



Letting Go

by

CrazyKate

Archivist Note: The author re-edited and updated this story in October 2015.

Summary: When Hutch is found, murdered under horrific circumstances, and in the company of a strange young man, Starsky finds himself struggling to overcome his grief. And when new details about Hutch come to light, Starsky is left questioning how much of the past was really the truth and just who exactly Hutch really was.

Author's Notes: The first chapter of this story was originally posted at "Learning to Let Go" as a one shot. I have since finished it, so I am posting the story in its entirety.

Reviews are appreciated :)

I want to say a special thank you to Flamingo, who runs the Starsky and Hutch Archive, for graciously taking on the task of beta-ing this story after it was finished. Thank you for "schooling" me on my grammar, punctuation, and even challenging me to become a better fanfic writer.

Categories: Slash

Genre: AU Alternate Universe; action/adventure

Warnings: Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

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by **CrazyKate**

Chapter 1

February 5, 1978

The lady downstairs had let him in.

She eyed him warily at first, then, after deciding there was enough of a family resemblance, she produced a key from her pocket. She hadn't said much but, then again, neither had he. He wasn't here to make acquaintances, and he had no desire to make small talk with strangers.

After silently unlocking the door to the upstairs apartment, she had told him that she didn't care how long he stayed but had asked him to lock up on his way out. He had agreed politely, and she left him to his own devices.

Upon entering, the man was assaulted with a sudden feeling that he shouldn't be there. Not quite a sense of unwelcoming, but he certainly didn't belong here. And wouldn't have been, except for the circumstances.

The apartment was small but clean. The layout open and inviting. The bathroom and single bedroom just to the right of the front door. The living room flowed into the dining area and the kitchen took residence behind it. There appeared to be a greenhouse behind the kitchen; it was filled with flourishing plants.

The apartment itself was uncluttered, although there were a few personal items: magazines, books, and a guitar.

The man paused taking in the space, suddenly overwhelmed by the fact that he would never again see the man who called this place home.

He stood numbly without tears. And yet, a part of him wanted to scream. Wanted to cry out how unfair this whole thing was, and how he should have gone first.

A son should never die before his father.

A father should never have to bear the knowledge that his son passed away under such painful and tragic circumstances.

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The tragic call had come in the way that such things normally do, at the worst possible time.

Dr. Richard Hutchinson was on call, and in the midst of notifying a set of parents that although he had tried his best, their son was never going to have normal cognitive functions again. The parents had reacted as expected and the way the way that normal parents do, with tears and mourning.

And he had done what was expected, reached out a hand in sympathy accompanied with words of support and encouragement. No, this was not the end of their son's life. He was brain damaged, but with their love and support, he could still live a happy life.

A sad smile followed by his giving the parents the names and numbers of a few family therapists. It would be hard work, but they could get through it.

His duty done, he excused himself to the privacy of his office. There was correspondence to write and patient referrals to be attended to.

There at his desk, while his head was buried in a patient file, his phone rang.

"Dr. Hutchinson." He had answered gruffly, slightly annoyed at the interruption.

"Dr. Hutchinson, my name is Captain Harold Dobey of the Bay City police department--"

"Yes. What is it?" he snapped, not immediately making the connection.

"Sir, your son is a detective under my supervision-"

"Yes?" he repeated, interrupting again, his heart suddenly dropping to his knees. "What is it?" he pressed.

A pause, then a deep shaky breath. The deep-voiced man sounded like he was trying to hold back tears. "Sir, I regret to inform you that your son has been killed."

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Feeling suffocated by the memory, Richard made his way outside to stand in the small greenhouse. He suddenly felt too old and too exhausted to be facing this pain alone.

His wife, Catherine, hadn't felt well enough to make the trip to Bay City, too emotionally fragile to be expected to face the city her son had called home. Their daughters, Katherine and Mallory, hadn't spoke of Kenneth since his funeral.

Richard had insisted that his son's body be transported back to Duluth, so he could be laid to rest in the family plot. His eternal resting spot next to his grandfather, who had been Kenneth's favorite person in the world.

Richard had been surprised at the handful of people that had traveled from Bay City to Duluth to attend the funeral. His son's superior, Captain Dobey, and his wife, Edith, a tall dubious man by the name of Huggy, and of course, his son's partner, David Starsky, had been present. The four of them had stood in the back row, holding hands with each other, silent tears streaming down their faces. It was at that moment, through the pain of these people, it had hit Richard just how incredibly loved his son had been.

Richard busied himself, watering the plants with a half-full watering can he found on the floor. The plants appeared to be well cared for. He had the sudden idea that his son must have spent a great deal of time in here. A welcome retreat for when the terrors of his job touched too close to his soul. Richard found himself desperately wishing the plants could provide him the same respite.

Dead. His only son was dead. Taken not by any natural circumstances, but by the hands of a person. A monster, really.

The majority of the details were kept quiet and not announced to the public, pending a full police investigation. Richard did know that the body of his son had been found along with another young man by the name of Michael Bennett.

Michael had been lucky, if one could call him that. Although he had sustained a traumatic brain injury and lay in a coma with little hope of ever regaining consciousness, he was alive.

The official cause of Kenneth's death had been listed as a gunshot wound to the head, and while that had been accurate, the truth of what his son had endured was so much worse than that. Richard knew all the horrible details because, as a physician, he was able to obtain a copy of the coroner's report. He had sat alone, late one night, in the privacy of his study at home, with a full

bottle of bourbon and the report, complete with all gruesome details and photos of his son's dead body.

The full bottle of bourbon had quickly become a half as he read and then re-read every excruciating detail. Richard had cried over what his son had endured, and his heart ached with so many unanswered questions. Why would someone commit such senseless, horrible acts? And who was Michael Bennett, and why was he left alive while his son had his life so violently ripped away?

Richard turned his attention to weeding one of the plants. He gently tore at the dead leaves, dropping them carelessly on the floor. The details were almost too much to bear. His son had been taken and held for over two weeks. He had been tied up, tortured relentlessly, and finally shot at point-blank range.

Richard didn't think he was ever going to be able to get the pictures out of his mind. The marks, the bruises, and the horrible image of the gunshot wound. His son had been unrecognizable; his features distorted by the wound to his face.

His level of anger had shocked Richard as first. How could this have happened? How could someone have done this to his son? He was angry at the perpetrator, but most of all he was angry at himself. His baby boy. His handsome, strong, capable son was gone, and now they would never have a chance at reconciliation.

Their joint alienation of each other had been silly. Richard had flat out refused to support his son when he decided to become a police officer. He had stupidly told him that if he followed through with his intent, not to come home again.

It had been Richard's ridiculous attempt at manipulating his son's future, and it had blown up in his face. Kenneth, angry, and rightfully so, had retaliated by moving away and cutting him off completely.

Returning to the kitchen, Richard washed his dirty hands. He moved to wipe them on the towel hanging off the fridge handle when a set of photos on the fridge door caught his eye. They were both of Kenneth and his partner, David Starsky. The first one was taken a lifetime ago. A black and white of the pair, young and bright-eyed, dressed in police uniforms. His son was smiling carelessly. God, he looked so innocent, so young.

The other photo, Richard figured, must have been more recent. Both men were older and dressed in casual clothing: Starsky in a dark blue windbreaker, Kenneth in a green flannel shirt. Kenneth's hair was longer than Richard ever remembered seeing it, and he had grown a mustache.

They were standing next to a pool table in a dimly lit room, their arms thrown around each other, a beer their hands. Their eyes twinkled with slight inebriation, and they smiled broadly, lovingly at each other. It suddenly occurred to Richard that there was so much more between these two men besides friendship, and his heart ached to know just what.

Richard reached his hand out and touched his son's face in the picture. It seemed like only yesterday he had been a blonde haired, blue-eyed toddler. Where on earth had the time gone?

"That was taken a month before he disappeared." A man's voice from behind Richard startled him.

He removed his hand but didn't turn. He didn't have to; he knew who the man was.

"When did he decide to grow a mustache?" he asked. There was so much he didn't know, he realized sadly.

He heard the chuckle from behind him, creaks in the floorboards as the man approached the fridge.

"About eight months ago," came the soft answer.

Richard turned to find his son's partner standing by the kitchen table.

The boy looked rougher than he had at Kenneth's funeral. His face was tired, his eyes deep with sadness, his clothes wrinkled, and his shoes untied. He looked like hadn't slept or shaved in a month.

Seemly uncomfortable with the silence, Starsky spoke again. "Hutch's sister called me. Said you were in town to--uh--" He stopped, his voice failing him. He looked down, cleared his throat deeply, and continued. "Clean out. Asked if I would check up on you."

"That's very thoughtful of you, but I don't think that will be needed--"

"Please, you don't understand," Starsky interrupted, a desperate note in his voice. "Hutch was..." He paused, struggling with his tears and the appropriate words. "He-- well, he was my life. Let me help you. I *need* to help you."

Richard thought about rejecting the offer for a moment, but he had too many burning questions, and Starsky was the only one who could provide any answers.

He nodded his head in compliance before whispering, "What were you to each other?"

Tears flowed freely down Starsky's face as he choked out the answer. "I think you already know."

Fighting his own tears, Richard suddenly felt like he was the outsider, and that he should be the one asking for permission to stay.

"You loved him," Richard stated simply.

Starsky struggled to reply. "He was everything to me. I built my life around him and now he's gone."

Richard nodded knowingly, not trusting his own voice. And both men stood. Neither looking at each other, tears falling, both trying to grieve a life that had ended much too soon.

Chapter 2

April 29, 1978

The alarm went off, a high-pitched annoying beep that seemed intent on driving him slowly into madness.

David Starsky groaned as he rolled over on to his back. He rubbed at his eyes, allowing the alarm a few more beeps before finally mustering up enough energy to switch it off. He hadn't wanted to wake up from the dream he was having. It was a good one. Dreams were where Hutch lived.

He lay on his back, yawning. Then blinked drowsily before taking a moment to assess his image as it was reflected back to him from the mirror that hung over his bed. He was almost unrecognizable. He looked like a tired, run down middle-aged man, even to his own eyes. There were dark circles that had taken up residence under his deep blue eyes, and there was a sadness there that never fully would go away. His hair was longer and bigger than it had been in a long time, and he had grown his beard out. Full and unruly. He rubbed his hand across its coarseness. Wondering if he could muster up the energy to trim it. Even Dobey had made a comment about its length, and he was pretty keen on leaving Starsky alone these days.

Losing a partner, not to mention the love of your life, will make people treat you with kid gloves. Starsky was so damn tired these days. His psychiatrist said he was depressed, and he had the prescription drugs and the once a week appointments to prove it. The pills didn't do shit, and he was quickly getting tired of being forced to bare his soul once a week to a short, balding man who didn't do anything but tell him to "give it time." But Dobey wouldn't let him come back on the force without them, the appointments not the pills, so he was stuck. And without Hutch, being a cop was really all he had left.

Three months ago, he had buried his best friend.

Dobey had given him the first couple months off; bereavement leave is what his superior had called it. And, still struggling with coming to terms with a life without Hutch, Starsky had spent that time being wilder than he had been when he had returned from Nam all those years ago.

Hard liquor, beer, women, men. It didn't matter as long as he didn't have to remember their name afterwards, and he wasn't left alone in the big bed, *their* bed, with all of his thoughts and memories. On the nights that he couldn't cope, bed partner or not, he dabbled in some recreational substances. They helped him to forget. And they worked, too, until the night he taken his new found partying too far. Who knew you couldn't mix amphetamines and booze? He sure didn't. And, yes, it did seem stupid to him now. But at the time it had been necessary.

Then he needed to forget. And now it seemed like all he could do was remember.

It was a damn good thing that Huggy had decided to stop by and check on him that night. He had rushed him to the ER and called Dobby. Starsky still remembered the painful conversation with Dobby in his hospital bed.

"Starsky, son, I know what it's like to bury a partner, and there is a deep pain and sense of personal responsibility that comes with it. It was damn hard when I had to bury Elmo Jackson, but I can't imagine what it must be like for you." He faltered for a moment and moved to sit next to Starsky on the edge of the hospital bed.

It was an awkward sight, the large dark Captain teetering on the edge of the bed, Starsky sitting up in the bed, hiding his face from view by gazing at the wall.

Dobby placed his hand on Starsky's slumped shoulder as he continued. "You two had such an intense bond, it was something special and amazing to see from the outside. The way you guys worked together and just the cohesion you had. I have never seen anything like it, and I probably won't see anything like it again. But, Starsky, you have to understand, you have to let go now; you have to do what you can to live your life for the both of you."

"But I love him," Starsky sobbed.

"I know, but you can't stop living just because he is gone. Hutch wouldn't want you to go on like this--"

"I don't want to go on at all."

Dobby closed his eyes and gripped the shoulder little tighter at that response. He didn't want to ask the next question, but knew he had to. "Is this what that was?"

"Yes-No. I don't even know anymore." Placing both his hands over his face, Starsky leaned forward and let go of what little control he had over his tears.

Dobby shifted and caught him by the shoulders, encircling him in a protective bear hug. As he moved his hand to rub comforting circles on his detective's back, he allowed Starsky to cry himself to sleep.

The next morning Dobby informed Starsky he was pulling him from the roster, then took away his gun and badge. He could have them both back, the large man had advised, but only after a psychologist was willing to say he was fit for active duty. Then the captain employed Huggy Bear to be become Starsky's unofficial babysitter. And, although Starsky still wasn't sure if the overdose was going to be on his record, he quickly found that he really didn't care.

Starsky let out a heavy sigh and peeled himself out of bed. Allowing himself a stretch and a yawn, he made his way the bathroom. Today was his first day back at work since Hutch. The shrink had finally signed off on him returning to active duty. It felt a little bit like the first day of school.

After relieving himself, he leaned over the sink, splashing cold water on his neck and face, leaving his beard dripping. He removed the prescription bottle from the medicine cabinet, and

threw back one of the small, white pills, followed by a handful of water from the sink. He ignored his reflection in the mirror, having already had his fill of himself for the day. Another yawn escaped on his way to the kitchen, where he busied himself making a pot of coffee before settling at the table with a cup and opening the black composition book that was resting on the tabletop. Sitting quietly he began to write, as he had so many other times over the last three months.

Hey Hutch,

I am going back to work today, officially. I am supposed to be getting a new partner, too. I don't really know how I feel about that yet. It all feels so strange. Like I'm walking around in a weird dream and I just keep on waiting to wake up.

I just want to wake up.

You dad called me. Left me three messages since last week. I haven't gotten up enough energy to call him back yet. I haven't seen him since, shit, well, that weekend in February we spent cleaning out your place. I don't know why he would call me now.

I kept all your flannel shirts and a couple of your jackets. It helps, you know. Makes me feel like I still have some piece of you. I think Huggy knows. He gave me a funny look when I wore that red flannel one you always were wearing. I could tell he knew it was yours. He didn't say anything about it, though.

Speaking of Huggy, between him and Dobby I rarely get a moment to myself anymore. I guess that's what happens when you inadvertently try to commit suicide. I swear it wasn't deliberate. I just wanted to forget. You can understand that, can't you?

I miss you. I don't know what else to say besides that.

Letting out a sigh, Starsky shut the notebook. He pushed it back to the center of the table as he stood. He wasn't ready for today, but he couldn't put off the inevitable any longer.

Chapter 3

Darkness was all he knew. His body felt fluid, as if he was a liquid river flowing through a world of air. He heard no noise, except for a strange beeping. His body felt heavy and weightless at the same time. Trying to move his arms and legs, he quickly found that they weighed too much. His muscles were sore and his body fatigued.

He was so tired.

He focused his attention on opening his eyes and found even that to be a struggle. He had a fleeting thought that he had felt this way before, but it quickly left him. The beeping once again filled his ears.

Why was it so familiar?

Refocusing on opening his eyes, he found he didn't have the strength to do it just yet, so he relaxed a little. He was warm and comfortable on whatever it was he lay on, and opening his eyes didn't seem such a priority anymore.

The beeping filled his ears, but he found it didn't disturb him. It was soft, steady, and oddly comforting. He tried to concentrate on what it could be, and where he had heard it before, and like so many times before, he came up with nothing. He tried to focus on how long he had been here or even what had happened to him, but thinking about that always left his head hurting and an emptiness in his heart.

He remembered nothing.

He felt something grip his... What was the name of it again? Hand? That sounded right; someone was holding his hand.

"Come on, kiddo," a soft familiar voice coaxed. "I know you're awake."

The grip on his hand tightened, followed by another touch. Someone was rubbing his arm.

"Come on, Michael. Let dad see those eyes of yours."

Michael struggled to comply and once he did, he was met with a warm smile from a man sitting in a chair next his bed. The man was somewhere in his sixties and average looking, dressed casually in khakis and a navy blue sweater. Both his white hair and beard were short and clean, and he wore reading glasses. He seemed kind, and Michael felt safe and at ease.

"That's it, kiddo." The man reached up to smooth a hand through Michael's hair before leaning forward to place a kiss on his bandaged forehead. "Good morning, sleepyhead."

Michael stared at him; blinking drowsily, he tried to recall who he was. He had seen him before; he knew that much for sure. He and a woman had been fixtures at his bedside since the day he regained consciousness. But he couldn't remember his name. Who was he?

As if to answer Michael's thoughts, the man smiled again. "I know you are used to seeing Mom this early, but she had a hair appointment. So you get me instead."

He was given another warm smile as the man kissed his forehead once more and then their intertwined hands. Michael reflexively swallowed and closed his eyes. Then he remembered. The woman was his mother, and this man was his father. The memory was both comforting and troublesome, because something about this was wrong, but he couldn't place what.

Michael felt exhausted. The effort of trying to remember, paired with opening and closing his eyes, took all the energy he had. He closed his eyes and let his exhaustion pull him back to unconsciousness.

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Daniel Bennett watched as his son fall asleep and, once again, felt an overwhelming sense of frustration.

Three months. It had been three months since his son had been found lying in an abandoned warehouse next to the body of a deceased police officer. Both young men had been abducted, held, and tortured. The cop had been shot and killed, his own son brain damaged and left for dead.

Everything about the situation remained a mystery. They had no idea who had committed the horrible crime or why. As far as Daniel knew, the police still had no leads, and there was no connection to link Michael and the detective to each other or their captor prior to the incident. As sad as it was, everything about the random crime seemed to be just that, random.

Daniel's heart felt heavy from recalling the events that led to this son's hospitalization. Although he was grateful that his son had survived, he felt more than a little grief to think that someone else's did not. He couldn't help but think about how blessed they were to have their son alive, even given the circumstances, when another man's life was so brutally taken.

While Daniel was not religious man, he found himself praying for peaceful eternal sleep for Detective Kenneth Hutchinson and closure for the family and friends he left behind. How must they be feeling right now? Losing a friend, a brother, a son?

Nevertheless, it wasn't as though his son had escaped unscathed. Because of the brain injury Michael had sustained, their beautiful, brilliant son had lost all of his verbal and motor functions and was dependent upon the nurses and hospital staff for taking care of his every need.

There had been surgeries when their son was first rescued, too numerous to count, but every single one necessary to keep Michael alive. The most memorable one had been when the doctors went in to alleviate the pressure on his brain.

Brain surgery was scary to read about, but terrifying when it was something that was happening to your kid. And after that last surgery, the doctors had warned them that the probability of Michael awakening from the coma was slim to none. There had just been too much damage to his brain.

Michael had remained in a coma until a week ago, when suddenly, unexpectedly, he had opened his eyes. Daniel smiled at the memory. That was their Michael, always trying to prove everyone wrong.

Since awakening, the doctors and neurologists cautioned both parents not to quickly judge his abilities, that the brain had amazing ways of healing itself, don't expect too much but don't hold too high of expectations. *Give it time.* That was what they said. The hospital would provide the physical supports needed to keep their son's body stable. Only time would tell to what extent his body, and brain, would heal.

It was understood that Michael might never have the same level of physical or cognitive functioning again. But regardless, one thing remained clear, Michael had a lot of rehab in front of him before anything would be set in stone.

Daniel rubbed his hand over his eyes as he leaned back in his chair. The whole ordeal was so emotionally exhausting and on days like this, it seemed overwhelming.

Crossing his arms, he glanced at the clock on the wall. His wife would be back within the hour and her presence would provide welcome respite to all his painful contemplations. In the meantime, he tried to make peace with his scattered thoughts and watched his son sleep.

Chapter 4

May 20, 1978

He could hear the whispers. He only pretended he couldn't.

Sitting at his desk, trying to concentrate on reading the report in front of him, Starsky found himself focusing on something else entirely. Everyone was looking at him; he could feel it. Sneaking looks when they thought he wasn't paying attention. Looks they were taking to pass judgment on his abilities. They all seemed to be waiting for something.

Waiting for *him* to do something.

It wasn't enough that there was plenty of whispers and gossip going around about Starsky these days. No, apparently they wanted some action from him, too. Like his life wasn't enough of a side show already. Dobey did his best to nip it in the bud when he was aware of who was starting the gossip, and did his best at covering Starsky's ears when he didn't. Starsky still heard most of it though.

The kinds of things they were saying should have made him angry, but they didn't. *Shit*, most of it was true anyway.

Starsky groaned as he, once again, tried to focus on the report in front of him. The words were all running together and he had no desire to understand what they meant.

Fuck it.

He sighed in resignation and scribbled his signature at the bottom. He hadn't written it, but he was sure that his partner, Billy Cooper, did all the details justice.

It was strange being in the old squad room without Hutch. Everything looked completely different and, yet, exactly the same. The coffee machine and filing cabinets were still neighbors, at home next to Dobey's office door. The room still housed the same number of desks, although they were in much different order now.

Starsky no longer took up residence right outside the Captain's door, where Hutch and he had spent so much time. Instead, he and his new partner had been relocated to the northwest corner of the room. Dobby had thought that the change in scenery would help ease his hurt, and Starsky played along, letting his superior believe that it did. However, there were so many memories and feelings to contend with, Dobby could have moved his desk to the moon and it wouldn't have mattered.

Starsky was haunted by memories.

Everywhere he looked, everything he recalled was connected in some way to Hutch. At home, work, and even driving in the Torino. Day after day, he was assaulted with memories of the past. Everything always came back to Hutch.

They had known each other since their academy days and had been lovers for almost as long. Spend over a decade of your life wrapped up in someone both personally and professionally and you forget how to separate. You forget how to function as a single person.

Starsky gathered the report; making his way across the room, he threw it in Captain Dobby's inbox before filling a coffee mug and taking his seat again. He rubbed at his beard and then his eyes.

From day one, Dobby had been withholding the details of Hutch's murder investigation from Starsky. He was too afraid that it would throw him off track when he was only starting to get back on his feet after losing Hutch.

As far as the investigation went, they didn't have much; Starsky knew that from a few secret glances at the files. Everything was at a complete standstill. Donovan and O'Reilly, the two seasoned detectives who had been assigned the case, were hopeful that their luck would soon be changing. Michael Bennett had recently shocked everyone and had come out of his coma.

The two officers had gone down to interview the man a few days after he had gained consciousness, only to be sent away empty-handed. Michael Bennett was in a semi-vegetative state and completely non-verbal. The doctors were hopeful that he would come out of it and regain at least some of his skills, but they were completely convinced that he wouldn't remember a thing. He was the one lead on the case, a *witness* to the crime, and he couldn't give them anything. He couldn't even remember his own name.

If Starsky was honest with himself, he was angry about it. He was even angrier with himself for not having the energy or the balls to stand up and demand to be put on the case. He should be doing *something*. Instead, he found himself incapable of doing *anything*. It wasn't some stranger who had been tortured, beaten, and then killed. It was Hutch. *His* Hutch. The crime scene photos alone still gave him nightmares.

Exhausted, both mentally and physically, Starsky wondered how much longer he could keep up the facade of normalcy. Without his best friend by his side, there just didn't seem to be a point to any of it.

"Can't keep doing this," he mumbled absently into his half full coffee cup.

"Um, what's that, Dave?" Cooper looked up suddenly and assessed him uncomfortably from the other side of the desk.

Starsky looked up, startled. He hadn't intended to say his thought out loud. "Uh... Nothing." He dismissed the question.

Cooper offered him a shrug and returned to his paperwork. He was used to Starsky mumbling nonsense to himself by now.

Starsky glanced nervously around the squad room. There were those damn looks again, from his *brother* cops. Dobey could silence the chatter, but he couldn't throw a mask over the stares. The expressions that made Starsky feel about two feet tall. The ones that verified that he shouldn't be there anymore. That maybe, just maybe, he should be an inpatient at Cabrillo State. After all, wasn't that what happened to people who tried to kill themselves?

Starsky fidgeted in his chair and took a sip of his coffee. The caffeine was too much for him, his hands were already shaking and he felt ready to crawl out of his skin but he drank it anyway. He needed to do something normal. He needed to feel *normal*.

Cooper sat calmly on the opposite side of the desk, working away on a report. All business and seemly unfazed by the stares and the whispers. How could Cooper not hear them? They were practically *shouting*.

The room was suddenly too small. Starsky's body was shaky and his palms sweaty. As his vision blurred, he did the only thing he could think of.

"Hey Cooper, how about a ride?"

XX

It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining, not too hot and not too cold. Just perfect. Well, perfect except for one thing.

Starsky squinted against the rays of sun assaulting him through the windshield. The kid really needed to think about tinting his windows. He grabbed his aviator sunglasses from the front pocket of his red flannel shirt, a hand-me-down from Hutch, and plopped them on his face.

It had been a strange few weeks, Starsky mused, as Cooper drove the well-worn back roads of the warehouse district.

Billy Cooper, although no Kenneth Hutchinson, was a solid guy. Seven years Starsky's junior, the kid had made the transition to plain clothes around the time of Hutch's death, and he was a damn good cop. Cooper ran investigations by the book and completed reports on time, quickly becoming a favorite of Dobey.

Starsky liked him well enough, even though he had pretty much ignored him since becoming partners almost a month ago. The kid left him alone and didn't give him any static about his current mental capabilities, which Starsky was grateful for. But Starsky did have one complaint, though—well, actually two.

The kid called him 'Dave'. Not Starsky, not Detective, not even partner. Just Dave. Hutch would have never pulled shit like that. The second complaint was that the kid never let him drive, instead forcing them to shove themselves into in his tiny, 1972 Dotson.

The car was a two-door, pea green disaster. Full of dents and dings that come from parking too close to the cars in the grocery store parking lot, and it was just as cramped for a grown man to sit in as it sounded.

Starsky found himself with absolutely no leg-room, and he was barely pushing six feet. God only knew how Cooper folded himself into it at six foot four. Hutch would have loved Cooper's damn car. Starsky hated it.

"Hey, Cooper?" Starsky glanced at his watch. "Whadda ya say we knock off early today?"

Cooper took his gaze off the road and looked at Starsky in shock, as if he just asked him to shoot his own mother. "But it's only 3:45."

Starsky sighed and swiped his hand over his eyes. *Christ*, could the kid be anymore square? "Yeah, so?" he responded patiently.

The kid made no move to continue the conversation, obviously assuming his one sentence contribution was enough.

Starsky let out another sigh, this time making sure that it was hearty and would be heard by the driver of the vehicle.

"Yeah, well..." Starsky paused, his attention momentarily drawn to a tall blonde guy wearing a flannel shirt walking down the sidewalk. He looked so much like Hutch that Starsky had to remind himself that it wasn't. And once they passed him, a good look at the blonde's face quickly snuffed out his suspicion.

"You were saying something?" Cooper prompted, noncommittally.

"Yeah... No..." Starsky took another pause to shake the sidewalk blonde out of his mind. "Yeah, Cooper, look, there ain't nothin' going on today. I don't think that knocking off a couple hours early is gonna hurt anything."

It was Cooper's turn to sigh. "I don't know, Dave."

Starsky rolled his eyes. Maybe this request really was the equivalent of asking the kid to shoot his own mother. But Starsky decided he didn't care. The car was too small, and he was feeling claustrophobic. He could feel his palms start to sweat and his heartbeat was skipping a little too fast. He needed to get out.

"Listen, Cooper. Knock off or don't knock off, it doesn't really matter to me. Just pull in the space over there and let me out, okay?"

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Cooper gave in, switching lanes quickly and negotiating his small car in the open parallel spot. Throwing the car into park, he turned. "What are you doing, Dave?"

Starsky really wished he would stop using that tone of voice; it was too authoritative for such a young kid. If Cooper wasn't careful, he was going to end up just as sarcastic and arrogant as...

Starsky forced himself to abandon the train of thought as quickly as it came. This was neither the time nor the place to be having a meltdown. He plastered on a smile that he hoped would put Cooper at ease.

"You can just leave me here. I am clocking out for the day."

"But you don't have a car. I could drop you off at home if—"

"NO!" Starsky interrupted, a bit more loudly than he intended to. He forced out a friendly chuckle to soften the word. "No, Cooper. That's fine. Huggy's is only a few block from here, and I could use the exercise."

Cooper eyed him warily, obviously deciding whether or not he should let him leave.

Hutch would have never been that obvious, Starsky mused, then forced himself to think of something else. Scratching at his beard, he assessed Cooper. Starsky wasn't stupid; he knew why Dobey had decided to partner him with such a particular and responsible kid. Cooper may have looked like your normal everyday undercover cop, but Starsky saw him for what he really was, another babysitter charged with keeping tabs on him and reporting back to Dobey.

"Okay," Cooper finally complied. "But you're going straight to Huggy's, right?"

Just another fucking babysitter.

If Cooper had been Hutch, Starsky would have told him to stuff it, or maybe he would have responded with a sarcastic 'yes, Mom'. But Cooper wasn't Hutch, so Starsky found himself forcing a polite smile and nodding.

"Alright, then. See you tomorrow, Dave."

Starsky didn't reciprocate the farewell. Instead, he jumped out of the car, slamming the door shut forcefully. He offered up a wave, then turned and started walking.

He deliberately didn't look back.

Chapter 5

After leaving Cooper's car, Starsky found that he didn't want to go Huggy's after all, instead opting for some time alone. Not that he had anything against Huggy, but he had tolerated enough babysitters for one day.

He found himself wandering the sidewalks of downtown, fitting himself in with the crowds of people that always seemed to swarm the sidewalks. Some of them were tourists, eager to catch an up-close glimpse of Bay City. Others were locals on their way to their various destinations.

None of the people seemed to pay any attention to Starsky, and he ignored them completely, losing himself in the impassiveness that comes from avoiding your own thoughts. Everything just so *wrong*, and he felt like a shadow of a person. Like maybe, he really didn't exist. His mind was blank and his body felt numb.

Was any of this even real?

He wasn't sure how long he walked, but suddenly he found himself standing outside his home. Confused, he rapidly turned his head. Then turned around in a quick circle, not quite believing what he was seeing. There was his Torino, parked in his normal spot on the street outside his brown townhouse. And next to his car was the blue Honda that belonged to his neighbor, Steve.

Everything appeared to be normal. The street lights dimly lit the dark neighborhood. The street was quiet and calm. The only sound was the gentle, spring breeze rustling through the trees.

What the fuck?

Had he really walked the distance between downtown and his apartment? No, that was impossible. He just left Cooper, what, ten minutes ago. Hadn't he?

Shit.

It was dark out. How long had it been dark out? He glanced at his watch and was shocked to see the time. 11:24.

Shit. Shit.

Starsky took a quick check of himself, rubbing his body with both his hands, before wrapping his arms around himself, hugging tightly. He felt okay. He was tired and his feet hurt, but he had no major complaints other than that.

How had so much time passed without him being aware of what he was doing? He was taken over by a familiar sense of anxiety, and he forced himself to breath normally.

It was okay. Everything is okay.

He just blacked out for a little. No big deal. Right?

Wrong.

He struggled to recall what time exactly he had left Cooper. It was pushing 4 o'clock that much he knew for sure. He had left Cooper, walked the two blocks to Huggy's, and then decided not to go in. Then he... Then he what? What had he done after that?

Walked, evidently.

He forced a few deep calming breaths, holding himself a little more tightly, and made the trek from the sidewalk up the stairs to his front door.

I'm losing my fucking mind.

Unlocking the door, he entered his townhouse, finding it dark and uninviting. He turned on a few lights as he made his way to the fridge to grab a beer.

Leaning against his counter, he cracked the can open and took two long drinks. He had a fleeting thought that he really should eat something, but quickly dismissed it. His stomach was turning from anxiety, and the beer was already making him feel sick.

Fuck.

He took a few more sips before abandoning his beer on the counter and moving to sit heavily in a chair at his kitchen table. Starsky reached over and pulled his battered notebook from under a pile of old, discarded newspapers, and his unopened mail. He opened it and began to write furiously.

Hey Hutch,

I feel like I am losing my mind. I don't think I can do this anymore.

I just want it to be over.

I don't know what to do.

Everyone keeps telling me that I need to move on--that I need to let go of you, that I can't keep doing this shit to myself. I know they are right but, Jesus, babe. I DON'T know how to do that. I don't know how to live without you. I don't think I even can.

I am so, so sorry. I know I never said that to you before, but I am. I never should have waited so long to look for you. I never should have let you leave that day. I should have stopped you or gone with you.

I should have done something.

Anything.

I'm sorry that you went the way you did. I'm sorry I didn't find you in time. I'm just so sorry.

A few thick tears dotted the words he had just written, and Starsky couldn't continue. Too many tears were blurring his vision, and he found himself gulping for air between sobs. He slammed

the notebook shut and shoved it across his table in sorrow. Writing in a stupid notebook wasn't going to bring Hutch back. It wasn't going to change anything.

Hutch was gone, he was going crazy, and there wasn't anything anyone could do about it.

Starsky stood and walked to his bedroom, kicking his shoes off on the way. He didn't bother removing his clothes, instead dropping his body heavily on the mattress. Burying his head in the nearest pillow, he sobbed himself into a restless slumber.

XX

The next morning came suddenly.

A small patch of sunlight filtered through a hole in the bedroom curtains, but it came unnoticed by the still form in the bed. Starsky jumped, startled awake by the sound of a passing car backfiring. Ignoring his reflection in the mirror above him, he slowly pushed himself up to sit on the edge of the bed. His face felt tender and his throat raw and scratchy from crying so violently the night before.

He let out a groan before he rubbed at his beard and cleared his throat. Another night of unstable behavior that hadn't changed anything.

It hadn't changed a damn thing.

Starsky stood and slowly pulled yesterday's clothes off, stripping to his boxers before walking to his bathroom. He opened his medicine cabinet and grabbed his morning dose of antidepressant. He stared at the tiny white pill as he held it in the palm of his left hand, an abrupt moment of clarity entering his head.

Why did he even bother taking them? They obviously weren't doing him any good. He closed his hand around the pill and squeezed. He could feel it turning into a chalky powder in the palm of his hand.

Why?

His body began to shake as he was overtaken by intense anger. He was a little taken aback with the sudden all-encompassing emotion. He hadn't known he could still feel it with such intensity.

What was he doing?

Opening his fist, he stared at the pill. It was thoroughly crushed and sticking to both sides of his palm. He looked up and assessed his image in the bathroom mirror. The eyes that stared back at him were of someone he didn't recognize.

What the fuck was he doing?

He had asked himself that question so many times over the last three months, but he hadn't really had an answer. He hadn't really taken the time to figure out an answer. This wasn't him. None of this was him. He wasn't a victim. Hutch may be gone but *he, he* was *alive*. And he sure as shit wasn't the kind of person who just crumbled when faced with tragedy.

Too long.

This had gone on for too long. He had allowed himself to be so wrapped up in guilt and grief over losing his best friend that he had stopped paying attention to anything and everything around him. Two things were suddenly clear. He couldn't move on, and he couldn't go back. The past was too painful for him to be constantly reflecting on, and his future seemed sketchy and unsure.

Starsky was sure of one thing, however. With Hutch gone, he didn't want to do this anymore. He couldn't do this anymore. It hurt too much, and his heart just wasn't in it. This sudden knowledge gave him a feeling of freedom, and terrified him at the same time.

He could go *anywhere*. He could be *anything*. It would be so easy. Just leave this life and everyone behind. Hell, he could go rob banks in Bolivia if he really wanted to. The idea was intoxicating. He felt like he was waking up after being asleep for a long time. It was peculiar and, yet, liberating at the same time.

Turning on the bathroom faucet to rinse the demolished pill off his hand, he found that he suddenly knew what he had to do.

XX

May 21, 1978

Captain Dobe was not now and never had been a fan of working weekends. It was just another thing that was required of him of as superior officer.

This particular Saturday had found him in his office completing the various clerical tasks that were sometimes required as a captain: signing off on various reports, ensuring that documents were in order for cases that would finally make it to court, and other clerical work. Dobe hated clerical work, especially when it deprived him of a Saturday with his family.

Under normal circumstances, when there weren't any huge investigations going down, Saturdays were something that the Dobe family reserved for each other. Edith always planned special family outings for those days: maybe a movie or an afternoon at the park together, followed by a nice family meal. It was the only real quality time the four of them got anymore.

The kids were growing up so fast, and their weeks tended to fill quickly with school and various afterschool activities and sports they seemed to be so interested in these days. Not to mention their busy social calendars.

Dobey shook his head; he didn't remember being that busy when he was Cal or even Rosie's age. But then again, the world was changing and so was everyone in it.

A quiet knock on the doorway broke through the Captain's thoughts.

"Come in," he mumbled gruffly shuffling papers around his desk. When he looked up he was surprised to see the man lingering in the doorway. "Starsky." Dobey motioned ushered him in the room with a wave of his hand. "What are you doing here? You and Cooper aren't on the roster for today."

Dobey leaned back in his chair and assessed his detective. The boy looked tired and his eyes were puffy, but he had a determined look in his eye that was reminiscent of the Starsky he once knew. Starsky didn't say a word, instead reaching his hand out and depositing a small, white envelope on his desk.

"What is this?"

"My resignation."

Dobey opened his mouth to protest but Starsky continued, "Effective the day after we find Hutch's killer."

"*Starsky*," Dobey sighed in exasperation. He found himself unsure of the proper thing to say.

"I want the case."

"No," Dobey responded firmly; he wiped his hands over his eyes and rested his head in his hands. "Dave. I can't allow that."

"Then, I'll do it on my own."

Dobey let out a sigh. He leaned heavily on his elbows and rubbed at his eyes once again. "Why are you doing this, Starsky? Why can't you just let this go and move on with your life? Look at you; you're doing well. You finally have your feet back under you. You're back at work. I thought you were taking steps to getting your life back."

Starsky shook his head and laughed sarcastically. "Is that what I got back? My life? Because it sure as shit doesn't feel like that."

"Give it time--"

"I've given it time!" Starsky exploded. "How much more time is it gonna take, Cap?! Because when I wake up, all I can think about is Hutch and that he's gone. I go to sleep and all I can dream about is how he died. Alone. Waiting for me to find him." Starsky's voice broke on the last word, and he had to turn away to rein in his emotions.

Dobey looked at Starsky sadly; he opened his mouth, hoping that the correct comforting words would come out. Instead, he found himself saying nothing. Disgusted with himself, Dobey

turned his head away from Starsky. HE was the superior officer. This was HIS detective. He should have the right words to help heal the situation. But he didn't.

"Captain. I couldn't help him... I couldn't save him. But I can do this... I can get justice for him. For his family... For myself." Starsky paced in front of the desk, throwing his hands up; there was a level of desperation in his voice as he continued. "Don't you see? This is it. This is closure. Everyone around me has been pushing for me to make it better. To get my shit together and live my life. Well, this is it. This is the first step. I have to do this if I am gonna be able to move on."

Dobey stared into his detective's teary eyes. He had the feeling that he was losing what little control he had over the situation. But this was what he had wanted, wasn't it? For Starsky to snap out of it. To show that he was still in there somewhere; to show that he could still care about something. But now that he was, Dobby felt an overwhelming sense of fear.

Could he trust Starsky to run a legit investigation? Could he trust that he wouldn't push too hard or hurt anyone in the process? No. No, he could not. And there was the secret of Hutchinson's past to worry about.

What would Starsky do if he discovered the truth about his partner and what he had been doing? Starsky and Hutch served very important roles in each other's lives as detectives. They were each other's moral compasses, one pulling the other back from the brink when they were on the verge of doing something they wouldn't be able to take back. If Starsky learned the truth, without Hutch by his side, would anyone be able to pull Starsky back from doing something unthinkable?

Dobey let out a thick sigh. This decision would change everything, and only time would tell if it would be for better or worse. Dobby didn't want to admit it, but he knew Starsky was right. Giving Starsky Hutch's case was the only way he was going to be able to heal and move on, and the only chance they had of solving Hutch's murder. It wouldn't matter how long it took, how many leads he needed to chase down, or how many rocks he need to look under. If anyone could bring Hutch's killer to justice, it would be Starsky.

Then, against his better judgment, Dobby found himself nodding. "Okay."

Starsky looked at him clearly surprised.

"But," Dobby added firmly, pointing a finger at Starsky. "You keep me informed. I want updates daily. And Cooper stays. He works with you. Understood?"

Starsky gave him a small, triumphant smile. "Understood."

Chapter 6

May 23, 1978

Like so many days before, this particular Monday afternoon found the Bennett family in Michael's hospital room.

The sun was shining through the windows and the chirping of birds could be heard, drifting in from the outside trees. A sense of calmness and security had enveloped the family that they hadn't been able to enjoy before.

"That's it."

Daniel looked up from his novel as he heard the soft and inviting tone of his wife's voice.

There had been a time, within the last three months, Daniel had thought they would never be able to have days like this, and now that he was faced with one, he was doing his best to collect and imprint every single moment in his memory.

Sherry was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, perched over the small, plastic table that was connected to the bedside. She was walking Michael through the process of playing a simple memory game. It was the kind of game Daniel recalled from when his son was much younger. One upside-down card had been turned over while the player tried to recall where its mate lay. This game served two purposes for his son now: to challenge Michael cognitively, and to help him with the dexterity in his hands and fingers.

"Good job, Michael," Sherry praised as their son slowly moved his hand to turn over the suspected mate to the card that lay overturned before him.

His movements were slow, but his dexterity was coming along, and he was no longer plagued by the violent shaking of his muscles that protested such a simple movement.

"Great, honey!" Sherry clapped her hands and planted a kiss on Michael's still swollen forehead, as the card he picked was turned over to reveal the matching apple.

Michael looked to her, his blue eyes glistening with pride.

There was just something about Michael's eyes, Daniel mused. They looked different. But then again, with everything his son had endured, a slight difference in eye color wasn't the only thing that looked different.

Michael's head and face were still very swollen, the worst of this reflected on his forehead and by his ears. Daniel blamed the residual swelling on the numerous surgeries that his son had undergone after just being found. The rest of Michael's face, neck, and face were peppered with dark, angry bruising. It was amazing how long it could take to body to erase the confirmations of trauma that it had once endured.

Recently, though, Daniel had found himself anxious for the swelling and bruising to fade completely. He was ready for a more familiar image of his son to emerge.

Michael was doing very well. He was showing steady improvement. The life support machine was no longer needed, and the other items of medical equipment were slowly starting to disappear from his bedside.

Michael was gradually regaining his motor skills and control over his body, as well. He was able to move his limbs readily and independently, and prepping him to learn to walk again was the main focus of Michael's physical therapist as of late. Daniel and Sherry were looking forward to seeing their son take his first independent steps since the accident.

Michael's cognitive skills were coming along, too. They weren't returning as quickly as his motor skills, but he was still making giant leaps and bounds. He had already surpassed the expectations of the doctors, and he was continuing to make improvements.

They had the daily rigorous physical and cognitive therapies to thank for Michael's continued recovery. He had a whole team of specialists dedicated to helping him regain his skills. And at every new development, Daniel and Sherry would overjoyed. As proud of their boy as they had been when he showed the same developments as an infant.

Now, if Michael would only say something. Anything. He didn't have to sit up and recite the declaration of independence in its entirety, a simple 'mom' or 'dad' would do. Michael hadn't said a word since waking, and despite working closely with a speech pathologist, he had made no headway. Verbally, he was at a complete stand still.

And then there was the worrisome vacant expression that sometimes took residence on his face. Sometimes it appeared to Daniel that Michael was looking at them as if they were strangers. Some days it was like he didn't recognize them at all. The doctors and nurses assured him that this wasn't the case. Vacant expressions were to be expected from patients who had suffered traumatic brain injuries. It would get better.

But even so, Michael's lack of speech and the vacant expression worried Daniel more than he wanted to admit. He was recovering and Daniel was thankful for how far he had come, but, damn it, if some days it just didn't seem like enough.

Daniel wondered how time could pass so slowly and yet so quickly at the same time. He wanted his son back. He wanted to be able to have passionate debates about the state of the world, to take him fishing, to sit on the porch together smoking a cigar and enjoying a beer.

"Okay, baby." Daniel smiled at Sherry's prompt. "Can you find the card that matches the tree?"

Michael's face revealed his intense concentration as he assessed the overturned cards. He regarded them for a few minutes before purposefully reaching his hand out once again.

"Great job, baby!" Sherry exclaimed once again, and Daniel abandoned his novel on the table next to his chair.

Leaning back in his seat, Daniel silently regarded his wife and his son interacting. As happy as the moment was, it was hard on him to sit on the sidelines, powerless, knowing that he could do nothing to heal his son. It was a situation that made him feel helpless. And as a man and as a father, helplessness was never something he was entirely comfortable with. He needed to be in a situation that he could *something* about. One that he could fix.

Sherry was so much better at dealing with situations like this. Circumstances where patience and reassurance were so heavily needed. She could spend all day with their nonverbal son and carry on whole one-sided conversations, maintaining her warm and cheery demeanor throughout the day. She was warm and gentle, and she never demanded too much or too little from their injured son.

Daniel watched as Sherry smiled at Michael, who stared intently at the downturned cards. She was so patient. Always letting him have all of the time that he required. She was a marvelous mother, but then again she always had been. Motherhood had always come so easy to her, and she had always just known what the right thing was to say in every situation when it came to their boy.

It had always been Daniel who had struggled with maintaining the balance between expressing his love and requiring performance out of his son. Not to say that he wasn't engaged and loving, but he had always upheld certain expectations when it came to when things should be concluded or left behind. Even now, he found himself with silent timelines for when his son should be meeting his recovery milestones.

The years had softened his expectations when it came to his son, and their relationship had grown beyond that of father and son. They had become friends. And Daniel found himself missing that friendship most of all.

Sherry looked up from Michael and the cards. They made eye contact and she offered Daniel a heartfelt smile and a look that told him to quit tormenting himself. Sherry always seemed to know what to do when it came to him, too.

Daniel sighed and retrieved his book from the table. As he resumed reading, he forced himself to abandon his worry.

Chapter 7

May 23, 1978

Cooper was feeling impatient. And a little bored.

It was late and he was alone, sitting in the driver's seat of his Dotson in the dark, abandoned, grocery store parking lot. He let out a sigh and glanced at his watch. It was close to midnight, and he was tired of waiting around.

Captain Dobey had summoned him for a private meeting, and suggested that they meet in the non-descript location where the two of them weren't likely to be recognized. Although, the grocery store venue was a new development, Cooper was used to having these secret meetings with Dobey. They had been having private weekly meetings for some time now. During which, they only discussed one topic: Starsky.

Cooper still remembered his excitement when Dobey had called him into his office that initial day and instructed him that he was going to be Starsky's new partner. The thought of being able to work a beat in homicide as a plainclothes detective was a huge step up, not to mention the opportunity to work with a detective who had such a prodigious reputation.

Everyone who had passed through the homicide department had heard the stories of Starsky and Hutch. Their arrested records and the stats on their solved cases were incredible.

At the time, Cooper had thought of all the things he could learn from Starsky. He was thrilled at the presentation of such a great opportunity. That enthusiasm was quickly dashed, however, when Dobey advised him as to why he was to be partnered with Starsky.

Cooper was there for one for one reason, and one reason only: to keep tabs on Starsky. He was to keep Starsky on the sidelines during investigations while still making him feel like he was a main player. This strategy served an important purpose according to Dobey. "To control the inevitable train wreck." Dobey then gave Cooper explicit instructions to document Starsky's every move.

It had annoyed Cooper at first; he didn't like to think that his career had boiled down to being a glorified babysitter for another detective who couldn't handle the job anymore. It was a waste of his time, not to mention a waste of his potential. And then there were the questions. Why let Starsky return to work at all, if Dobey had no intention of ever letting him do anything?

Then another more serious thought had entered his mind. Why bring a detective back if he was so clearly incapable of doing his job? None of it made any sense. But Cooper found himself accepting the new partnership anyway.

Feelings and questions since calmed, Cooper had grown accustomed to his role in the new partnership. He found that most days he didn't think twice about making his notes and submitting them to Dobey. Starsky's detached and sometimes erratic behavior cured him of any negativity he may have harbored about doing so.

Cooper didn't think for a second that Starsky was dense enough to not have at least some sort of inclination of what was going on, even with his current precarious mental state. But he never called him out on it. He was just doing his due diligence. Besides, Cooper had his career to think about, too.

Cooper let out a breath and started tapping the steering wheel of his car. *Any second now*, he thought. He had been waiting for almost 20 minutes and Dobey still hadn't shown. He was starting to worry that maybe Dobey had forgotten all about this meet.

Yet again, he scanned the parking lot. There were a handful of empty vehicles parked sporadically, but none that he recognized. He blew out an emphatic breath.

Jesus, what was he doing here?

He jumped as the passenger side door was abruptly pulled open. He looked over to see Captain Dobey bending to enter the vehicle. He was holding a paper grocery bag that was weighed down by unseen contents.

"Shit!" Cooper exclaimed before he thought better of it. "*Where* did you come from?"

Dobey ignored his question, instead asking his own. "You alone?"

"Uh, yeah... Obviously." Cooper lifted his eyebrows and indicated the empty back seat with a confused look. "What's going on?"

Dobey fidgeted, trying desperately for comfort in the car's seat. "I'm putting you and Starsky on the Bennett and Hutchinson investigations," he blurted out.

"*What?*" Cooper was shocked. "But why?"

Dobey sighed, giving up on attaining any comfort in Cooper's passenger seat. The car was just too damn small.

"Because Starsky asked for them."

Cooper scoffed, shocked and little angry. "Seriously? If I ask you for a million dollars would you give it to me?" He looked to Dobey and forced eye contact.

Dobey met the dark eyes with his own and rapidly looked away, focusing his gaze out the windshield on the darkness outside. "Don't be smartass." The response was almost a whisper.

"I thought you partnered us so that I could keep him away from cases and police work, and now you are just handing him his best friend's case!?" Cooper interrogated. Frustrated, he slammed his hands against the steering wheel. He inadvertently hit the horn and it let out a beep, startling both men and making them jump.

The car was silent for a moment before Cooper turned to Dobey, vigor shining in his eyes. "Keep him busy, you said. Run the cases the way I saw fit, but keep Starsky out of the line. Give him something easy to do. Make him feel like he was *contributing*. Carry him. Stick with him until he gives up and walks away. This *isn't* walking away. This is something else!"

Dobey shook his head. "I have my reasons; it had to be done."

"Yeah, right. What about our deal?" Cooper demanded.

Dobey considered the young man for a second. "That still stands. Starsky turned in his resignation, contingent on the closing of Hutch's investigation. You stick it out with Starsky, get him through this case, and you will get what I promised you."

Cooper tightened his lips and stared out the driver side window. He silently considered his options before quickly deciding he didn't really have any. He groaned.

"Fine. But what am I supposed to do here? Run interference? How am I supposed to keep him from jumping off a cliff once he sees the case files? *Jesus Christ!* The guy is already nuts. Talking to himself and scribbling god only knows what in that *fucking* notebook all the time. He's lost it. Everyone can see it; why can't you?"

Dobey didn't respond. The responsibility of David Starsky's sanity and career weighed heavily on him.

"This will kill him, Captain. You know that. He can't handle working this case," Cooper warned.

"I know," Dobby whispered, and questioned himself and his intentions for the millionth time. *Was he doing the right thing?*

"And what's with the sudden secrecy? Why couldn't you just tell me this at our usual meet?"

"I couldn't take any chances that this would be overheard. I don't want any of this coming back to Starsky or anyone else. It is very important that you run this investigation a certain way. You let him think he runs the show, but you do all of the legwork, you hear me?"

Cooper was annoyed, but despite his frustration, he nodded in compliance.

"Good." Dobby handed the paper grocery bag over to Cooper.

"What's this?"

"The case files will be handed over to you and Starsky, officially, sometime next week. Donovan and O'Reilly, they're putting up a fuss." He paused and gestured toward the bag in Cooper's hands. "These are personnel and case documents relating to Detective Hutchinson. They may provide some insight into some things concerning the investigation. Starsky can have access to the others, but these, these stay private." Dobby reached out and touched the bag once again. It almost seemed that he didn't want to give them up.

"Why?" Cooper asked suspiciously. This was wrong. Looking after Starsky was one thing, withholding information was something else completely.

"There are details in here about Detective Hutchinson and his..." Dobby hesitated, shaking his head and searching for the correct word. "His *history* with the department."

"What kind of history?" Cooper probed. He didn't like where this was going.

"Just read the files. And keep them a secret," Dobby demanded. He turned his gaze to the window before he continued, deadly serious. "This is classified information, you understand? You share those files with *no one*. Don't let Starsky see them, period. If he were to discover this information, especially now, it would kill him."

"As opposed to what you're doing right now," Cooper stated sarcastically.

"I am *protecting* him!" Dobby bellowed.

"From what?"

"From himself," Dobby said firmly.

"And the truth," Cooper challenged.

Dobey glared at him. "This is temporary. There is larger picture here, Detective Cooper, and we all have roles to play." He paused. "This is yours."

When Cooper showed no signs of responding, Dobey cracked the door open and exited the vehicle, leaving Cooper, quite literally, holding the bag, and wondering just what the hell he had gotten himself in the middle of.

XX

It had been a long day, and before Cooper's odd meet with Dobey, he had intended to go home, take a nice hot shower, and collapse into bed. Of course, he would have completed his normal covert drive by Starsky's place prior to heading home, just to make sure that the Torino was parked on the street where it belonged, and that the curtain-covered townhouse windows were lit up with the normal amount of light.

He had done this secret practice from day one, always ensuring that the other detective was safe at home before retiring to his own apartment for the night. It hadn't been one of Dobey's requirements, rather, Cooper's own personal obligation.

However, after watching Dobey disappear into the dark parking lot, Cooper found himself drawn to the bag and Dobey's strange behavior surrounding it. The bag had been heavy, both in weight and moral obligation, in that it supposedly contained Detective Hutchinson's departmental secrets.

Why had Dobey entrusted it to him?

Cooper skipped Starsky's place completely, and hastily drove ten miles over the speed limit to get home. He had the odd feeling that he was being watched, and the paper grocery bag made him feel suspicious, but he wasn't sure of what.

Entering his dark apartment, Cooper locked the deadbolt behind him. Turning, he threw both his keys and the paper bag on his kitchen table. The bag made a thumping noise as the heaviness hit the wood and Cooper jumped. He stared at it for a moment before letting out soft chuckle, the ridiculousness of his sudden action lifting his mood. He really needed to lighten up.

Cooper skimmed out of his black jacket, and threw it on the back of a kitchen chair. He glanced at his watch and was dismayed to see the time was 1:35 am. He groaned and debated on whether or not he should just forget the bag for tonight, skip the shower, and head to bed. He was supposed to pick Starsky up at 9 am, and he already knew morning was going to come much too soon.

But Cooper found he couldn't just push that damn bag out of his mind. He grabbed a glass from one of the brown colored kitchen cabinets, filled it with water, and drank greedily before filling it once more and taking a seat at the table.

Mindful of the full water glass, he began pulling items out of the bag. There were files, just like Dobey had said. Thick and brown and rubber-banded together. There looked to be 20 total, and there was a small, handwritten note taped to the cover of the first one. The paper looked worn and it had yellowed with age. But it looked to Cooper like Dobey's writing.

Strange.

The note itself had a name and phone number, or at least it had been a phone number at one time. Now it was unreadable, having been scratched out by someone. The name was odd because of how it had been written: *Handler: Special Agent Thomas Carter.*

Cooper ran his hands through his short hair and scratched at his scalp.

What was going on?

Dobey had been so cryptic, and his secrecy had left Cooper paranoid. The sudden revelation of the files and the note was not helping his outlook. One Bay City detective's death couldn't warrant this much secrecy and mystery.

Could it?

As Cooper worked his way through the files, he was shocked to be privy to the answers to all of those questions and some he hadn't even thought of yet. The details were shocking and almost unbelievable. Suddenly he felt like a detective in a cheesy crime novel, but he wasn't. He had to remind himself that this was *real*.

The sun was starting to peek through his blind-covered windows when Cooper finished reading the last file. He rubbed at his eyes tiredly and a yawn escaped. The clock over his table read 7:57 am. Just enough time for a quick shower and some breakfast before picking up Detective Starsky.

Shit, Starsky.

How much of what Cooper had just learned did he know? The guy was partnered with Hutchinson for eight years. He had to have known *something*. And if he *did* already know, why was Dobey trying so hard to keep things from him?

Cooper didn't know the answers to those particular questions, but he knew one thing with complete certainty: he was in way over his head.

Chapter 8

June 12, 1978

It was a bleary, rain-filled Monday morning when Cooper made the drive from his apartment to Starsky's townhouse. He found himself, for the first time since becoming partnered with the

other detective, wishing that he and Starsky resided closer to each other. Traffic was terrible. Various vehicles were lined up bumper to bumper on the freeway, moving at a snail's pace, and he was in a hurry.

Today was the day that the case files for the Hutchinson and Bennett investigations were officially turned over to him and Starsky. On paper, anyway. Cooper had actually gotten them the night prior at his weekly meet with Dobey, but Starsky wasn't privy to that information.

At the direction of Dobey, Cooper had spent the night looking over both files, not for a break in the case, but for details that might trigger regression in Starsky's improved behavior. Anything Starsky was going to be looking at, Dobey wanted Cooper to have seen first, so that in the event that Starsky couldn't handle it, he would know what to do. Not that he would know what to do in a situation like that Cooper had argued, and Dobey had given him the not-so-valuable advice of 'wing it.' Cooper had not found the statement helpful or nearly as amusing as Dobey had.

Dobey then suggested he and Starsky look at the files in a comfortable environment, somewhere where they could maintain their privacy, in case Starsky had an emotional outburst. He had advised Cooper to invite himself over to Starsky's place with the files. Cooper thought the proposition was a little out of place, and he was pretty sure Starsky had been suspicious when he called and suggested it that morning. But Starsky had agreed, and Cooper found himself driving over to his partner's place, case files riding safely in the back seat.

Not really knowing what else to do, Cooper had kept Starsky close after his grocery store meeting with Dobey, where he had been advised the Hutchinson and Bennett investigations were to be officially turned over, and he had been given unexpected access to Hutchinson's secret files. Per Dobey's warning, Cooper had kept his eyes on Starsky, waiting for hints of the inevitable emotional breakdown by his partner.

It never came.

What did show up was a version of Starsky Cooper had never met before. Gone was the detached, depressed disheveled man. The new Starsky was present and engaged in whatever was placed in front of him. He arrived to work on time and he had even started driving himself, his red Torino once again claiming its spot in front of the metro building.

Even his appearance was different. Starsky had cut his unruly hair into a short, businessman cut, erasing any evidence of his curls. He had kept his dark beard, though, only trimming the unkempt facial hair short and close to his cheeks. Cooper figured Starsky's new attitude and lease on life had to be a show, aimed at one audience member in particular--Captain Dobey.

Starsky wasn't stupid; he knew he couldn't continue to conduct himself the way he had before having the investigation turned over. Dobey would never allow it. And if Starsky had been living under a magnifying glass before, well, now Dobey had him under a microscope.

Cooper had to admit he was pulling for Starsky. He liked him, especially now that he was seeing a glimmer of who Starsky had been before losing Hutch. He wanted things to turn out okay for the guy, and even though Starsky finally seemed ready to stand on his own two feet, Cooper still found himself oddly protective of this partner. A feeling that surpassed Dobey's imposed

obligations. He would do no less, Cooper decided, then to make sure that at the end of this investigation, Starsky would remain as whole as possible, and not just because it was a requirement of his deal with Dobey. No, it was because the more time he spent with the man named David Starsky, the more inclined he became to calling him a friend.

But despite his own comfort in their current situation, Cooper was unsure whether Starsky would consider him a friend. Even though the detective had rallied and pulled himself together in order to work his partner's homicide investigation, there were times when he still looked at Cooper oddly. As if he were a suspect and not to be trusted.

And Cooper, well, he felt like a rat. The thought of secretly reporting to Dobey was weighing heavily on his mind. Then there was his new knowledge of Detective Hutchinson. Cooper found himself wondering just how much of Detective Hutchinson's activities Starsky was aware of. He would have asked, but it wasn't exactly the kind of thing a guy could just drop in conversation.

As of right then, two scenarios were clear to Cooper when it came to Hutchinson's actions. Either Starsky knew and had been sworn to secrecy by his deceased partner, or Hutchinson was a better liar than anyone gave him credit for. And if Starsky really didn't know anything, Cooper certainly didn't want to be the one to disclose it to him. Especially since Dobey had been so quick to warn him about the repercussions of Starsky knowing any of it.

Cooper wondered if Starsky's distrust of everyone around him perhaps unconsciously stemmed from the lack of faith that Dobey seemed to have in him these days. Captain Dobey really didn't give Starsky enough credit. Dobey cared about Starsky; that much was obvious. However, Cooper was starting to wonder if those feelings were clouding his superior's judgment.

It had occurred to Cooper, more than once, that Starsky might have been able to move on with his life, after Hutchinson died, if Dobey wouldn't have let him come back on the force. Maybe he could have left Bay City and done his grieving in private, instead of being held hostage to the past in front of everyone he had known almost his entire adult life. There was just a damn time when you had to let people go. You had to put what faith you could muster into the situation and set them free. Let them live their lives as they were meant to be.

And Starsky wasn't free to live his life; he was stagnate, imprisoned by the past. Dobey was standing by, doing nothing but holding the handcuffs, too focused on the importance of keeping Starsky alive than looking at the quality of life the man had.

The drive took less time than expected; despite the traffic, Cooper arrived at Starsky's home. He parked his Datsun on the curb behind the bright, red Torino in front of the brown townhouse. Pulling the files out of his cluttered back seat, he made the trek up the stairs and knocked on the door.

As he heard Starsky's footsteps from behind the door, he wondered what secrets he would uncover today.

Chapter 9

June 12, 1978

The morning at Starsky's residence was oddly calm and uneventful.

Various paperwork and crime scene photos lay scattered on the coffee table. Starsky had planted himself on his couch. Cooper sat opposite Starsky, cross-legged on the floor, using the coffee table as a makeshift desk.

Starsky let out a heavy, frustrated sigh as he forcefully shut the file that lay on his lap. *What the fuck had those clowns been doing for all these months?*

Starsky had never really cared that much for Donovan and O'Reilly, the previous officers working Hutch and Bennett's case, but he fucking hated them now. Not only had the two delayed his and Cooper's access to the case files, all the while making personal attacks against Starsky, but their documentation and leads on the cases were worth shit. The pair had maintained that they were steadily making new breakthroughs on the case, but seeing their work now, Starsky knew that that assessment couldn't possibly be true. They still had nothing more than the evidence that had been gathered at the very beginning.

Starsky found himself wondering if Donovan and O'Reilly's opposition to him and Cooper taking over the case had more to do with covering their own asses than worry about Starsky running the investigation.

"What about hobbies? Activities outside of work? They have anything like that in common?" Cooper's dry voice broke through Starsky's silent thoughts.

"Nah. No hobbies or activities in common. They lived in totally different parts of town. Shit, they didn't even use the same bank."

Starsky blinked and rubbed at his eyes. They had been doing this for hours, Cooper looking at Hutch's file, Starsky with Bennett's, and they still hadn't been able to find a single correlation between the two men. It was starting to wear on him, leaving him tired and frustrated, and he really didn't want to come off that way. He needed to come off as *normal*.

Lately, Starsky had been trying so hard to make it look as if he had his life together. He had wanted this case and Dobey had given it to him. He figured the least he could do would be to pull it together and *act* normal, at least until the case was closed. There would be plenty of time to carry on and be depressed later, once Hutch's killer was either behind bars or had a bullet in his head. Starsky hadn't decided what tactic he would employ. Yet.

"Any correlation between the disappearance dates?" Cooper asked, not looking up as he plopped his own file on the coffee table in front of him. He planted his elbows on his thighs and leaned heavily on the palms of his hands.

"Nah. Bennett was reported missing a week before Hutch."

"No connection there," Cooper reiterated in a whisper, as if making an observation to himself rather than conversation.

Starsky reached his hands up to run them through his curls. It took him a moment to realize they weren't there and why. Startled, he settled on scratching his scalp instead. He had cut his hair off on a whim. Partly as a show for Dobey, and partly just for the sheer hell of it. Because he had wanted to feel like he had control over something in his life. He hadn't counted on missing his hair so much, though. He hadn't understood at the time how much of a security blanket it had become to him over the years. And now without it, he felt naked and different somehow, like he had lost an important part of his identity.

Starsky sure as hell hadn't planned on it causing an uproar. People stared at him after it was gone. They didn't even try to hide the shock and judgment on their faces. It didn't take long for the whispers to start up again, either. And instead of putting Dobey at ease, the haircut had done quite the opposite. The large man had pulled Starsky into his office only moments after seeing it for the first time. He had gone on and on, asking why Starsky felt the sudden need to adhere to the department's dress code, when he had so blatantly disregarded it in the past.

The only thing that Starsky could think to say was that he wanted a change, and after hearing the same response at least ten different ways, Dobey seemed satisfied. He let Starsky go without further question, but Starsky was pretty sure Cooper and Dobey would discuss the topic further at their secret meeting.

The meetings should have annoyed him, but they didn't. As time went by, Starsky found that he cared less and less about what people said about him, regardless of who they were.

Starsky grabbed at his coffee mug. After taking a sip, he leaned forward to place it back on the table. And then he saw it, something that he couldn't recall seeing before. A lone manila file, slightly peeking out from under a pile of other documents.

After sitting his coffee down on a waiting coaster, he grabbed at the file but grasped it by the wrong side. As gravity took over, the contents spilled out on the carpet.

"Damn it," he muttered, and groaned as he bent to retrieve the spilled items. He stopped suddenly, shocked by what he was seeing. *Oh, Christ.*

Cooper looked up when he heard a gasp. "What is it?"

"Pictures," Starsky answered. He swallowed hard and willed the lump in his throat to go away.

Cooper closed his eyes. How could he have been so careless? "Crime scene?" he asked. *Damn it, damn it.*

Starsky shook his head, unable to tear his eyes away from the two images that were lying next to each other. He bent and retrieved them from the floor, holding one in each hand.

Cooper, noticing Starsky's sudden preoccupation with the new photos, moved from the floor and sank next to Starsky on the couch.

"Shit," Cooper assessed for both of them, as he peered over Starsky's shoulder at the pictures, trying to act as though he hadn't seen them before. Starsky held a photo of Hutch in one hand and a photo of Michael Bennett in the other. "They could be related."

"Related?" Starsky asked. "Fuck, they could be *twins*."

"Hutchinson was older though, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, by a couple of years. You can't tell that by these photos though."

Cooper watched Starsky, who made no effort to put the pictures down. He seemed frozen in the moment and unable to look away. "This the first time you've seen Bennett?"

Starsky nodded. "Yeah."

"It must be quite a shock for you."

That doesn't even begin to cover it, Starsky thought. "Yeah."

"What are you thinking, Dave?"

My heart hurts. Starsky shook his head. "Dunno."

"Think this is the work of a serial killer?" Cooper asked, trying to return Starsky's attention back to the moment.

Starsky clicked his tongue. "Could be," he answered distractedly.

Starsky was more than a little taken aback by the similarities between Hutch and Michael Bennett. Except for very minor, almost indistinguishable, differences, they really could have been twins. Same blonde hair, same blue eyes, each of the men's features mirrored the others, right down to their body shapes. It was unnerving.

Suddenly, Starsky found he didn't want to look at the photos anymore. He couldn't. Reaching for the manila file, he made quick work of depositing them back inside.

"What about friends? Could they have been friends?" Cooper asked just as suddenly. *Come on, come on. Keep it together, Dave.*

It was a stupid question, Starsky thought, they both knew that, but it served a purpose. Cooper was surreptitiously trying to bring Starsky's attention back to the task at hand. A tactic that Starsky saw through completely, but was grateful just the same.

Starsky dropped the file on top of the others on the coffee table, and leaned back into the couch. He let his shoulders sink into the top of the cushion as he threw his head back to look at the ceiling. "Nope. Hutch and me hung in the same circles. I've never met that kid before."

Cooper looked up and considered Starsky. *You sure about that?* Time to do a little investigating of his own. "You positive you knew everyone Hutch knew?" he urged.

Starsky knew the kid didn't mean anything by the question, but felt a blaze of anger and glared at him in response.

"Sorry. I was just asking," Cooper defended, reaching for his coffee cup. "I mean, you guys were partners, you weren't married to each other. Who knows what he did when you weren't around."

"Shut up!" Starsky shouted. "*Man!* What is with you today? HE was my best friend, and I just know okay!?"

"Okay, okay," Cooper soothed, aware of the turmoil he was causing. Jesus, this was not the reaction he had wanted, but Starsky's level of anger peaked Cooper's curiosity. Was Starsky angry because he knew more than he was saying, or because he didn't like Cooper questioning him about what he *didn't* know?

Rage bubbling in the pit of his stomach, Starsky bit his tongue and rubbed his hands on the worn denim of his jeans. He had to do something to prevent himself from punching Cooper. He reminded himself it wasn't Cooper's fault the kid didn't know about him and Hutch. Not a whole lot of people did. And really, what was the point of disclosing that information now?

He rubbed hard at the jeans, focusing on the sensation of rough texture on his palms to calm his nerves. As he did, he found himself considering the jeans. They were years old, faded and even torn in some pretty scandalous places. Nonetheless, he found himself unable to throw them away. The jeans held too much of his history. They were too much of a comfort to abandon in a trash can.

Funny how you could sometimes wake up and find yourself attached to the strangest things. Uncontrollable, curly hair. Worn out blue jeans. Life was like that for him now. Attached to the most random objects. He wondered if life would ever be the same. He wondered if anyone could ever understand what losing Hutch had done to him. But most of all he wondered if *he* really understood what all this had cost him.

"So. You guys were tight, huh?" Cooper asked, slouching his shoulders and peering into his almost empty coffee cup. His hand lingered on the brown mug handle, tracing the distance from the rim to the bottom.

Starsky looked at the kid as if he had grown another head. Hadn't he just screamed at Cooper for asking questions about Hutch? *What was he doing?* "Yeah," Starsky responded coolly.

"What was he like?"

He was perfect. "What do you mean?" Starsky asked, confused. The kid didn't give two shits about Hutch two weeks ago, and now he wanted to know what he was like?

"I mean, what was he like? I am investigating his homicide, I should know at least a little about him, don't you think? I mean if he were anyone else, I would interview his family, but they aren't here and you are."

Starsky was a little taken aback by the kid's bluntness; it left him feeling defensive and oddly protective. He wondered if Cooper knew how big of an asshole he looked like right now. And there was that anger again, threatening to force him to just tell Cooper to fuck off.

"He was a good guy," Starsky found himself saying.

Cooper rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. You spend the majority of your time with him for eight years. Then after his death, you spend four months violently grieving for him. The way he died was horrible, I will give you that. But the only thing you can say about him now is, *he was a good guy?*"

Starsky willed Cooper to stop traveling down this road. He just couldn't be held responsible for what his actions would be. *Just stop talking.*

"There's got to be more to the story than that," Cooper pressed. *Come on, come on. You have to know something about what I know.*

Starsky saw red. He had never wanted to hit someone so bad in his life. He jumped up from his spot on the couch and started pacing, doing something, anything to prevent himself from making a mistake. "What in the *fuck* do you mean by that? You think you know *anything* about it? You've been a cop for what, five minutes? I lost my *partner*. My *best friend*. And you just sit there and judge me for what I choose to say about him--"

"Dave," Cooper interjected, a remorseful look covering his features. It dawned on him that this was not the reaction of a man hiding something. It was the reaction of a man who was still *grieving* his best friend. "Look, I am sorry. I didn't mean anything by it, okay? I just I got a little focused and I forgot. I forgot about how deeply this affected--*affects* you. I am sorry. I didn't mean to make you upset."

Starsky stopped pacing in front of the coffee table, fury clouding his handsome face. He considered Cooper's apology before answering. "You didn't upset me. You pissed me off."

"Okay," Cooper said smiling slightly. "Sorry for pissing you off. Are we okay?"

Starsky blew out a breath. "I guess so." He reclaimed his spot on the couch and Cooper took his on the floor.

They didn't say another word, each silently looking through the case files. As he reviewed Michael Cooper's file once again, Starsky suddenly found himself wondering if Cooper had been asking innocent questions or probing for something else.

Chapter 10

June 10, 1978

That night, Starsky couldn't sleep.

He grumbled, as he once again kicked at his covers and rolled over to lie on his stomach. He buried the side of his head in the pillow and took a few deep breaths in an effort to calm his upset mind. It didn't work. He found himself too plagued with anger over Cooper's questioning to settle down. Why had the kid been trying so hard? Was it because they finally had been handed the investigation, and he was just trying to be a thorough cop, or was it something more?

Why did Cooper feel the need to push so hard so suddenly, and why had Starsky let the mild questions eat at him so much? Starsky had to admit Cooper's questions had been simple. And sure, the kid could have asked them a little more gently. But those questions were no different than the types of questions Starsky had asked a grieving family member, himself, during past investigations. It was protocol, and Starsky was, as Cooper insinuated, the closest thing Hutch had to a family member in Bay City.

In the end, Starsky supposed he just didn't like what Cooper was suggesting. Cooper thought that Starsky hadn't known his partner as well as he thought he had. Starsky's first thought would be that he had. Yes, *of course* he had.

Hadn't he?

Cooper was young and fairly new to detective work. Shit, he hadn't really even had a real partnership yet. He didn't know how it was. And besides, he didn't know about Starsky and Hutch. He didn't know how close they had been. How codependent they were.

How on earth do you explain to someone what it was like to know another person inside out? That your partner at work had been your partner in *everything*. That you *knew* that there were *no* secrets between you and him, because you *respected* each other. Because you *loved* each other.

Starsky didn't have to look back and wonder what Hutch had been doing when he wasn't around because he knew Hutch. Except, when you come right down to it, do you ever *really* know anyone? Sure, Hutch had tended to be quiet sometimes. Wasn't everyone? But Hutch, he could also be so damn *secretive*. And Starsky had always shrugged those times off.

Hutch was just Hutch. He was quiet, contemplative, and, sometimes, he was downright brooding. Those were the times when he wouldn't say anything at all. No biggie, Starsky figured; he could talk enough for the both of them. That was just personality stuff. Just because Hutch had certain traits and liked to be quiet, it didn't mean that Starsky didn't know him. *Right?*

Relaxation still eluding him, Starsky pulled himself out of bed and padded to the kitchen. He grabbed a glass and flipped the sink's tap on. Filling the glass to the brim he drank deeply. He wasn't really thirsty; he just wanted something to do. Besides, the water felt nice and comforted his throat. He wished it could do the same for his mind.

Glass in hand, he started to return to the bedroom, but a pile of mail, discarded on his counter top, distracted him from moving any further. Starsky paused and mentally tried to calculate how long it had been since he had last opened any of his mail. Realizing it had to have been at least of couple of weeks, he swore quietly.

There was time when mail hadn't been something he avoided, a time when Hutch was around. But now that he was gone and Starsky had politely accepted Richard Hutchinson's request to have his son's forwarded to Starsky's address, he found the mail something to be nervous about.

There was just no way for him to predict how he would react if he came across an envelope with Hutch's information scrawled across it. Sometimes it would be with tears and sometimes with no feeling at all. Other times, he was overtaken by such strong rage that he couldn't help but lash out. A few walls in his townhouse reflected the bruises of such occasions.

Lately, Starsky found himself avoiding the mail altogether. He didn't want a piece of mail addressed to Hutch interfering with his ability to act normal in front of Dobey and Cooper.

Starsky lingered, in the middle of his kitchen, for a moment more, wordlessly debating whether he wanted to return to bed to stare aimlessly at the ceiling, or if he would rather open his mail. It was a hard decision, with each choice sounding equally unpleasant. But in the end, he chose the mail.

Grabbing the pile, Starsky took a seat at the kitchen table to tackle the mammoth job. Flipping through, he sorted the various envelopes into three piles: junk, bills, and Hutch. Much to his surprise, the only reaction Starsky felt, this time, when coming across his partner's name, was a pain to his heart. But he found it didn't haunt him quite so much anymore, and he was able to maintain his composure.

Maybe he was finally starting to heal.

Starsky yawned as he made it the bottom of the pile. He felt a pang of sadness when he looked over and noted the pile for Hutch only had one item in it. It seemed too soon for the world to forget that Kenneth Hutchinson had ever existed. The only item left to open was a large manila envelope addressed to Starsky from Richard Hutchinson.

Curious and a little apprehensive as to what Hutch's dad could have sent him, Starsky turned the file in his hands and ripped at the flap adhered to the envelope. It pulled away easily, and Starsky dumped the contents onto his kitchen table. A thick legal file stared back at him, and a handwritten note from Richard was taped to the outside of it.

David,

I found file this going through Kenneth's paperwork. I thought you might want to have it, as it appears to be personal mementos.

Best,

Richard Hutchinson

The file stared at him from the table, teasing him with memories of the past. Starsky fingered the edges of it and hesitantly considered opening it. Did he really want to go through all of this tonight? He could just as easily put it away and return to bed.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled the rubber band off the file, and laid it on the table. Once open, the file held a stack of newspaper clippings and pictures. He took a deep breath and began studying them, item by item. Some of it was easy to look at, like the clippings of some major arrests he and Hutch had made, a few letters written to Hutch, commendations on his service for the police department.

Some of the items were a little more painful, and Starsky found himself wiping tears as he looked at them: Starsky and Hutch's professional photos from back when they were uniform, both incredibly young with stern, serious looks on their faces; a couple of candid pictures of Starsky and Hutch, much like the one Hutch used to have hanging on his refrigerator. There were some of himself that Starsky was sure he had never seen before. A black and white picture of him sleeping peacefully, curled up in Hutch's bed. A photo of his backside, dressed in tight, ripped blue jeans, as, shirtless, he leaned over the windshield of the Torino, washing it. Despite his tears, Starsky laughed and shook his head in amusement. *Dirty sneak.*

As Starsky flipped over the last photo, reaching to deposit it on the top of the growing pile, he was surprised by a color portrait of a group of men. His brain not fully comprehending what his eyes were seeing, Starsky frantically grabbed at the photo with both his hands and stood up, shocked.

What the hell?

It was a photograph of the 1977 YMCA amateur men's baseball team. Standing in the front row, smiling, was Michael Bennett. And standing next to him, arm wrapped around Michael's shoulder, was a face Starsky recognized as well as his own: Hutch.

There it was, staring him right in the face, the connection Cooper and Starsky had been looking for. Hutch and Bennett had known each other. They had been on an amateur baseball team together.

So much for not keeping secrets.

Chapter 11

June 19, 1978

Daniel paced outside of his son's hospital room. It was the only way he could deal with the uneasiness that his mind was so intent on hanging on to. He shouldn't be nervous and he knew that, but still, the feeling lingered.

Michael was doing beautifully, and his doctors were planning on discharging him from the hospital in the next couple of weeks. The various medical devices that had decorated their son's bedside over the last few months were no longer needed. Their boy could breathe, eat, and stand on his own.

The physical therapist was hopeful Michael would be walking independently very soon, since he had already taken his first shaky steps without assistance. Michael was doing well, and his parents were being urged to consider his future.

They had decided against using an inpatient care facility and were opting to take Michael to their home in San Francisco when he was discharged. As retirees, Daniel and Sherry were willing and able to take care of their son and provide him with the daily support he would need to continue improving.

Michael's doctors had been behind this decision and were in the process of referring him to the various therapy specialists that he would need in San Francisco. Sherry was delighted at the prospect of finally bringing her only child home.

Daniel found that he couldn't fully share in his wife's elation. It wasn't as though Daniel wasn't happy or thankful for the steps Michael was making with his rehabilitation; it was the opposite. He knew what a gift it was to have Michael come so far in such a short period of time.

Their son's progress was on track and the future seemed to promise a version of their son who, physically, would be reminiscent of the Michael they once knew. However, Michael's inability to speak and the confused look that still covered his face was bothersome. There were times when Daniel swore that Michael wanted to say something. That he *needed* to say something.

Not long ago, Daniel had tried to give his son a voice by presenting him with a notebook and pen. Daniel still remembered how excited he had been that day, as he placed the pen in his son's hand and helped him get a grip on it. Sadly, Michael wasn't able to write anything more than a few scribbles. His cognitive skills were still fuzzy and struggling to catch up with his physical recovery. Daniel had been heartbroken at the time, but he had taken a page out of Sherry's book and praised his son for trying. All the while, his son's continued inability to communicate added to his tension.

When Daniel wasn't worrying about what things his son was incapable of saying, he was troubled about the people who seemed to be so fixated with him. As soon as Michael had awoken from his coma, the police became a fixture around him. They had wasted no time in trying to access him. Daniel would never forget the day when they were visited for the first time.

Two detectives just showed up unannounced and demanded information in the midst of the family's turmoil and grief. They were insistent that Michael must have known something about what had taken place and had been determined to find out what. But they eventually left empty handed, as Michael had only woken up two days prior and was still very much in a catatonic state.

Then there were the agents from the FBI. Many of them, too many to count, in and out of the hospital since Michael had been found. They never spoke to Daniel or his wife; instead, they just covertly lingered outside Michael's room.

Daniel stopped pacing and smiled politely as a nurse passed, carrying a blanket to a neighboring patient. He stood motionless before turning around and dropping himself into a hard chair next to the door near his son's bed.

Today, Michael was to be visited again and Daniel was nervous. Homicide and attempted homicide investigations aside, why were so many people concerned with his son? How many more visits by differing law enforcement officials would it take for them to realize what he and wife already knew? Michael remembered nothing, and even if he did, he had no way of telling anyone.

The whole situation was starting to seem a little suspect. Had Michael done something to warrant suspicion, or was this just the result of the series of events that Michael had been a part of?

Michael had always had a streak of trouble in him. He had excelled at everything he did. His good looks and charm made things come easily and readily. The boy was arrogant, reckless, and spoiled. He was the type of man that lived his life without a thought of tomorrow or consequences and, as much as it pained his father to admit it, the effect his actions had on others. Although, he felt like a terrible father for considering it, Daniel sometimes wondered if Michael had somehow brought this tragic situation upon himself.

Daniel glanced at the clock on the hospital corridor. The officer was due to arrive at any moment; dread filled his stomach. But, at least this detective had given the family a courtesy call, instead of just showing up out of the blue.

Daniel had tried sharing his abounding doubts about Michael and the whole situation to Sherry, but she had reacted angrily. She accused him of not being appreciative enough of the miracle that was their son's life.

Sherry didn't understand Daniel's apprehension, and she didn't want to. Her son was alive, and she was going to do everything she could to guard him from any responsibility he may or may not have in this situation. Just like when their boy had been growing up, Sherry had always been so quick to protect him.

Sherry was a good wife and a wonderful mother, but sometimes she could get so caught up in being supportive and loyal that she would ignore the warning signs that were in front of her face. Especially when it came to the people she was closest to. Sherry was fiercely loyal to those she loved, and she would do anything in her power to shield them.

Daniel looked up as a young man dressed in a tan jacket and jeans approached him.

"Mr. Bennett?" The man asked.

"Yes?"

"Sir, I'm Detective Cooper. We spoke on the phone regarding your son."

"Yes, good to meet you." Daniel said the words, even though he wasn't sure he felt them. He offered his hand to the young detective who took it in a firm handshake.

As Detective Cooper smiled at him, Daniel found himself wondering what information he could possibly provide. Nonetheless, he resigned himself to losing another hour of his life to useless questioning.

Chapter 12

June 20, 1978

It had taken a while, but Starsky was finally able to track someone down from the YMCA baseball team photo.

A guy by the name of Alan Henderson had agreed to meet with him under the false pretense that Starsky was interested in joining the team for the upcoming season. He wasn't sure why he had lied about such a thing. He could have just as easily told the guy the truth -- that he was a detective and needed to speak with him regarding an open investigation.

In the end, Starsky supposed that he was done assuming he knew anything about what Hutch had been doing playing on the team. And really, maybe it was better that way, since lately, every time Starsky assumed he knew anything about Hutch, he ended up being completely wrong.

Alan had agreed to meet him after work that Wednesday, and he had proposed they meet at a little bar called the Pits. Starsky had been shocked when the guy suggested it. Out of all of the places in Bay City Alan could have chosen, he picked the one owned by Huggy.

Starsky would be lying if he said he wasn't a little nervous about seeing Huggy. He'd been avoiding him since Hutch's case had been turned over. Avoidance aside, Starsky liked Huggy. They were friends and had been for a long time. He had known Huggy before he met Hutch and that history posed a problem. It was easier to act *normal* and to pretend as if everything was fine with people who hadn't known him forever.

Starsky decided to have this meeting sans Cooper. He still hadn't shared the baseball connection, and he wasn't sure he was going to. He was having a hard enough time admitting that maybe he hadn't known Hutch as well as he thought, and he wasn't in any hurry to have Cooper question him about it.

The kid seemed to have so many damn questions about Hutch these days and that left Starsky feeling more than a little distrustful of the kid. Something just didn't feel right. Or maybe he was just being paranoid.

Fucking baseball. Starsky mused.

What a stupid thing to keep secret. Starsky liked baseball; it was the all-American sport and he enjoyed it as much as anybody. Why on earth would Hutch hide playing *baseball* from him? It didn't make any sense. Maybe it was because baseball wasn't the only thing he had been hiding. Maybe baseball was a cover for something else.

What had Hutch's relationship been with Bennett?

That was the million-dollar question that had been plaguing him since discovering the picture. Their body language alone was enough to make Starsky uncomfortable. Hutch had had *his* arm

around Bennett. What was the context for that? What were they to each other? Teammates? Friends? Secret lovers? Starsky shook his head. Even Hutch hadn't been kinky enough to want to make it with a guy who looked like he could be his identical twin, even Starsky knew that.

Uncomfortable with the turn his thoughts were taking, Starsky pulled his keys out of his ignition and exited the Torino, but the uneasiness remained. He lingered outside the entrance to the Pits for a moment before taking a deep breath and finally going inside. The bar was busy, packed with patrons, and Starsky was grateful. Maybe he could sneak in, have the quick meet, and then leave without Huggy ever even knowing he was there.

That wasn't to be. The moment Starsky took a seat in the only empty corner booth, there was Huggy sitting down on the other side.

"Hey, Hug," Starsky said lightly. *Please, please just let me be.*

"Hey, there Starsky. Well, isn't this a sur-prise."

"Been a while," Starsky concurred, nodding his head and clasping his hands together.

"A while? What'cha drop off the face of the earth or somethin'?"

"No, just back at work. Keeping busy. Ya know?"

"Oh, I know. Dobby said he gave you Hutch's case. Man, why you want to go diggin' through all that for?"

Just another spy. "Closure." Starsky shrugged, trying to be noncommittal.

"You just be careful that's not all you get," Huggy said elusively.

Starsky couldn't put a finger on the odd look his friend gave him. Did Huggy know something he didn't? *Jesus Christ. Did the whole fucking world know details about Hutch that Starsky hadn't been privy to?*

"Hey, Hug, how 'bout a coupla beers?" Starsky asked, trying to change the subject.

"Are you meeting somebody?" Huggy pried.

Starkey glared. "No. I thought I'd double fist it tonight," he replied sarcastically.

Huggy crossed his lanky arms and looked at him, not amused. "I thought you were off the sauce. Are you drinkin' again? Is that why you ain't returning my calls?"

"What are you, my mother?" Starsky fumed.

Huggy took the hint and pulled back a little. "No, just a worried friend."

"Well, don't be. I'm good. Now, how about those beers?"

Huggy shook his head in defeat and silently left the table.

Starsky looked toward the entrance just in time to see a dark-haired black man wearing a yellow t-shirt, jeans, and a Bay City YMCA baseball hat. *Alan*. Starsky held up his hand and waved him over, a smile on his face. It took a moment, but Alan noticed and smiled back, making his way to the private booth.

"Hey, man," Alan greeted, holding out his hand, and taking the seat opposite Starsky. "Dave, right?"

Starsky took the outstretched hand and gave it a firm shake. "Yeah, good to meet you in person, Alan."

"I hope you don't mind, I ordered us a round and--oh, here they are now."

Starsky gave Huggy a smile that was not returned as he silently dropped the beers off and walked away.

"Nah, beer is good. So, Dave," Alan said after taking a deep drink. "You are interested in our little Y team, huh? What position do you play?"

"I don't," Starsky said, setting his own beer down as he pulled his badge out and flashed it at his companion.

Alan was shocked. "Hey! What is this?"

Starsky popped his badge back into jeans pocket. "I have some questions regarding a couple guys that were on your team last year."

"Who?"

"Ken Hutchinson and Michael Bennett."

Alan took another drink of beer and wiped at his mouth. "Why? They in trouble or something?"

"You could say that."

"Man, why I am I always getting in the middle of people's shit?" Alan asked, frustrated.

Starsky just stared back at him, his eyebrows raised. "I'm waiting, Alan."

"Well I don't know any Ken Hutchinson, but I do know Michael Bennett. Mikey and his brother played with us last year."

Starsky stared at Alan. "Michael Bennett doesn't have a brother. He's any only child."

"Come on, man, you're pulling my chain." Alan slapped the table, leaned back in his seat, and laughed. "They look just like each other. Ain't nobody gonna believe they're not related. Not brothers, shit."

Brothers?

"Wait." Confused and suspicious, Starsky grabbed the folded picture of the YMCA team from his back jeans pocket. He unfolded it and placed in front of Alan.

"That his brother?" Starsky pointed to the smiling Hutch.

"Yeah. That's him."

Starsky couldn't believe what he was hearing. Hutch didn't have a brother and neither did Bennett. He took a drink of his beer to keep from screaming. What was going on here?

"What was his name?" Starsky demanded suddenly, setting his beer down with a firm thunk. The violent motion made the amber liquid splash and spill over his hand. He retracted it and wiped it on his ripped jeans.

"What was his name again?" Alan paused, his face scrunched in concentration. "It started with an A. Aaron, Albert, Adam... Adam! That was it. Adam and Michael Bennett. Man, they were good, too. I can't seem to get a hold of either of them for this season though. Damn shame."

"You won't be getting either of them to play this year," Starsky blurted out.

"Cause of whatever trouble they in, right?" Alan asked knowingly.

He probably should have been nicer, Starsky knew that, but he suddenly felt angry and a little jealous of this stranger who knew Hutch as Adam Bennett.

"Man, don't you read the papers? Five months ago. The two guys that they found in the warehouse. One alive but brain damaged, the other dead. That was them."

It occurred to Starsky how surprising it was that he was able to talk about Hutch in such disconnected terms. He probably would have thought more about it, but Alan's response halted him.

"Shit." Alan rubbed at his chin. "I remember hearing something about that, but I had no idea that Adam and Michael were the guys that-- Shit."

"How well did you know them?" Starsky probed, all business.

Alan inhaled sharply and paused, collecting his thoughts. "Uh, not real well. I mean we played on the Y team together last year." He stopped shaking his head slowly. "Man," Alan said finally.

"Any contact outside of that?" Starsky probed as he rubbed at his beard.

Alan made a face. "What? No, I mean we may have went out for a drink or two after some practices. But other than that, we didn't hang."

Starsky didn't know if he believed Alan or not, but he decided to let that go. Taking a deep breath, he leaned back in the booth, crossed his arms, and stared the other man down.

Alan tried to avoid Starsky's gaze, but it didn't take long for him succumb to it. "What? You think I did it?" he exploded.

Starsky smirked. "No. I am just wondering what else you know. What have you got to hide?"

"Nothin! Man, what makes you think--?"

"I got a hunch, Alan," Starsky said, baiting. Starsky leaned in and hunched over the table, his elbows supporting his upper body.

"I don't know nothin'," Alan maintained. "I played baseball with them for a season. I hadn't met them before, and I haven't seen them since."

"You're not lying to me, are you, Alan?" Starsky growled. He had to be sure this guy was telling the truth.

"Listen, man. I don't know anything. I swear." He paused thoughtfully. "Although, I have a really hard time thinking that either of them would be involved in something that would make somebody want to hurt them like that."

"What makes you say that?"

"They both seemed like honest enough guys. And the way Adam kept tabs on Michael?" He laughed. "Man, I have seen guys on probation that have a longer leash." Alan leaned back and laughed again.

"Yeah," Starsky said numbly, and offered up a fake smile.

His stomach was turning wildly. He knew that he should be questioning Alan further, but he found that he couldn't think of anything to ask. He had too many questions and not enough words to make them come out right. Why would Hutch be posing as someone's brother? And why had he been keeping such close tabs on Bennett?

Starsky rubbed at his eyes and sighed. This was too much. Nothing about this was making sense. How on earth had Hutch done all this without Starsky noticing?

Hadn't he known Hutch at all?

Chapter 13

June 20, 1978

It was midmorning when Cooper and Starsky came across each other in the metro parking garage. They hadn't planned it. Just a random occurrence that was bound to happen every now and again.

As they made their way up through the winding hallways of the old government building, both men remained silent. Each of them debating how much of their secret discoveries they should disclose to the other.

Shoving his hands in the pockets of his blue windbreaker, Starsky finally broke the silence. "I think we oughta plan a meet with Bennett and his family."

"Uh, I already did," Cooper said. "He's still non-verbal, and his dad didn't know a thing. No new info there." *Except that he keeps on getting visited by federal agents.*

Starsky stopped in his tracks. He grabbed Cooper by the arm and stopped him, too. "What?" Starsky's voice was dangerously calm, and he looked at Cooper with an accusing stare.

"I went to see Bennett and his family." Cooper pulled his arm out of Starsky's grasp.

"Alone? Why the *fuck* would you do that without me?"

"I didn't mean anything by it. I just thought that maybe I would spare you having to see him, since you were having such a hard time over Hut-"

Cooper didn't get a chance to complete his sentence. Starsky grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him into the plaster wall.

"Don't you say it. Don't you *fuckin*g say it!" Starsky screamed, his fists buried in the material of Cooper's shirt, their noses almost touching.

Cooper could see the anger radiating in Starsky's deep blue eyes. But he also saw a hint of something else, and that something made him very nervous. He'd heard stories, sure. Of the old days when it was Starsky and Hutch who ran the show, and how hot-headed Starsky could be. But it wasn't until he saw it in person that he really understood.

Despite their height difference, Cooper had to admit an angry Starsky was intimidating. Especially when he had you pinned up against a wall, and his eyes were sparking with a slight glint of madness. Cooper hadn't seen Starsky like this before. At that moment, Cooper was slightly afraid; he wasn't really sure of what he had said to make Starsky fly off the handle.

Cooper broke eye contact with Starsky to look at the surrounding area. A group of uniformed officers had started to gather, and they were watching the both of them closely.

This is bad, Dave. We're in public. They can all see you.

"Let me get one thing straight here, Coop." The nickname rolled off Starsky's tongue as he held the younger detective against the wall. "I call the shots here. No more babysitting, no more checking in with me constantly, you hear me?"

"Uh, yep. Loud and clear," Cooper said, trying to act more afraid than he was, trying desperately to say the correct thing in the correct way to pacify Starsky. This situation needed to end as quickly as possible.

"And never, ever," Starsky slammed Cooper harder against the wall to emphasizing his words, "plan secret meets behind my back."

"Okay, Dave. I won't. I promise."

"Good. You're either working with me or your working against me. Which is it, Coop?"

"Uh, with you?" Cooper whispered. *I am not the enemy here.*

"What was that?" Starsky demanded, pushing his arms a little bit harder against the kid's chest.

"I said, WITH YOU."

Removing his hands, Starsky stepped back from the wall and assessed Cooper. He looked at the crowd and back to Cooper. And then internally groaned.

Shit.

This was not the kind of thing he needed to be broadcasting to the whole force. This was a dangerous place to be getting angry and shoving people. There was a time when people wouldn't have given Starsky shoving someone or blowing his lid a second look. But now, with Hutch gone and everyone analyzing his every move, he had to be more careful.

Finally, Starsky shook his head in approval. "Good. Now let's get going."

Cooper pulled his lanky form off the wall and moved to straighten the wrinkles in his shirt. He didn't make eye contact with Starsky.

Starsky turned and ignored the kid completely. He pushed his way through the crowd of officers and continued down the hall.

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Starsky sat opposite Cooper and assessed him. His anger had left him as quickly as it came, but it left him with a strange feeling in his stomach. Why would Cooper plan a meet without him? What was he hiding?

The squad room was eerily quiet and empty except for the two of them, the middle of the day had claimed most of the officers for various calls and witness interviews.

Cooper wasn't making eye contact or conversation, and Starsky was having a hard time getting a read on him. He didn't know if Cooper was feeling angry or afraid or having any emotion at all.

Starsky struggled to withhold a sudden chuckle. He hadn't meant to be so pushy in the hallway; he just wanted to lay down the law a little. Boy, had it worked. Cooper hadn't spoken to him since their little altercation. But still, Starsky thought, he really should try to make it look like he wanted to be friends, even though he had no real interest in doing so.

Cooper was so damn annoying lately. Challenging him on every single detail about his knowledge of Hutch. And then he goes and interviews Bennett's family behind his back? Talk about private parties.

"Listen, Cooper," Starsky said, his voice low.

"What?" The kid looked up and met Starsky's eyes. There was neither a hint of fear nor anger in Cooper's brown depths. He looked normal, as if the hallway conversation never happened.

"Coop, look, sorry I got a little intense with you back there. I didn't meant to scare you."

"You know, you're pretty scary when you get mad." Hutch's words from years before echoed in his brain.

"You didn't scare me." Cooper shrugged.

"Starsky, in my office now." A blunt voice interrupted them.

Starsky looked up to see Captain Dobey standing in the doorway of his office, a stern look on his face.

Terrific.

Did Cooper tattle or was it someone else?

"Here we go," Starsky sighed. Throwing his pen down, he shot Cooper a glare as he made his way to Dobey's office.

Dobey reached out and palmed his neck, gently guiding him into the office, and shutting the door firmly behind them.

"Have a seat." Dobey directed, pointing to a chair in front of his desk.

Starsky complied, sighing deeply as he crossed his legs, resting the side of one foot heavily on his opposing knee.

"That was a cute stunt you pulled this morning," Dobey started as he stood in front of Starsky. He tried to look as intimidating and authoritative as possible, his body language demanding truth out of the younger man. It didn't work.

"I don't know what you're talking about." The lie was out of Starsky's mouth before he could stop it.

"Don't lie to me, Detective," Dobey snapped back, his voice gruff with authority. "If you want to be angry at someone about Cooper visiting the Bennett family alone, then blame me. I am the one who advised him to do it."

"Is that the only reason you called me in here? To lecture me?" Starsky challenged tilting his head with disdain. He was already irritated and he could already tell that this conversation wasn't going to help that.

"No."

Dobey took his seat behind the large brown desk and quietly assessed Starsky. He had been prepared to deal with the helpless grief that consumed Starsky. The Starsky that couldn't get out of bed or handle things in his life. However, this new Starsky Dobey wasn't so sure what to do with. His level of anger alone was unsettling.

It wasn't Cooper's fault that he went to see the Bennett family solo. Dobey had ordered him to do the legwork himself. But Dobey had never expected Starsky to turn on Cooper the way he had. Dobey now realized that he was quickly losing control over this situation, and Starsky.

Then there was the unsettling information that he had most recently gathered. "Your psychologist called me this morning," Dobey said finally. His tone alone required an explanation.

"Oh, really. Did you two have a nice chat?" Starsky's words were laced with sarcasm.

Dobey looked at Starsky. "Don't do that," he warned.

Starsky leaned back and crossed his arms loosely. He had meant it as a gesture of disdain, but ended up looking like a disobedient child.

"He advised me that you stopped coming to your appointments. Said he hasn't seen you in three weeks. What do you have to say about that?"

"I am cured," Starsky offered haughtily, lifting his hands in the air.

Now he was just trying to push Dobey's buttons. The captain pointed an angry finger at his insolent detective. "I am sure I don't need to remind you that those weekly sessions were a condition of your continued active duty status!"

Starsky didn't have a response to that remark, and Dobey took a moment to calm himself down.

"Just because I have allowed you to work Hutch's case does not mean that I have forgotten about everything you struggled with after losing him," Dobey stated firmly. "You need to follow up."

"Okay, Cap," Starsky said uncrossing his arms. "We through here?"

Starsky asked the question out of habit, as he was already standing, his hand resting on the doorknob. He had no intention of continuing the discussion, no matter what Dobey had to say about it.

Dobey shook his head. This conversation was pointless. Starsky wasn't going to listen to him no matter what he said. "Yes. You can go," he said, resigned.

Starsky nodded and threw the door open.

"But make another damn appointment!" Dobby bellowed, but Starsky was already gone.

Chapter 14

June 20, 1978

Starsky found himself angry once again as he exited Dobby's office. He needed fresh air and answers.

"Cooper," he shouted as he walked towards the door.

Cooper looked up from his papers to see Starsky exiting the room. Taking Starsky's statement of his name as an invitation, he stood, grabbed his jacket, and followed his partner. Cooper didn't catch up to Starsky until he arrived at the entrance to the parking garage. Starsky was standing next to the door, leaning against the building with his arms crossed. Waiting.

"You and me are gonna have ourselves a little heart to heart," Starsky said with a new level of determination in his voice. He peeled himself off the wall and opened the door, indicating Cooper should enter first.

Cooper hesitated, and then wondered why he was so resistant. Maybe this was the opening he had been waiting for. His opportunity to tell his partner the truth. He lingered for a moment, and then entered the parking garage.

Starsky waited until he was sure that the garage looked empty enough for a private conversation. He didn't see any officers. The garage mirrored their own office upstairs; it was mostly abandoned. He motioned for Cooper to walk with him.

"Okay, Coop," he said finally. "I want to know what you know, and I want to know how you know it."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I know you and Dobby have been passing notes in class about me, and I wanna know why."

"He's worried about you," Cooper offered, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yeah, him and the rest of town."

"Well." Cooper hedged, suddenly rethinking his prior zeal for disclosing everything. Could Starsky handle it?

Starsky tried so hard to act normal. And he talked a pretty big game, too, but Cooper knew he was still struggling with losing Hutch. His varying levels of control over his emotional status was

proof of that. After all, the man had attacked him this morning and in front of an audience. That certainly wasn't the action of a man who was emotionally stable.

But then again, the garage was almost empty, and if Starsky decided to throw a fit or get violent again, this was as good a place as any. There wouldn't be anyone to watch the show this time.

"Cooper," Starsky demanded.

"I learned some pretty interesting stuff from Bennett's father yesterday. I think we may have a connection--"

"Baseball. The Y amateur league," Starsky interrupted.

"Baseball?" Cooper questioned clearly confused. "Who said anything about baseball?"

"I thought--" Starsky hesitated. Reaching his arm out he grasped Cooper by the arm halting them both in the middle of the empty garage. His arm fell away as he continued, "Wait a second. If you don't know about the baseball connection... Wait... What are YOU talking about?"

Cooper looked at Starsky; this was the moment he had been waiting for. The window of opportunity. His heart told him to disclose everything, but his brain told him to keep his knowledge secret. He stood frozen in place, torn between the differing opinions of two of his most vital organs.

Desperate for answers, Starsky grabbed Cooper's wrist. He held it tightly and gave it a solid shake before he asked again, certainty in his eyes. "Cooper, what do you know about Hutch that I don't?"

"I don't know anything," Cooper lied and then wondered why he did it.

Starsky sighed and Cooper swore he saw the slightest hint of tears.

"Please," Starsky said, almost too soft to hear. "You don't know what this is like. I feel like everyone knows something that I don't. I have to know. I *need* to know."

At that declaration, Cooper turned and made eye contact with Starsky. Holding the haunted blue depths, Cooper chose to go with his heart. "Starsky, Detective Hutchinson—Hutch—he was FBI."

Starsky froze, shock written all over his face. "What?" he whispered.

Starsky may have had doubts about Hutch and his shrouded actions prior to his death, but he instantly rejected Cooper's admission. It couldn't be true. It wasn't possible. There was NO way. He would have known it. Somehow, he would have *known* it.

"You're a fucking liar," Starsky finally choked out, finding his voice again. "Why would you *even* say that?"

Cooper shook his head sadly and shrugged. "Because it's the truth."

"But--"

"Think about it, Starsky. It makes sense."

"No." Starsky was pleading now, shaking his head in desperation and fighting tears. "He would have told me. He would have said something. He would have said something to *me*."

"It's true," Cooper affirmed. "Think about it... his education level, nobody with his background stays a detective. Why didn't he ever work his way up? The weird connection to Michael Bennett. The secrecy. You said it yourself, he never really talked about his past prior to Bay City and the academy. *Shit*, you didn't even meet his parents until after he died."

Starsky's stomach hit his knees. Everything Cooper was saying made sense. *Oh god, why did it have to make so much sense?* Suddenly, Starsky was light-headed and nauseated. His physical body rejected this new information as violently as his brain. He bent over and forced himself to take deep cleansing breaths.

"Dobey? Does Dobey know?" he somehow managed to choke out.

"Dobey is the one who told me."

Starsky closed his eyes at that admission, the final betrayal, and quite possibly the largest one of all. Still leaning over, Starsky shook his head violently. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. He couldn't stop the past as it flashed in front of his eyes. Eight years. Eight fucking years and he never said anything. His partner. His best friend. His lover.

Had it all been a lie?

And Dobey. *Christ, Dobey*. His superior officer. His friend. A man whom he had looked up to as a surrogate father for almost as long as he had been a cop. Not only had Dobey been spying on him, but the whole purpose of it was to keep the truth a secret.

Dobey had lied, too.

Starsky suddenly felt like he was just a pawn in a much larger game. Was anything in his life what he thought it was? Was there anyone he could trust?

"Look, Dave," Cooper said softly. "I am really sorry. I am sorry he never told you, and you had to find out this way. But I think the fact that he was FBI has a lot to do with why he died. I think that is the link we are missing here. I think the fact that he was FBI is what links him to Bennett."

Starsky opened his eyes and pulled himself back to standing. He took a deep, gasping breath and looked at Cooper. Could he trust him? His whole world, what was left of it anyway, had just crumbled.

"The Feds, they've been keeping pretty close tabs on Michael Bennett. That's what I learned from his father yesterday. Why? Why would they do that? Unless this case is much bigger than what we think it is. Unless this case isn't what we think it is," Cooper stated excitedly.

"What are we gonna do?" Starsky whispered.

Cooper grabbed him by his shoulders and shook him lightly. "We are going to figure out what the *fuck* really happened to Hutchinson and Bennett."

June 20, 1978

"Jesus," Starsky whispered for the thousandth time.

Cooper looked at him, nodding excitedly. He plopped a cold beer in front of Starsky on the coffee table. They had landed at Cooper's apartment after their conversation in the parking garage. Cooper promising Starsky an up-close look at Hutchinson's private files and six-pack of beer.

"I know. It's crazy. I couldn't believe half that shit when I read through it." Cooper waved his arms wildly; he found himself an overabundance of nervous energy and paced behind the couch as he continued. "And, I mean, *man*, just the fact that you never *knew*. Talk about undercover."

"Yeah," Starsky answered half-heartedly. He certainly didn't share Cooper's excitement over the turn of events. He couldn't; his world had just shattered, and he wasn't quite sure where that left him. None of it made any sense.

Starsky reached for his beer and drank deeply; the bottle was half empty when he finally came up for air.

How could Hutch live such a double life and not tell him? Starsky had to admit, as a coworker and brother cop, he was impressed at the things that Hutch had managed to conceal and achieve. As a friend and a lover, well, his reaction was quite different. He felt betrayed, wounded, and alone. He idly wondered how much worse it was all gonna feel once the shock wore off.

Had anything been the truth?

All the cases they had worked together. Their beat. Dobey. Baseball? Hutch had lied about baseball. Hidden it from Starsky completely, while he was running around pretending to be some stranger's brother. That hadn't made any sense to Starsky either. Until now. If Hutch had been FBI, then maybe he had been assigned to protect Bennett. Cooper was right; this was probably the link that they had been missing all along.

"You know?" Cooper said, bringing his pacing to an abrupt halt and dropping on the opposite end of the couch. "You're taking this a lot better than I thought you would."

Starsky looked to him; he didn't know whether he should be offended or flattered. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I mean when Dobey dropped the news on me, he made it pretty clear that if you found out, you would probably lose your shit."

"Yeah," Starsky said again. *I'm not so sure I won't.*

Oblivious to Starsky's internal agony, Cooper took a drink of his own beer. He had to admit, it felt good having gotten all of the secrets surrounding Hutchinson off his chest. Now they could finally work together as a team, instead of avoiding the truth and working against each other. Dobey had been wrong; Starsky knew everything and he was taking it just fine. *He was going to be just fine.*

"Who's this Special Agent Carter?" Starsky asked, noting the name at the bottom of a correspondence written to Captain Dobey.

"His handler. You know, his boss. His real boss."

Starsky stared at Cooper; when the information dawned on him, he hoped that his response didn't come off as sad as he felt. "Right."

If Hutch was undercover FBI, then Dobey wasn't his boss that was for sure. His position with Bay City PD was just a smokescreen for the other more complex investigations he had been a part of. Starsky had always thought that he and Hutch were on a pretty level playing field professionally. Sure, Hutch had been known to go on and on about how he was the brains and Starsky was the brawn a time or two, but that was just a joke. But suddenly the joke wasn't funny anymore. Especially now that Starsky knew it was true.

"You try to contact him?"

"I am still working on that. I've left a few messages, but I haven't gotten a response yet. I am working on it."

Starsky met Bennett's eyes with his own. "Work harder."

Chapter 15

June 21, 1978

"You did WHAT!?"

"Shhhhhhhh! You're calling attention to us," Cooper scolded.

Captain Dobey looked at the neighboring tables sheepishly. Thankfully, the other patrons in the rundown bar on North 18th Street seemed to have better things to do than pay attention to the thundering of the large captain.

"Tell me this, Detective Cooper." Dobey leaned across the table as he whispered sternly. "I give you explicit instructions to keep those files secret from Starsky, and then you turn around and share them?!"

"He's fine," Cooper defended. "Captain, I really don't think you give him enough credit. The guy took it in stride."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Dobby glared. "I hope you are happy, Detective. You just set off a time bomb."

Cooper smiled, pleased with himself. "I don't think so, Captain. I didn't exactly share *everything* with him. I mean I shared what I thought he could handle, but I left out a lot, too."

Dobby didn't need to ask what information Cooper withheld, he already knew. But he also knew it was only a matter of time before Starsky discovered it, and what would they all do then?

"You think this is some sort of game, don't you?" Dobby asked his voice laced with disappointment. "All you think you did was share some files with Detective Starsky. Well, that's not all you did. You opened a door. Regardless of what you withheld and how this case ends, he will find out. And when he does..." Dobby trailed off shaking his head and gazing off behind the bar.

"He'll be fine," Cooper placated. "He's an adult, and they weren't married, for Christ sake. Besides, haven't we all had people in our lives that we thought were friends but turn out to be enemies."

Dobby needed to stop worrying. Everything would be fine. Just fine.

XX

June 27, 1078

Everything most certainly was *not* fine.

Cooper tried his best not to show his stress as he sat at his desk at Metro. Starsky's seat on the other end of the desk still remained empty, and it had been that way for a while.

"Come on, come on," Cooper mumbled into the phone receiver pressed firmly against his ear. The phone on the other end was ringing wildly.

Shit. Giving up, Cooper slammed the phone down and ran both his hands through his hair. Where the fuck was Starsky?

Cooper hadn't heard from him at all. In fact, that last time they had spoken was the night that he had dropped the bomb about Hutchinson. Cooper cursed himself disgustedly, and picked the receiver up once more and tried the number again.

Dobby had warned him this would happen. Once, when turning the secret files over to him, and then again when Cooper disclosed that he had shared them with Starsky.

But Cooper had thought Starsky could handle it, and at first it appeared like he had. It wasn't like Cooper had just dropped the information on him out of the blue. After all, it had been Starsky who demanded to know what Cooper knew. Cooper had only given him what he wanted. He had only told him what he needed to hear.

Starsky would have found out eventually anyway, Cooper justified silently. Starsky was digging and he knew things with Hutchinson weren't what they seemed to be. He wasn't stupid. And it was better that he heard it from someone who could be considered a friend than from somebody else.

As he listened to the endless ringing of the phone he had dialed, Cooper couldn't help but wonder -- had he made a mistake? He found himself agonizing over the details of that day. Starsky had looked fine. He had acted fine. And after his initial shock wore off, he had taken the new information like a champ.

Starsky had looked over the files and asked coherent questions. They had shared a six-pack of beer and discussed their next move, and then Starsky headed home. But then Starsky just disappeared.

The first few days, Cooper didn't think anything of Starsky's absence. Starsky had been acting normal prior to disappearing, and Cooper figured that he just needed a few days to process the new information about Hutchinson; maybe lick his wounds a little. In the back of his head, Cooper knew he should report Starsky's status to Dobey, but he didn't. His faith in Starsky still too strong; his partner would pull through this. All Starsky needed was a little time and someone to believe in him.

And now, a week after Starsky had gone missing, Dobey was starting to pressure Cooper about his whereabouts. Cooper found himself still covering up the truth; he told Dobey that Starsky was 'around', and that he was speaking to him every day, but Cooper could tell that Dobey didn't believe him, and the Captain was demanding to see his partner in person.

Cooper's mind was going a mile a minute. What if Starsky had done something stupid? What if he had hurt somebody? What if he had hurt himself?

Dobey had told Cooper that Starsky had already tried to commit suicide once. What if all this new information had been too much, and he had tried again?

Cooper slammed the phone down in fear and frustration. He needed to find Starsky and soon. He grabbed at his cars keys and threw his tan jacket on. Maybe Starsky would be at home this time.

It was a long shot but he had to check.

XX

July 3, 1978

Sunset found Starsky sitting alone in the sand on a beachfront. A small fire was burning in a pit in front of him as he looked at the ocean, watching the rapid movement of the water, hoping it could somehow calm his mind and mend his soul.

Never before had a traumatic event left him feeling so lost or so *broken*. He loved Hutch, had given him everything that one person could give another. His friendship, his loyalty, his heart, and Hutch had lied. *His Hutch had lied about everything.*

After leaving Cooper's that fateful night, Starsky intended to go home and go to bed. He tried to do exactly that. However, he soon found that he just couldn't. The familiar surroundings made him feel claustrophobic.

Starsky didn't even consider what he was doing until moments later when he found himself in the Torino, speeding away from the city's lights. He hadn't known where he was going at first and he really didn't care. But he found the further he got from Bay City, the more clarity he seemed to have.

Starsky needed to be alone. He needed time to be around people who didn't know him, and time to think. He ended up following the highway that lined the Pacific Ocean, jumping from one small coastal town to the next.

Starsky knew that he should be angry but he wasn't. He just didn't have the energy. All the new information regarding Hutch's true occupation had left him feeling deflated and hurt. His zealous energy and gusto for solving Hutch's homicide was fading, and he found those feelings being replaced with something new.

Dobey had set him up. He had hidden the truth about Hutch, but then placed him in a situation where it would be impossible for him not to discover everything. Starsky didn't want to think that this action had been deliberate, but he couldn't help but think that it was.

Starsky had known that Dobey had people spying on him from day one, but he had never expected this. He had never expected that the man was doing anything other than trying to help him, in his own way. That almost hurt the most. The only people in his life that he thought he could count on, the ones who he thought would stand by him no matter what, had lied.

Everything was a lie.

Cooper had been excited when he finally showed Starsky Hutch's personnel files. It made him feel better about their ability to work together, and solve Hutch's case once and for all. Starsky did find it a bit funny looking back now. The person whom he had been the most distrustful of, ended up being the most trustworthy person in his life. He owed a lot to Detective Cooper; without him, he would have never discovered the truth.

Starsky held the battered old notebook he had spent so much time and energy tunneling his grief into over the past six months. His last connection to Hutch. What he thought had been the last true declaration of his love and devotion, but what had actually turned out to be letters to a stranger.

He flipped through the pages one by one, looking at the things he had written. The desperate pleas of a heartbroken man. He found himself getting a little angry then. Hot tears fell slowly from his eyes, burning his cheeks as they rolled down, but Starsky made no attempt to wipe them away. Instead, he allowed the deep sobs to escape as he tore out the pages of the notebook one by one and fed them to the low burning fire.

This hurt was too great to hang on to, and this was the end of it.

Starkey had done a lot of thinking during his time alone and he made some important decisions. He would neither continue to mourn his supposed best friend, a man that he never really knew, or continue to work on his homicide investigation.

It was time to let go.

Tomorrow was July 4th, Independence Day. And it was time for him to make a declaration of his own. The thought was appealing, but Starsky found that it only made him sob harder. Tomorrow he would return to Bay City, to thank Detective Cooper for helping him learn the truth about his life, but after that he would leave the city and his career as a police officer for good.

Starsky wasn't sure where he would go or what he would do. But he was certain about one thing. He wouldn't look back.

Chapter 16

July 6, 1978

Sitting in the passenger side of the Torino, Cooper looked at Starsky out of the corner of his eyes. They were parked in the parking lot of the Venice Pier and Special Agent Carter was due at any time now.

Cooper had been more than a little shocked when Starsky had resurfaced a few days ago. He just reappeared at the door of Cooper's apartment that morning, but Cooper hadn't been prepared for what Starsky had to say. He was leaving and didn't have any interest in pursuing the case. He had already heard what he needed to know. Starsky had thanked Cooper for being solid and having his back, even if he had been distrustful of him at first.

Cooper had begged the man to reconsider his decision. To stick the case out and bring justice to Hutch and Bennett. He didn't want Starsky to walk away not when their luck seemed to be changing. Cooper had finally received a call from Hutchinson's handler, Special Agent Carter. The man wanted to meet, and Cooper really didn't want to do that without Starsky. More than anyone, Starsky deserved to meet Hutchinson's real boss. Maybe they could finally get the answers to all their questions.

It took a little begging, but Cooper was able to convince Starsky to postpone leaving so he could make the meet with Carter. Cooper was hopeful that maybe, just maybe, it would change his

mind. Make him stick it out. They were so close to making a big break in the case; Cooper could feel it.

"About that time," Starsky said, his gaze set on the beach in front of the parking lot.

"Yep," Cooper answered and the two exited the car.

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Cooper and Starsky met up with Carter by a lone hotdog stand on the pier. Starsky had to laugh at the middle-aged FBI agent in his three-piece suit surrounded by the beach goers in their swimsuits and cover ups. The man looked incredibly out of place.

"Detectives," Carter greeted indifferently; he made no attempt to shake their hands.

"Agent Carter," Cooper greeted with a nod and then jumped right in. "I understand Detective Hutchinson was under your supervision."

"He was."

"We were hoping you could tell us why he and Michael Bennett would be fou—"

Carter held up his hand, silencing the rest of Cooper's question. "Before you go any further and waste anymore of my time and yours, I feel it important to advise you that any information relating to Bennett and Hutchinson is classified."

"What?" Starsky asked, stunned. "Why?"

Carter looked at Starsky and glared slightly. "The information you know is sufficient. Any more disclosure will compromise a larger case that is still ongoing."

Starsky scoffed, took a deep breath, and counted to ten to avoid punching the pompous agent in the face.

"But we don't know anything at all," Cooper pressed. "And why would you withhold case information? This case is ours. We're just doing what we were assigned to do."

Carter turned and glared at him. "This case belongs to the FBI. And what you were assigned to do, *Detectives*, is to be bodies. To make it look like those crimes were being investigated, but to do nothing. The other two, what were their names--"

"Donavan and O'Reilly," Starsky provided, his voice firm and arms crossed.

"Yes, Donavan and O'Reilly, they understood, and it's time you did as well. Your investigation is over."

"But what about justice? What about Hutch? What about Bennett?" Starsky asked, his voice dangerously low. "Doesn't he deserve justice?"

"That will come in time," Carter assured him. "There isn't anything that can be done now. As for Bennett, all I can say is maybe he had it coming. What do the kids call it these days, karma?" He paused and Cooper thought he saw a look of sadness flash across his face, but Carter shook his head and the look left with the motion.

The three men stood assessing each other. Cooper was too angry to speak. Starsky too numb to do much of anything. It was Carter who broke the silence, and when he spoke, it was in a much softer tone. Cooper thought he almost sounded human. Almost.

"As for Hutchinson, he was my friend, too. I am sorry about what happened, and the FBI is sorry about what happened, but I assure you, everything is being taken care of."

"But--"

Detective Carter scoffed, interrupting Cooper's objection. "What? Do you think that this was random? Do you think that any of these circumstances were random?"

He looked at Starsky then at Cooper and finally back to Starsky. When neither man offered a response, he continued. "You think it was a coincidence that Bennett and Hutchinson looked so much alike?" Cooper laughed. "Hell of a coincidence! Don't you think?"

"What are you saying?" Starsky asked finally. *Enough. No more games. No more smokescreens, just tell us the truth.*

"What I am saying is, it was planned. Special Agent Hutchinson, as I knew him, was on a job. He was paired with Bennett to protect him, to keep him alive."

Starsky took a deep breath and forced out a response, "But Hutch--"

"Did a damn good job," Carter interrupted, suddenly serious. "It may have cost him his life, but Bennett is here, isn't he? Hutchinson did what he was assigned to do. Protect Bennett at any cost."

XX

"What a fucking pompous asshole!" Cooper swore, slamming his fist against the Torino's dash. "Why even meet us if he wasn't going to tell us anything—"

"Cooper," Starsky interrupted quietly.

Cooper looked at him. Starsky was sitting limply in the driver's seat, gazing toward the pier, his face reflecting a look of calm resignation.

"Does it matter?" Starsky asked matter-of-factly.

"Well, of course it matt—"

"Cooper." Starsky turned and focused sad eyes on the younger man. "It's over." He offered Cooper a sad half smile.

"Aw, come on, Dave," Cooper said softly. "It doesn't have to be—" Cooper started then stopped as he looked at Starsky again. Starsky looked punctured. Defeated. Heartbroken. And old.

A man that young shouldn't look that old. Cooper surprised himself with the sudden thought, but then he had another. It ended here for Starsky. It had to. And it was then Cooper knew, he had to do the one thing that Dobey seemed incapable of. He had to set Starsky free; he just needed to find the right words to say.

Starsky took a deep shaky breath and then cleared his throat. He pulled Cooper back from his thoughts when he spoke softly. "There's one more thing I want to do before I'm done, and I was hoping you would join me."

"Anything. Name it," Cooper stated quickly. He owed him as much.

"I wanna see Bennett."

Chapter 17

July 8, 1978

It was early. The clock on the wall chimed 4:00 am. The apartment was dark except for the TV static that did its best to illuminate the small living room.

Cooper was alone, sitting heavily on his couch. His coffee table was littered with empty beer bottles, and he was close to finishing his most current one. The Hutchinson and Bennett files lay tattered and torn, haphazardly scattered across the floor, still resting where they landed during an earlier emotional tirade. How on earth had things turned out the way they did?

This was a series of events that could not have had a worse conclusion. And for that, Cooper felt responsible. He *was* responsible. He had gone into his partnership with Detective Starsky thinking he knew everything. Thinking that he had control over the situation. That he could sit back and divvy out information to Starsky, and decide what he needed to know, and when he needed to know it.

Cooper had thought that Starsky could handle it. He was wrong. He was so wrong. He was supposed to protect him. To keep him safe. Let him come through the end of this *unscathed*.

Unscathed, Jesus. There wasn't any part of Starsky that remained unscathed, especially now. He hadn't protected Starsky at all; in fact he had done the opposite. He had destroyed his life.

It all seemed so clear now, looking back. If only he hadn't shared what he knew about Hutchinson. Then maybe things could have turned out okay. Then maybe Starsky could be okay. Cooper was never going to be able to take back what happened, and what it cost Starsky.

At least he could take comfort in knowing that Starsky remained unaware of the level of Hutch's betrayal. The level of betrayal they had all been involved in. Hutchinson, Dobey, even himself.

Dropping his now empty beer bottle on his carpet, Cooper leaned forward and rested his head in his palms. If only he could forget the look on Starsky's face.

If only he could take it all back. He just wanted to take it all back.

XX

July 8, 1978

Another Saturday afternoon found Dobey in his office working on paperwork. It was a quiet day, and he was feeling particularly pleased with the tasks he was accomplishing.

Then, Starsky barged through his office door.

"We need to talk," he demanded.

Looking at his frazzled Detective, Dobey had oddest sensation of *déjà vu*. But keeping this feeling to himself he indicated at a chair near his desk. "Have a seat."

Starsky shook his head. "No... No, I'm gonna stand for this one."

"Okay."

"Why did you give me Hutch's case?"

The question shocked him, and Dobey leaned back in his seat. His first intuition was to lie, but then remembered what Cooper had shared with Starsky. There would be no more hiding behind averted facts, he realized. It was time to tell the truth. "Because you asked for it."

Starsky shook his head violently and walked closer to Dobey's desk. "No. No. NO, THAT'S NOT WHY!" He slammed his hand on the desk and the larger man jumped in surprise. Starsky was agitated and his body language was volatile.

"Okay," Dobey whispered gently, trying to control the situation. "Okay," he repeated, raising his hand in the air. He found himself voicing more truths that he would rather have kept secret. "I gave you the case because I thought that you couldn't handle it. I didn't think you would do anything with it."

Starsky closed his eyes at the admission. It was nice to hear the truth, but it was funny how it didn't make him hurt any less. "You thought I would just sit on it? Just like Special Agent Carter wanted," Starsky stated softly.

Dobey looked guilty, and Starsky wanted to scream.

"You fucked up, Captain." He pointed an accusing finger at the large man. "You probably were right in thinking that I couldn't handle that information, and if I would have been alone who knows what I would have done. But you fucked up. You didn't account for Cooper."

Dobey opened his mouth to respond, but found he didn't have the words.

"You didn't account for him telling me the truth," Starsky continued wildly. "For him actually feeling like he had an obligation to me. You thought that you could employ him to babysit me indefinitely. That he would be okay sitting on his thumbs and not looking any further into any of it."

"No. I never intended that--"

"Sure. You never *intended* it to work like that. Is that it?" Starsky interrupted with fury. "Just like you didn't *intend* to hide the fact the Hutch was active FBI the whole time we were partnered together. Just like the two of you didn't *intend* to hide everything from me. How could you? I trusted you. I trusted both of you!" Starsky looked to the wall when his words ended in a sob.

"I was only doing what I thought was best," Dobey provided sadly. "I'm sorry, I was just doing what I thought I had to do."

"To WHAT?" Starsky screamed his voice cracking.

"To keep you alive."

Starsky shook his head in disgust. "Well, congratulations. You succeeded. Was it worth it? Was all of this worth it?"

Once again, Dobey found he didn't have the right words. He looked at his Detective, pain and regret etched on his face. His silence said more than words would have been able to.

"Ya know," Starsky continued tearfully, "when he first died, I thought I had lost everything. But I was wrong. So wrong. Because now, standing in front of you seven months later, I know I have lost *everything*. I don't even know who he is. He is a complete stranger to me."

"Starsky. He's still who you thought. Just because he was FBI, that doesn't change the fact that he was your best friend."

Starsky scoffed, his throat thick with tears. He looked into Captain Dobey's eyes as he disclosed what he and Cooper had most recently learned. "Hutch is alive."

"What?" DobeY asked, suddenly worried. Had Starsky lost it? When he continued, it was in a quiet tone that someone would use on a distressed child. "That's not possible. Starsky, you know that isn't true."

Starsky didn't look at DobeY; he was too focused on the windows behind him.

"After we were summoned by Agent Carter, Cooper and I took a drive to San Francisco. I wanted to see the man that Hutch gave his life for. Imagine my surprise when I walked into that house and saw not Michael Bennett, but Hutch staring back at me."

DobeY was dumbfounded, but Starsky was beyond paying attention to his superior at this point. He moved and leaned his back heavily on the wall, completely lost in the painful memory.

"He recognized me straight off. I wish I could have said the same. If you wouldn't have spent so much goddamn time keeping me away from there, making Cooper run interference, making him run the show, we would have known Hutch was alive a long time ago."

"Starsky--"

"They'll be calling you soon." Starsky nodded at DobeY's phone. "The FBI. I am sure they'll want you to contact his family, let them know he's alive."

"Starsky, this is good news. This is great news. Hutch is alive." DobeY smiled, the worry that had weighed so heavily on him the past few months dissipating.

"Is it?"

"Of course it is," DobeY said cheerily.

"I can't go back with what I know now. I wish I could, but I can't. He is a completely different person to me now." Starsky didn't wait for a response; he silently he turned and left.

Much later, DobeY would look back on that Saturday and question whether Starsky had really ever been there at all.

Chapter 18

July 9, 1978

The phone call came early one Sunday morning.

Alone in his office, nursing a cup of coffee, Richard struggled his way through the various referrals and paperwork on his desk. He was working from home as he often did. It seemed like he was working more and more these days.

The black phone that rested on his desk abruptly began to ring. He reached for it, only to have it stop just as quickly.

"Dad!" Richard heard his youngest daughter, Mallory, scream. He cringed. How many times had he told her not to yell?

He leaned back in his chair and sighed just as Mallory peeked her blonde head into his office. "How many times do I need to tell you to stop yelling?"

"Sorry, Dad." She grinned but Richard could tell she wasn't sorry. "The phone is for you. It's someone named Dobey. He says it's important."

Mallory shut the door and Richard picked up the phone receiver.

The news he heard changed the rest of his life.

Kenneth was alive.

XX

July 11, 1978

The events that led to Richard standing alone on the Bennett's front porch in San Francisco were a blur.

The rest of his family, his wife and two daughters, had already seen Kenneth. They had rented a car and rushed over to the Bennett's residence as soon as their flight to San Francisco had landed. It had been Richard who had held back. Too apprehensive that the reunion with his son might not be a happy one, he had traveled to Bay City instead.

He had spoken to Captain Dobey, probing for more details on just what exactly had happened. How had his son's identity so carelessly been confused with the other man, Michael? But his son's superior had no answers for him; it seemed that the Bay City PD was still trying to figure that out themselves.

So, Richard had moved on, probing the doctors who had been in charge of his son's recovery for any kind of information they would provide. And because he was physician himself, they had allowed him access to his son's medical files. From this, he learned just how serious his son's injuries and been, all the surgeries Kenneth had endured, and the therapies he was involved with.

It was all almost too remarkable to believe. A terrible tragedy leaving his son completely non-verbal and his true identity confused. Who knows how long mixed up would have continued if David Starsky hadn't decided to pay the Bennett family a visit. From what Richard had gathered from Dobey and a detective by the name of Cooper, Starsky had taken one look at Kenneth and recognized him for who he really was. He was responsible for bringing Kenneth back to his real family. It was shame he never got the chance to thank him.

And now, standing in front of the Bennett's front door, Richard had no one left to question, and no more details to discover. The only thing left to do was to walk through the door and lay eyes

on his son. Yet, he still found himself lingering. Nervous about what he would find on the other side of that door.

And the most somber questions still remained.

Would his son remember him? And if Kenneth did remember him, would his father's presence be welcome? They hadn't exactly parted on the best terms. He hadn't seen his son in years. Richard also knew that he hadn't done their relationship a service by not rushing to his son's side with the rest of his family. Would his son be angry or hurt over his father's thoughtless need for information? Would the negative feelings of the past remain, even now that his son had been resurrected from the dead?

Taking a deep breath, Richard smoothed his suit jacket in worry, stopping when he had a sudden thought. Did any of that even matter?

No.

His son was alive, and he had a second chance to make things right. He wouldn't let anything stand in his way. Confidence restored by that simple realization, Richard smiled as he reached out and opened the door.

End