



A Friend Removed

by

Mary Kleinsmith

Summary: When Starsky wins a free vacation in Atlantic City, he drags a reluctant Hutch along for a few days of nightclubbing, gambling, and fun. But when Hutch disappears without a trace, and no one can find any evidence that Hutch had ever traveled with Starsky, the trip becomes the vacation from hell.

Notes: Originally published in the zine, [Dealer's Choice #2](#), a gen multifandom zine published by Cindy Rancourt.

Categories: Gen

Genre: Action/Adventure, E-Book, Zinefic

Warnings: No Warnings Needed

A Friend Removed

by **Mary Kleinsmith**

The broad shouldered man strolled through the New Jersey State Psychiatric Center. His tailor-made suit spoke of a man for whom money was never a problem, even if it wasn't always legally obtained. He was accompanied by an average looking orderly who was acting as escort. It really wasn't necessary -- the authoritarian-looking man was well used to traversing these halls, both with staff and alone. He'd come to see his brother every day for the past two weeks, hoping to find some kind of improvement in his condition. He was met with long faces at the staff's inability to help the mid-twenties patient. The doctors, nurses, and orderlies were always respectful to the man who was most definitely the most powerful person in the city. Even some of the city's beat-cops gave him a wide berth, afraid of ending their careers in a six-foot hole.

The small window in the door was hardly big enough to accommodate much of a visit, but as Jackson Preston peered through it, he realized it really didn't make much of a difference. The room it revealed was barren, bright white with soft walls and floor. And in the far corner, a small figure curled into an almost invisible ball. This sight was possibly the only thing that could draw a sentimental emotional reaction from the hard-as-nails brother.

The young man, Jesse, stirred slightly, allowing his brother to see the large, vacant eyes he wore as a matter of course now. Jackson remembered the intelligence that used to burn there, ready to be used in any way the young man chose. A few short months ago he had looked forward to bringing the young man into the "family" business. Now his dream was gone -- dashed in the clarity of his brother's deterioration. Preston was paying for the best doctors and treatment possible, thousands of dollars of funds drawn from the capital he had invested in his two casinos.

"It'll never be," he muttered, but the orderly standing nearby didn't hear him. Jackson didn't care; he hadn't meant for him to respond anyway. "But I promise you, little brother, I'll make him pay."

If I *ever* see that stinkin' cop again, I promise he'll pay the same way he's makin' you pay. Even if it takes every last dime I've got!"

Jackson abruptly turned and stalked off, the visit to the barren room refueling his anger and desire for vengeance. He momentarily toyed with the idea of taking some of his men and going to the west coast with the sole intent of extracting the revenge he so desperately craved. But he discounted it, as he had several dozen times before, as being too foolhardy. He was out of his element in California -- knew he'd be vulnerable there. *As long as he's out there, I guess I can live with it. But Detective Sergeant First Class David Michael Starsky had sure as hell better keep away from Jersey.*

On the other hand, maybe Starsky coming here wouldn't be such a bad thing. Actually, it would be terrific! If he could get Starsky to New Jersey, he could get even with Starsky without having to leave the place where he had backup. He began to concoct a plan, a recipe for revenge, and he could already sense the sweet taste of it in his mouth.

"Cmon, Hutch! Finish packing, we've got a flight to catch!" Starsky followed his blond partner around his apartment like a faithful puppydog, eager to get him going.

"You don't want me to forget something important, do you?"

Starsky finally settled, slumping down on the quilt while Hutch piled clothes into a brown suitcase laid open on the bed. "Ya know what I think, partner? I think you're *intentionally* dragging your heels because you don't want to go on this vacation."

"Starsk, I've been very honest about my lack of enthusiasm for this trip. Look," he went on, "a vacation is where you should rest, relax, commune with nature, rejuvenate yourself. A vacation is *not* running around a huge city all night long, sleeping during the day, and spending your awake hours in noisy clubs, casinos, and bars."

"Hey, you've already had your chance. We went camping *last* time we got vacation, remember? Now it's finally my turn. And besides, the telegram said that I'd won *free* accommodations at this great hotel! This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us, pal. We'd never be able to afford this place on our salaries!"

"I know, I know. But, Atlantic City, Starsk? Couldn't it have been anyplace quieter?" Starsky just watched, knowing the blond did not really expect a reply. Hutch snapped the latch on his suitcase, carrying it to the blue one already sitting beside the door. "Okay, I guess I'm ready. Oh, wait a minute! I've got to leave a note for Jennifer!"

"Who's Jennifer, partner?" Starsky asked, his interest suddenly shifting.

"She just moved in next door. Only been in a week. She promised to water my plants for me while we're gone."

"So? What's the note for?" Why did Starsky always have to wear that evil grin when women were the subject of a discussion?

"Because she basically knows nothing about plants. I've got to tell her which plants to water and how often." Hutch hastily scribbled several lines on the back of a grocery receipt and taped it to the lamp shade.

"Are you finally ready now?" Starsky had the excitement level of a child on Christmas eve.

"Yeah, I am." He picked up a suitcase in each hand and followed Starsky out the door. "Good-bye, plants!" floated in the air behind him.

By the time the duo had disembarked the plane in New Jersey, Hutch was in a decidedly disagreeable mood. The cramped confined of the plane's coach section had cramped his legs, and he was sick to death of having to listen to Starsky grouse about having to leave his precious Torino in the "Park and Fly" area of LAX.

"It's not like you're leaving a baby without a sitter, Starsk!"

"But *anything* could happen to her!"

"Anything could *not* happen. And if you're so concerned you should've arranged to have someone drop us off instead of insisting on driving to the airport!"

Starsky stopped lamenting over the Torino and resorted to nervously tapped his fingers on his leg as both men walked across the airport. They approached the baggage carousel, and Hutch nodded courteously to the young porter who stood nearby.

"I feel naked," he commented to his partner out of the side of his mouth.

"What d'ya mean 'naked'? You look okay to me." Hutch held off answering, knowing the answer would come to his partner if he gave him a moment. "Ohhhh! Your just missing that canon you carry!"

"It's *not* a canon!" Hutch snapped back. Starsky had hit upon Hutch's "sore spot", and Starsky grinned at the retribution.

"Hutch, you've got to get used to going without that hunk of metal at least once in a while!"

"But I *do* feel lost without it! Ya know, Dobby once asked me if I wore it to visit my mother! Now where do you think he'd've gotten a ridiculous idea like that?"

"I really have no idea," Starsky answered guiltily. Hutch suspected he knew more than he was letting on, but let it go for now.

"You have to admit, as cops, guns are just a part of our lives. Are you telling me that you -- David Michael Starsky.... Detective.... Sergeant.... -- don't miss your Baretta when you leave it at home?"

"I don't miss it hardly at all. I'm just glad I was able to talk you into leaving yours at home. There's just no reason to need it here!"

Both men fell silent as they noticed their bags coming into view on the carousel. Starsky pulled off two black vinyl-covered cases, and Hutch pulled off the brown and blue pair which he had carried to Starsky's car back at the Venice apartment. As they walked to the airport exit and hailed a cab, they didn't notice the porter scurry away, like a rat to his hole.

The phone rang on the desk in Jackson Preston's library, and, although the man was sitting right next to it, a younger man crossed the room and hitched his hip on the corner of the furniture before answering the ring.

"Yeah?" A large vocabulary was obviously not the man's strong suit. He listened for a moment -- long enough for Mr. Preston to become curious about what he was being told. "Okay, I'll tell him." He set the phone back in the cradle and turned to his seated boss. "That was our watchdog at the airport. Seems he overheard two guys talkin' who come in a few minutes ago. They was talkin' about being cops, and one called the other one 'Detective Sergeant David Starsky'. Isn't he that cop...?"

Jackson's face grew red, and his brow furrowed in barely contained anger. "Yeah, I know -- took him long enough to get here! That's that lousy, stinkin', good-for-nothing pig who put my Jesse in jail." His tone grew louder and angrier. "He shoulda known he was too young -- that he wouldn't be able to take it! Now my little brother is stuck in that sanitarium, and he'll probably never get out! Now I'll have him right in the palm of my hand?!"

"Jimmy said it sounded like he and his friend were on vacation. Said they were jokin' about not havin' their pieces with 'em."

"Who was this 'friend'?"

"Jimmy said he was tall, blond, light skin. He checked with the airline and they said his name was Kenneth Hutchinson."

"That's Starsky's partner, and from what I know they're as thick as thieves. Inseparable, if you know what I mean." He sat thinking for a few minutes, then an evil grin appeared on the face. "And I know exactly what I'm going to do to get Starsky exactly where I want him. I know what hotel they'll be stayin' at. Find out from Jimmy what cab company they used to leave the airport. We gotta be sure and cover all our bases in this operation. Starsky's a good cop -- if we leave any holes, he'll find 'em."

"Whatever you say, boss. But what's your plan?"

"Bring me all the information I need, and I'll outline it for you. We'll need a coupla more guys. Check the payroll for two...no, make it three...of our most trustworthy 'workers'."

Starsky and Hutch stumbled into their large room at 4:30 am the following morning, after a long night of club-hopping and card-playing. Although his partner was not sharing in his enthusiasm, Starsky was obviously having the time of his life.

"This is fantastic!" he spouted, pulling handfuls of paper from his dress pants pockets and throwing them on his bed. They were about half green, with the remaining a variety of different color paper, including a few cocktail napkins.

"Starsk, I'm starting to really believe this was a mistake," Hutch said drowsily from the other bed, where he'd ungracefully plopped down his exhausted body. "Maybe I'm just getting too old for this kinda running around."

"Naw, you're just fine. And look! We really cleaned up tonight!"

"You mean 'you' cleaned up tonight. My luck at the tables stank!" He remained seated as he pulled off his suit-jacket and then the shirt underneath it. He unbuttoned and unzipped the trousers and raised himself off the bed just long enough to pull them down around his ankles and then off. He began to empty the contents of the pockets, laying his personal items -- wallet, keys, pocket knife, change -- on the table between the two king-size beds. The remaining contents of the pockets -- almost entirely white sheets of paper or napkins -- he laid on the bed. He had less green cash than Starsky did, but his other pile was about the same size.

"Hey, partner," Starsky said, motioning to the pile, "it doesn't look like you did so bad!" Hutch began to study the scraps of paper, arranging them in a neat pile.

"No, I guess not." He studied the names and numbers scribbled on the sheets of paper, trying to remember which face went with which name and number. "Think you'll call any of them?"

"I don't know. Y'know, sometimes the *guy* likes to do the pursuing. Most of these women were pretty aggressive."

"Since when do *you* back away from aggressive women?" Starsky didn't see fit to respond to that. "I don't know about you, partner. But I'm gonna get some well-deserved sleep! I can't believe we've been out this long! Think I'll sleep at least until afternoon!" He pulled back the covers and crawled under them, dressed in only his shorts.

"I have to admit, I am a little tired too," Starsky responded. After making certain the drapes and shades were drawn, he deposited all the former contents of his pockets beside Hutch's on the table and then flicked off the light. It didn't take long before both exhausted men were sound asleep.

Outside the room, three men in housekeeping uniforms positioned a laundry cart in front of the officers' room. They waited until the light under the door went out, then went to work. A green canister was removed from the bottom of the cart along with a long piece of tubing, which the pseudo-housekeepers affixed to the canister's nozzle. The label on the canister stood out brightly, black writing on white: NITROUS OXIDE. The tube was slid under the crack in the door, and a twist of a small lever started the noxious gas flowing into the room. The canister was small, so they let the gas flow until it was empty. The key a cooperative hotel worker had given them gave them instant access to the room.

The first few steps were taken quietly, as they didn't feel absolutely certain that the gas would actually work the way they wanted. But as the light from the hallway streamed into the room, both officers were still motionless in their beds.

A flashlight shone in Starsky's face, eliciting no response. "That's Starsky. We want the other one." The same flashlight swung around to settle on the relaxed features of the blond officer. "C'mon, we've got a lot to do. One man pulled the laundry cart into the room, and Hutch was unceremoniously dumped into it. The men then went over every nook and cranny of the room, removing Hutch's clothes, suitcases, toiletries -- anything that appeared on his side of the room or had his name on it.

"We gotta be sure we get it all," one said desperately. "Mr. Preston will kill us if we leave anything behind." They checked under the bed and beneath the pillow and blankets and found nothing. Lastly, the bed was made -- neatly and professionally until it looked as if it'd never been slept in.

"Okay, you two take care of the cart. I'm gonna go talk to the desk clerk. I've gotta be sure all the records are cleaned up too." The trio re-locked the door and split up, the cart and two men heading for the freight elevators, the third heading for the lobby.

It was 2:00 in the afternoon before Starsky finally awoke from his gassed sleep. He cracked open his left eye -- his better one -- to read the clock, then decided it was about time he got up.

"Time to get up, Hutch!" He pushed himself to a sitting position, then swung his legs off the bed facing Hutch's. "Oh, guess you're already up," he mumbled to himself. *Leave it to my fastidious partner to make his bed before the maids can do it.*

Starsky padded on bare feet to the bathroom door, which was closed tight. Putting his ear close to it, he heard no sounds from within. "Hey, partner! You fall asleep in there?"

No response.

"Hutch?!"

Still no response.

"C'mon,. buddy. I know you weren't crazy about this vacation, but when did you stop talking to me completely?" He twisted the door knob and pulled the door open, prepared to find Hutch in any one of several possible positions. What he didn't expect was not to find him at all. *Where'd he go?* Starsky silently questioned, laying a fist on each hip. He turned to scan the room, looking for a note taped in some obvious place. *Hutch wouldn't go out without leaving me a note!*

He scanned the room quickly a second time, still looking for some indication where Hutch had gone. His eyes rested, finally, on the table which sat between the beds. It took a few moments for him to figure out what exactly was wrong with the scene there. His side was just as it had been when they'd gone to bed. Wallet, ring, watch, a small stack of bills, and a pile of paper containing the names and numbers of the girls he'd met last night. He switched his gaze to Hutch's side of the table and was disturbed to find nothing there. *If Hutch went out, he would've taken his wallet and watch, but I don't think he would've taken all his numbers with him. What the hell is going on here?*

"Guess I'll have to go looking for him," Starsky said to himself. He quickly pulled a pair of worn jeans from his suitcase, then went through what he'd brought with him to find a shirt. Nothing in either of his suitcases seemed to strike his fancy, and he slapped the lid shut in frustration. "Hutch won't mind if I borrow a shirt. Why do his clothes sometimes look better to me than mine?" He knew it was the "brother" syndrome, and remembered when Nicky always used to take his clothes when they were kids. Somehow the other guys clothes always looked better.

The wall against which he'd seen Hutch set his suitcases was remarkably barren. He checked the room further, but the brown and blue pair of cases were nowhere to be found. "Hutch wouldn't have a reason to take his suitcases with him, even if he *did* go out. So help me, if this is one of his jokes, I'm gonna kill 'im!" He reopened his own case, chose a T-shirt he didn't really care for, and pulled it on over his head.

A cold chill ran up his spine, but he chalked it up to the change in climates between L.A. and New Jersey. He added a second, button-down shirt over the T-shirt, collected his watch, wallet, and ring off the bedstand, and prepared to leave to begin his search for Hutch. He made certain that he still had the key to the hotel room, so as not to end up embarrassingly locked out. *Well, at least Hutch didn't take the key with him.*

The lobby was crowded, apparently with more late-risers who had overindulged in the night life the previous evening. He searched every face, but none of them was his blond partner. He went to the concierge's desk, where a woman sat over her notebook of events. Starsky imagined her to be a striking beauty, but she disguised it somewhat with tightly pulled-back hair and heavy-rimmed glasses.

"Excuse me, Miss," he began when she looked up at him. "I'm trying to locate my roommate -- he seems to have gotten up before me."

"Well, Mr...?"

"Starsky."

"Well, Mr. Starsky, I've been on duty here since 8:00. Maybe I've seen him. What's his name and what does he look like?"

"His name's Ken Hutchinson, and he's blond, kinda Nordic-looking. About 6'1" tall, fit -- not too thin but not heavy either, and," his voice dropped slightly at this last, "most women seem to think he's pretty handsome."

"I don't remember seeing anyone like that all morning. But why don't you take a seat and I'll have him paged. If he's in the hotel -- provided he's not in a room -- he'll be able to hear it."

Starsky sat in the chair beside her desk and listened to the page over the speakers. When there was no response, she placed the page a second time. Still no response.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Starsky. It doesn't appear he's in the hotel. Maybe you can check with the front desk -- he might have checked in there, for messages or whatever, before he left."

"That's a good idea. Thank you very much." And Starsky made a bee-line for the reception desk. The man on duty there was courteous, if not overtly friendly. "Hi! I was wondering if maybe my friend checked in here before he left the hotel this morning. Maybe to check for messages? His name is Ken Hutchinson, and he's tall and blond."

"Well, I don't remember someone like that, but let me check for messages -- it's just likely he left one for you if he left the building. Which room are you in?"

"We were sharing Room 302."

"Ahhhh," the man said, as if answering an unanswered question. "That's one of our 'dual occupancy' rooms. Let's see now..." he went to a bank of boxes, each one marked with a room number. Starsky found the box marked 302 before the man did, but shortly the clerk reached into the box and came out empty. "I'm sorry, sir. It doesn't look like there's anything there."

Starsky was really beginning to get scared now. Each time a possibility was eliminated it sounded a warning bell in the back of his mind, and the cold chill was back again. "If I didn't know better," he said with a nervous laugh, "you'd think he never came with me in the first place!"

"Well, sir, that's certainly not the problem, I assure you. When did you check in?"

"Yesterday -- early afternoon."

"Then let me ease your mind a little." The man flipped the pages in the registration book until he came to the pages marked for the prior day. He spun the book around on its turn-table and Starsky, purely out of courteousness, looked down the page for his and Hutch's signatures.

"Here it is!" Starsky finally spoke up. Room 302 -- Dave Starsky." A sudden frown creased his forehead, and he failed to go on. "Wait a minute. What happened to Hutch's signature?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Hutch. Hutch. That's my friend. And he signed your book right after I did. But his signature isn't there now."

"I assure you, sir. If he signed in, his name must be there."

Starsky was beginning to become very agitated. "Well," he said, his voice shaking slightly, "maybe when the clerk on duty found out we were in the same room, he decided he needed only one signature and whited Hutch's out."

"There are *never* any modifications made to our registration book, sir. And in any case, if you examine the page carefully, you'll see there's no sign of correction fluid anywhere."

Starsky looked again, frantically, at the page and had to admit that the clerk was right. *What the hell is going on?*

When Hutch finally came to, the first thing he did was try to rub his sore and burning eyes. Tried, but was unsuccessful, as he found his hands bound behind him. From the feel of the restraint, he was padlocked with a heavy chain. Since it was apparent to the detective that he was being held captive, he was surprised that he was not blindfolded as well. Hutch blinked several times and his surroundings finally came into focus. Four barren walls surrounded him, barren but for the unusual markings on the walls. There was a distinctive "12 FT" painted on each of the side walls of this place. *Where am I?* He looked up and realized that the walls ended about ten feet above his head, and then there was a great deal of empty space until the ceiling. It finally clicked in his mind: *What am I doing in an empty swimming pool?*

Hutch struggled to his knees, dislodging the frayed, worn blanket that had been covering him, and then made an attempt at standing -- an attempt because, as he made the effort, he found that the chain restraining his hands also extended to the pool's drain, securely fastening him to the bottom of the pool. *I guess someone wants me to stay here for awhile.*

He looked down at himself, closely examining what he saw. He was clothed only in the shorts he'd been wearing when he was grabbed -- his chest and limbs lay bare, and he shivered. The blanket was still within reach, so he pulled the thin fabric around himself. It helped a little, but the goosebumps still remained, now a sign of his fear rather than his cold.

"HEY!!!" The blond man shouted, and the echo off the sides of the pool announced how empty it was. He tried again. "HEY!!! IS ANYONE THERE?!" There was still no response. *Now who would dump me here and then leave? What the hell is going on?!*

After checking all the adjacent stores and shops, flashing the picture of Hutch he'd retrieved from his wallet, Starsky was sadly discouraged at his lack of any tangible results. It seemed that Hutch had simply disappeared, and for some reason, every sign of him had disappeared as well. He wanted to search further, but in the midday traffic he found it impossible to flag a cab.

"Excuse me," Starsky said, once again at the concierge's desk. "Can you help me arrange to rent a car. I can't get along without one."

"Sure, Mr. Starsky. Anything for a guest. What kind of vehicle would you prefer?"

"Anything I can get fast. I need it here right away!"

"Hold on a moment and let me call the rental agency. I'll see what they have available."

Starsky paced the hotel lobby from front to rear and back again while the concierge made the required phone call. His back-and-forth treading came to stop by the front door, when he saw the cabdriver they'd used from the airport pull up front with another guest. Starsky couldn't have explained what he was hoping for, but he sprinted for the car.

"Hey, Driver!" The cab had started to roll away, but the driver hit the brakes at the screaming man. Starsky stuck his head in the open passenger window. "Hey..." he breathed, out of breath from the run. "Do you remember me? I road in your cab yesterday."

"Sure! How are you enjoying your visit?"

"Well, it could be better. I need to ask you something. Remember the man, my friend, who came in with me? Have you seen him around the city at all?"

The driver looked at Starsky silently with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Look, if you haven't, I'd really appreciate it if you'd keep your eyes out for him. If you see him, call me here. My name is David Starsky, and I'm in Room 302."

"I'm really sorry, buddy," the driver came back. "Maybe it's just my memory -- I pick up so many fares, you know. But I don't remember anyone bein' with you. As far as I remember, you were alone!"

"NO!" Starsky practically shouted, then lowered his voice to avoid attracting any attention his first outburst hadn't already drawn. "No, don't you remember? He was tall, blond, Scandinavian-looking?"

"Look, buddy. This is New Jersey. I'd certainly remember a Viking if I'd seen one here!" Horns began to honk behind him, cabs waiting to deposit their fares and depart so as to go onto another. "Sorry, but I gotta go." He put the car in gear and pulled away slowly, allowing Starsky to withdraw his head from the window before he went.

When Starsky turned back toward the hotel, his face was a hollow, stunned mask. *I just don't understand.* He was numbed by the latest development, not being able to comprehend how this could be happening. *I know Hutch came with me! I KNOW IT!* The concierge approached him. "Mr. Starsky, I've arranged that rental car for you. It'll be here in fifteen minutes." When the dark haired man failed to respond to her news, she took him by the arm and led him to the chair beside her desk. "Why don't you just sit down for a moment and catch your breath. I'll get you something to drink."

He continued to sit, stunned, while she stepped into the bar which was just off the Mezzanine level. "What'll ya have, beautiful?" the bartender greeted her.

"I have a guest out there who's a little out of it. Gimme something strong that'll snap him out of this funk." She watched as the man combined several different liquors in a small glass until it almost overflowed.

"Here, give 'im this. It'll either bring him around or kill him!"

"Thanks, Tony." She returned to her desk, with Starsky still sitting next to it and staring. She put the small glass in his hands. "Here, drink this. It'll help."

Starsky raised the glass to his lips like an automaton, merely doing what he was told. When the fiery liquid hit his throat, though, his expression changed quickly.

"Eh, eh, eh," he coughed quietly, trying to cool the burning of the liquid on his vocal cords. His eyes focused, though. "What is that?!!" he breathed heavily.

"Just something our bartender cooked up. Are you feeling better now?"

"Better, yes, but I'm still missing one partner!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I still can't find any evidence he ever checked in."

"WE CAME IN TOGETHER!"

She looked uncertainly around the lobby, and wasn't quite sure if he'd seen her motion with her eyes to a nearby security guard. The guard strolled closer, but took no further action. "Look, while we're waiting for your rental to arrive, why don't you call the airline you flew in on? Maybe he checked back in with them for some reason. You can even use my phone." She turned it around to face him.

"Do you have a phone book?"

"No, but here's a list of all the airlines that fly out of our airport. The number should be on there somewhere."

Starsky scanned down the list until he found the airline they'd used, chosen by Hutch himself because it offered the best rates. He dialed the telephone carefully.

On the third ring, a clerk answered. "Good afternoon, Miss. I need to check on the reservations of two men who arrived in Atlantic City today?" He purposefully did not mention to the clerk that he was one of the men. If someone was trying to get to him, he wasn't going to give them the advantage.

"Yes, sir. What was the flight number, please?"

"Flight 569 from Los Angeles, non-stop."

"And the gentlemen's names?"

"David Starsky and Kenneth Hutchinson."

"Just one moment while I check the flight manifest." Starsky hung on and listened to the Muzak for almost five minutes, until the reservations clerk finally came back. "I'm sorry it took so long, sir, but I wanted to be thorough. I do show a David Starsky arriving on that flight, but there was no reservation or seating listing for Kenneth Hutchinson. I ran his name through the computer in case he came in on another flight or another day, but there's no record of his using this airline at all in the last four weeks. Maybe another airline..."

"Thank you," Starsky muttered as he hung up the phone, cutting her off; he was almost slipping back into his dazed state. "I don't understand." He looked at the concierge with almost pleading eyes. "They don't have any record of his coming in with me. How is that possible?"

"I'm sorry things are going so badly for you in our city. Look, it's been dark for a couple hours now. Why don't you go up and get some sleep. Maybe things'll be clearer in the morning."

"What do you mean 'clearer'?" Starsky said accusingly. "I'm telling you, my partner Hutch *did* come to Atlantic City with me and he *did* spend last night in our room."

The concierge once again motioned to the security guard with her eyes, and he marched right up beside Starsky's chair. "Why don't you just do what the lady says, sir." His tone and imposing presence made it clear that this was not a request.

"Well, maybe I'll go get something to eat, then turn in. I am awfully tired." He looked more than tired -- he looked positively haggard. He pushed himself unthreateningly to his feet and headed for the exit, remembering the small grocery store he'd seen down the street.

Ten minutes later, Starsky walked along the sidewalk with a small grocery bag in his arms. He noticed distractedly the mid-size cherry red car parked in front of the hotel, but didn't believe it merited any more than a quick glance.

As he cross the hotel lobby, the concierge once again intercepted him. Handing him a small ring with two keys, she told him, "they just now dropped off your rental car. They told me it's out front, a red mid-size car. You didn't happen to see it coming in, did you?"

"Yeah, I saw it. Thanks a lot for arranging it for me -- it looks fine. Goodnight." He waved the hand that held the keys as he went up the stairs toward his room.

"Frank," the concierge turned to the security guard after Starsky had gone. "Please keep an eye on Mr. Starsky for the rest of his stay. I'm afraid he's been under a little too much stress and it's starting to show on him. If he becomes unduly agitated or shows signs of a breakdown, call the hotel doctor. He'll probably sedate him and arrange for his transportation to the hospital for psychiatric treatment."

"Yes, Miss Preston. I'll keep an eye on him. D'you think this 'partner' of his really exists?"

"I'm afraid to Mr. Starsky he's very, very real. However, to everyone else in the world..." She shrugged her shoulders, and walked away, leaving the interpretation of her answer in Frank's hands.

Starsky pulled the hotel key out of his pocket and let himself into Room 302. He half-expected to see Hutch lying on the bed as he walked through the door, having a jovial laugh at his expense. He could just hear it now: "Just wait'll I tell Dobey and Huggy. Boy did I have you going!! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

But the neatly made bed was unoccupied, and the room seemed even emptier than it had this morning. He went to the small refrigerator the hotel provided in each room and deposited the items from the grocery bag inside. Four cans of root beer soda, a ready-made submarine sandwich, four Hershey's candy bars, a small jar of salsa (he set aside the bag of tortilla chips), and four containers of black cherry yogurt. "Why in the world did you buy that?" he asked himself. "You don't even know where Hutch is, and you're buying groceries for him? Maybe I really *am* losing my mind!" He slammed the refrigerator door harder than was really necessary, and plopped down on the bed. His eyes fell on the pile of telephone numbers on the bedside table. With one angry swoop he pushed them all into the garbage can. "Sorry, ladies. I have some more important things to take care of now!"

The dark-haired man laid out the contents of his pockets on the bedside table, retrieving the photograph of Hutch last. "Gotta keep an eye on you!" he laughed as he propped it against the lamp's base. The eyes of the blond in the photograph seemed to look directly at him; was there a slight sense of pleading in the blue eyes there? "Naaaah!"

Getting back up off the bed seemed to take a lot more effort than he'd thought. Once on his feet, he went to the bathroom, stripping off each piece of clothing as he went. By the time he reached the shower, he was completely naked and slipped behind the shower doors. Hot water massaged the muscles of his back and chest, momentarily allowing him to forget that Hutch was not in the outer room waiting for him. He finally realized he'd exhausted as much time as possible in the shower, so he twisted the knob off and reached out for a towel, which he wrapped around his slender waste. A second towel was applied to the dripping curls, rubbing until his hair was practically dry.

"Am I losing my mind?" he asked himself distractedly as he faced his reflection in the mirror. "Nah! There's gotta be another answer." He brushed his teeth and dried himself all over with the towel that had moments ago adorned his waste. He walked to his suitcase and pulled out a pair of shorts, pulling them on and then jumping into bed. The shower had made him weary, and he started to doze off immediately. "I'll track down Hutch tomorrow. That or he'll show up on his own," he mumbled just before he fell totally asleep.

When Starsky awoke the next morning he reached to click on the lamp, feeling slightly better about facing the day. His stomach growled loudly as he pulled on his shirt. "Sorry, pal," he said to the monster in his abdomen, "no time for a restaurant now." He finished snapping the jeans

around the shirt he'd tucked in. "Hey, I almost forgot!" Four steps took him across the hotel room to the mini-refrigerator there. "There's lot to have in here," he went on, pulling the door open. "Nothing better for breakfast than a nice, filling sub." The soda was in front, so he pulled out a can, popping open the top and setting it atop the appliance. He pushed three containers of yogurt aside and pulled out the container of nacho cheese dip. Slowly it began to sink in: "Wait a minute! Where's my sub?" He searched the refrigerator again and still came up without the sandwich. "What the hell...?"

He straightened to his full height, his puzzlement not allowing him to notice the cheese dip he still held in his hand. He reviewed the contents of the refrigerator again. "Three cans of root beer plus the one I just opened, four candy bars... wait! I'm sure I bought four containers of yogurt. Now there's only three! Well, maybe I'm remembering wrong." He went on, "there're the chips I bought," his glance went to the top of the refrigerator then scanned to the jar he still held in his hand. "Cheese dip? CHEESE DIP? I don't even *like* nachos with cheese. Where's the Salsa I bought?" He shook his head in frustration, his appetite quieted by the apparent mystery. "Guess I was just too distracted last night. I'll take it with me today and see if they'll exchange it." It never occurred to him that he was essentially talking to himself.

He laid the cheese on the bed and shut the refrigerator door, but not before retrieving one of the candy bars. *Root beer and chocolate. Not the usual way I start my day, but good enough for now.* He finished dressing quickly and walked to the table to retrieve his wallet. His hand froze a few inches from the leather item itself, realizing something else. "Where's Hutch's picture?" He scrambled to the floor, searching every area around the table for the photo. He emptied the garbage can and pulled all the blankets and sheets off the bed, but the picture was nowhere to be found. "Damn!! This is gonna be a lot tougher without your picture, partner."

The hotel room locked securely behind him, Starsky headed for the lobby. He juggled the keys to the rental car in one hand, thinking -- hoping -- how much easier the car would make his search. He nodded and smiled at the concierge as he crossed the hotel entryway. The weather was warm today, but not hot like some of the summers in L.A. He wished that they were back there now. "At least nothing like this could happen in the middle of the woods!" He muttered aloud.

Amelia Preston, the concierge, saw his mouth moving as he made his way toward the exit. "Looks like everything is right on schedule," she said to the red-haired man on her left. "We've got him talking to himself already -- that's a good sign!"

"Maybe that's nothing new for him, Miss Preston."

"No, he doesn't look to me like the type to talk to himself. Tell my Daddy that we should have this taken care of by tomorrow afternoon. Just a few more 'incidents', and, if he's not already completely insane by then, the cops'll lock him up anyway *thinking* that he is." She laughed out loud, a cold, hard, cruel laugh at the expense of the dark-haired officer.

The red-headed man left her side and she sat down behind her desk. Moments later Starsky was back through the doors, headed directly for her desk. "Excuse me, but did someone move my car?"

"What car? Oh, you mean the rental we arranged for you last night?"

"Yeah, that's the one. It was parked right out front last night, but now it's gone."

Amelia put on her best innocent face, then creased it with a frown. "I don't know about that, Mr. Starsky. If you moved it after the rental agency brought it last night, I didn't know it."

"But I *didn't* move it. The agency parked it out front -- I saw it myself!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't allow cars parked there overnight. They parked *your* car in our hotel parking lot. You told me you saw it there yourself!"

It took a lot to fool David Starsky, but this woman looked so innocent. *How could she possibly be playing with me like this? No, I must've seen someone else's car out front last night and just mistook it for mine.* "Sorry for the confusion, Miss. If you'd be so kind as to direct me, I'll go retrieve my car." Amelia pointed out a side entrance and gave him simple directions to the lot and he proceeded as she had indicated. As he turned his back, he didn't see the wicked smile -- almost a sneer -- that appeared on the lovely features.

Starsky blanketed the city for most of the morning, stopping in every store, shop, restaurant, and club but no one could remember seeing Hutch. His investigation was hampered because he no longer had the picture of his friend. Even worse -- his failure to succeed in the search was beginning to bring him down, and he was growing more and more depressed. The photo, in addition to being an invaluable tool, served as Starsky's lifeline, keeping him from sinking into the insanity that Jackson Preston so desperately wanted.

Starsky finally decided that the search was going nowhere without having a photograph of Hutch. *It's no use. Guess I'll go back to the room and give Dobby a call. He can at least express me the picture of Hutch from his personnel file.* The curly-haired man climbed into the front seat of the rental car, finding himself distinctly unaccustomed to the extra roomy inside. He thought for a moment how he and Hutch could probably each fit a date into the front seat with the two of them. His eyes lost focus momentarily as he looked at the passenger side of the front seat, then focused again on the only item really occupying the seat: the cheese dip he'd bought the night before.

He held the orangish jar in front of his face. "But first, I might as well take care of *you!* He headed back for the hotel, but luck wasn't with him and he hit nearly every red light. At the last one before the hotel, he turned left and then left again into the back lot of the small grocery store. He approached the elderly gentlemen behind the counter directly after entering the market.

"Good afternoon, sir." Starsky's mom was always certain to instill good manners in her little Davey. "I don't know if you remember me, but I was in here last night. It seems I picked up this jar of cheese by mistake when I actually wanted salsa and I was wondering if you'd let me exchange it.

The gentle old man smiled at Starsky like his long-lost grandfather. "Why sure, sonny. I don't see a problem with that just so long as it hasn't been opened." He reached for the jar, feeling with his thumb to see that the vacuum seal was still depressed. "No, it's still sealed. I don't remember you,

but . ." The clerk and proprietor of the store turned the jar to face him and focused for the first time on the label. "Wait a minute, young man. I'm sorry, I was wrong. I can't exchange this for you."

"Why not? You could do it easily a few seconds ago."

"Because this is not a brand that I carry. I got contracts with some of these companies and I can't carry any competitor's brands."

"I just bought it last night! When did you stop carrying it?" Starsky was getting exasperated.

"I've *never* kept this brand. And I've been in business here for almost fifty years. Look, I'm afraid you might be a little confused. Maybe you bought it at another store."

"No! I bought it here just last night. Don't you remember me?!" Starsky's volume was rising with his frustration level, and by this time he was shouting. "I bought a submarine sandwich and some other items."

"We don't even make subs here -- never have! Look, kid. I don't want no trouble. Why don't you just buy your salsa, take both jars, and go. Before I have to call a cop!"

"Fine! Fine!" The anger swelled in Starsky's chest, and he was glad for it. It kept him from realizing how really scared he was. "I'll just take my cheese dip and go!" And the officer stalked out of the store.

Starsky's face was still angry as he stalked through the lobby and up the stairs. The people who worked there didn't intercept him this time, seeing the determined look on his face. Many of them watched only because Preston's money had given them incentive to keep an eye on this man. But none of them believed that this scene was worthy of any kind of report.

By the time he was half up the stairs, he realized he was running. Starsky didn't believe he was capable of unlocking a door so quickly, but in mere microseconds he was inside the room with his back up against the door. His chest heaved but he wasn't sure if it was from the exertion or from the anxiety. "I'm gonna take care of this right now!" He grabbed a candy bar from the fridge, then flopped himself down on the bed and picked up the entire phone, setting it in front of him on the bed.

"Hello, hotel operator? Yes, I'd like to make a long-distance phone call, please. Sure, the number is 619-555-3200. Thank you." He held the phone to his ear, waiting for the connection to be made, and took advantage of the moment by taking a large bite of the chocolate. He finally heard a click, then the ring began. "Briinnngg...briinnngg...briinnngg. Hello, Los Angeles Police Department. May I help you?"

"Hi, this is Detective Sergeant David Starsky. Please connect me with Captain Harold Dobey."

"Sure, please hold one moment, sir."

It was only a minute before the silence ended. "Dobey here," came the gruff answer.

"Hi, Captain. It's me, Starsky."

"Hi, Starsky. How's the vacation going?"

"Strange, Captain. Strange."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, I'll explain it later. Right now, I need you to do me a favor."

"What is it you need?"

"I need you to get a copy of Hutch's picture from his personnel file and send it out here in the fastest way you can find."

"Ahhh, Starsky..." Dobey didn't go on.

"What is it, Captain?"

"Well, Starsky... You see, I'd be happy to get you a picture of whoever you want, but who is this 'Hutch' person?"

"Oh, c'mon, Captain. Joke's over. I'm in real trouble out here! Hutch's disappeared and I can't even prove he was ever here!"

"Well, whoever he is, I'm sure you'll find him eventually." A pause of silence. "Look, Starsky. I've gotta go. Enjoy the rest of your vacation, and come back refreshed. Hopkins will be glad to have you all rested up."

"Hopkins? Who's Hopkins?"

"You're partner, dummy," Dobey laughed. "Bye!" The phone clicked in his ear, but Starsky hung onto it for some time in stunned silence.

In an small, isolated room, the hotel operator clicked off the line and smiled up at the man who stood on her left. While not a man of imposing stature, he was definitely very big on talent. To her right stood Jackson Preston himself.

"That was perfect, Rich. Now I know why you're the best, biggest impressionist in Atlantic City. Maybe someday I'll actually buy tickets to one of your performances."

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Preston. When do I get the payment you promised?"

"It's being deposited in your bank account as we speak."

"Thanks again. Boy, you've sure got some sense of humor! What a great joke to play on a friend -- and he really sounded scared! You really *do* spare no expense!"

"Remember, Rich. Your payment is contingent on your silence. The joke's no fun if someone finds out too soon." He smiled at Jackson as he walked out of the room, then Jackson turned to the operator. "You let me know any other calls Detective Starsky makes, huh? And if he tries to make any more calls to the coast, just tell him the lines are down. That'll delay him for a bit anyway."

"Yessir!" she said, but he'd already turned his back and was walking through the door.

Hutch stirred groggily, tired from what he believed was too much sleep, but was actually an aftereffect of the chloroform they'd used on him while he slept. "Feel like a bear in the spring," he mumbled to himself, even the quiet words echoing in the empty pool. He looked above to see the light once again shining through the skylight above him. It had been dark when he'd fallen asleep, but not for long, and he discerned from the shadow that the sun was now almost directly overhead. He had no way of knowing if it was just before or just after noon, but the mind, atrophied from sleep, didn't dwell on it.

He was still chained to the drain of the large pool, but he noticed as he shifted slightly an ache across the back of his shoulders and realized that his hands were no longer chained *behind* him: they were in front, where he could see the massive links and heavy padlock. "Now why would they do that?" he wondered to himself, and got his answer a few moments later when he noticed a small plate of food and can of soda laid near where he'd been sleeping. *Must've changed my hands when they brought the food. I'm surprised it didn't wake me up.* This was the first meal they'd brought him since he'd awoken to find himself in this place, and he realized he was famished. The portion on the plate was small, enough to sustain but not much more. He dug into it greedily, forgetting all the gentlemanly manners his mother had taught him.

As he pushed the food into his mouth, he looked around some more, hoping to find some sign that he hadn't been left here alone again but finding no one there. "Where are you, Starsk? Have you forgotten about me? Please, please come get me outta here, pal !"

The food was gone too soon, and with nothing else to occupy him, he fell once again asleep. As he drifted off, the thought occurred to him that this would make the meager meal last longer, burning as few calories as possible until someone came. Then he'd have the energy he'd need to overpower whoever kidnapped him and get back to Starsky. "Oh, Partner. If they'd do this to me, what are they planning for you?"

Starsky was never sure whether it was a sleeping dream or an awake hallucination, but it shook him to the very marrow of his bones. Hutch had been there...standing...silently...at the foot of his bed. His form had wavered, ghost like, beckoning him to come with him. *NO! It wasn't a dream! He was really here!* He'd sat there staring, open mouthed, as the form stayed for several minutes, then finally wavered one last time and disappeared.

"No! Don't go!" Starsky reached out for his partner and saw the fading figure reach toward him in return. When it had gone, he rubbed his eyes, trying to decide if he really believed them, and found the long dark lashes wet. He cringed in embarrassment, even though there was nobody there to see the tears. Then curled up in a fetal position on the bed, hiding his face when the whimpering started again. He pushed a hand on his chest, but the sobs weren't to be controlled. The escape of sleep finally claimed him, and the tense arms and legs finally relaxed. He wasn't looking forward to the dreams he'd surely, truthfully, have.

The sun through the window awoke the dark haired man early the next morning. He'd purposefully left the drapes and shades opened the night before, allowing nature's own alarm clock to wake him for another day of searching. However, after the vision he'd had during the night, he decided that he needed more help. "Gotta clear one thing up first," he said to himself as he ran cold fingers through his curls.

He flicked on the lights and rose from the bed, letting his bare feet touch the carpet in only one small area. "You WERE here! You WERE! I KNOW you were!" He bent down and examined the carpet next to his bed, then meticulously went over every inch of the carpet at the side and end of his bed, searching for any signs that someone had stood there. Dirt? No. Grass? No. Blond hair? No. He finally sat in a heap on the floor, looking dejected and lonesome. "You need help," a voice said in his head, and he wasn't sure if the voice was his own or Hutch's. He got up and dressed, his movements slower and less crisp than usual. Again, a different thought flew through his mind. *Am I losing my mind?*

He didn't take the time to shave or shower, having too many other things on his mind. Besides, Starsky didn't care how he looked to other people. "So what!" He said to himself as he walked to the rental car. "I don't know anyone in this stinkin' town but Hutch. And he'll take me no matter *how* I look!" As he crawled behind the wheel and put his keys in the ignition, it occurred to him that he had no idea where the local police station was. Well, that should be easy enough to remedy. He'd just ask the first patrolman or native once he got on the road.

As soon as he'd left the hotel room, Preston's men moved in, removing from the room the hidden projection equipment they'd so carefully concealed. They also removed the two remaining candy bars from the refrigerator and replaced them with new ones. "Can't have them running tests on these, huh?" one man asked another. The bars had been drugged, of course -- only enough to encourage Starsky's little "waking nightmare".

Shortly the equipment was dropped on the table in Jackson Preston's house. "It's working like a charm, sir. He had no idea where his 'ghost' came from. Ran out like he was shot out of a cannon."

"I know," Jackson said. "I've got a whole city's worth of people keeping an eye on him. When he gets to wherever he's going, they'll let me know."

"Mr. Preston?" It was asked mildly, almost timidly. "What are you gonna do with Hutchinson once Starsky's taken care of?"

"Why, my dear boy, I don't intend to 'do' anything with him. Once Starsky's where I want him, we won't need him anymore. And when that happens, we'll just leave him where he is."

"Well then, sir, forgive me for asking, but why are we still bothering to feed him. I mean, we've got all the pictures we needed for the camera, and it just seems risky. And if anyone ever found him out there alive..."

"Rick, you are absolutely correct. I've been so caught up in thwarting Starsky that I haven't been thinking about blondie. Okay. Send out orders to all the men -- there will be no more visits to 'The Palace'. Besides, anyone we send out there could be spotted by the cops or Starsky. That hotel is *supposed* to be deserted. We can't have people coming and going out there. Hutchinson will eventually just fade away."

The red car pulled up and parked in front of the police station, and Starsky noted the "Limit: 2 hours" parking sign on the curb. The station itself looked very much like the ones back home. He had a feeling, however misplaced, that this was "his" domain, and charged through the precinct doors as though he owned the place. Officers, suspects, and lawyers all rushed around, barely paying attention to the man as he stood in the middle of the hallway. After a few minutes of going unnoticed, Starsky snared a passing uniformed man by the arm.

"Excuse me, Officer," he said, remembering, finally, his manners. "Where can I go to fill out a missing persons report?"

"Oh, that's easy. Go down this hall," he pointed, "then turn right at the first hallway. It'll be the third door on the left. Ask for Sergeant Bailey." Starsky politely thanked the man and made his way down the hall.

The room was awash with desks, and Starsky circled it until he finally found a name plaque that said "Bailey". The man at it was very apparently busy, with forms rather than people. The L.A. detective didn't feel so bad interrupting the kind of work he was slaving over.

"Sergeant Bailey?"

"Yes, sir. That's me. What can I do for you?"

"One of your officers referred me to you. I need to fill out a missing persons report."

"Well, he steered you in the right direction, Mr....?"

"Starsky. David Starsky. And, actually, it's Detective Sergeant."

"Oh? You a cop?"

"Yeah. I'm with the L.A.P.D., Homicide division."

"And what are you doing in Atlantic City, Detective Starsky?"

"We just came on vacation. I thought it might be fun to see some shows, try our luck...you know."

"You said 'we'. Who is 'we'?"

"Well, 'we' is who I came to see you about. I came to Atlantic City with my partner, Detective Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson. He, ahhhh, seems to have disappeared."

"Oh, he did? Look," he said, giving Starsky a look that spoke volumes, "are you sure he's not just playing some kind of joke on you. I mean, around here it seems partners are always playing tricks on each other. Especially the plainclothes ones."

"We *are* plainclothes back in L.A., but I'm sure he's not playing a trick."

"Okay," Bailey agreed, pulling out a light blue form. "Then let's get started looking for him. Please take a seat. I probably don't need to tell you the drill, so let's just get through this so we can put out an APB. We'll see what we can do to located this errant partner of yours." The officer smiled gently, noticing the worry lines creased in the dark man's forehead and the dark circles under his eyes.

"I'd start by monitoring the hospitals if I were you. Hutch'd have to be hurt in order to stay away like this. I called them all -- at least all the ones I could find in the phone book -- when he first disappeared, but you never know *when* he could show up!"

"When exactly did Sergeant Hutchinson disappear?"

"It'll be three days tonight. He vanished from our room in the middle of the night."

"Did he have any enemies that you know of in the city?"

"No. Most of our enemies are on the west coast. And for the most part, any enemies of Hutch's are enemies of mine. Y'see, we've been partners for a long, long time. It doesn't make sense that they'd do something to him and leave me alone."

"You keep referring to your partner as 'Hutch'. Is that his nickname?"

"Yeah. Most of the time he prefers it over 'Ken'. Do you think you can help me? I've been trying to find him myself, but this city of yours is just too big." He didn't tell him about the call to Dobby or the vision from the night before. That was information Bailey just didn't need.

After the form was completed, Starsky rose and shook hands. "Will you be checking in with your hotel? I'm presuming, of course, that you have no intention of giving up your own investigation."

"Yeah, I'll be checking in. If you find out anything, you can leave a message for me there. I'm in Room 302."

"I'm sure you'll be hearing from us, Sergeant Starsky. Just keep a stiff upper lip."

Starsky left the precinct house feeling much better and a little less alone now that he felt sure he was going to be getting some help in finding Hutch.

The "12" was no longer so distinct, as it fuzzed at the edges and flowed in and out of focus. It even wavered some, as though he were looking at it from under water. "Heh heh," Hutch feebly laughed. "Imagine that -- water in an empty pool. You're losing it, Hutchinson." He pulled once again at the restraining chain, barely even able to lift it now.

Three days without food or water had left him weak. His stomach was long since past the point where it growled or ached, a period he'd endured the previous day. He couldn't afford to take the time to recognize the hunger, as his mind kept trying to stray away from him. *You're not gonna leave me too?* He deliriously questioned his own mind, and was a little hurt when he didn't get an answer. *Why not? Everyone else's gone. No one left. Not Abby or Judith or Gillian. Not Dobey or Huggy or Starsky. Nobody but me.* If someone would only come. Anyone at all. Just to let him know there still *was* a world beyond the four walls of this pool.

He suddenly had a moment's clarity, and he realized that unless he found something to concentrate on, he'd end up a blubbering fool. "Think, Hutchinson. Think!" The urgency of his tone covered some of the weakness, but could not conceal it all. "Why would someone do this to you. They haven't been back in God knows how long. If they wanted something from me, they'd've been here on and off. How long has it been? Days and days and days, I'm sure. And I haven't seen anything. What do they want from me? And where is Starsky?" His mind chose that inopportune moment to desert him again. He found himself unable to get a clear picture of his partner. The dark on top, then lighter below. Vibrant blue piercing from the light area. Somehow it seemed right, and yet wrong. Was that Starsky? No. Yes! No! Yes!

His mind finally gave up trying to convince itself, and he lay his thin body -- thinner than it had been and accented by the nakedness of his arms, legs, shoulders, and chest -- on the pool floor, letting the coolness of the stone seep into his bones. It made him even more tired, and he gave in to the sleep that was grasping at him with icy fingertips.

"But it's been four days!" Starsky shouted into the telephone receiver. The silence he received in response told him he'd stepped on somebody's toes. "Look, I'm sorry officer. Please!" It was almost a plea the way it came out, and Starsky quickly became aware of the tone in his voice. He calmed it to as close to normal as he could manage. "Please," he said, quieter this time. "Just check with Sergeant Bailey. He'll tell you about my case. Maybe he's even found out something."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm sure the Sergeant would have called you if he had anything new." The voice sounded almost apologetic. "I'll tell you what. When Sergeant Bailey comes back in, I'll ask him personally about your case, then either he or I will call you back. Whether or not he's found anything, you *will* hear from us."

"Yeah.... Yeah.... That sounds good. Thanks a lot -- I'll be talking to you!" Starsky laid the receiver in the cradle, unconsciously rocking back and forth on the edge of the bed. It had been seven days...SEVEN DAYS...since he'd seen his partner.

Still with everything on his mind, that number kept coming back to him. Seven days. Seven days. Seven days. Finally, the subconscious floated to the conscious. "Damn! Seven days!! We're due back on duty today!" He reached for the phone. "Gotta call Dobby." His hand froze a half an inch above the receiver and hovered there while he gathered his thoughts. *Remember last time you called him.* The other side of his mind answered. *It was nothing! I'm sure he was just kidding around!* The first voice again. *Dobby wouldn't kid after hearing about Hutch.* And the second answering, *He would if he thought we were kidding!*

"SHUT UP!" Starsky finally screamed, silencing both voices. He grabbed the phone without hesitating this time. "Operator, I need to make a long distance call to the West Coast. Yes, to L.A." He listened into the receiver for a moment. "What do you mean all the lines to the West Coast are down? How can they *all* be down!" His voice dropped in volume when he realized he was harassing the woman. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take it out on you. Can you tell me when you expect them to be back up?" The answer he received was very apparently unsatisfactory, as his face fell and he let his chin drop to his chest. "Yes, thank you. Yes, ma'am. Could you please ring my room when the lines are back up. I'm David Starsky in Room 302. Yes, thank you very much. Good-bye."

He hung up the phone for just an instant -- an instant he used to pull the telephone book from the bottom shelf of the bedside table. He scanned the pages until he found the number he wanted. The dial on the telephone spun around once again. "Hello, I'd like to send a telegram. Yes, it's to Captain Harold Dobby, Los Angeles Police Department, Metropolitan Division, Los Angeles, California. You ready? Okay, here's what I want it to say. 'Captain, stop. Held up in Atlantic City, stop. Hutch missing seven days, stop. This is no joke, stop. Will call later, stop. Signed, Starsky'. Yes, ma'am. That's fine, ma'am. Thank you very much."

Starsky felt a little better after the telegram was dispatched, and prepared to grab something to eat and head out again. He'd long since exhausted the supplies he'd stored in the refrigerator, except for that horrible jar of nacho he'd been stuck with. He'd even managed to choke down all that yogurt. It actually wasn't that bad, and he swore he'd admit that to his partner if...no, "when", he ever saw him again.

Sending the telegram had somehow lifted his spirits, and there was a slight bounce in his step as he once again crossed the carpeted lobby on his way to the store. What he didn't expect was to be intercepted by Sergeant Bailey and three other, rather large, uniformed men. Bailey's expression was grim, and the sight of it ran a chill through Starsky. *Oh, God! Please tell me you've found him and he's safe. Don't tell me he's dead, please!* As they got closer, Starsky could also see sympathy in the green eyes, and knew for certain what the policeman's pronouncement would be.

"It's okay, Detective Starsky," Bailey said as he spread his arms. "It's okay, just keep calm. Everything is going to be all right." Starsky realized his tone was gentle, but patronizing. Could he tell how upsetting the disappearance of Hutch had been to his partner? Of course! He'd seen it in the squad room that first day. Starsky tried to get a word in, to ask what exactly they'd found.

The officer didn't seem to want to tell him, and every time Starsky opened his mouth, he'd interrupt and talk more nonsense, soothing words.

After a half a minute of this, Starsky would finally be complacent no more. "CUT IT OUT!" he shouted, drawing the eyes of every person in the lobby. He cut it to half volume, but the tone was as intense as ever. "Whatever you have to tell me, I can take it! Did you find Hutch?"

"Sure we did. We know exactly where he is." Why did his tone sound so strange? "If you come with us, we'll take you to him."

"Is he all right? How is he? C'mon, I gotta know!"

"Yeah, yeah. He's just fine, and you're gonna be fine, too." The muscular officers he had with him each took an arm, escorting Starsky to the car.

"Well, hell, I *know* I'm gonna be fine! I'm just worried about my partner." One of the burly officers slid in next to him, with Bailey and the remaining cop utilizing the front seat. As the rear squad car door slammed shut, it occurred to Starsky that he was trapped. In any precinct in the country, squad car back seats are never able to be opened from the inside.

He discounted the thought as the car began to roll, leaning forward in the seat to talk to Bailey. "Where is he? Did you take him to the precinct, or is he in the hospital?" All the officers kept their silence. "C'mon, I've been looking for seven days! The least you can do it let me in on it. It can't be any worse than the things I've been imagining!"

There was silence again for a moment, then the officer seated next to him turned to Bailey as he drove. "Nutty as a fruitcake, huh, Sergeant?"

"Simms, you know better than to talk that way in front of a patient!" The reprimand silenced the officer, but certainly got Starsky's attention.

"Patient! Patient? Where are we going?" He finally took a good look around him. Although he was not very familiar with the city, he *knew* that this wasn't the way to the station he'd visited before. "This isn't the way to your headquarters. Then we must be goin' to a hospital. Is that it? Is Hutch in a hospital?"

"Take it easy, Sergeant Starsky. Yes, we're going to a hospital. We should be there in only another ten or so minutes." The officers all relaxed when they saw the out-of-state detective sit back with a small smile, content to wait the ten minutes until he'd see his partner again.

Even for the summer, the weather had taken a decidedly nasty turn, manifesting itself as torrential downpours with thunder and lightning. A man and woman, with two small children in tow, walked dripping toward the abandoned structure.

"But, Fred, it's probably locked tight. We'll never be able to get in! And the windows are all boarded up!"

"I'll find a way, honey. We are not spending one more storm under an overpass or in an alley, trying to find a roof over our head. I may be out of a job, but we're not rats to be drowned or ignored! I owe you, and the kids, better than that!" His tone was desperate, and his wife knew better than to push him when he was this determined.

Each adult carried a sack filled with whatever possessions they still had to their names, while the small girl, her face dirty and scared, clutched at a ragged doll whose hair appeared to be falling out. A boy, even younger than the girl, was also dirty-faced and he periodically toddled and was carried on their way. They listened carefully as they approached the abandoned hotel, knowing that they could be sent to jail for what they were about to do.

"Absolutely nothing," Fred said as he concentrated harder. "Looks and sounds like we're all clear." He found a large, flat stone laying nearby, and used it to pry one of the boards off the windows. When three of the four nails were free, he slid it aside, pivoting on one remaining nail, and finished breaking the already cracked window in the frame. He was very careful to leave no glass to cut tender legs and arms, then, just to be safe, he took off his soaking wet shirt and laid it over the bottom.

"You go in first," he said to his wife Karen. "I'll hand through the kids, then follow you in. Once the board is slid back, no one will know we're here." She did as he said, very grateful to be in out of the rain and thunder. The building was very dark, but no darker than some of the alleys they'd called home over the past three months since they'd lost their apartment. The children, whose eyes were quick to become accustomed to the dark, reveled in the wide open spaces of the hotel lobby and ran up and down the empty halls, investigating everything in sight.

The family, for once, felt secure, but it didn't keep Karen from worrying. "What if we get caught? If they put us in jail, they'll take away the kids!"

"Don't worry," Fred soothed, pressing her head against his shoulder. "We'll only stay until the storm is over, and no one will ever be able to tell we've been here!"

The parents spread their thin and fraying blankets on the carpeted floor -- it was a much preferable place to sleep than they had been using. They had just settled down on them when Jacob, their young son, came toddling back. "Mama." He held his arms out and his mother scooped him into hers in a tight hug. She could tell he was ready for bed, tired from the walk, and decided they probably all were.

"Carol!" she called into the darkened halls. "Carol, come here. It's time for bed." The young girl, her blond waves dancing in the meager light, skipped back toward her parents.

"Oh, mom! Can't I *please* stay up just a few more minutes?! Please??? I want to look around some more!" Her smile expressed her excitement at their new place, her childlike innocence keeping her from being aware of her family's predicament. "Please???" she begged again.

"Oh...well, okay. But just fifteen more minutes. I'll call you again, so listen for my voice. And when your time's up, I want no more arguments."

The young girl threw her arms around her mother's waste. "Thank you, mommy. I promise I'll go right to bed when you call."

Jacob was already asleep by the time Karen returned to their makeshift beds, and she and her husband sat and held each other, knowing the peace would end all too soon. Karen guessed that about one quarter of an hour had passed, when she looked up into her husband's eyes and pushed away from him. "I'd better call Carol." She went to the same hall her daughter had disappeared down. "Carol, bedtime!" She listened for the echoing footsteps of her oldest child, but none came. "Carol Elizabeth, come here this instant!" She waited a few minutes but still got no response. Turning to her husband, she said, "I guess I'd better go look for her!" Her exasperation was as apparent as her exhaustion.

"No, honey," Fred stepped in, holding her back with one arm. "I'll go get her. You keep an eye on Jacob. She's probably just playing; I mean, what could happen to her in an abandoned hotel?" He kissed her lightly on the brow and headed off down the darkened hall. Room doors loomed on each side, and he opened each one and checked the room within. He could barely see, at the end of the hall as he approached it, a large glass wall which reflected what little light there was. What the glass separated from the hall he did not know, but thought how Carol was probably attracted to the view.

As he neared the glass, he jumped in astonishment only to realize it was his own reflection which had frightened him. "Carol, where are you, honey?" He walked to the right, keeping one hand on the all-glass wall to his left. His hand touched something cornered, and he realized he'd found a doorway in the glass wall. This area was as light as the lobby itself, and he realized that the slight bit of sunlight that the clouds had not dispelled was shining through the skylights in both here and the lobby. A left turn took him into the new room, and he beheld the statue-like outline of his young daughter, frozen in space and time. "Honey, why didn't you come when we called?" He placed gentle hands on the girl's shoulders, but she jumped nonetheless. Instead of an answer, she only pointed.

The skylight revealed a dim figure on the bottom of the pool, no more than a vague outline itself. Roughly man-sized, but he couldn't see anything else. "It's okay, honey. I'll check and see what that is. Why don't you go back to your mother?" He turned her by the shoulders and she numbly walked away. The pool was empty, but the end where the figure lay was very deep. "Maybe the other end is more shallow," he mumbled to himself. Sure enough, the bottom at the far end was only about three feet down, and it was an easy drop to the pool's bottom. He rushed down the sloping bottom toward the motionless figure, coming up short next to it.

"Oh, dear Lord! It's a man!" He looked over the prone figure carefully before approaching it. The man didn't move, only lay on his side. Clad only in undershorts, a fragmented blanket strewn over the legs, he did not shiver, but the movement of his chest indicated he was alive. The breath movement accentuated the protruding ribs and the blue eyes were open but vacant. "Hey, buddy! Hey, can you hear me?" When he got no response, he reached for a wrist to take his pulse -- maybe he wasn't really breathing after all. The dim light made it hard to tell anything definite. He found the man's hands and moved up the fingers toward the wrists. His search was blocked, however, when he realized that, instead of feeling the soft flesh and the pulse, he was feeling hard metal. He followed the cuffs to the chain and the chain, in turn, to the floor drain. "Who

would have done this to you?" He didn't expect a response, nor did he get one from the unresponsive figure. Fred couldn't figure if he was conscious or not, but decided to treat him as if he were. "Don't worry, buddy. I'll get some help for you!"

It took only moments for the man to fly from Hutch's side to his wife's. "There's a man back there!" he told her, panting and out of breath. "We've got to get an ambulance for him!"

"Carol told me she saw someone, but I couldn't imagine..."

"I don't know what's wrong, but he's alive and he needs help. He's been chained here God knows how long. Barely nothing to wear and, from how it looks, nothing to eat. We can't just leave him!"

"Okay, honey, calm down. You're right. No matter what it means to us, we've got to get him some help. Why don't you go find a phone and call an ambulance. I'll stay here with the kids."

The two youths were amazing, not awakening for more than a moment during the whole process. Lights flashed, voices yelled, and people came and went through the lobby; yet Carol and Jacob slept through it all. Fire/Rescue workers broke the chains, and ambulance attendants loaded the catatonic man onto a stretcher and took him away. The lights of the emergency vehicles faded away, and the couple who had found Hutch considered themselves lucky that no one, in all the confusion, had thought to ask what the homeless family had been doing in the hotel. Or, at least, if they wondered, they had the kindness not to voice it and create problems.

"It must be our reward from above for helping that poor man," Karen whispered to her husband, as they watched the children's steady breathing.

"Yeah. I wonder why someone would want to do that to *anyone*!"

"From the looks of him, I doubt even the doctors will ever know. His eyes looked so empty!"

"He didn't talk, he didn't react. No identification, no identity. He may be lost forever. But at least he's alive." Karen curled up next to her husband, sighing at the warmth and the unaccustomed comfort.

"I'm so tired. Think I'll go to sleep now." And she did just that, as Fred stroked her fine hair.

This is a nightmare! Detective Sergeant Starsky could hardly believe the events of the last few hours. His situation had gone from bad to worse since his visit by Sergeant Bailey and his compatriots. He thought back, now, on that ride in the squad care -- the ride he believed would take him to Hutch. They'd been traveling about ten minutes when Starsky started to realize something.

"Hey! This isn't the way to the precinct! Where are we going?" When the three officers failed to comment, he began to draw his own conclusions. "We *are* going to the hospital, aren't we? Or worse, the morgue!" They still didn't respond. "DAMMIT!! Tell me what's going on!" His

agitation was now blatant, and he was becoming more riled by the moment. "SAY SOMETHING!!!"

Sergeant Bailey's only response was into the radio. He had picked up the microphone and spoke to his dispatcher. "Bailey to dispatch. Just an update to relay to the doctors. Tell them the patient has become agitated bordering on violent. We'll probably need restraints upon our arrival, which should be in about five more minutes. Copy, dispatch?"

"Affirmative, Sergeant. Will relay to NJPC."

As the radio conversation ended, Bailey half-turned toward the back seat, speaking to the officer there. "You'd better cuff him. I wouldn't want him hurting anybody."

As he now stared at the white walls of his barren room, he thought back on the entire process. The humiliation of being cuffed, then straight-jacketed, and thrown into this room. Doctors, nurses, and orderlies speaking to him with that condescending tone they used, as if he really belonged here. It reminded him of the time he'd gone under cover as a patient at Cabrillo State. But then he had Hutch to back him up and help him when he needed it.

This room is so different from that one. That one had a real bed, tables, chairs, almost like a regular hospital. He surveyed his current room with large eyes that held a touch of fear. These walls were white, cushioned, and the only bed was a plain, unsheeted cushion thrown carelessly in the corner. He finally voiced what he'd been afraid to think before. "They think I'm crazy. They can't find Hutch, so they think I'm insane -- that I imagined him." He knew that any protests he made now would be ignored by the orderlies, and he didn't want to risk another sedative. *Sure wish they hadn't felt the need to use that needle like a harpoon!* he thought, wanting to rub the sore spot the injection had left in a sensitive area of his anatomy.

Starsky's eyes scanned the walls, looking for what? He wasn't sure. He just felt the need to be as familiar with this room as he could. There was nothing remarkable -- not even a window to the outside world. He did finally note the small window, no more than nine inches by eight inches, in the door itself.

Getting to his feet was difficult without the steadying influence of his hands and arms. He struggled, leaning against the wall and slowly sliding his way to a standing position. Once vertical, it was easy for him to walk to the door. Still, his steps were slow and steady -- the determined steps of a sane individual. *If I can't convince them I'm normal with what I say, maybe I can do it with what I do.* He stood at the window, peacefully watching the hospital staff moving through the halls, dealing with other patients. They were usually alone, but as a pair of doctors traversed by his door, Starsky realized that, along with everything else, his room was soundproof; the doctors' mouths moved, but he couldn't hear a whisper of what they were saying. *I could scream my head off for a month and nobody'd hear me.*

Starsky resigned himself to his situation, figuring his only choice was to wait until someone came into his room. He took a seat on the mattress, leaning his back up against the wall. He closed his eyes, resting, and tried to think of something to occupy his attention. "I know," he finally said aloud. His voice took on an announcer's tone, a poor imitation of Don Pardo. "Okay, Detective Starsky, the topic today is 'classic television shows'. Let's see how many you can name

before your time's up." His voice reverted to its natural lilt, and he began with the shows he remembered from his youth. "Dennis the Menace, The Ed Sullivan Show, Car 54-Where Are you?, Ozzie& Harriet, Patty Duke, 77 Sunset Strip, Andy Griffith Show, Route 66..."

The dark-haired man continued to drone on, listing every television show he could recall. Somewhere between Dr. Kildare and Perry Mason his eyelids began to get heavy, and once the general lighting went out, the entries on his list came slower and slower. "The Virginian.... Wagon Train.... The Man from Uncle.... My Three Sons...." His mind finally joined his body in shutting down, and he slid sideways along the wall until he lay on the makeshift bed, allowing sleep to claim him until the morning.

Starsky had been long since asleep when they wheeled the catatonic man past his door. The nurses had hastily tied a hospital gown around the nearly naked form, and the garment covered the evidence of the obvious malnourishment. He didn't move on the gurney as it rolled through the halls, his eyes open but not looking around. The orderlies moved the bed into a white padded room -- similar to the one Starsky was in, yet equipped for a patient who was physically as well as mentally ill -- gently lifting the patient from it and onto the large bed in the center. The orderlies took great care to attach the restraining straps to the patient's arms and legs in case he came around abruptly, and then moved quickly to remove the gurney and themselves from the room, leaving the patient still staring into space.

They were just about to slam the door shut when a long, trim arm halted the movement. Catherine Craig, Cathy to her friends, stepped in to bodily block them. In addition to being a kind and caring nurse, she was also assistant-head of the nursing staff on this floor. Even the most disturbed of patients, ones who responded to absolutely nobody else, would sometimes respond to Cathy.

"What's that for, Miss Craig?" one orderly inquired, nodding at the tray she carried.

"The doctor who checked out our John Doe in there said he's badly malnourished. If I can't get him to eat anything, we're going to have to put him on an IV. I'd like to avoid that if I can." She breezed past them, then glanced back just long enough to comment, "You can go. In the state he's in, I'm sure he won't hurt me. And even if he was inclined to do so, medically, he doesn't have the strength." Once at the bedside, she gazed disapprovingly at the straps around Hutch's wrists. "These really aren't necessary, Jerry!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Craig. Regulations."

The orderlies shrugged at her continued perusal and left the room, shutting the door behind them. One of them remained by the door to let her out when she was ready, as the door was set up to never open from the inside.

Cathy cranked up the head end of the hospital bed, then levered one knee onto the mattress beside the inactive body, looking sadly into the forlorn eyes. "Let's see if we can't get some food into you." She took the slumping blond figure by the shoulders, noticing how her touch elicited no response, and straightened his sitting position. He muscles were stiff, and it took all her

strength before the patient was vertical enough to feed. *Thank God the new dress code's letting us wear pants. I'd hate to try to do this in one of those stupid uniform dresses.*

The substance in the bowl most nearly resembled babyfood, but she knew it was a nutrition-intensive concoction which the Dietary Department had pureed at her request. She filled the spoon halfway with the greenish substance and held it to the patient's mouth, but he did not open. A gentle hand on the blond's bottom jaw opened the orifice, and she emptied a mouthful inside. In one smooth motion Cathy closed the jaw and rubbed the throat, eliciting a swallow from the patient. The next mouthful was easier, and he swallowed without her touch.

"That's very good!" she said to him encouragingly, and although the eyes and mind still didn't seem to react, this time he opened his mouth on his own when the bowl of the spoon approached. "Keep this up and you'll be back to normal in no time!" The food was bland, practically tasteless. But the dietary staff really knew their business. Any food that was harsh or spicy would be rejected by the patient's digestive system after so long without food. Even this might give him difficulties, although nothing serious. And, of course, it contained all the essentials he needed to regain his strength.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Preston. It's nice to see you again." The receptionist at the Psychiatric Hospital tended to be a little gabby for Jackson's liking, but he smiled at her and allowed her to ramble on. "Y'know, I think it's really nice the way you come so often to see your brother. I not sure that he's up yet, by the way. So many of our patients never get *any* visitors. And they're so lonely, too. Like this one guy..."

Jackson tuned the woman out, letting her ramble on for a short period. Then he cleared his throat to get her attention. The sound created a pause in her spiel, and he jumped at the chance to get a word in edgewise. "That's very nice, but I'm not visiting my brother this time. I'd like to see a patient that was admitted yesterday -- his name is David Starsky."

"Oh, sure. Why didn't you say so in the first place?" She flipped through her book, searching for the assigned room number. Finally, her seeking finger found the correct listing. "Here it is." She paused for a moment. "Oh, I'm sorry. He's still in the evaluation stage. I'm afraid you won't be able to talk to him."

"That's okay, but can I at least look in on him. There can't be any harm in that, can there?" His smile was so warm that he cajoled her into approving.

"Of course, Mr. Preston. He's in Evaluation Room 15, down this corridor and to the left. If he's awake, please be sure your presence doesn't upset him."

"As you wish, my lady," he crooned, charmingly taking and kissing the young woman's hand. She giggled as he walked away and reclaimed her seat behind the receptionist's counter.

Finding Room 15 was simple, even in the dim lighting of the hallway. Preston stopped to the side of the small window, the same size as the one through which he monitored his brother's downward spiral. He snuck a quick glance into the room, like a 13-year-old boy peeking at his

first girl. It was instantly apparent that Starsky was asleep on the mattress, so the man afforded himself a longer, more detailed perusal.

Even in sleep, Starsky's face looked haggard, worn with the slow degradation of his sanity. "Serves you right for what you did to my brother!" Preston growled under his breath. If he'd confronted Starsky face-to-face, Starsky would have informed him that his expression was not for the loss of his sanity -- his hold was still secure in that department, despite what the staff kept assuming about him -- but from the continued worry for his missing partner.

Starsky rolled over restlessly, and Preston smiled at his lack of comfort. *With Hutchinson dead and Starsky locked up here, I've got everything I want.* Somehow, though, knowing he'd finally gotten his revenge didn't lift his spirits quite like he'd imagined. He still felt a heaviness in his chest, and a moment later realized that it was because, regardless of what he did to the L.A. detective, his brother was still here and still unwell. *And that,* he thought resignedly, *may never change.*

It was hard for a man like Preston to admit his impotence in such a situation, but he did just that to himself now. He'd visited regularly, recruited the finest doctors to help Jesse in his struggle with the world he now resided in, but nothing seemed to help. He stood watching the sleeping figure for a few more minutes, then left the hospital, his conflicting emotions still warring with each other inside his head and his heart.

"Hello, Long Distant Operator? Get me the Aladdin Hotel in Atlantic City, please." Captain Harold Dobey sat behind his desk, frowning down at the puzzling telegram he'd received. "Those dumb kids," he said under his breath. "Who do they think they're trying to pull one over on? Well, this little stunt is *not* gonna get them even one more day of vacation time." The line clicked, and a feminine voice came on the line.

"Aladdin Hotel -- where your wish is our command. Registrations Desk, how may I help you?"

"Yeah, could you connect me with David Starsky's room, please?"

"Just one moment, sir." He held the line again, listening to the silence. Shortly, the same voice returned. "I'm sorry, sir. I have no one registered under that name."

"But I know that's where he's staying! Try looking under Kenneth Hutchinson."

"Yessir, I'd be happy to." He heard the sound of papers shuffling for a few seconds. "No, nothing under that name, either. Are you sure they told you they were staying at the Aladdin?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm not likely to screw up a simple name like that!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't know what to tell you. There is currently nobody registered in either of those names."

"They would have checked in eight days ago. They were on vacation."

"Eight days ago, huh? Why don't you hold on and I'll check to see exactly when they signed in."

"What'll that prove?!" Dobey's voice was becoming gruff, and the girl on the phone was starting to sound a little scared. He tried to remind himself that she was helping him, and attempted to be more gentle with her.

"I'm not sure, exactly. But it will prove if they were ever here."

"Okay, check then. I'll hold."

It didn't take long for the girl to return. "I did find a record of a David Starsky signing in. It looks like he checked out yesterday morning."

"Checked out? But where'd they go? You can't just lose two grown men, even if the city is the size of Atlantic City."

"I am sorry, sir -- really I am. But Mr. Starsky didn't leave any kind of forwarding information, and I can't find a record of that other gentleman, Mr. Hutchinson, at all."

Captain Dobey rubbed his scratchy eyes tiredly. This day was already adding up to one big disaster. "Well, thank you for checking, Miss. I appreciate it. Good-bye." His voice was tired, matching his demeanor. "Those two boys are more work than my *own* kids. I just hope they don't contaminate Cal."

The phone buzzed again, and Dobey grabbed up the receiver before the second buzz could sound. "Dobey."

"Excuse me, Captain," the police switchboard operator said. "I have a long-distance call for you from New Jersey. Shall I put it through?"

"Well, it's about time those guys checked in! Yeah, put 'em on!" They're not gonna know what hit 'em when I get my hands on them! But the voice on the phone didn't belong to either of his officers.

"Captain Harold Dobey?" The unidentified voice was questioning.

"Yeah, that's me. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm from the New Jersey Psychiatric Center. It seems we've admitted one of your men. He had your name on him as the person to contact in an emergency. Do you know a young man named 'David Starsky'?"

"I sure do. He's one of my best officers!" The question occurred to him why Starsky would carry his name as a contact. Why not Hutch's? It only took a moment for him to realize. *He probably figured that, if something happened, he and Hutch would be together.* That question was quickly replaced with a more important question. "What's he doing there?"

"I'm afraid he's had a breakdown, Captain Dobby. He's been suffering from delusions, and when the police tried to help him, he became violent."

"Are you sure you're talking about David Starsky? He's the most level-headed man I know. Are you his doctor?"

"No, I'm not medical personnel. I work in the office keeping the records and helping with contacting families."

"Can I speak to his doctor, please? I need to know how bad this really is." It occurred to him that Starsky's breakdown was very real. If the telegram he'd sent was true, and not just a joke, the stress of Hutch's disappearance alone might be enough to cause the man to snap. Heaven knows he'd seen him -- both of them, actually -- come close enough when one or the other was missing or in danger.

"I'm sorry. Doctor Jones isn't in at the moment. The file says that Mr. Starsky is in observation and evaluation, but it also says he's been sedated at least once because they couldn't control him. Can I have Dr. Jones return your call?"

"No, that's quite all right. I'll be on the next plane there. Thanks for calling, Miss."

Dobby hit the button to disconnect the line, then dialed another number. "Hi, sweetheart. Did you have a good day at school? Good, I'm glad you had fun. Can I talk to mommy, please?" He began to clean the items off the top of his desk, sliding them into drawers or stowing them wherever there was room.

"Hi, honey," he said suddenly as his wife came on the line. "I need you to do something for me. Pack me a carry-on size suitcase with enough clothes for a few days. One suit and some casual clothes. I have to catch the next flight out to Atlantic City. Starsky and Hutch have gotten themselves into something again."

"What is it, dear? They're not in *legal* trouble, are they?"

"No, it's not that. Now, I don't want you to get upset, so try to keep calm. I just got a call from a psychiatric hospital out there. They say Starsky had a breakdown and was admitted there. And earlier today I got a cable from him saying that Hutch had disappeared! Until this came up, I thought it was a joke. I'm going to go straighten this out myself."

"But, Harold, what if he really *did* have a breakdown? What if Hutch really disappeared -- God knows they've both got enough enemies."

"If Starsky's really sick, I can at least have him transferred home. And I can help the police in looking for Hutch -- if Starsky was okay enough to send the telegram, he must have filled out a Missing Persons report with the local cops."

"I think you're right, dear. They need you. I'll put together your suitcase and get you booked on the next flight. You can come home, clean up, and say good-bye to the kids."

"Don't tell them too much -- they'll just worry. Just tell them I'm going to help Uncle Dave and Uncle Ken. They don't need to know any more than that."

"Okay. Good-bye. I'll see you in awhile."

"Bye."

The last thing he did before leaving the office was to retrieve the photograph of Hutch from his personnel file. He was sure that Starsky would have had one, but you never know what happened to his possessions when he was committed. He frowned with distaste as the word went through his mind. "Committed" was such an ugly term, and it was one he never thought he'd hear applied to the dark half of the pair.

After what seemed like an eternity in the observation ward, but was actually only a couple days, a burly orderly finally arrived to take Starsky away from the isolation. He'd long since decided that he hated the color white, and concluded that he would repaint or wallpaper any white surface in his apartment as soon as he got home. The straightjacket, which he'd been relieved of for awhile, was reapplied, but it still felt great to get out and walk the corridors.

It shocked him, when the jacket was first removed, to see the fear in the eyes of those who came to his room. The same huge orderly who walked beside him now had stood by the side of a petite, actually tiny, woman who had brought his food tray three times yesterday. She had looked terrified, and the orderly, who might as well have been called a guard, stood poised to move at a moment's notice. *She's scared of me?!* Starsky marveled.

Their leisurely stroll ended in another wing of the hospital, where Starsky was admitted to a tidily-kept office. Behind the desk, with his back to the door, sat a short man with sandy hair. Starsky noticed the plaque on the desk: Dr. Cornelius Jones. The orderly cleared his throat loudly, pushed Starsky further into the room, and left, closing the door behind him. At the slight noise, Dr. Jones spun around in his chair to face the patient.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Starsky. I'm Cornelius Jones, but feel free to just call me 'Neal'. Why don't you take a seat." He gestured to one of two chairs which sat opposite the immaculate desk, and Starsky awkwardly plopped himself into it. He already didn't like this man. Though his words were polite, his tone was condescending, and Starsky felt like he was back in the first grade. "How are we feeling today?" Jones went on.

"Y'know, Doc," Starsky spoke up, already irritated by the situation. "I really don't understand why all you medical people can't seem to live life in the singular. If 'we' means you, then how do I know? If 'we' means me, then I'd be a helluva lot more comfortable out of this damn straightjacket." He struggled a little against the straps for effect.

"I'm sorry, Dave. I can't do that yet." He began to straighten the few sheets of paper on his desktop. "This will be your preliminary exam. After we're through with our talk, I have to file a report on whether I think you should be allowed to interact with our non-violent residents. Now

the first few questions are purely a formality -- I need to verify your identity for the tape recorder I'm going to use. You don't have a problem with my taping this, do you?"

"Just so you don't send it to my mother."

"No, Dave. There's no chance of that. Okay, here we go." He pushed down the record button.

"Please state your name."

"I am Detective Sergeant David Michael Starsky."

"And where do you live, Detective Starsky?"

"In an apartment in Los Angeles."

"That's California?"

"Yeah. Where else?"

"And where do you work, Detective Starsky."

"Metropolitan Division of the Los Angeles Police Department."

"Why did you come to our city, Detective Starsky?"

"I'm supposed to be on vacation. And I don't appreciate your condescending tone."

"I'm sorry if my tone is bothering you. I just want to make sure you understand."

"A five-year-old would understand. Let's just get on with it!"

"Okay, Detective Starsky. Do you believe that you came to New Jersey alone?"

"No, I didn't come alone. I flew in with my friend Hutch." He said it so reasonably that Dr. Jones almost believed it. But there was no disputing the facts.

"But nobody at the airline saw him. He wasn't checked in...there was no seat reservation for him...and not a single person at the hotel where you stayed has seen him either. Are you sure about his coming with you?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Starsky said, and he could feel the control of his temper slipping away as the stupid questions kept coming.

"Now, David, I want you to think carefully. Is it possible that this man, the one you called 'Hutch' doesn't really exist? Could you just have imagined him?"

"Look, Dr. Jones," Starsky said, clenching his teeth together to keep from yelling at the man, "Hutch is as real as I am. I did *not* imagine him, and I did not dream him up during the night."

"While you were cruising the city, were you able to find *anyone* who remembered seeing 'Hutch'?"

"That's 'Detective Hutchinson', pal. He's also my partner."

"Your partner? Did you happen to check in with your superiors in L.A. when he 'disappeared'?"

"Yes, I did. I needed a photo to flash around town."

"And what did he say?"

Starsky's voice became a quiet whisper at this point. *Maybe I really have lost my mind!* "He didn't even know who Hutch was. He said my partner was some guy back home named Hopkins. I don't even *know* anyone named Hopkins. He must've been joking."

"Really?" Dr. Jones asked, the disbelief clear in his voice. "Is your Captain the kind of guy who jokes a lot? And I'd think you'd at least remember your partner. I mean, police officers rely on their partners for their very lives."

"BUT HUTCH IS MY PARTNER!"

"I'm sorry this interview is irritating you, Detective Starsky. Maybe we should switch to another topic. Has anything else strange happened since you've been in Atlantic City?"

"Like what?"

"Our officers talked to some people. It seems there was an incident with a rental car and where it was parked? And then there was something else about a mom-and-pop grocery store near the hotel?"

"Okay, yeah, those things really did happen -- and there *was* that deal with things disappearing out of my hotel room refrigerator -- but I am *not* crazy!"

"Nobody said you were crazy, Detective Starsky. There are just some people who think you need a little rest and some help." He opened a folder and started scribbling on the charts inside. "I'm going to recommend you be transferred to our standard-security area with a room of your own. And there won't be any need for the restraints, I believe. I hope you can learn to relax here -- we're only trying to help."

Starsky resigned himself to the fact that arguing with the Doctor was getting him nowhere. He'd just have to bide his time until he could convince them, or prove to them, that he wasn't insane and get them to release him. Besides, it would give him time to write to some people who might be able to help. He was lost in thought when Dr. Jones summoned the orderly to take Starsky to his new room. But as he was being led through the door, he turned for just a moment.

"Doctor, am I allowed to write letters to people?"

"Of course, Detective Starsky."

"Will they be censored?"

"No, they won't. They will be reviewed for destinations, but nothing more."

"Can I have some paper and envelopes?"

"Sure, I'll arrange to have some brought to you. Goodnight, Detective Starsky."

The plane landed at 10:30 Eastern Time, and Dobby looked out at the darkness from the terminal while he waited for his suitcase to come around on the carousel. He knew it would be too late to visit Starsky, and that his doctor had probably already gone home for the night. The next best thing, he thought, would be to start on the missing Hutch.

Avis had a car ready, and by 10:45 he was headed in the direction the clerk had indicated as Precinct 14, the station responsible for the area where the hotel his officers used was located. As he expected, the halls of the building were quiet, but every now and then a suspect was brought through screaming or cursing at an officer, the system in general, or the world at large. It reminded him of Metro back home, with all its conflicts and variances.

"Good evening, Officer," he said as he approached the desk sergeant. He pulled out his captain's badge. "I'm Captain Harold Dobby from the L.A.P.D. I'd like to check and see if a 'missing persons' report has been filed for one of my officers. Can you help me?"

"You *lost* one of your men?" the dark-haired sergeant laughed around the large wad of gum he slobbered over. This was obviously not an example of this city's finest. And it irritated Dobby even more that he seemed to find the whole situation very amusing.

"It just so happens that one of my men came her on vacation and vanished. I need to know if his partner filed that report."

"Ahhhh... sorry, Captain. So, can I presume that this officer is still missing? I mean, I don't have to go into the inactive reports, too?"

"No, he's still missing, so it should be in the 'active' file."

While now more cooperative, the man's obsession with his gum continued to irritate the already-ruffled captain. "Okay, sir," chomp, chomp, "what's your officer's name?" Chomp, chomp.

"Detective Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson. He's about 6'1" with blond hair. Early thirties."

Chomp, chomp. "Any identifying marks?" Chomp, chomp.

"Yeah, he has a scar on his lower back."

"Okay, lemme take a look." Dobby could swear he still heard the chomping as he walked away.

Fifteen minutes passed while DobeY waited. He utilized the first five calling his wife, letting her know he'd arrived safely. He felt a little guilty that he hadn't thought to call her from the airport, and apologized profusely for waiting this long to call. As he hung up the phone, his eyes finally lit on an unoccupied chair near the sergeant's desk. The seat, however, was uncomfortable, and DobeY shifted positions several times before the sergeant finally returned.

"Captain?" Thankfully, the man had ditched the gum, and actually began to fit the impression DobeY believed an officer should present. The captain jumped to his feet.

"Right here, Sergeant. What did you find?"

"It's the strangest thing, Captain. I did find an MP report for a Kenneth Hutchinson from California, but it was filed in the 'closed cases' file, waiting to be put in the 'inactive' cabinet. And where we usually fill in the information on how the person was found, all it says is 'see Sergeant Bailey for details'. I've never seen a report filled out like this!"

"So you can't tell whether he was found or not, just that the case was closed?"

"Yessir. Sergeant Bailey's off duty right now, but if you want to come back in the morning, I'm sure he could shed some more light on the situation."

DobeY heaved a very tired sigh, and resigned himself to the wait. "Okay, I'll be back tomorrow. I have another matter to take care of here, too, so I'm not sure when I'll get here. What time does Bailey come on?"

"7:00 sharp. And Sergeant Bailey's *always* on time." He said it as if, instead of being a compliment, it was an insult.

"Oh!" DobeY's face brightened just a little. "Since he comes on so early, I should be able to come here before taking care of that other business. Thank you for your help, Sergeant."

"Your welcome, Captain. When you get here in the morning, all you have to do is go down this hall," he pointed, "turn right at the first hallway, and it'll be the third door on the left. Sergeant Bailey's desk is in there."

"Okay, Sergeant. Goodnight." The wish didn't sound at all happy, as DobeY mulled over the possibilities the missing persons report brought to mind.

Cathy would have hesitated to admit that the blond John Doe had quickly become her favorite patient. There was something that spoke to her from his eyes, begging her for answers where she had none. His physical condition had improved immeasurably, although his returning strength was never a threat. The restraints were removed, but Hutch remained inactive.

After several consultations, the doctors had finally diagnosed his mental situation as "hysterical amnesia" of a very rare form: this patient had not only forgotten the facts of his life and the world around him, but had also forgotten how to *do* anything. He was like a newborn, not

knowing how to walk or talk or even crawl. At least, they concluded, that if he *never* regained his memory, he could still relearn everything he's lost. He didn't seem to be impaired in any other way, and the staff had set about spending their time re-educating the blond.

Cathy sat at the foot of Hutch's bed now, trying to teach him again to talk. He looked at her intensely, her long, dark curls pinned up off her neck, although she wore no nurse's cap. For some unexplainable reason, the patient was more attentive and learned better from Cathy than any other person who worked with him. He didn't even understand why he was attracted to the brunette curls of this woman. Somehow their impression made him feel safe, comfortable, and he was temporarily distracted from the loneliness and solitude his situation put him in.

"Come on, John. Just try... 'hello'." His eyes strayed from her face, and she took his chin in her gentle fingers to pull his attention back to her mouth. "Just watch me -- try to do what I do. 'Hello'. Please?... Do it for me, John.... Let's prove to those doctors that you can do anything you set your mind to! C'mon, we're partners, aren't we? Then we've got to work at this together.... Watch my mouth: 'Hello'." The blue eyes suddenly filled with a determination she hadn't seen before, as if her statements made him feel not quite so alone in this task. But nothing came from the patient's lips.

"That's okay, John," she said dispiritedly, patting the fair cheek. "We can try again later. I've got to go now." She jumped off the bed and headed for the door, but only got as far as placing her hand on the knob when she spun around in astonishment.

"Lo." It was quiet and garbled, but there was no doubt that it had come from the bedridden patient.

"John! John, did you just say that?!" In a fraction of a second she had jumped back up on the bed, her knees digging into the mattress. "Say it again!! C'mon, you can do it! One more time!"

Her praise encouraged him, and this time he managed to get out a slightly stronger "ello". No "H" sound yet, but then that *was* one of the most difficult sounds in the English language.

"Bravo!" She shouted aloud, throwing her arms around Hutch with the glee of a child. He felt his face become warm, but wasn't sure what he was supposed to do in return. Hesitantly, very hesitantly, he raised his arms -- stiff from being still for so long -- and put them around the white-covered body. After a few moments, she pushed away, and he fell back against the bed, tired from all the new developments.

"That was wonderful, John! And you even moved your arms!! Well, now that we know you can, we're just going to have to get you down to the gym for some exercise." Her smile made him feel relaxed, finally comfortable with something he was able to do. "I do have to go, but I promise, I'll be back later." The corners of his mouth rose slightly in the shadow of the smile he was feeling inside. But even that, Cathy knew, was an indication of his progress into a fully functional adult.

She left Hutch's room feeling fulfilled, as so few cases here could because she could actually see some improvement in her patient. She took a deep breath, composed herself into a professional facade, and went off to her next duty.

Dobey grabbed the first blue-suited body as he came through the doorway. "Where can I find Sergeant Bailey?" The man pointed and then pushed his way past the imposing presence in their squadroom. The Captain approached the desk, noticing the man behind it did not seem to be occupied with anyone else at the moment.

"Sergeant Bailey, I'm Captain Harold Dobey, L.A.P.D. I need to talk to you about a 'missing persons' report."

"Yeah, Captain. The desk sergeant last night left it for me. Said you'd be in first thing. What exactly did you not understand about it?"

Dobey didn't understand the man's nonchalance. "Why was that report filed under the closed cases? It didn't say anything about the missing man being located or that he was killed."

"Well, I didn't want it to become public knowledge that one of the L.A.P.D.'s finest was so unstable. At least in New Jersey, Missing Persons Reports are available for public viewing whenever they're asked for. I'd think that you'd appreciate my covering for that..." he searched for the correct word. *Lunatic...* "unfortunate man."

"Sergeant," Dobey hissed, becoming more impatient with the man's tone and lack of cooperation. "I know that David Starsky, the man who filed that report, was taken to the hospital with what they're calling a 'nervous breakdown'. What I want to know is, what have you done since his breakdown to find my *other* officer!"

"Other officer?" Bailey began to redden, not wanting to admit that he could have made a mistake and jumped to an abrupt, and incorrect, conclusion.

"Yeah! My other man! For God's sake, man! His name and description is right there on your report. Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson! Starsky's partner! Why aren't you out there looking for him?"

"Are you trying to tell me," Bailey voice cracked, incredulous, "that this Hutchinson is a real person? That he really exists?"

"Of course he exists! What in the living hell is going on around here."

"Aaaaaaa.... Captain Dobey, please have a seat. I think there may have been a mistake."

"Sure sounds like it to me," Dobey answered as he sat.

"Let me start from the top and tell you exactly what *my* experience was with Detective Starsky. Then maybe you'll understand what's been going on here. Your man Starsky came in a few days ago and filled out this missing persons report." He handed the sheet across the desk to Dobey. "I took down all the information he was able to provide on this 'Hutchinson', but he wasn't able to provide me with a picture. I started out my investigation at the place he was supposed to have been last seen, the hotel, but not a single person there had seen anyone matching his description.

The desk clerk showed me the registration book, and only Starsky's name was on it. From there I decided to check with the airlines -- I mean, who knows? Maybe he had something come up -- or they had a falling out -- and he'd gone home. The airline Starsky flew in on did *not* have a reservation for a Hutchinson, and hadn't had one for at least the last six weeks. I went to every club, restaurant, bar, and casino Starsky claimed they went to together, and while lots of people recognized the photo I had taken of Starsky, not one remembered a blond man with him, and several adamantly insisted that he'd been alone.

"Now, during this investigation, I also uncovered some other facts about your Officer Starsky. He apparently created quite a ruckus in a local grocery by getting into an argument with the owner over an item that he claimed he bought there, but couldn't possibly have. The concierge at the hotel said he didn't seem to be able to keep track of where his rental car was parked, and one person reported hearing him talking to himself -- something about people sneaking in his room and stealing food from the refrigerator! From all these things, and my inability to find any evidence that this Hutchinson existed, it was deduced by local doctors that Starsky was suffering from a breakdown, and imagining a partner that didn't really exist." His story finally ended, and he sat in silence waiting for the eruption he knew was coming.

The growl started low, coming from Dobey's very gut. It finally pushed the words through his chest, throat, and out the large man's mouth. "YOU MEAN TO TELL ME THAT YOU HAD STARSKY COMMITTED, DECLARED INSANE, BECAUSE YOU COULDN'T PROVE THAT HIS PARTNER WAS REAL???" He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the photo of Hutch he'd brought along. "DOES THIS MAN LOOK REAL ENOUGH TO YOU??" he yelled as he threw the picture on the desktop.

Bailey picked up the photo and looked into the blue eyes. "I'm sorry, Captain Dobey. There was obviously a very serious mistake made. I'm sure that the Psych Center will release Detective Starsky into your custody. If you want, I'll go out there with you right now. I'm really sorry, Captain."

Dobey seemed to have calmed himself slightly, so at least his next words weren't at the top of his lungs. "I think you'd better, Sergeant. And if he's not okay, I promise you, some heads will roll!"

"I'm sure he's fine," Bailey said, trying to mollify the angry man.

"He'd better be! You know, being a police detective, Dave's made a lot of enemies over the years. And if he's susceptible to the desire for revenge of one of them because you locked him up, everyone up to and including the governor is going to hear about it!" Dobey stalked out of the room, and Bailey jumped up from his desk and followed meekly behind.

Starsky sat in a quiet corner of the day room, where bright sunlight shone through the shatter-proof windows. He ripped a page from the notebook he held, laying it with several others on a nearby table. He silently ticked off on his fingers who he'd already written to, trying to come up with anyone left who might be able to help. Finally, at a loss, he set down the pad and picked up the loose sheets, reviewing them one by one. He stopped at the one he'd written to Dobey. *This one shouldn't really be necessary! I don't get it! We're way past due getting back for work, and*

he hasn't heard from me in ages! He should be pounding down doors looking for us. But, nothing! It occurred to him that something could have happened to Dobby -- he was in the same dangerous business they were in -- and he made a wish that it wasn't true. It was always horrible when an officer fell, but it seemed so much worse when there was a family left behind. Starsky remembered little Rosie, smiling up at him so sweet, and couldn't think of her having to grow up without her father.

The dark head turned its gaze out the window, as if the grass and trees out there could offer him some answers. He knew that Hutch must still be missing, otherwise he would be here if at all possible. Once they'd put their minds together, this puzzle would be child's play to solve.

The receptionist was talking on the phone when Dobby and Bailey strolled through the reception area and up to her counter. It was very apparent that the phone call was not work-related, as she relayed a story about a certain libidinous young man she'd been seeing lately. Dobby, the larger and more imposing of the pair, stood in front, and when she didn't react, he cleared his throat loudly. She glanced up, but made no other overtures to help him. When a second "mm-hmm" elicited the same response, Bailey stepped in between the black man and the desk. His uniform garnered him a somewhat higher level of respect, as she suddenly stopped her conversation with a quick, "I gotta go, Sally. Better get back to work."

She was suddenly all sweetness and light. "May I help you gentlemen?"

"Yes, Miss Cavanaugh," Bailey put in, eyeing the "Grace Cavanaugh" name plaque which sat on the desk. "We need to speak with Dr. Cornelius Jones right away."

"But I think he's with a patient."

Dobby stepped toward her at this point, and the girl virtually shivered at his implied threat. "He said *right away!* This is an urgent matter, and nothing less than death is going to keep me from seeing him!"

"Ahhhh.... I'll see if I can find him." She picked up the receiver and dialed a three-digit number. "Yes, I need to locate Doctor Jones.... No, it can't wait. I've got two gentlemen here at the front desk who insist this is an emergency...." She dropped her voice, whispering into the phone, even though it was still loud enough for Dobby and Bailey to hear. "At least one of them's a cop! And the other one looks like he's ready to chew tar. Just find him!" She listened for a few moments and then replaced the receiver in the cradle. "They're going to send him up right away. You can take a seat until he gets here."

As they sat, Bailey once again tried to apologize for the mistake. "Really, Captain Dobby. I'm so sorry. But tell me, what was I *supposed* to think! Even the airport said that Starsky had been alone."

"I know, Sergeant. I guess I'm more angry at the situation than at you in particular. I know there wasn't much else you could've thought." He sat back and put his hands behind his head, resting it against them since the chair didn't go high enough to provide a headrest. "After we get Starsky

out of here, while we're looking for Hutch, I wanna take a good, close look at what exactly happened. A man doesn't simply vanish, and it would take a helluva lot of financial resources and power to 'disappear' someone as thoroughly as Hutch was."

"The problem, Captain, is that in Atlantic City, there are lots of people with enough money and power to do it. This city attracts the rich, and, unfortunately, the gambling brings in folks who don't always walk on the right side of the law. Combine the two, and you've got real trouble."

A short, balding man rushed to the counter, and Grace jumped from her chair when he addressed her. "What the hell is this about an emergency?! I was busy with a patient!" He was forceful in a way many men of small stature were, using his voice to obtain the control a taller man's presence alone would provide.

The pair of officers practically jumped on the doctor, rescuing Grace from his verbal flogging. "We needed to see you right away, Dr. Jones," Bailey injected.

"Oh. Hi, Sergeant Bailey. I'm sorry I didn't see you there. It's been one of those days -- you know!" He gave the policeman a quirky half-grin.

"This is Captain Harold Dobey, Doctor. He's David Starsky's C.O. And I'm afraid I've made a huge mistake." Dobey felt a sliver of respect for the officer begin to grow at his courageously admitting to having made such a major blunder.

"What is this mistake?" Dr. Jones asked, for some reason directing the question at the large, black man.

"Okay, I'll spell it out for you, Doctor. Then I want to see my man. Now, it's my understanding that Starsky was admitted here because he had a breakdown. That is what the clerk said when she called me. Now, since he's been here, I want you to tell me what you've observed that reinforced that diagnosis."

"Well...his biggest psychosis seems to be the existence of a friend. A purely made-up, imaginary character who, he claims, travels around with him. He calls this personality 'Hutch', but I really think it's just a way for him to express desires and beliefs that he's afraid to express himself. Then there were several violent episodes when he was first admitted. He had to be tranquilized on more than one occasion." When no further information was forthcoming, Dobey stepped in, and Bailey stood by his side, content to take the back seat from here on in.

"Now that you're done, I'm going to tell you a little something about my Detective Starsky. First off, and strongest, you should know that he doesn't work alone. His partner, and his best friend in this world, is one 'Kenneth Hutchinson'." A light began to dawn on the doctor's face. "Yeah, Doc. 'Hutch'. And 11 days ago I saw them *both* leave for a non-stop flight to Atlantic City, New Jersey. Starsky would never have gotten on that plane alone." Dobey grabbed the doctor's hand, and before Jones could pull it back, he'd slapped the photo of Hutch into his palm. "THAT is Ken Hutchinson. He is not an illusion, or a delusion for that matter. Now tell me something else, Doctor. In your medical opinion, is it reasonable for a perfectly sane man, unfairly and incorrectly committed to this nuthouse, to become agitated? Hostile? Perhaps even mildly violent?"

"Well, this does alter my diagnosis in David Starsky's case. I would deduce, given the facts that you have just given me, that he probably does not need to be a resident of this facility. But, Captain, he's still a loose cannon -- is it appropriate to have a man like that on your force?"

"It's precisely because he's a loose cannon that makes him such a damn good cop. You see, he and Hutch are the perfect partners. Starsky sometimes can be a loose cannon, yes. But Hutch is almost always level headed -- sometimes too much. Starsky's impulsiveness is controlled by Hutch's caution, and Hutch's contemplativeness is controlled by Starsky's need to act. They're the best team I've got. And I hope to hell I can find Hutchinson and reunite them." He took a deep breath and concentrated on slowing down his speech. "Now, will you *please* release Detective Starsky?"

"Officers, why don't we go to my office. I'll have Starsky brought to us there." He motioned for the duo to precede him down the hall, then spoke to Grace. "Call the dayroom -- I think I saw Starsky there. Have one of the orderlies bring him to my office."

The reunion between Captain and Sergeant was one worthy of balloons and confetti, but Captain knew it dulled in comparison to the joy he'd see if he could manage to bring the separated partners back together. Both men tried not to think of the possibility that Hutch could still be dead -- gone from both of their lives forever. They stood side by side facing Dr. Jones, who sat behind his desk flipping through some papers. Finally, he picked up a pen and scrawled his name.

"I'm really sorry about all this, Detective Starsky. Here are your release papers. And since you should never have been here in the first place, I'll be sure that all records of your stay here are destroyed. That way, they can never be used against you."

Starsky grabbed the sheets from the man, who looked sheepishly at the small precinct assembled in his office. The curly-haired man carefully folded the papers and pushed them into the pocket of his newly retrieved Levi's. The doctor spoke again as he rose from his chair. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have patients to treat. And I'm sure you can take it from here. Feel free to use my office as long as you wish." He shut the door behind him, leaving the three officers together.

"Now Dave," Dobey began, feeling free to speak in front of Bailey, "start from the top and tell me everything that's happened since you and Hutch landed in New Jersey." Starsky spoke for almost half an hour, outlining each event specifically and his own reactions to it.

"...and then they brought me here. I've been biding my time ever since, trying to get someone to listen to me and spring me from this joint. I even have a whole stack of letters I was gonna send to friends back home so someone would come and get me out of here. And finally, here you are!"

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here, Dave." The concerned look on the man's face touched Starsky, but he wasn't about to let it get soapy.

"Well, now that I've got my papers, let's go find Hutch!" Starsky jumped up from the chair, heading for the door, but Dobey caught his arm before he could escape.

"Wait, Starsky. Please sit back down, I want to talk to you." Starsky hesitantly obeyed, looking into Dobey's face for an answer.

"Okay, Cap. What's the matter?"

Dobey placed a huge, gentle hand on his man's shoulder. "Starsky, I know you're riding a high right now -- getting out of this prison and all -- but you need to realize something. With all that's happened, it's still very possible that Hutch is dead."

"No, Captain. He can't be dead. He can't be."

"Starsky, think about it. If someone grabbed Hutch, then made it look like he was never here in the first place, why would he risk keeping him alive. I know it hurts, but you've gotta face facts."

"I can face facts. And I will when I have to, but not yet." He turned to directly face Dobey, looking him square in the eyes, his shining dark blue meeting Dobey's brown. "I know I can't make you understand this, but I *know* Hutch is alive. I can feel it here," Starsky pounded a fist on his chest, "and here," he laid his flat hand on his stomach. "It doesn't matter if it doesn't make sense here!" He tapped his index finger at his temple. He said it with such conviction that Dobey almost believed it too.

Dobey gave up with a sigh, remembering that he would have reacted the same way if he were in Starsky's shoes and it had been Mike who'd disappeared. *And we weren't quite as close as these two are, Mike. Closer than most, but these two are unmatched!* He tried to lighten the mood.

"Hey! Speaking of your papers, I think we should have a little celebration." Dobey poked around until he located the doctor's small metal garbage can, conveniently recently emptied of any other contents. He pushed it in front of Starsky, then began patting his pockets, searching for something.

"What's that for?" Starsky asked, confused.

"What do you need, Captain?" Bailey inquired at the same moment.

Dobey chose to answer Bailey's question first. "I'm looking for matches. You need matches to properly burn those commitment papers!" Bailey reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small packet, which he handed to Dobey. Dobey, in turn, held them out to Starsky.

"Burn my papers? Are you crazy? No way! I'm going to keep these forever!"

"But why, Starsky?"

"Well, Hutch is always tellin' me I'm crazy. And after we find him -- and we *will* find him -- he'll probably at some point tell me again. Then I'm gonna hit him with these!" He grinned devilishly, imagining his fun at his partner's expense. "Absolute, total, irrevocable proof that I am

completely and totally sane!" Starsky burst out laughing, and Dobby's deep growling laugh and Bailey's cackling chuckle joined his until all three had tears in their eyes.

While all this activity was going on in one small office, a totally ignorant Jackson Preston sauntered up to the receptionist's desk one again. He barely stopped to greet her, heading instead directly toward the hall where he'd watched Starsky before.

"Good afternoon, Miss Cavanaugh. I'm just going to go look in on my friend, David Starsky, again." Grace scrambled from her chair and raced around the desk, catching him before he could get too far down the hall.

"Mr. Preston, Officer Starsky isn't down there anymore!"

"Why isn't he?" Preston asked, trying to keep calm. "Did something happen to him? He didn't do something stupid like kill himself did he?" *Please, please, please let it be true! Tell me that he lost hope and committed suicide. Finally, I can have my justice!* But Grace's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Oh, nothing terrible like that! You're going to be so happy!! Your friend is being released! It seems it was all a mistake -- a misunderstanding. They're signing the papers now!"

The receptionist's broad smile fell quickly when the reaction was not what she expected.

"DAMN!! I didn't go through all this to have it ruined!!" He slammed a fist against his thigh, and she jumped at the sound.

"But I thought you'd be happy! He should be out any minute -- you could even wait for him if you want."

"In that case, I'd better get out of here." He turned on his heels and walked away, headed for the double doors.

"Aren't you even going to go visit your brother? You haven't seen him all week!"

"What's the use!" Jackson shouted over his shoulder. "He doesn't even know I'm there anyway!"

The swagger was back in Starsky's step as he and his captain headed for the doors out of the psychiatric hospital. The only thing keeping him from being totally ecstatic at the occasion was the still-missing Hutch. Dobby's rented car was parked nearby, and Starsky waited while he unlocked the doors, then slid in on the passenger side.

Cathy was just passing Grace's desk, carrying a tray full of medication, when her head, bent to study the drugs in her charge, snapped up at Grace's sudden expletives. "What's all that for?"

"Those two cops -- they just left here and forgot this stupid picture!" She waved a photo of about 3" x 2" in the air. "Doc Jones set it down here and then walked away."

"You could probably catch them if they only just left," Cathy suggested helpfully.

"Nah, why bother. When they realize they forgot it, they'll be back. Seemed real important to 'em."

"What's the picture of?" Cathy asked, at the same time stopping Grace's hand on the way to sliding the photo in a drawer.

"Some guy that's missing. Friend of theirs or something. I heard 'em say that they couldn't seem to find him anywhere."

The hair on the back of Cathy's neck stood on end, and she had long since given up trying to ignore it when these feelings came. She didn't even question it -- just chalked it up to some sixth sense that was occasionally awakened. Her right hand on Grace's left, she set the tray down with her left and used that one to extract the picture from the receptionist's fist. She turned it over to study the face it showed.

"Oh, dear Lord! It's John!" He was much younger, maybe five or ten years, and was wearing what appeared to be a uniform shirt.

"You know him? Grace questioned, chewing, and Cathy wondered when she'd retrieved the ever-present bubblegum.

"He's a patient here! A John Doe with amnesia! I've got to get in contact with his two friends. Do you remember if they said where they were staying?"

"Nah, I wasn't payin' that much attention. Don't worry. Like I said, they'll be back."

"C'mon! Think! They must've given some idea where they were going!"

"I swear, they didn't! But if it's any help, they just finished meetin' with Neal Jones. He might know somethin'."

While Cathy knew Neal as being a staff doctor, she hadn't had occasion to work with him much because they practiced in different departments of the center. Nevertheless, she picked up the phone and shoved the receiver into Grace's hand. "Have him paged. NOW! I'm going to go see if maybe they're still in the parking lot."

She spun toward the door, but didn't even get one step in that direction when the odd pair barreled back through, Dobey patting his pockets. "Are you sure you got it back from Jones?"

"No, I told you that already! I am *not* sure."

"Well, we can always have Jones paged and asked if *he* knows what happened to it!"

Cathy stepped up to interrupt them, her lovely eyes meeting Starsky's dark blue ones. "Excuse me, I think I can help you. You're looking for this, aren't you?" She handed the photo to Starsky, the warm skin of her hand brushing against the rough skin of his. She blushed as he continued to watch her, then finally pulled her eyes away from his.

"Thank you, miss.... Ahhhh...I'd better get going."

"You don't have to go." She stuttered a moment, then rephrased. "I mean, you *shouldn't* go! I know where John is!"

"John?" Starsky's look changed to confusion. "Who's John? Your boyfriend?"

"No! Your friend! I know where he is!" She was becoming more excited by the moment.

Starsky held out the picture again. "You've seen this man? You've seen Hutch?"

"Yeah! He's here! He's a patient." She could see that Starsky was becoming agitated, and felt somehow that her favorite patient was someone very special to him. "C'mon, I'll take you to his room." She turned to Grace, who had somehow faded into the background. "Call Dr. Simons and have him meet us outside John Doe's room." She turned back. "This way, gentlemen." She introduced herself as they headed down the hall, with Dobey responding with introductions for himself and Starsky.

Starsky had to make a conscious effort not to run ahead of the other two in his eagerness to get to Hutch. He still had a voice in his head that said that the pretty nurse was mistaken -- confusing one face for another. "Why do you call him John? I don't understand."

"Well, I really should wait and let Dr. Simons give you the details of his case, but we called him John because nobody knew who he really was, he had no ID on him, and he, himself, doesn't even know who he is. We had to call him something, so...you know...John Doe?"

Starsky's face was tense, and Dobey kept a hand on his shoulder, as if keeping a young stallion from bolting from the corral when spooked. "Keep cool, Dave. I know you want to tear the place apart to get to Ken, but it won't do him any good. Let's just talk to the doctor, then maybe he'll let us see him." He guided Starsky to a chair which sat outside a room. Cathy was moved by the man's concern, and stepped to his other side, draping a comforting arm around the shoulders. Were those shoulders trembling? Yes, definitely. But whether it was from concern, excitement, or fear, she didn't know.

"Why don't you tell me about your friend," Cathy asked, kneeling down next to the dark-haired man, hoping that the distraction would calm him. "I don't know anything about him, but I sure would like to know what kind of a man I've been treating."

The silence stretched on so long that Cathy feared he wouldn't answer, and she found herself strangely moved at the pure concern on the man's face. *Dave. That other man called him Dave.* Finally, Starsky spoke, his voice virtually quivering.

"Well...he's...he's...he's my *partner!*" He said it as if the term held greater significance than its actual dictionary-definition.

"Dave, do you work together? Is that why you say 'partner'?"

"Yeah. We're cops, partners, but it's more than that...." He ran a hand through his hair, hesitating. "I don't think you can understand unless you've been on the force, but it makes us more than friends. He watches out for me, and I watch out for him. We cover each other's backs. We're *there* for each other.... On duty and off.... He's been the only one I could lean on during some of the worst times of my life, and he's leaned on me through some of his worst moments. It's like...y'know those stories they show on TV about twins who were separated at birth, yet somehow always *felt* that a part of themselves was missing? Well, that's what it feels like -- and Hutch is the part I'm missing. And, I think, I'm the part he's missing too. When I hurt, he hurts, and when he hurts, I hurt. He's my best friend, buddy, confidant, support system. He'll stand behind me when no one else will, and risk his own neck to save mine."

He hesitated for just a second more, but really seemed calmer now. Talking appeared to be helping him through his fear for his friend. "He's the best partner a man could have, and if he has any faults, it's that he cares too much. That makes our line of work hard on him. Yet he still finds the strength to stick it out and be a great cop." His face curved into a smile, and his tone lightened. "Of course, if you ever told him I said this, I'd deny it to my dying day. That's how it is with us. Unspoken loyalty." Starsky jumped up and started to pace, carefully avoiding running Cathy down. "Where is that doctor? Sure is takin' him long enough!"

"He should be here in just a minute. Please, try to stay calm. I've been working here for a long time, so if you'll permit me...." She guided Starsky to stand against the wall, still for the moment. "Patients, no matter how bad of shape they may be in, pick up on the emotions of those around him. When you see John...I mean, Hutch...if you're upset, he'll become upset, whether he remembers you or not. By the way, 'Hutch'? Is that his first name? I really *should* change his chart."

Dobey entered the conversation he'd been watching curiously up to this point. "His name is Kenneth Richard Hutchinson, and if you need them, I can have the department physician send you his medical records."

"Ken Hutchinson," Cathy repeated. "Hutch. Somehow, that seems right for him. I'll check with the doctor, but I don't think we'll be needing his medical records. He's regaining his strength and seems to be fine physically."

"Well, Miss Craig, I'm glad that you approve of the way I've been treating my patient." The voice emanated from a smiling man who rounded the corner, and Cathy laughed lilytingly at his friendliness. The man was of average height with a head of thick, dark hair, strikingly handsome with slight lines around his dark eyes, telling of a doctor who cared enough to worry about his patients. "Hi, I'm Doctor Kelly Simons." He offered a hand which Starsky shook eagerly, then let Dobey have his turn to greet the man who had been caring for Hutch.

"Doctor, we've finally identified our John Doe. His real name is Detective Ken Hutchinson, and these are his friends, partner Dave Starsky and Captain Harold Dobey." There was a friendliness in her voice that never seemed to leave.

"Okay, I know you too well, Cathy. How much have you already told them? There's no sense going over something that's already been said. I'm sure that Mr. Starsky and Mr. Dobey are eager to see their friend."

"Oh, all right, you've got me! But all I told them was that he couldn't remember who he was -- I *had* to explain the 'John Doe' on his records. I figured I'd better leave the rest up to you."

"Okay, guys. I'll try to make this quick -- I'm eager to get you in with your friend too. Now, there's nothing serious physically wrong with your friend, and his amnesia is considered completely psychological. The experience he endured damaged him emotionally to the point that he completely shut down. He didn't remember anything -- not even how to speak. Now, thanks to Miss Craig here, he's made great inroads in learning to talk. But we can't reteach him the *facts* of his life. I'm hoping, now that we know who he is, that seeing you two will bypass all that and bring him back his memory."

"Doctor," Starsky questioned, "what exactly *were* his circumstances that brought him here. I mean, we come here on vacation, have one terrific day, and then he disappears off the face of the earth. Then he turns up here! Where'd you get him?"

"Your partner, Mr. Starsky, was found being held in an abandoned hotel. He had apparently been restrained there for several days, and, as a guess, I'd say was completely removed from any human presence. It usually takes that kind of seclusion to put a patient into this state. During that indeterminate time, he wasn't fed or clothed. He's lucky it's not winter or he'd have frozen to death. When he was found and admitted here, in addition to his psychological state, he was suffering from severe malnutrition and dehydration." He smiled in Cathy's direction. "Thanks to Miss Craig, he's been eating well and, although still underweight, is at least getting all the nutrition he needs. And he *does* look better."

"What can we do, Doctor?" This came from Dobey, as he watched the patient's dark-haired partner swallow hard.

"I want just what you probably want. I want you to see your friend. You see, it's just possible that seeing someone he knows will jog his subconscious into letting him remember because he won't feel so alone. But I think you should go in one at a time. Two might be too much at once."

"Kelly," Cathy suggested, "I think that Detective Starsky here should go in first. He and Ken are best friends."

"Okay, then. Dave goes in first. Let's get to it! I, for one, am eager to see what happens."

"Where's his room, Doctor?" Starsky asked, already headed down the hall.

"Wait! Stop, Detective Starsky!"

"Why should I stop?" Starsky went on, walking backward as he faced the doctor.

"Because you already passed your partner's room. It's this one right here!" He pointed to the second door from where the three of them stood, and they exchanged laughing smiles at Starsky's embarrassment.

The pillows and cranked up bed allowed Hutch to sit almost completely erect, and he held a hand-mirror in front of his face, trying out the new sounds and words he'd learned earlier that day. He watched his mouth carefully, doing his best to imitate the movements he'd seen the nurse make.

The creek of the door startled him, and he dropped the mirror on the bed beside his legs. He expected to see one of the nurses or his doctor, who were the only people in the world to him now. He wondered sometime what came before the time he was here -- was there ever a time when he hadn't been here? Starsky rushed into the room, all smiles and excitement, and pounced on the end of the bed.

"Boy! You have no idea how happy I am to see you! Do you have any idea how much you had me worried, partner?" He looked up, hoping to see the man he'd always known, but the blue eyes were vacant, with no recognition in them. Starsky's hopes shattered, and he curled his legs under himself and sat face-to-face with the blond haired man. "Hutch! It's me! Starsky!"

There was still no sign of recognition in the face, but Starsky did see a little bit of pity there. *Pity for me because the friend I loved is gone, or pity for himself because he can't remember a part of his life?* He felt his eyes start to swell at the disappointment, then buried his face on his folded arms to prevent them from making Hutch even more uncomfortable.

A hand fell on his shoulder, touching lightly, and, to his total disbelief, he heard the beginnings of a voice. "Starsky..." Starsky didn't raise his head, and the tears flowed even heavier. *He's only imitating what he heard me say. Learning, not remembering.*

Hutch felt the shoulder under his hand quiver, and a phrase came to the forefront of his mind. It suddenly didn't seem so difficult to express what was in his mind, and he whispered to the bent head. "Who do we trust? Me and thee." The dark head jerked up in astonishment and joy, and as he looked again into the blue eyes, he saw a light there that he hadn't before.

"Hutch! Is that really you in there?!" He laughed boisterously, and the blond's smile practically lit the entire room. "M-m-m-m-me, Starsk." And such a sense of relief washed over him that he joined in Starsky's laughter. The three figures outside the room were alert for any sound coming from the room, but the pair's guffaws were not what they expected.

Dobey, Dr. Simons, and Cathy Craig burst into the room, amazed at what they saw when they came in. The men leaned on each other, both supporting and being supported. Dobby looked at them happily, and spoke in quiet tones to the medical personnel. "What you see right there, folks. *That* is who Starsky and Hutch are. Someone to lean on and be supported by."

Hutch turned a tear-stained face to the room's new occupants. He knew the first two faces, but it was the third that really interested him. "C-c-c-c-captain D-d-d-dobey!" He removed an arm from around Starsky, who was still laughing hysterically, and reached for his captain and friend, and squeezed the large hand tightly once he felt it in his own.

"Cathy," Kelly said, turning to the dark-haired woman, "why don't we leave them alone for awhile. I have a feeling we can be certain of a full recovery." They snuck out, unseen, but could hear three voices begin to chatter behind them.

Dr. Simons eagerly consented to releasing the patient from hospital care, since his memory and abilities seemed to be rapidly returning -- the only indications of his previous condition being slightly slower movements -- shades of the malnutrition -- and an occasional stutter when a word didn't readily come to mind. Captain Dobey could literally hear and see the improvement from hour to hour, and he had no doubt that Hutch would be back to normal within a couple of days.

Hutch waited impatiently to rejoin his partner, who had left the hospital on a mission: his blond partner couldn't leave the building until he had something to wear. And since Starsky couldn't locate Hutch's luggage, he headed for the nearest department store to replace the missing attire. The recently recovered patient was more than slightly wary at this prospect -- his idea of fashion and Starsky's tended to vary drastically.

While awaiting Starsky's return, Cathy came to Hutch's room to discuss his diet, wanting to be sure that he got the proper food to continue his recovery from the malnourishment. She came equipped with a clipboard and a diet instruction sheet, and sat at the edge of his bed while Dobey looked on.

"I don't think he's gonna need that diet, Miss," Dobey addressed the nurse as if Hutch wasn't even in the room. "Ken Hutchinson eats healthier than anyone I know."

"Really?" Cathy questioned, with a tone of disbelief in her voice. "Okay, hotshot," she turned to the blond figure in the hospital-issue robe, "why don't you list for me what a typical day's food would involve if you were back home."

Hutch ran down the list, from breakfast to dinner, and then for good measure added on the vitamins he was currently taking. When he was finished, he smugly looked to her for her reaction; it was not what he expected.

"Yuck!! You really eat that without it being prescribed to you?"

"Sure! Isn't it good enough to fill the diet's requirements?"

"Well, yeah, it is. But *I* certainly wouldn't eat it by choice! Give me a pizza anytime! Or better yet, a burrito! By the way, that rundown was awfully thorough for an amnesia patient!" She laughed, and Hutch thought how much she sounded like his partner.

"Speaking of Starsky, I wonder what's taking him so long!" Dobe and Cathy frowned to each other at the apparent non-sequiter, but let it pass without comment. Hutch fidgeted, eager to get up and out of a place he'd seen quite enough of.

"Captain, w-w-w-w-w-what are the local cops doing about finding out who did this to me and Starsk." He had been regaled with the story of Starsky's escapades over the last week or so, since Hutch had turned up missing.

"Well, they've gone back and questioned everybody again, but they're all sticking to their stories. Whoever put them up to this, they're all mighty scared of him."

"Maybe we should try another route. What can you tell me about the place where they found me. I was unconscious when they took me in and not alert enough to notice when the paramedics brought me out."

"I didn't get a lot of details," Dobe remarked glumly, "except that it was some old hotel called the "Palace".

"Oh! I know that place!" Cathy interjected. "It was really big back in the '60's. Then its popularity died out, and the owner went bankrupt. I think the city ended up confiscating the property for back taxes."

"Well, Bailey told me that they've kept the place under surveillance, but nobody's been back." Dobe turned his dark eyes to Hutch, a look of compassion haunting them. "Apparently, they intended to just leave you there to die."

Starsky breezed into the room just in time to hear the captain's last statement, and his light, carefree mood suddenly turned dark. "Yeah, and if I get my hands on those.... Well, let's just say that *someone* is gonna pay!" He heaped four bags onto the bed, making the blanket and Hutch's legs impossible to see.

"Starsky, what is all this? I thought you were just gonna pick me up some clothes for today! I can pick up the rest later."

"That *was* my plan, but the store had so many neat things, I just couldn't resist." Hutch visibly cringed at this, thinking how different his idea of nice-looking clothes was from his partner's.

"Starsk, you really didn't have to. Maybe you should take this all back -- all except one outfit so I can get out of here -- and get your money back." He hoped that the dark-haired man would agree, since it was a much nicer way of getting rid of what he was sure would be very gaudy clothes.

"I wouldn't hear of it, partner," Starsky said, smiling, oblivious to his partner's attempt to spare his feelings. "Take a look -- I got some really good prices, too!"

Hutch pulled the first bag closer, hesitating just a moment before he reached in and pulled the contents out. "Nothing special here," he muttered, examining the white T-shirts, socks, and underwear. He checked them only long enough to be sure they were the right size, which Starsky had surprisingly also gotten right.

He moved on to the next bag, with Starsky looking on happily, pleased with the job he'd done on the shopping trip. This bag held two pair of dress pants, a pair of tan cuorderoys, and a pair of designer dark blue jeans.

By the time the third bag was examined, Hutch almost sat in shock. Starsky had chosen items that Hutch very well could have picked for himself. There wasn't a gaudy shirt in the collection. "Starsk, this is all terrific! Everything is just perfectly suited for me!"

"Well, partner, I may not agree with your tastes, but after all this time I certainly know what they are! I did take one liberty, though." He handed Hutch the last bag, this one smaller than the rest, and from it Hutch removed an average size shoe box. Taking off the lid, he beheld a pair of sneakers, running shoes, in a bright, clean, white color.

Hutch examined them closely, and his partner felt an explanation was necessary. "Look, I know you prefer shoes, but they're a lot harder to get to fit right, and I figured these would be easier since you weren't there to try 'em on."

"Well, at least they're not electric blue," Hutch commented, smiling. "They're terrific, Starsk. And sneakers are just fine -- it all is," he waved a hand to include all the attire widely distributed over the bed. "And now that I've got them, I'm outta here. Miss Craig, if you'd please...."

Cathy stood on the spot for a moment, not certain what he wanted, but when she saw his eyes move toward the door, it sank in. "Okay, Ken. But I wouldn't be seeing anything I hadn't seen the day they brought you in!" Hutch blushed furiously, and Cathy turned, exchanged winks with Starsky, and floated from the room.

"I *do* like that girl!" Starsky said fervently. "She really knows how to get to you!" He laughed at his still-reddened partner as the blond threw back the covers and began to change his clothes.

As he dressed, the three detectives talked about the case, and Hutch filled in his partner on what Cathy had told them about the "Palace".

"You mean all that land and the hotel belong to the city?" Hutch could almost see the wheels in his partner's mind turning, and his eyes gleamed. That usually meant he either had a great idea or was up to no good. Hutch decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Ya got something, Starsk?"

"Maybe...maybe...give me a little bit. I wanna think this through before I say anything."

"Okay, just don't wait too long," Dobby put in as Hutch stood from pulling on the new sneakers. Now fully dressed, the three headed out of the room.

"The girl at the front desk told me we have to see her on the way out to sign out one last time before we go."

"Really?" Hutch asked, his spirits lifting slightly. "What's she look like?"

"She's not your type, Hutch. As a matter of fact, I had to concentrate real hard to figure if she *worked* here or if she *lived* here. Kind of the empty-headed type."

"Oh," was Hutch's only response as they approached the large front desk.

Starsky addressed the receptionist. "Okay, here we are, just like I promised. Where do we sign to get outta this chicken outfit?"

She pushed two clipboards onto the counter toward them, blowing a huge bubble as she did so. "Just put your signature at the "X" at the bottom of the page." The men picked up the documents, looking over them carefully before scribbling their names at the bottom. Both men were far too smart to sign anything without reading it first. "Y'know," she began again, "I'm real sorry you're not gettin' to see your other friend before you leave. I imagine he'll be comin' back before too long."

Starsky's head snapped up with a suspicious glare. "Miss, I'm a stranger in this city. I don't *have* any friends here except for the two you see here. What makes you think I'd have a friend to visit me?"

"Well, *he* did. The man who came in asking about you just after you were admitted. Said he knew you and wanted to know how you were doing. He even went and looked in on you while you were in "Evaluation". I think you might've been sedated at that time, though. When he came back this morning, I gave him the good news that you were being released, but then he ran off. He didn't seem very happy about it for someone who's supposed to be a friend." She shrugged her shoulders as if this was pretty much typical for the people she knew, and admitted to not questioning it any further.

Hutch turned to stare at Dobey. "Cap, you don't suppose..."

"Captain, it's gotta be!" Starsky interrupted. Who else here in Atlantic City would care how I was except the person who wanted me here in the first place!

"You're saying," Dobey began, trying to get a clear picture, "that this man who came to see you that first day is the same one who set up this whole charade?"

"Yeah! *And* the one who did that to Hutch. He nearly drove *me* out of my mind, and he actually succeeded in driving Hutch out of his, temporarily at least." This last was added with a quick grin of happiness at Hutch, who had been fully restored to psychiatric health and was quickly approaching full recovery in his physical state. The only thing it would take now would be some good food and rest.

Dobey turned back to the receptionist. "Listen, Miss..." he read the name plate for the first time, "Miss Cavanaugh. I need you to think very, very hard. Did this man ever say his name...who he was? It's very important that we know."

"Well, he hardly needed to, Mister. First of all, he's one of the most well-known men in town. Secondly, his brother is a patient here. His name is Jackson Preston." The name didn't ring any

bells with the dark haired officer. He shrugged his shoulders at Hutch, who shrugged his back. It didn't mean anything to him, either.

"You said his brother is a patient here. Could we talk to him?"

"I'm 'fraid that one's in no condition to talk to anyone. But you could look in on him if you want. He's down that hall, Room 28. You'll have to look in through the window, but you should have a pretty good view. Oh, and his name is Jesse. He's only 23 years old. Cryin' shame, if you ask me."

The trio was already headed down the hall, nearly missing her last sentence. They checked the numbers on the doors, and pulled up short in front of the one marked "28". Hutch peered in the tiny window first, taking in the pitiful creature in the padded room. "I don't know 'im. I'd swear I've never seen that face in my life!"

He stepped aside and let Starsky take a peek, and immediate came to attention when he heard his partner's sharp intake of air. "I know that kid, although I don't think I ever knew his name." He turned around to address his two friends. "Remember when you had to escort that prisoner to Santa Barbara about a month ago? And you remember me telling you about the screwed up bust we had while you were gone?"

"Yeah, you and some of the guys brought in a bunch of kids for selling, but couldn't get your hands on the big cheese."

"Yeah, that's the case. Well, that kid," he motioned with his head, "was one of the ones we picked up that night. I didn't even fill out the arrest report myself, but ultimately, I guess I was responsible. But how did he get from a California jail cell to a padded room in New Jersey?"

"As a guess," Hutch deduced, "I'd say something went wrong in prison, and he lost it. His brother probably had him brought here when they decided nothing could be done. But who is this guy?"

"Jackson Preston," Bailey explained, "is one of the richest, most powerful men in the state of New Jersey. He owns several companies out of Atlantic City and two casinos here. He's also been tied to some shady dealings, but nobody's ever been able to pin anything solid on him. Why do you ask?"

"Because," Dobby addressed the officer directly, as his two men stood by, "there's a very good possibility that he's the one who's behind this whole mess! And I want 'im!!" Dobby slammed a ham-sized fist on the desktop for emphasis, causing both Bailey, Starsky, and Hutch to jump.

"Believe me, Captain, I'd like nothing more than to nail that guy. But there simply isn't enough evidence. That guy's slipperier than a mud-puppy in a waterhole."

"I've been thinking about that," Starsky proposed, and Hutch and Dobby's faces showed their surprise that he'd finally discuss his idea in front of the local cops without running it down with them first. "Now, whether it's Preston or someone else who did this, I think we can fool whoever

this is into tipping his hand." Starsky went on to run down his idea, and Bailey, Dobey, and Hutch all had to admit it was an excellent one.

Before long, Bailey was on the phone with the commissioner's office, who called back shortly with approval from the mayor for the plan. He was completely willing to go along with whatever was necessary in order to finally pin something on the evasive Preston.

"Now," Dobey interjected, "all we have to do is find a believable person who nobody in New Jersey knows."

"I've got the p-p-p-perfect man for the job!" Hutch picked up the phone, requested an outside line, and before long dialed several numbers. There was a pause, then a smile spread on the blond's face. "Hiya, Huggy! You know anybody in New Jersey?", a pause, then, "How'd you like a free trip to the East Coast? "

"Of course!" Starsky exclaimed.

"Who's Huggy?" Bailey questioned.

"Huggy's the ideal guy, and we know exactly what he's capable of. Plus, we can trust him one hundred percent!" He finally realized he hadn't really answered the question. "Huggy's a friend from L.A. He's also one of our best informants. He's got a great ear for always knowin' what's going on!"

"Okay, get him out here as soon as you can," Dobey addressed Hutch and Starsky as Bailey nodded his approval.

For his plan to work, Starsky knew that nobody in town could see Hutch roaming the streets. So he went by himself to pick up Huggy from the airport, leaving Hutch to coordinate the other details from the precinct. When he became tired, he sacked out on the couch in the Captain's office, who was only too happy to cooperate given the opportunity to finally convict Preston.

Hutch did his job very well. When Huggy's plane landed, there were reporters waiting. The story wasn't earth-shattering, but it was definitely worth a short blurb in the paper or on the television news broadcast. Later that evening, Starsky, Hutch, Dobey, Huggy, and half the Atlantic City police force gathered around the small set in the squadroom, where the news was in progress.

"And in local news," the model-like anchorwoman announced, as a film was rolled of Huggy, dressed in a business suit, getting off the plane, "an out of town investor has released plans to reopen the old "Palace" hotel. It has been confirmed by the Mayor's office that the hotel, which has lain empty since the government claimed it for back taxes six years ago, has, in fact, been purchased by Mr. Robert H. Brown of California. Mr. Brown reports that renovation work is scheduled to begin first thing Wednesday morning. In other news..."

Bailey clicked the television off. "Well, so far, so good. Looks like Preston's going to have to make his move soon. You guys better get out there; this whole thing'll be for nothing if he gets there before you and doesn't find his victim there."

"The only question left," Dobby interrupted, "is how we're going to be sure that Preston himself will come with his men. I doubt he usually handles little details like this himself."

"Gee, thanks for the kind thought, Captain." Hutch put in, smiling. "Always nice to be considered a 'little detail'!"

"Very funny, Hutchinson. But this whole plan could go right down the drain if we can't solve this!"

"It might not be that hard to solve after all," came a voice from behind them. They turned and saw a new face on a medium-height heavy-set man. Bailey and the local captain introduced him as the police commissioner, and hands were shaken and introductions made all around.

"Excuse me, Commissioner," Captain Braille said, "but what did you mean that it might not be a problem after all?"

"I've studied Preston for many years. Not just watched or kept an eye on, but studied. I always knew he was up to no good. And one thing I've learned about him is that he doesn't trust too much. Yes, he'll trust any of his men to carry out a little task, like he probably did in taking you," he looked at Hutch, "there in the first place. But when it comes to something that could put him away, he *always* has to oversee it himself. I don't think he believes his men are all that bright -- he *is* a man of extreme intelligence, and many pale by comparison -- and he's always watching out that they don't leave something undone that could trip him up. I'm sure he'll go out to be sure that there isn't any telltale evidence left behind."

"You're certain of this?" Starsky asked with concern.

"Absolutely. I know that man as well as I know myself. And I *know* he'll be there."

"Well, then, partner," Hutch said, slapping a hand on Starsky's back. "I guess we'd better get out there, too!"

The last unmarked police car pulled away from the Palace a mere 1-1/2 hours later, having resealed the entrances so there was no sign that anything had changed. They even made sure that boards that had hung loose continued to do so.

All was not in readiness inside, however. Each of the room doors in that first corridor had an officer hiding behind it, and four more hid in the dark shadows of the pool, out of sight. Only one thing had yet to be resolved.

"You are *not* going in there in my place!" Hutch stated stubbornly, and Starsky recognized that set in his jaw.

"Yes, I am!" Starsky yelled back at full volume, overpowering the blond.

"No, you're not!"

"Yes, I am!"

"Boys, boys!" Dobey finally decided it was time for a referee. "Stop! Right now!! Since neither one of you can accede to the other, I guess *I'll* make the decision. The Atlantic City PD has given me authority over this case, so I'll make the choice."

"Captain, that's *my* place," Hutch petitioned him. "I'm the one who spent all those days s-s-s-s-s-s-secluded here! And I'm the one they're going to be looking for!"

"Captain, it's gotta be me! Hutch is in no condition to take on something like this!" At Hutch's frown, Starsky turned to him. "Blondie, I know you don't wanna admit it, but you're still not up to your usual par. I can see you're still weak, tired, plus there's no telling what you're gonna feel when you catch sight of those guys." He closed the distance between them, drawing close, his words only for his partner. "You've been through so much in the last week. I wanna be sure you're completely recovered before I go risking your neck again!" He didn't say it aloud, but his concerned look told Hutch that his curly-haired partner was as concerned for his psychological state as he was for his physical. It was somehow harder to express this, though.

Hutch, although he appreciated Starsky's concern, played his last card. "But they're gonna know as soon as they walk in that it's not me down there! In case you haven't thought about it, those curls of yours are *brown*, not blond!"

"A-ha! I already thought of that, too!" He opened a dufflebag he'd been carrying and revealed a man's blond wig, and Hutch was amazed at how close a match it was to his own hair. "In the dark with this on, he'll never know the difference. And you can be waiting to pounce when they come in after me."

Both men finally looked to Dobey for his final decision, and Dobey hesitantly gave the nod to Starsky. "Thanks, Cap. I'll get changed and then it'll just be a matter of waiting." Minutes later, with Starsky wearing the blond wig, his shorts, and a blanket wrapped around him, they all sat down to wait. Two officers were serving as lookouts in order to let them know the moment somebody showed signs of coming.

The alarm was finally raised about 2:00 in the morning, and Dobey, Starsky, and Hutch jumped from their slumber. Hutch checked the holster which held the police special the NJPD had loaned him, while Starsky held his in his hand as he jumped down into the shallow end of the pool. He lay near the drain on his side, the blond hairs of the wig falling toward the floor, his gun cradled under his arm.

Everyone stood motionless and out of sight, waiting for something to happen. Hutch nearly jumped from his hiding place when the men entered the pool area. Four burly men entered first, followed by a stern-faced Preston. Dobey felt the blond officer tense beside him, his hand tightening on the handle of the gun, unaccustomed to its smaller size in his palm. The Captain

could barely make out the anger in the man's eyes and face -- it was clear that Hutch dearly wanted to tear this man apart. But seeing him behind bars would have to do.

"Okay, get him outta there," Preston ordered, then amended it with, "be sure you've got your gloves on. We can't be leaving any prints around." He himself pulled on a pair of immaculate white gloves, the kind Howard Hughes used to wear. The four men did likewise and two of them went after the unmoving blond figure at the bottom of the pool, two remaining behind to take the body from them.

Four hands reached for Starsky, bending close. When the decoy decided they were close enough, he suddenly pulled out the gun and pointed it at them. "Trick or treat, scum!" The rest of the pool room instantly erupted into action, with all the officers emerging from their hiding places.

The bust went smoothly, without a hitch, and before long all five men were cuffed and being read their rights. Hutch admitted to himself he was actually a little disappointed that none of them had resisted. He would've loved to get to exact a little revenge on the men for what they'd done to him, but he also knew that, when that kind of a fight was done, that he'd probably have to be carried away himself. He *was* still weak and out-of-shape, but a few weeks at Vinnie's would take care of that.

As the local police took the five of them away, Dobey, Starsky, and Hutch followed behind, relieved to finally have the case closed. "Why is it," Starsky inquired, "that every time we go on vacation we end up in the middle of a case? I mean, we'd probably get more rest if we just locked ourselves in our apartments with the phone off the hook."

"Maybe next time we should try that," Hutch answered. "And would you *please* take that off?!"

"Take what off?" Starsky looked down at the clothes he'd retrieved. "But I just got them on!"

"Not your clothes, dummy! I meant that *thing*!" Hutch motioned to Starsky's head, and the detective realized that the blond wig was still perched there.

"What? Don't you think I'd look good as a blond?"

Dobey interrupted their fight, figuring that if he didn't, it would go on all day. "Take it off, Starsky! One blond on this team is more than enough!"

Cathy snuggled closer to Starsky as they watched the chorus line doing the can-can on the stage. The waiter had already cleared away the dishes they and Hutch had emptied during the meal. Starsky slipped his arm around her waist and looked over at his partner, who didn't really seem to be enjoying the show all that much.

"What's a matter, partner? This *is* the show you wanted to see, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," was his unenthusiastic response as he rested his head on his hand, elbow on the now-empty table. Starsky actually knew what was bothering the blond: his date, a girl Cathy had

introduced him to just this morning, had called to cancel because she'd gotten sick. Hutch wasn't sure he believed that -- maybe she just hadn't liked what she saw.

The lights went down, setting the mood for a more sedate number to follow the energetic can-can. Male and female dancers in evening clothes took their places on the stage in a salute to ballroom dancing.

Cathy leaned close to Starsky's ear and whispered, "don't worry about Hutch -- I've found a substitute." Starsky looked at her with a smile and surprise in his eyes.

"Cath, you are something else!" he whispered back.

They watched the rest of the number together, and near the end the dark-haired officer saw the shapely silhouette of a woman coming toward their table. Just as she arrived at Hutch's side, the lights came up, and Cathy decided it was time for the introductions.

"Dave, Ken, this is Joy, from the chorus line. I invited her to join us." Starsky smiled approvingly at her choice for his partner, and he, Cathy, and Joy turned to see Hutch's reaction. Somehow, it was not what they expected.

"Well!" Cathy exclaimed, "I like that!" The man in question, tall, blond, and handsome, sat next to the showgirl completely oblivious to her. As a matter of fact, he was oblivious to everything, as he'd fallen fast asleep!

Joy slid in next to him as Starsky tried to rouse his partner. "Hutch!.... Hutch! Wake up!"

"Huh?" the blond muttered groggily as he raised the head he'd been resting on his arms.

"Let me try, Dave," Joy said to Starsky, while Cathy looked on in amusement. Joy twisted her head around to the left, interlocking her lips with Hutch's, and suddenly his eyes opened wide and he eagerly returned the kiss.

Cathy and Starsky laughed uproariously as the two finally pulled apart. Hutch looked toward them with a sly smile. "I think I'll go back to sleep. You *will* wake me again, won't you?" he said to the tall, willowy blond. Joy and Hutch joined in the laughter with Hutch regaining his second wind to spend their last evening in the city with two beautiful ladies.

The End