

**Summary:** "Why are you here anyway?" the woman asked.

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**Story Notes:** Written for [Dawnebeth's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" challenge](#).

**Categories:** Slash

**Genre:** AU Alternate Universe, Episode Related

**Warnings:** Possible Suicide Trigger; Drug Use

## **TROUBLED WATERS**

**by Spencer**

### **Prologue**

Roxy didn't recognize her reflection in the mirror anymore. Her soft curves had turned to sharp edges long ago. And she was hurting. Hurting from poverty, loneliness, from rejection. But most of all, she was hurting from the drug that was slowly killing her. More accurately, the lack of it. But still she wanted more. Because for a few precious moments, it turned all the pain into ecstasy.

A knock on her door distracted her from the job at hand. Two cops, and a pretty lady, stood on the other side. The woman was a stranger but the cops she knew well. Their warm smiles and blue eyes were a welcome change from the men who usually came to her door. These two cops weren't like any men she'd ever known. And she'd known plenty. She could get lost in eyes like theirs. If she hadn't already been lost.

Despite the john sitting on her bed, she ushered them in.

"Come on in. Let's have a party." She wrapped her thin robe around her thinner shoulders and smiled as prettily as she knew how.

The john sat up and hastily zipped his pants and pulled his t-shirt over his over-sized belly, looking sheepishly from one to the other of the intruders and thinking how he'd explain a bust to his wife. But they practically ignored him as he brushed past them and scurried out into the hall. It wasn't her business they were interested in. They'd come for something else. The name of Roxie's source who may be passing off strychnine-laced Horse. She would have helped them if she could. But she couldn't even help herself.

"Business hasn't been too good lately." Roxy wasn't above begging. She chewed her lip and rubbed her arms against a chill only she could feel.

Hutch's soft heart got the better of him. Hutch pressed some money in her palm as Starsky and the woman, a reporter, hung back. "Buy yourself something pretty," he told her.

She squeezed the money with grateful desperation in her fist. "Come back when you're off duty," she invited him.

"I would, but my Catechism teacher would have a fit," Hutch gave her a little wink as he left. Somehow she knew it wasn't just his sense of morality that kept him from her bed. Plenty of her johns were married. They just weren't in love and had no loyalty. Hutch was full to bursting with both.

Sometime later, not that time mattered anymore, someone had put a mellow song on the juke box in the bar downstairs – a welcome respite from the nearly constant hockabilly twang and squalling guitars. The music floated up from the bar and into her room as she pulled a baggie from her bra.

*"When you're down and out  
When you're on the street  
When evening falls so hard  
I will comfort you."*

She heated the powder to liquid over a candle and tightened the strap around her arm.

*"I'll take your part, oh, when darkness comes  
And pain is all around  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down."*

Roxy felt the sting as the needle pierced her vein, then a rush of ecstasy. Then she felt nothing at all.

## Chapter One

He breathed deeply from the cool air and coughed, expelling the remains of a foul gas from his lungs, and his head cleared. He realized he was standing on the bank of broad river that roiled and churned before him in violent beauty. Behind him silvery gray fog swirled and shrouded the landscape, making it difficult to distinguish whether he was surrounded by mountains or meadows. He shivered, though not as much from the chill as a strange feeling of hopelessness that clung to the shadows.

Across the frothy water the sun shone bright as gold, illuminating gently rolling hills and the outline of a town in the distance, then majestic purple mountains that rose beyond that. The scene was more than idyllic. It was mesmerizing. Even viewing it from far off caused a wave of peace to wash over Hutch. He felt powerful forces pull him in like an embrace. Love. Belonging. That's where Starsky must be. He could *feel* it.

Only the treacherous river stood in his way. Its depth was indeterminate; jagged rocks and deadly current made it impossible to cross.

Impossible? No, Hutch would find a way. He *had* to.

Hutch hadn't been standing there long before he noticed a boat approach slowly yet steadily from the other side. A tall ferryman in a long dark robe stood in the stern, using a pole with graceful expertise to push the boat along as if trolling a Venetian canal rather than the churning whitewater.

"Welcome friend," the ferryman called out when he was a few yards off. As experienced as Hutch was at picking out the details of someone's appearance, the man seemed unusually non-descript. Other than his serenely set lips, patrician nose and eyes that glowed with an otherworldly light, the rest of his features were hidden by the hood of the robe. The shadow it cast made it impossible to distinguish his ethnicity. Even his movements and posture disguised his age, displaying neither the liveliness of youth nor the deliberateness of age.

The ethereal Everyman displayed a practiced smile as he eased the gondola-like craft alongside Hutch. "Do you have your toll?" He asked.

"Toll?" A feeling of relief washed over Hutch. The man was apparently there to ferry him across the river. Once Hutch made it across, he'd know how to find Starsky. All he had to do was follow the beat of his heart.

Hutch dug through the pockets of his jeans and jacket but came up empty handed. It had been a long time since he'd carried the spare change that had once kept Starsky supplied with chocolate bars. He didn't even have his wallet and badge. He'd left them on the bedside table that morning along with his gun.

The ferryman frowned. "Wasn't it explained to you?"

"No, nothing was explained to me." Hutch covered his mouth as he emitted one last dull cough. Then lowered his hand quickly, unable to wipe away the image of Starsky's blood leaking through his jacket and out between Hutch's fingers.

"I'm sorry. You should have been told." The ferryman said gently. "Something must have gone wrong."

Across the river, the rolling hills and city tugged at Hutch impatiently. Something going wrong didn't even begin to cover it.

The frantic water collided with the rocks and in his mind Hutch again heard the crack of gunfire and its accompanying echo against the parking garage walls. His breathing hitched as he relived for the thousandth time racing to the other side of the Torino and seeing Starsky curled on the ground.

It was his worst nightmare come true. Starsky's death would be their punishment for what they'd come to share. As if their kind of love was some celestial game they had refused to play by the rules. Outside Starsky's hospital room, Hutch had railed against the universal powers who had conspired to bring them together only to tear them apart.

But then days later Starsky's eyes had reopened and locked onto his. For a while both their hearts had gotten a second chance. They'd shared champagne in bed and toasted a new beginning.

It was all taken back from them in the blink of an eye. Hutch had been called to the hospital right after Gunther's sentencing. Fluid had unexpectedly built up in Starsky's lungs, he was told. Cardiogenic pulmonary edema. This time there was no magic bullet, no saving grace. Hutch held Starsky's hands as his friend slipped from earth.

Doctors don't have all the answers, a man in a white coat as sterile as his eyes told him, explained with gravitas. 'We're not miracle workers.'

'Then who *is*?' Hutch had raged. If anyone deserved a miracle, it was Starsky. Each time they thought they might win at something, the rules kept changing.

He thought maybe he'd thrown a chair but wasn't quite sure. Someone – Dobey? Huggy? – had grabbed hold of him and forced him to calm down. So he did. But only on the outside. On the inside it was as though a grenade had gone off, shattering every organ. Leaving nothing intact.

"I don't have money for a toll," Hutch told the ferryman through gritted teeth. He'd paid a price with every breath he took. Hadn't he paid enough?

"It's not up to me." The words were offered in apology, sounding sincere but not quite convincing.

"I have a friend on the other side. I'm sure he'll pay once I'm across." Hutch felt the pressure of frustration building like compressed steam. He'd come so far – sacrificed so much. He couldn't be left stranded here. He wanted to scream. But he doubted screaming would work any better now than it had then.

"I'm sorry. There are rules we have to follow," the ferryman explained as the rushing water buffeted his craft. He held it steady with his long staff and balanced with a wide legged stance but even so it was a precarious position that wouldn't last long.

Rules. Everywhere rules. Rules about what's right and what's wrong. Even when there doesn't seem to be any difference. Even when the end result is the same. It had all become too confusing. Rules about who's punished and who goes free. Rules about who lives and rules about who dies. Nothing had changed. Even here.

Hutch's hands tightened into fists. Starsky would come for him. He knew he would. Just like when he'd been trapped under that car on the mountainside. He hadn't even told Starsky where he was going that time. Had no way to contact him. But still Starsky came. He'd lifted his head from the dirt and caressed his cheek.

"We made it partner," Starsky had whispered in his ear. Hutch had almost lost hope his partner would come for him in time. But he did.

Then there was the time Starsky had written his name across the glass. That had to have broken some kind of rule, hadn't it? Garish graffiti defacing the pristine window? But just seeing Starsky's name when he'd opened his eyes was enough to keep Hutch holding on when a plague fought to take him away.

Death had staked its claim so many times but their claim to each other was stronger. They each had risked everything at one time or another to stay together, succeeding despite the odds. Until that day it all came crashing down.

Hutch reached out to the ferryman as he pushed his empty boat away from the shore. Fought to keep his gasp from becoming a sob.

How often had he and his partner flaunted the rules for what they believed in, especially when what they believed in most was each other? Enough to risk everything -- their jobs, their safety, their hearts. Their lives had become entwined. After a while even *they* lost track of where one ended and the other began.

And then they had broken one of the biggest rules of all. They had fallen in love with each other.

Maybe that's why Starsky had been taken from him. Maybe this was separation was their punishment. Still, Hutch had to believe that if he waited long enough, Starsky would come for him now. He sat down to wait.

## Chapter Two

The woman emerged soundlessly from out of the swirling mist. Hutch didn't even notice her until she had sat down next to him.

"Mind if I join you?" She asked, drawing up her knees and tucking her thin dress around her legs. Hutch wondered briefly where she came from but merely lifted his shoulders in an offhand shrug and turned his attention back to the boat's slow but steady progression across the troubled water. For now his sole focus was in finding a way across the river.

"Why didn't Charon take you across to the other side?" Her voice was friendly and pleasant, yet tinged with a hint of melancholy. Her skin was so pale it was nearly translucent, as if she might blend back into the fog at any moment.

"Charon?" The name meant nothing in this place of nothingness.

"The ferryman," she explained.

"Oh. He said something about a toll," he replied. The ferryman was nearly across now, seemingly oblivious to the two figures sitting on the bank. "I didn't know anything about a toll."

"Oh. I thought as much." She gave a small frown. "I've seen it before. I just wouldn't have expected it of you."

Hutch turned and looked at her closer then. She seemed strangely familiar. "How would you know anything about me?"

The woman appeared to be in her late twenties, with wisps of soft blonde hair lying at her shoulders. In another time and place she would have been attractive. Here she just looked otherworldly, ghostly. Hutch thought if he were to reach out and touch her she would disappear. In fact she looked, Hutch thought, much like he'd felt for quite a while. Transitory.

She smiled softly. "I know a lot about you, Ken Hutchinson. You'd be surprised. I know you're kind and caring and . . . generous."

Hutch looked back out across the water. "Maybe before. But none of that matters now." Beyond the verdant hills, the sun shimmered on the roofs of the town, casting them in an iridescent glow. Almost like the stained glass of a church. Everything about the place was enchanting.

"Why are you here anyway?" The woman asked.

Hutch pursed his lips. He could ask her the same question. If only he knew where *here* was. Nothing seemed to exist other than the fog and the river. Once more he found a barrier between where he was and where he wanted to be -- and with whom. Was it a physical place or merely a state of mind? It was irrelevant. In either case, *here* was where Starsky was *not*. Which made it empty. Meaningless. Just like before.

When his partner had let go of his hand that day in the hospital, there'd been nothing left for Hutch to hold onto. Without Starsky, Hutch had felt himself fading away a little more every day. He saw a little bit less of himself when he faced his reflection in the mirror.

His days were waking nightmares. His nights were haunted. He couldn't bear sleeping in the same bed he'd shared with Starsky. The bed where they'd fumbled so at first to show their feelings until it all had worked together like sorcerer's magic. A little of this, a little of that until the sparks ignited into blue flame

No one had never really understood their connection. Even them, themselves. At first they'd fought it -- with Gillian and Terri and dozens more. And then came Kira. Starsky's last grasp at "normal" love. But Hutch wouldn't let go. He'd wanted too badly what Kira had. Starsky. They'd finally figured it out that night. Whether wrong or right, he and Starsky were meant to be together. They'd finally just accepted it for what it was.

Without Starsky, Hutch was only half a man. Incomplete and lost. No one had been able to piece him back together. Not that Dobey and Huggy hadn't tried. Each in their own separate ways. But Dobey's heartfelt bluster and Huggy's streetwise wisdom just wasn't what he needed. He needed Starsky.

Left alone, Hutch began to make a ritual of sitting in the Torino where Starsky's presence still lingered. At first Hutch would take his customary place on the passenger side. If he kept his eyes straight ahead, he could make believe that Starsky was sitting at his left, like always. Then he'd close his eyes and lean back, trying to capture the last remnants of his scent – the freshness of a morning shower, the tang of garlic and spices from an impromptu picnic, a mingling of sweat and exhilaration at the end of the day.

When the ache became nearly unbearable, Hutch slid behind the wheel and let the leather of the seat enfold him. He ran his hands over the steering wheel and remembered Starsky's touch, that had turned from fumbling to firm. Late one night he turned the key and the engine flared to life. The car rumbled and pulsed, creating a sensation like a child must feel in the womb. He let it lull him. And like an infant pre-born he'd been reluctant to escape its sanctuary. Then he fell asleep, only to awaken on the bank of the turbulent river.

"I'm not exactly sure. One minute I was sitting in my partner's car, listening to the motor hum, and now I'm here." He remembered feeling sleepy, unable to keep his eyes open. Maybe this was all a dream.

Her response came as if she'd read his mind. "You're not dreaming, Hutch. I hate to tell you, but you're not in the land of the living anymore."

Her words weren't all that much of a surprise. Hutch hadn't been fully alive for quite awhile.

"Where *am* I then?" He asked.

"Between here and there."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Not hell, Hutch. But not Heaven either." She indicated the gleaming town across the river with a tilt of her head. "You've been caught in the land in between." The little wave she gave made her hands look like butterfly wings.

A cold foreboding reached like spectral fingers down his spine. "What is that river?" He asked.

"It's been called a lot of things," the woman told him. "You may have heard it referred to as Styx."

"The boundary between earth and the underworld." The chill settled in his blood making it feel like ice in his veins.

"Something like that. On the other side is what some have called Heaven. Eternal paradise." She turned to gaze wistfully across the water. "But not everyone gets to go there. Like Charon said, you have to have earned your way across."

"By good deeds? Is that it?" Hutch gritted his teeth as he thought of the stories he'd heard growing up in his strict Lutheran church. Some things had made sense, but so many others didn't. After a while he grew tired of trying to sort it all out.

"Yes and no. It's more about the how much you value the life you've been given during your time on earth. That's the toll Charon requires to Charon to take you across."

"I told him I didn't know about the toll." The unfairness he had felt before seemed to have followed him.

"That's because you came here too soon. Something must have gone wrong. You shouldn't have come. You weren't properly prepared."

She looked at him sadly and took one of his hands in hers. "Tell me what you remember." Her hands weren't as frozen as he felt. Although they were unnaturally cool to the touch, they weren't uncomfortably so.

"I was ss . . . sitting in Starsky's car. The Torino." Her touch seemed to pull the memories from him when he would have stayed silent. "The red tomato, I used to call it. I was trying to remember what he smelled like, what he felt like." Hutch closed his eyes the way he had in the car and when he opened them he saw the woman's eyes on him. Tears glistened and her expression was pained. He realized there was something familiar about her.

"I know you." He said.

"You did once," she admitted. "But that was in another time and place."

"You're Roxie."

The woman's face softened. "Roxie was a hooker and a junkie. She died from an overdose of tainted heroin." Roxie's lips lifted then in a soft smile. "But that doesn't matter anymore. Here I'm just Roxie. And all the pain is gone."

Hutch squeezed the hands that held his. "I'm sorry we couldn't do more to help you."

"You did enough, Hutch. Both you and Starsky. You didn't look past me like everyone else. You treated me like a person. I wouldn't have taken any help you offered. We would both have been fooling ourselves. I was too far gone and you'd been around enough to know it."

Hutch thought of the last time he'd seen the woman he knew as Roxie, shaking and begging in the filthy room about the bar. Sympathy had resonated through him like a struck tuning fork. Like her, he'd had his own upper room experience. He'd understood the pain and the craving she felt. The hopelessness. If it wasn't for Starsky he might have ended up the same way.

"Are you stuck on this side, too?"

"Yes, Hutch. I am. I threw away the life I was given. I didn't give it enough value to cross over."

Empathy vibrated through him once more. Roxie was stuck forever in this misty no-man's land. Pain didn't exist for her but neither did pleasure.

"It doesn't seem right," Hutch spoke his thoughts aloud. "You were an addict. It wasn't your fault."

"But the choices I made put me on that path. Hanging out with the wrong people. Thinking I could beat the system. Besides, I can't complain." She shrugged her shoulders, simultaneously pulling her hand from his grasp. "I could be somewhere far worse, I guess. We all have a price to pay for the lives we lived."

Hutch didn't want to ask what she meant by a place far worse. He'd been there once or twice.

Across the river a figure approached. Not the cloaked ferryman but another man, fairly young and dressed in faded jeans and t-shirt. Even from a distance, Hutch would have known him -- Heaven, hell, or anywhere in between. His cocky swagger and shock of dark curls.

Starsky.

Hutch stood up as his heart leapt in his chest. His partner had come back to him like in so many of his dreams. Starsky stopped on the bank and looked across to him. So near but yet so far. The raging waters of Styx separated them.

Starsky lifted up his hand to acknowledge him. Words would have been useless across the churning river so they just locked onto each other with their eyes.

"It's Starsky." Roxie stood alongside him.

Hutch nodded.

"You were sitting in his car. The motor had been running . . . ."

Hutch nodded once again as his eyes remained fixed on the man standing across from him.

"And now you're here. Don't you see, Hutch? That's what happened. It was just a terrible mistake." She turned from him and yelled out, "It was a mistake! Charon – did you hear? Come back!"

But her cries were pulled away from her as if by the swift-moving current.

Hutch paid little attention. Nothing else mattered but the man across the river and the unbridgeable distance that lay between them.

### Chapter Three

*Come on Silver Lady take my word  
I won't run out on you again believe me  
Oh I've seen the light . . . \*\**

Roxie looked slowly from Starsky to Hutch, following an invisible cord that seemed to run between them, tying them together even across the expanse. "You love him don't you?" She asked, a kind of wonder in her voice.

Hutch didn't need to answer.

"What's it like?" She asked him with a shy hesitation.

"Love?" *Can such a thing be put into words?* He thought. "It's the most powerful force in the universe." Hutch tried to explain. "It gives everything meaning. It makes the impossible possible."

Roxie nodded. "I'd always hoped something like that existed, although I've never known it myself."

"It does Roxie. Never doubt it." Hutch touched her softly on the arm and a warmth radiated through her.

She followed his gaze as he looked back at Starsky, then she began to pace the bank. "There has to be a way to get across. You don't deserve to be here."

"You don't either," Hutch turned his attention to her after a few more minutes.

"I told you before. I threw my life away. I didn't value it the way you did yours."

"How can you be so sure? There was a time I would have done the same as you."

Roxie stopped her pacing to stare at him. "What do you mean?"

"I got strung out once by a couple of goons who were looking for a girl. I knew where she was. I gave her up to them to get another hit. I would have given up anything to get more of the stuff. So I know what addiction can do to a person."

She rubbed her arms as if remembering the feel of the needles. "How'd you get clean?"

"Starsky." He indicated the man who hadn't moved from his position opposite them. "He sacrificed his career to get me clean. Stood firm as a mountain until I came back down. Hounded me for months afterwards until the craving was gone." He didn't voice that fact that a craving for Starsky had taken its place.

That's what she'd needed, too, he thought. Someone who was willing to sacrifice everything to save her. But not everyone has a Starsky.

Suddenly, Charon and his boat appeared next to Starsky, seeming to materialize out of the mist and spray from the water that stuck the rocks close to the bank, both majestic and frightening in its fury. Starsky approached him with an agitation nearly as fearsome as the river, gesticulating with his hands and leaning towards him with menace. Charon didn't back away an inch. Just followed with a turn of his head Starsky's heated indicating of Hutch and Roxie.

Words must have been exchanged. Hutch could imagine what was said. He watched as Starsky tore through his pockets and knew what he was looking for. The toll money needed to pay Charon to bring Hutch across the river.

After desperate moments of searching Starsky stopped and looked across at Hutch. His despair was palpable as Charon just shook his head. Starsky didn't have the payment required. Hutch stretched his hand out over the water toward his friend. "*Don't blame yourself,*" he wanted to tell him. "*It's my fault. I should have known what would happen.*"

Now they would spend eternity separated from each other. Able only to look, never to touch.

Charon pushed off the bank and used his staff to maneuver the craft ponderously yet effectively over to Hutch's side of the river. The treacherous current seemed to hold no sway over the sturdy, flat-bottomed boat. Yet Hutch knew if he jumped in and tried to swim across, he'd been swept away downstream. And who knew what awaited him there.

"Your friend has come for you." Charon commented as he drew up alongside the rocks that lined the bank yet never stepping off onto solid ground.

"I told you he would."

"Very few return to the River Styx once they've been ferried across. You must be very special to him."

Hutch indicated Starsky with a tilt of his head. "*He's* the one who's special."

"Humility. Devotion. Admirable qualities."

"He doesn't deserve this, Charon," Roxie interjected, her voice crackling with reproof, surprising even herself. She'd been beaten down so long that it felt foreign to stand up to something for once. "I thought this was a place where wrongs were righted."

"That's true," Charon responded dispassionately. "But even here, there are debts that must be paid. Hutch was given a life but he handed it back. He has nothing left to bargain with."

"You took something from me that I couldn't live without!" Hutch shouted, not giving a good goddamn how he sounded. Had the battle he fought in been for nothing?

Charon's eyes seemed to look through them rather than at them, like beams of light cutting through fog, yet he said nothing.

"It's no use, Hutch. Don't think I haven't tried to bargain with him." Roxie sank down to the ground in defeat, her arms curling around knees once again like a child, her sudden bravado winked out like a spark in the night sky. Hutch looked down at the forlorn figure she made on the ground and felt a familiar passion flare to life in this place of death.

Hutch took a step forward, unwilling yet to back down.

"You talk about the life we're given and choices we make. But some things are out of our control. Like who we love and who loves us," Hutch snarled. "What's the point of love if it's kept in a gilded cage and not set free?"

At least I had love once, and maybe I screwed up. But what about Roxie? Maybe if she'd have had someone in her life like I did, she wouldn't have ended up turning tricks for drugs." He pointed a finger at the woman at his feet. "It's not fair that she be kept here."

"You dare to question us?" A crack appeared in the ferryman's detached veneer and his well-modulated voice rose a pitch higher. Roxie shivered but it didn't bother Hutch a bit. He'd confronted authority figures before. Those who thought they held power over life and death. He'd learned in another itm and place, love was most powerful of all.

"You hide in your robes and stay safe on that boat so nothing can touch you. You can't possibly understand what Roxie's life was like." Hutch might have missed his opportunity to be of real help her before, but he saw another chance to stand up for her now. "I'm not just questioning you. I'm *demanding* that you take Roxie across."

"It's impossible!" Charon tightened his grip on the staff in his hand as he made ready to push off the bank.

Her eyes grew round and glistening as she listened to their fierce exchange. No one had ever questioned Charon before. Maybe because those who had been left stranded here had been too lost and broken. Who didn't believe their souls were worth fighting for. Hers might not be but . . .

"Wait!" Roxie jumped up and latched onto Hutch's arm. Her sudden movement took both men by surprise. She let go and slowly turned up her palm to reveal a few crinkled dollar bills.

"Where did you get that?" Hutch asked, not having noticed it before.

"Don't you remember, Hutch? It's the money you gave me when you came to my room that night. I was hurting so bad, I would have done anything for a few dollars. Even turning a trick for a cop." Roxie's eyes glowed like pearls at twilight. "But you just gave it to me for nothing. You smiled at me. And for a minute I wasn't a lousy hype, I was a woman."

For a minute she savored the bittersweet memory, then blinked it away. "I arrived here with it still in my hand. But when I offered it for Charon he said it wasn't mine to give. But maybe it's yours."

She waved the money at Charon. "How about it? You said yourself he had admirable qualities. Shouldn't this be what it takes to get him across?"

Roxie's gaze drifted across to the figure of Starsky standing silently, watching their exchange. "Hutch was grieving his partner," she said. "Love shouldn't be the thing that keeps us out of heaven, it should be what lets us in."

Charon didn't respond immediately. He tilted his head as if listening to something in the wind, then slowly nodded. "Yes, this *is* a special case. Selfless generosity is precious indeed. Perhaps something can be arranged after all."

He took the faded and crumbled paper from Roxie's hand, secreted it into a deep fold of his robe, then indicated for Hutch to step onto the boat. "The price has been paid. You're permitted to cross over."

Hutch's heart felt as if it might burst in his chest. To be together with Starsky at last! And not just for a few fleeting years -- but for forever. No more hiding in dark corners, dodging bullets and unanswered questions, chasing shadows and ghosts. He waved his arms in exuberance over his head and Starsky waved back, giving a little bounce on his toes as the message was received.

Hutch set a foot onto the sturdy floor of the boat, felt it sway a little, then stabilize. He pivoted, about to leave the stony bank behind when he saw Roxie's wistful smile. Silvery-gray mist floated around her slight figure.

"Wait," he said as the ferryman speared his staff deep into the water. "Once I cross over, I can never come back here, is that it?"

"That's the way it works." The ferryman held the craft momentarily in position.

Hutch looked from Roxie to Starsky and Starsky lifted a hand to wave at him once again. Hutch reached up his arm and held it there, not waving so much as reaching out. Wanting him to understand. Then his arm fell to his side. "I can't go, Charon."

"What do you mean? The price has been paid."

"The fare wasn't mine -- I gave it to Roxie. It's hers, not mine. It's not fair that I use it now. I'll wait with her until we find another way across."

"There is no other way!"

"Let's get this straight." Hutch lifted a finger and pointed it at the robed man. "I left her alone with her demons once before, I'm not going to do it again. There's got to be another way."

He stepped off the boat with deliberate care then looked across to Starsky, who was no longer waiving. Although he was too far away to read his features, even from this distance his friend's concern and confusion were easy to feel.

"Make him understand," Hutch addressed Charon softly, his eyes locked on Starsky.

Charon tilted his head once again as if listening to the wind and a light seemed to come over his face that his hood had kept shadowed. "If you insist the money be returned to Roxie . . ."

"I do." Hutch stated resolutely.

The ferryman reached into his robe where he had put the money and pulled out his hand. Instead of dollar bills, shiny gold coins spilled from his fingers.

"It appears this should now be quite adequate for Roxie's toll." He smiled and Hutch felt a strange warmth spread through him.

Roxie stood and her mouth gaped open.

"Would you like to cross now?" The ferryman asked.

"But. . ." she looked from Hutch to Charon, confusion and longing written plainly on her face.

Hutch nodded his encouragement and did his best to smile. "The fare is yours, not mine. It's your time, Roxie. Don't worry about me. Send Starsky my love." It was all he could do to not stumble over the name that felt so good on his lips.

Roxie flung her arms around Hutch, tears shimmering in her eyes. "I will, Hutch."

Charon held his hand out to Roxie. "Come now, child. The sun is setting."

On the other side of the river, the golden rays of the sun were sinking behind the mountains, casting their shapes in glorious shades of purple and pink, luminous as pearls. While on Hutch's side, the landscape remained a dusky gray, unchanging from dawn to twilight.

Roxie stepped hesitantly onto the boat, using Charon's robed arm to steady herself, then turned to Hutch. "It's not so bad here, Hutch. At least there's no pain."

And the boatman pushed off the rocks.

## Chapter Four

*Sail on Silver Girl, sail on by*

*Your time has come to shine; all your dreams are on their way.*

*See how they shine . . .\**

Hutch watched the ferry and its two passengers make their slow, sure way across the troubled and turbulent waters. Every now and again the water would pick up the rays of the sinking sun and the angry sprays would sparkle like diamonds.

No pain, she'd said. No pain, but no pleasure either. Just an endless numbness. At least Roxie was free to experience joy perhaps for the first time in her life. He knew he'd had more than his share. In fact, his life had been so full he'd often wondered how he'd stumbled upon it all. Then after all he'd been given he'd dare to play with fire.

The moment he first felt a love that was more than platonic for his partner he knew he was heading down a destructive path. It was what he'd been taught all his life. Men don't desire other men. But what he didn't understand was how the love he felt for Starsky be so wrong? It had made them stronger together. Indomitable. But that was the ultimate irony. The love that had bonded them made him impotent alone.

He cursed his weakness as Roxie and Charon reached the other side. He saw Roxie place her hand on Starsky's arm as she told him why they'd come across and left his partner behind. Explained the exchange Hutch had made on her behalf. Saw him shake his head then fall to his knees.

He could almost hear Charon's dispassionate response to his friend. "Rules are rules. There's nothing I can do." The man put his hand on Starsky's shoulder but Starsky angrily jerked away. After a few minutes Charon shook his head once again then indicated to Roxie the road that led to the town. He started down the path with Roxie in his wake, her pace a dance of reluctant excitement.

Starsky remained, silhouetted against the deepening indigo of the sky. His devastation drifted across to Hutch like a current of air, the fiery frost of it burning through him like dry ice. Hutch hoped he understood his choice.

Hutch longed to tell Starsky he was content to stay if that was the price loving him had cost. He knew now he wouldn't have denied the way he felt even for a place in heaven. Maybe some days the rules would change and if so, he'd still be there. For now, they could only look at one another and Hutch determined that if that was all he had, he would somehow make it be enough.

On the other side of the river, stars appeared overhead like jewels against velvet. Still the men remained on their respective sides, neither willing to walk away. Soon the darkness would obscure them from each other but it wouldn't matter. They'd been separated long enough.

Hutch watched as Starsky dug in his pocket and pulled something out in his hand. He waived it in the air and the silver of it caught a fragment of starlight.

It was Starsky's badge.

Hutch remembered when they'd been awarded them upon graduation, a time when they'd been youthful and cocky. How they wanted to change the world and finally ended up changing each other.

They'd made plenty of missteps since then. They'd become tempered, harder perhaps. They'd had lost their superhero visions and toward the end had turned more to each other than their careers for fulfillment. They could understand each other the way no one else could.

Hutch always seemed to question things too much – not like whether Big Foot was real or if Foxy Lady would win in the fifth – but what their purpose was, why the bad guy sometimes won and if loving Starsky was wrong why did it feel so right.

And when Hutch had stood on the sand that day and tossed his badge into the waves, unable to endure the disillusionment any longer, Starsky had stood at his side, sending his badge into the depths right along with him. He hadn't asked him to, hadn't even told him he was going to do it. Starsky just knew.

The gray mist that billowed around him held no answers, either. Just Starsky on the other side, turning his badge in his hand, the badge Hutch had laid down when it became too heavy. Suddenly Starsky flipped it up in the air and for a moment it glittered among the stars, then fell back down and splashed midpoint into the river. Hutch caught his eyes and could almost hear him saying in that musical drawl, "mind if I join you?"

Hutch watched little metallic shape disappear. With that small act of rebellion, he knew Starsky to be telling him he'd cross over to his side if he could. He'd give up Paradise to be with Hutch, because being together was their own kind of paradise. The darkness all but obscured him now, but Hutch didn't need to see him to feel his presence.

Suddenly the place in the water where Starsky's badge had fallen began to bubble as though it was super-heating. The bubbling effect spread from one small point outward in ever enlarging circles. Silver spires rose from where the water stirred. They reached upward then arched gracefully apart, at intervals dropping branches back down into the water, serving as piles to support its elegant span. The silver spires curved down to rest on either side of the bank, precisely at Starsky and Hutch's feet.

A bridge had risen across the troubled water.

Hutch thought perhaps the fog had distorted his vision like a mirage in the desert. Or perhaps this was some new kind of test. What more did he need to prove that he was worthy?

Charon's wraithlike image appeared at his side. "It's no mirage, Hutch. It's real. It's your way across."

"But I thought you said I didn't have the toll. That the rules couldn't be broken."

Charon smiled and for the first time Hutch realized what a glorious smile it was. "Rules can't be broken it's true, but for the right reasons they can be bent a little."

Hutch looked up at the glowing bridge and saw Starsky standing in the middle above the river, half wrapped in shadow, half illuminated in moonlight.

"Humans are flawed creatures. You've made your share of mistakes. But love overcomes all." Charon nodded his cloaked visage at Starsky. "Go ahead, he's been waiting for you."

Hutch stepped onto the bridge that appeared as delicate as lace yet held his weight steady and strong. As the two men met midway, they reached out to each other and drew together in a long-awaited embrace. Then they crossed together into Paradise as behind them the arches of the bridge faded into the mist.

**FIN**

\* "Bridge Over Troubled Water" by Paul Simon

\*\* "Silver Lady" by Tony Macaulay and Geoff Stephens