



A Matter of Trust

by

Sinjin

Summary: Diana becomes the unwitting pawn in an insurance scandal while receiving treatment in a psychiatric hospital. Under the care of an unscrupulous doctor with obligations to the mob, Diana is convinced that Hutch must pay for his sins of the past.

Category: Gen

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Dr. Lewis Cooper met Mr. Denney in the receiving area of Cabrillo State Hospital and ushered him into his office at the end of the hall. After Dr. Cooper had settled himself comfortably into his swivel chair behind the desk, he directed his gaze towards the bespectacled attorney before him.

"I understand you want to discuss the financial situation of one of my patients," began Dr. Cooper.

"Yes, indeed," replied Mr. Denney, handing over a folder. "I have the essential facts listed here. When Mrs. Grady passed away she left the sizable estate you see before you to the patient in question. The money from the estate is to be put in a trust fund to cover the costs of the patient's care."

Dr. Cooper took a moment to glance through the file and then addressed the man across the desk. "I take it that Mrs. Grady wanted her niece to be moved to a private institution?"

"No such stipulation is indicated in the records," said the attorney.

Dr. Cooper looked at Mr. Denney knowingly. "How can I be of service?"

"Well, I need to appoint an executor for the trust who has the best interests of the patient at heart, there being no other known relatives. Naturally, that should fall to you."

"Naturally."

"There is one more detail in question."

"Yes?"

"A beneficiary must be named in the event that anything should... happen to the patient in question while under the care of this facility. It is my recommendation that the stated responsibilities of that position also fall to you. Of course, if such a situation should occur, you would direct the aforementioned funds to be used for the benefit of this fine institution."

"Of course."

After some brief paperwork, the men shook hands and parted company. Once in his car, Mr. Denney pulled out the envelope that the doctor had handed to him upon his departure. It contained five one hundred dollar bills. He smiled and tucked the package away in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Out on the streets the temperature was hovering around the 100 degree mark. Starsky was behind the wheel of the Torino humming softly and tapping his fingers on the dash, seemingly oblivious to the heat. Hutch sat beside him looking vacantly out the window and cursing the weather.

"How 'bout we stop for lunch at this great new place I saw advertised in the paper?" ventured Starsky. It's just a few blocks from here."

"How can you eat when it's this hot?"

"I don't see what the weather has to do with an appetite. A man's gotta eat."

Hutch just rolled his eyes. Taking this as a sign of consent, Starsky pulled into a drive-in called Benny's Big Dogs and drove up to a maniacal-looking clown's head to place his order.

"You can't be serious," groaned Hutch.

"Whaddaya want, Blondie? My treat."

"Starsk, do you have any idea what's in hot dogs? God, they're just *animalscraps!*"

"Oh, those cow lip stories are just a bunch of old wives' tales." He turned to the clown head and ordered a Big Dog Special and a cherry slush. "Hutch?"

"Nothing for me."

"We may not have time to stop later."

"I'll take my chances," snapped Hutch.

Starsky just sighed and waited in hopeful anticipation of his meal. What arrived was a foot-long frankfurter covered with mustard, relish, sauerkraut, and pickles. He eyed it with delight, absentmindedly handing Hutch the cherry slush so that he could get a proper grip on the monster dog. He was just about to take a bite when the dispatcher's voice came over the radio. Hutch grabbed it and responded.

"ZebraThree, see the man named Huggy," came the voice from the radio.

Without missing a beat, Hutch grabbed the hot dog from Starsky and tossed it into a garbage can outside of the car.

"Whaddaya doin'?" yelled Starsky. "It's not an emergency. I could have eaten that in peace!"

"I was about to be violently ill just sitting next to the thing," said Hutch. Seeing the pained look on his partner's face, he relented. "Look, I'll make it up to you later. Let's just go see Huggy." He tried to hand his partner back his drink but Starsky ignored him and started up the car. Hutch decided to finish the slush himself.

When the detectives arrived at The Pits, they saw that Huggy was doing a bustling trade. They squeezed in at the end of the bar and waited for an opportunity to speak to their friend. Starsky soon became restless and started playing with a bowl of peanuts. Not content to simply nibble on a few, he began tossing them in the air and catching them with his mouth. Hutch finally grabbed the bowl and sent it down the bar. As Starsky started to protest, Huggy nodded to the detectives in acknowledgment and after serving a couple of drinks, he made his way down towards them.

"I see you've got your hands full here, Hug," said Starsky.

"That's an understatement if ever I heard one. I've got two waitresses out sick and a lot of thirsty souls in here."

"What did you want to see us about?" asked Hutch, picking up a napkin from the bar and wiping his neck.

"I see your partner's not in a sociable mood this afternoon," he said to Starsky, "so I'll dispense with the pleasantries. Mickey came in here late last night all hyped up about something." At the mention of the name, Hutch looked slightly taken aback. His reaction was not lost on his partner, but Starsky said nothing.

"What did that little weasel want?" asked Hutch with an unmistakable edge in his voice.

"He wouldn't give me any details, but he said he wanted to talk to you two as soon as possible. This time of day you can find him at his regular post in front of Joe's DeliMart on Tremont."

"Thanks, Hug. And don't mind Hutch," the brunet said, reaching across the bar and grabbing a handful of nuts. "Some Minnesota boys never do adjust to the L.A. heat."

Starsky and Hutch walked out of The Pits and returned to the Torino. Hutch began to defend his mood, but decided it was too hot to argue the point. He climbed into the car and leaned his head against the door as his partner pulled onto the street, hoping for a breeze. Now the weather was not the only thing that was bothering him. In his mind Mickey had always been a low-life. He had never understood Starsky's soft spot for the snitch. Mickey may have given them some useful tips in the past, but Hutch had always had an uneasy feeling about him. He knew that survival on the streets was an uneasy bargain for informants. They had to protect themselves, and working with the heat was a risky proposition at best. But Mickey had just seemed somehow oilier than the rest. And there was a sense of desperation about him that had always spelled potential danger to the blond. It was that desperation that had led Mickey to play both sides when Forrest and his goons had pumped him full of heroin. He shuddered briefly at the memory and tried to push it from his mind, but he couldn't. Hutch remembered looking across the table at Mickey at the restaurant. He thought about how that scum had tried to give him some bullshit story about who had shot him up and strung him out, just biding his time until Monk and his boys showed up. He remembered trying to stave off his own dizziness and look Mickey in the eye. He'd thought if he could just focus on that face it would tell him something. It was then that Hutch realized it wasn't desperation that he had seen in those eyes, but simply the longing for a drink. Mickey had just wanted to keep himself in beer and pretzels. It wasn't even a question of betrayal, just one of expedience.

Hutch felt another pair of eyes on him. He looked across the car and realized Starsky was looking at him with a fair amount of concern. "You okay, partner?"

"Yeah, I was just thinking."

"About anything in particular?"

Hutch started to say something and stopped. If Starsky could not see what was wrong with talking to Mickey, he wasn't going to be the one to explain it to him. "It's nothing. I was just thinking."

At that moment they pulled up to Joe's DeliMart. Starsky cut the engine and turned to Hutch, but the blond hurriedly got out of the car and approached Mickey. Starsky quickly followed him. The snitch was standing by the store's entrance and eagerly greeting customers while opening the door for each of them.

"Now, remember, one good turn deserves another. Don't forget me on the way out in the way of your spare change."

He was about to open the door for Starsky and Hutch when he stopped short.

"This is a great little enterprise you've got going here," said Hutch. "I guess chivalry isn't dead, it just comes with a price tag."

"You've got me all wrong," said Mickey. "I provide a valuable service and gratuities are strictly voluntary."

"What information do you have for us?" asked Hutch.

"Now, gentlemen, this is my place of business. Let's be a little discreet, huh? If you want to discuss information, I suggest you offer to buy me a cup of coffee across the street."

"We ain't got all day, Mickey. Tell us here and now or forget it," said Hutch.

Mickey turned to Starsky in hopes of more sympathy. "You understand, right? I've got what they call *sensitive information*." He turned to open the door for a young woman who was leaving the store and bowed slightly as she headed down the street. "That's all right, darlin', I know you'll do right by me next time." He turned back to the detectives. "Now, where was I? Oh, yeah. Now how about a little negotiating?"

"Mickey, you keep jerking me and my partner around and you're gonna get yourself picked up for vagrancy," said Starsky. "What have you got?"

With some reluctance, Mickey removed a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Starsky. "Starsky, you and me go way back. I know I owe you, but I don't want to go out on a limb for nothing."

"Listen, you scum," said Hutch. "I haven't forgotten your habit for double dealing. I could break your damn neck right now."

"No, Hutch, you've got me all wrong. I wouldn't do that. I know what you're thinking. But Monk -- may he rest in peace -- he threatened me. I didn't have no choice. I meant to talk to Starsky. I never asked for you. I was gonna help him out and just make it look like I was goin' along with what Monk said." He switched his nervous gaze from Hutch to Starsky. "Honest. You know I never took your money when I couldn't tell you nothin'."

Starsky nodded and looked down at the paper Mickey had handed him. It contained an address. "What's this?" he asked.

"It's worth somethin' to ya, ain't it?"

Starsky wasn't quick enough to prevent Hutch from grabbing Mickey by the collar and shoving him against the building. "Listen, you turkey, how about you tell us why we're here and let us worry about an adequate payment."

"Hutch, take it easy," said Starsky, pulling on his partner's arm.

Hutch released Mickey and backed off a few steps. Several people on the sidewalk were eyeing all three of them with suspicion. Mickey turned again to Starsky. "There's this guy named Streeter. I don't know if that's his last name or just a nickname. He's a big guy, about 6'3" with stringy brown hair, wears an Army fatigue jacket. He's been hassling the owners of several stores around here about signing up for his protection services." He paused and eyed Hutch apprehensively. "Seems like more of a punk than anything else, but he's got Joe edgy and he didn't seem too taken with me working the door. I don't want some hothead taking issue with my *gainful employment* here." He nodded to the paper that Starsky was holding. "That's a cigar shop downtown run by a Mr. Martinez. Seems he gave Streeter an earful when he suggested his terms. Streeter's let it be known that he's gonna pay him a visit tonight at closing time and make an example of him." Mickey paused and licked his lips. "So, that oughta be worth twenty bucks, right?"

"What about the other shop owners? We'd like to talk to them," said Starsky.

"Hey, these people just want the harassment to stop. They don't want to broadcast the fact that they've been talking to the police."

"What about Joe?"

"Look, he's not even in town right now. He's visiting his sister. I thought it would be nice to clear this up for him before he gets back."

"You're quite the Good Samaritan," quipped Hutch.

"Now, Starsky, that's gotta be worth twenty bucks, right?"

"Tell ya what I'm gonna do," said Starsky. He whipped out a bill from his pocket and ripped it in two. "Here's half a ten. If the information turns out to be good, I'll drop you the other half."

Any protests Mickey may have made were silenced by a look from Hutch. Starsky gave Mickey a broad smile and a pat on the back and when Hutch wasn't looking he stuck the other half in Mickey's pocket. The two detectives roared off in the Torino.

Starsky looked over to Hutch who was wiping the sweat from his forehead and then turned back to the road. "Hey, you had even me going there, partner. You played the heavy better than usual. You could have saved the act."

Hutch turned to his partner and studied his profile. "Starsk, that was no goddamn act. I've been sitting here trying to figure out where the hell you're coming from."

"What are you talking about, Hutch?"

"I know this guy is your snitch, Starsk. And I'm sure there's some reason you're so damned loyal to him, but he sold me out. Hell, he sold us both out. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that bastard was willing to get us both killed."

"I was supposed to get that message from Mickey, not you," said Starsky in a controlled voice. "I don't know what Huggy was thinking to let you out on the streets in the state you were in."

"So now you're blaming Huggy?"

"No, I'm just telling ya that the message was meant for me."

"What difference does it make who the message was for?" yelled Hutch. "That no good scum wanted to see me dead. And here you are patting him on the back and handing out cash like it was all in a day's work." Hutch regretted his words immediately. What the hell was he saying? This to the man who had carried him out of the streets and held vigil. Held vigil while he had trembled and pleaded and vomited and called his partner every name in the book.

Without warning Starsky pulled the Torino toward curb and slammed on the brakes. "Hutch, when I first went to Mickey, I threatened him within an inch of his life. I told him that if I ever found out that he was lying to me... that if I ever found out he knew where you were and wasn't being straight with me... Jesus, Hutch, what are you saying to me? That I don't care about you? That I'd risk your life? Mickey was playing both sides, sure. Who do you think told him to do that? I knew it was the only way we'd be able to confront the bastards that pumped you full of that junk."

"Starsk, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm saying."

"He's right about the money, Hutch. He wouldn't take it. I shoved it at him. He wouldn't take it. That message was for me." He started up the Torino and pulled back into traffic. He continued in a quiet voice. "Hutch, you are the most important person in my life. After all we have been through, I can't believe you would doubt that for a second."

The words cut to the bone. Hutch couldn't believe it either. He knew he had never doubted Starsky. He never would. "Starsk, I don't know what to say except that I'm an idiot. It's probably this damn heat messing with my mind. What can I say?" He knew it was a lame excuse. He took a deep breath and looked at the floor of the car. "How about I buy you that lunch now? I'll even talk into the damn clown's head myself."

Starsky kept a straight face. "On the condition that I can have seconds if I want."

"You got it, partner." The conversation was closed for now. But Hutch knew he'd have to set this right somehow.

Dr. Cooper sat in his office reviewing the medical records of several patients when the door flew open and a tall man in his late twenties with brown stringy hair entered. He slammed the door behind him and took a seat at the desk. Dr. Cooper was visibly shaken.

"H-how did you get in here?"

"Well, I walked in, ya moron. Dis place ain't exactly got state of da art security, no. But when da state's paying, what can ya expect?"

"You should have met me somewhere else. You can't just waltz into the hospital. What if people see us together?"

"You didn't seem to have an aversion to my presence when you needed my help," the man replied angrily, losing his accent.

Dr. Cooper took a deep breath and tried to compose himself. "Yes, I know. Forgive me, that was out of line."

"I should t'ink so. Now as we've got dat established, how 'bout discussing Mr. Perelli's payment plan."

"Payment plan?"

"Yes, Doctor, after all, we may be sharks, but we ain't Neanderthals. Mr. Perelli wants to work out an arrangement dat's fair for both parties. By my records, it seems as if you are in the hole for seventy grand." The man stopped to whistle between his teeth. "Dat's quite a sum if I do say so myself. Ya didn't lose it all on da horses did you?" he said laughing.

"I don't see how the particulars of my gambling are any of your business."

"Doc, I don't give a damn how you spend your money," ugliness creeping into his voice, "just so long as da payments are made on time. And starting next week, you'll make regular restitution at five grand a week until a full eighty thousand has been paid."

"I can't come up with that kind of money! Listen, I have every intention of paying you back -- "

"Well, dat's a given."

"But you've got to be more reasonable."

"Dr. Cooper, I t'ink we understand each other, and I am a busy man," he said running a hand through his greasy hair. "I'll be back next Friday for da first installment." He got up to leave and turned. "Mr. Perelli doan want to dirty his hands if things need to turn unpleasant. Dat's where I come in." With that the man left the office.

Dr. Cooper leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. He studied its pattern for a few minutes and then walked to his filing cabinet. He reached for the same file that had been put in his hands by Mr. Denney.

After lunch, the detectives made their way downtown to Martinez's cigar shop, but there was a sign on the door stating that the store would not be opening until 4 P.M. They decided to return to the police station and try to find some information on Streeter.

The partners drove to the precinct and found the squad room in a bit of an uproar. It seemed a well meaning rookie had commandeered a large fan from the maintenance room and had plugged it in set at full speed. Before he could adjust it, scores of papers had been blown off the desks, sending a fair number of detectives and officers scrambling for their airborne reports.

"Anderson!" bellowed Detective Perrelli. "What the hell is the matter with you? And what are you laughing at, Hutchinson?"

Hutch stifled a giggle and busied himself with finding information about Streeter in the police files. A couple of hours passed before the detectives would concede defeat, but there was no information about a man with a name or an alias of Streeter who fit the general description.

"Let's run this by Dobby," suggested Starsky.

"I know what he's going to say. He's not going to want us to set anything up without some more definite details. And definite details we ain't got."

"Then we'll just have to go with what we *have* got."

Starsky headed for Captain Dobby's office and Hutch followed his lead. Starsky opened the door as he knocked and quickly settled himself into a chair before the desk. Dobby had a napkin tucked into his shirt and a half eaten lunch of a hamburger and fries lay before him. He was currently having a very heated debate with someone on the other end of the phone.

"I don't care how politically sensitive the situation is, I need those statistics on my desk by five o'clock this afternoon! Let me worry about damage control!" He slammed the phone down and glared at the two detectives. "Starsky, don't you ever knock?"

"I did knock, Cap'n, but you were probably distracted." With that he reached for some of the tempting fries.

"Distracted?" yelled Dobby. "And let go of those damn fries!" Starsky dropped them immediately. "It just so happens that I've got a crisis on my hands to diffuse and I don't need my detectives barging into this office like it was the locker room!"

"Captain," interrupted Hutch, taking a seat, "we're sorry, but we need to arrange for a stakeout tonight." He proceeded to give Dobby a rundown of their encounter with Mickey.

"Seems like a pretty sketchy scenario to me. And you say you haven't been able to touch base with Martinez?"

"No, Cap'n, but we'll head back there around four and see what he has to say."

"Fine. But I want some more concrete information before we start talking about stakeouts," he said, wagging his finger at them.

The detectives nodded and headed for the door. Just then the phone on Starsky's desk rang. "Starsky," he answered.

"Hey Starsk, this is Huggy."

"Hey, Hug, what's up?"

"Mickey was in here just a little while ago bustin' my chops about the way Hutch was all over him. He says he heard from some guy named Streeter and he's scared for his life. He says he's got information, but that he wants enough bread so he can get out of town."

"Where's he now?"

"He told me he wants to meet you at the abandoned amusement park near Mandelay Heights. The one they used to call Adventureland. He's on his way there now."

"Why way out there?"

"I told you, this is one jumpy cat. He said he'd be waiting by the fun house. And another thing. He said he ain't coming near you if Hutch is there. He not so affectionately referred to him as the 'Blond Hothead.'"

"All right, Hug. Thanks."

"Anytime. Tell Blondie I heard that they're calling for a break in the weather soon."

Starsky hung up the phone and looked into Hutch's expectant face. "Mickey crossed paths with Streeter and he is anxious to give some more information out at the old amusement park."

"Damn Starsk, why the hell does he want to meet way out there?"

"I don't know, but he only wants to meet with me. It seems your hospitality this morning rubbed him the wrong way."

"Well, I don't care what he wants, you're not going alone."

"Hutch, it's nearly 4 o'clock. If you check out Martinez's place, I can meet with Mickey and save some time. He wants to meet me at the fun house near the entrance and it's got one hell of a vantage point. He'll have plenty of time to spot you and split."

"I don't like it. It's not the way we work."

"Hey, I'm not crazy about the trek out there, but I don't want to blow a chance to get the lowdown on this Streeter." Hutch continued to look unconvinced, so Starsky added: "Look, I'll be careful."

Hutch hated the idea, but he somehow felt the need to support Starsky on this one. He thought about what he had said earlier in the day and it made his stomach turn. He knew that Starsky's loyalty could never be in question, and yet he had practically accused him of knowingly endangering his life. "All right," he replied, "just don't take any chances." Hutch looked down at some paperwork before him and mumbled, "because I don't know what I'd do without you." He hadn't thought Starsky had heard but the brunet squeezed his shoulder and said: "Don't worry, Blintz, you're not going to get rid of me that easily. Now let's get outta here so I have time to stop by the bank."

"Jesus, Starsk, how much are planning on giving him?"

"I'll take care of it, Hutch." There was something in Starsky's voice that told Hutch not to push the issue and so he didn't, but he felt uneasy, just the same.

The detectives headed to their respective cars. Hutch had some trouble starting his LTD. It needed a tune-up badly, but he was unwilling to return it to Merle and take another chance at a disastrous interior make-over. It finally started and with some ungainly lurching made it out of the police parking lot. Starsky waved to him and headed in the other direction. For some reason Hutch felt a chill go through him that could not be explained in the still ungodly heat of the afternoon.

When Starsky arrived at the park, he cut the motor and coasted to a stop. He had to admit that there was something about abandoned complexes like this one that unnerved him. There was something almost sinister about rides sitting idle and empty concession stands. Starsky tried to cajole himself by admitting that it was probably his penchant for late night horror movies that made him shiver. He took a deep breath, making a mental note not to mention to Hutch how nervous he had been, and walked towards the fun house. He called out to Mickey a few times, but there was no response. He grabbed his gun and approached the door to the building. Starsky then flung the door open and tried to quickly adjust his eyesight to the darkness within. It took him a few moments to assess the situation. There were still a number of mirrors hanging on the walls that distorted images, but many had been smashed and the floor was littered with broken glass. The detective proceeded down the hallway slowly and realized that he was in a very vulnerable position. He rounded a corner and tried to step lightly, but with every footfall the loud echoing of breaking glass filled the building. At the end of the hallway, Starsky saw a figure sitting in a chair with his back to him. He approached cautiously and thought he recognized Mickey. But the figure was awfully still. All of a sudden the figure turned. It was indeed Mickey, but he looked pale as a ghost.

Starsky put his gun back in his holster and took a deep breath. "Mickey, you sure as hell better have a good explanation for this one."

"Streeter found out I talked to you and Hutch."

"How did that happen?"

"I don't know and I don't care. He told me that if I didn't keep my mouth shut, I was gonna wind up dead. Now I've done right by you, Starsky, you know that."

"That's a two-way street, Mickey."

"Well, sure, Starsky, I know that. But I gotta get out of town, at least for a while."

"Tell me more about Streeter. There was no information under that name at the station."

"I don't know him by any other name. But he's a mean son of a bitch and he's got one hell of a temper."

"So he just blows into town without a real name and starts hassling the locals."

"He's got an accent, sort of. Not Southern really, but he must be from down that way somehow. I think I heard mention of Louisiana. And he looks like a typical swamp rat. I guess he's handling business for somebody bigger, but I ain't discussed that with him. I just wanted him to stop giving Joe at the DeliMart such a hard time, so I wouldn't lose my spot as the greeter. Seems like I'm gonna have to give that up anyway."

"So you don't really have any new information for me, do you?"

"No, Starsky, but I know that something is gonna go down at Martinez's place at closing. Streeter doesn't know I told you that."

"Okay." Starsky reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills which he handed to Mickey. "That's all I can get my hands on right now."

"That's fine, Starsk, that'll do." He paused and licked his lips nervously. Starsky was studying him and Mickey felt like he was somehow being silently interrogated. "What, Starsky?"

"I'm just trying to figure something out."

"Well, spit it out, huh?"

"I want to believe you."

"Well, of course you can believe me."

"I want to believe you were being straight with me about Forrest."

"Starsky, I may be a lot of things, but I ain't a fink. I know what people are thinking when they look at me. They think I'm a drunk, that I'm a bum. And I may be those things, but I ain't a fink, Starsky, I swear to God. I know that partner of yours doesn't give a damn about me, and to tell you the truth he scares me. But I know what he means to you. I helped him for you, cause you've always been good to me."

Starsky stood studying the man another minute and then smiled. "You take care of yourself, Mickey."

"Thanks, Starsky."

Starsky got back in the Torino, relieved to be out of the fun house. He wondered himself why he gave Mickey such slack. He had always sensed that there was a decent guy in there somewhere who had just stumbled down too many wrong paths. He usually didn't concern himself with the lives of the snitches who had fed him information over the years. It didn't pay to become emotionally involved when there wasn't much one could do anyway. He had seen Hutch learn that the hard way. The first couple of years of their partnership, he had seen the blond try to reach out to people who weren't interested or who were somehow beyond the point of salvation. Hutch had learned to pull back in recent years at least on the outside, but Starsky suspected that his partner still hoped to save a few souls along the way. Starsky always thought of himself as inclined to expect to be disappointed, but he knew deep down that in some ways that was a line he fed to Hutch for his partner's sake. He too was looking for the good in people.

Hutch arrived at the cigar shop just after four. It was empty except for an elderly man who was rearranging the contents of a display cabinet at the far end. When he spied Hutch he smiled broadly. "I can see you are a man of distinctive tastes," he said with a faint Cuban accent. "Perhaps I can interest you in some new arrivals of superb quality."

Hutch walked down to the end of the counter. "Are you Mr. Martinez?"

"I am indeed. And you are wise to ask for me by name."

"Mr. Martinez, my name is Detective Hutchinson. Did you have an altercation lately with someone offering your store protection." Even as he said it, it seemed unlikely. Mr. Martinez was awfully frail and affable to boot.

"No, indeed. There hasn't been anything like that going on, Detective. And if so, my son Carlos would handle it."

"And you are sure your son hasn't gotten into a heated argument with anyone."

"No, and I'd know about it. My son and I are tight. I'm hoping to give the business to him in a few years when I retire. Seems like someone has been handing you the wrong information."

Hutch looked about the store for a few minutes, trying to figure out what was wrong with this puzzle. He gave it one more try. "Listen, Mr. Martinez, I don't know if you feel you have to protect someone. But I've heard that a character called Streeter is supposed to show up tonight at closing time and teach you a lesson. Are you sure you don't want to tell me more about that?"

"Detective, I'm an old man. I'm not hiding anything, but I do appreciate your concern. It's a changing world for sure, and it's good to know the police are so willing to help the little guy."

"Yeah," said Hutch. But he was distracted wondering whether Starsky was wandering into a trap while he was investigating a bogus lead.

Hutch thanked the man and quickly left the store. It was more than just wrong information. Everything about the situation was wrong. He called the precinct as soon as he got to the LTD and was patched through to Dobey.

"Captain, you had better send the cavalry to the amusement park out at Mandelay Heights. I'm sure Starsky is in trouble. I'll meet you there."

Without waiting for a reply Hutch roared off in the direction of the park, thankful that his car was cooperating in the crisis. He cursed himself for not trusting his instincts and insisting that his partner not check out this lead alone. Hutch tried to tell himself that he was overreacting, but he felt in his heart that he wasn't and he couldn't seem to make the car go fast enough.

Just as he was turning onto the long inclined road that led to the entrance of the amusement park, he passed the Torino headed in the opposite direction. Both men slammed on the brakes and swerved back to meet each other.

"Hutch, what the hell are you doing here?"

"You met with Mickey?"

"Yes, and he's on edge as it is. You don't need to be tearing up here in that lousy rat-trapcar of yours."

"Oh God, and I got Dobey to send out a bunch of uniforms."

"Jesus, Hutch, what were you thinking?" With that Starsky roared down the hill to head off the squad cars before they got near the park. Hutch slowly turned the LTD around to join his partner. He knew he would get a reprimand from Dobey, but he was just so relieved to be wrong about Mickey, it didn't seem like too much to endure.

Detective Nick Perelli sat at his customary table at the back of a small dive called O'Malley's Tavern. It was an Irish pub that had seen better times and had become an odd mix of neighborhood bar, video arcade, and greasy spoon. Perelli was soon joined by a lanky man with stringy brown hair who grabbed a menu and began to scan its offerings. Without looking up Perelli grabbed the menu out of his hands. "You aren't here to fill your gut."

"Fine. Da crud in dis place would probably rot my insides."

"And you can drop that damn cracker accent. It wears on my nerves."

"For your information, it's Cajun. And I think it gives me character. I've spent a while perfecting it."

"And I'm telling you to drop it. All I'm asking you to do is keep to the script and get the job done."

"Where's the glamour in that?" said the man stretching and looking around the bar.

"Look, Streeter, if you're looking for glamour, join the actor's guild. Are you going to play it straight, or do I have to recruit a slightly smarter gutter rat? And speaking of gutter rats, why the hell have you taken up with that snitch Mickey?"

"I gotta get a handle on the action here. I'll tell ya, that bum don't miss a thing."

"Just remember not to let your *research* interfere with your work."

"Russo sent me to you as a favor. If you don't appreciate what I have to offer, I can go back to the Big Easy anytime."

"You, my friend, were a pay-off. And I'm beginning to think that Russo gave me the shaft."

"That's crap. What would an L.A. cop have on a syndicate man like Russo?"

"Listen, you little son of a bitch -- " He stopped and lowered his voice. "You're just like Russo said: too many goddamn questions."

"Hey, I want to know where I stand. I'm looking out for my future too. I don't guess a cop on the take usually gets to collect his pension."

Perelli rose up and grabbed Streeter by the shirt, shoving him into a back room just behind his corner table. As the two men disappeared behind the door, a few patrons turned their heads. The scene proved to be of little interest, however, and they soon returned to the drinks and greasy food before them.

"Now listen, you little punk," said Perelli, throwing the man against the wall. "Your job is to do what you're told, when you're told. You are to keep a low profile and lose the curiosity. You got that?"

"Yeah, man, whatever you say," said Streeter a little breathlessly. The stench from a backed-up urinal over the wall was choking him. "Let's go back to the table, huh, before I get sick in here."

Perelli took a few moments to look the man before him up and down. He released Streeter and they returned to the table. "Let's keep this short," said the detective. "I've got places to be."

As soon as Starsky and Hutch returned to the squad room, justice was swift. Dobby's door swung open, followed by a bellowed "Hutchinson!"

Hutch glanced towards the Captain innocently. "You want to see me, Captain?"

"Yeah, immediately. And you too, Starsky."

Starsky leaned over to Hutch. "You've gone and done it now, Blondie."

They were barely in the office when Dobby started his tirade. "Do you have any idea how understaffed we are in this Department, Hutchinson?"

"Captain, I..."

"Do you know how many hours I spend trying to get the Commissioner to realize what we're up against every day on the streets?"

"Captain, I..."

"And here you are taking valuable officers off their beats so you can play posse! Do you have any conception about the paperwork generated, not to mention the areas left vulnerable by your actions?"

"But, Captain, I..."

"I think these are what's known as 'rhetorical questions,' Hutch. You don't gotta answer 'em."

"And you!" yelled Dobby turning to the brunet. "What the hell were you doing out there without backup? I would think one of my best detectives would have more sense."

"Captain, I was just going with my gut instinct and... one of your best, huh?"

Hutch rolled his eyes. Leave it to Starsky to start fishing for compliments when they were getting their butts chewed.

"Yeah, who just made a move a rookie would have more sense not to. Tell me Hutch, what did Martinez have to say?"

"Yeah, Hutch, what did Martinez have to say?" Starsky added.

Hutch was visibly uncomfortable and squirmed in his seat a moment before mumbling, "He didn't know what I was talking about."

"What?" bellowed Dobby.

"He didn't know what I was talking about," Hutch said in a louder voice. "He'd never heard of Streeter."

"This story is getting better and better."

"Something doesn't add up, Captain."

"You got that right."

"No, I think something is really going down. That's why I overreacted. I thought for sure Starsky was in trouble, but I still think something's going on. I want to check out the cigar shop at closing time."

"Forget it," said Dobby. "I've wasted enough manpower on this goose chase. You two are supposed to be getting off duty right about now. I suggest you both go home and keep yourselves out of trouble!"

Starsky felt he needed to defend Hutch's actions. But Dobby anticipated his speech and cut him off. "I suggest the two of you get out of my office before I get the notion to assign you to traffic control for a couple of weeks."

The detectives decided not to push their luck and headed for the door. They bumped into Detective Perelli on the way out. "Sounds like the two of you got Dobby warmed up for me. I guess now's not the time to ask for a raise."

"Very funny, Perelli," said Hutch.

"I don't know how the two of you got as far as you did in this Department the way you're always ruffling the brass."

"That's because we have ineffable charm," mused Starsky.

"Maybe it's because we do damn fine police work," said Hutch. He knew he was rising to the bait, but he couldn't help himself. Hutch was more on the defensive than he cared to admit.

Perelli just laughed and closed the door to Captain Dobby's office behind him.

Hutch felt Starsky's eyes on him and looked over to his partner. "What?"

"Nothing," said the brunet with a half smile. "It's just that you seemed to be getting mighty sensitive back there."

"I just don't like taking crap, especially from arrogant cops like Perelli." Hutch realized he was digging himself into a deeper hole, but he was smarting. "And you, with your *ineffable* charm. Have you been keeping Reader's Digest in the john or something?"

"Hey, you're not the only one who knows big words, ya know."

"I think we should take the Captain's advice and get the hell out of here."

"That's the first sense you've made all day."

As they reached the police parking lot, Starsky turned to Hutch. "Martinez's place closes at 10 P.M., right? How about I pick you up at quarter 'till."

"Two minds, one thought," replied Hutch as he headed for the LTD. He smiled to himself on the way home, taking the time to appreciate the fact that even though he had screwed up royally, Starsky still had faith in his hunches.

When Dr. Cooper entered the room he saw the dark-haired woman curled up in a chair. He pulled another seat up to hers and studied her for a few minutes. She appeared unaware of his presence. "Miss Harmon?" he ventured. There was no response. "Miss Harmon," he said a bit more loudly, with a hint of impatience in his voice. He leaned over and touched her arm. The woman flinched at the contact and became aware of the doctor for the first time.

"Well, hello there," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"I can't seem to find all the pieces I need," she began unsteadily.

"I see," answered Dr. Cooper, summarily flipping through the notes in her chart.

"Feeling angry are you? Frustrated perhaps?"

"No... not angry. I feel sad. I feel sad that I can't find all the pieces. So it will make sense. I can't think straight." The woman curled even more tightly into a ball.

"That's what the medication is for. It will help you to think more clearly. To remember the details *exactly* the way they happened."

"But it's after they give me the pills. So many pills. It's then that I forget, just when the parts were coming together."

"Nonsense, Miss Harmon. The staff here knows what is best for you. You mustn't question the people who are working so hard to make you well."

"I want to get well."

"Of course you do. How about we go back to some rather troubling times? Maybe together we can make some sense of them."

"I don't think I want to go back. I'm frightened."

"Nonsense, Miss Harmon. I'm here for you. Now why don't you be a good girl and sit up so we can get to the bottom of all this." The woman slowly sat up; she gripped the arms of the chair tightly and looked with hesitation at the doctor.

"That's much, much better. Now, I want you to look at a photograph for me. Just look at it and tell me what you feel." The woman looked frightened but she agreed and straightened herself up more in the chair. Dr. Cooper reached into the file and removed a picture of Detective Kenneth Hutchinson that he had had sent from the Records Department at Police Headquarters. When the woman saw it she gasped and turned away as if viewing the photo were terrifying.

The doctor grabbed the woman and forced her to turn back. "Miss Harmon, you cannot run from painful feelings. You must confront them. Who is this man?" he asked, pushing the photograph back into her line of vision.

"That's Ken . . . Ken Hutchinson," she sobbed.

"He hurt you terribly, didn't he?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't remember, Doctor. Put it away, please!"

"Stop repressing your feelings, Miss Harmon! This man hurt you, violated your sense of trust. Don't you remember?"

"I only wanted to be with him. So many other people kept getting in the way. Telling him bad things about me; but they weren't true. I loved Hutch."

"Diana," said the doctor with conviction. "This man, Ken Hutchinson, treated you...

He treated you badly, didn't he?"

"I don't know. You're confusing me. I...I don't remember."

"You don't want to remember," Dr. Cooper said angrily, and then quickly softened his tone when he saw the woman becoming distraught. "Just relax, Miss Harmon. I'm putting the picture away now. You don't have to look at it anymore. Just relax."

"I want to remember what happened. I do, Doctor!"

"These things take time, Miss Harmon. But don't worry, together we will make sense of it all." He reached over and held her hand. "I'll come and see you again tomorrow. Then we'll talk some more." He squeezed her hand and then got up to leave the room. Before heading back to his office, he stopped at the nurse's station to speak to one of the aides.

"Miss Diana Harmon will need another sedative. She was very disruptive in session today. I fear she may do harm to herself or others."

"Dr. Cooper, I did give her the daily medication indicated on the chart this morning."

"And I'm telling you what needs to be administered now."

"I'm sorry, Doctor, I was just concerned that --"

"You be concerned with doing your job and let those qualified to do so make the medical decisions."

"Yes, Doctor," said the aide, and she hurried to fulfill the request.

Dr. Cooper returned to his office and again opened Diana Harmon's file to make notes about the day's session. He began: *Despite repeated efforts to disabuse Miss Harmon of notions that her ex-boyfriend is trying to harm her, she continues to harbor extreme feelings of ill-will towards him. She entertains homicidal thoughts and continues to be a threat to herself and others.*

Starsky got out of the shower at about 7 P.M. and decided to watch TV for a few hours before picking up Hutch for the stakeout at Martinez's cigar shop. Flipping through the channels he discovered a marathon in progress of Clint Eastwood's spaghetti westerns. *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* had just started. Starsky sighed with satisfaction and noted with some regret that he'd have to tear himself away from this cinematic extravaganza before he had gotten his fill. He consoled himself with the notion that at least he had caught one of the true classics. Of course Clint was the king, but the comedic talents of Eli Wallach were not to be beat. It wasn't long before the detective realized that there was an important component missing from the scenario. Raiding the refrigerator satisfied that need, and he was soon enjoying the splendor of left-over lasagna, chased by potato chips.

Hutch slammed the door to the LTD with extra force. For the last few days this had proved necessary to get it closed at all. The heat of the day had subsided only marginally and it was weighing heavily on the blond detective's nerves. Once in his apartment, he made a point of surveying the damage to his plants. After a thorough round of watering his charges, he took a long shower and tried to wash the frustrations of the day away. Hutch emerged feeling a little more human. He picked up his guitar and tried to play a few tunes from memory. He wasn't feeling in the mood to work on his own compositions, so he settled for a few selections from Neil Young's *Harvest* and ended with the Beatles' "Golden Slumbers". Hutch glanced at the clock and saw that it was nearly eight. He was suddenly feeling as if the apartment were shrinking and he longed to be somewhere else. The blond decided to take a walk.

Detective Perelli looked up from his paperwork. His partner of six months stood before him with a stack of files in his hand.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this part of the job," said the younger detective.

"You'll get used to it, Bobby. Just remember to stick to the facts. If you start trying to impress with flowery language, you can get yourself into a real mess," said Perelli.

"Don't worry. The pimps we busted might be characters, but I don't think I'll be wasting any 'flowery language' on them."

"So you got plans for tonight?"

"Well, now that you mention it, I do indeed."

"With Carla, I presume?"

"You got it."

"You two seem to be getting pretty tight."

"I don't want to jinx anything. But this could be the one." Detective Quintero looked a bit embarrassed in spite of himself. "They always say that the guy is afraid of commitment. I don't want to pop the question too early in case I scare *her* off."

"You'll know when the time is right. I, myself, had an uncanny sense of timing. Just ask my two ex-wives," Perelli said laughing.

"So you have plans tonight, Nick?"

"Yeah, I got a little personal business to take care of. Sounds like you're going to have a helluva lot more fun."

Bobby laughed. "Well, take care of yourself."

"You know it."

After walking for about fifteen minutes Hutch spotted a blues club and decided to check out the evening's talent. When he entered he was nearly overpowered by the smoke which seemed excessive even for a bar. Hutch ignored his impulse to return to the street and walk home. He decided since he was there, he would stay for a few numbers. He got a ginger ale at the bar and seated himself at a dark table in the corner.

After a couple of minutes, an elderly black man approached the stage, picked up a guitar, and announced in a raspy voice that he would play some numbers before the main act. He said a few words about the musical genius of Mississippi Fred McDowell and launched into a memorable rendition of "61 Highway":

*Lord, that 61 Highway, she's the longest road I know
She run from New York City down the Gulf of Mexico...*

Hutch let his mind wander. It felt soothing to allow the song to filter through the background of his thoughts. It wasn't much cooler in this place than on the street, but for some reason he was beginning to relax.

*... I started school one Monday morning, baby, I throw'd my books away
I wrote a note to my teacher, Lord, I'm gonna try 61 today...*

When the man had finished that number, he began "Mama Don't Allow":

*You may call me crazy, baby,
But I know right from wrong...*

Hutch checked his watch and figured he had enough time to catch the first few minutes of the main act. After the old man left the stage, a woman took a seat at the piano. She paused to take a long drink from a glass put before her by the bartender. Then she began to sing "Black Night" in an irresistibly sultry voice. The crowd quieted considerably.

*Black night is falling
Oh, how I hate to be alone.
I say, black night is falling
Oh, how I hate to be alone.
I keep crying for my baby
But then another day is gone.
I have no one to talk with, to tell my troubles to,
My baby's gone and left me, someone tell me what more I can do?
Black night is falling
Oh, how I hate to be alone...*

Hutch was mesmerized by the performance. It seemed so full of raw, but understated, emotion. He'd often heard that one had to earn the right to sing the blues. That it was a talent honed by heartache and tough living. Whatever it took, this lady had nailed it. He sat through a few more numbers before heading back to the apartment to meet Starsky. He nodded to the woman as he passed the stage and their eyes met briefly before she was pulled back into the lyrics of her song.

Mickey sat at the table, nervously nursing his beer. He tried to look calm, but he knew his hands were shaking badly. He decided it would be enough not to spill the beer. Across from him sat a tall man in his late twenties with slicked back brown hair, a few strands of which had escaped and were framing a rather gaunt face. He dragged slowly on a cigarette and blew the smoke in Mickey's face.

"Mickey, dis ain't no rocket science. Dere's no reason to get nervous."

"Listen, Mr. Broussard."

"I told you the name's Streeter. You hard a hearin' of somethin', cher?"

"No, Mr. Streeter."

"It's just Streeter, got it? Not Mister, not nothin' in front of it."

"I got it." Mickey tried to pick up his beer. But his hands were shaking too much to hold the glass and he quickly put it back on the table.

Streeter eyed Mickey with disgust. "Can't even drink a goddamn beer. Mon Dieux! But I tell you what. You going to get your act together and pull dis off. You hear me?"

"I told you I'd do it, but I don't know if Starsky trusts me. He suspects that maybe I was helping this guy called Monk. I'll spare you the details, but his partner nearly got killed and he woulda been next. I don't think this plan is gonna work, Streeter. It might just blow up in our faces. I know I owe ya, Streeter, but maybe there's some other way I could --"

"Dere's no other way, Mickey. I don't intend to be keeping company wit' a drunk like you any longer den necessary. Dis is it and you are gonna make it work."

"But I don't get it. Why did you want me to tell them you're gonna make trouble for Martinez? It doesn't make any sense."

"Don't you worry, dey'll get enough of a show to keep 'em interested. I'm just makin' sure I got a little insurance."

Mickey decided to let it go, but he was already regretting his involvement in the whole business.

Streeter took a long drag on his cigarette. "Just trust me, Mickey. After all, your whole future is hanging in da balance." He smiled evilly at Mickey and got up from the table, flicking his cigarette into the glass of beer.

Part Two

Starsky arrived right on time and Hutch settled into the Torino for the ride downtown. Hutch mentioned his trip to the blues club.

"Hey, I happen to know where you can hear some more of that stuff at this time of night." Starsky fiddled with the radio until he found a scratchy blues station. Billie Holiday was singing "That's Life I Guess" and Starsky couldn't resist joining in even though he only knew about half the words.

Hutch leaned over and turned up the volume. "Let the lady sing in peace, will ya?" he said in mock irritation. Starsky simply raised his own voice to match Billie's. Hutch had to laugh. His partner couldn't quite carry a tune, but he sang with gusto. Hutch decided not to upstage him and only wondered what Dobby would think of his detectives carrying on like this. Starsky turned off the radio as they pulled up across the street from Mr. Martinez's cigar shop.

"Look, Starsk, I don't mean to cast aspersions on the great tomato, but don't you think we ought to move a little farther down the street?"

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were implying that this great engineering marvel was some sort of eyesore," said Starsky. But he did coast further down the block. It was few minutes to ten.

"Do you think this Streeter character will have called the whole thing off after talking to Mickey?" asked Hutch.

"Probably," answered Starsky.

"Gee, partner. That's great. Mind tell me why we're even bothering to do this? Unauthorized and all."

"I believe in hunches. I think you sensed something this afternoon."

"Yeah, that hunch sure played out well," said Hutch. "I call any more like that and I'll be up for a promotion for sure."

"I think there is something going on. Maybe not with Mickey. But, I don't know, even that is possible."

The mention of Mickey's name made Hutch flinch ever so slightly. He no longer felt annoyance, only shame.

It was 10 o'clock and the detectives watched Mr. Martinez shutting and locking cases for the evening. He was alone in the store.

"He sure keeps late hours for such an old man," said Hutch.

Just then a woman turned the corner and headed for the door of the cigar shop. She had on a miniskirt and four inch heels. Hutch grabbed a pair of binoculars for a better look.

"Whaddaya got?" asked Starsky.

"Give me a minute... That woman looks familiar."

"Lemme see." Without missing a beat Starsky grabbed the binoculars.

"I wasn't finished looking, you know."

"She's familiar all right. I've seen her a few times down at the precinct being booked for solicitation. I haven't seen her lately though."

Hutch grabbed the binoculars and took another look. "She seems a little old to be a working girl." He focused the lenses some more. "In fact, she looks like what my father used to refer to as 'nine miles of bad road.'"

"Damn, Hutch, that's cold."

Hutch looked at his partner a little guiltily. "Well, I just meant that, I don't know. You gotta admit Starsk, she's pretty old."

"I bet she has no trouble getting johns. It's not just about sex. A lot of people are plain lonely. Maybe when you get older, you start to understand that."

"It's not like you to get philosophical about such things."

"I'm just saying that sometimes life is complicated. I don't think we're in a position to judge."

Hutch was about to say something when he noticed some activity. Mr. Martinez placed a box of cigars on the counter and pushed it towards the woman. She in turn removed an envelope from her purse and quickly pushed it towards Mr. Martinez. She then left the store. Hutch described what he saw to Starsky. "What do you think that was all about?"

"Don't know. You want to question Martinez or follow the woman?"

"I'll take Martinez," said Hutch as he left the car. He jogged across the street and met the old man at the door as he was about to lock it. Martinez seemed none too pleased by Hutch's presence but he decided to let the detective in.

"I'm Detective Ken Hutchinson. We spoke earlier today."

"Yes, I remember. I also remember telling you that you had the wrong information."

"Well, I just wanted to be sure. Sometimes people decide to protect other people for the wrong reasons."

"Listen, Detective, I'm very tired. I just want to go home."

"Sure, but I want to ask you about your last customer."

"Hey, I don't keep tabs on my customers."

"You must know she's a prostitute."

"That makes no difference to me. She pays like anyone else. I guess her clients enjoy a good cigar. Tells me she's a classy broad."

"Well, I noticed she handed you an envelope as payment. Is that typical behavior for the classy broads?"

"Look, unless you got a search warrant, I want you to leave. I've got nothing more to say to you." Hutch sighed, nodded to Martinez and left the store. He was reminded again of Dobey's lecture. With the stunt he'd pulled this afternoon he'd ruined any chances of getting the Department's blessing for this operation, let alone a warrant. He walked back to the Torino and waited for his partner.

Starsky caught up to the woman on the next street. Without looking at him, she began: "Either make me an offer or arrest me, I don't need no escort."

"The lady's got a good memory."

"The lady's late for an important meeting."

"Mind if I ask you what you were doing in the cigar shop?"

The woman stopped and faced Starsky. "I don't suppose buying cigars is too obvious an answer. I ain't into this cat and mouse game, so make your point."

"I think maybe you've got more than an interest in cigars."

"If you're implying that I've got an interest in Mr. Martinez, you're way off, baby," the woman said laughing. "He couldn't keep up with me. But I bet I could give you a run for your money." With that she walked off.

Starsky couldn't justify pursuing it further. Bringing her in for further questioning would be fruitless and a box of cigars with an unbroken seal was hardly incriminating evidence. He returned to the Torino.

Together the detectives tried to put the pieces together. "Well, it seems the woman's paying off Martinez for something. So it doesn't seem as if he's the one getting the shakedown," said Hutch. "Beyond that, I don't know."

"So we know some of the players, but not the game. We'll have to let it go at that for now." Starsky put his key in the ignition and roared down the street. He was thinking of how much more of the Eastwood marathon he could afford to watch and still get a good night's sleep.

After her meeting with the brunet detective the woman who called herself "Liv," after Liv Ullman, hailed a cab and headed for the other side of town.

"So, you working tonight, honey?" asked the cab driver.

"Just drive the damn car, will ya?" she said tiredly.

"I'm only trying to make conversation."

"Yeah, well, don't take it personally. I'm a little world weary tonight."

"I hear that."

They drove the rest of the way in silence.

The cab stopped in front of a suburban home. The cabbie wondered what sort of arrangement this could be, but he stopped himself from asking. Liv gave him a healthy tip and a smile that seemed sincere though sad. He watched her approach the front stoop; part of him wanted to see that she got inside safely. Once the door closed behind her, he drove off.

Nick Perelli was waiting inside, drinking a beer.

"Can I have one of those?" asked Liv.

"Sure, just don't forget what you came for."

He went to the kitchen and got her a beer. "And I take it you have a box of fine Havana specials for me, Liv?"

She tossed him the cigars and took a seat on the couch with the beer. She began to wonder exactly when it was that her life had taken the turn it did. But it was so long ago, there didn't seem to be much point in pursuing it. Liv looked at Nick and wondered when he had decided that being a cop just wasn't enough. She watched him remove a layer of cigars and sigh with satisfaction at what he found underneath. She felt disgusted by it all.

"I had company tonight," said Liv.

"What do you mean?"

"A cop, a cute little one at that."

"What the hell did he want?"

"Wanted to know what I found so interesting about Mr. Martinez."

"Damn, if that old man isn't trying to double cross me. You recognize the cop?"

"I've seen him before, in the days before you let me operate so 'liberally,' shall we say." He has dark hair, nice blue eyes, and a Polish name, I think. Something that ends in a "ski."

"Starsky?"

"Yeah, that could be it."

Perelli grabbed her arm with some force. "Could be or is?"

"Take it easy, Nick," she said, pulling her arm away and rubbing it. "Yes, I'm pretty sure it was Starsky."

He looked at Liv and sighed. "I'm sorry, baby. Didn't mean to take it out on you. I'm just wondering what the hell Starsky's doing snooping around. And chances are good his partner wasn't far behind. Did you see anyone else?"

"No, just Starsky."

"All right. You relax here. I've gotta make some phone calls."

After about fifteen minutes, Perelli returned to the livingroom. He stopped to smile at Liv and then walked upstairs to the bedroom and began to disrobe. Liv followed him and started to take off her clothes in a corner of the room.

"I've been missing you, babe," said Nick in the darkness.

Liv stopped momentarily in the act of removing her stockings. "Have you really?" she said with marked weariness in her voice.

"I can't remember when I've uttered a more honest sentence."

There was something in Nick's voice that rang true and Liv wondered at it. "My God, I almost believe you."

"You ain't got to question me, baby. I'm the real thing."

Liv sighed deeply. "You know, Nick, every time I make the mistake of thinking you could be a decent guy, I get slapped in the face." She laughed quietly at the statement.

"There was a time when I would have put stock in that kind of faith."

Liv turned to Nick with tears in her eyes. She desperately wanted to respond to the earnestness she sensed behind the words, but she didn't know where to begin.

"Hey, Liv, don't go soft on me now. We've both seen too much living for that sort of sentimentality."

"Don't I know it." Liv tried to regain a hard edge that would belie the vulnerability she felt was consuming her. She draped her skirt and blouse over a chair and turned to face Nick. She knew it would be easiest to merely submit to him in the dark and push aside any feelings or attachments, but somehow she couldn't help but believe that they shared something special and terrifying -- a communion of loneliness and despair assuaged by a few hours of pretended tenderness.

Nick pulled her into his arms and sensed that she was trembling. The sensation unnerved him, while awakening a protectiveness in him he'd long thought dead. "Hey, Liv, what's going on?"

"You were married once, right?"

"Well, if truth be told, twice."

"I was married once myself. But I couldn't get over the feeling that I was missing something more."

"So you wanted variety, huh? I guess coming home to one old sorry sack just wasn't your bag."

"Goddammit, Nick!" said Liv nearly yelling. She pulled away from him and into herself.

"What's the matter, baby?"

"I'm trying to talk to you. Like one human being to another. Quit talking to me like I'm some one night stand!"

Nick was silent for a while. "Liv, I thought we understood each other."

The words cut Liv like a knife. "God, Nick."

"It's a little late in the game to start changing the rules, don't you think?"

"I suppose."

"Then how about you come over here and give me some lovin'?"

Liv turned to Nick and began to kiss him softly on the chest. She turned slightly to brush away the tears before they hit his flesh. She knew it was too late to change the tide of her life or his. All she could hope for was an ending that was kind in its swiftness. She closed her mind to all other thoughts and buried herself in Nick, hoping only for oblivion.

Mr. Martinez quickly locked the door to his shop after Hutch's departure. He wasted no time placing a call to his son. On the third ring, Carlos answered the phone.

"I just received another visit from a Detective Hutchinson. I get the feeling that Perelli is trying to spread the wealth. Tonight I made the final payment. It's time to put this whole thing to rest."

"If it's any consolation, I believe Perelli's too greedy to share any of his action. Besides, I know for a fact even his partner hasn't a clue about his side business. I doubt he'd tell anyone else in the Department."

"Maybe, but I want you to be on guard, just in case."

"Okay, Pop."

While Starsky sat fully entranced by *High Plains Drifter*, Hutch was making plans to return to the blues club. When he got there he spotted the woman who had been performing earlier taking a break at the bar and finishing a drink.

"Can I buy the woman with the golden voice another drink?"

"I get them for free here and besides two club sodas a night is about my limit."

Hutch laughed and ordered himself a gin and tonic. "Will you be singing again tonight?"

"I've got one more set."

"Then I'm in luck."

She gave him a half smile and walked back to the piano. Hutch decided to stop trying to charm the woman and just enjoy her incredible voice.

At 9 the next morning, Dr. Cooper sat at his desk and watched as Diana Harmon was led in by an attendant. She took a seat and stared at the doctor nervously.

"Miss Harmon," began Dr. Cooper, leaning back in his chair and interlacing his fingers, "you do understand that we are all here to help you."

"Yes, I want to believe that."

"Then you must put your full faith in it. You must be willing to embrace the truth, however painful it may be. That is the only way you are going to get better."

"I know, Doctor. I'm ready."

"Good." He came out from behind the desk and took a seat next to Diana. He took a deep breath and then began. "I want you to tell me about Ken Hutchinson."

Diana shuddered. "I loved him. I loved him very much."

"What else, Diana."

"What do you mean?"

"What did he do to you? Tell me how he hurt you."

"He didn't hurt me. It was Starsky. He didn't like me. I think he told Hutch not to like me, but I don't know."

"Don't change the subject, Diana. Hutch is the one that hurt you."

Diana suddenly faced the doctor as if she had remembered something striking.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"The knife. I remember the knife."

"Hutch was threatening you; you had to defend yourself."

"No!"

"Stop repressing the memories, Diana!"

"I had the knife! I stabbed him! I wanted him to be dead!"

"It's understandable, Diana, after all his abuse. You were just trying to defend yourself. You didn't have a choice. Nobody is blaming you."

"No, it isn't true!" Diana jumped up and began pacing back and forth, wringing her hands.

"Sit down, Diana. You need to relax."

"No, you're confusing me again. It's not like you say. It was me. I didn't want any one else to have Hutch. I was going to make sure no one could have him. It was me. I was going to kill him so that nobody could have him." Diana stopped pacing and sank to the floor sobbing. "I just didn't want him to leave. Like everyone else had left. He must hate me. My God, what have I done?"

Dr. Cooper came to Diana's side and coaxed her back into her chair. "You have to stop blaming yourself. It wasn't your fault."

"Of course it's my fault! Why else would I be in here! I'm crazy, right?"

"No, Diana, that's not true." He held on to her hands and tried to calm their shaking. "You were an abused woman. They didn't understand that."

"That's not true! Why do you keep saying that? You're trying to confuse me! I know what I did! He must hate me, Doctor. I don't want him to hate me." Diana began to rock in the chair and cry uncontrollably. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Now, Diana --"

"I don't want to hear any more from you! I know what I know! You're just trying to trick me!"

Dr. Cooper went to his phone and called for several attendants. When they arrived the doctor gave orders to have Diana restrained and sedated. She resisted and began to yell at Dr. Cooper. He in turn rolled his eyes in front of the attendants as if to confirm that the woman was indeed hysterical. The attendants gave her the necessary shots and wheeled Diana back to her room. Once alone, Dr. Cooper opened Diana's file and recorded his notes for the session: *Miss Harmon continues to feel threatened by her ex-boyfriend. She has made repeated threats to his life in therapy sessions...*

Hutch was grateful that this morning the weather was a little cooler. He was tired but happy, though he didn't quite know why. He hadn't been able to talk to the woman again last night. He didn't even know her name. But he felt happy, nonetheless. As he entered the squad room, he saw Starsky bent over his desk, raising his head high enough only to take a sip from a large mug of black coffee.

"Tell me, partner, just how much of that Eastwood marathon did you watch last night?"

"Don't ask."

"Feeling that bad, huh?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact. Is there some reason that you're so chipper this morning."

"I don't know, Starsk. It's a beautiful day; I've got my health. Everything just seems right with the world."

"Oh, cut the crap. Yesterday, you were biting people's heads off. Don't tell me a few degrees of cooler weather is responsible for this turnabout."

"Well, maybe not entirely," Hutch said grinning.

"Don't tell me -- the singer at the club?"

"It's not what you're thinking."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"I just enjoyed her singing. It wasn't about picking her up or trying to impress her."

"So you struck out?"

"No, I didn't strike out. I wasn't even batting."

"Yeah, right."

Hutch was about to counter his partner's remark when Dobe came out of his office, scanning the squad room. "You looking for us, Captain?" he asked instead.

"Not this time." He spotted Detective Quintero across the room and addressed him with a roar: "Where in the livin' hell is your partner?"

"Now Captain, take it easy. I'm sure there is a good explanation."

"Yeah, I get a lot of that sort of thing," Dobe said glaring at Starsky and Hutch.

"Hey, when did this start being about us?" said Starsky.

"Never mind. Quintero, as soon as Perelli does show up, I want you both in my office. You got that?"

"Got it, Captain," said the young detective.

Perelli checked his service revolver before climbing out of his Mustang. He had parked behind the mobile home park and was determined to approach on foot so as not to announce his visit. He nearly tripped over a big-wheels as he turned the corner of a modest trailer and cursed under his breath. Perelli walked down two more rows until he was sure he had come to the right dwelling. He knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" a sleepy male voice called after a few moments of silence.

"It's Perelli."

"All right, I'm coming." As the latch was released and the door unlocked, Perelli shoved his full weight against it and nearly sent the man behind it flying. Perelli shoved the man onto a couch face down, twisting his left arm behind him.

"What the hell --" yelled the man. At the same time a half dressed woman appeared at the door and began to scream.

"Tell the bitch to shut up!" hissed Perelli. "Or I swear I'll put a bullet in your brain right now!"

"It's okay, Teresa. Calm down," said the man. He tried to turn around and face Perelli, but he was pinned to the couch. "Man, what is the matter with you?"

"Hey, Teresa, me and Carlos here need to have a talk. Would you mind going back in the bedroom?"

Teresa was wide-eyed and shaking. She seemed unable to move.

"Sweetheart, it's ok. Just go in the bedroom."

When the two men were alone, Perelli let go of his grip, but he kept his weapon leveled at the man. "What are you and your old man trying to pull, Carlos?"

"You come in here putting a gun to my head and scaring my girl half to death and you ask me what *I'm* trying to pull?"

"Old man Martinez been talking to the cops? 'Cause they sure seem mighty interested in him all of a sudden."

"Well, he's been wondering about the same thing."

"I just had the last of the negatives delivered. All in good faith, just like I promised."

"And you were paid, as promised. Then my father calls with news that another detective came snooping around. He thought the guy might be one of your converts."

"Who was he?"

"Someone called Hutchinson. He came to the shop trying to find out who was shaking the old man down. Said he'd heard there'd be trouble at closing time."

"Damn, I had a feeling both Starsky and Hutchinson were in on this."

"In on what? It better not have anything to do with me and my old man. As far as we're concerned the relationship with you is over."

"Don't get an attitude with me. I don't have to tell you what immigration would have to say about your little marketing enterprise."

"Damn, Perelli. You've been holding those pictures over my head for nearly two years. The debt has been paid. It's over. If this is your attempt to renegotiate, forget it. You'd best be concerned with who's watching your back. Besides, if we was gonna rat you out, we'd have done it a long time ago. Seems you're the one getting sloppy."

Perelli put his gun back in its holster and backed towards the door. "I want to know what goes on. If your father has any more dealings with Hutchinson, you call me."

"Like hell, I will. This is your mess now; you fix it."

The detective was beginning to feel outmaneuvered. Two years ago, Carlos had only recently arrived in the country. He was new to its regulations and the lay of the land. He had gotten involved in a series of minor drug deals and wound up on a surveillance tape. Perelli had been assigned to the case and had managed to edit the tapes, hoping for some leverage with the older Martinez who seemed to have a profitable business. The father and son had been only too willing to go along with the plan then, but the son in particular had grown more savvy in the last few months. It hadn't taken him too long to realize that paying off the cops was not a given; it was localized corruption, not a systemic problem. Knowing that he would already be missed at the station, the detective decided not to keep pushing a hand that no longer appeared to be a winner.

"Just keep your nose out of trouble, Carlos. And pass the word along to your old man."

Carlos recognized a clumsy attempt at saving face and decided it was best to let it go at that. He let the detective out without another word and returned to the bedroom to comfort his frightened girlfriend.

After Dobby returned to his office, Quintero buried his head in a pile of reports without further comment. Starsky went down to the computer lab to try and locate the file of the prostitute he had encountered outside of Martinez's cigar shop. Hutch was finishing some paper work on a robbery case that would probably call for his testimony in court. As he threaded a sheet of paper into the typewriter, he watched Quintero furiously sorting through a sheaf of forms. Roberto "Bobby" Quintero had been promoted to the rank of detective about six months ago and paired with Perelli. The older detective had been assigned several new detectives since his former partner of many years had been killed in the line of duty. Hutch didn't know much about the younger detective; he was a quiet man, but he was eager to learn from his colleagues and had proven himself dependable in a few hairy cases in the last few months. He and Perelli were night and day, though, and Hutch wondered just how the pair operated. Bobby had tried to cover for his partner but he sure appeared to be uptight about the situation.

"So what's your partner really up to, Quintero?" Hutch had asked more as playful banter than anything else. But that was not the way it was received.

"Don't you have some misguided police operation to plan?" asked Quintero, the anger rising in his voice.

"If I thought my partner was in trouble, I'd plan another one in a heartbeat, you're damn right about that," answered Hutch, clearly peeved.

"Look," said Quintero, "I didn't mean to get on your case."

"No sweat. I didn't mean anything about Perelli. I'll admit that he pisses me off, so I don't mind giving him grief. The man's got an impressive arrest record, though. There's no denying that."

"Yeah," said the younger detective, but he appeared distracted. Hutch decided to let the matter drop, but he wondered what was eating Quintero and if it had anything to do with Perelli.

When Starsky returned he produced a fairly extensive rap sheet on a woman identified as Ellen Taylor, with an alias of Liv. Most of the arrests were for prostitution. There was also an indication that she had attended a drug rehabilitation program as part of a reduced sentence for possession of marijuana. Hutch glanced over the file quickly, but there was nothing striking about it. "So now we have a name. Now what?"

"There have been no arrests for the past eighteen months," said Starsky.

"So," said Hutch. "Maybe she's cleaning up her act."

"Not judging from her wardrobe last night."

"Then she's being more discreet. Maybe she's got a private list of clients; no need to work the street."

"Or maybe someone's making sure a blind eye gets turned." Starsky scanned the names of the arresting officers, but nothing added up.

Hutch thought for a moment and then took the file from his partner's hands. Hutch scanned it with his finger. There were several different arresting officers, but the last three arrests had been made by Det. Perelli and that is where the blond's finger rested. He looked up at Starsky and then quickly over to Quintero. Starsky figured Hutch didn't want him to say anything about it aloud, but he didn't know why.

"I need some candy," said Hutch suddenly, digging in his pocket for some change. "Seems I'm short, you'd better come along so you can give it a good belt."

"It's nice to be recognized for my unique talents," quipped Starsky as they went into the hall. Once by the machine, Starsky successfully retrieved a Mars bar and began munching on it.

"That's supposed to be for me."

"I can't remember when you've been less subtle about needing some privacy. Good thing Quintero doesn't know about your eating habits. Now why are we standing out here?"

"According to the file, Perelli made the last three arrests of this Liv woman."

"So we ask him about her whenever he shows up. What's the big deal?"

"Probably nothing. It's just that I tried kidding with Quintero about his partner's absence this morning and he acted awfully defensive."

"If you were paired with Perelli, you'd be defensive too. Nick likes to bend the rules a little to get the job done."

"Well, so do we."

"Yeah, but with us, the left hand knows what the right hand is doing. With twenty years on the force, I bet Perelli takes charge and lets Quintero do mop-up operations."

"How can people work like that?"

"For as long as I've known him Perelli's always been a loner, with or without a partner. I think he was fairly close to Deitz, though," he said after a pause.

"That must have affected him somehow."

"You got that right. That's probably why he agreed to act as a mentor of sorts to the younger detectives. Quintero will most likely get another assignment soon, and Perelli will help train some other detective. Makes more sense than two rookies learning the ropes together.

"Isn't that what we did?"

"Yeah, but we had the instincts to carry us through," Starsky said smiling. "That's my theory, anyway. Now how about getting back inside before they start spreading rumors about us?"

Once back in the squad room, Starsky and Hutch returned to their paperwork. Perelli showed up soon after. Quintero eyed him nervously. "Dobey is waiting for us," he said.

"Sounds like my lucky day. Let's not keep the man waiting," he said with false cheer.

After they were in Dobey's office, Hutch turned to look at Starsky. "What do you think?"

"I think I'll ask him about Liv when he gets out and be done with it. I kinda think we're grabbing at straws, Hutch."

Dr. Cooper opened the door to his office and found Streeter there eying the diplomas on the wall. He realized he must have jumped a foot, but he tried to remain calm. "You said you'd be back on Friday. It's not been a week yet."

"Well, dere's a fine how d'ya do."

"What's going on? I know you didn't come here to check out my credentials."

"No, though I sure as hell wouldn't want a shrink wit' a gambling problem messin' wit' my head."

"What do you want, Streeter?"

"I've come to check on my investment."

Dr. Cooper hesitated and then went to his filing cabinet to retrieve a folder. "I have a proposition to make to Mr. Perelli. I think he'll find it very attractive."

"Yeah, what's dat?"

"I want to discuss it with Mr. Perelli. It is a delicate matter."

"Dat your polite was of saying you doan trust me? You tell me and I'll tell Perelli."

Just then the phone rang. After a few moments the doctor responded. "Yes, all right, I'll be there shortly." Dr. Cooper returned his gaze to Streeter, feeling pulled in two directions at once. "Okay, have a seat and let me explain."

"I'm all ears."

"I have a patient in my care that's very disturbed."

"What's dat got to do wit' anything?"

"She's a woman with no relatives and a lot of money."

"And... "

"And I hold the purse strings. If anything were to happen to this patient, I would come in to a fair sum."

Streeter burst out laughing. "So what's da plan, Doc, you gonna knock her off yourself?"

"Dammit, lower your voice!"

Streeter suddenly became serious. "Let's get to the punch line of this thing."

"I'm not going to do anything, but leave an avenue of escape. I'm working to focus her repressed anger towards an old boyfriend -- a cop."

"So she goes after the guy and gets herself arrested. What does that solve?"

"She's not going to get taken in. Not if I continue my present line of therapy. I've had quite a breakthrough. Suffice it to say, she'll fight to the death. And if she kills the cop along the way, the police will be far more willing to use deadly force."

"Sounds like another gamble to me. Who's da poor bastard who got himself hooked up wit' her?"

"He's a detective named Kenneth Hutchinson."

"You're joking me!"

"I'm hardly in a position to be joking."

"Oh, Doc, we may just have hit paydirt here. Give me a minute to t'ink." Streeter began pacing the office, the wheels turning.

"Well, what are you thinking?"

"For one t'ing, your handling fee just went up. Burning a cop is a liability."

Dr. Cooper didn't know what to make of the situation. It was as if Streeter were having difficulty hiding his pleasure over some great fortune. "Well, yes. I figured if you could arrange to make Detective Hutchinson accessible, I'd be appreciative."

"Make him *accessible*? Dat's a great euphemism, Doc. I gotta remember that one. I'd say an extra ten grand would ensure his being *accessible*."

Dr. Cooper hesitated only briefly. "Yes, but I want Perelli taking charge of this one personally."

"Doc, outta da goodness of my heart, I'm gonna overlook da implication that you find my hands less than capable. Don't you worry, I'm giving this one to Perelli on a silver platter." With that he departed, leaving the doctor with the distinct feeling he'd taken a path of no return.

Starsky hoped for a way to approach Perelli privately to ask him about Liv. He could kill Hutch for filling him with suspicions he wouldn't have drawn on his own. He hoped he could sound convincingly casual. Later that day he got his chance when both men met in the restroom. Starsky thought it was a hell of a spot, but it seemed like his only possibility of the day.

"Hey, Nick, you remember busting a prostitute by the name of Liv?" He figured straight to the point was the way to go.

His recovery was swift, but Starsky noted that Perelli seemed visibly shaken by the question. Starsky's curiosity was piqued.

"Yeah, what about her?"

"Well, Hutch and I got a tip about some action at a place downtown. She was there in a compromising position."

"So you picked her up for hooking?"

"No, she wasn't hooking."

Perelli finished drying his hands and turned to Starsky. "If you got a point, I sure wish you'd make it."

"Okay. You arrested her a number of times and then the arrests stopped. It seemed... I don't know... a little inconsistent."

Starsky watched a play of emotions cross Perelli's face. For his part, Perelli was wondering what route to take next. He could give an explanation that may or may not satisfy Starsky. Liv was a tough lady but Nick wasn't sure she wouldn't let something slip if interrogated. He decided to take a gamble. He walked to the bathroom door and locked it from the inside.

"If you're gonna beat me up, this probably ain't the best place."

"Listen to me, Starsky." Perelli figured supplicating was not his strong point, so he kept a gruff enough demeanor to keep the act believable. "I know you ain't ever been married. Take it from me, it's a fine institution. But when you're trying to make two alimony payments on a cop's salary, it can start to sour you on the idea of the gentler sex."

Starsky was trying to piece this one together, but he wasn't quite getting it.

"Yeah, I've let Liv slide a bit." He bit his lip and continued. "She's good company, Starsky. I'm not in the habit of reforming people, but I figure when she's with me at least she ain't being exposed to the scum on the street."

Perelli saw the slight shock on Starsky's face and secretly congratulated himself for following his gut on this one.

"I got no plans to marry the broad," he said and then with determination softened his tone. "But a man does get lonely."

Starsky nodded wordlessly.

"This is just between us, right Starsky?"

"Sure, Nick."

Perelli walked to the door and unlocked it. Then he turned back. "It's not like Huggy to start dropping a dime on the local streetwalkers." He seemed to be waiting for some type of response, but when Starsky offered none, he left. Starsky waited another moment and then headed back to the squad room.

Perelli walked downstairs to make a call on a private line. An idea was brewing in his mind that he was hoping to either confront or put to rest. He knew that Huggy was the main snitch for Starsky and Hutchinson. But he also knew that Starsky had been known to use that bum called Mickey. The fact that Streeter considered him such an authority in these parts was beginning to rankle. He didn't like the uneasy coincidence. Streeter answered the call on the first ring.

"We need to talk," said Perelli. "You've got some explaining to do."

"How about O'Malley's in fifteen minutes?"

"You seem awfully eager."

Streeter responded forgetting the ban on his Cajun accent. "Cher, when you hear da news I got for you, you're gonna t'ink Christmas done come in August."

Perelli hung up the phone. That snake Russo was certainly sending him a message with this fool. But he had enough on his hands without worrying about what the New Orleans crime bosses had in store. Perelli looked at his watch and made a number of decisions in rapid succession. He had two hours until he and his partner were due at a briefing with Dobey about some operation in the warehouse district. If he simply went through the motions of what he had to do, he could make it.

"Say it again, Diana. Say it like you mean it."

"I hate him."

"Again."

"I HATE HIM!"

"And why do you hate him, Diana?"

"Because he hurt me."

"WHY?"

"HE HURT ME!"

"Now look at the photograph. I want you to say it directly to him, Diana. Let him know how you feel."

Diana tore the photograph from the doctor's hands and glared at it. "I hate you, Ken Hutchinson! Do you hear me? I HATE YOU!"

Dr. Cooper nodded in approval.

The first thing Perelli did was to head to the locker room. He stood around a few minutes, finding it necessary to "shoot the shit" with a couple of guys who were just coming on shift. The detective could feel the sweat rising on the back of his neck. Damn, he wished they'd hurry. He was barely listening to his own mindless banter. As soon as the cops had left the room, Perelli reached into his locker and pulled forward a false back panel. He secured a silencer for his weapon, and quickly put the locker back in order. He saw Anderson in the

hall and asked him to pass on the message to Quintero that he was checking on some leads they had discussed earlier. Then he dashed out the door and got into his Mustang.

Perelli parked behind O'Malley's and went in the back door. He was vaguely conscious of the smell from the urinal that seemed magnified. He opened the door to the bar slightly and saw Streeter sitting at their usual table. Perelli had to resist an urge to strangle him right then and there. "Hey," he called to the seated man. "Meet me out back." Then Perelli headed back to the Mustang.

Streeter was right behind him. "I always wanted to take a ride in that cool car of yours."

"Just get in," grumbled Perelli. Somehow small talk seemed oddly obscene in light of what the detective felt to be the inevitable. "I know that you gave Mickey information about Liv's delivery at Martinez's place. Now I want to know why."

"That was insurance."

"Getting two detectives on my ass is your idea of insurance!"

"Perelli, just calm down. And listen to what I've got to tell you. This is going to solve all our problems." Streeter proceeded to tell the detective about Dr. Cooper's plan to repay his debt to Perelli with a handsome profit. He also invented a tale about coaxing the idea out of Cooper with a fair amount of skill and finesse. Perelli was thinking about how he hoped Streeter was enjoying the story that would prove to be his last, but he had to admit there was a strange irony to the tale. Maybe there was a way to salvage the situation. Streeter ended with lamenting the fate of "that sick chick's boyfriend." "Poor Hutchinson, now there's a poor bastard with no taste in woman!" Perelli looked at his watch. He made some adjustments to his mental list of things to do. It had just grown by two.

"That's all well and good. But did you ever stop to think that if you hadn't opened your big trap to a drunken bum, this wouldn't be necessary?"

"Perelli, come on. I did you a favor. Cooper had no way of paying the vig, let alone the debt. What were you going to do? Break his legs? What would that have proven? And what if he turned on you? The word of a doctor would be taken a bit more seriously than the rest of your clients. Ever think of that?"

Inwardly, Perelli was thinking of how he couldn't wait to burn this liability. Outwardly, he feigned interest in Streeter's unfolding plan for kidnapping Detective Hutchinson. He drove steadily toward the pier.

Streeter seemed unaware of the fact that the Mustang had left the main road and traveled down a restricted service road under a bridge. He noticed his surroundings only when the car had stopped. "What are we doing here?" he asked.

"I gotta get out and think."

The next few moments were a blur to Perelli. He was vaguely aware that Streeter had followed him to the water's edge and stood a few feet behind him, but he did not turn to face the man. He simply attached the silencer to his gun as Streeter marveled once again at their mutual good fortune. Almost as an afterthought, Perelli spun around and grabbed Streeter's arm, pulling him forward and simultaneously shooting him through the back of the head. He dumped the body into the fast moving current and returned to the car without looking back.

Perelli then drove in a haze to Cabrillo State Hospital. In a calm manner that Dr. Cooper found most unsettling, the detective informed him that Streeter was no longer with the operation. Continuing in a businesslike fashion, Perelli asked to see the files on Diana Harmon. He was particularly interested in the carefully fabricated session

notes. After studying the records for some time in silence, Perelli had one important question. "Is she prepared to put a bullet in a cop's brain?"

Dr. Cooper flinched at the question.

"Don't waste my time, Dr. Cooper. Answer the question."

"Yes, she's capable of such an action. I'd venture to say she's most impatient for the opportunity."

"Good. Now understand two things. First of all, she ain't gonna kill a cop. The desire is enough. And second, you're coming along for the ride."

"I can't leave the hospital!"

"You can and you will. I don't need this broad having a relapse. You are going to make sure that doesn't happen. In three days' time you arrange for this Harmon woman to wander away from the grounds just after midnight. When you report her missing, you ask for Detective Quintero to file a report." He flipped one of his partner's business cards on the desk. "There are a lot of these things floating around. You just happened to have one in the office. You with me so far?"

"Yes."

"Then you stay where I can reach you. You let me figure out the details. Got it?"

"I guess so. There are a few details to work out. I have to see who's on the roster for that night and arrange --"

"Then I take it we're agreed?"

The doctor fell silent for a moment. "Yes," he said.

Perelli left the hospital and glanced at his watch. One phone call to make and he could get back to the station for the briefing at one. He stopped a few blocks from the hospital at a payphone to call Liv. When she answered the phone, he took a deep breath and began.

"Don't talk, just listen. I want you to get in touch with the Mahoney boys. Liv, just hear me out. I don't want you going anywhere near the crazy sons of bitches. You just contact them and tell 'em to meet me at 10 o'clock tonight behind O'Malley's. Tell them I've got a job they're really going to enjoy."

Part Three

Starsky and Hutch headed out to the Torino in the afternoon to cruise the streets. The weather had cooled markedly, but the temperature still hovered around ninety degrees.

"So, did you get a chance to talk to Perelli?" asked Hutch.

"Sure did. And he had quite a tale to tell."

When Starsky failed to continue, Hutch looked over to his partner questioningly.

"It seems Nick is keeping company with the little cigar lady."

"Keeping company?" asked Hutch, definitely surprised.

"Hey, I didn't ask about the nature of the attraction or the length of the commitment. He gave me a line about alimony payments and left the rest up to my imagination. He admitted to cutting Liv slack."

"You buy it?"

"I don't know. I guess. The way Perelli told the story, it was almost, ya know, poignant."

"Poignant?"

"Yeah, and you can spare me the crack about the *Reader's Digest* in the john."

Hutch just laughed. The two then continued idly scanning the streets in silence. Hutch was first to speak. "You know Perelli better than I do. What do you make of him?"

"I know he cuts his share of corners, but he commands a good deal of respect in the Department and on the streets. Maybe he's gotten a little harder since Deitz's death. But who wouldn't have? I've always admired the fact that he stayed on the force. I don't think I would have."

"I'm that irreplaceable, huh?" said Hutch with a grin.

Starsky turned his gaze from the road momentarily to face his partner. "Yeah," he said simply. His tone was deadly serious.

Hutch took some time to let the gravity of the statement fully register.

"Do you think he's just gotten harder, or is it something more?"

"I think he just got detached," said Starsky. I didn't know Deitz well, and he was definitely the quiet member of the duo, but they clicked somehow. Complemented each other. In this mentorship program, Perelli keeps himself at somewhat of a distance. But then I ain't heard any complaints from Quintero... I guess there is one thing."

"Yeah, what's that?" asked the blond.

"The way he tells a joke."

"Huh?"

"I know it sounds kinda weird, but you can tell a lot about a person by the way he tells a joke."

"I hate to think what those goofy one-liners say about your character."

"No, that's not what I mean." Starsky idled at a light and tried to clearly form his explanation. "It's not about the cleverness of the joke or even the delivery. It's the purpose in telling it. With Perelli, it's like he's trying to remind people he's got a sense of humor. Almost as if he's trying to distract them from something else... I don't know if that makes any sense."

Hutch observed his partner's profile for a few moments. "In an odd way it does make sense. I don't know that I would have noticed it. What do you make of Liv's visit to the cigar shop?"

"I've been thinking lately about Mickey's insistence that we see it. God only knows how and if the Streeter character figures in."

"I've got no answers there. You think Mickey really split town?" Hutch posed the question gingerly. He didn't want Starsky to think he was questioning his judgment.

"I ain't seen him lately. But I haven't exactly been looking," was all Starsky offered in response.

"Well, apparently the heat's too much for the criminals. I can't remember a time it's been so quiet," said Hutch, gently changing the subject.

"Yeah, that, or it's the calm before the storm."

"How 'bout we drop by the Pits?"

"Sound like a plan," replied Starsky and spun the Torino around, causing a few other motorists to lean on their horns.

"God, Starsk, I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Do what?"

Huggy's was just as busy as the last time the detectives were in, but luckily there were enough waitresses to handle the crowd. Huggy approached them both immediately. "Well, if it ain't two of the worst dressed dudes in town. Good thing I'm a bit lax on the fashion code in my establishment."

"Come on, Hug. That's a low blow," said Hutch snickering.

"Glad to see you're in a better mood, Blondie."

"Yeah, well, I apologize if I was abrupt the other day."

"All is forgiven," said Huggy.

"You haven't happened to see Mickey hanging around, have you?" said Starsky.

"No way, man. Last time I saw that cat he was looking to get far away from this town. I ain't seen him since. Why d'ya ask?"

"No reason," said Starsky. "Look, you think you could give two thirsty bastards on the worst dressed list a couple of sodas?"

"I'll do better than that. How about a couple of my tropical specials?"

"Just make sure they're not lethal," said Hutch, checking his watch. "We have another hour on duty."

"Don't worry, gentlemen. These magical concoctions are meant to energize, not immobilize."

Huggy returned with two frosty drinks. Hutch eagerly drained his, noting that oranges and pineapples were part of the line-up and perhaps a hint of vanilla.

Starsky was a bit less enthusiastic, suspecting that Huggy was trying to slip him a nauseatingly healthy concoction. He did manage to finish it though, and the detectives soon returned to the Torino.

After some last rudimentary paperwork back at the station, it was time to call it a day.

"Listen Starsk, I've made arrangements to leave my car at Merle's, much against my better judgment."

"He's still the best mechanic in the city, Hutch."

"Yeah, that's what I figured. I just don't need the upholstery giving me hives."

Starsky laughed heartily at that.

"Anyway, I was hoping you could give me a ride tomorrow."

"Sure thing, Blondie."

About nine o'clock that night Hutch decided to give the blues club another try. He dressed a little less casually than usual. And it was a fact that Huggy's unflattering comment was still on his mind.

When he arrived at the club, the elderly gentleman from the other night was just finishing up a set. Hutch ordered a Tangeray and tonic from the bar. *Hell*, he thought, *it was time to start exercising more refined tastes*. He was happy to see that the corner table was still available and was soon seated at it. His trip to the bar had confirmed that the lady from the other night would be singing. He also found out that her name was Dakota. He found that rather intriguing. When she came on she started with a lighthearted oldie from another era: "1927 Kansas City":

*Bath-tub gin and movie stars
Two more payments and the baby's ours.
It's the little things that make life so sweet.*

Hutch found her rendition bewitching. In spite of himself, he began rehearsing what he would say to her at the first break. He decided to take a chance and sent a club soda up to the piano with a request for something from "the quintessential Billie Holiday." The drink and note arrived at the close of a song. He watch Dakota read it and was sure he saw a smile escape her lips.

"I usually don't take requests, but it's hard to turn down a fan of Miss Billie's and so this one's for you, whoever you are." And with that she launched into a striking rendition of "I Can't Give You Anything But Love."

*I can't give you anything but love, baby.
That's the only thing I've plenty of, baby.
Scheme awhile; dream awhile;
You're sure to find
Happiness, and I guess, all those things you've always pined for.*

Hutch tried to catch her at the break, but she was busy talking to the other patrons of the club. He stayed until midnight and then reluctantly decided to head back home to get enough sleep for the following day's shift. Next time, he promised himself. Next time, they would have a meaningful conversation.

Perelli returned home around 11 P.M.; Liv was waiting for him. She was sitting on the couch in her robe, drinking a beer. When Perelli walked in she jumped up so quickly she nearly upset the bottle.

"What's going on? I've been worried sick!"

"Take it easy, Liv."

"Take it easy? Jesus Christ, Nick. I don't know what plans you have for the Mahoney brothers, but I'll tell you what. I want nothing more to do with it. Nothing good can come from messing with the likes of those two crazy bastards."

"It's already been taken care of."

"My God, Nick, what have you done?"

"I don't want to talk about it now, Liv. I'm tired. Let's just go to bed."

Liv was tempted to leave. No, to storm out. In some display of righteous indignation. But as quickly as the idea surfaced, it receded. Who was she kidding? She had cast her lot with Nick. There wasn't anywhere else to go. She couldn't return to the streets; she couldn't take up residence in suburbia. Liv decided then and there to ride this one out to the end.

Still feeling the effects of the Eastwood marathon, Starsky decided to make an early night of it. As a result he was in bed by 10:30 and soundly asleep a few minutes later. Unfortunately, it was not to be a restful night.

A few minutes before 1 A.M. Starsky was awakened violently when a pillowcase was thrown over his head. As he struggled to make sense of what was happening, a rope was roughly tied around his neck to secure the pillowcase. Another pair of gloved hands grabbed his wrists and jerked them behind his back. Starsky felt the ropes cut into his wrists as they were bound. He desperately tried to free himself from the grasp of his two assailants, but the surprise of the attack left him no room to maneuver. Starsky attempted to communicate with his attackers, but they said nothing. He figured he'd be led off somewhere, hence the makeshift blindfold. But he was unprepared for the viciousness of the assault that followed. Without warning, Starsky began to be beaten mercilessly. With his face covered and his arms bound, he was unable to dodge the blows or defend himself. As he tried to call out he felt a hand covering his mouth over the pillowcase, muffling his yell. At one point Starsky was shoved hard against the bedside table and crashed into a lamp. He felt shards of something sharp ripping through his t-shirt and slicing his back. He was then thrown back on the bed for more pummeling. The detective could only hope that he would pass out soon; he remained conscious far longer than he would have liked.

Just after 2 A.M. Nick rose from his bed and slipped on a pair of pants. Liv had been aware of him tossing for the past hour but said nothing, sensing that Nick was in no mood to talk. Now he was at the door and heading downstairs to the livingroom. She followed to the landing and heard him pick up the phone and begin to dial. Liv closed the door and returned to bed. Any further business he had with the Mahoney brothers would only cause her more worry.

But Nick wasn't calling the Mahoneys. Even if he had wanted to it would have been too late for that. Nick had a difficult time getting through to a much more powerful contact, realizing with a sinking feeling that it was four in the morning in New Orleans. But he could wait no longer. After going through three middle men he was finally connected to the boss.

"Mr. Russo, this is Nick Perelli. I'm sorry about the hour."

"Well, I must admit there are things I'd rather be doing, like catching up on my sleep. I take it this is a matter of some importance."

"Mr. Russo, there have been... some complications with Mr. Broussard."

"Complications with Streeter? How so?"

"I was expecting someone I could work with, Mr. Russo."

"Pulling the Cajun shit, is he?"

"Mr. Russo," Nick said hurriedly, "Streeter is no longer with the organization."

There was a slight pause. "I see. I hope you gave him a healthy severance package."

"I don't think you understand --"

"I understand perfectly, Perelli. But I'd rather not discuss it further on the phone."

"I had no choice, Mr. Russo. He was compromising my position."

"Enough, Perelli. I wouldn't lose any sleep over the personnel decision. If anything, you saved me the trouble. And it shows me that you are a good judge of character. Now that the driftwood is gone, I'd like to send you two of my finer associates to help with operations. I take it you can put them to good use."

Nick was slow to answer. He didn't know whether to be relieved that Russo wasn't sending out a hit on him or angered that Streeter had been sent as some sort of test. And what kind of test? To prove he could remove a liability or that he could murder in cold blood?

"Perelli, you there?"

"Yes, Mr. Russo."

"My associates --"

"I assume they are quality people," interjected the detective, hoping he carried a measure of calm resolve in his voice. "I have a particular project that requires skilled professionals."

"Of course. And just to show my good faith, I plan to accompany them myself. I'll be in touch." With that the phone went dead.

Nick remained in the livingroom mulling over the phone call. He was grateful for the extra manpower but not about Russo's plans to come to L.A. The man never left the Big Easy without good reason. Nick was sure that he would want more than a piece of the deal with Cooper. But the question was: How much more?

Starsky and Hutch were due at the precinct at 8 A.M. Hutch woke in time to take his customary run. Once back at Venice Place he showered and drank some strong black coffee. He expected Starsky at 7:45, but he didn't show. At five to eight Hutch called his apartment but got no answer. At ten after eight he called the Department to see if his partner had forgotten him, but Starsky had not checked in. Fully expecting to find his partner having slept through the alarm and subsequent phone call, Hutch got a cab and headed impatiently to Starsky's apartment. The Torino was parked in front. Boy, was he going to get on Starsky's case.

The first alarm was raised when Hutch reached the door. It was splintered as if it had been forced open, and none too subtly. Hutch drew his magnum and entered the apartment cautiously. The livingroom appeared undisturbed. Hutch moved on to the bedroom and froze at what he saw. The furnishings were relatively intact, save for a broken lamp, but the bed was splattered with blood. He lurched for the phone and was quickly connected with Dobey. When the Captain heard Hutch's voice he began to launch into a reprimand for being late. The detective cut him off.

"You need to issue an APB on Starsky," he said, his voice shaking.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a missing partner."

"Are you sure?"

"Dammit, Captain, what kind of question is that? I'm standing in his empty apartment, looking at a blood splattered bed!"

"All right. Take it easy. I'll send some squads over immediately."

When Starsky came to, he began to shiver uncontrollably. His arms were still bound behind his back and his feet were tied together. His entire body screamed with pain from the innumerable blows he had endured during the attack in his apartment and he was chilled to the bone. The detective tried to make out his surroundings from where he lay on the cold cement floor. At least they had removed the pillowcase. The light from a single bulb in the ceiling was dim, but it revealed a small, barren room without windows. Starsky's eyes soon found a wooden door. He could hear voices coming from the other side but could not discern the words.

Tim and Dylan Mahoney were on the other side of that door, growing restless.

The officers Dobey sent to Starsky's apartment had turned up nothing of any value during the search and two days had passed. Back at the station, Hutch was becoming so frantic he could not contain himself.

"Listen, Hutch, I've got all the men I can spare looking for your partner. What else do you want me to do?"

"I don't know, Captain!"

"You don't need to raise your voice to me, son. I'm trying to help."

"I know that, Captain. I'm sorry. I just didn't see this one coming."

"Well, who'd have the best reason to want to kidnap Starsky?"

"Hell, it could be any number of people holding a grudge. I'm just hoping that whoever's got him wants to make some sort of a deal."

"You expecting them to contact you."

"God, that's what I'm hoping for."

"I hope you are not planning on handling this yourself."

Hutch didn't answer but simply headed for the door.

"Hutchinson, where are you going?" bellowed Dobey.

"I don't think anyone is going to make contact while I'm standing in the middle of a police station."

"If you are contacted, the first thing you are going to do is call for back-up."

Hutch turned at the door to the Captain's office. "That's not the way this game is played and you know it," he said, pointing his finger at his superior. "If I call in the cavalry, Starsky's a dead man. If I'm lucky enough to get a lead, I'm damn well going in alone." Hutch left, slamming the door behind him.

"Dammit," said Dobey under his breath.

Dylan Mahoney sat in a chair tipping it back as far as it would go without toppling. Grabbing some sucker in the middle of the night and beating him within an inch of his life was exciting. Having to babysit a cop for three days was downright boring. He hoped Perelli hadn't lost his nerve on this one. His brother, Tim, rather admired this Starsky character. He was a tough bastard and managed to make a smart remark whenever either one of the boys entered the room. Tim had no patience for lily-livered targets that begged for their lives. Guys with an attitude kept things lively.

Detective Perelli was feeling like a puppet on a string. He sat opposite the three men from New Orleans in a seedy little Italian restaurant that Russo had suggested. Half the patrons looked like underworld heavy-hitters, so at least the meeting did not seem out of place. Over a meal of pasta and red wine, Nick spelled out the details of Dr. Cooper's plan to collect Diana Harmon's inheritance. He informed the three that Detective Starsky had been kidnapped as bait to lure his partner, Hutchinson, the object of Diana's obsession. Cooper had been instructed to allow his patient "to escape" from Cabrillo State Hospital the following day. Nick was hoping that Russo's two associates could transport Diana. He explained that the good doctor might be needed at a later time to make sure the patient stayed "focused."

Russo listened with an air of annoyance. "Why didn't you just grab this Hutchinson if he's the one Ms. Harmon is so crazy over?"

"You don't understand how these two cops work, Mr. Russo. I want to be able to keep an eye on both of them before anything goes down."

"Seems to me quite a lot has already gone down. I thought you wanted to keep the partner alive to see Hutchinson."

"I do. But I was short-handed. I had to bring in a couple of guys that not only inflict pain but enjoy the show."

Russo took a long drink of wine. "It sounds like a damn amateur hour. You're lucky I'm a man who tends to look towards the prospects of the future."

Here it comes, thought Nick.

"I'll have my associates help you out on this one," continued Russo. "In return, I'd like you to allow me room to operate in your fair city."

And there it was. Nick wanted to protest that he did not wield that kind of power, but he knew he was in too deep to start backing out.

"You can even call Joe here Streeter. It'll be like nothing ever happened to the punk."

"Mr. Russo, I told you that was unavoidable."

"I know. Damned shame he was my sister's kid."

Nick nearly choked on his wine. "My God, I didn't know Streeter was your nephew!"

"Family obligations. They're like a rope around the neck. Why else do you think I had that little swamp rat hanging around?"

Nick was completely speechless.

"Just think how ruthless I can be to people who aren't kin."

Starsky wondered when the two thugs that were guarding him would let him in on the reason for his capture. If they had wanted him dead he would be already. But they were sure making his stay as miserable as possible. Tim was clearly in charge, but he was not a talker. As the younger of the two, Dylan followed his brother's lead. He was just as mean, but he looked for direction before taking any action. Starsky figured that if he were going to get any information it would probably be from Dylan.

It was during the cop's second day of captivity that Dylan came into the room alone to feed him some soup. He removed the restraints on Starsky's ankles, and was about to remove the restraints on his wrists, but figured it wasn't a good idea. He cursed that he'd been reduced to spoon-feeding a pig. Starsky bit back a smooth reply and accepted the spoonfuls of soup in silence. After a few minutes he ventured some conversation.

"When are you and your brother going to fill me in on this little plan of yours?"

"Shut the hell up!"

"It just seems that he's making all the decisions here. Don't you get a say?"

Dylan glared at Starsky and threw the bowl of soup across the room. The detective realized he had miscalculated on this maneuver, but it was too late to rectify the situation. What followed was a vicious beating. Starsky tried to roll out of the way of Dylan's punches, but the man soon had him pinned and began to slug him with fury. Tim was suddenly at the door. He grabbed his brother and tore him away from the detective.

"What the hell is going on here?" he demanded.

"He was giving me grief," said Dylan simply.

"Jesus, Dylan. I don't mind you getting your kicks, but you can't kill the dude. Perelli was damned clear about that."

Starsky was vaguely aware of the brothers arguing, but he could not seem to put the words together. Tim walked over to the detective and eyed his limp body worriedly.

"He'll be okay," said Dylan, more concerned with his brother's wrath than the officer's health.

"He'd better be. We don't need a corpse on our hands."

Starsky heard the door slam. He fought to sit up and managed to crawl to the wall and lean against it. Then he passed out cold.

At the appointed time, Russo's two associates arrived at the hospital. Dr. Cooper had been informed of their coming and though cooperative he was clearly nervous about the whole situation. He took some comfort in the

fact that Diana had made such striking progress, if one could call it that. Dr. Cooper couldn't help but take a fair amount of pride in the fact that he had been able to orchestrate such a transformation. The raw materials were there, naturally. Diana Harmon had suffered a series of traumas in her childhood and certainly had enough repressed anger to spare, but he believed it was his skillful counsel (and masterful blend of chemistry) that had made it possible to suppress the young woman's budding guilt and return her to a state of unbridled, vengeful rage.

Dr. Cooper brought the two men to Diana's room and gently woke her up. "Diana, the gentlemen that I told you about are here. They want to help you right the wrongs of the past."

Diana was only too eager to follow the men to a waiting van that was parked behind the hospital. Dr. Cooper even started to relax, believing for the first time that his plan might actually work. His calm was shattered by the men's insistence that he also get in the van.

"You don't understand. I have to stay here and report Ms. Harmon's disappearance," he whispered to them.

"There's been a slight change of plans. It has been determined that your expertise will be required immediately."

"But Perelli told me specifically that I was to call in a missing person's report to Detective Quintero."

"This operation is in bigger hands now," said one of the men. "I'm sure the doctor is a quick study. If all goes well, you'll be back in the morning to make that call."

Hutch had been cruising the streets all day and half the night in the Torino hoping for some answers and growing increasingly agitated. If anyone knew anything, they sure weren't talking. He stopped by The Pits one last time, but Huggy had heard nothing. "Listen, Hutch, something'll give. That partner of yours is too damn stubborn to give up."

"Who said anything about giving up?" snapped Hutch.

"Man, I love Starsky too, but you gotta calm down."

"I didn't mean to jump on you, Hug. But I'm running out of options." He slammed his fist down on the bar.

"I hear you, man. Just take it easy. You can't help Starsky if you're ready to explode."

"I know," said Hutch rubbing his eyes. "I'm heading home. You call me the minute you hear anything."

"You got it, Hutch."

Hutch took the stairs at Venice Place two at a time, hearing the phone ringing inside of his apartment. "Talk to me," he said into the receiver.

A woman's voice came over the line. "Well, that's a fine way to answer the phone."

"Lady, what do you want?"

"I can't say this is how I imagined the conversation would be, Hutch."

"Who is this?"

There was a long silence. "Ken, this is Diana. Diana Harmon."

Hutch took a long breath. The images of their last encounter played through his mind. Once she had been arrested he had tried to put the woman out of his memory. He had purposely not followed her case after giving his statement at Headquarters. Was she out of prison, he wondered. Had she received counseling? Diana's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Hey Hutch," she cooed into the phone. "I'd really like to see you again. I know that we got off to a bad start, but I've had some time to think about the mistakes we made. I'm sure we've both grown up a lot in our time apart."

"Diana, what is this all about?" Hutch said, with an unmistakable sharpness in his voice.

"Hutch, I just want to see you again."

"I don't have time to play games with you, Diana."

Diana's voice turned icy. "Don't take that tone with me, Hutch. You are going to be truly sorry if you keep taking that tone with me."

Hutch's head snapped up as a new idea suddenly dawned on him. "Diana, what are you talking about?" There was fear in his voice and he knew it.

"I'm talking about that meddlesome partner of yours. Seems I had to get to him to get your attention. The two of you -- both of you always laughing at me like I was the butt of some great big joke!"

"Diana, listen to me," Hutch said, softening his voice. "Let's talk."

"Oh, so now you want to talk. I loved you, Hutch. I would have given my life for you. But you just wouldn't let me in. I loved you, you bastard," she sobbed.

"Please, Diana, let me talk to Starsky."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? The two of you would have a fine old time laughing at me. But that's not the way it's going to be this time. I'm in control here and *I'm* the one making the rules! There's a driver waiting downstairs. You've got one minute to get in that car or he's leaving without you." The connection was severed.

Hutch had no time to think. When he got downstairs there was a dark blue Mustang with the passenger door open at the curb. He approached it slowly. There was a driver and two men in the back. "Get in," said one in the rear. Hutch did so and closed the door. The first thing he noticed was that Mickey was behind the wheel. "And I'll take da cannon I know you got," continued the man.

"All right," said Hutch. "I've got to take off my jacket first, so just be cool." He removed his jacket and then his holster with the magnum and handed it to the man as the car sped away from the curb. "You must be the one they call Streeter."

There was just the briefest of hesitations and a slight reaction from Mickey. "Mais, yeah. How did you guess?"

"I heard something about a Cajun running around these parts lately."

"Cajun, shit. You doan gotta be so formal. I'm a regular coonass from down the bayou, me."

"Diana must have promised you a lot of money to kidnap one cop and bring in anther. I don't know how she got out of prison, but I can guarantee you, you aren't going to get paid."

"Paid by dat crazy broad? Are you kidding? Dat one doan know whether she's comin' or goin'."

"And what a surprise it is to see you again, scum," Hutch said, turning to the driver.

Mickey said nothing, keeping his eyes on the road.

"Dat's enough chitchat."

"What is this all about?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Just sit back and enjoy da ride."

The drive ended at an abandoned warehouse. Hutch was led inside by the two heavily armed men. "I want to see my partner right now," he said.

"Sure. Only make it a brief reunion; we've got other business for you."

Hutch was taken to a room where he got his first glimpse of Tim and Dylan. He didn't recognize them, but they appeared to take their jobs as watchdogs very seriously. They shoved Hutch into another smaller room and the door was slammed behind him. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the near darkness, but then he spotted a form slumped against the wall. "Starsky!" he yelled and sprang forward to reach his partner. He pulled his friend from the wall and was unnerved by his condition. Starsky's body was covered with welts and bruises. The back of his t-shirt was covered with dried blood. With shaking hands he undid the restraints on his partner's wrists. Then Hutch gently reached around Starsky's back with one arm and pulled him close. He held his partner's chin with his other hand and gently shook it. Starsky moaned slightly but did not appear to be conscious.

"Starsky, can you hear me? It's me, Hutch." There was still no response. "Starsky, I'm right here. Open your eyes, babe."

Slowly Starsky began to rouse. At first he was completely disoriented. He attempted to pull away from Hutch and yelped at the pain. Hutch realized his partner thought he was again in the grips of the goons who had nabbed and beat him. He drew his partner back to him and peered worriedly into his face. "Relax, Starsky, it's me. It's Hutch." Finally, Starsky seemed to recognize his partner.

"God, Hutch. Am I happy to see you."

"Same here, pal."

Starsky began to shake uncontrollably as the chills returned.

"It's all right, buddy. Just take it easy." Hutch removed his jacket and drew it around his partner and then pulled him close again.

"I can't seem to stop shaking, Hutch."

"Don't worry. I'm here now. Everything's gonna be okay." Hutch wanted to rub his friend's arms and legs to warm them, but he knew with all the injuries that would only cause more pain. He could hardly bear to look at Starsky's bloody wrists. All he could do was rock his partner gently and hope that his own body heat would have some effect.

"Just where is here? And why are we here?"

"I'm not sure what this is all about, but it has something to do with Diana Harmon."

"What?"

"Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction. She's the one who invited me to this little party. The infamous Mr. Streeter was one of my escorts."

"Streeter?" said Starsky, trying to make sense of all the information. "What the hell does he have to do with all this?"

"Damned if I know. You'll never guess who was the chauffeur -- Mickey."

Starsky suddenly caught his breath as the throbbing pain returned to his chest. "Take it easy, Starsky," said Hutch pulling his partner closer. "I'm gonna get us out of this."

"I'd love to believe that, but now we're both stuck... I can't believe Mickey is mixed up in this."

"I hate to admit it, but I was beginning to have faith in the guy."

"I bet you're just saying that to make me feel better," said Starsky, attempting a grin.

"They used you to get to me. Now that they've got me, I can get to the bottom of all this."

"Yeah, but who's they? And what does Diana have to do with Streeter or the two goons that have been keeping me holed up here?" asked Starsky wincing.

"I don't know, but I have a feeling we're going to find out real soon."

"Hutch?"

"Yeah, buddy?"

"I don't know if this makes any sense, but I could have sworn I heard the two goons talking about Perelli."

"Nick Perelli?"

"Yeah, but I couldn't swear to it. Everything was pretty hazy at the time."

Hutch remembered that Perelli also owned a Mustang, but before he could think about the possible connection, Tim and Dylan entered the room, followed by the two men from the back of the car.

"Get up," ordered Tim.

"This man needs medical attention," said Hutch.

Tim and Dylan moved as one, grabbing Hutch by the shoulders and tearing him away from Starsky, who fell back on the concrete floor. Hutch released his fury on the two brothers and was doing an impressive job of subduing them both when the men from New Orleans joined the fray, drawing their guns on the blond detective.

"What is it you want from me?" yelled Hutch in desperation.

"Dat's what we come to get you for," said the man named Joe who had assumed Streeter's identity for reasons that were not quite clear to him.

"If you want me then why are you taking it out on my partner?" Hutch got no reply to his question but was forced out of the room by the four men. "Answer me, Goddammit!" He turned to catch another glimpse of Starsky before the door was again slammed shut. Hutch was taken to another part of the warehouse and tied to a chair. A second chair was put in front of him a few feet away. Tim and Dylan played guard while the other men left the room.

"I hear you're about to be reunited with a long lost love," said Tim grinning.

The two men from New Orleans made their way to a group of offices in the back of the warehouse. They entered a room where Russo and Perelli were seated. Joe turned to his boss and directed his remarks only to him.

"The one called Hutchinson is secured. How do you want to handle this?"

Russo began to answer but was quickly interrupted by the detective.

"Slow down a minute! The whole plan was to have cops arrive on the scene when the broad is threatening deadly violence so they have an excuse to blow her away."

"Perelli, I think you'd best leave the rest of this operation up to me."

"Cooper hasn't even had time to contact my partner to file a missing person's report. Then we've got to give Mickey a chance to act like he's making contact with me so I can use the information to bring some squads in here."

"Change of plans, Perelli."

"What the hell are you talking about? The plans are perfect the way they are. I'll be the first one on the scene to make sure everything goes down properly. There will be time for the Mahoney boys and your guys to clear out. I'll make sure of it."

Russo rose suddenly from his seat. "I kind of like this town. First impressions are very important. I'd like to establish my credibility with the powers that be."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that I've got a chance to take out two cops -- two detectives, no less. Nothing sets the tone like blowing away two of L.A.'s finest."

"Russo, you can't be serious! I've got you figured in for a healthy cut of Cooper's payoff. Everyone walks away clean. I won't be party to the killing of fellow detectives."

"You sure have a selective code of morality, Perelli. You're goddamn lucky to be alive after your handling of Streeter. Moron or not, he was still family."

"I'm not blowing away two cops."

"We'll let Diana do that, seeing as she's so eager. Only the big players in this town need to know what really went down."

Nick began to protest, but Russo shot a look at his associates who quickly took his meaning and drew their weapons on the detective. "Perelli, either you go along or I boost the cop death toll to three. Now what's it gonna be?"

Nick nodded his head slowly and then looked away.

Russo looked back to Joe. "What's the word from the good doctor?"

"Miss Diana is chomping at the bit. I tell you, she's one frightening little lady. Wouldn't want her on my bad side."

Russo addressed his two associates, but he was watching Nick as he did so. "Then I say no time like the present to bring the bitch out and let the chips fall where they may."

"Mr. Russo, there's one other matter," said Joe. "Tim and Dylan have specific plans for the one called Starsky. Seems like the two of them are into mind games, but I don't see the harm in it if both of these guys are going to wind up dead regardless."

"No indeed. You let them have their fun."

"Jesus Christ," Nick cried out.

"Boys, make sure Detective Perelli is detained here while we carry on. I don't want any unnecessary distractions."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Russo." answered both men in unison.

As Tim and Dylan caught sight of the three men from New Orleans approaching them, they moved behind the chair where Hutch was bound to make sure that he was unable to move. The men were accompanied by Diana Harmon. She appeared to be quite composed, except for an evil grin that seemed plastered on her face. When she first caught sight of Hutch, her face softened ever so slightly, but she quickly corrected herself and assumed a glib expression, taking a seat in the chair opposite Hutch. She claimed center stage of a performance which presumably was in her honor.

"My dear Hutch," she proclaimed. "Finally, we have a chance to talk face to face."

"Diana, what is this all about?" asked the exasperated blond.

"What is this all about, my sweet? I'll tell you. This is all about retribution. About making sure certain people get what is coming to them."

"Diana, you need help. It's not too late to turn this around."

"How long has it been, Hutch? Nearly two years. And *now* you're concerned about my welfare? Do you know where I've been for the past two years? DO YOU?"

"No, Diana."

"Well, of course you don't. That's because you used me and threw me away. And they hauled *me* away for being crazy! Do you have any idea what it's like to be in a mental institution, Hutch?"

"Diana, please..."

"All those doctors messing with my mind. Trying to confuse me..." For a moment Diana seemed lost in thought. Hutch seized the opportunity to speak.

"But you and I know the truth, Diana. You know we can work this out. I'm here. Talk to me."

Diana looked at him in earnest but seemed to physically shake herself out of the hold Hutch's words were beginning to take. "Oh yeah, you're willing to talk now. That's because of that damn meddling partner of yours. Where is Starsky anyway? I knew something was missing from this picture."

At the mention of Starsky's name, Hutch stiffened. "Diana, if you've got a problem with me, then let me handle it. This is not Starsky's battle and he's suffered enough."

"Oh, not half as much as he's gonna suffer, baby."

With that, Tim and Dylan left to retrieve Starsky from his holding cell. Hutch strained against the ropes in a vain attempt to get closer to Diana. "Diana, for God's sake. What is it that you want?"

Diana took a long time before answering. She had expected the three men behind her to interrupt at some point. She figured they were going to stop her from getting all the satisfaction she wanted. But they said not a word, and she imagined that she was calling all the shots. It gave Diana a heady feeling of power and she wanted to savor every moment.

"What I want is to see you suffer. I want you to feel what it's like to have everything you love taken away from you. That's what I want."

Nick flinched as he heard the door to the office opening. He braced himself, not knowing what to expect. A slightly inebriated Mickey entered. Nick sighed with momentary relief.

"There's some bad shit about to go down, Perelli."

"Where the hell did you come from?"

"I bet you thought your big contacts from New Orleans would have put me away by now, huh?" He paused to raise a beer to his lips with a slightly shaky hand and took a long gulp.

Nick just looked in astonishment. The man probably should be dead. He couldn't believe he was getting drunk in the middle of this whole mess or that Russo hadn't seen fit to dispose of him. God, who would miss one lousy snitch?

"But I've got an ace up my sleeve," Mickey continued. "I've got the world convinced I'll sell my services to the highest bidder. I'll tell you, it's kept me alive all these years."

"I don't believe you're getting liquored up! Do you have any idea what's about to happen to those two detectives out there? My God, you've been Starsky's snitch for years."

"My taste for booze makes me human. People trust a guy who's human."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Sure I heard what you said. You need my help. And I'm willing to help you. How about we start negotiating?"

Starsky was dragged out of the small room where he had been held for three days and thrown to the floor near Diana. He was no longer restrained in any way. The Mahoney brothers had determined he was far too weak to require it. Starsky hit the floor with a groan. He tried to sit up but was unable to manage it. He squinted against the bright lights.

Hutch was beside himself watching his partner in so much pain. "Take it easy, Starsk. It's gonna be okay I promise."

"Oh yeah. We're all together again. Everything's going to be fine and dandy." Diana looked around at the men from New Orleans. They remained silent. Diana was in her glory. "I got an idea." She winked at the Mahoney brothers as if to confirm some prearranged plan. "I'm going to ask you do a few things for me, Hutch. Things to prove that you are truly sorry for the way you treated me. And I'm going to make sure you have the proper incentive." With that she grinned evilly at Starsky who still lay on the floor, struggling to catch his breath.

"For the love of God, Diana. You have the power to stop this. You must stop this!"

"Stop? Honey, I'm just getting started. Now, let me see. Let's start simple. Hutch, darling, tell me how beautiful I am looking today."

"Diana, I'm not into playing games."

"Oh no?" She turned her head just slightly toward the brothers and nodded. At the sign, Tim kicked Starsky in the stomach.

"GOD, NO!" screamed Hutch.

Starsky began to writhe in pain, but he used all his strength to focus on his partner. "It's okay, Hutch," he croaked.

Diana was visibly shaken by the viciousness of the blow. Her reaction was not lost on Russo who whispered to Joe to fetch Dr. Cooper.

Diana looked around and took a deep breath as if to convince those around her of her composure. "Glad you liked it, sugar," she said looking at the gasping Starsky. "'Cause there's plenty more where that came from."

Part Four

After an intolerable few moments, Mickey decided that Nick's deal was the best currently on the table. He untied the detective and promised to contact Liv with a message before "losing himself in the woodwork," as he put it.

Nick ran to a payphone near the warehouse and called his partner.

"Where the heck have you been?"

Don't talk, Bobby, just listen. I don't have time to explain. Starsky and Hutchinson are being held by a couple of syndicate people from New Orleans and I don't think either one is going to be alive much longer."

"My God, Nick. How did you get mixed up in all of this?"

"Never mind that. I need you to send some squads down here immediately. Tell Dobey if you have to, just make it quick." He proceeded to give Bobby directions to the warehouse.

"Where are you going to be? Are you all right, Nick?"

But there was no response. Nick had already hung up the phone.

"Diana, you look beautiful today. You honestly do."

"You said that with a hell of a lot of conviction, Hutch," Diana said sarcastically. She nodded to the brothers again and this time Tim backed off so that Dylan could have his turn. He got down on his knees and punched Starsky in the face. Starsky saw the blow coming and tried to protect himself, but he could not bring up his hands fast enough.

"DAMN YOU, STOP!!! YOU'RE GOING TO KILL HIM!" Hutch was again straining at the ropes. He was on the verge of tears.

Diana watched Hutch and the look of vengeance left her face. Unconsciously she reached out her hand to touch his arm. This action was interrupted by Dr. Cooper who now stood beside her and gently pulled her arm back.

"Diana, don't be fooled by this man. He's a great conniver. Don't forget all the pain he has caused you. He has to pay for that now."

"That's right, Hutch," said Diana, her voice shaking. "You can stop your friend's pain anytime you want to by doing right by me. It's your fault he's suffering. It's your fault I'm suffering."

Starsky struggled to remain conscious. He was worried about the extent of his injuries, but he was also becoming increasingly concerned with the anguished look on Hutch's face. These people seemed to know just how to get to his partner. He knew Hutch already took on more than his fair share of guilt for everything. He feared this would send his friend over the edge. He managed to raise himself on an elbow. "Don't listen to her, Hutch. You know none of this is your fault." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"You don't care about anyone but yourself, do you, Hutch? You'd let Starsky die just to punish me, wouldn't you?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" moaned Hutch.

"It's so simple. All you have to do is tell me you love me like you mean it. I know you love me, Hutch. Why won't you say it?"

"I'll tell you anything you want to hear, Diana. Just please leave my partner alone."

"That's not good enough!"

"Diana, I know you are hurting. I want to help you. But you've got to let me help you. Don't push me away. Don't punish Starsky."

Diana sensed an earnestness in the words that moved her. She searched Hutch's face and then looked over to Starsky who was struggling to remain upright and winced at the sight of his battered body.

"Please, Diana..."

"Oh, Hutch, this is not what I wanted..."

Russo came forward and grabbed Dr. Cooper by the arm. "Do something!"

"Diana, remember what this man did to you. What both of these men did to you!"

"No... You - you're trying to confuse me again!"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" yelled Russo with exasperation. He took Hutch's magnum from under his jacket and handed it to Diana. Dr. Cooper tried to grab it, but Russo pushed him out of the way.

"Not yet. Let me work with her. She's too unstable!"

"Any more time under your guidance and everybody's gonna start making up and shaking hands. This needs to end now." He turned to Diana. "Sweetheart, it's time to blow the bastards away. Take care of the loser who dumped you and then put the other one out of his misery."

Diana turned the gun over several times in her hands. She regarded it with a mixture of fascination and revulsion.

"Diana, please. Don't do this. Let me help you."

"SHUT UP!" she yelled at Hutch. "Everybody stop talking and let me think. I've gotta think." She looked over at the Mahoney boys. Thinking that it was a signal to pummel Starsky, Tim delivered a few vicious blows. Starsky rolled on his side and coughed a few times; then he lay deathly still. Blood began to run from his mouth.

Tim and Dylan then turned their attention to Hutch who was all but bursting from his restraints. He was attempting to stand and they shoved him back down. "My God, Diana, stop this, please!" Hutch was completely overwhelmed by the situation. He feared that Starsky was dead and that he had been unable to prevent it.

Diana looked frightened and could not take her eyes off of Starsky. "I didn't say to hit him again!"

"Diana, it's them or you, babe. And any way you play this, they're going to wind up dead. SHOOT THE BASTARDS!" yelled Russo.

Diana took a moment to look at Russo's determined face. She turned again to look at Starsky who had not moved. Then she looked at Hutch, who was completely overcome with anguish for his partner. "Oh my God," she said very quietly. And before anyone could stop her she turned the gun on herself and fired.

"DIANA, NO!" screamed Hutch. But it was too late. Diana's body crumpled to the floor.

At that moment Detective Quintero burst into the room with what seemed to be an army of officers. "EVERYBODY DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND GET ON THE FLOOR! MOVE IT!"

The cops swarmed around the group. The men were quickly disarmed and arrested and hauled off to waiting squad cars. Paramedics were the next to arrive on the scene.

"My partner, you gotta help him!" yelled Hutch.

"Everything is under control, son." It was Dobey who was now undoing the ropes binding Hutch. As soon as he was free he bounded over to Starsky's side. He picked up a limp hand while giving the paramedics room to work.

"You're safe now. You hear me, buddy? Everything's going to be all right. You just hang on."

"Sir," said one of the paramedics. "You can follow us to the hospital, but we need room in the ambulance to work on your friend."

"I want to be with him!"

Dobey was at his side again, putting his arm around the detective. "Let them do their job, Hutch. You'll ride to the hospital with me."

Hutch let himself be led off. He saw Diana's body one more time as it was being covered up and began shaking. Dobey was afraid Hutch was thoroughly traumatized and he quickly deposited him in the passenger side of his car while trying to assure him that everything was under control. Hutch kept mumbling about internal injuries and handling the situation all wrong. The Captain just let him ramble as they made their way to the hospital.

When they arrived, Hutch burst into the admitting room. "I need information on my partner, Detective David Starsky!"

"Just a minute, sir. The doctors are working on him now. You must take a seat and be patient."

Hutch began to pace the floors with vehemence until Dobey forced him to sit down. Nearly an hour later the doctor came out to update the detective and the Captain on Starsky's condition. As soon as Hutch saw him approaching, he jumped to his feet.

"How is he, Doctor?"

"Well, his body has taken a terrible beating, but he will heal. He is severely dehydrated and has a couple of cracked ribs but nothing life threatening. Luckily the blood from his mouth was due to a nasty cut and not as a result of serious internal injuries."

"Thank God," whispered Hutch.

"We would like to keep him for a few days. He's completely exhausted and I'm sure there aren't many places that don't ache. I've giving him a strong sedative so he can get some rest. He'll be asleep for the next twelve hours at least. You should go home and get some shut-eye yourself."

"I want to be here in case he wakes up and needs me."

"Hutch, you heard the man," said Captain Dobey. "Pushing yourself to the point of exhaustion isn't going to help your partner."

"I'm staying," said Hutch firmly.

Captain Dobey just sighed. He knew better than to argue with the detective on this one.

"Very well," said the doctor. "Follow me."

Hutch pulled up a chair and guarded his partner through the night. He took comfort from watching Starsky's chest rise and fall slowly. Hutch shuddered to think what a few more punches and kicks would have done. He closed his eyes and offered up a silent prayer for his partner's return.

Hutch dozed off in the early hours but was instantly awake when he heard Starsky jump up and then gasp. Hutch was immediately at his side. His partner was wide-eyed, but whether from fear or pain was hard to determine. Hutch put his arm around Starsky and gently drew him close.

"It's okay, buddy. You're in the hospital. You're going to be fine."

Starsky relaxed in his partner's arms. "Damn, I feel like I've been run over by a mack truck," he mumbled, feeling the effects of the sedative returning.

"I know, Starsk. I'm sorry," Hutch said, tears welling in his eyes.

Starsky looked at his partner confusedly. "It ain't your fault, Hutch." He tried to continue but was suddenly so overcome with exhaustion he couldn't seem to form the words. He did manage to muster a weak smile at his partner who looked so worried.

Hutch held Starsky for a few minutes until he was again asleep and then laid him back down on the pillow. Hutch then resumed a vigilant watch over his friend.

About an hour after the arrests were made, Nick Perelli turned himself in. With Cooper and Russo in custody, he knew it was only a matter of time before they'd have enough to put him away with no chance of parole. He just didn't have the energy or the desire to run. He had sent Mickey to tell Liv that the gig was up and to deliver a key to her for a safety deposit box. Liv was to take the money stored there and leave town. Nick figured that with a dirty cop and syndicate men to deal with, the Department probably would be in no hurry to track down a prostitute. Liv accepted the key wordlessly. Once Mickey left, she allowed herself to weep.

Detective Perelli was charged with the murder of Hoyt Broussard, but it was a few more weeks before "Streeter's" body was recovered. Simonetti and Dryden from Internal Affairs were brought in to determine the extent of Perelli's blackmailing and protection racket activities. It wasn't long before Mr. Martinez and Carlos were among the witnesses giving statements. The men from IA also gave Detective Quintero the third degree but were convinced that he knew nothing of his partner's illicit activities. Simonetti reluctantly agreed to give Hutch a few days' reprieve before questioning him to give him time to spend with Starsky in the hospital. But he was clearly anxious to conduct that part of the investigation.

The week following the release of Starsky from the hospital was a blur for Hutch. He divided his time between checking on Starsky at his apartment and giving statements at the precinct. Starsky tried to convince him that he was fine and well on the mend, but Hutch ignored his protests and insisted on fixing his meals, fielding all his calls, and generally just hovering about like a mother hen. Starsky reasoned Hutch needed to do this to make his peace with the situation, so he let him.

One night when Hutch decided to spend the night on the couch, Starsky woke up in the early morning hours in a cold sweat. In his dreams he had imagined himself back at the warehouse in the hands of a grinning Tim and Dylan Mahoney. After taking a few deep breaths and convincing himself that it was only a nightmare, Starsky wandered out to the livingroom. Hutch appeared to be sleeping peacefully, but he looked awfully drawn. Starsky figured his partner hadn't slept much since the whole ordeal with Diana so he decided to go back to bed and leave Hutch undisturbed. As he turned to go, Hutch sat up.

"What is it, partner?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep. I just got up... to get a drink of water."

"Yeah, I believe that. You look like you've seen a ghost."

Starsky sighed. "Just a bad dream."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Don't worry about it, Hutch, it's over."

"What are you trying to protect me from, Starsky?" Hutch said with his voice rising.

"I think you've got that a little backwards, buddy. It's like you're watching me every minute. I'm not gonna break, ya know."

"Starsky, if you are reliving that nightmare at the warehouse, I want to know about it! Don't shut me out."

"I'm not shutting you out, Hutch, so relax. I just get the feeling you're somehow blaming yourself for this. It's not your fault. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, pal. I know that."

Starsky wasn't convinced that Hutch really had let himself off the hook, but he decided to let it go for now.

"Since we're both up, how 'bout you put a pot of coffee on."

"You got it, partner," said Hutch, heading for the kitchen. "Oh, and did I tell you? I actually got my car back from Merle's in better condition than when I left it."

"That wouldn't take much of an effort."

Hutch laughed, but Starsky knew the main issue had been left unresolved. He wondered what it would take for Hutch to let this one go.

After another week of recuperating at home, Starsky was cleared for duty. The men from Internal Affairs lost no time calling Hutch in once they heard that Starsky was back. He was summoned several times and asked the same litany of questions. On this morning the detective was called yet again. When Hutch entered the interrogation room, Simonetti and Dryden were waiting for him. He took a seat and waited for the barrage of questions. Simonetti was quick to get started.

"Okay, Detective Hutchinson," he began, flipping on a hand held tape recorder, "we all know why we're here, so let's get started. For the record, please state your name and rank and the nature of your relationship to the deceased, Miss Diana Harmon."

Hutch would normally have made a flip remark to put the IA man in his place before answering, but he did not this time. "My name is Kenneth Hutchinson, Detective Sergeant, First Class. Two years ago, I had a brief relationship with Miss Diana Harmon."

Simonetti looked at Hutch with suspicion. He was being a little too cooperative. "Could you please be more specific with regard to that relationship?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Did you have intimate relations with Miss Harmon?"

"Yes."

"Did Miss Harmon then have reason to believe that a serious commitment existed between the two of you?"

Hutch looked over to Dryden who was looking out the window. He turned back to Simonetti but remained silent.

"Detective Hutchinson, shall I repeat the question for you?"

"No, I heard you." Hutch's voice was empty of impatience or sarcasm. He sighed deeply and continued. "I know what you are getting at. We did sleep together. I suppose on the basis of that fact, Diana may have taken the relationship more seriously than I did."

"She wanted more than you did. What did you do about it?"

"I told her we needed to slow down."

"I seem to recall an engraved watch being thrown across the precinct and a very irate lady screaming at you in front of half the Department. How long did you let her believe there was a serious relationship going on?"

"There was never a serious relationship going on," Hutch raised his voice slightly but almost immediately became quiet again. "I knew she was getting overly possessive, but I had no idea..." His voice trailed off.

Dryden spoke for the first time. "I think that's all we're going to need for now."

Simonetti glared at him. "No, I believe there are a few more issues to put to rest."

Dryden stood up, ignoring his partner, and approached Hutch. "Hutchinson, that's all we need for now. You understand we may have reason to speak to you again."

Hutch looked up at him and detected a note of sympathy on the IA agent's face. "Yeah, okay." He rose to leave.

"Dobey will keep us informed of your movements so that we can talk again," Simonetti added as a parting remark.

As soon as Hutch had left the room, Simonetti turned on his partner. "What the hell was that all about? You trying to make me look like an ass?"

"Simonetti, you were coming down awfully hard on the man. I happen to think he's been through enough."

"Oh, is that right? Am I the only one concerned about the fact that Detective Hutchinson's lady friends tend to wind up dead with his gun as the murder weapon?"

"He was fully cleared in his ex-wife's death. You know that."

"Yeah, I remember how broken up the man seemed to be about that too."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. But I do know that today Hutchinson was at a loss for his customary comebacks. He didn't even seem interested in defending himself. So I can't think why you'd want to defend him. If I recall correctly he and that smart-aleck partner of his had you handcuffed to a table."

"And I seem to remember that 'smart-aleck' giving you a nasty left hook." Dryden laughed openly as he said it.

"You have a pretty warped sense of humor."

"Maybe I just interpret things a little differently. The way I see it, those two have an awful lot of faith in each other. I think that should count for something."

"It wouldn't be the first time partners covered each other's dirty tracks."

Dryden sighed and let the comment go unanswered. He admired Simonetti's tenacity when it came to getting to the bottom of a case. And the man had put away a fair number of dirty cops. But he was troubled by his partner's thrill of the hunt. He almost seemed disappointed when a cop was found innocent. "I'm gonna get some coffee," he said finally, heading for the door.

"I don't suppose you'd consider getting one for me?"

"Sure," Dryden answered.

As Dryden passed the squad room on the way to the cafeteria, he nearly bumped into Hutch who had grabbed his jacket and was making a hasty bee-line for the parking lot. Hutch looked at him but said nothing and continued on his way. Starsky was right behind him.

"Hutch!" he called after the blond. Hutch ignored his partner and headed out the door. Starsky was about to run after him when Dryden grabbed him by the arm. "I think we should talk."

"Haven't you boys from IA done enough?" barked Starsky.

"Detective Starsky, I know we've had our differences in the past. But I really do think you want to hear what I have to say."

Starsky looked towards the door through which Hutch had hurried. He'd probably already hesitated too long to catch his partner. He looked back at Dryden. "Okay, let's talk."

Dryden led Starsky into an empty office. "I think your partner's in trouble."

"No shit. And why do you suppose that is? You and Simonetti keep grilling him over the same nonsense. How is that supposed to make him feel?"

"I'm not going to give you the speech about procedure, but you know that's the reason. That's not what concerns me. I'd expect Detective Hutchinson to react angrily, like you're doing now. He doesn't seem angry. He doesn't register any emotions at all. It's almost like he's given up."

"Whaddaya mean by that? You think he's guilty of something?"

"Hey, Simonetti's a hard-ass; we all know that. That's why he's so good. Do I think he's going to find anything on Hutch? I don't think even Simonetti believes that."

Starsky looked Dryden straight in the eye. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Look, he's your partner. And I'm not trying to overstep my bounds here. But I think Hutch is on the edge."

Dryden's words caught Starsky up short. He knew Hutch was shaken by what had happened to Diana and to him, but to hear it from someone else filled him with a sense of dread. The agent's words interrupted his thoughts. "I promised my partner a cup of coffee. I'll see you later." Starsky remained in the office a few moments longer, wondering what to do next.

After Hutch reached the parking lot, he immediately considered walking back in. After all, running out of the station wasn't going to prove anything. He checked his watch and realized that there was less than an hour left on his shift. The hell with it; Starsky would cover for him for forty-five minutes. He was getting out of there.

Hutch soon found himself a few blocks from The Pits. Figuring that a couple of beers would help him unwind, he swung the LTD into the parking lot and went in the back. Hutch took a seat at the end of the bar. He saw Huggy across the room, entertaining a table of customers. He was too far out of earshot to hear the conversation, but he could tell even at that distance that Huggy was charming the group. The blond was soon approached by a waitress he didn't recognize. He ordered a beer and as an afterthought a shot of whiskey. He tried to catch Huggy's attention, but the man was fully engaged in his act and Hutch decided to forgo a conversation. He chased his beer with the shot and was amazed at how good it felt. The blond congratulated himself on knowing the cure for his mood. His partner was forever telling him to mellow out and relax. Maybe it was just a question of taking a break from non-stop worry. Hutch glanced at his watch and realized a little guiltily that it was not yet five in the evening. It *was* a little early to be drinking whisky. He glanced over to the table in the corner and saw Huggy leave to handle some minor catastrophe in the kitchen. He turned back to the bar and summoned the waitress. He had planned to order another beer, but they were just slowing him down. The blond switched to whisky and ordered them in quick succession. The waitress seemed a bit hesitant after he finished his fourth one, but she was new and didn't want to upset a customer who might wind up being a good tipper, so she kept them coming.

Hutch thought about the interview with Simonetti and Dryden. He realized that they had let him off the hook far too easily. What could that mean? Had he said something to incriminate himself without realizing it? Were they questioning Starsky right now? Had he left his partner to explain his hasty departure? God, why was he always putting Starsky in compromising situations? Hutch's relaxed state was evaporating. Looking down at his watch, the detective realized an hour had passed and that he had lost count of his drinks. He looked up to spot the waitress again. It took a moment for him to focus his gaze. Once he did, he waved her over and pointed to the empty glass.

"Okay," she said nervously, "but this is your last one. And you might want to call yourself a taxi." She poured the drink and went to move on to another customer, but Hutch grabbed her arm.

"Leave the bottle."

"Let go of my arm."

Hutch realized he was being out of line. He let go immediately. "Hey, I'm sorry. Jus' leave the bottle," he slurred. "Don't worry, I'll pay for it."

"I can't do that, sir," the waitress said loudly and looked over her shoulder.

"Hey, I said I'm gonna pay for it." Hutch reached for the bottle again but found that Huggy was standing where the waitress had been a moment ago.

"Hutch, how long have you been here? And where's your better half?"

"Hug, I don't wan' no trouble. Jus' want the bottle. I'm payin'."

"Hutch, your money ain't no good here any more tonight. But I will give you some black coffee on the house." He served up the coffee and gave the waitress Starsky's home phone number. Huggy managed to keep the blond sufficiently distracted until his partner arrived.

When Starsky walked into The Pits, he exchanged glances with it very relieved proprietor and slapped his partner on the back.

"Starsssk, whaja doin' here?"

"I'm your ride, Blondie. Hey, Hug, can I settle up with you?"

Huggy just waved him off. "Get him home safely; that's all I ask."

"Hey, I can pay my own tab, ya know."

"Of course you can. Now shut up and give me your arm." Starsky proceeded to half carry his partner out the door. It had started to rain and it was with some difficulty that Starsky negotiated his partner around the major puddles and got him situated in the passenger seat of the Torino. The cold water seemed to sober Hutch up a little and he fell silent on the way home. Starsky kept glancing over at him worriedly.

"You want to crash at my place tonight?" he ventured.

"No, just take me home."

When they arrived at Venice Place, Starsky ignored Hutch's protests and helped him up the flight of steps to his apartment. When they got to the top of the stairs, Hutch reached for his key and told Starsky to go home.

"Listen, let me come in and make some coffee for you before I go."

"Starsky, I've already made a big enough fool of myself. I think I can handle it from here."

"Hutch, let me come in --"

"Starsky, I said no!" Hutch immediately regretted the remark, but he didn't take it back. "Look, I'm fine, okay? Really." He gave Starsky what he hoped was a good-natured punch on the arm. "I just want to take a shower and sleep this off."

Starsky nodded. "Okay," he said. He watched as Hutch let himself in and shut the door. Starsky stood outside the door for a few moments before deciding to return home. He knew he couldn't make Hutch talk before he was ready, but Dryden's comments were weighing heavily upon him. Why did his partner insist on carrying the burden alone?

Over the next few weeks, Starsky became increasingly concerned about his partner's behavior. He didn't appear to be getting any sleep and some days he looked hung over. He seemed to be in a constant state of agitation and snapped at everyone.

While cruising the streets in the Torino one day, Starsky took a close look at his partner. His eyes were ringed with black circles and it was clear he had lost a good deal of weight. Starsky's apprehension was increasing. He felt he needed to confront Hutch, but he hesitated because there seemed to be some fragile balance to be maintained. Once he bridged the subject, he felt there would be no turning back. Starsky felt he had to be sure. But sure of what? If he confronted Hutch about his fears, about his guilt, how could he be sure he'd have the right answers?

The radio interrupted the Starsky's thoughts. "Zebra Three, there's a two-eleven in progress at 125 Saunders Street."

Hutch grabbed the radio. "Zebra Three is responding." He replaced the equipment and glanced at his partner whose eyes had not left the road. They traveled the rest of the way in silence.

When they arrived on the scene, Starsky cut the engine and coasted to a stop a few houses down the from the reported address. He took several seconds to survey the scene. The house in question was an unassuming ranch

that appeared to have no activity. Starsky glanced at Hutch to verify their points of entry. He noticed that Hutch was shaking. "Hutch..." he began worriedly, but his partner cut him off.

"Starsk, I'll take the back." He looked over to the brunet for confirmation. Starsky was looking at him questioningly.

"Look, Starsky, I'll take the back. Are you okay with that?" There was a rising tone of annoyance in his voice.

"Hutch, I think we should call for back-up. I've got an uneasy feeling about this one."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know, Hutch, it's just..."

"Dammit, Starsky, we're wasting time!" Hutch got out of the car and ran towards the back of the house. Starsky ran to the front. He pressed himself against the wall to the left of the door and after mentally counting to three, he burst in.

"Police! Freeze!" he yelled at two men who were trying to lift up a television set. One of the men surrendered immediately, dropping the set. The other, taking the full weight of the TV, threw it with all his might at Starsky and tried to run past him towards the front door.

Hutch saw what was happening as he entered from the back. He put the first man in handcuffs as Starsky, after returning his weapon to his holster, grabbed the second suspect in his ill-timed escape attempt. Not easily admitting defeat, the second man spun around and caught Starsky on the jaw with a right hook. When Hutch saw it, he became enraged. Starsky reeled from the blow but was up again, ready to grab the assailant. Hutch beat him to it, however, and once he caught up with the man, he began to beat him without mercy.

"HUTCH!" screamed his partner. "For God's sake, don't kill him!"

But Hutch was beyond hearing. He seemed possessed by hatred and fear as he continued to pummel the man and scream at him.

"You don't mess with a man's partner, turkey! YOU GOT THAT!"

Starsky finally managed to pull Hutch off of the man. "Hutch, take it easy! What's gotten into you?"

Hutch simply shook himself free of Starsky's hold. "I just don't like taking garbage from scum, that's all."

Once the paperwork for the incident had been cleared back at the precinct, Starsky grabbed Hutch and hauled him into the locker room.

"What's gong on with you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the way you've been acting lately. About flying off the handle at people with no provocation. I'm talking about the way you show up in the morning, looking like you spent the night in some gin joint! I don't know how much longer I can cover for you, buddy. Dobey isn't blind, you know!"

"So you've been *covering* for me, have you, buddy? Well, let me tell you something. I don't need your protection or your advice. And if you don't like the way I do my job, you can put in a request for another partner!"

With that, Hutch stormed out of the locker room, slamming the door behind him.

It was after eleven that night when Hutch rooted under the kitchen sink and located the fifth of Jack Daniels. He slid it into the pocket of his sweat jacket and headed for the door. Jogging easily with one hand at his side to keep the bottle safe, he was soon at the high school track. The stadium lights had been switched off for the night, but there was a sizable moon to illuminate the field. Hutch placed the bottle carefully under a set of bleachers and began running at a slow pace around the track. He tried desperately to empty his mind of all thoughts and simply run. Soon his footfalls fell into a steady rhythm and the blond concentrated only on keeping his legs and arms moving. There was a sharp breeze in the air, but he didn't seem to be conscious of it. The detective longed for the monotony of the track to consume him.

Hutch did not know how much time had passed, but he slowly became aware that a light rain was falling. As he continued to run the drizzle steadily grew into a heavy rain. It wasn't much later that Hutch became sensitive to a roaring in his ears from the downpour. It was strangely comforting and he took no action to escape the torrents. The ruts in the track filled with water and the track soon became a minefield of soggy patches. Hutch continued to run. He increased his speed until he was sprinting, keeping his eyes straight ahead. As much as he tried to eradicate all images from his mind, he saw flashes of Diana before him with a gun in her hand, crumpling to the ground. He heard himself scream and remembered the sight of Starsky's battered body. Hutch pushed himself to run beyond the haunting images, but he could not outstrip them. Suddenly his foot twisted in one of the ruts and sent him sprawling to the ground. Hutch just lay on the track for a few moments, unable to move. He realized that apart from a few scrapes and bruises he was unhurt, but he just couldn't see the point of rising from where he lay panting.

"Dammit, Hutchinson!" he cried out in pain and frustration. "Get your sorry ass up!"

Hutch stumbled to his feet and headed towards the bleachers. He felt ashamed at himself for acting this way, but grief and exhaustion were getting the best of him and all he hungered for was numbness. Hutch nearly tripped again as he reached the bleachers. The rain was coming down in sheets and it was obscuring most of his vision. He got down on his hands and knees and after a few minutes of foraging, found the bottle of liquor and pulled it towards him. Hutch sat down on one of the slick risers and unscrewed the cap. As he brought the bottle to his lips he paused and thought about Starsky. He knew what he was doing was selfish. Starsky understood him better than he understood himself and must have known that something was seriously wrong. Hutch knew Starsky was holding back, hoping his partner would come to him when he was ready. It must have been eating him alive not to demand that Hutch share his hurt with him.

With this thought Hutch nearly put the bottle down, but his mind raced back to Diana and his own anguished scream and without thinking further he opened the bottle and drank in greedy gulps.

At about 2 A.M. Starsky reached for the phone and dialed his partner's number. Judging from his behavior over the past few weeks, Starsky felt it unlikely that he would be waking Hutch. He let the phone ring six times before returning the handset to its cradle. He lay back in bed thinking that perhaps he was overacting. A minute later he threw some clothes on and grabbed his keys.

Starsky dashed to his car in the rain, trying his best not to get too wet. He attempted to rev up the Torino without disturbing his neighbors too much. The detective backed out of the driveway slowly, but a sense of urgency seized him as he pulled onto the main street. He decided that it was time to confront Hutch. He had never understood why it was so difficult for his best friend to come to him when he was in trouble. It somehow made Starsky feel whole to know that Hutch entrusted his life to him. But it seemed as though Hutch only

readily accepted his partner's aid when it was a matter of physical danger. Hutch always resisted help when it came to his personal demons.

Starsky coasted to a stop in front of Venice Place, grateful to have found parking so close. Hutch's wreck of a car was across the street. Starsky pulled the back of his jacket over his head to avoid getting drenched and ran to the front of the building; he jumped the stairs two at a time and reached above the door frame of Hutch's apartment for the key. He let himself in and quickly surmised that no one was there. Starsky fell into a chair and tried to think how far Hutch could get without wheels. He attempted to convince himself that his partner was not hurting as much as he believed and maybe he was just out on a date. But facing an early shift the next day and it being the middle of the week made that idea unlikely. Starsky started pacing around the apartment, not knowing where to start looking. He absentmindedly opened the closet door in the livingroom and saw Hutch's gun swinging in its holster. A shudder went through Starsky. Even if he were headed down to the local grocery store for a quart of milk, Hutch carried a weapon. Starsky reached for the phone and dialed Captain Dobeys home phone number.

Hutch realized that he had built up quite a tolerance for old Jack's brew. He wasn't reaching oblivion as quickly as he would have liked. He started laughing quietly as if this were some great joke being played on him. Hutch heard the low rumbling of thunder and it seemed to be dawning on him for the first time that he was soaking wet. He shivered a bit and was aware of a chill but it somehow seemed removed from his own body. As his mind started to drift, he thought of Gillian and double dating with Starsky. There was something threatening about this memory, but he couldn't quite connect with why it was ominous. He remembered the four of them laughing over a story he'd told at the bowling alley. Hutch strained to recall what the story had been. That was the day he'd known for sure he'd found something truly special. At least that's how he remembered it. Maybe it was really the day it had all started to unravel. At what point had he stopped paying close enough attention to what was right in front of him? Somewhere along the way he'd gotten careless. And it had all fallen apart. Absorbed by his own happiness, he didn't listen to what Gillian tried to tell him. He hadn't heard her. He hadn't protected her. Just like he hadn't protected Starsky. In fact he had damned near gotten his own partner killed. When *had* he become so careless? He stood up and tried to walk towards an image that seemed just beyond his grasp. It was as if a tangible presence were beckoning to him and he moved towards it. "Gillian..." Unsteady on his feet, Hutch pitched and fell. The bottle smashed in his hand and blood started spurting from his forearm. Hutch was stunned for a moment but had enough sense to realize that he had to stop the bleeding. He started cursing himself for his clumsiness. Just when he was getting close to blissfully passing out, he had gone and squandered the rest of the liquor. Hutch took off his sweatshirt and wrapped it around his arm. Feeling like a fool, he willed himself to make the journey back to his apartment. It was only a couple of blocks, but it seemed to be taking forever in his alcohol-clouded state. Dimly aware that he must look like a common drunk, Hutch kept to the back streets and alleys so as not to get picked up for public intoxication. Somehow the picture of him being tossed into the back of a squad car for disturbing the peace suddenly struck Hutch as particularly funny and about a block from his apartment he slid to the ground wracked with fits of laughter. If felt so liberating to laugh and Hutch was nearly shrieking when it occurred to him that he better get a hold of himself before the cops really did haul him off. He bit down on his hand to get control. After a few minutes, the laughter subsided and was replaced with bitter sobs. The sweatshirt that he had tried to wrap around his arm had fallen and Hutch left it on the ground as he attempted to lift himself to his feet. Feeling completely defeated, Hutch struggled to cover the last block to get home.

After Dobeys had gotten over his initial tirade about being disturbed at an ungodly hour of the morning, Starsky was able to explain his concern about Hutch. He realized he had kept his fears about his partner to himself and he tried to fill Dobeys in on Hutch's behavior over the last few weeks. Dobeys decided that if Hutch did not report

in for work the next morning by 8 A.M., he would issue an APB. Starsky reluctantly agreed to the plan but decided that he was going to spend the intervening hours searching the streets himself.

Starsky put on his jacket and grabbed his keys. As he opened the door to the apartment, the door to the building was opening below. His partner stumbled in and braced himself against the wall.

"Hutch!" Starsky yelled.

Hutch looked up unsteadily. He remembered thinking it was odd that Starsky would be standing at the top of the stairs, but before he could pursue this thought he collapsed.

Starsky flew down the steps to the side of his unconscious partner. He grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him slightly, and then more forcefully, but there was no response. The blood from the cut on Hutch's arm was spreading profusely and Starsky ripped off his jacket and pulled off his t-shirt to bind the wound. Once it was secure, he grabbed his partner by the shoulders again.

"Hutch, can you hear me, buddy? What have you done to yourself?"

Hutch opened his eyes slightly. "Starsk?" he croaked.

"Yeah, it's me. Just take it easy."

"God, Starsky, I'm sorry. I just... it's my mind. I can't get it to turn off." Hutch tried to turn away. He felt his body wracking with sobs and he didn't want Starsky to see. He put his hand on the railing and raised himself to his feet. But as he tried to climb the first two steps, he swayed and would have fallen if Starsky had not caught him.

Starsky guided his partner into a sitting position on the second step and then pulled him into an embrace. "Hutch, quit pushing me away and just let it out, babe." Feeling secure in Starsky's arms, Hutch let himself go and cried. Starsky rocked him gently and stroked his hair. For a few minutes neither man said anything. When Hutch had quieted a bit, Starsky suggested they make the journey upstairs. He got Hutch to his feet and slowly and carefully half dragged, half hoisted him up the stairs. He deposited Hutch on the couch and went to the bathroom to get supplies for treating the gash on his partner's arm properly. When he returned, Hutch was leaning back on the couch with his eyes closed. He let Starsky dress the wound. He flinched violently at one point and Starsky caught his breath.

"Sorry, partner. I'm almost done. I really should take you to the hospital."

"No hospitals, please, Starsk," Hutch said quietly with his eyes still closed. Starsky went to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. He then returned to the couch and surveyed his partner's face worriedly. He wondered how many times Hutch had wound up in a similar state and had dragged himself to bed and to work the next morning after spending a night trying to escape from the memories that haunted him.

Hutch felt his partner's gaze on him and opened his eyes.

"How did this happen?" asked Starsky motioning to Hutch's arm.

"I slipped," answered Hutch, turning his face away.

"Jesus Christ, Hutch!" yelled Starsky.

Hutch jumped and turned around; Starsky's eyes were bright with tears. "It's the goddamn middle of the night and you are running around the neighborhood drunk as shit and bleeding like a stuck pig! What the hell happened?"

Hutch looked at him helplessly. He tried to answer but seemed at a loss for where to begin.

Starsky went to the kitchen to get the coffee and to collect himself. He returned with two steaming mugs and placed them on the table. "Look, Hutch, I didn't mean to yell at ya. But you've got me scared to death. What is going on?"

Hutch took a deep breath and looked at the floor. "I've been running at night. Trying to wear myself out so I could sleep." He paused for a minute and then looked up at Starsky. "Tonight I tripped and fell on the damn bottle."

"What is it you are trying to drown?"

"Diana... you. Getting people killed and nearly killed."

"Hutch, you are blaming yourself for situations totally out of your control. If it makes you feel any better --"

"But that's just it, Starsky," Hutch burst in, "I don't want to feel better about this."

"You just want to get blitzed every night?"

"No, it's just... I need a break sometimes."

"So you'll just feel like hell during the day and sabotage your liver at night, is that it?"

"Starsk, you don't understand."

"No, I don't understand. I don't get why you *want* to torture yourself. What purpose is that going to serve?"

"I can handle it."

"Is that right? You are beating suspects half to death when you aren't stumbling around in a fog. You call that handling it?" Starsky got up and went to the phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"I need to let Dobey know you're in once piece." Starsky placed the call, giving as few details as possible. When he returned he found Hutch staring into his mug of coffee.

"For Pete's sake, Hutch, this has got to stop. I'm not going to stand by while you drink yourself to death."

"I appreciate you trying to take me off the hook, Starsk, but I screwed up. You can't change that."

"Dammit, Hutch! When are you going to get it through your thick skull!"

"Diana didn't deserve what happened to her."

"I'm not saying she did. She had some lousy breaks."

"Lousy breaks? She was abused by the system. I put her into that system and I didn't even know where she was. I thought she was in jail and I was content to let her rot in there. Turns out they locked her up somewhere even worse."

"And Dr. Cooper's been brought to justice. I'm sorry Diana's dead, but she made that decision herself."

Hutch jumped up, spilling some of his coffee. "Hell, Starsky, she was being so manipulated and brainwashed she didn't have a chance to make a decision! I had an opportunity to reach her. I could have stopped her and I didn't. She tried to tell me."

"Hutch, you were tied to a chair and surrounded by a bunch of bad guys with guns."

"No, no. I'm not talking about that. I mean when we were together. There were so many signs. I should have gotten her help then."

"Is this some trip Simonetti's been laying on you? Jesus, Hutch. We do the best we can. We make the best decisions we can. You aren't psychic and you can't play God."

"It's what's right in front of me. I don't trust myself to make the right decisions anymore."

"Hutch, that's not --"

"And *you*, getting clobbered by those damn creeps and telling *me* not to worry." His voice cracked. "God, I thought after the last round of blows, you were dead."

"But Hutch, I'm not dead. I'm right here. I know what happened to Diana stinks, but there ain't nothing you could have done to prevent it! And until you believe that, you are going to be a liability to me and to yourself."

Hutch turned away feeling ashamed. Starsky promptly grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to sit back down on the couch; he sat opposite him on the coffee table keeping a firm grip. "But there is one thing you can control, Hutch. And that's your faith in this partnership. I need you, Hutch. I need to know you've forgiven yourself for whatever sins you think you've committed... Hutch, I need you back."

Starsky's words struck a chord in his partner. He knew he had been hurting Starsky even more with his behavior over the last few weeks. He had worried about questioning Starsky's choice of snitches. What did he think he had been communicating by shutting his own partner out? He had doubted himself a thousand times and yet this man had never wavered. Hutch realized he had to restore the faith in himself if only to do right by his partner. Starsky was the most important person in his life and if he were willing to put his trust in him, it was the least Hutch could do to honor that bond. For Starsky's sake and for his own. Right now Hutch was letting them both down. Starsky was right; it had to stop.

Hutch looked directly into his partner's eyes and smiled. "If you'll have me, I'm back, partner," he said quietly, but with firm conviction. Starsky grinned in return. It was not until that moment that he realized how relieved he could feel. He squeezed Hutch's arms one more time before releasing his hold.

Trying to lighten the mood Starsky ventured, "Now that you're back, how about getting some rest?"

"What time is it?"

"Don't worry about that. Dobby gave us both the day off."

"Oh God, what did you tell him?"

Starsky took Hutch's chin in his hand. "I told him we both deserved a break."

"Thanks, buddy."

During the weeks which followed Hutch continued to wrestle with his feelings of guilt, but he was learning to put events and his own responsibility for them into perspective. Starsky understood that his partner needed time alone to make his peace with the world. He was content to know that Hutch would pick up the phone when he needed reassurance on the journey.

One Friday after work, Hutch suggested that Starsky join him at the blues club he had frequented before Starsky's kidnapping. He told him he wanted to introduce him to Dakota so his partner could hear how one ought to sing a Billie Holiday song.

Starsky agreed, happy to see Hutch rediscovering his joy in music. When Hutch arrived at his partner's apartment to pick him up, he seemed in such good spirits Starsky decided to forgo the nasty insults that he usually reserved for the LTD. As Starsky climbed into the passenger seat, he noticed Hutch's guitar in the back.

"You planning on joining the lady on stage?" he asked in a dubious tone. "Have you even talked to the woman yet?"

"I sensed a chemistry between us. We both have a great love for the blues."

"Oh, brother. This oughtta be interesting."

When they arrived, Hutch stopped at the bar to send a club soda and a note to the woman at the piano. Then the two detectives sat down at a table and Hutch put the guitar by his chair.

"Hutch, I don't think this is going to work."

"Relax, Starsk, I've got it covered."

"If you say so."

Both men sat back and enjoyed the rest of the set. After her last song Dakota got up from the stool and nodded to the appreciative crowd.

"Thank you. Before I go on break, I'd like to sing one more song for you with a member of the audience. Now, I don't know if he can sing or not. But anyone who professes as much love as he does for the incomparable Billie Holiday must be able to hit a few notes. So would you please welcome Mr. Ken Hutchinson."

Hutch got up to a round of applause and nearly tripped over his guitar case. He quickly recovered and headed for the stage. Hutch pulled another stool up to Dakota's and strummed his guitar a few times to warm up.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready."

Dakota glanced one more time at the note in her hand. "This one goes out to... Starsk. It's called 'You've Got a Friend.'"

Together Hutch and Dakota produced a fairly impressive duet.

*Winter, spring, summer, or fall
Now, all you got to do is call
And I'll be there, yes I will
You've got a friend.*

Starsky was somewhat embarrassed but immensely flattered. When the song was finished he clapped enthusiastically and whistled. Now it was Hutch's turn to be embarrassed. Hutch invited Dakota over to the table and introduced her to Starsky. Starsky was grinning from ear to ear. He kissed her hand.

"That was beautiful."

"Why, thank you."

"Hey, what about me, buddy?"

"Yeah, you were okay too."

Dakota laughed.

"Gee, thanks," said Hutch.

Dakota then excused herself so she could greet a few other patrons before her second set.

"Okay, so you proved me wrong."

"Hutch laughed. "Well, what can I say?"

"Hey."

"Yeah?" asked Hutch.

"Thanks for the song. It meant a lot."

"Sure, Gordo." And then more seriously, "I know I've acted like a jerk. I just couldn't handle not being there for you. I want you to know how important you are to me."

"You've always been there for me, Hutch. But it's a two-way street. I need to be there for you too."

"I hear you."

Starsky smiled and nodded.

At that moment Dakota returned with a few scraps of paper in her hand.

"I see others have followed my lead in presenting you with requests," said Hutch.

"Well, it seems my loyal following wants you to do another song."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. We're going to sing some of Billie's material and see what stuff you're really made of."

Before he could protest, she had pulled him out of his seat and they were headed for the stage. "Break a leg," called Starsky after them as he began clapping wildly to announce their arrival.

Hutch just rolled his eyes, but he couldn't remember a time when he had felt happier.

THE END

Songs:

"61 Highway"

Written by: Fred McDowell

"Mama Don't Allow"

Written by: Fred McDowell

"Black Night"

Written by: Jessie Robinson

"That's Life I Guess"

Written by: Lewis/DeRose

"1927 Kansas City"

Written by: Mike Reilly

"I Can't Give You Anything But Love"

Written by: Fields/McHugh

"You've Got a Friend"

Written by: James Taylor