasn't the kind to hold a grudge.

But Starsky... well, hell, the way he reacted, his partner might have been lying dead on the floor, instead of suffering only a bruised shoulder from being shoved against the wall. The anger on Starsky's face had scared Edmund Denis Riley more than any encounter he'd ever had with a criminal. Hutchinson was an all right kind of guy, even if he was a hot dog; he hadn't even filed a report on the incident. Starsky, on the other hand, got really hot. "Riley," he said tightly. "Don't ever cross my path again. Or my partner's path." Riley had tried fervently to comply in the past four years. He thought that David Starsky was dangerous, like a bomb waiting to explode, and it was not his wish to be anywhere around when it happened.

But apparently Louis hadn't taken any offense; he just kept looking at Riley, a vague half-smile on his face.

"Yeah," Riley expanded, "I taught that kid a lot about being a cop. So what do they do?" He didn't wait for an answer. "They put him in plainclothes and make him a detective. And what about me? Here I am, still riding a beat. Some things ain't fair, I know that." He shut up then and glanced at his watch. If they left now and drove slowly, they would get back to the precinct house just a few minutes before they were supposed to.

"Where can I find Kenny--Detective Hutchinson?" Louis pressed.

Riley was already halfway into the car. "Uh... Parker Center. Uptown," he said over his shoulder. "Catch the bus across the street."

"Thanks," Louis said.

He watched the zone car pull away before bending to carefully tuck the folded newspaper into the shopping bag. What to do now? Clothes, he decided. I need some California clothes. His old brown suit was all wrinkled from the bus trip and it felt much too warm for the weather here. So he would start putting old man Goldbaum's money to some good use and buy himself something to wear.
But first....

He needed a car. There were plenty around, of course, and he would have no trouble getting one. After all, he'd ripped off his first car when he was fourteen. Except... except that theft always carried with it the chance, no matter how remote, of getting caught. And if he was arrested for something as stupid as stealing a car, he would not be able to do what had to be done. He wouldn't be able to complete his mission.

So he decided to buy a car. Nothing fancy. Just some used job that ran. Pay cash and be done with it, legally. There was more than enough money. Then, once he had a car and some new clothes, he could set about avenging his sister's murder. He could get back at Kenny.

He walked toward the bus stop, thinking about Kenny. Thinking very hard about the man who had killed his sister. Louis was filled with satisfaction at the thought that soon Marcie's death would be avenged. Once Kenny had been punished, maybe Louis would be able to forget. Maybe then the headaches would go away for good.

He stood on the corner whistling softly as he waited for the bus.

**
CHAPTER TWO

It was hot.

Starsky, only half-awake, rolled over with a groan and wondered what had happened to the air conditioner. He sat up, forgetting for the moment about his injured arm, and then remembering as a stabbing pain chastised him. "Shit," he muttered. It was easy enough for doctors and captains and certain unnamed partners to call an injury "minor," but that didn't make it hurt any the less.

After spending a few minutes reflecting on the unfairness of life in general and his own misfortunes in particular, Starsky got up from the bed, struggling to untangle himself from the twisted sheets. Naked, he padded into the kitchen for a can of Dr. Pepper, his bare feet making small slapping noises against the floor.

The cold soda slid easily down his parched throat, giving him an almost indecent sense of pleasure. He carried the drink into the bathroom and took another long swig as he reached in to turn on the shower. Setting the can down, he stepped under the lukewarm water.

Starsky was in no hurry, so he sudsed slowly, wondering how he might be able to get out of going to work for one more day. The rush of water obliterated all other noises, so Starsky didn't hear the front door open or the sound of footsteps crossing the living room. He sang two mournful choruses of "Nobody Knows the Troubles I Seen" and then got out of the shower.

As he shaved and dressed, his sore arm complicated matters just enough to make his mood a little more irritable. The fact that he cut himself twice didn't help much.

He walked into the living room, trousers on, trying to pull a T-shirt over his head. His difficulties with that task prevented him from seeing the figure crouched in the kitchen.

"Don't you have anything to drink except Dr. Pepper?"

Startled, Starsky jumped, jerking the shirt the rest of the way on, twisting his arm in the process. "Damn!" he yelled.

Hutch straightened from his perusal of the refrigerator and looked at him curiously. "What's wrong?"

Starsky fairly bristled with righteous indignation. "Wrong? What's wrong? You almost scared me to death, that's what's wrong! Don't ever do that again."

"I yelled when I came in," Hutch said, genuinely bewildered as to why he should be the recipient of Starsky's wrath.

"I was in the shower, dammit."
"All right, all right. Take it easy, huh, Starsk? Don't start with me; it's too hot."

Starsky rubbed his arm. "I didn't start anything. You're the one who broke and entered and scared me out of a year's growth."

"I didn't break anything," Hutch protested. "I used the key."

"Yeah, well..."

Hutch turned back to the refrigerator. "Don't you have anything to drink except Dr. Pepper?" he repeated.

Starsky was struggling to get his arm sling on. "Some chocolate milk."

Hutch took the carton out, sniffed the contents suspiciously, and quickly put it back. "Thanks anyway."

Starsky shrugged.

Giving in to the inevitable, Hutch finally took out a Dr. Pepper and popped the can open. "You need some help with that thing?" he asked, after watching his partner's battle with the sling for several more minutes.

"No," Starsky answered through clenched teeth.

Hutch watched a little longer; then, when his own nerves couldn't stand it anymore, he walked over, efficiently straightened the sling, and held it so that Starsky could get his arm in properly.
"Thanks," Starsky muttered.

"You've got blood on your chin," Hutch said.

Starsky disappeared into the bedroom to get his shoes and socks. Hutch sat on a bar stool, morosely drinking Dr. Pepper. The blond detective was suffering from a by-now-familiar sense of ennui. It happened like that frequently and he had come to see it as just one more occupational hazard. But that didn't make it any easier to live with.

The weeks of balancing on the tightrope of an undercover investigation--always nerve-wracking--had been made even harder this time by the fact that he was the outside man, hovering on the fringes of the real action. He had spent day after day operating tape recorders and monitoring listening devices, while his partner moved among some dangerous people. There was no respite for Starsky, forced to live the role of petty crook twenty-four hours a day for weeks on end. And that meant there had been no respite for Hutch, either. All he could do was listen and wait. Even during those times when he'd been officially off-duty and the job of listening had been delegated to someone else, even then he couldn't relax. Sometimes he went home and tried to sleep. Or he went over to the Pits and had a couple of beers. But mostly he would end up back in the temporary communications center, listening and waiting.

And then it was all over, quickly and suddenly. Not the way it was scheduled to happen at all. The weeks of waiting exploded in violence, in the sudden release of pent-up adrenalin.

He twisted the soda pop can in his hands. All too clearly, he could remember his feelings of utter impotence as he sat in a car two blocks away from where Starsky was, hearing the words that were being exchanged in the warehouse, words that meant only one thing: Starsky's cover had been blown. The car roared into action, racing toward the warehouse, as Hutch listened to the voices with a growing sense of horror, knowing what was going to happen and knowing that he could never get there in time to prevent it.

He heard the sound of gunshots clearly. And then there was only an even more frightening silence. A moment later, he and the others burst through the warehouse door, breaking up the escape attempt.

For three frantic minutes that seemed more like three years, he ran between the high pyramids of packing cases, searching for Starsky. He found him, finally, half-conscious and huddled in a corner. It all ended with the ambulance ride and the hot, sickening smell of blood on a summer afternoon.

Now Hutch felt tired, empty. Even the soda pop tasted flat and bitter. He set the can down on the counter with a sigh. Wondered if he wasn't too young to feel so old. And it was too damned hot in the room. "What's wrong with the air conditioner?" he asked as Starsky came back into the room.
"Don't know. It was working okay when I went to bed." Starsky picked up his gun and, electing not to bother with the holster, stuck the weapon into his waistband, covering it with the shirt. "Can I drive today?"

"With one arm? No way."

Starsky scowled. "Well, can we take my car, at least? A whole day in your jalopy and my kidneys won't be worth having."

Hutch was in no mood to drive the Torino, but he was also not in any mood to argue the matter. It was easier to humor his partner. "All right, but I'm going to be behind the wheel," he cautioned, "so let me drive and keep your opinions to yourself. Understand?"

Fleetingly, Starsky grinned at him.

Hutch felt his own mood lighten just a little and he smiled faintly in return. This was a new day, he decided. A new job to do. The Fields business was finished. The bad guys were in jail—at least that bunch of bad guys. Starsky was all right. Hell, things weren't so bad.

Almost jauntily, he led the way out of Starsky's apartment.

For nearly three hours they patrolled without incident. To the casual observer, such activity might have looked boring, but neither Starsky nor Hutch ever really found it so. Cruising up one street and down the other, watching, anticipating... and knowing that at any given moment, the world could explode around them. Such duty was an important part of the job. Maybe it was the air of constant anticipation, or the underlying aura of unknown danger; maybe it was the reassurance of routine or, simply, the quiet sense of companionship that was encapsulated within the car, but the two of them never minded patrolling.

Of course, some days were better than others. When it was pushing ninety degrees, and the whole city felt like one big oven, with their car as the hottest spot in that oven, then street duty was not quite so great. Especially when David Michael Starsky was in a bad mood.

He was swilling down his third can of soda now as he leaned forward to check another license on the hot sheet. It didn't match. His arm gave a twinge as he sat back and he rubbed it.

"Hurt?" Hutch asked.

"Of course it hurts," Starsky said, his voice increasingly grouchy.

Hutch decided to head for the office. For once, the prospect of paperwork didn't seem quite so bad. At least there was a fan in the office. "Maybe you shouldn't be back on duty," he commented, turning the car toward headquarters.

Starsky was seriously considering hanging his head out of the car window in an effort to cool off. "Yeah, well, try telling that to Dobey. The whole damned department is on vacation." He crushed
the empty soda can with his good hand. "Besides, the Captain doesn't like to send you out alone. Everybody knows I'm the brains behind this team."

Hutch pulled into the parking garage. "You're the brains, huh? How many brains does it take to catch a bullet in the arm?"

They got out of the car and started across the garage. Starsky pushed the door open with his shoulder. "You're right. That was a dumb thing to do." He stopped abruptly, blocking the entrance. "Of course, I thought I had a partner right outside who was gonna help me," he said. "In fact, this partner's last words to me before I went into that warehouse were 'Don't worry, Starsk, I'm right with you.' Anyway, I thought that's what he said."

"Yeah, well...." Hutch's voice dwindled off and he shrugged. "Yeah, you're right. I said that."

Starsky nodded and let the door swing shut on Hutch.

"Talking about vacations," Hutch said a moment later, hurrying to catch up, "what you'd have in mind for this year?"

Starsky shrugged. "Don't know. Just hang around, I guess. Hadn't thought much about it."

They turned into the squad room. "What about going to Europe?" Hutch suggested.

"Ha. You must be getting more on the pad than I am, buddy. What's your secret source of funds? Don't you think it'd be nice if you shared it with your partner?"

Hutch sat at his desk. "Hey, I mean it. We could go on one of those economy flights and then when we get there, rent a car or something. It's not that much; I've been checking it out."

Starsky bent over so that his face was directly in front of the fan. "Yeah?"

"Sure." Hutch began pulling unfinished reports from the drawer. There were a lot of them. "We could go see the Coliseum in Rome."

"Italian girls," Starsky said, letting the air move through his sweaty curls.

"The Eiffel Tower."

"French girls."

"Greek ruins."

"Greek girls." He straightened and looked at Hutch. "You know, that sounds pretty good."

"I want to see the museums," Hutch said firmly.
"Sure, sure. A great place to pick up girls."

Hutch gave up and reached for the first report on the depressingly high pile. Starsky stood in front of the fan a moment longer, a dreamy expression on his face. Hutch kicked him once, sharply, and Starsky settled down to work as well.

They spent nearly two hours trying to get caught up on the backlog of their paperwork. Reports are the bane of most police officers' existence and they were no exception. And since Captain Dobey was a stickler for perfection, the work was accomplished only with a great deal of erasing, swearing, and crumpled paper.

Finally Hutch straightened, rubbing the small of his back. "I'm hungry," he said.

Starsky gestured for a moment of silence so that he could finish the page he was typing. Luckily, his typing skills were such that it was no great disadvantage for him to be working one-handed. One hand or two, he was a rotten typist.

Finally he pulled the sheet from the typewriter and reread his closing aloud. "And so Detective Hutchinson and me climbed back into the fiery red Torino, satisfied that justice has been served once again. We have faced death and danger and have won."

"I," Hutch said.

"What?"

"Detective Hutchinson and I. You said me."

"Oh." Starsky stared at the report for a minute, then shrugged and tossed it onto the "done" pile. "Maybe he won't notice."

"Sure."

"Sounds good, though, huh?"

Hutch slammed the desk drawer shut. "He'll be thrilled."

"How about pizza?" Starsky asked hopefully.

"I guess." Hutch riffled through another pile of papers on his desk. "We can make another stab at getting Wally Graham on the way."

Starsky snorted. "Fat chance. I still say he's gone to Mexico and he's not coming back."

Graham, a thrice-convicted housebreaker, was now being sought on a parole violation; they had been hunting him off and on for months. Hutch was convinced that sooner or later, he'd show up at his mother's house. Starsky figured that nobody would be that dumb.
As they rose to go, Dobey stepped out of his office. Even in the August heat, he still wore his suit jacket and tie. "You two going somewhere?" he asked suspiciously, eying the still unfinished paperwork.

Hutch waved the warrant. "Got a tip that Wally Graham might be at home," he said, fibbing just a little.

"All right," Dobey said, mollified.

"And we want to grab a pizza," Starsky added as they hurried out the door. They could hear Dobey yelling behind them and they both grinned.

Hutch's smile faded slowly as he took the wheel of the Torino. "Hey, Starsk," he said, pulling out of the garage.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

Starsky was already preoccupied with watching the passing scene on his side of the street. "Huh?" he said absently.

"For not getting there in time. I'm sorry."

"Oh."

"I... tried."

There was a moment of silence. Starsky shifted in the seat. "Yeah, well, so how about you buy the pizza," he said, "and then we'll be even."

"Deal." Hutch knew that his apology had been unnecessary and, between the two of them, absurd. Starsky already knew that he'd tried his damnedest to get there in time. Hell, of course he had. Propelled by anger or fear or both, he'd charged into that warehouse prepared to take on Fields and all of his goons single-handedly.

But still, there was the guilt. Another occupational hazard, he figured. His partner had almost died because he was late. There was no getting around that simple fact. It was the stuff nightmares were made of. So Hutch apologized and felt stupid about doing so.

It didn't really matter, though. He knew that Starsky understood all of that just as well as he did. Understood about the fear and the guilt and the need to say "I'm sorry." Starsky understood, so it was okay. And all nightmares went away sooner or later, didn't they?

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CHAPTER THREE

Louis was very pleased with himself.

It was still only his first day in Los Angeles and already he had accomplished so much. Now, clad in a striped sport shirt and new, too-stiff blue jeans, he sat behind the wheel of his 1968 dark green Volkswagen and waited for Kenny to come out of the police building. He'd been waiting for just over an hour, but it didn't bother him. He didn't mind waiting.

It was pure luck that he spotted Kenny at the wheel of the Torino as it left the parking garage. The car didn't look like something Kenny would be driving, but there was no mistaking the blond hair and that arrogant profile. Louis thought that such a stroke of luck must be a sign. His mission was surely blessed.

He had no difficulty handling the small car, although he was more used to driving the huge, lumbering hospital station wagon. However, there was considerably more traffic than he was accustomed to. The hardest part was keeping track of the red-and-white Torino as it moved easily through the busy streets. Kenny naturally knew the city well, while Louis was a stranger to it. Once he even lost them in the traffic, but after some hasty sidestreet maneuvers, he found them again, coming out just half a block behind them. He grinned to himself, imagining Kenny's chagrin if he knew about the tail. *He's about half as smart as he thinks he is,* Louis decided.

Ahead, he saw the car pull to a stop in front of a ramshackle brown house. He parked the innocuous Volkswagen next to the curb a short distance away and settled back to watch.

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"Must be ninety degrees out here," Starsky complained, following Hutch up the sidewalk.

"Probably," Hutch agreed equably.

"'Course, you don't have a sling on your arm."

"Right."

Starsky gave up trying to pick a fight for the moment and they split up, Hutch going around to cover the back of the house. In the unlikely event that Graham was inside, and if he decided to make a break for it, logic dictated that he would head out the back.

Of course, it has never been proved that logic is necessarily a strong element in the criminal psyche.

Starsky went up the steps to the front door and raised his good hand to knock.

He never made it.
The door was abruptly jerked open and Wally Graham came barreling out. The analogy was apt. Or perhaps it might have been even more apt to say that Graham steam-rollered out of the house. Wallace Eugene Graham stood 6'8" in his stocking feet (he was now wearing something that closely resembled Marine combat boots) and weighed in at somewhere around the three-hundred pound mark.

Starsky, who had been at least sure that Graham's mother, a petite, kindly woman nearing seventy, would open the door, never had a chance. Even with two good arms, he would have been at an overwhelming disadvantage. As it was, with one arm in the sling, it was hopeless. He simply toppled over like a rag doll when Graham hit him. "HUT--" was all he managed to squeeze out before the situation got even worse.

Graham, if he'd been halfway smart, would have simply dropped Starsky and run. He might even have gotten away in the confusion. However, like many crooks--at least the unsuccessful ones--Graham was stupid. His stupidity in this particular instance was reflected in the fact that he did not let go of Starsky and make a run for it. Instead, he grabbed a handful of dark curly hair and proceeded to beat Starsky's head against the porch, while at the same time attempting to strangle him.

Starsky lost consciousness almost immediately.

A split second later, Hutch came around the corner at a dead run, his gun out. He went into the crouch position, aiming directly at Graham's head. "Freeze, you son of a bitch, or I'll blow your damned brains out!" he yelled.

The big man looked at him in vague surprise; then, almost sheepishly, he opened his ham-sized paws and Starsky fell heavily to the porch. "I guess you got me," Graham said cheerfully, assuming the frisk position.

Without wasting any time on words, Hutch managed to slap the cuffs around the man's massive wrists--pinching some skin in the process and not giving a damn--and then secured him to the porch railing. He actually had very little confidence that the porch or even the house itself could remain standing against the force of Graham's anger. The big man seemed calm enough now, though.

Hutch forgot Graham as he crossed the porch and knelt beside Starsky. His partner was still and very white. A patch of red stickiness was slowly forming beneath his head.
Mrs. Graham appeared in the doorway. "I called an ambulance," she murmured. "And some more cops."

"Thank you," Hutch replied in a whisper. He just sat there for a moment, feeling helpless. Then, very carefully, he lifted Starsky's arm and replaced it in the sling. Probably it was a dumb thing to do, because it couldn't possibly help Starsky at all right now, but it made him feel better to have done something.

"Wallace don't realize... he forgets how big he is sometimes," the old lady said, trying to explain. "He don't mean to... is he hurt bad?"

Hutch shrugged. "I don't know... there's some blood."

"I could get a towel. You want a towel?"

"Probably I shouldn't touch him," Hutch said, much as he wanted to. Then: "Hell, I can't just let him lie here like this." He pulled off his jacket and carefully eased it under Starsky's head. Some blood got on his fingers and he tried to wipe it on his jeans. "Damnit, Stark," he said.

The woman stepped out onto the porch, toying with one corner of her apron. "Poor Detective Starsky. He's always been such a nice boy. I recall the time when you was both here looking for Wallace and Detective Starsky climbed up on the roof to get my cat down."

"I remember that," Hutch said.

"He died, you know."

"What?" Hutch was staring at his partner.

"The cat. Jesse, my cat, died. Got hit by a car."

"I'm sorry." Hutch could hear the sound of approaching sirens and he bent over until his lips were next to Starsky's ear. "Here comes help, buddy," he breathed. "Hang on, Stark."

"What's gonna happen to Wallace?"

Hutch looked up at the frail old lady and he felt a twinge of sympathy for her. Then his gaze returned to Starsky's pale face, which was already starting to swell and discolor from the beating he'd taken. If she had only called them when her son first arrived, as she'd so often promised to do, then everything could have gone down easily. They could have come in prepared. Starsky wouldn't be lying on this broken-down porch, bleeding and hurting, and maybe dying. Hutch felt the hard knot of bitterness inside him grow a little bigger. There was no sympathy left for anybody else at times like this. They had to worry about themselves. They had to take care of each other because there was nobody else they could count on. Nobody else cared; that was damned clear.
At that moment, he hated the old lady almost as much as he hated her son. He hated all the people in this neighborhood, who had probably all known that Graham was at home and had not told the police. The people stood on the sidewalk now, gawking. What had happened was nothing more than a nice break in the routine of their summer afternoon. They didn't care that a good cop, a good, kind man, might be dying as they stood watching.

He shook his head. "Wallace is going to jail," he said heavily. "For a very long time."

A black-and-white pulled up in front of the house, with an Emergency Medical Van right behind. Hutch got to his feet, unhooked Graham from the porch railing, fastened both hands behind him, and shoved the now-placid man toward the uniformed officers as they came up the steps. "Book him," he said bitterly. "Assault with intent to kill. Resisting arrest. And I'll think of a few more later."

With some obvious trepidation, the cops fell in on either side of Graham and guided him toward their car.

Meanwhile, the medics had reached the porch and were beginning to slide Starsky onto a stretcher. Hutch wiped his sweaty face with one hand, watching them anxiously. "Is he okay?"

One of the medics, a raw-boned redhead, cast him a scornful glance. "How the hell do we know yet? All I can tell you is that he took a terrific blow to the head. Who hit him, you or Goliath?"

"Why the hell would I hit him? He's my partner."

"Oh, yeah? Can't tell the cops from the robbers anymore."

"The big guy beat his head against the porch."

"Shee-it," the medic said.

Hutch picked his bloody jacket up from the porch and twisted it in his hands as he followed the stretcher down the sidewalk. "I'll follow you in," he said.

The redhead nodded and popped his bubblegum. "Suit yourself."

He got one last glimpse of Starsky's face as the emergency van slid past. An IV was being adjusted into his partner's arm. Hutch rolled his jacket into a ball and tossed it into the back seat of the car. Then he got behind the wheel and left the scene in a manner more like Starsky's driving style than his own.

He didn't notice the dark green VW that pulled out just behind him.

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The hospital waiting room seemed tiresomely familiar to Kenneth Hutchinson. He sat slumped in the same ripped leatherette chair and drank the same terrible coffee. The magazines never changed and the grouchy head nurse (interchangeable with every other grouchy head nurse) wouldn't tell him anything about Starsky's condition.

Nearly three hours passed. He paced sometimes, gulping cup after cup of coffee, until he had indigestion on top of a headache. Two children whined and fussed over one bedraggled doll until Hutch could cheerfully have thrown both kids and the damned doll out the window. The mother seemed oblivious to it all, engrossed as she was in the pages of MODERN TV AND SCREEN magazine.

An old man, who sounded like he was in the last throes of pneumonia, was apparently just waiting for his wife; Hutch didn't dare to think what she might be suffering from. One man sat patiently behind his newspaper, seemingly unperturbed by all that was happening around him. Either the guy had nerves of steel, Hutch thought glumly, or he just didn't give a damn about whoever it was he was waiting for.

Hutch was just about to storm the desk and threaten to take hostages unless somebody told him something about Starsky, when the doctor came strolling into the room, looking as if he were walking into a tea party. It was the same man who had treated Starsky's gunshot wound three days earlier.

Hutch tossed the Styrofoam cup, still half-full, into the wastebasket and pounced on the doctor. "Well?" he said. "What the hell took so long? How's Starsky?"

The doctor had a face that looked like old leather, full of creases and deeply tanned. His benign expression didn't change as he took Hutch by the arm and led him aside. "You know... ah, Detective Hutchinson, isn't it?"

Hutch nodded.

"Well, Hutchinson, your partner is either one of the luckiest men I've ever seen or one of the unluckiest."

"What do you mean?"

"For the second time this week, he's had a very close call and managed to come out of it with very little damage."

Hutch felt his whole body untense and he leaned against the wall. "You mean he's okay?"

The doctor smiled, deepening the creases on his face. "Near as I can tell. He's got a very mild concussion. And a great big headache. Also, he doesn't look too pretty at the moment, but I've assured him that his dashing good looks will return in a couple of days. We're going to keep him overnight, just to be on the safe side, but I don't anticipate any complications."
"Can I see him?"

"Well... just for a moment. He needs to rest." His sharp brown eyes raked over Hutch. "And from the way you look, some sleep wouldn't hurt you, either. He's right down the hall, room 211."

Hutch started away, then stopped. "Thanks, doctor. For the second time this week."

"Anytime," the doctor replied. "That's why I'm here. However, Detective Hutchinson, may I suggest that you start taking better care of your partner? The third time in his case may not be a charm, you know. Might turn out to be three strikes."

The doctor was joking, of course, and Hutch knew it. Still, the crack cut a little too close to the bone, and Hutch felt a wrench of guilt. He knew himself well enough to recognize that his nerves were shot to hell. This, coming right on top of the weeks of tension and the shooting, was just about too much for one Kenneth Hutchinson.

He stopped for a drink of water just outside Starsky's room. Bending over the too-low fountain, he took several gulps of the icy water, trying to wash the taste of bitterness from his mouth. As he straightened, he caught sight of himself in the shiny metal surface above the fountain. For a moment, he didn't recognize the gaunt, pale face that stared back at him. There was a streak of dried blood across one cheek. He took out his handkerchief, dampened it in the cold water, and scrubbed the blood away fiercely. Then he carefully placed a smile on his face. It looked phony as hell. A smile like that wouldn't fool a perfect stranger, never mind someone who knew him as well as he knew himself. But it was the best he could do. Starsky would just have to settle.

Hutch pushed the door open and stepped into the semi-darkness of the room. Starsky, a gleaming white bandage on the left side of his head, turned to look at him. "Hi, hot shot," he said, his voice sounding strangely gravelly.

His face looked terrible. Hutch stepped closer to the bed and saw the reason why Starsky's voice sounded funny. Apparently, Graham had gripped him by the neck at one point in the attack, because it was a mass of purple and red bruises. Both eyes were black and blue. Hutch averted his eyes quickly. "Hi, yourself. How are you?"

"Hungry. We never got our pizza."

Hutch tried to laugh, but his weary soul couldn't manage it.

"Hey, Hutch," Starsky croaked.

"Yeah?"

Starsky's bruised and battered face seemed to form a smile. "You ever think that just maybe we're in the wrong business?"

_Frequently_, Hutch thought. Aloud, he only said, "It's just been a rough week."
"For sure."

Hutch was awkwardly trying to straighten the sheet over Starsky. "Better keep covered," he muttered. "I don't think you're in any condition to fight off hordes of aroused nurses."

"I'll be the judge of that," Starsky said, imitating Alan Alda imitating Groucho Marx. He pushed Hutch's fussing hands away. "Knock it off, willya? You're making me nervous."

Hutch stopped. "Oh. Yeah."

"Look, buddy, why don't you go home and grab some Z's? I want you back here first thing in the morning to spring me from this place."

"Okay, sure." But Hutch stood there a moment longer, not saying anything. Then he sighed. "Well, 'night," he said finally.

"Yeah... sleep tight," Starsky mumbled, snuggling down wearily. The drugs were beginning to work and he wanted to sleep. "Hey," he said, not opening his eyes.

"Huh?"

"Take... care of my... car."

"Count on me." Hutch lifted one hand in a half-wave, but Starsky was already asleep. Hutch paused, watching him for a moment, checking to be sure that his partner's breathing was steady. It was.

He finally stepped out into the hallway. Ignoring the other people, he stopped, resting his forehead against the cool tiled wall. Damn, he thought. Damn all the stupid bastards like Wally Graham and damn all the slick bastards like Barney Fields, and damn everybody. We're nothing but targets in some fucking shooting gallery. Knock over a pig and win a prize.

He blinked away the hot dampness that threatened. Where is it written, he wondered through a fog, that we have to do all the suffering?

When he realized that he was actually beginning to fall asleep leaning there against the wall, Hutch pushed himself up, shoved both hands into his pockets, and headed for the elevator.

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Louis lowered the newspaper, nearly smirking with delight as he watched Kenny hurry by. For all those hours, he'd been sitting not five feet away and Kenny had never even noticed him. Kenny was so uptight, Louis gloated, that I probably could've walked through here bare-assed naked and he wouldn't have noticed.
The good news about David had pleased Louis. While sitting in the waiting room, pretending to read the newspaper, he had watched Kenny worry and he had started to formulate a plan. It was a beautiful plan, a wonderful idea. But David was the key to the whole thing and if he'd died or been badly hurt, it all would have gone down the drain.

Louis was shrewd. No matter what problems he might have had, no one ever said he was dumb. After only a few hours of careful observation, he knew the best way to punish Kenny. Kenny thought that David was his friend. Well, someone as evil as Kenny didn't deserve to have any friends.

As he walked out to the parking lot, Louis could not forget the violent scene he'd witnessed on the porch that afternoon. David never had a chance against that big guy. Well, of course, Kenny could have prevented it. Should have prevented it. The fact that he hadn't kept David from getting hurt only proved that he didn't really care.

Maybe, just maybe, David might prove to be an ally, rather than an enemy. After Louis had a chance to talk to him and tell him the truth about Kenny--the truth about the evil cruelty that lingered just below the surface, masked by that choir-boy face and the false claims of friendship.

Louis climbed into his car, feeling very much at peace with himself. He felt happy. Tonight he would go to a motel. Tomorrow he would find a better place to live. Somewhere he could be alone. He figured that it would take him three or four days to get everything ready. Then he would look for a victim. No, victim wasn't the right word. A sacrificial lamb. That was better. The imagery pleased him. The blood that would be spilled by the innocent lamb was going to serve a higher cause. Louis would be creating a martyr. That made him almost like God. Or God's instrument, he amended quickly, not wanting to offend the heavens. I will be doing God's work. I can't fail, no way, not with Him on my side.

He laughed aloud.

**
CHAPTER FOUR

Hutch rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully before swiveling his chair around to glare at the man sitting opposite him. "Jimmy, I'll tell you something," he said. "Want me to tell you something?"

Jimmy the Creep grinned and nodded eagerly. "Sure thing, Mr. Hutch. Sure thing."

Hutch leaned across the desk and spit the words out. "I think you're lying. You haven't said one single damned word of truth since you came in here."

The Creep's smile wavered a little and his feet began to shuffle back and forth on the floor. "Now, Mr. Hutch, that ain't so. You know me."

"Yeah, I know a lot of you street scum."

Jimmy managed to look indignant. "I ain't like that; I ain't like the rest. I never onct lied to youse guys. Just ask Mr. Starsky. He knows me from way back. I was Mr. Starsky's very first bust, didja know that?"

"Yes, Jimmy, I knew that. I've heard that same old story about a dozen times from you and at least two dozen times from him. I think it's a heartwarming tale and I'm so glad that the two of you have such a terrific relationship going."

Jimmy nodded cheerfully.

Hutch sighed and leaned back, picking at his teeth with a matchstick. His voice turned hard. "Look around, Jimmy. Do you see Mr. Starsky anywhere in this room?"

Slowly, Jimmy's gaze swept the squad room. No one else seemed to be paying any attention to them at all. His watery eyes focused on Hutch again. "No, I guess he ain't here."

"That's right, Jimmy, he's not here. Do you want to know why?" He waited for the man's nod. "Mr. Starsky isn't here because he's home recuperating from a beating he got from another piece of street scum. That makes me mad, Jimmy. Do you know why?"

Jimmy began to sense that things weren't going to fall his way this time around. He realized that Hutch was waiting for some response. He nodded. "Yeah, sure, Mr. Hutch, I know why that makes you mad."

"Why?"

"Cause Mr. Starsky is your partner."
Hutch shook his head. "Nope. Wrong, Jimmy. That makes me mad because when he's not here, I have to do my work and his work. That's too much work. It makes me tired and when I get tired, I get grouchy."

"Yeah, I heard that," Jimmy agreed solemnly.

Hutch shot him a glance. "You heard what?"

"That you get grouchy real easy."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"From Mr. Starsky."

"Really?" Hutch thought about that for a moment. "Well, in this particular case, Mr. Starsky knew what he was talking about. I am grouchy and I don't feel like sitting here shooting the breeze with you about the good old days when Mr. Starsky was in uniform and he used to run you in for being drunk and disorderly every Friday night."

Jimmy, wisely, didn't say anything. He just sat there wondering if there was some kind of law against scratching your personals in a cophouse. He decided not to risk it and just scooted around on the chair a little.

Hutch snapped the matchstick in two suddenly. "Let's cut the crap, huh? Now. I know that somebody is dealing reds and yellows in Lucy's Bar and Grille. And I know you know it, too. So talk to me."

The Creep studied a wad of bubble gum that was stuck to the bottom of his shoe and considered his alternatives. It didn't take him long to decide that he would rather count on the scruples of a cop--even a grouchy cop like this one--than on the goodwill of his own associates. He shook his head and a trickle of saliva dribbled from his lower lip. "I already done told you everything I know, Mr. Hutch, I swear."

"You got a job, Jimmy?"

"You know I ain't worked in years. 'Cause of my back that was shot up in the war."

"Want me to book you as a vagrant?"

But Jimmy only shook his head again.

Hutch gave up. It was hot and he was tired; he should have gone off duty an hour ago. One detective trying to do the work of two (both of whom were already overworked) got worn out fast. "Get out of here, Jimmy," he said mildly. "I'm sick of smelling you."

Jimmy the Creep scurried away without a backwards glance.
Hutch watched him go and shook his head. Sometimes it was hard to remember that there were any other kind of people in the world. _Not everyone_, he reminded himself yet again, _is a piece of street garbage like the Creep or a violent dummy like Wally Graham_. It was sometimes frighteningly easy to lose sight of the decent people.

_Maybe there ought to be a time limit on how long a man can be a cop_, he thought idly. _Maybe we should have to get out before it's too late and we can't see the forest for the trees._

The thought of Wally Graham made Hutch reach for the phone and dial Starsky's number. His partner, home from the hospital for three days now, was beginning to get itchy.

The phone was answered on the third ring. "'Lo?"

"It's me," Hutch said, slumping in his chair and morosely studying a crack in the ceiling plaster.

"Hi, me. How's tricks?" Starsky's voice was almost back to normal.

"You sound cheerful," Hutch said glumly.

"Why shouldn't I? The police surgeon has okayed me to get out of the house as of tomorrow. And Lola came by to give me a backrub."

Hutch let his mind move languorously over the mental image of one Lola, Starsky's Stewardess of the Month. Her red hair. Her firm, slender body. He sighed, realizing that Starsky was undoubtedly going to be tied up for the rest of the evening. He decided to just go on home, eat some yogurt, and crawl into bed. "Hey, that's great," he said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Well, I was going to come over, but if you've got company--"

"She's gone. Flying to Miami."

"Too bad."

"Well," Starsky said, "actually, it's probably for the best. I mean, I'm feeling much better, but I'm not sure that I'm quite up to Lola yet."

Hutch smiled into the telephone.

"Come on over," Starsky said. "I could use a little totally unexciting company."

"Thanks a lot."

"Anyway, you still owe me a pizza."

"I'll stop and get one on my way."

"Great," Starsky said enthusiastically. "Hurry it up."
"Sure."

But he didn’t hurry. For one thing, the muggy heat made all movement unpleasant. Even more, his own sense of deep weariness slowed him down. He was so tired, so shaky, that at one point he even felt as if someone was following him. When he looked, of course, no one was there. *Paranoia? Great, just what I need.*

He had an icy cold beer while waiting for the pizza and exchanged several absent-minded double entendres with the waitress, who inquired after Starsky and promised to serve up a double deluxe pizza to help him recover his strength.

The beer helped a little. At least enough so that by the time he reached Starsky's, he was able to greet his partner with a reasonable facsimile of a grin.

Starsky was looking more like himself. Most of the bruises and swelling had subsided, and he no longer wore the arm sling. Dressed in his favorite and most absurd robe and moving a little more slowly than usual, he got some more beer from the refrigerator and joined Hutch on the couch. Lifting the lid of the pizza box, Starsky inhaled and gave an exquisitely pleased sigh, then glanced sideways at Hutch. "Beats having yogurt for dinner, right?"

Hutch shot him a glance, wondering how the hell he'd known. "I think that broad put everything in the kitchen on here," he complained.

"Edie? Yeah, she really knows how to put a pizza together."

For several minutes they ate in silence. After a day of too many words, Hutch was not uncomfortable with the silence. It was, in fact, restful and reassuring. Comforting. The room became a refuge and he could almost forget that there was anything outside in the world to mar the peace of this place. He could feel himself beginning to relax; the guards so carefully erected during the day began to slip a little.

Starsky, having put away five wedges of pizza to Hutch's three, finally sat back and took a long swallow of beer. "So what's wrong," he asked suddenly.

"Wrong?" Hutch was carefully studying the blotch of grease on the bottom of the pizza box, glumly figuring that the same thing was undoubtedly happening to his stomach.

"You're down about something," Starsky said, pretending not to study Hutch.

"'S nothing, I guess." Hutch realized in amazement that his voice had trembled a little. He tried to draw back within himself, to reconstruct the barriers that had slipped so dangerously. But it was too late. His emotions were too close to the surface. He knew that Starsky was waiting for him to say something; that stubborn son of a bitch would wait all night if he had to. Hutch took a swallow of beer; he could understand at that moment, perhaps better than ever before, why so many cops became alcoholics. They used liquor to dull the edges of the pain caused by the job.
Hutch fiddled with the beer bottle for a moment, then set it down with precision. But he was luckier than most cops. He didn't need to drink away his pain. Not as long as he could share it with Starsky. Having somebody to understand, to listen... that made the difference. "Christ, Starsk... I'm just tired, that's all." He took a shuddering breath. "I'm just so damned worn out." He was staring at the floor.

Starsky leaned forward and put his beer bottle down. Very carefully, he put an arm around Hutch's shoulders. "It's okay, you know," he said. "Everybody gets tired. I get worn out sometimes."
Hutch gave a short laugh. "Even you?" he asked sardonically.

"Yeah, even me." Starsky's smile was self-mocking. "Sure. Sometimes the job stinks. But hell, man, don't kill yourself over it."

"Does it matter? I'm going to get killed someday anyway." Hutch glanced sideways at Starsky's face and saw nothing judgmental there, only concern. "You've almost died twice this week." He looked away again.

"Like you said, it's been a bad week." Starsky shifted slightly, not relinquishing his hold on Hutch. He stared at his partner's profile for a moment, wondering with half his mind when they had stopped being young. The anger and anguish of too many years showed plain on Hutch's face. It hurt Starsky a little to see. He sighed. "Hell, buddy. You're probably right. We'll get blown away one of these days. But it sure as hell won't help to get an ulcer worrying about it."

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut for a minute. Damnit, he thought. He stood quickly and began to gather the debris from their dinner. He said... we'll get blown away... is he that sure? Does he always think about it in the plural? He walked into the kitchen and dumped the remains of the pizza into the trash. At least, Starsky wouldn't be eating cold pizza for breakfast. "Well, look, you just be more careful, huh?" He shoved the pizza box down fiercely. "Don't go getting blown away without me." The words were said lightly, but there was a strange intensity just beneath the surface.

"Hell, no," Starsky said. He wadded a paper napkin and tossed it at Hutch. It missed. "That's not on the itinerary."

"The itinerary?" Hutch picked up the napkin and threw it away, then took two more beers out of the refrigerator and walked back to the couch. "I know I'm going to regret asking, but what the hell are you talking about?" He sat down, handing one bottle to Starsky. They both leaned back, relaxing, feet propped on the table.

"Our life itinerary."

"I repeat, partner--what the hell are you talking about?"

"It's this book I read. Talked about every person having a life itinerary. Like it's all plotted out, even before you're born."

"I see." Hutch rested his head against the back of the sofa and closed his eyes.

"See... it's like... everything is written down in a book, except that it's not a real book, of course."

Hutch sipped the beer. "Sort of a cosmic record?"

"Sure, you've got it."
"And you've got our itinerary all figured out?"

"Well, no," Starsky demurred modestly. "Not all of it. But I figure we'll go out in a blaze of glory."

"That's reassuring," Hutch said dryly.

Starsky missed the sarcasm. "Uh-huh. The way I see it... well, you remember BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID?"

Hutch opened one eye and peered at him. "Yeah?"

Starsky gave a satisfied nod. "That's it. Out in a blaze of glory. That's the way we'll go."

"Butch and Sundance were the bad guys, Starsk. I don't think the good guys ever end up that way. We either get old and fat and bald and end up getting wasted by some punk kid holding up a candy store, or we drink ourselves to death. Where's the glory? The good guys just don't make it."

Starsky thought for a moment, then his face brightened. "I got it. Davy Crockett. He was a good guy and he went out in glory. At the Alamo."

"Uh-huh." Hutch closed his eye again. "Why don't you go back to reading MAD magazine, Starsk, and leave the cosmic tinkering to somebody else?"

Hutch opened both eyes this time and stared at Starsky. He nodded slowly. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

There was a short silence and then Starsky's expression lit up. "Hey, how about a game of Monopoly?" he suggested. "We haven't played in a long time."

"Well...." Hutch pretended to deliberate. "Okay. Though I hate to trounce a man just out of his sick bed."

"Hah! Famous last words." Starsky jumped up to get the game, grimacing as his sore body rebelled against the sudden movement.

They finally managed to get the game set up, after some rather heated discussion centering around whose turn it was to be the banker. Starsky finally prevailed, by employing the unfair tactic of rubbing his injured arm as if it still hurt. It didn't.

Hutch rolled the dice for his first turn and, at that instant, the telephone rang.
"Damn," Starsky said, just having gotten himself comfortably arranged on the floor.

"Sit still; I'll get it." Hutch got up and went to the phone. "Hello?"

"Hutchinson? Is that you?"

"Yes, Cap. What's up?" Hutch hoped it was nothing, or at any rate, nothing that couldn't wait until morning. Hell. The tension in his neck was just starting to ease a little. He only wanted to finish his beer and play Monopoly with Starsk.

Dobey was quiet for such a long time that Hutch thought they'd been disconnected. "Cap?" he said. Starsky gave him a questioning look; Hutch could only shrug.

Finally Dobey spoke, his voice leaden. "We've got a dead cop. Murdered. No, damnit, not just murdered. This was an execution."

Now it was Hutch's turn to fall silent.

"What's going on?" Starsky asked, getting up from the floor.

"Who was it?" Hutch asked Dobey.

"Patrolman Richard McGowan."

Hutch didn't know him.

"What the hell is going on?" Starsky asked again, standing close to the phone.

"Somebody iced a cop," Hutch replied shortly. "Dobey says it looks like an execution."

Starsky's lips tightened and he moved away, rubbing his arm absently.

"Hutchinson, get out here right now. Corner of Adams and Pierce. In the park," Dobey said.

"Yeah, Cap, on my way." He hung up and went for his shoes and socks. "Gotta go, Starsk."

"Not without me," Starsky said, already headed into the bedroom to shed his robe and get dressed.

"You're in no condition--" Hutch began.

"The doc said I'm okay. And Dobey will need everybody he can get." As he talked, he pulled on blue jeans and jerked a T-shirt over his head. Then, carrying tennis shoes and socks, he came back into the living room. "Besides, if somebody is running around wasting cops, you think I'm going to send you out after him alone? You couldn't handle it, buddy." He pulled his holster on.
"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Hutch muttered, waiting by the open door.

Starsky went past him. "Don't mention it. What's a partner for?"

Hutch closed the door firmly and then stood in the hallway, watching Starsky go down the steps. He could tell from the way his partner moved that he was still hurting, despite his flippant words. Still, Hutch was damned glad he was coming along.

"Hey, you waiting for a bus?"

Starsky's voice brought him out of his brief reverie. "Right behind you, buddy," Hutch said, taking the stairs two at a time. As he moved, he could feel the comforting/frightening familiarity of the gun pressed against his side.

**
Starsky wondered if he'd ever get used to looking at a dead body.

Some were worse than others, of course. A hairless, bloated corpse fished out of the water after three months was bad. Or someone like the man who'd died in an unventilated bathroom in July and went undiscovered for a week. Starsky had thrown up at that one.

Now he looked at his partner across the recently deceased body of one Patrolman Richard McGowan and he could read Hutch's face like a book. Murder dismayed his partner. That sounded obvious, but it wasn't. Many cops could view the killing of one person by another with something like professional detachment. Probably that was the best way to be. Starsky, in fact, liked to think of himself as being that way. Cool. Professional. He thought that no one knew how hard he had to work at being casual. He did fool a lot of the people all the time.

But Hutch was different, Starsky thought. Hutch couldn't see things in that objective manner. He took murder very personally. Starsky sometimes thought that Hutch liked to see himself as the White Knight, punishing evil and protecting the innocent of the world.

"Damn," the Knight-in-Shining-Armor said now.

At least this body wasn't in bad shape. It had scarcely had time to cool off and McGowan's blue uniform wasn't even mussed. They could see why Dobey had labeled this crime an assassination. McGowan's hands were fastened across his chest with his own cuffs. His wallet, I.D., and gun were piled neatly by his side. Tidy. It all looked carefully arranged.

Hutch stepped aside to let the police photographer snap some more pictures. McGowan looked very young. His chestnut hair stirred lightly in the muggy breeze. He might have been sleeping, except for the bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

Starsky crouched down for a better look. I wonder if this was in his life itinerary? he wondered idly, staring at McGowan's face. It was as if he thought that by looking long enough and hard enough, he might learn who had killed this man. Unfortunately, no such message was forthcoming. "What do we have, Cap?" he asked finally.

Dobey's expression was that of a black avenging angel. "Not much. McGowan disappeared about four hours ago. Just vanished out of the patrol car." Dobey paused, watching as the team arrived to remove the body.

Starsky grunted a little as he tried to get up; his body was stiffer than he'd thought. Hutch reached down, took him by one hand and pulled him up. "Thanks," Starsky said.
"You okay?"

"Yeah. What do you mean, Cap? Nobody 'vanishes' from a zone car."

"His partner was in a diner picking up coffee. He was inside maybe ten minutes. When he came back, McGowan was gone."

Starsky wiped a line of sweat from his upper lip. "Who found him?"

Dobey sighed. "That was rough." He gestured toward one of the black-and-whites parked nearby. A uniformed cop was leaning against the car, his head down. "His partner found him. He'd been searching, of course, since it happened. He was coming through the park when he spotted the body."

They were all silent for a moment.

"Shit," Starsky said eloquently.

Hutch shrugged and started toward the patrol car, with Starsky following. "Think the partner's on the up and up?" Starsky muttered.

Hutch gave him a look. "I can see where somebody might be tempted to shoot his partner. Maybe he ate tacos and chocolate ice cream together."

"Ha, ha." But then Starsky shook his head. "I guess that was a dumb thought. Nobody would kill his own partner."

Hutch wondered how Starsky managed to keep alive that streak of naiveté. It was his own experience that, given the proper circumstances, anyone would do anything. But his partner somehow seemed to go through life expecting the best of people. He must have been disappointed any number of times, but he always seemed to bounce back and give the world a twisted grin that said, "Screw you, I'm not beat yet." The funniest part of it all was that Starsky liked to think of himself as a cynic.

The cop straightened as they reached the car. "Hi," Starsky said. "Officer--"

"Powers. Mike Powers," he said. It was obvious that he'd been crying. He rubbed his eyes with the back of one hand and then extended that hand to them.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Starsky and this is my partner, Detective Sergeant Hutchinson."

Powers nodded. "Hi. Dick... Officer McGowan was my partner."

"We know. This must be rough." Starsky wished he could think of something to say at times like this, but he never could. He glanced at Hutch, but for once even he seemed at a loss for the appropriate words.
Powers didn't seem to notice. "We went through the Academy together. Then, finally, last month, we were both assigned to the Ninth Precinct. The lieutenant says we make a good team." His voice cracked and he began to cry again as they watched McGowan's body being loaded onto the meat wagon.

Starsky was fiddling with his notebook, trying not to look at Powers. Hutch leaned against the car, feeling the droplets of sweat that were trickling down his armpits.

Powers suddenly banged one fist down onto the hood of the car. Hutch jumped six inches. "Damnit," Powers said furiously. "I just went inside for coffee. A fucking cup of coffee. That's all. How can this have happened so fast? How come it happened at all? Jesus, it just doesn't make any sense." He took hold of Hutch's arm. "How can he be dead like that when I just bought him a jelly doughnut?"

Hutch patted the young man on the back awkwardly. Young? He's probably only five years younger than me. But I feel old. Christ, I feel old. Finally Powers moved away and took a deep breath. "Okay?" Hutch asked quietly.

"Yeah. Sorry." He cleared his throat. "Sorry."

Starsky had been watching the Crime Lab team. "Sure," he said. "Don't worry about it."

Powers was calm now and there was something even more painful in his sudden icy steadiness than there had been in his tears. "It's just that... well, Dick wasn't just my partner. He was my best friend. And to find him like that... ." He looked at the two of them. "Maybe you don't understand, but it's like a part of me was laying there dead, too."

Neither of them answered. They both stared at the ground.

Finally Starsky flipped open his notebook. "What can you tell us, Mike? Did you and... Dick have any trouble on patrol just before this?"

"No. Nothing." He shook his head. "It was a quiet tour." He managed a rueful half-smile. "In fact, we were bitching about being bored. Wishing something would happen." He fell silent.

"So you stopped for coffee?" Starsky urged gently.

"Uh-huh. At Petey's Cafe. That's about five blocks from here. It's where we always stop."

Although Powers didn't mention it, they stopped there every tour because Petey gave them free coffee. Everybody got free coffee somewhere. Well, almost everybody. Except these two detectives, Powers suddenly remembered. It dawned on him then that this was the Starsky and Hutch, the infamous team of hotshots. Rumor had it that they took nothing from nobody. In fact, rumor had it that Starsky had once poured a cup of steaming hot coffee over the bald head of a cafe proprietor who had tried to insist that the pair take coffee on the pad. Of course, the cafe was fronting a dope ring and the coffee offered was probably symbolic of future considerations,
but still Starsky's action seemed a little rash. Word had it that he could be pretty mean when he wanted to. He seemed pleasant enough now, though.

Starsky, blissfully unaware of his reputation for meanness, stopped writing. "And you went in?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I went in. We tossed for it and I won."

Hutch raised his brows curiously and Powers smiled again. "The waitress. A really built little blonde. We always flipped to see who got to go in."

Hutch returned the smile. "Got'cha."

Starsky just waited, pencil poised.

Powers nodded, acknowledging that he knew what was expected of him. He took a moment to collect his thoughts, took a deep breath, and continued in a monotone. "So I went in and got two cups of coffee and a jelly doughnut for Dickie. He can eat anything and it never shows. Me, all I have to do is look at the stuff and I get fat. Dick is always after me to go jogging with him."

Starsky just let him talk. "Says it'd make me feel better. Probably he's right." He stopped suddenly. "Sorry. So I got the coffee and went back to the car."

"And?" Hutch said.

"And nothing. He was gone."

"Gone?" Starsky repeated, glancing up.

"Yeah. The car was turned off. His door was shut. He was just... gone." Powers sounded like a bewildered child.

"So what did you do?" Hutch asked.

"I looked for him. See, I figured maybe something was happening in one of the buildings on the block and he went to check it out." Powers was in total control now; the facts came out as he had been taught at the Academy. "See, the rest of the block is all empty. The buildings are supposed to be torn down to build a bank or something. Petey's is the only place still open. We get a lot of vandals in the other places."

"You checked all the buildings?"

"Yessir. And I yelled for him. I did everything I could think of and then I radioed headquarters and they sent out three more cars." He stopped as a thought came to him. "Goddamn. I guess Dickie was already dead. When I was yelling for him and looking for him. He was probably already dead and I didn't know it." He shook his head. "Damn. I should have known."

"You had no way," Hutch said gently.
"But... I should've known."

"I understand you found the body?" Starsky asked.

"Yeah." Powers rubbed one hand back and forth across the car. "I was driving through the park, you know, just looking, and I saw something laying by the side of the road. I thought... well, I don't know what I thought, but I got out to take a look. And it was Dick. Shot. Dead." He shrugged. "That's all."

"Okay, Mike," Starsky said, shutting his notebook. "We'll be in touch."

"Yeah... hey, we'll find this bastard, huh?"

"Sure," Starsky agreed, not knowing. "We'll find him."

"Okay." Powers put on his hat, straightened his tie, and wiped his nose. "It's just that I don't know what's going to happen," he said vaguely. "I don't have a partner anymore, you know?" He shook his head and opened the car door. "I guess they'll give me a new partner. Won't they?"

"Sure," Hutch said. "Sure they will."

Powers paused getting into the car, watching as the M.E.'s car pulled away. "Won't be the same, though," he murmured. His voice was so soft that they could hardly hear him. "Just won't be the same." He slid behind the wheel and slammed the door.

They watched him light a cigarette--disregarding for the first time the rule against smoking while on duty and in "conspicuous view of the public"--check his cap in the mirror, and drive off.

Starsky shoved the notebook back into his pocket, flinching a little as his muscles protested. Hutch glanced at him. "Sure you're okay."

"Uh-huh. Yes, mother, I'm fine."

The scene was beginning to empty now. Dobey, looking tired, came over to them. "Are you back to work, Starsky," he asked, "or just sightseeing?"

"I'm back, Cap."

"Good. You two are catching this one."

In police parlance, that meant they would be in charge of the investigation. This case was different, though, because a cop had been the victim. Not that such a case was necessarily handled by the investigating officers with any more skill or dedication than the murder of an ordinary citizen would have been. What it did mean was that every other cop on the force, from traffic control to the commissioner's office, would be doing whatever he or she could to help apprehend the killer. Even those who were off-duty would be drifting into their respective precinct houses to see what they might do.
None of which would probably help Starsky and Hutchinson one damned bit.

Starsky took the wheel of the Torino. Hutch opened his mouth to suggest that perhaps prudence would dictate that he continue driving, but then he kept quiet and climbed into the passenger seat. Starsky acknowledged the concession with a slight smile as they left the park behind.

"Petey's Cafe?" Hutch said.

"Right. Let's check out the waitress."

"I like a man who gets right to the heart of a matter," Hutch commented.

As Powers had said, the cafe was on a street destined to be demolished in the cause of urban renewal. In Starsky's opinion, that was not a bad idea. The empty buildings gave the place a desolate appearance, especially at night. "Don't think I'd come here for coffee even if it was free," Starsky said as they approached the cafe.

"Why? It looks just like your kind of place," Hutch replied. "Don't you love restaurants where you can't see in through the windows because of the dirt?"

Starsky hurried a little to keep pace with his partner. "This street is scary. Looks like a ghost town."

Hutch grinned, ducking his head so Starsky wouldn't see, and pushed the cafe door open.

The person behind the counter was definitely not the "really built" waitress Powers had spoken of. He was an overweight, dirty T-shirt-clad, cigar-smoking slob. He was also sadly lacking in the proper Chamber of Commerce attitude. Although the place was empty and looked in serious need of customers, he didn't greet them cheerfully. In fact, he scowled when they came in, barely bothering to glance up from the scratch sheet he was perusing. Of course, it was possible he might have been one of those people--who number in the millions--that claim an ability to smell a cop a mile off. Maybe he knew they weren't customers.

Starsky, feeling a not entirely-unjustified wariness toward someone who outweighed him by about one hundred and fifty pounds, lingered at the far end of the counter, studying some pie that was displayed in a grimy plastic case. The pie was either cherry or apple. Or peach. He couldn't tell.

Hutch walked over and tossed his I.D. open-faced, onto the counter. "Evening," he said.

The man deigned to look at the badge, then at Hutch. "Yes, sir," he said, meaning absolutely no respect at all.

"A cop got killed tonight," Hutch said.
"I didn't do it." The fat face, which lacked all semblance of jolliness, quivered in what Hutch guessed was supposed to be a smile. It was distinctly unpleasant. "Unless he ate the hash. I never recommend the hash."

"You're funny," Hutch said flatly. "Hey, Starsky," he said, raising his voice a little.

"Yeah?" Starsky replied, still studying the pie.

"We got us a regular Bob Hope here. Remind me to laugh later, will you?"

"Sure, partner, I'll make a note of it."

Hutch picked up his I.D. and replaced it in his pocket. "Look, Mr...?"

"Petey."

"Look, Petey, the cop who got iced was sitting in front of your place when he was snatched. His partner was in here getting coffee."

"Yeah?"

"You've got a waitress? A blonde?"

"Yeah."

Hutch sighed. "Petey, are you really all that hot to take a trip downtown?"

Petey sneered. "Rubber hose time? You can't haul me in. I ain't done nothing."

"Haven't you? Well, you better start doing something right now. You better start talking to me."

Petey only looked down at his scratch sheet again.

Starsky had perched on a stool at the end of the counter and was playing absently with the sugar packets. "Health Department been around here lately, Petey?" he inquired in a friendly tone.

"I'm clean," Petey protested.

"Yeah?" Starsky lifted the plastic cover off the pie case, smiled sweetly, and smashed the cover against the edge of the counter. "It's illegal to have food sitting around uncovered," he said amid the clatter of plastic falling to the floor. "Isn't that right, Hutch?"

"That's right, buddy."
Petey, his face mottled red with anger, glared at Starsky and took a step in his direction. Hutch leaned across the counter swiftly and grabbed a handful of quivering flesh. "Don't do it, Petey," he said gently. "Don't even think about it."

Petey stopped.

Starsky relaxed, trying not to let it show how much it had hurt his arm to destroy the damned piece of plastic.

The fat man spoke to Hutch, still eying Starsky malevolently. "I don't know nothing about any cop getting killed. I just got here an hour ago. Sometimes the beat cops stop here for coffee. I believe in cooperating with the fuzz."

"Yeah, sure, you're going to get the good citizenship award. Now what about the waitress?"

"Name's Candy something... Gable, that's it, Candy Gable."

"Good boy, Petey. Got an address?"

"Yeah, somewheres." There was a pause and Petey sighed. "You mean, I gotta go look for it?"

"Bingo."

"Just a minute," he said, disgruntled. He lumbered into the back.

Hutch walked over and stood next to Starsky. "Bet that hurt."

"Huh?" Starsky said, feigning ignorance.

"Your Tarzan of the Jungle routine. Bet it hurt your arm."

"Oh, that. Nah," he lied.

Petey came back finally, holding a slip of paper delicately between his fingers. "The broad lives at 67 Milgrim Avenue. Apartment 4-B."

"Thanks for your fantastic cooperation, Petey," Hutch said, already heading out the door.

"To hell with it. Hey, you, punk," Petey yelled at Starsky.

Starsky stopped. "Yeah?"

"I'm gonna write a letter to City Hall about that cover you busted."

"Oh, are you? Well, make sure that you spell my name right. H-u-t-c-h-i-n-s-o-n. Ken." He smiled and went out.
Hutch was standing on the sidewalk, glaring at him. "Why'd you do that?"

"Do what?" Starsky said innocently.

"Give him my name like that?"

They got into the car. "Did I give your name? Hell, I'm sorry, Hutch. But you know how people are always getting our names wrong? Calling me Hutch and you Starsky?"

"Yeah, well, I've never been able to understand that. I don't look anything like somebody named Starsky. And, anyway, what's that got to do with it?"

"Well, I guess I just got a little mixed up about which is which. Sorry about that."

Hutch only growled in response. He didn't say another word on the journey over to 67 Milgrim.

This street, though not destined for razing, should have been. It was not the kind of place one would like to visit on a dark night alone--or even, in one curly-haired detective's opinion, in the company of one's partner.

The lobby of number 67 was redolent with the distinctive smells of human poverty--heavy grease, spilled wine, urine. Starsky and Hutch were so used to it that the atmosphere only vaguely penetrated their consciousnesses. Rather doubtfully, they got into the creaky elevator. While it moved reluctantly upwards, Starsky entertained himself by reading the graffiti scrawled on the walls. One colorful anatomical suggestion made his forehead wrinkle. "Hey, Hutch," he whispered, nudging his partner in the ribs.

"What?" Hutch replied, still ticked off.

Starsky pointed. "Is that possible? I mean, could somebody really do that?"

Hutch read the eloquent phrase. The elevator door slid open. "Not everybody," he said archly. He stepped out of the elevator, leaving Starsky gaping.
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RUTH 79

JESUS SAVES
Starsky jumped out after him, almost getting trapped in the closing doors, and followed Hutch down the hallway.

The door opened at the first knock. Obviously, however, they were not who the girl inside had been expecting to see on her threshold. Her bright smile of welcome slowly faded. "Yeah?" she said.

"You Candy Gable?" Hutch asked, showing his badge.

"Yeah. What's wrong?" Her figure was everything promised by Powers, and as was clearly visible through her lemon-yellow negligee, it was all real. The hair showed black roots beneath the blonde, but the body was all real.

"Can we come in?" Hutch said. "We'd like to ask you a few questions.

She moistened her already moist lips. "Well, I'm expecting company...."

"We won't be long," Starsky assured her.

She stepped aside and they went in. The room was furnished in early Woolworth, with at least six pictures painted on black velvet hanging on the walls, each worse than the last. It was clean, at least. Candy perched on the sofa and tried to cover herself demurely. It couldn't be done. She was definitely not a genuine blonde, Starsky noted.

"You know a couple of cops named Powers and McGowan?" Hutch asked.

She looked determinedly thoughtful for the length of time she apparently thought the question warranted, then smiled. "Oh, you mean Mike and Dick? Sure, I know them."

"Were they into Petey's earlier?"

"Yes. Well, Mike was. He came in for coffee, like always."

Starsky, whose attention had wandered, struggled to concentrate. "Anything unusual?" was the best he could manage in the terms of a question.

"Unusual? Like what?"

Hutch decided that the simple approach was the best one in this particular instance. "Candy, did anything happen tonight that didn't usually happen?" he asked slowly.

Again, she thought. Her chest heaved. The two actions seemed somehow connected. Starsky had never found the thought process so fascinating. "Oh, yes," she said finally.

They both leaned forward eagerly.
"There was a whole lot of cop cars parked out in front. But that was after Mike left. And somebody came in to ask if Dick had been in, but I said no, because he hadn't, only Mike." She was pleased with herself. They were pleased with her. Everybody smiled.

They walked slowly to the door. "Was there anybody suspicious hanging around tonight?" Hutch asked.

"No... just the regulars."

Starsky tried fervently to think of another question, one that would call for a great deal of deep thought, but he came up blank. Too soon, he was back in the elevator, staring at the suggestion that was still on the wall. Again, it gave him pause. "Hutch," he began.

"Don't ask, Starsk," Hutch said. "Just don't ask."

So Starsky didn't ask.

They went to headquarters next. Late as it was, there were a number of officers, some off-duty and dressed in civvies, with I.D.s hanging from their shirt pockets, milling about. A cop had been killed, and everybody wanted to help. Admittedly, their motivations were mixed. Yes, it made them angry and they wanted to nab the son of a bitch. But it also scared them and made them feel painfully vulnerable. If there was a copkiller on the prowl, who might be next?

Hutch got the files of both the dead officer and his partner from Personnel and brought them into the squad room, where Starsky sat drinking a Coke. "I wish they'd put Dr. Pepper in the soda machine," he complained, not for the first time.

"Get up a petition," Hutch replied unsympathetically, handing him Powers' file while he sat down with McGowan's dossier.

"That's not a bad idea. Will you sign it?" Starsky asked, propping his feet on the desk and opening the file.

Hutch only looked at him, his blue eyes guileless, then started to read.

It didn't take long to finish. Neither file held much beyond Academy reports. The two officers hadn't been around long enough to accumulate much of anything else. There was something sad in that, but they did not allow themselves to dwell on the fact.

They straightened at the same moment and looked at one another across the desk. "Damn," Hutch said, massaging his neck.

"You didn't really expect to find anything, did you?"
"No. But it would have been nice." He picked up Starsky's Coke and finished off the last warm, flat swallow. "We better go get some sleep," he said, standing. "I think tomorrow is going to be a very long day."

Starsky nodded, but didn't get up. He swiveled the chair back and forth slowly, his face closed and unreadable.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He shook his head and finally stood. "Nothing's wrong. I was just thinking."

"That's a refreshing change. What were you thinking about, mushbrain?"

Starsky was searching for his car keys. "About Mike Powers."

"Don't." Hutch's voice was strangely harsh and Starsky looked at him in surprise. "I mean it, Starsk. Don't think about Powers. It won't help him and it won't help you. It won't help us."

"I know... but... well, I was just wondering what's going to happen to him now."


"Yeah, but he... ." Starsky's voice dwindled off. For a long moment, fear was a palpable thing, hovering in the room between them, touchable and much too real. Starsky stared at Hutch, wondering what was going on behind the cloudy eyes that he could usually read so well. "Hutch," he said tentatively.

"Let's go home," Hutch said. He broke the mood, dispelled the fear, chased away the hobgoblins, by crashing out through the swinging doors.

Starsky took a deep breath and followed him.

**
CHAPTER SIX

Louis bought a morning paper and some food and drove out to his new home. It was a long drive, but he didn't mind, because when he got there the place was so perfect. And it all belonged to him.

He had spent one whole morning searching for a place. A place that was isolated so that he could go about doing what had to be done in privacy. Someplace secret. Then, having taken a wrong turn and trying to find his way back to the highway, he stumbled across the deserted amusement park. It seemed like an unbelievable stroke of luck until he realized that it was more than luck—it was divine intervention. More proof that his cause was being backed in heaven. Oh, yes, he was the holy avenger and God and all the angels wanted him to punish Kenny.

He parked his car behind the entrance wall and carried his purchases into his favorite building, the one called MAZES OF FUN. He wound his way to the center of the twisted passages, wondering how they managed to make the floor do such funny things. At first, he had hardly been able to walk in the building because of the way it was built, but now it didn't bother him at all. He thought it was funny.

When he reached the center, he spread a blanket on the floor and stretched out, opening the newspaper. Eating cold Big Macs and drinking watery root beer, he read the front page story carefully. Front page. That pleased him. His mood was so cheerful that even the mention of Kenny's name brought forth only a chuckle.

Sauce from the hamburger dripped out and fell onto the page. He wiped it away impatiently so that he could finish the story.

Detective Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson refused to comment on any leads the police might have.

*Big deal, Louis thought. Damned big deal, ain't he? Well, he and I both know they don't have any leads. All they got is one dead cop.*

Louis finished two of the hamburgers and wrapped up the third to have later. Then he lit a cigarette and leaned back to think. To plan. A man had to have a plan—like a map along the road of life, as Dr. Goldbaum used to say.

So. Yeah, they had one dead cop. But that wasn't enough. No, not enough. Had to be at least one more corpse before he could get down to the real point of it all. One murder, well, that might be anything. A killing done just for kicks, maybe. That happened, although Louis couldn't understand it. Killing just for the fun of it was crazy.

Or it might have been a grudge killing. Even a mistake. But two identical murders... that began a pattern. And when the pattern was apparently continued beyond two... he chuckled.

Yes, there had to be another death. But not quite yet. Give them a couple of days to worry. Not to rush, as old Goldbaum would have said. All in good time.
Meanwhile there was a lot to be done. Preparations. Louis looked around his new domain proudly. He still couldn't believe his luck in finding this place. The only disadvantage was its distance from the city--it was a good forty-five minute drive. But that slight inconvenience was more than offset by the positive aspects. And even the fact that it was so far from the city was good, in a way. It meant that nobody else would be around to bother him.

He stretched and craned his neck so that he could make out part of the sign that hung over the park's entrance through a hole in the roof. --UNLAN--.

FUNLAND. Oh, yeah. Fun and games for Kenny. Time for Kenny to find out who was really King of the Mountain. He'd be sorry. So sorry. Him and his good friend, David. It was all going the way Louis wanted it to.

Louis belched.

The hamburgers had filled him to the point of repleteness and the rest of the day stretched before him. He lit another cigarette. Later, he would have to make a complete tour of the park and find out just where would be the best place to entertain a guest. A real important guest. He chuckled. Fun and games for Kenny. The chuckle grew as he thought about what he was going to do.

The sound of his laughter echoed hollowly through the MAZES OF FUN.

**
CHAPTER SEVEN

The investigation was going nowhere.

Starsky sat in the squad room reading the same skimpy reports for the fiftieth time in the past two days. He already knew what he would find there. Nothing. There just wasn't anything to give even a hint as to who might have killed Richard McGowan and why. But when he couldn't think of anything else to do, reading reports was better than just sitting. At least he looked busy.

When he realized that he'd been staring at the same sentence for ten minutes, he gave up with a sigh and leaned back to pour himself the latest in an uncounted number of cups of coffee. It tasted even worse than usual, but his senses were so numbed that he hardly noticed.

The door to Dobey's office suddenly swung open and the Captain appeared. "Starsky, where's your partner?"

Starsky shrugged. "Don't know." He glanced at his watch and frowned. It was later than he'd thought. "I do not know," he repeated slowly, realizing that Hutch was ninety minutes late getting back from a meeting at the D.A.'s office.

"You don't have any idea?" Dobey pressed, his face solemn.

"No." Starsky set his coffee cup down with deliberation. "Probably the meeting just ran long."

But Dobey shook his head. "I just called Hartland. He said that Hutchinson left right on time."

At the most, it was a fifteen minute drive.

Neither of them said anything for a long time. Someone in the room was typing slowly and painfully, and Starsky listened to the tortured sound for a moment. "Probably he just stopped for something," he said finally.

"Sure," Dobey agreed.

They didn't believe it, but neither of them knew why they couldn't just accept that simple, safe explanation. "Look," Starsky said, "just because somebody ices one cop, that doesn't mean that every time a guy is late..."

"Right, right," Dobey said.

Starsky reached for the phone and dialed Communications. "Patch me through to Hutchinson," he said, skipping the preliminaries. "He's in his car."

A moment later, the voice of the radio operator came back. "Sergeant Hutchinson does not answer."
"Try again," Starsky said tightly.

"There is still no response."

Starsky hung up very carefully. The sound of the typewriter went on in the background. Tap... tap... tap... tap... "Why the devil doesn't that bastard learn to type?" he burst out. Then he slammed to his feet. "I'm going to find him."

Dobey nodded, but Starsky was already gone.

He literally ran all the way to his car and then set out to cover the route between the station and the office where Hutch's appointment had been. He drove slowly, tapping the steering wheel, his eyes darting from side to side, missing nothing. He was a little bit scared and a whole lot angry at himself for being afraid. Hutch would laugh when he found out.

Starsky tried not to think about Mike Powers.

Powers must have felt this way, too. Angry and scared and embarrassed. Thinking that everything was all right, had to be all right, just had to be, so why worry? Powers had probably felt that way right up until the time he'd found his partner's body.

Damn.

Starsky was praying in Hebrew, words he thought he'd forgotten a long time ago. The radio crackled and he jumped. "Zebra-3, Zebra-3."

He grabbed the mike. Hutch must be trying to reach him. Damnit. He'd probably stopped at the health food store to replenish his supply of goat's milk or something equally disgusting. "Yeah? Zebra-3 here."

"Stand by for a patch-through to Captain Dobey."

Dobey. Not Hutch. The hand that held the mike was suddenly slippery with sweat. Starsky didn't say anything.

A moment later, Dobey's voice filled the car. "Starsky?"

Something in Dobey's tone made Starsky's mouth go dry. "Yeah, Cap, I'm heading east on Bellaire now, but there's no sign of--" He spoke quickly, hoping desperately that he could keep Dobey from saying anything else.

"Starsky," Dobey broke in, "we've got another body. Corner of Malvern and Wrigley."

Starsky was silent, waiting, not even breathing.

"Male. Cuffed. Shot once in the head."
"And?" he said finally, not even recognizing his own voice.

"That's all I have. I'm en route to the scene."

"Shit." Starsky slammed the mike back into place and pressed the accelerator to the floor. Making a U-turn, he sideswiped two cars and didn't even know it. "It's not Hutch," he said aloud, angrily.

He could feel his heart beating with such intensity that it was almost painful. Concentrating on that pounding, he tried not to think about anything else.

Hutch... .

It wasn't fair. It wouldn't be fair if Hutch was dead.

Starsky remembered when his father died. That had been a terrible time. Grief then had been all mixed up with anger at the manner of the death, fear for what would happen next, and a chilling, almost physical sense of betrayal.

_How could my father die and leave me all alone?_

Of course, he wasn't a kid now. He knew that his father had not chosen to die, had not willingly betrayed him. That had been a child's reaction to something beyond his comprehension. The hurt had been so great that there was no room for logic. Now he could be logical.

_How could Hutch die and leave me all alone?_

Something came back to him, something he'd not thought of in years. When they came and told him about his father, he went a little crazy. He grabbed the old man's service revolver from its holster and charged out into the street, ready to kill. It was nearly two hours before his uncle found him in an alley, still clutching the gun, trying to find the punk who'd murdered his father.

Of course, now he realized that such personal vengeance was not the right way. There were laws and he was sworn to uphold those laws. Justice must be served. Even a killer of cops deserved a trial. Even Hutch's killer... .

He knew that he would kill the one who murdered Hutch. Knew it in the deepest recesses of his mind and heart. He wasn't a kid now. They wouldn't be able to stop him. Nobody would.

"It's not Hutch," he said again. "Please...."

From a block away, he could see several zone cars parked on the shoulder of the road. People milled about on the sidewalk, staring down into a hollow ravine.
Starsky squealed to a stop, nearly tail-ending one of the black-and-whites. He was out of the car before the engine died, pushing and shoving his way through the crowd. "Get out of my way!" he yelled. "Damnit, let me through!"

He half-ran, half-slid down the grassy incline and reached the bottom on his knees. The group of cops standing there parted so that he could get to the body. He realized that his eyes were closed and that he was afraid to open them.

He said the prayer again, took a deep breath, and looked.

The body lay face up in the grass, hands cuffed in front, blond hair stained with blood pressed against the ground. The dead man wore a blue uniform. A cop. Another dead cop. But not Hutch.

"Not Hutch," he whispered. "Oh, god." He clutched at the grass, relieved, and at the same time guilty because he was so damned glad it wasn't Hutch. Glad it was somebody else. Anybody else. Just anybody but Hutch.

"Starsky?"

He turned his head and saw Dobey. "Cap," he said, pushing himself to his feet. "I think we've got a maniac on our hands." His voice was hoarse.

Dobey just looked at him, not saying anything, then handed him the I.D. on the victim.

Starsky took one more look at the dead officer. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry you're dead. Really... please believe that.* He walked back up the incline and slumped behind the wheel of his car. All of those people whose job it was to record the scene were scurrying around doing just that. Everything they jotted down, or photographed, or picked up would be added to the files he and Hutch already had. More reading material.

He rubbed his eyes with the heel of one hand and watched dully as a car from the M.E.'s office pulled up next to his. Hutch climbed out, said something to the driver, and came over. "Hi," he said, sliding into the passenger seat. "Another one, huh? This really stinks."

Starsky didn't look at him. "Where the hell have you been?" he asked, his voice very soft.

Hutch was watching the photographer. "Ahh, my damn car broke down. By the time the tow showed up and--"

"Why didn't you call in?"

"I called the tow. Didn't Paulson in the garage let you know? I asked him to. Or anyway, I meant to. Maybe I forgot."
Starsky was a little awed by the intensity of his own anger, so he fought to keep his voice totally devoid of emotion. What he really wanted to do was grab Hutch and beat the shit out of him. "Goddamnit, you should have called me. We've got another murder here."

Hutch was trying to clean an oil stain from the front of his shirt. "Yeah, sure, I know; that's why I'm here. By the time I got back to headquarters, you were all over here, so I hitched a ride with Knopf." He rubbed at the stain with his handkerchief. "I think this shirt is ruined." He didn't really care about the shirt, of course. Sometimes, though, you had to concentrate on the small, unimportant things or become totally overwhelmed by what was happening. He cared deeply, passionately, about the dead cop, but it wouldn't do any good to sit here crying about it. So he bitched about a ruined shirt. "Same M.O., is it?" he asked.

When there was no answer, Hutch glanced at Starsky. His partner was gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white. "Starsk?" Hutch said hesitantly. He glanced out the window as the body was carried by and a terrible thought struck him. "Hey... Jesus, is that somebody we know?"
"I thought it was you!" Starsky burst out.

Hutch looked surprised. "What?"

Starsky forced himself to relax, slowly loosening his fingers. "You were late," he said flatly. "I went out looking for you, because you were late and I couldn't raise you on the radio. I tried. But you didn't answer. And then the call came across about a body being found cuffed and shot. I thought... I thought...." He shrugged and fell silent.

Hutch sighed, shoving the handkerchief away. "God, Starsk, I'm sorry... I...."

"It's okay."

Hutch swore under his breath. "No, it's not okay. I just never thought... well, I didn't know there would be another murder."

"Forget it." Starsky wanted to forget it, to put the whole thing out of his mind. He didn't want to think about Hutch being dead or his own frightening anger or any of that.

"Damn, you must have been... I know how I would have felt."

"Do you?"

Hutch had no answer for that. They sat in silence, watching the Crime Lab team outside. "It's hot," Hutch finally murmured. Then: "What the hell is going on here?"

"Vendetta?" Starsky suggested.

"A specific grudge, you mean? Or against cops in general?"

"Who knows? Guess we'll have to find out if there's any link between McGowan and this guy. Maybe there's something to connect them." Starsky started the car.

"Maybe."

"Of course, I won't hold my breath."

Hutch heard the softening of Starsky's tone and knew that his partner was coming down from the peak of anger and fear. He relaxed against the seat. "Well, if it's there, we'll find it, buddy."

"Yeah." He glanced at Hutch. "What's wrong with your car?"

"Don't know. It overheated and started smoking. I bailed out. Thought the whole thing was going to burn. But it didn't."

"That's good."
"The guy at the garage said that he wouldn't even be able to look at it until Wednesday. So guess
you're stuck with being the chauffeur until then."

"S'okay. At least, I'll know where you are all the time." He was grinning as he said it, but the
smile did not reach his dark eyes.

"Maybe we should drop in on Huggy," Hutch said after a moment. "Could be there's some talk
going down on the street."

"Worth a try." Starsky wheeled the car around and headed for the Pits.

That establishment was jammed with lunchtime business and Huggy Bear looked less than
delighted when Hutch gestured at him to leave the bar. Nevertheless, he followed them to the
back. "Make it snappy, my new centurions," he said. "I've got customers to keep happy."

Starsky perched on a table and starting shelling and eating peanuts. "Cut the jive, Hug," he said
mildly. "We've got another dead cop."

Huggy whistled softly. "Numero duo? Someone does not like the boys in blue this week."

Starsky was engrossed in his peanut shelling, so Hutch took up the conversation. "Any idea
who?"

"You mean has any word come along the grapevine concerning some dude with a king-sized
grudge?"

"Exactly."

Huggy shook his head. "Nary a word, my friendly flatfeet."

"Nothing?" Starsky said, unable to hide his disappointment.

"El zippo. Sorry. But rest assured that I shall keep my diligent ear pressed to the ground."

"Yeah, do that," Hutch said.

"Hey, Hug," Starsky said between peanuts, "which ear is the diligent one?"

Huggy, already on his way back to the bar, stopped short and looked around, a pained expression
on his face. "The way things is," he said, "I would suggest that you officers of the law avoid
aggravating what few friends you have left."

They both grinned at him and walked out, Starsky scattering a trail of peanut shells in his wake.
Back in the car, they were silent.
The street looked just as it always did--the people of the city were going about their various legal and illegal activities, sweltering in the heat a bit more than was usual, but continuing to love, laugh, kill, and fornicate. It all looked normal. But it wasn't the same.

It wasn't the same because there was a mania out there killing cops. They were, by virtue of their job, the targets of an unknown, ruthless enemy. This was not a new feeling, of course, but the events of the past few days had intensified it. They were very aware of their position on the firing line.

Cops tend to be a clannish group; sociologists have studied the syndrome and arrived at many explanations, most of which draw negative conclusions having to do with paranoia and other character faults. That may well be because the sociologists have never been cops. Dave Starsky and Ken Hutchinson were most definitely feeling clannish as they rode the streets of their city, a city that had become a deathtrap. Theirs was an especially small clan. It consisted of just the two of them. It was them against... well, against everybody else. The killer could be anybody. Even, god forbid, another cop.

Hutch had once asked: "Who the hell can we trust?" Starsky's reply, "Like always, me and thee," was more than a flippant comeback. It was the truth. In those words was the very soul of their relationship. Me and thee. They trusted only each other and that trust had no boundaries. Although the trust was long-established, they never took it for granted. Each treated it as a treasured object.

Hutch leaned back, stretching one arm across the back of the seat and staring out the window. He was wishing that Starsky would say something funny. The wish was so strong that he almost voiced it. "Starsk," he almost said out loud, "crack one of your rotten jokes, willya? Make me laugh. Please." But he glanced at his partner and kept the wish inside. Starsky's face was tired and pale, almost haggard. So Hutch kept quiet.

Starsky wondered what Hutch was thinking about. His partner sometimes tended to brood, a habit that came, Starsky maintained, from reading too many books by authors with long Russian names. Hutch thought about things too much. That wasn't all bad, of course. It was nice having a partner who was smarter than average. Average on the force was not that great to begin with, actually. But Hutch was... deep. The danger in that, Starsky knew, was that one could get too deep; one could drown. Which was why Hutch was lucky to have him for a partner. Because he always knew when to reach down and pull Hutch up.

"Hey, Hutch," Starsky said finally.

"Hmm?"

"Remember the other day when we were talking about going to Europe?"

"Yes, I remember. So?"

"Well, I was just wondering if we could go to Spain, too."
Hutch looked at him. "Senoritas, right?"

"Nope." Starsky grinned lasciviously. "Tacos."

Hutch laughed.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Louis was well-satisfied. The second killing was receiving even more coverage that the first had. After all, the first one might have been a fluke. A mistake. Or maybe the cop in question had been playing around with somebody else's wife. But two dead cops, that was something else.

This time the newspaper even had pictures. Academy snapshots of both dead officers. A nice shot of Anderson's body lying in the ravine. And a fuzzy, through-the-windshield view of Detectives Hutchinson and Starsky, apparently "stymied" by the crime, according to the caption.

"Stymied, are they?" Louis chuckled. He was sitting just outside the front gate, perched next to the big blue wooden horse that for generations of children had been the very symbol of FUNLAND. Louis liked the horse; it was good company. "Pretty soon they're gonna be more than stymied. Pretty soon they're gonna be crazy. Kenny will be flipping out."

Two deaths was enough, he figured. A pattern had been set. Cop vanishes. Cop is found dead. Simple. So simple, Louis thought cheerfully, that Kenny would never be able to figure it out.
Louis crushed out his cigarette and decided to walk around the park for a while before leaving to drive into the city. It was still early and such walks helped to relax him. Dr. Goldbaum had approved of walking. Every day, his sprightly little figure could be seen traversing the grounds of the hospital. Frequently Louis walked with him and Dr. Goldbaum would give him advice on how to live.

Once in a while now, he sort of missed Goldbaum's advice.

The amusement park was a good place to be. It made him think of the summer he was sixteen and worked as a roustabout in a small traveling circus. In fact, he and Kenny had joined the Franklin Brothers Circus together. It had been a good summer, the best of his life. Long, hot days filled with hard physical work that left him sweaty and satisfied and seemed to help ease the bewildering and unnamed tensions that had begun to inhabit his body. And when the days ended, there were the nights. Lazy hours spent under the stars, sleeping on just a blanket out in the open and talking to Kenny. Kenny could identify all the stars. He knew all their names, and he could tell the most wonderful stories about ancient gods and heroes. Kenny knew such exciting things.

Louis loved that summer. Loved the work and the animals and the constant traveling from place to place. Loved eating all his meals in the mess tent with the other sweating, swearing roustabouts. But most of all, he loved Kenny. He wanted desperately for Kenny to be his friend and for a while that summer, he thought that they were friends.

But it was all just a lie. Kenny only pretended to like him, because when the summer was over Hutchinson had no more time for him. Once school started and big man Kenny was being elected to things and playing ball and getting good marks and all that other stuff, he had no more time for Louis Mitchell, who never got elected to anything and who wasn't so smart.

The pain of that rejection was still there.

Louis was walking too fast. He tried to calm himself. He couldn't allow himself to get so upset. That much emotion interfered with his ability to think. And now he had to plan and think more carefully than ever.

The first two murders had been almost too simple. The poor dumb cops never knew what was happening to them. But they were just preliminary to the main event.

Louis stopped walking suddenly and pulled the newspaper clipping from his pocket. Carefully he unfolded it. The smiling face of David Starsky appeared in front of him. In his eyes, though, David wasn't smiling at Kenny, but straight off the page at him. They communicated silently.

Louis smiled tenderly. Soon now, David, he thought. Soon.

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A frightening pattern was developing. Bureaucracy felt obligated to respond. Meetings were held at the highest level. Orders filtered down. Subtle pressures were applied.
It all came to rest, eventually, on Starsky and Hutchinson.

At 1 A.M. two days after Anderson's murder they were still in the squad room. Most of their time had been spent poring over police records looking for a potential copkiller. Maybe someone who had threatened the police lately. Someone, in particular, who liked to cuff people and shoot them in the head. It was all coming to nothing. They could feel the hot breath of Dobey and the chief and the commissioner and the mayor and everybody else in the damned city on their necks. That didn't make the work any easier. Tension was building in both the detectives. They exchanged fewer and fewer words as the hours passed and those few were primarily profane and said irritably.

Finally Hutch pushed the pile of reports away in disgust. "We're wasting our time," he said bitterly.

Starsky yawned. "I know," he agreed, "but what else is there to do at 1:30 in the morning?"

Hutch tapped the desktop. "I think we should backtrack Anderson's beat again. Talk to everybody."

"Now? Hutch, everybody's in bed. Except you and me."

"Damnit, Starsk, somebody saw something. Anderson arrived at Glassner's Drug Store right on schedule. Twenty minutes later, he does not show up at Phillips Hardware. What happened? A few hours later his body turns up in a ravine. Why? How?" Hutch's voice was intense. "I want to know."

Starsky rubbed his face wearily. Christ, sometimes... sometimes it was hell having a friggin' knight in shining armor for a partner. "Ahh, Hutch... I want to know, too. But I'm asleep on my feet. I don't even know what I'm doing. I need to go home and get some sleep."

Hutch looked at him for a moment. "So? If it had been me lying dead in that ditch, would you still want to go home and sleep?"

Starsky, in the process of putting his holster on, froze, his face suddenly white with anger. "No, man," he said finally, his voice granite-hard. "No, I wouldn't. If it was you dead, I'd shave my head, don sackcloth and ashes, and mourn for thirty days and thirty nights. Does that make you happy?" He turned and stalked out the door, not looking back.

Hutch grabbed his jacket and gun and followed him.

Starsky didn't stop until he reached the car and even then he didn't say anything. He barely waited until Hutch was inside and had the door slammed closed before pulling away from the curb.
Hutch sat hunched in the seat, gnawing on his thumbnail, risking an occasional glance at his partner. Starsky's face was white marble in profile. "Aren't you going to say anything?" Hutch asked finally.

"No."

"Okay." He watched out the window for a moment. "Hey, why don't I just crash at your place tonight?" he suggested, determinedly cheerful. "It would save some time."

Starsky shrugged.

Hutch tapped the back of the seat with his fingers. "If you don't mind."

Starsky's only reply was to make a sharp right turn and head toward his own apartment.

"Well, fine," Hutch mumbled. "Or maybe I could just sleep on the sidewalk out front, if you'd rather. Whatever."

Starsky stopped short at a red light. Resting both arms on the steering wheel, he leaned forward so that he could see the signal. "Why'd you make that crack back in the office?" he said quietly.

"I shouldn't have. I'm sorry."

The light changed, but the Torino didn't move. "That was a really lousy thing to say to me, Hutch. I think that was the worst thing anybody ever said to me."

"I know, Starsk." He touched Starsky's shoulder lightly. "I'm really sorry." He wondered why he seemed to spend all his time lately saying that. "I'm just so damned tired."

"So am I, or I would've decked you," Starsky replied, easing through the yellow light.

"I deserved it," Hutch said ruefully. He beat a tune on Starsky's shoulder. "It's just... I've got a funny feeling about this whole case, Starsk. It bothers me."

"'Cause it's cops getting wasted?"

"No. Well, not entirely. It's... well, I feel like if we don't catch this guy now, it'll be too late."

"Too late? What do you mean?"

Hutch shook his head. "Hell, I don't know. Maybe I'm talking in my sleep."

"Yeah, well, that might explain some of the dumb things you've said lately." He smiled a little as he spoke.

"Right," Hutch agreed.
They didn't say much during the rest of the ride. Hutch kept his eyes closed until the car pulled to a stop in front of Starsky's. "Did we ever eat dinner?" he asked as they got out.

"I don't remember."

Hutch stopped abruptly and sat down on the back of the car. "Starsk . . ."

"Huh?" Starsky said, trying to find his apartment key.

"Before we go in there, I want to ask you one very important question."

Starsky looked at him. "What?"

"I won't have to eat salami for breakfast, will I?"

"Naw," Starsky said.

Hutch sighed in relief.

"--you can have pastrami." Starsky turned around and then gave a yelp as Hutch kicked him in the butt.

They went into the building.

~~

Louis saw them arrive at David's.

He stood in the doorway across the street and watched as they got out of the car and paused briefly, talking. Their voices were a soft murmur of words that he couldn't quite understand. The sight of them standing together in the circle of brightness from the street light made Louis feel strangely isolated. For a moment, he wanted desperately to step out of the shadows and be in the brightness with them. He wanted to touch and be touched. He yearned to be a part of them.
Kenny suddenly lifted his foot and kicked David, who gave a sharp holler that Louis heard clearly. Then they both laughed, easily and affectionately, and disappeared into the building. Louis, sharing their joke, grinned.

*Kenny must be spending the night,* he decided after a moment. *Hope he doesn't do that tomorrow night, too. That would mess up all my plans.* David had to be alone when it happened.

He yawned. It was time to go. He had the long drive home yet and tomorrow would be a very busy day. Nevertheless, he stood there a little longer, long enough to see the light go on upstairs, to watch two dark shadows moving behind the curtains. One of the curtains was pulled back suddenly and David appeared at the window. He stood there for a moment, apparently tinkering with the air conditioner. Louis stepped further back into the shadows, but David didn't even glance his way. He only pulled off his shirt, stretched, and said something over his shoulder before vanishing behind the curtain once more.

In a couple more minutes, the light went off.


Oh, yes. Sweet dreams. Tomorrow Kenny's nightmare would begin. Tonight he could fall asleep feeling safe and secure, probably listening to the sound of David's breathing, as Louis used to listen to Kenny's breathing years ago when they were stretched out under the stars. Sometimes he would stay awake for an hour, propped on one elbow, watching Kenny sleep.

Well, let Kenny sleep tonight. It was all about to end for him. After tomorrow, Kenny would be alone like Louis was alone now. After tomorrow, Louis would never have to be alone again.

**
CHAPTER NINE

It was their seventh interview of the morning.

The old woman made Hutch think of a canary as she bounced around the room in a bright yellow housedress, her eyes like two shining black jewels; her gaze darted from his face, to Starsky's, and back again. It made Hutch nervous to watch her.

The apartment was unbelievable. From the looks of the place, she'd started collecting furniture and stuff in about 1900 and never thrown a single thing away. Hutch shifted a little on the horsehair sofa; it was almost as uncomfortable as Starsky's couch where he'd slept—fitfully—the night before. He peered at his notes and tried to make some sense of what he'd written. Most of it seemed to have something to do with a cop named Flannagan, whom the old gal had known around 1920 and who had either shot Pretty Boy Floyd or been shot by him or else retired to Arizona to paint pictures of the Indians.

Starsky, meanwhile, took another bite of the oatmeal cookie the woman had insisted on serving them. He wondered idly whence came the myth that all grandmotherly types were good cooks. The cookies were the worst he'd ever eaten, worse even than the ones Hutch and he had concocted one Christmas after over-indulging in some 90-proof eggnog.

In fact, the only thing worse than the cookies was the sticky lemonade she'd poured for them. He took another sip and turned toward Hutch, raising his brows questioningly. But his partner only shrugged and started to close his notebook.

The old lady caught the exchange—Hutch doubted whether she ever missed anything—and she began to backpedal a little from her earlier vows of ignorance. "Now, boys," she said coyly, "I'm not saying that I did see anything on the night this poor officer was killed, mind you that. But if I did and if I should remember it later...."

"Yes, ma'am?" Hutch said politely, watching Starsky reach for what had to be his fifth cookie and begin to eat it. Hutch shuddered inside. Someday, he thought glumly, Starsk's stomach really will fall out and I bet he'll expect me to pick up the pieces.

"Well, if I did see something and I remember it later and call the police station, would you both come back?"

Hutch sighed, envisioning another visit to the claustrophobic apartment and, undoubtedly, more cookies. "Yes, ma'am, we sure would."

Starsky searched for one of his cards, couldn't find any and gestured at Hutch. "Give Miss Corby a card," he said.

"Sure thing, Detective Starsky," Hutch said sourly.

She took the card and studied it carefully. "Detective Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson."
"That's me."

"Gracious, you look so young to have such an important job."

"Uh-huh. Look, ma'am, you can just call the station and ask for that extension, if you remember anything."

A few minutes later they made their escape and headed back to the car. Seven interviews and what did they have to show for it? "Nothing," Hutch said glumly. "All that time, and we end up with absolutely nothing."

"Not exactly nothing," Starsky said as he slid behind the wheel.

"Oh?" Hutch thought quickly back over the interviews, but he couldn't remember a single damned thing of any significance. "What?"

"I've got a deluxe case of indigestion."

Hutch snorted unsympathetically. "I don't doubt it."

Starsky started the car. "God, those were the worst cookies I ever tasted."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Hutch crossed his arms and stared at Starsky, shaking his head hopelessly. "Then tell me something, partner. Why'd you eat five of them?"

A look of total amazement crossed Starsky's face. "I didn't!"

Hutch nodded smugly. "I was counting. Five cookies. And two glasses of that horrible lemonade."

"Yeah, really? Jesus." Starsky shook his head in dismay. "Why'd I do that?"

"Starsky, you'd eat anything put in front of you. As long as you could be absolutely sure that there wasn't any nutritional value in it at all."

Starsky scowled.

"We better head out to Riverview," Hutch said after a moment.

Starsky glanced at his watch. "What time is the service?"

"Eleven forty-five." Hutch took a black armband out of his pocket and pulled it on.
They were going to the funeral for Patrolman Anderson. Not to mourn, although they would, but to see who else turned up. It was just possible that, along with family, friends, and other cops, his murderer might appear. As macabre as it seemed, that sometimes happened.

"I hate funerals," Starsky muttered as he turned into the drive of the cemetery some twenty minutes later.

"Everybody hates funerals, mushbrain."

"But I really hate them."

"Uh-huh. Drop me here," Hutch said. "I'll walk through the crowd and meet you on the other side."

"'kay."

Hutch got out of the car and started across the grass toward the gravesite. He could see a long line of blue uniforms and he tugged self-consciously at the black armband that adorned his jacket. No one seemed to pay him any attention as he strolled slowly through the crowd. A young woman, probably Anderson's wife, stood next to the grave, holding a young boy by one hand. Neither of them was crying. Hutch paused, watching the scene for a moment. His eyes searched the faces of everyone there.

Not seeing anyone that he felt was the killer—how the hell do I know? he thought wearily—he walked again, crossing the lawn and reaching the curb just as the Torino slid up. Hutch got in.

"Anything?" Starsky asked.

Hutch shook his head. "You?"

"Nope."

They watched through the window as the service wound to its conclusion. Starsky flinched and jumped when the gun salute was fired. "I hate that," he said. "Don't you let them do any shooting when they stick me in the ground, okay?"

Hutch was pulling off the mourning band. "That's dumb, Starsk. We're going out in the same blaze of glory, remember? They'll be planting us at the same time."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot." He grimaced. "Jesus, I hope that doesn't mean they fire twice as many shots. What do you think?"

"I think this whole conversation is morbid and we ought to change the subject."

"Right."
"Let's get out of here," Hutch said. "This has been a really rotten morning."

Things didn't get any better as the day went on, unfortunately. Everybody on the force seemed on the one hand to be waiting for something else to happen and on the other to be praying that nothing would.

It was after midnight before Starsky and Hutch quit for the day. Too tired even for dinner, they drove out to Hutch's place in almost total silence. Starsky pulled to a stop in front of the building but didn't bother to turn off the car engine. "See you in the morning," he said, his voice raspy with weariness.

"Eight o'clock," Hutch said, opening the door.

"Eight?"

"Yeah, we have to go talk to Anderson's wife. Try to be on time for a change, huh?" He slid out of the car, then stopped and turned around, bending to look in at Starsky. There was a vaguely bewildered expression in his blue eyes. "Hey, Stark," he said.

Starsky looked at him blearily. "Huh?"

But Hutch just shook his head. "Nothing. I guess. See you."

"Yeah, see you, hot shot."

Hutch slammed the door shut. "Be careful," he said through the window.

Starsky waved and drove off.

Hutch stood on the sidewalk and watched until the red tail lights could no longer be seen. He tried to dismiss the vague but persistent sense of unease that had nagged at him for days now. It was just weariness, he knew, and the damned lack of progress on the two murders that made him feel this way.

After a moment, he shoved both hands into his pockets and went inside. A good night's sleep was all he needed. Everything would look much better in the morning. Maybe he and Stark would even break the case tomorrow.

Starsky sometimes thought that he could have made the drive between Hutch's place and home with his eyes closed. Although it was tempting, he didn't test the theory this night.

Tired as his body was, his mind still raced. As he drove, Starsky tried to sort through what they had on the case. No matter how he added it up, though, it came to the same thing: a big fat zero. Somebody was killing cops. Apparently randomly. Apparently. But Starsky had never liked pat
theories and he didn't like that one. More often than not, he'd discovered, a pattern could be detected in any criminal activity. He had no doubt that one could be detected here, given time.

Given time and enough dead cops.

He parked the car and got out. It felt good to get home. As he climbed the steps, he started to pull his holster off, trying to decide if he could stay awake long enough to drink a glass of chocolate milk. He pulled some mail from his box and unlocked the door, struggling to keep mail, gun, and holster all balanced.

The door swung open and he stepped in, reaching for the light switch.

He didn't know what hit him first—whether it was the slight movement in the darkness or the heavy, cloying odor of chloroform; but he knew instantly that someone was there, waiting for him in the safety of his own home.

Quick as the realization was, however, it was still too late. Something covered his face; the smell became overpowering and he began the long descent to the floor. *NO!* his mind protested helplessly. His body tried to respond, to struggle, but his arms wouldn't move the way he wanted them to. He flailed wildly, but couldn't get a grasp on whoever was there.

As he fell, one thought came with crystal clarity out of the fog that was enveloping him: ohchristhutchwillbemadwhenidontshowupontime.

The absurdity of that thought struck him at once. Hell, he wasn't going to be late. Be was going to be dead. Getting dead didn't hurt so much, he decided. But there was something that hurt a lot. Something... As the floor collided with his knees, he had one final thought: I hope Hutch doesn't find my body. That hurt Starsky. The thought of Hutch's pain.

*oh hell oh hell* "Hutch?" he whispered just before the floor smashed into his face.

**
CHAPTER TEN

At 7:45 A.M. Hutch dialed Starsky's number. He let the phone ring twelve times as he stood there drinking his breakfast. Figuring that a dozen rings were more than enough to wake even Starsky, he hung up. "Starsk must be on his way over," he said to the African violet. "Who says there are no more miracles?"

He finished the rest of his healthy morning concoction, rinsed the glass carefully, and went to finish dressing. By eight o'clock he was standing down on the sidewalk, waiting to see the red tomato come squealing around the corner. This day already threatened to be the hottest yet.

By 8:25 he was back upstairs. "Nobody could sleep through twelve rings, could they?" he bitched to the violet. "Except maybe David Starsky." As he spoke, he was dialing again. This time he let the phone ring twenty-five times.

He hung up slowly and glanced at the clock. 8:28.

He walked over to the window and looked down into the street. "All right," he said very quietly. "All right. Now Starsky is not at home. So he must be on his way. Probably he stopped for breakfast somewhere. Guess he didn't have any old pizza lying around."

The violet didn't even crack a smile.

Hutch waited fifteen more minutes, during which time he drank two glasses of water and paced the room some twenty times. *Hell, he could've walked over and been here by now.* He went to the phone again and dialed Starsky's number. This time, he hung up after only one ring, suddenly unable to bear the sound of that other phone not being answered.

He took a deep breath and dialed headquarters. Dobey answered. "Captain, I need emergency transport," he said, skipping the preliminaries.

"What's wrong?"

Hutch bit his lip, not wanting to say. He had an irrational fear that by voicing his suspicion that something had happened to Starsky, the suspicion would thus become fact. But Dobey was waiting. "Starsky hasn't shown up at my place, and he doesn't answer the phone. I need a black-and-white so I can go over there. He might be... sick or something."

Dobey was silent for a moment. "I'll have a zone car there in two minutes," he said. "And I'll meet you at Starsky's."

Hutch stalked the sidewalk like a caged animal until the squad car arrived. He jumped into the back seat and gave them Starsky's address. Neither of the uniformed men spoke to him; apparently they knew what was coming down.
Starsky's car was parked in its usual place. Hutch got out of the squad car and walked over to the Torino. It was locked, of course. It was just as it should have been. Except that it was very wrong. He leaned against the car and wiped sweat from his face.

The two patrolmen were watching him. "Do you want us to go up?" one of them asked.

He shook his head. "No. I'm going. You wait here for Captain Dobey."

The entrance hall felt cool. He walked up the steps slowly and deliberately, blocking his mind, not allowing thought. He simply catalogued impressions; he'd been a cop long enough to do that without thinking about it. Nothing seemed amiss. He passed no one on the stairs. A woman opened the door to pick up her morning paper. She nodded at him. He only stared at her. She disappeared back into her apartment.

The door to Starsky's apartment was not closed all the way. He pushed it open slowly. "Starsk?" he said. "Hey, Starsk?"

His voice echoed hollowly in the empty apartment. Hutch had never known how empty a place could feel. Yesterday's mail was scattered on the floor just inside the door. He wandered through each room, still taking mental notes. Bed unslept in. The dishes he and Starsky had used for yesterday's breakfast were still sitting on the cupboard. Coming back into the living room, he noticed the smell. He sniffed a couple of times, following the odor, and found a piece of cotton wadding next to the sofa, as if carelessly tossed there. Not touching it, he leaned forward. Chloroform.

He slumped onto the couch and closed his eyes.

A thought crept in: *Starsk is gone.*

Instantly, he clamped his mind shut. No thinking. Not yet. It was too dangerous. His hands were clenched. The worst part about it was that he wasn't surprised. He had known. Somehow, since the beginning of this case, he'd known. Even last night, saying good-bye to Starsky, he'd known. Good-bye... was it? God... he hadn't said enough. He hadn't said anything.

The floor creaked as somebody walked into the apartment. "Hutchinson?" Dobey said tentatively.

"Starsky is gone."
How simple it was, once the words were out. Hutch straightened and opened his eyes. He gestured toward the mail still lying on the floor. "Whoever it was must have been waiting for him when he came in last night. They used chloroform to knock him out and..." And what? "Then they snatched him." That was as far as he could go right now. Starsky was missing. Missing. A bad word, but not... final.

Dobey was making aimless circles in the middle of the room. "Why?" he said tightly. "Why?"

Hutch picked up a pillow from the couch and punched it once viciously. "Why?" He gripped the pillow tightly in both arms. "It's simple. Because somebody is killing cops and Starsky is a cop." That remark brought him a little too close to facing reality and he tightened his hold on the pillow, trying to swallow down a rising nausea. It kept coming.

He jumped up. "'Scuse me," he mumbled, walking quickly toward the bathroom. He slammed the door and leaned against it for nearly five minutes until the sick feeling passed. Then he took a deep breath, splashed cold water on his face, carefully and precisely dried it off, and went back into the other room.

A Crime Lab team had arrived and started its work. Hutch bent down to pick up the mail and glanced through it. A letter from New York. A renewal form for a PLAYBOY subscription. The current issue of MODEL RAILROADING. A lot of ads. Starsky must be on every damned mailing list in the whole country, he thought.

Dobey appeared next to him. "Hutchinson," he said, "we'll find him."

Hutch tossed the mail down onto the couch. "Uh-huh." He took out his wallet and dug one finger into the inside compartment. A key tumbled out into his open palm. "I'm taking Starsky's car," he said.

"Just where do you think you're going?"

"To find Starsk."

"Wait," Dobey began, "you don't even know where to start looking."

"I'll find him."

He shoved his way down the steps, going past more cops coming up, and detectives already talking to Starsky's neighbors. Hutch knew without asking that nobody had seen or heard anything out of the ordinary. Nobody ever did.

As he was unlocking the Torino, one of the men from the gathering crowd came up to him. "Detective Hutchinson?"

"Yeah?"
"Al Krause," he said, flashing a press card. "Is this another dead cop?"

Hutch wanted to smash his fist into the guy's curious face. But he didn't. "A police officer is missing," he said tightly. "That's all."

"Yeah, well, two others were 'missing' already and they both showed up dead. This Starky looks like three, right?"

"Starsky," Hutch said. "David Starsky. Is that such a damned hard name to say?" He slammed the door shut, just missing the reporter's fingers.

He drove two blocks before realizing that he had no idea where he was going. It didn't matter. The important thing was to keep moving. Just keep moving. Pretend that by working hard enough and long enough, he would succeed. He would find Starsky if he wanted to badly enough. It was like making a deal with the cosmic powers. By proving how much he cared, he would earn the right to get his partner back.

Ken Hutchinson was scared. And he was mad. But most of all, he was alone. God, was he alone.

**
CHAPTER ELEVEN

*I'm alive.*

That in itself was something of a surprise and it took a little getting used to. Starsky had expected to wake up dead. Or whatever. But here he was, indubitably alive--if somewhat cautiously so. Without opening his eyes, he attempted to analyze the situation.

He was lying on a narrow, exceedingly lumpy cot. His arms and legs were bound with tape of some kind. And, except for his underwear, he was naked. Even his watch, ring, and medallion were gone. Apart from a headache and some very cramped muscles, though, he seemed to be okay.
"I know you're awake, David, so you might as well open your eyes."

Starsky considered for a moment what the best response to that unexpected comment might be and finally decided to just open his eyes.

"There. That's better, isn't it?" The speaker was a stocky, bespectacled man about his own age. "I've been waiting a very long time for you to wake up." There was a hint of reproval in the voice.

"Yeah?" Starsky said. His cotton-dry mouth made talking difficult. "Could... could I have a drink?"

"Sure." The man rummaged in a grocery sack for a moment. "I'm sorry there's no ice, but I have your favorite." Proudly, he held up a can of Dr. Pepper. "See?"

Trying to ignore a faint chill of apprehension that swept through him, Starsky nodded. "Thanks, uh...?"

"My name is Louis," he said, popping the can open. Soda sprayed high in the air. "I can't cut you loose from the tape right now, David, so we'll just have to manage as best we can." He crouched next to the cot and slid one arm beneath Starsky, lifting him. "Don't drink too fast," he admonished.

Ignoring the warning, Starsky gulped the warm soda eagerly. His stomach, already queasy, rebelled, but he fought back the nausea. "Enough," he said and Louis lowered him carefully.

"Are you hungry?"

"No." Starsky's head was beginning to clear now and he was better able to survey the room they were in. There wasn't much to see. It was small and cramped, dominated by a huge old generator. Besides the cot on which he was lying, the only furnishings were a rickety wooden table and two chairs. There was one window, a small one up close to the ceiling. Sunlight streamed in through a large hole in the roof. Louis stood quietly, apparently willing to let Starsky satisfy his curiosity. "What's going on?" Starsky asked finally.

Louis sighed. "That's very... complicated, David. Later I'll tell you. Right now, I don't have time to explain it."

"Oh? Why? Are we going somewhere?"

"Just me. I have an important errand to run. But I'll be back."

"Terrific," Starsky muttered. Then: "Did you kill the two cops?" Bluntly. Hoping to throw him off.

"Yes, I did," came the calm reply. "But they don't matter."
Starsky stared at him, simultaneously realizing and accepting the fact that he was in the company of madness. "Don't matter?" he said, still trying to reason with the man. "Louis, two dead men have to matter."

Louis looked at him blankly.

Starsky gave up. "Are you going to kill me, too?"

"I hope not, David." Louis picked up a bundle from the table. "You won't try anything foolish while I'm gone, will you?"

Starsky ignored that, shifting slightly so that he could see better. "Those are my clothes."

"Yes." Louis was putting the clothes into a bag. As Starsky watched, he saw his gun, I.D., and cuffs go in as well. Finally, carefully, Louis added his watch, ring, and medallion.

"Why are you taking all my things?"

Louis smiled gently. "It's necessary." He came back to the cot and knelt down. Still smiling, he checked Starsky's bindings. It was a most effective job of taping. Starsky couldn't move his arms to any purpose, or move his legs to walk.

"Why is it necessary?"

Satisfied that his captive was secure, Louis rested back on his heels for a moment. "Oh, David, you ask so many questions. I guess it's because you're a cop."

"I guess."

"But, see, I just don't have the time right now to answer all of your questions. Later, later everything will be clear." He got to his feet. "But I don't want you to lie here worrying while I'm gone. Worrying is counter-productive, you know." The phrase was obviously a quote. "I have to take all of your things, so that when they find the body--"

"What body?"

"That doesn't matter, David. Don't interrupt, please. It's very rude."

"Sorry."

"I'm not angry," Louis said quickly, reassuringly. "You haven't learned the rules yet. It's just a body, that's all." He laughed softly. "After all, they're expecting a body, aren't they? They know you're missing and so they're expecting to find a body. I'll give them one."

"But--"
Louis raised a finger to his lips. "Shh, David, no more now. I have to go." He gave Starsky's shoulder a pat, picked up the paper bag, and was gone.

Alone, Starsky immediately struggled to get free, all the while knowing that it was useless. There was simply no way to get out of the tape. Panting from the exertion, he gave up the struggle and tried to figure out what the hell was going on.

Suddenly, with a peculiar sense of triumph, he recognized the pattern. What was Louis had said? "Just a body." No, not just a body. A body wearing his clothes. A body carrying his wallet and I.D. His gun.

But what was the point?

Anyone who knew him would recognize immediately... of course, there were ways of making a corpse difficult to identify, at least until the lab tests could be done. Most of the ways were too gruesome to think about. And if, as Louis had said, they were expecting to find his body—the pattern, the damned pattern—well, the phony corpse could keep them guessing for a little while.

Still, ultimately, what was the point? Because, Starsky felt sure, there was a point. Louis was certainly crazy, but there was a point.

Starsky sighed. So everybody would think he was dead. Everybody. Even Hutch. He caught his breath. Oh god. Hutch would think he was dead. Not for long, maybe, but even an instant with that knowledge was almost too painful to bear. He remembered how he'd felt, thinking that the body in the ravine was Hutch.

And he remembered another time. When the Haymes girl was snatched. He shivered again as he recalled seeing the rifle slugs hit Hutch and send him crashing through the storefront. Afterwards, Starsky could not really remember chasing the car, dismounting from the cycle, firing. "That's for Hutch," he'd muttered as the car exploded in flames. An act of vengeance, pure and simple. A stupid act that might have cost the girl her life. But he didn't think of that at the time. Just of Hutch lying dead in the shattered glass. The worst feeling in the world. The desolation. The emptiness.

Now, this time, Hutch would think he was dead.

*Don't go getting blown away without me.* Hutch's words.

And I promised. I promised.

The frustration built within him. No longer able to just lie there thinking of the pain his partner was going to feel, Starsky suddenly turned his body slightly and rolled off the cot. He hit the floor with a grunt.

*Now what?* he thought.
With much groaning and scraping of his skin against the rough wooden floor, he managed to move a few inches. The door was still at least six feet away. He realized that even if he could traverse the distance, there was no way he would able to open the door. All he could do was wait for that nut Louis to come back.

He sighed and rested his face against the floor. *Ahh, Hutch... I'm sorry. But I'm not dead yet. I'll get back. Please, believe me.*

~~~

Louis stepped through the curtain of beads that covered the entrance to the Blue Gull Cocktail Lounge. At this hour only a few afternoon drinkers sat at the bar, listening as the jukebox ground out a country song. Several people glanced up as Louis entered, but after a week and a half, he was considered a regular and everyone went back to his own business. Louis walked to the end of the bar and sat next to a young man dressed in cut-off Levis and a Mickey Mouse T-shirt. "Hi, Joey," he said.

"Lou."

"How's it going?"

Joey made a thumbs-down gesture. "Shitty. That asshole agent of mine couldn't get me booked into a supermarket opening."

Louis sipped at the beer that the bartender had automatically set in front of him. "That's too bad." The tale of woe was the same one he'd listened to Joey recite everyday since they'd met.

"Yeah, too bad." Joey ran one hand through his tangled dark curls. "If I don't earn some bread pretty soon, it's back to Cleveland and a job in the fucking steel mill."

"Hey, that'd be a shame." Louis drank more beer. "Hey, Joey," he said, as if a thought had just occurred to him. "Would you like to earn twenty-five dollars this afternoon?"

"Is the pope Catholic?" Joey's forehead creased. "It's legal, right?"

Louis smiled. "Oh, sure. And moral and non-fattening."

"What do I have to do?"

"Act. You're an actor, aren't you?"


Louis shrugged. "I got this friend I want to play a joke on. You gotta play like you're my brother... Eddie. My brother Eddie. Just for an hour."
"An hour? And I'll get twenty-five dollars?"

"Sure."

Joey was obviously tempted. Just as obviously, the deal struck him as a little too good to be true. 
"But what do I have to do?"

"Oh, I'll explain all that to you on the way. Do you want the job or not?"

For just one more moment, Joey hesitated. Then he nodded. "Okay, Lou, sure."

"Great." Louis reached down and picked up the brown sack that sat at his feet. "There're some
clothes in here. Go into the john and change."

"I gotta change clothes?" Joey sounded skeptical again.

"Look, for twenty-five bucks, I don't think it's asking too much for you to change clothes, huh?
Don't actors wear costumes?"

Joey took the sack, slid off the stool, and headed toward the bathroom. Louis finished his beer,
paid the bar tab for both of them, and went over to the door to wait. The sack he'd given Joey
held only David's clothes; the gun and other things were still in the car. He stood patiently by the
entrance.

A few minutes later, Joey emerged. Now he was wearing faded blue jeans, a too-much washed
red T-shirt, bright red socks, and beat-up Adidas. He was scowling as he walked over to Louis.
"This crap is worse than my own stuff," he muttered.

Louis took the sack that now held Joey's clothes. "How's the fit?"

"Almost perfect. The jeans are a little tight, but it's okay."

"Good."

They left the bar and got into the VW. Louis headed toward the warehouse district. He had
already scouted the area thoroughly and knew exactly where he was going. Joey seemed a little
nervous, perching on the seat as if he might take flight at any moment. He didn't ask any more
questions during the twenty-minute drive.

Louis finally pulled to a stop behind an abandoned nut and bolt factory. Joey looked around
skeptically. "What are we doing here?"

"Well, this is where it's going to happen," Louis said kindly.

"Where what's going to happen?" Joey's hand was edging toward the door handle.
Louis pulled his gun out. "I have to kill you, Joey."

The young man's face went white. "Hey, man, you crazy? Put that fucking gun away. What are you, anyway? Some kind of nut? I got no money, if that's what you want."

"I don't want your money, Joey. Close your eyes."

"No, I won't." But he did. As the gun came closer, he screwed his eyes closed tight, like a child trying to shut out a scary sight. "Ohchristdontplease... please... no... please, Lou, don't." Crying, he scrabbled for the door handle. "Please..."

Louis grabbed him by one arm, holding him with a vise-like grip. People didn't realize how strong Louis was. It amused him that they usually thought he was a weakling, because he wore glasses and didn't go around showing off. "Don't be scared, Joey," he murmured tenderly. He felt very close to Joey at that moment. It had been the same with the others. The people he killed were not his enemies. They were his friends. More than friends, even. They were almost like... lovers. There was a spiritual bond uniting them. All of the people he killed belonged to him and they would always belong to him. No one else could ever possess them as he did. For a moment, he pulled Joey so close that he could smell the lime-scented aftershave he wore. "Ahh, Joey," he said.

The shot reverberated within the car and Lou cringed a little. The body that had been Joey slumped back against the door. Louis carefully put the gun away. He reached behind the seat and brought out the rest of David's things. He slipped the watch onto Joey's wrist and the ring onto his finger. Pulling him forward a little, he dropped the chained medallion around his neck.

He got out of the car and, walking around to the passenger side, opened the door carefully. Joey fell into his arms. Louis pulled him out and rested him gently on the ground. The cuffs were next. Everything had to be just so.

When he had the body just the way it needed to be, Louis reached into the car again and pulled out a length of steel pipe. For a moment, he hesitated. This part he didn't like. But he recognized that it had to be done. That was a sign of mental health, he had been told, learning to recognize the inevitable. "Forgive me, Joey," he whispered. "But it's necessary." Joey understood.

The first blow of the pipe into Joey's face made a sickening noise, crunchy and squishy at the same time, and Louis almost quit right then. But he forced himself to raise the pipe and swing it again, sending it crashing into flesh and bone. It got easier. When the task was finally finished, Louis wrapped the bloody pipe in some newspaper and put it back in the car. He took out the gun, still in its holster, David's wallet, and I. D., and put them carefully beside the body.

He stopped for a moment to survey the scene. Looked fine. Everything was fine. If he didn't know better, he'd swear that was David's body lying there. Now he had only to wait.

But he didn't want to go back out to the park yet. Not yet. He felt peculiarly excited by what had happened. This had been even better than the other times. This had been the best of all.
He slid behind the wheel. Hot blood coursed through him and he felt as if he had to find some release for the raging emotions or he would explode. He pressed back against the seat, panting, sweating, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

If he closed his eyes, he could see Joey’s face just before the shot was fired. A face transfigured by fear. The scent of lime mingling with the stench of terror. The image seemed so real that he almost wanted to reach out and clasp Joey to him again. Then the face grew hazy. Changed. It became Kenny. Or David. He couldn't tell.

Louis finally drove out of the parking lot, leaving behind the body, taking with him the excitement, the memory of the exquisitely painful pleasure. There was a theatre he knew about that showed movies all day and all night. It would be cool in there and he could sit and remember.

**
CHAPTER TWELVE

There came a time when he couldn't think of anyplace else to go or anyone else to talk to. He couldn't think of one more damned thing to do. So he went back to the office and slumped at his desk. Just sat, staring everywhere but at the next desk. Occasionally, he checked his watch. It had been just over twelve hours since he'd walked into Starsky's empty apartment and he knew not one iota more than he'd known then.

Someone dropped a file on his desk. The name typed neatly on the front was STARSKY, DAVID MICHAEL. Hutch looked up. "Thanks, Minnie," he said heavily.

"Any word?" the policewoman asked.

Hutch shook his head.

"Don't worry," she said with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Starsky will be fine."

He toyed with the file folder. "You think so?"

"Sure." She looked as if she had more to say, but then she only patted Hutch's shoulder and left.

Hutch opened the folder and began to read. There was a complete description of Starsky's apartment. Copies of the interviews with all the neighbors. As Hutch had known would be the case, no one had seen or heard anything. The general feeling seemed to be that since Starsky was a cop, they were accustomed to his coming and going at strange hours and had learned to ignore the attendant sounds.

He skipped quickly over the bio sheet; he knew the facts of Starsky's life as well as he knew his own. The photo attached to the bio wasn't very good; it looked more like the mugshot on a wanted sheet than anything else. Still, he stared at it for a long time.

He became aware, finally, that Dobey was standing next to his desk. "Yeah, Cap?" he said, still looking at the photo.

"Have you eaten today, Hutchinson?"

He thought. "I had breakfast." He carefully replaced all the papers in the folder and closed it.

"You better get out of here for a while. Go have a couple of beers and some food and then try to get some sleep. Tomorrow...."

"Yeah? What about tomorrow? Everything will look better in the morning, right?" His voice was bitter; then he felt guilty for taking it out on Dobey. He got to his feet. "All right, Cap. I'm going over to the Pits. Huggy was going to check out some names for me. Some people who don't like cops."
"Maybe he's come up with something," Dobey said hopefully.

Hutch shrugged. "No, I don't think so. He just wanted to do something. For Starsk."

Dobey only nodded.

Hutch put the file into the drawer and left the office. He knew that people were watching him as he walked out of the station. What do they expect me to do? he wondered. Am I supposed to react? Or not react? He didn't know what they wanted of him, so he did nothing. Just straightened his back and kept his face expressionless. Let them think whatever they wanted. It didn't matter if some of them thought he was an emotionless bastard who didn't care that his partner was missing and the rest figured him to be hovering on the edge of a screaming fit. Didn't matter.

But when he walked into the Pits a few minutes later, his carefully constructed facade of control almost shattered. It had been a mistake to come here; this place was too much identified with Starsk. It made the hurt even worse, the absence of companionship even more real. He wondered, fearfully, if it would always be this way. If Starsky was gone forever, would he ever get over the sense of loss? Or would he spend the rest of his life looking around for somebody who wasn't there?

He walked straight to the back and slumped into a booth. Huggy came over, put a beer in front of him, and sat down. "Well?"

Hutch took a long swallow of the beer before answering. "Nothing."

"Me, neither," the black man said glumly. "Nobody knows nothing." He studied Hutch shrewdly. "How you hanging, man?"

"Ahh." Hutch spread his hands helplessly.

"You're doing fine." Huggy's usually lively face was solemn. "If it was the other way around--"

"Christ, I wish it was," Hutch broke in.

Huggy shook his head. "No, man, don't lay that trip on Starsk. If it was you snatched... the man would go bananas. He'd be tearing the city apart." He smiled faintly. "Starsky ain't got your cool, buddy."

"Maybe he has the right idea."

"Wouldn't help."

"Nothing helps."

Huggy stood. "Let me make one of Huggerino's Special Burgers."
"I'm not hungry."

"Don't recall asking if you was." He walked away.

Hutch took another swallow of beer. That didn't help either. He wondered how much beer it would take to blur the sharp edges of his pain. More than he could drink, probably. He'd pass out before he stopped hurting. And when he came to, nothing would have changed.

He almost wished he could react like Starsk. Tear the goddamned place apart. Yell. Smash somebody's face in. But he couldn't. All he could do was sit here and drink beer and... and nothing. Except hurt. They were just different that way. Probably that was why they made such a good team. Balance. They balanced each other. It had always been that way. He had foolishly convinced himself that it always would be that way.

Above the noise of the bar, he couldn't hear the phone ring. However, he did see Huggy move to answer it and then look quickly in his direction. He was on his feet and across the room before Huggy could summon him.

Huggy held out the receiver. "Your captain," he said.

Hutch took the phone. "Yeah?" he said quietly. He stared down the length of the bar, watching a pick-up in progress, watching all the other people in the world go about their lives. He watched, but he didn't really see any of it.

"Ken?" Dobey's voice came reluctantly over the wire.

"Uh-huh."

"Corner of DeWitt and Franklin."

Hutch nodded.

"Hutchinson?"

"Yeah, I heard you. Corner of DeWitt and Franklin. What about it?"

"A body. That's all I have now."

"Okay."

"Hutchinson? You all right?"

"Fine. Sure, sure. I'll meet you there." He hung up slowly and looked at Huggy. "They have a body."

"Is it--?" Huggy didn't finish the question.
Hutch shrugged. "Don't know."

He left the Pits and climbed back into Starsky's car. Although the temperature was still almost eighty, Hutch couldn't seem to stop shivering. He drove with care, observing all of the traffic laws. After all, it wasn't his car, and he didn't want to take a chance on scratching or denting anything. Starsky would never forgive him.

He could see the flashing lights of the zone cars before he reached the corner of DeWitt and Franklin. Parking behind one of the black-and-whites, he turned the car off and sat there for a moment. Just sat there. The sense of panic hit him suddenly. He fumbled for the door handle, shoved it open, and nearly fell flat in his headlong plunge out of the car and across the grass.

The crowd parted to let him through. He reached the parking lot behind the factory and started across the asphalt surface. Suddenly Dobey appeared in front of him. The heavyset black man caught Hutch by one arm. "Ken," he said quietly, "don't go over there."

Hutch stopped short and stared at Dobey. He didn't--couldn't--speak, but the anguished plea was clear in his eyes.

Dobey sighed, nodding. "It's Dave."

"No..." Hutch said vaguely. *He promised me... the itinerary... the damned itinerary... he promised....* 

"Yes, Ken. It's Dave. I'm... I'm so very sorry." Dobey looked as if he might cry at any moment.

"No. It can't be him," Hutch mumbled, trying to pull his arm free. Dobey's grip, however, was unrelenting. "I have to see him," Hutch said.

"Ken, this is worse than the others."

"Worse?" Hutch laughed a little. "What's worse than dead?"

Dobey swallowed hard, trying to forget what he had just seen and knowing that it would come back to haunt him as long as he lived. "His face, Ken... his face is... smashed in... a brutal beating."

Hutch shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense. It's not the M.O." He gave an abrupt, violent jerk and broke free of Dobey. "That's not the goddamned M.O.!" he yelled.

Before the other man could respond, Hutch was gone, pushing by the Crime Lab team and several uniformed officers gathered there. The body lay on the parking lot, just under the glare of a streetlight. Hutch stopped, frozen.

He inventoried. Blue tennis shoes with white stripes. Red socks. Faded jeans. Washed-out red T-shirt. He felt his legs go and he fell to his knees next to the body. "Oh god," he whispered.
"Starsk..." Hands cuffed. Gun, wallet, and I.D. all stacked neatly. The M.O. He picked up the I.D. and flipped it open. Starsky. ohstarsk

His eyes went automatically from the I.D. photo to Starsky's face.

Except that there was no face.

There was only a bloody pulp where the face should have been. Ravaged features were topped by a mass of blood-soaked curls.

Hutch had to get away. Half-crawling, half-running, he crossed the parking lot to the cover of the bushes. Crouching there, he gave in to the waves of nausea. Again and again his stomach heaved. After an eternity, he sat up, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand.
Dobey stood nearby. "Ken?" he asked quietly. "Are you okay?"

Hutch was shivering again; he wrapped both arms around his legs and rocked hack and forth, trying to get warm. "Yes, sir," he said dully. "I'm okay."

Dobey reached to help him up. "Come on, let's go." He wanted Hutch away before they started to remove the body.

"No," Hutch said. "Not yet." He was on his feet, still shaky, moving toward the body again.

"Ken," Dobey protested, "don't do this to yourself."

Hutch didn't answer. He knelt on the ground, staring at the body. Starting at the shoes, he studied the dead man again. He put one hand on the right shoe for a moment. Touched one leg thoughtfully. Noticed the watch. Lifted the hand and looked at the ring. This time he didn't look away when he reached the shattered face. He stared intensely at it, not allowing himself to react. The truth dawned on him slowly. He lifted the hand again, held it between both of his, studied the fingers, replaced it gently. At last, he nodded to himself.

It was nearly five minutes before he gathered up Starsky's things and got slowly to his feet. He gave the body a long last look and then turned away.

Dobey was waiting; he gestured to the men there to take the body away. "Ready, Ken?"

Hutch seemed to notice him for the first time. He tightened his grip on Starsky's things. It was a moment before he spoke, but when he did, his voice was calm. "Cap, that isn't Starsk."

Dobey, trying to urge him away, only half-heard. "What?"

Hutch was allowing Dobey to lead him across the parking lot. "Captain Dobey," he said firmly, "that is not David Starsky."

Now Dobey heard. "Ken, please. Don't. I know how you feel. Hell, I don't want to believe it, either, but--"

Hutch could feel himself growing angry. His voice turned sharp. "Damnit, man, I know Dave Starsky as well as I know myself and that's not him."

"Hutchinson, the I.D... the clothes... Ken, I know you don't want to face it, but... Dave is dead." Dobey stopped in front of Hutch and gripped him firmly by both arms, meeting his gaze. "Ken, Dave is dead. I know how much that hurts you."

"Do you?" Hutch asked with real curiosity.

"I cared about him, too."
"Yes, I know." Hutch sighed and shook his head. He pulled away from Dobey and plodded toward the Torino. As he went past the group of reporters gathered there, a flashbulb exploded in his face. Behind him he could hear Dobey answering questions. He reached the car and opened the door. Someone in the crowd asked how to spell Starsky's name. Hutch spun around. "That's not Starsky!" he yelled.

The scene fell silent as everyone turned to look at him. "That is not David Starsky," he said again, quietly this time. Another flash went off. He could see Dobey coming toward him.

Hutch got into the car and slammed the door. No more talking right now. He needed to think. The engine turned over with a roar and the car squealed away.

Alone, he relaxed a little, taking several deep breaths.

"That's not Starsky," he whispered.

But why? Who would dress a body in Starsky's clothes and leave all of Starsky's things there? Hutch didn't know. All he knew for sure was that the body lying back there was not that of his partner.

Which proved nothing, not even that Starsky was still alive.

He decided to go check out Starsky's apartment again. Something might have been overlooked, something that no one else would find significant, but that he would notice. After all, he knew Starsky better than anyone else did. He knew Starsky.

Or maybe it was just that he wanted to be at Starsky's place. Like driving the Torino. Being in the car made him feel a little less alone; almost like Starsky was right there with him.

Or maybe, he thought, I'm just crazy. Maybe that really was Starsk back there. Maybe.

He decided that if reality was Starsky being dead and insanity meant thinking he was still alive, all things considered, he'd just as soon be crazy.

And that, he concluded, sounded just like something Starsky would say.

**
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The night was endless.

He didn't even hurt anymore because his whole body was numb. Sometimes he managed to sleep a little, but then he would have some crazy dream that woke him again. Once he even thought that his father was in the room with him. "Pa?" he said, "Pa, help me, please..." But his father only vanished.

Hutch was there, too, talking to him, saying things that Starsky could just about hear. "Hutch? Help me...." He tried to reach out and get a grip on Hutch, but his bound hands closed on empty space.

It was morning before Louis came back. Starsky heard the door being unlocked and he rolled over to watch Louis come in; his captor held a newspaper and several paper bags. He stood on the threshold, staring down at Starsky, a strange expression crossing his face. "Are you all right, David?" he asked finally, moving to set everything on the table.

"Just terrific," Starsky muttered.

"Why are you on the floor?"

Starsky glared up at him, wanting to let all the anger he was feeling burst out, but unable to overcome the sick tiredness that filled him. "Why am I... on the floor? 'Cause it's better for my back, you bastard."

Louis' mouth tightened. "Don't talk to me like that, David."

"Sorry."

"I didn't mean to stay away so long, but I fell asleep in the movie."

"Dull picture?"

"Look, I brought your breakfast. I hope you like Egg McMuffins?"

"My favorite." Starsky tried to move. "Louis, I gotta take a leak."

"Oh." Louis seemed to view the necessity with distaste. "Oh, yes, all right." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the gun. "All right, but please behave, David. I wouldn't like to shoot you."

"I wouldn't like to get shot," Starsky replied.
Louis bent down and cut the surgical tape with a razor-sharp scalpel that Starsky hadn't even seen until that moment. Starsky managed to sit up, rubbing his wrists and then his ankles. "The bathroom is through that door," Louis said. "There's no window."

Starsky accepted that news glumly and got to his feet slowly.

Louis tossed a paper sack at him and Starsky managed to catch it. "There's some clothes. Put them on."

Starsky held the sack tentatively. "Are they mine?"

"No, but they'll fit. When you come out, I have a surprise to show you in the paper."

"I can hardly wait," Starsky mumbled, walking stiff-legged from the room.

He lingered in the bathroom as long as he dared, even though the place was filthy and the smell sickened him. But he couldn't think of anything to do except continue to humor Louis and wait for a chance to make a break. The clothes fit, as Louis had promised, and Starsky finally left the bathroom wearing cut-off Levis and a Mickey Mouse T-shirt.

Louis was waiting patiently, holding a length of chain in his hand, the other end of which was attached to the huge generator. He tossed the free end to Starsky. "Put this around your ankle," he ordered.

Starsky held the padlock reluctantly. "Ahh, Louis...."

"I don't like to say things twice, David."

Starsky sighed and bent to snap the lock closed around his ankle. "Not that link, David," Louis said sharply. "Tighter."

Starsky closed the lock firmly. "Satisfied?"

"Yes, thank you. Sit down now and we'll have breakfast." Louis opened the bag and pulled out several paper-wrapped items and two paper cups of coffee. "I hope black is all right?"

"Fine, thank you," Starsky said with exaggerated politeness. The gun was next to Louis' hand, just out of Starsky's reach. The scalpel was nowhere in sight, but Starsky felt sure that it was close by. They ate in silence for a moment and then Louis reached for the newspaper. "You got your picture on the front page," he said.

The photo showed a body sprawled on the ground with several unidentifiable police officers standing around. Starsky glanced at the picture briefly and recognized his clothes. Slowly, he set the food down onto the table, suddenly sick. "These... these are his clothes, aren't they?"
"Joey didn't need them anymore," Louis said calmly. Carefully, precisely, he read the headline aloud: "THIRD COP KILLED."

"Except he wasn't a cop, right?"

Louis smiled faintly. "No. Joey was an actor. Let me read this now. It says: 'Local Detective David Starsky is the apparent third victim of an unknown assailant who has killed two other officers in the past week.'" Louis paused and took a sip of coffee. "There are more pictures on page five, it says." He turned quickly to the fifth page. "There."

Starsky looked at it. The picture was the same one that had been in the paper the previous week, showing Hutch and him leaving the hearing for Barney Fields. "They caught my bad angle," he said.

Louis' fingers tightened on the edge of the paper. "They put Kenny's picture in, too."

"Kenny?" Starsky looked to the bottom of the page. "You mean Hutch?" he asked, seeing his partner's face looking back at him.

"Yeah."

"You know Hutch?"

Louis nodded sharply. "Kenny. His name is Kenny."

Starsky stared at Louis for a moment, then looked at the picture again. Hutch was gazing directly into the camera, but his face looked strange... sort of vague. He was carrying a gun and wallet clutched against his chest. Starsky had a sudden, flashing memory of the two dead cops, with their guns and wallets neatly beside them. He looked at Hutch's face again. "Oh, god," he said softly.

Louis apparently read something that angered him; the paper rattled. "Damn. He knows. He knows."

"What?" Starsky said, finally tearing his gaze from Hutch's face.

Louis shoved the paper closer and Starsky bent to read. "Detective Starsky's long-time partner, Detective Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson, claimed that the body was not that of Starsky, who vanished without a trace after going off-duty Tuesday night. Police spokesmen maintained, however, that the body was almost certainly that of the missing officer. A positive identification could not be made immediately because of the brutal beating inflicted on the face of the victim." Starsky finished reading and closed his eyes briefly. Hutch knew. Hutch knew he wasn't dead.

"Damn," Louis said again. "I don't understand. How did he know?"
"Hutch is my partner," Starsky said. "He knows me. A phony corpse might fool everybody else, but not Hutch. Not my partner."

Louis stared at him. For an instant, no more, the madness was clearly visible in his eyes. Then the mask of blandness returned. "Kenny is going to suffer," he said, the quiet manner not quite able to conceal the bitterness in his voice. "He has to pay for what he did. You can see that, David, can't you? Kenny is evil and he has to pay. The wages of sin is death. God wants me to punish him."

"Hutch is my friend," Starsky said.

Louis' face was stony. He carefully picked up the gun. "Kenny is already dead," he murmured. "He only has to suffer a little more first." He walked to the door and spoke without turning. "Kenny used to be my friend," he said. "Before you ever knew him. He was mine first." He left, slamming the door.

Starsky just sat there, looking at the picture of Hutch in the paper. God, he looked terrible. No sleep, probably, no food. Hope he's remembering to take his damned vitamins. Starsky grimaced. That was kind of funny. Here he was, in the clutches of a homicidal maniac, liable to have his head shot off any moment, worrying about whether or not Kenneth Hutchinson was taking his damned vitamins. "Well, I'd still hate like hell to get blown away and not have you at your peak," he murmured.

He gave a frustrated tug to the chain. Nothing happened. So what did I expect? To move that generator and drag it behind me right out the door? He smiled wryly and gulped down the rest of the cold coffee.

Sighing, he walked back to the cot and sat down. For the moment, there seemed to be nothing he could do except wait. Wait and hope for a chance to make a break. One hand idly fumbled with the lock around his ankle. Already, the skin was starting to look raw and red. The situation was far from hopeless, he reasoned. Hutch knew he was alive and Starsky knew that Hutch would be looking for him. Together they could handle this Louis creep. Hutch would find him. Many people underestimated his partner. They thought that because he had his own style, a quiet, methodical way of handling things, he lacked... determination, or something. That mistake in judging Hutch sometimes made a lot of trouble for people.

Starsky leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. He just had to keep thinking like that. No matter how bad things got. They had been in dicier spots than this. He just had to believe that Hutch would come through. It was a matter of keeping faith.

"All right, Hutch," he said aloud. "I'm ready to be rescued anytime now. I ain't proud. You can come charging in here on your white horse anytime." He sighed. "Come on, buddy."

~~~
Louis smoked three cigarettes, one right after the other, as he stalked the park. He was furious. Counting to ten didn't help. Deep breathing didn't help. The whole idea had somehow gone awry. Kenny had known that the dead body wasn't David. The point of it all had failed.

Well, he would just have to come up with something else. After all, the odds were still with him. He still had the upper hand. He had David. That made him the boss, not Kenny. He stared up into the cloudless blue sky. It was so damned hot. Didn't it ever rain in Los Angeles? He wished there would be a good, soaking, cleansing rain.

Finally, he went into the MAZES OF FUN and lost himself in the twisting hallways. That seemed to help ease the tension. He needed time alone to think and plan again. He lit another cigarette and began to consider his next move.

**
"Hey!"

Hutch woke himself up yelling. The sudden jerk into consciousness left him groggy and disoriented and it took him several minutes to remember where he was. The dream still seemed so vivid that he stayed huddled where he was for a few minutes, trying to remember reality.

His body felt twisted and uncomfortable. The last thing he could recall was stretching out on the sofa with the newest copy of MODEL RAILROADING. "Damn this couch," he muttered. "Why the hell don't you get something comfortable, Starsk?" His words echoed bitterly in the empty room.

Sighing, he finally got to his feet and did a couple of quick toe-touches; his joints cracked in protest. "Ouch." He went into the kitchen and, bowing to the inevitable, popped open a can of Dr. Pepper. Drinking it, he wandered into the spare room where Starsky had set up his model trains.

It was an elaborate arrangement. Starsky had spent many hours and a ridiculous number of dollars getting everything just the way he wanted it. Hutch wondered where he got the patience. Absently, he touched the "on" lever and the train began to move slowly around the circular track. Pulling the cars was the gleaming locomotive he'd given Starsky last Christmas.

Hutch watched the train begin to gather speed as it went past the built-to-scale Hershey chocolate factory. He pressed the yellow button that controlled the train whistle and its haunting sound filled the room. It blew twice before Hutch viciously jerked the train to a stop. "Damn," he said.

He turned around to leave the room and saw Dobey standing in the doorway. "You know," he said hoarsely, "I never realized before how goddamned lonely a train whistle sounds. And Starsk listens to that all the time. I don't see how he stands it."

Dobey turned and led the way from the room. "Maybe he stands it because he never really feels alone," he said carefully.

Hutch thought about that for a moment. "Yeah," he said, "maybe."

"I've been trying to reach you."

"I spent the night here." He looked at Dobey sharply. "What?"

"You were right."

Hutch rubbed his eyes. "It wasn't Starsk," he said flatly.

"No. We don't know yet who the guy was. But it's not Starsky."
"Yeah." Hutch sat down on the couch, stretching his legs out on the coffee table. "So what the hell does it all mean?"

"I thought maybe you'd be able to tell me."

Hutch looked surprised. "Me?"

Dobey perched uneasily in a too-small chair. "Think about everything that's happened, Hutchinson."

"I have. Several hundred times. I think about it when I'm sleeping."

Dobey shook his head. "No, man, you haven't. Not clearly. At least, not since Starsky disappeared. Forget that Starsky is your partner for a minute. Think through everything that's happened, including the body we found last night."

Hutch took a swallow of soda. He leaned his head back against the couch and closed his eyes. Maybe Dobey was right. Maybe he'd gotten too damned close to the investigation. "Okay," he said slowly, using Dobey as a sounding board the way he usually used Starsky. "First: McGowan disappears and is later found shot. Apparently a random victim. Second: Anderson disappears and is later found shot. Apparently a second random victim. Third: Starsky disappears. Fourth: A body is found that we are supposed to think is Starsk." He fell silent for a moment. Then, as a new thought dawned on him, he opened his eyes. "That wasn't random," he said softly. "And if that wasn't, maybe none of it was."

Dobey nodded. "Exactly. Someone wanted us to find that body and think it was Starsky. Because we were expecting to find Starsky's body. We had been conditioned that way. And the plan worked. Except for you."

"Except for me." Hutch sighed. "Great. But what does all that prove? We're not any closer to finding either the killer or Starsky than we were before."

"Maybe." Dobey got up from the chair and began to pace. "We can come to a couple of possible conclusions. One, that Starsky was the object of all this. That everything that happened was made to happen so that Starsky could be snatched and presumed dead."

Hutch considered that. "But what's the point?"

"Does there have to be a point? Starsky has a lot of enemies."

"Yeah, I guess. But so do I. Most cops do."

"Most good cops," Dobey amended. "Okay. Let's look at the second possible conclusion."

"Which is?"
"Who cares about one more dead cop?" Dobey asked suddenly.

Hutch was startled. "What?"

"Face it, Hutchinson. To most of the world, that's all it would be. Just one more dead cop. Who would care if Starsky was dead?"

"A lot of people!" Hutch said, stung.

"Oh, sure, Ken, I know. His family would care. His friends. The people he works with. Me and my family. We love him, too." Dobey spun around and stared at Hutch, his gaze piercing. "But who would care the most? Who would come stare at that body all dressed up in Starsky's clothes and hurt the most?"

There was a long silence. Hutch's face was white beneath the morning whiskers. "I would," he said softly. "I would."

Dobey looked away, feeling somehow indecent watching the naked anguish that Hutch was suffering. "Yes, Ken," he said after a moment. "You would."

Hutch upended the soda can and drained it. Then he got up from the couch and went into the kitchen to throw the can away. He didn't speak until he was back in the living room. "My god, do you realize what you're saying, Cap?" He walked over to the window and stared out; already heat rose in waves from the sidewalk. "That makes me the center of it all. That means that three people have died and god only knows what's happened to Starsk all because of me."

He felt sick to his stomach.

"I think we have to consider that possibility."

"It's a rotten possibility," Hutch said fiercely. "I hate it."

Dobey didn't answer.

"All right," Hutch said finally. "Then I guess we have... I have to start all over again, don't I?"

"Yes."

Hutch sighed. "Yeah." He picked up his gun and holster. "This guy's gotta be crazy, right? To go around killing innocent people just to get back at me?" He was pulling on his holster as he spoke. "The question is, what's he gonna do next? His bluff is over."

Dobey pulled a copy of the morning paper from his jacket pocket. "If he read this, he already knows it didn't work."

Hutch skimmed the story and saw his own words of denial quoted. "Damn. Me and my big mouth."
"There's no telling how this might affect him. To think that his whole plan, all the other killings, went for nothing, because you weren't fooled...."

Hutch was staring at the picture of Starsky and himself. "Yeah," he murmured absently. "He might go over the edge altogether and do the job for real this time."

Dobey nodded and stuffed the paper back into his pocket.

"The first thing to do," Hutch said, slamming the door of the apartment and starting down the steps, "is to find out who the dead guy is. That might give us a trail to the killer."

"All right, get to it. Keep in touch," Dobey ordered.

Hutch's only reply was a back-handed wave as he walked quickly toward the Torino.

~~~

The morgue fit his mood perfectly.

Even the tiled lobby, adorned with plants that looked more fake than real, while not necessarily a gloomy place, was distinctly uninviting. He perched in an orange plastic chair and waited to be summoned. After several minutes, a young woman clad in a spotless white jacket opened the door and smiled at him. Despite the air of antiseptic officialdom that hung over the place, her smile was genuine. "Good morning," she said as if she meant it. "This way, please."

Her trim figure leading the way, he followed her down the stairs to where death waited.

Death, even in these antiseptic, cool, tiled surroundings, smelled. It is an unmistakable odor, even if one has never smelled it before. Hutch had, too many times. But he never got used to it; something deep inside, maybe a primal instinct for self-preservation, made him want to turn and run the other way as fast as he could.

He didn't run, of course.

They went into the body-storage room. The stainless steel rectangle was refrigerated, kept at a constant 38o. There were over a hundred little square doors, each with its own number. The doors resembled the lockers one would see at an airport or bus terminal. Except that in this case, behind each door, there was a sliding slab and on some of the slabs rested a naked body.

The woman walked to the door numbered 56 and pulled it open. "Here he is," she said cheerfully.

Hutch stared at the body. Unclothed, with that terribly unrecognizable face, the shell of a once-living being seemed painfully vulnerable. The thought struck him that he might just as easily have been standing there looking at Starsky. He still might be, before this damned case was over.
If it was ever over. It was beginning to feel like a nightmare that he wouldn't ever wake up from. He cleared his throat. "What can you tell me?"

She consulted her clipboard. "As a matter of fact, the I.D. came down just a few minutes ago. "Who?"


Hutch jotted the name and address down in his notebook. "Thanks."

She shoved the slab away again and closed the door. "All part of the job."

They started back upstairs. "You like this job?" Hutch asked curiously. "Being around dead people all the time?"

"Why not? You like your job, being around bad people all the time?"

"Usually." He shoved the notebook into his pocket. "Sometimes, like now, I hate it."

Her face was serene. "See, by the time I get these people, there's no more good or bad. There's only a body. Whatever that person was in life, now he or she is... finished. The journey is over. I don't have to judge, like you do."

He nodded and left her standing in the lobby, still looking cheerful.

~~~

The apartment building at 1824 Grenway had seen better days. It was in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, populated by unpublished novelists, undiscovered artists, and uncast actors. Everybody did something else to fill the time and pay the bills until that one big break came along.

According to the landlady, Joseph Taylor worked off and on as a waiter. At the time of his death, he was in an off period and two months behind on his rent. "But I didn't wanta throw the kid out on the street, you know?" she said.

"That was charitable of you," Hutch said, trying to stay out of reach of both the whiskey fumes that filled the hallway every time the frowsy blonde opened her mouth, and her hands, which she seemed inclined to place on various portions of his anatomy as she spoke. Presumably to make a point more effectively.

"Yeah, charitable, that's me. Old Marlane Huff, easiest touch on the block. Just ask anybody," she said, attempting to massage his left bicep. "See, I usta be in the business. Even made a movie once with Tom Mix."
"Oh, really?" Hutch sidestepped a grab at his thigh. At least, he hoped it was a grab for his thigh. "So what about Joe Taylor?"

"A nice boy, real nice. Never minded coming in to spend some time with a lonely widow." It was fascinating the way her hands kept moving, seemingly independent of her conversation.

"Well, when he wasn't here keeping you company, where did Joe hang out?"
She smiled and squeezed his hand intimately. "Down at the Blue Gull. Joey spent a lot of time in the Blue Gull."

"Well, uh, thanks for your cooperation," he said.

"Anytime, blondie. Hey, by the way, you wouldn't be looking to move, would you? I mean, I've got an empty apartment now."

"I think the rent is too high," Hutch said.

"We could make an arrangement."

"No, thanks." He started to turn around and go down the stairs, thought of her predilection, and reconsidered, backing away instead. "Uh, thank you."

He smiled to himself as he got back into the car. Boy, it really took all kinds. *Wait till I tell Starsk about...* He bit his lower lip so hard that the taste of blood filled his mouth. It was such an ordinary thought. So ordinary and it hurt so damned much.

~~~

The bartender in the Blue Gull stopped drying glasses when Hutch flashed his badge. "You know a guy named Joe Taylor?"

"Sure, Joey comes around a lot. Nearly every day."

"Was he in yesterday?"

The man wiped the counter with a none-too-clean towel. "Yesterday? Uh, yeah. I think so . . . sure, he was in for a little while."

Hutch, watching himself in the mirror behind the bar, realized for the first time that day what he looked like. Unshaven. Clothes that looked like they'd been slept in. Which they had. And a funny look in his eyes. Even he wasn't sure what the look meant. It was part fear, part anger, and a large dose of pure desperation. He blinked. "Was he alone?"

"This is a friendly bar. Everybody talks to everybody."
"So who was Joey talking to yesterday?"

The bartender was quiet. After a moment, Hutch took a five dollar bill from his pocket and slid it across the bar. "Maybe this will refresh your memory," he said quietly. The man reached for the money. Hutch grabbed two of his fingers and carefully bent them backwards. "I'm in no mood for games," he said, still speaking softly. "My partner has been snatched and if I find out later that you've been holding out on me, I will personally come back here and take you apart piece by piece. Comprende?"

The man was turning pale. "Yeah, yeah," he gasped, "but for christ's sake, lemme go. You're busting my frigging fingers."

Hutch released him. Sometimes, he thought, Starsky's methods worked quite nicely. "So? Who was Joe talking to?"

"Ahh, some new guy," the barman said, rubbing his hand. "Been coming around the last week or so. He'd come in every day, sit nursing one beer, and rap with Joey for awhile."

"This guy have a name?"

"Lou."

"Lou?"

"That's all I know. Except that Joey left with him yesterday. Never done that before. In fact, it was kinda strange."

"What was?"

"Well, Joey went into the head, changed into some clothes this Lou gave him, and then they left."

Hutch felt a small flame of hope kindled within. "What kind of clothes?"

"Just clothes. How should I know? I was busy."

"Think about it," Hutch said mildly.

The man backed away a little, his hands kept out of Hutch's reach. "All I remember is a red T-shirt."

"Very good. How'd they leave?"

"In Lou's car. A VW. Green."

"Know the license?"
"Why the hell should I?"

Hutch got up from the barstool. "What about Lou? Got a description?"

"Early thirties. Stocky. Horn-rimmed glasses. Longish hair."

All of which meant nothing to Hutch. "I'm going to send the police artist over," he said. "You tell him what you can."

"Yes, sir."

Hutch left the cool dimness of the bar and walked back out into the burning afternoon. So. He had a name. A description. A car. God, this more than they'd had all along. This was a lot. He and Starsk had tracked down people with a lot less information.

Only one thing worried him. If the theory that Dobey and he were now operating under was true, shouldn't this guy Lou sound familiar? The name and description meant nothing at all to him. Still, at least he didn't feel like he was chasing a ghost anymore.

"Hang in there, Starsk," he muttered. "Just hang in there a little longer, buddy."

***
Kenny didn't look too good.

Louis focused his new binoculars a little better. They really worked great. He was nearly two blocks from Kenny and it was as if they were standing right next to one another. Kenny came down the steps of the police station and paused for a moment on the sidewalk. He exchanged a few words with a policewoman standing there and then got into the Torino.

Louis decided not to follow him. For one thing, he was afraid of being spotted. Anyway, he had more important things to do. Back at Funland, where David was waiting for him.

The man on the car radio kept talking about how hot it was and wondering about rain. Louis made only one stop on the way back out to the park. He went into a coffee shop for some sandwiches and things. David would probably be hungry by this time. Besides... it would make what he had to do easier.

He wanted to avoid any more hassles. Last night he'd been forced to punish David for trying to get the tape from around his wrists. He hated doing it, but his control had to be maintained. David just had to learn who was the boss.

Before getting out of the car back at the park, Louis pried the plastic top off the cup of Dr. Pepper. He broke open two of the red capsules and dumped the contents in, stirring it well with an extra straw. Then he replaced the lid and put the soda back into the sack.

David was sitting on the cot. Louis sighed in exasperation; the tape on David's wrists was gnawed again and his ankle was bleeding from futile attempts to get free of the chain. But David seemed exhausted from his efforts. He looked up listlessly as Louis came in. The small room was stiflingly hot, especially with the afternoon sun pouring in through the hole in the roof.

"Hello, David."

Starsky didn't answer.

"I brought you lunch."

"I don't want another goddamned Big Mac," he muttered.

"It's not. I got you a nice ham sandwich. And some cold soda."

Starsky shrugged. Louis set the food on the table and sat down in one of the chairs. He began to eat his own sandwich. After a moment, Starsky stood and walked over to the table. Ignoring the sandwich, he picked up the paper cup and began gulping down the soda. It helped a little. He felt like hell and figured that, besides the heat and generally rotten conditions, he was suffering a delayed reaction to the chloroform he'd been drugged with. It happened that way sometimes. He recognized that he was also experiencing a severe depression. A giant case of homesickness. He
sat down across from Louis. "So where you been?" he asked, taking a small bite of the sandwich and washing it down with another gulp of soda.

"In the city."

Starsky nodded. That confirmed his suspicion that they were some distance from town. He took another bite, chewing thoughtfully. "And what did you there?"

"Huh?" Louis seemed more interested in watching him eat than in his own food. "Oh, I saw Kenny for a little while."

Starsky forced his voice to remain even. "How is Hutch?"

Louis laughed a little, softly. "Actually, he's looking kinda bad. Tired, you know?"

"Yeah." He lost what little appetite he had and pushed the sandwich away. "Tell me something, Louis. Why do you hate Hutch?"

"I have my reasons. Good reasons."

Starsky drained the cup and crumpled it. "So what happens now?"

Louis didn't answer.

Starsky stood. "Course we could just go through life together in this room, right?" He had been waiting each day for the gun to get far enough away from Louis' hand so that he might have at least a fighting chance of grabbing it. But it never did.

He took one step toward the cot and the room began to spin. He tripped and almost fell, just managing to make the cot before crumbling. "Hey..." he murmured vaguely. Could it be the chloroform again?

"David? Are you all right?"

Louis was standing over him. But he looked funny. Sort of wavy. Far away one second and then right on top of him the next. "You... put something... in my drink," he said, and then he giggled. "That sounds like... a line... from an old MGM flick," he said.

"I thought you needed to relax."

"Son... of a... bitch," Starsky said. He tried to raise his taped hands to hit Louis, but the thought didn't seem to get from his brain to his arms. He stared up at Louis. "Are... are you going to... kill...?"

"Kill who?"
"Me..." Starsky shook his head, trying to clear away the fog. "No... not me... Hutch. Are you going to kill him?"

Louis didn't answer immediately; he walked around the room, rubbing his hands together. Starsky blinked, trying to keep him in sight. "One way or another, I will. I don't want to kill him, you know? But he has to be punished. God wants me to punish him. Because of what he did."

"What... what did he do?"

"I don't want to talk about that." From somewhere, Louis produced a black medical bag and began to rummage through it. "He should have been my friend. Then I could forgive him. Friends forgive each other."

Starsky was watching him warily. "Hutch is... friendly with everybody," he said.

"Not me. He was mean to me. And then... and then he killed her."

Starsky's mouth wasn't working right and his words came out thick and twisted sounding. "Killed... who?"

"Marcie. My sister. I loved her best in the whole world and Kenny killed her." He took a hypodermic needle from the bag. "You shouldn't be friends with someone like Kenny. You can see that, David, can't you?"

"Hutch is... my friend."

"No!" Louis shouted. "I'm your friend, not him. Kenny will hurt you someday, just like he hurt me."

Starsky managed to move his head back and forth a little. "No," he said firmly. "Hutch... will never... hurt me."

Louis sat down on the edge of the cot, smiling gently. "But he already has, don't you see? You're here because of him." He shifted the hypo in his fingers. "Won't you be my friend, David? Help me to punish Kenny."

Absurdly, he knew, Starsky returned the smile. "No, Louis."

"Well," Louis said regretfully, "you will help me, David, whether you want to or not." He gripped Starsky's arm tightly.

Starsky tried to get away, but the hold on him was too strong. "I don't like... needles," he said, willing his body to move. All of his thoughts kept getting sidetracked, though. Nothing seemed to work.

"Close your eyes."
But Starsky shook his head. "Screw... you." A great wave of blackness was beginning to descend upon him and he knew that there was no sense in struggling against it. Still, his anger survived and he made one final attempt. "No..."

"All your dreams will be pretty," Louis murmured.

Starsky managed to lift his head a little. "Don't hurt him," he said breathlessly. "I'll... kill you... if you... hurt Hutch."

From somewhere far away, he heard laughter and then waves of color and sound swept over him and washed him along helplessly.

~~~

Hutch's earlier optimism had faded and now he could only sit at his desk reading through the reports of every arrest he had made since he first joined the force. It was slow, boring, and thus far, useless work.

Someone was standing by his desk. The uniformed cop looked vaguely familiar. "Detective Hutchinson?"

"Yes?" Hutch said, reaching for his cold coffee and taking a swallow.

"Mike Powers... you remember me?"

After a moment, Hutch nodded. "Oh, sure, Mike... how you doing?"

"Fine," Powers replied, twisting his hat in his hands. "I just wanted to let you know... I'm sorry about your partner." His voice was quiet. "I know how you feel."

"Yeah, I guess you do." Hutch leaned back for the coffee pot and poured more into his cup. "Want some?"

"Uh, no, I gotta get on the street." He gestured toward the hallway, where a slim black officer waited. "That's my new partner."

"Wilkins. I know him. A good man."

Powers nodded. "Yeah. He seems like a nice guy." They were silent for a moment. "I still... well, I miss him, you know?"

Hutch was sipping at the coffee; it was at least hot, even if it tasted like tar. "You'll be okay," he said finally.

"Oh, sure." Powers held out one hand. "So will you, Sergeant. Good luck."
They shook. "Take care," Hutch said.

"You, too."

Hutch watched as Powers walked out and joined his partner. The two men spoke quietly for a minute, then both smiled a little and they left. Yeah, Powers would be okay, Hutch thought. And what about himself? Oh, he'd be all right, too. What had he said to Starsk before, about Powers? "He'll get a new partner. That's all." Well, he had. Simple as that.

He tried to imagine a new partner for himself. Couldn't do it.

Dobey, unnoticed, had come in and was standing next to Hutch's desk, a computer readout in one hand. "Hutchinson," he said. Then, when Hutch's glassy expression didn't change, he said again, more sharply, "Hutchinson!"

Hutch raised his bleary eyes. "Huh? Oh, yeah?"

Dobey stared at him. "You need a shave."

"Yeah, Captain, right. I need a shave. I need to change my socks and underwear. I also need twelve, no, eighteen hours of sleep. And several thousand milligrams of vitamin C. But do you know what I need most of all?"

Dobey didn't like the rising tension in the tone of Hutch's voice. Day by day, hour by hour, it was increasing. "Yes, Ken, I know. Take it easy. It's going to work out okay."

Hutch sighed and sat back. "Yeah, so everybody keeps telling me. Well, clap your hands if you believe in fairies. Personally, I don't think there are any more happy endings."

"Maybe." Dobey lifted the paper. "You know a guy named Mitchell? Louis Alfred Mitchell?"

Hutch rubbed his face and thought. "Did I ever bust him?"

"No. This would have been years ago."

"Mitchell...." He raised his eyes suddenly. "Louis Mitchell? Yeah... hell, he grew up in my neighborhood. Why?"

"We just got a communiqué from the state police in Minnesota. This Mitchell has been in and out of mental hospitals for about ten years. Two weeks ago, he got out again. This time without permission. Killed a psychiatrist, took a large sum of money and a supply of drugs and disappeared. They think he might have come this way."

Hutch grabbed the paper and read it quickly.

"You know any reason why this guy would have it in for you?"
"Hell... after all these years? I haven't even seen the creep since before I went to Nam."

"Creep?"

Hutch nodded. "Yeah. Louis was strange... even when we were kids, he never fit in. A lot of us tried, but he was just... strange." He swiveled the chair back and forth. "I once saw him kill a kitten. The animal scratched him on the hand and he became so furious that he grabbed the kitten and twisted its neck until it died. I tried to stop him, but... even after I knocked him down, he wouldn't let go. And then he laughed." He tossed the computer readout onto his desk. "Jesus, I can still hear that laugh of his. And now he's got Starsk?"

"I'd say the odds are in favor of his being our man."

"Yeah. We have a picture?"

"They're sending one across the wire. Should have it soon."

"APB?"

"It's going out now."

Hutch rubbed the back of his neck. "I can't understand why. I mean, I always thought he was a fruitcake, but to show up here after all these years and start killing people... and snatching Starsk. Hurting people that he doesn't even know...."

"The man is insane."

"Yeah."

"Hutchinson, you better go home for a while." Dobey raised a hand to forestall the protest. "That's an order. Shave. Shower. Eat something. Take your damned vitamin whatever. Hutch, it's not going to do Starsky any good if you collapse."

"I'm all right," Hutch insisted.

Dobey's gaze went pointedly to Hutch's trembling hands.

Hutch sighed. "All right. But I'm coming back later."

"Sure. But try to get some sleep first, will you?"

The muggy air hit Hutch like a brick wall when he stepped out of the building. He made the drive home like an automaton, listening dully to the APB being broadcast for Mitchell. "It's a big city," he said aloud. And I seem to be talking to myself a lot lately. Isn't that a bad sign? Maybe I'm going crazy, too. "Fifteen square miles of city," he said. "Is this another game of hide-and-seek, Starsk?"
And who said they're still in the city?

"It's a big state. A big country. And a damned big world."

Assuming that Starsky was still alive, Hutch remembered something that Mike Powers had said when his partner was killed. Something about the fact that he should have known McGowan was dead. Hutch wondered if he could feel it if Starsk was dead.

"Yeah. Yeah, I would." And damn the logic that said he wouldn't.

He parked the Torino and sat there for another moment, listening to the APB one more time. Somehow he didn't expect much to come of that. Maybe he had known from the very beginning of this case that, in the end, it was going to come down to a battle between the murderer and himself. Now he felt that way even more strongly.

"Aim, hell," he said. He got out of the car and started toward his apartment. From somewhere, he could hear a faint roll of thunder.

**
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He was running... running...and something was chasing him... a huge, shapeless, rolling beast... a creature of many colors... grayblack... yellowred... closer and closer it came... his legs were pumping madly, but his feet wouldn't move... the beast came closer... closerclosercloser... 

He sat up. Someone was screaming. The voice was full of terror and he thought perhaps he should do something to help the person who was so frightened. Then he recognized that it was his own voice that he heard. But he couldn't stop. He just kept screaming and screaming.

Someone was shaking him. A hard slap to his face knocked him against the wall. "DAVID! DAVID!" a voice yelled at him. A face took shape in front of his eyes. He tried to get away, but his body wouldn't move.

Then, suddenly, it was over.

He fell, drenched in sweat and panting, back onto the cot and opened his eyes. Someone he thought he should know was crouching next to the bed. "David? Are you all right now?"

He didn't know who this person was, but he knew that he was scared. He wanted to get away. An idea took fragile shape in his mind. "I... I need to... take a leak," he said. "Let me go to... the john."

"Well... okay. But be careful." Louis didn't go for the gun. He bent to unlock the chain from Starsky's leg and as soon as the padlock fell open, Starsky moved. He brought both arms down onto the back of Louis' neck. Louis toppled over like a tree.

Starsky slid from the cot and got to his feet. His eyes weren't working right. Everything wavered and quivered in front of him. He tried to figure out where the door was. That was all he could think of. Just get out. Get away. He forgot the gun. Forgot the scalpel. He opened the door and stumbled out into the night. As he ran, he gnawed desperately at the tape around his wrists.

He fell, scraping both knees against the ground. A sharp pebble dug into his leg. He held the rock pressed between his knees and rubbed it against the tape around his wrists until finally the tape broke and his hands were free.

Struggling to his feet again, he moved toward a light and a familiar shape in the distance. By the time he reached the phone booth, there was a number in his mind. He didn't know whose number it was; it wasn't his own, that much he was sure of. He giggled a little as he pushed open the door of the booth. Wouldn't do any good to call his place. After all, he wasn't there. After the fit of giggles passed, he dug one hand into the pocket of the cut-off's, looking for change, and finally came up with some coins. He tried to get one into the slot, dropped it, tried to bend and retrieve it, gave that up and tried another coin. This time, it worked and he slowly, painfully, dialed the numbers that were making a vague memory in his head.
There were some clicks and other machine noises and then a tinny voice told him more money was needed. He kept shoving coins into the slot until the voice said, "Thank you," and then he heard a phone ringing on the other end.
Hutch couldn't sleep. He had done everything else Dobey ordered. Showered. Shaved. Ate a carton of yogurt. Swallowed some vitamin C and several other miscellaneous nutrients. But he couldn't sleep. He got dressed again. Watched the evening news on TV--where they no longer even mentioned the fact that a local detective was still missing. Time and the EYEWITNESS REPORT waited for no man. He listened to the weather. They were still saying that it might rain.

He walked around the apartment. Watered the plants. Finally, he went into the bedroom to get his shoes and socks. To hell with it. He'd go back to work.

Ollie was sitting on the high shelf in the closet. Hutch saw him, paused, and took the stuffed bear down. Terri's note was stuck to the toy with a piece of yellowing Scotch tape. Not knowing why, Hutch carried the bear back into the living room and sat down on the couch.

He knew what the note said by heart, although he'd not read it since that first time, and he'd been drunk then. They were both drunk that night, at their private wake for Terri. Both drunk, both crying; the tears helped to purge the grief. He spoke the words aloud to the uninterested room. "To dearest Hutch... to you I entrust Ollie and Dave. Please love them both and don't let either one of them change." His voice cracked a little. "Damnit, Ollie," he said. "I don't know if you and I can make it alone."

The phone rang.

He almost didn't answer it. He was afraid of what he might hear. Could be Dobey: "Hutchinson, we've got another body."

The phone kept ringing.

Still holding Ollie, he lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

There was no voice on the other end, just the sound of someone breathing.

"Hello?" he said again. "Look, I don't go in for funny phone calls."

Then, softly, hesitantly: "Hut... Hutch?"

He thought for a moment that he was dreaming.

"Hutch...?"

"Starsk?" Hutch's eyes closed as he fought for steadiness. "My god, Starsk...?"

"Hey... Hutch... he... he's got me... Hutch?"

"Starsk, where are you? Where are you? Are you all right?"
It sounded like Starsky was crying; he sniffled loudly. "It's after me... I keep trying to run, but... I can't... oh, Hutch...."

Hutch tried to keep his voice calm. "Tell me where you are, Starsk."

"I don't know... phone booth... it's all dark and funny colors... nothing is standing still...."

"Starsk, listen, please." His partner kept mumbling. "Listen to me, Starsky," Hutch said sharply. There was a silence on the other end of the line. "Are you listening?"

"Y... yes, Hutch."

*What the hell is wrong with him?* "Starsky, look straight out the front of the phone booth. Are you doing that?"

"Yeah...."

"What do you see?"

"Huh? Oh... a horse... a blue horse... big."

*Jesus, he's totally zonked.* "Starsk, please... look again. You don't see a big blue horse, do you?"

"Uh-huh... yesyesyesyesyes!" His voice rose in near hysteria.

"All right, Starsk, all right. Take it easy."

"I hurt, Hutch... I hurt...."

"Shh, okay, I'm going to help you. Now, babe, look out to your right. What do you see?"

"Right?" Starsky muttered to himself again, apparently trying to determine which way was right. "A building... a big building."

Hutch licked at the sweat forming above his upper lip. "Okay, good. Are there any words on the building?"

"Words? Uh, yeah, yeah."

"What do the words say, Starsk?"

"Uh... M... A... Z... Hutch, I hurt, please."

"Read the letters, babe, come on. Tell me what the letters say and I'll come get you."

"No!" Starsky yelled the word.
"Starsk? What's wrong?"

"He... wants to... kill you... don't come."

"Read the letters, buddy. M-A-Z, what's next?"

"Letters? M... A..."

"You said that already, partner, what's next?"

"M... A... oh, no," Starsky suddenly whimpered.

"What? You okay?"

"He's coming... he's coming to get me... Hutch, Hutch, please, help me."

"Where are you!" Hutch shouted into the phone. "For christ's sake, babe, where are you?"

"Hutch..." It was a faint whisper, filled with despair and pain, fear and hopelessness. It didn't sound like Starsky at all, but like some lost, scared little kid.

"Starsk?" Hutch heard the sound of the receiver hitting against the wall of the phone booth. Then he could hear voices, but the words were unintelligible. He listened desperately, straining to understand.

"HUCH..."

The one piercing scream came over the wire clearly and struck Hutch like a sharp blade in the heart. "Starsky?" he whispered. A moment later, someone was breathing into the other phone. He knew it wasn't Starsky. "Louis?" he said softly.

"Hello, Kenny. How'd you know it was me?"

"I'm a cop, remember? It's my business."

Louis seemed to find that funny. "Yeah, right."

"What'd you do to Starsky?"

"David was getting a little upset. I just gave him another shot. Now he's all nice and relaxed. Quiet. But he'll be punished for what he did. David is very stubborn, do you know?"

"Where are you, Louis? It's me you really want, right? Tell me where you are and I'll come. Then you can let Starsky go."
There was a pause and he thought that maybe Louis was going to agree. But then he chuckled again. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? No, I won't tell you. Not yet. You're the big hero cop. Find me if you can."

The phone clicked as Louis very carefully hung up.
Hutch just sat there, listening to the dial tone until the phone began squawking in protest, and then he hung up, too. He realized that he was still holding Ollie in his hand. He looked at the bear for a long moment, then carefully propped it in one corner of the couch. "A big blue horse?" he muttered, quickly pulling on his shoes and socks. "MAZ? What the hell is all that supposed to mean?"


MAZ and a big blue horse.

He deliberately kept thinking about those things and that kept him from remembering the sound of his name being screamed, from remembering the pure terror in the voice, from thinking about what might be happening to Starsky right now.

Dobey looked up in surprise when Hutch came crashing into his office. "What's going on?"

Hutch dropped into a chair, gripping the arms. "I talked to Starsk."

"What?" Dobey said, obviously stunned.

Hutch quickly related the details of what had happened. "All he talked about was that big blue horse," he finished. "And M-A-Z." He slumped in the chair, chewing on his fingernail. "He was drugged."

"Well, that fits in with the report from Minnesota. Mitchell has a whole cache of drugs he took from the hospital."

"Yeah." Hutch's mind wandered for a moment as he recalled his own experience with drugs. Strung out and hurting. Crashing down and nearly checking out. And Starsky there with him the whole time. He never would have made it without him. And now his partner needed him and where was he? Sitting here passing the time of day with Dobey.

Dobey toyed with some pencils on his desk. "How did Starsky sound?" he asked finally, quietly.

"Huh? Oh... good as could be expected, I guess. Except that he was talking so crazy." Hutch gave a rueful half-smile. "It was good to hear his voice."

The captain nodded his understanding. "Well, at least we know he's still alive."

"Or he was. Half an hour ago."

Dobey's forehead wrinkled. "You talked to Mitchell. What's your evaluation? Think he'd kill Starsky?"
"Who the hell knows? He's a madman." Hutch was silent for a moment, before continuing thoughtfully, "Still... no, I don't think he will. Not yet anyway. I got the impression he was enjoying the game."
"The game?"

"Using Starsk as bait. He wants me to jump when he whistles." Hutch sighed and got to his feet. "See you."

"Where are you going?"

"To hunt down a blue horse, I guess. What else do I have?" He opened the door.

"Hutchinson."

He looked around without speaking.

Dobey's eyes were hard. "When Mitchell whistles...."

"Yeah?"

"Don't jump without letting me know. I mean it," he added sharply, as Hutch seemed about to protest. "This isn't a private battle between you and Mitchell."

Hutch's voice was colder than Dobey had ever heard it. "He's got my partner."

"Hutchinson, if you try to turn this into a personal vendetta, you could wind up in big trouble."

"Starsky's already in big trouble."

"Don't you think I know that? All I'm saying is, handle it right."

Hutch nodded, his eyes midnight dark. "Okay. I'll try."

"You'll try?" Dobey said tightly.

"Man, that's the best I can do. I won't promise."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Dobey lowered his gaze first, looking at a report on his desk. Hutch started to say something else, then changed his mind and went out, closing the door quietly.

**
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Louis sat on the floor and watched David.

It had been hours since the last shot and David had scarcely moved or made a sound, beyond an occasional low mumbling. Louis was beginning to worry a little. Maybe he'd given him too much stuff. He leaned over the cot. "David?" he said. "David, wake up."

Obediently, David's eyes opened; his gaze was unfocused. "Huh?" he said thickly.

"Are you awake now?"

"Yeah... yeah... Hutch?"

Louis took hold of Starsky's arm and squeezed it tightly. "No. No. Not Kenny. This is Louis."

Starsky suddenly whimpered and tried to crawl away. "No...."

"You can't go anywhere, David. I have you all chained up and I won't let you get away again. That was a very bad thing you did before. You hurt me."

Starsky shook his head. "Sorry... sorry..."

"Well, I've decided to forgive you. This time." He pointed to Starsky's knees. "See? I even cleaned up your legs where you hurt them. Aren't I your friend, David? Don't I take care of you?"

As he spoke, his hands smoothed ointment on Starsky's scraped knees. "I take good care of you. Not like Kenny. Kenny lets you get hurt. Remember the time you were shot?"

Starsky wanted to object. *Hutch tried... he tried to get there on time... he didn't want me to get shot... Hutch would never hurt me... he cares.*

"And remember when that guy beat you up on the porch? I saw that. Kenny should have helped you."

*He tried... he came as fast as he could... it was so quick....*

Louis finished his ministrations on Starsky's knees. "You shouldn't have called Kenny, David. We don't want him here. Not yet. Not until we're ready."

"I want..."

Louis stood and spoke briskly. "When I was in town last time, I bought a new surprise. Guess what?"

"I saw... I saw the horse," Starsky said suddenly, clearly, rationally. "I saw the big blue horse."
"What? Oh, yeah. His name is Prince. I read it on the sign. Prince. That's a nice name for a horse, I think." He was busy ripping open a paper sack. He pulled out a camera and beamed proudly. "See? Isn't this nice? It's the kind that gives you the picture in only sixty seconds."

But Starsky didn't seem to hear him; he was talking to himself, shaking the chain angrily.

Louis shrugged and began to read the instructions on using the camera. It took him nearly forty-five minutes to figure it all out and get the film properly loaded. "Stand up, David," he said finally. "I want to take your picture."

"Go to hell, you son of a bitch."

Louis walked over to the cot, grabbed Starsky by the hair, and lifted him. "Get up!" he shouted, throwing him against the generator. "I said I want to take your picture."
Starsky hit the generator with a crash and sank to his knees. Somehow, he managed to push himself into a standing position. "I ain't saying cheese," he mumbled, wiping blood from his chin.

Louis didn't answer. He pointed the camera and snapped the picture. "There," he began, "that wasn't so bad--"

To Starsky's clouded mind, the flash from the camera seemed to explode like a bomb. The whole room was ignited in a blinding, burning light that was trying to consume him. He covered his face, screaming, and tried to get away. He ran until he reached the end of the chain and then fell flat, jerked back harshly. "No," he moaned, "nononononono." He rolled around desperately, trying to keep the flames from devouring him.

Louis tore the developing picture from the camera and dropped it on the table. He grabbed Starsky, trying to hold him down against the floor. "David! Stop it, David!"

Finally, he relaxed, still trembling, but quiet. Louis helped him up and back to the cot. "You all right now?"

"Y... yes."

Louis patted his shoulder, not appearing to notice that Starsky flinched away from the touch. "Sure, you're okay. 'Cause I was taking care of you. Isn't that right?"

Starsky nodded.

"Do you know whose fault it is that you're hurting?"

"N... no."

"It's Kenny's fault."

Starsky shook his head. "No, not Hut... Hutch."

"Yes, it is." Louis' fingers tightened their grip. "It's his fault. Kenny is evil; he hurts you. I don't hurt you because I'm your friend. Who takes care of you?"

Always placate a madman. From somewhere in the confused mess of Starsky's mind, the thought rang clearly. "You do," Starsky whispered.

"Who hurts you?"

"Hut... Kenny."

Louis smiled. "Yes, that's right."
Starsky huddled on the cot, his whole body hurting. He wanted to fight Louis; at least, part of him did. He wanted to call back his traitorous words, deny the lies. But he was so tired. So sick. It was easier to accept. Easier to give up. He was probably never going to get out of here anyway. He would die in this hot, stinking room. Hutch would never find him. Probably his partner had stopped looking. He'd been here so long. Hadn't he? Weeks, he thought. Maybe longer. So surely Hutch would've given him up by now. Figured he was dead. Found a new partner and gone on with his life. Silent tears rolled out of Starsky's eyes and coursed down his face.

Louis walked over to the table and picked up the picture. It had come out very nicely. He gazed at it proudly. David was looking directly into the camera and there was blood trickling down his chin. Louis wondered how Kenny would feel when he saw it. Guilty? Maybe.

Pretty soon Kenny would join them. Soon.

Louis glanced over toward the cot. David was half-asleep and talking to himself again. His face glistened wetly. Louis smiled faintly as he sat down to address the envelope. A streak of lightning zig-zagged across the sky. Maybe it really was going to rain.

Two days.

~~~

Hutch could not believe that two days had passed since his phone conversation with Starsky. During that time, he'd made no progress. None. He still had no idea what M-A-Z meant or what the hell Starsky could have meant by all of his talk about a big blue horse.

Of course, it all could mean nothing. Everything Starsky said might have been part of a drug-induced fantasy. That's what Dobey thought and there were moments when Hutch was beginning to agree. But Starsky had sounded so sure. Dobey hadn't heard him. And even if Dobey had, he didn't know Starsky, not as well as Hutch.

Hutch reached into the desk drawer and brought out two items. The first was an arrest warrant for Louis Mitchell, on kidnapping charges. He was holding that in reserve until needed. The other paper was a colored pencil sketch of a blue horse. Jacobs, the police artist, had given Hutch a strange look upon hearing his request. But then the jovial man shrugged and complied. Hutch had stared at the sketch for hours and it was still nothing more than a picture of a blue horse.

"Sergeant Hutchinson?"

He looked up and saw a clerk standing there. "Yes?" he said, trying to sound civil. On two hours sleep out of the last forty-eight, civility did not come easily.

"You have some mail. Marked urgent and personal."
He took the envelope and saw his name printed carefully on the front. There was no return address. "Thanks," he said belatedly to the already-gone clerk. He took a sip of coffee and ripped the envelope open.

The photo fell, face-up, onto the desk.
Hutch stared at it for a long time, not touching the glossy picture, just looking. Starsky looked like a caged beast, desperate to escape, but knowing there was no place to go. There was blood trickling down his chin. He looked... scared.

Finally, Hutch picked up the photo and carried it into Dobey's office. Without speaking, he dropped it onto the Captain's desk. Dobey glanced at it and then at Hutch. "So. A new move."

"Yeah."

Dobey picked the picture up by an edge. "What's that behind him?"

"Huh? I didn't notice." He bent closer to look. "Looks like a machine of some kind."

"A generator," Dobey said.

"Yeah?"

He nodded. "A fairly good-sized one. Something like that could provide a lot of power."

"Think it's a factory, maybe?"

"Could be."

Hutch swore under his breath. "We keep learning. We keep getting more 'clues', whatever the hell that means, but we never get any closer to Starsky."

Dobey looked thoughtful. "You know, Hutchinson, I have a feeling that sooner or later, Mitchell will tell us where Starsky is."

"Oh, sure."

"Sure?"

Hutch nodded. "I've known that ever since I spoke to him. Like I said, this is a game."

Dobey's gaze went back to the picture. "Looks like Starsky is the big loser. Starsky and three dead men."

Hutchinson didn't answer. He picked up the photo and left Dobey's office.

Dobey sat still for a moment, his face creased. He reached for the phone, dialing an adjoining office. "This is Dobey. When Detective Sergeant Hutchinson leaves the building, I want a tail put on him. A good one. And stick close."

He hung up slowly.
The old lady looked vaguely familiar to Hutch. She was sitting in a chair next to his desk, watching the activity in the squad room with eager eyes. "May I help you, ma'am?"

"Oh, Detective Hutchinson. Remember me? Miss Corby?"

He remembered then. The cookie-and-lemonade lady. "Sure, I remember," he said. "You have something to tell me about the case?"

"Well, no," she replied.

Hutch hadn't thought so. He sat down and tried to sound cordial. "Well?"

"I read in the paper about that other officer being kidnapped. Such a terrible thing. Have you found him yet?"

"No, ma'am, not yet."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry; such a terrible thing."

"Thank you for your concern."

She reached into a voluminous shopping bag and pulled out a wrapped package. "I noticed how much your friend enjoyed my cookies when you two were visiting me before."

Hutch managed a faint smile. "Yes, ma'am, he did."

"So I baked up a special batch just for him. I thought perhaps you could give them to him when he's found." She held the package out to him.

After a moment, he took it. It was another moment before he could trust himself to speak. "Thank you, Miss Corby," he said softly. "I'll make sure that Detective Starsky gets the cookies. I know he'll appreciate them."

She smiled. "Have faith. You're both good boys and I know everything will turn out all right."

Her conviction seemed to radiate across the desk and touch him. "Well, I know you're busy, so I'll be on my way." As she stood, her gaze skimmed over the top of Hutch's desk. Her eyes brightened. "Why, my gracious, that makes me think of Prince."

Hutch, tucking the cookies into a drawer, glanced up. "Beg your pardon?"

"That drawing. It reminds me so much of Prince."

Slowly, Hutch reached out for the artist's rendering of the blue horse. "This?"

"Yes, indeed."
His mouth was dry. "Who is Prince, Miss Corby?"

"When I was a child, every summer my father would take me out to the Funland Amusement Park for a whole day."

"Funland? I've never heard of it."

"Oh, it's been closed down for a number of years now. But Prince was always my favorite thing to see."

Hutch fought back the impulse to grab the woman and shake the rest of the story out of her. "Prince? The horse was at the park?"

"Oh, yes. He was a large wooden horse painted the most lovely shade of blue."

He ran the tip of his tongue across his lips. "This horse was in the park?"

"Just outside the main gate."

Hutch searched frantically through a drawer and finally found the map, which he spread on top of the desk. "Can you show me where this park is?"

"Well..." She leaned over the desk and studied the map carefully before pointing a neat, white finger. "Right there."

Hutch gave a long, long sigh, closing his eyes.

"Detective Hutchinson, are you all right?" Miss Corby asked.

He opened his eyes. "Yes, ma'am," he said, folding the map quickly. "I'm better than I've been in a long time." He bent and kissed her on one wrinkled cheek. "I love you."

She blushed and tittered all the way out of the squad room.

Hutch sank into the chair, his hands clasped together tightly, his face revealing none of the turmoil that was going on inside. It was so simple now. All he had to do was step into Dobey's office and tell him where Starsky was. In moments, a virtual convoy of cars and armed men would be on their way to rescue his partner. So why wasn't he on his way into Dobey's office?

Well, it was his partner. That was part of it. And this whole thing was his fault. Still... he wasn't an idiot or suicidal. At least, he didn't think he was suicidal. Not yet, anyway.

But Hutch still felt that the final battle was one that would be fought--must be fought--between two men. Louis and himself. That was the way Louis wanted it and if his wish was thwarted, he would kill Starsky. Hutch felt very sure of that. He picked up the envelope that the photo had arrived in and noticed for the first time that there was also a slip of paper tucked inside. He took
it out and carefully unfolded it. The block letters were precisely made. Neat. There were only two words written on the paper and they proved what Hutch had felt for so long. Louis expected to be found. Even wanted to be found, at least subconsciously. Hutch ran one fingertip along each letter carefully. COME ALONE.

That was all the note said. It was enough. There didn't have to be any threats or hints of what would happen to Starsky if the order was disregarded. It was all very understated and casual. It also scared the hell out of Hutch.

He folded the note again and tucked it into his shirt pocket. Then he picked up the warrant and, looking like a man going out for coffee, he strolled from the squad room and headed for the car.

He hadn't gone more than three blocks when he spotted the tail. It didn't surprise him very much. Dobey was no fool. But he couldn't allow Dobey's plan to work. There was no way he would lead that car to Louis, thus risking Starsky's life. No way. Probably there would be hell to pay later, but if Starsky was back safely it wouldn't matter. And if Starsky wasn't all right, it wouldn't matter either.

The unremarkable black sedan was sticking close. Hutch made a sudden turn and headed toward Starsky's apartment--because it was closer than his own place. The sedan immediately followed. He parked in Starsky's usual spot and got out, carefully not glancing toward the tail.

He climbed the steps and went inside, hoping that the two cops in the sedan would enjoy staring at the Torino for a while. He went through Starsky's place, not even pausing for a moment, and climbed out the fire escape that ran down the back of the building. Two minutes later, he was in a taxi on his way to the garage where his own car was.

The mechanic on duty eyed him malevolently. "Yeah, yeah," he muttered. "The car is done. Been done for two days; I was about ready to start charging you rent."

Hutch couldn't be bothered. He paid for the car and drove away, leaving the mechanic still talking. As he left the city, Hutch tried to figure out just what he should do when he reached the park. Just go walking in calmly and say, "All right, you son of a bitch, here I am"? That might work. Or break the door down and go in shooting? Hell, he didn't know.

He didn't even know for sure that Starsk was still alive. Unless he'd misread Louis completely, he should be. Should be. That wasn't much to hold on to. It was damned little, in fact. But it was all he had right then, so he clung to it.

He hunched over the steering wheel and watched for the turn-off that would take him to Funland. And Starsky.

**
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There was a sense of frenzy in the day.

It began before dawn. Louis came into the room, slammed the door, and stood watching as Starsky woke from his drugged, heavy sleep. "David?"

"Huh?"

"Are you listening to me?"

Starsky tried to see, tried to listen, but every-thing was shrouded in a thick gray fog that would not dissipate. He struggled to sit up a little, leaning one shoulder against the wall. "Huh? Yeah, yeah... I'm listening."

Louis paced the room, repeatedly wiping his palms against the front of his shirt. "Too hot to sleep," he said. "I got a funny feeling."

Starsky rested his head on his knees. "Yeah? Is it hot?" he mumbled.

Louis looked at him impatiently. "What's the matter with you, David?"

"Nothing."

"Well, get up. Let's have breakfast."

"Not hungry."

"Get up, I said," Louis repeated irritably. "It's time for breakfast. We have a busy day ahead of us."

"Yeah?" Starsky finally managed to get up from the cot and stumble over to the table, where Louis was unwrapping two Carnation breakfast bars. Starsky took one, nibbled at the corner, and made a face. "I don't like this."

"Eat it. It's good for you." He ate his own bar. "I bet you're tired of staying in this room, aren't you?" he asked cheerfully.

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I think I'll let you go outside today. We'll go for a walk around the park."

"What park?"

"My park. It all belongs to me now. I'll show you everything."
"Terrific."

Louis was fastidious about certain things. His tidy habits stemmed, primarily, from numerous long stays in various hospitals, where habit becomes deeply ingrained. Habit in the wards included such daily activities as washing, brushing one's teeth, and shaving. Presentability was considered very important. One might be mad, but that was no excuse for slovenliness.

Just because he was no longer in the hospital or under the bright-eyed scrutiny of Doctor Goldbaum, Louis saw no reason to abandon the rituals. Each morning, he washed in the cold water that was available, brushed his teeth, and shaved with his single-edged razor. It all served to make him feel better able to face whatever the day might bring. Additionally, he felt that it was his responsibility to extend these habits to David. So, when his own ablutions were complete, he always brought water, soap, toothpaste, and the razor to the cot and stood watching as David did a rather superficial job of cleaning himself. This morning, though, David's hands were trembling so badly that Louis was afraid to let him use the razor. So he took on the job himself, carefully soaping David's face and running the razor over it.

Starsky longed to escape the too-intimate contact; his stomach heaved at the touch of Louis' soft fingers on his face and neck. But he was afraid to move away, not knowing what Louis might do. So he clenched his teeth and bore it. Louis wiped the last of the soap from Starsky's face carefully. "Do you think that Kenny will find us?" he asked suddenly, as he cleaned the razor.

Starsky was startled by the unexpected question and it was a moment before he could reply. "I don't know."

"You know Kenny."

"Yes."

"So what do you think?"

Starsky thought. Sometimes lately, it had been difficult to even remember what his life had been like before Louis brought him to this room. Sometimes he could hardly even remember Hutch. Now he concentrated very hard, closing his eyes with the effort, and he could see an image. A face. Yeah, that was Hutch. He opened his eyes and nodded. "Yes. Hutch will find us," he said firmly. The image was gone now, but he felt very sure that Hutch would come.

Louis apparently agreed. He got up to put the shaving things away. "I think it might be today," he said.

"Why?"

"I just have a feeling." He sighed.

Starsky felt a surge of hope and a flicker of fear flow through him at the same time. Hope that this whole thing would soon be over. Fear of what might happen when Hutch did show up.
It was fully light outside now. Louis began to make preparations for their excursion out of the room. He carefully and tightly re-taped Starsky's wrists. Then, using a short length of chain, he fastened Starsky's legs together and released him from the long chain. "You can walk now," he said, "but don't try to run, or you'll just fall down."

"I won't."

"If you do, David, I'll shoot you. Believe me."

"Yeah."

"I don't really need you anymore. Kenny will be coming."

"I know."

Louis nodded, satisfied that Starsky would behave.

Starsky had no intention of trying to run. He had to keep himself alive at least long enough to prevent Louis from killing Hutch. Getting himself shot wouldn't help Hutch one damned bit. Louis shoved Starsky out through the door in front of him and Starsky was suddenly outside for the first time in longer than he could remember. It was a muggy, overcast day. The first thing he saw was a huge wooden horse, its blue paint chipped and faded. He stared at it, vaguely remembering it, but not quite sure of its significance.

Louis nudged him a little. "Come on. I want to show you the mazes. It's my favorite building."

Starsky stumbled in the direction Louis indicated. "I like the merry-go-round," he mumbled.

"Later."

Starsky glanced around at Louis. The gun was in his right hand, deceptively casual. That didn't scare Starsky as much as the sight of the too-familiar hypodermic needle that he could see in Louis' shirt pocket.

When they reached the MAZES OF FUN, Louis took a cloth from his pocket and tied it around Starsky's eyes. "We're going to play a game," he said. "I'll take you to the very center of the maze and then we'll see if you can find your way back out. Okay?"

Starsky didn't answer. He tried to concentrate on the route Louis dragged him along, but they turned so often, seeming to backtrack, and spent so much time going in circles, that he was totally confused. Louis obviously knew the maze well. Like a dumb animal trained to run the labyrinth as his best trick, Starsky thought bitterly.

When they finally stopped, Louis did not remove the blindfold immediately. Starsky tried to pull away when he felt the needlepoint touch his arm, but then he also felt the edge of the scalpel pressed against his jugular and he stayed very still. The needle slipped in, deposited its poison,
and slid out again. Louis stepped away. "Keep your eyes closed," he ordered, pulling off the blindfold. "Count to one hundred slowly, then open your eyes and try to get out. Understand? Do you understand, David?"

The drug seemed to react more quickly in his system each time that Louis injected him. Already, reality was getting fuzzy. Starsky managed to nod.

"Count out loud so that I can hear you. Loud, real loud."

"One!" Starsky yelled. He could hear Louis' footsteps moving away. "Seven!" He couldn't tell which way Louis was going. "Twenty-five!" His own voice seemed to echo all around him. He kept counting, kept shouting. "Seventy-three!" Louis was gone. He was alone, but he kept counting. "One hundred!"

Now there was total silence in the maze. He opened his eyes slowly and saw three passages. One was the correct way out. But even as he watched, the passages seemed to change, shift, waver. He rubbed his eyes with his taped hands, took three steps, and fell sideways against the wall. 

*Damned drugs must be affecting my... my equilibrium*, he thought. He tried again and this time guessed correctly. The passage led somewhere.

Step by step, he made his way toward what he hoped would be the exit. Some place out there, Louis was waiting for him. Some place out there, Hutch was looking for him. What if Hutch arrived while he was trapped in this damn place? Louis would kill him and there would be nothing he could do about it.

He moved faster and faster, bumping into the wall at each step, nearly falling, moving again. Without knowing it, he began to sob, gasping for breath. The beasts were chasing him again and if the monsters were merely his own fears, his own terrors given substance only within his imagination, they were no less frightening for that.

"Louis!" he yelled.

From somewhere, he could hear laughter. Colors began to spin around him. He couldn't move anymore. Helplessly, he sank into a corner. "Hutch?" he said between hoarse sobs. "Somebody...? Please, help me...."

But there was only laughter and the raspy sound of his own crying.

**
CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hutch parked one-half mile from the entrance to Funland, on the very edge of the huge parking lot. He took his gun from the holster and checked it automatically with one part of his mind on that and the rest of his thoughts on what lay ahead. Then he slid out of the car, leaving his jacket behind, and quietly shut the door behind him. The muggy afternoon air was perfectly still.

As he approached the amusement park, the first thing he saw was the big blue horse that sat just outside the main gate. A blue horse. He looked at it for a moment, sighing. Poor Starsky. Everybody thought he'd gone crazy. Well, I believed him. Mostly. The lock on the gate had been smashed long ago and there was a faint rusty creak as he pushed it open and went into the park. He smiled grimly as a sign caught his eye. MAZES OF FUN. M-A-Z. So far, Starsky was batting a thousand.

Hutch wondered which of the buildings might hold a generator. He turned away from the MAZES OF FUN and started toward a smaller wooden structure with no sign.

"Stop there, Kenny." The voice, soft and almost kind, came from behind him. He started to lift the gun. "Don't do that, Kenny," the voice admonished.

"Hello, Louis," he said, holding quite still.

"Drop the gun carefully."

Hutch hesitated.

Louis sighed. "David is still alive, but he won't stay that way if you don't do as I say."

The gun hit the ground with a dull thud. "Where is Starsky?"

"Oh, he's in a safe place."

"Not good enough. I want to see him right now."

Louis' voice took on an edge. "You're not the boss here, Kenny. You may be a big hero cop outside, but in here, I'm in charge. This is my place. In here, David belongs to me, not you. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, I want you to take out your cuffs and fasten your right wrist." Hutch slowly complied. "Put your hands behind you now. Pull the cuffs through your belt and fasten the other wrist. Do it tight. Don't try to shit me."

Hutch did as ordered. A moment later, he felt a hand on him, checking the cuffs. "Good boy." The hand spun him around. "Well, Kenny. Hello."
"Louis. It's been a long time."

"Yeah, it has. But you look the same."


Louis chuckled. "Yes, I bet you would. Had you going for a while, didn't I?"

They were walking slowly toward the center of the park as they talked. "You sure did, Louis."

Like many criminals, not all of them mad, Louis felt the urge to brag about his accomplishments. "I did everything right, didn't I?"

"Yes, I guess you did."

"Sure. I had a plan and I followed it. Dr. Goldbaum always used to say that it was important to have a plan."

Hutch's gaze darted from side to side as he searched for a sign of Starsky. "That was before you killed him, though, right?"

Louis looked a little surprised. "You know about that?"

Hutch gave a small, bitter smile. "I'm good at what I do, too."

Louis only grunted sullenly. They stopped next to a ride called the CIRCLE-O. "You know something about all these rides, Kenny?"

"What?"

"They can all be run by hand, if the power goes off."

Hutch nodded. "Yes, I remember that from the summer we worked in the carnival. That's so in case of an emergency, the passengers can be taken off."

"Uh-huh. You remember our summer?"

"Yes."

The CIRCLE-O consisted of a dozen or so small metal cylinders arranged in a circle around a tall center pipe. "Get into the first little car there, Kenny."

"Why?"

"Because I said so, that's why." Louis gave him a shove toward the platform.
It was awkward climbing with his hands fastened behind him, and Hutch nearly fell before he managed to scramble into the car. He glared at Louis. "Now what?"

Now nothing. Just sit there and be good."

"Where's Starsky?"

"Shut up about him." Louis crouched down in the center of the platform and began to turn the crank. "It was a little rusty," he commented casually, "so I oiled it up and now it works fine."

"Very nice, I'm sure." Hutch braced his legs against the front of the too-small car, trying to keep himself from falling out as the machine began to turn in a slow circle.

"I'm glad you came alone."

"Those were your orders."

"Uh-huh." Louis was turning the handle more quickly now. "I'm glad you obeyed, because I didn't want to have to kill David. I like him."

"Do you? Then why have you been hurting him? If you like him?" It was getting a little hard to talk, moving in ever-faster circles and fighting to stay in the car.

"It was necessary." To Louis, that seemed sufficient explanation. "Besides, sometimes he misbehaved. Discipline must be maintained." He was obviously quoting a rule from some past officialdom.

"Well, now that I'm here, why don't you let Starsky go?" Hutch could feel the wall of metal digging into his spine. He was getting very dizzy. Louis appeared only in quick flashes and the ride went around in circles.

"No. Not yet."

Hutch was nearly shouting now, his words seeming to be whisked from his mouth. "Look, it's me you want, isn't it? Let him go."

"No. I won't. I don't have to. Stop pretending like you care what happens to him. You don't have to pretend now; there's no one here but you and me." Louis stopped turning the crank for a moment and the ride slowed. "Stop pretending to be David's friend."

"Pretending?" Hutch kept his eyes closed in an effort to fight the waves of dizziness that threatened to overwhelm him. As a kid, he'd always gotten sick on the rides that went around in circles. Even now, he didn't like them. Every time Starsk and he went out to Disneyland (usually with visiting stewardesses) his partner kept up a constant stream of teasing, trying to get him on some of the wilder rides. But he stayed off the ones that went in circles. Hell, sometimes,
Starsky's driving was enough to make him sick. "What do you mean, pretending?" he asked breathlessly.

"You never cared about anybody but yourself. You never cared about me or about Marcie, and you don't care anything about David."

"I do care about him!" Hutch yelled. Then he struggled to take a deep breath. Damnit. He couldn't afford to lose control. One raving maniac at a time was quite enough. "Louis, I don't understand what this is all about. What did I ever do to you? And who is Marcie?"

Slowly, slowly, the crank began to turn again. "You don't even remember her?" Louis sounded close to tears. "You killed my sister and you don't even remember her?"

Hutch kept his eyes closed tightly, trying to concentrate on the words, trying to ignore the round and round motion. "Your... yeah, Louis, yeah, I guess I remember Marcie... your sister? Sure... but god, man, what do you mean? I didn't kill her."

"Stop lying! She told me all about it."

Hutch's legs were beginning to cramp painfully. "About... what?" He hoped to god that he wasn't going to throw up.

"How you got her pregnant before you went to Viet Nam. Didn't you ever wonder what happened?" He turned the handle more quickly, not giving Hutch a chance to answer. "She went to a back-alley butcher for an abortion. And she died from it."

Hutch was beginning to remember Marcie: a beautiful, angelic-looking girl, with a lifestyle that was far from angelic. She was the kind of girl whose name was frequently mentioned—justifiably or not—in the high school locker room. He had probably spoken to her half a dozen times in his life, had never dated her, and had certainly not gotten her pregnant. "Louis... I don't know... what Marcie told you... but it wasn't me... please, believe me."

"No more lies, Kenny!" Louis shouted. "I'm tired of your lies!"

"Louis... I don't... I never... ohmygodimgonnabesick...."

"It's all your fault, Kenny! Your fault that Marcie is dead. Your fault that all the others are dead. And it's your fault that I had to hurt David. It's all because of you."

Great waves of blackness rolled over Hutch and he fought to stay conscious. "Where's Starsk?" he murmured. "What have you done to him?"

"Your fault... your fault... your fault...." The echo seemed to go on forever as the blackness of sweet oblivion swallowed Hutch.
The pounding in his head was insistent. There was a rhythm to the noise: yourfaultyourfaultyourfaultyourfaultyourfault. He rolled over and opened his eyes. Louis was gone. Hutch was no longer sitting cramped in the CIRCLE-O. He was lying on the floor of a room that smelled of age and dampness.

He finally managed to sit up. The sight of himself reflected in several mirrors around the room threatened a return of the dizziness. He closed his eyes again, seeking equilibrium. *Where the hell am I?*

And more important: where was Starsk? That question was enough to propel him first to his knees and then onto his feet. He started to take a step and promptly lost his balance and fell against the wall. *What the devil...?* He couldn't seem to stand up straight. The walls all seemed to be tilting over on top of him... *god... did he drug me, too?* No matter how hard he tried, the room wouldn't stay level. By leaning against the wall, he managed to reach an exit--or what looked like an exit, only to bump into a mirror and fall down again.

He didn't get up immediately this time. Instead, he pulled his knees against his chest and closed his eyes, trying to understand just what the hell was going on. He didn't feel drugged, exactly, just very, very dizzy. Discombobulated, as his grandmother used to say.

"Please... somebody..."

The voice came from nearby, suddenly and softly. Hutch held his breath, waiting. "... please...."

Hutch lifted his head. "Starsk?" he said softly. "Starsky?"

There was a pause. "Who's that?" the voice said.

"Starsk? It's me."

"Hi, me." It almost sounded like Starsky laughed a little.

"Where are you, partner?"

"Hutch?"

"Yeah, buddy, yeah." Hutch fought the urge to jump to his feet and run toward Starsky. Instead, he began to scoot on his knees, still leaning against the wall, toward another exit. "Keep talking to me, Starsk. Where are you?"

"Hutch?"

He had guessed correctly this time and there really was an exit. "Hey, boy? You still there?"

"Yeah, Hutch... is it really you this time?"
He lost his balance at that moment and crashed face-first into the wall. Blood began gushing from his nose. "Damn," he mumbled, sinking down against the wall.

"Hutch?" Panic was evident in Starsky's voice. "Hutch!"

Hutch tried to wipe the blood on his shoulder. "It's okay, Starsk, I'm coming." He began to move again.

"I thought... I thought you went away again," Starsky said. "Or maybe you're a dream. Are you a dream?"

Hutch blinked, trying to see beyond the wavering mirror images of himself that filled the hall. "I'm real," he said absently.

"Yeah?" Starsky sounded skeptical.

It was confusing as hell trying to follow the sound of Starsky's voice, because it seemed to echo. Hutch paused for a moment, leaning against a mirror, staring at his own bloody face as he tried to catch his breath. "You hanging in there, buddy?" he said after a minute.

"I'm here."

"Good boy." He moved again.

Abruptly, he rounded a corner and nearly fell over Starsky. They stared at each other for a long time. "Hey," Hutch said finally, softly.

Starsky gave a long, shuddering sigh. He raised his taped hands and gripped Hutch's arm tightly, as if needing to be sure of his reality. To be sure that this wasn't another dream image that would vanish when he reached for him. Then he fleetingly touched Hutch's face and hair. "Thought... thought you'd quit looking for me... been so long... months and months...."

Hutch tried to smile. "Hasn't been that long, partner. 'Sides, you should have more faith in me. I wouldn't give up."

"Yeah...." Starsky touched Hutch's cheek lightly, seeking and offering consolation. "You're hurt... bleeding...."

"Nah. Just bumped my nose. This place is strange. Can't seem to get my balance."

Starsky moved to lean his back against the wall, pulling Hutch with him. They sat shoulder to shoulder. "Tilts," Starsky mumbled.

"What?"

"The building, Hutch. It tilts."
Hutch realized that Starsky was right. The floor of the building had been constructed at a very slight angle, hardly noticeable when one looked at it, but enough so that anyone walking there was thrown off-balance. "Yeah," he said.

Starsky seemed to have lost interest in the conversation. He was humming softly to himself.

Hutch sniffled. The bleeding seemed to be stopping. He took a moment to wonder where Louis was.

"Did you see it?" Starsky asked suddenly.

"What?"

"The blue horse. Did you see the blue horse?" Starsky's amethystine eyes were unnaturally bright, especially as contrasted with his pale, hollow face.

"Yes, I saw the blue horse, Starsk. You were right."

Starsky chuckled. "Yeah. You thought I was seeing things."

"We have to get out of here, Starsk. Think you can manage it?"

"Sure... sure, we can make it."

Life was being lived in the plural again. Hutch, who had not cried before, even when he thought Starsky was dead, blinked away a sudden hot wetness. He scooted around so that his pocket was close to Starsky. "Get the keys out so you can unlock the cuffs."

"Huh? Oh... keys... yeah, okay." Starsky managed to get his fingers into Hutch's pocket and pulled out the key chain.

"The small one, Starsk," Hutch urged. "You know which key is for the cuffs, don't you?"

"Course I do... whaddaya think, I'm suddenly gone dumb?" Starsky mumbled, fumbling with the keys.

Hutch grinned for the first time in days. "Nothing sudden about it, partner."

"Ha, ha." Starsky dropped the keys, swore, and managed to pick them up again. It took another couple of minutes, but finally the cuffs slipped from Hutch's wrists.

He rubbed his numbed arms. "Thanks. Can I return the favor now?"

"Huh?"

Hutch reached toward Starsky's hands. "Let me undo the tape."
Sudden fear filled Starsky's face. "No... I'm not supposed to... he said if I took the tape off again, he'd hurt me... I did it before and...."

Hutch put an arm around Starsky, gripping tightly, and tried to give him a reassuring smile. "Hey, man, it's okay. He won't hurt you anymore. I promise." Although he felt tight inside with the urgency to move, to get out of this place, he sat very still for another moment, just holding Starsky. He could feel his partner relax a little. Slowly he began to pull the tape off. Starsky was still trembling and suddenly Hutch was afraid. *Those drugs... whatever the hell he's been pumping into Starsk... what if they've done something permanent to his mind?* He firmly pushed those fears aside. *Later. Later for all that.* Now they just had to get out of here. The last of the tape peeled away. "I can't do anything about the chain on your legs," he said, "so we'll just have to manage as best we can, okay?"
"Okay."

Hutch started to get up, then thought better of it. "We better crawl. Can you crawl, Starsk?"

Fleetingly, Starsky smiled. "Yeah. And I can also feed myself and talk in whole sentences."

"Bastard," Hutch said.

They started to crawl, slowly and carefully, with Hutch leading the way. He found that by looking downward only, it was easier to move. Starsky stayed right on his heels, occasionally talking to himself. "Where is he?" Starsky asked at one point.

"I don't know," Hutch replied, staring at the floor.

"He won't let us get away, Hutch, you know that, don't you?"

"Never mind him right now. Just keep moving."

"Never mind?" Starsky's voice sounded strained. "I can't 'never mind' him, Hutch. He... he scares me."

"Shut up, Starsk," Hutch said firmly. He thought he could see an exit up ahead. But it might be another wall. A mirror. A goddamned optical illusion. "See that, Starsk? What's that look like to you?" There wasn't any answer. All he could hear was the raspy sound of Starsky breathing. Hutch glanced over his shoulder and saw Starsky still doggedly following him.

It was, indeed, a door. Hutch breathed a sigh of relief and pushed it open. He got to his feet, helping Starsky up as well. Starsky's face had a strangely vague expression, and he didn't even seem aware that Hutch was holding him. "Hey, Starsk?" he said sharply. "You still with me?" Starsky didn't answer. Hutch tightened his grip on his partner. "Okay, babe, never mind. You just hang on tight, okay?" They stepped out of the building and started slowly toward the entrance of the park.

They had taken only a few steps when the first shot rang out and a bullet hit the ground just in front of them. Hutch glanced around frantically. "Louis!" he yelled. "Damnit! It's over!" The only reply was another bullet, even closer than the first. Hutch, dragging Starsky by one arm, ran toward the Ferris wheel. "Get in," he ordered Starsky. "Get in there and keep your head down." Starsky, made awkward by the chain on his legs, tried to climb in; he struggled for a moment until Hutch finally shoved him over the side and into the first car.

He crouched on the floor and looked up. "Hutch?"

"Stay there until I come for you. Hear me?"

"Yeah."
"And for Christ's sake, keep your head down." He turned and ran away, dodging more bullets as he went. The shots seemed to be coming from the building opposite the maze and he cut around to the rear, hoping to surprise Louis.

Louis crept out of the side entrance and headed toward the Ferris wheel. Rain had started falling at last. He leaned over the first car. He smiled. "Hello, David."

Starsky looked up at him. Rain splattered onto his face. "Go... to hell," he said hoarsely.

Louis struck him across the face with the barrel of the gun. Blood streamed from Starsky's cheek. "Don't say that to me, David. When you talk like that, I have to punish you. You understand that, don't you?" He spoke sadly. "I don't like to punish you, but I have to. For your own good."

Starsky tried to climb out of the gondola.

"If you move, I'll kill Kenny right now," Louis said mildly, pulling the hypodermic from his pocket. "I will shoot him in the head like I did the other cops and I'll make you watch. Do you want to watch Kenny die?"

"No," Starsky whispered, sinking back. "No... no... no...."

"Then behave yourself." Louis leaned forward with the needle and pressed it into Starsky's arm. He didn't notice that the arm, wet with rain, slipped a little. The needle didn't penetrate the vein properly and most of the liquid simply flowed back onto Starsky's skin. Starsky watched dully as Louis dropped the needle onto the ground. "There. That should keep you quiet for a while. Now I have to go take care of some other business."

Starsky's hand moved a little and he grabbed the edge of Louis' sleeve, holding on with surprising strength. "I told you before... if you hurt Hutch... I'll kill you."

"Oh, David." Louis laughed and then he was gone.

Starsky kept his head down, as Hutch had ordered. When the car first started to move, he thought it was the wind. But then he realized that the car was getting higher and higher. Very carefully, he eased up far enough so that he could see over the edge.

Far below, he could see Louis slowly turning a crank. As he turned, the Ferris wheel revolved. When the car Starsky was in had reached the very top of the arc, Louis stopped turning. Then he picked up a length of pipe and jammed the mechanism.

Starsky watched all of this with an air of mingled disbelief and detachment. Finally, he just settled back in the bottom of the car to wait for Hutch. Hutch would handle it. Right now, he needed some sleep. His eyes closed.

Even the thunder and lightning didn't wake him.
CHAPTER TWENTY

Hutch ducked in and out of doorways, trying to find Louis. It was a nerve-wracking game of hide-and-seek and rain, now falling in drenching, unrelenting sheets, added to the difficulty. Nearly thirty minutes had gone by and he could find no trace of Louis. At least, there had been no more shots fired. Maybe, just maybe, he thought, Louis had given up. Maybe.

He decided to go back and get Starsky. They could go to the car and summon help. He took a deep breath, held it, and ran through the pelting rain back to the Ferris wheel. There, he rested against the bottom car. "Hey," he began, "bud--"

Starsky was gone.

Hutch stared into the empty car stupidly; then he looked around the bottom of the ride. "Starsk?" he yelled.

"Yeah?"

The faint reply came from above and Hutch's gaze rose, raking the top of the Ferris wheel. He froze in horror as he made out the sight of Starsky trying to climb out of the uppermost car. His stomach lurched. "Starsk!"

"Yeah... yeah... I'm coming, Hutch." Starsky was hanging over the edge of the car.

"Stay there, Starsk, stay there. God, don't move!"

"I want down." The chain around Starsky's legs tangled and he lost his balance, falling the rest of the way out of the gondola. He just managed to grab the edge of the car and hold on with both hands. "Hutch!" he yelled.

Hutch grabbed the operating mechanism and saw that it was hopelessly jammed. "Hey, buddy," he yelled. "stay there! I'm coming to get you. Stay there." He climbed onto the superstructure of the Ferris wheel and started upwards. The surface of the metal frame was slippery with rain. Bit by bit, he inched his way up.

"Hutch? Is that you?"

"Yeah, yeah, babe, hang on, I'm coming." He tilted his head back a little and got a face full of rain. "You just hang on," he ordered.

"Hutch?"

"What?"

"I think I'm gonna let go." Starsky's voice was confused and scared. "I want to let go. Did you ever feel like letting go, Hutch?"
The drugs were obviously acting on Starsky's mind. Hutch took a deep breath. "No. No, you're not going to let go, Starsky. Damnit, I'm crawling all the way up there to get you. Don't you dare let go, or you can just find yourself a new partner, 'cause I quit! You hear me?"

Incredibly, Starsky laughed a little. "Yeah... yeah, I hear you."

Hutch kept inching higher. The farther he climbed, the stronger became the winds that buffeted him. There was a sudden flash of lightning and he clung to the wheel, wondering briefly what would happen to the two of them if the structure were hit. "That would qualify as a blaze of glory, I guess," he muttered to himself.

"Hutch? You okay?" Starsky asked, after the huge bellow of thunder that followed the lightning.

"I'm fine, Starsk. How many times have I told you that it's the lightning that's dangerous, not the thunder. Thunder can't hurt you."

"Makes a lot of noise," Starsky said.

Hutch didn't bother to answer. He risked another glance upwards and saw Starsky clinging to the car, looking down. He shook the rain out of his face. "Almost there," he said, more to encourage himself than Starsky. As he got closer, Hutch began to plan his next move. He couldn't risk climbing up next to Starsky, for fear that the weight of their two bodies on one side would tip the car and throw them to the ground. He decided to slip under the car and approach from the opposite side, climb in, and then pull Starsky up. At that point, he could begin to worry about getting them both down.

Hutch reached the top of the Ferris wheel and rested for a moment. He was so damned tired. Day after day after day of tension, no sleep, and draining emotions had worn him down. But it wasn't over yet. He sighed and wiped his face against his arm. "Okay, Starsk. I'm going to climb in and then pull you up. Hold on tight, because the car will probably rock when I get in. Got it?"

"Uh-huh."

He thought that Starsky sounded vague again, but he didn't take the time right then to worry about it. Reaching as far as he could, he grabbed the edge of the car and managed to hoist himself up and then, with a grunt, over, falling into the rain-drenched gondola. The car swung back and forth. Hutch scrambled for the other side, where he could see Starsky's hands. "Stark?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

He put both hands on Starsky's arms and pulled. "Try to push with your feet, buddy," he gasped out.
"There's... nothing to push on... but air," Starsky answered.

Hutch gave a final, back-wrenching jerk, and Starsky fell into the car, scraping his body across the edge. They both lay panting on the bottom of the gondola. "Hey," Starsky said finally.

"Huh?"

"Did I say... it's good to see you."

"Same here," Hutch said. "I sorta missed your ugly mug. Now, how the hell are we going to get down? And please don't suggest jumping."

"Climb, I guess. You got up here, didn't you?"

Hutch sat up, studying his partner, taking in Starsky's trembling hands, bloodshot eyes, and the vacant expression on his face that seemed to come and go without warning. "Hey," he said, "don't take this the wrong way, but I don't think you can make it."

"No?"

"I mean, you might suddenly decide to take flight or something."

Starsky rubbed his eyes. "You think so?" He bit his lower lip. "Hutch, this'll go away, won't it? I won't always be flipping out, will I? Hell, they'll kick me off the force."

"Of course it'll go away. Soon as we get you to a hospital. You can kick it." Starsky didn't answer; his thoughts seemed to have slipped away again. Hutch sighed. "Well," he said, "we might as well get going. Else we're liable to drown sitting here." He took the cuffs from his pocket. "Time to play Freddie Fireman, I guess." He pulled one end of the cuffs through the front of his belt. "Starsky, let me tell you something." Starsky looked at him blearily, not speaking. "We're going down together. If you decide to take a flying leap or something dumb like that, I probably wouldn't be able to stop you. But I'll be going right along. Understand?"

"...yeah...."

Hutch put no faith in the affirmative answer. "Okay. Now, I want you to get on my back. I'm going to attach you with the cuffs. Help me as much as you can, Starsk, or we won't make it."

"Okay."

Hutch turned around and Starsky put both arms over his shoulders. A moment later, the cuffs were snapped around Starsky's wrists and Hutch began to climb out of the car. "You okay?"

"Fine." Starsky giggled. "He ain't heavy; he's my partner."

"Screw that," Hutch muttered. "You may be my partner, but you're still heavy."
"Did'ja ever see that movie?"

Hutch searched for a footrest without looking down. He didn't want to look down. "What movie?"

Starsky was trying to help; he really was. He rested his feet on part of the superstructure, easing his weight on Hutch a little. "BOY'S TOWN," he said. "Spencer Tracy."

They moved downward a little. Hutch's arms felt like they were breaking. "Oh. Yeah, I saw that. A long time ago." A strong blast of wind struck the Ferris wheel and Hutch hung on desperately. In his ear, he could hear the rapid sound of Starsky's breathing.

"They jumped," Starsky said.

Hutch was moving again. "Who jumped?"

"Don't you remember? Butch and Sundance. Remember when they jumped off that cliff?"

"Yeah. But they jumped into the river."

Another giggle. "Well, buddy, if we... stay up here a little longer... the way it's raining... we'll have a river down there."

Hutch felt like giggling himself. *Damn... I'm getting as flaky as he is.*

"Where's Louis?" Starsky whispered into Hutch's ear.

"Don't know."

"He wants to kill you."

"Screw him."


Hutch's foot slipped. He felt himself falling and grabbed frantically for support. His hands closed around the length of pipe. He couldn't move for a moment. His head rested against the structure and he closed his eyes. "Ahh, Starsk," he said.

Starsky was very still for a moment, then he whispered again. "Hey," he said into Hutch's ear, "you want to climb on my back for a while?"

"That sounds fair," Hutch replied, moving again. "This partnership is supposed to work both ways, right?"

"Sure. Next week it's your turn to get shot, beat up, and snatched by some freako."
Hutch was beginning to move a little more quickly now, gaining assurance as they neared the ground. "Next week," he said, "I'll probably be back walking a beat. By the time Dobey gets through with me."

"Yeah?"

"I didn't exactly follow procedure, coming out here."

Hutch knew, before Starsky spoke, that his partner's thoughts had drifted away again. He didn't know how he knew it--maybe Starsky's hold on him slackened a little, or perhaps something in the pattern of his breathing changed. "Starsk?"

"About Christmas...." Starsky said, sounding completely rational--except, of course, that they were clinging to a Ferris wheel in the middle of an August thunderstorm and it wasn't exactly the best time to be talking about the Yuletide. "About Christmas," he said again.

"What?"

"Your present... in case I... don't make it..."

"I don't need this kind of conversation right now, buddy," Hutch said.

"Please... let me tell you... it's on the third shelf in my closet."

"Isn't it a little early to have your Christmas shopping done?" Hutch asked, giving up any attempt to keep the conversation on a rational level.

Starsky giggled. "Yeah... but this is special. Can I tell you what it is?"

"I'd rather be surprised." Hutch was wet in places he hadn't known there were places.

"But... I want to find out if you like it or not."

"You can find out on Christmas." Starsky was quiet. "Buddy?" Hutch said. "We're almost down. Take it easy, okay?"

Starsky's head moved from side to side. "Ahh, Kenny," he said. "It's too late. We have to be punished, don't you see? Louis is going to kill us. Because he must. You can understand that, can't you, Kenny?"

"Stop it," Hutch said sharply.

"I'm gonna jump... I wanna jump."

"Go right ahead. We'll both go, Starsk. But we're down too low now. It won't kill us. Probably just break a couple of bones. That'll certainly please Louis. Go right ahead and jump."
Starsky didn't answer, but he didn't jump either.

A few minutes later, Hutch's feet hit the ground. They both sat down in the middle of a large puddle. Starsky gave another of his giggles. "Hey, Hutch," he said.

"What?"

"You think Butch and Sundance really started out like this?"

Hutch was already busy unfastening the cuffs. "Probably not," he muttered. "But I think Abbott and Costello did." He stood, pulling Starsky up as well. It was at that moment that he saw Louis standing behind Starsky. Hutch didn't stop to think. That would have given Louis time to act. He simply threw himself at the man. They collided and fell to the ground. Starsky watched with interest as the two of them scuffled in the water and mud. Before he could decide what to do, it was over and Louis was subdued. Hutch snapped the cuffs around Louis' wrist and dragged him over to the Ferris wheel. He shoved him against the base and secured him. Sticking Louis' gun into his own belt, he said, "It's all over."

Louis spit in his face.

Starsky was still watching them, his expression muddled. "Hutch?" he said hesitantly.

"Yeah, buddy, just a minute." He turned to Louis. "You got the key to unlock the chain on his legs?"

Louis nodded sullenly and took the key from his pocket.

"Thank you," Hutch said politely. "I'll be back." He turned and smiled at Starsky. "You ready to get out of here?"

"Yes."

Hutch bent and unlocked the chain, tossing it away viciously. "Come on, partner. We're going out to the car and radio for some support."

"Okay," Starsky said. But he didn't move; he just stood there, staring at Louis.

Hutch took his arm gently. "Come on, partner, let's go. It's all over now."

"David," Louis said. "David, don't go with him. He's not your friend. He doesn't care about you, not like I do."

Starsky only shook his head. He came along when Hutch gave a gentle pull to his arm. They could hear Louis yelling behind them as they left the park and walked toward the car. The rain hadn't let up at all, but they hardly even noticed it any more. Still, the car seemed a lot farther away than it had when Hutch parked it.
When they finally reached the car, Hutch opened the door and Starsky crawled in wearily. Hutch got in as well, slammed the door closed, and picked up the microphone. "Zebra 3 to headquarters." There was only static. Hutch swore. "Zebra 3 to headquarters." Nothing. "We're probably out of range," he said. "Especially with the storm." He tried again. "Officers need assistance." Damn... should be able to get the Highway Patrol... somebody. But all he got was static.

Starsky was leaning against the seat, watching him. "What'll we do?" he asked sleepily.

"Well... guess we'll just have to take him in on our own." He grimaced. "Hell, Dobey is going to crucify me anyway." He replaced the mike. "Look, you stay here. Maybe try to radio again. I'll go get him."

Something flickered through Starsky's eyes. "Hutch?" he said.

Hutch, already sliding out of the car, stopped and turned to look at his partner. "Hey," he said softly. "It's okay. I'll be right back." He touched Starsky's arm lightly. "All right? Trust me?"

Starsky's eyes were half-closed. "If I can't trust you," he murmured, "I might as well give up, right?"

"Right." Hutch smiled. "Be back soon."

"Yeah... see you, hot shot."

Hutch got out of the car, shut the door, and started trudging back toward the entrance to Funland. It was almost over. Pretty soon, they would be home. He could have a cup of hot mint tea. Maybe a shot of Irish whiskey. He would take a long, steamy shower. And then he would fall into bed and sleep for a week. And when he woke up, he could pick up the phone and call Starsk and Starsk would answer.

Hutch almost smiled.

**
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Louis kept yelling until they were out of sight. Then he smiled. Oh, Kenny, how did you ever get to be a cop? I thought cops had to be smart, but you aren’t so very smart. You make a lot of mistakes. He reached with his free hand and pulled another key out of his pocket. It was the key that had once belonged to Ptl. Richard McGowan. So, Richard, you're still helping me. Thank you. It took only a moment for Louis to free himself.

He ran over to the generator shack and picked up a piece of pipe, hefting it thoughtfully. It was satisfactory. He walked back to the Ferris wheel and stood patiently waiting in the darkness.

It seemed only a moment before he saw Kenny coming back. Kenny had his head ducked to keep the rain out of his face, and so he obviously didn't realize that Louis was no longer where he'd been left. At the last moment, he looked up, saw the empty cuff, and stiffened.

The pipe crashed down on his head and he crumpled to the ground.

He listened to the sound of the rain for a long time before finally opening his eyes. His eyes, in fact, seemed to be the only part of his body that could move. His hands and feet were tied securely.

For several minutes, he studied the painted baroque ceiling and the gaudy posters of dancing girls that adorned the walls surrounding the stage on which he lay. One faded poster eloquently proclaimed the charms of Little Egypt. The smell of musty velvet permeated the air. "So," he said finally, "what now, Louis?"

Louis spoke from somewhere behind him. "It's time for your punishment, Kenny," he said. "Once you've been punished, I can rest. I'm so very tired, Kenny."

"What about Starsky?"

"David? Well, I haven't made up my mind about him yet. I suppose he's still waiting for you in the car. I'll take care of him later. Right now, it's just you and me."

Hutch tried to move his arms and legs, but he was held fast. "Have I been out a long time?"

"Oh, yes. A couple of hours."

What's happening to Starsk? Louis was behind him, doing something Hutch couldn't see. But he could smell the unmistakable odor of gasoline. "Louis, you're wrong. I had nothing to do with what happened to your sister."

"Don't lie, Kenny. Marcie told me."

Hutch could hear the sloshing sound of liquid being poured. "What are you going to do?"
Louis came into his line of sight, carrying a red gas can. "Remember BEAU GESTE?"

"What?"

"It was an old movie all about the French Foreign Legion."

*Starsk probably saw it,* Hutch thought. "What about it?"

Louis began to pour gasoline on the chairs that circled the stage. "The hero got a Viking's funeral."

The fumes were beginning to make Hutch nauseous. "Oh. Yeah, I remember that movie." He shifted uncomfortably. "Am I the hero in this story?"

"Yes, of course." Louis sounded surprised at the question. "You've always been the hero, haven't you?"

Hutch tried to keep the very real fear he was feeling from showing in his voice. "Louis, don't do this. We can get help for you. Please, you don't have to do this."

"Don't beg, Kenny. You have to die, so don't beg. Beau Geste didn't beg."

Hutch closed his eyes briefly, then opened them and spoke quietly. "I'm not Beau Geste and this isn't some goddamned movie. This is real life, I'm Kenneth Hutchinson, and I don't want to die."

The gas can was empty and Louis tossed it aside. "I hope you're not going to disappoint me, Kenny. I thought you'd be much braver than this. David was brave; he never begged."

Hutch tried to breathe through his mouth so that he wouldn't have to smell the fumes. "I'm not begging," he said finally.

Louis stepped up onto the stage and crouched next to Hutch. "Good."

Hutch began to realize that he was going to die. Well, nobody lived forever. Maybe there was one thing he could do first, though... "Louis?"

His captor was spreading red velvet neatly over the stage. "Yes, Kenny?"

"You won't kill Starsky, will you? He wasn't a part of all this. Why kill him?"

Louis carefully spread the velvet over Hutch. "You don't want me to kill David?"

"No. Please."

Louis smiled. "Are you begging?"
It didn't bother Hutch now. "Yes," he said, "I'm begging. Don't kill him."

With tender solicitude, Louis tucked the old stage drapery around Hutch. "Well, you mustn't worry about it, Kenny. David is my responsibility now. I'll take care of him." The drapery covered everything except Hutch's head. Beneath the heavy fabric, he was drenched in sweat. Louis carefully wiped the rivulets of moisture from Hutch's face. "I'm sorry it's so hot. But I thought that the velvet was important. Sort of regal, don't you think?" I want you to die in a manner that befits you." The stilted words sounded strangely sincere.

"Thank you," Hutch said.

Louis looked at him sadly. "Oh, Kenny... if you had only been my friend. It would have been so much easier." Again, he wiped at the sweat, pushing Hutch's hair back from his face. "I think I could even have forgiven what you did to Marcie, if you'da been my friend."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." Louis sighed. "It's time now, Kenny. Good-bye."

Hutch didn't answer. He stared at Louis.

Louis got to his feet wearily and walked off the stage to the door. There, he stopped and turned around to face Hutch. "Are there any words I should say, Kenny?"

"No." Oh, god, Hutch thought. Oh, god... I don't want to die like this... not all alone like this... I'm sorry, Starsk, for screwing up your itinerary... it really was a great itinerary... oh hell... oh hell... I wonder if it hurts. Probably the smoke will kill me before the fire even gets here... that's good... I wish... I wish... oh god, there's so much I wish... oh, Starsk....

He watched, weirdly fascinated, as Louis took a box of matches from his pocket. Beneath the velvet drapes, Hutch was shivering uncontrollably.

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Starsky was getting scared.

He'd slept for a while after Hutch left; how long he didn't know, but it seemed like a long time. Time enough, anyway, for Hutch to have gotten back. But there was still no sign of his partner coming across the parking lot.

He reached for the radio again. "Anybody there?" he mumbled for the hundredth time. "Help, please, anybody. Hutch isn't back yet. Hey, isn't anybody listening?" He waited, but there was still nothing but static in reply. After a moment, he sighed and gave up. What next? Well, Hutch might get mad but he just couldn't sit here waiting anymore. He had to go find out what was taking so long.
The rain had nearly stopped. Starsky got out of the car and walked across the puddle-filled parking lot. He tried not to think of all the things that could have happened to Hutch. But as he walked, his heart began to pound fearfully. Louis had made so many threats. Louis was... evil. Starsky began to walk faster and faster, so that by the time he reached the entrance to the park, he was running.

"HUTCH!" he yelled, leaning against the front gate. "HUTCH!" There was no answer and so he went into the park. His bare feet made squishing noises against the wet asphalt.

Suddenly he saw Louis run out of a bright pink stucco building. As he watched, Louis struck a match and tossed it back through the doorway. There was a sudden whoosh of flames. "What the hell...?" Starsky mumbled; then, suddenly, he knew. He ran over to Louis and grabbed him with both hands. "Where's Hutch?" he shouted. "Where is he?"

Louis' face was tranquil. "Having his Viking's funeral. He's the hero, so it's right that he should die this way."

Starsky spun around; he could see flames inside the building and feel the heat beginning to emanate. "Oh god," he whispered. "Oh, god, no."

"Don't worry, David," Louis said. "I'll take care of you. You can be my friend now."

With a low moan, Starsky pushed Louis aside and ran toward the building. Louis fell to the ground. "No, David!" he yelled. "Don't go in there. That's not for you! It's for Kenny! Just Kenny! It's his!"

Starsky didn't even hear him. He hesitated only a bare moment when he reached the doorway, then took a deep breath and plunged through the flames. "HUTCH! HUTCH!"

He reached the center of the room, where the flames had not yet penetrated, and saw Hutch lying in the middle of a low stage. With one leap, he was on the stage, bending over Hutch. "Hutch?" he said, gasping for air. "Please, don't... don't be dead... please...."

"Starsk...."

The acrid smoke made tears pour from Starsky's eyes. "Hold on, buddy, hold on." He jerked aside the heavy curtain and began to tug at the ropes binding Hutch. "Hold on, hold on," he kept saying over and over and over.
"Get out, Starsk," Hutch mumbled. "Go...."

Starsky had Hutch's feet free and was trying to release his arms. "Not without you."

The flames were nearing the stage. Hutch coughed as his lungs filled with smoke. "Ahh, Starsk," he managed to say. "Not you... not you, too."

Starsky shook his head fiercely. "One way or another, we go... out of here together." He rubbed at his burning eyes with the back of one hand. "Who else would want one of the last... of the autographed copies of that damned Buddy Holly album?" He pulled at the ropes. "Took me a year to find it." He coughed. "For Christmas."

Hutch could feel the blackness closing in on him as Starsky pulled the last of the ropes away. He reached out to touch Starsky. "You're a... crazy son of a bitch," he whispered.

"Yeah, I know." He kicked away the drapery. "Hutch?" There was no response. "Okay," he said. "Okay." He grabbed one of the curtains and wrapped Hutch in it. Then he took another and pulled it over his own head and shoulders. The flames were crackling very nearby and a large piece of ceiling fell with a crash. "Here we go," he said, lifting Hutch.

As they headed toward the door, flames licked at the heavy velvet and the thick smoke making it nearly impossible to see. The weight of Hutch in his arms kept Starsky from moving very quickly. He tripped over a piece of timber and fell to his knees, nearly dropping Hutch, but managing to hold on. He ducked his head and took a couple of deep breaths, inhaling the odor of old velvet and his own stinking body. "Okay," he mumbled. "Okay, buddy, I gotcha, I gotcha." They moved again.

After what seemed like millennia spent in the bowels of hell, he burst through the door and into the fresh rain-soaked air. He kept moving until they were well-clear of the building and then he collapsed to his knees. More tears coursed down his face as he frantically pulled the cover away from Hutch. His partner's face was ashy white. Dead looking. "Hutch?" he said softly. "We're out... we made it. Hutch?"

Hutch didn't move.

"Jesus," Starsky said. "Hutch? Answer me, damnit." He shook Hutch gently, then more fiercely. "Damnit, don't you be dead. Hutch?" He leaned forward and rested his cheek against Hutch's hair. "Please.... " He saw Louis watching. "You," he said bleakly. "You did this... I told you not to hurt him." His eyes went back to Hutch's too-still face. "I told you not to hurt him." Gently, Starsky rested Hutch against the ground.

He gave an unholy, wordless moan and launched himself at Louis, who just stood there watching, making no move to defend himself. Starsky hit him like a cannonball and they both fell to the ground. "Goddamn you," Starsky said hoarsely. "I'll kill you... I'll kill you." He grabbed for the gun that Louis had dropped and his fingers closed around it. A feeling of power
surged through him at the familiar feel of cold metal in his hand. "I told you, didn't I?" He put the barrel of the gun to Louis' forehead.

Louis didn't speak or move.

"Starsk...."

Hutch's voice was only a raspy whisper, but it reached Starsky. He looked up. "Hutch?" he said. "I thought...."

"Don't do that, Starsk," Hutch said. "Don't kill him."

The flames from the burning building cast dancing lights over the tableau of Starsky and Louis. Starsky shook his head. "He hurt you... almost killed you. I told him... I warned him that if he hurt you, I'd kill him." His hand trembled on the gun.
"Starsk, you're not a murderer. He's sick, very sick. You can't shoot him."

"He hurt you," Starsky repeated dully.

Hutch was moving toward them slowly, crawling on the wet ground. "If you kill him, you'll never forgive yourself. You'll be a different person."

"I don't... understand," Starsky said. He shook his head, trying to clear away the fog.

"You would destroy David Starsky. You'd be lost... that would hurt me, buddy, more than anything he could do." He reached them and held out one hand. "Don't destroy yourself, Starsk. Please. I need you."

Starsky stared at him for a long time. "Hutch?" he whispered. "I... oh, damnit." He handed the gun to his partner.

Hutch sighed. "Thanks, buddy," he said. "Thank you."

Starsky got to his feet and walked over to the nearest building. He slumped against the wall, burying his face in his arms.

Louis sat up. Hutch held the gun on him steadily. "Don't even think about moving," he said, hoping he sounded a hell of a lot tougher than he felt.

"No. I won't." Louis took off his glasses and tried to clean them on his wet shirt. "Thanks for what you did."

Hutch cleared his throat and spit. "Don't thank me," he said flatly. "I did it for him, not for you. You're not worth it." He thought that he could hear the sound of sirens approaching and he raised his head to listen. "I think we're about to have company." Not taking his gaze from Louis, he scooted over and sat next to Starsky. "Here comes the cavalry," he said.

Starsky nodded and leaned against Hutch's shoulder. They sat silently waiting. A few minutes later, several black-and-whites and a county sheriff's car raced into the park, lights flashing and sirens sounding. Hutch watched as Dobey climbed out of one of the cars and walked quickly over. "Cap," he said. "Hi."

"Hutchinson." He looked at Starsky. "He okay?"

"Yeah, he's okay. Starsky is okay." He handed Dobey the gun. "If you'll give us a hand, we're ready to go home."

"Are you?" Dobey rumbled.

Starsky, his eyes closed, gave a small grin. "Yeah." Two of the uniformed officers helped them up. Dobey tried to put Hutch into one car and Starsky into another, so that they could lie down,
but Hutch shook his head firmly and pulled Starsky into the back seat with him. Dobey didn't argue the point.

Starsky let himself relax against the padded seat. It felt very safe here. "Cap," he murmured as the car began to move.

"What?"

"If you put Hutch back walking a beat... you have to put me there, too. We go... together."

"Yes," Dobey said glumly. "I know that. Nobody else would want you."

Hutch smiled. "How'd you find us?" he asked, his throat hurting with the effort.

"Through Miss Corby. After you ditched the tail, I did some checking and found out she had spoken to you."

Starsky was almost asleep, but one blue eye opened a little. "You oughta be a detective, Cap," he said and then he giggled.

**
"Starsk?" There was no answer. Hutch stepped into the room. "Hey, How you doing, huh? They say you're much better." He came closer bed. "I've been after them for two days to let me come see you, but said I had to wait until... until all the drugs were out of your system. Guess it was kinda rough for a while, right? I know what that's like. Of course, I had your help when it happened to me." He took a deep breath. "I tried to get in here."

Starsky's face was pale and bruised, but he smiled a little. "I know. The nurses told me. Said you were a real pain in the butt."


"Okay."

"Really?"

"Sure. I'm fine. How's your head? They told me you had a concussion."

"Good as new."

They were silent for a time. "Well, so much for the medical reports," Starsky said finally. He was staring at the edge of the blanket.

Hutch reached over to pour himself a glass of ice water. He tried not to look at Starsky's arm, which was still a mass of bruises. "You want company in here? They said I could switch rooms now."

Starsky shrugged.

"Maybe you'd rather be by yourself." He tried to remember what the doctor had told him about not overreacting to Starsky's moodiness.

"No. Move in. If you want to."

"Okay. Well, sure, I want to. The old guy they've got me with now talks about his gout and his grandchildren all day and snores all night."

Again, Starsky made the effort to smile. "I snore, too."

"I'm used to your snoring. He sounds like a bull elephant in rut."

"What's happened to him?" There was no need for Starsky to say who he was talking about.

"He's out at Cabrillo State."
Starsky held out his hand. "Could I have some of that water?"

"Sure." Hutch handed him the glass and watched as he sipped. "You want to talk about it? he asked quietly.
Starsky took a deep breath. "I don't know."

"Might help."

"Are you sure you want to listen?"

"Why not? What's a partner for?"

Starsky handed him back the glass. "Maybe you don't want me for a partner anymore," he said, not looking at Hutch.

Hutch set the glass on the nightstand. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that... Hutch, I almost killed him. Murdered him."

"Ahh, Starsky..."

"It's true. I wanted to kill him."

"But you didn't."

"But I wanted to. And I would have, if you hadn't stopped me."

Hutch spoke carefully. "Starsky, you were pumped full of drugs; you didn't know what you were doing."

Starsky shook his head. "No. That's not good enough. I knew. I knew what I was doing."

"Everybody wants to kill at some point. I've felt like it a couple of times."

"But you never would have."

"Neither would you."

"Yes," Starsky said, nearly shouting. "Damnit, Hutch, aren't you listening to me at all? I wanted to kill Louis; I would have blown his brains out if you hadn't stopped me. I would have done it."

"Okay," Hutch said soothingly. "Okay, Starsk."

"Okay?" Starsky echoed. "Oh, sure, Hutch. That's just fine. I'm no better than he is."

"That's not true," Hutch said sharply. "Damnit, Starsk, the circumstances were--"

"I know what the circumstances were." He clenched his fists. "Damnit, the circumstances shouldn't matter. I'm supposed to be a cop. I would have killed him," he said again.
Hutch said nothing.

"Did you tell Dobey what happened?"

"No. I didn't think it was important. I just told him you subdued Louis. The rest... well, I didn't think it mattered. It doesn't matter."

"Let's keep the family skeleton in the closet, huh?"

"That's not what I meant."

"I know." Starsky was quiet for a moment. "Is that enough secrets or do you want to hear one more?"

"What?"

Starsky's eyes were darkened to blue-black. "I'd do it again. In the same circumstances." Hutch only looked at him. "And if... if you aren't there to talk me out of it... that scares me, Hutch. Does it scare you?"

"No." Hutch shook his head. "No, because I don't think you'd do it."

"Yeah?" Starsky smiled bitterly. "Don't have so much faith in me."

Hutch rested one hand on Starsky's shoulder. "Besides, I'll be there."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"What if I... what if I had pulled the trigger? What if I had killed him? Would you still be here?"

His words were said softly.

Hutch didn't answer quickly. His fingers tightened on Starsky's shoulder. "Yes."

"For sure?"

"For sure."

They looked at one another for a long moment. Starsky seemed to be searching Hutch's face for something. Whatever he found there apparently satisfied him, because he relaxed against the bed a little. Still, his eyes were shadowed. "I thought... I thought maybe you'd hate me."

Hutch cleared his throat. "Hell, man. No." He got to his feet. "Well, guess I'll go get my toothbrush and stuff." It was a question the way he said it.
"Yeah," Starsky said. "Think we can get a TV in here?"

"I'll find out." He hesitated. "Be right back."

Starsky nodded and smiled. Hutch left. Starsky's smile slowly faded and he bit his lower lip. *Hutch understands,* he thought. *It's all right, 'cause he understands.* But he was still scared and he knew that the fear would never go away.

**
Hutch was whistling as he came into the squad room. One of the policewomen on her way out looked at him skeptically. "On a Monday," she said, "nobody should be that cheerful."

He grinned. "You're right. Sorry."

He sat down at his desk and picked up some memos to read. His eyes, however, kept wandering in the direction of the door. After about fifteen minutes, a familiar T-shirt-clad figure hurried past the window and into the squad room. Hutch looked at him and shook his head. "Your first day back on duty in two weeks and you come in late?"

Starsky scowled. "Damned alarm didn't go off. I didn't even have time for breakfast. And the candy machine in the hallway is busted again. I'm starving." He searched through the drawers of his desk and came up empty-handed. "Coulda sworn I left half a peanut bar in here." He glared darkly at his partner. "Bet you ate it while I was out."

"Fat chance. Probably the mice got it."

"Mice," Starsky said with dignity, "do not eat peanuts."

"Must have been the elephants, then."

Several days at the beach had tanned Starsky's face and he appeared to be fully recovered from the effects of the drugs. Only Hutch saw the faint shadow left in his eyes and that, he knew, had nothing to do with the drugs. "I can't work on an empty stomach, Hutch," he said pitifully.

Something clicked in Hutch's brain. "Aha! I've got it."

"What?"

"I come to your rescue again." He reached into a drawer and pulled out a neatly wrapped package. "Here."

"What is it?" Starsky asked suspiciously.

"Cookies. Homemade cookies."

"Oh, yeah?" He grinned and pulled open the wrapping. "Chocolate chip. My favorite. Thanks, buddy." He took one cookie and practically put it into his mouth whole. "You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble," he said around the cookie.

"Oh, I didn't," Hutch replied.

Starsky's expression was slowly changing. He swallowed the cookie quickly and grabbed Hutch's coffee cup. He gulped. "God, that was terrible. Where'd those cookies come from?"
"Miss Corby. She brought them by especially for you."

"The old lady? The one who told you where I was at?"

"That's the one."

"Oh." Starsky looked at the rest of the cookies. "I guess she helped save my life, didn't she?"

Hutch nodded. "I'd say so. In fact, I called her and told her that. Thanked her for both of us."

"Good." Starsky shoved the cookies away and picked up some memos of his own. He shook his head. "That's weird."

"What, partner?"

"Why would she help save my life like that and then try to poison me with her cookies?" His tone was aggrieved.
Hutch began to laugh. Everyone in the room turned to look at him and he slumped into his chair, trying to control himself, but the laughter wouldn't stop. Starsky turned his blue gaze toward Hutch. "You're a little weird yourself. I don't know what's so funny about me being poisoned by some crazy old lady."

Tears were rolling down Hutch's face as he tried to stop laughing. Starsky watched him a moment longer and then shrugged. He began to read the top memo. As he read, one hand went absently to the cookie package, took out one cookie and began to eat it slowly.

Hutch couldn't stand it. He jumped up and ran out of the room, holding his stomach, still laughing. Starsky glanced up curiously as his partner exited. "I think he needs a vacation," he said to the room at large. Then he reached for another cookie.

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You held my hand when it was cold,  
When I was lost, you took me home,  
You gave me hope when I was at the end,  
And turned my lies back into truth again;  
You even called me friend  
You needed me... .  
You needed me.  
GOODRUM