Summary: An ill Starsky and a worried Hutch do some banking when they suddenly find themselves in the middle of an armed robbery.

Story Notes: 2001 Torino Award - 3rd place for Short Story

Categories: Gen

Genre: Action/Adventure

Warnings: No Warnings Needed

Payday

by M H E Priest

The ringing telephone elicited a deep groan from the dark-haired man. It sounded like a cacophonic brass band to him, only compounding his misery. He picked up after the fourth obnoxious ring. "What?" he snarled quietly.

"Starsk? Is that you?" The voice on the other end of the conversation was equal parts worried and scolding.

"Naw, it's Superman." His words were slurred and sleepy.

"Starsky, are you still in bed?" Now, the voice was completely scolding. "You know how late you are? Eddie's waiting for us, and Dobey'll have our hides if we get in later than 11. What's wrong with you?"

Detective Sergeant David Starsky grimaced. *Damn, how does he know somethin's wrong? And over the phone? I couldn't a said more'n four words. "Nothin's wrong, Hutch. Cut me some slack. My alarm didn't go off,"* he lied. The alarm had worked, but he had shut it off and gone back to sleep. "What time is it, anyway?"

"A few minutes after 9. Look, I'll call the hospital so Eddie won't worry and drive the nurses nuts. You pick me up in…twenty minutes. And Starsky?"

"Yeah?"

"Get a second alarm clock."

Starsky held the receiver to his head for several seconds after Hutch broke the connection. With great effort, he returned the receiver to its cradle. *Second alarm clock. Sounds like somethin' a firefighter oughta have.* He sighed heavily and wiped the perspiration from his face. He rose from the queen-size bed and swayed for a few moments. He noticed for the first time that his blue-and-red-striped pajama bottoms were soaked, as were his pale blue sheets. "Yeah, right --
Superman," he said sarcastically while he gently rubbed his abdomen. "Superman livin' in an apartment made of kyrptonite." He stripped and made his way to the bathroom for a shave and a cool shower. Once there, he helped himself to three aspirins, washing them down with tap water cupped in his hand. He looked at his reflection in the mirror: complexion pale and ruddy at the same time, dark crescent moons under dark blue eyes, heavy beard shadow. "Gonna be one of those days." He stepped into the shower stall after deciding he couldn't trust himself this morning with any sharp objects.

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Detective Sergeant Ken Hutchinson continued to hold the replaced receiver of his phone while he mentally replayed the last few days.

His partner had been quieter than usual. He had also declined to join him and Abby in their first meal after the fast. Hutch had assumed that the "Baron of Beef and Bean Burritos," as he had called Starsky two nights ago, couldn't stomach the menu of wholesome foods they had planned. But, now that he thought about it, Hutch realized that his friend's appetite and energy levels were definitely depressed. And that he seemed to stand just a little stooped over, and walk with a cautious, rather than carefree, attitude.

"Starsk," he asked as he switched his sky-blue gaze to the canal outside the front door of his small, rented house, "what's wrong?" As he dialed the main number for County General Hospital, he promised himself he would know what was wrong with his pig-headed partner by lunchtime. Then he would castigate himself for not noticing this problem, or whatever it was, sooner.

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Starsky didn't have to pull into the driveway of his partner's house. The tall, blond man was waiting for him, pacing along what passed for a sidewalk in that neighborhood. Starsky screeched the red-and-white Torino to a jolting halt beside Hutch and regretted it instantly. Geez, why'd that make my stomach hurt? he wondered silently. He absently massaged his gut again before adjusting his sunglasses.

Hutchinson jerked the passenger door open and swiftly planted his backside on the seat. He peered over the top of his aviator sunglasses at the dark-haired man. "Do you know what time it is, partner?" he asked with a touch of temper in his tone.

Starsky's nostrils and the Torino's engine flared simultaneously. "Who are you -- John Cameron Swayze?" he asked with an acid tongue. He checked the rearview mirror before peeling away from the sidewalk.

Hutchinson's blond head snapped back slightly as the car accelerated rapidly. "Well, well, aren't we in a fine mood this beautiful May morning?" He waited for a response from Starsky. All he got was jaw muscle contractions. "Starsk," he asked, changing his tone from mocking anger to brotherly concern, "something's wrong. Are you sick?"

Yeah, sick of your damn radar. How do you do it? Starsky licked his dry lips. "Guess I have been
feelin' a little under the weather. It'll pass soon." He sighed. "Sorry about being so late, okay?"

*Just like you to change the subject, pal. I'll go along -- for now. "Yeah. Sorry for getting on your case like that. You know how Eddie and Dobey can be."

Starsky laughed through his nose. "They both can get pretty excited, can't they? Hey, remember that time about four years ago when Eddie had to testify about gettin' knocked down by those two convenience store robbers?"

"Oh, yeah!" Hutch started to laugh. "He was so excited that he put his T-shirt on over his dress shirt!"

"The best part was you gettin' him undressed. He thought you were tryin' to roll 'im! I never heard such squealin' from a man before."

"Like I would want his clothes. Now, you on the other hand…"

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The detectives picked up Eddie Hoyle from the hospital where he had been for almost a week following a concussion -- a "gift" from bounty hunter Bo Rile who had been trying to cover up a murder. The middle-aged man was, for all intents and purposes, homeless, but tended to refuse handouts or any other type of charity. Even though he was a soldier brain-injured in combat in Korea, he emphatically declined assistance from the Veterans Administration. Knowing this and how hard it would be for Eddie to find work to replace what he had lost at Lola Turkel's bail bond business, Hutchinson had arranged for Eddie to do cleaning work at the downtown YMCA in exchange for a room and some pocket change.

Starsky and Hutchinson helped Eddie settle into his new home. To Hutch's never-ending amazement at his partner's capacity for doing the unexpected, Starsky produced two posters to add "just the right touch of homeliness" to Eddie's tiny, drab, concrete-walled room. Hutchinson had to admit the posters did add *something*, though he wasn't sure what. Both were entitled "Lady Liberty." One was the Statue of Liberty, now adorned with a stars-and-stripes sash, thanks to trick photography; the other image was a devastatingly gorgeous, raven-haired, buxom beauty in a skimpy star-spangled bikini, standing in front of an American flag. Eddie was thrilled with both posters.

Starsky finished making the twin bed according to army standards. He stood back and took a moment to admire his work. "Eddie, you got yourself a really nice place here. Wish we could stay and chat a while longer, but we gotta get to work."

"Oh, that's okay, Hupp," Eddie said. "Thanks again for the paintings. They look real good in here."

Starsky grinned lopsidedly; he and the real "Hupp" had finally given up correcting Eddie. "You're welcome, Eddie. My pleasure."

"Oh, and thank you, too, Starpy, for getting me this job and such a nice place to live. I hope I..."
won't let you down."

"My pleasure as well, Eddie. Well, Star, uh, I mean, Hupp and I have to run. We'll come for a visit some time."

Somehow, the pair managed to pull themselves away from the loquacious redhead in record time. As they headed for the exit, Starsky experienced a swell of unmerciful nausea. With great will power, he resisted the urge to hold his belly. He swallowed hard, hoping Hutch didn't noticed. "Hey, Hutch, you go on out to the car. I gotta make a pit stop."

The big blond stopped. What he saw disturbed him. Starsky was sweaty and ashen, and he moved his body as if it were a lethargic puppet. He said, "I'll come with you," even though he knew Starsky would object. He was not disappointed.

"What are you now, a damn bathroom attendant?" Starsky snapped. "I'm not a three-year-old. I think I can accomplish this task on my own." He snorted and set off to find the restroom.

Hutch shrugged his shoulders and crossed his arms over his chest. He watched his partner closely. There was no spring in his step, and he pitched forward as he walked. Hutch's concern for his friend climbed several notches. Starsky, you can't keep this from me forever. He thought about the curly-haired man's ability to back him up should something heavy go down. Oh hell, why worry about that? He backed me up on the roof with Bellamy when he was a lot worse off than this.

Hutchinson sighed and left the building.

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Starsky bypassed the urinals and headed straight for the first stall. Quickly kneeling, he hung his head over the toilet and retched. With much effort, he eventually vomited a scant amount of stringy bile, but he did feel better. He sat on the green linoleum, leaned against the stall wall, and tried to catch his breath. The activity of vomiting had produced heavy perspiration, causing portions of his shirt to cling to his trunk. Sweat now collected at and dripped off his unshaven chin. Pushing himself to finish in the bathroom and leave so Hutch wouldn't come looking for him, Starsky shuffled slowly to a sink. After he washed his hands, he splashed his face with copious amounts of cool water and rinsed his mouth. He checked his reflection in the mirror. What he saw reminded of him of how he looked only a couple of months before.

He looked and felt now like he did just hours after Vic Bellamy had injected him with a poisonous compound.

He closed his violet-blue eyes to shut out the image before him. He shuddered as he thought, Oh shit! Is that damn poison coming back? Maybe I wasn't cured... He buried that thought deep in his brain where he hoped it would crush itself under its own depressing weight.

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Early May in southern California is enough to inspire any poet. On this particular day, the
temperature was below normal and there was a light breeze and a bright sun in a sapphire sky. Hutchinson was glad he had chosen to wear a black turtleneck sweater, a medium-weight tan jacket, and dark brown cargo pants. He sat on the hood of Starsky's car, black-booted feet braced on the bumper. He let the sunlight warm his Nordic features. Softly he said, "Ah, Starsky, if it weren't for your problem, this would be a perfect day." He checked his pocketwatch -- Starsky had been in the bathroom for almost ten minutes. *This is taking way too long. Time to check on him.*

Just as Hutch planted his feet on the pavement, Starsky emerged from the building. As his partner strolled closer, Hutch could make out sweat stains on the front of the open-necked red shirt and under the arms of the khaki safari jacket. He walked around to stand by the passenger door. Hands on hips, Hutch asked as neutrally as possible, "What took you so long, partner? Go for a swim?"

Starsky was in a foul mood. To make matters worse, he was at a loss on how to answer his partner's query. He chose not to answer it. "Can't a man use the john without people jumpin' all over him? Just get in the car, will ya, Hutch?" He made a show of brushing off the bumper where Hutch's feet had rested before carefully seating himself behind the steering wheel.

Hutch got in, but placed his hand firmly over Starsky's, stopping him from turning the ignition. "Starsk, you look terrible."

"Guess I didn't have as good-a luck pickin' out my parents as you."

Hutch huffed. "Listen, Starsk, quit kidding around. You know exactly what I mean. You have a fever? Pain? When was the last time you ate anything?" Hutch's questioning became increasingly intense as he leaned even closer into his partner's personal space.

"Look, I told you already that…"

"You were just feeling a little under the weather. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I believe that donkeys can waltz. It's something more. I know it. And you know that I know." Hutch let anger and disappointment leak into his voice.

This time Starsky huffed. "Just drop it, okay? Hey, why don't we grab an early lunch? We'll get some take-out and eat it at the station. Whaddya say, huh?" Starsky flashed his partner a smile of reconciliation.

Hutch, acknowledging his temporary defeat, pulled his hand away and sat up. "Okay, Starsk. Where to? And no chili dogs today."

The dark-haired man started and revved the engine several times before putting the car in gear. "Oh, I just remembered. I'm tapped out. Gotta go by the bank and cash my expense check. Every time I get one of those, it always feels like an extra payday."

"We're late enough as it is, Starsk. Tell you what. My treat. I have enough to cover our lunch."

"Okay," Starsky agreed hesitantly. "Where did you have in mind?" He cringed inwardly,
knowing that his flaky-food-loving partner would pick some bizarre eatery.

"Well, have you heard about that new vegetarian deli over on…"

"Oh, now wait just a darn minute!" Starsky interrupted. "No rabbit-people rest'rant for me! No butterfly bones, or mushroom umbrellas, or unicorn horn soup. No way."

"My money, my choice." Hutch crossed his arms over his chest once again.

"Thanks, but no thanks, partner. We'll swing by the bank. I gotta have somethin' decent to eat."

"Fine. Go ahead. But you take the heat from Dobey when we're later still, and you take the consequences of eating lard in several revolting disguises."

Starsky shook his now-achy head and carefully pulled into traffic.

Hutch kept his attention focussed on the life happening outside his car window. After a few minutes of silence, he asked, "Where did you get those posters?"

"Posters?" Starsky paused for a moment. "Oh, yeah, posters. Why? You wanna get your own? Pretty nice, huh?" He suppressed a grimace as the pain in his belly seemed to compress itself around his navel.

"Well, Starsk, I'm not sure I'd use 'nice' to describe the posters. I was thinking more like 'tawdry' or 'disrespectful'."

"Whaddya mean, 'disrespectful'? What's wrong with the Statue of Liberty gettin' dressed up? Or with a beautiful lady displaying her, um, patriotism? It's not like the bicentennial comes around every year, ya know."

Hutch sighed and rolled his eyes. Starsky sounded as if he were prepping for a debate. "Of course I know that, Starsk, but I just have a problem with the commercialization of a very important event in this country's history." He could feel himself getting worked up, and enjoying it. "'Defile the flag for a profit'," he orated in a pompous voice. "You know, that really gets me right" -- indicating his stomach -- "here."

Starsky shook his head and frowned. "Ya know, buddy, sometimes you take things too seriously. You're gonna pop your cork one of these days. Why don't you get into the spirit of '76? It's the least you could do for your partner, what with your bahing and humbugging every Christmas."

"Okay, Starsky, if it'll make you happy, but it still doesn't excuse the trivialization of the meaning of America's 200th anniversary." Hutch's intensity was nearing a peak.

Hutch's strong feelings about the strangest things -- in Starsky's opinion -- never ceased to amaze and entertain him. "Well, it's helpin' Huggy out. I got those posters from him the other night when I went to The Pits to eat after I left your place."

"Why didn't you say so?"
"You didn't give me the chance," Starsky said a little condescendingly. He glanced at his partner. Hutch impatiently waved for him to continue. "Hug's got quite a line of merchandise for the bicentennial. All kinds-a stuff. And anyway, what the heck is a 'spinoli fritter'? Sounds like some crummy dessert that'd make your stomach feel like it's on a runaway ferris wheel." Starsky screwed up his face in disgust.

Starsky -- the master at changing direction in midstream, thought Hutch, not without affection. "It's Abby's recipe. She chops fresh, organic spinach and broccoli, mixes in some wheat germ…"

"Stop right there, pal. My appetite is dyin' as you speak." Hell no, my appetite is already dead. Second lie to him today. Lying to Hutch bothered Starsky more than his physical condition did at the moment. He squirmed in his seat.

Moments later, Starsky pulled into a space in the second row of the main branch's parking lot. "Back in a few." He slowly and painfully began his exit from the Torino.

"I'm coming, too. Want to talk to the loan officer." Hutch turned the engine off and dropped the keys into Starsky's waiting hand.

"Whaddya need a loan for?"

"Oh, I've been thinking about making some changes."

"Changes?"

"Yeah, changes. I'll tell you if you tell me what's going on."

Starsky shot his friend a dirty, you-can't-trick-me look and finished heaving himself out of the car.

The partners walked to the First Bay City Bank side-by-side. Hutch noticed that he had to slow his normal pace to allow Starsky to stay even. Inwardly, he cursed the stubbornness of his friend. He held the door open for the smaller man.

Just inside the busy bank lobby, Starsky started the scan for a particular teller. He grinned despite his increasing discomfort when he spotted the short auburn hair of his current favorite teller. Hutch, who took a moment to say "Good morning" to Hugh, the elderly but still fit bank security officer, turned back to his partner, then followed his gaze. "Give Kate my best, will you, Starsk?"

Starsky, too anxious to get in Kate's line, responded to Hutch with some unintelligible mutter. Hutch merely shook his head before starting for the loan officer's suite toward the back of the bank.

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Kate's line moved quickly. In less than five minutes, Starsky was at her window, beaming the most endearing smile he could achieve under the circumstances. "Hi there, Kate," he said with almost a swagger to his words.
Kate blushed, excited by what would surely be a flirtatious transaction with one of her cutest customers. She returned his blue gaze with her milk chocolate-colored eyes. "What a pleasant surprise, Officer Starsky. Another payday so soon?"

Starsky tingled at hearing her New England accent. "Uh, not exactly. I need to cash my expense check. Think you can handle that?"

"Oh, I can handle anything you give me, Officer." Kate arched her left eyebrow and reached out for the check. "I didn't realize police officers got expense checks. Or are you just special, Officer Starsky?"

"You might say I'm special. And I wish you'd call me Dave." Starsky leaned closer to the bars separating them. He placed the check in her hand. "I'd like to deposit all but 200 dollars, Kate, if that's possible." He squeezed the slender hand that now held his check.

"Anything is possible, Officer. But I'm afraid I can't call you by your first name. Sorry -- bank policy. You wouldn't want me to get in trouble, now would you?"

The customer behind Starsky poked him in the lower back. He twisted at the waist to see a shriveled, thin old woman with a face and hair like a pug dog. "Hey, would you hurry it up? I got better things to do than listen to you pitch woo. You young people these days, you got no sense of propriety."

"Oh, sorry, ma'am." Starsky twisted back to face Kate, who was barely succeeding in controlling her expression. He mouthed to her, "Pitch woo?" which provoked a giggle from her. He grinned widely until the pain around his navel stabbed sharply at him. He gasped and felt the sweat return and his color leave.

Kate leaned closer to him now, her straight, reddish brown hair against the bars. "Dave," she whispered, "you don't look so good. I'll call Hugh over here to help you, okay?"

"No, no, I'll be okay. Musta had something for breakfast that dudn't agree wit' me." He clutched at his navel with his left hand as he rested his right arm heavily on the marble counter.

The roar of rapid automatic gunfire momentarily overshadowed the intensifying pain in his belly.

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"Of course you don't need an appointment, Officer Hutchinson," said the grinning and balding loan officer. "First BC knows how erratic a policeman's schedule can be. Now, what can I do for you today?" He motioned for the detective to take the vinyl-covered chair across from the desk.

Hutch eased himself onto the cushioned seat. "I realize the question I have might be considered a bit odd, Mr. Whitaker, but is it possible for someone who doesn't own a home to get a home improvement loan?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Officer. Could you be more specific?"
"I'd like to build an attached greenhouse at the apartment I rent. Before I ask my landlady, I need to know if such a loan is feasible."

Whitaker could read the earnestness in the younger man's face, could see it in his body language. "Well, Officer Hutchinson, by definition, you cannot qualify for a home improvement loan. But I think we can set you up with a personal loan at a comparable rate. However, have you considered that you would be improving someone else's property at your own expense?"

Hutch's ears reddened at the question. "That will be part of the negotiation with my landlady."

"And I think my overall health is worth the cost."

"Excellent. How about getting the process started now?"

"Thanks, but not today, Mr. Whit…"

The roar of rapid automatic gunfire momentarily interrupted Hutchinson's train of thought. Within a second, he recovered. "Whitaker, hit the silent alarm, and forget I'm a cop! Got it?" he commanded in a harsh, hushed voice. He pulled his police ID from its home in his jacket and hurriedly stashed it under a stack of papers on Whitaker's desk. Next to the stack of papers was a metal letter opener. Snatching it up, he then eased it into the right cargo pocket of his pants. When he saw that Whitaker hadn't moved, he hissed, "Do it!" He watched with satisfaction as Whitaker's finger found and pressed the button under the desk.

"Shit, no time to hide my weapon and holster! Just be careful, hope for the best, Hutch thought as a person swathed in black from head to toe ran into the loan office and pointed an automatic rifle at him, then Whitaker. "Hands up, out front, NOW!" Both men complied with the order, with Hutch leading the way to the lobby. Please, Starsky, be okay."

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The lobby and its occupants were in chaos. Screams, shouts of profanities, and invocations of God rose to near-deafening levels. Starsky, now facing the bank entrance but unable to stand straight because of the pain, inched his left hand toward his holstered Smith & Wesson. He worked on ignoring the high noise level so he could concentrate. What he saw in the next few seconds concerned him greatly.

"Good morning, ladies and germs," boomed the rich yet cold baritone of a man clothed in midnight blue from top to bottom. He heard the expected thud as Hugh's unconscious body hit the floor. "Tellers, back away from your posts, NOW!" All five women did as they were told. He motioned with his head for a man in black to go to the bank's offices. (Please, Hutch, be careful, thought Starsky.) Simultaneously, a robber dressed in charcoal gray -- the one responsible for knocking out the security guard -- moved to a position beside the entry, locking the doors on his way. A fourth thief, dressed all in hunter green, had taken a position at the far end of the row of tellers' windows.

"Oh shit, thought Starsky, these guys are real pros."

"Everybody else, down on the floor, NOW!" continued the man in blue. He saw that everyone,
except for a tallish, stooping man with dark curly hair and a woman who appeared to be about eight months pregnant, began following the order immediately. Blue made a subtle gesture to Green, who moved toward the two. "This is a robbery, or payday, as my colleagues and I prefer to call it. If you do as I say, you will not get hurt."

Starsky felt rather than saw Green’s movement behind him, so the gun butt that crashed into his right shoulder was not a complete surprise. He cried out and fell to his knees. He heard Kate sniffle and call out his given name. His sight swam and blurred, his arm hung useless. The shove that put him face down on the polished granite floor was a surprise.

Green brushed past the just-disciplined man and headed for the woman. She started screaming hysterically when she realized Green would likely do the same to her.

The floored detective craned his head up toward the screams. He saw Green lift his weapon, readying it to bash the overwrought woman. He lurched to his feet, barely avoiding stepping on the old pug-like woman, and unsteadily lunged for Green. "Stop! No!"

Hutchinson arrived in the lobby just in time to see his partner barreling toward a green-dressed man and to see a man all in dark gray aim his gun at Starsky. The blond detective, knowing he could do nothing to help Starsky at that moment, forgot to breathe.

Despite the verbal warning, Green was slow to react. Starsky hit him in the chest under his upraised right arm, using his own numb right shoulder as a battering ram. There was a single shot, fired just as they toppled over together.

Hutch thought he would have to order his heart to beat. But before he could determine whether Starsky had been shot, Black pushed Whitaker and him to the cold, hard floor. He watched the man in blue advance on the two, automatic rifle ready to use.

Starsky and Green grappled with each other for a few moments until another sharp pain from deep inside the former’s gut disabled him long enough for Green to get the upper hand. He elbowed Starsky in the mouth, cutting his lower lip and stunning him. The robber leapt to his feet, regained total control of his rifle, and buried the barrel’s end in the dark hair of his attacker. "Take out Curly?" Green asked Blue, who was now alongside him.

Before the de facto leader could answer, Starsky had recovered enough to blurt out with a mild lisp, "You stupid bastard! She's pregnant! Takes her longer to -- aaawwwww!

For some reason, Green chose to chastise the detective with a steel-toed foot to the left ribcage instead of a bullet to the brain. "So, take him out?"

Hutchinson, biting back the growing frustration with the situation and the urge to come to his friend's aid, turned his attention to Gray and Black. He cursed their ability to ignore the proceedings with the other two robbers. Shit, these guys are good! What will it take to distract these two? Nothing came to mind, so he resigned himself to wait for an opening that just had to come. Then his thoughts returned to his partner. Dammit, Starsk, when are you going to learn to watch your mouth? Hutch's every nerve seemed overloaded as he waited for Blue to answer.
"Yeah."

The nonchalance in the baritone voice added a new level of disgust to the death sentence he had just given the curly-haired detective. Hutch closed his eyes and lowered his head, feeling pathetic and impotent, sick and empty, knowing his best friend's death was imminent. Even knowing that if he acted now, that he and any number of civilians would be dead as well, did nothing to console him in his caution.

At that moment, Starsky wasn't sure being dead was such a bad thing. The pain in his abdomen now felt like two large gangs in an all-out rumble. His lower left ribs hammered at him with each inspiration. He gave up sucking on his lower lip.

Green snorted and grinned. "Bye-bye, Curly," he snarled. His finger muscles began their contractions. Starsky willed his head to move away from the gun and his legs to move toward Green in an effort to knock him off his feet.

"You can't kill him! He's a policeman!"

Green's finger backed off the trigger and a startled Starsky froze. Every head, with the exception of Gray and Black's, turned to the origin of those two anxiously shouted sentences. Once he realized that Green hadn't fired his weapon, Hutch thought, Kate, you may just have won him a stay of execution, and me more time.

Blue's eyes bored into the fear-widened eyes of the teller. He quickly bent over to frisk Starsky. In seconds, he ripped a slim brown leather case from its residence in Starsky’s jacket and flipped it open. He cursed when he saw the shield. After harshly pushing the detective onto his back, he discovered the shoulder holster. Blue angrily yanked the Smith & Wesson out and waved it menacingly at its owner. "You goddamned motherfucker! Just waitin' for the right moment to blow me away, huh?" His low tone didn't shroud his hostility and loathing.

Starsky stared back at him, defiant and stubborn. "Yeah." It was the perfect mimic of Blue's own intonation of that word earlier.

Hutch felt time suspend itself in his body as he waited for the coup de grace to descend on his best friend.

Sirens in the distance jarred Hutch back into real time and the robbers into action. Hutch watched helplessly as Blue kicked Starsky in his right chest as he rammed the purloined handgun into the front of his pants. He heard Blue shout angrily, "Green, Black, payday!" His heart thumped in empathetic agony in his own chest as he watched his best friend curl up, groan miserably, and begin the slide into stupor.

Blue left Starsky and the pregnant woman to take a position that allowed him to cover the lobby. While Black ordered the tellers to fill a bank bag with cash, Green entered the vault with the "cooperation" of the bank manager.

The sounds of Whitaker's erratic respirations and the stifled sobs and whimpers from around the lobby, paired with his heightening worry about Starsky, conspired to prevent Hutchinson from
coming up with a plan. He watched the weeping pregnant woman awkwardly kneel beside his
hurting partner and stroke his head with one hand in an effort to soothe him and massage her
bulging belly with the other. He fought the guilt he felt that he wasn't the one to give aid and
comfort…*That's it! Give aid and comfort!*

"Uh, Mr. Blue?"

The robber in dark blue focussed on the meek voice coming from a tall blond man. Training his
rifle on that straw-colored head, he spat a mean "Shut up!"

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The burgeoning crowd outside the bank, growing angrier by the minute that the bank had closed
for no apparent reason, now surged away from the entrance when one patrol car bumped and
swerved into the parking lot and a second skidded to a stop on the street. A second later, the first
round of sirens howled their last.

Two of the four police officers herded the already-moving crowd even farther from the bank
before they started traffic control. The other two officers emptied the trunks of their black-and-
whites of shotguns and rifles, and donned bulletproof vests. Within two minutes of their arrival
on scene, six more squad cars and a two-toned blue unmarked car joined them.

A rotund, energetic black man in a vested gray pinstripe suit bolted out of the blue car, red light
on its roof still flashing. "Can anybody here tell me somethin' I don't know?" roared the man
authoritatively.

Manfredi, one of the patrolmen rerouting traffic, was closest to Captain Harold Dobey.
"Nobody's had time to assess the situation, Captain," he answered. "Been too busy with civilian
safety."

"Okay, then." Dobey rapidly surveyed the deployment of his officers. They had surrounded the
bank, stationing themselves behind their vehicles for added protection. He permitted himself to
have a proud thought on how well these officers handled moved into position without direction
from him.

Dobey jogged the few feet back to his car. Suddenly, like a seasoned magician, he had a white
handkerchief in hand. He began mopping the perspiration off his face as he reached for the
radio's microphone. "This is Dobey. Patch me through to the bank's phone now!" As he waited
for the call to go through, he spied the familiar red and white Torino. *What the hell is going on
here?*

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"But sir, I don't mean any disrespect, but…"

"But shut the fuck up!" interrupted Blue in a half-scream.

Hutch could see that Blue was irritated, but not in danger of losing control. This reconfirmed his
evaluation of the robbers' professionalism. Now he intended to see if they were also smart.

"Sir, please, I think the pregnant lady may be in labor."

"So what?" Blue barked as he continued to scan the cowering customers.

"So she and her baby could be in trouble. And the cop…"

Again, Blue rudely interrupted Hutchinson. "Who gives a fuck about that damned cop?"

Hutch swallowed the colossal wad of cotton in his mouth and throat so he could continue. "Well, sir, he doesn't look very good and he could be seriously hurt. I'm a paramedic and I'd like to see if they're okay, if I can help them." On hearing that, Whitaker whimpered loudly. Hutch smothered the man's jagged cries with a withering glance.

The blond detective hoped the break in his conversation with the blue-clothed robber meant the thief was considering the implications of a threatened pregnancy and a dead cop. He laughed tensely to himself as he thought, *Guess this is a pregnant pause.*

"Okay, baby doc, do your thing. But no funny stuff, or one of these fine citizens will pay." Frigid smugness encased his words. The captives experienced a group shiver.

Hutch, shaking off the ice, nodded submissively and prayed that his relief that the bait had been taken was not obvious. He carefully stood, taking great pains that his concealed Magnum stayed that way. He could feel Blue's eyes watching his every muscle flex and contract.

The man in black had just finished gathering the cash from the tellers' tills when the telephone in that area rang. Not surprisingly, the ringing elicited a number of shrieks. Black looked to Blue for direction. Hutch continued to move toward his partner and the woman, at times barely avoiding stepping on a fellow prisoner.

The telephone kept ringing and the tension in the lobby kept rising.

Hutchinson reached his destination. This time, he had to swallow his heart because Starsky, curly hair matted down with sweat, had a deathly pallor, even deathly odor, on him.

*****

*Dammit, why won't they pick up?* thought Dobey as the number of unanswered rings grew. He reached for the amplifying megaphone on the front seat of his car. The device emitted several squeaks when the captain toggled the on switch. He hit it a few times with the heel of his hand, more out of frustration with the robbers' unresponsiveness than with the irritation the annoying sounds created in his ears. He put the mouthpiece to his full lips. "You, in the bank," Dobey commanded in his most masterful voice, "this is Captain Dobey of the BC Police Department. We have the bank completely surrounded. Pick up the telephone so we can talk, and keep this situation from getting worse."

He could hear the phone continuing to ring over his radio speaker. *Maybe Starsky and
Hutchinson are trying to work something out with them, he hoped against hope.

*****

Hutchinson had to use every ounce of willpower to check the pregnant woman before he examined his partner. He squatted in front of her and asked calmly, "Are you and the baby doing okay?" He was painfully aware that nothing about Starsky changed with the nearness of his voice.

He gently placed a hand on her upper arm. He could feel the tightness in her muscles. Even worse, he could sense the heat radiating from Starsky, and could hear the tiny moaning breaths that knocked at his memory's door. When have I heard him breathe like that?

She nodded in short, fearful jerks of her head. She winced fleetingly and exhaled a puff of pain. "I think I'm in labor, mister."

Maybe now these bastards will leave you alone. "What's your name?"

"Anita. Anita Chou." She looked for reassurance in the light blue eyes just inches from her dark brown ones.

"I'm Ken. And you're going to be just fine," he said soothingly as an answer to her unspoken plea, "both of you. Let me help you sit."

"No!" she whispered adamantly. "I can't stop helping him. He didn't let that man hurt me, he may have even saved my life. I have to keep helping him."

Hutch finally became aware that Anita's hand had not left Starsky's head. Before he could say anything to persuade her to sit, that her rescuer would be fine without her touch for a few moments, she mewed with surprise. "Oh good lord! My water just broke!"

With her free hand, she grasped the sleeve of Hutch's jacket.

The blond detective, dumbfounded and paralyzed, stared at the woman. A split second later, Dobey's augmented voice barged into the lobby, providing a welcome break from the piercing monotony of the still-unanswered telephone.

"Shi', Dobey here. Trouble now."

The slurred murmur from Starsky was music to Hutch's ears. "Them or us, buddy?" he asked quietly. With Anita still clinging to his jacket-turned-lifeline, he pivoted on the balls of his feet so he could examine his partner. There was no visible blood on the floor, nor were Starsky's clothes bloody, but they had absorbed a fair amount of amniotic fluid. He began patting him down, looking for a bullet wound. "Starsk, did you get hit?"

Starsky climbed further out of his stupor. "Hutch, tha' you?" he asked excitedly.

"Shhhhh! Not so loud, okay? Yeah, it's me. You get hit?"
Starsky snorted. "Yeah, coupla times to ribs."

_He takes a lickin' but keeps on tickin'. "No, I mean shot."_

"Don' think so. But gut on fire, Hutch. Can't be…suppos' ta be cured…hurts so bad." Starsky curled into a tighter ball and uttered a sharp groan.

The unwanted and unthinkable recognition forced itself into Hutchinson's consciousness. _Jennings' poison! Dammit, why didn't I make the connection earlier?!_

Hutch jumped when he heard the deep, threatening voice in his right ear say, "How are they doing, baby doc?"

Swatting away the hot breath that tickled his ear, Hutch hopped back into his helpful but meek character. "Oh, Mr. Blue. Well, in my opinion, both of these people should get to a hospital as quickly as possible. Mrs. Chou's baby is coming, and the officer here is very sick with some kind of, uh, infection." Blue stared imperiously at him. "I think." Blue's expression didn't change. "Sir."

"This mouthy pig seems to know you. Called you 'Hutch.'" Blue cleared his throat strictly for effect. "You really a cop, baby doc?" He said it almost as a declaration.

Struggling to maintain his impromptu cover, Hutch stuttered, "Oh, oh, oh, nnnnno, sir. I'm a paramedic. I, uh, don't know why he's confusing me with a…a piece of furniture." Hutch returned Blue's stare with his best guileless, who-me? face. He placed his hand over Anita's, whose grip on his coat sleeve had tightened considerably. Starsky seemed oblivious to the interchange.

The telephone kept up its solo concerto of one-note dissonance.

Blue narrowed his eyes and studied the blond man closely. After two more rings, he rose with purpose. "Black, answer, code charlie." Blue turned his back on the partners and the woman to walk back to his position.

Black nodded curtly once before striding three steps to the telephone. He picked it up in the middle of its umpteenth ring. The quiet, though welcome, echoed heavily in the lobby. Every prisoner, including Starsky and Anita, strained to hear every word as the robber brusquely said, "You allow our pick-up through, we leave unchallenged, with the money and two hostages, a sick cop and a woman in labor. Three minutes to back off or one customer dies every three minutes. This is non-negotiable." He broke the connection a millisecond later.

******

Captain Dobey was beginning to lose his patience. He knew he didn't have a chance to control this situation until he and the robbers began a dialog, giving him the opportunity to influence them. Though he craved a swift resolution, he dared not storm the bank. Such an action was entirely unacceptable. Additionally, he had to assume his two best detectives would be in big trouble if they had been identified as cops. This stupendous May day was turning to crap.
He was temporarily stunned when the ringing finally ceased without warning. He listened closely to what the no-nonsense voice had to say. As he took a breath to respond, all he heard was a dial tone.

Dobey's plump second and third fingers frenetically keyed the microphone twice. "Patch me through again, and hurry!" As he waited for the call to go through, he contemplated his options. *What options? In five minutes, this'll all be over. And if they got one cop, they got the other...* He let the ubiquitous handkerchief linger over his anxious face a few seconds longer than necessary.

*****

The tension in the room continued to grow unfettered. A number of the captives began to cry and wail.

"Shut up, or we won't wait three minutes!" shouted Blue matter-of-factly. The cries obeyed, and became whimpers and whines.

The telephone started singing its ear-splitting tune again.

Hutch bent low enough to whisper in Starsky's ear. "Stark, you catch all that?"

The wet curls bobbed one puny nod.

Hutch rejected the sense of impending doom, the memories of that merciless twenty-four hours after Bellamy injected the poison into his defenseless partner, the futility of expecting a rescue from their fellow officers outside the bank. He took a deep breath and prepared to execute the second part of his plan.

*****

The powerful engine of a black step-van parked in the bank's lot thundered to life. The driver, a man dressed completely in dark brown, steered the vehicle toward the entrance. Several officers trained their weapons on him and the van. He stopped. Easily finding the officer in charge, he shouted to the large black man, "Less than three minutes, pig! Do I pass, or does someone die?"

_Damnit! These turkeys have thought of everything!_ Dobey, frustrated with his inability to gain control of the situation, paused a few moments, hoping that some solution would invade his brain. When it didn't come, he yelled, "Let him pass!"

Every officer lingered in position, hesitant to obey Dobey's order. Dobey knew exactly how they felt, and didn't fault them for not immediately following his command. Nearly crushing the microphone in his tightening fist, he bellowed again, "Stand down and let him pass! That's an order!"

The officers and the two squad cars nearest the bank entrance yielded to the van. The driver, smirking triumphantly under his ski mask, eased the van onto the sidewalk and halted it so its
back doors were aligned with the bank's doors.

*****
Hutchinson tracked the four robbers as furtively as he could. When it seemed to him that their attention was elsewhere, he stealthily eased his Magnum from its leather sheath and pressed the butt into his partner's left hand. He felt Starsky's body acknowledge understanding and heard the soft click of the safety moving to the off position.

With palms as slick as an icy sidewalk, Starsky gripped the Magnum with ferocious determination. He forced his eyes to stay open and willed himself to focus on his partner and not the accelerating pain that now seemed to be concentrated in his right lower abdomen. He knew, without Hutch having to tell him, to follow his lead. And he had a fair idea what Blondie had in mind.

Hutchinson turned his attention to Anita Chou. Gently but firmly, he forced her to release his sleeve. He mouthed, "Get down when I say." He gazed at her, trying to give her the confidence she'd need in the next few minutes.

A contraction stopped her from responding immediately. She hyperventilated for a few seconds, then jerked her head in understanding and agreement. She stroked the drenched, tangled dark hair of her first savior twice more before she unwillingly ceased contact with him.

Gray announced that the van was ready. Hutchinson, noting that the foursome was still not attending to him and the designated hostages, fingered the letter opener out of his cargo pocket and into his now-sweaty palm.

Since Anita was between him and the bank entrance, Starsky placed in his mind's eye where Gray stood. Don't you dare move, you sonuvabitch, he tried to telepathically communicate to the thief guarding the door. He moaned with pain to cover the sound of his cocking the hammer back on the heavy pistol.

Hutchinson watched with anticipation as Blue strode jauntily towards them to claim his two hostages. His adrenalin, already pumping, rushed to higher levels. Starsky sensed this easily in his partner, and his adrenalin level soared as well. The anxiety in the lobby neared rupture.

In seconds, Blue was inches from the crouching Hutchinson. "Black," he said simply.

Black picked up the ringing phone again. "Good. You met the deadline. We leave now with the cop and the woman, you don't follow, or we kill them in pieces." Again he hung up without waiting for an answer.

Hutch whispered, "Down!" just loud enough for Anita and Starsky to hear. He began to rise without warning, using the strength in his legs to assist in shoving the letter opener into the softness of Blue's genitals. Anita, with unexpected alacrity, lay down on the hard floor. Starsky rolled onto his belly, hardly noticing the agony within, and stretched his left arm across Anita's lower legs. Instantly finding his target exactly where he thought the man would be, he fired Hutch's weapon, which bucked hard in his hand. The bullet crashed into Gray's chest, just below
the left fifth rib. Gray, in turn, crashed into the bank's door, splintering but not breaking through the tinted glass. The screams, louder and more filled with terror than ever before, reverberated along with the gunshot.

In the meantime, Blue let out a choked scream. Hutch pushed the robber, who was now clutching the injury between his legs, away while simultaneously yanking Starsky's automatic from Blue's pants. He felt something familiar buried beneath the midnight blue jacket. He thumbed off the safety and yelled out, "Vest!" He rapidly acquired his target and fired, hitting Green in the throat. Green spun around twice, losing his grip on the bag of money. In its flight, the bag opened and its contents showered the nearby captives.

Starsky, who had turned on his back and was leaning his head on Anita's wildly contracting belly, immediately registered the meaning of Hutch's shout and adjusted his aim slightly before he pulled the trigger a second time. Black staggered back a step before he went down, graced with two new holes in his head.

Hutchinson, with Starsky's Smith & Wesson firmly in his two hands, rushed toward Green. Starsky grunted his way back onto his belly and pointed the Magnum at Blue's head. "Gotcha, sucker," he rasped. "You're fired."

*****

Dobey was the first officer to react to the initial gunshot. He had already dropped the microphone in anticipation of the robbers and their hostages leaving the bank, so he was able to draw his revolver in record time. He saw the brown-clothed man in the van's cabin grab at his ear but was too far away to hear the cry of pain caused by the booming sound of the Magnum coming through his earpiece. At the same time, he saw something dark hit the bank door, but the fractured glass prevented positive identification. He sprinted toward the van and had his weapon aimed at Brown's head before he could recover from the deafening sounds. "You're under arrest, turkey."

Those officers not paralyzed and slack-jawed at seeing Dobey move his considerable bulk so swiftly caught up with him. Before they could ask, he barked, "Move in!"

When the leading two officers were several feet from the door, they heard the locks tumble. The door swung open under the weight of the trunk of a man dressed all in dark gray. One of them, Jack King, prepared to fire at the blond man in black and brown but stopped when he realized the gun the man held was trained on the gray-masked man. A second later, the blond man looked up. "Good God, Hutchinson! You were in there the whole time?! Are you hit, man?"

Hutchinson looked at King quizzically. King jerked his head toward Hutch's hands. He focussed where King had indicated. Surprised, he saw Blue's blood covering his right hand. "No, I'm fine. Take him, would you, Jack? Careful, though. Starsky shot him in the chest, but he's got a vest on." He turned to Ethan Morris, the other officer. "Call a couple of ambulances NOW, Morris. We got a woman having a baby and Starsky's -- " He cut himself off and ran back into the lobby.

Two other officers had taken Brown into custody, freeing Dobey to enter the bank. Five steps behind Hutchinson, the captain surveyed the lobby. About eight or ten people had taken it on
themselves to calm those still actively traumatized by the armed robbery and bloody shootings and stabbing. He could see a spindly old dog-faced woman comforting a pregnant woman who was obviously in labor. As he got closer, he recognized Starksy's jeans and striped sneakers. He called for more officers to join him as he approached a still body dressed in green.

Hutchinson knelt beside the silent, oh-lipped Blue. After flicking the safety back to its on position, he shoved it into his holster. Fishing out the handcuffs tucked at his lower back, Hutch roughly rolled the foiled thief onto his stomach. Grabbing him by his right forearm, Hutch roughly jerked the arm behind the man's back and snapped shut one bracelet on the blood-covered wrist, then repeated with the man's left arm.

Once Starsky saw Blue secured, he permitted his vigilance and his grip on the Magnum to relax. To complicate his wretchedness, his left hand now ached and cramped, thanks to his tight hold on the gun and its powerful recoil.

Hutch was at his side and had the Magnum in hand before it touched the wet granite floor. With his free hand, he stroked his friend's dark hair several times.

Starsky returned to his left side and curled up. "Oh God, Hutch, it hurts." His voice quavered and words lisped slightly. "I'm sc…"

A blood-curdling scream drowned out the last word. The old woman proclaimed happily, "This baby ain't waiting for nobody!"

Hutchinson dropped the Magnum into one of the deep pockets of his jacket. Without hesitation, he scooped Starsky up in his arms and headed for the door. "Cap'n, I'm taking Starsky to Memorial Receiving! Guess you can deliver the baby!"

Dobey, who had just established that Black and Green were dead, hollered after the rapidly moving detective, "Hutchinson! Get back here! Ambulances are on the way!"

"No time, Cap!" he shouted over his shoulder. He carefully maneuvered Starsky through the threshold. "It's Jennings' poison!"

Dobey froze, vocal cords worthless. Seeing the noon sunlight reflect whitely off Hutchinson's hair and Starsky's feet bounce without purpose thawed him seconds later. He jogged to the soon-not-to-be-pregnant woman. "Okay, ma'am, let's have this baby." A pretty young woman with straight auburn hair joined him. "Let me help."

*****

Hutchinson commandeered Jack King to help him get Starsky in the Torino. While he searched for the keys, Hutch told Jack, "Notify Memorial Receiving that I'm bringing Starsky in. Tell 'em to have Dr. Franklin there with Starsky's records from about two months ago."

"Is he gonna be okay, Hutch? What's wrong? Oh man, he looks…"

Hutch cut him off with a silencing stare. "I know." He took a deep breath and said apologetically,
"Sorry. I'll fill you in later. And thanks, from both of us." He found the mars light and smacked it on the car's roof before running to the driver's side.

Starsky, unable to sit up, had slumped sideways. Before Hutch could sit behind the steering wheel, he had to raise Starsky's head and slide under it. His partner's head now resting on his thigh, he thought the intense heat pouring out could almost burn him there. The rest of him chilled when he no longer heard any sound from Starsky.

Hutch stabbed the key into the ignition and turned it. The engine rumbled quickly to life and Hutch was out of the parking lot in three seconds. He laid his hand on Starsky's chest, relieved to find it moving. He activated the siren and floored the accelerator pedal. He made himself keep both hands on the wheel, despite his need to reassure his partner -- and himself -- with his touch.

For a few moments, Starsky came out of his stupor and lisped pieces of thought out loud:
"Late… trouble … can't do this … no payday … hurt too much … gotta be over … scared … Hutch … help … Hut …" The road became temporarily blurry for the driver.

Time slowed immeasurably for Hutch, so it seemed like days to get to the hospital. Bracing the preternaturally quiet Starsky against the seat with just his right arm, he slammed the Torino to a stop less than a foot from the door of the Receiving wing's entrance. In seconds, he wrestled his limp friend out of the car and into the hospital where he found Dr. Franklin and several nurses waiting. An orderly arrived with a stretcher.

"Doctor, it's the poison again!" Hutchinson shouted, desperation shading every word as he and the orderly managed to get Starsky on the gurney without dropping him.

This roused the pale and hurting detective. He saw Franklin, and knew he was in the despised hospital. He pawed weakly, searching for the lapels of his friend's tan jacket. He found them quickly but couldn't grab them. He fell back on the stretcher, whining in frustration.

Hutch bent over him so they were face to face. "You'll have the antidote soon, buddy, hang on."

The balding, bespectacled physician, unruffled by the blond detective's earnest decree, gestured for the nurses and the orderly to take their new charge into the examination room they had prepared for him. As he felt himself move away from Hutch, Starsky managed a loud, "Stop!" that aggravated his split lip and bruised chest.

Hutch grabbed the rail, forcing the gurney to halt. He held his hand up, palm out, and mouthed, "Ten seconds." He brought himself face to face again. "What is it, buddy?"

Starsky cleared his throat. With intense sincerity, he asked, "Don't let 'em cut off my clothes, 'kay?"

Hutch stared into the indigo eyes to see if Starsky was putting him on. The eyes were just as sincere as the voice.

"Promise?" Starsky prodded.
"Yeah, pal, I promise." Hutch asked the nurses with his own eyes to help him keep his promise. They all smiled their agreement to varying degrees. Starsky let loose a cry as the abdominal pain stabbed harshly at him again. Hutch felt his heart dive into his stomach.

Speaking with professional calmness and authority, Dr. Franklin plowed Hutch with questions about Starsky's signs and symptoms. His agitation increasing with each query, Hutch consistently ended each answer with a demand for the antidote. Franklin ignored this demand and pushed on, determined not to jump to conclusions. He instructed the big detective to first park the red and white car in a real parking space, then to wait outside the exam room.

Hutch grudgingly did as he was told. In a few minutes, he was back and pacing incessantly in front of the closed exam room doors, peering through the small windows as he passed, but unable to see anything but an off-white curtain.

The orderly cracked open one of the doors and leaned out. Hutch rushed to him, light blue eyes dark with worry begging for some information. Instead, the orderly, chuckling openly, thrust a white and blue plastic bag filled with Starsky's belongings at him. Then he laughed outright and returned to the room.

Hutch, suspicious of the orderly's amusement, decided to check out the contents of the bag. He found a molded, light green chair nearby. Plunking himself down, he opened the bag. There on the top were two socks, one red, one blue, both still wet with sweat. Under them was a U.S. flag. What the hell is Starsky doing carrying a flag around with him? Gingerly, he pulled the clammy banner out so he could unfurl it and re-fold it properly.

But it wasn't a flag. It was a pair of undershorts, size medium, emblazoned with the stars and stripes.

Hutch held the underwear out at arm's length, not knowing what to do or think.

"That's disgusting -- using our flag for underwear! Must be a commie. Or a hippie," he heard someone say scornfully. Not daring to make eye contact and blushing deeply, Hutch quickly wadded up the shorts and stuffed them deep in the bag. I'm gonna kill you, Starsky!

*****

Within two minutes of beginning the physical examination of the dark-haired, highly distressed patient, Dr. Franklin was on the telephone with a general surgeon. Five minutes after Hutch found Starsky's new underwear, Starsky was on the way to the operating room.

Hutch got to pace some more.

*****

An hour and a half later, Dr. Harmon, the surgeon, came out to speak with the concerned, exhausted blond man.

"Dr. Franklin tells me you're Mr. Starsky's partner on the police force, and just about his only
"Yes, that's right. How is he?" Hutch resisted the temptation to drag the news out of him.

"Worst appendix I've seen in years. It burst just as I was taking it out" -- Hutch's eyes widened and his breathing ceased -- "but not too much spilled and I cleaned out the abdomen thoroughly." The surgeon brimmed over with self-satisfaction. "He should be fine. On antibiotics intravenously for a week, then we'll talk about discharge." He stopped and waited for thanks.

Hutchinson began breathing again, all too relieved that Starsky was alive and that the problem wasn't the poison. "Thanks, Doc. When can I see him?"

The surgeon smiled smugly. "In a couple of hours."

*****

"When can I eat? I haven't had much of anything for days." Starsky punched the down button for the head of the bed again.

The pain medication had given his partner the dreaded motor-mouth syndrome complicated by the laughing disease and a minor lisp (the cut lip received two stitches), and Hutchinson had just run out of patience. "Starsk, you just had surgery yesterday. Your gut has to start functioning normally again. You know that."

Starsky hit the head-up button again. "Hey, I want one of these at home. Oh, where are my clothes? They didn't cut anything, did they?" He pressed the down button and whooped. "Just a little faster, and this could be a roller coaster. C'mon, Hutch, get in the other bed and we can have races."

A firm knock at the door silenced both men, but Starsky continued to operate the bed controls. Captain Dobey entered, bearing a crinkly-wrapped basket of fruit and nuts. "Good to see you awake, Starsky. You were still pretty out of it last night."

"Oh, good -- food! Thanks, Cap. Whud me 'n' Hutch miss?"

Dobey began being mesmerized by the slow and steady up-and-down of Starsky's bed. Hutch lightly thumped his arm. "Oh. Uh, Mrs. Chou had a healthy baby boy. Three weeks early. She's naming him 'David Kenneth Harold.' The five robbers were a professional team out of Philadelphia. They called themselves the 'Payday Gang.' Dammit, Starsky, stop that!"

"What?" he asked innocently. The head of the bed was on its way up again.

"Never mind! Well, I got work to do. And so do you, Hutchinson. I expect you back at work tomorrow. You'll be working a case with a couple of your fellow detectives while Starsky's laid up. There was a big heist in Dallas. A 70-carat diamond was stolen about a week ago. Rumor has it that the thieves may try to fence it outta here." He looked back at Starsky. The head of the bed was almost at the bottom. "See you later, Starsky."
"See ya, Cap! Thanks for the food!" The head started its upward journey again. "Hey, Hutch, see if there's a burrito in there, wouldja?"

Hutchinson rose stiffly from the uncomfortable chair. He walked over to the bed and promptly unplugged it.

"Hey, why dja do that, Hutch?"

"You can't have anything to eat yet, Starsky."

"Okay, okay. So, are my clothes all right?"

"Yes, Starsky," Hutch said tiredly, "your clothes are fine. They're filthy, but otherwise unharmed."

"Did ya see 'em? My new shorts?" Starsky started giggling.

"Starsky, what the hell do you mean getting *underwear* with the American flag printed on them? That's practically sacrilegious!"

Starsky thought Hutch's reddening cheeks were hilarious. He advanced to chortling. "It's just my way of bein' patriotic."

"I think you mean *idiotic*."

"So, I guess you don't want the pair I got you, huh?"

Hutch rolled his eyes and shook his head emphatically. "No, I don't want them."

"So, I guess that means I can have 'em, huh? I'll have to get you somethin' else then. Hey, Hutch, where ya goin'?" he called out to his partner's back as he left Starsky's room.

"Captain Dobey! Wait! Can I start on that case today?"

The End
2001