

Summary: Huggy Bear remembers those dark days in May when Starsky was shot.

Categories: Gen

Genre: Episode Related, Challenge

Challenges: MSN Group Challenge: tell a story from Huggy's Point of View.

Story Notes: This story was written in response to a challenge on the MSN Group to tell a story from Huggy's POV. Short but intense. Major tissue warning in spots.

Author's Note: Since the first few chapters will follow the actual events from the episode "Sweet Revenge", some excerpts from that story line will be used. However, this story will focus more on Huggy's memory of the events during that period of time. You may notice several similarities between this story and my previous story "The Man He Used To Be." This story is actually a companion piece to that story, just being retold from a different perspective.

Beta read by [ProvencePuss](#)

Sparkle731 also has stories on Fanfiction.net [here](#).

A DARK DAY IN MAY

CHAPTER 1

I grinned to myself as I watched my two best friends, Ken Hutchinson and Dave Starsky, clowning around with each other as they played a game of pool. Night and Day. Darkness and Light. That's what they reminded me of. Hutch was a big blond with ice blue eyes and a cool, calm demeanor to match. Starsky, on the other hand, was a curly-haired brunet with an olive toned complexion and a volatile, unpredictable nature. They were both lean and muscular, their bodies toned and in shape. They were tough hard-nosed street cops working one of the roughest beats in the city.

As I watched them, I let my mind drift back to that dark day in May when Hutch almost lost Starsky to a hail of bullets in the parking garage at police headquarters. It was an assassination attempt aimed at both of the dynamic duo. The gunmen's biggest mistake was hitting Starsky but missing Hutch. Like an avenging angel, he hunted down the man responsible and brought him to justice, and then returned to the hospital to devote his time and energy to helping Starsky recover from his injuries. I closed my eyes as I found myself remembering that day.

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That day had started out just like any other day for me. I got up around noon and stumbled into the bathroom to take a shower. I had spent the night with a young lovely that had kept me occupied until almost five am, so I was running a little behind that morning. I owned and operated a lucrative bar and grill in downtown Bay City that opened at noon for lunch and closed at two-thirty in the morning. Most of my waking hours were spent working, keeping an eye on my ever-changing staff, and my ears open to what was happening on the streets.

I knew that Diane and Anita, my two best waitresses and most reliable employees, would have things under control when I arrived. They both arrived at eleven am and got the bar ready to open for the lunch trade. After lunch, Diane would leave and then come back later that evening to work the night shift. I never had to worry about the bar when either one of them was there and in charge.

I was in a cheerful mood as I got dressed for the day. I had no idea that events were unfolding at that very moment that were about to change the lives of two of my best friends dramatically. When I went downstairs, the bar was already crowded with the lunch crowd. I was lucky enough to have a faithful group of regulars that came by every day and word of mouth was the best advertising you could ask for. I exchanged pleasantries with several customers as I made my way to the kitchen to check on the new cook I had just hired a few days ago.

He seemed to be doing a good job, keeping up with the orders in a timely manner and keeping things running smoothly. I made a few quick mental notes about some supplies we were running low on as I went back out front to tend the bar. It was just another typical Tuesday morning. Around one o'clock, a news bulletin flashed across the TV mounted behind the bar, something about a shooting in the police garage downtown. One officer had been shot and was presumed dead. The details were sketchy and I didn't really pay that much attention. No names or any other details were given at that time.

Violence of that kind was second nature in a place like Bay City, a suburb of Los Angeles. My mind was soon occupied with other things and I forgot about the news flash until the phone rang a couple of hours later. The lunch trade had slowed down, so I grabbed the phone and said, "This is the Bear, talk to me."

For several seconds I heard nothing but silence on the line and I almost hung up, thinking that someone had dialed a wrong number, but then a gruff voice said, "Huggy, it's Captain Dobey. I'm at Memorial hospital."

"Hey, Cap...what's up?" I asked, even though I felt an uneasy churning in the pit of my stomach, you know the kind you get when you automatically know somebody is gonna tell you something you don't want to hear.

"Starsky's been shot and it doesn't look good. You better get down here. Hutch is gonna need you." Those few words sent a knife slicing through my heart.

"I'll be right there." I said, hanging up the phone before he could reply. My mind flashed back to the news bulletin I had heard on the TV earlier. *Oh, sweet Jesus. Not Starsky. Not Curly.* I caught Anita's eye and said hastily, "I gotta leave. I don't know when I'll be back." She gave me a puzzled look, but didn't ask any questions as I rushed out the front door.

I climbed into my white Caddy which was parked at the curb in front of the building and fumbled with my keys, trying to get my numb fingers to fit them into the ignition. My heart was pounding like it wanted to jump out of my chest. Starsky and I had been friends since we were teenagers. We had met when his mother sent him to Bay City to live with his aunt and his uncle when he was thirteen. We had been the best of friends ever since.

To most people, ours would be considered an unlikely friendship. A Jewish white boy from New York and a jive streetwise black kid from the inner city but it worked for us. In spite of his bravado, Starsky was still a thirteen-year-old kid who had been ripped away from his friends and the only family he had and sent three thousand miles away to live with virtual strangers. He was scared shitless. I befriended him and helped him to adjust to the sudden upheaval of his life, something he never forgot. See, that was the thing about Starsky. He was loyal to his friends, almost to a fault. Once you were his friend, you were his friend for life.

I finally got the Caddy started and pulled out into the traffic. I broke every traffic law there was in my mad dash to the hospital that day. The words from the news broadcast, *presumed dead*, kept echoing in my head. Twenty minutes later, I was pulling into the parking garage at Memorial Hospital. I quickly found a spot to park the Caddy and climbed out of the vehicle. I didn't even bother to lock the doors as I ran across the pavement

towards the elevators. I figured if somebody wanted to steal anything they were welcome to whatever they wanted.

I bypassed the main lobby, going straight to the ICU. I knew if Starsky was still alive, that was where he would be. The entire fourth floor was crawling with cops. It looked like police headquarters. Uniformed officers were milling around along with a few undercover officers in plain clothes that I recognized sitting in the waiting room. All of them wore a shocked expression on their face and an air of foreboding hung heavily in the air.

When a fellow officer is shot, it affects the entire brotherhood of cops. Every officer on the force from the lowest patrol officer to the highest-level officials would be working together to find the man responsible for the attack on Starsky. Starsky and Hutch were both well liked and respected by their peers, even the few who didn't particularly care for them, still respected them. Their partnership was almost legendary in the department. Everybody who knew them knew how close those two were. They weren't just partners, they were also best friends.

I glanced up and down the main hallway, looking for someone who could tell me what was going on. Near the end of the hall to my left, I saw a familiar blond figure, hunched forward on a chair, staring through one of the glass observation windows that lined the hallway. The burly figure of Captain Harold Dobey, head of the homicide division at Metro, stood beside him. I hurried in that direction, trying to hold back my panic as I drew closer. The sagging shoulders and dejected posture of both men spoke volumes about Starsky's condition.

Hutch was straddling a chair with his arms folded across the backrest, staring through the observation window into Starsky's room. I caught my breath when I got my first glimpse of my injured friend. Starsky was lying on his back in the bed, his normally olive complexion as white as the bed linens. A sheet covered his lower body, his exposed chest and abdomen heavily bandaged, along with his left shoulder. A nurse and a doctor were both in the room with him.

Two IV's dripped steadily into the back of his right hand and one into the back of his left. Wires and tubes poked out from various spots underneath the bandages. A clear plastic bag hanging on the bottom of the bedrail collected his urine. The bed was surrounded by machines, the machines that were keeping him alive.

The lower half of his face was obscured by the mouthpiece to the ventilator that forced his chest to rise and fall in the normal rhythm he could no longer maintain on his own. I found my eyes drawn to the heart monitor standing to the right side of the bed. Those jagged green lines on the screen assured me that Starsky was still alive.

"Cap?" I said quietly, forcing the words out past the lump in my throat.

"A couple of guys dressed up like officers." Dobey told me gruffly, a catch in his voice. "He's lucky to be alive."

"He's gonna be okay..." I said, even though I doubted my own words. I could see the slackness of the muscles in his face and the way his eyes and cheeks seemed to be sunken into hollows.

"He's dying." Hutch said in a flat, toneless voice that sent a chill down my spine. He never took his eyes off his motionless partner. I knew the big blond well enough to know that he was barely holding on to his emotions.

"No..." I gasped in a strangled voice. I refused to allow myself to believe that Starsky was going to die. He had been hurt so many times before, stared death in the face and walked away the winner. My mind refused to accept the fact that this time would be any different.

"He's suffered massive damage." Hutch said so softly I had to strain to hear the words. "The body can only withstand..." his words trailed off into silence as I saw him choke back a silent sob.

"But, there's a chance." I insisted, still refusing to accept the inevitable. "There's always a chance."

"Of course there's a chance." Dobey said gruffly, mirroring my words. "There's always a chance."

The doctor came out of the room and Hutch jumped to his feet, determined to be with his partner. "He's in a coma." The doctor reminded him needlessly as Hutch brushed past him and disappeared into the room.

"Hey, Doc...ummm...." Captain Dobey said, unable to ask the question that lingered foremost in his mind.

"He may survive a few more hours...there's no way of knowing. He should already be dead. He should have died back there in that parking garage." The doctor said, answering the unspoken question and dashing my wild hopes that they were wrong in their assessment of Starsky's injuries.

It was my turn to slump down in the chair Hutch had just vacated, my knees giving out on me. I turned my head to stare through the window at the two men in the room. Hutch was slumped in a chair beside the bed, just staring at Starsky, such a grief-stricken look in his eyes that I instinctively wanted to reach out and comfort him. I found myself blinking back the sudden tears that pooled in my eyes.

If Starsky died, I knew that Hutch would find a way to join him in death. Those two were connected in a way I'd never seen before. They were two halves of the same whole, one could not survive without the other. They were true soul mates in every sense of the word.

As I sat there staring through that window at my two friends, I knew that I would be staying at the hospital until the crisis was over. I would join Hutch in his lonely vigil over the man who had affected both of our lives so dramatically, a curly-haired rascal who had made us both believe in ourselves again. He was my best friend. I owed him more than I could ever repay in my lifetime. Even if he was already lost to us, somewhere beyond our reach, I would be here for him, and for Hutch, until the end.

CHAPTER 2

Did you ever notice how slowly time seems to pass in a hospital? Seconds seem more like hours and hours seem more like days. There just isn't anything to do but wait and drink stale foul tasting crap that they try to pass off as coffee. Or pace the floor. Or stare at the ceiling. Or sneak outside for a smoke. I found myself doing all of those things as I waited. Hutch, he just kept sitting in that chair, looking through that window at Starsky. You could almost see him dying a little bit each minute along with his partner and his friend.

I'm not sure how he managed to do it, but Captain Dobey took over an empty room close to Starsky's room and turned it into a makeshift command center. It looked like he was going to run the show from right there in the hospital. He had already posted a guard on Starsky's door and on the entrance to the ICU unit. Nobody was going to get at Starsky again if he could help it.

I had gone off in search of some decent coffee and returned to find the entire floor in chaos. It turned out that while I was gone, a man masquerading as an intern had tried to get into Starsky's room. Luckily, Blondie had gone to the men's room and found the real intern unconscious in one of the stalls. Captain Dobey related how Hutch came storming out of the restroom like a man possessed and tackled the imposter just as he started to go into Curly's room. Turned out he had a needle in his pocket that was filled with enough morphine to kill ten men. He's damn lucky that Hutch didn't kill him with his bare hands.

I overheard Captain Dobey telling Hutch that he had called Starsky's mom and that she was on her way there from New York. She should arrive sometime early the next morning. I had met Rachel Starsky when I was

younger and had always liked the woman. She had the same determination and inner strength that her oldest son had always shown. For a long time Starsky had resented her for sending him away after his father was killed but eventually they had resolved their differences and were closer than ever.

My maw and me had always been close and when he was a kid, Starsky had sort of adopted my mom as his surrogate mother. He hung out at my place almost as much as he did at home. When my mom died, he was the first one at my side, grieving right along with me. I've never forgotten that. He was the only white face at her funeral but that didn't bother him none. And since I already had a reputation for being good with my fists, nobody dared say anything to him because he was with me.

It's funny the things you remember about somebody when you're sitting in a hospital waiting to see if they're going to live or die. Even though the doctors were still convinced that Starsky wasn't going to make it, I tried to keep the faith. When it comes right down to it, faith and hope are all we have left in situations like this. Hutch was trying but I could tell that he was terrified at the thought of losing Starsky.

I can still remember the first time Starsky introduced me to the tall, awkward blond who seemed to have two left feet sometimes. They had just been assigned as roommates at the Police Academy and were already fast becoming the best of friends. I have to admit that I was a little jealous at first because up until then I had filled that role in Starsky's life. But when I saw the two of them together, the way they interacted, I knew it was meant to be. Over the years, they had developed almost a psychic bond between them and they could communicate without even speaking. It was unnerving to see them together sometimes, especially when they carried on an entire conversation right in front of you without saying a word. But, that is one of the things that made them such a great crime fighting team out there on the streets.

Sometimes it seemed like they were joined at the hip. You hardly ever saw one of them without the other one right there by his side. I used to tease them about being '*an old married couple*' and often referred to the other half of the duo as '*their better half*'.

I never meant anything by it, not like some of the men they worked with who liked to spread the rumor that they were more than just friends if you catch my drift. That always made my blood boil. I've never been able to understand why two men couldn't show how they felt about each other, that they really cared about each other the way those two did, without being labeled something they weren't.

I knew from experience that Starsky had always been a 'touchy feely' kind of guy who wasn't afraid to show you how he felt about you but he never swung that way. When I first met Hutch, he was a real uptight, rigidly controlled kind of dude but the years with Starsky had mellowed him out quite a bit. But, he was never as openly affectionate with anyone else the way he was with Starsky. But, I knew they were both straight as they come. Hell, you should have seen some of the ladies those two have hooked up with over the years. Me, on the other hand, well let's just say that I've been known to walk on the wild side from time to time. Maybe that's why I can be a bit more liberal when it comes to what they call 'alternative' lifestyles.

I turned my attention back to the conversation going on between Captain Dobey and Hutch. They seemed to be arguing about the security surrounding Starsky.

"These guys are pros, Captain!" Hutch said, his voice strong with barely concealed rage. "They're gonna try again and they're not gonna stop until they finish the job!"

"I know what's going on out there as well as you do!" Dobey snapped back in irritation.

"I'm not gonna stand around here and wait for them to make another move!" Hutch snapped, his patience worn thin. I could see that he was torn between his desperate need to be there in case Starsky didn't make it and his equally desperate need to find the man who had shot his best friend.

"At this point, we don't have much choice!" Dobby bellowed in his usual gruff tone.

"Yes, we do! We take the offense and get out there and find the fuckers who are behind this!"

"How? Who? Where?" Dobby demanded "We don't even know who they are?"

"Then we find out!" Hutch growled. I could see he was close to losing it. When he got like this, Starsky was the only who could keep him under control. "We go out and look for them!"

"And get what? A bullet in the head? It's not just Starsky they want! They want you too!" Dobby reminded him loudly. "If you go out there, it's gonna be like shooting a duck in a barrel. Just calm down. Be calm. Wait until I can find you a new partner."

Bad choice of words, Captain. I thought to myself. The expression on Hutch's face said it all, his eyes turning hard and unforgiving.

"I already have a partner." He said in a cold, flat voice. "I don't need another one." With those parting words, he turned and stalked off down the hallway.

"Well, don't just stand there!" Dobby said, turning to glare at me. "Go catch up with him and make sure he doesn't do anything stupid!" He reached into his pocket and tossed me his car keys.

I caught the keys one handed and hurried off after Hutch. I managed to catch up with Blondie as he waited impatiently for the elevator.

"Dobby send you after me?" he growled as I stepped up beside him.

"Keys." I said, jangling the set I held in my hand. "You can't drive a car without keys." The doors to the elevator slid open and we stepped inside. Hutch angrily punched the button for the parking garage.

"Starsky's gonna die, Hug..." Hutch said in a tightly controlled voice, leaning back against the wall of the elevator and staring straight ahead. There was an awkward pause. I didn't know what to say. What do you say to a man who is watching his whole world crumble beneath his feet? "Starsky's going to die and there ain't nothing anybody can do about it." I could hear the defeat in his voice and see the dead look in those ice blue eyes. Hutch sighed heavily. "At least from their end there isn't."

His voice turned cold and deadly, a tone that I knew far too well. It was one I heard him use anytime Starsky's life was in danger. At that moment, he was a very dangerous man. "But I'm still here. I'm still alive. They haven't got me yet and until they do...there damn well better be something I can do about it!" The elevator doors slid open and he stepped out, turning back to look at me as he held out his hand. I tossed him the keys. "What's it look like?" he asked as he palmed the keys.

"It looks like Dobby's car." I told him with a faint smile as we exchanged an understanding glance. "Take it easy, huh?" Hutch gave me a mock salute as the doors slid shut between us. I punched the button to go back up to the fourth floor.

The room that Captain Dobby had commandeered as his temporary headquarters was in even more chaos than when I'd left. Phones were ringing, uniformed officers were gathering information, and Dobby was trying to keep some kind of order. An anonymous caller had contacted headquarters with the tip that a local tabloid had offered \$10,000 for a picture of Starsky in his hospital room. To avoid every crazy with a camera from trying to get to the critically wounded man, Dobby was posting officers on each floor of the hospital to watch for possible intruders. Needless to say, the hospital administration wasn't happy with that arrangement but Dobby didn't care. He was going to do whatever it took to protect Starsky.

That's another thing I could never understand about people. What makes them want to witness someone else's tragedy up close and personal? Just human nature I guess. The attack on Starsky in broad daylight in the police garage of all places was the big news story for the day. Rumor had it that it was already going out over the wire services to all the major newspapers and television channels in the country.

I found a corner and tried to stay out of the way. It immediately caught my attention when I heard Captain Dobey bellow "Where are you, Hutchinson? What the hell is going on?" My ears perked up. Hutch? I had just left Hutch a few minutes ago. What kind of trouble had he managed to get himself into in that short a time? I moved closer to Captain Dobey so I could hear Hutch's answer.

"I need a patrol car and an ambulance on the third level of the County Hospital garage."

"That's right here!" Dobey yelled in exasperation.

"No kidding." Hutch's voice said dryly. "Brown. Jenny Brown. Feed her name into the computer and let me know everything you can find out about her."

When I heard the name, I couldn't help but lean forward so I could talk into the mike Captain Dobey was holding in his hand. "Hutch, this Huggy. Did you say Jenny Brown?"

"Yeah. What's it to you?" Hutch growled, not in the mood to be pleasant.

"It's gotta be her."

"Who?" Hutch demanded, somewhat impatiently. I ignored the irritation in his voice. I knew he was on the edge.

"It's gotta be her. Jenny Brown." I said "She's one of the top models around. She's been on the cover of Cosmo, Vogue...you name it."

"I just did." Hutch said "She's the one who paid for the hit. I'm on my way there right now to talk to her."

"Hutch, you be careful!" Dobey ordered, shoving me out of the way. "And report back in as soon as you talk to her! That's an order!"

The radio fell silent as Hutch got off the air. Within a few minutes, the mystery was cleared up when two uniformed officers Dobey sent to the parking garage reported back that they'd found two men, one dead and one handcuffed to a badly banged up car, in the garage. Piecing together the story, Dobey was able to determine that the two men had tried to go after Hutch in the garage and they had come out on the losing end. They had learned the hard way that you didn't mess with a pissed off White Knight when his partner was lying in a hospital bed dying from four gunshot wounds to his torso.

CHAPTER 3

You soon learn to ignore the background noises in a hospital, the endless pages over the intercom, the quiet murmur of the nurse's voices as they go about their normal routine, the clatter of the medicine carts going from room to room. I was trying to concentrate on a magazine I'd confiscated from the waiting room when a page caught everyone's attention. "Code blue. Station one. Code Blue. Station one." A suddenly flurry of activity in the hallway brought us all to the doorway to see what was going on.

Dobey and I both shoved our way into the hallway when we realized that the nurses and doctors were all heading for Starsky's room. The other officers in the room flowed out into the hallway behind us as we rushed in that direction.

We all gathered around the observation window that looked into Starsky's room. The scene unfolding in front of us was one of frantic activity. The heart monitor beside Starsky's bed displayed an flat green line indicating no heartbeat. An older nurse with gray hair was busy doing chest compressions with a steady rhythm as the rest of the medical staff converged on the room. Starsky's face had taken on the slack, unresponsive appearance of a corpse.

It was difficult to see everything that was happening in the room since there were so many technicians and other medical stuff crammed into the tiny room. Snatches of conversation drifted out into the hallway. I heard words like "Cardiac arrest", "No vital signs", "Defibrillator", and "Epinephrine" I may not know what most of the words meant but I sure as hell knew what cardiac arrest meant. Starsky was dying and Hutch wasn't here like he was supposed to be.

I felt my stomach twist into knots as I watched a nurse slid a large flat board underneath Starsky's shoulders and back, between his body and the mattress. Another nurse was cutting through the bandages on his left side to expose his skin. I watched the scene unfolding in front of me with an overwhelming sense of loss and helplessness. I grimaced when I caught a glimpse of an angry red incision running across Starsky's stomach.

I held my breath, silently praying to a god that I had abandoned long ago.

Dear God, don't let him die! Not now! Not like this! He's a good man. He doesn't deserve this! I knew that my prayers were futile at best but that was all I had left to fall back on. I watched as Starsky's body arched violently when the doctor pressed one paddle of the defibrillator against his left side just under his ribcage and the second paddle against the middle of his mangled chest. I held my breath as the doctor stepped back and everyone's eyes, including mine, darted to the heart monitor. A flat line. No response. A nurse resumed the chest compressions while the doctor recharged the machine to a higher voltage.

Starsky's body jerked violently, arching off the bed again, but there was still no response. I barely noticed the nurse who stepped up to Captain Dobey and said quietly, "Captain Dobey, Sergeant Hutchinson is on the phone for you. Line two." My mind registered Dobey walking away to take the call. *Come on, Hutch...get your ass here! Starsky needs you, man!* My thoughts raced through my mind erratically. *Please, God...don't take him just yet! Give Hutch time to get here!*

I felt the jolt of electricity in my own chest as the doctor shocked Starsky again. Still nothing. I knew the doctor couldn't keep shocking him indefinitely. Sooner or later, he would have to give up. For a moment, I thought he had decided to do just that but then I heard him say "One more time."

Come on, Curly...come on! I whispered frantically as I watched the doctor prepare the paddles again. Starsky's skin had started to take on a grayish color as his body shut down. Then two things happened simultaneously. The doctor shocked Starsky's again, his body arching even more violently than before from the jolt of electricity and the doors at the end of the hallway burst open with a loud bang as Hutch came running down the hall like a madman. My eyes darted to the heart monitor as the line on the screen jumped erratically and then fell into a steady rhythm as Starsky's heart began beating on its own again. My knees almost gave out and I felt myself stagger backwards, falling into a chair sitting along the wall. I was overwhelmed with relief and an emotion that could only be described as pure joy.

The tall blond collided with a cart filled with dinner trays, shoving it aside in his desperate need to get to his partner's side. The terrified look in his eyes was plain to see. He skidded to a halt just outside the doorway as the doctor came out of the room. Looking at the worried faces surrounding him, the doctor smiled faintly and said in an awe struck voice, "We got him back. He's alive. He's still not out of it, but I'll be damned if he isn't

still alive." A wild cheer went up from some of the officers gathered in the hallway as they slapped hands and shoulders in relief.

Without a word, Hutch shoved his way past the doctor and slipped into Starsky's room. Before leaving the room, a nurse stepped over to the window and pulled the curtain closed but not before I saw Hutch bowing his head, as he slumped down beside Starsky, his shoulders shaking with heart wrenching sobs that drifted into the hallway.

The rest of us returned to the makeshift command center, drained emotionally from the traumatic event we had just witnessed. Soon men began whispering among themselves about the miracle they had just seen. Starsky's heart had started beating the moment Hutch arrived, as if the blond half of the dynamic duo had willed his partner back to life with his very presence. Somehow, I knew that would become part of the legend of these two men and their remarkable partnership and friendship. Now, I'm not the type to believe in miracles but I had no doubt in my own mind that there was no other word to describe what had just happened.

I called The Pits to check in and told Diane to fix a basket of sandwiches to bring it to the hospital. Captain Dobey hadn't eaten anything since I'd been there and neither had a lot of the other men. At least I could do something by providing the hungry men with food. It had become almost a ritual whenever Starsky or Hutch was injured and in the hospital for me to bring them food. Neither one of them liked the hospital fare. I can't say that I blamed them. It always tasted like cardboard to me, even the candy bars in the vending machines didn't seem to have any flavor.

Captain Dobey was slumped at his temporary desk when Hutch came into the room. The deep lines on the taller man's face were evident, along with the dark circles under his eyes. "How is he?" Dobey asked wearily.

"Holding his own." Hutch said flatly, as he brushed a big hand over his face. He was desperately in need of some sleep but I knew he wouldn't rest until this crisis was over or Starsky was out of danger.

"The mechanic who tried to waste you in the hospital garage..." Dobey was saying.

"Yeah, did you get an ID?"

"Nope. They got to him in his cell at the county. Knifed him."

Hutch's eyes widened in alarm at the news as he grabbed a phone on a nearby table and quickly punched in a number. When someone answered on the other end, he said grimly "This is Hutchinson. Listen...Jenny Brown...we booked this afternoon. I want her transferred to maximum security." He listened intently for a moment and then his face darkened, his eyes flashing with anger. "What? Who sprung her?" He demanded. With a disgusted snort, he slammed down the receiver and growled at Dobey. "Jenny Brown was bonded out by some big shot lawyer named Jonathan Wells." He sprang to his feet and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Dobey yelled after his rapidly retreating figure.

"To find out what the hell is going on!" Hutch yelled back over his shoulder.

"Well, don't just stand there!" Dobey barked, turning his attention to me. "Get out there with him! And try to keep him on a leash!"

Me? I thought to myself as I hurried down the hall after Hutch. Keep Blondie on a leash when he's in full blown avenging mode? Yeah, right! I'll be lucky if he doesn't tear me a new one for tagging along after him.

CHAPTER 4

Hutch didn't object when I finally caught up with him in the parking garage and climbed into the car beside him. Hell, he didn't even talk to me. But that was okay. I knew he had other things on his mind. I knew he still felt bad about leaving Starsky, especially after what had just happened, so did I, but finding out who was behind this was still a top priority. They had to be stopped before they could try again.

The honorable Jonathan Wells had his offices in a fancy building in downtown Los Angeles. You know, one of those buildings that makes you feel out of place the minute you walk in the door. Especially if you're like me and come from the wrong side of the tracks. But, Hutch, with his cultured, refined background, seemed to fit right in.

The lawyer's office was on the sixteenth floor. Hutch brushed past the stunned receptionist and barreled his way into the private domain of the good lawyer. I stayed in the waiting area, trying to look inconspicuous and failing miserably. The receptionist kept giving me dirty looks as if she thought I was going to make off with the paintings on the wall. I gave her one of my best Huggy Bear smiles which she pointedly ignored. I sighed and resigned myself to waiting on Hutch to finish his business with the lawyer.

When the receptionist stepped away from her desk momentarily, I saw my chance to help out and slipped over to the desk. I tore the last sheet out of the book lying open on her desk and slid it into my pocket. I hurried back to my spot beside the elevator doors and leaned against the wall nonchalantly.

It wasn't much longer before Hutch stormed out of the private office, his eyes smoldering with rage. Obviously his visit with the good Jonathan Wells had not gone well.

"What are you doing here?" he barked at me gruffly as I fell into step beside him.

"Trying to catch up with you." I said innocently, as we stepped into the elevator. As the doors slid silently shut, I lowered my voice and said, "Hutch, my man...you are in luck. Huggy is about to make a very special delivery."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"The receptionist's call sheet." I said, as I discreetly slipped him the sheet of folded paper I had snatched from the desk. "A list of all the outgoing calls made by the honorable Jonathan Wells."

Hutch took the paper and tucked it into his jacket. We both fell silent until after we had exited the high-rise. As we started walking towards the car that we had parked down the block, Hutch muttered, "Every time I get a door open...it gets slammed right back in my face. I tell you, Huggy...whoever is behind this has all the power. All the damn control."

"Maybe. Maybe not." I answered with a shrug. "You keep pushing and somebody is bound to make a mistake."

Hutch paused to pull the sheet of paper out of his jacket. He skimmed rapidly over the list of names and phone numbers. "Bates? Bates?" he muttered under his breath. "San Francisco area code. Six...seven...eight calls." He frowned thoughtfully "Who the hell is this guy Bates?"

"There's a phone." I pointed out. "How about seeing what you can find out?"

"Give me some chance, will ya?" Hutch asked as he walked towards the payphone in front of the building. "I'm all out." I dug through my pockets and handed him all the chance I had on me. Hutch picked up the receiver, cradling it against his shoulder as he started depositing coins in the slot. "What's the number?"

"Uh...555..." I said, taking the piece of the paper from him so I could read the number. "6278."

Hutch dialed the number and waited impatiently for someone to pick up on the other end. I watched anxiously as the color drained from his face and he hung up without saying a word into the receiver.

"What?" I asked, my curiosity getting the best of me. "Who answered? Who's Bates?" I didn't like the expression on his face. Something about it made me nervous, very nervous.

"I...uh...I don't know." Hutch said with a slight stammer. A bad sign. Hutch only stammered when he was upset or under a lot of stress. "But, at least I know who this phone number belongs to."

"Who?" I demanded somewhat impatiently.

"The man turned down a chance at the presidency because it was a step down in power." Hutch said in a stunned tone. He looked at me somberly. "Hug, this number...it's Gunther Industries. It's the private line to James Gunther."

"Gunther?" I repeated in an equally stunned voice. I knew exactly who James Gunther was. Hell, everybody did. He was a powerful man with worldwide connections, both legitimate and some not so legitimate. He had been under suspicion for years for being the money man behind some real heavy duty illegal enterprises but nobody had every been able to pin anything on him. He had enough money to buy his way out of any investigation that was thrown in his direction. "You think Gunther has something to do with what happened to Starsky?"

"I don't know but I'm sure as hell gonna find out," Hutch said with cold, determination. "If I can connect him to the contract on Starsky and me, he's gonna go down this time and the bastard won't be able to buy his way out of it."

"And how do you intend to do that?" I asked "Gunther has the connections to cover his ass so good he'll still come out smelling like a rose."

"Not this time." Hutch growled in a determined voice. "Not this time. Somewhere there is a tie to Gunther Industries, I'm sure of it. And I intend to find it if it's the last thing I do," Hutch said, his voice rising in frustration at his inability to find the link he needed. Still, his instincts told him that he was on the right track.

"And just where do you plan to start?" I asked in patient voice.

"Minnie Kaplan. She's the department's computer whiz. She can dig up a paper trail on Gunter if anyone can. If I can show a connection between Gunther Industries and any of the high profile cases Starsky and I have been involved in the past couple of years, it could tie him into what happened to Starsky."

It was a start. Not much to go on but it was a start. I was just along for the ride. We continued on to the car and Hutch drove to police headquarters, He parked in front of the main entrance, using the same spot that Starsky favored whenever he parked on the . street. As we entered the building and made our way towards the communications center in search of Minnie, several officers stopped us to inquire about Starsky's condition. Hutch was polite and cordial but I could see that the endless questions and well wishes were starting to wear on his already ragged nerves.

Minnie Kaplan was sitting at her desk in the communications center. She glanced up as we stepped into the room, instantly bouncing to her feet and rushing forward to give Hutch a heartfelt hug. "How's Curly?" she immediately asked. She was genuinely fond of the two men. She had been one of the first officers on the scene when the word spread through the building that Starsky had been shot.

"Holding his own." Hutch told her, giving her the same answer he had been giving everyone else who had asked. "Look, Minnie....I need a favor. It might have something to do with what happened."

"Name it."

"I need you to find out everything you can about James Gunther and Gunther Industries. And I need it as soon as possible."

"That's a tall order. It could take awhile." She said. "Where are you gonna be? At the hospital?"

"Of course." He told her with a tired smile.

"You take care of him, Huggy." Minnie said, glancing in my direction. "A Hutch without a Starsky just don't look right, ya know?"

"Yeah, I know." I replied with a return smile. "I'm gonna be Blondie's shadow for awhile...at least until Starsky is up to the job again."

Hutch left the building by the back stairs. I felt a tightening in the pit of my stomach when I realized where we were headed. The parking garage. The place where Starsky had almost died. I choked back the bile that rose in my throat as a vivid image of the shooting surfaced in my mind in all its gory detail. As we stepped into the lot, my gaze was automatically drawn to a roped off area about a hundred yards away. The pavement still bore the red stains where Starsky's blood had soaked into the pavement before help arrived. I shivered involuntarily as the echo of gunfire echoed in my head.

Hutch turned and walked towards a fenced off section of the parking lot, the impound area. A flash of red caught my eye, gleaming underneath the glare of the mid-day sun. The Torino was sitting alongside the fence that surrounded the impound lot. I felt the nausea churning in my stomach as I viewed the damage to Starsky's pride and joy. The rear windshield and both windows on the driver's side of the car were shattered, along with the driver's side mirror. Bullet holes marred the surface of the vehicle, ugly jagged holes torn through the metal into the very heart of the car. Streaks of dried blood were smeared across the driver's side of the vehicle and rear wheel well. The Torino had been as badly wounded as its owner.

"Oh, man..." I whispered "It's a good thing Curly can't see his baby now."

"He's never going to see it like this." Hutch vowed firmly. "I don't care how much it costs...he'll never see his car looking like this." he smiled faintly. "I think he spends more money on that damn car than he does on food and you know how much he likes to eat."

I tried not to look too surprised when Hutch dug the keys out his pocket and tossed them to me. The big blond was exhausted, physically, mentally and emotionally. He could at least rest while I drove back to the hospital. He crumbled into the passenger's side of the car and leaned his head back against the seat, closing his eyes. I cast worried glances at him from time to time as I headed to the hospital. My own eyes burned from a lack of sleep and my stomach insisted on reminding me that I hadn't eaten in several hours.

Nothing had changed since we had been gone. Starsky was still in the same condition he had been in when we left. Still alive, but still in a deep coma, unresponsive to his surroundings. Mrs. Starsky had arrived in our absence and was sitting at her son's bedside. She noticed us at the window and gracefully rose to her feet, joining us in the hallway.

"How is he?" Hutch asked, trying desperately to keep the anxiety from showing in his voice.

"The same." Rachel Starsky said softly, patting Hutch on the arm comfortingly, much the way that Starsky himself would have done. The doctor said that his vital signs are more stable than they were earlier...but he keeps saying not to get our hopes up. He's still not out of danger." She looked at Hutch fondly. "Why don't you

go in and sit with him for a while?" she directed a smile in my direction. "Mr. Brown here can buy me a cup of coffee."

"My pleasure, lovely lady." I said with a grin, offering her my arm like a true gentleman. Hutch slipped into Starsky's room as Mrs. Starsky and I strolled down the hallway to the elevator.

Instead of taking her to the hospital cafeteria, I escorted her to a small coffee shop across the street. After she'd ordered a cup of coffee and I had ordered coffee and a sandwich, she looked at me and said,

"You've been a good friend to David over the years, Jerome." I winced at her use of my given name. She was one of the few people who knew my real name and called me by it. Noticing my expression, she chuckled softly. "I'll try to remember to call you Huggy while I'm here so I don't embarrass you."

"You can call me whatever you want...within reason." I told her with a grin.

The smile faded from her face. "My son is dying, Huggy...and I'm not ready to lose him. Not yet. Not like this."

"Hey, Starsky's a lot stronger than anybody thinks. He'll make it...you'll see."

"I wish I could believe that." Her eyes filled with sadness. "His father died before I got a chance to say goodbye to him...now it looks like the same thing may happen with David."

"You can't think that way." I heard myself saying. "As long as he's alive...there's still a chance. He should have died in that parking lot but he didn't. He should have died in surgery but he didn't. He should have died when he went into cardiac arrest but he didn't. He's still fighting...he's fighting to stay with everybody who loves him."

"Then he's in for the fight of his life." Rachel said with a heavy sigh. "And he may not be strong enough to survive it." Her face took on a serene look. "God's will be done...it's in his hands now."

"Amen to that." I said quietly.

CHAPTER 5

I stretched to try and work the kinks out of my neck and shoulders. I had been at the hospital for four days. Starsky was still in a coma but still holding his own. I hated to leave but I knew I had to go and check on my livelihood. Diane and Anita were more than capable of taking care of things in my absence but I couldn't expect them to run the bar indefinitely. I needed to be there. I sighed heavily and went in search of Hutch to let him know that I had to leave but I would continue to check in on Starsky every day. I found him exactly where I knew he would be, sitting at Starsky's side.

"Hutch," I said, using that quiet voice that you tend to use in a hospital room, especially in a room where the patient was seriously ill or in a coma like Starsky was. "I hate to do it, but I really need to get back to The Pits."

"I understand, Hug." Hutch said, never taking his eyes off Starsky's face. "Starsky does too. You have a business to run. We're both grateful that you've stayed here this long."

"Hey, that's what friends are for. Right?" I said, "I'll come by everyday to check on Curly and bring you a care package."

"Thanks, Hug. You're a good friend. I appreciate it." Hutch looked worn out. I knew that he'd been spending every waking hour at Starsky's side, sleeping in the chair beside the bed or on one of the sofas in the waiting room. And I knew that was where he would stay until the danger to Starsky was past. He was still investigating Gunther enterprises and hoping to find a link between the big man himself and the assassination attempt on Starsky. It had become his personal vendetta. I almost felt sorry for James Gunther if Hutch ever found a connection. Hutch would bring him down, no matter how powerful or dangerous he was.

I left the hospital, my heart heavy with regret. I almost felt like I was betraying my friends by leaving. I drove back to my bar and went inside, nodding at Diane and Anita as I passed through and climbed the stairs to the two apartments located above the bar. One was my own personal apartment (which had two entrances, one downstairs into the bar and a separate outside entrance.). The second one was mainly one big room that I kept for my friends who needed a place to sleep it off when they'd had a little too much to drink or had a fight with their wives and needed a place to cool off for a day or two.

It felt good to be home. It felt like I had been gone for weeks instead of just a few days. I stripped off my clothes on my way to the bathroom and climbed underneath the shower, adjusting the water until it was as hot as I could stand it. The hot needles of spray felt good as it relaxed my tense, weary muscles. When I'd finished my shower, I walked into the bedroom and threw myself down across my king sized bed. Soon, I was sleeping soundly. It was almost ten hours later before I finally opened my eyes. It was almost eight pm and from the sounds drifting up from below, it sounded like business was jumping.

Quickly pulling on some clean clothes, I went downstairs to help out my staff. It felt good to be back in the swing of things. Several regulars asked me how Starsky was doing, knowing that I was a close friend of the two detectives. I fielded their questions the best I could as I served drinks and called orders back to the kitchen. I didn't want to give out too much information on Starsky's condition, not while there was still an on going investigation. By the time the bar closed, I was exhausted and ready for another ten hours of sleep.

As she helped me to clean up, Diane looked at me and said, "Is Starsky going to make it?"

"I don't know, darling. I just don't know. He's hurt awful bad. The doctors ain't holding out much hope even if he has hung on this long."

"I sure hope he makes it. I've been praying for him."

"A lot of good folks have been praying for him." I said, "Just keep on praying, darling. Keep on praying."

"I'll finish up here, boss. Why don't you go on to bed?"

"I think I'll do that." I said with a grateful smile, giving her a playful swat on her well-formed backside in passing.

After a good night's sleep, I got up around noon, checked with Anita and Diane to make sure they had things under control, then bagged up some food to take with to the hospital as promised. It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining and there wasn't as much smog as usual. The traffic wasn't even that heavy so I enjoyed the drive to the hospital. I was disappointed to discover that there was still no change in Starsky's condition. He wasn't any worse but he wasn't any better. He was still just holding his own. The ventilator was still pumping air into his lungs but Hutch said that he thought that Starsky was starting to fight it, trying to take some tentative breathes on his own. Even the slightest hint of improvement in his condition was a cause for celebration.

I convinced Hutch to take a walk and get some fresh air while I saw with Starsky. Under the circumstances, the doctor had laid aside the normal rules that applied in the ICU and was allowing a few selected visitors to stay with Starsky for longer periods than usual. Mrs. Starsky and Hutch were both allowed unlimited access to his room.

I settled into the chair beside the bed and glanced over at my dark-haired friend. His color seemed better, some of pallor being replaced by a more natural hue. I found my eyes drawn to the bandages that still covered his torso, imagining the damage to his body that they concealed. As my eyes swept over his body, I noticed that they had shaved his chest hair. I tried not to smile in amusement. He was really going to hate that when he finally woke up. It wasn't that Starsky was a vain man exactly, but he knew that the ladies were turned on by his furry chest and muscular build.

I found myself remembering when we were kids and the hair started to fill in on his chest. He had been embarrassed at first until he found out that the girls really liked it. His first serious girlfriend in Bay City had really loved running her fingers through those dark springy curls. He was grinning that thousand-watt smile of his when he told me all about it later. Of course, that's not all he told me that she liked doing to him.

I'd never thought about it much one way or the other. The ladies I'd been with seemed to like my chest just fine even if I didn't have much hair on it. And I'd seen Hutch without his shirt on numerous times, so I knew that Blondie looked like he had a bare chest too until you looked closer and noticed the fine coat of almost invisible pale blond hair that covered his torso. It wasn't even remotely close to being as thick Starsky's was but it was there just the same. I knew that the same coarse dark haired covered Starsky's arms and legs too. And even though he shaved every morning, by late evening, a dark shadow was already visible on his strong, firm jaw making it necessary for him to shave again if he had a date.

I noticed that his face was already covered with a heavy stubble. The nurses were too busy to attend to his personal hygiene beyond what was absolutely necessary for his survival. I figured that Hutch must have taken over his more basic needs, like shaving him and combing his thick, unruly curls which tangled so easily when he was lying in bed. I knew that Hutch often did that whenever Starsky was injured and unable to care for himself adequately but Starsky did the same thing for him, so I figured they were even on that score. It was just another example of the closeness and the undying trust that they shared with each other.

"Come on, Curly." I said, reaching out to rub his uninjured shoulder. "You gotta open those blue eyes and rejoin the rest of us. Blondie's about ready to lose it without you." It felt funny to be talking to him when he couldn't respond but I'd always heard that someone can hear you even if they are in a coma. I swallowed hard to dislodge the lump that kept trying to crawl into my throat. Even if Starsky pulled through this, he still had a long hard road ahead of him in order to fully recover from his injuries. Hell, his just being alive so far was considered a fucking miracle, so why not pray for another one?

Hutch soon returned. I knew he that couldn't stay gone long. He never did. We talked for a while as he ate the food I'd brought him. Now, Hutch tries to eat all that healthy junk like soybean flour and sunflower seeds, along with these really gross health shakes he makes every morning. But, when he's hungry, he can still chow down on junk food with the best of us. It didn't take him long to finish off a Huggy burger and an extra large order of fries. After he finished eating, I got ready to leave, promising to stop by the following day at the same time.

CHAPTER 6

Three days later the one thing we had all been praying and hoping for finally happened. Starsky opened his eyes for the first time since the shooting. I wasn't there to see it but I heard all about it afterwards. Hutch had been so excited that he had danced the startled nurse around the room. I would have loved to have been there to see that for myself. Starsky had only been able to keep his eyes open for a few seconds before drifting off again but this time it was into a deeply medicated slumber instead of a coma.

Hutch was still pretty wound up when I got there, insisting on telling me over and over again about the thrill of seeing Starsky finally open his eyes again. The various doctors assigned to his case were still being cautiously optimistic, warning Hutch not to get his hopes up too high. Starsky was not out of danger yet. Unforeseen complications, infections, his own bodies weakened condition, could still prove fatal to the dark haired detective. Due to the large number of blood transfusions he had been given since the shooting, his immune system was practically shot to hell. In his present condition, even something as simple as a bad chill could kill him.

"They've got him heavily medicated to keep him quiet and make him sleep." Hutch explained "So his body can start to heal and get stronger. The doctor said that even when he wakes up, he'll probably be confused and disoriented, too weak to even talk. He probably won't even remember the shooting." *That would be a blessing if you ask me*, I thought to myself. I tried to concentrate on Hutch's words as he continued, "They don't want him to panic or get scared."

Easier said than done, I thought. Starsky was going to be scared out of his mind if he woke up and couldn't remember what had happened to him, especially considering the amount of pain he was going to be in. That alone would be enough to panic anybody in their right mind. And, in spite of the cardiac arrest, there were no signs that indicated that Starsky had suffered any kind of brain damage during the time he was considered clinically dead.

I stole a quick glance at Starsky, looking for any change in his face or his position but it all looked the same to me. For the first time since entering the room, I noticed that he had been weaned from the ventilator. He still had a nasal cannula providing extra oxygen to help ease the strain on his severely injured lung but he was breathing on his own. Another milestone to celebrate. A nasal gastric tube had been inserted in one nostril and threaded down into his stomach which Hutch explained was to evacuate air from his stomach and to tube feed him. Unable to eat, Starsky was losing weight at an alarming rate.

I continued to visit the hospital every day. Although Starsky's eyes were always closed when I was there, I began to notice subtle signs that he was aware of his surroundings on some unconscious level. Sometimes his hand would twitch, his fingers moving as if he were trying to reach for something but he was too weak. A muscle would twitch in his cheek or his eyelids would flutter but he didn't wake up. Whenever Hutch was touching him or talking to him, the monitors would reflect a definite change in his blood pressure and his heart rate, as if he knew the big blond was there and he was safe.

Two days after he came out of the coma, there was a major setback when Starsky had to be rushed back into surgery when he suddenly spike a high fever. It turned out that he'd started bleeding internally again, meaning more painstaking repairs to his already mangled insides. Then he developed pneumonia and had to be put back on the ventilator. He also developed a serious infection in one of the surgical wounds. Once more, we were back to counting the minutes and then the hours, waiting and praying for him to rally. After almost a week, he was finally determined to be out of immediate danger, although the doctor kept him on the ventilator for two more days as a precaution.

Through it all, Hutch was determined to bring James Gunther to justice and prove that he was behind the hit on Starsky. He had been methodically unraveling the tangled web of bogus holding companies and falsified records that concealed Gunther's illegal activities. It was stressful and tedious work that was taking more time than he would have preferred. Minnie and several other officers were helping out, but Hutch still insisted on being kept advised of any new developments or leads.

I wasn't there the day Hutch finally found the connection that linked Gunther to several high profile cases that Starsky and Hutch had been involved in over the past two years, cases that gave Gunther more than enough motive to want to see them dead. But, believe me I heard all about it from a nurse that I had become friendly with during the course of my visits to the hospital since the shooting.

Hutch had rushed into Starsky's room with an arm full of computer printouts, ranting and raving to his semi-conscious partner about finally finding something he could nail Gunther on. The exasperated nurse had finally gone in search of Captain Dobby to get him to calm down the excited blond so that Starsky could rest undisturbed. Finally, Hutch calmed down and caught a flight to San Francisco that same afternoon. Under the circumstances, the SFPD had agreed to let him serve the arrest warrant on James Gunther in person.

When Hutch returned he told me that when he arrived at Gunther's mansion and burst into his office unannounced, he had found Bates, Gunther's right hand man, dead from drinking a cup of poisoned tea. Arrogant and aloof, Gunther had pulled a gun on Hutch but never having had to do his own dirty work before, Hutch had easily disarmed him and cuffed him before turning him over to the SFPD.

Hutch told me how badly he had wanted to just blow the bastard's head off and I can't say that I blamed him for that. But, in the end, the cop in Hutch had prevailed. Gunther would have his day in court and Hutch would do everything in his power to make sure that he couldn't buy his way out of it by making sure he had an airtight case against him.

When it was all over, Hutch returned to his partner's side and that is where he stayed except for brief trips that he made to headquarters to work on the case against Gunther. Whenever possible, he worked on the case at Starsky's bedside with files and computer printouts piled in his lap and on the floor around him.

The nurses had learned to work around him, asking him to leave only when they had to tend to Starsky's wound care or when the doctor needed to do some medical treatment under sterile conditions. Finally, one of the nurses found a recliner in the doctor's lounge and moved into the room next to Starsky's bed so Hutch could be more comfortable since he was practically living at the hospital. I knew that Hutch had only been home a few times since the shooting to shower and to change clothes but not to sleep. He did that at the hospital, sitting beside Starsky's bed. The entire medical staff was overwhelmed by Hutch's obvious affection and devotion to his injured friend.

I'll never forget the first time I was in the room when Starsky opened his eyes. Hutch had stepped out for a few minutes to talk to the doctor and I was sitting in the bed beside him when I saw his eyelids flutter and then open, not much only about half way, but it was enough to see the sapphire blue of the pupils.

"Hey, Curly! You're awake!" I said, my throat tightening up with emotion. "Hutch is talking to the doctor right now but he'll be right back." I wasn't sure if he understood me or not but he seemed to relax, then his eyes closed again and he was out. But to me, I still felt as if I had just witnessed a miracle.

CHAPTER 7

I knocked lightly and then opened the door to the private room on the sixth floor of the hospital. After almost a month in intensive care, Starsky had finally gotten strong enough to be moved out of the ICU. He was still as weak as a newborn kitten and in a lot of pain but he was making progress and was considered to be out of immediate danger.

He was going to live but now he would have to pay the price in blood, sweat and tears.

Although Gunther was in jail and his organization in shambles, Starsky was still registered under an assumed name and only those directly involved with his care knew his true identity. His visitors were also restricted to a select few: Captain Dobby, Starsky's mother, Minnie Kaplin, me and Hutch. There was still a police guard on

the door to his room to make sure that nobody else, other than authorized medical personnel got into his room. Nobody was taking any chances with Starsky's safety and continued recovery.

Hutch was helping Curly out of bed for a trip to the bathroom. It had only been two days since Starsky had been allowed out of bed for the first time and he was still pretty unsteady on his feet. I pretended not to notice the way his face twisted in pain as Hutch helped him sit up on the edge of the bed.

"Just take it easy, pal." Hutch said in a soft, quiet voice that I never heard him use with anyone else but Starsky when he was hurt. "Just sit there for a minute and catch your breath." Hutch glanced at me with a smile. "Hey, look who's here. It's Huggy."

"Hey, Huggy." Starsky said in a voice so weak that I had to strain to heard the words. He didn't look at me but I knew that he wasn't being rude, he couldn't turn his head without it hurting. He couldn't do much of anything without it hurting.

I slipped over to the opposite side of the bed without saying a word and watched as Hutch slid his hands underneath Starsky's arms, wrapping his arms securely around the brunet's back, taking care not to put too much pressure on still healing wounds and incisions. He was always so gentle when it came to Starsky, treating him as if he were a fragile piece of china, and in a way, that's just what he was right now.

I heard the hiss of pain that escaped involuntarily from Starsky's lips as Hutch helped him to his feet. He leaned heavily against Hutch, who supported most of his weight as they made the slow painful journey to the bathroom. I had to admire Starsky for his courage and his determination. Even though he could have just as easily have chosen to stay in bed and use the bedpan or the urinal like he did at night, during the daytime, he insisted on going to the bathroom, even though Hutch had to stay with him and help him.

It was several minutes before they came out of the bathroom. Starsky's face was drawn with pain, covered with a thin sheen of sweat from the exertion and the pain. Even the few short steps to the bathroom and back was enough to drain what little strength he had and that wasn't much. I could see that on the return trip to the bed, Hutch was doing most of the work. Starsky could barely move.

When they reached the bed, Hutch easily lifted Starsky up into his arms as if he were a baby and gently laid him down on the mattress, carefully arranging the pillows to make him as comfortable as possible. Starsky had lost so much weight since the shooting that he looked like a skeleton with his skin stretched tightly over his bones. His cheeks were sunken and his face gaunt but he still had a ghost of that smile that I'd know anywhere. Not that he had much to smile about these days.

Starsky laid his head back against the pillow and closed his eyes, riding out the agonizing pain that was ripping through his body without making a sound. But the rasping sound of his painful breathing sounded much too loud in the silence of the room.

Hutch leaned over him, gently running his fingers through those thick dark curls, soothing him in a comforting tone. "It's okay, buddy. You can rest now."

"Hurts..." Starsky said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"I know it does...just try to take it easy, okay?" Hutch said. He glanced at me, the sadness showing in his eyes. We both knew Starsky and for him to even hint at the amount of pain he was in meant that it had to be bad. See, that's the thing about Starsky. When he has a cold or a sprained ankle, he'll whine and fuss, demanding your attention. But let him get hurt really bad and he keeps it all locked inside, not wanting anyone to know just how much he's hurting. He'd rather suffer in silence than burden the ones he cared about by letting them see him in so much pain.

After several minutes, Starsky's breathing eased and evened out as he fell asleep. Hutch gently rearranged the covers to make sure he didn't get a chill and then looked at me solemnly. "He's still in so much pain all the time, Hug." His voice trembled with emotion. "God, I wish it had been me instead of him."

"Then he'd be the one worrying his head off about you instead of the other way around." I pointed out. I knew that Blondie was carrying around a huge guilt trip because he hadn't been able to protect Starsky and keep him from being shot. That's how Hutch was. He blamed himself for everything, even when it was something he had no control over.

"They've got him on morphine every four hours but he's always hurting so bad before the next shot that it tears me apart to see him suffering like that." Hutch said "And you saw how much it hurt him just going to the fucking bathroom but he's too stubborn to use the urinal and the bedpan during the day."

"Yeah, we both know all about that stubborn streak, don't we?" I said with a grin. "But that's part of what brought him this far when the doctors were ready to give up on him."

"He just tries to push himself so hard. I'm afraid he's gonna hurt himself more than he already is."

"That's what you're here for. To make sure he doesn't. You know you're the only one he'll listen to right now."

"Yeah, I know." Hutch said forlornly. "And I know he's still scared to death. Wondering if he'll ever be normal again."

"Hey, Curly never was what you could call normal." I said with a chuckle, trying to lighten the mood. "I thought you knew that by now."

Hutch chuckled back but I could tell it was a forced laugh. He had a long way to go yet too before his own fear and doubts were put to rest. The doctors were convinced that Starsky would have some permanent damage from the shooting, especially to his left lung which had literally been shredded by the bullets. Realistically, he may never be able to work the streets again. If that happened, it would be a hard adjustment for both him and Hutch to make. Neither one of them would ever be able to work with another partner, they were too tight, too much of a unit to ever operate effectively with anyone else. Taking out Starsky, had effectively crippled Hutch too. Gunter may have not killed Starsky but he may have put the team of Starsky and Hutch out of commission for good.

My attention was drawn back to the bed as a low, soft moan escaped from Starsky's lips as he moved in his sleep, reawakening the pain. He normally slept on his left side, but that wasn't possible in his present condition. He had to lie on his back to minimize the pressure on his healing wounds. But that position was causing him to develop pressure spots on his buttocks, tailbone, and heels that the medical staff was trying to prevent from developing into bedsores. When he was in bed, he wore specially padded booties on his feet to relieve the pressure on his heels but his position still had to be changed every two hours while he was in bed since he couldn't move himself to change positions like he normally would.

Hutch was immediately leaning over him and talking to him softly, easing him back to sleep. Sometimes, I thought it was a shame that Hutch had given up a career in medicine. He would have made a dedicated and caring doctor. But, then again, I doubt if he would have had the same bedside manner with anyone else that he had with Starsky.

I glanced up as a nurse's aide brought in Starsky's lunch tray. Hutch took it from her and sat it down on the bedside table. Because of the severe injuries to his stomach and his digestive tract, Starsky was restricted to soft foods that were easily digestible. It would be quite some time before he'd be able to eat his favorite junk foods again. The bland, unappetizing diet wasn't helping him to regain any of the weight he'd lost. Hutch and I often

snuck him in little treats like milkshakes and ice cream, things his damaged system could still tolerate that he could also enjoy eating.

Hutch reluctantly roused Starsky from his nap and helped him to sit up in bed enough to eat, or rather to have Hutch feed him. He was still too weak to even feed himself. Hutch lifted the cover from over the food. Chocolate pudding, tapioca, runny mashed potatoes with something that was supposed to be gravy, and lime jello. There was also a glass of milk and two glasses of juice. Starsky wasn't allowed to have any coffee or any carbonated drinks. I had to smile when I thought about Starsky's previous eating habits and cast iron stomach. I felt sorry for him each time I saw the only food he was allowed to have now.

The expression on Starsky's face as he surveyed the tray sitting on the table clearly showed his distaste for the meal in front of him. Even with Hutch's coaxing and patience, Starsky only ate about half of his lunch, although he did drink all of his liquids. I left after he was finished. I mean I loved the guy and all but I could only take so much. It hurt too much to see him like this.

CHAPTER 8

I looked around the room to make sure that everything was in order. Captain Dobey, myself and some other officers from police headquarters had spent the entire day getting ready for Starsky's homecoming. After almost three months in the hospital, he was finally well enough to come home. But he still had a long, long way to go.

He still needed almost twenty-four hour care since he still couldn't do much for himself. And since he couldn't tolerate climbing steps, I had helped Hutch find a two bedroom cottage on the beach that he could rent with the option to buy. It had large open rooms to make it easier for Starsky to get around. He was still terribly weak and confined to a wheelchair most of the time because of his unsteady balance and almost constant pain as his injuries continued to heal. I had also helped Hutch sublet his apartment and Starsky's on a long-term basis. The doctors estimated that with physical therapy and the amount of healing that Starsky still had to do, it could be at least a year before he was completely healed physically.

I had made sure that the refrigerator and freezer were both stocked with food. Starsky was able to eat solid foods again but he was still on a strict, rigidly controlled diet. His digestive system still couldn't tolerate certain foods or combinations of food and there were other foods he could only eat in moderation. He still vomited frequently from both his medications and his slowly healing digestive system. Cooking meals he could eat and manage to keep down was going to prove to be a challenge for Hutch.

The others had spent the day rearranging furniture and setting up a slightly larger than average hospital bed in one of the bedrooms for Starsky to sleep in. A regular bed was still out of the question for a few weeks. Starsky's own bed was stored in the second bedroom along with the rest of his bedroom furniture. Hutch's bed and bedroom furniture was stored in the two-car garage behind the house. The garage also held another surprise for Curly, his Torino, repaired as good as new thanks to Merle the Earl.

Hutch was moving in with Starsky to care for him during his convalesce, a fact that didn't surprise anyone who knew the two men. Although Starsky's medical insurance would have paid for a live-in nurse, Hutch wouldn't even consider it. He knew that nobody could care for Starsky as well as he could. Everyone knew that it was his care and his attention that had brought Starsky this far so quickly. There had been some major setbacks in his recovery thus far, including two bouts of pneumonia, a severe infection of the one of the surgical wounds that didn't want to heal, and problems bringing Starsky's weight back up to an acceptable level so he could leave the hospital. He was still underweight but at least he had lost the skeletal appearance he'd had for so long.

Captain Dobey and the others left when Hutch called to say that he was ready to leave the hospital with Starsky. They didn't want to overwhelm Curly with a lot of visitors his first night out of the confines of the hospital. I stayed to fix a light supper for them so that Hutch wouldn't have to worry about cooking and to help him get Curly settled in for the evening. Forty-five minutes later, I heard Hutch's car pull up beside the deck that ran along the front of the cottage and stop. I curbed the impulse to rush to the sliding glass doors that opened onto the deck and look outside.

Ten minutes later, Hutch slid open the doors and pushed the wheelchair with Starsky sitting in it inside. His face was pale and pinched with pain even though it wasn't that long of a drive from the hospital. But after three months of limited activity and physical exertion, it had obviously worn him out. Hutch pushed the chair over to the sofa and gently helped Starsky out of it, lying him down on the sofa and making sure he was comfortable before handing me a paper bag with all of his various medications in it, along with his discharge instructions, list of doctor's appointments and physical therapy schedule. Starsky's eyes had already closed and he appeared to be sleeping.

"I have to unload the car yet." Hutch said in a tired voice. "Would you mind putting all his meds on the kitchen counter for me?"

I nodded and set about my task while Hutch went out to bring in the various items out of the car. There were over twelve different pill bottles. Medications that Starsky still had to take. There was morphine for the pain, pills for nausea, three different kinds of antibiotics, stool softeners, pills to control the muscle spasms, pills for the migraine headaches he'd suffered from since the shooting, pills to help with his digestion, valium to help him sleep at night, and Prozac for his lingering depression and frequent nightmares. There was also a salve to put on his surgical incisions to help keep the scar tissue from tightening up and easing some of his discomfort. And there was an inhaler that he had to use because of his still impaired lung. By the time I had finished, the kitchen counter looked like a pharmacy counter.

I glanced at the discharge instructions. He wasn't allowed to do much of anything. No lifting, no bending, no stretching, no climbing stairs, no driving, no showers only tub bathes, no restrictive clothing, and no sexual activity. I had to grin at that last one. Somehow I had a feeling it would be a long time before Starsky felt up to that particular activity again. The bandages had to be changed twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. At least all of the stitches had finally been removed.

His list of doctor's appointments and physical therapy schedule went on the refrigerator for easy reference. He had appointments with an internist, a lung specialist, a cardiac specialist, and a neurologist. And he had physical therapy three times a week for two hours at a time plus a list of exercises that Hutch had to do with him at home. The list of appointments made me exhausted just looking at them. I wondered how Starsky and Hutch were ever going to manage to do all that.

I glanced around as Hutch slid the glass doors shut with a soft click as he brought the last of the things in from the car. There were stuffed animals and balloons that friends and co-workers had sent to Starsky, along with cards and letters from people he'd never even met. There were pictures that Rosie Dobey, Captain Dobey's seven year old daughter had drawn for her 'adopted' Uncle Starsky and books that Hutch had brought to the hospital to read to Starsky at night when he couldn't sleep. And there was enough plants to start another greenhouse. Starsky had left the flowers behind with instructions to the nurses to pass them out to the other patients.

"Something sure smells good." Hutch said as he sank down in a chair at the kitchen table.

"Chicken soup ala Huggy Bear." I said proudly. "And strawberry fluff for desert."

"Sounds great. Thanks, Hug." Hutch said in a grateful voice. "For everything..."

"Hey, that's what friends are for. You want to eat now or wait a little while?"

"Let's wait a little while. Starsky's worn out and I want him to rest as long as he can before I wake him up to eat."

"It's good to have him home." I said, stealing a glance at the brunet sleeping peacefully on the sofa.

"Yeah, it is." Hutch agreed. "There were times when I never thought I'd see this day. But he's still got a long hard road ahead of him."

"Yeah, but he has you to help him travel it." I pointed out. "You look pretty wiped out yourself."

"Yeah, I think we're both going to eat and then call it a night."

Frankly, I wondered how Hutch had managed to hold up this long. Besides spending most of his time at the hospital with Starsky and working on the Gunther case, in the past three weeks he had been working closely with the nurses at the hospital to learn how to care for Starsky's wounds at home. They had also been showing him how to provide some of his other care, while the physical therapists had been teaching him how to do the exercises he would have to do with Starsky to help him regain his mobility. He had also been learning massage techniques to break up underlying scar tissue to prevent contractions or any restrictions of movement as well as techniques to ease the painful muscle spasms and cramps that Starsky frequently experienced as his injuries continued to heal. Talk about burning the candle at both ends. Hutch had been burning it at both ends and in the middle.

Hutch decided it was time to wake Starsky up so he could eat and take his night time medications. He crossed to the sofa and knelt down beside his friend, gently calling his name as he ran his fingers through his curls. Starsky opened his eyes and smiled at Hutch sleepily. "Hey, Blintz..." he said, his voice stronger than I'd heard it in quite some time. "Is it time to get up?"

"Yeah, you need to eat and take your meds. Then I'll change your bandages and we're both gonna hit the sack."

"Okay."

Hutch slipped one arm underneath Starsky's shoulders to help him to raise up off the sofa. I saw the grimace of pain that twisted his face as he moved. He rose stiffly to his feet with Hutch's assistance and the big blond helped him to the kitchen table, ignoring the wheelchair that Starsky hated to be confined to so much. Every measure of comfort and independence that Hutch could allow him, he was going to make sure Starsky got, no matter how small or insignificant. After Starsky was comfortably settled in his seat, Hutch got his evening meds and a glass of water. It looked like an awful lot and it was but Starsky patiently took each one with a tiny sip of water.

I got each one of us a bowl of soup. It was my mother's secret recipe, complete with thick egg noodles, rich broth, and a mixture of vegetables. I knew that Starsky had always loved it, even as a kid. That's one of the reasons I had fixed it. It was well worth the effort when I saw the smile that crossed his face when I sat the bowl down in front of him. He ate slowly, taking small bites, but finished the whole bowl, a vast accomplishment for him since his appetite was still virtually non-existent. Puking your guts out whenever you eat will do that to you, not to mention the pain in his chest and abdomen from that little activity as healing muscles and internal organs were taxed well beyond their endurance.

The external wounds had healed, even though the scars were still tender and sensitive. The doctors had told him and Hutch that the internal injuries would take several months yet to heal completely with severe discomfort for Curly until they did.

By the time he finished eating, Starsky's eyes were already getting heavy as the medications began to kick in. As Hutch helped him to his feet, he glanced at me and said, "Hug, would you mind giving me a hand getting him ready for bed?"

"Sure." I said, going to fetch the wheelchair to take him back to the bedroom.

"Starsk, do you mind if Huggy helps me? Just for tonight?" Hutch asked

"Guess not..." Starsky said, his words starting to slur and his head starting to bob. He could barely keep his eyes open as it was. "Gotta see it sometime...might as well be now."

I felt a sudden uneasiness in the pit of my stomach as I realized what Starsky's words meant. Hutch had to change the bandages before Starsky went to sleep. I had never seen the damage to his body from the shooting or the numerous surgeries to save his life and I wasn't really sure that I ever wanted to. But, I put on a brave face and followed Hutch back to the bedroom. Hutch gently slipped his arms around Starsky's waist and pulled him to his feet. Pivoting on one foot, he swung Starsky around until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. Once he had his balance, Hutch put one arm under his knees and the other arm behind his shoulders, gently easing him back onto the bed. Starsky lay down with a soft sigh of relief.

Next, Hutch carefully removed the loose fitting tee shirt that Starsky was wearing, exposing his chest and abdomen. The heavy thick bandages I was used to seeing had been replaced with a light covering of gauze bandage and gauze pads. I sat with Starsky while Hutch got the supplies he needed to do the dressing change.

I sat there and watched in silence as Hutch carefully cut away the old bandage, exposing more of Starsky torso. I noticed that his chest hair was starting to grow back but it was uneven in spots. I knew they had kept it shaved in the hospital to lessen the chance of infection until the incisions were healed. Hutch carefully removed each gauze square, slowly revealing more of Starsky bare skin. The scars stood out, vivid and ugly against his body. His torso looked like some jagged roadmap, a brutal reminder of the pain he had suffered and continued to suffer as he recovered.

One scar ran down the middle of his chest from just beneath his breastbone to below his waist. A second scar ran across his stomach from side to side, twisting up along his left side. A third incision ran from his left shoulder down alongside his left nipple ending just below his ribcage. And those were just the scars from the major surgeries he'd had while he was in the hospital.

Four small round, slightly puckered craters marked the entrance wounds the bullets had taken as they ripped into his body. One in his left shoulder that had shattered his collarbone and shoulder blade. One just below his left nipple that had shredded his lung. One in his abdomen, just below his ribcage on the right side that had cost him his spleen and a small portion of his liver. And the final bullet wound, dangerously close to his heart, just to the right of the middle of his chest. I knew that scars from the exit wounds on his back would be even worse. In addition there were smaller scars from drain tubes that had been inserted into his body to drain off the infection and to re-inflate his collapsed lung.

I knew that in time the scars would fade from the angry red color they were now to a pale white, blending in with the rest of his skin tone and partially concealed by his chest hair. But let me tell you, it was still a shock to see them for that first time. I could only imagine how Curly had reacted when he'd caught his first sight of them, knowing they would be a permanent reminder of what had happened to him. It hadn't taken him long to figure out that he'd been shot when he was finally aware enough of his surroundings to start asking questions. He'd been shot enough times in the past to know what it felt like. But it had been hard for Hutch to tell him that this time he'd been hit four times in the chest and stomach and almost died on the parking garage pavement. And Hutch had insisted on being the one to tell him, knowing that he'd take the news better coming from him than from some stranger.

It was even harder to tell him that he actually had died, not once but technically three times. Once in the ambulance on the way to the hospital immediately after the shooting, once during the emergency surgery to stop the bleeding and repair the damage to his shattered body, and the cardiac arrest that had last the longest, for almost four minutes. Thankfully, Starsky had no memory of any of it. The last thing he remembered clearly from that day was playing ping pong with Hutch in the squad room and then waking up almost three weeks later in a world of pain. I hoped that he would never remember the trauma of those few short minutes that had changed his life forever on that fateful day in May.

Hutch had told me about the nightmares that Starsky frequently had since the shooting. Nightmares he couldn't remember much about when he was awake. Nightmares where he cried out in pain, his body jerking sporadically as if he were being shot over and over again. Hutch was positive that during those nightmares, Starsky was reliving the shooting in his sub-conscious. I still hoped that those memories never surfaced. They were ones that Starsky could do without.

After removing the bandages, Hutch carefully cleaned each healing wound with warm soapy water, gently patting them dry. Then he applied the medicated salve to soothe the irritating itch and to ease the tightening of the scar tissue. Then he reapplied the gauze pads, holding them lightly in place with some gauze strips and surgical tape. The entire procedure took almost an hour and left Starsky sweating and close to tears. Starsky had kept his eyes tightly closed the entire time, breathing heavily. Now I knew why Hutch had given him his medications first, especially the morphine. Finally, after Hutch had finished and was putting away his supplies, Starsky fell into an exhausted drug induced slumber.

Coming back into the bedroom, Hutch walked with me to the front door. The dark circles under his eyes stood out vividly against his pale skin. "They look like hell, don't they?" he said softly as we paused in the front doorway to say good night.

"Yeah, they do but just remember that Starsky's alive because of those scars."

"Don't worry." Hutch said ruefully. "I'm not about to forget that. To me, every one of those scars represents a miracle, the miracle that kept him here with me." He sighed heavily. "Starsky can't stand to look at them. He hates the sight of them. All they do is remind him how close he came to being dead for good." His eyes clouded with sadness at a sudden, vivid memory. "He cried the first time he saw them...and then he broke down, shattered into a million pieces."

"Good thing you were there to put him back together again." I said softly, sensing Hutch's turmoil and his pain.

"I'm still working on that." Hutch said with a wan smile. "Good night, Huggy and thanks for everything."

"Anytime, Blondie. Anytime." I said as I let myself out and slowly drove back to my own apartment, lost in my own dark thoughts about hope, faith and my own mortality. I believed that God had spared Starsky for a reason. I just had no idea what that was but his work here on Earth wasn't done yet. Or maybe God had spared him because he knew that Hutch could never survive Starsky's death and had granted Hutch's desperate prayers to save his partner's life. Either way, Starsky was still alive and that was really all that mattered to me.

CHAPTER 9

Fifteen months, three weeks and two days. That's how long it took Starsky to get back into shape physically enough to qualify to go back on the streets at Hutch's side. Months, weeks, days, hours and minutes of gut wrenching agony, constant fear, discouragement, and mind numbing doubt, mixed in with a fair amount of

tears. It was weeks before Starsky could begin to do even the simplest things on his own without Hutch's assistance.

During Starsky's long recovery, Hutch became his lifeline, his savior, his confessor, his biggest fan, and his entire support system all rolled into one. Curly became completely and totally dependent on his big blond partner and friend. Some days he needed Hutch's encouragement and coaxing just to get out of bed in the mornings, other days, he need Hutch's strength just to take a few more steps or do a few more exercises during his physical therapy. And there were the days that all Hutch could do was hold him while he cried, bitter tears of pain, sorrow and regret over the ordeal he was suffering through. But one thing remained constant, Hutch's never ending love and compassion for Starsky. Hutch was his fiercest protector, shielding Starsky from the realities of the world around him that Starsky wasn't up to dealing with yet.

Slowly, I watched as Starsky got stronger, the pain loosening it's stranglehold on his body an inch at a time. As his body and spirit healed, more and more of his indomitable fortitude emerged until the old Starsky was back, mixed with equal parts of a new, more mature and centered man. He had died and been reborn. He had fought the devil himself and won. I was proud to call him my friend.

None of us who are close to him will ever forget that dark day in May that almost took him away from us permanently or the terrible days of waiting and hoping that followed. But, we will also never forget the inner strength, the courage and determination that saw our friend through the most terrible ordeal of his life. I think we all learned something from what happened that day. If nothing else, we learned just how fragile life really is and how suddenly it can be taken away from all of us. If you care about someone, don't wait to tell them until it's too late. You may never get another chance to do it again. Live your life as if each moment is your last. Each word you speak, each act you perform makes a mark on the lives of the people around you and a memory is born. Take the time today to tell someone that you love them. Tomorrow it may be too late.

I thank God that we all still have plenty of tomorrows to spend with Starsky.

THE END