

Summary: It wasn't that he was making this personal. It already was.

Story Notes: Based on events in the episode, "Pariah."

Thanks to Mvnet, who keeps the wolves from my door.

Categories: Gen

Genre: Episode Related

Warnings: No Warnings Needed

Wolves at the Door

by **Spencer**

An old Cherokee once told his grandson, "There is a battle between two wolves inside each of us.

One is Evil -- made of anger, envy, greed, guilt, jealousy, inferiority and ego. One is Good -- made of joy, peace, hope, love, kindness, humility and truth."

The grandson thought about it for a while, then asked his grandfather, "Which one wins?"

PROLOGUE

My son, Gary, was special. He was going places. He wasn't going to end up rotting in a prison cell like his old man. I didn't mind when he dropped out of high school. School was a waste of time. I'd always thought so. I quit school in eighth grade, myself. Now, if his mother had stuck around, she might have seen it differently. But the cancer got her when Gary was barely out of diapers. She's long gone now.

I would have raised Gary myself if it hadn't been for that stupid fight. How did I know the punch I landed would knock Benny's head into the bar? Damn if it didn't crack open like a watermelon. For that, I got fifteen years. But it's not like Benny didn't deserve what he got, that loud mouth bum.

Still, Gary visited me every week. The foster home was good about that. Something about the system trying to keep families together. Well, I guess they should have thought of that before they locked me up. Anyway, I taught Gary what really mattered in life. What counted and what didn't.

Hell, by the time he was fourteen, he was smarter than me. Always coming up with ways to get around things. Told me he found a way to make some easy bread. No fast food counters or car washes for him. No siree.

Ya see, my boy was one 'a them entrepreneurs. Bringing home enough extra cash to buy clothes at the department store instead of Goodwill. And those fancy tennis shoes the kids liked to wear. He even brought me a flashy ball cap for Father's Day. One with an Angels logo on the front. Can you believe that? Me wearing a hat with a halo on it. Christ, how we laughed at that.

Just before they let me out, they told me Gary had been arrested for pushing drugs near McKinley, his old high school. I found out later two undercover cops had tricked him into showing his hand. That burned me good. They just wanted to prove they were smarter than my Gary.

He'd gotten in trouble before but that was kid stuff. They'd slapped his hand and turned him back over to his foster family. But he wasn't a kid anymore. This time they locked him up with a bunch of punks at city jail. Losers who couldn't hold a candle to him. I wanted to get him out, but there wasn't a whole lot I could do, stuck where I was, myself. I sent him a message through the public defender, though. Told him to just hang on. I'd be out in a few days and I'd be coming for him.

Then one of those hoods he was in with snuck up on him with a knife he'd hid in his shoe. He was probably jealous of Gary. Ended up sticking him while everybody else stood by and did nothing. I'll bet even the cops kept their hands in their pants while they watched, though they said they did everything they could to save him. He probably called for me as he lay there dying. Sometimes I still hear him calling for me.

Useless animals -- all of them.

Without Gary, I don't have anything to live for. It's like I'm back in the slammer again. Just doing my time. And thinking about how I'm going to pay them all back. For Gary.

CHAPTER ONE

We make plans and God laughs. That's what Starsky says his mother likes to tell him. Everything can change in the blink of an eye. Or the bullet from a gun.

It had started out like most days. With Starsky's ass parked on my countertop, gulping a root beer and munching pizza from my refrigerator, leftovers from a little party with friends the night before. One of the friends, a gorgeous stewardess named Molly, had stayed the night. Starsky'd left early. A considerate wingman giving us a little privacy. Not that it mattered. Starsky was usually the last person I saw at night and the first person I saw in the morning. It just seemed right that way.

After breakfast, Molly headed off for the friendly skies and Starsky and I hit the streets. It was a typical day. Following up on a tip about a fencing operation in the back room of a jewelry store

(nothing but cheap knockoffs from Japan) and running down some witnesses to the beating of a derelict by the docks (not sexy enough to hold much interest).

Around three o'clock we responded to a call for back up at a liquor store where a robbery was in progress. We heard shots fired as soon as we arrived on the scene. Patrolman Louis crumbled practically in front of the Torino. He'd taken one in the chest. Any policeman's worst nightmare.

Starsky covered me when I ran out to check on Louis. I grabbed his legs and pulled him to safety behind his cruiser. His wound was serious, but hopefully, not life threatening. I applied pressure and tried to reassure him as we waited for more units to arrive. But bullets continued to fly even as a crowd gathered, making a bad situation even worse. I looked over at Starsky and he signaled that he was going to circle around to the back of the store. Hopefully, he might head off the gunmen from there. I stayed to cover the front.

Two masked men ran out the back with Starsky on their heels. I heard Starsky shout and more shots fired. Each one sending a percussive shock straight through me. I was desperate to see what was happening. Other police units started to arrive but by then it was too late. By the time I was able to follow my partner around to the back, one of the gunman was lying like a discarded doll in the street. The second of the two perps whom Starsky had tried to chase down was gone. He'd never stopped running.

Starsky came back to where the perp lay motionless on the ground and I waited. He stuffed his gun back in his holster as he addressed our backup. "A male," he recited tensely, his breath coming in gulps, "about five-ten, a hundred and sixty-five pounds, blue pants . . . Go put it on the air." Text book-style identifying details. But at that moment we might as well have thrown the text book out.

One of the officers new on the scene crouched down by the fallen figure, careful not to kneel in the blood pooling on the pavement. "He's just a kid," he announced as he pulled off the mask that had been covering the young man's face. "You killed a kid."

The uniform could have been broadcasting the six o'clock news. It seemed as though most of the neighborhood had come out to see the action anyway. Not only was there a dead kid on the street, apparently several of the onlookers knew who he was. A local boy. Lonnie Craig.

I turned to my partner who looked as though *he* was the one who'd been shot. His face had gone pale, his eyes hollow. I was afraid he might be sick right then and there. My heart sank to my knees.

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A teenager is dead, a family is torn apart and what do we do? Go back and write reports. Righteous justification for the use of deadly force. Starsky had followed procedure all the way down the line. He had identified himself as a policeman, had ordered the runner -- make that Lonnie -- to stop. But Lonnie had turned and pointed a presumably loaded gun at him point blank. A crowd of onlookers just steps behind. Starsky had had no other options. He fired back. Skill, experience and fate's favor allowed his shot to be the one to hit its mark.

Lonnie had come from a fatherless home. But it was a good home, and he had never been in trouble before. Then a year ago, his grades started to fall. He began to get into fights at school, dropped off the baseball team. Little incidents that added up to a big change in his life. But armed robbery was on a separate scale altogether. A source of persuasive power and influence had taken away his ball glove and thrust a gun in his hand instead.

No matter how many times Starsky recounted the disturbing series of events, there seemed to be one more person wanting to hear. Wanting to stir the pot of community unrest. We secluded ourselves in Captain Dobey's office along with the city attorney, Bruce Collins, while a crowd of reporters gathered outside. Scraping and snarling. Hungry for a headline story.

Their appetites would soon be satisfied. Dobey announced that the coroner's inquest would be made public. To say I didn't like the idea was an understatement.

"What you're doing is throwing him to the wolves." I instinctively jumped to Starsky's defense, while Starsky sat quietly, unnaturally passive.

"What we're doing is trying to keep this incident from exploding," Collins tersely explained.

Talk about explosions. At the moment it was *me* he should have been worrying about.

"You want me to read him his rights?" I bared my teeth.

It was Starsky who defused the situation. "Hold it, hold it. I think maybe they're right, Hutch," he admonished softly. "The sooner this thing is out in the open, the better."

He knew 'this thing' was hurting me as much as it was him. That I'd take on the whole city for him if I had to.

"Besides, if throwing me to the wolves is what it takes, then let them do it. I don't go down so easy." He gave me a little smile, tremulous and heartbreaking.

Damn. He was reassuring *me*. Go figure.

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Starsky looked awkward sitting alone at the defendant's table at the public inquest. Lop-sided, Huggy, would say, without me sitting beside him. For now, a position behind him would have to do. He turned to look at me. It was his turn for encouragement and I waved my tie at him. The silly gesture made him smile and I relaxed. I guess we'd both needed to be reassured.

Just before the hearing was to start, Dobey walked in with some information on the possible second suspect in the robbery.

"Joseph Tremaine." The captain flipped open the manila file on the table in front of Starsky while I looked over his shoulder. Some bystanders had provided a partial description and Tramaine's fingerprints had been found at the scene.

“Twenty-two years old, four priors.” The thin face of a young, Caucasian male stared out at us from the rap sheet. His hair over-long and his eyes wild. “He was a fry cook at place near the dead boy’s home,” Captain Dobey noted.

“It seems Lonnie Craig was a loner. This Tramaine was his only friend.”

We were itching to start tracking the suspect down, but first we had to sit through the sad parade of the witnesses to the shooting as they were called to the stand one by one. A slightly confused grandmother and pained neighbor -- obviously a family friend -- among them.

The friend, Wes Tidings, was the one whose testimony worried us most. He had been bitterly antagonistic toward Starsky at the scene, but after a few minutes on the stand his hostility melted away. The truth was bitter to swallow.

“I thought he was surrendering at the time,” Mr. Tidings stated when questioned. “Now it’s hard to say. I guess I made a mistake.” His voice faltered. “Eunice I’m sorry, so sorry.” This to Lonnie’s mother, sitting through it all with tears shimmering in her mahogany eyes.

“Lonnie was bringing the gun down. I think he was going to shoot that police officer.”

Case closed.

CHAPTER TWO

The public inquest behind us, we took Tramaine’s file and retreated to the comfortable security of the Torino. Our home away from home. Starsky stuck the key in the ignition as he sank into the soft leather seat. A fluid motion he’d done hundreds of times. But instead of turning the key, he rested his hands on the wheel. He tipped his head against the backrest and sighed, eyes on the roof.

“Thank God *that’s* over.” I voiced for us both.

“But it’s *not* over, Hutch.” He looked at me, his expression troubled rather than relieved.

“What do you mean?” I knew what he was going to say. I could see it in the blue heat of his eyes.

“Tramaine is still out there. Just waitin’ to get his hooks into the next Lonnie. That’s how they operate.”

“They?”

He looked away and his hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Those guys who are always needin’ someone lookin’ up to them. Like they’re not man enough on their own. They’ve fucked up their own lives so much that they prey on young, vulnerable kids just so they can fuck someone else up even worse.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” We’d both seen that kind plenty. Sometimes it’s a dog eat dog world, alright.

But I sensed that wasn’t all there was to it. There was more Starsky wanted to say.

“Ya know, I was a pretty messed up kid myself after my dad was killed.” He was looking out the front windshield, but it wasn’t the parking garage he was seeing. It was ghosts.

I knew Starsky’s dad had been gunned down when Starsky was barely in his teens. The elder Starsky had been a cop himself, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, but since telling me the story, my partner rarely mentioned it. He wasn’t the kind to wear his heart on his sleeve. I put my hand on his knee, not only to let him know he had my full attention but to send a measure of comfort. A physical transference of intangible emotion. The way it worked between us.

“I was hurt and angry but didn’t really know how to deal with what I was feeling. I couldn’t talk to Ma, she was going through her own kind of hell. Plus she had Nicky to deal with. He was the baby. I guess she thought that since I was older, I could handle things better. I was the man of house.”

“You were just a kid, Starsk. Of course you didn’t know how to handle it.” What kid would? It’s one of those unexpected tragedies that comes along in life, with no accompanying pattern or guide, and you just have to get your hands bloodied as you feel your way along. My heart contracted painfully in my chest. He might have had to go it alone back then, but not anymore. We had each other now.

“There was this other kid. Hector Davis. He lived two streets over. We started hangin’ out together that summer. He was a couple years older than me. Ma didn’t like him but I guess I thought, with him bein’ older, he was kinda cool. Hangin’ around him made me feel like maybe I was grown up, too.”

He shifted in the seat, his thoughts discomfiting. I squeezed his knee beneath my hand. It’s okay. It was no secret the world Starsky had grown up in was much different than mine. A tight-knit community of working class families striving toward the American dream. At times rubbing elbows with those who’d rather steal it than earn it. He didn’t have to say anything more but I thought it might make him feel better if he did. So I waited.

“I wasn’t thinkin’ straight. He talked me into breakin’ into a local pizza joint with him. The Pizza Palace. Best pepperoni in town. Anyway, we busted a window and got into the register. I figured we’d treat ourselves to twenty bucks, but there was a whole wad a hundreds stuffed in the bottom. Hector just startin’ fillin’ in his pockets. I couldn’t drag him away. One of my dad’s cop friends was patrolling that night and caught us. Said he saw the beam from our flashlight. Brought me straight home to ma.”

“Pretty dumb to break into a place just around the corner, huh?” He paused, and I knew he was giving me an opportunity to voice shock or disappointment. I did neither. We’d both made plenty of mistakes, especially when we were young, ignorant and hurting. Neither of us was perfect. But I’d learned by then that, like wildflowers that sprout through the cracks in pavement, our greatest strengths were rooted in imperfections.

“I had to go before a juvenile magistrate.” Starsky continued, his voice tense, his hands twisting on the wheel. “They didn’t press charges on me though. Even the guy who owned the pizza place, Joe Durniak. Everyone there knew our family, or had heard of us at least. Dad’s shooting had been pretty big news at the time. I guess no one wanted to make it any rougher on us than it had already been.”

“But Ma didn’t know what to do. She saw I was headin’ for trouble. So she sent me out here. You know the rest.” He sent me a brief nod. Yeah, I knew his family was back in Brooklyn, the way mine was in Duluth. We’d both been far from home when we’d met. But I thought we’d both decided that home wasn’t so much connected with a place as it was connected with a person.

“It turned out for the best, didn’t it?” After all the pain he’d gone through, I wanted to hear him say it. That he was glad things eventually worked out the way they had. That his wounds had healed and the currents of fortune had moved to put us in each other’s path.

He didn’t answer me directly. Just went back to staring out window. When he started talking again, his words skidded out like the Torino rushing downhill with no breaks. “I hated Ma for a long time after that. For sendin’ me away. My whole world had been destroyed. But it shocked me into growin’ up. I mean, *really* growin’ up. Not just playing actin’ like a wise guy.”

Starsky’s speech came to an end in a spinout. That’s when he turned to look at me, as if gauging to see how much I understood. His sapphire eyes glittered. Maybe because it was Starsky, and because we were still connected through my hand on his knee, I understood it all.

“Then, when I saw Mrs. Craig in that court room today -- and saw how much she loves her son no matter what he’d done and how she’ll have to live with the way he died. . .” Starsky swallowed hard. “Well, I’m just glad my Ma didn’t have to go through that.”

Me, too, Starsk. Me too.

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We stopped off at Huggy’s and handed him Tramaine’s picture. By then it was early afternoon and Huggy Bear’s all-night bar and diner was making preparations to open for business. After a light-hearted crack about all white folks looking alike, Huggy said he and his clientele would be on the lookout for Tramaine. I was grateful to him for the help, but I was even more grateful for his support of Starsky.

“It took guts for you to go through what you did today,” he told him sincerely.

Huggy didn’t know the half of it. The inquest was all behind the camera. If he thought *that* took guts, the next day we went to the Craig’s house so Starsky could talk with Lonnie’s mother face to face. We hoped she might be able to provide more answers about Tramaine.

Starsky and I had discussed it at length. He was insistent that he be the one to question her and not only that, that he do it alone. He figured she didn’t need to have any more pressure placed on her by the police than what she was already dealing with. I reluctantly agreed, but that was

before we saw the houseful of mourners. They were mingling on the porch and even spilling out into the yard. Starsky would have to walk through them like a gauntlet to get to Mrs. Craig.

“You don’t have to do this,” I told him as he pulled the car to the curb.

But he just looked at me. “Yes, I do.”

It wasn’t that he was making this personal. It already was.

A soulful hymn was spilling out the doorway of the Craig’s humble clapboard house and onto the street. As I watched Starsky walk with resolve through the gathering of Lonnie’s family and friends, any one of whom would love to tear Starsky limb from limb, I realized Daniel couldn’t have shown more grace and courage in his own lion’s den.

Mrs. Craig came out to meet him and for a minute they just looked each other eye to eye, as if taking each other’s measure. I wondered if Mrs. Craig realized how much in common they had. A black, single mother and a young, Jewish cop. In a time warp somewhere it might have been Mrs. Starsky on that porch and a Detective Craig calling to offer condolences.

After a few minutes I could see Starsky show Tramaine’s picture to some mourners who had stepped in for a closer look. He had won them over. *I should have known*. I exhaled deeply in relief, and wondered how long I’d been holding my breath.

When he was done, he walked back to the car and I met him halfway. I put my arm around his shoulder and he returned the brief embrace, not caring if we had an audience. They were good people.

CHAPTER THREE

The day went from bad to worse. As we were going through the motions of following up leads on Tramaine, we got a report that a patrolman, Dan Tinker, had been killed by a sniper as he was responding to a routine call.

Dobey pulled us into his office to listen to the tapes of two phone calls the department had received in connection to the shooting. The first had come in while the hearing had aired the previous day. In it, the caller had vehemently claimed that the inquest verdict was a white wash and had threatened to retaliate if Starsky wasn’t punished for killing Lonnie Craig.

Dobey clicked on the tape recorder and a voice that sounded of gravel and violence spewed out. “That blue coat I shot this afternoon was only the beginning. Cops like Starsky are a cancer. They eat up and destroy people like Lonnie and . . . and now you’re going to have to pay.”

“Starsky, you pig. I know you’re listening. Killing you is too easy. First, you have to pay my price. You got ‘til tomorrow morning to turn in your badge and resign. I want to read about it, Starsky.”

Acid flooded my stomach. This was one sick fuck. I could only imagine what Starsky was feeling as he listened. It took everything I had to keep from jumping up and turning the obscene thing off. Ripping out the tape and hurling it from the window or, better yet, setting it on fire just to watch the thin plastic strip melt into oblivion.

I settled myself deeper in the chair and pressed my feet into the floor. One of the first things we'd learned in the academy was to not allow ourselves to be ruled by emotion. We had a job to do.

Starsky leaned forward and pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes closed. A picture of calm containment. But I knew him too well. He was neither calm nor contained. He was thinking and that was more dangerous.

"I want to read about it in tomorrow morning's paper," the disembodied voice continued. "If I don't, another screw is going to get burned. And then another and another and another. Until finally it's you, sucker, and I blow you into a thousand pieces."

The tape was clicked off.

"That's why Dan Tinker -- a cop I didn't even know -- got wasted?" Starsky removed his hand and asked woodenly.

Dobey rattled off the information they had received from the university linguistics department that clued to the caller's possible identity -- ex-con, mid-fifties, Atlantic seaboard -- but Starsky wasn't listening to the facts anymore. I knew all he was thinking was that an innocent man was dead because of him.

My partner carried responsibility heavily. Sometimes it seemed, like a modern-day Atlas, he carried the whole world on his shoulders.

"That lets out Tramaine. He doesn't even fit that description." Starsky got up and paced the room in slow motion. As if walking through a dream. Make that a nightmare.

"No, it doesn't." The detective in me stepped in. "It only means that Tramaine didn't make the call. But whoever made the call seems to know Lonnie, so maybe he knew Tramaine, too." My brain started to sift through possibilities like a mail sorter. Filtering through sizes, shapes, geographies.

"That's our best guess," Dobey advised. "Now the first edition of the morning papers hits the streets at six-thirty. That gives us eleven hours to get that killer."

"There's another way. I can always resign." So that's what trip my partner's brain had taken. I sure as hell didn't like where he had headed.

"No way." Dobey responded sharply. "The police department can't start giving in to terrorists. I don't care what their demands!" The bonus point on the final exam for Negotiating 101. Too bad it was infinitely easier to say than do. Especially when lives were at stake.

“Well, there’s liable to be a whole lotta cops’ wives that are gonna think differently about that.” Starsky pounced back. Neither Dobey nor I was in a position to dispute him. But that couldn’t be helped.

“Every officer on duty will be apprised of the situation and warned to take extra caution.” Dobey’s stern statement reminded us that we all knew the risks of the job when we signed on. If we wanted to play it safe we should have been accountants.

“And what if we don’t catch him? How many more cops will get blown away because of me?” A fierce sob caught in his throat. His logic had been fighting with his passion but his passion was winning. Yeah, Starsky was a sharp cop. One of the sharpest. But he had a heart as big as New York and Los Angeles combined, and that’s what made him one of the best.

“None!” My appeal was equally passionate. “Now Starsky, the guy that’s running around out there has a screw loose. That’s not your fault.” I stared him down.

Put down the self-flagellation whip, buddy. You may be the world I revolve around, but I’ll hold that privilege for myself.

I could sense the moment his mind changed, like a shift in the direction of the wind. A decision to find a more strategic crossing of the river.

“Now we’ve got a lead. A white male, ex-con in his fifties who knew Lonnie.” I listed.

“Then I suggest instead of sitting in my office talking about it and resigning, you get your cans back out there on the street and *nail this turkey!*”

Starsky waved his arm in deference to the captain’s outburst. We were back in business. I let Starsky go out the door ahead of me as I acknowledged my gratitude to Captain Dobey. He’d never know how much.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tempus fugit.

We spent the night chasing phantoms and by morning were no closer to the psycho cop killer or Joseph Tramine. But the deadline had passed. One more policeman’s family found itself blown apart by senseless violence. One side of a bed left cold, one vacant chair at the dinner table.

More weight to strain Atlas’ shoulders.

After getting the brush off at the scene of the crime, Starsky dropped me off at the station to fill out more reports. I thought he’d just stepped out for a cup of coffee. When he didn’t come back, I went looking for him. I found him closed away in his apartment, the drawbridge raised and the world sealed off. But that didn’t stop me. I used my key, not bothering to knock.

He was curled on the couch like a child, blanketed in shadows. I eased down next to him without speaking. Just carded my hand through the tangles of his hair. He could have used a haircut but I liked the way the curls wrapped, like an infant's hand, around my fingers. Simple, guileless.

I'd seen him like this only a few times. When the weight he imposed on himself threatened to crush him, he'd withdraw alone while he gathered the strength to push back. But he'd never retreated this far. So much more used to seeing him as lively as a ping pong ball, this dark acquiescence was disturbing.

"I can't do this anymore, Hutch," he murmured, breaking the silence after a little while, but not looking at me.

"Do what, buddy?"

He lay still as more long minutes passed. I thought he might have forgotten I was there, even though my hand still rested in his hair. "Have someone else die because of me," he intoned at last.

I gritted my teeth. Starsky's need for comfort warred with my desire to lash out -- at what I wasn't even sure. "I told you before. None of this is because of you."

"How do you know? It seems like death just follows me. It came to Brooklyn. It was all around me in 'Nam. Do you know how many of my friends died over there?"

No, I didn't. And I wouldn't ask until he was ready to tell me. But that would have to wait for another day. We'd fight one battle at a time.

"None of which is *your fault*. We've gone over this. These deaths are because of some crazy lunatic out there."

He might have heard me but his response showed he hadn't listened.

"It was my fault my dad died," he recited flatly as if he'd said it a thousand times. A coerced confession. The words playing over and over in his mind in a torturous loop.

Christ. Was that the kind of shit he'd been telling himself? I shifted and pulled his body against mine. Putting my hand around his stiff shoulder, I gently stroked his arm until at last he relaxed into me. He turned his face into my chest, as if shielding his eyes from something he didn't want to see.

"Tell me."

Fill me in buddy, so I can set you straight. It's time to get off this ride.

He didn't say anything for so long that I thought he wasn't going to answer, but then he took a deep breath and straightened. I could see a storm swirling in the depths of his eyes.

“Report cards had just come out and I made the honor roll,” he started. “I couldn’t wait to tell my Pop. I’d made him promise to take me for pizza if I brought home a good card. Just him and me. So he did. Didn’t even take time to change outa his uniform.”

I could almost see them. Father and son. Matching dark curls and dancing blue eyes, laughing and shoving each other as they swaggered down a broken sidewalk. The street lights just starting to come on.

“We went to my favorite pizza place. When we got there, the owner acted a little funny. Said he was closin’ early. ‘No way, Joe,’ Pop told him. ‘I’m treatin’ Davey. He made honor role,’ he’d said, like he couldn’t say it loud enough. Like he wanted the whole neighborhood ta hear.”

“The pizza had just been set on our table, the cheese still bubblin,’ when this car drove by spraying bullets through the front window. Pop pushed me down under the table . . . tried to cover me. I’d never felt so scared. But kinda safe, too. Cuz Pop was there protectin’ me. When the noise stopped I pushed back at him so I could get up. But he didn’t move.”

I could feel the battle Starsky waged within himself to control overwhelming emotions. I drew him in tighter and felt him shiver.

“Ya see, Hutch? Pop died because of *me*. If I hadn’t a made him take me for pizza. . . “

He swallowed a sob. The admission was so intimate I was sure he’d never told anyone else. A hot coal he’d held and refused to drop, letting it burn him from the inside out.

“I never made the honor roll again. For years I couldn’t stand the sight a pizza.”

“I can believe anything you tell me but *that*.” I nudged him.

He turned his head and gave me a sad, little smile. “Now, it kinda just reminds me of him.”

Thank God my partner was coming up for air.

“You’re not responsible for life and death, Starsk. As far as I know, that’s someone else’s job. Either that, or we’re grossly underpaid.” Then a thought occurred to me.

“The restaurant where your dad was . . . killed. It was the Pizza Palace, wasn’t it.” The question was rhetorical. I knew my partner well enough to know the answer.

“You got it,” he confirmed.

Joe Durniak’s place. The generous, neighborhood businessman who had paid for Mr. Starsky’s funeral. Pieces were falling into place like a hailstorm, its icy pellets chipping away at fragile surfaces. Seems like Uncle Joey had a few more things to answer for than a poorly timed drive-by.

It was going to be a long afternoon. But I wasn’t going anywhere.

CHAPTER FIVE

By now Starsky was waging a battle on all fronts. The next day I was stopped by two uniforms collecting money in the hallway of the station to help the families of the murdered officers, but when Starsky joined me to contribute, one of them -- Officer Lee -- refused his donation.

“Keep it. Jack’s family doesn’t need any of your conscience money.” The uniform growled at him.

“Where do you get off with that garbage?” I snapped back.

“Stay out of it, Hutchinson.”

As if I would. I had the man up against the wall in an instant, blinded by instinct, ready to tear out his throat.

“Hutch, Hutch . . .” Starsky murmured, calling me off with a soft reprimand, but I wasn’t quite ready to back down.

“What are you going to do, Hutch?” He goaded. “Punch me out? If I hang around this precinct long enough your pal’s gonna get me killed.”

Had we all gone insane? A wolf pack turning in on itself?

I thought about Starsky’s painful soul-baring the previous day. “You know something, Lee? If you used your brain as well as you do your mouth, you might understand what’s going on here.” I let him loose then, and turned to Starsky.

“Are you still a cop?” I asked him, knowing he’d just been to see Captain Dobby, thinking again about turning in his badge. This time I hadn’t tried to stop him. I knew he needed to convince himself he’d done everything humanly possible to prevent any further killings done in his name.

Apparently, our straight-talking captain would still have none of it. Dobby’s voice of reason insisted that dealing with an alphabet soup of creeps goes with the territory. Once again, he was miraculously able to convince Starsky to hold on. Or maybe Starsky’d just yielded to the heavier weight of two rams butting heads.

“Yeah, I’m still a cop.”

My heart was released from the fist that had been squeezing it. I’d been ready to accept any outcome and I had let him know that I would stick with him no matter what, but those words were music to my ears.

This time when we hit the streets our luck seemed to turn. We cornered Tramaine at a local market and brought him in. Maybe we’d finally get some answers.

“How can I tell you what I don’t know?” Tramaine whined when we brought him in for questioning.

“You know,” I pressed. “You and Lonnie Craig were friends. You had to spend a lot of time together, teaching him how to hold his gun. The right things to say at a liquor store hold up. All the important things in life.”

Tramaine was sweating. Clutching his gut as he puffed on a cigarette. Suffering the agonies of drug withdrawal. Another day I might have been able to drum up some sympathy for him. Not today. Not with Starsky propped up by his elbow against the wall, the weight of a hundred worlds pressing in on him. I felt compelled to connect with him as I walked by, a gentle touch to his ribs.

“What are you going to do? Charge me with contributing to the delinquency of a minor?” was the man’s sullen response.

Starsky exploded like a super nova. He hauled Tramaine to his feet and pushed him up against the wall. He pulled back his fist, ready to send it into the hype’s face. I intervened quickly, jumping in between Starsky and the target of his rage.

I could read the emotions on his face like a jumbled verse. Feel the frustration and fury that shook him. ‘*Down, boy,*’ my eyes pleaded. He was too far gone for words, but we didn’t need any. Like Androcles’ lion, he backed away and let me take back over. He had that much trust in me. We had that much trust in each other.

Tramaine was shaking violently now, and not just from his need of a fix. At my threat to walk away and leave him to Starsky’s wrath, he broke. Lonnie hadn’t been a loner as we’d first surmised, Tramaine explained. He’d been running numbers in the district, putting him in contact with dozens of guys who might possibly fit the caller’s description.

Nobody knows his customers except the runner himself.

We’d been chasing our tails.

But maybe not for long. A third call came into the station and we were there to answer it. Personally.

Starsky grabbed the handset and I picked up the extension.

“We know who you are you sucker. You two-bit pervert psycho.” Starsky was rabid. “You don’t got the guts to come out and face me.”

“Starsky,” the man groaned out, as if in sexual release.

“What’s the matter, punk? You lose your nerve?” Starsky taunted.

“You’re a dead man, Starsky.”

“Only if you can make me that way. You’re the one who wants to cut out all the bull. Alright, you’re after me, ya got me, sucker. You name the time and the place and I’ll be there -- alone.”

I held my breath at the other extension. Wanting him to take Starsky's lure, yet dreading that he would.

Like a typical coward, the caller ignored Starsky's offer. Just prattled on about how we were going to have to play by his rules. He set another deadline for the killing of not just another officer, but an entire family. The wife, kiddies, maybe an old granny, too.

The man was crazy like a fox. He didn't stay on the line long enough to trace the call. Starsky rested the handset against his forehead and closed his eyes in anguish. I leaned against him, commiserating.

oooooooooooo

I was hearing it in my sleep. Angry words from a tormented mind. Something was hidden there. I could feel it.

"Cops like Starsky are a cancer. They eat up and destroy people like Lonnie and . . . and now you're going to have to pay."

"They destroy people like Lonnie and . . . now you're going to have to pay."

"They destroy people like Lonnie and . . . "

An older man. Ex-con. Someone to whom Lonnie meant something. Reminded him of someone. His own son. A young drug dealer killed in jail. A father who blamed Starsky for putting him there.

George Prudholm.

Prudholm had just been released from lock-up himself only days before his son was killed in a prison knife fight. He'd gone crazy at the news. Vowed he'd get even. Is that the man we were looking for?

We got his address from his parole records, hoping to corner the wolf in his den. But when we rushed to his apartment he wasn't there. The filthy rooms smelled of stale beer and unwashed laundry. Fast food wrappers and girly magazines littered the tables. Along with two-year old clippings of Gary Prudholm's stabbing in city jail. Small rectangles of faded newsprint from the back pages.

In a cabinet, the door hanging off its hinges, I found a box of bullets of the same caliber that killed Dan Tinker. I showed the box to Starsky who looked briefly at a handful, then flung them across the room in a fit of anger. The small metal fragments scattered like cockroaches.

Starsky's calm containment, his quiet acquiescence had disappeared. He'd become a raging lion, shoving over a floor lamp and kicking up the garbage strewn on the floor.

"Why couldn't he have been here!" He roared.

I watched the eruption from a safe distance. In a way, I was glad to see him taking his frustration out on something other than himself. The lamp and papers were just inanimate objects, after all. Not like his soul that had suffered in silence for so long.

“Well, ya got it out of your system. Now what do you want to do?” I asked when he paused.

The brittle ring of the phone jarred our already rattled nerves. Starsky dove to answer it.

Guess who.

“You’ll never make it, Prudholm.” Starsky’s spoke into the phone. His tone was deadly, barely recognizable. “Ten minutes from now your face is gonna be smeared on every TV screen and newspaper in the city.”

I desperately wanted to hear the response on the other end but Starsky kept the handset from me. I could guess the reason why.

“You’re dead, Prudholm. You’re dead, and I’m still walking around. Look, I’m the guy you’re really after. And my offer still stands. You name the time and place and I’ll be there. Alone.”

Icy silence. I could almost see frost from our breath form in the air.

I could image Prudholm’s reaction on the other end.

“What’s the matter Prudholm? I can’t hear ya.”

Another pause.

“I’d like to burn a bum like you and I don’t need any help to do it. Just like I didn’t need any help to take that punk kid of yours.” It may have been a low blow but I knew what Starsky was doing. He’d say just about anything to bring this menace out in the open, offering himself as bait.

It was arranged. Starsky slammed down the phone.

“Where’s the meeting?” I asked, blocking the door as he started to bolt out.

“He said alone.”

“There’s no way. I won’t allow it.” *No way.* He been carrying this burden by himself long enough. His guilt, his feelings of responsibility for things that were out of his control. He wasn’t a lone wolf any more. I needed to make him see that.

“And neither will Dobby.” I reminded him for good measure.

“We don’t have a choice.”

I grabbed him by both arms, unwilling to let go. “You’re walking into suicide.”

“Hutch,” he pleaded, “he said if he even smelled another cop he was going to waste a whole carload a kids.” His big heart was breaking. So was mine. But I had nothing left to say. I let him go and followed him out to the street.

Backup was just beginning to arrive. Starsky ran around the driver’s side of the Torino but before he got in I reached out to him across the top. For a minute time stood still and we just looked at each other, trying to say things for which there were no words. But it was our eyes we always understood best.

CHAPTER SIX

“You ask which of the wolves battling inside us wins my son?” The old man answered. “Why the one we feed, or course.”

I took a few steps as if I could follow the Torino down the street, but then I noticed the backup cruiser pulled up to the corner. I switched on auto-pilot.

“Dobey wants you guys staked out inside until you’re relieved.” I told the uniforms standing in front of the black and white. That was easy. They headed inside the apartment building without question and I commandeered the Galaxie.

Starsky had gotten a good head start but that tomato red paint job wasn’t hard to spot. I tried to stay as far back as possible, remembering Prudholm’s warning about not even wanting to “smell a cop,” but I quickly realized where my partner was headed. The abandoned zoo. A secluded spot with plenty of cover. Perfect for an ambush.

I parked well away from the front gate and scrambled up a hill overlooking the park where I could get a good overview of the perimeter. I could see Starsky stalking along the main path below me, looking from side to side and calling out for Prudholm. Basically offering himself up as target practice.

The beat of my heart, the movement of air through my lungs seemed deafening as I strained to listen for any other living creature. After several minutes there was a movement from few feet below me, but above Starsky and to his left. A tumble of stones and the glint of gun metal.

“Starsky! Look out!” I shouted, almost at the same time as shots rang out.

Starsky responded to my voice as if I had physically pushed him. He rolled for cover then fired back toward the shooter’s location. Prudholm swung his rifle toward me next, his shot snapping a branch just above my head. But then he snapped back around toward his original prey.

Starsky ran up the path to cut him off. Now that the odds had been evened, he was more than a match for Prudholm. Even as Starsky dodged and weaved, he managed to clip the ex-con in the

shoulder and the man fell to the ground. By the time I reached them, Starsky had kicked the wounded man's rifle out of his reach as he stood above him.

"What's the matter? Am I too old for you? You only kill kids?" I heard Prudholm growl as he sprawled on the ground at Starsky's feet. Harmless now that he had been declawed.

"Come on! I'm the guy who wasted your pig friends. What do you me want to do, turn my back on you?" The demented man was practically *demanding* Starsky to kill him.

Starsky lifted his Beretta to point it straight between the crazy man's eyes. His arm shook. Emotions crossed his face like the moon passing in front of the sun, throwing the world into darkness. Was he still seeing the pathetic, old man? Or was he seeing his father lying lifeless on the pizza shop floor? Perhaps it was the bodies of his buddies strewn through a blood-soaked rice paddy, or Lonnie Craig face-down in an alley. So much anger, so much grief. But killing this man wouldn't turn back the clock.

"Starsk." *Time to set down the burden you've carried. Time to move on.*

His finger posed on the trigger, his hesitation hung like smoke in the stagnant air. Until at last he clicked the hammer back into place and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Read him his rights, Hutch."

oooooooooooo

Starsky and I were at our desks going over a list of cars reported stolen in the past week -- a Delta 88, an El Camino, a Chevette (the taste of car thieves' tastes seemed to be getting worse) -- when she walked in. The squad room banter stilled. We looked up to see Mrs. Craig in a simple navy dress and matching hat walk with quiet dignity past the assorted uniforms and suits straight to Starsky. A gauntlet of her own. We obviously hadn't learned all there was to know about courage.

Starsky rose to his feet to greet her. I did, too, but kept to my side of the desk. Everyone else pretended to go back to their work, but I knew their attention stayed on Starsky and his victim's mother.

"Mrs. Craig," he nodded. She held her gloved hands clasped in front of her, a patent leather handbag looped around one wrist. Starsky seemed unsure whether he should reach out to offer her his hand, so he kept them lax at his side. Loose and unthreatening.

"Detective Starsky, Detective Hutchinson." Mrs. Craig acknowledged us both, then turned to address my partner. "I heard about you arresting that man -- Mr. Prudholm -- who had killed those police officers."

"Yes, ma'am."

"That was brave thing to do."

“It was just my job, ma’am.” Starsky shifted his weight and brushed his palms against his jeans, as if they suddenly itched. He’d never been comfortable with overt praise. Especially when he felt it was undeserved.

“The papers say that man had lost a son, too.” An awkward silence passed between them. “I know you feel responsible for . . . for Lonnie.” Her dead son’s name must have still felt like cut glass on her lips. “But I want you to know . . . it wasn’t your fault. And I forgive you.”

“If there was anything else I could have done. . .” Starsky’s voice held anguish, too.

“You did what you had to do, Detective Starsky. Now you need to forgive yourself.”

“Dave.”

“Dave.” She smiled hesitantly. “You law officers try to protect us citizens, just like we mothers try to protect our children. And we all worry if we’re doing the right thing. Goodness knows I have. But, in the end, we all just do the best we can.”

“Isn’t that right?” This, Mrs. Craig directed to me. I nodded and she followed my eyes back to my partner.

“None of us has all the answers, son. Only the Good Lord.”

She made the next move. She reached out and laid a tentative white glove on top of Starsky’s hand. At first it seemed stiff and unnatural. But then Starsky’s hand turned up to embrace hers fully. I was well aware of that firm, sincere grasp. Her eyes warmed to it like chocolate chip cookies.

“Does your mother live around here, David?” she asked.

Starsky collected friends like he once collected marbles, a varied array that sparkled in his palm.

“No, I’m afraid she lives on the east coast -- Brooklyn.”

“That’s a shame.” Mrs. Craig gave a little frown as she thought. “When’s the last time you talked you her?”

“It’s been a while . . .” He trailed off awkwardly.

“Why is that? You should call her.”

“I . . . I wouldn’t know what to say.” After all these years, was it too late to explain to his mother about the hurt, the loneliness, the guilt? Starsky’s candidness surprised me. It wasn’t like him to open up like that to a stranger.

“Ask her what she had for dinner. Ask her what book she’s reading. It doesn’t matter what you talk about. She just wants to hear your voice.”

Mrs. Craig took both his hands in hers now. Sincerity pouring from her like honey. “Lonnie’s gone, but you’re still alive. And you have a mother who loves you. Call her.”

So he did. And every Friday night since.

EPILOGUE

It may be a different four walls, but it’s a prison just the same. They say I’m crazy. That I need help. So now, along with washing dishes and pressing sheets, I see a shrink once a week. Sit in group counseling like a circle jerk, just to see which one of us breaks first.

Sick people aren’t responsible for what they do. Or so they tell us.

Morons.

They tell me to find something productive to do with myself. Like I should write fuckin’ poetry or something. With Gary gone, I got nothing to live for. No, that’s not exactly true. I got one thing. Revenge. Now that’s a purpose I can sink my teeth into.

FIN