



Moving On

by

CrazyKate

Summary: The companion piece to [Letting Go](#). This novel is complete.

After the events of Letting Go, Starsky and Hutch each struggle to come to terms with the secrets of Hutch's hidden past.

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Moving On

by **CrazyKate**

Chapter 1

January 10, 1979

"Kenneth," a man's voice stated firmly from the head of the Hutchinson family's dining room table. "You will never regain your speech skills to the fullest extent possible if you insist on not talking. You need to practice the words you do have."

The words weren't said sternly, but Hutch glared at his father just the same. A moment later, his father reached over and took the small notepad and pencil that Hutch had been using to converse with his sister.

"Don't glare at me. It is not my fault. It is a fact," Richard said, as he placed the items in front of him. He then returned to his morning paper.

Mallory rolled her eyes at her father and stayed silent like her brother. Hutch sighed in resignation and turned his focus to his breakfast.

Boy had his life changed.

A year after what his family had diplomatically come to refer to as 'Kenneth's accident', and six months since his parents had taken him back to Duluth, Minnesota, Kenneth Hutchinson's life was almost unrecognizable.

It had only been twelve short months, but some days it seemed more like twelve years.

Hutch still struggled communicating verbally despite his continued sessions with a speech therapist. He was seeing one of the best in the state of Minnesota; his father had made sure of that. However, his recovery was slow and frustrating.

Cognitively, Hutch had regained his understanding of most words, but found that his brain signals were still not working correctly and preventing him from being able to communicate effectively. This limited his speech to few word sentences that he struggled to get out. But he really was making progress, and for that he was thankful.

All the speech therapy in the world couldn't make him want to speak in front of his father, though. He despised it.

Richard Hutchinson always had such an incredible gift for making his son feel self-conscious about his abilities. And now that the stutter that had plagued him so heavily during the early years of his childhood had returned, Hutch avoided talking around his father completely.

But his father was right. How could he expect to regain his verbal skills if he didn't practice? It was the same thing his speech therapist told him at every appointment.

"Well, I'm off," Mallory stated suddenly. She stood and picked up her breakfast plate and reached for the one sitting in front of her brother. "You done?"

Hutch smiled and nodded.

"Use your words please," Richard said from behind his newspaper.

Mallory ignored her father and picked up her brother's plate. She shot Hutch a smirk as she used her shoulder to push through the door that separated the kitchen and the dining room.

Hutch rolled his eyes and winced as a sharp pain shot through the left side of his head. Leaning his forehead against his arm, he closed his eyes and forced quiet deep breaths, willing the pain to dissolve before his father noticed.

It didn't work.

Richard looked up from his newspaper and to his son. "Is this another migraine?"

"N-no." Hutch forced the word out slowly and deliberately, in an effort to appease his father.

"Sharp pain?"

Hutch nodded his head in agreement.

"You've been getting those more frequently, haven't you?"

Hutch nodded once again.

Richard sighed and placed his newspaper on the table. He moved to stand next to his son. Grasping Hutch's chin, he looked into his son's eyes. "Well, your pupils look normal. But I'm going to schedule you for another visit with the neurologist, just to be safe."

Oh, the joy of having a physician as a father, Hutch thought grimly, and then hated himself for thinking it.

He really shouldn't be so rude. His father was trying to be more loving and supportive, and because of this, so was he. And in reality, his father really was a completely different person than he was prior to 'the accident'.

Hutch had a theory about the sudden change in the level of love and affection that Emily and Richard Hutchinson were displaying toward all of their kids. It was the result of having a son who had been assumed dead and buried, only to have him suddenly reappear alive and mostly well.

It was a second chance that shouldn't have happened, and that was enough incentive to make anyone change.

Richard smiled, and Hutch did the same. "I am sure it is nothing to worry about. Take some aspirin and rest today."

Like I do anything else, anyway, Hutch thought, sadly.

He nodded at his father's instructions, and slowly made his way through the large house. He stopped briefly in the upstairs bathroom to get some aspirin before finally arriving at his childhood bedroom.

The room itself, surprisingly enough, looked just as it did when he left it behind all those years ago. His childhood bed rested under the bedroom window. The same pennants were on the walls. His baseball trophies sat on a shelf above his small oak desk, and a matching oversized bookcase, tightly packed with various books, was in the corner. Even the curtains were the same. The only thing that seemed to be changed was Hutch.

As he lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, Hutch couldn't help but think about the past. His memory was still pretty spotty when it came to 'the accident' and the early days of his recovery. Fragments of images and people that didn't make any sense to him now.

The only vivid memories he had were of leaving Starsky the evening before he disappeared, and suddenly becoming aware that the people sitting beside his hospital bed were not his real parents.

Hutch hadn't known that fact right away; his brain still confused from the severe injury. It had taken him two months to become aware of the mix up with his identity. But once he had, he quickly discovered that he had no way of communicating that information to Daniel and Sherry Bennett.

In hindsight, though, Hutch suspected that Daniel had started to realize that he was, in fact, not Michael. It was Sherry who had been so opposed to hearing any doubts her husband may have had about his true identity. Hutch still remembered the heated argument they had had in his hospital room. Sherry had accused Daniel of not being thankful enough and not accepting the situation. Hutch had wanted to scream at her that Daniel was right, but he couldn't.

Then the next day, Daniel had brought in the notepad, and Hutch had thought that would be the end of it. He was quickly frustrated, however, as he found he couldn't yet write anything legible. He had wanted to cry then; the whole situation seeming so impossible.

Would anyone ever realize what had happened?

With each visit by a special agent from the Bureau Hutch found himself hopeful that someone would see him for who he really was. How many times did he need to be visited by people from his old life before someone would recognize him? But no one ever did, and Hutch found himself silently hysterical.

The more time passed, the more Hutch started wondering if he wasn't really dead and stuck in some cruel version of purgatory. But at least he had the Bennetts. Hutch found himself taking comfort in the knowledge that he wasn't alone. Without the encouragement, love, and support that Sherry and Daniel had given him, who knows where he would have ended up. He owed them so much, and it grieved him to think that he couldn't even keep their son safe.

Michael Bennett should be the one who was alive, not him. Hutch failed him just like he had failed Starsky.

Christ, Starsky.

Hutch tried to squash any thought of his old best friend, but his mind was intent on making him relive his greatest betrayal. It was Starsky who had saved him. And in return, Hutch had destroyed him.

When Hutch had been discharged from the hospital, the Bennetts had taken him to their home in San Francisco; there he had given up on anyone ever knowing his true identity. He had resigned himself to living as Michael Bennett, until his frazzled brain healed enough for him to be able to communicate otherwise. However, recovery was a slow process, and Hutch found himself slowly giving up hope.

Then, unexpectedly, and out of nowhere, Starsky had appeared.

Starsky had taken one look at Hutch, grabbed Daniel Bennett by his arm, and pulled him out of the living room. Starsky had said nothing to Hutch, but he didn't have to. Eight years of knowing the man like the back of his hand made Hutch fully capable of reading the look that passed across Starsky's face, and at that moment he felt relieved.

Starsky was there and everything would be okay now, because he recognized Hutch for who he really was.

And later, when Starsky returned to the room, it was another look that told Hutch that nothing would ever be the same. Starsky didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. Hutch already knew.

Starsky's first look had changed Hutch's predicament, but the consecutive one had changed his life.

The first moment was the one of the happiest that Hutch could remember; when fate had finally decided to return his proper identity. But it was the second moment that was one of the worst; it was the very instant that Hutch realized he couldn't have it back, and nothing would ever be the same again.

Starsky knew everything, and he would never forgive Hutch for what he had done.

And now six months later, Hutch could only sit and reflect on how exactly everything had gone so wrong.

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Spring 1967

Twenty-four-year-old Kenneth Hutchinson sat alone in the large sterile office of Special Agent Briggs.

He was nervous, and because of this, he resorted to pulling on the sleeves of his gray suit jacket. The suit was new, and so was his position with the FBI. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined that he would be sitting here, waiting to be debriefed on his first assignment.

Kenneth had never intended police work as a career choice; his first passion had been human behavior. During college, he had wanted to study sociology, and his father had wanted him to be pre-med. They had finally cut the difference, and he had completed a double major in both biology and sociology.

The course load had been incredibly intensive, not to mention challenging, but he made it through, graduating a year early and with honors. And subsequently, he had been accepted to medical school. His father had been over the moon with excitement.

But after a quick marriage the summer after graduation to his college sweetheart, Vanessa, and an equally quick divorce, Kenneth had found himself in need of a new life direction.

So, on a whim, he found himself completing the FBI entrance exam. It had been a joke, really; not something that he had ever thought about doing before, and he certainly had never expected to get in. Then when Kenneth had been accepted to the program, he laughed it off and immediately dismissed going. Him, an FBI agent? *Ridiculous.*

However, the idea grew on him, as did the notion of getting out from under his father's thumb. Three months later, Kenneth found himself boarding a plane that would take him from Duluth, Minnesota, to the FBI training facility in Quantico, Virginia.

His father had been furious, accusing him of running away from his potential and throwing his future away. But Kenneth didn't care what his father had to say; he was already too invested in the idea of starting a new life.

At Quantico, Kenneth had found both the training and schooling to be rigorous and demanding, but he had applied himself with the same vigor he always did, and it was only a matter of time before he was excelling at the academy.

And now, two years after leaving Minnesota and his family behind, he was finally getting his first official assignment as a FBI agent.

Hutchinson jumped as the door behind him opened. He turned to see a man who couldn't have been much older than himself entering the room. Hutch stood and offered him a smile.

"I am sorry to keep you waiting." The man returned the smile and held out his hand. "My name is Special Agent Thomas Carter. I am here on behalf of Agent Briggs."

"Oh, okay," Kenneth said, taking Carter's hand in a firm shake. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Carter motioned at the chair in front of the desk. "Have a seat. I will brief you on your assignment."

Three hours later, Kenneth found himself making arrangements to have his belongings shipped across the country to Bay City, California. He sighed and sat heavily on his couch. He was already growing sick of packing, and he had only just started.

Taking a swig of his beer, he thought about what Carter had told him. Kenneth was to go to California, report for enrollment at the Bay City police academy, and befriend a cadet by the name of David Starsky. Carter had sent him with a pretty comprehensive history on Starsky.

Originally from New York, Starsky had lost his father, a New York City police officer, at a fairly young age. Starsky had been troubled during his early teens -- falling into the wrong crowds, making some bad choices, and functioning in a consistent state of disarray. He was 14 when his mother finally had enough, and sent him to live in Bay City with his aunt and uncle. Once there, Starsky had pulled his act together. He did the things that normal teenagers do. He occasionally worked washing cars at his uncle's car lot, and he had played football. After graduating high school, Starsky joined the army, and he spent the next few years fighting in the Vietnam War.

Currently, Starsky was enrolled at the Bay City police academy, where he was completing his final month of training. And it was there that Kenneth was to become his new best friend and, eventually, his partner on the streets.

Kenneth couldn't help but wonder why one man warranted so much attention from the FBI, and even after being debriefed by Carter, he wasn't completely confident of what he was supposed to be watching for.

Taking another drink of beer, Kenneth sighed. All his hard work in college and subsequently Quantico, only to become a glorified babysitter for a guy whose only crime in life was having a deceased father who, deplorably had been linked to a major East Coast drug lord.

What a life.

Chapter 2

January 12, 1979

"Hey, buddy, quit hassling the lady," David Starsky said to the gruff, middle-aged bar patron. "Either order a drink or leave."

The man looked up from the young blonde woman he had been harassing, and focused his gaze on the curly haired man behind the bar. It was a moment before his eyes met Starsky's, but once they did, both men held the contact, Starsky glaring with the seriousness of his previous statement, and the gruff man trying to decide his next move. In the end, the man gave up and turned to leave the bar.

Shaking his head, Starsky sighed. *Some people.*

"David," a woman's voice slurred, insistently, "when are you going to give in and marry me?"

Starsky grinned and returned his focus to the woman sitting directly in front of him on the other side of the bar. She smiled back, and he leaned over the bar, resting his weight on his elbows, and placing his palms on his cheeks.

"Maggie, are you offering to have me as a kept man?" Starsky flirted.

"Who said anything about that?" Maggie scoffed and made a face. "I would still expect you to run my bar. But, baby, with an ass like yours, I would take care of you *forever.*"

Starsky laughed at the comment. He pulled himself off the bar and set up another highball of Maggie's usual: Scotch and soda, easy on the ice.

Martha Johnson, although she preferred Maggie, was owner of the Ocean Bar. She was old enough to be Starsky's mother. Grumpy, craggy, and demanding, most people didn't get on with her, and others avoided her completely. Starsky had taken to her right away; she said things exactly how she saw them, and he appreciated the honesty, especially now.

"How about it darlin'?" Maggie asked.

"Oh, don't you bother, Maggie," a young redhead, sitting alone at the other end of the bar, interjected. "I've been asking him to take me out for weeks; it never works. I'm starting to believe he really does have someone waiting for him back home-whenever that is."

"I don't have anyone," Starsky quickly defended, "honest." He looked at Maggie and back to the redhead. Neither woman looked like they believed his declaration.

"Well, anyway," the redhead continued tersely. She looked at Maggie. "If he ever decides to date anyone in Coos Bay, I have first dibs. If anyone else is interested, well, they can get in line."

Starsky didn't even try to hold back a laugh at the redhead's disclosure. She was already toasted, and most likely would not remember this conversation in the morning.

"Age before beauty, sweetheart," Maggie stated, and winked at Starsky. He smiled back, pulling the white rag off his shoulder and busied himself wiping the bar.

The redhead was Laura Elliot. Starsky estimated that she was around his own age. Laura was short and thin, and she reminded Starsky of a middle school librarian. She was pretty enough, though with her long, fiery hair eternally pulled back in a side braid. She had the most beautiful green eyes Starsky had ever seen.

Most of the time, Laura was quiet and reserved. However, the second she started drinking, her composure went out the window. Starsky had a lot of experience dealing with the non-poised version of Laura, as most weekends she was a regular at the Ocean bar, where he bartended.

Laura was memorable to Starsky for two reasons, neither of which was that she had a tendency to get drunk and come on to him. Firstly, Laura drank nothing but beer. Secondly, she had lost her husband around the same time Hutch had died-or actually around the time Michael Bennett had died. Starsky still had a hard time separating the two events.

"Well, if you won't have me, then I suppose it is time for me to head home," Maggie slurred. She picked up her highball and polished off the contents. She glanced at her watch. "Will you look at that? It's nearly 2 am." And at that, Maggie got up, threw out her arms to stretch, and yawned.

"See you tomorrow, David." Maggie didn't look back as she said her good-bye, but she did offer a backwards wave as she made her way to the exit of the Ocean Bar.

"See ya, Maggie," Starsky said.

"That just leaves you and me, Dave," Laura said in a throaty voice.

"Yeah," Starsky joked. "You, me, and room full of people." He indicated the sparsely filled bar.

After his final conversation with Dobey, Starsky had decided he was going to leave Bay City for good. He didn't have a destination in mind, but he knew he couldn't stay there. Especially after knowing *everything* Hutch had hidden from him.

Starsky had thought about returning to New York, to spend time with his mom and brother. At least until he figured out his next move; however, that idea was quickly dismissed. Starsky had no desire to explain to his mother what had happened to bring him back to New York, or why he wasn't a cop anymore. He didn't want her to worry any more than she already did.

After leaving Dobby's office, Starsky had stopped at his townhouse one last time to pack a duffle bag full of clothes and a few personal items. He had made a quick call to Huggy, asking him to sell what was left of his possessions and find someone to sublet his place. Huggy had agreed, no questions asked. Starsky then emptied his bank account, and once again found himself driving up the coast.

Finding the quiet, solitary ride a welcome respite, Starsky spent the next couple of weeks making his way lazily through the small towns that lined the Pacific Ocean. He finally settled in the small ocean town of Coos Bay, Oregon. Starsky found its beauty enticing, but there was comfort in the fact that he was a stranger to all the people who lived there. He quickly found that he could breathe easy and relax in the anonymity the small town provided.

This was Starsky's new beginning. He could be anyone, and he could do anything. People only had to know what he disclosed. In Coos Bay, he wasn't Starsky, or even one-half of Starsky and Hutch. Here, he was just Dave, or David, if you were Maggie.

Starsky had rented a room at a local boarding house. The room was small, and he had to share a bathroom and kitchen with the other tenants, but Starsky didn't complain. The rent was cheap, and he sometimes enjoyed the feeling of having people around. Starsky swiftly discovered that with boarding house living, he could have as much or as little privacy as he wanted.

Starsky had only been in town a week when Maggie had asked him to run her deceased husband's bar. He hadn't been able to come up with a good reason not to, and that was why, on that particular night, he was tending bar and shrugging off drunken advances.

The old grandfather clock in the corner chimed, and Starsky looked at his own watch to verify the time. Two am.

"Alright, everyone. Closing time!" Starsky yelled and pounded his fist on the bar to get everyone's attention.

He got some glares, but the people started to file out of the bar. It wasn't until after he locked the front door that he realized Laura was still sitting on her barstool.

Starsky groaned. He had been hoping for an easy closure tonight. He was tired and anxious to go to bed.

"Come on, Laura," Starsky said, placing his hands on his hips, "that means you, too."

Laura said nothing. She just sniffed and wiped at her eyes.

"Laura?" Starsky asked quietly. He walked back behind the bar and stopped in front of where she was seated. He crossed his arms and waited for her to say something.

"It's just--I just miss him so much, you know?" Laura sobbed.

Christ.

"Yeah, I know," Starsky whispered, his voice heavy.

Starsky really wanted to kick her out -- he still had to clean up before he could leave himself -- but he found he didn't have the heart to. He felt partially responsible for her tears. He really shouldn't have served her that last beer; he had known she was teetering on the edge of drunkenness, but he had done it anyway.

"Can I stay?" Laura asked tearfully. "I won't do anything. I'll just sit here. Please, Dave?"

"Maggie wouldn't like that," Starsky hedged, but it wasn't a lie. Closing time was closing time. And according to Maggie, if you weren't employed by the bar, you had to leave. No exceptions.

"Please? I-I just don't want to be alone. Please don't make me leave," Laura pleaded, her eyes full of tears.

Starsky let out a heavy sigh. What was he supposed to say to that? "Okay," he agreed quietly. Uncrossing his arms, he pointed a finger at her. "But you just sit there. Don't move from that spot, and don't touch anything."

"Okay," Laura agreed, looking relieved.

Starsky busied himself with closing the bar, and aside from a few more sniffles, Laura stayed quiet. It was almost ten minutes later when Starsky spoke again.

"You can talk. Ya know, you don't have to pretend you're not here."

"Okay." Laura giggled, and wiped at her eyes. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I dunno," Starsky said, wiping off a table top.

"You really don't have anybody?" Laura blurted out. "Waiting on you, I mean. Or maybe you're waiting on them? A nice guy like you has to have somebody."

Shocked, Starsky stopped wiping the table; he hadn't expected a question like that. He stood frozen for an instant, trying desperately to think of something to say.

He still hadn't thought of anything, when he started flipping wooden chairs and placing them on their respective tables.

"No," Starsky said finally, "I don't have anyone. I did, but it's over now."

"What happened?" Laura asked innocently.

"Um..." Starsky paused again, grabbing the back of a chair at the last table. "Listen, Laura, it's a long story, and it's late."

Laura looked at him for a moment, then shook her head as if waking up from a dream. "Oh...god... I am drunk," Laura exclaimed, mortified. "I am sorry-- for asking, I mean. I am so embarrassed. I wouldn't normally do that."

Starsky shrugged. "It's okay."

"No. No it isn't," Laura insisted. "It's none of my business, and I was being rude. I don't like it when people ask questions about my Pete either."

Starsky smiled. He wasn't mad, not really. He liked Laura, and even though the questions had made him uncomfortable, he knew that she hadn't asked them on purpose.

"Come on," Starsky said, "let me take you home."

"Okay," Laura agreed; then jokingly added, "but I am not putting out."

Starsky laughed. "That makes two of us."

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True to his word, Starsky was a gentleman as he walked Laura to her small house near the water. And an easy friendship started to bloom between them; the pair laughed and joked as they walked arm in arm in the darkness.

After leaving Laura at her home and behind a locked door, Starsky made the short trip to the boarding house. Upon entering his room, he found a note taped to his door. Starsky smiled at the hand written message. Kicking off his shoes, he sat down at the small desk in the corner and dialed the familiar number.

The phone rang twice before a warm voice answered. "This is the Bear."

Starsky smiled. "Hey, Hug."

"Hey... Starsky... man, how you doin'?"

"Fine, Hug," Starsky responded. "Got your message. What's up?"

"I was just callin' to let you know that I have the money from the last of your stuff. I'm sending it your way tomorrow."

"Thanks."

"How you really doin'?" Huggy pressed.

"Good... Really."

"Uh-huh." Huggy sounded skeptical, and a momentary silence settled between the two men.

When he left Bay City, Starsky had decided to leave all aspect of his previous life behind, and for the most part, he had. Huggy was the only one who Starsky had disclosed his new location to, though he had sworn him to secrecy. Starsky did not want anyone from his old life tracking him down.

"Hey, Hug..." Starsky hesitated, his fingers tracing the wood paneling on the wall by the desk.

"Just ask," Huggy replied knowingly from the other end of the phone.

Starsky smiled. Same old Huggy. "He still with his folks?"

"Yeah. I have their number if you want it."

"Um... No..." Starsky whispered. "That's okay. You talk to him at all?"

"I talk to his sister, Mallory, on occasion. It seems that our blonde friend--"

Starsky flinched at the old moniker, and even through the phone, Huggy realized his error, and paused. "Sorry..." Huggy offered, then continued, "Hutch isn't completely verbal... Yet."

Starsky rested his forehead against the wall. Gripping the phone receiver with his left hand, he rubbed at the base of his neck with his right. His heart felt relieved and heavy at the same time.

"Is... Is he okay? I mean, does she say he's doing good? Outside of the talking thing?" Starsky hated himself for asking. He didn't want to, but his need to know over-powered his hurt at the moment.

"Yeah, man. He's doing good," Huggy comforted.

"Good."

"Cooper's been around asking about you lately," Huggy said, switching topics. "Are you sure I can't tell him--?"

"NO!" Starsky almost screamed. "You can't tell him anything."

"Okay, okay," Huggy pacified. "It's just...he's worried about you. He feels responsible for how all this went down, and I think it would help if he could at least talk to you."

Starsky sighed heavily. "I'm not ready, Hug," he said firmly.

"It's been six months, Starsky. Hutch is alive," Huggy said softly. "When are you going to start putting this behind you?"

"I'm putting it behind me," Starsky stated, annoyed. "That's why I left. That's why I can't talk to them right now."

"When will you?"

"I dunno. Maybe never."

"Starsky," Huggy chastised, "maybe you could at least hear him out. Let Hutch tell his side of the story before you kick him out of your life."

"It's not that easy." Starsky sighed.

"Well, it isn't that hard!" Huggy exclaimed, the emotion behind the words taking Starsky off guard. "He's alive and he can tell you what you need to know. All you got to do is ask."

But Starsky was done listening. "Hey, Hug, I gotta go." Huggy didn't get a chance to respond before Starsky hung up the phone.

Starsky sat in the desk chair for a moment longer, rubbing his face with both hands. He shouldn't have called Huggy this late. He should have waited until morning. There was no way he was going to be able to sleep now. Now that he had all these thoughts floating around in his head.

The details of what Hutch had done cut deep, and still reeling from the pain of Hutch's dishonesty, Starsky found himself trying to fill up his days. He kept himself busy; it gave him less time to focus on the past. Most days, he found he didn't think of Hutch at all, but it was the nights that were a completely different story.

Nighttime was when Starsky found himself alone, and when he was alone, the silence and darkness whispered the details of Hutch's betrayal over and over again.

If this would have been another time, Starsky would have filled the nights up with random bed partners, booze, and drugs; however, this wasn't another time.

This was now, and now that he was alone, he couldn't take the chance of doing something stupid. He didn't *want* to do anything stupid. It was time for him to move on. It was time for a new life chapter to begin. And now that Starsky was aware of that fact, he had every intention of turning the first page.

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Spring 1969

The day had been long and stressful, as were most days since Starsky and Hutch had been promoted. They were now officially partners, and Metro's newest set of undercover detectives.

It was a quiet evening that found Starsky and Hutch sitting on the old torn and tattered couch, a hand-me-down from Starsky's aunt and uncle, in Starsky's run-down Third Street apartment. An empty pizza box and discarded beer cans littered the coffee table as they sat silently, watching the Late, Late Show.

Starsky had never meant for it to happen. But then Hutch leaned forward and regarded Starsky with the most peculiar look. It was then that Starsky noticed the astonishing way the moonlight was illuminating his partner. And at that moment, Starsky didn't think. Instead, he took a chance. And when Hutch didn't push him away, Starsky thought it was the best decision he ever made.

It wasn't until later, in the darkness of his bedroom, when Starsky came up for air, that he started to have second thoughts. Hutch was his friend. His best friend. And even though he had only known him for two years, Starsky knew that he had never loved someone as much as he loved Hutch. And that made him afraid.

"Wait," Starsky breathed heavily, pulling his face back from his partner's. "What are we doing? We can't do this."

Hutch smiled big and warm. His giant blue eyes sparkled in the moonlight as he reached out and grabbed Starsky's face in both his hands. "I love you, and I will never hurt you," Hutch vowed in a whisper. His face was soft and filled with love, and at that moment Starsky believed him.

Starsky allowed his partner to pull him into a deep, passionate kiss.

There was no turning back after that night. For either of them.

Chapter 3

January 12, 1979

"Hey, Kenneth," Mallory peeked her head in her brother's bedroom. "How about a ride this morning?"

Hutch hadn't been sleeping, but the voice of his nineteen-year-old sister startled him all the same. He blinked a few times trying to clear the fuzziness from his brain. He glanced at the alarm on his nightstand, then rolled over and groaned. *Why the hell would he want to go ride horses at 7:38 am?*

It was early. A fact Hutch was aware of because the sun had yet to peak out from under his bedroom curtains. He was tired, and had no interest in horseback riding or even getting out of bed. The night was a restless one, and what little sleep Hutch obtained was unsettling. It was filled with dreams of things that haunted him now; images of events that he could do nothing to change.

"Come on, sleepy head," Mallory insisted with a smile. "You haven't been on a ride for ages, and with Mom and Dad gone, you and I are the only ones left in the house."

Richard and Emily Hutchinson were in Minneapolis, and were not due back for another few days. Richard was attending a medical conference and Emily had gone along to enjoy the extensive shopping opportunities of the much larger city.

Prior to leaving, Richard had given Hutch stern instructions to 'take it easy', and Hutch was well aware of his father's nervousness about leaving his son and daughter to their own devices, despite both siblings being adults.

"Come on," Mallory coaxed, "please?"

Mallory was only asking Hutch to accompany her because their parents were absent. There was *no* way Richard would allow Hutch to ride a horse. Feeling rebellious, Hutch smiled. *Why not?*

"F-Fi-ve m-min-utes," Hutch stuttered.

Mallory's face lit up in an electric smile. "Okay! I'll wait for you downstairs."

She was gone as suddenly as she appeared.

Hutch rubbed at his eyes and peeled his body from the warmth of his covers. Stretching his sleep tightened shoulder muscles, he walked over to his dresser and pulled out a pair of jeans, t-shirt, and a sweater.

He dressed swiftly and joined his sister in the foyer of the house. They collected the heavy riding boots and winter gear that they would need to protect themselves from the elements. Mallory opened the front door of the home and a slight, frigid breeze assaulted Hutch's body. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself.

God, how Hutch missed California. He missed the beach and the sun. And, although the weather in Bay City could be cool at times, it never left him feeling frozen. January weather in Duluth was downright glacial.

Hutch thought for a second about backing out of the ride. He could just as easily resettle himself in the warm of this bed and doze the day away. But, instead, Hutch followed his sister along the shoveled pathway to the red barn near the edge of the Hutchinson property.

The Hutchinson property had been willed to Richard when Grandpa Hutchinson had passed away years ago; however, Richard and Emily had raised their family there.

After his wife passed away, Grandpa Hutchinson insisted that his son's family move in, stating that the wide open spaces and the surrounding nature made the property a perfect place to rear children.

Richard had put up a fuss at first; demanding that he could take care of his family, but he had eventually given in, and Hutch had been four when the family moved in. The red barn was converted to a two-bedroom apartment and that was where Grandpa Hutchinson lived for the remainder of his life. All the Hutchinson children had enjoyed having him close during their formative years.

Hutch had many fond memories of his grandpa and of the family home. He loved the property growing up, and he still loved it now, but it was the winter that posed the problem to him as an adult.

Hutch hated winter. It was cold and depressing. He hated the temperature, and he hated snow even more.

Chilled by the cold breeze, Hutch found himself dreading the impending horseback ride. His sister was absolutely ridiculous for wanting to take a ride in this type of weather. But once they saddled their horses and settled themselves on the thin, tranquil trail behind the old red barn, Hutch found himself relaxing in the saddle and enjoying the scenery.

Hutch was immediately refreshed by the thick smell of pine trees. There was harmony in the quietness of the early morning. The surrounding trees and snow drifts greeted the pair with their superb beauty, and Hutch smiled in spite of himself.

He may not like winter, but this ride was gorgeous.

Bay City could never feed his soul the way that nature could. The beauty of the countryside was almost enough to make him forget everything that had plagued him the night before. Almost.

"You doing okay?" Mallory looked at her brother as they rode slowly, side by side.

Hutch nodded and smiled. He hadn't been on a horse in years, and was surprised how quickly he remembered what to do. Of course, it didn't hurt that Mallory had instructed him to ride on Charlie, an elderly predictable Quarter Horse. Charlie's temperament was patient and gentle, and his gate was slow.

"Isn't this the most beautiful place?" Mallory asked. She took a deep breath and pushed the air out with a smile. "Nowhere else I would rather be."

Hutch gave her knowing smile, and was taken aback by how similar he and his younger sister were. That had never occurred to him before.

"You know," Mallory continued, "don't take this the wrong way... but I'm kinda glad that you got hurt."

Hutch scowled and looked at his sister. She didn't look back, her gaze set on the snow covered path. That was an odd thing to say. Why on earth would anyone be glad about another person being seriously injured?

"I mean... I am *not* happy that you got hurt," Mallory said finally. "But I am happy that you ended up back home. Before 'the accident', I didn't even know who you were... You were this strange person--an idea really. My shadow of an older brother who lived over 1,200 miles away. Someone whom I had only met a handful of times and only talked to maybe three times a year."

Hutch felt guilty at his sister's disclosure and sighed. He had never intended it to be that way; when it came to the Hutchinson children, timing had always been an issue. The large age gap between the three siblings made maintaining close relationships impossible, or at least that was what Hutch had told himself when he lived in Bay City.

Hutch had turned fifteen the year that Mallory was born, and at that time, he had been more interested in baseball and friends than a new sister. Mallory had only been three when Hutch had left for college, and with their older sister, Kathryn, married and living in the neighboring town of Ramsey, Mallory had grown up as an only child. Although, never best friends, Kathryn and Mallory had a fairly close relationship, but Mallory grew up with very little contact from her older brother.

Hutch would have liked to blame his covert career with the FBI for his nonexistent relationship with both his sisters, but he knew that it wasn't responsible. His falling out with his father, after Hutch had declined to attend medical school, left a sour feeling, and Hutch had stopped pursuing contact. As more time passed, Hutch became preoccupied with his life and career in Bay City, it became easier for him to ignore the relationships altogether.

It was sad for Hutch now, however, to think of all those wasted years. And post 'accident', Mallory was the only one who he really got along with. Every day he was discovering he had more in common with her than he could have ever imagined.

Mallory was earthy and loved the outdoors. She had a caring personality and her support was unwavering, reminding Hutch of Sherry Bennett. Over the past six months, Mallory had become his confidant and friend, and with each passing day, Hutch found himself more grateful for Mallory's presence.

"Well, I'm glad you are here, anyway," Mallory finished with a shy smile.

"M-me t-too," Hutch managed. He reached out and grasped his sister's shoulder.

The pair rode in a comfortable silence for the rest of the journey.

XX

Spring 1969

The room at the FBI facility in New York City was small, windowless, and dark. Hutchinson found himself feeling slightly claustrophobic as he entered, trailing behind Carter.

A portly, middle-aged man was seated at the small table in the middle of the room. He looked like someone who had lived a hard life. His hairline was receding, and what was left of his dark hair was thickly peppered with strands of white. The man's face showed his age with various wrinkles.

In two years of tracking David Starsky, this was the first time Hutchinson had laid eyes on the drug lord who was believed to be connected to his partner. Hutchinson had a fleeting thought that the man couldn't possibly be as dangerous as Carter had described.

The door to the room was firmly closed; the man looked at Carter and Hutchinson and frowned. Hutchinson couldn't put his finger on the look the man gave him.

"Hi Joe," Carter greeted the older man. "How you been?"

Joe scowled. He was not happy to see the agents. He pointed a finger at Hutchinson. "Who's the kid?"

"That is Special Agent Kenneth Hutchinson." Carter motioned to the blonde man. "Hutchinson, say hello to Joe Durniak."

"Hi," Hutchinson said, pursing his lips, still not quite sure what to think of Durniak.

"Kinda young to be a fed, aren't you, kiddo?" Durniak sneered with a smile. He pulled a quarter out of his suit jacket and tossed it to Hutchinson, who caught it seamlessly. "Why don't you go get yourself a coke and let the grown-ups talk?"

The older man's scratchy voice grated on Hutchinson's nerves, as did his statement. Hutchinson tossed the coin back, and sat in the chair opposite Durniak.

"That's Special Agent Hutchinson to you. Not kiddo. And I'm staying. Better get used to me, Durniak; I'm your new headache." Hutchinson grinned and rested his palms on the table.

Durniak scoffed and laughed. "You got to be kidding me. What are you, twelve? I have suits older than you."

Hutchinson smirked at that, and Durniak decided that maybe the kid couldn't be all that bad.

"Well, boys," Durniak said, "I am loving the chit-chat, but do you mind telling me why I'm here?"

"The FBI wants to deal," Carter stated, leaning heavily in his seat next to Hutchinson.

"What, with me?" Durniak laughed. "Now you really *are* joking."

Hutchinson and Carter looked at each other. Carter raised his eyebrows at the blonde man's questioning gaze. *Same old Joe.*

"No joke, Joe," Carter responded, "Your testimony for immunity."

"Immunity against what? You guys?" Durniak questioned, pointing to the agents. He took another drag off his cigarette, his eyebrows lifting in surprise. "*Shit*, I'm safer working against you."

"We can protect you, Joe," Carter insisted, his quiet voice determined.

Durniak laughed heartily, then became serious. "Bullshit. The only people I need protection from is you, and I can provide that myself."

"We'll take care of you." It was Hutchinson who spoke that time, gentle and convincing.

Durniak almost believed him. Almost.

Durniak glared at Hutchinson from across the table. He tapped the ash off his cigarette while responding, "Sure, you will. Just like you took care of Michael Starsky."

"Those circumstances were unfortunate," Carter interjected, "but we're not talking about him. We are talking about you."

"Yeah... well... I don't know what you boys take me for. You think I don't know what really happened?" Durniak frowned, his forehead wrinkling. "Starsky was no accident. It was decision. Shame, too... I really liked him. As far as cops on the take go, he was by far my favorite."

"That was nearly 18 years ago!" Carter exploded.

"I never forget a friend," Durniak stated, a dangerous edge to his voice.

"That is not what we are here to discuss," Carter fumed. "Are you going to deal?"

Durniak smirked. He took another drag off his cigarette before abandoning it in the ashtray. Leaning back in his seat, he crossed his arms. He looked at Cooper and then at Hutchinson.

"No," Durniak said finally, "I don't think I will."

XX

"Well that was a fucking waste of time," Hutchinson said, a note of frustration in his voice, as he and Carter stood in the descending elevator.

"Joe loves to play games," Carter said evenly.

Hutchinson shook his head and sighed. What a waste of a trip; he found himself suddenly tired by the thought of the upcoming days. Within the hour, he would be boarding an airplane and enduring the long cross-country journey back to Bay City. Upon arriving, he was expected to report back to Captain Dobe and resume his post by David Starsky's side.

The sequence of events alone sounded exhausting, and Hutchinson didn't want to do any of it. He wanted a vacation.

The new development in his relationship with Starsky was making Hutchinson more than a little worried, and the impromptu trip to New York had been a welcome respite. He needed time to get away from the situation, and an opportunity to clear his thoughts.

Hutchinson hadn't meant for it to happen, and he was sure that Starsky hadn't either. Sparks had been flickering between the pair for a while, and that night, they had finally turned into a flame. Hutch knew there would be no forgetting that night, and he didn't want to.

Starsky had kissed him, and the events that had taken place, covered by the darkness of night, had changed everything. There would be no more running away from the attraction that Hutchinson felt for the curly haired detective.

Hutchinson had never expected to like Starsky; their personalities were just so opposing. He hadn't thought they could become friends, and he definitely hadn't expected to fall in love with him. However, Starsky had such a way about him, all charisma and energy. Hutchinson couldn't help but like Starsky—he couldn't help but love him, but loving Starsky presented a huge problem for him professionally. Starsky was a person of interest to the FBI, and Hutchinson had been assigned to monitor him, not become his lover. Things were becoming much too complicated.

What a mess.

Hutchinson found himself frustrated with his situation with the FBI. He had been tracking Starsky for a couple years now, and he hadn't done anything suspicious. In fact, Starsky didn't seem to have any remaining connection to Durniak at all, and the FBI's continued interest in him was starting to seem a bit excessive. But Hutchinson wasn't paid to ask questions or advise the Bureau on his personal opinion of David Starsky's character. No, he was there to watch and wait. So, that is exactly what he did.

Chapter 4

January 28, 1979

"Well." Laura looked at Starsky expectantly. "What do you think?"

Starsky considered the cavernous living area, taking in the tarp covered furniture and floor. This was not what he had pictured when he agreed to help Laura re-paint. He had been prepared for a quick job, not an area the size of a hotel lobby. This was going to take all night.

"Is this house a clown car?" Starsky grouched. "The outside of this place sure don't look like this room should be this big."

"Looks are deceiving." Laura leaned against a wall and rolled her eyes. "Hey, you are the one who offered, remember? I told you I was perfectly fine doing this job alone, but you just had to insist."

Starsky and Laura had been spending an increasing amount of time together. The night Starsky walked the intoxicated Laura to her home, marked the beginning of their strong friendship. Although, neither person had the intention of dating the other, they soon found that their personalities were complimentary enough, and they settled into easy companionship.

However, the platonic nature of their friendship didn't make them exempt to the gossip mill of the small town. When Starsky and Laura started spending time together, people took notice, and now, much to Starsky's chagrin, his friendship with Laura was the talk of the town.

Starsky shrugged. "Yeah...well. That was before I knew just how big this room really was."

"Oh, come on now. You've been here before. You knew how big it was!" Laura rolled her eyes, but smiled at his teasing. "Are you retracting your offer now?"

"Course not... What color are we painting it anyway?"

"Green."

Starsky made a face. "Green? Are ya *serious*?"

Laura laughed. "Seafoam green," she clarified, "and the trim will be white. It's going to look so good. Just think of it, Dave."

"Oh, I am," Starsky replied, a hint of disgust in his voice.

"Okay, Mr. Interior Designer," Laura jokingly challenged as she crossed her arms. "What color would *you* paint it?"

"Oh, I dunno," Starsky said as he slowly circled the room. "Hey, how about a nice beige?"

"Beige?" Laura scoffed. "That is such a man thing to say. In fact, Pete said that very same thing last summer when I--" she stopped suddenly, her mouth shutting in a firm line.

Starsky looked at her concerned; Laura didn't meet his eyes. He wanted to say something comforting at the mention of her deceased husband, but he couldn't think of anything. So, instead, he changed the subject. "Seafoam green it is. Do ya have a ladder?"

Laura looked at him gratefully. "Out back, in the garage."

Starsky reached out to her and squeezed her shoulder firmly. "I'll be right back."

XX

Laura was giggling hysterically, and Starsky bit his tongue to keep his swearing at bay.

"You know, Dave... if your bartending gig with Maggie doesn't work out, you can always work as a painter," Laura forced out between her laughter.

Starsky glared at her while kicking the downturned paint tray off his legs. He *had* been balanced on the ladder, intently working on painting the top portion of the wall. But then he leaned too far to one side, tipping the ladder and spilling both himself and the paint to the tarp covered floor.

Starsky had landed hard. The paint tray splattering across his legs, leaving his favorite jeans dotted with the offending green color. Then adding insult to injury, when Laura had discovered he was mostly okay, she had dissolved into laughter.

Realizing Starsky was not finding the situation as funny as she was, Laura stopped her giggles and hid her smile. "How about a beer? I'll go order that pizza I promised you," she offered.

Starsky considered the proposal for a second then chuckled, his pride feeling less bruised at the mention of pizza and beer. The situation was funny; he could hardly fault Laura for laughing at him.

"Sounds good to me. Hey, help me up, will ya?" Starsky held up his hands and Laura grabbed them with her own.

Laura grunted and Starsky laughed, as the petite woman struggled to pull him from the floor. Suddenly, though, Starsky was on his feet and they found themselves pressed close against each other, still holding hands and staring deeply into each other's eyes.

Caught up in the moment, Starsky reached out and fingered a wayward strand of Laura's hair behind her ear. His hand rested on her cheek and Laura allowed herself to lean into him. She closed her eyes, savoring the closeness.

Before he knew what he was doing, Starsky leaned down and covered Laura's mouth with his own. It surprised Laura; however, she didn't pull away. The kiss was chaste at first, but quickly turned deep and desperate as the pair clung to each other.

Laura lifted her hands grasping fistfuls of Starsky's short curls. Responding to her, Starsky moved his hand from the small of her back and reached underneath the back of her old red t-shirt.

Suddenly, though, Laura pulled back, breathing heavily. "Stop," she stated firmly.

Starsky pulled away from her. He blinked rapidly, his senses slowly returning. *What was he doing?*

"I'm sorry," he offered, shock and confusion on his face. "Laura, I'm really sorry, I don't know what came over me."

"I do." Laura shook her head and smiled sadly. She wrapped her arms around herself. "Devastation will make you do amazing things."

"I'm not devastated," Starsky defended, feeling a spark of anger in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't be that transparent. *Could he?*

"Are you sure about that?" Laura asked skeptical.

Starsky opened his mouth and shut it quickly. No, he wasn't sure about anything. He shrugged and raised his hands in defeat.

"I should go," he whispered.

"You don't have to," Laura offered, stretching her arms out. "I can still order that pizza. Besides, we're only half done with the room."

There was no hint of pity or begging in Laura's voice, and Starsky found himself considering her offer.

"Please, Dave," Laura continued, "don't let this silly little indiscretion ruin the night. So we kissed. No big deal. Now we can put our mutual attraction to each other behind us and just be friends."

Starsky looked at Laura, doubting her words. She was his friend, and despite being drawn to her innocuous personality, he had no interest in either a one-night stand or a relationship with her. This fact wasn't due to lack of chemistry but rather bad timing. Laura was still struggling deeply with the loss of her husband, and Starsky had the lingering demons of his own romantic past to contend with.

But even with their 'silly little indiscretion' as Laura had said, still lingering in the room, Starsky found himself hesitant to leave.

"Okay," he whispered finally. "But *you* finish the area by the ceiling. I'm *not* getting back on that ladder."

He would stay, but they wouldn't kiss again. He would make sure of it.

XX

It was well past midnight when they finished painting the room.

"Whew," Laura exclaimed as wiped at her sweaty face with her forearm. She threw her dirty paint brush in the empty paint tray on the floor. "I can't believe we're finally done."

"Yep," Starsky agreed, wiping at his own face. He took a few backwards steps away from his finished wall and assessed the new color.

"Ya know, that color really isn't all that bad. It really brings somethin' to the room. It's nice."

"You see!" Laura exclaimed, she reached out her hand and gave Starsky's shoulder a playful shove. "I told you it would be great."

Starsky smiled and shrugged. The night had been a good one, their momentary kiss long since forgotten, erased by the mixture of beer and paint fumes. Starsky picked up his half empty bottle of beer, finishing it in a few large gulps, and collected Laura's discarded bottle from the floor. "You want 'nother?" he asked, already on his way to the connecting kitchen.

"Please."

Starsky threw the empties in the trash can by the back door. Collecting two beers from the refrigerator, he re-joined Laura in the living room.

He found her admiring their handiwork, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room, leaning back and resting her weight on the palms of her hands. Starsky handed her a beer and she patted the floor before taking the bottle.

Starsky sank heavily to the floor. He was feeling a little lightheaded, tired, and sore. Letting out a contented sigh, he took another deep drink.

Starsky and Laura had worked their way through a six-pack while painting, and they were well on their way to finishing a second. Starsky grinned; he had never known a woman who could match him beer for beer like Laura could.

"What?" Laura asked, her expression curious. Suddenly uncomfortable on the hard floor, she fidgeted and shimmied herself around.

"Nothin'." Starsky looked at the floor and then back to his friend. "I was just thinkin'... I've never met a woman that could hold her beer like you."

"Ohhh," Laura giggled. "Well, you can thank Pete for that."

Starsky grimaced and waited for her to shut down the conversation. He was surprised when she continued, the alcohol making her unfazed by the topic.

"I didn't like beer at first," Laura smirked, "but then again, I didn't like Peter much either. We are--were--such opposites. It's a wonder we managed to stay married that long... but that's love I suppose."

"How long were you guys married?" Starsky ventured. If he hadn't been so buzzed, he wouldn't have dared the question, but the night was casting a soothing spell over the friends as they sat close on the floor.

"Oh..." Laura blew out a breath and shook her head. "Well, it would have been twelve years in April, but we were friends long before that."

"Wow," Starsky whispered, now understanding the level of grief that Laura was struggling with. He hadn't known she was married for that long, his knowledge of the death of Peter Elliot secondhand.

"It's strange," Laura continued, leaning forward and peeling the label off her beer bottle. "I've been with him for so long that some days I don't know how I will ever make it without him. I feel like half of me is missing... you probably don't understand."

"I understand. More than you will ever know, I understand." The soft words came out before Starsky could stop them. Laura's disclosure about her husband was making him think of everything he had endured over the last year, and how much he missed Hutch. *Oh, god, how he missed Hutch.*

Laura's head shot up and their eyes met. For a moment, it was as if they were staring into each other's soul.

"You do. Don't you?" Laura whispered finally, seeing her own hurt reflected in Starsky's eyes.

Uncomfortable with the attention, Starsky took another drink. He had said too much, and now he was unsure of how to proceed. He didn't want to talk about Hutch. He didn't want to share the past; he wanted to forget it.

"Dave," Laura pleaded. "Please, don't say that to me and then act like you didn't." When he didn't respond, Laura reached her hand out and rested it on his forearm. "Please?" she asked, her eyebrows rising.

Staring down at her hand, Starsky shrugged. Feeling cornered, he let out a heavy breath. "I lost someone, too."

The words were so quiet, Laura almost thought she had imagined them, but when Starsky continued, she knew she hadn't.

"I had someone, just like you had Pete, but..." He trailed off and focused his eyes on a freshly painted green wall.

"She's gone. too," Laura finished, and Starsky nodded.

There was no point in correcting her; he had no intention of telling her that the person whom he had loved had been another man.

"Dave, I am sorry," Laura said genuinely as she squeezed his arm tightly.

"Me too," he whispered back.

She didn't push him any more on the matter, and they both sat in a sad silence, finishing their beers. Each of them hostages to memories of their respective pasts.

XX

Spring 1955

"Davy, I'm not going to tell you again."

Twelve-year-old David Starsky scowled at the voice of his father. "I'm comin'!" he yelled, as he threw the covers back on his bed and dropped his curly head to the floor, searching under the piece of furniture.

"Where's that *damn* book!?" Davy whispered. He was going to be late for school, again.

"I'm gonna tell Pop you swore," a smug, voice stated from behind him.

Davy pulled himself from the floor to see his little brother, Nicky, leaning in the doorway of their bedroom. "SHUT UP, Nicky!" Davy growled, "I'm lookin' for something."

"Hey, Davy, why are you always losin' your school books?" Nicky taunted with a smirk, "Pop is gonna be so mad when he finds out you can't find your math book."

Sitting on his knees, Davy turned and assessed his little brother suspiciously. "How did ya know I lost my math book?"

Realizing his error, Nicky pulled himself off the doorway and backed out of the room. "Uh, lucky guess?"

"Ya took it, didn't you?!" Davy accused. He pulled himself off the floor and raced after his brother, but was stopped in the hallway when he collided with the uniformed form of his father.

"David," Michael Starsky scolded, as he rested his hands on his first born's shoulders. "Why are you chasing your brother when you are supposed to be getting ready for school?"

"He took my math book." Davy glared at Nicky, who stuck his tongue out at his brother.

"I don't want to hear it," Michael sighed, wishing his boys would just learn to get along.

"BUT POP HE-"

"I don't care what he did," Michael interrupted, his patience for his sons' morning antics waning. "Davy you are older than he is, and you know better than to react to every little thing he does. Besides, if you would keep your books where they belong, he wouldn't be able to take them."

"Ah, he'd still take 'em!" Davy exclaimed, and he tried to fling himself out of Michael's grasp and at his brother. Nicky darted behind the protection of their father's back.

"David, quit!" Michael said sternly. "Leave your brother alone."

"Fine," Davy seethed. He stopped struggling in the grasp, but his blue eyes remained afire. "I still need my book back."

Letting go of Davy, Michael turned to Nicky, who smiled innocently. "Nicholas, give your brother his book."

"Okay," Nicky replied, and re-entered his bedroom. He emerged a second later, book in tow. "Here you go, Davy."

Davy glared at his brother and swiped the book out of his grasp.

Michael sighed. "Get a move on now. God forbid you two are late...again."

XX

The Starsky boys rushed down the stone steps of their Brooklyn apartment building. They were going to have to run the six blocks to their school if they had any hope of being present when the first bell rang.

They hadn't made it very far down the city sidewalk lined with various businesses when Nicky gave up. "Davy," Nicky huffed from behind his brother, "wait. My side hurts an' I'm too tired to run."

Davy stopped in his tracks. He closed his eyes and groaned. Why couldn't he have been an only child?

Davy turned and saw his brother standing stagnate about half a block behind him. Nicky made no effort to shorten the distance between them, and Davy swore under his breath.

Ignoring the passing people, Davy yelled at his brother, "com' on! We don't have all day!"

Nicky whined something that Davy couldn't hear, and started toward him, walking painfully slow.

"Nicky." Davy was exasperated; he opened his mouth to insult his brother, but was stopped by a deep scratchy voice.

"Davy, little Davy Starsky."

Davy turned and saw a heavysset man with dark hair sitting in a parked car next to the sidewalk. Recognizing the man, he smiled, "Hiya, Mr. Durniak."

Joe Durniak frowned. "Davy, call me Joey. Not Mr. Durniak. We're friends, not business associates."

"Um, okay," Davy agreed, knowing full well that his father wouldn't like that at all.

"You boys late for something?" Durniak asked, as Nicky finally caught up to Davy.

"Yeah.... School," Nicky wheezed. He made a show of bending over to catch his breath, and Davy rolled his eyes at the dramatic gesture.

Durniak laughed. "Well, boys. How about a ride?"

"Hey, yeah!" Nicky agreed excitedly.

Davy was less enthused by the offer. "I donno, Mr. Durn-Joey. Pop wouldn't like it."

"Come on, Davy," Durniak smiled. "I am sure it will be fine. Besides, you could even make it to school on time."

Everything inside of Davy was screaming no, but then Nicky opened the passenger side door of Durniak's car, and he found himself crawling in after his younger brother.

Davy felt awkward as Durniak drove the few blocks to the school. Nicky was unfazed by his brother's discomfort, rambling on and on about how nice Durniak's car was.

Davy just couldn't shake his uneasiness about Durniak. He never knew how to feel about the man. He wasn't stupid; he knew that Durniak wasn't Brooklyn's most upstanding citizen, but he was friends with his father, and that friendship sometimes confused him.

Durniak parked his car in front of the school. Davy opened the door and jumped out, Nicky following on his heels.

"Thanks for the ride, Mr. Durniak," Davy said from the curb, already forgetting the man's previous request of being called by his first name.

Nicky started to walk away, but Davy grabbed him roughly by his upper arm.

"Ow! Davy!" The younger boy exclaimed.

"Thank Mr. Durniak for the ride, Nicky," Davy whispered firmly.

"Oh," Nicky smiled, "Thanks Mr. Durniak."

"Well, see ya," Davy said and both boys turned to leave.

"Davy?" Durniak asked.

Davy looked at the man. "Yeah?"

"Stay behind and talk to me a second?"

Surprisingly, Nicky stopped mid-step. He looked at Davy, hesitant to leave his big brother alone.

"Go 'head, Nicky," Davy assured, "I won't be long, and you'll be late for class."

"Kay," Nicky shrugged, then ran toward the school entrance.

"Davy," the older man smiled reassuringly. "You're a good kid. You got a good head on your shoulders, and because of that, I want you to come work with me."

"Um," Davy hedged. Durniak's words shocked him, and he wasn't quite sure what to say. "What for?"

"Just some random jobs," Durniak reassured. "Car washing, a few deliveries here and there. I would pay you, of course. Boy like you got to be eager for some extra pocket money."

"Maybe," Davy hesitantly replied. "I would havta check with my pop first."

"I already checked with him and he said it would be fine. In fact, he seemed pretty excited that you would have something to keep you busy." The lie came out of Durniak's mouth smoothly and convincingly.

"He did?" Davy asked. He felt uncomfortable, but he couldn't quite figure out why. That didn't sound like something his pop would agree to, especially not without talking to his son about it first.

"He did," Durniak affirmed with a nod. He pulled at the breast pocket of his suit jacket, removing a pack of cigarettes. "How about it, kid?"

"Well, I guess I could," Davy said quietly. He watched Durniak light his cigarette, the uneasiness in his stomach growing.

"Good," Durniak mumbled around the cigarette. He took a deep drag and smiled. "We'll talk more about this later. You better get to class."

"Yeah... Bye, Mr. Durniak," Davy didn't get very far when Durniak spoke again.

"Oh, and Davy?" Durniak smiled, forgoing his previous lie for a mild threat. "Not a word of this to your father. I would hate to have to tell him that you accepted a ride to school. Especially since your little brother was with you."

Feeling like he had been had, Davy didn't say anything. He turned and ran from the car, anxious to get as far away from Durniak as his feet could carry him.

Chapter 5

January 28, 1979

It had snowed all week. Hutch found himself progressively depressed during that time, as he watched the big heavy flakes fall from the cloudy sky, leaving the Hutchinson family property covered with a new accumulation of drifting precipitation.

The cold and snow were almost too much for him to handle, not to mention the fact that upon hearing about his children's spontaneous horseback ride during his absence earlier in the month, Richard Hutchinson had dictated that his son stay in the house.

"The cold isn't good for your constitution, Kenneth," Richard had said, and Hutch had felt a flare of anger and resentment towards his father for making such a silly declaration.

Hutch had tried to challenge Richard on the subject, but once again, his limited speech failed him, and his father had won the argument before it even started. If only his father would respond to Hutch's efforts to converse via notepad, but Richard refused to acknowledge anything his son communicated that way.

Imprisoned in the family home, Hutch found himself spending most afternoons in the sunroom. And on this particular day, it provided a much needed break from the snowfall. Hutch was excited to see the sun settled high in the sky, warm rays of light filtering through the floor-to-

ceiling double hung windows. Hutch reveled in its warmth, and it left him feeling happier than he had been in a long time.

Eternally worried about his son's health, Richard Hutchinson had ensured that the heat in the sunroom was a consistent 70 degrees, citing that the warm temperature was needed to keep a plethora of plants alive. However, Hutch had a sneaking suspicion that the room's temperature was a direct result of his own continued presence in it.

Despite Hutch's improvement, Richard remained controlling in regards to his son's health, and as of late, Hutch was becoming less receptive to his father's control over his life. He wasn't a child and despite his 'accident' it was hardly fair of his father to treat him like one. Each passing day increased Hutch's desire for independence; he was a grown man and felt he should be allowed to make his own decisions without the input of his father.

Hutch hummed softly as he moved about the room, watering the various plants. He was so focused on the job as hand, that he was startled when a quiet voice interrupted his thoughts.

"The plants look healthy, darling. You are doing a wonderful job."

Hutch looked up to see his mother standing in the doorway. He offered her a grateful smile and moved to the corner to water the Swedish ivy that hung from the ceiling.

Houseplants had been nonexistent in the Hutchinson household prior to Hutch's return. Emily Hutchinson had requested the long-abandoned sunroom be cleaned up and filled with various plants for the enjoyment of her son.

Hutch had only been home for a few days when his mother had led him to the small room that was located off the family's kitchen. She had gifted the room to him and he was delighted at the prospect. As he assumed the duties of caring for the various plants that lived in that room, Hutch found he took comfort in once again being surrounded by silent green friends.

"Darling, a letter came in the mail for you today," Emily stated, reaching out to touch her son's shoulder, her hand lingering. "I put it on the desk in your bedroom along with the notepads you requested." She smiled knowingly at him. "Just don't let your father know that I am the one who has been giving them to you. That is our little secret."

Hutch winked at his mother, grateful for her support. His father had been taking away the small lined notebooks at every opportunity, and his mother had been replenishing his stock just as quickly. Richard saw the paper and pencil as a hindrance to his son's recovery, but Emily saw it as giving her son a voice.

"I will leave you to it." Emily leaned in to kiss her son's cheek and was taken into a swift hug. Never someone who was completely comfortable with physical contact, Emily was taken aback by the sudden embrace of her stoic son. However, she didn't hesitate to return it. Wrapping her arms around Hutch, she smiled, and held him closely. Savoring the moment, Emily found herself grateful that her only son was alive and safe under the roof of his childhood home.

Hutch closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of his mother's perfume; something about that smell was so ingrained in his mind that it left him feeling calm and protected.

Moments later, Hutch pulled back, and Emily smoothed her son's wrinkled flannel shirt.

"Well, don't stay in here too long," she requested softly. "Your father will be home soon, and he will have fit if he thinks you're overdoing things."

What else is new? Hutch rolled his eyes.

XX

After finishing up with his plants, Hutch retired to his bedroom; he was anxious to see who had written him. He received letters from the Dobe family pretty regularly, and sometimes Huggy. It was nice to have some sort of link to his past life, and he was thankful that there was a small group of people who still loved and supported him, despite what he had done.

As his mother had promised, both the letter and the notebooks were waiting. Grabbing the letter and sitting heavily on his bed, Hutch was surprised when he didn't recognize the handwriting on the white envelope, and he hastily tore it open.

Dearest Kenneth,

I hope this letter finds you in continued good health. Both Sherry and I were pleased to receive the letter from you, as we both have been anxious about your progress. We are so happy that you are doing well.

I wanted to contact you earlier, but I thought that perhaps that might be inappropriate. We had you for six months and it was time to step aside and let your family have their time with you.

It has been a difficult road for us. Having to say good-bye to Michael has been the hardest thing we have ever had to do. Especially, with the details about his life that we now know. Some days are better than others, and Sherry continues to struggle deeply with the events that took place. We take it day-by-day, but knowing that you are healthy and thriving with your family makes things easier to face. But we will continue to miss Michael and you.

Your apology for Michael's death was appreciated but hardly necessary. Please know that we do not hold any ill will or negative feelings toward you. You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for. What happened to Michael was not your fault, and neither Sherry nor I want you to hang on to those tragic events. You did everything in your power to protect our son, and we know that. You did the best you could, and we hope that you will someday be able to believe that and forgive yourself.

I hope that you will not find this too forward, but please also know that Sherry and I will always be here for you. Your correspondence will always be welcome, and we hope that a

day will come where we can reunite once more. I do not know how we could ever look back on the time we spent together and not have some fondness for each other.

Sherry and I wish you the very best. Please take this new beginning and seize the opportunity it presents. Don't hold on to the past; look forward to the future. Life is a gift. Please make sure you live it.

Know that will always love you,

Daniel and Sherry Bennett

Choking back a sob, Hutch wiped at the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Daniel's words had touched him deeply. He was happy to know that the Bennetts had forgiven him for what happened to their son. Although those around him had assured him that Michael Bennett's death was not his responsibility, Hutch had a hard time letting go of his guilt. It didn't matter how many people told him otherwise, in Hutch's mind he would be forever responsible for what had taken place.

Even now, months later, Hutch found that the Bennetts were never far from his thoughts. After everything they had gone through together, it was hard not to feel close to them.

As he refolded the letter and tucked into his desk drawer, Hutch made himself a silent promise that he would continue contact with the Bennetts. He grabbed a sharpened pencil out of the drawer. Ignoring the stack of new notebooks his mother had left him, Hutch pulled a worn, brown leather-bound journal that he hid under a pile of discarded paper and envelopes on the desk. He wrote a date at the top of the page, then tapped the eraser of the pencil on the table top as he paused to collect his thoughts.

A new beginning.

That was what Daniel had written, and Hutch had to admit he hadn't thought of his current situation like that before. No longer was he a hostage to his secret career with the FBI. Everyone knew the truth about what he had done and he was free of it, something he had been wanting for a very long time. No longer would he be expected to deceive those closest to him, but this revelation was both sad and comforting at the same time.

It wasn't so long ago that Hutch had been dreaming of a very different new beginning. One with a very different career for himself and Starsky by his side. It pained Hutch to think about that dream now, but Daniel was right, he needed to let go of the past and look toward his future, whatever that was supposed to be.

If only it were that easy.

Huggy had confided to Mallory, who in turn had told Hutch, how Starsky left Bay City right after discovering his partner was alive. Starsky's departure had been quick and unexpected, and he hadn't left a forwarding address. Hutch suspected that Huggy probably had a good idea of

where their mutual friend had ended up. But Huggy didn't volunteer that information, and Hutch didn't feel like he was entitled to it, so he didn't ask.

Hutch was ashamed to admit that a small part of him was relieved when Starsky disappeared from his life. His lover's absence made living with the guilt of what he had done less difficult. Hutch had more than enough guilt to grapple with on a daily basis without Starsky's presence serving as a physical reminder of what he had done.

Forgiveness over betraying Starsky would not come easy-if ever. Hutch didn't even know how he would begin to make amends to his former lover. Or if he ever could.

That knowledge didn't prevent him from missing Starsky, though. Hutch missed Starsky in ways that he didn't even know he could miss another person. Starsky had been his best friend, his partner, his lover. Hutch wanted so badly to reach out to the other man, whom he had been so close to for so many years, but he knew that he couldn't do that. Not after everything he had hidden and everything he had done. If there was to be a reconciliation, Starsky was the one who would have to initiate it.

But the odds of Starsky initiating contact seemed slim. How could he not hate Hutch for everything he had done? Hutch's heart hurt just thinking about how Starsky must have felt when he heard the truth. Their whole relationship was based on a lie, and the worst part of all was that Hutch had initiated it. He was responsible for everything, and if he had been in Starsky's shoes, he knew that he would feel equally as betrayed and furious. Hutch didn't fault him for terminating their relationship at all.

All Starsky had done was love Hutch, and Hutch had failed him.

Some new beginning.

Thoughts collected, Hutch put his pencil to the journal and began writing intently.

XX

Spring 1976

"Hey, wanna hit up a movie tomorrow?" Starsky asked from the kitchen table. He was working his way through a slice of leftover pizza and the morning paper.

Hutch placed the coffee pot back on the stove. He was expected to meet Special Agent Carter in New York the next day. He would be flying out at midnight, and he yet to come up with a feasible reason of why he would be ditching his lover for the next few days.

Hutchinson was joining Carter for his yearly visit to Joe Durniak. He wasn't sure why Agent Carter was so persistent that Hutch be present during these meetings, living across the country from Durniak, he certainly wasn't involved in that side of the case.

Hutch was starting to have sneaking suspicions that just as he was deceiving Starsky in regards to his true career, Carter was deceiving him when it came to Joe Durniak. Hutch was starting to wonder if he was somehow only a small player in a much larger scheme by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Hutch? Ya hear me?" Starsky drawled lazily. He made no effort to look up from behind his paper.

"Yes."

"Yes, ya heard me, or yes ya wanna go?" Starsky pressed.

Well, here we go. Hutch thought grimly. He lingered by the stove and braced himself for another unavoidable argument.

"Yes, I heard you. And sorry Starsk, but I'm not going to be around the next few days."

Starsky looked up from his paper. He eyed Hutch suspiciously before continuing. "Why? Where ya goin'?"

"Out of town." Hutch shrugged, knowing full well how much that response would anger his partner.

"Out of town?" Starsky repeated, annoyance seeping into his tone. "Where? And when were you gonna tell me?!"

"I thought I already did," Hutch lied. "It isn't anything to worry about; just a short trip. Get out on the road, clear my head a bit."

"Where ya going?" Starsky demanded, his grip creasing the newspaper.

"I just told you."

"Bullshit! Who does that? Who ya going with?"

"No one," Hutch responded evenly. He turned back to the stove and busied himself with the coffee pot, doing anything he could to avoid eye contact with his disbelieving partner. *Keep your distance, Hutchinson, or you'll never leave him. Or worse, you'll tell him the truth.*

"Nobody goes out of town alone!" Starsky accused, throwing his paper down on the table.

"I do," Hutch responded calmly, baiting Starsky into escalating their fight. Grabbing his coffee cup from the counter, he took a seat next his partner. Hutch reached to grab Starsky's hand in his own, but Starsky pulled his hand out of reach.

"What's your problem? Why is everything a big fuckin' secret when it comes to you?" Starsky body was rigid with agitation and his blue eyes were furious.

"Babe," Hutch tried. "Come on. This isn't a big deal. I just want to get out of the city for a couple of days... Alone. I've done it before and I'll do it again. I am sorry that it is upsetting you so much, but it really isn't anything to worry about."

"But why?" Starsky pressured. "Ya know... I let your little private trip go last year, and the year before that. And *even* the year before that one, but now, babe, I wanna know... I think I *deserve* to know... Where exactly do you go?"

Awe, babe. Hutch felt a stab of guilt, and found that he couldn't look at his partner after that statement.

"Starsk, me not telling you... it doesn't have anything to do with our relationship," Hutch advised calmly, his gaze and hands resting on the tabletop. He felt the smoothness of the table under his fingertips as he traced them over the lines of the wood. *It has nothing to do with us, just my career and your past, but that doesn't have any influence on what happens between us.*

"Then what it about then!?" Starsky yelled. "How long have we been together?" he pointed his finger wildly between them. "I'll tell you how long. Six years. SIX YEARS!!! And you can't even tell me where you go when you decide you need to run away from yourself!"

Hutch flinched at Starsky's assessment of his secret activities. If his lover only knew how often he really did want to run away from himself.

"This isn't about you," Hutch tried softly. He had meant to continue but as soon as Starsky's face darkened, he knew he wasn't going to get a chance.

"You're an asshole," Starsky growled. "How can you *even* say that to me? Like the things you do don't affect me? You sit there and act like I shouldn't give a shit if you decided to disappear for a few days!"

"I'm still going," Hutch stated. His partner's words only adding to the distress he already felt over the situation.

Starsky shook his head violently, Hutch's retort adding to his frustration. He stood, almost tipping his chair in the process. "Fine. You do that. Just go, but don't be surprised if I'm not here when you get back."

Hutch tried to respond but Starsky was already out the door, slamming it forcefully behind him. He wanted to go after Starsky and assure him that everything was okay, but he didn't.

Going after Starsky would only further complicate things. It was easier to let Starsky leave. To let him be pissed off for a few days. At least this way, Hutch didn't have to worry about his partner probing for information. And if Starsky were angry at him, Hutch could breathe easy knowing that his partner wouldn't be looking for him during his absence.

Hutch rubbed his eyes and sighed heavily. He suddenly wondered when his life had been reduced to lies of omission and cleverly placed domestic tiffs.

He *hated* lying to Starsky. And he hated his predicament even more. He couldn't go on like this forever.

Hutch loved Starsky, and he *despised* lying to him. But there was no clean way to disengage from his current predicament.

If he continued lying, things stayed the same. He and Starsky would continue working together, and would be free to continue their secret domestic partnership. But tell Starsky the truth and... Well, Hutch wasn't quite sure what the cost of that disclosure would be. It would compromise his assignment with the FBI and his career, Hutch knew that much. As for what the truth would do to Starsky, Hutch wasn't so sure. It would probably be the end of everything that Hutch held dear.

If telling the truth meant losing Starsky, then that was something Hutch never wanted to have to do. But he also couldn't continue to lie to the man whom he loved more than anyone he had ever known.

Not a day went by that Hutch didn't feel like a traitor. His guilt over monitoring Starsky's actions for the FBI weighed heavily on him, and it wasn't something that Hutch took lightly. He knew what he was doing, and what it would cost him if Starsky ever found out.

Starsky was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and Hutch loved him completely. Starsky was warm and caring, and what he saw in Hutch, Hutch would never know.

Starsky's love was, for the most part, unwavering, and sometimes being loved that way was enough for Hutch to forget who he really was and what he was really doing in Bay City. And lately, Hutch found himself thinking more and more what life would be like if they really were just Starsky and Hutch, two Bay City detectives. No secret meets with the FBI. No Joe Durniak. Just the two of them.

It sounded like a dream, or the perfect new beginning.

XX

Spring 1976

Hutchinson wasn't good at waiting. Although his position with the FBI had presented him with vast opportunities to improve this skill, it had actually done the opposite. Hutch was more intolerant to waiting around currently than he had been eight years ago.

And now standing alone in Special Agent Carter's office in D.C., Hutchinson was down to his last straw. The quiet allowed him too much time to think about how messy his life had become.

Hutchinson hadn't seen Starsky since the morning before, when he had left his kitchen in a huff, and he couldn't help but be worried about the man. How long would Starsky stay angry this time? And more importantly, what would he do as a result of that anger?

"Damn it," Hutchinson sighed.

"Bad day?" Carter asked as he entered the room.

"Uh, no. Not really," Hutchinson lied and fidgeted with his shirt collar. He always hated wearing a suit and avoided doing so every chance he could, but the meeting with Durniak, and the subsequent meeting with his superior, required the professional appearance. There was a time when wearing a suit was second nature to him, and Hutch suddenly wondered when that had changed.

"Well, I am about to make it worse," Carter stated as he sat behind his desk. "Durniak is refusing to meet with us."

A groan escaped from Hutchinson. It was unprofessional and he knew that, but he couldn't hold back his disgust. *Another trip wasted.*

Carter was not amused. "I am sorry that your career is such an inconvenience to you," he reprimanded, his voice heavy with disapproval. He crossed his arms and stared at Hutchinson. It was clear he was expecting a response.

"No, sir," Hutchinson responded emphatically. "It's just that I am finding it increasingly... difficult to get away from my cover in Bay City. It's been years, sir, and, well, if I suddenly disappear for a few days people tend to notice. It can be... stressful."

Carter smiled. "Well, that is natural I suppose. You've built a life there, Agent, but I will caution you to not get too invested. That isn't who you are. Your real identity, your real future, is with the FBI."

Carter's oversimplified assessment of his complicated situation annoyed Hutch, and he had to stop himself from glaring at the man. If Carter thought it was so easy to live somewhere for eight years and not get 'too invested' then let him try it.

"And what happens to me when Durniak does decide to deal?" Hutch challenged, suddenly worried at the prospect. "What am I supposed to do? Pack up and leave? Start a new life? Is that when I get to be who I really am."

"Hutchinson," Carter said. "None of that matters. Durniak will never, I repeat, never deal with the FBI."

"What?" Hutch looked to Carter. Still struggling with the stress of the last couple days, Hutch couldn't remain his composure. This was just too much. "Then why the fuck am I even here?! Why am I still expected to watch Starsky? It's been *years*, Carter. He hasn't done a thing to warrant suspicion. All Starsky had done is be a good cop, and I'm sick of lying to him. What is the goddamn point?"

Shocked by his own sudden tirade, Hutchinson leaned forward in his seat. His elbows rested on his knees and he sank his forehead in his palms. *Oh, god. That was a mistake.*

Carter crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat. He wasn't shocked by Hutchinson's outburst. It had been inevitable. Hutchinson had been growing closer and closer to Starsky as time went on. It was only a matter of time before his conscience caught up to him.

However, Carter accepted something that Hutchinson didn't. There was no room for second thoughts now, or even for questioning the moral consequences of his actions. Hutchinson was in too deep, and it would be best if he accepted his role in Starsky's life for what it was, a case.

"We all have roles to play, Hutchinson," Carter said sternly, dismissing his earlier questions. "This is yours. Don't get attached and don't get too comfortable. Leave your moral compass at the door, because it serves no purpose here. You were hired for a job and you will do it."

And that was the moment that Hutchinson knew no amount of daydreaming about a new beginning would change his predicament. He was stuck.

XX

Hutch sighed heavily as he sat in the waiting area outside his gate. His flight wasn't scheduled to leave for another 45 minutes, and it would be a while before the boarding call was made. He looked at the various people walking by and took note of the few scattered people waiting for flight to Bay City. But he found that none of them were interesting enough to distract him from his current state of mind.

Hutch felt cornered and defeated, his meeting with Carter still fresh, and he was having a hard time accepting the finality of the situation. Hutch found himself wanting to call Starsky. He yearned to hear the comforting sound of his voice. It was a respite that he should feel entitled to, and Hutch felt horrible for even needing it. But dismissing his worries and guilt, he went searching for a telephone. After all, it would be good to know if his return to Bay City would be welcomed or resented by his partner.

Finding an empty phone booth and shutting the door firmly, he deposited his change and dialed the familiar number. He leaned his forehead against the window of the booth as he listened to the ringing.

Please... Please be home.

"Yeah?" Starsky's tone was abrupt and crass and it made Hutch think that maybe calling wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Hey, babe," Hutch said. He forced the words out with much more cheer than he felt. *It's so good to hear your voice.*

"Hutch?" Starsky's voice sounded unsure. "I wasn't-I didn't think you were gonna call."

"Yeah... well. I wasn't sure I wanted to call," Hutch admitted softly. *I miss you.*

"Yeah," Starsky agreed and both men found they really didn't have anything else to say, the tension from their fight still thick between them.

"Look," Hutch finally broke the silence. "I-I'm sorry. Can we just... I love you and I am sorry... okay?" *Please let that be enough, babe.*

"Just come home." Starsky sighed. "How long will it take you this time?"

"I'll see you tomorrow," Hutch promised. He smiled, happy with relief. Starsky had let him off easy-this time.

"Babe? Are you ever gonna tell me where it is you go when ya need to be alone?" Starsky's voice was gentle, and it made Hutch want to tell him everything. But he couldn't. Not now. Not ever.

"Maybe someday," Hutch sighed. *I can't tell you, but god knows I want to.*

"Well, I guess that's enough." Starsky sighed. "Babe, are you okay? You don't sound too good."

"I'm fine," Hutch assured, but he wasn't. Not even a little bit.

"You don't sound fine," Starsky worriedly challenged. "Just come home, babe. Whatever it is you're feeling right now, we can figure it out together."

It was such a simple statement, but Hutch almost sobbed at the words. How he wished it could be that easy.

It would never be that easy.

Chapter 6

February 15, 1979

"Com' on, Maggie," Starsky groaned as he carried yet another box to the small storage room in the back of the bar. "Just drop it already."

Maggie grinned, happy that her questioning was hitting its mark. "I am just repeating what I heard, David. Talk of the town is that you spent a night at Laura's."

"That was *weeks* ago. And it wasn't like *that*. And since when are you a gossip?" Starsky demanded, his back to Maggie. He dropped the box to the hard wood floor. When it made a solid thump, he wondered if anything was broken, but quickly decided that he didn't care. Broken items would serve Maggie right for giving him such a hard time over his friendship with Laura.

Since when was it so scandalous for a man and woman to be friends?

After the night Laura and Starsky had spent painting her living room, the small town had been downright alive with rumors about the fictional romantic relationship between the two. And as

gossip quickly spread about Starsky and Laura's adult sleepover, the new rumor only served to reinforce people's suspicions that they were, in fact, a couple.

Starsky would have liked to know who had spread that particular piece of gossip, just so he could thank the individual with a swift kick to their knee or other more painful places. Being the main topic of town fodder was starting to make him uncomfortable, and for the first time he found himself missing the anonymity of Bay City.

The townsfolk were correct about Starsky spending the night at Laura's, but the context was all wrong. Being too drunk to make it back to the boarding house, he had slept on her couch. Nothing had happened. Well, outside of the kiss they had shared, what Laura now jokingly referred to as 'the indiscretion'.

"I am not a gossip," Maggie defended, looking incredulous.

"Sure you aren't," Starsky challenged with a grin.

"Kid, I have never been a gossip and I will *never* be a gossip. You live in a town this size for as long I have, you start to realize that some things are meant to be sacred, but rarely ever are."

Ain't that the truth? Starsky shook his head.

"Hey, Maggie, where do ya want the rest of this stuff?" He indicated the remaining boxes on the floor. There weren't many, but the small storage room was already filled to the brim. "What is this junk anyway?"

Maggie dismissed his question with a wave; not even looking up from her pile of receipts and deposit slips, she changed the subject completely. "You be careful when it comes to Laura Eliot. That girl doesn't need more heartbreak in her life."

"Maggie, we are just friends-"

"Oh, you say that now. But one thing always leads to another, as far as you young people are concerned. I don't want you to hurt her."

"What makes you think that I would be the one to hurt *her*?" Starsky asked clearly annoyed. He felt a sudden flare of anger as Maggie's protective words reminded him of another group of people who, not so long ago, had been so intent on protecting him. "And what makes you think she wants you looking after her like that?"

Maggie looked up, shocked at Starsky's tone. She hadn't meant to make him angry, but when she saw the look on his face, she realized that was exactly what she had done. Even so, she had meant her warning about Laura.

Maggie liked Laura; she was a sweet girl and didn't deserve the tragedies that fate seemed so intent on making her endure. Maggie wasn't sure what Starsky's back-story was, but she did know that it couldn't be good.

Maggie wasn't blind; she saw the haunted look that sometimes crossed the boy's face, and the pain in his eyes that he worked so hard to cover up.

From Maggie's perspective, Starsky and Laura were two wounded people just trying to get through the rest of their lives. The pain of one mirroring the other's, it would be easy for them to cling to each other. But the relationship would never last, and Maggie would do anything in her power to avoid that train wreck.

"Oh, don't you get yourself in a tizzy," Maggie soothed. "I didn't mean it like that. You're a nice boy, David. But you're unavailable, and Laura needs to know that."

"What makes you think I'm unavailable?" Starsky spat. He was still angry and this conversation was doing nothing to calm him.

Maggie sighed as if the answer to his question was the most obvious thing in the world. Taking another drink, she eyed him shrewdly.

"Never mind," Starsky dismissed, taking a deep breath. Getting into a fight with Maggie wouldn't solve anything. He turned his back to her and returned to the boxes. "Where do you want the rest of this stuff?"

"Pack 'em in the storage room," Maggie directed. She returned to her paperwork, already dismissing their dispute.

Starsky did as he was told. Cramming the remaining four boxes into the overly full room, he shut the door quickly, in fear of the cardboard tower toppling over on him. He made a mental note to avoid opening the door in the future.

"You are a pack rat," Starsky accused mildly. Walking over to the bar, he grabbed a glass and poured himself a draft beer.

"You shouldn't drink on the Lord's day," Maggie advised from her post at the bar. She shuffled the receipts into a pile.

Starsky took a drink and rolled his eyes. He nodded at the drink Maggie had in front of her, which was her third since he had arrived two hours ago. "That's rich...coming from you," he joked.

"Do as I say, not as I do. You are much too young to drink on Sundays. I'm old; I've earned the privilege."

Maggie wasn't really serious. Starsky knew that she didn't care whether he drank on Sundays or not. She just enjoyed the banter.

"Well," Starsky stated finally, "I came in on Sunday to move your boxes full of shit," he nodded at the room, "into that cramped storage room. I've earned the privilege, too."

Maggie looked up and grinned. "Maybe you have."

They were silent as Starsky finished his beer and helped himself to another.

"Hey, maybe you should slow down," Maggie voiced. "It's early; you have all night to intoxicate yourself."

"But I always thought that would be the greatest thing about working at a bar... an endless supply of booze." Starsky smiled and took another drink. The alcohol was relaxing him and he embraced the feeling.

"Well, I hired you to work at my bar, not work on developing alcoholism," Maggie grouched.

Starsky stared at his employer as she looked over her pile of receipts. Despite her tendency to put off bookkeeping responsibilities until late on Sunday afternoons, he liked her. Maggie was eternally forthright, and Starsky had admit that she usually had pretty good intuition. Maggie often knew how people felt before they even knew themselves. Suddenly Starsky decided that perhaps he wanted Maggie to answer his earlier question after all, curious as to what her brutally honest assessment of him would be.

"Hey, Maggie," Starsky asked quietly. Abandoning his beer, he grabbed a rag and busied himself with wiping the bar. It was already clean, but he did it anyway, feeling the need to be busy. "What makes you say that I'm unavailable?"

Maggie exhaled sharply. She looked up at him, unsure if she wanted to continue their previous conversation. "Why are you wiping that bar?" she hedged. "It can't get any cleaner than it already is."

Starsky stopped the aimless task and threw the white rag in the sink behind him. He reached for his beer and drank deeply.

"Oh, I don't know," Maggie breathed finally, dreading her answer and Starsky's reaction to it. Maggie wasn't good with emotions, and Starsky's past was not something she wanted to be privy too.

Starsky finished his beer and poured himself another. Leaning over the bar, he rested his upper body heavily on his elbows.

"Listen, David." Maggie met his eyes. "I will tell you the same thing I told you the day I hired you. I don't know anything about your past, and I don't need to. I like you, and you're a good kid."

"But," Starsky provided, looking away from Maggie's gaze.

"But... The more I get to know you, the more I can't help but think that you are running from something... or someone."

Starsky flinched, and Maggie pretended not to notice, but it confirmed that her words had been true. Not wanting to push too hard, her tone was soft as she continued. "Now, whether that is

another person or yourself, I don't know. But there is sadness in your eyes that could only mean one thing."

"Which is?" Starsky probed, taking another drink of his beer. He was sure he didn't want to hear Maggie's answer, but something inside of him was whispering that maybe he needed to hear it regardless.

"It's the same look that Laura has in her eyes. Someone or something broke you, and you are trying your damndest to hide it."

"Yeah, well," Starsky snorted desolately. The same old knot reformed in his chest and squeezed his heart relentlessly. "Obviously I'm doing a shit job."

XX

In the darkness, Starsky lay on his bed. Sleep was not coming easily, and the beers he drank at Maggie's were doing nothing to entice him into unconsciousness.

Maggie's words still lingered, and he found that he couldn't let go of what she had said. He had told himself that he was doing a good job of starting over and moving on, but he wasn't, and the truth in Maggie's words had stung.

Was he really running away from Hutch? Or was he running away from himself?

As days passed, Starsky found the deep hurt he felt over Hutch's dishonesty not cutting quite so deep, and it was slowly being replaced with new emotions -- feelings like anger and resentment, and the worst feeling of all: longing.

Starsky didn't want to long for his lost lover, but he did.

Everything seemed so clear now. Comments made in passing by people who didn't even know Hutch all took on new meaning now. What was it that Maureen Blake had said a few years ago, when they overheard Hutch comforting Nancy as she was struggling with the truth about her fiancée Billy?

"That's a fine thing your partner is doing. He lies very well."

Hutch was a hell of a liar, a fact that Starsky had always known. He just never expected the level of deception that Hutch was capable of, or to be at the receiving end of his lover's largest fraud.

There was one lie in particular Hutch had told Nancy, the same day Maureen had made her comment about his ability to lie, that Starsky found himself focusing on more and more.

"He started out to use you and then, in his own way, and I guess, with as much love he was capable, of he fell in love with you, too."

Where had Hutch come up with that? And as much as it made him feel ridiculous to think such a thing, Starsky couldn't help but wonder if Hutch's words to Nancy, in that moment, had more to do with their own relationship than comforting his childhood friend.

Starsky dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. All the love in the world and displaced reassurances couldn't change what happened. He groaned and turned to his side. He readjusted his pillow and tried to force sleep, but his thoughts quickly returned to Hutch.

Starsky thought of the day in the parking garage when Detective Cooper had disclosed who Hutch had been. It had shocked him, but what was worse was how much that knowledge shined a new light on his relationship with Hutch. It had opened his eyes, and, suddenly everything made sense.

The secret yearly trips Hutch used to make. The weird phone calls at all hours of night, and then there were his partner's absences when he started shadowing Michael Bennett.

Starsky was frustrated with himself and the role he had played in Hutch's deception. He had known all along that there were things that didn't quite add up about his partner.

Starsky had known, even back then, that Hutch wasn't being completely honest. How many times had they argued over Hutch's inability to share things with Starsky, or his need to maintain privacy over some aspects of his life?

Starsky hadn't been blind to Hutch's behavior, he had been avoidant.

Again and again, Starsky had dismissed his worries about the situation. Telling himself that everything would be okay, because he loved Hutch, and if you love someone, you take the good and the bad. You allow them keep whatever secrets they think they need to have.

Foolishly, he had thought that Hutch would come around. Someday he would feel comfortable and loved enough by Starsky to let him into his private world. Only that never happened; Hutch never told Starsky his secrets. It was Detective Cooper in an abandoned parking garage who had done the one thing that Hutch had spent their entire partnership trying to avoid.

Starsky had never expected his own past to be so intertwined in Hutch's secret life, and that knowledge was what Starsky was so intent on running away from.

XX

Summer 1955

"What's the point of this?" Davy mumbled as he scrubbed the tail end of Durniak's black car.

It wasn't dirty, the exterior still shining from the last time he had washed and waxed it, but that morning Durniak had advised Davy that he wanted the car washed and waxed again. So Davy obediently complied, but that didn't mean he couldn't silently complain about having to repeat a job that didn't need to be done.

Davy had been secretly working for Durniak for a few weeks. The work was easy just as Durniak had said, and the boy was excited at how quickly he was making money. He was still wary of the man, but so far, Durniak hadn't asked him to do anything that would warrant the uneasiness.

Staying true to his forced promise to Durniak, Davy hadn't mentioned his new job to his father. And it had been easy enough for Davy to hide that he was working with Durniak. With both of his parents working, they were rarely home during the day. It was Nicky who had posed the largest threat, but Davy had sworn him to silence with daily deliveries of candy. His brother was such an easy pay off.

Davy tried not to think about what his pop would have to say if he knew his son was working for Durniak. He would be in deep trouble, Davy knew that for sure. But as long as Davy didn't do anything that was illegal, what was the harm in doing some odd jobs and collecting some extra money?

Durniak's headquarters was located in a non-assuming industrial building, the front of which housed parked cars from Durniak's operation. Davy assumed this was to hide them from the police or other interested parties.

Durniak's large office was located on the second floor in the back of the building. There was a large staircase leading up to the office and a small landing just outside the door. And when Durniak left his door open, he was provided with the perfect lookout to observe most of the activity below.

The building would have been impossible for Davy to walk to from his family's apartment, so he took a bus, his new employer funding his almost daily fare to and from the warehouse.

The morning had been quiet, and Davy was alone in the large building except for Durniak himself, who was in his office with the door shut. Doing whatever it was the man did.

As the days passed, Davy found himself wondering more and more just what exactly Durniak did behind closed doors. Not that the man would ever disclose such a thing to him.

From day one, Durniak had advised Davy to 'make himself scarce' if anyone ever arrived at the building announced. Davy never explicitly asked why he would have to do such a thing, but he had a pretty good idea. Durniak had relationships with some pretty rough people, and Davy was not eager to get up close and personal with any of them.

The boy bent down and dipped his soaked sponge in the bucket filled with soapy water. Wringing it out, he heard the door in the front of the building creak as it opened and then footsteps. Not sure if he wanted to be seen by whoever was entering the building, Davy dropped on all fours and hid behind Durniak's car.

The footsteps were coming closer and closer. Davy took a little relief in knowing that he was hidden from the intruder on the opposite side of the car, but then he heard Durniak greet the man from his office doorway.

"Detective Starsky," the man's deep voice called out. "This is a surprise."

"We need to talk, Durniak," Michael Starsky demanded seriously.

Davy listened to the exchange between his father and Durniak in shock. He knew his father was friends with Durniak, but never would he have thought that he would visit Durniak at his office in the daytime. Policemen didn't do that-that was what bad guys did.

The conversation between the men was muffled as they entered Durniak's office. Curious, Davy pulled himself off the floor and quietly made his way up the stairs and to the closed door.

What was his father doing there?

Crouching down and pressing his ear against the door, Davy listened to the conversation inside.

"... I don't know, Joe," Michael Starsky said, worry evident in his voice. "I don't know how much they know, but it isn't good. These are powerful people we are messing with here."

"Don't be so worried, Starsky." Durniak laughed deeply and Davy could hear the sound of his cigarette lighter. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

"Yeah, right," Michael scoffed. "That's easy for you to say. You don't have the feds crawling up your ass. I don't know how much longer I can do this. I have my family to think about."

"Stay the course, Starsky. I can protect you and your family. That much I can promise you. Think about the big picture and what your role in this means..."

Davy pulled his ear back from the door, the conversation inside making him feel sick.

Was his father working for Durniak?

And if his father was working for him, did that make him a good guy or a bad guy? And why did his father sound so... scared? His pop wasn't supposed to be afraid of anything.

His stomach churning, and forgetting about Durniak's half-washed car, Davy made his way out of the building. He ran a few blocks without thinking about where he was going, his mind full with worry.

What was going on?

It was much later when Davy realized that he had ran in the opposite direction than he had intended to. His on-foot trek had taken him further away from his neighborhood, rather than closer.

It was late in the afternoon and he decided to stop at a bus stop. Sitting on the bench, he silently hoped that he would be able to get back home before either of his parents returned from work.

XX

Michael Starsky was worried, and the primary focus of his worry was his eldest son. Stopping in the doorway to his sons' bedroom, he regarded the boy.

Davy was sitting on his bed, his back resting heavily on the headboard, his feet planted on the mattress, and a book propped on his elevated knees. His son gave no indication that he was aware of his father's presence, his curly head downturned as he focused on the words in front of him.

It was unlike Davy to choose reading over playing with his friends, especially during the summer. The boy had been uncharacteristically quiet the last few days, and Michael had a feeling that his son had been avoiding him entirely.

The whooping and exciting squealing of the neighborhood kids could be heard through the room's small window, and Michael wished his son would break out of his mood and join them.

"Davy?" Michael smiled. "It's early yet, why aren't you out playing with your brother and the other kids?"

Surprised by his father's voice, Davy jumped and looked up. "Um... I just really wanted ta' finish this chapter."

"Reading, huh?" Michael tried as he entered the room and stood by his son's bed. He grabbed Davy's worn baseball mitt from the bedside table. Looking it over he continued, "Since when is reading more important than your friends?"

"I *like* reading," Davy stated defensively, bothered by his father's question. He turned the page of the book and scowled. "I'm not stupid, ya know," he muttered.

Wrong tactic, Michael mused. He reached his hand out to smooth his son's curls but Davy moved away from the touch.

"Oh, David," Michael sighed. He threw the mitt back on the table. "I didn't mean it like that. It isn't like you to want to be inside." He laughed. "Your Ma and I usually have to drag you back in the house when it gets dark out."

Davy didn't respond and it didn't go unnoticed by Michael that his son wasn't meeting his eyes or how defeated he looked.

"Davy," Michael whispered softly. Michael scooted his son over on the small twin bed and sat next to him. Waiting was not a newly acquired skill for him, and he had every intention of getting his boy to tell him what is on his mind.

"You know you can tell me anything," Michael assured.

"Yeah, I know."

Davy wanted to ask his father what he was doing at Durniak's the other day, and why their conversation sounded so scary. But doing so would mean admitting his own presence at Durniak's office, and he couldn't disclose that information without getting into trouble.

"What's wrong, son?" Michael asked. He rested his hand on Davy's head and this time Davy allowed the touch. Michael smiled as he smoothed his fingers through his son's curls.

"Nothin'." *Except I don't know how to feel about you now.*

"You sure about that?" Michael probed.

"No, nothing's wrong, pop. Honest," Davy whispered.

"It doesn't sound like it, kid." Michael's voice was gentle.

Leaning forward, Davy met his father's eyes and finding them inviting and comforting he asked the question that was weighing so heavily on his mind.

"Why are you friends with Joe Durniak?"

Michael sucked in a shocked breath. He hadn't expected that at all. He had expected perhaps a hidden fight with a neighborhood kid or an altercation with Nicky. Why would his twelve-year-old son be so preoccupied with a drug lord?

Unless...

"Davy, did he talk to you?" Michael asked. His voice did nothing to convey the nervousness he felt. When Davy pulled away from him on the bed and rested his gaze on the floor, Michael realized his fear was warranted. "David."

Davy shrugged. "So what if he did. You guys are friends anyway."

"I am *not* friends with Joe Durniak," Michael insisted. He suddenly wondered how much of his own dealings with Durniak Davy was aware of.

David was a smart boy, almost too smart. He was fierce and loyal when it came to the people in his inner circle, and he had tendency to give people too much of a benefit of a doubt. If Durniak had spoken to Davy, or worse convinced him to be a part of his dealings, Michael wasn't sure what he would do.

Michael often worried that his son's loyalty to those he loved would hurt him in the end. Lord knew the boy couldn't live his life like that, as much as Michael hoped that David could maintain some of his trustworthiness and innocence of childhood, he knew that it was almost impossible.

What would Michael do if Davy counted Joe Durniak as a member of his inner circle? If his boy's loyalty was extended to the dangerous drug lord?

"He thinks you are," Davy mumbled as he picked at an unseen lint on the bed quilt. *And I think you are, too.*

"David." Michael pulled his son over to him. He encircled the boy in his arms and rested his cheek on his curls. This was important and he needed to make sure that his boy understood. "Joe

Durniak-he's not a good guy. You are old enough to understand that. He's dangerous." *More dangerous than I hope you will ever know.*

"Dangerous?" Davy asked a confused. "If he's so dangerous than why are you so close to him?"
And what does that make you?

"Listen Davy, things aren't always what we believe they are. We all have our places in life, we have our roles and responsibilities, and sometimes because of those, you end up doing things that you never thought you would. You'll understand that when you're older."

As Davy leaned into his father's chest, he thought that perhaps he understood what his father was talking about now. It seemed like the older he got, the more he was doing things he didn't want to do.

"David," Michael continued. "I need you to listen to me very carefully. Stay away from Durniak. Do you hear me? And don't believe a word he says to you. If he talks to you or ever asks you to do something for him, you need to tell me right away."

"But Pop--"

"I mean it, David. Promise me." Michael pulled back from his son and moved to face his son.

Staring into his father's blue eyes, Davy debated whether he should tell the man everything. Michael's words were meant to comfort and assure, but the conversation only served to reinforce his son's worry about his relationship with Durniak.

"Promise," Davy lied. If his father could have secrets, then so could he.

"Good," Michael said with a smile. "I love you, kid."

"I love you too, Pop," Davy responded automatically.

Content with the conversation, Michael smiled. He ruffled his son's hair and got up from the bed.

"Now," Michael said as he picked up the baseball glove. He smiled warmly as he handed the glove to Davy. "Get outside and play with your friends."

Chapter 7

March 1, 1979

Hutch heard the yelling long before he reached the doorway. His sister's shrill voice reverberated in the hallway followed by the muffled sound of his father's stern words.

Despite the level of noise, Hutch couldn't hear what the argument was about, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. Stopping a few paces from his father's office door, he debated on whether he should wait for Mallory to leave the room or escape back to his bedroom.

Hutch had been on his way to the family room, enticed by the inviting fireplace he knew would be crackling with warmth. He had been writing in his bedroom, but quickly became bored with the familiar desk and the isolating feeling of the room. In need of a new environment, Hutch had decided that the family room would provide the much needed new scenery to clear his mind and allow him to focus on documenting his past. However, distracted by the disagreement between his father and sister, Hutch had detoured outside of his father's office.

Just as Hutch turned to leave, Mallory exited the room, slamming the door behind her. He looked at her expectantly, but Mallory remained quiet, and he nodded at the door.

"Oh, that?" Mallory said, her voice thick with tears. "That was nothing. Just Dad shoving my failure in my face. No big deal." Her voice broke on a sob; she covered her mouth with her hand and ran down the hallway.

Oh, kid, Hutch thought glumly.

Hutch found her in the family room. His sister was sitting cross-legged, heavily nestled into the large leather couch in front of the fireplace. Hutch sat next to her and nudged her shoulder with his own.

Mallory wiped at her tears with her shirtsleeve, her breath hitching; she smiled sadly. She didn't say anything, instead staring into the memorizing flames of the flickering fire.

Hutch inhaled deeply. What he wouldn't give to be able to speak freely and uninhibited at this moment. To assure her that whatever the argument had been about, she shouldn't let it affect her so deeply.

Mallory was wonderful no matter what Richard Hutchinson had to say. Their father had a tendency to have ridiculous standards and precise ways in which he thought things should be done. Hutch, of all people, knew what it felt like to be on the side opposing their father.

Hutch pulled Mallory to him and enveloped her in a half hug.

Mallory rested her head on his shoulder and took a deep breath. "I suppose you are wondering just how I can be here with you, instead of away at college?" she whispered quietly.

Hutch's brows furrowed. No, he wasn't. The thought had never occurred to him. He felt a little foolish and self-centered, realizing he had been so wrapped up in his own situation and the errors of his past, he had never taken the time to wonder why his nineteen-year-old sister would be living in the family home instead of working on her academic pursuits. *I've got to pay more attention to what is going on around me.*

"N-no," Hutch answered honestly. He shrugged and squeezed his sister tightly.

"I flunked out," Mallory confessed softly, her blue eyes twinkling with tears. "Me. I was a straight A student, but now I'm nothing but a college dropout. And a failure."

You're not a failure, Hutch thought sadly. You can go back. I have failed at so much, and at things with much larger consequences.

"I think I was having a hard time, after... well, after what we thought happened to you."

Hutch found himself wondering if any of his family members knew the gruesome details of what he and Michael Bennett had endured. Hutch didn't remember a lot of what happened after they were abducted, but he remembered enough, and what he did recall was enough to cause ferocious nightmares. Nightmares that would occasionally hold him hostage until one of his family members shook him awake, worried from his frightened cries.

"Dad didn't care so much about me failing. I mean, right when it happened." Mallory's voice broke through her brother's thoughts. "I think he was struggling with losing you. And Mom, Mom didn't even notice at all. She *was* grieving so hard. The only one who really said anything to me was Kathryn." Mallory paused at the painful memory.

"S-so," Hutch joked, in an effort to lighten his sister's mood.

Mallory pulled back from their embrace and looked at him with a blank expression. Hutch was briefly worried that his joke might have missed its mark, but then Mallory smiled in agreement.

"Right," she chortled. "Who cares what she thinks anyway."

Kathryn was quickly becoming somewhat of a private joke between the siblings. It had come as a shock to Hutch how cold and disengaged from both Mallory and himself their older sister was. He certainly didn't remember her that way growing up, but time had shaped all of the Hutchinson siblings in ways none of them could have predicted. Leaving Hutch and Mallory more alike than different, and Kathryn as stern and disapproving as their father.

Even after miraculously being found alive, Hutch had only seen his older sister three times since returning to Duluth. And those visits had all been forced by their father.

Kathryn just didn't seem to be interested in re-establishing a relationship with Hutch, not that he could really blame her. They had absolutely nothing in common, let alone anything to talk about. Besides, each knew that that they were loved by the other, even if their familial resemblance ended at blonde hair and blue eyes.

"It still smarts though," Mallory continued, returning her gaze the fireplace. "Knowing that I failed and knowing how Dad and Kathryn feel about it. God... I'm the kid who shattered Dad's hopes and dreams of the perfect, successful family unit."

"N-no," Hutch shook his head. "T-th-at w-was m-me." He smiled at her and rubbed her shoulder.

"Yeah...well... it's both of us now," Mallory quipped, tilting her head toward her brother. "Ugh, look at me, carrying on like a little kid. That's enough of that."

And just like that, Mallory was happy again, the upsetting argument pushed from her mind. Hutch was constantly awed by his sister's ability to let things go as completely and readily as she was able to, a personality trait that he desperately wished he could develop, especially now.

"Hey, Kenneth?" Mallory wiped her hands on her jeans. "I almost forgot; I picked up that book I was telling you about. Remember, that new one by Peter Straub? I was hoping you would read it to me."

Frowning, Hutch looked at his sister with dread. *Oh, no.*

Early on, Mallory, like their mother, had distanced herself from stating an opinion on her brother's speech skills. She had never forced him to talk and had always been grateful when he had decided to take part in their conversations.

That had all changed last week, however, when Hutch's speech therapist finally laid down the law with him, and much to his embarrassment, his family. Although the therapist believed that Hutch had the potential to regain his speech skills entirely, it would never happen if certain members of the family didn't start 'holding him accountable' for how he chose to communicate. His recovery was at a standstill and would remain that way until Hutch was forced to communicate in a strictly verbal manner.

Hutch had wanted to fire her on the spot, especially after seeing the gloating look on his father's face, as Richard had been telling the members of the Hutchinson family the very same thing since bringing Kenneth back to Duluth.

It didn't take long for Richard to strip his son of all the notebooks his mother had been secretly providing. The only thing that remained was the leather bound journal. His father had allowed him to keep it, but only after taking a look inside and realizing that the book was just as it appeared to be: a story of his son's past.

Shortly after the notebooks had been confiscated, Mallory began telling Hutch the titles of new novels she wanted to read. Hutch had thought that she was making conversation at first, but when she had started suggesting they read some of the books together and aloud, well, that was when he realized what she was doing. Reading novels with Mallory was just her secret way of getting him more comfortable with speaking.

"It's in my bedroom," she added with a grin. "I could go get it and maybe make us some coffee or hot chocolate?"

Hutch shrugged. The idea of drinking hot coffee and curling up in the family room with a roaring fireplace and snow falling outside the bay windows did sound enticing. However, the idea of stumbling his way through a horror novel by Peter Straub did not.

Despite speaking more frequently, Hutch was still very self-conscious of his stutter and broken words. How on earth did Mallory expect to be able to understand the plot line or even retain the story if he was the one reading it?

The family room wasn't exactly the most private of areas, and there were no doors. His voice was guaranteed to travel down the hall. What if his father heard him and decided to come criticize him?

"Please, Kenneth," Mallory asked, already aware of her brother's reservations. "You can go as slow as you need to. It won't be that bad, I promise. And after my fight with Dad, you won't have to worry about him eavesdropping. He'll be in his stupid office for the rest of the day."

Hutch groaned and considered her words. He really didn't want to, but he had to admit Mallory's suggestion was by far the most creative and intriguing speech exercise anyone had come up with... so far.

"O-kay," he agreed slowly. "Br-ing...c-coff-ee."

XX

Summer 1976

It was early, and for the first time he could remember, Starsky was up before sunrise on a Saturday he had off. It was a fact that was mildly annoying, especially now that he was sitting on his couch and listening to his blonde partner snore slightly through the open bedroom door.

Not that he was in any hurry for Hutch to wake up. The quiet was a welcome respite from the awkwardness and tension that had returned with Hutch from his secret trip just over a month ago.

Something was wrong and Starsky wasn't sure what, but he knew it had to be something big.

Dressed only in his blue flannel pajama bottoms, Starsky walked to the kitchen and began to rustle through cabinets as quietly as he could manage. He needed coffee if his thoughts were going to be focused on Hutch's strange behavior this early in the morning.

Grabbing the percolator from the counter, he filled it with water, flicked on the stove, and rested it on the burner. He spooned coffee into the basket before slipping it inside the percolator and popping the lid on top.

Letting out a large yawn, Starsky made his way back to the couch and sat down, his legs resting heavily on the coffee table.

Ever since their last fight, Hutch's moods had become increasingly volatile. One minute he would be fine, laughing and joking, and the next he would be screaming, or worse, so quiet and depressed he didn't say a word. And he wouldn't just remain that way for minutes or hours. No, Hutch's despondence could last for *days*.

Starsky was at a loss of what to do, but he was getting tired of walking on eggshells around Hutch, constantly unsure of what version of the man would make an appearance at any given moment.

"Babe?" a tired gravelly voice asked from behind him. Startled by the sound, Starsky jumped. He hadn't heard his soft-footed lover approach.

"Sorry." Hutch grinned; he leaned over the back of the couch. Throwing his arms around his partner, Hutch rested his chin on the other man's shoulder. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Ya didn't scare me," Starsky lied. He turned his head and planted a kiss on Hutch's stubble-covered cheek.

"Uh-huh," Hutch teased. He didn't sound convinced. He planted his own kiss on the mop of curls, pulled himself upright, and gave into the wide shoulder stretch his back was craving.

"I put coffee on the stove," Starsky offered, flopping his body to lie across the couch. Hutch glared at him, slightly annoyed Starsky hadn't left him any room, before picking up Starsky's feet and slipping himself in the seat beneath them and resting the offending body parts on his lap.

"What do ya wanna do today?" Starsky yawned.

"Oh, I don't know. Go back to bed?" Hutch suggested with a grin.

Starsky scoffed and opened his mouth to respond, then the phone rang.

"Who the hell is that?" Starsky complained. "The sun isn't even up yet."

He reached over to pick up the receiver, but was stunned when Hutch quickly pulled himself up from the couch and grabbed it out of his hand before he could greet the person on the other end.

Irritated, Starsky sunk back into the couch. He crossed his arms and assessed his partner with a slight glare.

"Hello?" Hutch answered quietly.

"Hutchinson? Carter." The voice response was quick and sounded agitated.

Hutch closed his eyes in relief. *Thank God* Starsky hadn't picked up the call. He looked back at Starsky, who whispered the word 'Dobey'. Hutch shook his head, and pulled the most unassuming name from his brain.

"Oh, hi, Mom," Hutch responded nonchalantly. He grabbed the phone dock in his free hand and stood up, walking as far out of earshot as possible.

"Really?" Carter grouched. "That's the best you could think of?"

"This really isn't a good time," Hutch advised in a friendly tone. He lingered by the entrance of the bedroom, and silently cursed the shortness of the short phone cord. If only it were a few inches longer then maybe he could exit the room completely and continue the conversation in private.

"Make it one," Carter demanded. "Durniak is going to deal."

At that, Hutch almost dropped the phone receiver. Starsky looked at him oddly, but said nothing. Hutch smiled at him reassuringly, but inside he was screaming.

No. No. No. This can't be happening.

"When?" Hutch inquired quietly.

"Soon. You and Starsky are going to be tasked with transporting him. I am sure I don't need to advise you that is cover for something else."

Shit. "Yeah," Hutch said distractedly, turning his back to Starsky's accusing stare.

"You'll be working closely with another Special Agent. Oliver is his name. The rest of the details will be disclosed to you at a future date."

"Okay, sounds good, Mom. I'll talk to you soon," Hutch responded and slammed the phone down firmly. He could feel his frustration and anxiety as it suddenly threatened to overwhelm him.

Durniak was going to deal, and that would change everything.

Hutch took a deep breath to regain his composure. He turned and offered his partner a slight smile, which Starsky did not return. There was no hint of the previous warmth or support in the darker man's body language.

"Do I even wanna know?" Starsky asked Hutch seriously.

Hutch grimaced, shook his head, and looked at the floor. *No. No, you don't.*

"I do have one question for ya, Hutch," Starsky spoke again, and Hutch met his partner's accusing stare. "Since when does *your* mom call you before sunrise at *my* place?"

Hutch groaned before he could stop himself. How could he have been so sloppy? *Oh, goddamn it.*

XX

Two days later, Starsky still wasn't speaking to him. In fact, sitting in the squad room surrounded by their fellow detectives, it was as if Hutch didn't exist at all.

It had been quite the screw up; even Hutch knew that. However, the worry Hutch felt about Starsky's anger over his pre-dawn phone call with his 'mother' didn't put a dent in what he felt when he realized that Carter had called him at Starsky's place.

How had his superior known he was there? And what else did he know about the nature of their relationship?

Hutch told himself not to worry about it. The fact that Carter had called him at Starsky's house didn't mean that he knew the true nature of their relationship. There was a plethora of logical reasons as to why two platonic partners would have spent the night together. But even with this logical argument, Hutch still found his stomach turning.

Starsky had pressed him to disclose who had really been on the other end of the phone, and Hutch had found himself, once again, covering up a lie with another lie.

It had been his mother, Hutch insisted. He had given Starsky's number to her in case of emergencies. Starsky hadn't believed him, of course, but he didn't question him further. Hutch was secretly grateful to his partner for letting him off so easy. Then he realized that Starsky had not only decided to stop pressing him about the phone call, but he decided to stop talking to Hutch entirely.

That reaction worried Hutch more than he wanted to admit. It was not in his partner's character to be silent. A silent Starsky was a dangerous Starsky. The more time that passed, the more apprehensive Hutch became about their relationship. Things were unraveling fast and he desperately wished he could stop it.

"Starsky, Hutchinson, in my office now," Captain Dobey's firm voice called out from the doorway.

Starsky raised his eyebrows and looked at his blonde partner, wondering what they were in trouble for this time. It was the first acknowledgement his partner had given him, and Hutch offered up a smile that was not returned.

Looking away guiltily, Hutch stood and heard his partner's chair scratch against the floor as he pushed away from the desk.

"Starsky, shut the door behind you," Captain Dobey ordered as the pair filtered into his office.

Starsky did as he was instructed, and sat in the wooden chair next to the one Hutch sat in. "What's up, Cap?" Starsky asked. Crossing his legs, he rested one hand on his bent knee and the other on his thigh. He needed to hold on to something if he was going to prevent himself from fidgeting, nervous energy suddenly taking over his body.

The tension between Starsky and Hutch was palpable, and Dobey leaned back in his seat and regarded both men. Starsky was looking at him questioningly, and trying his best not to fidget, which was a dead giveaway of trouble between the partners.

Dobey knew that Starsky's eternal response to tension was movement, as if being in a constant state of locomotion would somehow shield him from the weight of agitation.

Hutch, on the other hand, had two ways of dealing with tension. He would either blow up in your face or avoid it entirely. Captain Dobey quickly judged that day as a day of avoidance, as Hutch's face was expressionless, his gaze focused firmly on the picture frames behind the Captain's desk.

Dobey couldn't help but feel bad for the young agent, knowing the assignment he was going to brief them on would, most likely, alter Special Agent Hutchinson's undercover assignment and perhaps, even, his future with Bay City PD.

Never fond of FBI agents or the arrogance they all seemed to exude, Dobby hadn't expected to like Hutch, but over the years he had grown fond of the undercover FBI agent. He was a good young man, and a hell of a cop.

Dobby's only regret was that Hutch would never officially be under his supervision, although he did still consider him as 'one of his boys'. Dobby felt a flash of sadness at the prospect of losing someone whom he saw as a son.

"I have a new assignment for you," Dobby spoke finally. "The FBI requested two detectives for an undercover transport. The witness is a mob boss they've been after for years, and, well, he's finally decided to deal."

"Sounds fun." Starsky grinned. "Who's the guy?"

Dobby took a breath. Resting his palms on the desk, he looked at them seriously. "Joseph Durniak."

At the mention of Durniak's name, Hutch assessed Starsky out of the corner of his eyes and waited for a reaction. He wasn't disappointed. Starsky's jaw dropped and so did his crossed leg.

"What?" Starsky asked quietly, his body suddenly rigid. "Why would they want us?"

Dobby looked at Starsky and told him exactly what he had been instructed to. "I recommended you. And you should be grateful. It's an easy job, Starsky. Your cover will be a couple of truck drivers, delivering some paper goods. It's basically a road trip, with the exception of the witness."

"Road trip?" Starsky asked, his tone becoming increasingly tense. "Why can't they just find somebody else?"

"Starsky," Dobby sighed. "I just told you--"

"Since when are we on such friendly terms with the FEDS?" Starsky exclaimed, leaning forward in his seat. "This is bull-shit Captain!"

"STARSKY!" Dobby reprimanded.

Hutch flinched at the sound, but remained quiet. He wasn't going to get involved in this debate, mostly because he knew something Starsky didn't. This trip was inevitable.

Rubbing his hands through his hair, Starsky tried again.

"But Cap--"

"Starsky, the orders came down from the FBI, and they are non-negotiable. They want you and Hutch, so that is exactly what they are getting." Dobey's tone was final and left no room for argument.

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An hour later, they emerged from Dobey's office: Hutch carrying the file that contained the details of their awaiting undercover assignment and Starsky with a look of trepidation.

Hutch considered his lover silently, questions burning in his mind. Never in all their years together had Hutch seen Starsky react to an assignment like that before, and certainly had never seen him try to talk Dobey out of assigning them anything, no matter how bad the case was.

Hutch had his own reservations and his own reasons for not wanting to reunite with Durniak, a man who could so easily expose him to his lover for what he really was, but what was Starsky's reservation about seeing the man? What was *he* so worried about?

What was the power Joe Durniak seemed to hold over everyone he came into contact with?

After all the time he had spent watching his lover, Starsky had never given Hutch a reason to believe that he was doing anything suspect. He had never done anything that would have led Hutch to believe he had maintained any contact with Durniak as an adult. But, now, after his reaction in the office, Hutch wondered if he really knew all the details about Starsky's relationship with Durniak.

What hasn't he told me?

Was Starsky's apprehension just residual anxiety? Or was it a kneejerk reaction from a grown man whose memories of his childhood boogeyman remained vivid in his mind? Maybe Starsky knew something about Durniak no one else did. And if that was the case, was it the same thing the FBI seemed so convinced he knew?

Or maybe Starsky's reaction was the result of his residual anger from their earlier falling-out. Starsky was still pissed at him; Hutch knew that for certain. Perhaps his wanting to avoid the assignment had nothing to do with Durniak, but everything to do with not wanting to spend the next two weeks confined to the small cab of a semi-truck with only Hutch to talk to.

Or not talk to.

Hutch grimaced at the thought. Sitting in a quiet tension-filled cab certainly wasn't something he wanted to do either, but he wasn't exactly in a position to make demands from his peeved partner.

He was startled when Starsky mumbled something.

"What?" Hutch asked timidly.

"I said, this is bull-shit."

"Come on, Starsk, what's the big deal?" Before he could think about how welcome the action would be, Hutch reached out and squeezed his partner's shoulder.

Starsky looked at the arm on his shoulder and then to Hutch's face. The fire in his eyes told Hutch that assignment or no assignment, his slip up with the phone call was still not forgiven. He removed his arm and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Nothin'. I just don't see why we gotta be the ones to do this, that's all," Starsky said as he stopped to lean against the wall.

Waiting for the next elevator, they stood in silence for a few seconds, before Hutch took a breath and tried again. "Starsk, can you just put everything aside for a second?" Hutch asked genuinely. "Why is this assignment making you so uncomfortable? Do you know this Durniak guy?"

Starsky frowned. "No," he declared firmly, however the crack in his voice contradicted his claim.

"Starsky," Hutch pressed. "You know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

Starsky looked at Hutch and gave him the most counterfeit smile Hutch had ever seen. "That's funny, coming from you," Starsky scoffed.

"Oh, come on, babe," Hutch mumbled, shaking his head. "I said I was sorry."

"Oh, you're a real comedian today." Starsky snorted. "But, this, me not wanting to do this job, it's got nothin' to do with Durniak. *I promise,*" Starsky vowed snidely.

But Hutch didn't believe him, not even a little bit. As they entered the empty elevator, Hutch wondered if he wasn't the only one keeping secrets after all. "Okay," Hutch said. *You may be pissed as hell at me now, but I still think there's more to this.*

Time would reveal the truth soon enough, for both of them.

Chapter 8

March 13, 1979

It was quiet for a Tuesday night. Which should have been a welcome reprieve to the man who owned the bar, especially after such a busy weekend. However, after being pressed for the last thirty minutes for information he had no intention of disclosing, the man found himself wishing the bar were busier. Much, much busier.

"No," Huggy Bear stated firmly as he glared over the bar at the man who sat in front of him.

The man smiled in return.

"Please?" Detective Billy Cooper offered Huggy a dazzling smile, and followed it up with a knowing grin. "Come on, I know you know. Just tell me."

Done with the detective's probing, Huggy rolled his eyes and turned away from him.

"Oh, come on, Huggy!" Cooper exclaimed, slamming his half-full beer glass down. The white foam sloshed over the rim of the glass and speckled the brown bar.

Unhappy with the younger man's outburst, Huggy scowled at him. The kid had nerve to come into his place, start demanding information about their MIA friend, and then throw a tantrum when he didn't get any new information.

Embarrassed by his outburst, Cooper looked away sheepishly. He tapped his fingers on the bar as he considered his next move.

"You think denting my bar and breaking a beer glass is gonna make me tell you?" Huggy grouched as he threw a rag Cooper's way. It hit the man on the side of the head and Huggy smiled.

Cooper grinned slightly as he grabbed up the rag.

"You spilled it, you clean it up." Huggy motioned to the bar.

Wiping at the bar and tossing the towel back, Cooper looked at the other man seriously.

"Huggy." Cooper paused. He placed both his palms flat on the bar and set his gaze between them. "It's important."

"Yeah, sure it is." Huggy laughed. "Just like the time before this one, and the time before that. I've told ya before and I'll tell ya again, I don't know where Starsky is."

"That's a lie!" Cooper disagreed. Snatching up his beer, he took a deep drink. He held it between his hands as he tried his next tactic. "I thought we were friends, Huggy."

"Kid, just because you and your partner... what was his name again?"

"Cyrus," Cooper provided before taking another drink.

"Yeah, you and Cyrus have struck up a business relationship with me does not make us friends. In fact, that makes us less than friends."

"You and Starsky were friends," Cooper mumbled into his empty beer glass.

"Starsky and I *are* friends," Huggy corrected. "You and I are *not*."

"Why don't you like me?"

"It's not about liking you." Huggy reached to grab Cooper's empty glass. "You want another?"

Cooper stood. He stretched and released a loud yawn before shaking his head. "Naw, better not." Cooper rolled his eyes and plastered a fake smile on his face. "I gotta meet Cyrus bright and

early tomorrow." His partner's name was said as if he caused him physical discomfort and Huggy took pity on the younger man.

"I'm sure he's not that bad," Huggy offered as he leaned over the bar.

"You met him." Cooper's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You really think he's 'not that bad'?"

"Well," Huggy shrugged and smiled knowingly, "he is an interesting fellow."

"Interesting? That isn't even the half of it!" Cooper's face fell, and he shook his head with disgust.

Huggy laughed again and Cooper rested his face in his palms.

"If he were any squarer, he'd be a bible," he mumbled from behind his hands.

"I believe bibles are rectangular," Huggy corrected with a grin. "Besides, I remember a time when Starsky said the same about you."

"I am *not* square."

Lowering his hands, Cooper glared at Huggy and slapped his palm on the bar. If the action was meant to intimidate the bar owner, it missed its mark. Huggy crossed his arms and smiled broadly.

"I miss Starsky," Cooper declared softly. Letting out a heavy breath, he stretched once more. It was a shame their time together had been so short.

"You didn't know Starsky," Huggy differed. "Not really anyway. You guys were partners for what? A month?"

"Three," Cooper fumed. "And I knew him well enough to know that I liked him a hell of a lot better than I'll ever like *Cyrus*."

Huggy rolled his eyes and grabbed Cooper's empty glass. He filled it with another draft, and slid it in front of the man.

"I said, I didn't want another." Cooper pointed to the drink and looked at him questioningly.

Huggy shrugged and leaned over the bar once more.

Cooper picked up the glass and peered into the amber liquid. "I just wish I knew he was okay," Cooper stated sadly. He took a drink, then frowned, and for a moment Huggy was afraid the kid might burst into tears.

"Starsky is fine," Huggy assured with a nod. "He's getting on with his life."

"You really think so?" Cooper asked softly. He placed his chin in his palms and rested on his elbows. "What makes you think that?"

"Because it's Starsky," Huggy said as if that should explain everything.

Cooper blew out a breath and took another drink. "I really do have to find him, Huggy."

"And I really can't tell you where he is," Huggy answered firmly.

"Right...because you don't know."

"No." Huggy shook his head. "Because I made him a promise, and he deserves to have at least one person keep their word. Don't you think?"

Cooper nodded, and let out a heavy sigh. The pair stayed in silence as Cooper finished his beer, both lost in their own thoughts.

"You're a good friend, Huggy," Cooper said finally. "But you can't protect them forever. Starsky or Hutchinson."

Summer 1977

"Starsky," Hutch sighed from the driver's seat of the large semi-truck. "Do you have to play with that thing?"

Still holding the CB radio microphone to his mouth, Starsky paused his ramblings long enough to glare at his partner. He didn't respond to Hutch, instead switching the channel on the radio and trying again. "Hello? Is anybody out there?"

Hutch frowned and scratched his face. Four days they had been on the road, and Starsky was still giving him the cold shoulder, choosing to converse with random strangers over the damn CB radio than speaking with Hutch, who was sitting in the seat beside him.

"Is anybody out there?" Starsky tried one last time, but the radio continued to play static and no one responded to his friendly call. Starsky sighed in disappointment and re-hung the microphone on the side of the radio.

Hutch's shoulders relaxed with relief, grateful Starsky had finally given up.

Leaning back as far as the firm seat would allow, Hutch shimmied his bottom and readjusted his arms on the steering wheel. He would be glad when they were done driving the monster of a vehicle. The combination of the hard seat and the long days of sitting were doing a number on his back. Hutch found himself wondering how men could make a career out of sitting in such an uncomfortable seat.

Sighing deeply, Starsky leaned his body against the passenger door. Propping his elbow on the windowsill, he rested his chin in his palm.

Hutch looked over at him and rolled his eyes.

God, would he just get over it already?

Driving in the tense quiet of the large semi-truck for the past few days, Hutch had decided one thing for certain: he was done apologizing. Of course, that also meant that he needed to stop conducting himself in ways that warranted him apologizing to people, and the only way to do that would be to leave the FBI for good.

It was simple. Hutch would successfully complete what he had been tasked to do with Durniak. Then he would return to Carter, give him his notice, and approach Captain Dobey about becoming a detective for Bay City officially.

It probably wouldn't be that easy; Hutch knew that. He would first have to convince Carter to let him leave, and then he would have to convince Dobey to let him stay. All the while not letting Starsky find out about anything that had been going on behind his back.

Dobey would welcome him with open arms, Hutch knew that, and Carter, well, Carter shouldn't have any opposition to relieving him of his duties. After all, Hutch had been assigned to watch Starsky and track his connection with Durniak. Now that Joe Durniak was on the FBI's side and testifying, it brought Hutch's role in the case to a close.

Hutch couldn't help but smile at the thought. In a less than a week, his undercover assignment would be over and he would be free to pursue whatever he chose. In the first time in a very long time, his life would be his own.

Now if only he could figure out a way to fix things with Starsky.

Hutch yawned heartily. Looking out of the corner of his eyes, he caught Starsky looking at him.

"Hey," Hutch tried, "wanna play a road game?"

Starsky scoffed. The offer had been for his benefit and he knew that. Hutch hated playing road games. Things like I spy or the license plate game all seeming too childish for the blonde man to waste time on.

"No," Starsky answered gruffly.

"Okay," Hutch tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "Want to listen to the radio?"

"No."

"Okay. Is there anything you do want to do?" Hutch offered Starsky a half smile. *Come on, babe. Talk to me here.*

"Yeah," Starsky said turning in his seat to look at Hutch. "Yeah, there is something I want to do. I want to talk about you and me."

The words took Hutch by surprise and he faltered for a moment, unsure of what to do next.

"Um...okay..." Hutch hedged, Starsky's direct response taking him by surprise.

Pulling his arm off the window, Starsky sat up straight, his fiery blue eyes set on his driving partner. "I want you to tell me the truth, Hutch. No more bull-shit."

"You want the truth," Hutch repeated with a nod. "I already told you the truth."

"Bullshit," Starsky retorted, crossing his arms in frustration. "God, I am so sick of your shit right now."

"My shit?" Hutch demanded, his brows drawing together. "What about your shit? You're the one not talking to me, remember?"

Starsky glared at his partner, but didn't say a word.

"Okay, fine," Hutch huffed, his own frustration taking over. "You want the truth, then you tell me the truth, buddy." He pointed a finger Starsky's way. "Why were you so against taking this case? You answer that honestly and then we'll talk."

It was smokescreen; there was no way he would be able to reveal the truth, but then again, Hutch didn't think that Starsky would either. The words did exactly what he had intended them to do; they lit the fuse to Starsky's temper.

"That is exactly what I thought you would say," Starsky accused. "It's always everybody else's fault isn't it? Drawing attention to the lies other people tell just so you don't have to face your own."

"This conversation is pointless," Hutch fumed. "You are convinced that I'm lying to you, so you aren't going to believe a word I have to say anyway."

"You're an asshole," Starsky mumbled into his hand.

"And you're stubborn! The only reason you are picking this fight with me now is because you're looking for something to distract you from Durniak!" Hutch bellowed.

Starsky's mouth snapped shut and hurt clouded his blue eyes. He turned and focused his gaze out the windshield.

Hutch sighed, immediately regretting his accusation. What was he doing? Arguing would get them nowhere.

Returning his focus to the road, Hutch's jaw tightened. Knowing secret details of Starsky's past didn't give him the right to use them as a distraction during an argument. Starsky was right; he was an asshole.

"Babe, I'm sorry," Hutch offered softly. "I know you don't believe me, but I am. It was a mistake, and I promise it won't happen again." *Because after this week, I won't have any reason to lie to you.*

Starsky exhaled loudly and looked out the passenger window. Hutch set his mouth in a hard line and resigned himself to another tense evening. However, it wasn't long until Starsky spoke again.

"Can't we just park this? At least until the case is over?" Starsky's soft request took Hutch by surprise, and he turned briefly to find the dark-haired man looking at him.

"Yes," Hutch answered. His relief from the sudden request was short lived, however, and was quickly being replaced by worry for his partner.

"You're right," Starsky whispered, looking away again. "I don't care about who was on the other end of that phone. It really isn't that big of a deal." Starsky paused on a heavy sigh. "I just wanted the distraction."

"From what?" Hutch prompted, as he gripped the steering wheel tighter.

"Oh, I don't know," Starsky sighed. Restless, he rubbed his hands on his knees. "Durniak, I guess. Hutch..." Starsky trailed off, rubbing hands over his tired eyes, and Hutch thought he would explode.

"Starsk?" *Tell me all about it, babe. It was horrible; I know that.*

"I really need you on my side for this one," Starsky said finally, as if that should explain everything.

"But *why*?" Hutch pressed. His concern over hearing the truth of his partner's relationship with Durniak took precedence over Hutch's happiness of being a comforting presence to Starsky, even in the middle of an argument.

"None of that matters now." Starsky shook his head and smiled sadly. "Just a lot of bad memories to contend with."

"About what?"

"Things nobody can change now."

"Oh." Hutch sighed, trying to mask his disappointment. Starsky wasn't going to offer up any more details on his relationship with Durniak, at least not that night.

"He knew my father." The sentence was so soft, Hutch almost didn't hear it.

And there it was: the admission Hutch had been waiting seven years to hear from Starsky. Hutch's shock was genuine, even though he already knew the information his partner disclosed. It didn't make him feel the way he thought it would.

Hutch always thought that those simple words would make him feel relief or maybe even joy. Instead, he felt sad. Not only for himself, but also for Starsky.

What must he be feeling right now?

Feeling a sudden urge to protect his partner from whatever unease the thought of seeing Joe Durniak was causing him, Hutch grabbed Starsky's hand and held it firmly.

"Hey, it's okay," Hutch said finally. "I'm right here with you. Whatever happened, it's all going to be alright."

Fighting back tears, Starsky smiled at him gratefully, and Hutch smiled back warmly. His partner's disclosure had answered all his questions and, yet, none of them at all. But after this week, none of that would matter anymore, and in that moment, Hutch decided he didn't need to know what Starsky and Durniak had shared. He loved Starsky, and this would be their new beginning.

Letting go of Hutch's hand, Starsky wiped at his eyes and cleared his throat. He moved his legs around and threw his arms up to stretch as much as the close roof of the vehicle would allow.

"Hey," Starsky mumbled, his tone sounding upbeat. "It'll be dark soon. What do ya say we find somewhere to park it for the night? This seat is killin' my butt."

Hutch's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Okay," he agreed. He smiled as Starsky's hand found his own and squeezed tightly.

XX

Summer 1955

It was sunny, a hot August summer morning, just like any other. Davy was enjoying the warmth as he made the short walk from the bus stop to Durniak's place. Rounding the final block, Davy abruptly stopped as he noticed an unfamiliar car and a police car parked in front of the building.

The door was wide open, and there seemed to be an eerie calm to the block. It was as if he had suddenly entered some alternate universe.

Years from that day, Davy would look back and wonder if he had only added the quietness in his mind. Certainly, the packed streets of Brooklyn hadn't ever known a day of such still quiet.

Biting at his bottom lip, with a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach, Davy hesitated from his place on the sidewalk. Frozen in place, he debated whether he should turn around and head back home or sneak a peak of what was going on in the building.

Moments later, though, his feet made his choice for him. Without thinking, he found himself drawn to the building, and he moved toward it like a piece of metal to a magnet.

Davy heard the voices long before he reached the open door. Although he couldn't make out a word being said, the tones sounded detached, dangerous.

Squatting down and holding on to the outside doorframe, he peeked his head in. All the cars that Durniak normally hid in the warehouse were gone. Durniak was nowhere to be seen, and neither were any of his regular flunkies.

Davy's eyes darted to Durniak's office door at the top of the metal staircase. It was wide open, the light off and office vacant. Davy suddenly realized the warehouse had been abandoned.

Then the men in the back corner of the building caught his eye. Two of them were wearing dark suits, and Davy couldn't see their faces, as their backs were to the door.

There was another man in the room, but the suited men blocked him from Davy's view. All he could make out was a glimpse of dark fabric, which told him the man, most likely, belonged to the police car parked out front.

"Did you really think you could get away with it?" One of the suited men asked the uniform cop.

"You don't have to do this," a voice stated firmly. His grip on the door slipping, he almost fell over, and Davy's jaw dropped when he realized who had spoken.

"It's too late for that now," a different voice spoke that time. The tone was deep and cold, and it sent shivers down Davy's spine.

The noise of three consecutive gunshots filled the room, echoing in the thin warehouse walls. The uniformed man fell to the ground, and the color drained from Davy's face as his brain frantically tried to understand what he was seeing.

"POP!" Davy didn't remember screaming, but he must have, because a second later the men turned their bodies and their attention to the doorway. Luckily, the boy remained hidden from their view by the parked cars and his low stance.

"Who was that?" one of the men asked the other.

"I don't know," the other responded. "But check it out. We need to get out of here."

Davy lost his grip on the door and fell backwards. Breathing heavily, he sat in shock, his brain frantically trying to get him to move. Too caught up in his panic, he didn't hear anyone one approach him until he was roughly scooped up from behind.

Davy let out a yell and then a full scream as a hand pressed firmly to his mouth.

"Davy, be quiet," a voice firmly whispered. "We have to go. Now."

Joe Durniak picked up the boy roughly, carried him to the waiting car, and quickly pushed the boy through the driver's side door. Sliding in behind him, Durniak slammed the door shut.

The engine roared to life and they drove away just as a man in a dark suit exited the warehouse. The man's eyes met Davy's and they stared at each other until the car got too far away for either of them to hold the contact.

Gasping for breath, tears glistened in Davy's eyes as his brain finally registered what he had just seen.

"Turn around!" the boy sobbed. "Those guys, they shot Pop. We gotta help him!"

For a moment, Durniak looked from the road to the boy. His expression and the sadness in his eyes made Davy feel panic in his chest.

They were leaving. Just driving away, and leaving his father on the dirty pavement inside the warehouse to bleed death. Or maybe he was already dead.

"There is nothing you can do about that now," Durniak's calm voice advised.

"AREN'T YOU GOING TO HELP HIM!?" Davy sobbed. He turned to the passenger door and tried to open it, but it was locked. When he couldn't get his hands to cooperate to unlock it, he started punching and hit the window. "Let me out!"

"David stop," Durniak ordered firmly. "There isn't anything that can be done."

Sobbing in earnest, Davy stopped pounding on the door. He leaned over and rested his forehead on his knees and buried his head in his hands.

No. No. No. No.

XX

Davy didn't know how long they drove, but when Durniak parked the car it was dark outside.

"David?" Durniak asked from his seat.

Taking a shaky breath, Davy didn't move. His feet were planted on the car seat. Hugging his legs to his chest, his chin was resting firmly between his knees.

"Davy." Durniak inched closer to the boy and gripped his shoulder. "You can't tell anyone what you saw tonight. Do you understand me?"

"What did I see?" Davy asked innocently as he turned his head. His red-rimmed eyes found the older man.

Making eye contact with Davy, Durniak assessed the boy. He was in shock and exhausted. His face was red and sore from his tears, and he looked much younger than his twelve years. It made Durniak regretful about what the boy had seen. No boy should have to watch the assignation of his father.

"Pop's dead," Davy whispered thickly, his gaze firm on the dashboard. "Isn't he?"

Durniak squeezed the boy harder. Words failing him, he nodded.

"Well," Davy paused, taking a deep shaky breath, "aren't we gonna report it?"

"No." Durniak looked at the boy, his eyes shimmering with knowledge and sadness.

Davy's head shot up and his expression hardened as he comprehended the older man's response.

"Why?" Davy spat.

Durniak's forehead creased as he considered the boy's reaction. This could be trouble. Davy's stubbornness and volatility could make the situation increasingly difficult.

How could he calm this brewing storm? How could he possibly keep the boy safe after what he was witness to?

"David," Durniak said finally. "Listen to me, and you listen good. You can never, I repeat never, tell anyone what you saw tonight."

Davy's mouth opened to object but Durniak continued.

"You weren't there. You understand me? It's bad enough that one of those guys saw you. They'll probably try to find you, but we'll deal with that... when the time comes."

"I don't understand-"

"No, you don't, do you?" Durniak grabbed him by both shoulders and shook him gently. "But someday you will. Your father was a good man, no matter what people will try to tell you. He was a good man. Someday you will understand what your father tried to do, and what it ended up costing him."

"Okay," Davy promised. "I wasn't there." The boy was trying his hardest to be strong, and while his blues eyes were fiery, his lower lip quivered.

"Good," Durniak affirmed. He smiled and ruffled Davy's hair, eliciting a quiet sob from the boy. Durniak pretended not to notice.

Unable to fight the sobs any longer, Davy's face scrunched up, more tears slipping from his eyes. His Pop was dead, and Durniak was smiling. How could the man possibly smile at a time like this?

Davy's father was dead and nothing would ever be the same.

Chapter 9

Fall 1955

"Hey kid."

Davy looked up from his brother's bike and displaced chain to see familiar face looking back at him.

"Hiya, Joey." Davy frowned, his eyes squinting against the sun. "Long time no see."

Durniak's mouth twisted at the boy's greeting. He had expected some sort of warmth from the boy. Maybe not a hug, but definitely more than a frown.

Disinterested in the sudden reappearance of the man, Davy went back to fixing his brother's bike.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" Durniak asked, placing his hands on his hips, his deep voice scratchy. "After all this time?"

"It's been months, Joey." Davy shrugged as he fumbled with the chain and dropped it on the pavement. "Damn it!"

"Your mother know you use words like that?"

Davy glared up at Durniak. "She doesn't have a whole lotta time to pay attention these days," he sneered at the man. "Besides, I'm not supposta talk to you anymore."

"Who says that?"

"Everybody. And you... the night Pop died."

Feeling guilty, Durniak sighed. He had told the boy that right before he dropped off the face of the earth.

Having a cop killed in your warehouse, abandoned or not, was something that came with consequences. Of course, being a man in his position, Durniak had ways of taking care of his troubles. And this particular hiccup had required paying off the right people and laying low for a while.

Durniak hadn't intended on continuing his relationship with Davy; he had already caused the family enough grief. However, his conscience had caught up with him and he found himself increasingly worried about the boy's safety.

"You back in school?" Durniak asked the boy.

"Yeah," Davy sighed. He hung his head in defeat as he dropped the chain once more.

"Here, let me," Durniak said, hitching up the legs of his dark suit pants and dropping to his knees on the pavement next to the bicycle and the boy.

"You'll get your pants dirty," Davy warned softly, but he handed the chain over anyway.

"That's okay," Durniak smiled. "I have others."

Davy snorted. He wiped his greasy hands on his blue jeans and stood to watch Durniak work on the bike. It didn't take him long and a few short minutes later it was fixed.

"There we are. Good as new." Durniak smiled. He lifted the bike to turn it right side up, and Davy grabbed it by the handlebars.

"Thanks, Joey."

"No problem, kid." Durniak clasped the boy on the shoulder, but Davy shrugged off the contact.

"You doing okay?" Durniak asked softly. He shouldn't care; somewhere in the back of his head he knew that, but he did.

"Yes," the boy assured him, but the dullness in his blue eyes told Durniak something else. The boy looked so different from the last time he'd seen him. Older somehow.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Durniak smiled. "How's your Ma and your brother?"

"Okay. Ma's workin' a lot more these days and Nicky's a pain in the ass, but he always was so that's not really new..." Davy shrugged. "I should get inside. Nicky's waitin' and Ma'll be home soon."

Without waiting for a response, Davy turned toward the apartment. Durniak's eyebrows rose as he watched the boy walk the bike to the front of the apartment building.

"Hey, Davy," he called out.

Still holding on to the bike, the boy turned. "Yeah?"

"You let me know if you ever need anything. You hear me? Your brother and your Ma, too?"

"I don't even know how to find you." Davy's face scrunched up in confusion. "Why do you even care anyway?"

Ignoring the boy's question, Durniak pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. It wasn't until he had lit one and taken a drag that he address the boy again. "You won't need to find me. I'll find you," he said, blowing dark smoke from his mouth. "You keep your nose clean, you hear me? Stay out of trouble. I'll be keeping my eye on you." He pointed at the boy. "You remember that. Your Pop may not be around anymore, but you got me to answer to now."

Summer 1977

The semi-trailer was dark, stuffy, and it smelled. Some foul, permeating odor the man couldn't place. He couldn't remember what day it was, and he was having trouble recalling what had finally prompted him to conspire with the enemy. It was just like anything else in life, he supposed; it sounded like a good idea at the time.

The man could feel the truck come to a halt, and it wasn't long before he heard a group of muffled voices. There was sudden thump on the outside of the trailer, and Joe Durniak jumped. Taking a deep breath, he moved his hands to smooth the wrinkles in his jacket as he prepared himself for what was to come.

As the door rose and sun filtered in from the outside, Durniak had to squint his eyes against the blinding harshness. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust, but once they did, he set his gaze on a familiar man.

For a moment, Durniak was surprised to see the tall blonde FBI agent, but once he considered the importance and secrecy of this operation, he wasn't surprised. Of course, Agent Carter would want one of his 'men' on the line, and Hutchinson was perfect for the job.

Durniak scoffed and, not for the first time, he found himself wondering if Hutchinson would ever wake up and see Carter for who he really was.

As he met the man's eyes, Hutch tried his best not to glare at Durniak. He found himself unconsciously crossing his fingers that Durniak would stick to his orders, although he wouldn't be surprised if he didn't.

The man was terrible at following directions, either too stupid or arrogant to stick to agreements made with the FBI. Hutch shouldn't have worried though, because Durniak's gaze was gone from him as quickly as it came, and it was focused on Starsky.

"Hi ya, Joey," Starsky greeted, his hands on his hips, his eyes squinting against the glare of the sun. "Long time no see."

Durniak didn't recognize the voice at all, but seeing the man in front of him was like looking into the past. He stared at the dark-haired detective for a moment, trying to pull his identity from his memory.

"Davy," Durniak stated, and when the man let a smile slip through, he knew he was correct. "Little Davy Starsky."

A warmth filled Durniak's chest as he took a long look at the man who stood in front of him. It had been so long since the last time they'd seen each other, and the boy looked good. Durniak's joy was short lived, however, as Starsky nodded and pointed to Hutchinson.

"This is my partner, Ken Hutchinson."

Durniak's mouth fell slightly agape. *Partner?* He looked to Hutchinson, who looked back unfazed by the reunion. Little Davy couldn't be partners with Hutchinson; that man was an FBI agent and completely untrustworthy.

"How d'ya do?" Hutchinson asked. He showed no obvious sign of stress or any indication that he had met Durniak before.

"How long you been partners?" Durniak probed, as he looked between the two men, his apprehension growing.

Hutchinson didn't miss a beat. "Oh, about seven years," he answered noncommittally as he looked away from both men.

"Well, if he kept you around that long, you gotta be okay." Durniak didn't mean a word of it, but he said it anyway. Something was wrong in this situation, and his mind was still trying to grasp the idea of Davy being partnered with Hutchinson. Or why Hutchinson would be a part of his transport at all.

"Well, little Davy, here, he never knew whether to love me or hate me. I represented everything your father fought against," Durniak continued, watching the blonde man closely. "Some wise guys, they shot him down one night."

"Yeah, I know," Hutchinson stated. Durniak was more than a little angry that the kid didn't even have the decency to look guilty or ashamed, and in that moment, Durniak was sure he hated him.

"Joey paid for the funeral," Starsky offered, his hands sitting firmly on his hips.

"Your papa, he was one hell of a man. He deserved better than he got," Durniak voiced. Even years later, he still felt the need to offer some sort of comfort to the boy.

Starsky didn't reply, looking away instead.

Durniak felt a deep sadness when he realized that Davy still couldn't talk about his Pop. The past twenty-two years had done nothing to help ease the pain of losing the man so traumatically.

Durniak looked at Hutchinson, expecting him to say something, anything to Davy about his father's death. Durniak's anger bubbled as the blonde man stayed silent. Fucking Fed. Couldn't Hutchinson tell how much this conversation was bothering Davy?

"We better get movin'," Starsky said with a nod.

"Yeah," Hutchinson agreed. Durniak took a little satisfaction from the note of dread in the blonde's voice, as well as the strained expression that briefly crossed his face.

Starsky moved to jump in the back of the trailer, and Hutchinson reached for the rope that would pull the door back down.

"No, let Davy drive," Durniak objected suddenly. "I'll sit here and talk old times," he nodded at Hutch, "with your friend."

Durniak assessed the two men. Starsky looked annoyed and then disappointed. Hutchinson was glaring, anger highlighting his features.

"If you're not here, he'll only hear my side. That'll be nice." Durniak tried to smooth Starsky's ruffled feathers, but, still looking disappointed, Starsky sighed.

Durniak felt guilty about pushing their reunion off. It would have been nice for little Davy and him to ride alone. He was more than a little curious to know what the boy had to be up to, but that would have to wait. There were much more pressing issues at hand.

"Okay," Hutch agreed quietly. Then, just like that, he was jumping in the back of the trailer. "Lock it up; thanks a lot," he added quickly to the man outside the door.

Durniak and Hutch sat in silence as the door was shut and the engine of the semi roared to life. It wasn't until they were back on the road and being slightly swayed by the moving vehicle that Durniak spoke again.

"Well, well," he started, anger seeping into his voice. "Nice to see you again, Special Agent Hutchinson."

"Wish I could say the same, Joe." Although, his voice was slightly friendlier than Durniak's, Hutch looked equally displeased.

"You really been his partner for the last seven years?" Durniak demanded.

Curious about Durniak's interest in Starsky, Hutch wasn't sure what he should say. There was no reason to lie to the man, but sitting in the back of the trailer with Durniak's eyes accusing him of something he wasn't sure of, Hutch didn't know if he wanted to say anything.

"Christ," Durniak whispered. "He doesn't know about you, does he?"

Still staring at the floor, Hutch shook his head. Durniak closed his eyes and rested his head heavily against the wall.

"Shit. I knew he'd become a cop, and I was sure the Feds would pair him up with some little spy. With everything his dad did and what Davy saw, there wasn't no way they were gonna leave him unsupervised."

"What do you mean 'what Davy saw'? What did he see?" Hutch looked at Durniak, his brows furrowing in confusion.

"Why don't you check your case files," the older man sneered, crossing his arms.

Hutch frowned and looked back at the floor.

"Oh, ho," Durniak taunted with a grin. "What's wrong, kiddo? Is that information out of your pay grade?"

"Shut up," Hutch growled. "You don't know a fuckin' thing about me."

"I know you're an idiot," Durniak responded. "Some stupid kid who's got himself in way over his head, and now you're dragging little Davy down with you."

"Shut up!" Hutch screamed, his index finger shooting to Durniak's face. "You don't know *shit* about *shit*, so just stop talking."

"Get that finger out of my face," Durniak warned, his eyes darkening. "You are the one who doesn't know shit here. Not me. You got it? You're just a pawn in this game. A cog in a wheel. You think you matter... *You don't matter.*"

His mouth set in a firm line, Hutch glared at the older man. He wanted so badly to contradict what Durniak had said. To tell him that he did, in fact, know exactly what was going on, but Durniak was right. Hutch had no idea what the FBI's master plan was, and the older man's accusation about Starsky only added to Hutch's anxiety about the damage he was doing to the other man.

"Jesus. You are so *fucking* stupid," Durniak breathed. "How can you *not* see what's really going on here?"

At Durniak's words, Hutch's anxiety turned to anger. He set his eyes on the man and let loose. "What do you think this is, Joe?" Hutch growled. "Do you really think the FBI is going to let you testify? Take care of you? Let you live?"

"I know they aren't," Durniak countered. "Question is, do you know why?"

"No," Hutch whispered. He hadn't meant to respond, but the words slipped out of his mouth before he could stop them, and when Durniak snorted and broke eye contact, Hutch kicked himself for saying anything at all.

"That's what I thought." Durniak sighed and Hutch thought he heard disappointment in the man's tone. "This is too much."

Spring 1955

Standing in front of the large oak desk, thirteen-year-old Davy Starsky was trying hard to ignore the throbbing in his knuckles, the sting of the scratches on his face and neck, and the blood dripping from his nose.

Joe Durniak looked at him disapprovingly from behind the desk.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" Durniak asked firmly. Tapping the ash off his cigarette, he abandoned it in the waiting ashtray, and looked at the boy expectantly.

"Nothing happened."

Durniak's brow rose in mock surprise. "Really?" he asked as he indicated at the man next to the door. "Well, why don't we just ask Charlie? He saw the whole thing."

Davy groaned; he had forgotten about Charlie. He looked at the tall man, and Charlie offered him a supportive smile, but it did nothing to make Davy feel better. He couldn't do anything these days without Durniak knowing about it.

"You don't want to tell me, fine," Durniak stated. "Go clean the cars in the garage instead."

"Joey!" Davy exclaimed. "That isn't *fair*!"

"Don't yell at me," Durniak reprimanded. He pointed at the boy. "You made me a promise that you would keep your head down and stay out of trouble. You broke that promise, and now you will deal with the consequences."

"It isn't even that big of a deal!" Davy fumed. "Lots of boys fight."

"I don't care what other boys do. I care about what you do." Durniak looked at him seriously. "Davy, this could have been bad. What would have happened if Charlie hadn't stopped you? What would have happened if it had been someone else? You can't go around reacting every time somebody says something that makes you mad."

"But he was." Davy said stubbornly. He crossed his arms and frowned. "Charlie was there, this time, and the time before that."

Charlie cringed at the boy's words, something that did not go unnoticed by Durniak. Pursing his lips, Durniak leaned back in his chair and assessed the boy.

No one fought Durniak when he gave orders, and insolence wasn't something he was used to. Either out of respect or fear, people always did what he told them to without thought or question. Davy Starsky did not.

The boy seemed to be infinitely prepared to disobey Durniak's instruction to stay out of trouble, and his adolescent stubbornness was making Davy increasingly hard to control. Of course, the rough crowd of older boys Davy had taken to hanging around with, as well as his choice in activities, didn't help matters.

Durniak found Davy's new found insolence troubling, and he suddenly found himself struggling to keep the boy protected and away from the attention of law enforcement. The stress was almost too much to handle.

"What would your father say?" Durniak asked suddenly as he rubbed his temples.

At the mention of his father, Davy's face fell and he looked at the floor in shame.

Watching the boy, Durniak felt slightly bad for using Michael Starsky's disapproval against his disobedient son. However, the tactic always worked, and if it kept the boy on the straight and narrow, then it was worth every bit of pain it caused.

"Sorry," Davy mumbled a moment later. He lifted his head with a sigh and squared his shoulders.

"Now," Durniak said softly, picking his cigarette out of the tray. "Go clean yourself up, and get to work on those cars."

Considering the instructions, Davy looked at Durniak. Seeing the fire in the boy's blue eyes, Durniak wondered for a moment if the boy was debating refusing his order altogether.

"Okay," Davy whispered finally, and Durniak breathed a sigh of relief.

As the boy left, Durniak wondered how close he was to the inevitable day when Davy would stop listening and following his directions. What would he do then?

Summer 1977

"It's your fault Michael is dead!" Rachel stated tearfully. "You had to fill his head with ridiculous notions and absurd theories of the people he was working for. You made him paranoid, and you got him killed!"

"The only thing I did was confirm what he already knew," Durniak defended softly. "It was our mistake thinking it could be changed."

"You lied to him is what you did. You told him he would be safe. How safe is he now?" Rachel demanded. Her lower lip trembled, but her eyes shone pure hatred.

"I should have done a better job with your husband. I should have protected him better. I will not make that mistake with Davy-"

"YOU'RE A MONSTER!" Rachel interrupted. "You had my husband, but you cannot have my son."

"Rachel, you don't understand-"

"I understand completely. You are a criminal, and he is my son. Do you have any idea what this must look like?"

Durniak woke suddenly. The room was dark, small, and unfamiliar. It took him a moment to figure out exactly where he was, and once he did, dread filled the pit of his stomach. The dream itself was unsettling, but so was what would come tomorrow.

Durniak rolled over to face the curtain-covered window. Squinting in the darkness, he made out the form of Special Agent Hutchinson sitting in a chair. Durniak watched the young man for a moment, and it wasn't until Hutchinson look at him that Durniak finally spoke.

"Where's Davy?" he asked.

"Food run," Hutch answered with a shrug.

"Food run?" Durniak's forehead wrinkled and he looked to clock on the nightstand. "It's past midnight."

"Yeah... well... tell that to Starsky's stomach."

Durniak laughed, and Hutch turned his attention behind the curtains and out the window.

Rolling to his back, Durniak sighed once more before giving up on getting any sleep that night. Groaning, he pulled himself off the bed and made his way to the small table.

"So tomorrow's the day." He sighed, sitting heavily in the chair.

"Yep," Hutch answered quietly. He pulled back from the window and sighed. "There isn't anything going on out there."

"Are you really expecting anything?" Durniak raised his eyebrows. "After all, you are in here."

Ignoring Durniak's words, Hutch stood. He stretched his arms and back, letting out a satisfied grunt, before making his way to the duffle bag on the floor and digging through it. He smiled as he pulled out a bottle of bourbon and returned to sit by window. "How 'bout a drink, Joe?"

"57?" Durniak asked, as he eyed the bottle hopefully.

"52," Hutch corrected with a smile. He placed the bottle on the table in front of Durniak.

"Shit," the older man whispered a slight twinkle in his eyes. "Kiddo, you didn't have to do this."

"Yes, I did," Hutch said softly. He sat at the table and tilted his head. "End of the road, Joe. It's the least I could do."

Durniak nodded and reached for the bottle. Uncapping it, he took a drink, grimaced, and then offered the bottle to Hutch, who waved it away with a sad smile. "You're gonna make me drink alone. You're a hell of a guy, kiddo," Durniak grouched before taking another sip.

Hutch pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows, and Durniak realized he had made the blonde feel guilty, but it wasn't about making him drink alone.

"It's okay," Durniak offered. "I'm an old man."

"Yeah," Hutch sighed. "That should help, but it doesn't. And I keep telling myself that you are a criminal but," Hutch held his palm in the air, "that doesn't help either."

Durniak wanted to tell him that he understood, and although he was dreading what would happen in the morning, they were all thrown in this situation and none of them had a choice or made the rules. Hutchinson was only doing what he was ordered to do.

"You need to be careful," Durniak found himself warning. "Don't trust anyone around you. Especially those closest to you."

"Shouldn't I be saying that to you?" Hutch joked, but when Durniak didn't reply, opting for another drink instead, Hutch wondered how in over his head he really was. "What's really going on here, Joe?"

Durniak looked at Hutch in surprise. He thought of the day in the semi and how he had accused the kid of not knowing what was going on. He had just thought the kid was messing with them. How could he be so unaware of what was happening?

"You mean you really don't know anything?" he asked. "Thought you were just pulling my leg in the truck." He looked at Hutch. "Maybe you still are..."

Hutch rolled his eyes. Great. He thought Durniak was lying to him, and Durniak thought Hutch was lying as well.

"I know some," Hutch admitted. "Not enough to explain why the FBI would do this. Or what Starsky has to do with any of it."

"Shit," Durniak sighed.

He took another drink and leaned back in his chair. He offered the bottle to Hutch once more.

Hutch looked at it and then decided one drink couldn't hurt; in fact, it might even help considering how he was feeling at that moment. Durniak grinned at him as he took a deep drink then coughed.

"Well," Durniak sighed, taking the bottle back. "I was arrogant." Durniak shrugged. "Michael got too close. And Davy... well, poor Davy was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"That tells me nothing," Hutch stated as he rubbed his face with his palms. He was tired, the fatigue of this case finally sinking in, and the single drink of bourbon combined with his anxiety for the morning was making him feel sick.

"There is a larger picture here, kiddo..." Durniak paused, looking at Hutch seriously. "You don't play games with the people you work for. I don't know how much of this story I can tell you without putting you in danger." Durniak smiled. "Although, you aren't Davy, and we aren't friends. So maybe I should care about that."

"Okay." Hutch smiled and took another drink from the bottle. "If you won't tell me everything, at least tell me how the two of you are connected."

"Davy saw something he shouldn't have... I'll leave it at that," Durniak eyed Hutch carefully. "If he wanted you to know what happened, he would have told you himself."

"Is there more to it than that?" Hutch pressed, looking at the man suspiciously.

"No."

"Have you been protecting him?" Hutch asked. He felt guilty probing the man for information that he should be hearing from his partner, but at this moment his need to know outweighed any objection from his conscience. Starsky wasn't talking, and Durniak was.

"No," Durniak answered without thinking, the alcohol loosening the grip on his secrets. "Not all this time. It was easy when he lived in New York. I could keep both my eyes on him, point him in the right direction, but... Rachel caught wind of me having contact with him and, after what happened to Michael, you can imagine why she didn't want me around him."

"You're the reason he got sent to California," Hutch whispered.

Durniak nodded. "I tried to talk her out of it, but she had already made up her mind. I tried my best after that, but I completely lost track of him when he ran away to 'Nam." He paused, shaking his head. He held the bottle of bourbon between his hands and leaned on the table.

"I was so angry when I heard he'd become a cop," Durniak continued. "That first year, I thought for sure the FBI would take him out and nobody would be asking any questions... just like Michael. But then..." Durniak paused and shook his head.

"Then what?" Hutch demanded. *Why would the FBI take Starsky out?*

"Then I got a little visit from your boss and his boss. They told me they had paired him with somebody, and they would kill him if I didn't do what they asked me to do-"

"What?" Hutch breathed, his heart in his knees, his brain frantically trying to comprehend what Durniak was saying. *This isn't right. None of this is right.*

"I didn't," Durniak laughed. "They couldn't control me and I told him that."

"But Stars-"

"He couldn't touch him, either." Durniak pointed to Hutch. "I told him that, too. He needs Starsky alive."

"Why?"

"The two of you... You've become sort of a package deal. I know more about you than you think I do." Durniak looked at Hutch knowingly. "And, *kiddo*, they can't control you if they wipe him out, now can they?"

Hutch leaned back in his chair. What was Durniak saying? That the FBI and Carter were the *enemy*? That Durniak, Michael Starsky, and his son were all victims of a larger scheme?

Hutch couldn't believe it. He didn't want to believe it. He grabbed the bottle from Durniak's hands and took a deep drink.

"Yeah, that would be my reaction too." Durniak laughed drunkenly, as Hutch slammed the bottle in front of him.

"I don't believe you," Hutch spat, pointing his finger at the older man. "You're a fucking liar."

"Don't be stupid," Durniak slurred lightly. "You know I am telling you the truth...It-it was never about Davy and what he saw. It was about me and Michael Starsky, and what we know. The knowledge his father died for. The knowledge I *will* die for."

"Then why deal, Joe?" Hutch threw his arms up in the air in frustration. "If what you are saying is true, why give the FBI what they want? If you have as much power as you say you do, why give in at all?"

Durniak stared into the almost empty bottle of bourbon and considered his answer.

His anxiety getting the best of him, Hutch ran his fingers through his hair and sighed heavily.

"The world's changing, kiddo," Durniak stated finally, and there was look of acceptance in the man's eyes that frightened Hutch. "Those new young guys that run New York, they're all strangers to me. Yeah, they respect me *now*, but only because they're afraid of me. That fear won't last forever. All my friends are dead, and soon I will be, too." Durniak paused and met Hutch's eyes. "Would you believe me if I said I was tired. Maybe I'm ready to pack it in."

"What's going to happen to Starsky?" Hutch whispered, fear gripping his heart, his eyes wide. "If what you're saying is the truth and they take you out, what's stopping them from taking care of Starsky, too?"

"Maybe they've lost interest in him," Durniak scoffed. "Maybe they haven't. Either way, kiddo, what happens to him is your responsibility now."

XX

Standing in the privacy of the hotel room bathroom, Hutch took a breath. He had pulled it off. Everything was okay; everything was going to be okay.

Hutch almost didn't have the courage to follow through with it. His conversation with Durniak weighed heavily on his mind, but in the end, he had done exactly what he had been told to do. He played his role perfectly. He had followed the direction of Special Agent Oliver, whom they met in the basement, and ushered both Starsky and Durniak out of the safety of the hotel and into the street.

As directed, he left Starsky with a dying Durniak while he led the uniformed officers on a wild goose chase to the hotel across the street, eventually, deliberately, allowing them to take the wrong man into custody, allowing Nash a clean get away.

Everything had gone according to plan. Joe Durniak was dead, and Starsky didn't suspect a thing.

Hutch leaned over the sink. Running a stream of cold water, he bent over and splashed some on his face. After seven long years of lying and documentation, it was over. The case would be

closed, and his role in it was over. Hutch should have been happy, but the feeling that was threatening to overwhelm him was far from joy.

Unable to support himself any longer, Hutch found himself leaning his back heavily against the bathroom wall. His knees bent and he slowly slid to sit on the floor.

Was the story that Durniak had told him the night before true? Or was it just a grand work of fiction from a man who was facing his impending death? Hutch didn't know what to think. His own anxiety about Carter and the FBI was making him inclined to believe the story Durniak had told.

Hutch pulled his knees to his chest and bowed his head. What was it the truth? Durniak was dead; he probably would never know.

Suddenly, Hutch broke out into a fit of deep and irrational laughter. It lasted for a moment before the reality of his situation overcame him, and then Hutch sobbed.

Chapter 10

April 1, 1979

Leaning his cheek heavily in the palm of his hand, Captain Dobby sighed from his seat behind his desk. The morning hadn't been a good one, and it was getting worse by the second.

"...I can't believe you aren't doing anything about..." Detective Cooper's zealous voice filtered to Dobby's ears, as the younger man paced frantically in front of him.

"Leave it alone, Cooper," Dobby instructed. He rubbed his palms over his tired eyes and looked at his detective to find the man's mouth agape.

There was a fire in the younger man's eyes that told Dobby he had no intention of letting go of his theories about the FBI or Detective Hutchinson.

"That's an order," Dobby added, deciding to make his instruction more concrete.

Cooper was becoming troublesome. Fueled by self-imposed responsibility over Starsky's meltdown and sudden departure from Bay City, he just couldn't let go of the Bennett case. Despite the FBI pulling it from them completely, Dobby knew Cooper had been conducting a secret investigation of his own, and that only meant one thing: trouble.

Dobby had been unable to protect Starsky or Hutch from the lingering hand of the FBI, but he could protect Cooper. If only the kid would let him.

"Why?" Cooper demanded, exasperated at Dobby's dismissal. "What are you so afraid of?"

"Nothing," Dobey growled. He straightened up in his seat. "None of this concerns you... Or me, for that matter." He waved his hand, motioning Cooper out the door of his office. "You have other cases and a partner to attend to."

"Fine," Cooper mumbled, giving up on his fight, at least for that day.

As he watched him leave, Dobey felt bad for shutting down Detective Cooper. The kid was a hell of a cop and he would go far in the department, if he could only let go of the past.

Cooper was too invested in uncovering the truth of what happened to Hutchinson and Bennett. Dobey didn't want to hold him back, but he had to. Because really, how did any of that matter now?

Starsky was gone, and so was Hutch. Each man finally removed from the careers that had taken so much from them. Dobey knew more than anyone how tragic the previous events had been, but it was over now, and some things were better left buried.

XX

"You're going to have to leave that alone, you know?" Detective Cyrus's dry voice stated as Cooper sunk down into his desk chair.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Cooper glared at the balding man and reached for the stack of files on the desk. He had no interest in looking at any of them, but he was on thin ice with both Dobey and Cyrus. It was better to look busy and less focused on other matters.

Cyrus sighed heavily, as if having to converse with Cooper was the most taxing experience he would have to endure in his life. He scooted his chair further away from his desk to get a better look at Cooper, who had leaned over his own desk, and was trying his best to ignore him.

"You were just in there," he pointed at Dobey's closed door, "trying to plead your case about Starsky and Hutch and how everything was just a set up."

"Was not," Cooper denied, irritation tugging at his voice. He looked up at the man and frowned. "You don't know what I was doing in there. *Maybe* I was complaining about you."

Cooper knew the statement was transparent, and when Cyrus let out a mild chuckle, it confirmed Cyrus knew it, too. Cooper would never in a million years complain about his partner. As much as they didn't mesh professionally, or personally for that matter, Cooper could have been paired with a lot worse.

"They're gone," Cyrus advised sternly. "And you need to get on with your life. You can't hold on to cases like this; you'll never survive this job."

"What do you know?" Cooper mumbled. It was childish and he knew it, but he had to say something.

Cooper hated how Cyrus spoke to him. Things were always said in the same demeaning tone, a tone that clearly communicated how superior Cyrus believed he was. This point of view was not warranted, and as far as Cooper could tell, the only reason Cyrus felt superior was because of his years of experience on the force. Starsky had never spoken to Cooper like that, and he had been a detective just as long as Cyrus.

Cooper shifted through case files and tried to ignore Cyrus completely. It proved to be difficult, though, as the other man seemed intent on scrutinizing his every move. Cooper glanced through six different files before sighing and giving up focusing on anything besides the older man's piercing stare.

"What?" Cooper demanded as he dropped a file and threw his hands up in frustration.

"You're going through the wrong files," Cyrus chastised. He pointed to the documents in front of Cooper. "Those are old. I left them there for Minnie to file. Cooper, *where* is your head?"

Not here, Cooper thought bitterly. Wordlessly, and ignoring Cyrus's confused look, he re-stacked the files, stood up, and grabbed his jacket from his chair.

"Where are you going?" Cyrus's voice asked just as Cooper pushed through the door of the squad room.

"Home... Vacation." *Anywhere but here.*

XX

Spring 1977

"On behalf of the FBI, I want to congratulate you on the successful completion of the Durniak case. It couldn't have gone more smoothly..."

Special Agent Carter's voice was almost a whisper, and Hutch found himself looking around their surroundings and wondering what they were doing there.

For the first time in Hutch's career, Carter hadn't asked him to return to D.C for debriefing. Instead, Carter had traveled to Bay City and insisted they meet in the tiny unassuming coffee shop on the corner of 5th and Kent. The behavior was odd, and only added to Hutch's growing discomfort and suspicion of his superior and the FBI.

"...I regret to inform you that your request for transfer from Special Agent of the FBI to Sergeant Detective at the Bay City police department has been denied."

"What?" Hutch's brows snapped together and the tone of his voice did nothing to conceal his shock. He was irritated when Carter's only response was an arrogant smile.

"*Why?*" Hutch demanded.

"That isn't really what you want, Hutchinson. It seems like it is now, which is understandable, your case just ended, but believe me, it isn't. Besides, you are too important to us to slip through our fingers."

Anger bubbling in his chest and cheeks reddening with fury, Hutch looked at Carter. *How the fuck could he know what I wanted?*

"What's the plan then?" Hutch asked bitterly. "Relocation?"

"No. We have a re-assignment, but it will not require relocation. We are going to keep you in Bay City and in your current undercover position--"

"But I thought that case was over. I thought I was done watching Starsky," Hutch spat.

"Easy," Carter warned quietly as his eyes darted to the neighboring customers in the coffee shop, but Hutch was beyond caring about their small audience.

"So, let me just make sure I have this straight," he asked heatedly. "I can't transfer over to be a detective at Bay City officially, but I can continue to work there as undercover FBI?"

"Correct."

"What is the point of *that*?" Hutch fumed. "Because I got to tell you, working two jobs while getting paid for one sucks. I ought to know, I've spent the last seven years of my life doing it."

The words were spoken a little too loudly and Hutch knew it. Carter's expression darkened as they both watched an elderly couple look at them worriedly as they vacated their small table and left the establishment. Carter smiled politely at the couple, but Hutch found he couldn't muster the small nicety.

"You aren't mad about money," Carter said suddenly as he glared at Hutch. "The FBI has rewarded you for your hard work, and your pay grade more than reflects your level of expertise."

Planting his elbows on the desk, Carter leaned forward. He clasped his hands together and smiled in satisfaction. Hutch wasn't sure what was making him feel more uncomfortable, the look on the man's face or his sudden overwhelming lack of control over his life, but either way, Carter's next words sent a chill down his spine.

"You are angry because you let yourself get too personally involved and now you can't get out. You are angry because you are powerless and I call the shots."

His throat dry and Durniak's warning echoing in his head, Hutch stared at Carter. His superior grinned and took a drink of his coffee.

"Well," Carter prompted after a few moments. "Are you going to accept your place in this, or do I have to convince you further?"

Hutch scoffed. *His place in this? What the hell was this? And what gave Carter the right to tell him what his place was?*

Instead of responding, Hutch found himself thinking. Durniak was dead, and he could do anything. He could be anybody. He and Starsky could just run away and start a new life together.

"That statement requires an answer." Carter frowned sternly, and his words brought Hutch back to the situation at hand.

"And what if I say no," Hutch whispered. "What if I decide I don't want to do this anymore? What if I just walk away?"

"You won't do that," Carter stated smugly as he crossed his arms.

"Why not?" Hutch challenged.

"Because if you do, you will lose Starsky."

"Why would you think that's important to me?" His stomach churning, Hutch cursed himself for being so stupid, and he cursed Durniak for so being right.

"Oh come on." Carter let out a laugh. "You two aren't exactly the best at hiding it..." He paused as Hutch's face fell. "Oh come on now, don't look so upset. The whole Bureau doesn't know. Only a few of us and we don't care who you choose to sleep with, but we won't hesitate to use it against you." Carter smiled. "Which is why you will stay, and you will work your re-assignment."

"I can say no. This isn't a done deal."

"I don't have to tell you what this will look like. I mean, the fact that you are both men aside, he was a person of interest in a Federal Investigation, and you were assigned to watch him. Think of what we will do to your career. To your future." Carter paused and looked at Hutch seriously. "Or what we can do to him if you decide to leave."

The coffee shop suddenly felt too small; Hutch leaned forward in his seat and fiddled with his tie. His whole career flashed before his eyes. All the hard work. All the lies. The façade he was living in Bay City, and his relationship with Starsky.

Durniak had been right; all of it was for nothing, and Carter was completely untrustworthy. Hutch was assaulted with the sudden question: what was he willing to do to protect Starsky?

"Okay," Hutch said finally. "What do I have to do?"

"There you go." Carter bent his head, his eyes shining in satisfaction. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Hutch didn't answer. He didn't trust himself to withhold from saying something insulting. Instead, he watched Carter pull a manila file from his briefcase and place it in front of him.

"This is your new assignment," Carter advised. "It is fairly similar to your last one. I will provide you with more details in the next few days."

Hutch wanted to ask why the man couldn't just disclose the details now, but he knew the question would be in vain. It was all becoming clear to him why Carter always chose to withhold details. It was his way of maintaining control, and his way of keeping Hutch in a constant state of dependence.

Without a word, Carter stood and exited the coffee shop. Away from the prying gaze of the other man, Hutch let out a heavy breath and his shoulders slumped. What was he going to do?

He tapped his fingers on the outside of the file, determined not to look at it. Carter had just blackmailed him into remaining in a life and a career he no longer wanted any part of. There was no way he was going to look at the information Carter left him with, at least not at that moment. Curiosity got the best of him, however, and Hutch turned the file around to read the name written on the tab.

BENNETT, MICHAEL

XX

"Goddamn it," Hutch swore as the fern he was watering tumbled to the floor of his greenhouse. The pot broke apart on impact, leaving him to sigh and stare at the mess. The destroyed plant making him reflect on just how messed up his life really was.

"What was that, babe? Oh." Starsky's voice filtered in the room from the doorway. "What happened?"

Still looking at the plant on the ground, Hutch threw his hand up in frustration. "I dropped it," he answered. Making no effort to clean up the mess, Hutch found himself thinking about his afternoon meeting with Carter, and wondering what else could go wrong.

This situation wasn't right. Not one damn bit of it.

At least he could take comfort in knowing that he would no longer have to report on the actions of his lover. With the death of Joe Durniak and eight years of nothing of suspicion to report, David Starsky was no longer considered a threat. That joy was short-lived, however, because the closure of the Joseph Durniak case was only the beginning of Hutch's new troubles.

The FBI was using his lover as leverage, and Hutch was letting them. A fact that was only making the bad feeling in the pit of his stomach grow by each passing second.

How was he supposed to go through the rest of his life hiding the truth from Starsky? How was he going to continue working for both the Bay City Police Department and the FBI? There just weren't enough hours in the day to conceal the undercover operation that Carter had tasked him with.

What Carter was requiring was impossible. And as he stared at the broken plant, an unsettling thought crossed Hutch's mind. Perhaps, that was why Carter had chosen him. Maybe he was handing over this particular assignment knowing full well that Hutch couldn't succeed. And if that were the case? Then who could Hutch trust?

Boy, Joe Durniak would have loved this.

Forgetting about his partner who was lingering in the doorway, Hutch let out a groan and hung his head in defeat. He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Ya know, it just a plant, right?" Starsky asked, his eyes sparkling, and his face warm and caring. "Besides, you can repot it and it'll be good as new."

"I know." Hutch sighed.

"If you know, then why are you standing there looking at it like it's the end of the world?"

Shaking his head, Hutch shrugged. *Because it feels like it.*

Without a word, Starsky grabbed the trash can out of the corner and bent to retrieve the fragments of the broken pot.

"It's not a big deal, babe," Starsky re-affirmed, and at that moment it occurred to Hutch that he couldn't possibly love the man more. Perhaps, he was overlooking the one person whom he could trust more than anyone.

"Starsky I-"

"Hmm?" Starsky asked, taking a break from cleaning up the broken pot to meet his partner's eyes.

But the second their gazes met, Hutch knew he couldn't tell him the truth. All the lies he'd told and whatever reaction Starsky would have aside, Carter had threatened to hurt his partner, which was something Hutch refused to neither allow nor be responsible for.

If he told Starsky now, there was no guarantee that Hutch would be able to control what his lover's reaction would be. And what would Carter's retaliation be? By the way Joe Durniak was talking before his death, the consequences of Starsky knowing the truth would not be good.

"Nothing," Hutch said with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. He grabbed the broken pot and plant from Starsky. "I can handle this. You can get back to that movie you were watching."

Starsky looked at his lover oddly. He didn't say anything, but Hutch was sure he knew something was up.

"Babe," Starsky asked, looking seriously at the blonde man. "Are you sure there isn't anything you want to talk about?"

"No," Hutch lied shaking his head. "There isn't anything."

"You've just been acting so weird lately."

"I'm fine," Hutch stated firmly. Feeling uncomfortable with his partner's prying, he turned his attention to re-potting the fern.

"Okay." Starsky shrugged as he gave up. He was not in the mood to argue. "I guess I'll get back to the movie then."

Hearing the other man's footsteps as he left the greenhouse, Hutch let out a stressed breath and leaned his forehead against the wall. He couldn't do this anymore. He wouldn't do this anymore. He need to take control over his life, and he needed a plan.

Chapter 11

April 28, 1979

Richard and Emily Hutchison's anniversary was a grand affair, complete with a dinner party and house full of people. The parties hosted by the family were always festive and left the attendees gossiping about the pleasure of the gathering for weeks.

Hutch, however, was having no fun at all.

"...we still can't believe it..." Mrs. Anderson continued in her monotone voice, concern reflected on her fair, wrinkled features. Hutch held back a sigh. He nodded and smiled at her politely, but inside he wanted to scream.

Mrs. Anderson was now the eighth guest who had cornered him to disclose how grief stricken his family was when they thought he was dead, and how miraculous everyone thought his survival was. It amazed him how so many near strangers thought he wasn't aware how awful the events had been for his family, or how they thought it prudent to discuss it with him now.

"...and I mean your mother! Well, she was just a mess..." Mrs. Anderson droned on, and Hutch found himself tuning her out...again.

This was all his father's fault. If Richard Hutchinson wasn't so protective and had allowed his son to venture out a little more than was allowed in the last six months, well, then all these people wouldn't be looking at Hutch like he had just risen from the dead.

He turned his gaze to the crowd of people beyond them. Standing in front of the living room window was his sister, Mallory, and she was speaking to someone whom he hadn't seen in a very long time.

"Excuse me," Hutch interrupted suddenly. He didn't wait for Mrs. Anderson to reply before he started making his way across the room to his sister. He was too focused on the man who was speaking intently to Mallory to care about his rudeness.

A large smile broke out on Hutch's face as he finally made his way to the pair, and he found himself being pulled into a firm embrace by the familiar man.

"Hey, hey, buddy!" Jack Mitchell exclaimed between the smacking of his bubblegum. He pulled back and held onto Hutch's shoulders. Looking into the blue eyes, he assessed him warmly. "It is so good to see you!"

"Hey, Jack." Hutch smiled. "I didn't know you were planning on coming to this thing. I didn't even know you were back in town."

Jack's mouth hung open for a moment. "He speaks!" he noted, and looked to Mallory who giggled.

"Yeah," Hutch grinned. "Thanks to Mal and more than a few crappy horror novels-"

"Hey! You liked most of them!" Mallory interrupted in a teasing tone.

"Well, I supposed I did." Hutch laughed. "And I recovered most of my speech skills along the way, so I really can't complain too much."

"It could have been worse, buddy." Jack looked to him with his eyebrows raised. "She coulda made you read her romance novels."

"Ew!" Mallory laughed. "That's sick, Jack. He's my brother!"

"That would have much been worse," Hutch agreed, his eyes wide.

Jack nudged Mallory with his shoulder and nodded at the wine and champagne bottles being distributed at the bar in the corner. "What do you say we get a bottle and take it out back. We'll make this real party, huh?"

Mallory looked at the bottles then back at Jack. "Okay," she whispered. "But only if Kenneth joins us."

"But of course." Jack snapped his gum and threw an arm around each sibling. "I wouldn't dream of leaving him behind."

XX

"Las Vegas!" Hutch looked at Jack in surprise from his seat on the wooden fence. "What are you gonna do there?"

Jack took a deep breath of the dusk air. He shrugged and grinned. "I dunno. Gamble, drink." He looked at Mallory, who was taking a drink from the champagne bottle, before whispering with a wink, "Sleep with show girls-"

Hutch and Jack both laughed as Mallory pulled the bottle back, her face falling in annoyance.

"Hey, Jack, I'm no prude," Mallory declared. "I know guys who like to sleep with girls and I know plenty of girls who like to sleep with guys."

"Yeah, like who?" Hutch questioned, his eyes narrowing with protectiveness.

"Just you never mind that. It's none of your business." Mallory grinned and took another drink.

"Hey, come on now, guys," Jack interrupted, grabbing the bottle from Mallory. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble, Mal." He winked at her before taking a deep drink.

"So, Vegas, huh?" Hutch shook his head. "I'm sorry, I just can't see it, Jack."

Wiping at his mouth, Jack passed the bottle to Hutch and watched him thoughtfully. "You could come with me, you know," he stated quietly and nodded at the house. "Get you away from here."

Mallory looked at Jack in shock. She opened her mouth to object, but Jack looked at her and she pulled her mouth in a tight Hutchinson line.

"Let him answer for himself, Mal," Jack insisted.

Hutch swallowed and looked at Jack seriously. When Jack looked back expectantly, Hutch took another deep drink. "Nah," Hutch sighed finally, shaking his head and handing the bottle back to his sister. "I can't do that, Jack."

"Why not?" Jack challenged, and Mallory looked at the ground, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"I don't know." Hutch shook his head and let out a small exasperated laugh. "I just can't."

"Well, what are you gonna do?" Jack scoffed. "Stay here? Don't think that I didn't notice how close an eye your Pop is keeping on you. How, on our way out here, he pulled you aside and told you to put on a jacket and not drink too much. *Jesus*, it's like you're twelve or something."

"Jack," Hutch whispered. "You don't understand."

"Damn right, I don't understand," Jack stated disappointedly. He shook his head when Mallory offered him the bottle again. He turned to Hutch with a pleading look.

"Don't you see, buddy? You're healed. You can do anything. You can be anybody." Jack shook his head with vigor and pointed again at the family house. "This life... it isn't your life. This isn't you. What happened to the guy who had dreams? The guy who was gonna be somebody and help people?"

Hutch swallowed thickly and looked at the house. What had happened to *that guy*? He had left home to get out from under his father's guidance and an imposed career path he had no interest in, only to join the FBI and be forced to blindly follow every order they ever gave him, regardless of whether he agreed with it or not.

It was then Hutch realized *that guy* had never existed. But who had was an overeager stupid kid who was too blind to make decisions about his own life. And that recognition left him with a sadness he couldn't explain and anger he couldn't ignore.

"Well?" Jack prompted.

"Jack, I'm not going to Vegas," Hutch stated finally. He grabbed the bottle back from his sister. "And I'm not sure what I'm going to do at the moment, but when I figure it out, I know one thing for sure..." Hutch paused and took a drink. "It's gonna mean something this time," Hutch finished firmly, and Mallory and Jack looked at each other in confusion.

XX

Summer 1977

The motel was a dive and Hutch felt a little conspicuous standing in front of room 216. He didn't belong there, and he was sure someone was going to take note of his presence.

"Holy shit!" the blonde man exclaimed. He opened the ratty dented room door. The young man eyed Hutch with a mixture of annoyance and awe.

"Man," Bennett continued, "when they said they had a guy who looked like me, they weren't kiddin'!"

Hutch was equally surprised to see how much he and Michael Bennett looked like one another. The pictures Carter had given Hutch hadn't done the resemblance justice; they could have been twins or, at the very least, brothers.

"Yeah," Hutch muttered. He cleared his throat and held out his hand. "Michael Bennett, my name is--"

"I already know who you are," Bennett interrupted, waving his hand dismissively. He opened the door further and ushered Hutch in the room. "Carter told me all about you."

"He did?" Hutch asked, trying hard to hide his confusion and annoyance.

Carter had been more than a little lax on the details of Michael Bennett, leaving him with only the case file. Information that was limited at best.

As Bennett closed the door, Hutch regarded the motel room and his nose wrinkled with disgust. The gray carpet was matted and dotted with mysterious stains. There was a TV with a broken screen sitting on the dresser. The curtains were caked with several layers of dust, and the bed looked like something the pioneers may have fashioned.

"Disgusting, isn't it?" Bennett laughed as he noticed Hutch's expression.

"That doesn't begin to cover it," Hutch stated. He turned to face Bennett. "Our guys put you up here?"

"No, I *live* here," Bennett responded, his words laced with sarcasm. "Of course, your boys put me up here. It shouldn't really surprise you, though. You know I'm not at the top of their list right now."

"Yeah," Hutch lied. He bit his lip and his brows furrowed. In reality, he didn't know where on the FBI's scale of importance Bennett was.

Bennett smirked and tilted his head as he continued, "That's okay, though. And if you talk to that asshole, Carter, you let him know I like the accommodations. In fact, I *love* them."

Hutch snorted and allowed a smile. If Bennett shared his current low opinion of Carter then maybe they would get along just fine.

After his last meeting with Carter, Hutch had decided to do a little pushing of his own. He had deliberately pushed his meeting with Bennett off two weeks later than what the FBI had originally intended, instead choosing to throw himself into a new case at Bay City PD with Starsky by his side.

He had ignored phone calls and scathing messages from Carter only to eventually be pulled into Dobey's office and advised by the large man that he needed to follow through with his assignment. It was then that Hutch realized he needed a new tactic; he couldn't avoid Carter or his new case forever. Besides, if Dobey was getting involved that only meant Carter was starting to lean on him, too, which was not a good thing.

"Hey, listen. It's late. Let's get a move on, huh?" Hutch motioned at his watch. He had told Starsky he was hitting the gym for a late night work out, and needed to wrap the meeting up if he wanted the excuse to be believable. Even he didn't think he could convince Starsky that he spent three hours in the gym.

"Oh, what?" Michael asked bitterly. "Do you have your real life to get back to?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Jesus, what am I to you people? I've been locked up here by myself for three days; you can't stay one hour and socialize with me?" Michael glared at the other blonde, then looked away in irritation.

Hutch rolled his eyes at the childish action. He was an FBI Agent, not a babysitter. Surely Bennett understood that. Hutch had been sent here to check in with Bennett. His job was simple: keep him unseen and keep him safe. This did not require they be friends, or that Hutch keep him company.

"Sorry," Hutch offered stiffly. He took a deep breath then regretted it. The air was stale and musty, and it left a funny taste in his mouth.

"Look," Hutch continued. "I'm just here to keep an eye on you, okay? I don't give a shit what you do or don't do. Just as long as you stay in this room. My job is to keep you out of public view for a while... make you disappear."

"Son-of-a-bitch," Bennett muttered as he sunk down on the bed. He let out an angry breath and stared at Hutch with accusing eyes. "You too, huh?"

"Me, too?" Hutch shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're just like the rest of 'em. And you're in on it!" Bennett blamed, throwing his hands up in frustration. "This is how it ends, isn't it? You're just some decoy, and then some person is gonna come rushing in and," he slammed his hand down on the mattress, "shoot me down in this shitty motel room..."

Confused about the man's rant, Hutch stood in front of the bed eyeing him warily. He had no idea what he was being accused of being 'in on,' or why Bennett would be so paranoid. Although, maybe Bennett was right to be paranoid; after all, the FBI did just assassinate Durniak.

"Hey!" Bennett yelled as he snapped his fingers.

Startled out of his reverie, Hutch jumped slightly. He blinked a few times and met Bennett's eyes. The other man's body language was abrasive and his face furious.

"What?" Hutch asked placing his hands on his hips.

"You aren't even listening to me," Bennett accused, his features dark.

"Yes, I was," Hutch assured him, his voice soft and comforting. "And nobody is going to sneak in here and kill you."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do," Hutch said with a soft smile. *No, I don't.*

"O-kay, fine." Bennett sighed. He threw himself back on the bed. "If that's how you want to play it. I'll go along... I guess."

"Good," Hutch replied. Five minutes with this kid, and he was already over this assignment. He reached in his back pocket, pulled out an envelope, and placed it on Bennett's chest.

"What's this?" Bennett asked. He grabbed up the envelope and picked at the seal.

"Contact number and code name," Hutch answered. His face was set in a firm expression. With a finger pointed, he continued authoritatively, "You will not use this number to contact me unless it is an absolute emergency. Do you understand?"

"Really?" Bennett laughed.

He pulled the small sheet of paper out of the envelope. He gazed at it before tucking it in the front pocket of his t-shirt. Crumpling the envelope with both hands, he tossed it in the corner of the room.

Watching the action, Hutch lifted his brows, and Bennett smiled sardonically.

"I'll just leave that for the maid," he quipped.

But Hutch wasn't laughing. Bennett was getting on his nerves. "Just don't call me, alright?" Hutch growled, making his way to the door.

"Hey!" Bennett's voice rang out and, with his hand on the doorknob, Hutch stopped to look back. Bennett was grinning wildly and barely suppressed laughter as he continued, "Nice to meet you, Agent X."

"Don't call me," Hutch growled once again. As he exited the room, the only sound that he could hear was Bennett's wild laughter. And to Hutch's ears it sounded manic.

What the hell had Carter assigned him to?

XX

Ring

Ring

"Ugh... babe," Starsky groaned, his head shoved between his pillow and Hutch's back. "Your phone's ringin'."

"You're dreaming," Hutch mumbled. "Go back to sleep."

Ring

Ring

"How are you *not* hearin' that?"

Hutch sighed sleepily and snuggled his head further into his pillow. Starsky was imagining things. His phone wasn't ringing. He couldn't hear anything at all... except for the sudden incessant ringing of his telephone. Hutch jumped out of bed, jumbling his cozy partner.

"Hey," Starsky grumbled sleepily, but made no attempt to move from under his warm blanket.

Hutch rushed out of the sleeping alcove, skidded to a stop in front of the ringing telephone, and grabbed the receiver. "Hello?" he whispered.

"Hey! Agent X!" the caller answered cheerfully.

Hutch's eyes snapped shut and dread filled his stomach. *Oh, my god. No, no, no.*

"How did you get this number?" Hutch demanded quietly. "This isn't the number I gave you... And I told you not to call me!"

"Well, yes, you did say that," Bennett answered casually. "But I swear this is an emergency. I'm having an emergency like you would not believe."

"What is it?"

"I'm out of pizza."

Hutch eyes closed firmly and he forced himself to take a deep breath. Pizza as an emergency. This guy sounded like Starsky.

"It's 3 o'clock in the morning!" Hutch hissed. "Go to bed."

"I can't. I'm hungry. I want pizza and I can't order one because of the early hour..."

"What do you want me to do about it?!" Hutch exclaimed a little too loudly and winced. He looked back through the sleeping alcove. Starsky didn't move and made no indication he had heard him. Hutch felt a little relief when he realized his partner must have gone back to sleep.

"I want you to bring me a pizza," Bennett answered exasperated. "Jeez, keep up, Agent X."

"I am not doing that." Hutch almost laughed. "No way."

When Bennett made no sound from the other end of the phone, Hutch felt a little worried. What if this really was an emergency? What if something was going down at the shady motel and pizza was just cover to get Hutch over there? But he shouldn't have worried.

"Okay fine," Bennett stated petulantly. "I'll just do it myself. I'll walk on down to an all-night grocery store and get some snacks.... Hey! Maybe I'll introduce myself to a couple of people on the way there. Maybe take some pictures..."

Hutch sighed heavily, and his shoulders sank with dread. Bennett wasn't going to let this go. One way or another, Hutch was going to have to leave his apartment and bring him food.

"Fine," Hutch snarled. "Give me a half hour."

He didn't wait for an answer, and he didn't hold himself back from slamming the phone receiver down. Hutch was suddenly too angry to care if he woke his partner or not. His life was out of control, and he was powerless to stop it.

Shit, he wouldn't even bring Starsky snacks at this absurd hour.

Chapter 12

April 28, 1979

The bar was nicer than he had expected. It was small, well lit, and sparsely filled for a Friday evening. Cooper lingered uncomfortably by the door for a moment, his eyes scanning the tiny crowd for the man he had come to see.

It took a second but eventually he found him, and Cooper couldn't hold back his exuberant smile as he approached the man behind the bar. "Never thought I'd see the day, David Starsky tending a bar. Huggy would be proud."

Still smiling, Cooper watched as the man turned and looked at him in surprise.

Starsky didn't say anything at first. He just stood, his eyes wide and mouth agape in shock. But Cooper didn't mind; the silence provided him with time to really assess the man he'd been so worried about for so long.

Starsky looked good. Gone were the dark circles or any evidence of the deep grief he had been suffering while they had been partnered together. It filled the younger man with relief to finally see with his own eyes what everyone had been so intent on telling him. David Starsky was completely fine. Or at least he appeared to be.

"What are you doing here?" Starsky asked finally, his eyes still reflecting his shock.

"I think the real question is what are *you* doing here?" Cooper responded cheerfully. Still grinning, he sank into a barstool and rested his hands on the bar.

"I live here." Starsky's eyes were furious, and Cooper knew he was trying to keep his cool. "And you aren't supposed to know that."

"You look good, Dave. Way better than the last time I saw you," Cooper stated, dismissing Starsky's statement. He tried to make eye contact with Starsky, but the other man looked away.

"Yeah... well. I've had some time. And some sleep." Grabbing his half-full beer from the back of the bar, Starsky took a drink, and looked at Cooper carefully.

Cooper maintained his smile at first but, after a few moments, he became uncomfortable with Starsky's silence and his intense icy stare. He hadn't exactly expected Starsky to throw a parade over his arrival, but he certainly envisioned a much warmer welcome.

"What are you doing here, Cooper?" Starsky sighed finally. He leaned over the bar, holding his beer in both hands.

"I need your help," Cooper blurted, then bit his lip and grimaced. He hadn't wanted to jump into business so soon, but the other man's seriousness was making him nervous.

"Course you do." Starsky shook his head and took another drink. "Huggy tell you I was here?"

"Uh.... No," Cooper mumbled. His guilty eyes dropped to the worn bar.

Not only had Huggy not provided him with Starsky's whereabouts, but he had told Cooper to back off and leave Starsky alone. However, one very well placed distraction and a quick rustle through the back office of the Pits had provided Cooper with an address.

"What are you doing here?" Starsky asked again, and Cooper looked up in time to see him finish his beer and then slam the glass down on the bar. Cooper jumped at the noise and struggled to remember if Starsky had been this intimidating before.

"Well?" Starsky's eyes narrowed in frustration, and he let out a heavy sigh.

"I know who killed Michael Bennett," Cooper exclaimed.

The statement hung between them for a moment and Cooper blinked, waiting for Starsky to understand the importance of his words. But Starsky's response was not what he expected, and Cooper watched as the man's face broke and he let out a small laugh.

"No, you don't," Starsky scoffed, shaking his head. "The feds pulled that case. Ain't no way they're talkin' to you about it."

"But I do," Cooper breathed in shock. *Why doesn't anyone believe me?*

"How? They took the files back. They took everything back. Shut us-you-down."

"Haven't you ever heard of a photocopy?" Cooper demanded angrily. He leaned forward and set determined eyes on Starsky. "Christ... it doesn't matter," he continued, waving his hand in frustration. "Don't you even care? Aren't you at least a little bit curious?"

Starsky looked at Cooper and thought about the kid's passionate words. If he was honest, he knew he was. He wanted to know what happened to Bennett just as much as Cooper did, but having to think about the Bennett investigation meant having to think about Hutch, and that wasn't something he was prepared to do.

"Sorry, kid." Starsky shook his head sadly. "I have a life here. And, well, you're on your own."

"I need you on this," Cooper insisted, his face pleading. *You have to help me. No one else will.*

"No can do, kid," Starsky whispered firmly. "And you need to go home."

Starsky didn't wait for Cooper to respond. He grabbed his empty glass and poured himself another draft. Cooper watched as he sipped at the drink and focused his eyes on door at the back of the bar.

Cooper shook his head, trying desperately to make sense of the man who stood before him. This wasn't happening. He had made this trip to tell Starsky his theory, but he had never envisioned a scenario where Starsky would be uninterested in what he had to say. But, somehow he was, and in that moment, Cooper understood. He had been dismissed. Starsky wasn't going to help him, and he was truly alone. But still, he couldn't stop trying.

"You don't belong here." Cooper's angry voice broke the silence. "This isn't you!"

"How the hell could you possibly know if this is me or not?" Starsky responded, his tone matching the younger man's. His forehead wrinkled angrily, and he focused accusing eyes on Cooper. "You don't even know me."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Cooper demanded, throwing his hands up in the air.

"Because it's true."

"I can't believe you!" Cooper sputtered, his face turning red. "After everything I did for you. After everything we shared-"

"Oh, get off it!" Starsky interrupted. "I knew you for six months. We didn't share anything, and I think you've ruined my life enough!"

Starsky shut his eyes as soon as the words left his mouth. He watched guiltily as Cooper's face fell, and he looked at the wall.

Shit. He hadn't meant to blame Cooper. Starsky held no contempt for the younger man over what he had disclosed about Hutch. Nothing that had happened was Cooper's fault, and he knew it.

"Who's this guy?" Maggie interrupted suddenly as she took the seat next to Cooper. She set her half-empty drink down on the bar, and shot Starsky a worried look.

Realizing the heated exchange had caught the attention of some of the bar patrons, Starsky rolled his eyes and shrugged. Leave it to Maggie to break up their mild argument.

"He's nobody," Starsky answered darkly. "He was just leaving."

"He just got here!" Maggie objected in a friendly tone. "He hasn't even ordered a drink yet."

"That's right," Cooper agreed. His eyes found Maggie, and he smiled broadly at her as he continued, "I haven't even gotten a drink yet."

"What do you want?" Starsky sighed.

"Oh, I dunno... Beer..." Cooper forced a smile. "Whatever you want to pour."

"O-kay," Starsky sighed unhappily. Starsky poured Cooper a draft and slid it in front of him. He reached his hand out and snapped his fingers, prompting Cooper to pay him. It was rude and he knew it, but that didn't stop him from doing it, and the action served to sooth his irritation from Cooper's surprise visit. At least a little.

"How much?" Cooper reached for his wallet, but was stopped by Maggie's hand.

"Oh, no. You don't have to. This one is on the house. Any friend of David is a friend of mine," she ordered.

"Well, thank you." Cooper offered her a sincere grin. He took a drink and decided the woman's presence offered him another opportunity to recruit Starsky to his cause.

"Besides, you're the first visitor he's had since he moved here. I'm curious to know a little more about him," Maggie added with a smirk.

Starsky moaned heavily and his eyes found the ceiling. This was going to be a long night.

"So, you were talking about what you shared before I rudely interrupted you." Maggie touched her hand to Cooper's arm, prompting him to continue.

"Yes, we were," Cooper declared emphatically. He ran his finger around the rim of his beer glass and eyed Starsky. "Do you want to expand on that topic, Dave?"

Starsky snorted and shook his head.

Maggie sighed, irritated by the tightlipped men. Looking from one man to the other, she decided on a tactic to get them talking. "So, what were you? Lovers or friends?" she asked, and both men looked at her, shocked by the inquiry. Maggie grinned in satisfaction and took another sip of her drink.

"Maggie!" Starsky exclaimed, his cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

"Neither. Partners," Cooper answered dryly.

"Partners?" Maggie asked, her face unsure. She looked at Cooper, then at Starsky, then at Cooper again. "Like lover partners?"

"Maggie," Starsky sighed. "Will you let it go?"

"Oh, come on, David." Maggie chuckled. "I'm just pulling your leg. Besides, I am starting to wonder about you." She turned to Cooper and pointed a finger at Starsky. "Do you have any idea how many girls he has turned down since he's been working here? It's weird. Handsome thing like him, you'd think he'd take one home once in a while."

Cooper let out a laugh and Starsky glared at him.

"He did move in with that Laura," Maggie continued in a mumble, her face scrunching up as she thought about Starsky's love life. "Of course, they are *just friends*."

"Laura?" Cooper's eyebrows shot up in surprise. He gave Starsky a smirk. "You dog. You are getting on, aren't you?"

Starsky didn't reply. Instead, he raised his hands up in defeat. The kid could think whatever he wanted about his love life. Everyone else did, including Maggie.

"So, you were partners?" Maggie grinned again as she played with the straw in her drink.

Starsky shook his head in annoyance and pushed out a heavy breath. Maggie was going to pry until Cooper divulged all his secrets.

"Cop partners," Cooper clarified with a grin.

And with that disclosure, Maggie's delighted expression faded, and she looked at Starsky in shock. "You're a cop?" she whispered.

It wasn't an accusation, but Starsky still felt a flash of guilt for not previously disclosing the information. Maggie had taken care of him since the day he came to town. She was family, and shouldn't have had to hear it from Cooper. Not knowing what to say, Starsky pressed his lips together in a line and shrugged. "I was a cop." Starsky shook his head sadly. "Now, I'm not."

"That... makes a lot of sense," Maggie stated, still looking at him. Starsky could tell she was putting pieces together about his life that didn't quite fit before.

"Sorry, pal," Cooper said sheepishly. He kicked himself for, yet again, disclosing too much about Starsky. "I didn't know she didn't know."

"It's okay," Starsky replied. "It's probably about time she knew anyway."

Starsky reached out and squeezed Maggie's shoulder, the action serving as a silent apology. And when Maggie met his eyes and covered his hand in her own, he knew he was already forgiven.

"Well," Cooper voiced suddenly, "Maggie, since I have disclosed secret information to you about Dave here," Cooper tilted his head at her, "do you mind letting him off for the night so the two of us can catch up?"

"You gonna talk shop, huh?" Maggie asked knowingly.

"Yes."

"No."

Cooper and Starsky responded at the same time.

Maggie looked between the two. "Well, which is it?" she asked.

"Yes," Cooper verified with a handsome smile.

"Okay," Maggie agreed then looked at Starsky seriously. "But you and I will be talking later."

Starsky removed his hand from her shoulder, and Maggie left her barstool to take his place behind the bar.

"Are you sure, Maggie?" Starsky whispered as he watched her finish her drink then slouch over the bar.

"Yes," Maggie insisted, and waved her hand loosely at the men. "Go on. Go play with your friend."

XX

It was well past midnight when Laura returned home. The small house was dark with the exception of the kitchen light and the static-filled TV screen.

Hanging her jacket and purse on the hook by the door, Laura made her way over to the TV to turn it off, but stopped suddenly and frowned as she discovered the strange man sleeping on her couch.

Laura looked at him for a moment, studying his handsome features. She should have been afraid or at least a little uncomfortable at the prospect of a stranger in her house, but somehow she wasn't.

The man looked endearing, lying on his side, her grandmother's hand-stitched throw pillow clutched to his chest. And when he snored lightly and rubbed his feet together, she couldn't hold back a smile.

After turning the TV off and covering the man with a blanket from the back of the couch, Laura made her way to the kitchen. She spotted her roommate sitting alone at the table.

It was late and she was eager to get to bed. But taking in Starsky's slumped shoulders and the empty beer cans in front of him, she thought better of it and joined him in the small kitchen.

"Who's the guy?" Laura whispered as she stood behind Starsky's chair and squeezed his shoulders.

"Hutch," Starsky slurred as he stared down at the old photograph.

Laura squeezed his shoulders again, and, looking down, she noted the picture in his hand.

"Who's that guy?" she asked nodding at the picture.

"Hutch," Starsky repeated.

Laura shook her head and sighed in annoyance. Starsky was drunk and clearly didn't understand her questioning.

"The guy on the couch," she tried again as she grabbed a glass from the cupboard and filled it with tap water. "Who's the guy on the couch?"

"Oh," Starsky groaned heavily.

Laura set the water glass on the table, and Starsky scrunched his nose and turned to look at her. Laura pointed at the water glass, prompting him to take a drink, then crossed her arms and leaned against the counter.

"How was your date?" Starsky smirked, changing the subject. He took a drink of water and eyed her curiously.

"A total dud." She sighed in disappointment.

"You're home awfully late for it to be a dud." Starsky winked at her, and Laura mumbled something he couldn't hear.

"Well, it was. The guy was a creep." Laura's eyes narrowed and she repeated her previous question. "Who's the guy on the couch?"

"Oh." It was Starsky's turn to roll his eyes. "That's Cooper," he stated as if that would explain everything.

It didn't, and Laura let out another sigh as she made her way to the refrigerator. She opened the door and eyed the contents. "Is he friend of yours?" she pressed.

"Yes-no-maybe. I'm not really sure," Starsky slurred. Running his hands through his hair, he returned his gaze to the picture in front of him.

"Okay, then... Let's just invite total strangers to stay on our couch," Laura grouched under her breath. Finding nothing of interest to eat, she grabbed a can of beer and joined Starsky at the table. "So if the guy on the couch is Cooper, then who's Hutch?" She popped the top of the can and took a small drink.

Starsky pulled his eyes from the photo and looked at her with a pained expression. Laura was taken aback by how haunted his blue eyes looked. He stared at her for moment before sliding the picture in front of her. "Him."

Laura smiled as she assessed the picture of Starsky and a blonde man. Beer in hand, they had their arms wrapped around each other, and their eyes twinkled in slight inebriation as they smiled broadly and lovingly at each other.

Laura didn't ask any more questions. She didn't have to. Something about the look in the men's eyes and their body language told her everything she needed to know. There was so much more between Starsky and the man besides friendship, she found herself suddenly understanding.

This was the person Starsky had lost. The one whom he was trying so desperately to run away from.

"I loved him," Starsky offered thickly, and Laura looked up to see his eyes shining as a few tears slid down his cheeks.

"I know," she whispered. She gripped his forearm with her hand and squeezed tightly. "Sometimes it helps if you talk about it."

Starsky tried to snort, but it turned into a sob. More tears ran down his cheeks and, blinking rapidly, he looked at the wall. Laura realized he was trying to get a hold of himself.

"It's okay," she offered softly. "Whatever happened, it's going to be alright."

"N-no it's n-not," Starsky sobbed. He took a shaky breath and swiped at his eyes once more.

"Then tell me about it," Laura offered as she squeezed his hand once more.

Starsky sobbed again and closed his eyes tightly. He didn't want to. He wasn't sure he could. But when he opened his eyes once again and found Laura's comforting expression, the words just started spilling out.

Between sobs, Starsky told her everything. His career as a cop. His relationship with Hutch. How he had discovered everything was a lie when Hutch was thought to be dead, and how, in the end, he had been the one to discover he wasn't.

By the time Starsky got to the end of the story and confided Cooper's theory, his tears had long since stopped, but a strange understanding had settled between him and Laura.

"Wow, Dave," Laura said finally. Resting her forehead on her palm, she gazed at him in astonishment. "That story... it's... incredible."

"It's something alright," Starsky whispered, running his hands exhaustedly over his face and then through his hair. "I don't what I'm gonna do."

"Dave," Laura stated suddenly instant. "If what Cooper said is true then-"

"Then I have to go back," Starsky finished numbly. He looked at her again and she raised her eyebrows and offered him a half smile.

"Is that really so terrible?" she asked.

Starsky closed his eyes and his face scrunched up with anxiety. "I don't know," he breathed. "How I am I supposed to do that? Knowing what I know now? How I am supposed to look at that city the same or possibly see him again?"

"Dave," Laura sighed. She met his eyes and reached to grab his left hand in both of her own. "I don't know the answer to that, but I will tell you one thing. If I ever got Pete back... I mean if one day he were to just reappear, there is nothing that would keep me from loving him. No amount of secrets would stop me from being by his side."

"It isn't the same," Starsky said thickly. "You and Pete, your relationship wasn't based on a lie. You knew who he was from day one. I didn't."

"I don't think I'd care." Laura smiled. "I would at least give him a chance to tell me the truth before walking away. Especially if I loved him as much as you seem to love this Hutch guy. Love is messy. It's inconvenient." She made a face. "And sometimes it's a total train wreck."

Starsky fought tears and, her own eyes brimming, Laura squeezed his hand once more, trying to will some of her own strength into her friend.

"But if there's one thing that loving and losing Peter taught me, it's that it's good to be loved. It's good to love. You don't always get to choose who you fall in love with, or when, or even why." She paused, her face reflecting calm acceptance. "It just is."

"I don't know if I can see him again," Starsky confided. "How am I supposed to be around him?" He paused and looked at Laura pleadingly. "How am I supposed to not still love him? I don't know how to do that. "

"Dave, this is a gift," Laura stated with a smile. "You can fix anything. You just have to try hard enough."

XX

"Are you sure you don't want to wait a few days?" Cooper asked as Starsky slammed the trunk of the Torino. "You could wait for me to get back, and we could drive back together."

Throwing on his aviator sunglasses, Starsky smiled. Looking from the street to the front of Laura's house, he considered Cooper's words. But inside, he knew he couldn't wait. If he was going to leave Coos Bay, it had to be now.

The places that had felt like home to him during his adult life were few and far between, but Coos Bay was one of them. He was a little sad to be leaving it behind. His forehead wrinkled as he thought about the people he had to leave, and he felt a flash of sadness when he realized he would no longer be seeing Laura and Maggie every day.

"Nah," he answered finally. "The drive will be good for me." He turned to Cooper and grinned. "It will give me time to think about what I'm gonna say to Dobby."

"Just don't be too hard on him." Cooper laughed. "I think he's still recovering from your last conversation."

Starsky grimaced as he pulled his car keys out of his front pocket. He couldn't remember everything he had said to the man, but the memory of leaving Dobby's office was vivid. He had been destroyed and furious and Dobby had been the perfect target, regardless of how much the man was responsible for what happened.

Starsky stuck his hand out to Cooper, who looked at it for a moment before pushing it away and pulling him in a fierce hug.

"Okay, kid," Starsky chuckled as he pat the other man on the back. "We're gonna see each other in like four days."

"You could come with me for this one you know?" Releasing him from the hug, Cooper looked at Starsky seriously.

"No." Starsky shook his head firmly. He took a deep breath and swiped his sneaker at some rocks on the street. "It's better if you go alone. I don't want to influence anything. Besides, I'll have to check in with Huggy, find a place to live."

Cooper nodded in understanding, but he still found himself wishing Starsky were accompanying him. This was going to be a hard trip to make alone.

"Well," Starsky sighed. "I better get going. I promised Maggie I would stop by the bar, and Laura's meeting me there to say good-bye."

Cooper nodded, and watched as Starsky climbed into the Torino and shut the door. Starsky sat in the driver's seat for a moment before rolling down the window and nodding at Cooper.

"Cooper," Starsky advised his face serious. "You don't sway him, you hear me? If he's out, he's out. Don't pull him back into this."

"I won't," Cooper promised.

Chapter 13

Summer 1977

"But I don't want to play baseball!" Hutch exclaimed. He slammed his palm down on the top of the broken TV and Bennett grinned gleefully from his spot on the bed.

"Oh, come on! Don't be such a spoil sport. It'll be fun," Bennett insisted, his eyes twinkling in excitement. He rested his arms behind his head. "Besides, it'll get me out of this stinky motel room-"

"You aren't supposed to be outside of this motel room, remember?" Hutch interrupted angrily.

"Yeah, and you're supposed to be keeping an eye on me," Bennett countered with a grin. "You haven't exactly been doing that either."

Hutch propped his hands on his hips and scowled. He couldn't argue with Bennett on that one. Aside from dropping off food now and again and a couple of phone calls, Hutch hadn't made contact with Bennett for weeks. Carter was screaming in his ear about not doing his job properly, but Hutch was beyond caring.

Of course, he hadn't forgotten the threat Carter had made towards his partner if Hutch refused to comply with his new assignment, but so far Carter's threat seemed to be an empty one. And Hutch was cautiously optimistic that Starsky would remain safe as long he maintained minimum contact with Bennett and stayed as close as possible to Starsky.

Commitment to an amateur baseball team, however, was not minimum contact, and Hutch was furious that Bennett would sign the both of them up without even consulting him first.

"You're crazy!" Hutch fumed, sitting heavily on the side of the bed. The words weren't completely untrue, but Hutch was at a loss of anything else to say.

"That's what they tell me," Bennett stated with a smile.

Hutch rolled his eyes and rested his forehead in his palms. Christ, didn't this kid take anything seriously?

"Ya know, Agent X," Bennett stated suddenly, "you really need to lighten up."

He watched as Hutch sighed in irritation and crossed his arms absently.

"Or maybe you need to be a little more serious," Hutch mumbled, his eyes narrowing in disdain.

Bennett sighed. He rolled his eyes and then himself off the side of the bed. "It's just baseball. Christ! You sound like I just asked you to rob a bank with me or something. What's wrong. You don't like sports?"

"I like sports plenty," Hutch countered. "It's you I don't like."

"Well that's a little mean, don't you think?"

Hutch glared his answer and Bennett rolled his eyes again.

"And you tell me I'm the childish one," Bennett griped. "It's no big deal, Agent X. Seriously, so we'll play a little amateur ball. And get a little exercise. The world won't end, I promise."

Hutch wasn't worried about the world ending. He wasn't even worried about Carter. He was worried about the time commitment of playing on a YMCA baseball team, and the lies he would have to tell his partner in order to participate in the activity.

Things with Starsky were better than they had been for a long time. The conclusion of the Durniak case, and what little Starsky had confided to Hutch about his relationship with the man, served as a catalyst to bring the two men closer. They were enjoying a sense of calm and peace that they had never had before. And with the exception of Bennett, who seemed content to be a constant irritating thorn in Hutch's side, life was good.

"First practice is on Monday, 7 o'clock," Bennett said suddenly. He handed Hutch a copy of the roster. "Pick me up at 6:30. Don't be late."

Wanting to make sure the other man understood his discontent, Hutch glared at Bennett. But the younger man just rolled his eyes and flopped back down on the bed.

"You'll get over it," he mumbled quietly as he threw his hands behind his head and crossed his ankles.

Turning his attention to the roster, Hutch pushed down a new anxiety. As he read the names, he silently hoped he wouldn't come across the name of anyone he knew. Nearing the end of the list, Hutch breathed a sigh of relief as he realized he didn't know any of the other players. But his heart skipped a beat and his brows furrowed as he read the final name and comprehended what Bennett had done.

"You're a moron!" Hutch accused. He looked at the younger man, his eyes narrowing in disgust. He crumpled up the roster and threw it at Bennett.

"What?" Bennett flinched when the paper made contact with his face. "Ow, what was that for?"

"You're a moron!" Hutch repeated. His finger rose and he held it righteously in the air. "You registered with your real fuckin' name!"

Fall 1977

Hutch heard the phone ringing before he made it through his front door. Throwing it open and reaching to replace his key at the top of the doorframe, he scowled at the intrusive sound. Today had not been a good day, and the last thing he wanted to do was take another annoying phone call from Bennett.

Starsky and Hutch had just closed a particularly stressful case. The investigation had been frustrating and tedious, and once closed, it left both men overly tired, stressed out, and bickering.

Their bickering quickly turned into a horrendous fight, and, deciding both of them needed some space, Hutch left Starsky at his townhouse and, for the first time in weeks, retreated to the quietness of his own apartment.

Slamming the door behind him, Hutch made his way to the couch and threw himself down heavily. He kicked off his shoes and rested his head on the back of the couch to stare absent-mindedly at the ceiling.

The phone stopped ringing and Hutch silently debated if he should call his partner and apologize. But he quickly dismissed the thought, deciding that space was probably best.

The two of them had been living together for the most part since the closure of the Durniak investigation, something that had been an unconscious decision on Hutch's part as he found himself spending more and more time at Starsky's place in an effort to avoid Bennett's phone calls.

He couldn't avoid Carter's contact, though, and Hutch sighed as he considered the thought. Not only had Carter's contact increased, but his communication was becoming increasingly volatile. Hutch didn't know if he should feel threatened or frustrated, as the man had started calling him at all hours of the day.

The squad room, the Pits, his apartment, Starsky's apartment. It didn't matter where Hutch was, Carter seemed to know his whereabouts at any given moment. It was strange, and if Hutch were honest, a bit scary.

And peppered inbetween the horrible phone calls from his superior, Hutch was receiving almost daily calls from Bennett. Those calls were better, although, not by much. Either Bennett was bored and wanted to talk, or he was requesting Hutch bring him something.

Hutch jumped then swore when the phone started ringing again. He frowned and his shoulders became rigid as he grabbed it from the side table.

"What!" he screamed into the receiver.

"Agent Hutchinson, you are alive," Carter's icy voice stated from the other end. Hutch rolled his eyes at the words. Agent Carter was just about the last person he wanted to talk to.

"Yeah, what can I do for you, Carter?" Hutch asked, his tone matching Carter's.

"I just wanted to remind you that it would serve you well if you could recall who you really work for. The case you and Starsky just completed. Utter waste of your time and talent."

"That's what I'm here to do. Remember?" Hutch's eyes narrowed and he tried to force himself to be respectful. "Be an undercover detective while I babysit your golden boy at the shitty motel. I can't help the cases I get assigned or weirdoes who act out their vampire fantasies while they take out dancers."

Hutch's attempt at civility failed and he ended up shouting. But Carter's words stung. Hutch resented him for offering commentary on the case, especially since the closure of it had resulted in a fight with Starsky.

What gave Carter the right to have any opinions on anything?

"Speaking of Bennett," Carter continued, "you need to check in with him. I shouldn't have to remind you to do your real job, Agent, or what is at stake if you decide you don't want to comply."

"He is driving me insane!!" Hutch bellowed in frustration. *And so are you.* "What the fuck am I even doing with him anyway? You're not doing anything with him, but letting him slowly rot in that room."

There was a silence on the other end of the phone, and Hutch wondered if he had crossed the line with the man. But then he pondered if he really cared anymore.

"Don't worry, Agent," Carter stated finally. "Someday this will all be over."

"Yeah?" Hutch sneered. His finger worried the open collar of his shirt. "What makes you say that?"

"Because," Carter answered, his voice dangerously calm. "Someday your partner will be dead, and so will you."

Shocked by the statement, Hutch almost dropped the phone. He didn't get a chance to reply, however, as he heard the line click and then the sound of a dial tone.

XX

Hutch didn't visit Bennett after Carter's threatening phone call. The exchange had left a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he rushed over to Starsky's place, convinced he would find the other man hurt or worse.

Starsky had given him an odd look as he busted through the door, but Hutch had wanted to cry at the sight of his partner, sitting on the couch nursing a beer completely fine.

And since that day. Hutch's fear over Carter's threat had subsided, but his anger remained. How dare he threaten Starsky like that? Who the hell did Carter think he was?

It took three weeks, two particularly nasty phone calls, and one uncomfortable meeting in a tiny coffee shop, before Hutch complied with Carter's orders again.

Kicking the motel door closed with his sneakered foot, Hutch dropped the paper bag of groceries on the bed.

"Here," he growled, then turned to exit the room, and Bennett's face fell at the prospect of losing his company so quickly.

"Hey!" he objected, pulling himself from the bed and rushing to stand in front of the door. "You just got here! Can't you stay for a second?"

"No." Hutch glared at him. He reached for the doorknob, but Bennett blocked it.

"Come on, Agent X!" he exclaimed. "I haven't seen you in forever." He paused, gazed at the stained carpet, and stuck his hands in his jeans pockets awkwardly. "I mean... after seeing you so much during baseball, and now that the seasons over...I never see you... I kinda miss the company."

Hutch's shoulders slumped. He sighed heavily as he moved away from the door and further into the messy motel room. He didn't want to, but he felt bad for Bennett. He had been so focused on his anger at Carter, he had completely forgotten about the kid and how bored he must be.

"A half hour," Hutch offered, feeling a little less guilty as he took a seat on the chair next to the bed. He was quiet for a moment before looking seriously at Bennett and pointing an emphatic finger at him. "But this means you don't call me for at least three days."

"Okay," Bennett agreed readily, a relieved look on his face. "Whatever you want."

Bennett slapped his hands together and looked around the room awkwardly. Normally he would be jumping at a chance to push the Agent's buttons, but there was strange tension in the room today, and he was nervous.

"So," Bennett started as he took a seat on the bed, "you talk to Carter lately?"

Hutch looked up and gave him an expression that made Bennett think if he could have shot him on the spot he probably would have.

"Why would you ask me that?" Hutch demanded seriously.

"Um," Bennett hedged. He bit his lip and ran a hand through his blonde hair. "I dunno... mutual topic I guess."

"My relationship with Carter doesn't concern you," Hutch growled with a frosty glare. He was trying hard to push it down, but his anger at his superior was quickly returning.

"He thinks it does," Bennett mumbled. He was starting to re-think his request to have the Agent stay.

"What?" Hutch stared at Bennett in confusion, but then his expression became dark, his blue eyes furious. "What has he been saying to you?" he demanded.

Bennett looked at the floor, his features overtaken by an emotion Hutch hadn't seen on his face before: fear. Suddenly it occurred to Hutch how strange Bennett was acting. His normal happy-go-lucky demeanor and playful banter were absent, and Hutch couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't the only one Carter was getting to.

"Bennett, why are you here? Why is the FBI holding you?"

"Does it matter?" Bennett whispered, avoiding Hutch's eyes.

"Yes."

"Listen," Bennett continued as he grasped his hands together in nervousness. "I've been in trouble for a while, you know? I may have stuck my nose in where it didn't belong a few times, and let's just say this time I pissed off the wrong guy."

"Who?"

Bennett looked at Hutch seriously. He took a moment to consider the question, and Hutch could tell the kid was debating on whether he should answer. In the end, Bennett's eyes closed and he provided the information in a whisper so soft Hutch had to strain to hear it. "Carter."

Hutch's mouth fell open and he turned to stare at the wall. Carter? That didn't make any sense. How could pissing off Carter equate to being held in motel room by the FBI? Something was wrong here, very wrong, and suddenly, all Hutch could hear was Durniak's warning to him months earlier.

"You need to be careful. Don't trust anyone around you. Especially those closest to you."

"Bennett," Hutch pressed insistently, "does Carter have contact with you? Does he ever call you?"

Bennett continued to stare at the floor, but when Hutch leaned forward to see the kid's face he saw apprehension and desperation in his eyes, and it was then Bennett nodded.

"What does he say?" Hutch asked, but nothing could have prepared him for Bennett's answer.

"He tells me things about you."

"What?!" Hutch asked his face contorting in astonishment. *This is wrong.* He looked at Bennett, waiting for more information. "What kind of things?"

"I dunno," Bennett whispered. "Lots of weird stuff... How good a cop he thinks you are. How you're pissing your career away." He paused for a moment and took a deep breath.

"He's a scary guy," Bennett continued quietly. "He actually told me that he'll do anything to make sure you realize your potential." Bennett looked at Hutch. "Why is he so obsessed with you?"

"I don't know." Hutch sighed. his heart heavy with uneasiness and questions he didn't have the answers to.

What was he doing here? What was Bennett doing here? None of it made a bit of sense.

Suddenly overwhelmed, Hutch rubbed his shoulders, and Bennett looked at him oddly as Hutch rested his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands.

"Hey... are you okay?" Bennett asked, his features concerned. But Hutch didn't answer.

"Hey man," Bennett tried again. He reached his hand out and patted Hutch on his shoulder. "Look, I'm sorry I've been giving you such a hard time."

Bennett sighed as Hutch ignored him once again. But a moment later he jumped, startled by the man's groan. Deep laughter emerged from Hutch and Bennett looked at him dubiously as Hutch lowered his hands and made eye contact.

"You're sorry?" Hutch snorted before emitting more laughter. "Do you even know how miserable you have made my life? How miserable this situation has made my life?" He paused as laughter overtook him again. "And... and now...now you're *sorry*?"

Biting his lip uneasily, Bennett nodded and shrugged. "Yes," he offered lightly.

Hutch stared at Bennett firmly, his eyes darkening. This situation wasn't Bennett's fault, and neither was Carter's overwhelming interest in him. But at that devastating moment, Hutch needed someone to blame and Bennett was the perfect target.

"Fuck you," Hutch whispered. Then he got up from the bed and left a confused Bennett in the room alone.

XX

Sitting outside Special Agent Brigg's office, Hutch fought fatigue and nervousness. The black-suited receptionist smiled at him as he yawned once again. He blinked a few times and rubbed his tired eyes before shifting in his seat. Exhausted, he tried to calculate how long it had been since he had slept last.

After abandoning Bennett in the motel room, Hutch had driven to the airport and, after waiting a few hours, he had boarded a flight to D.C. There was only one thing left for him to do, and Hutch no longer cared about the consequences to his career or himself if his relationship with Starsky was disclosed.

While the thought of losing Starsky was a painful one, Hutch suddenly found he had no other choice. He needed help and clarification on Carter's role in his life. Things couldn't continue like this.

"Well, Detective Hutchinson, this is a surprise," Special Agent Briggs's stated as he opened his office door.

Hutch stood quickly and smoothed his wrinkled corduroy pants, but stopped abruptly when his tired brain registered the man's words. Had he just called him "Detective"?

"Detective? Special Agent Hutchinson," Hutch corrected as the other man offered his hand to him.

Briggs raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Well... no," he laughed. "I meant Detective. That's what you're doing now, right? You transferred over to be a detective. In Bay City, I believe."

"No, sir," Hutch stated seriously, his stomach sinking to his knees. "My transfer was declined. I am still working undercover... for you."

"No," Briggs shook his head vigorously. He looked at Hutch in confusion. "No, you aren't, and you haven't been for some time. I signed the paperwork myself."

Mouth open in shock, Hutch could only stare at the man as he questioned the events of the last six months. His knees felt wobbly and his head was swimming.

"Are you alright?" Briggs asked. He rested a hand on Hutch's arm and guided him to a chair inside his office. "Here, you look like you need to sit down. All the color has drained from your face."

"B-but, I've been working," Hutch insisted.

He sat heavily in the chair and fought nausea. The room felt too small, and it was spinning. His hand finding the collar of his shirt, he unbuttoned the top buttons and felt like he could breathe again.

"For whom?" Briggs asked, his features serious. He was unsure if he was witnessing a man who was having a nervous breakdown, or if he was about to hear information he would rather not know.

"Special Agent Carter," Hutch whispered, and when Briggs's face fell, he knew he was in trouble.

"Special Agent Carter," Briggs repeated quietly. He moved to shut the office door, and, returning to stand in front of Hutch, he lingered for a few moments, his face serious. "Hutchinson," he said finally. "Special Agent Carter is on leave, and he has been for quite some time."

"What do you mean by that?" Hutch demanded.

"He's on leave... indefinitely. It seems some of his orders-well-he wasn't exactly following proper procedure," Briggs paused. "It's been a rough year."

"I don't understand." Hutch shook his head, trying desperately to deny what Briggs was saying.

How could this happen? How could he be a detective and not even know? How could he work for Carter for six months and not understand how wrong everything was?

Hutch fought another wave of nausea as he realized he had known something was wrong all along, he had just been too focused on protecting his relationship with Starsky to take a good look at what was really happening.

"I need to know everything," Briggs stated suddenly. He moved to gather a pen and notebook from his desk and then sat next to Hutch. Uncapping the pen, Brigg assessed the blonde man seriously, and Hutch swallowed and forced a few deep breaths trying to get a hold of himself.

This was the end of it. Briggs was going to question him, and his career and his relationship with Starsky would be over.

Chapter 14

May 10, 1979

The house was larger than Cooper expected. Standing on the huge porch waiting for someone to answer the door, he was taken aback by the grandeur of the family's property.

Taking deep breaths of the warm spring air, Cooper's eyes studied the never-ending lawn before settling on the red barn. Its beauty was spectacular, and he found himself daydreaming about a different life, one where he lived surrounded by the nature of the mid-west.

The front door of the house was opened, and Cooper brought his eyes back to see a tall blond man step onto the porch.

"Yes?" the man asked quietly. He looked Cooper up and down suspiciously.

"Hutchinson? Ken Hutchinson?" Cooper grinned broadly.

"Yeah...who are you?" the man asked, and Cooper's jaw dropped.

"You can talk! Full sentences even!" he declared.

"Yes." Hutch eyebrows rose, surprised by the man's bluntness. "And so can you."

Cooper took a step back on the porch. He smiled and shook his head in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," Cooper offered. "The last time I saw you... well...you were a mess."

"Yeah..." Hutch hedged, and then looked at Cooper uncomfortably. "Who are you?"

"Hutchinson, my name is Detective Cooper. I don't believe we have formally met," Cooper said. He offered his hand to Hutch, who looked at it for a moment before taking it in a firm shake.

"I know who you are," Hutch responded quietly. He pulled his hand back and crossed his arms.

"Oh, I wasn't sure if you would or not," Cooper offered.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. Cooper stuck his hands in his jacket pockets as Hutch's lips set in a firm line and he evaluated the shorter man seriously.

"What can I do for you Detective Cooper?" Hutch asked finally.

"Um... Look, I was hoping I could ask you a few questions?" Cooper asked, uncertainty clouding his features.

"About what?" Hutch asked in a clipped tone. He tightened his jaw, becoming defensive at the prospect of answering questions.

Hutch knew Cooper had been Starsky's partner for a short while, and that it was the younger man who had disclosed Hutch's true identity to his lover.

And standing in front of the man whom had finally toppled the house of cards that had been his life, Hutch was not sure whether he wanted to punch Cooper in the face, or thank him for disclosing the information he had failed to.

But either way, he had no intension of answering any questions.

Cooper took a breath and pursed his lips as he tried to decide what to say. He was startled by the Ken Hutchinson who stood before him. He had expected Hutchinson to still be frail and delicate from recovery. He had not anticipated the tall, strong, almost intimidating presence the man was exuding.

Hutch's brows rose and he looked at Cooper expectantly, but the younger man remained quiet, and he stood uncomfortably in front of him. After another moment of silence, Hutch snorted and rolled his eyes.

What could the harm be in talking to the kid? Besides, it was nice to know he could still intimidate someone.

"Is this a sitting conversation?" Hutch asked. He indicated the wicker chairs on the porch.

"Could be." Cooper sighed heavily. His shoulders slumped in relief, and he smiled once again. Cooper took the nearest chair and Hutch sat opposite. Leaning back, he crossed his arms and returned to eyeing Cooper.

"So-" Cooper started awkwardly, but was quickly interrupted by the sound of the screen door opening and then slamming shut.

Both Hutch and Cooper turned to see Mallory making her way to them.

"I thought you might want some coffee." She smiled, and rested a tray on the table.

"Hey, thanks," Cooper stated warmly. Secretly grateful for distraction, he grabbed a cup and held out his hand. "I'm Billy Cooper."

"Nice to meet you, Billy Cooper, I'm Kenneth's sister, Mallory." She sat in the chair next to Cooper and played with a lock of her blonde hair.

"Mallory, can we have privacy, please?" Hutch sighed as he glared at her in annoyance.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Mallory feigned innocence. She looked at Cooper, then at her brother. "You guys want to be alone?"

"Yes," Hutch verified firmly, and Mallory held his gaze for a moment, her blue eyes shining with stubbornness.

"Okay," she said finally. And standing up from the chair, she mumbled, "But you're only going to tell me later."

Hutch rolled his eyes, and Cooper watched Mallory re-enter the house.

"Funny, kid," Cooper laughed.

"Yeah, she's a riot." Hutch shook his head and reached for a mug. "So, what can I help you with?"

"Well...I was hoping we could help each other. I want to know about Special Agent Carter."

"What about him?" Hutch asked in what he hoped would be a normal tone of voice.

Why did the kid want to know about him? Suddenly uncomfortable, Hutch averted his eyes and set them on the red barn beyond the porch.

"What do you know about him?" Cooper pressed.

"Not much." Hutch's jaw clenched and he shrugged.

Leaning forward and setting his mug of coffee on the floor between his feet, Cooper looked at Hutch. But still avoiding his gaze, Hutch kept his eyes on the barn and silently chewed on his bottom lip.

"I know what he did," Cooper stated quietly. "I know what he did to Bennett... And I know what he did to you."

Abruptly, Hutch looked at him, shock written all over his handsome features.

For a moment, Cooper thought Hutch was going to break down, but just as quickly as it came, the look was gone, and seriousness clouded Hutch's blue eyes as he responded. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on!" Cooper sighed and he leaned his head back in frustration. He let out a hearty breath before making eye contact one more. "You don't have to lie to me. I know everything."

"Everything?" Hutch scoffed disgustedly, his eyes suddenly shining in anger. "How could you possibly know *everything*?"

Cooper bit his bottom lip and considered his next words carefully. He was walking a fine line and although his overzealous excitement had been enough to convince Starsky, somehow he knew it wouldn't work on Hutch.

"Okay," Carter sighed finally, and he softened his features. "I don't know everything. But I know what he did, and I know he's still out there. If the FBI made the same connection I did, they never did anything about it."

Cooper had expected some sort of shock or anxiety from Hutchinson with his disclosure, but the blonde man didn't even look surprised to hear that Carter was still free. And his next response was not what Cooper had expected.

"You have no idea what he's capable of." Hutch shook his head and leaned back in his chair. Hitching his ankle over his knee continued. "Or who you are dealing with."

"So tell me," Cooper insisted calmly. Although the expression of his face reflected understanding, he was growing frustrated. In his gut, he knew that Carter was responsible, he only needed Hutchinson to verify his bluff.

"I can't," Hutch advised as he tilted his head.

Cooper waited for Hutch to explain further, but he didn't. Instead, Hutch took another drink of coffee and looked back to the barn.

"Why?" Cooper pressed harshly.

"Because," Hutch sighed, "I don't remember."

Cooper's mouth dropped open and his face contorted suspiciously. And when Hutch didn't move his eyes from the barn, it occurred to Cooper how much he didn't want to be having this conversation.

"That's bullshit," Cooper accused. "You don't want to remember. And who could blame you? With all the lies you told, your life was imaginary."

Cooper hadn't meant to be mean, but the words slipped out before he could stop them. He was surprised, however, when Hutch turned to him and smiled.

"Cooper," Hutch said calmly, "don't do this. Don't get involved. This isn't about you. I know you think pressing this is going to bring some sort of justice, but it won't." Hutch shook his head.

"Carter is sick and he hides behind very powerful people. You can't beat him—you won't beat him—especially not with the game he plays."

"Why?"

"He set the rules, and because of that, they are constantly changing." Hutch shook his head, lost in the past. "Just when you think you have the game figured out, he changes it again. There's no point in trying to fight him."

"And you're okay with that?" Cooper challenged, disappointment shining in his eyes. "You're just going to sit here and forget about everything that ever happened?"

"Forget?" Hutch scoffed and shook his head vehemently. "No, I could never *forget*. But I won't sit and play a game I know I can't win. And that is exactly what this is to him, Cooper, a game. He doesn't give a shit. He doesn't care who he hurts."

"If what you say is true, then how long do you think it will be before he tries to find you again? Do you really think he's forgotten about you?" Cooper challenged as his eyes narrowed in desperation.

"Oh, I don't think for a second he has," Hutch stated. He offered the detective an apathetic shrug. "But what does it matter? I've already lost everything that was important to me."

"Then why not fight back?" Cooper demanded, his eyes wide.

Hutch opened his mouth, but he didn't get an opportunity to answer.

"Kenneth?" Richard Hutchinson's voice called out as the older man stepped through the screen door. He looked at his son and the young man in confusion. "Who are you?"

"I'm—"

"He was just leaving," Hutch interrupted, and looked at Cooper firmly, and it was then Cooper knew, if they wanted to take down Carter, they would have to do it without Hutch.

XX

Dinner that evening was an uncomfortable affair, despite it being the first meal the family had shared together in a while.

There was no conversation, and the clinking of silverware on dishes was the only noise that could be heard. A tension had settled between Richard and Hutch since the anniversary party, and this tension hadn't been helped by Hutch's refusing to disclose the identity of his secret visitor that afternoon.

It was Richard who finally broke the silence.

"I've been in touch with Kathryn's husband," he started as he placed his fork on his plate and laced his fingers together. "I was telling him about how far you've come in your recovery. And he was telling me about an opening in his banking firm. It's only part time, but we were thinking it would be perfect for you."

Hutch sighed and looked at his father in dread. Investment banking? What the hell did he know about investment banking?

"Uh, well... Thanks for the thought, but that doesn't sound like something I would want to do," Hutch offered.

"Well, Kenneth, just what exactly is it you are going to do?" Richard sighed heavily, his eyes narrowed in disappointment.

Hutch set his fork down. It made a clanking noise as it touched his half-empty plate. He brought his hands together, unconsciously mirroring his father's earlier posture.

"I didn't think that was a concern at the moment," Hutch challenged as his eyes met his father's. "You seem pretty content to keep me under foot."

"Well," Richard scoffed. "What are you planning to do, son? Return to the FBI? We both know they won't have you, not after the injury you sustained."

"No."

"Are you considering returning to Bay City then? Maybe return to your partner?" Richard lifted his hands indicating the room. "In case you haven't noticed, son, he isn't here. I seriously doubt that he has been pining over you all this time, even given the sensitive nature of your relationship."

Emily and Mallory looked at each other from across the table, obviously uncomfortable with the tension building in the room.

Hutch felt uncomfortable too, although for a completely different reason. Hutch was certain that his mother and Mallory hadn't known the nature of his relationship with Starsky, at least not until five minutes ago. His father, on the other hand, Hutch felt certain had known for a while.

Richard had been the one who traveled to Bay City to clean out Hutch's apartment. It wasn't as though his relationship with Starsky had been overt, but there were things in his living space that would quickly confirm any suspicion one would have about what was going on between the two of them.

Surprisingly, though, his father never brought it up. Until now.

Forcing himself to take a deep calming breath, Hutch faked a smile. "I appreciate your support, Dad," he said finally. "But I would also appreciate it if you would let me plan for my own future."

"Because that worked so well for you the first time," Richard stated with a hint of cruelty in his voice.

Hutch found himself flinching. He closed his eyes and let out a deep calming breath as he considered his father's words. What was he going to do? But the question seemed so overwhelming, and he still didn't have an answer. However, he did know one thing; he couldn't remain in the dining room. The tension in the room and his father's insistent planning was just too much for him, at the moment.

"Excuse me," Hutch stated. He threw his napkin off his lap and walked out of the dining room.

"Me, too," Mallory said. She leaned her chair back and followed her brother out of the room.

He was halfway down the hall when she pushed through the dining room door.

"Kenneth, wait," she called down the long hallway.

Hearing his sister's voice, Hutch stopped. His shoulders slumped, but he didn't turn around. He was too uncertain of what his sister's reaction to his father's disclosure would be to be able to look her in the eye. Would she even look at him the same?

Hutch felt a small hand touch his arm, and he looked out of the corner of his eye to see Mallory standing next to him, her face reflecting something he didn't expect. Love and acceptance.

"So... You and your partner, huh?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah."

Mallory squeezed his arm again and moved to stand in front of him. "It's okay you know." She smiled at him. "It's the 1970's; we're well into free love and all that."

Hutch snorted. Leave it Mallory to compare his relationship to a movement organized by hippies.

"Seriously." She laughed as he turned to meet her eyes. "I don't care who you want to love."

"Does that change how you feel about me?" Hutch asked as he turned to face her.

"No," Mallory said firmly. She shook her head and pulled him into a hug. Leaning her head on his shoulder, she whispered, "You're still the same guy... This doesn't change a thing."

Hutch closed his eyes in relief. He wasn't sure what he would have done if Mallory thought differently.

"Now, if you decided to run away to Ramsey and become an investment banker," Mallory stated, and Hutch could hear the smile in her voice, "I won't be able to look at you the same again."

"I won't be doing that." Hutch laughed. He wrapped both arms around his sister and held her tight.

Mallory's undying love and support suddenly reminded him of Starsky and how much faith the man had once had in him. Hutch felt empty at the thought of what could have been. Things should have been different. They *could* have been so different.

Hutch closed his eyes and his mind turned to something more worrisome.

Detective Cooper had shown up that afternoon to question him about Carter, and Hutch knew it could only mean one thing. His time was running out, and he had to stop running away.

Hutch pulled back and met his sister's eyes once again. She stared at him uncertainly as he looked at her, his features sad but determined. "I can't stay here," he said softly.

"I know," Mallory whispered, her blue eyes brimming with tears.

Winter 1977

"Gym again, huh?" Starsky asked from his seat on the couch, as Hutch exited the bedroom dressed in his cutoffs and an old t-shirt.

"Yep," Hutch answered with a grin. His eyes darted around his partner's living room floor. "Have you seen my tennis shoes?"

"Which ones?"

"The brown ones," Hutch answered absently as he made his way to the kitchen to continue his search.

"I dunno, babe."

Starsky looked from the TV to his living room covered in his partner's random belongings. He fought a slight annoyance as he took in the pile of laundry Hutch had abandoned on the wicker chair and the pile of Hutch's mail on the coffee table.

"You got so much stuff over here, you're makin' a mess of this place," he mumbled to himself.

"I still can't find them." Hutch sighed in defeat. He leaned over the back of the couch and rested his chin on Starsky's shoulder.

"You wanna borrow mine?" Starsky offered as he tilted his head and rested his cheek on his partner's.

"Hmmm."

The offer was appreciated, but Starsky's feet were a size and a half smaller than his own, and the thought of wearing, let alone running around in shoes that were too small, was not a pleasant one.

"Nah," Hutch said finally with a shake of his head. "I'll just stop by my place and grab a different pair."

Starsky reached back and palmed his partner's neck bringing their faces even closer to each other. He rubbed at the tightness he found and smiled when Hutch let out an approving groan.

"Babe?" Starsky asked quietly. "What do you think about movin' in together?"

The question shouldn't have caught Hutch by surprise, but it did. And instead of answering his partner's question, he found himself delaying the subject.

"I don't know, Starsky," he mumbled as he tried to pull his neck out of his partner's grasp.

Starsky held firm, unwilling to let go of the subject or Hutch that easily. "Come on, babe," Starsky pressed. "What's the big deal?"

"This place isn't big enough for the both of us!" Hutch deflected. His back was starting to cramp from bending over and the pain made his words sound harder than he intended. "You're hurting my back, Starsk."

"It wouldn't have to be this place," Starsky assured, calmly letting go of the blonde's neck.

Hutch stood up and Starsky turned in his seat to look at his lover's face.

"I don't know what you're getting so weird about," Starsky continued. "In case you haven't noticed, we're living together now." He lifted his hand and indicated Hutch's belongings littered around the living room. "We just haven't made it official."

"I don't know why I'm being so weird," Hutch mumbled. Then shrugged and laughed, because he really didn't.

For the first time in his life and relationship with Starsky, he was free to live however he chose.

Carter was gone, and so was Bennett. And he would never have to see either man again. Agent Briggs had assured him of it.

Actually, Agent Briggs had assured him of a lot of things.

Hutch had been surprised when the man didn't press him on any details on Starsky. In fact, his partner hadn't come up in the conversation at all. But the other man was much more worried about Hutch, and what his retaliation toward the FBI would be once his shock wore off, especially after being told the details of Carter's dubious dealings with both Hutch and Cooper.

And although Briggs hadn't offered Hutch an explanation of Carter's strange behavior, or how the FBI could have been so unaware of what was going on, Hutch suddenly found he no longer cared.

None of what he had endured in the last six months mattered to him, because that day, in Brigg's small office, he had been given the one thing he had spent so long wishing for. He was no longer FBI. He was free, and his life was once more his own.

It was all he had ever wanted.

There would be no more sneaking around, and it would no longer be necessary for him to tell his partner lies.

Hutch was actually going to the gym today; that activity was no longer cover for something else. His life was finally his own, and Hutch felt a flash of excitement at the prospect of moving in with Starsky.

Grinning broadly, Hutch bent over and placed a firm kiss on his partner's lips.

"Why don't we talk more about it later, huh?" he whispered.

"Okay," Starsky agreed with a smile.

He pulled Hutch in for another kiss. It was a few moments before the blonde man pulled back, his face lingering inches away from Starsky's.

"I gotta go, babe," Hutch offered deeply.

"The gym calls you," Starsky finished quietly with a half grin.

"The gym calls me," Hutch affirmed. "But you keep that thought and conversation in the back of your mind. We'll talk more about it when I get back."

"See you in a few hours?" Starsky smiled.

"See you in a few hours."

Hutch placed a kiss on the tip of his partner's nose, eliciting a laugh from the other man. He stood, stretched his back, then with a wave and smile, he left the townhouse and Starsky sitting on the couch.

But Hutch didn't come back that night, and Starsky couldn't find him at his apartment the next day.

It would be three long weeks before Starsky would discover what had happened to his lover, and when he did, it only left him with a shattered heart and a countless questions.

Chapter 15

May 10, 1979

Parking his Torino on the curb outside the Pits, Starsky was taken aback at how normal the action still seemed. He smiled as he took in the front of the building and the rundown sidewalk. Everything looked as it always had.

Starsky glanced at the passenger seat and Hutch's absence suddenly seemed glaring. This had been *their* place. The Pits would forever be intertwined with Hutch in Starsky's mind.

Countless hours had been spent in the establishment. All the times he and Hutch had gone to Huggy for a lead. The nights after work and weekends they had come to eat, drink beer, and play pool. They had spent countless hours in the establishment. Sitting curbside in the Torino, Starsky was having trouble ignoring all the memories.

Starsky hoped his absence from Bay City would calm his hurt over Hutch, and in some ways, it did. However, now, sitting in front of their old hangout, he felt an all too familiar feeling of grief and loss, and it threatened to overwhelm him.

But the past couldn't be changed. Starsky knew he would be better served to focus on his future, and the purpose of returning to his old stomping grounds.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Starsky pushed the memories from his mind and ignored the sadness in his heart. He left his car and made his way to the front door of the establishment.

The bar was darker than he remembered. Removing his sunglasses, Starsky placed them in the breast pocket of his red and white plaid button up. His face scrunched up in confusion as he took in the décor.

Huggy had done some redecorating while he was gone, and the lighting was only the beginning. The scattered pinball machines had been moved to the far wall and lined up next to each other in a neat row. The tables that filled the area in front of the bar had been taken out, replaced by pool tables. The only remaining seating were booths next to the walls and the stools by the bar.

Entering further, Starsky noted there were few patrons in the bar, not uncommon for a Thursday afternoon, but he didn't recognize any of the people who were sitting at the scattered tables or the girl behind the bar.

Sighing deeply, Starsky's heart ached a little. Realizing that although things looked the same on the outside, they were very different in the inside. Suddenly, he felt homesick, and the feeling made him think of Maggie, Laura, and a much smaller bar in a much smaller town.

"How come it took you so long to get here?"

A voice interrupted his thoughts. Starsky turned his focus on the approaching man.

"Well," Starsky answered, grinning broadly, "I thought I'd take my time."

The man stopped in front of Starsky, his dark eyes evaluating him seriously. He motioned with his finger for Starsky to turn in a circle. Starsky obliged, holding both arms out and turning with a chuckle.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked, stopping in front of the man.

"Yes," Huggy Bear said with a smile. He took a step forward and swept Starsky up in a fierce hug. "It is so good to see you, man," he mumbled into Starsky's shoulder. "You look so good."

"Thanks, Hug."

Giving the taller man a firm squeeze and a few hearty pats on the back, Starsky pulled out of the contact. He smoothed the bunched fabric of his shirt, and rested his hands in his jean pockets.

"How did you know I was comin' back?" Starsky questioned. He hadn't told anyone he was returning except for Maggie and Laura. Well, Cooper knew too, he supposed.

"Cooper," Huggy and Starsky said in unison.

Starsky shook his head, and Huggy laughed.

"Man, that kid," Starsky sighed. "Always beatin' me to the punch."

"Yeah," Huggy agreed. He grasped Starsky by the arm and ushered him to sit at the bar. "He's a pushy one for sure. But he got ya here, didn't he?"

Starsky's eyebrows rose and he nodded. The kid had done that.

Huggy walked behind the bar, smiling at the questioning look the lady bartender gave him. He grabbed a couple of glasses then moved to fill them with draft beer. Placing his hand on the tap handle, he hesitated, looking at Starsky warily. "You good with this?" Huggy asked seriously, nodding at the beer tap.

Starsky pursed his lips. He knew Huggy was thinking about the time before he left. A time when he had been a mess and incapable of controlling his vices or his life. "I'm good, Hug," Starsky assured him.

Huggy grinned and poured the beers. Resting one in front of Starsky, Huggy sat next to him.

"You're not even gonna ask why I'm back?" Starsky questioned. He took a sip of the light colored liquid, then rested his elbow on the bar, leaning his head in his hand.

"No, man." Huggy sighed, spinning his beer glass. "I know why you're back. Cooper hasn't exactly been quiet about wantin' to find ya... or why."

"Yeah," Starsky mumbled. He looked at the line of liquor bottles on the wall. "Self-restraint isn't exactly his thing."

"That's putting it mildly, man," Huggy snorted.

Turning his focus to Huggy, Starsky considered Cooper's theory and he wondered how much of it Huggy knew. His eyes darkened and he fought anger as he wondered how much of his life had been a topic for conversation between Cooper and Huggy.

There was a time in all this mess when Starsky had questioned how trustworthy Huggy was. He had thought that his time away had cured him of the concern, but he was suddenly assaulted with the same lingering thought. *Who here could he trust?*

Finishing off the last of his beer, Huggy set the glass down on the bar and considered Starsky. It didn't take long for him to pick up on the tension, and he decided it was time for a new subject.

"I heard you were bartending," Huggy smirked.

Beer in hand, Starsky's arm froze, the glass inches from his open mouth. He slammed the glass down on the bar and set his fiery eyes on Huggy.

"What else did you hear?" Starsky accused bitterly. His anxiety getting the better of him, the words came out before he had a chance to think about them.

Huggy's brow rose and he leaned away from Starsky. Shocked by the tone and underlining accusation of the words. How could Starsky even ask him that? He had to know he had his back, even after all this time.

"Hey, man, don't be like that," Huggy whispered. "I've been on your side. You know that."

"Do I, Hug?"

"Of course," Huggy insisted firmly. "Any of this shit... With Hutch and Dobey and whoever else, it didn't have anything to do with me, ya hear?" He paused, his dark eyes pleading with Starsky to understand. "Anything I did after you lost Hutch, I did out of love. You were a wreck, man. You needed people to take care of you. You *have* to know that."

His fiery features softening, Starsky looked at Huggy. This was *Huggy*. Of course, he could trust him. Couldn't he?

"I know, Hug..." Starsky paused shaking his head. "I'm sorry..." he hesitated, rubbing his hands over his face. "I didn't mean that. It's just weird... ya know."

"Yeah, I know," Huggy offered softly. His gaze fell to the bar, and he took another drink.

Starsky sucked in a deep breath and considered Huggy's words.

Huggy hadn't done anything to him outside of try to keep him safe when he was struggling with his grief over Hutch. It was Huggy who had sold his possessions and tied up all the loose ends of his life in Bay City, supporting him in his need to escape the city. Huggy had also been the one who kept his whereabouts a secret this past year. He had done everything Starsky had ever asked him to do.

"It's been a hard year," Starsky sighed. He rubbed his hand through his short hair. "Learning all that shit about Hutch, then leaving and working through some of it. I thought that was the hard part," he smiled grimly. "But now... now that I'm back I'm realizing that leaving-running away-was probably the easy part."

Huggy nodded, and smiled sadly. He couldn't think of the right words to say, but he understood.

Even though the worst of his grief was behind him, Starsky still had a hill to climb, especially if Cooper was able to convince Hutch to come back, too.

"So," Huggy asked, needing to change the tone of their conversation. This was a reunion after all. Not the time to be working though such seriousness. "Where you stayin'?"

"I'll probably get a hotel." Starsky shrugged, waving his arm in the air. "Somethin' cheap and temporary until I can find a new place. I still got to talk to Dobby." He laughed. "I don't even know if I can get my job back."

"Don't worry, my man," Huggy said smiling broadly. He reached out and clasped Starsky on the shoulder. "Dobby will take you back. And don't worry 'bout findin' a place. I got ya covered."

XX

Standing outside of Squad Room 519, Starsky lingered to look through the glass windows of the double doors. It was strange to see the room he had spent so much time in over the years after months of being absent. Everything looked different, and yet, exactly the same.

The room was sparsely filled with detectives. Some of them Starsky recognized, but others he had no recollection of. Most had their heads down, their concentration focused on the work in front of them. No one seemed concerned about the curly headed man peering through the squad room door.

Starsky reached for the door handle. Then, biting his lip, he hesitated, trying to ignore the nervousness settling in his stomach, his heart unexpectedly heavy with worry.

Starsky hadn't seen or spoken to Dobby in almost a year. And although Cooper and Huggy seemed certain the captain would allow Starsky back on the force, Starsky wasn't so sure.

Starsky wanted to believe Dobby would be welcoming, but the guilt and shame of their last conversation still weighed heavily on his mind. He had been angry and hurt, and because of this, he blamed Dobby for everything, leaving without allowing the other man to explain his side.

What if Dobby chose to hang on to the negativity of the past and prevented Starsky from returning to work?

Then there was another more worrisome thought. What if Dobby couldn't take him back? What if Starsky's behavior prior to leaving, and his abrupt departure, had sabotaged his future with the Bay City PD?

Taking a deep breath, Starsky stood up straight. Although he was uncertain of the response awaiting him behind the squad room doors, he knew one thing for certain. He would never know if he remained in the hallway.

Taking a deep breath, Starsky stood up straight. Setting his jaw, he resigned himself to whatever his future may hold. He grasped the doorknob tightly and opened the door.

The squad room was alive with the assorted chatter and office noises that had become so familiar to Starsky over the course of his career. It was oddly comforting, and felt a bit like coming home.

Reaching Dobby's open office door, Starsky loitered in the doorway for a moment, his eyes resting on an accustomed sight. Dobby was hunched over his desk. His head resting on the palm of one hand, he held a pen in the other, tapping it idly on the desk, as he stared intently at the form in front of him.

Dobby looked exactly as Starsky remembered him, and, reassured by the captain's consistency, Starsky smiled and knocked on the doorway.

"What?" Dobby growled without looking up.

"Do you have a second, Cap?" Starsky asked.

Dobby's pen dropped from his hand. He looked up slowly to stare at Starsky with wide shock-filled eyes.

"Starsky?" he asked. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Hiya, Captain," Starsky offered with a timid smile. He crossed his arms nervously.

Dobby's face broke into a wide grin. He swiftly stood and rushed to the doorway, whisking the thinner man into a big bear hug.

"Good to see you, Captain." Starsky laughed into the man's shoulder.

"I can't believe this," Dobby stated in awe. He pulled back from the embrace and held Starsky by the shoulders, looking him up and down. "You look fantastic," Dobby declared, pulling Starsky into another embrace.

Starsky laughed, but his eyes filled with tears at the warm welcome. He hadn't expected it at all. It really was like coming home.

"Thanks, Cap," he whispered thickly.

Grinning, Dobby pulled out of the embrace. Walking behind Starsky, he pushed the office door shut. He turned to lift his arm to direct Starsky to sit in a chair in front of his desk. He stopped abruptly, noticing Starsky's tears.

"Is everything okay?" Dobby asked, his brows narrowing with concern. He grasped Starsky's forearm and held it tightly.

"I didn't expect you to be this happy to see me." Starsky laughed tearfully. He cleared his throat and wiped at his eyes. Silently chastising himself for crying so easily. He didn't need Dobby to think he couldn't control his emotions. Especially not now.

But Dobby seemed unfazed. "Of course, I'm happy to see you," he assured.

Letting go of Starsky's arm, he motioned for him to sit. Dobby felt a flash of déjà vu as he watched Starsky sink in the chair and hitch his ankle over his knee.

"I am a little nervous, and wonder why you're back, though," Dobby added as he moved to sit at his desk. "What going on, son?"

His tears vanishing, Starsky's jaw set stubbornly, and Dobby knew what he was going to say before the words left his mouth.

"Want to go after the person who killed Michael Bennett."

"Well," Dobby hedged softly. He blew out a breath, and leaned back in his chair. "That will be difficult. As we no longer have that case, and you no longer have a badge."

"Cooper has a theory..." Starsky started, but stopped when Dobby sighed heartily and averted his eyes.

"Don't tell me. Cooper is the reason you're back," Dobby said grimly. "Don't tell me; he tracked you down."

"He has a theory," Starsky continued, ignoring Dobby's question. "He thinks Special Agent Carter killed Bennett and... injured Hutch. And, well, Cooper's got it in his head that he's gonna come back."

Dobby's brow furrowed and he sighed heavily. That was not what he wanted to hear. And this was not the reunion he wanted with Starsky. In fact, he wasn't sure he wanted to reunite with his former detective at all.

After the initial shock of Starsky's sudden disappearance wore off, Dobby had found himself happy that the younger man had left his job and the city behind. Maybe Starsky had ended up somewhere he could work through his pain and heal. Maybe then he would be able re-build his life.

"He's gone." Dobby shook his head. "And even if that's the case, I'm sure the FBI... I'm sure they are dealing with him."

"Really?" Starsky scoffed. His face contorting with disgust. "They're gonna take care of it? Like they took care of it before?" Shaking his head, he frowned. "What the hell does that even mean?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like. This is out of my hands."

"I don't care," Starsky challenged. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. Resting his hands on his knees, he braced himself for an uncomfortable argument.

"Don't do this, Starsky," Dobey pleaded firmly. He rested his elbows on his desk and tented his fingers.

"Don't do what? Investigate a murder-"

"Don't mess with these people," Dobey interrupted. He held up his hand and looked at Starsky seriously. "Just let it be. Michael Bennett is gone, and Hutch is with his family. It's over."

"No," Starsky stated firmly. "It will never be over. Not until Carter answers for what he did. Do you think this will ever be over for Bennett's family? Or for Hutch. Or his family or," he paused. "Or me?" Starsky shut his mouth quickly. His gaze fell to the carpeted floor, and he took a couple of breaths to compose himself. Finally, he looked at Dobey again.

"I'm gonna do this," he whispered insistently. "With or without a badge... With or without your help."

Dobey held Starsky's intense gaze before sighing and pinching the bridge of his nose. He was filled with dread. Starsky's words echoed in his mind, reminding him of another meeting not so long ago. Starsky had wanted to go after the killer then, too, Dobey had allowed him to do so. But Dobey had misjudged Starsky's pain, and underestimated Cooper's abilities. It was decision that had haunted him every day. And now, Starsky was setting him up to repeat his mistake.

Starsky looked good. Stronger. Less like the shadow of a man he had been a year ago and more like the feisty determined detective Dobey knew so well. Maybe he wasn't the same person he had been prior to learning the truth about Hutch, but Starsky was doing a hell of a job of acting like it.

Rubbing his hand over his mouth, Dobey looked into Starsky's determined eyes; he knew what he had to do. He couldn't stop Starsky from going after Carter, but he could at least be on his side.

"Okay," Dobey sighed finally. "You want your badge back; you can have it."

Starsky watched Dobey open his desk drawer and take out a badge wallet. He placed it near the end of the table. Starsky snatched it up and flipped it open. Inside, looking the same as the day he had turned it in, was his badge.

"You kept it in your desk?" Starsky regarded Dobey with awe. "All this time. Cap, it's almost been a year."

"I had a feeling you might need it again." Smiling warmly, Dobey tilted his head. "Welcome back, Detective."

Starsky's face lit up at the words. He held the badge tight, and savored the weight of it in his hand. He was back, and it felt good. It felt right. Something else, however, did not.

"Captain," Starsky started. He looked at his superior, regret etched on his features. "The last time we spoke--"

"Starsky," Dobby interrupted, holding his hand up. "I think we can agree that we both had responsibility in how that conversation went. But if you're going to apologize, there is no need. Let's just agree that there will be no more secrets moving forward."

Starsky's eyes sparkled as the corners of his mouth lifted. "Okay," he agreed with a nod. "No more secrets."

Chapter 16

May 13, 1979

The airplane cabin was small, stuffy, and buzzing with noise. Overlapping chatter of the passengers, mixed with the hum and vibration of the engines, filled the small area. Hutch was grateful for the distraction, but found it wasn't quite enough to occupy his nervous mind.

Tapping his fingers on the armrests, he let out a deep breath and fidgeted in his seat. The movement did nothing to put him at ease. Because after nearly a year absence, he was returning to Bay City.

It was split-second decision, something Hutch hadn't given a lot of thought. After leaving his sister in the hallway, and with his father's ill-mannered words iterating in his mind, he pulled the number of Detective Cooper's motel out of his jeans pocket and phoned the young man. And before he had a chance to consider what it would mean, Hutch was agreeing to return to Bay City with Cooper, to help him track down Carter.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Hutch rubbed his eyes, then looked out the window. He watched puffy white clouds quickly float by as the plane climbed higher and higher, and found himself being gripped by panic.

What was he doing? How could he possibly think about going back? After everything he did. And why the hell didn't he join Jack in Vegas instead?

"Are you nervous?"

The voice interrupted his anxiety-fueled thoughts, and Hutch turned unfocused eyes on the man sitting next to him.

"Um... yeah." Hutch's eyebrows shot up. He pulled at the collar of his button up shirt. He was surprised Cooper would know to ask him such a question. "Flying always makes me a little nervous," he added in a gravelly voice.

Confused, Cooper raised a brow and tilted his head at his companion. "No," he offered quietly, trying his best to suppress a grin. "Are you nervous about going back? Why would I ask you about flying?" He chuckled, his eyes shining in humor. "That's just weird."

"Oh," Hutch responded softly. He turned his gaze back out the window. *I'm terrified. But I'm not going to tell you that.*

Cooper watched Hutch for a few moments before deciding the blond man had dismissed his inquiry. This didn't shock him, however, as he had spent a great deal of time with Hutch over the past few days, making him accustomed to his questions remaining unanswered.

Kenneth Hutchinson was not turning out to be the person Cooper had envisioned him to be. Hutch was quiet. Almost too quiet. Cooper wondered if Hutch withheld conversation because they hardly knew each other or if it was something more.

Maybe Hutch was feeling apprehensive regarding his impending return to Bay City. It had to be nerve-wracking, Cooper mused, returning after a year absence to face the reality of the remaining wreckage caused by years of deceit.

Or maybe Hutch was lost in his memories-or lack of memories-with regards to Carter. Perhaps that was the catalyst for Hutch's sudden change in demeanor.

Either way, Cooper was starting to wonder if the other man was just a bit... off. Then again, how could anyone expect him to be normal after everything he had been through, plus he had sustained a pretty serious brain injury.

Crossing his legs, Cooper slouched down in his seat. He cracked his knuckles. It was a nervous habit, one his mother had tried desperately to break him of when he was child, but much to her irritation, it was habit Cooper had continued in adulthood.

Cooper pursed his lips and exhaled. This was going to be a long flight. He turned his focus away from his mysterious seatmate and to the people sitting across the aisle.

"Is he there?"

The question was so soft, Cooper almost didn't hear it. He glanced over to see Hutch leaning the side of his head heavily against the window. His expression was set, but his haunted blue eyes echoed his sadness. Cooper knew the question was deeper than the three words Hutch mumbled.

Grimacing and biting his bottom lip, Cooper considered his answer.

Starsky wanted Cooper to keep his involvement in catching Carter a secret, and although Hutch was accompanying him to Bay City, Cooper was unsure if it was the appropriate time to tell Hutch anything about Starsky.

Breathing deeply, Cooper suddenly felt as though he was stuck in the middle of a very complicated relationship. And the middle was a very uncomfortable place to be.

"It's okay," Hutch breathed, noticing Cooper's discomfort. He rubbed his hand over his eyes before resting his head against the window once more. "You don't have to tell me anything."

His head dropping, Cooper shut his eyes. Hutch sounded so heartbroken. What could be the harm in telling him the truth? It wasn't anything he wouldn't find out eventually anyway.

"Starsky came back," Cooper disclosed softly. He looked at Hutch and regarded him seriously. *Please don't make me regret telling you that.*

Cooper watched a haunted look pass over the blonde's handsome features. And he couldn't help wondering what Hutch was thinking or feeling, now that he knew his arrival in Bay City meant a possible reunion with his ex-partner.

"Does he know I'm coming back?" Hutch pressed.

"No." Cooper shook his head. "But Starsky knew I was going to see you. He knew there was a possibility you'd come back."

Hutch's eyes shot open and he abruptly pulled his head from the window. He looked at Cooper with wide and condemning eyes. Cooper had to force himself to maintain eye contact.

Hutch's wavering moods were reminding him of another time when he had to cope with the unpredictability of Starsky's behavior, and he once again struggled with how much information to disclose.

"Why didn't he come with you?" Hutch asked quietly.

"He didn't want you to come because of him." Cooper shrugged, silently hoping this limited information would be enough to appease him. "He wanted you to come back on your own."

"Oh," Hutch responded softly. His eyes set on the seat in front of him and his fingers moved to worry the collar of his shirt. "Is he okay?"

Cooper opened his mouth to respond but stopped when he felt someone touch his shoulder. He turned his attention to the aisle and the pretty brunette flight attendant holding up an in-flight magazine with a questioning expression.

Cooper smiled and took the magazine. The attendant smirked and touched his shoulder once more, before sauntering down the aisle.

Clearing his throat and the image of the attendant's long tan legs from his mind, Cooper reminded himself of the seriousness of his conversation with Hutch.

"Yeah. I think he's okay," Cooper answered. "A lot better than he was when we were partnered together, anyway."

It was such a casual statement, but Hutch's brows furrowed as guilt gripped his heart. He found himself needing more details on how much his death and the disclosure of his secret life had hurt his ex-lover. "What do you mean by that?" he pressed.

Cooper rolled up the magazine and gripped it tightly, wondering what he should say. He couldn't disclose the details of Starsky's grief and struggle after losing Hutch. It wasn't his place to do so. Besides, if Starsky wanted Hutch to know the details about that time, he would tell him.

"Well..." Cooper started, tapping the rolled up magazine on his armrest. "Listen, Hutchinson-Hutch-I think you better ask him." He raised his eyebrows and nodded at his seatmate. "You know, I don't really know too much about what he was really thinking or anything... I mean...he left right after we found you, and I only reconnected with him recently."

Hutch closed his eyes and let out a sigh. Even though Cooper didn't come out and say it, Hutch got his message loud and clear. Cooper wasn't going to divulge any more information on Starsky. Hutch suddenly felt guilty for probing. He was no longer entitled to know the details of Starsky's life, and he hadn't been for some time.

Even so, Hutch realized he didn't need Cooper to tell him how destroyed Starsky had been during his absence. He already knew. The look on Starsky's face a year ago had said it all.

Nervous, Hutch contemplated the prospect of seeing Starsky again.

What would his ex-partner's expression convey to him this time? Would Starsky finally talk to him, and if he did, what would he say?

Hutch felt sadness settle in his chest, and unshed tears filled his eyes. Pulling his dark sunglasses from his shirt pocket, Hutch put them on, desperately hoping his sudden grief would remain unnoticed by Cooper.

May 15, 1979

Reaching for his coffee cup, Starsky looked up from the file to find yet another person staring at him intently. Letting out a frustrated sigh, he forced a smile and eye contact with Detective Cyrus.

It was Starsky's second day back on the force. Which meant piles of reinstatement paperwork, getting resettled, and a lot of unwelcome stares from fellow detectives. Starsky had expected as much. Even he didn't think he could disappear from his life in Bay City only to suddenly reappear a year later without a few curious stares. People were bound to notice. And they did.

Detective Cyrus continued his gawking, and Starsky rolled his eyes, "Why don't you take a picture? It'll last longer." He nodded at the man.

Cyrus blinked his eyes, hastening his intense evaluation of Starsky. He picked up a pen and transferred his intense gaze to the paperwork in front of him.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Starsky could tell there was no sincerity behind the words, but he smiled anyway. Cyrus had a chip on his shoulder, and he had put it there.

Cyrus was a square. An asshole, really. Starsky knew it wasn't his miraculous reappearance that was making him the target of Cyrus's attention. No, it was because Starsky had stolen his partner.

Captain Dobey had reinstated Starsky's and Cooper's partnership and Cyrus was left solo. He still couldn't believe Dobey assigned Cooper to Cyrus. It was just cruel. Although, it was probably covert punishment for disclosing the secret details of Hutch's career with the FBI to Starsky. Dobey always had his own way of evening the score.

"Hey, hey!" a voice exclaimed.

Both Cyrus and Starsky looked up to see Cooper pushing through the squad room doors. Cyrus groaned and averted his eyes to his paperwork.

Starsky grinned. "Welcome back," Starsky offered warmly.

Walking up behind Starsky's office chair, Cooper grasped him by his shoulders and gripped them tightly as he shook the other man.

"How are ya? Welcome back yourself!" Cooper exclaimed. "How did your first day go?"

Starsky's eyes widened at Cooper's exuberance. He was suddenly thankful he had abandoned his coffee cup on the table. Not that he was bothered by Cooper's willingness to touch him, or shake him, rather; it was just a bit too early to have to deal with overenthusiastic reunions. Pushing his feet against the floor, Starsky rolled his office chair away, shimmying out of Cooper's grasp.

"First day was fine," he responded dryly. "How was your trip?"

"Uh," Cooper hedged, shaking his head overeagerly. "Good... Yeah... it was good."

Turning his back on Starsky, he frowned nervously as he made his way to the coffee pot in the corner. He knew what Starsky wanted to know, but he wasn't sure how to tell him. He wasn't certain a crowded squad room was the place to do it.

Picking up a tan cup, he motioned it at Starsky, but the other man shook his head and held up his full cup. Filling his cup to the brim, Cooper drank the hot beverage greedily, before refilling the mug and replacing the pot on the warmer. He forced a big smile as he sat across Starsky and leafed through the open case files.

"Did you get very far while I was gone?" Cooper asked.

"Nah." Starsky tapped on the table. "Just a lot of red-tape. How was the trip?" *What did Hutch say?*

Starsky's eyebrows shot up and he forced himself to remain still. He didn't want the kid to know how eager he was to hear how the meet with Hutch went.

"Fine, fine," Cooper mumbled, looking away from Starsky. "It was great."

Starsky's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Why was the kid being so tight lipped? Cooper flew half-way across the country to meet Hutch, and all he can say is "It was great"? What was he hiding?

"Okay then," Cooper stated. He took another drink of his coffee. "Where do we start?"

"We don't," Starsky answered. He held up his hand when Cooper opened his mouth to object. "I mean, we do," he continued in a whisper. "Just not here."

Cooper followed Starsky's eyes as he surveyed the other officers in the room. He nodded in agreement when he understood. The room wasn't safe. They couldn't assume they could trust anyone.

"Cooper," Starsky growled lowly, his eyes serious. "If you don't quit stalling and tell me how your damn trip went, I'm gonna knock your teeth out." *Did he come back with you?*

Cooper looked up his mouth agape. He stared into Starsky's twinkling eyes then grimaced and pursed his lips. "Uh, I was meaning to talk to you about that..." he offered meekly.

"Obviously."

"Well..." Cooper started, then hesitated as Starsky's eyes widened and his mouth fell open.

Cooper frowned and turned in his seat, his gaze setting on the door.

"Oh, shit," Cooper mumbled. His eyes settling on a familiar man standing outside the squad room windows, speaking to a uniformed officer.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Starsky accused shakily.

Starsky's body was shaking and heart was pounding. He forced a swallow and tried to push down the anger and the panic threatening to overwhelm him. He couldn't do this right now. He needed to get out.

Standing abruptly, Starsky swiftly made his way to Dobey's office door.

"Dave!" Cooper followed Starsky to the door, ignoring the stares of the other officers and how Starsky's reaction to the man outside was quickly becoming the center of attention.

Starsky gripped the doorknob with a sweaty hand. He tried to open the door, but Cooper pushed him away and stood between him and the door.

"You're making a scene, Dave," Cooper chastised softly, ensuring they couldn't be overheard by the prying ears.

"I don't care," Starsky whispered through gritted teeth. "Get out of my way, Cooper!"

"No." Cooper crossed his arms and held his head high in defiance. "You have to face him, Dave. Stop being a child." *What are you so afraid of?*

Biting his lip, Starsky considered Cooper's words. In his head, he knew the kid was right.

Hutch was right outside the door, he should at least talk to him. But seeing him was a shock and he found he just couldn't do it. He wasn't ready. He thought he could handle seeing Hutch again, but he couldn't.

It was too soon.

"Not yet," Starsky whispered, his eyes pleading with Cooper to let him go behind the door. "Cooper... please."

Grabbing Starsky's arms, Cooper opened his mouth to object, but couldn't think of anything to say. The strong capable Starsky he had found in Coos Bay was melting away before his eyes, leaving behind a timid broken version of the man that was too similar to the man Cooper had known almost a year ago.

This wasn't how Cooper wanted this to go. If Starsky wasn't ready to see Hutch, he couldn't force him. "Okay."

His shoulder's sinking, Starsky's relief was palpable. He let out a deep sigh and pushed through the door.

Cooper watched Starsky close the door behind him. Defeated, he turned and found sad blue eyes observing from the doorway. This could have gone better.

"I'm sorry." Cooper nodded guiltily. "I should have just told him. I didn't think he'd react to you like that." *I'm not entirely sure what that was.*

"It's okay." Hutch pursed his lips and forced a small smile. "Not your fault."

"Yeah."

Cooper kicked his feet on the tile floor unsure of what to say. This was not the reunion he had pictured. This was supposed to be a happy day. Starsky was supposed to be ready for this. He jumped when Dobe's office door opened abruptly, revealing the confused Captain.

"Cooper, why the *hell* did Starsky just rush through my office?" Dobe barked, his serious eyes set on the young detective.

Cooper gaped at the large man a moment, before realizing Dobe was unaware of who was standing beyond them.

"He was avoiding me," Hutch offered quietly.

Dobey looked over and set wide eyes on the blond man. His jaw dropped as he stared at him in shock.

Uncomfortable with becoming the center of attention, Hutch letting out a heavy breath and smiled timidly. His eyes scanned the stunned expressions of the officers in the squad room, and he found himself regretting such a public reunion.

What if Dobby ran away from him, too?

He shouldn't have worried. Dobby's face cracked a mammoth smile as he made his way to a nervous Hutch.

"I cannot believe this," Dobby exclaimed. He evaluated Hutch, looking him up and down in amazement.

"Hi." Hutch smiled nervously.

A moment later, in front of a room full of gaping detectives, Dobby palmed Hutch's neck and pulled him into a fierce hug. "I didn't think I would ever see you again," Dobby confessed thickly.

Dobby gripped him tightly, and Hutch found himself desperately trying to contain his tears. Starsky may have run from him, but Dobby's reaction was more than he could have hoped for. "Me either."

Releasing his hold, Dobby took a step back from Hutch. He rubbed at his eyes and cleared his throat. "Well," he stated gruffly. Taking in the stares of the officers in the room, Dobby's eyes darkened and he frowned. "What are you looking at!" he growled. "Get back to work!"

Hutch jumped at the Captain's curt direction, before allowing himself to be ushered into his office. Cooper followed, but stopped in his tracks when Dobby turned his dark eyes on him.

"Cooper!" Dobby barked.

"Yeah?" Cooper shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at Dobby expectantly.

Dobby pointed a finger in Cooper's face. "Go check on your partner."

XX

Starsky sat in his Torino in the parking lot of Metro. His anxiety calming, he was quickly becoming disgusted with himself. Weaving his hands through his short hair, he groaned.

What did he just do?

After not speaking to Hutch for nearly two years, and seeing him for the first time in a year, his reaction was to *run away*.

Resting his forehead on the steering wheel, Starsky swore. During his time away from Bay City, he had envisioned numerous scenarios of what he would do if he saw Hutch again, but he had never thought of one where he ran away.

What the hell was he doing?

The passenger door opened abruptly, and Starsky jumped. His head came down and slammed hard against the steering wheel. The pain was instantaneous, as was his anger.

"Son of a-"

"Well, that was interesting," Cooper interrupted calmly. "Are you going to tell me what that was about?"

Holding his forehead, Starsky glared, but remained silent.

"Well?" Cooper prompted. He moved his head from side to side, popping the vertebrae in his neck.

"You could have told me, you know!" Starsky growled.

Cooper sighed. He picked at the lint on his button up shirt as he waited for Starsky to calm down.

Starsky pulled his hand back from his head and winced. His head was throbbing and his pride was dented from his hasty retreat from the squad room. He found he couldn't quite manage to be civil. Especially since Cooper's actions had initiated his erratic behavior.

"You could have at least warned me," Starsky grumbled.

"Oh, shut up, Dave," Cooper chastised.

Now was not the time for Starsky to be having second thoughts about seeing his former partner. They had a job to do, and they needed Hutch to do it.

"If I wouldn't have surprised you," he continued. "You would have been avoiding each other forever." He pointed a finger at Starsky. "*In fact*, you're still avoiding him."

His hand dropping from his head, Starsky's eyes narrowed. He pursed his lips, and fought a surge of anger as Cooper continued.

"I understand you being nervous to see him again." Cooper glanced at Starsky. "But I do *not* understand you running away. *Christ*, you could not get out of there fast enough."

"It just shocked me, *okay*?"

"I know. The whole squad room knows!" Cooper insisted, his tone climbing. He looked at Starsky seriously before quietly adding. "And so does Hutch."

Starsky's mouth snapped shut, and he swallowed quickly.

Hutch saw him run away?

That was not the reunion he had wanted. Poor Hutch. How hard must it have been for him to come back? And Starsky couldn't even say hi. He couldn't even look him in the eye. Suddenly, Starsky found his anger ebb, only to be replaced by a new emotion. Guilt.

"Shit," he said finally, pinching at the bridge of his nose.

He closed his eyes and considered his next move. He felt guilty about reacting to Hutch so terribly, but he felt angry at the same time. He shouldn't be the one feeling guilty. After all, it was Hutch who had lied. And it was Hutch who had ruined everything.

Cooper regarded Starsky as doubts settled in his mind. Starsky's reaction to Hutch was troubling. Biting at his lip, Cooper gazed out the windshield and questioned the other detective's ability to handle what they had set out to do.

If one look at Hutch was able to shake and unravel Starsky this much, how was he going to handle working with him? How were they all going to work together if Starsky couldn't even handle being in the same room? Maybe Dobey had been right; Starsky was better off being left alone.

"Starsky, if you can't do this-"

"I can do it, okay!" Starsky insisted. Irritated Cooper would suggest such a thing, he pounded his fist on his thigh then rubbed his palms on his jeans. Couldn't he?

"Starsky," Cooper whispered seriously, his hand moving to smooth over the Torino's glove compartment. "Hutch is back...let's close this thing. Make Carter pay for what he did."

Still staring out the windshield, Starsky rested his hand over his mouth and nodded slightly. "Where's he staying?" he whispered.

"A hotel. I don't think permanence is on his agenda."

Starsky's hand fell from his face and he scowled at Cooper for a moment before making decision.

"Fuck that," he stated vigorously. "You bring him by the house after he gets done with Dobey. He can stay with me."

Chapter 17

May 15, 1979

It was evening but the sun still hung high.

Trailing Cooper through Metro's parking lot, Hutch was enjoying the warmth and happiness the sun filled him with. He scrunched his nose and closed his eyes behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses before letting out a satisfied sigh. He had missed California so much.

"I'm right there." Cooper pointed at the small pea-green Dotson parked in-between two black and whites.

His attention settling on the car, Hutch smiled. He walked to the passenger door, his hand skimming over the roof of the vehicle. "Man," he breathed. "Nice ride."

Reaching out to the door handle, Cooper's arm dropped. His brows furrowed as he tried to decide if Hutch was serious or being factitious. But as he watched the blonde man caress the hood of his baby, Cooper understood Hutch's words were intended as a compliment.

"Thanks." Cooper grinned, sitting in the driver's seat. He smiled at Hutch as he sat next to him and shut the passenger door. "Glad somebody appreciates it. Starsky *hates* this car."

"Yeah... well, he would." Hutch chuckled. "I think if he had his way, the whole world would be driving around in striped tomatoes."

Glancing at Hutch, Cooper let out a hearty laugh. "His car is a *striped what?*"

"You heard me."

"Man, I'm gonna have to remember that one." Cooper grinned, placing the key in the ignition and turning the vehicle over. "File that away for ammunition in the future."

Feeling a flash of sadness, Hutch considered the younger man's words. What would the future hold for any of them? If the present was any indication, then Cooper and Starsky would still be partnered together. Hutch wasn't sure where he would end up once all this was over.

Flicking on his blinker, Cooper eased his car out of the metro parking lot and into traffic. They drove in silence for a while, each man hiding behind the darkness of his sunglasses.

Hutch unrolled the window and leaned his elbow on the windowsill. Resting his head in his hand, he enjoyed the feeling of the wind in his hair and the sun on his face. Pushing his negative thoughts aside, he allowed himself to enjoy the moment.

He closed his eyes and his mind wandered to another time. A happier time, when he was sitting shotgun in Starsky's Torino and they were working their beat. Those were the days, even if they have been a farce.

Re-opening his eyes, Hutch blinked furiously. His gaze darted around buildings lining the street. This wasn't right. They were driving in the opposite direction of his hotel.

"Hey, Cooper?" Hutch started, his brows furrowing as he glanced at the other man. "Where are we going?" he pointed a thumb behind them. "My hotel is that way."

Keeping his eyes on the road, Cooper grimaced and shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah... you're not stayin' there anymore."

"What?" Hutch asked worriedly. "Where are you taking me then?"

"Uh," Cooper started, pausing to take a deep breath before mumbling. "Starsky's."

Uneasiness settling in his chest, Hutch's face paled. What was wrong with the kid? Starsky didn't want to see him. Both of them had watched his former partner's sudden departure from the squad room earlier in that afternoon. When presented with the opportunity to reunite with Hutch, Starsky had chosen to run away. Why the hell would Cooper think it was okay for Hutch to crash at Starsky's place?

"Well," Hutch pressed nervously. "You aren't headed in the direction of his place either."

"You've been gone a long time." Cooper sighed sadly. "And so has he. Both of your old places are long gone, man."

"Oh." Hutch rubbed his hand over his mouth. He kicked himself for asking such a stupid question. Of course Starsky's old place would be gone. He had left Bay City, too.

Heaving a sigh, Hutch thought about how much time had passed since he had been working and living in this city. It had been a year since Starsky located him and his family took him back to Duluth, but so much more time had passed since Hutch sat down and had a conversation with Starsky.

"It wasn't my idea," Cooper offered, observing the silent man's worry. "I know he ran this afternoon, but he's cool with it, man. We talked earlier."

Hutch looked at Cooper questioningly, but he didn't say anything. His thoughts were too consumed with the thought of seeing Starsky for the second time that day, and the anxiety that came with the prospect.

Closing his eyes, he tried to remember the last day he and Starsky were together. The details were fuzzy, but Hutch still remembered the way Starsky grabbed him as he leaned over the couch. The smell of his aftershave. The look in his eyes after they shared what would become their last kiss. Things had been so different then.

Some days, Hutch wanted to go back to that time, a time when he and Starsky had been in love, and other days he wished they never had been. Hutch didn't need to see or even speak to the other man to know he had caused Starsky so much pain. And in the end, it was all for nothing.

When Cooper finally pulled up in front of a small, one-story house, Hutch forced a deep breath and reminded himself to stay calm. He had to be strong and open to whatever Starsky had to say to him. Because, after all, he had created this situation. He deserved whatever horrible things Starsky would say.

Looking at the house, Hutch took in the buildings surrounding it. The area was old, run-down, and industrial. The house itself was brown, and in need of fresh paint job at the very least. There was no yard, trees, or plants. The property was dingy and to Hutch, it seemed wrong.

Starsky didn't belong here, and neither did he. What were they doing here? How the hell did they get here?

Taking in Hutch's shocked expression, Cooper grimaced. "It's better on the inside, I promise," he offered quietly. "It's a Huggy thing, and Dobey's involved too. They thought it would be best if you guys stay somewhere... well... somewhere nobody would think to look."

Trying to hide his apprehension, Hutch set his lips in a stubborn line. Huggy and Dobey were right about one thing. Nobody would ever expect them to stay in a place like this.

Hopping from the car, Cooper slammed the door behind him. He threw out his arms and released a satisfied groan as he stretched. Pulling off his sunglasses, he moved to pop the trunk of the car.

Hutch lingered in the passenger seat. The unpleasantness of the house and neighborhood was bringing back memories of Bennett, another industrial area, and much more traumatic time.

Hutch leaned forward and placed his head in his hands as he was violently assaulted with words of the past.

"Did you really think this was over? Did you really think you could just walk away?"

No.

Cooper knocked on the window.

Startled out of his reverie, Hutch shot up quickly, knocking his dark sunglass off in the process. They fell on his lap and he looked at Cooper with confused eyes.

"Hey, you okay?"

Hutch nodded and inhaled deeply. He wasn't and he knew it, but taking in Cooper's concerned expression, he quickly realized he needed to manage the memories that haunted him. At least for now. In his heart, he knew the time for full disclosure about Carter and Bennett was coming quickly, and once it did, he would no longer have anyone by his side.

No one would stand by him once they discovered what he had done.

Getting out of the car, Hutch leaned over to stretch his back. He had done too much sitting in the last couple of days and his body was no longer used to it. As his arms returned to his sides, Cooper handed him his worn duffel.

"When did you get my stuff?" Hutch asked, hanging the worn strap on his shoulder.

"I stopped by your hotel when you were meeting with Dobey," Cooper explained.

"Oh."

Making their way to the back of the house, Cooper's eyes scanned the area around them, trying to ensure no one was watching them. Hutch wanted to tell Cooper he was wasting his energy; they weren't in any danger here, at least not from Carter, but he stayed silent.

They stopped in front of the back door of the property. Removing his keys from his pocket, Cooper fumbled with them before locating the correct one and unlocking the door.

"Hey, Dave," Cooper called out, ushering Hutch into the small kitchen. "Hey, pal!" he called again walking through the kitchen to the living area.

Hutch followed, but stopped abruptly, his duffle falling to the floor, as he heard a familiar voice answer.

"Hey, Coop, man, you don't gotta yell."

"If you'd answer me, I wouldn't have to yell," Cooper countered in good humor.

Hutch's heart was pounding in his chest. He stood frozen in place; the walls of the small room seemed to be closing in on him. He pulled the top buttons of his flannel shirt open and rubbed at his neck, his mind trying desperately to combat his overwhelming panic.

He couldn't do this.

What was he doing here? He didn't deserve to be here. How could he look Starsky in the eye, stay in the same house as him, after everything he did?

Suddenly, Cooper was in front of him, picking up his discarded duffle, and grasping him by the shoulders.

"I don't want to be here," Hutch choked out. "Why did you bring me here? I'm not ready to do this."

"Aw, shit, not you, too," the younger man whispered. "What the fuck is up with you guys?"

Hutch didn't respond. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head viciously.

"Come on, man," Cooper chastised quietly. He gripped Hutch's shoulders tightly. "You can do this. You need to get your head in the game."

Hutch almost laughed at the younger man's choice of words. If only Cooper really knew how much his 'head was in the game'. Hutch couldn't get any more in the game if he tried.

Heaving a hearty breath, Hutch opened his eyes and set them on Cooper's dark serious ones.

"You are going to get your shit together," Cooper firmly whispered, shaking him slightly. "You are going to grow the fuck up and deal with the mess you left behind. Do you understand me?"

Hutch opened his mouth to respond, but a quiet voice interjected before he had a chance.

"Leave him alone, Cooper."

Cooper dropped his hands from Hutch's shoulders. Hutch set his eyes on Starsky, and sucked in a shocked breath. He felt a tightness grip his heart as he evaluated his ex-partner.

Starsky looked good. Dressed in torn blue jeans, tennis shoes, and a black pocket tee, he looked the same and, yet, completely different. There was seriousness and pain in his eyes Hutch was sure he had never seen before.

Starsky set his jaw and averted his eyes to stare intently at Cooper. Hutch was sure Cooper didn't understand what Starsky was doing, but Hutch knew. He was masking his pain, pushing down his hurt, so they wouldn't know how much the reunion was affecting him. But Hutch knew because he felt it, too.

"Hey, sorry, man," Cooper stated genuinely, turning to face Hutch once more. "I didn't mean to get so pushy"

"It's fine," Hutch interrupted in a whisper. He pursed his lips and shrugged. "It doesn't matter." *Because you're right.*

Cooper nodded. He looked at Starsky and watched him stick his hands in his jeans pockets. Averting his eyes, Starsky awkwardly scanned the room. Cooper looked from Starsky to Hutch and then back to Starsky. Letting out a breath, he made a decision.

"Well," Cooper started, handing the duffle to Hutch. "It's time to peel off the Band-Aid, boys." He gave Starsky a quick pat on the arm and nodded at Hutch. "I'll leave you to it. I'm gonna go... somewhere else. I'll see both of you tomorrow. Bright and early."

As Cooper made his swift exit out the backdoor, Hutch had to restrain himself from pulling the man back inside. His nervousness was suffocating, and Starsky seemed equally uncomfortable.

His duffle hanging awkwardly off his shoulder, Hutch's gaze fell to the floor. His hand found the collar of his blue undershirt and he pulled on it, unsure of what to say or do.

What was going to happen now?

Starsky pursed his lips and forced a smile. "Uh... You want a beer?" he asked.

"God, yes," Hutch agreed, his hand falling from his shirt. Perhaps alcohol could make this situation a little less awkward.

Starsky grabbed beer from the fridge, then kicked the door shut with his foot. He tossed a can to Hutch, before making his way to the living room, tilting his head, inviting Hutch to follow.

Hutch's nose scrunched in disgust as he took in the small living area. The kitchen was clean enough. Old, but taken care of. The living room was something else completely.

It was small, barely able to contain the small TV, recliner, and couch. The furniture was old and musty; probably purchased second hand. The room was painted a terrible beige color, or it had been at one time. Now, the walls were yellowed with age and the areas by the ceiling had started peeling. The carpet, however, was a surprise. It looked as though it had been replaced within the last few years.

"Nice place," Hutch offered before he could stop himself. He looked cautiously at Starsky, hoping his words wouldn't be taken as an insult.

Starsky's face broke into a small smile, "No, it isn't," he scoffed. "It's a dump. You can thank Huggy's cousin for that." He sat heavily in the recliner. "Don't get too used to the accommodations though; this shit is temporary. At least until we get eyes on Carter."

Hutch dropped his duffle on the floor and sank on the couch. Despite appearances, it was soft and comfortable. Slightly more relaxed, he leaned back and crossed his legs. He popped the top of his beer, throwing the tab on the old dented coffee table, and ventured a question. "So... how are things?"

Holding his beer to his mouth, Starsky's body became rigid and his eyes narrowed as he stared at Hutch. It was such a simple question, but somehow coming from Hutch, it stung. What gave Hutch the right to ask him that? After all this time, how the hell did he think things would be?

"Um..." Starsky started, forcing himself to be civil. He rolled his beer can between his hands. "Okay. I suppose." Irritated, he set his fiery eyes on Hutch, before asking a question he knew would get under the blonde man's skin. "How's your family?"

Almost dropping the can, Hutch sputtered on his beer. "Um... fine," he croaked, wiping at the drops by his mouth. Biting his lip sadly, Hutch fought the urge to continue their verbal sparring match, but he decided to end it instead.

"Starsky," he sighed, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I-I know that doesn't make up for anything. But, I just want you to know-"

"Yeah," Starsky scoffed. "I'm sure you're *really* fucking sorry."

"Starsky-"

"Listen," Starsky huffed angrily, his half-empty beer can crunching in his hand. "I can't talk about this with you right now. We have a job to do, so let's just focus on that, okay?"

Hutch considered Starsky carefully. He was angry-no-pissed. As much as Hutch wanted to press the subject and try to clear the air, he held himself back. Nothing good would come if the conversation continued further.

He was on very thin ice with his ex-partner, and if Starsky didn't want to talk about the past, then they wouldn't talk about the past.

"Okay," Hutch agreed softly.

Starsky sank into the recliner. Hooking an ankle over his knee, he sipped at his beer.

Hutch turned his focus on the condensation beading on his beer can as he held it. He rubbed at it and then wiped his moist fingers on his jeans.

"You saw Dobe today," Starsky stated. "Did you get your badge back?"

Grimacing, Hutch bit his lip. He wondered how Starsky could possibly think it would be that easy for him after everything he'd been through.

"Um... not exactly," Hutch hedged, wondering if this was another conversation that would ignite Starsky's short temper.

"What does that mean?"

Hutch's forehead furrowed and he felt the onset of a headache. The question was simple but with Starsky surveying him carefully, he choked on the answer.

"Well?" Starsky prompted impatiently.

"I can't come back," Hutch blurted out. His gaze setting on the wall. "At least not now anyway." His jaw clenched and he gritted his teeth, trying to remain in control of his emotions.

Starsky's face contorted in confusion. "What?"

"Starsky, I had a brain injury." Hutch's eyes met Starsky's, and he held the gaze for a moment, desperately hoping his ex-partner would understand what he was really saying.

His body language becoming rigid and his face guarded, Starsky lifted his brows and took another drink. Hutch decided to err on the side of full-disclosure. God forbid Starsky mistake his omission as another lie.

"It was bad," Hutch explained softly. "I'm a lot better than I was a year ago. I can talk again." He smiled. "But... As of right now, I'd never be able to pass the physical to get reinstated. And they'd sure as shit never give me a gun."

His mouth agape at Hutch's disclosure, Starsky placed his beer on the coffee table. Rubbing his hands on his thighs, he forced himself to stay calm.

If Hutch couldn't be reinstated, why would he come back?

Starsky could feel anger simmering deep inside of him, and it made him feel small. Somewhere in the back of his head, he knew his reaction should be different. He should be happy to see Hutch again. Grateful that the blonde man was willing to come back and help. But he didn't. He couldn't. His heart was still too broken to allow such things.

"Then why are you here?" Starsky demanded angrily. "How the fuck are you going to help us?"

"I'm here to make things right," Hutch whispered, his gaze dropping to the floor. "To put it all to rest."

Furious, Starsky shook his head. How the hell could Hutch fix anything? He couldn't be reinstated, but he was back to *help*? How could he do anything without a badge or even a gun?

"You've done enough," Starsky whispered coldly. He bit his lip to prevent himself from saying something he'd regret in the morning.

"Starsky-"

"I'm tired," Starsky interrupted curtly. "You probably are, too."

Hutch shut his eyes and hung his head in defeat. Starsky was running away, again.

Standing, Starsky walked to the front door. He jingled the doorknob to ensure it was locked. Pointing down the hall he whispered, "The first door is my room. There's a bathroom on the other side, and the bedroom at the end of the hall is yours. I'll see you tomorrow."

Watching Starsky leave down the hallway, Hutch placed his beer on the coffee table. Overwhelmed, he rested his head in his hands. How on earth was he going to make this right?

XX

"NO. STOP. NO!!"

Starsky jolted awake at the sound of the screams. His brain fuzzy, he looked around the darkness of his small bedroom, trying to understand if he had been dreaming or if someone had screamed.

"NO!" Hutch's voice yelled again.

Throwing his blankets off, Starsky jumped from bed. He grabbed his gun from the tiny nightstand, before holding it defensively and silently padding to the darkness of the neighboring bedroom.

Nudging the door open with his foot, Starsky peeked inside. His eyes scanned the small closetless room. He frowned as he realized that with the exception of Hutch, the room appeared empty.

Hutch let out a whimper, and Starsky lowered his weapon. He abandoned it on the top of the dresser by the door. Walking over to the side of the bed, Starsky turned on the small lamp on the nightstand. The soft light illuminated the room, and Starsky took in the covers kicked to the floor and Hutch's sweat-soaked t-shirt.

Must be a hell of a dream.

"NO, NO, NO." the blonde man screamed again. His head thrashing from side to side.

"Hutch," Starsky voiced firmly. "Wake up." He sat on the bed and, placing his hands on other man's chest, he shook gently.

"STOP!" Hutch bellowed as he shot up to seated position.

Shocked by the movement, Starsky pulled his hands back quickly, and considered the blonde.

Hutch's breath was coming in gasps. With unfocused eyes, he looked wildly around the room, still in the clutches of his nightmare.

"Hutch," Starsky tried again.

Hutch only gasped harder. His sweat covered shirt rising and falling.

"HUTCH!" Starsky yelled forcefully. Clutching the man's shoulder, he shook firmly.

Hutch's eyes shot to his face and he let out one last gasp before blinking and laying confused eyes on his former partner.

"You okay?" Starsky asked.

"Starsky?" Hutch whispered uncertainly. His forehead wrinkled in confusion as his eyes took in Starsky sitting on the bed and then the unfamiliar room. "W-what are you doing here? W-where am I?"

Starsky frowned, taken aback by Hutch's confusion and the violence of his nightmare. The man looked... scared. Fearful tears threatened to spill from the confused blue eyes.

As angry as he was at Hutch, it broke Starsky's heart to see him like this. He wanted to reassure him, hold him close, and tell him everything was going to be okay. But he didn't. He couldn't. There was still too much pain between him and Hutch to allow such contact.

Instead, Starsky said the first thing that came to mind. "What the hell were you dreaming about?"

The words were crass and harsh. Too harsh. And as he watched Hutch flinch, Starsky regretted the tone.

Hutch sighed thickly. He pushed himself higher on the bed, and leaned his back against the headboard. "Nothing," he quietly lied, his eyes closing in defeat.

Hutch found himself wishing for the safety of his bedroom in Duluth, the warm comforting face of his sister or even his father, when they had come to waken him from a violent nightmare.

Although he had awakened him, Starsky was far from a comforting presence, a fact that cut and stung. It left Hutch feeling broken and vulnerable all over again.

Suddenly, Hutch wanted nothing more than to be far away from where he was. Somewhere he could be left alone with his memories and fear of an old abandoned warehouse and the terrors

that had happened there. Instead, he was in the dark strange bedroom of a rundown house. A place where neither he nor Starsky belonged.

"You always scream like that when you dream about nothing?" Starsky challenged.

His lips setting in a stubborn line, Hutch glared at him. "It's fine, Starsky. I'm fine. Go back to bed." *You don't want to be in here anyway. I can see it in your eyes.*

Getting off the bed, Starsky stood. He considered Hutch seriously for a few moments, unsure if he should push the topic or let it go. Half of him wanted to drag the dirty details from his ex-partner, but the other half told him to respect Hutch's wishes.

"Good night, Starsky," Hutch prompted firmly.

Starsky threw up his hand and shrugged. Fine. If Hutch didn't want to talk about his nightmare then they wouldn't talk about it. It didn't make a difference to him, well, *not* really, anyway.

Starsky nodded. Then turned and walked to the door. "See you in the morning," he offered quickly, shutting the door behind him.

Lying heavily on the bed, Hutch listened as Starsky's footsteps padded down the hallway, then he heard the sound of a bedroom door closing.

Rubbing his hands over his face and pushing the haunting images aside, Hutch resigned himself to another night of tossing and turning. After such a vivid nightmare, he wouldn't allow himself to sleep again. Especially not with Starsky sleeping down the hallway.

Chapter 18

May 22, 1979

Sitting in the Torino's passenger seat, Cooper kicked his feet against the floor and looked at Starsky out of the corner of his eyes. Starsky's face was set in the same determined expression Cooper had become accustomed to over the past few days, and his eyes were hidden behind the dark aviator sunglasses that had also become a fixture.

Not knowing what to say, Cooper sighed. A tense uneasiness had settled between himself and Starsky since Hutch had returned. Starsky had all but stopped talking to him, and Cooper knew for certain Starsky wasn't talking to Hutch. In fact, Starsky was doing everything in his power to exclude his ex-partner's involvement in their activities.

Since Hutch had disclosed his inability to regain his badge, Starsky had kicked him off the investigation, stating that it was safer for him to remain in the rundown house where he wouldn't draw attention to himself. Much to Cooper's disappointment, Hutch hadn't challenged Starsky's decree. He had accepted his long isolated days in the house without any question.

Cooper had wanted to push the topic, but had kept quiet and secretly slipped Hutch the keys to his car instead. At least that way, Hutch could leave if he wanted to or if he needed to. It would be their little secret. Starsky didn't need to know, and Cooper prayed he wouldn't find out. He was already stuck in the middle and he didn't want to invite more tension between them, even though it was obvious to him what was going on.

Starsky was still angry over Hutch's past and the secrets he kept, and Hutch felt so guilty for what he did in the past and not disclosing the truth that he was willing to do anything Starsky wanted him to, just to keep the peace. It irritated Cooper at first, to see the determined Hutchinson cave to whatever Starsky told him to do just to lessen the tension between them, but today he was grateful. It was one less thing to worry about.

The investigation into Carter's whereabouts was not going well. In fact, Cooper wasn't sure if they were getting anywhere at all.

The few leads he had encountered prior to Starsky and Hutch coming back had all fizzled, leaving this new investigation in the same place they had been almost a year ago, when he and Starsky had their strange encounter with Special Agent Carter.

How many times had Cooper agonized over that sunny day on the pier? He wasn't sure, but that day had changed everything. It had been the catalyst to Starsky deciding to leave Bay City. It had been the last thing he and Cooper had done before discovering Hutch's whereabouts.

Carter was the man responsible for the death of Bennett and destruction of Hutch's life, and he had the nerve to meet them in public, the audacity to call Hutchinson his friend, and he had shut their investigation down, something he had no authority to do. At the time, Starsky had been too devastated to question the order and Cooper, well, he hadn't been smart enough to press the subject.

Rubbing his hand over his face, Cooper sighed heavily, dismissing his thoughts. They weren't any good to him now. What was done was done. He was better served focusing on what he was going to do now.

Agent Briggs was in town. He was their last hope of finding Carter. Of having the upper-hand. If they couldn't press Briggs for Carter's whereabouts then they would be stuck, waiting for Carter to show himself. To react to whatever the man decided to do.

Biting his lip and returning his gaze to the large FBI building, after five long hours of waiting, Cooper wondered if they were wasting their time.

"How long do you wanna wait this out?" he asked. "What if this is just another dead end?"

"As long as it takes," Starsky said firmly, his sunglasses covered eyes still set on the building. "If he shows, we're gonna be here to talk to him--" Starsky dropped off, his attention turning to a heavyset man in a dark suit walking through the parking lot. "Speak of the devil, I think that's him."

Starsky jumped from the car and Cooper followed. The men walked quickly to catch up with the agent as he made his way to the front door of the building.

"Special Agent Briggs?" Starsky asked the man's back.

The man stopped walking and turned. He looked at Cooper and Starsky dubiously. "Yes. Who are you?"

Cooper placed his hands on his hips and glanced at Starsky.

Starsky moved his hand to the back of his jeans and pulled his badge out. "Detectives Starsky and Cooper." Starsky flashed his badge at the man. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Really?" Briggs snorted. Amused, he crossed his arms. "You have questions for me? Usually that works the other way around." He looked at Starsky warmly. "I'm happy to see you back. I thought you had left the force."

Starsky's mouth fell open. "How did you know that?"

"You were partnered with Hutchinson when he was based in Bay City. He always spoke very highly of you."

"He did?" Starsky mumbled, taken aback by Briggs's warmth and demeanor. This man was nothing like Agent Carter, but he wasn't so sure that was a good thing.

"He did," Briggs affirmed. "I am assuming that's what you're here to speak to me about." He turned to Cooper and assessed him seriously. "Detective Cooper, I wish I could say it was pleasure. You have been making quite an uproar with your theories about Carter."

"You know about that?" Cooper asked his eyebrows rising in astonishment.

"Detective Cooper, it is my job to know about that," Briggs smiled warmly. "I have been watching you with great interest."

Cooper looked at Briggs, his eyes uncertain. The statement was not said in a threatening manner, but it still sent a shiver up his spine. The FBI had been watching him?

"Now," Briggs continued, motioning at them with his hand. "Why don't you two ask your questions? I have a meeting to attend."

Cooper and Starsky looked at each other, each trying to decide if Agent Briggs was being sincere or preparing to give them the run-around. Cooper shrugged and Starsky decided to ask the burning question. It was now or never.

"Where is Agent Carter?" Starsky turned his gaze back to Briggs and stared at him intently.

"The same place he has been for the last six months."

"Which is where?" Starsky pressed.

"I don't think you boys should be privy to that information," Briggs laughed. "But since you came out of your way," he turned and motioned at Starsky. "And you, well, you came back. All the way from Oregon to find out," he paused to turn his gaze to the car filled parking lot.

Starsky pushed a heavy breath through his nostrils and forced himself to count to ten.

Were Briggs's words threats masked by a friendly tone and welcoming demeanor or was Briggs just trying to remind him and Cooper who was in charge when it came to things concerning the FBI. Starsky didn't know for sure, but he did know one thing, he was done playing games.

"Where is Carter?" he asked firmly. Setting his shoulders stubbornly, he looked at Briggs. He was not leaving without answers, not this time.

Briggs's reaction was not completely unexpected. "Does Hutchinson know you're here?" Licking his lips, he smiled coyly.

"Don't answer my question with another question," Starsky fumed, his eyes narrowing in annoyance. "I want to know if you know where Carter is."

Briggs smirked.

Cooper looked at Starsky who pursed his lips, his fists clenching at his sides. Briggs was taunting Starsky and it was only a matter of time before he would take the bait.

"Why isn't he in jail?" Cooper demanded suddenly. He took a step forward, placing himself between the two men. "How can you be sure he won't hurt anyone else?"

"It was an isolated incident," Briggs answered with a shrug of his shoulders. He turned his attention to Cooper. "Carter showed no indication he would do it again--"

"Oh, so murder and attempted-murder are isolated incidents now?" Cooper interrupted.

"Like I said, the situation was *isolated*." Briggs paused, a look of sincerity passing over his features. "Even so, it remains... regretful."

"Regretful?" Starsky scoffed, his face scrunching with anger. "Scratching somebody's car is regretful, forgetting to buy eggs is regretful. Letting some nut-job run around, playing FBI agent, abducting and killing people is NOT regretful!" He pointed a finger at Briggs. "I want to know how the hell you're ensuring Hutch's safety if Carter isn't locked up!"

"Mr. Hutchinson has a restraining order," Briggs exclaimed. He looked at Starsky, then Cooper. "Something you would know if you did your job *correctly*, Detective Cooper. His family was given explicit instructions to report any suspicious visitors. So far, there has only been one strange incident reported."

Cooper's face broke into a smile. "Oh," he said crossing his arms. "You're talkin' about me."

"Yes."

"Well, Hutch is a friend. A *good* friend," Cooper offered. "I was just checking in with him. Seeing how he was. I know that isn't a crime."

"Look," Agent Briggs sighed, growing weary of the conversation. "I liked Hutchinson, a lot. He was a fine agent. What happened to him and Bennett was horrific. But I assure you, he is in no danger."

"Yeah," Starsky scoffed disgustedly. "Because you're watching everybody, right?" He threw up his hands and continued, his voice becoming heated, "How the fuck can you watch Carter if you're so damn busy watching people who aren't gonna do anything!?"

Agent Briggs's gaze dropped to the pavement. He cleared his throat and took a few breaths before looking at Starsky with guilty eyes.

"Okay," he whispered. "I will tell you where he is but," he held up a finger of warning and directed it at Cooper, "if I hear that you are hassling him in any way or interfering..."

"What?" Cooper challenged stubbornly. "What are you gonna do."

Briggs set narrowing eyes on Cooper. "Just try it and see," he jeered.

"We won't do anything," Starsky interjected, pulling Cooper to stand behind him. The kid was getting a little too heated, and Briggs was pushing all the right buttons to get him to do something stupid. "That is," he continued, eyeing Briggs seriously, "unless he starts it."

"Fine." Briggs nodded. "Carter is a patient at a state run facility." Noticing Cooper's open mouth, he lifted his hand and pointed a finger at him. "Don't ask me which one; I will not tell you." Lowering his hand, he looked at Starsky. "He is receiving treatment for his indiscretions. Now, I think you two better leave. And, Detectives, it would be best if you don't assume you know details about this situation that you couldn't possibly know."

"What do you mean by that?" Cooper asked suspiciously.

"I suggest you speak with Mr. Hutchinson. Since you seem to be such good friends." Briggs didn't wait for a retort. Turning, he walked away, leaving Starsky and Cooper to linger in the parking lot.

"Well, that was bizarre," Starsky stated, watching Briggs enter the building. "Coop, I don't know about you, but that just gave me the strangest feeling of déjà vu. I can't decide if he's a good guy or someone I want to punch in the face."

"Yeah."

"State run facility?" Starsky continued, pulling his car keys and sunglasses from his pocket. Popping the glasses on, he nodded his head toward the Torino and started walking. "I can't believe he told us that. With the way he was tryin' to intimidate us."

"Can't be too hard to check into patient rosters," Cooper added, following Starsky.

"Yeah... assuming he's in California."

Cooper let out a heavy breath and threw open the passenger door of the Torino. Placing his hands on the top of the car, he looked at Starsky seriously. "Do you think Hutch is hiding something? I mean, what do we really know about how the whole thing went down?"

Starsky ground his jaw and frowned as he quietly considering the question. "I don't know," he whispered finally. "But I'm gonna find out."

XX

Walking in the rundown house he was sharing with Hutch, Starsky slammed the door behind him.

Sitting on the couch, Hutch jumped from the noise. He looked up from his novel and assessed Starsky carefully, wondering if he should venture a greeting.

Silently, Starsky removed his blue windbreaker and placed it on the hook by the door. He kicked off his shoes, each of them landing haphazardly halfway across the room.

Hutch grimaced and decided to remain quiet. Starsky was pissed about something, and he was not eager to become an outlet for his irritation.

Ignoring Hutch, Starsky walked purposefully to the kitchen.

Hutch heard the fridge door open, then close, and the sound of a beer can opening. He pursed his lips and pushed a breath through his nostrils. Since being reunited, he couldn't help but notice how much alcohol Starsky was consuming.

It was the first thing Starsky reached for when he got home and the last thing he drank before bed. And the amount he was able to work through, during that short time period, was more than a little concerning. Hutch found himself hoping Starsky's dependence on the liquid was just a reaction to the stress that would eventually ebb.

As Starsky returned to the living room, beer in hand, his expression hard and angry, Hutch's worry about the alcohol was quickly replaced with uneasiness.

Whatever Starsky had to say, it was going to bad.

"Hey, Starsk," Hutch greeted. Shutting his novel, he held it tightly in his hand. He offered the other man a small smile. "How's it going?"

Starsky snorted. His eyes narrowing, he took another drink.

"How's it going?" he repeated, pulling the can back and shaking his head disgustedly. "Oh, it's going fine. I met your friend, Special Agent Briggs today..." He paused and Hutch's face paled at the mention of the name.

"W-What did he have to say?" Hutch asked quietly. Dread filling the pit of his stomach, his gaze fell to the floor and he rested his palm across his mouth.

"Oh, you know... Not much," Starsky sneered. Pacing, he walked the length of the living room. "Just some minor details about Carter. He's been in a state hospital for the last six months." He turned and assessed Hutch suspiciously. "Did you know that?"

"Um," Hutch hedged. Sucking in a deep breath, he held it for a moment, then blew it out forcefully.

Starsky's brows narrowed. He made his way the front of the couch. Planting his feet firmly on the floor, he stared at Hutch intently. For a guy who wasn't supposed to remember anything, Hutch's avoidance was very strange.

Hutch didn't answer the question. Instead, his face became guarded and he picked at loose thread on his jeans.

"Okay," Starsky sighed heatedly. Scowling, he decided to push a little harder. "The FBI isn't pursuing a case against Carter, did you know that, too?"

Again, Hutch provided no answer, but his silence told Starsky everything he needed to hear. Hutch had known, and he had kept it a secret.

"Jesus, fuck, Hutch!" Starsky exploded. "How could you *not* tell us that? Here we are chasing around some guy who isn't even around to do anything?!"

Hutch's neck snapped up and he looked at Starsky. His guilt fading, his blue eyes twinkling with irritation. How dare Starsky press him-attack him-for not disclosing facts nobody else had the right to know.

"It's a condition, Starsky," Hutch answered, his voice icy calm. "If I decided not to press charges then the details of the case would never have to come to light. I could move on with my life."

"What does that mean?" Starsky pressed. "What about Bennett? You weren't the only one Carter hurt. Bennet is dead. Why doesn't Carter have to pay for *that*?"

"I know Bennett is dead!" Hutch shouted. He threw the novel on the floor, leaned forward, and with sinking shoulders, he rubbed at the sudden aching in his forehead. "There are details of what happened, Starsky. Things that I don't even remember-"

"Jesus Christ," Starsky breathed, the reality of the situation dawning on him. He took another drink of his beer. Emptying it, he crushed the can in his hands. "What are you even doing here?" he whispered. "We don't have a case. We're chasin' guy who everyone says isn't a threat. You're withholding details. What the *fuck* is going on here, Hutch?"

Avoiding eye contact, Hutch set his jaw and forced a swallow. He was quiet for a moment before shaking his head in defeat.

Starsky snorted, his blue eyes shining with disappointment. Giving up on getting any answers, he threw his hands in the air and turned away from Hutch.

It was one thing to be given the run around by Agent Briggs, but it was something else completely to be getting it from Hutch. Starsky felt sick to his stomach. Dealing with Hutch and this situation hurt way more than he had expected. Coming back had been a mistake. He should have stayed away, and he found himself suffocated by unanswerable questions.

What if there really was no case? What if Briggs was right, and Carter wasn't really a threat to any of them? Were they just chasing shadows? Were they all too focused on making someone pay for the past to realize there wasn't anything that would make it right?

Suddenly, Starsky realized case or no case, finding Carter or not finding Carter, he needed to figure out what he was going to do with his life, and if Hutch had a place in it.

"Why did you come back, Hutch?"

"To make things right," Hutch answered softly.

"With me?" Starsky asked, his eyes dark. He threw the crushed can on the floor and crossed his arms defensively.

"Maybe."

"Shit." Starsky squeezed himself tight. "You really are brain damaged," he whispered harshly. "How are you gonna make things right, Hutch? I don't even know who you are. I don't know a single fuckin' thing about you."

"Starsky," Hutch whispered deeply. "You still know me."

"No, I don't." Shaking his head, Starsky unraveled his arms. He pointed to the Peter Straub novel lying at Hutch's feet. "Since when the fuck do you read horror novels?" he asked sadly. "I thought you hated stupid shit like that. I guess that's just another thing you lied about."

Hutch bit his lip, his gaze dropping to the floor. "Starsky, I-

"I don't want to hear it, Hutch!" Starsky screamed. But his eyes, wide and brimming with tears said something else.

Starsky's anger had left him, replaced by the deep and overwhelming sadness he had become accustomed to since his life had fallen apart. Taking a shaky breath, Starsky bit his lip and willed himself not to cry.

"What happened to you?" he asked before he could stop himself. "Why did any of this happen?"

Defeated, Hutch hung his head. "Starsky," he whispered, his eyes filling. "I-I don't remember."

"I don't believe you," Starsky growled tearfully. "Why won't you stop lying?"

His stomach churning with grief, Starsky turned away from Hutch. He fought sobs as hot unwanted tears spilled down his cheeks. He took a few steps toward the privacy of his bedroom, then stopped.

"Tell me something true," he whispered brokenly, more words falling out before he could stop them. "Please, j-just," Starsky paused on a shuddering breath. "I *need* to know that it wasn't all a lie."

"I love you," Hutch whispered thickly. "That has always been true."

More tears spilling down his cheeks, Starsky sobbed. He shook his head desperately, trying to stop. Trying to ignore the pain inside of him.

He should have felt happy, but instead he was devastated. Something inside Starsky told him he couldn't believe those words. There was still too much he didn't know. In his heart he still knew, he didn't know Hutch at all.

Hutch moved to stand behind Starsky, leaving a few feet between them. He wanted nothing more but to gather his ex-lover into his arms, but he didn't. He couldn't. Starsky was devastated, and he was responsible for shattering him.

Suddenly disgusted with himself, Starsky sniffled and wiped at his face. Crying in the hallway wasn't going to fix anything. Not pushing Hutch on what he knew wasn't going to help anything either.

This had to end. And Starsky decided to use the only leverage he had.

"Then tell me what happened." He turned and faced Hutch. "If you really love me, then tell me what happened the day you left me."

Staring into Starsky's eyes and seeing the hurt he had put there, Hutch took a deep breath and the words trickled out.

"Ah, ha!" Hutch exclaimed, his eyes focusing on his missing tennis shoes hiding under his bed. He leaned down and grabbed them, just as the phone began to ring.

Hutch smirked, wondering if the caller was Starsky trying to coax him out of his visit to the gym. He held his shoes by the laces, swinging them gently, as he made his way to the phone.

"Hello?" he answered warmly.

"Did you just think you could walk away?" an icy voice asked. "Did you really think it would be that easy?"

Hutch's mouth fell open. The shoes fell from his grasp, landing heavily on the on the floor with twin thunks.

Carter.

Fighting a sudden feeling of panic, Hutch gripped the phone receiver tightly.

"Well," Carter continued. "Don't you have anything to say to me?"

"Carter," Hutch breathed roughly. His brow furrowed as he struggled with any further response.

Carter wasn't supposed to be contacting him anymore. Agent Briggs had assured Hutch he wouldn't. Carter was supposed to be back in D.C where he would answer for holding Michael Bennett hostage in Bay City without probable cause.

How could he possibly be back?

"I'm not done with you," Carter stated.

"What do you want?" Hutch whispered. He had a bad feeling in his stomach and the hair on the back of his head stood up.

"We need to meet."

Bending his head, Hutch closed his eyes. "I don't think so," he sighed. "I don't work with you anymore."

"Well," Carter responded. "Michael Bennett would disagree."

"Michael Bennett is gone," Hutch countered. "He's not even in Bay City anymore. Special Agent Briggs...he took over that case. It's over Carter."

Hutch wanted to tell Carter that the case never existed. That whatever delusions the man held about the danger of Michael Bennett or himself had never existed, but he held back. Briggs had described Carter as a man teetering on the edge of sanity, and Hutch knew disagreeing with Carter wouldn't help the situation.

"Bennett isn't gone," Carter laughed manically. "He's here with me now."

"What?"

"You have 30 minutes to meet me," Carter demanded calmly. "If you don't show, Bennett is dead."

"How do I know you really have him?" Hutch pressed, rubbing his hand over his face. "You never told me the truth about anything before. Why start now?"

There was silence on the other end of the line and Hutch thought for a second that Carter had given up. He heard the scuffling sounds of movement and then a desperate plea.

"Agent X," Bennett exclaimed. Hutch's face twisted at the note of desperation in the man's voice. "Don't do what he says-"

Bennett was cut off and Hutch heard him let out a yelp of pain before Carter spoke again.

"Is that convincing enough?" the other man sneered. "You have 30 minutes, Agent Hutchinson."

"Where?" Hutch demanded, shaking his head desperately. "I don't even know where you are."

"We'll be in a warehouse. Down by the docks."

"Which dock? What warehouse?" The seriousness of Carter's threat sinking in, Hutch squeezed his eyes tight and forced a deep breath.

"Oh, you know the place," Carter answered with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "It's the same area where you and Starsky busted Billy Desmond."

"But-"

"You have 30 minutes Agent," Carter interrupted.

Hutch heard a click as the line went dead.

The phone receiver slipping from his hand, Hutch stood in place. His eyes wide and breathing heavily, he tried frantically to decide what he should do.

He didn't know what to do.

Should he call Special Agent Briggs and advise him that Carter had made contact with him? Tell him Carter somehow had abducted Bennett, again.

How the fuck did he get Bennett, again?

If Carter was serious about killing Bennett and his timeframe for doing so, there was no way Hutch could make contact with Briggs in time.

A loud beeping noise escaped from the displaced phone receiver, but Hutch ignored it, as another thought entered his mind. He was not FBI, no matter what Carter wanted to believe. Bennett was not his responsibility and never really had been.

What if he ignored Carter's call? What if he went to the gym instead? What if he just called in the threat to Agent Briggs and let him clean up the mess?

Sighing, Hutch dismissed the train of thought as quickly as it came to him. He couldn't do that. His conscience wouldn't allow him. If Carter was serious and Hutch didn't respond to his threat, Bennett would be dead before anyone else could intervene.

As much as Hutch didn't care for Bennett, if there was even the tiniest chance that he could save him, he had to take it.

Breaking out of his inactivity, Hutch bent to pick up the phone receiver then slammed it on the cradle. He grabbed his gun and holster from the back of his couch. Setting his lips in a firm line, he made a decision.

Carter was madman. He had long since taken his obsession with Hutch too far. This was over. One way or another, Carter would have to accept it.

"I went there," Hutch continued thickly, "with every intension of coming back. With every intention of coming back to you, but Carter... he had other plans."

"But how could you?" Starsky whispered his eyes once again shining with unshed tears. "One moment we're happy. Standing in the living room talkin' about moving in together and then... then you're just gone."

"Starsky-"

"You were out!" Starsky interrupted in a sob. Hot tears burned down his cheeks and he wiped at them angrily. "You let Carter pull you back in, and you chose Bennett over *me!*" Raising his hands, he indicated the dingy room. "You choose *this* over what we had. Over w-what we *could* have had."

"I wanted you! I wanted our life. Together," Hutch said desperately. "I still want our life."

Hutch took a step toward Starsky, and Starsky backed away a few paces. His face devastated, Hutch already knew what he was going to say.

"It can't work. It didn't work." Starsky shrugged sadly. "Even if I could forget about everything you lied about, you can't be with somebody who won't let you see behind the curtain. You can't be with somebody you don't trust."

Fighting tears, Hutch took in a shaky breath. "I can't blame you if you won't take me back. I mean, after everything I put you through."

"You say that like it's even an option," Starsky scoffed. "Like we could just come back together and live happily ever after."

Looking away from each other, but frozen in place, Starsky and Hutch stood in silence.

The tension between them had disappeared, but heartache and misery had quickly taken its place. They lingered, reeling in the pain from the truth of their situation. Each man wondering if the other had the courage to do what needed to be done.

Seconds turned to minutes that felt like hours before one of them spoke again.

"Go home, Hutch," Starsky whispered brokenly. "Go back to your family. You don't belong here anymore."

Hutch flinched at the finality of the statement. He shook his head and nodded sadly. He hated for it to end like this-for them to end like this-but, strangely, he felt like a weight had been lifted.

Starsky had set him free. He could leave his ex-partner knowing that Starsky could have closure. He could take comfort in the fact that he had made the choice not to love Hutch.

Now, and only now, could Hutch do what he came to do.

He was going to make things right.

Chapter 19

May 23, 1979

Still dressed in his clothes from the previous day, Starsky rolled over on the bed and groaned. He grabbed his aching head with both hands and grimaced. He really shouldn't have drunk so much the night before.

Pulling himself up to sit on the edge of the bed, Starsky glanced at the clock and wondered if Hutch had stuck around after their discussion last night. Part of him hoped he had and, yet, another part wished he'd never have to see the other man again.

It was all just too much.

Losing Hutch so painfully. Learning about Hutch's true identity, then having him reappear in his life just as suddenly as he had been lost.

Starsky had thought that when presented with his ex-partner he would be able to handle the ache of Hutch's deception, but he hadn't been prepared to combat the truth of the situation or the pain that seeing Hutch caused him.

The lies Hutch had told to save himself from the truth had hurt him them both in the end. And now, sitting on the edge of the bed, his head pounding from his hangover, Starsky knew the truth. Hutch loved him, but he hadn't stopped lying. There was still so much Starsky didn't know.

Pushing a warm breath through his nostrils, he rubbed his face with both hands and stood. It was time to face the morning and Hutch after the harsh words of the night before.

Making his way down the hall, Starsky stopped in front of Hutch's closed bedroom door. His hand gripped the handle momentarily as he considered peeking in on the other man. But, shaking his head, he dismissed the thought. Deciding to postpone another difficult conversation, Starsky continued to the dark kitchen.

Flipping on the light switch, Starsky heard a pounding on the back door and someone yelling his name. He made his way to the door just as Cooper threw it open. Breathing heavily, he stared at Starsky with anxious eyes.

"Starsky!" Cooper gasped. "You're still here." He stopped in the doorway, his hand clutching the doorknob as he breathed heavily. "Where's Hutch?"

"Still sleeping," Starsky sighed, his eyes narrowing at loudness of the younger man's voice. "What are you screaming for? Jesus, get in here and shut the damn door."

Grabbing Cooper by the arm, Starsky pulled him into the kitchen and pushed the door shut. Leaving Cooper in the center of the kitchen, he moved the counter and busied himself with making a pot of coffee.

"I got a phone call this morning," Cooper blurted out breathlessly.

"So?" Starsky growled. "I'm sure you get lots of phone calls," he mumbled, spooning grounds into the percolator. He was tired, emotionally exhausted, and hungover; not a good mix to be dealing with Cooper this early in the morning.

"Not like this one," Cooper said seriously. "Starsky... it was Agent Briggs. He called me at home."

"What?" Starsky turned. Gripping the handle of the coffeepot tightly, he looked at Cooper with wide eyes. "What did he have to say?"

Cooper pursed his lips and hesitated for a moment. "Carter is gone--"

Starsky's mouth fell open as a chill climbed up his spine.

"--Briggs said," Cooper continued. "He called to check in on Carter this morning, but he wasn't there." He took a few steps toward Starsky and rested his hands lightly on the counter. "The staff is clueless. One second he was there and the next he was gone."

"What?!"

Letting go of the coffee pot, Starsky's thoughts turned to Hutch sleeping down the hallway. If Carter had escaped, was Hutch still safe?

"Hutch!" Starsky bellowed, striding purposefully to Hutch's bedroom door. "Hutch!" he repeated, pounding on the door."

Starsky's only answer was the pounding of his own heart.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Biting his lip, Cooper watched nervously as Starsky threw the door open and looked inside.

The room looked inhabited; just how Hutch had left it. His duffle lay on top of the dresser. The bed looked slept in. The covers were disheveled, some lay haphazardly on the floor. But Hutch was nowhere to be seen.

"He isn't here," Starsky barked, walking in a panicked circle around the room.

Cooper lingered silently in the doorway.

"Why the fuck isn't he here!" Starsky demanded, throwing his hands up in the air. He turned, looking worriedly at Cooper as the details of his conversation the night before came rushing back, his painful words to Hutch echoing in his head.

'Go home, Hutch. Go back to your family. You don't belong here anymore.'

Is that what Hutch had done? Left in the middle of the night at Starsky's insistence? But who leaves in the middle of the night? Starsky considered the thought. People who don't want to be seen or who are taken against their will.

"Shit," Starsky mumbled.

Pushing through the doorway, he strode to his own bedroom. Grabbing his gun holster from the nightstand, he was shocked by its contents.

"My gun's gone, too!" Starsky fumed, throwing the empty holster to the floor in frustration. He ran his hand through his curls and let out an exasperated breath. "Damn it!"

Cooper's gaze dropped to the ground and he crossed his arms, his hands finding his sides. He held himself tightly, fighting the overwhelming feeling that things were falling apart.

"So is your car," Cooper whispered quietly.

Starsky's head shot up and he set stunned eyes on Cooper.

"No," he disagreed. "That's not possible. That would mean..."

Starsky's didn't finish his sentence; instead he strode to the large window in the living room. Pulling the curtains back, his eyes scanned the empty street outside. Cooper was right. The Torino was missing from where he had left it.

"Fuck!" Starsky shouted. "What *is* going on!?"

He pulled his hand back from the curtains and they fell to cover the window once again, settling in a slight back and forth motion. Starsky watched the movement, his brain frantic.

Why would Hutch steal his gun and his car? What the hell was he thinking?

Reality dawning on him, Starsky's eyes met Cooper's and he stared at the younger man intently. Hutch had known details he and Cooper hadn't. Hutch had known where Carter was, and he had known all along that the FBI didn't view Carter as a threat.

"Cooper," Starsky said quietly. A horrible feeling was filing his stomach. "I think you had it wrong... I think *we* had it wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been thinking a lot about what Briggs told us the other day." Starsky paused. Biting his lower lip, he turned away from Cooper and set his gaze on the wall. "We've been so focused on finding Carter, on *protecting* Hutch from Carter, we didn't think about any other option."

Cooper's arms dropped to his sides. He tilted his head and considered the words. His brows furrowed and his jaw dropped as he absorbed Starsky's suspicion. "Starsky, you don't think," he paused, his heartrate quickening, "that Hutch came back to *find* Carter?"

Starsky pursed his lips and shrugged sadly.

"Shit," Cooper breathed, planting his hands on his hips. "Starsky, if that's the case... I led Hutch right to him."

Breaking out of his inactivity, Starsky snatched his tennis shoes from the floor, grabbed his windbreaker from the back of the couch, and moved to gather his empty holster from his bedroom.

"W-where would he go?" Starsky demanded as he returned to stand in front of Cooper. "If Hutch went after Carter, where would he take him?"

"I don't know!" Cooper exclaimed. Stressed, he turned in place and ran his fingers through his hair, leaving it messed and sticking up. "He was your best friend. I barely know him. Starsky, are you sure he would go after Carter?"

"I don't know," Starsky whispered, snapping his jacket. He looked at Cooper seriously. "I would like to say no, but at this point," he threw up a hand in frustration. "I don't know what he would do."

"We have to find him," Cooper stated frantically. "Where would he go?"

Starsky shook his head, his harsh words from the night before haunting him. Had he pushed Hutch into this? Had he left Hutch feeling like he didn't have anything left to lose?

Meeting each other's eyes, Cooper and Starsky simultaneously provided the same answer.

"The warehouse."

XX

The drive to the abandoned warehouse, where Hutch and Michael Bennett were discovered, was silent and agonizing.

Cooper snuck peaks at Starsky from the driver's seat of his Datsun as he pushed the gas pedal to the floor and weaved in and out of traffic. Starsky was clearly agitated, his body language rigid and his bottom lip stuck between his teeth. Cooper knew Starsky was fixating on the same question he couldn't get out of his mind.

What were they going to find when they arrived?

"Can you drive any faster?" Starsky growled suddenly.

The question was rhetorical, and ignoring it, Cooper offered something else entirely. "It's okay," he lied. "Starsky, this will all be okay. I just know it."

"Yeah." Starsky rubbed his hand over his face in an effort to calm his nerves, an action he knew was in vain.

It seemed like hours before Cooper pulled his car through the open fence surrounding the warehouse. Driving on the dusty old path leading to the entrance of the building, Starsky and Cooper scanned their surroundings.

Starsky's heart dropped when his gaze set on the bright red Torino parked in front of the building, its red paint shining like a beacon in front of the large, eerie, timeworn building.

"Son-of-a-bitch," he swore.

"That doesn't mean anything, Starsky," Cooper tried to sooth, despite his own reservations.

Pulling up next to the Torino, Cooper had only put the car in park when Starsky jumped from the vehicle.

"Starsky!" he yelled, frantically pulling his keys from the ignition. "Wait for me!" Getting out of the car, Cooper chased after Starsky who was already pulling the door to the warehouse open. "Stop!" he insisted, pushing the door back.

Starsky glared at him.

"You can't go rushing in there to save the day by yourself," Cooper chastised in a whisper. "You don't have a gun, remember?"

Starsky looked at his empty holster then at Cooper's gun, sitting in its rightful place, strapped to the man's side.

"You're right," Starsky agreed. He held out his hand expectantly. "Give me yours."

"What?" Cooper scoffed. He looked at Starsky, insulted. "No."

Starsky glared at Cooper. "Come on, kid," he growled. "Either I go rushin' in there with no gun or you give me yours."

They stared each other down stubbornly for a moment, each man refusing to give into the demands of the other. Taking in Starsky's firm expression and his fiery eyes, Cooper realized Starsky wasn't going to back down.

"Fine," Cooper breathed in exasperation. He removed his gun and reluctantly handed over to his partner.

"Stay behind me," Starsky ordered. Holding the gun in one hand, he reached for the building's door handle with the other.

"That was supposed to be *my* line," Cooper grouched.

Walking through the entrance of the building, Cooper and Starsky were taken aback by what they found. The large building was silent. The floor was dirty and littered with small discarded pieces of trash and wood, but it was the boxes that neither man was expecting.

Boxes, too many to count, were stacked above eyelevel, acting as a wall to prevent them from seeing more than a foot inside the building. In the center of the boxes, there was a gap providing an entry to a makeshift maze.

"What the fuck?" Starsky mumbled. Placing Cooper's weapon in the back pocket of his jeans, he walked the distance to the wall.

"This isn't right," Cooper breathed in exasperation. "Where the hell did all these boxes come from? This was a crime scene, for Christ sake!"

"Nothing about this makes sense, Cooper." Starsky said softly. He reached his hand out and trailed fingers across the wall of boxes. Stopping in front of the gap serving as an entrance, he looked at his partner. "Let's see what's at the end of this."

Cooper nodded and followed Starsky into the makeshift maze. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like what they found.

XX

Walking wordlessly through the disorienting curves of the maze, Cooper and Starsky were on high alert, each man trying to move as quickly and quietly as possible.

They had been walking for a few minutes when they heard the beginnings of a muffled conversation. Starsky hesitated for a moment, straining to make out any specifics of what was being said. But he couldn't; the tones were low and too distorted by the walls of boxes.

Grabbing Cooper's elbow, Starsky nodded his head and the two quickened their pace. Each passing moment bringing them closer to the end of the maze, and making the muffled conversation easier to hear.

"...I can't believe you," a man's voice stated. "After all the fun we had. After all the games we played... You're being a very sore winner, Hutchinson. You won, remember? They wanted you both dead, but you beat Bennett, so I left *you* alive, and this is how you repay me?"

"That *isn't* true!" Hutch's voice rang out. "You didn't leave me alive on purpose! It was an accident. It just happened that way."

Cooper and Starsky shared a worried glance as they approached the end of their winding journey.

"*Shit*," Cooper breathed taking in the scene before him.

Hutch stood, his back facing them, his feet planted firmly on the ground. He held Starsky's gun in one hand and pinched the bridge of his nose with the other.

Standing beyond Hutch, his head bloody and face bruised, was Carter. Leaning up against a cement pillar, his hands were cuffed in front of him.

"He stole my fuckin' cuffs, too," Starsky whispered in annoyance. He turned to Cooper, grabbed the front of his shirt, and he stared at him seriously. "Cooper," he breathed. His words almost too quiet to hear. "Go radio Dobey; get him down here, now."

"But-"

"*Now!*" Starsky hissed. Letting go of Cooper, he pushed him back toward the maze.

Not wanting to leave Starsky to negotiate with Hutch alone, Cooper lingered for a moment, uneasiness settling on his handsome features. It wasn't until Starsky turned and glared at him once more that Cooper let out a soft sigh and departed with a nod.

Crouching low on the ground to avoid being seen, Starsky turned his attention to Hutch and Carter.

Carter was smiling manically, and Hutch had begun pacing in front of his hostage.

"You're so dumb," Carter spat. "Do you think they don't want this, too?"

Hutch stopped suddenly. His brows furrowing, he walked toward Carter and shoved the end of Starsky's Berretta in between the other man's temples. "Shut up!" he bellowed. "Shut up or I will kill you!"

Inhaling sharply, Starsky stood from his hiding spot. This was going to end badly and he needed to intervene. Touching Cooper's gun in his back pocket, he quietly made his way to Hutch and Carter.

"Aren't you going to do that anyway?" Carter teased with a satisfied smile.

"I-I..." Hutch started then hesitated, shaking his head in confusion. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do." He pushed out a deep breath and took a few steps back, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Still unseen, Starsky stopped in his tracks. He watched his ex-partner as Hutch cleared his throat and rubbed at his chest agitatedly.

"*Jesus...* that is so like you," Carter spat. "Mr. Never-think-things-through. Always rushing in to do something, and then, once he gets there, he doesn't have a clue what needs to be done." His shoulders sinking, Carter's eyes narrowed in annoyance. "Well, you better fucking figure it out,"

he growled. "You don't have much more time before somebody notices we're not where you're supposed to be."

Hutch looked at Carter suspiciously. He moved to stand in front of him once more. "What do you mean by that?" he pressed quietly.

Carter rolled his eyes and sighed. "The plan," he stated matter-of-factly. "You can't tell me now, after everything you've been through-after everything you've seen-that you don't understand how these things work. You don't get a choice in the matter. They wind you up and watch from the sidelines as you do exactly what they set you up to do. You kill me, you're only doing what they want you to."

"Bullshit," Hutch growled, pointing the gun at Carter once more.

"Hutch?" Starsky whispered softly.

His face contorting with shock, Hutch turned to see Starsky softly padding towards him.

"What are you doin', Hutch?" Starsky asked quietly, his face soft and understanding. He wouldn't push, especially not with how unstable Hutch seemed to be.

"Starsky," Hutch whispered. "W-what are you doing here?"

"I came to find you," Starsky answered. He nodded at the gun in Hutch's outstretched hand. "And for my gun." His eyes wide, he smiled gently. "Can I have my gun back, Hutch?"

His mouth agape, Hutch stared at Starsky a moment before backing away and shaking his head. "N-no," he answered, his gaze returning to Carter. "I have to finish this.... Please...go away, Starsky."

"I'm not gonna do that," Starsky said firmly, pulling Cooper's gun from his back pocket. The last thing he wanted to do was use it, but he would if he had to.

"Just leave!" Hutch bellowed. "I *need* to do this. This has to happen!"

Holding the gun firmly with both hands, Hutch moved to aim it at Carter's head once more. Starsky stopped in his tracks, frantically trying to think of the words to say to make his ex-partner stop what he was so intent on doing.

"Think about this for a second, Hutch," Starsky requested calmly. "You kidnapped Carter. You are holding him hostage with a gun you aren't authorized to have. If you shoot him, it's Murder One, buddy. There ain't going to be no comin' back from that."

"There's no coming back anyway!" Hutch screamed. His hands shook as his face set in a determined expression, and he pressed the gun to Carter's temple.

Carter made no attempt to move; he smiled happily instead.

"Pull the trigger," Carter coaxed. "Do it. Do it now."

Hutch bit his lip and closed his eyes, his finger slightly pressing on the trigger.

"No, Hutch!" Starsky pressed insistently, as he walked to stand next to his ex-partner. "Don't do this, Hutch. This isn't you.

"You don't know who I am, remember?" Hutch growled desperately.

"Yeah, you don't know him anyway, Starsky." Carter laughed. His eyes shined with excitement as he watched the interaction between the two. "Besides you can't save him."

"Will you shut up?" Starsky yelled, looking at Carter in disgust. "What the hell is wrong with you? You wanna die?"

Carter didn't answer. Winking at Starsky, his face was overcome by a wild smirk. Troubled by Carter's erratic behavior, Starsky turned his attention back to Hutch.

"Hutch," Starsky breathed. "Stop. Think about what you are doing," he pleaded. "Give me the gun. Please." He held out his hand expectantly. "You don't have to do this."

Hutch backed away, shaking his head furiously. "Yes I do," he whispered thickly. His eyes filling with frustrated tears, Hutch lowered the weapon but still gripped it tightly in his hands. "It's the only way to make things right. It's the only way to make it okay."

"Killing Carter isn't going to fix anything," Starsky appealed delicately. He slowly made his way closer to Hutch. He stopped when they were side-by-side, their shoulders almost touching. "Bennett is dead. But killing the man who did it... that isn't going to make what happened to either of you okay. This isn't justice, Hutch. It's revenge."

"Whoa!" Carter interjected suddenly. Pulling himself off the pillar, he raised his handcuffed arms and pointed at Starsky. "Is that what you think?" He looked at Hutch, his nose wrinkling in confusion. "They think I killed Bennett?"

Starsky considered Carter doubtfully.

"Well, well, well," Carter chortled. He looked between the two men before his blissful gaze fell on Hutch. "The tales we tell to avoid the truth."

"What is he talking about, Hutch?" Starsky demanded, his face falling, his uneasiness growing with each passing moment.

"Yeah, Hutch," Carter agreed. "What *am* I talking about?"

Hutch blinked numbly. He looked at Starsky, his wide eyes brimming with tears. He bit his lip for a moment before whispering the last secret he dared to keep. "I killed Michael Bennett."

The words hung in the air and Starsky took a step back, shocked by the disclosure. Carter laughed once more, and Starsky fought the urge to punch the man out. This wasn't funny. If the information was true, it was the opposite of humorous.

"What?" Starsky asked finally. "But you," he pointed to Hutch, his eyes wide with shock, "you, were abducted and *held*. You almost died, too. How could you possibly have killed Bennett?"

Hutch didn't answer. He was too lost in guilt and pain to respond. His haunted eyes fell to the floor and he ignored the two men completely. Backing up, he dropped Starsky's gun, and pressed his hands on the top of his head.

Taking in the devastation of his ex-partner, Starsky saw red. Blinded by fury, he advanced on Carter, pushing the man up against the cement pillar. "What the hell happened?" he growled. "What the fuck did you do to him?"

Carter smiled and shrugged. Starsky pressed his forearm against the man's throat. "Tell me or I will kill you myself."

"Ah, ah, ah, Detective Starsky," Carter snickered. "Murder One, remember? No coming back from that."

"You fucking--"

"STARSKY!" a voice yelled out.

Still holding on to Carter, Starsky glanced back to see Detective Cooper running toward them.

"What are you doing, man?" Cooper questioned. He looked at Hutch apprehensively, taking in the man's sunken shoulders and devastated expression.

"Nothin'," Starsky answered. He let go of Carter and backed away slowly. "He was just getting' under my skin a bit."

Cooper frowned. "Yeah," he breathed and nodded at Hutch, who was standing alone, his eyes squeezed shut and arms wrapped around himself tightly. "What's going on over there?"

Starsky's gaze shot to Hutch. Finding his ex-partner lingering a distance away, his back turned from the group, Starsky inhaled sharply and walked over to him.

Cooper regarded Carter uneasily then followed on Starsky's heels.

"Hey, Hutch?" Starsky asked to Hutch's turned back. Starsky reached out a hand and grasped his shoulder firmly. "Hey--"

Feeling Starsky's touch, Hutch sniffled and wiped a hand across his eyes. He took a deep breath and turned just in time to see Carter standing beyond them, his face set in a sinister smile as he held Starsky's gun firmly in his cuffed hands.

Then everything unraveled.

Hutch yelled.

Cooper turned.

Seeing Carter with his gun, Starsky pulled Cooper's out of his back pocket. Both Starsky and Cooper fired at the same time. Carter missed but Starsky didn't. His bullet hit Carter in the chest. The man took a step back, his face reflecting shock then pain.

"Tag," Carter pointed his finger at Hutch. "You're it," he whispered, then fell to the ground.

Cooper rushed to Carter. Bending down, he checked the fallen man's pulse. Not finding one, he shook his head and found Starsky's eyes. "He's dead," he whispered.

Starsky nodded. Looking to Hutch, he found his eyes dull and his breath coming in deep gasps.

"Something's wrong!" Starsky yelled. His hand found its way to Hutch's limp arm and he offered him a comforting squeeze. "I think he's having a breakdown or something."

And suddenly, DobeY was there, breaking through the entrance of the box maze, an army of uniformed police officers with their guns drawn trailing behind him.

Cooper looked to the crowd of officers and groaned. He stood and marched to the large man. "You're too fucking late!" he accused DobeY. His eyes furious, he pointed a finger in the large man's face. "The show's already fucking over!"

DobeY scowled at the young detective. "Where the hell did all these boxes come from?" he bellowed, then nodded at the body on the ground. "And who the hell shot Carter?"

Cooper opened his mouth to continue his verbal assault, but hesitated as he turned to look at Hutch and saw Starsky's features fall. Something was wrong.

"HUTCH!" Starsky cried.

Starsky grabbed at Hutch's shoulders as the blond man's feet came out from under him and he slowly sank to his knees. Starsky eased Hutch down on his back, and it was then Cooper saw it. Hutch's shirt, slowly becoming saturated from a growing blood stain.

Carter hadn't missed after all.

"NO, NO, NO!!!" Starsky screamed.

Desperately stripping himself of his jacket, he lifted Hutch's blood soaked shirt and pressed the jacket to the wound with as much pressure as he could manage.

"Somebody get an ambulance!" DobeY bellowed.

Cooper ran over to kneel by Hutch, watching helplessly as Hutch struggled to breathe and choked on the blood filling his mouth.

This was bad. Very, very bad.

"You're gonna be okay," Starsky comforted softly. "Everything's going to be all right."

Hutch lifted his hand to Starsky, who didn't see it. He was too intent of stopping the bleeding of the wound. Cooper nudged Starsky's shoulder and nodded at the outstretched hand, then moved his hand's to cover Starsky's bloody jacket. Starsky took Hutch's hand into his blood-covered ones.

"Hutch," Starsky breathed, squeezing his hand tightly.

"You..." Hutch sputtered, his eyes closing with effort.

"Don't talk, babe. Help is comin'. You just gotta hang on."

"Y-you..." Hutch started again, his eyes glassy but determined. "H-have... to know..." he paused to take a hindered breath. "I-I love you... n-no... lie."

"I know," Starsky cried. "I love you too, dummy. Please, don't do this, Hutch. I just got you back. You can't leave me again."

But the words came too late. Cooper hung his head and Starsky sobbed as Hutch's body became limp and his eyes shut.

Chapter 20

May 26, 1979

Darkness was all he knew. His body felt fluid, and he heard no noise, except for a strange beeping.

He was so tired.

He focused all his energy 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. Then he felt someone grip his hand.

"Come on, Kenneth," a soft familiar voice coaxed. "I know you're awake. Open your eyes."

Hutch struggled to comply and once he did, he was met with a warm smile. Hutch blinked his bleary eyes and swallowed dryly, his foggy mind trying to place where he was and why. He felt his father's hands on his chest as he tried to move from the bed.

"Easy... Easy," Richard whispered. He softly pushed Hutch to lay back. "It's is way too soon for you to be making quick movements." Letting go of his son, Richard took a seat in the chair next to the bed. His face reflected an emotion Hutch had never seen him display before. Anguish.

"We have to stop doing this, son," Richard Hutchinson chastised softly. "I don't think my heart can take any more phone calls."

"Dad?" Hutch croaked, his voice painfully dry and scratchy. He had the vaguest feeling that something had gone terribly wrong. "W-what's wrong?"

Rubbing his hand over his chin, Richard pursed his lips. He regarded his son sadly for a moment then shook his head.

"Well," Richard said finally, his soft voice strained, "you really did it, son." He clasped his hands in front of him and continued. "You were bound and determined to ruin your life, and that's exactly what you did." He paused, rubbing his hand over his face. "I know quiet life in the mid-west wasn't what you wanted, but it could have been a good life, son."

As tears threatened to fall, Hutch closed his eyes tightly. He felt sick and his stomach turned painfully. "Da-ad," Hutch sobbed. Taking a shaky breath, he stared tearfully at the ceiling. This was all wrong.

Richard stood and quietly made his way to the window. He cleared his throat as he took in the full parking lot below. He watched various people as they made their way to and from the large hospital, trying to find the words to tell his son how much his life was going to change.

"Why?" Richard asked brokenly. "Why couldn't you just let it go? Why couldn't you have just stayed home? You were safe. I would have kept you safe."

Hutch didn't respond. He had no memory of what his father was speaking of or the events that led him to be hospitalized.

XX

Standing in the sparsely filled hospital waiting room, Cooper leaned heavily against the wall. Crossing his arms, his head tilted to rest the side of his head on the cold plaster. Closing his eyes Cooper forced deep calming breaths. His guilt over Hutch's drastic behavior towards Carter, and his own role in what had happened, threatened to overwhelm him.

How on earth had they gotten here again?

The sound of someone clearing a throat caught his attention. Cooper opened his eyes and eyes scanned the people who sat in the uncomfortable chairs of the room. An elderly woman looked up from her magazine and offered him a warm smile that he couldn't return.

"Will you sit down already?" a harsh voice whispered. "You're makin' me nervous."

Cooper turned his attention to a neighboring chair.

Starsky was leaning forward, his elbows placed on his knees and cheeks resting firmly in his hands, glaring at him. "Sit down," Starsky ordered firmly.

Exhaling heavily, Cooper complied with the order. He sank heavily in the chair next to his partner. Neither man spoke for a few minutes, each held hostage to their own regrets and their mutually silent burden.

What was going to happen now?

"I don't understand why we can't see him," Cooper whispered suddenly. Slouching in his chair, Cooper moved his hands to smooth at his jeans nervously, before biting his lip and popping his knuckles, one-by-one.

The sickening sound elicited another glare from Starsky. "Will you quit?" Starsky hissed in annoyance.

"Sorry."

Sitting up straight, Starsky reached his arms up in the air. He blew out a breath, his shoulders relaxing slightly after the restricted stretch. He held the pose for a moment before dropping his arms and kicking his feet on the floor. He sighed heavily, trying not to think about Cooper's question or his sudden overwhelming need to be close to Hutch.

Richard Hutchinson had stayed tightlipped on the details of Hutch's injuries. Hutch was alive, Starsky knew that much, but he had been prevented from visiting him since he had awoken the day before.

Sitting nervously in the claustrophobic waiting room next to an antsy Cooper, Starsky ached to be close to Hutch -- to touch him, feel his beating heart under his hand -- but, most of all, to verify that he was still alive with his own eyes. And then Starsky would tell Hutch how he really felt. He would let him in on the earth-shattering realization he had had while frantically willing Hutch to live as he lay bleeding out on the dirty cement floor of the warehouse.

Starsky loved Hutch.

He no longer cared what the man had done or the lies he had told. None of it seemed to matter anymore. They were both alive and, more importantly, they belonged together. Maybe they couldn't have what they had before, but they could have something. And that something was worth fighting for.

His overpowering desire was both confusing and exhilarating. For the first time in a long time, Starsky was excited for what tomorrow would bring.

Looking at the entry to the waiting room, Starsky found Richard Hutchinson standing in the doorway. The man considered him sadly before pursing his lips and gesturing him over.

Taking a deep breath, Starsky stood. It was time to face the future and whatever it held.

Cooper jumped up next to him, but Starsky waved him back. "You stay here," he instructed.

Starsky walked over to Richard and was surprised when the man grasped him on the arm and ushered him into a private meeting room.

XX

Head turned and eyes fixed on the wall opposite the door, Hutch's brain felt fuzzy and his body exhausted. He tried his best to ignore the panic and desolation threatening to overwhelm him.

What had he done?

He was vaguely aware of soft footsteps as someone entered his room. Assuming the presence was his father returning, Hutch wasn't alarmed by the intruder. But when the person spoke, Hutch eyes widened and a chill ran down his spine.

"Detective Hutchinson."

Hutch turned his head abruptly, resting shock-filled eyes on Special Agent Briggs.

"How are you feeling?" Briggs asked as he sat down in the chair next to the bed.

"W-what are you doing here?" Hutch whispered. His heart beating wildly in his chest, he glanced at the doorway, hoping to see his father or someone-anyone-approaching the room.

"Now," Briggs reprimanded, "what kind of greeting is that?" He followed Hutch's gaze to the door and chuckled. "Forget about it, Hutchinson, your father isn't going to be back anytime soon."

Crossing his legs comfortably, Briggs leaned back in his the chair. "He and Starsky are having an intense dialogue." He smirked and added in a whisper, "They're talking about you, you know?"

"What do you want?" Hutch demanded. His voice sounding much stronger than he felt.

"Oh," Briggs hedged, "I just wanted to check in on you." He paused thoughtfully for a moment, his hand moving to rub at his chin. "I was very pleased with your actions toward Carter," he offered quietly.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, of course you don't." Briggs laughed. "You do feign innocence *so well*." His eyes shining with pride, he continued, "The boxes were a very nice touch."

"What do you want?" Hutch breathed.

"I stopped by to speak with your father," Briggs answered. "And now I'm here to talk to you."

"But why?"

"I just wanted to make you knew something..." Licking his lips, Briggs lowered his voice to a chilling whisper. "You and Carter weren't all that different, you know. You were placed in similar situations but you..." he paused pointing a finger at Hutch, "you are so much stronger than he ever was. So much more capable-even after all you've been through. The injuries you sustained-"

"Are you ever going to let me go?" Hutch interrupted weakly, his eyes closing in defeat. "Are you ever just going to leave me alone?"

Briggs looked at Hutch seriously. He pursed his lips and cracked his knuckles before responding. "To use Carter's words," Briggs stated, "game over, Hutchinson. You won." He turned and looked absently out the window. "But sometimes winners are called back to defend their titles. That is something you should be prepared for."

"How would you know what Carter's words were?" Hutch croaked, ripping the material of the hospital sheet in both his hands.

Briggs didn't answer. Instead, he saluted Hutch and smiled in satisfaction as he stood.

"How would you know what Carter said to me?" Hutch asked again.

But it was too late. Briggs was already gone.

XX

Making his way down the hallway to Hutch's room, Cooper was taken aback when Agent Briggs passed him, walking in the opposite direction. Hesitating in place, he blinked a few times before turning.

"Hey!" Cooper shouted. "What are you doing here?"

Briggs didn't answer, and Cooper frowned as he walked quickly after the departing man.

"What do you want?" Briggs demanded.

"I could ask you the same thing."

Letting out a sigh, Briggs shook his head and quickened his pace.

"Why did you call me?" Cooper fumed. He hastened his stride, matching Briggs step for step. "All the people you have at your disposal, when you discovered Carter was missing you called me. *Why?*"

Briggs smiled in satisfaction, and, shocked by the man's pleasure, Cooper stopped in place. Watching the man walk away, he was left with one remaining question.

"You planned all of this didn't you?" Cooper yelled after him.

The only answer Cooper received was the sound of Special Agent Briggs's laughter as he continued down the hallway.

XX

Leaning back in his chair, Starsky crossed his arms and frowned as Richard Hutchinson droned on about his son's future.

"...I just want him to be safe," Richard ended finally. Taking a breath, he licked his lips and stared at Starsky expectantly.

"Are you done?" Starsky asked, clearly frustrated. He uncrossed his arms and tapped his fingers on the small table sitting between them.

"Yes." Richard nodded, his eyes narrowing. He re-adjusted himself in the waiting room chair, assessing Starsky carefully, preparing himself for the outburst the younger man seemed to be about to unleash.

"You can't be serious." Standing up, Starsky looked at Richard accusingly. "You can't tell me you're just gonna do what they want." He hesitated. Taking a frustrated breath, he ran his hands through his hair. "There is more to this.... You have to see that-"

Richard held up a finger silencing Starsky's objection. "He is unstable, Mr. Starsky," he said. "It's undeniable. What Kenneth did was a direct result of a mental breakdown. Symptoms like that... symptoms of violence do not just go away. No matter how much we wish them to."

"Hutch isn't violent!" Starsky fumed, throwing his hands up in exasperation. He paced the small room like a caged animal. "He isn't crazy, He doesn't belong in a facility-"

"He doesn't have a choice," Richard interrupted quietly. "The FBI-Special Agent Briggs-has presented a very generous offer. He will not pursue charges against Kenneth for kidnapping and holding Mr. Carter, but only if he is admitted to a facility that can handle his needs." Richard's shoulders sank under the weight of reality. "You act as though this is what I wanted for him," he added in a whisper.

Starsky shut his eyes firmly. A wave of despair overtook him as he realized Richard was right. Hutch didn't have a choice. None of them did. And although his first instinct was to viciously defend Hutch and his actions, the one truth remained.

Hutch had chosen this path.

Hutch had decided to come back. He elected to steal Starsky's car and gun, and he had abducted Carter, a decision that had directly resulted in the man's death. All actions that didn't seem to fit the profile of a man who had a firm grip on sanity.

The truth overwhelming him, Starsky sat heavily in the chair across from Richard and relinquished the last bit of hope he had left.

"Fine," he whispered his eyes focused on the toes of his battered Adidas. "When will he go?"

"As soon as he's healthy enough to be discharged."

"Can I see him?" Starsky looked at Richard, his eyes sparkling with sorrow.

Tilting his head slightly, Richard whispered, "Of course."

XX

The hospital room was quiet and dimly lit.

Waking suddenly, Hutch blinked a few times, trying to dismiss the feeling that someone was watching him. His eyes scanned the room before resting on the chair next to his bed, finding a familiar man staring at him.

"Hey, Blintz," Starsky greeted with a sad smile. "How are you feeling?"

"What are you doing here?" Hutch asked hoarsely. He shifted uncomfortably in the bed but found his movement impeded by his injuries and the medical equipment connected to him.

"I came to see you," Starsky answered. Standing, he moved closer to the bed, his hands resting on the white sheet dangerously close to Hutch's own. "Your dad talk to you?" he asked, his voice heavy.

"Yeah."

"You know what's going down then?" Starsky asked. He was shocked; his voice sounded so much stronger than he felt.

Hutch nodded. Then, his eyes filling, he bit his lip and turned his head to face the doorway. He didn't want Starsky to see him. Not like this, and not after what he had done.

It would have been so much easier not to say goodbye.

"I'm sorry I ruined everything," Hutch said brokenly. "I-I wish I could just take it all back, make it s-so we never met.... Make it so I never h-hurt you."

Starsky's reaction was not what he expected. Grabbing Hutch's hand in both of his own, Starsky gripped it tightly.

"I don't," Starsky said, comfortingly. "But I don't want to talk about that. Not right now. Please, Hutch."

Shocked by the plea, Hutch assess Starsky uncertainly. "What do you want to talk about then?" he asked.

"About you and me," Starsky answered softly. "Us, I guess."

"I didn't think there was an 'us'."

Starsky shrugged. He caressed Hutch's hand lightly. "I was so angry, Hutch. You don't even know... everything you did. Everything you hid from me... I tried so hard to hate you but I couldn't. Then I tried to forget you, but I couldn't even do that. So, I decided I needed to stop loving you, because that was the only thing I thought I could do."

Hutch's heart sank. Shutting his eyes tightly, he fought a rush of anguish as Starsky continued, his voice thick with tears.

"But... last week, when I woke up and you were gone... and t-then I found you with Carter... and I saw how desperate and hurt you were..." Starsky paused to wipe the tears trickling down his cheeks. "And then having to hold you while you were dying...*Jesus...*" he shuttered at the memory. " Well, that's when I knew."

Opening his eyes, Hutch forced himself to look at Starsky. Hutch's tearful blue eyes met Starsky's glistening ones. "Knew what?" Hutch asked softly.

Starsky's face contorted as he let out a quiet sob. "I tried," Starsky continued. "But I can't... I can't stop loving you. I can *never* stop loving you.... I think that's why I've been so angry at you. Because the truth is I-I never stopped wanting you... *or needing you-*"His voice failing him, Starsky looked away and tried desperately to hold himself together.

Hutch wept at Starsky's declaration. How many times had he thought about being presented with this very situation? This was everything he ever wanted, but the moment was tainted by each man's knowledge that it wouldn't last.

Hutch was leaving again. And this time, neither man knew if he would be coming back.

"I missed you so much, Starsk," Hutch cried. "I love you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm... I'm sorry-" his mantra was cut off as his face was grabbed roughly and Starsky's lips touched his own.

The kiss was deep, full of passion and desperation. Hutch took a deep breath through his nose, trying urgently to remember everything about the kiss. The taste of the salt from their tears intermingled with Starsky's minty breath. The smell of Starsky's cologne replacing the sterile smell of the hospital room.

It was a moment Hutch wanted to keep forever. It was one he hadn't dared hope would happen. After all this time, despite his lies and secrets, their love had survived.

Pulling back and breathing deeply, Starsky rested his forehead against Hutch's. They were both crying in earnest as Hutch reached up and wove his fingers in Starsky's hair, pressing their heads firmly together.

"I'm gonna be with you every step of the way, Hutch," Starsky vowed in a broken whisper. "A-as much as I can, babe. You aren't alone...We'll get through this. Whatever it takes."

The pain in the room was palatable. Starsky and Hutch clung to each other desperately, both silently praying they could stay forever in each other's arms. Each trying to shield the other from the uncertainty tomorrow would bring.

June 15, 1979

It was a cloudy Friday morning that found Kenneth Hutchinson in the back of the white transport vehicle. The drive was long and quiet and he fought cramps in his legs, as he lay strapped on the hospital gurney. Much to his relief, his hands had been left unrestrained-his father had seen to that-but it did nothing to ease the apprehension he felt in his chest.

An orderly sat on a seat next to the gurney. His eyes hidden beneath dark sunglasses, the man stared out the van window in boredom as he snapped his bubblegum.

Pushing out a heavy sigh, Hutch brought his arm to his nose, breathing in the clean scent of the red-hooded sweatshirt Starsky had given him when they said goodbye. The smell was comforting, and it brought back blissful memories of a better time.

The orderly raised his eyebrows and muttered something Hutch couldn't hear. But the disapproval in the other man's face was enough to make him pull his arm back and place it in on his lap. The last thing he needed was for people to think he was actually unstable.

"We gonna get there on time?" the orderly asked, looking at the front seat of the vehicle.

"Yep," the driver responded noncommittally.

The orderly scowled at Hutch and popped his bubblegum again. "Thank god," he muttered.

Hutch offered the man a small smile, but it quickly faded as the van pulled to a stop in front of the large psychiatric hospital he would be living in.

Hutch jumped as he heard the driver slamming the door behind him.

"Come on," the orderly growled as the driver opened the rear door of the van.

The two attendants pulled Hutch's gurney from the vehicle. The sudden movement lurched him forward, and Hutch bit his lip as the straps of the gurney dug into his still tender stomach. Hutch closed his eyes and breathed deeply, forcing himself to ignore the pain and his growing apprehension.

"Come on!" the orderly growled at the driver again as they pushed the gurney towards the entrance of the building. "Hurry up!"

"Yeah, yeah," the driver grumbled back. "What are you in hurry for, huh? After we drop him off we'll just be on the road to pick up another crazy."

"I like to keep a tight schedule..."

The two men continued bickering and the wheels of the gurney made an unsettling grinding noise as Hutch was pushed over the fragmented sidewalk. They were almost to the front door when Hutch opened his eyes to survey his new home. His jaw dropped as he took in the mammoth pillars, the barred windows, and the melancholy faded white color of the huge building.

It looked like something out of a dream or a terrible nightmare.

Hutch looked at the building numbly as the gurney rolled forward. His eyes filled with unwanted nervous tears, he clenched his jaw and forced himself to breath normally. He balled the excess material of the sleeves of Starsky's sweatshirt in his hands, silently repeating the words Starsky had whispered to him just hours before.

"I'm okay. Everything is going to be okay. Just a few short months and this will all be over."

The words did nothing to calm him however, because deep down Hutch knew the truth.

Starsky's words were lies.

END

End Notes: Is it really the end? Well, it is of Moving On... Stay tuned for the next (and final) installment of this little tale.

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