

**Summary:** "The last two months had been more than difficult. The Department had been effectively decimated by Asian Flu, and those unlucky enough not to go down with it had found themselves working eighteen, twenty-hour days.

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## A Quiet Country Weekend

by Terri Beckett & Chris Power

"You want us to do what?" Cold, flat, patent disbelief in each syllable, Hutch's voice cut through the sudden silence in the office. Dobey groped for his handkerchief, blotted sweat from his face and refused to meet the two angry gazes.

"Ah, c'mon, Cap," Starsky protested. "You're puttin' us on, right?"

"Don't 'come on Cap' me," Dobey snapped. "You will report here at seven-thirty tomorrow morning, then go on to Parker and collect the prisoner--"

"All the way to Phoenix?" Starsky yelled, falsetto. "For the first time in Godknowswhen we get a couple free days, an' we gotta deliver some punk to Phoenix? He's Parker's baby, not ours!"

"We've been working our butts off eighteen hours a day plus, for weeks now," Hutch contributed. "This vacation--two days, damn it--has been postponed three times--"

"Give us a break, Cap," from Starsky. "Why can't they get rid of their own garbage?"

But the double-act cut no ice.

"I don't want arguments. Seven thirty, tomorrow morning, dressed smart enough for the Supreme Court. You'll be representing--"

"Yeah, yeah. Showin' Phoenix P.D L.A.'s finest." Starsky kicked viciously at the leg of Dobby's desk. "Why us, for Chrissake?"

"Because so far you seem to be immune to this flu bug." Dobby's smile was a travesty of humor, and he mopped the handkerchief over his face again. "Which is more than I am, I guess." The two officers drew away from him.

"Tough shit," Starsky muttered.

"Captain," said Hutch, "if Parker's so badly hit they can't spare anybody for this detail, why does it have to be us? This squad? Vice have got fewer on the sick list than us, so--"

"They need all their men. They say. They're going in on that child pornography case any time now, and they want every last man they've got. Besides," he went on, "the man's wanted on a homicide charge, which makes us the automatic choice."

Hutch admitted defeat, but his unbending formality was a fair indication of his mood.

"Okay," said Starsky. "So when do we get our vacation, huh?"

"When you get back," Dobby snapped. "If we've got enough guys back on the strength to spare you."

"Terrific. An' what happens if we get sick tonight?" he demanded.

"You go infect Phoenix, what else? Out!"

They obeyed, and Hutch did not slam the door behind them. Somehow the controlled click of the catch was more expressive than a frame-juddering crash.

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Starsky kicked the filing cabinet.

"That louses up the whole fuckin' weekend!" he exploded. "Again! I only just got Tracie calmed down from last time."

"Look on the bright side," Hutch snapped. "Maybe she'll get sick and call off."

"Thanks a bunch, pal. We were supposed to be drivin' south tonight,"

"Really," Hutch said before he could elaborate. "Will you quit bitching? You think you're the only one with problems?"

But Starsky wasn't listening.

"Holy shit! Willya look at the time? I'm already late! She's gonna go crazy--see, y'round--"

Hey!" Hutch yelled, and his partner paused halfway out of the door. "Pick me up at Vinnie's--"

Starsky waved assent, and disappeared at a run.

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Starsky may have had qualms about Tracie's probable reactions; Hutch knew what his date would say. And do. Ginette had given him an ultimatum after the last cancellation--one more last minute let down and he could take a hike.

So he was not unprepared for the eruption. Tall, good-looking blonds, she told him, were a dime a dozen in LA., and she wasn't about to sit at home waiting for him or any other man. The Police Department could be hit by every flu strain in the text books for all she cared, from Asian through to Zeelander, and she hoped he'd catch every last one. That was it, the final straw. She'd had enough. He was the first and last cop she'd date, and she didn't want to hear from or see him again.

Roses and chocolate hadn't helped any, and five minutes after arriving at her apartment, Hutch was outside in the hall, the flowers in ruins at his feet, and the door still vibrating on its hinges.

She'd kept the chocolates, though.

Ego smarting, he rescued the roses, took them back to Venice and stood them in water. When she'd cooled down, he would try and salvage the affair. Maybe. In the meantime--well, he had a lot of sleep to catch up on.

In the morning Hutch felt more alert, physically and mentally, than he had for a while. His mood was not much improved, however, being bolstered by excessive humidity and a sense of injustice. It seemed as if he was being penalized by both Ginette and Dobey for being a germ-free and conscientious police officer, prepared to work his tail off to help out. Damn it, who needed that kind of hassle? He sure as hell didn't.

It was about time he quit letting people take advantage of his good nature. And that included his partner.

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No matter how close a friendship may be, continual stress and strain can cause some surface cracks. But they were no more than that. The deep foundations and the basic strength of the inner structure remained, and would remain, unweakened. Long hours put in on next to impossible cases, the emotional wear and tear of other people's distress, the bitter frustration of watching the guilty walk free on a technicality, all needed an outlet of some kind. And when circumstances did not cooperate--or vacation plans were cancelled--the nearest targets for teammates were each other.

In their three years of partnership, Starsky and Hutch had had differences of opinion that ranged from the epic to the juvenile. It meant nothing and the release of inward-turning tensions enabled them to continue that little bit longer. When you can't hit the System, or the crook, or your boss, there was always your partner, and under those circumstances it was surprising how minor irritations could escalate to full-scale provocation.

The last two months had been more than difficult. The Department had been effectively decimated by Asian Flu, and those unlucky enough not to go down with it had found themselves working eighteen, twenty-hour days.

The short vacation had been a kind of goal to aim for, a carrot on the end of a stick. And now it had been whisked away. It wasn't as if a second Charles Manson had suddenly arisen, or the Syndicate had pulled off the crime of the century. Parker Centre wanted a man moved from Point A to Point B. They were short-staffed, and looked to Metro. Metro in the shape of Captain Harold C. Dobey, looked to Starsky and Hutch. The world can be grossly unfair at times.

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Hutch took his anger to Vinnie's gym and sweated it out. What Starsky was doing about his pressures, at that point in time he neither knew nor cared.

But a strenuous workout, finished off with a game of squash and a shower, did much to restore his equilibrium. He straightened his tie, shrugged into his jacket and started for the door, glancing at his watch. Seven o'clock, on the dot. Which meant Starsky could be waiting for him outside. On cue he heard Vinnie's voice raised in the tones of morose satisfaction he reserved for one person only.

"Told you that diet would get to you," the man said. "You want to change it before it sours your disposition for good." The answer was an easily identifiable snarl, and he came out of the locker room to be greeted by a black and brooding glare.

"Hi," he said, and received a grunt in return.

"All sweetness an' light, he is," Vinnie said. "Mary Mild on a summer's day."

"Stuff it," Starsky snapped. "When I want the funnies I'll send you a letter. Are you about ready, or have you taken root?" he demanded, rounding on Hutch.

"Ready when you are," he said coolly, eyebrows climbing. Knowing how his partner felt about their assignment, he was half-prepared for a demonstration of that disapproval, and further deepened Starsky's mood by not commenting on his choice of outfit.

For interstate relationships Dobey insisted on his men creating a certain image--shirt and tie, well-pressed pants, smart jacket and well-polished shoes. Hutch met all the criteria, looking as if he'd just stepped out of a fashion plate. Starsky was dressed as if he was about to go undercover in the back alleys of downtown L.A., and the ancient canvas rucksack slung from one shoulder completed the picture of the all-American slob. Dobey, Hutch reflected, would not be pleased. The thought did not dismay him.

He followed Starsky out to the gym's parking lot, but balked when he headed for the Torino.

"No," Hutch said. He didn't relish the duty given to them either, but he'd see it through. On his terms. And that didn't include the Starsky version of freeway driving.

"Whaddya mean?" his partner demanded.

"No way am I riding seven hundred miles in that machine. I'm not going to spend the whole trip there and back being car-sick."

"There's nothing wrong with my car," Starsky snapped.

"Did I say there was? We take mine."

"It'll never make it!" he jeered. "You want to be towed into Phoenix behind a breakdown truck?"

Hutch gritted his teeth and refused to rise to the taunt. "We take, mine."

"The hell we do!" Starsky bounced forward a few steps, poised on the balls of his feet, fists clenched, a mute challenge in every inch of his body. Hutch contemplated the furious face and decided not to waste his time arguing. The Torino was still a new toy as far as Starsky was concerned, having taken delivery less than six months ago. Therefore he would not be responding to reason.

"The roads can be pretty bad in Arizona," he mused, "Loose stones can make a hell of a mess of paintwork, and I might lose the windshield--yeah, maybe you're right. We'll take yours. If we drive with the windows down I may not throw up too often."

"Hold it! You're not throwing up in my car!"

"But--"

"But nothin'! Okay, we take your heap."

"If you insist."

Reaching for the passenger door, Starsky suddenly realized he'd been well and truly suckered.

"You friggin' double tongued con artist!" he yelled, planting a hard kick on the door before opening it. Hutch winced.

"Don't do that."

"Why not? What does one more dent matter, huh? It's only held together by the paintwork anyhow."

Hutch managed to ignore that, and Starsky slumped into the seat, sullen and silent. His features looked tired and drawn, and it occurred to Hutch that his partner might be coming down with the flu bug.

"Hey," he said quietly, and Starsky glanced round. The sniping was suspended, an unspoken truce mutually accepted. "You okay?"

"Sure. Missed breakfast."

"Oh."

"On the other hand," Starsky said. "You could be Typhoid Mary. How do you feel?" But there was no real acid in the words.

"Just fine. Tell you, buddy, right now I can't think of anybody else I'd sooner give it to."

"Thanks a bunch."

Their eyes met and they exchanged fleeting grins, but the armistice was short-lived. A series of red lights, a couple of lunatic drivers, gas fumes, and humidity that increased by the minute, were all that it took to bring back the needling.

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Parking spaces were in short supply at Metro. Hutch found a place on the other side of the road and twenty yards down, and swung into it. Heat and carbon monoxide hit like a solid blow as Hutch got out of the car, and he headed for the air-conditioning of the building without waiting for his partner.

But Starsky caught up with him at their squadroom door, gave him a sharp kick above the ankle and ducked past before he could retaliate.

"What's that for?" Hutch yelled, lunging for him and missing.

"It's Kick Hutch Week." Starsky told him, and bounded into Dobby's office like a gopher down a hole, retribution on his heels.

Their precipitous entrance did not take Dobby by surprise. He'd have heard and recognized the raised voices, and three years of experience would have prepared him for the abrupt advent. But he was obviously not expecting the varying degree of sartorial elegance, and an expression of heavy disapproval settled on his brow.

Starsky smiled with all his teeth, and performed a crisp salute.

"Good morning, Captain Dobby, sir," he said with false brightness. He was fixed by a jaundiced stare.

"Is it?" Dobby said, voice cold. "You know my views on dress. What you wear on patrol downtown is one thing. What you wear when you represent the L.A.P.D. in the Courts or in the jurisdiction of other Departments is another thing entirely. Right now you are no credit to your fellow officers." Starsky's eyes blazed, but the smile stayed on.

"Cap'n," Hutch said, before he could commit verbal CUBO, "we've arranged to take my car. What condition is the freeway in across the state line?"

"Lane repairs in the Dome Rock Mountains, with the usual tailback and delays. You can either join the queue or take a detour." Dobey held out a folded route map and a fold of bills. "The roads are marked but for the detour, and there's enough expenses here to see you through. Who's taking charge of 'em?" Hutch did not give Starsky a chance to claim them. "It's up to you whether you stop over somewhere or drive straight through, but keep in touch with Phoenix. And Hutchinson--you hand Kirov over. Leave Mr. Elegance in the car. They'll never believe he's the cop, and we might not get him back. Have a good weekend."

"Hey!" Starsky was outraged. "Just a cotton-pickin' minute--" Hutch grabbed him above the elbow and hauled him out of the office, receiving a few more kicks in the process.

"Don't you think you're carrying this protest-scene a bit far?" he demanded. "For God's sake, Starsk, it's not Dobey's fault we--"

"Can the platitudes! An' get off my back! I'm a cop, not some fuckin' cab-driver. Why can't they pick up their own crud? He ain't no big time hit man, just a back street tough."

"We had it all explained yesterday," Hutch sighed with weary and obvious patience. "Or weren't you listening?"

"Sure I was listenin'. But I still don't see why our weekend has to be loused up. We didn't pick him up. He wasn't even in our--"

"You have a parochial mind," Hutch told him. Starsky kicked him.

"Will you cut that out?"

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Parker Centre was expecting them and their prisoner was waiting, a stocky, dark-haired young man standing sullen-faced between two uniformed officers and cuffed to one of them. Hutch stared at him, an eyebrow twitching up. Stanis Gregor Kirov was in his early twenties, of Eastern European descent, and his features bore a certain resemblance to Starsky's. He was, however, better dressed.

"You've got the expenses an' the pretty clothes," Starsky said bisquely, his scowl daring Hutch to make comments. "You can sign all the paperwork as well. I'll take charge of Ivan the Terrible."

Hutch matched the scowl with one of his own, and reached for the papers.

"Don't fret," the lieutenant grinned, knowing them from their pre-Metro days. "Every new teaming gets these rough patches. Just takes a little work, boys. That's all. The divorce rate is pretty low, considerin'."

"How about the 'justifiable homicide' rate?" Hutch demanded.

"High. Sign here an' here, an'--"

"Yeah, I know. Maybe I could bribe Phoenix to keep him."

"Up yours," said Starsky, and leaned on the desk to glare at the officer. "An' we never been a new team, even when we were."

"That's right," Hutch agreed. "Wonder what I did to deserve it?"

"You just got lucky," his partner grinned.

Hutch raised his eyes to the ceiling, then scrawled the last signature. "Okay," he sighed. "Let's get the show on the road."

The handcuff was transferred to Starsky's wrist, and in silent procession, the three took the elevator to the basement garage. Kirov was bundled into the back seat of the car, cuffed to the bar provided for the purpose, and Hutch pulled out onto the street. Starsky picked up the microphone.

"Control, this is Zebra Three, your unfriendly neighborhood L.A.P.D Yellow Cab service, signin' out on a Special Delivery. Let Phoenix know we're rolling, an' we charge two bucks a mile, without extras."

"Will do, Zebra Three. Tell Hutch he has our sympathy. Have a nice quiet weekend in the country, fellas"

"How come nobody's got sympathy for me?" he snarled. "You don't know what a pain in the ass he can be" and he slammed the hand mike back on its clip. Hutch braced himself for a kick that didn't arrive, probably because he was driving.

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The battered brown car nosed its way through the Friday rush-hour traffic, its occupants sitting in a stony, hostile silence. In the back seat, Kirov tentatively examined the bar to which he was linked. Starsky felt the slight pull on the back of his seat and turned.

"Are you going to give us trouble?" he asked, with a hopefulness that was a more effective deterrent than any threat.

"Who, me?" Kirov drawled. "Now why would I do a thing like that?"

"Just hang loose, punk," Hutch said before Starsky could launch into the kind of speech that might goad a saint to violence.

"Sure, sure," the prisoner muttered. "Won't be me that'll make you sweat." Something in the tone of his voice brought Starsky round again.

"Yeah?" he demanded. "Don't say you've got some playful friends out there in the badlands?"

"No friends of mine!" Kirov spat. "Just givin' you a warnin' pig, because I wanna get, smeared. You're supposed to deliver me alive an' in one piece--an' there's a contract out on me."

"You're kiddin'," Starsky grinned. "So who are they? Buddies of that old guy you wasted for thirty five bucks?"

"I didn't kill him," Kirov reached out to grab Starsky's shoulder, but he was stiff-armed back. "I didn't kill him." he repeated, holding on to his anger with a visible effort.

"Sure you didn't," Starsky jeered. "He beat his own head in, caved in his own ribs--with carpet slippers, yet! Then put a slug through his own skull, right? Save it, punk. We've heard' it all before."

"They framed me! Novaks set me up--"

"Cool it," Hutch interrupted. "We've got a long journey ahead of us, and we're not interested in your fantasies. Save 'em for Phoenix. And you quit needling him, Starsk, or I'll shove you in the trunk and leave you there."

"Hah," said his partner, taking the opportunity offered by a stop at a red light to kick him again. "You an' whose army? Who's gonna read the map for you then? Ivan the Terrible? You'd end up in Cuba. He can't read maps too well." He hunched round to address the sullen Kirov. "No sense of direction. He can get lost between the men's room door an' the john. Threw himself on the floor, once. An' missed."

"Can it, Starsk," Hutch said icily. He slammed the car into drive and took off on green, jolting his passengers deep into their seats, and providing more ammunition for Starsky.

"An' he has the goddam nerve to complain about my drivin'!"

"You don't drive that car, you aim it like a cannon!" Hutch yelled. "And one day, with any luck, it'll explode like one."

"With you sitting in the passenger seat?" he hooted. "It might almost be worth it--sure take the crease outa your pants." The radio crackled into life, postponing any retort. "Zebra Three, go ahead," he said into the mike.

"Latest word from Highway Patrol; four mile tailback already on the Dome Rocks freeway, advise take indicated detour."

"Will do, Control. If the Lone Ranger here can find it. And if this heap lasts that far. Better tell Highway to stand by with tow-trucks." Hutch snatched the mike out of his hand.

From the back seat came a snort of incredulity.

"I don't believe you two. You're straight out of 'Freebie An' The Bean'."

An outraged silence hit the front seats.

"I didn't like that movie," Starsky said finally, quietly. "Did you like that movie, Hutch?"

"No."

"No." Starsky turned to stare at Kirov. "We didn't like that movie, Scarlett."

"Scarlett?" Hutch demanded. "He was Ivan the Terrible a while back. How did we get to Scarlett?"

"He's Russian, right? Russians are red. Reds under the bed. Red--bed--Scarlett O'Hare."

Hutch groaned, and another cold silence filled the car.

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The hostile atmosphere deepened during the hours that followed. They crossed the Colorado River into Arizona, paused through Ehrenburg, and despite repeated suggestions from Starsky Hutch did not pull over for any of the roadside diners along the way. And the time was well past midday.

The comments from the passenger seat became more frequent, obscene, and venomous, with the occasional gut-rumble from Starsky's stomach to add point to his requests for a lunch-break.

Finally, Hutch had had enough. His head ached, his eyes ached, and dust seemed to coat throat, tongue and sinuses. He pulled onto the forecourt of a small roadside diner and gas station. He braked hard enough to throw his partner against the seatbelt.

"Out," he said. "We are going to talk."

"Terrific," Starsky sneered. "Me, I'd sooner eat." But he got out, kicked the door shut and followed in Hutch's footsteps as he headed for a stack of oil drums.

As soon as they were out of sight from the car, Hutch stopped dead and spun on his heel. Then, forefinger stabbing the air under the smaller man's nose, he proceeded to lay down the law.

"Now you listen to me-and you listen god. I don't like this job any more than you do, but you're sure as hell not making it any easier for either of us. We are going to get this punk to Phoenix in the shortest possible time, and if you can't find anything constructive to say, you can take your bitching, stuff it, and walk back to L.A. right now. You read me?"

"Sanctimonious bastard. You really get off on that self-righteous kick, doncha?" Starsky took a step closer, aggression flaring. "Well, you ain't doin' it at my expense!"

"Self-righteous; hell." Hutch snapped, "One of us has got to act like a responsible--"

"Don't say it!" Starsky screeched, "or so help me, I'll--"

"Truth hurts?" he demanded, cutting in smoothly. Starsky opened his mouth to deliver a furious reply, and Hutch tensed, aware that the words were likely to be punctuated with a fist.

Abruptly he had a swift vision of themselves--two grown men quarrelling like--kids in a schoolyard, and amusement hit, taking away the anger and the tensions. The same rueful laughter glittered in Starsky's eyes and he relaxed into a slouch.

"Wassa matter?" he drawled. "Whats her name gave you the Big Freeze Off last night, buddy? Did the Playboy of the Western World lose out on the home comforts?"

"Don't try and dodge the issue," Hutch was reluctant to let go his mad, but the smile was not easy to keep in check. "You know I'm right, you just won't admit it. And as far as Ginette is concerned--I probably got the same reception from her that you got from Tracie."

"That bad, huh? Okay, I'll play it your way. For now. It'll be interestin' to see how long you can keep up the 'I am a martyr to my job' act."

"With you for a partner, it's no act," Hutch countered, but he wasn't bothering to hide his grin. The strain-lines about his mouth and brows lessened, and the sullen set to Starsky's jaw was gone. No need for apology, explanation, from either side. It wasn't important. The outward show would continue, the safety valve they both needed, but the barbs were blunted.

Side by side they returned to the car, and Starsky transferred the handcuff from the bar to his wrist.

"C'mon," he said shortly. "Pitstop."

"Freebie an' the Bean," Kirov muttered under his breath. "I just don't believe--"

"You say somethin', punk?"

"No," Kirov subsided, "Nothin' at all."

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It took all of Hutch's charm and his best toothpaste smile to persuade the waitress to come close enough to their table to take their orders, but after that, service was swift and the meal, when it came, was eaten in silence.

The girl cleared away the empty plates, brought fresh coffee, and Hutch brought out the route map. He spread it over most of the table, and anchored the corners with condiments and catsup bottle.

"We've got two detour points to choose from," he announced, trying ignore what Starsky was doing with the pitcher of cream-substitute, the colored sugar crystals and his coffee. "We can leave the freeway about a mile from here, or go on another fifteen miles and take that one there."

"It's right before the lane repairs," Starsky objected, stirring the greyish concoction in his cup and sprinkling in a few more rainbow crystals. "Everybody'll be usin' it. It'll be as choked as the freeway. We better take the first one."

Hutch grunted thoughtfully.

"I'm not so sure. According to the map, it's not much of a road, the other one is a two lane job. We'd probably make better time on it."

"Sure we would, if we could guarantee it's got no traffic," Starsky argued. "Look, he went on, tracing a line with the handle of his spoon. "This first road takes a wide loop an' rejoins the freeway just before the Plomosa Mountains. We'd make Golder around midnight, and could stop over there."

Hutch considered this, then nodded.

"Yeah. Okay," he agreed. "We'll see how it goes. We'll call Phoenix and the Sheriff's office at Golder before we leave here, and if it's a trail left over from the covered wagon days, I'll rub your nose in it."

"Of course, if you had a decent car, it wouldn't matter what kind of road it was," Starsky snorted. "The Torino--"

"--would've lost its suspension," Hutch countered, "along with axles and the fancy chrome-work."

"Yeah? Listen, smartass, that is A Car, not a fuckin' rust-bucket held together by paintwork an' prayer."

"And the Torino isn't any kind of car, dirtball, it's a suicide wagon."

"I just worked out why you two don't like 'Freebie an' the Bean'." Kirov announced abruptly.

"Oh yeah?" Starsky demanded.

"Uh-huh. It got too close for comfort." Two pairs of blue eyes burned at him, but he seemed immune to the concentrated malice, sitting back in his chair and finishing his coffee. "Do I get to go to the men's room?"

The afternoon sun hit like a furnace-blast as they left the diner. Even with the windows down and the air conditioning going flat out, it was unpleasantly hot in the car.

Kirov, unable to get rid of his own jacket because of the cuffs, lapsed into a half-daze, but behind closed eyes he was turning over his situation in his mind, partially listening to the desultory insults being bandied between the two cops. They were something new in his experience, and he was unable to decide whether the hostility they showed towards each other was a genuine reflection or not. It sure looked genuine. Certainly he would never have believed they were police, let alone working partners, if he had encountered them on the street. They were an unlikely pairing, to say the least Freebie and the Bean. He found his thoughts were beginning to run in circles, rats in a trap, and sought for another track on which to concentrate. It wasn't difficult to find one. The memory of his last meeting with Arne Novaks was never far away, and it spurred him into trying again to convince his escort of his innocence and the threat to his life.

They listened for a few minutes before they glanced briefly at each other, then Starsky put one elbow on the back of his seat and rested his chin on his hand.

"Scarlett, for a punk you're okay," he said in a mild conversational tone. "We could even get to like you, given time. And distance. But you're startin' to get up my nose. So do yourself a favor, an' zip your lip."

"But--"

"Shut it, Scarlett," Starsky repeated. There was ice under the easy pleasantry.

Kirov shut up.

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Two hours passed, alternating silences with spasmodic continuations of the needling match. The road, though a minor one, was no problem, and had its fair share of traffic. Starsky took all the credit for this to himself, and was not to be distracted from his smugness until they passed a series of hoardings advertising the charms of the Westerner Hotel. He decided he was hungry again, and announced the fact pointedly, but Hutch ignored him. They drove past the place without slowing, and Starsky craned round in his seat, watching the ranch-style buildings out of sight.

"Figured we could have stopped there," he said.

"Why?"

"To eat, dummy. It's a long way to Golder."

"All you think of is your stomach. We'll eat tonight, when we stop over. Not before."

"You can starve if you want." Starsky shot him a look of triumph. "But I came prepared." He hoisted his rucksack into position between his knees, and unfastened the buckles. "The Starsky Survival Kit," he announced, and thrust an arm inside coming up with a can of Coke. He balanced it on top of the dash, and hauled out a couple more. "One for me, one for you, an' because I'm a philanthropist, one for him." And opened them carefully. They did not foam, and Hutch's sigh of relief brought a smile to his face. Maybe he should have shaken the cans a little, on the other hand, that could have pushed Hutch over the edge, which was no longer part of the plan. He dived into the rucksack again. This time a bulky wax paper package appeared, and Starsky folded back the wrapping with a kind of tender affection. If his clothes had been chosen with Dobby in mind, the contents of the rucksack were for Hutch's benefit. "Here y' go. Horseradish an' beef. Horseradish an' pastrami. Horseradish an' Danish Blue."

"Danish Blue?" Hutch queried, aghast.

"Yeah. I ran outa beef. What d'you want, Scarlett? Mr. California won't eat any of 'em."

"Uh, just the beef? No offence, but I'll pass on the Danish."

Starsky nodded, and sat Kirov's choice to one side. Out of the cornucopia next came a packet of cookies, the bright fluorescent lettering proclaiming 'Coconut Yummies'. Hutch did a double take.

"You're not gonna eat those things?" he protested.

"Sure I'm not. I'm gonna stick 'em in your ear, buddy. When I can cut 'em open," he added, wrestling with the plastic foil wrapping.

"What else you got in there?" Hutch groaned, "You did remember your pajamas?"

"So, I'll sleep in my shorts. Didn't have room for everything, had to stick to essentials." He tore at the cookie packet, a scowl growing. "How about that? Triple wrapped." Finally discarded, the layers crackled to the floor, and he reached into the bag again. "Piece de resistance," he grinned proudly, bringing out a jar and showing it to Kirov.

"That I can resist, no sweat," he said.

"What the hell have you got there?" Hutch demanded, and Starsky chuckled.

"Candy coated ants, buddy," opening the jar with care. "Picked 'em up at that little Chinese place."

"Sounds more like you're turning into an Australian aborigine," Hutch snapped, his reaction and expression all that Starsky had wished.

"A what? You been readin' National Geographical in the john again? Have an ant on me," offering the jar under his nose.

"Quit it, will you?" jerking back. "Or we're liable to end up in the ditch."

"Some ditch," Starsky peered over the steering wheel. "There's a twenty-foot drop over there, good buddy. At least. Hey, you sure you don't want a candy-coated ant or two? They're guaranteed crisp an' crunchy to the last--"

The truck hit at that moment, looming out of nowhere, slamming into the side of the car with rending force. The choc-coated insects shot from Starsky's hand, fountaining like hail. Another broadside from the truck, and Hutch lost control of the wheel, half-stunned by the second impact. Tyres screaming, the LTD spun off the road, took flight briefly as it left the embankment, hit front wheels first and somersaulted once before jarring down on its belly.

After the first instant of shock Hutch switched off the engine, hit the release on his seatbelt and wrenched the door open, all in the space of a few seconds. Then turned to Starsky, and registered with horror that his partner was slumped against the buckled door-pillar, head lolling and blood masking his face. He unfastened his seatbelt, took hold of his shoulders and hauled him out over the seats, regardless of injuries. There was a strong smell of gas, and the LTD could go up any time.

He carried his partner to what he hoped was a safe distance, and ran back to the car. Kirov was struggling up from the floor, white with shock and fear, and fighting the handcuff on his wrist.

"It was a hit!" he yelled. "I told you they were after me! They want me dead--I told you!" Hutch ignored him, unlocked the cuff from the bar and hustled him out. Kirov collapsed to his knees, but Hutch spared him little attention. He paused long enough to clip the free cuff to the prisoner's ankle, effectively immobilizing him, then knelt beside the unconscious man. "Will you listen to me?" Kirov yelled. "It--"

"Shut Up!" he snarled, turning on him with a ferocity that startled him into silence. "Starsk? Starsky? How y'doin'?" A stupid question. Carefully he ran his hands over limbs and body, found no obvious broken bones, and the relief took his own legs from under him. He sat down hard, drawing shaking breaths into lungs that suddenly felt cramped, and checked Starsky's pulse.

Eyelids flickered, lifted, and dark blue eyes focused slowly.

"You okay?" Hutch groped for his handkerchief, and supporting Starsky's head with one hand, he dabbed gently at the blood. It was welling from a deep--cut in the centre of a growing bruise between hairline and right eyebrow. "Take it easy, babe."

"That hurts." Starsky flinched away from the light touch. "What the hell happened?"

"A trucker hit us into a side-pocket." He folded the handkerchief into a pad, placed it over the cut and put Starsky's hand on it. "Here, hold this, it'll stop bleeding soon. How do you feel?" Deep concern was in the quiet voice.

"Okay, I guess, considerin'. What the hell happened?" he repeated. "Felt like we got hit by a tank--where the shit did he come from?"

"Don't know. I didn't see him until the last minute. Could be just a juiced-up trucker wanting to play tag." Reaction began to make itself known, and he clenched his hands into fists to stop them shaking.

"Just?" Starsky echoed weakly. "Did you get the bastard's number?"

"No." Hutch glanced at the silent LTD. There was no sign of smoke, only a thin white plume of steam rising from the radiator grill. "I better check the car out."

"Optimist." Starsky managed a feeble grin.

"Yeah, well, we've got to get back to civilisation somehow, end you hate walking," he said, injecting a flippancy he did not feel. He took Starsky's pulse again; it seemed normal enough, and the gauze that rested on his face was keen, unwavering, though there was a lurking unease in its depths.

The first thing Hutch investigated was the inside of the car.

"Radio's out," he reported.

"Terrific. Told you we should have stopped at that motel."

"You could get your wish, Starsk." He checked tyres, wheels, and slid underneath to examine the axles and exhaust system. "If you're prepared to walk back," he added, voice muffled.

When he reappeared, he was dusty and disheveled, face and hands streaked black, "Scarlett, your rap sheet said you know engines. Gonna need your help."

"Sure, man, just give me my hands back."

Hutch fetched the toolkit from the trunk, dumped it by the front fender, and drew his gun. Then unlocked the cuffs, and Kirov limped over to lift the hood.

"Don't get any ambitious ideas, Scarlett."

"Relax," he muttered "I'm not that stupid."

Hutch didn't answer. He moved back to Starsky's side and crouched there. .

"How's the head?" he asked quietly. Starsky squinted at him.

"Fine. If I don't move it. A trucker, huh? Where the hell did he come from?"

"God knows. I didn't see him until the last minute. Could have sworn we weren't being tailed."

"We weren't." Starsky said positively.

"What was Scarlett saying about some guys wanting him dead--"

"Are you gettin' paranoid? It was a snow-job."

"Okay, but we're stuck out here with a useless radio and a wrecked car."

"He said a contract out on him, which makes it pretty certain to be a professional job. An' if that was a hit attempt, no way was it professional." Starsky said. "No one waited around to count the bodies, and the odds were in our favor that we'd survive it anyhow--that drop wasn't so far you could guarantee we'd all be killed, even if it did get close enough for me. Which leaves us with a juiced-up trucker and a hook for Scarlett to hang his contract-story on, an' aimin' to get us lookin' every which way except at him."

"And the next thing we know, he's lit out," Hutch finished.

"Right. An' we'd have to explain to Phoenix an' Dobby? I'm not gonna buy it, Hutch."

"Me neither." But he shifted uneasily, unable to dismiss the coincidence from his thoughts.

"Maybe they wanted us slowed up or on foot. They could have picked us up at that diner, the waitress had enough chance to overhear--"

"Hutch," Starsky said tiredly. "He's shootin' a line. When are you gonna ditch that trustin' nature of yours?"

Half an hour later the engine coughed, wheezed, and croaked into life, and Kirov emerged from under the hood.

"Radiator's holed, exhaust an' cooling systems are gone, an' could be the head's cracked," he announced, slamming it down. "She might make it to that motel, if you nurse her."

"If we can get back on the road." Hutch stood up, favoring stiffened muscles, and gestured him away to a patch of sand a few yards from where Starsky sat hunched up, head resting on his knees. "Sit down."

"Whatcha gonna do about the trucker?" Kirov demanded. "They're gonna try again when they find out he didn't finish it."

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. Sit down."

"An' shut up," Starsky added sourly. The man obeyed, but there was a visible tension quivering in him, and sweat darkened the dust and oil smearing his features as Hutch cuffed wrist to ankle again.

Starsky lifted his head, blinking in the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun.

"Good luck," he said, a wry twist to his smile.

"Thanks," said Hutch, and climbed into the car. With a silent prayer, he coaxed the LTD into motion. The sound effects were unnerving, but it jolted over the desert ground and crawled up the bank onto the road. "Okay, Starsk," he yelled. "Get off your ass and give Scarlett his leg back."

The effort of getting to his feet made Starsky's hood spin, and the pounding throb started up again. He clamped down on the desire to stay still and wait for it to ease, expressed himself with fluent obscenities and encouraged Kirov up the slope ahead of him with a hard shove between the shoulder blades. Friggin' junkheap of a car--and Hutch makin' like Andretti--on roads like these--crazy truckers waltzin' all over the highway. The sun was arc-light dazzling, but abruptly there was a grey haze over everything, and his balance was shot to blazes--

"Starsk?" A arm hooked around his waist, steadyng him, Hutch's voice, anxious. He hung onto the support, trying to get his lags under him, shaking his head to clear the thin high singing from his ears.

"--s'all right." He managed the reassurance. "Kinda dizzy for a minute, tha's all--"

"Yeah, yeah. Take it easy. Kirov, give me a hand here!"

"I'm okay," Starsky protested. "Don' fuss." His knees felt like Funny Putty, but he could cope. Hutch kept a hand under his elbow all the same, and he slid into the car with a sigh of relief. The

seats had been cleaned off to a degree, but the sticky runnels of spilled Coke and the remains of sandwiches and cookies were splattered everywhere else, mixed with grass from the shattered windows. He peeled a slice of horseradish coated pastrami from the dash, and regarded it mournfully.

"The inside of this car looks like an explosion in a take-away," Hutch grumbled, anchoring their prisoner once more.

"It wasn't your food," Starsky told him. Sitting down, and in the comparative shade, he was feeling better. The cut had stopped bleeding, and so long as he didn't move around the thudding headache was bearable.

Hutch put the car into drive and eased his foot down on the gas. Starsky listened to the complaints of abused automobile, and wondered how far the heap would manage before it finally died on them. And where that truck had got to.

"Just pray they've got a good workshop at the motel," Hutch said.

Starsky, eyes on the road, just grunted. A good workshop? It'd take a friggin' miracle.

~~~

The motel room wasn't exactly up to the standards of the Conrad Hilton chain, but so long as the roaches didn't start ganging up on him, Starsky didn't care. It wasn't moving, and it was out of the sun. He collapsed onto the sagging couch, jerking Kirov down beside him with the cuffs, and surveyed their surroundings. Three single beds, a TV, a couple of chairs and a dresser. Hutch dropped their bags onto the nearest bed, opened the door to the bathroom.

"Well, if we're lucky they'll fix the car and we won't have to stop over," he said optimistically.

"I'm not going any further today," Starsky told him. "J'y suis, J'y reste. An' like that."

"What?" Hutch glanced at him.

"I'm staying put," he translated. "Why don't you go get us some coffee?"

"You're feeling better, huh?"

"Oh, sure, terrific. A truck plays baseball with that apology you call a car, hits us for a home run down a canyon--you know I could have concussion? Not to mention busted ribs--"

"You are feeling batter," Hutch decided with a grin. "The Complete Hypochondriac. Listen, you reckon you can hold together long enough to call Phoenix, let 'em know where we are? I want to chase up the garage mechanic, see what the chances are he can' fix' the car."

"I can try," Starsky said, his expression one of self-sacrificing nobility. "You gonna babysit Scarlett, or do I tether him outside the phone-booth?"

~~~

He made the report to Phoenix as concise as he could, not feeling in the mood to indulge in conversation. When he got back to the room, Kirov was sitting on one of the beds, cuffed to the headboard, and Hutch was in the shower. Starsky stalked to the door and kicked it.

"C'mon, Blintz. You're not the only one needs to clean up."

Hutch emerged, toweling his hair.

"Those candy-coated ants of yours got everywhere," he explained.

"Quit bitching. They were dead, weren't they?"

"Yeah, but the candy was getting kinda sticky. What did Phoenix say?"

"Did we want someone to pick us up. I said we'd let 'm know when we knew."

"Tell 'em about the truck?"

"For all the good it'll do. I didn't even see the fuckin' thing, let alone get a make on it." He set down, heavily. "I'm bushed. Pick us up something to eat when you're through at the garage?"

"Okay."

As he left, Starsky hauled himself to his feet. He wanted a shower, food, and sleep, in that order. The various aches and pains were really beginning to get to him. Ask Hutch if he'd pocked any aspirin--"

"I need to go to the John." Kirov broke in on his thoughts as he rooted out a towel.

"Oh." Starsky fished in his pocket for the key to the cuffs, and leaned over to unlock the bracelet from the headboard. It wasn't one of his better ideas--nausea and vertigo hit together, and he felt his knees start to buckle. But before he could grab for support, something chopped at the back of his neck and the floor floated up to hit him in the face.

~~~

Kirov snatched the key from the slack fingers and got rid of the cuff on his wrist, pulled the S & W from Starsky's shoulder-holster, and slid it under his belt in back. A further swift search found billfold, two spare clips of ammunition, and Police I.D. He sat back on his heels and flicked it open. The gold badge glittered in the light for a moment before he slipped the wallet into his own hip pocket. Could come in useful. The other loot he stashed about his person. Time to move out.

"Sorry about this, Bean," He said to the still figure. "But I got some travelin' to do."

He eased the door open, straining eyes and ears. But there was neither sight nor sound of the downed cop's partner. It was not far off dark--the door clicked shut behind him and silence descended, broken occasionally by the swoosh of traffic along the highway.

~~~

Hutch found his car up on a ramp in the workshop, a bleak-faced and lugubrious mechanic inspecting its underbelly. He was not very communicative, but the list of horrendous faults, delivered in a laconic monotone, told Hutch that the repairs were going to take some time. Even when he stressed the fact that the car was a police vehicle on urgent official business, the man did not seem overly impressed. It began to look as if Phoenix were going to have to collect their prisoner after all. Better call the P.O.--but after they'd eaten.

"Where can I get food around here?"

A wrench gestured in the general direction of the motel.

"Diner's out back."

"Thanks," Hutch said politely, and made his way across the darkening courtyard.

It took a while to get his order filled, the only staff being a lethargic cook and a waitress who was plainly more interested in his body than his need for food. But eventually he was heading back to the room laden with coffee, assorted sandwiches and donuts to keep the wolf from the door--and Starsky's gut from grumbling through the night. He hoped.

Three styrofoam cups of coffee, however, presented a slight problem in logistics when it came to letting himself in. He kicked the door.

"Hey Starsk, open up, willya? I'm loaded." No answer. Another harder kick. "C'mon you lazy slob! Get off your ass and open the goddam door!" Nothing. That was worrying. Hutch freed one hand by putting the coffee on the floor, and hauled out his key.

The room seemed deserted, which was not only odd, but distinctly unnerving. The bad feeling in his gut intensified.

"Starsk?" The bathroom door was ajar, but before he got to it, he saw the body sprawled on the floor between two beds. "Starsk!"

The empty shoulder-holster told the story--Kirov and Starsky's automatic were long gone. So were I.D. and billfold. Hutch swore under his breath, touching fingers to the side of his partner's neck. Pulse okay--steady, strong, not too fast. "What the hell happened, babe?" Stupid question. All it needed was one moment of inattention. Shouldn't have left him. He was in no state to deal with Kirov, and the young hoodlum had known it and taken advantage of it. There was a faint chance he hadn't got far. But the hope vanished when the lightning check of courtyard and lot yielded nothing. No surprise. In the hour he'd been away, Kirov had had the chance to cover a lot of distance.

Hutch returned to the room to find Starsky on the threshold of consciousness and suffering with it.

"Easy, buddy," Hutch fetched a wet towel, used it to swab carefully at the crusted blood where the cut had reopened. "Take it easy, Starsk."

"Wha'--what happened?" Starsky muttered, trying feebly to fend off the unwelcome ministrations. Hutch--? Oh, Christ, my head--"

"Lie still. You'll be okay in a minute."

"I musta passed out--"

"Can you remember?"

"Or Kirov jumped you and took off," Hutch said

"No...Scarlett's gone?"

"With the wind," Hutch said grimly. "Along with your gun, I.D. and cash." Starsky moaned, and Hutch checked his pulse again. It was strong and regular, and the eyes that squinted at him didn't appear to have any trouble focussing. "C'mon, you'll be more comfortable lying down on the bed." Starsky grunted, and with his help crawled up to sprawl his length on the coverlet.

"You just got here? he asked, eyes closed.

"No. Came back with coffee and sandwiches--found you, went looking for him."

"And zilch. So now what?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Hutch chose to take it literally.

"First off, get you some medical attention."

"About Kirov, dummy. I'm okay."

"Will you lie still? He's not your worry right now."

"The hell he is! I'll smear him, so help me I'll--"

"Sure," Hutch interrupted. "When we get him back. Just take it easy--that's twice you've faded out on me, and that should spell probable concussion even to you. Will you cool off--"

"Are you kiddin'? Ho could be in the next county by now! An' I'm okay--" He started to crane up, but Hutch leaned his weight on his shoulders.

"Will you behave, or do I cuff you to the bedpost?"

"But--"

"But nothing. I'll get something for your head, than report to Phoenix and start asking around, see what I can find out."

"He'll be long gone--hitched out on a truck. We can't afford to waste time. I'm okay, for God's sake--"

"No, you're not," Hutch said quickly. "You give me any hassle, Starsk, and I'll call an ambulance."

Starsky looked up at him. Then relaxed and closed his eyes again.

"Have it your way," he muttered, knowing when Hutch was bluffing and when he was not, and not relishing the prospect of a night in the hospital. "For now," he added under his breath as Hutch gave a satisfied nod, convinced he had a victory.

Starsky gave him no reason to doubt it, even when Hutch returned from Reception with a pack of Excedrin and gave him three of them. It wasn't worth even a token resistance when Hutch got that look of grim determination in his eyes--and if they'd bombed out, they'd bombed out, and argument wasn't about to solve anything. Besides, he couldn't think straight like this...

Hutch drew the drapes across, switched off the lights, and closed the door quietly behind him. Kirov would be most likely to head for the road--there were people around the motel complex, and somebody must have, well, might have seen him. But before he started the hunt, Dobey and Phoenix had to know they'd lost their prisoner. The shame and professional loss-of-face brought a tide of colour to his skin; but he gritted his teeth, made the two phone calls, one found Phoenix's barely polite scorn harder to take than his Captain's blasting.

The phoenix P.D. told him they'd be sending out a team and informing all relevant authorities, but Hutch did not intend to wait around. Not while there was a chance he could still cut Kirov's trail. He promised himself, too, that he would work off some of his feelings on the escapee's person. Starsky wanted to dent him some--okay. But the queue would form on the right.

~~~

For almost an hour Hutch prowled the area, questioning staff, gas pump attendants, other guests, waitresses and customers in the all-night diner, all without result. Stanis Gregor Kirov had become the Invisible Man. Which was impossible. But no trucks had stopped by, no one had seen any car take on a passenger. It just didn't add up.

There was a sign on a door backing onto the yard--KITCHEN--ENTRY. Hutch entered. There were four people in there, three of them had neither been outside in the past hour, nor seen anything out of the ordinary. The fourth, whose sole duties seemed to be to empty waste pails into the garbage bins ranged outside and to chew gum, was more helpful.

"Yeah, I saw a guy in light brown denim," he said around the load in his cheek.

"Where and when?"

"Uh... A while ago. He ran across the yard out there."

"Show me." Hutch took him by the shoulder and propelled him through the door.

"Uh... He came from over there," the boy pointed vaguely in the general direction of the motel rooms, "an' climbed the fence." That was a fifteen-foot chain-link affair that delineated the

bounds of the site from the rough country beyond. It might deter coyotes, but presented little difficulty to a fit and presumably desperate young man.

"He climbed the fence," Hutch repeated. "And what did you do?"

"What the hell could I do?" the boy snorted, indignant, "d'y'think I'm Steve Austin or somethin'?"

"What's out there?"

"Hills." He shrugged, shifted the gum to the other cheek and continued to ruminate.

"Tumbleweed, sagebrush, sand, rocks--hills."

"And?" Hutch prompted with grim persistence.

"Uh--well, there's a road a couple miles away," the boy confessed after a short period of thought.

"Links to the Pedro Valley highway."

"Trucks use it?"

"Maybe. I guess so. There's a trail 'cross country, finishin' up at the Longhorn Bar 'n' Grill."

It was at least a possible lead. Hutch checked his watch, returned to the room. It was nearing midnight now, and time was running short, but he wasn't about to take off without reassuring himself about his partner's condition.

His fears on that score were groundless. Starsky was curled under the quilt, fast asleep and snoring slightly. Hutch's grin had an element of relief in it as he straightened the cover over the man's shoulders.

"See you later, babe," he said quietly, ruffling the tangled curls with gentle fingers.

~~~

Starsky didn't want to wake up. It was like trying to swim in a thick soup--far easier to float in limbo than force himself to the surface. But somebody in the next room had a radio turned up full, and the noise reverberated through the thin partition walls. With a groan, Starsky opened his eyes.

"Hutch?" His head felt thick and heavy, and a dull ache was pounding at the back of his skull. He was also hungry. Since there was no response to his call, he sat up gingerly, was pleased to discover that his head didn't fall off, and squinted at his watch A quarter before seven.

Morning? Had to be. Where was Hutch? The room was empty, the other beds unslept-in, no sound from the bathroom. But a white rectangle was propped on the dresser, with his name scrawled across it, and it promised explanations. He was not entirely surprised at its message.

'Going after Scarlett,' Hutch had written. 'Last seen before midnight heading across country towards Longhorn Bar 'n' Grill on road east of here. Have contacted Phoenix and Dobey. Stay put?'

"You aimin' for Hero-of-the-Week, Hutchinson?" Starsky groaned. "Man, you're just not safe out alone--"

Well, knowing Hutch, he'd have left a trail that a myopic Cub Scout could follow. Starsky took a sketchy shower, shaved, and with a clearer head and increased appetite, made for the diner. But he didn't stop to eat. While they filled his order, he went hunting for the LTD.

There was little improvement in the condition of the Heap--and there was no chance it was going anywhere for several days. There weren't any cars for rent either. But by then Starsky had spotted the high-powered Japanese motorcycle parked nearby.

"Whose is the Kawasaki?" he demanded. The mechanic regarded him sourly.

"Mine. An' she ain't for hire neither."

"I need transport," Starsky said. "Now I can be nice about it, or not. As a cop, I can commandeer the bike. Or you can loan her to me because you're a decent law-abidin' citizen an' you like my face. Which is it to be?"

The mechanic gave the matter some thought.

"You got collateral?"

"Sure. You hang on to the LTD."

"You bein' funny, mister?"

"No," said Starsky, showing his teeth. "I'm makin' you an offer you can't refuse. So don't waste my time."

He got what he wanted.

"--but you damage her, an' I'll hunt you across every state in the union," the man warned. "Cop or no cop,"

"Don't worry. How do I get to the Longhorn Bar 'n' Grill from here?"

"You don't wanna eat there they specialize in ptomaine poisoning with salmonella on the side."

"Terrific. How do I get there?"

~~~

The Longhorn Bar 'n' Grill was little more than a shack sitting on the edge of a dust-bowl masquerading as a parking lot, occupied at present by a lone truck. Starsky swung the bike into a spectacular dirt track halt, kicked down the stand, and sauntered inside. A blond head came up, frown-line deepening.

"What are you doing here? I told you--"

"I had other ideas." Starsky looked at the untouched coffee cup in front of Hutch, at the greyish fluid within. "You eaten?"

"No. For once why couldn't you do like you're told?"

"Because we're a team," Starsky said unanswerably. "What's the word on Scarlett?"

"The guy behind the counter sold him coffee and sandwiches--a couple of hours ago, says a truck heading south picked him up."

"So we head south."

"Sure we do," Hutch snarled. "What in? My car is off the road, remember?"

"I should forget? Cool it, will you. I got a bike outside."

"What?"

"Customised Kawasaki. All the horsepower we need." Hutch stared at him, patently disbelieving. "So c'mon, huh? Time we were movin'."

"Where the hell did you--no, never mind, don't tell me." He followed Starsky out to the bike, took one look and an unwilling grin tugged at his mouth. "You would have to pick one with a paint-job like-that," he commented. "Haven't you heard of being inconspicuous, Starsk?"

Starsky straddled the machine proudly.

"If you got, flaunt it," he announced. "You want breakfast, I got sandwiches and juice. This place ain't safe."

"Really." His partner climbed onto the pillion. "Kirov ate here."

"Yeah, an' if we get lucky, we could pick him up when the effects hit him. You ready?"

"Okay, cowboy, let's go," Hutch got a good grip on Starsky's jacket, and the motorcycle leapt forward with a throaty roar.

~~~

Tenada, Arizona, was a typical example of Smalltown U.S.A.--but it boasted a railroad, and that made it a possible first stop to check their quarry. A couple of oldsters sunning themselves outside the General Store reacted favorably to Hutch's badge and agreed that, yes, they had been out here most of the morning--the truck-stop down the road was in clear view--and they had indeed seen a big Mack halt there for a young man answering Kirov's description to get out. Starsky brightened.

"Which way did he go?"

"Railroad." The two syllables depressed him again.

"Oh, shit."

"How much cash did you have on you?" Hutch demanded.

"Enough for him to buy a ticket out of here. This time we've really lost him."

"How come he's so important?" one old man cut in and the second gave a friendly prod to Starsky's midriff.

"Don't fret, son," he chuckled. "Iffen you don't find him, I guess the other guys will."

"Huh?" said Starsky.

"Other guys?" repeated Hutch; then, "--oh, no! Phoenix!"

"Yep. Sounded like they came from those parts."

"We've got to find him first," Hutch said desperately. "My God! We're never gonna live this down--"

"Haveta wear bags over our heads," Starsky agreed. "For the rest of our careers."

"Tell y'somethin'," the first man cut in. "Didn't think much of those guys." .

"Who?"

"Th' crowd from Phoenix. Kinda mean, y'know? Carryin' guns. Hard cases."

Hutch stared at him hopelessly.

"A crowd? How many?"

"Four, five." The old man studied their horror struck faces. "But you still got time to find your buddy. There ain't been a train out since he got here, an' the next is due around three."

"Thanks." Hutch grabbed Starsky's arm and dragged him back to the bike.

"Four--maybe five?" Starsky moaned. "Dear God, they must have shipped in the whole of Phoenix Homicide Squad. Why that many for poor li'l Scarlett? He ain't so important."

"He killed a guy," Hutch said quietly. "And I'll make book they're leaping at the chance to score off the LAPD--you know how it is."

"Politics!" Starsky spat. "Be damned if we're gonna let 'em rip us off!"

"So--we try the railroad first, then split up to cover as much ground as possible."

"They've got a helluva start on us."

"So? We've beaten the odds before. Don't see why we can't do it again. Think positive, Starsk."

"Sure... Wish I had a gun. I'm gonna turn Scarlett into Swiss-steak."

~~~

The clerk at the ticket booth remembered Kirov, had sold him a ticket to Houston. He also remembered the three men who had enquired after him a short while later. But there was no other information he could give.

On the off chance that Kirov might be choosing to wait around for his train in the immediate areas, they spent an hour checking it out with no result.

"This has to be where we split." Hutch fetched up panting, against a fence, sweat matting his hair and splotching his shirt. "Gonna take too long like this. You want t'take the area south of here, while head north?"

"Kay." Starsky blotted his face on his sleeve. "An' we meet back here, when? Half after two? In case he tries for that train?"

"Right." There was a pause, then Hutch pushed himself upright. "And you be careful."

Starsky grinned at him. "Yeah. You too."

~~~

The construction site that butted onto the railroad yard was a jungle of concrete shells, idle machinery, and in the bright noon of the Arizona Saturday, appeared to be devoid of life. But there were any number of bolt-holes here for a fugitive. Starsky prowled the silent area, methodically quartering the ground, uncomfortably aware as he slid from cover to cover that he was unarmed and Kirov was not. He had the uncanny feeling that he was being watched- a sixth sense warning rippling ice up his spine in spite of the heat.

Kirov. Has to be. But where?

He halted in the shade of stacked timber two-by-fours and the feeling grew, raising goosebumps. So he wasn't altogether surprised to catch the clink of a stone behind him.

But instead of a kid in brown denim, a heavy-set man in a dark suit was leveling a silenced gun at his chest, the face behind the thick moustache showing white teeth in a grin of satisfaction.

"Okay, Kirov. Act sensible, huh?"

Starsky couldn't control the first twitch of a smile as he let the tension drain out of him. Dumb hick-cop. Don't even know what Scarlett looks like. Aloud, he said "Cool it, man, I'm not Kirov--" "And the gun spat without warning, the bullet kicking up dust inches from his feet.

"No tricks, punk."

What kind of trigger-happy moron--? "You wanna be careful with that piece," he snapped. "Will you listen to me? I'm not--"

The man covered the little distance between them with unexpected speed, left fist slamming into Starsky's ribs. Thrown back against the timber, numb with shock, he slumped to his knees--saw the kick coming and curled up, protecting groin and stomach, crowing for breath and retching.

"You got a lot coming to you, smartass," his attacker hissed. "You want another taste of it? Like the Boss told ya, you're either part of his System or you're dead. Now get on your feet."

"I'm not Kirov," Starsky croaked.

"An' I'm not gonna tell you again."

Slowly he obeyed, struggling up with the aid of the timber-stack for leverage end support. Silencer, no ID, no reading of his rights--it didn't take much in the way of mental agility to figure out this wasn't a cop. "You arranged the truck."

"Right, an' you cut loose, just like we reckoned. Up against the wood. G'wan, lean!"

Starsky leaned, and a hand patted him down.

"How long have you been tailin' me?"

"Since you hitched a ride at that greasy spoon. How'd you lose the pigs?"

"They got dented in the crash. I lit out first chance I got. Hey can't we talk this over? I mean, I could have reconsidered my position, y'know."

"Uh-huh. Mr. Novaks'll be doin' all the talkin' when we get you back to Phoenix. Move out, kid. We're goin' home."

All your fault, Hutchinson, Starsky thought illogically. If we hadn't split up--if we hadn't split up, you'd be in the shit with me and no chance of anybody haulin' us out/ Make it soon, buddy boy.

But since Hutch wasn't aware of his partner's predicament, Starsky didn't feel it wise ta rely on him coming to the rescue. He obeyed the heavy, stumbling over the rough ground back the way he had come towards the railroad and the town's main street. The guy knew his stuff, keeping just out of lunge-range, gun held rock-steady. But the footing was uneven and treacherous, and while he had his eyes on his capture, he wouldn't be watching his feet.

It was risky--hell, it was damn near suicidal--but there was no other way Starsky could think of right than of getting the advantage. A half-complete excavation lay in their path; he skirted as close to it as he dared. The dried-out edge crumbled under his weight, and the bigger man did not see the danger until the earth slipped under his feet, throwing him off balance. Starsky took the chance, diving for the gun, and they fell together into the slime six feet below. Starsky landed on top, knees driving into the hood's ribs, winding him. A swift, savage chop to the throat, and he wrenched the weapon from slack fingers.

It was a Colt Commander .45--better than a BB gun any day. Starsky tucked it under his belt; went through the suit pockets and found handcuffs, ammunition clips, and a small photograph of Kirov. It was some-what blurred, obviously taken from a moving car but clear enough to show salient features, and the case of mistaken identity was understandable.

Terrific.

Starsky cuffed the unconscious man and left him at the bottom of the pit, climbing out and sprinting for the town. Adrenaline gave him the boost, blanketing his hurts. To hell with Kirov-- Hutch had to be warned that it wasn't the Phoenix P.D. but a small army of goons hunting the same quarry.

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Hutch had drawn nothing but blanks in his search through the warehouse district that sprawled north of the town. The heat pressed in on him like a physical thing and he had the distinct impression that dehydration would be setting in any minute now. The dry scorch of the sun seemed to be leaching every drop of moisture in him, taking his energy along with it. Hell, it was impossible for one man to comb this warren. Kirov could be anywhere, laughing at him. And with Phoenix on the trail as well--or maybe they had already picked him up, and were waiting to pour scorn on the ineptitude of their LAPD rivals? He had no way of knowing, so had to continue the search. He pulled his sweat-soaked shirt loose from his back, raked impatient fingers through his sodden forelock, and headed for the next cluster of buildings.

Maybe it was the heat, maybe it was tiredness, sun-glare, but he wasn't aware of being tailed until the very last minute, when the three men closed in on him, trapping him in a blind alley. There was a fifteen-foot fence at his back, and silenced guns trained on his body.

"Hold it, sonny," one said shortly. "Make a move and you're dead meat."

Hutch eyed them with morose disfavor. He was in no mood to play along with these kind of party games.

"Big deal," he snorted. "put away the artillery, will you?"

"You got a big mouth, Blondie," a second man said, voice soft and menacing. "Shut it, or we shut it for you. Shake him down."

"Hey, wait a minute--" Hutch started, but a gun barrel cracked across the side of his head and he didn't get to finish.

"Tired of life, son?" the first man inquired silkily. Hutch tried to blink away the fuzziness of his vision, head spinning, knees threatening to buckle. A chill certainty settled in his gut as hands grabbed his shoulders and he was spun, slammed into the fence, and spread-eagled for a professionally thorough search. Kirov's snow job had not been a snow job. These men weren't cops. And if they weren't Phoenix's Finest, there was only one other valid explanation.

"Yeah, he's one of the escort, okay." They found, and relieved him of his ID as well as the Python. "Hutchinson, LAPD. Where's your side-kick, Blondie?"

Starsk.

"In the motel room, with concussion," he improvised. "Who--"

"No, he ain't." A hand in his hair wrenched him round for the fist that split his mouth. "You think we're dumb as that? He took off a while after you did."

"So why ask me where the hell he is?" He spat blood. "He was supposed to stay put. Who are you? What--?"

"Forget it. We'll deal with him after we've got Kirov. Okay, Bennie, he's all yours."

The man who had searched him grinned and lifted his gun, the ugly snout of the silencer looming large as a cannon.

"Where do you want it, piggie?" Bennie crooned. "Head or belly?"

"For Chrissake quit it with the games." his boss snapped. "Do it. We're too close to Kirov for you to fool around."

Hutch swallowed dryly, tensing himself for any last minute possibility of escape--then a flicker of movement caught his eye and a head was framed in a glass less window overlooking the alley. For one wild moment he thought it was Starsky, then realised that the dark curly tangle, belonged to Kirov, and what the hell was the young punk doing? Bennie's finger was whitening on the trigger when Kirov's shot took him in the back, and the execution bullet went wide, Hutch diving in under it to snatch the gum from the dead hand. He rolled and came up on one to discover that his targets had vanished

"Freebie!" Kirov yelled. "C'mon! They're huntin' cover."

The window was some ten feet above ground, but Hutch sprinted for it, jumped and caught the sill. He chinned himself up and over, aided by Kirov hauling at him, to sprawl painfully on a rusty, creaking cat walk inside. They flattened themselves down as bullets punched through the space they'd occupied a few seconds before.

"How many lives have you used up, Freebie?" Kirov panted.

"Gave up counting years ago," he wheezed. "Do you want a formal vote of thanks, and will you accept this as necessary?" He rested the automatic on the belt-buckle. "Hand over the gun."

"Sure," Kirov said wryly, obeying. "Do I get it back when they corner us?"

"If they corner us, I'll think about it. Now let's get out here--and don't take chances, Scarlett."

Kirov shrugged and led the way towards the rear of the building. "How's the Bean?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Okay, and thinking up novel ways of turning you into Swiss steak." Hutch told him. "He has a very inventive mind. Who are these goons?"

"Arne Novaks' discipline squad. He's Numero Uno in Phoenix--got a finger in anythin' shady you care to name. An' if you don't fit with his family, you're nowhere. So most folks walk his line. I didn't. They set me up an' dropped me in it. Kinda like an example for the rest of the herd."

"So you didn't waste the old guy?"

"Nope." Kirov halted beside a massive door and peered cautiously out. The coast seemed to be clear. "I was there, okay. I stuck a gun under his nose an' took the cash outa the till, but that's all. He was alive an' kickin' an' cursin' me out in Yiddish when I left."

Real big time."

"So what?" Kirov shrugged again. "I needed the bread, but why try to heist Fort Knox? I'm not ambitious, man, just broke."

"You're breaking my heart. Is it clear out there?"

"Yeah. Where to, Freebie?"

"The name's Hutchinson. Back into town, deal the local law in on the action."

"You're callin' the shots, I guess." Kirov gave him a speculative look. "D'you reckon you can keep me alive?"

"I aim to try," Hutch said dryly. "And Starsk's out there, too."

"Without a gun," he was reminded.

"Don't make book on it. He's resourceful as well as inventive. Head out, Scarlett."

"The name's Kirov." The young tough gave him a cocky grin and took off for the next patch of cover. Hutch gave him a ten-yard start, then followed, crouching low.

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They managed to travel several blocks without incident, but then a dark figure appeared briefly ahead of them, and a silenced gun gave its muffled cough as they dived simultaneously for shelter. Blood seeped from a ragged tear on Kirov's left shoulder where the bullet had scored a shallow furrow, narrowly missing Hutch as it passed on its way.

"Okay?" he panted, inspecting the damage.

"Yeah," Kirov said through clenched teeth. "Hurts like hell, but it's only a burn for God's sake gimme that piece!"

"No." Hutch edged forward, and another bullet spattered him with brick dust

"He's over there, behind that water tank."

"Yeah, but I can't waste my shots. What's back of us?"

"A factory, I guess. Hold on." Behind him Hutch heard wood splintering and grunts of effort, then, "C'mon, I made a gap--we can just about crawl through." Kirov had pulled away a few planks from a boarded-up door, and they bolted through the crack like mice down a hole. More shots whined and ricocheted past their last cover, but they were running the length of the factory floor, and were out of reach.

They emerged from the rear of the building into the afternoon sunlight, and discovered they were on the edge of the industrial complex. Ahead was an empty parking lot, a small single story warehouse, then scrubland and foothills. Behind them was the town and the sheriff's office, effectively cut off by Novak's hoods--boards cracked like exploding shells as they were ripped from their moorings, and Hutch gave Kirov a slap on his uninjured shoulder.

"There's only one Place to go, Scarlett," he said lightly.

"How good is the Bean at imitatin' the seventh cavalry?" Kirov gasped, starting the last frantic dash.

"Made a lifetime hobby of it," Hutch forced out, running on his heels. Starsky's rescue act was pretty special, but maybe he didn't know it was needed.

~~~

By the time they had reached the warehouse and forced a way in, both men were winded, and although Kirov's wound had stopped bleeding, his left arm was stiff and awkward. But inside was cover aplenty. A double row of roof supports marched from end to end, dividing the place into aisles stacked with crates and pellets or cardboard cartons, and down by the large doors of the loading bay stood a couple of forklift trucks.

Hutch gestured Kirov well away from the small door they'd used, heaved a crate across to form a barricade, and crouched behind it. The young hood ducked behind a girder, and a taut silence fell.

The heat in the high building was oppressive, more so than outside, and Hutch dragged his sleeve across his face. It was hard to concentrate, every now and then his sight would blur, and he'd have to wipe sweat from his eyes. Much more of this, and he'd be as dehydrated and wrinkled as a prune--

"Hey, Freebie," a hoarse whisper. "How 'bout lettin' me have a little firepower, huh?"

"No," he said.

Two of the opposition were careless enough to show themselves as they took up stations across the parking lot, but Hutch resisted the temptation to try a shot. A swift check showed the automatic had a full clip of seven, and while Kirov should have a few spare magazines for

Starsky's S&W, it was nowhere near enough to hold out in a full-scale siege. He glanced across at his companion. Kirov was almost invisible among the shadows beside the loading bay doors, where warped timbers had left gaps large enough to give a reasonable view.

"Two guys just ducked behind a wall," he reported. Hutch grunted.

"The old guy we questioned earlier said maybe five. Even with the one you took out, we're kind of outnumbered, Scarlett."

"Yeah. Maybe Bean'll bring along some friends."

"He'll need to. Keep your head down."

A dark figure appeared briefly sprinting forward and flattening out in the dubious shelter of a rise in the ground. Hutch swore under his breath. The target was too small to chance with a strange gun and a limited supply of ammunition. If he had his own weapon, though--he cut off the useless train of thought and wiped his sweating palms down his pants leg.

"Somebody's bellied down behind some weeds," Kirov announced.

"Same here." Hutch took out the S&W and held it up. "Scarlett, I hope you're a good shot," tossing it over. It was neatly caught.

"Pretty fair," he said. "Thanks."

"Pick your targets. Just remember that a murder rap could be cut down to armed robbery, but shooting a cop can't be wriggled out of." Kirov gave him a jaunty salute.

"Wouldn't shoot you, Freebie. Not unless I was sure of hittin' the Bean first. How are things in your neck of the woods?"

"My hero's getting ambitious. Scarlett, I'm going to see if he can make it in here. I think he's the one that's got my Magnum."

"Okay Y'don't mind if I drop mine as soon as--" He broke off and fired. "Fuck it, think I only winged him."

"Pick 'em more carefully. Here he comes--keep your head down."

"You take some crazy chances," Kirov grumbled, shrinking down behind a crate. Almost immediately came a burst of staccato automatic fire, the heavy bullets shattering through the planks and cartons and ricocheting from metal.

Hutch let out a choked scream, and Kirov heard the thud of a falling body. He spat obscenities, and scrambled from cover to cover back towards the door. He couldn't see Hutch in the shadows, then the makeshift barricade rocked under the impact of a massive kick, and the hood lunged into the warehouse.

The shots from Kirov's and Hutch's guns took him in the body, slamming him back against pallets, his chest a bloody wreck. Hutch pounced on him, reclaiming the big revolver with a gasp of relief. He also took charge of the man's own piece, found ammunition for it in the pockets. Another .45 auto. Useful. Then he glanced round to see Kirov standing over him, face starkly white, eyes blazing with fury and fear.

"I thought he'd got you," he yelled. "You crazy bastard! You damn near gave me heart-failure !" Hutch smiled at him with a confidence he didn't feel.

"Sorry to disappoint you, kid. Hadn't you better see how adventurous your guy is getting?"

"I winged him," he snapped. "I think." And dashed back to his post.

"Hey," said Hutch. "You ever think about turning States' Evidence? Putting the finger on Novaks?"

"Not until a short while back," Kirov admitted "Then I started to figure out what the hell I had to lose?" He paused and fired. "Mine's down. I may not've winged him before, but he's bought it now." There was an edge of fear still in his voice, balanced out by stubbornness. And vindictiveness. "See, Novaks is out to get me anyhow, so I aim to sling as much shit his way that I can. I'm gonna sing, Freebie. Like a fuckin' opera. That's why I took a hand back there, when Bennie was gonna waste you."

"And all me 'n 'Starsk have to do is get you to Phoenix, huh?"

"S right."

"Terrific. Here, catch," and when he turned, threw the newly acquired auto to him, along with half the spare clips. "Take off the silencer," he said "We want to advertise. There has to be somebody around who'll send for the cops."

"You're full of bright ideas."

"All part of the service." Hutch eased round his crate, peering cautiously out. Nothing moved on the parking lot, but from a window the factory beyond it a gun flashed, and the bullet drove splinters into his cheek. Three, maybe four, to go. Then came the lighter crack of the S&W.

"Sorry," said Kirov. "Missed him."

"Don't waste shots--" Hutch started, then figures appeared out of the buildings facing him and he had no choice himself but to return their fire, stop the advance.

The exchange of fire was brief, cost the enemy some perforated limbs, and the pair in the warehouse most of their assorted shells.

"It's a stand-off," Hutch muttered, dabbing at a bullet-burn on his right ear. "Straight out of some bloody western."

"Yeah. Don't think I'll watch any more of 'em." Kirov said. He did not say anything about the 7th Cavalry. This was one time when it wasn't going to come over the horizon on cue for the final credits.

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Starsky skidded to a halt beside the first phone booth he saw. It is one thing to be forced to admit that you needed help--but once the necessity was recognized, the sensible thing was to call in the marines. And that was exactly what he was going to do, with Captain Dobeey as the first line of assault. However, a quick search through his pockets revealed that he had lost his small change along with his billfold. Another point to be taken up with Stanis Kirov.

But it was not an insurmountable problem. He got the operator, and placed a collect-call to L.A. Dobeey's voice, when he finally reached him, was heavy with sarcasm and hoarse with flu.

"Well, if it isn't the Caped Crusader himself--or would this be the Boy Wonder? The Scourge of Gotham City and the Pride of the LAPD? Have you fallen over your misplaced prisoner yet, Detective Sergeant Starsky?"

"Uh, no, sir. Not quite," Starsky said cautiously. He did not like the way Dobeey placed emphasis on his rank. "The situation's kinda complicated."

"With you two, when isn't it? I want to hear some common sense. Put Hutchinson on."

"He isn't here, sir--"

"Judas Priest! Don't tell me you lost him as well?"

Starsky winced. This wasn't going the way he had it planned.

"No, not exactly, but--" Sounds of labored breathing interrupted him as his Captain plainly fought for self-control.

"Okay," Dobeey said at last. "Tell it like it is, Detective Sergeant Starsky. With no embellishments."

"No, sir." Starsky closed his eyes, leaned against the glass. He hurt in most of his bones and he felt sick. "We're in Tenada, Arizona. Scarlett--Kirov's been seen here, an' me 'n Hutch have split up to cut his trail. Thing is, Cap, some heavies from Phoenix have turned up, an' they sure as hell ain't cops. I put one out of action, but that leaves three or four lookin' for Kirov. It could be they're workin' for a guy called Novaks--he's the one Kirov was claimin' had framed him for the murder rap, an' had set him up for a contract."

"The crash was a hit-attempt?"

"Looks that way."

"Have you got a gun yet?"

"Uh, yeah, from the guy I decked--"

"Go see the local sheriff, get reinforcements," Dobby barked. "I'll get on to Phoenix and chase them up, get things moving. They--" Starsky, who had been trying to cut in for a while, finally managed it; a plaintive wail guaranteed to bring foreboding to his Captain's heart.

"But, Cap, Scarlett lit out with my ID as well's my gun. How'm I gonna convince 'em I'm a cop?"

"How the hell do I know?" Dobby blared. "You haven't yet managed to convince me you're a cop! Tell 'em to call me, and if I've cooled down by then, I'll claim you--and Starsky--"

"Yes, Cap?"

"You fuck this one up any more than you have already, and neither of you can count on making Detective First Class. In fact, you'd better not come back to L.A. at all!"

Starsky winced again as the phone was slammed down, replaced hand set with exaggerated care, and started looking for the Sheriff's office. It was pretty easy to find, being three blocks down on Main Street, and he headed for it at a fast lope, mentally rehearsing what he hoped would be a convincing speech. Enough time had been wasted already. Then he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in a store window--a bruised, disheveled, dust and mud-smearred figure--and shrugged dismissively. He'd have to brazen it out.

The sheriff was a greyish man in his middle fifties, looking as if he stood six-six in his boots, and built to match. Bleak eyes raked Starsky from head to foot and back again- as he entered, but nothing was said. Starsky glanced at the name on the desk.

"Sheriff Hoed?" he said crisply, falling unconsciously into the stance and attitude he'd learned in the Army and Academy--dealing with Superior officers, for the use of--"Detective Sergeant Starsky, sir, Los Angeles Police Department. I'm requesting assistance in the apprehension of a homicide suspect."

"Y'don't say." It was a drawl, and Hoed hooked left ankle over right on his desktop. "Now you wouldn't have any kind of ID to that effect, I guess?"

"No, sir. But--"

"Figured not." The big man levered himself to his feet. "'Listen, sonny. It's kind of a slow Saturday, and it's hot as the Devil's bake-house, an' I never was long on suffering fools gladly. Git."

Starsky gritted his teeth, clenched his fists behind his back, and fixed the sheriff with a cold stare.

"Me neither," he said. "I'm telling you the way it is, Sir. The homicide suspect was being escorted from LA to Phoenix--got away west of here. He tailed him into town--"

"You been watchin' too many cop-shows, boy," Hoad cut in. He did not look amused. "You juiced up, or just tryin' to win a bet? Whatever, quit wasting my time 'fore I decide to throw you in the pokey."

"You can check my identity with Captain Harold Dobey, 9th Precinct LAPD." Starsky decided he'd had enough. "The guy we're huntin' is armed and dangerous. And we're pretty certain he's got a gangland hit squad on his tail as well. So you quit fuckin' me around and get off your butt and give me what I need, or you're gonna have a replay of the Gunfight at the OK Corral right here in your town--"

Hoad growled something incoherent, florid face mottling darker red with anger. He lunged forward, but was halted by the sudden insistent shrilling of the telephone. He snatched it up, never taking his eyes from Starsky, as if daring him to move. "Yeah, Hoad." It was a snarl then his frown deepened. "Yeah--slow down, George--could be a buncha kids takin' pot-shots at-- heavy caliber, huh? Where? The old Litefoot Warehouse?--" His door slammed shut, and before he had fully registered Starsky's absence, the detective had dashed past the window. "Okay, thanks, George. I'll get the boys and be on my way. Stay clear of it, you hear?" He cleared the line and got the operator to put a call through to Captain Harold Dobey--and for the second time that day Dobey talked to Tenada. Yes, he had a Detective Sergeant Starsky in Hoad's town There ought to be a Detective Sergeant Hutchinson around as well. And if they needed help, Hoad had better give it to them. "You got it, Cap'n," he said agreeably. "But that kid don't look like any kind of--"

"Exactly." Dobey's voice was chill. "Which is why he's a good cop. Doesn't always pay to advertise, sheriff."

"Guess not," Hoad said laconically. "Okay, Cap'n, I'll get right along and see if your fair-haired boys need a hand."

~~~

Starsky raced back to where he'd left the bike, consigning Hoad and all his kind to hell. So much for Dobey's 'get reinforcements'. When the chips were down, you can't rely on anybody else. Me' n' thee, Hutch. But where the hell was Hutch--and what was coming down?

The old men were still parked outside the store. Starsky pulled up.

"Litefoot warehouse where is it?"

"Other side of town."

"Is there a quick way of gettin' there?"

"Sure, if you know it--"

"Do you?"

"Yeah, but--"

"You got a heart condition, Grandpop?" Starsky cut in tensely. "How'd you like to show we the way, huh? Climb aboard."

The oldster gave a reedy chuckle. "Urgent business there, son?"

"Could say that. So hang on tight, because I'm gonna be travelin'."

~~~

The warehouse blocks, anonymous in their similarity save for the occasional sign, were a ghost town, the dusty alleys echoing and deserted as the cycle snarled down them. The deep cough of a heavy handgun came from up ahead, audible even above the engine. Starsky braked to a halt, listening. It came again--a Magnum--Hutch's? And lighter automatic fire.

"Hey," his passenger demanded. "Who's usin' the artillery?"

"The Bad Guys," Starsky said briefly. "This is as far as I'm takin' you, Grandpop. Thanks for you help. I owe you one."

"No sweat, son--better than the TV any day."

"Really."

Starsky left the man standing beside the bike, and headed in the direction of the shots, gun in hand, sneakers silent in the dust.

Although he was alert for trouble, his first encounter with one of the Phoenix hit men was almost as much a surprise to him as to the hood. But the momentary advantage was all he needed.

"Freeze, you bastard," he snapped. The man's look of near-comical astonishment hardened into hatred, but the gun hand dropped, and the weapon was teased at Starsky's feet.

"Okay, Kirov. Don't know how you got outa that place, but it won't do you any good."

"I'm not Kirov," Starsky said between his teeth, thoroughly browned off with the way everybody seemed to confuse him with the punk. "Who you got pinned down out there?"

The man stared mesmerized at the gun aimed unwaveringly between his eyes, plainly disinclined to argue with it, or the guy who held it.

"A cop," he said. "An' since you ain't Kirov, he must still be in there, I guess."

Hutch. It had to be.

"How many of your trigger-happy friends are out here?"

He didn't need an answer. The burst of gunfire from nearby told him that there were at least three--and the hood chose that moment to dive for the gun. He would have made it, too, if he

hadn't met Starsky's foot midway, the impact to his stomach folding him over in a wheezing heap.

"Not one of your better days," Starsky said, and wasted no time. He used the man's own cuffs to secure him, pocketed the gun, and peered cautiously round the fence. There was an isolated building across a parking lot, and as he watched return-fire erupted from two points within. Now he was sure--Hutch's Python and his own S&W. It looked as if his partner had holed up to wait for the Seventh Cavalry. Only he was all the Cavalry they were going to get. He wasn't about to place any money on Hoad conveniently turning up.

A shouted order, and suddenly figures were running for the warehouse under a barrage of covering fire. There was no more time to think, only to act, and he sprinted across the open space. Five hunters--he'd put two down, three were making like a commando raid--so who the hell was minding the store? Somebody had miscounted somewhere, Unless--ohgod--they'd called in reinforcements of their own, and instead of five there was now a small army out there.

Shots kicked up spurts of dust inches from his running feet--he swerved, stumbled, and took a rolling dive for the precarious safety of stacked drums. He crouched there, trying to get his breath back and to reload from his scanty stock of ammunition. Well, if he'd had one before, he didn't have a choice now. No going back. He heard the Python bellow again--a scream of pain--and risked a glance out. One man was down, but another was heading out to replace him, and suddenly there were no more defending shots. The hoods were converging on the building, and at the same time his eardrums reverberated with a hail of lead, forcing him back into cover.

Can't stay here. Hutch.

"HUUUTTCCHH!" he yelled, bouncing up and sending a random scatter of shots at the rearguard. Then he dashed for the warehouse, linking like a jackrabbit. "HUUTTCCHH!"

~~~

Hutch fed the last shells into his Magnum, slotted the last clip into the automatic, heard Kirov cursing under his breath as he fumbled with the S&W.

"My shoulder hurts like crazy," he complained. "They ruined a good jacket. Freebie, I've been countin' positions. You said maybe five--we hit three, but there's more than two guys out there shooting at us."

"Yeah." Hutch agreed. Presumably, with two cops on the loose as well as Kirov, they'd sent for backup.

"Guess that's kinda flatterin'. It's already cost 'em plenty, reckon we can up the price a little more?"

"I guess so. If we can't, we're only half-trying." he said quietly. The kid was scared, that much was clear in his voice, but it was not affecting his nerves or shooting ability. Kirov, Hutch decided, was okay in a tight corner--especially if there was a chance that Starsky might barrel in and loosen up the situation. Might. A bullet cracked past his ear, and he ducked involuntarily,

bobbed up and fired. He had the satisfaction of seeing his target go down, but it was short lived. Retaliation was immediate, a fusillade, and one bullet carved a furrow through his sleeve and inflicted a raw graze from wrist to elbow. Kirov, too, was firing, scored a doubtful hit at the expense of three shells.

"Your piece sure sounds like a young cannon," he said into a lull. "You'd think somebody would've called in the National Guard by now. Betcha if I was aimin' to clean this place out, there'd be cops wall to wall."

"Give 'em time," Hutch said. "We still got some ammo left."

"I'd kinda like to take the fight to them," Kirov growled. "Don't like bein' pinned down like this."

"It isn't my idea of a Sunday picnic either," Hutch snapped. "But there are easier ways of suicide than trying to cross that parking lot. If we sit and wait for them to come to us, we've got a better chance of picking them off."

"Yeah, I know. Hang loose, Freebie. I wasn't about to do somethin' rash. Was just shootin' my mouth off, y'know? Complainin', that's all."

"What have you got to complain about? You're getting police protection, aren't you?"

"Police--Jesus H. Christ!" Kirov yelled. "If I knew who the hell he is, I'd complain to my congressman about this so-called police protection!"

"Yeah, criminal, ain't it?" Hutch grinned. "You have to go all the way from Phoenix to LA to find it. It's a cryin' shame." Random talk, a safety valve for tension and fear.

"Ain't it just. Don't know what the country's comin' to, an' that's a fact. All the taxes a man's gotta pay--" He broke off as another barrage thudded into walls and doors, spraying him with splinters. He fired back, triggering the Colt until the last empty case flew from the breech, then used the S&W.

Hutch reverted to his Python, his own acquired auto empty. He knew it could not be long before, they closed in. He tried to make every shot count, but men wearing dark suits in deep shadows were hard targets to hit.

"I'm nearly out," Kirov said suddenly, quietly. Silenced guns coughed again; he fired twice at briefly exposed limbs, and the S&W was empty. He regarded it wryly, then tucked it away in his waistband.

The breathing space was alight, then the parking lot bred running, weaving shapes. Hutch had one shot left. He blinked sweat from his eyes, took steady aim, followed the pattern of his target's run and put the bullet in the centre of the man's chest.

Answering shots ripped into the barricade, the walls, howled among the metal girders, but got no response from the defenders.

Kirov crouched behind a girder, waiting for the shooting to stop before he made a break for it. The odds were even now--then risked a quick glance and swore. Two to one against. The cop was down, bleeding from a head-wound. He hesitated, then dived for the next stack of cartons, eyes on the loading bay door. Novaks' goons couldn't surround the place, not with just the two of 'em. On the other hand, there was Freebie. He could be important if he ever made it to court--aiding the police, and all that crap--

"Mother-fuckin' pig--" Kirov spat and spun on his heel, sprinting for the fallen man. But he'd left it too late.

The two heavies burst into the warehouse and he was caught in their charge down, He fought, but he was out-weighted, out-punched, by men who knew their trade, and he did not stand a chance. Half-stunned and winded, his legs turned to rubber, he was hauled the short distance to Hutch's body.

The hoods had scores to settle, buddies to avenge, and while Novaks had ordered that Kirov be brought back to Phoenix alive, he'd said nothing about being undamaged. As for the cop--he was fair game, and with the kid subdued they turned their attention to the senseless huddle of limbs. Kicks sank into unprotected stomach and ribs, and Kirov took advantage of the diversion. His yell and sudden lunge caught them by surprise, but gained him nothing but a vicious blow to his stomach.

On the echo of his shout a new voice cut in, an edge to it that locked muscles for a vital fraction of a second.

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"HUUUTTCCH!" Starsky hurled himself through the door, hit the floor and rolled frantically for the covering shadows, piled crates splintering under the hammer-blows of bullets even as he went full-length behind them. There was a yell of 'Get that fucker' and he scrambled up, emptied the auto at the gunmen, aiming high because Hutch was out there somewhere. He caught a glimpse of pale hair, a figure sprawled against tumbled crates--Kirov was also down and struggling uselessly, a man kneeling his full weight on his spine, one hand twisted in the dark hair, gun in the other. No help from that quarter. Get position. No chance to reload. Keep moving.

The praying mantis shape in the next bay was--forklift, stacked with wooden pallets. It offered better protection and he threw himself for it, sliding for home base. He sprawled there behind the bulwark of metal for a breath before rolling belly-down to come up on his elbows, second Colt returning their fire. The man pinning Kirov jerked back, fell--and suddenly, with sickening abruptness, he was holding a useless weapon, the shell jammed in the breech.

Shit.

He dropped it, reached for the discarded gun, jerked out the empty clip--was ramming a fresh one home when a foot stamped down on his left wrist with bone-cracking force. The pain shocked a wordless yell from him, and he was looking up into the barrel of a sawn-off shotgun.

"Don't," someone said, and the hood turned, snub-barrel lifting. But the deep bark of a heavy handgun spoke first and the man was hurled back to slump against the forklift. "How 'bout you, hero?" Sheriff Hoad raised his voice, and a dark bulk rose from the floor behind Hutch's body.

"Okay!" The man lifted empty hands above his head, and deputies edged past Hoad's gun, converging on the men from Phoenix.

Starsky ignored them all. He knelt beside his partner and felt for a pulse, and reaction did not begin to hit him until he found it to be steady enough if fast. He sat down abruptly and rested his head on drawn-up knees, one hand clenched to stop it shaking, the other locked on Hutch's wrist. He felt somebody crouch beside him, knew it was Kirov. "Is he bad?" An uncertain question.

"Don't think so." His own voice sounded strained. "That head wound looks like a gash, not a bullet crease, thank God. A splinter, maybe," he broke off as Hutch stirred and moaned, free hand lifting to his blood-masked face.

"Starsk?" eyes blinking open.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"You're gonna have to get your watch fixed." "Yeah," he agreed. Their glances met, speaking their own kind of communication. "Kinda late, wasn't I?"

"Just about on time, I'd say. Hey, Scarlett?"

"Huh?" Kirov's dusty head came up.

"You okay?"

"Don't know yet. Wait 'til I stop shakin' an' I'll tell you."

Sheriff Hoad stood over them, hands on hips, studying them with sardonic amusement. "Which one of you guys is the prisoner?" he demanded. "Or do I haveta guess?"

"Me," said Kirov. He took the S&W out of his waistband and held it out to Starsky, taking no notice of the gun that suddenly appeared in Hoad's hand. "I guess you better have this back. I got your ID too."

"Yeah, I'm gonna talk to you 'bout that later." Starsky accepted the weapon, slipped it into his shoulder-holster.

"Come on, son, on your feet," the Sheriff ordered crisply. "You, too, Scarlett or what ever your name is. Hutchinson, are you walkin' wounded or d'you want to wait for the ambulance?"

"I'm okay," Hutch muttered.

"Your head's gonna need stitches," Starsky put in. "An' this crease on your arm ain't so good. You're waitin'. Don't argue. Sheriff, there's a guy over on the other side of the railroad station, handcuffed in a pit of some kind. He's part of Novaks' crowd."

"Another one?" Hoad's eyebrow's twitched. "Seems like half of Phoenix's bad guys've moved in. Okay, I'll get him picked up. You want I should take the kid an' stache him away in the jail?"

"No," said Hutch before Starsky could agree. "He's in protective custody. He's going back and put the finger on Novaks."

"It's a shame," said Starsky, "he didn't think of that before he left Phoenix."

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Sunday sunlight streaming through chintz drapes and church bells awakened Hutch. Also the lack of covering. He was cold, his wounds hurt, and he ached in every limb. And he wanted his quilt back. It was then he realized he wasn't in his own bed, but in the guestroom of the Sheriff's home on the outskirts of Tenada. To his right, on a camp cot against the wall, Kirov was stretched out under blankets, nothing of his visible but the top of his head. While beside him in the double bed was the reason why he was coverless. Somehow Starsky had managed to cocoon himself in most of the available quilt, was curled in a fetal huddle with a pillow clutched in his arms. At least, Hutch assumed it was Starsky. There wasn't much showing that could identify the body. He peeled back a fold, and one blue eye focussed blearily on the intruder.

"Mnghf?" said Starsky, and burrowed again into the cushioned depths.

"You're hogging all the quilt," Hutch accused, and got a mumbled reply. He wasn't sure, but it sounded like 'tough shit'. "That's terrific," he said, pained. "Is that any way to talk to your partner? I've been injured, Starsk."

The dark-curled head emerged, turtle-like, and Starsky regarded him balefully. "Whaddcha kvetchin' about? I saved your goddam life, didn't I?" He started to disappear, but Hutch grabbed a handful of quilt.

"The way I heard it last night," he pointed out, "you were up to your ass in alligators, and it was Sheriff Hoad who had to drain the swamp So gimme back the quilt, hero."

Starsky suggested that he perform an arboreal obscenity, and Hutch, goaded beyond patience, heaved powerfully. He'd forgotten his damaged ribs amongst his other hurts, and his yelp of pain was drowned by Starsky's outraged yell as the enclosing warmth was snatched away.

"What are you doin'?"

"Repossessing my quilt," Hutch said, tucking it around himself, wincing. Starsky scrambled to all fours, abandoning his pillow, and prepared to launch a counterattack. But the expected offensive didn't happen.

"Huh," he snorted derisively, "So now who's the Complete Hypochondriac?" And stalked across the room, stripping tie blankets from the cot. "C'mon, Scarlett. Reveille."

Hutch sneezed.

"Gesundheit," said Starsky--then looked at him.

Through red-rimmed, watery eyes, Hutch gazed back "I don't feel so well," he confessed.

Under the light dressing over stitches and the bruises, his skin was glossy with sweat, color high. Shivers racked through him, and he huddled deeper into the quilt.

"You caught it," Starsky accused, as if it was a social disease. "Damn it, you can sure pick your moments. Whaddcha wanna do that for?"

Hutch didn't answer. The flu, on top of everything else, and with Starsky still bristling with unspent energy from yesterday's adrenaline charge--he shook his head to clear it, and the room swam. Suddenly Dobe's heavy black features were in front of him, and he hadn't heard the door open, he gaped at the apparition.

"Cap?" Starsky exclaimed, so he knew it wasn't delirium. "What're you doin' here?"

"Checking up on you.--Hutchinson, what the hell happened to your face?"

"What?" he said, trying to concentrate His face. Was it that bad? "Oh, uh, it's Kick Hutch Week, I guess."

"I gotta monopoly on that," his partner growled. "What's comin' down, Cap?"

"Not as much shit as there could be," Dobe said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Phoenix P.D. are in Hoad's office, reading reports." And won the attention of all three men. "They're also awful anxious to talk to Kirov."

"I wanna do a deal with the D.A.," Kirov put in quickly. "Freebie got that down in his report, an' Hoad took my statement--"

"Sure, take it easy. They read it," Dobe assured him. "They're gonna welcome you with open arms, kid. They've been wanting hard evidence on Novaks for years, so I don't think you've got much to worry about on that score. As for the murder rap," he went on, "the guy Starsky left in the excavation has been talking, too, and he's cleared you of the old man's shooting. Between the pair of you, Novaks could be put away for a long stretch."

Kirov's relief was obvious, and Hutch managed a sympathetic smile. One of them had to, Starsky's expression would curdle milk right then, and he did owe the young punk.

"Hutchinson," the Captain broke in on his thoughts. "You look lousy. Why don't you lie down?"

"Yeah," Starsky snapped. "Go t'sleep. When do they want us in Phoenix, Cap?"

"The hearing's set for tomorrow afternoon, but you two don't have to be there. Your reports'll--"

"Oh, no," Starsky interrupted. "Our assignment was to deliver Scarlet to Phoenix. That's what we're gonna do." Hutch stifled a groan. On the one hand, he agreed with his partner, see the thing through to the end. On the other hand--he wanted, to go home.

Bargains in the D.A.'s office got Kirov a good deal. The charge of murder was dropped, replaced by one of armed robbery. Set against that was the way he'd saved Hutch's skin, then backed him up in the shootout. And the information on Novaks, of course. The hearing, therefore, did not take long, and by four-thirty the LAPD contingent was heading west out of the city in Dobey's Lincoln.

Slumped in the rear seat, Hutch was glad to be off his feet and moving. The doctor in Tenada's General Hospital had shot him full of dope before they'd left for Phoenix; given him a supply of pills to take at regular intervals, and the drugs had helped to some extent. But the day had been far from easy. Starsky had alternated between supportive concern and carping bitterness--he'd ignored the latter, knowing it to be reaction, and accepted the former. The concern, after all, was always there, even under the bitching. They were a damn good team. Always had been, right from the start...

"--green," Dobey was saying. "But I guess you'll grow out of it. Hell, we all make mistakes, it's a good way to learn. Sometimes. If you live that long." Hutch forced himself to pay attention.

"Whaddcha mean, we're still green?" Starsky sat bolt upright. "We pulled the whole case outa the fire--"

"With a little help from Hoad, and after you'd dropped it in the flames to start with," Dobey pointed out.

"How the shit were we to know the punk wasn't shootin' a line about that contract an' Novaks, huh? I mean, would you have bought it, if you were us? Sure you wouldn't. No self-respectin' cop would dammit, it's the oldest line in the book!"

"Maybe not. But you two didn't even take elementary precautions."

"What?" Starsky's voice rose an octave.

"For instance," Dobey went on remorselessly, as soon as you got to that motel you should have called the nearest law officer and had Kirov locked up in their cells."

"But--"

"Furthermore--"

In the back seat Hutch groaned Dobey may well be in the right of it, but Starsky was in no mood to see reason. All this would do was trigger a tirade that he, for one, could do without.

"--having lost him, you should have contacted Hoad as soon as you hit Tenade," was the next broadside, to be followed by; "nor should you have split up, with only the one gun and ID between you. Like I said, you're still green, a little rough 'round the edges. It'll come, with time. Give you a couple of years, and you'll be a pretty good team."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and Hutch slid lower in the seat. Then Starsky started. In climbing accents of outrage he listed his grievances, commencing with the canceled--for the

fourth time--weekend vacation. He dwelt at length on the crash, the assaults on his person by Kirov and a variety of hoodlums--and it wasn't his idea they split up in the first place but who the hell listened to him anyhow? When he got to the gunfight around and in the warehouse, the way it came over he was a combination of John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Gideon smiting the Canaanites hip and thigh. He built towards the climax, the final denouement, paused to draw breath for the last

devastating pronouncement, and destroyed the whole effect with a brain-juddering sneeze of epic proportions. He rounded on Hutch, eyes watering and furious, "--an' what do you do? You give me your friggin' flu! Thanks a bunch, pal " He sneezed again, and Hutch wordlessly passed over his box of tissues.

Share and share alike. Isn't that what partners are for?

end