Button, Button...

by

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Drake Park is one of those small, lushly landscaped islands of green set in an area not far from the heart of Los Angeles. It was designed and funded by the late Wynifred Drake, heiress to the Drake Railroad fortunes. As a child, "Wynnie" had had her own private park, complete with a scaled-down house, a boating pond, and a miniature train that carried her and her very small circle of friends all around the Drake estate.

Indulged though she was, upon becoming an adult she vowed to bring pleasure into the lives of less fortunate children. Since Drake Park was the first of many such areas Wynnie had funded, she sensibly said that having one park named after her was enough, giving city planners free rein to call the others whatever suited their fancy.

But Drake Park remained her favorite, and in later years a lawn bowling section complete with a wisteria-and-rose bower was built. Wynnie reasoned that grownups had to have some way of spending their time while they supervised their children and grandchildren.

Perhaps the old lady might not have appreciated the irony of the park's fortunes over the years. Built originally in an area of crowded schools and cheap housing, the real estate market had changed. Now, huge homes bordered the little park, some with grounds bigger than the park itself. Still, the children of the rich and famous preferred to come there for their boisterous games of soccer and baseball. Nannies sat with babies dozing in gentle sunlight, undisturbed by the muted click of lawn balls.

In a far corner, several young boys shouted and squealed as they clambered over an elaborate geodesic jungle-gym. This was Los Angeles at its most indulgent: everyone's playground.

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It was late afternoon. A battered, much-abused white truck sat directly across from Drake Park, one of its two occupants watching a trio of young boys playing on the jungle-gym. The children were of an age: eight or nine, blond, blue-eyed, each wearing jeans and a tee shirt.

The men, dressed in gardener's work clothes, studied a small picture intently, then the driver picked up a pair of binoculars. "I'm telling you, that's him in the orange tee shirt. Your eyes gettin' bad, or are you gettin' cold feet?" He was in his early forties, a hard-faced, thin-lipped individual with short, coarse grey hair.

His companion, younger by many years, stared doubtfully at the boys, then down at the snapshot. The boy in the orange shirt was now in the middle of a game of tag. Two other children had joined the trio. "Gimme those damn things!" he hissed, snatching the binoculars away from the older man. "I can't tell. Damned Anglos all look alike in this area." Still, he kept the glasses focused on the boy. "Yeah, it's him. No mistake." He shook his dark head. "For an old man, Freddie, you got a good eye."

Satisfied, Freddie put the picture back in his pocket. "Your trouble, Billy boy, is that you're already spendin' the money, aren't you?" His grin was not pleasant. "How many senYOHritas you gonna spend it on, huh?" His banter ceased, and his voice grew hard. "I'll tell you one last time, taco-eater, we wait for our contact to give us the okay before we spend one damn dime. You got that?"

Billy refused to rise to the bait. Instead he smiled. "Oh, yeah, I got it, Freddie. This is a real sweetheart deal, ain't it? We pick the chico up when we're told, drive him to whatever address they give us, and he's off our
hands. We don't even have to see him again. We get paid, and don't risk gettin' caught. Is that a deal or ain't it?"

But Freddie was staring at the boys again through the glasses. "Funny," he mumbled, "rich kids don't dress no better than the poor ones no more. Stick 'em all in jeans and tees and you can't tell them apart."

Billy ran his fingers through his long, oily hair, and snorted. "You're really out of it, ya know that? Lookit their shoes! Lookit their haircuts! For that matter, lookit their goddamn bikes! Then you'd know they got rich parents." He began to laugh. "Shit. We could probably snatch any one of that bunch and who'd know the difference, right?"

Lowering his binoculars, Freddie stared hard at Billy. "Who'd know? Their folks, for starters. Don't go talkin' like that or I'll think I'm teamed up with a loony." He warmed to the subject. "You may think I'm behind the times, but don't you get any ideas about double-crossing me on this. You try asking any of your classy friends with their pimpmobiles, and dames hangin' out the windows . . ." He chuckled as he glanced up and down the immaculately landscaped street. "Yeah, I can just see Honey Boy pulling up in his baby-blue Rolls, and no one blinkin' an eye." The thought amused him so much he batted the steering wheel. Then he turned serious.

"See, Billy, folks are funny. They look at this old truck with its junk in the back, and they don't give it another glance because gardeners are a dime a dozen around here. But the flash car, the souped-up bike, that grabs their attention."

He rolled the window down, enjoying the cool breeze. "Remember, if we don't screw up, the day after tomorrow you 'n' me're gonna be rich."

He yawned, and handed the glasses to his companion. "Now, when I get paid, I'm gonna buy a new truck, nothing fancy, but something that don't need fixin' every hundred miles."

"Just shut up and get outta here, will you?" Billy snarled. "We don't want those brats remembering a white truck parked at the curb, do we? Kids see everything, and if the cops ask 'em, it might jog their memories. I wanna live to spend the dough."

Chastened, Freddie said, "You're right, you sonofabitch." When he pulled the old truck away, nobody paid the slightest bit of attention.

David Starsky was feeling very expansive when he entered the squad room at Metro. He'd sorted his mail before he left home, the cleaning lady had done a good job on his apartment yesterday, and the wax job on the Torino looked like it would hold up for another week. Life was good, and today just might bring him and Hutch the case that would make them rich and famous.

Settling at his desk, he put his feet up and casually began sorting the files still sitting in a heap. Grinning, he tossed the incomplete ones on his partner's desk. Serve the bastard right for dumping all the reports on him late Friday. His smile softened as he recalled how the weekend had actually been spent. Hutch was a sucker for a good meal and soft music.

"You sleep here last night?" Hutch, smirking, had walked in without Starsky hearing him. He tossed the Times onto Starsky's lap. "I did the puzzle but left you the Jumble - as usual. Got anything done on that suicide?"

Starsky shook his head, his features neutral. "Nope. You and I both know it's murder, so I sorta hid it in your
He watched Hutch nod in approval. It was their usual Monday morning routine . . . keep the troops guessing. Since there was only one other cop in the squad room and he was on the phone, the pretense was rather superficial, but it wouldn't do to let their guard down. He noticed Hutch sitting down rather gingerly and fought back the urge to grin. There was no way blondie could blame him for his sore ass . . . not this time. He cleared his throat. "So, you gonna keep that dirt bike?"

The look Hutch gave him was one of total disgust. "Hell, no," he snapped, "I'm gonna sell it to my grandmother! Damn seat was loose . . ." As he removed his jacket and put it over the back of his chair, his expression changed. Turning so his back was to the other cop, he faced his partner. Quickly he slid an envelope across the desks. "Take a look at this, Starsk, and tell me what you think." Hutch's tone was barely audible, and all levity had disappeared.

"Without even lookin', I can tell it ain't good news," Starsky muttered, examining the envelope closely. It had been sent to Hutch, and his eyebrows arched when he saw the return address. "Twenty-two Paseo Las Fortunas? That's some neighborhood. How do you rate?" He slid out the single sheet of heavy bond paper, reading it twice before handing it back to Hutch. He met his partner's somber glance with suspicion. "Got any ideas why he wants to see us - and in such a hurry? I thought guys like that could afford their own armies."

Hutch shook his head and reached to reclaim the envelope. "Come on, Starsky," he said. "Phillip Kendall the Third may be richer than Croesus, but he and his wife have been very generous donors when it comes to the arts. Hell, when I was in my last year of college, his family established a chair in music."

Starsky was decidedly unimpressed. "That still doesn't explain why a guy with zillions sends you a letter askin' us to come and see him . . ." He glanced at his watch. ". . . in two hours."

For a moment Hutch looked frustrated, then he grinned wickedly. "Got it! He wants us to quit the force and set up a security network with us as its head."

"Put a cork in it, Hutch," Starsky responded sourly. "Betcha all he wants is for us to hassle some hooker who's into him with some dirty pictures." He reached over and lifted up a file folder. "Tell you what. You keep the rendezvous, I'll tie up some of the loose ends around here to keep Dobey happy. There's the Pitello case, for instance. When you get back we'll talk about it, okay?" He saw Hutch eye the folder he held and smiled to himself, knowing what was coming.

"The Pitello case, as you so grandly put it," Hutch said acidly, "is a rifled vegetable garden, and how the hell it ended up in Homicide I'd like to know."

Shaking his head, Starsky opened the file. "Just luck, partner, but you should see their daughter's peaches." He began to laugh.

Hutch stood up. "You let Minnie hear you talking sexist crap like that and you're gonna be minus a pair of nuts, big mouth. For that matter, any number of very independent lady cops, who shall remain nameless, will be glad to remove them."

The blue eyes twinkled, and Hutch leaned forward. "And if you lose your nuts, lover boy, whatcha gonna do on the weekends?"

A muffled snort from the other cop made Starsky turn bright red. He glared at Hutch. "With or without 'em I'm a better man than you, Gunga Din, so go meet with Mr. Phillip Kendall the Third. I'll work on somethin' really important."
"Tell you what," Hutch said in a conciliatory tone. "I'll nose around down in R&I and see if I can come up with anything in Kendall's background. If I can't find anything suspicious, then you come with me. If I do, then I'll go alone, okay?"

Starsky looked at Hutch intently, studying the even features. He knew he was going to give in to the big blond; didn't he always? Besides, he was curious enough himself to want to meet one of America's richest men. "Well, yeah. But you owe me lunch either way."

Shaking his head and muttering to himself, Hutch strode out of the squad room and down the hall. Starsky was about to say something to the other cop when the day watch began filling the squad room, followed by Captain Dobey.

"Lookin' good, Cap'n," Starsky said. "The new diet seems to be working." It was true, actually. Dobey looked as if he had lost twenty pounds.

To his utter surprise, Dobey stopped long enough to talk. "Get me the file on that suicide, Starsky. And if it isn't up to date, you've got exactly ten minutes to get it that way." He paused for breath. "Where's your partner?"

Starsky smiled sweetly. "Already down in R&I, sir, hard at work." He tossed the file onto the desk. "Take it away . . . but it's no suicide. This guy was murdered."

The captain stared at the detective. "You want the case?" he asked, picking up the file, scanning the single sheet inside. He slapped the folder shut. "Don't answer. I'm going to give it to Robbins and Garcia . . . any objections?"

Just then Starsky's phone rang, and he shook his head. Dobey went into his office and slammed the door.

Where the hell was Hutch? He'd been gone for an hour. Starsky tried to recall their conversation. He glanced at his watch. Kendall's note had said to be there by eleven, and it was now almost ten. He reached for the phone.

"Grab your jacket, pal," Hutch called from the doorway. "We don't want to keep the man waiting."

Starsky surveyed his partner. It was obvious what Hutch had been doing. He'd changed his tee shirt for a pale blue sport shirt, and his varsity jacket for his brown leather one.

"I see you're hoping to make a good impression," he said. He put the phone back in its cradle and grabbed his jacket, joining Hutch at the doorway.

Hutch patted his stomach. "So? What you got in your locker that'll make a difference? I keep telling you, Starsk, you should keep at least one good shirt and jacket in there . . . for occasions like this." He waved the envelope in front of Starsky, grinning.

That was it. For two cents he'd let Hutch go it alone. "And what's so damn special about this occasion? All we're gonna do is see what the hell Kendall wants. You . . . you sound like it's a blind date, or somethin'!"

Hutch paled, all humor draining away. He glanced around the suddenly silent squad room and jerked back, leaving Starsky feeling like a fool. He could imagine the comments if he went after Hutch, but wasn't up to facing the razzing he'd take if he stayed. "I'm gonna beat the hell out of you one of these days, you arrogant bastard," he said under his breath as he hurried down the hall.

He was almost to the steps when a pair of hands shot out and grabbed him. Hutch, eyes flashing in anger, drew him close. "One more remark like that and we're history, Sergeant Starsky! Or do you have a death
"Wish?" His fingers released Starsky's lapels and he was gone again, going down the steps two at a time.

"Hey! Hutch! Wait a sec, willya?" Starsky, shaken, closed the distance between them by running after his partner. "You know damn good and well what I meant - so why'd you take it personally? Hell, we used to be able to joke like that . . ."

There was probably more sense of loss in his voice than Starsky actually felt, because he saw Hutch slow down and turn around. Maybe Hutch felt it, too, and that was why he was so frigging mad.

He caught up with his partner, who said nothing, merely headed for the Torino. Starsky wanted desperately to taunt him about the impression he'd make on Kendall if the man saw that misbegotten rattletrap Hutch dared to call a car. A sense of self-preservation kept his mouth shut.

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It was almost eleven when they pulled into the parking lot across the street from the Kendall building. Starsky had to admit that the place certainly was beautiful, set in a mass of planters and fountains, with brilliant flowers bordering the courtyard. He noticed the crew of gardeners working to maintain its Disneyland appearance. Well-dressed people hurried up the walks, apparently eager to get to their appointments. He slid his glance back to Hutch. "Okay, you tell me why Kendall wants two cops to meet him here?" he asked softly.

"You've got a point," Hutch replied, his gaze narrowing as he drummed his fingertips on the Torino's door. "Incidentally, Kendall's clean . . . So's his old man, but I did find something out that surprised me. Kendall and his wife were divorced about a year ago . . . very hush-hush." He looked puzzled. "I thought they had one of those forever-type marriages."

"What's so unusual about a divorce? According to the Globe, the jet set changes partners all the time." He watched the sunlight stroke Hutch's hand, and swallowed.

"Nope. Not them. Sweethearts in college, never anything but pages and pages written about their domestic bliss. They got active in kids' charities after their son was born." Hutch pulled out his notepad, scanning the pages.

Starsky reached over and took it, grinning. "Phillip Kendall the Fourth? Even the pharaohs changed their names once in a while." He chuckled and handed the pad back. "One kid and they hadda name him after the old man . . . sheesh!"

Laughing, Hutch protested, "Yeah, but the kid won't have to have the family monogram changed, will he? The point I was making, pal, was that there wasn't a breath of scandal there. They're good people."

"Point taken." Starsky glanced at his watch. "Anyway, let's get this over." He got out of the car, locked it and took a deep breath of ocean air. "Must be nice to work by the beach, and look out at the ocean whenever you want."

He became acutely aware of Hutch standing almost behind him, hand on his back. "One of these days . . . maybe we can . . ."

It was enough. Starsky smiled, content. "Yeah, we've got lotsa time to think about that. Damn! The light's gonna change, c'mon!"

They dashed for the corner, and Starsky had just stepped off the curb when a battered old white truck came careening by, nearly taking off his foot. Starsky leaped back, shaking his fist and shouting, "Dumb ass! You . . . you . . .!"
Hutch grabbed the back of Starsky's jacket. "Take it easy! You were off the curb before the green." He
smiled at his partner. "That's why they teach you to look both ways."

"Thank you, Safety Sam," Starsky snarled, taking giant strides now that the light had changed. "I had the
distinct impression the guy wanted to make me a permanent cripple."

"You're getting paranoid," Hutch said as they ran up the steps. "We just don't meet enough nice people." He
went through the revolving door. "Besides, in ten minutes we'll know what's on Kendall's mind."

Starsky merely nodded as he read the registry. "There it is. Phillip Kendall Enterprises, sixth floor."

They rode to the sixth floor with several other people, then got out and walked down a long hall banked
with lush, potted plants and soft lighting. At the end of the hall was a pair of heavy doors, flanked by
planters filled with orchids and other exotica. A tiny fountain trickled into a mossy bucket.

"Maybe you should do something like this, Hutch," Starsky commented, grinning wickedly. "Can't cost
much."

Beside him Hutch whistled under his breath. "Tacky, isn't it? God, talk about ostentation."

Gratified, Starsky pushed the door open and waved his partner in. There, seated directly in front of them at a
battleship-sized desk, was a neatly dressed and coifed older woman. She stared at them over very large
glasses. "I presume you are Mr. Starsky and Mr. Hutchinson?" she said, in a quiet voice.

Hutch was immediately on his best behavior. "That's correct, ma'am. I'm Mr. Hutchinson, and this is my
partner, Mr. Starsky. We have an eleven o'clock appointment with Mr. Kendall." His eyes were wide
and guileless.

She thawed, just as Starsky had known she would. Hutch brought out the mother in certain types. "My name
is Minnie Silversmith, and there will be a short wait while Mr. Kendall speaks with his partner. Help
yourselves to coffee." She pointed over to where a large silver urn and real china cups sat on an antique
buffet. Real cream and sugar lumps were in matching servers.

Both men helped themselves, then sat down on a plush leather couch piled with bright suede cushions.
"Hmm, I might move in," Starsky said, his good humor restored. "The guy knows how to decorate a waiting
room." He looked around, noting more of the planters filled with orchids and ferns. He leaned toward
Hutch. "Did you tell me how they made their money?"

Hutch sipped his coffee, then flashed a big grin. "Fertilizer. Believe it or not, pal, the old man made millions
with steer manure. But sonny boy's gone in for the chemical stuff."

Instantly Starsky was on the alert. "You mean stuff that poisons the earth?" His eyes narrowed in anger.

"Shhh! No. Kendall's one of the new breed that's trying to save the planet, not ruin it. He's bankrolling some
experimental land restitution projects over in Europe." Hutch smiled. "I keep telling you, he's the guy in the
white hat, riding the white horse."

But Starsky didn't smile back. "Nobody's that perfect, Hutch," he said, looking his partner in the eye.
"'Cause if that's the case, why are we here?"

Hutch let out a breath, arched his eyebrows, and shrugged. But before he could reply, the secretary
approached them. Away from her massive desk she was all of five feet tall. "Mr. Kendall will see you now,
gentlemen. Please follow me."
They trailed along like two schoolboys. Minnie opened another set of beautifully carved doors, then stood to one side. Her features were inscrutable, but there was mischief in her eyes.

"Mr. Kendall. Your eleven o'clock appointment, Mr. Starsky and Mr. Hutchinson." With that, she closed the doors behind them.

Both men stood and stared, a grin spreading over Starsky's face. Phillip Kendall's private office was small, with plain, worn furniture. Piles of papers covered most flat surfaces, and an old coffee urn, stainless, sat on top of the filing cabinet. Alongside it was a large box of Winchell's doughnuts. Hutch thought the place was rather like headquarters.

But the man behind the desk studying them was obviously not like his surroundings. Phillip Kendall the Third belonged on the cover of GQ, with handsome, regular features and beautifully cut hair a little darker blond than Hutch's. Large, very dark blue eyes set in the tanned face were grave, yet unswerving. A long-fingered hand gestured for them to find seats.

"You're punctual, I appreciate that." The voice was soft. As the two detectives stared at him, he smiled briefly. "I know . . . you're wondering about the office." A shrug of the expensive jacket. "This was where my dad spent his later years. I couldn't bear to change anything. It always reminds me of how far we've come since my grandfather started the business."

Starsky cleared his throat. "If you don't mind my asking, why's the outer office so much . . . ah . . ." He spread his hands, palms up.

A genuine smile made Kendall come to life. "That's all Pete's idea. He quite rightly said that since we are in the fertilizer business, I shouldn't have my offices look like we can't grow grass."

He paused. "Oh, Pete is Peter Devereaux, my partner. He does all the hard work for the firm." The chitchat ceased suddenly, and Kendall lapsed into a gloomy silence, glancing nervously at his watch.

"Mr. Kendall, you sent us this letter . . . why?" Hutch asked quietly, as if sensing the man's unhappiness. "What seems to be the problem?"

 Abruptly, Kendall got to his feet, to pace around the small office. "Coffee? Doughnuts? Help yourselves." Just as suddenly, he went to the filing cabinet and brought out two folders, placing them on the desk. His expression was grim. "I need your help in the worst way, but I must have your word that you won't involve anyone else. You were recommended to me by someone whose judgment I value." He looked at each detective, then said, "You must help me."

Starsky, still suspicious, stated bluntly, "We don't make deals, Mr. Kendall. Hutch 'n' me won't do anything illegal, either . . ." His voice trailed away, and he smiled. "At least not until we know what's bothering you." He glanced at Hutch, who was nodding his agreement. Leaning forward, he added, "Besides, we're small potatoes. Surely you don't expect us to screw around with some big corporation."

Kendall held up his hand. "If I had that kind of problem, I have any number of people on my staff who could help." His voice faltered, then steadied, as he sat down. He opened the thicker of the two files, bringing out a picture of a woman. After staring at it for a long moment, he handed it to Hutch. "This is - was - my wife, Reina. I want you to find her."

The woman was beautiful: heavy waves of blonde hair framed a perfect, vivacious face. One slender arm held an oversized teddy bear, the other rested lovingly on a toddler with a head of cotton-white hair. It was obvious Reina Kendall was a happy woman.
Starsky took the picture. "I heard that you and your wife got divorced. How come you want us to find her all of a sudden?" His eyes had narrowed, his tone holding a slight edge.

The detectives looked up to see Kendall's face blanch, his knuckles tighten as he lifted out another photo. This one he handed to Starsky, exchanging it for the one of Reina.

"Because I have every reason to believe my ex-wife has taken Flip . . . and disappeared." He buried his face in his hands for a moment, then said dully, "This past year I was awarded full custody of my son, and she threatened then to kidnap him. Now he's gone, and I received this . . ."

"When did he disappear?" interrupted Hutch, glancing at Starsky, who still sat staring at the snapshot. Hutch held out his hand and took the photo, puzzled by his partner's expression.

But when he saw the boy in the picture, he knew. A gangly kid of about nine, very fair, with a chipmunk smile, grinned up at him. One knee sported a nasty-looking scab, and his tee shirt announced to the world that he had been to Marineland; other than that, Flip Kendall the Fourth, heir to millions, looked like thousands of other nine-year-olds. Including himself at that age.

"When did he disappear?" Kendall repeated the question in a whisper, his expression bleak. "Sunday, between ten and noon. Flip's on a soccer team, and during the week I make it a point to pick him up so I can watch him practice. It's something I've been doing for the last few months. But Sunday's game day, and we make it a big affair. He and I always go somewhere after the game - win or lose - just because we need the time together. Until yesterday I've always been able to spend the whole day with him." He swallowed a sip of coffee before continuing. "Yesterday, though, something developed at our Rome office - a foul-up - and I had to leave the game to talk to them. In fact I'm sending Peter over there this afternoon."

"Yeah," prompted Starsky, "but what happened yesterday?" Kendall's blue eyes dulled with some inner pain. "I sent Pete to wait for him, then bring him back to the office after the game . . . But when Pete got to the park . . ."

"Which park?" Hutch interrupted, hating what he was thinking about parks and little kids, and how the news was almost never good.

"Drake Park. It's not far from Flip's school. Reina and I used to take him there when he was a baby. There's never been any trouble there, if that's what you're thinking." But the shadows under Kendall's eyes belied his words.

Starsky heaved a huge sigh, then got to his feet, lightly brushing Hutch's shoulder on his way over to the window. "Are you certain he simply didn't go home with another kid? He's at the age when contacts like that are awfully important." His glance slid over to Hutch. "Maybe he misses his mom."

Kendall replaced the pictures in their folders. "Not on Sunday. He and I always made a big thing out of our special day. He misses her on other occasions, but not on Sundays."

"There's more, isn't there?" Hutch asked. "You mentioned receiving something. What is it?" He watched as Kendall drew a piece of paper very carefully from an envelope, painstakingly touching only the outer edge.

"Here," Kendall said. "This was at my house last night. I've no idea when it was delivered." The vulnerability of the man struck both Starsky and Hutch at the same time.

The note was a simple demand for ransom. "One hundred thousand dollars to be left at the marina at six a.m. Monday morning." Starsky stared at Hutch, then asked, "You've already paid this?"
"Of course I paid it. What choice did I have?" It was apparent that Kendall's control was crumbling. "Flip's life, surely you understand . . ."

Starsky read on. "It also says that after payment they'd call you an hour later and let you know where he was . . . Did they contact you again?" He heard Hutch suck in a deep breath as they waited for an answer.

"No . . ." came the whisper. "But there's something not quite right, either, something I can't put my finger on . . ." Kendall looked up. "I'm sure you know that feeling. If only I could think straight!"

Starsky took back the picture of Flip, once again staring at the immature features. Glancing up at Hutch, he smiled. "Looks a lot like those old photos of you, all teeth and legs." Then he frowned. "Did that scab on his knee leave a scar? It looks sorta deep."

Kendall studied Starsky approvingly. "Yes, as a matter of fact it did. It's pale now, but he still has it. He banged it on some coral when we were in Hawaii . . . That's one reason he's not crazy about swimming."

Hutch decided to get to the point, before Kendall either changed his mind or broke down completely. "Why did you wait until now to contact the police? And why in such a roundabout way? You said something's not quite right. Your son's missing, you've paid a huge ransom, yet you want us to look for your wife. The longer you play games with us, the colder this trail's gonna be. What makes you think this isn't a simple kidnapping for profit?"

He settled back in his chair, content now to let Kendall do the talking. Beside him, Starsky sat, a solid, comforting presence. Hutch sensed the same impatience he himself felt.

Kendall leaned forward across the desk, his eyes glittering, and took back the note. "Because I still think Reina took him. He's not the kind of kid to go off with strangers. Because we are wealthy we've always warned him about danger . . . he's a smart kid. But he'd go with his mother, if she told him it was important. He's all mixed up right now." He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, sweat glistening on his forehead.

But Hutch refused to let go. "Frankly, Mr. Kendall, your public image has always held that you and your wife had one of those made-in-heaven marriages. That picture you showed us of your wife and son, it's hard to believe she'd steal her own flesh and blood just to get money." Hutch looked out the window at the blue sky, then let his gaze drift around the cluttered room. All pretense of amity dropped away as he said, "Are you going to tell us why you believe she's capable of something like kidnapping?"

He felt Starsky tense, saw his hands begin to move toward the chair arms. "You told us something wasn't right. What's wrong with your wife?" Hutch knew something was definitely wrong - but what was it?

Angrily, Kendall glared at Hutch, then Starsky, then opened the top folder again. This time the picture he took out was tossed onto the desk, and Starsky immediately snared it.

"Shit," he said softly, then leaned sideways to share the picture with Hutch. "Look at this, willya?"

The woman in the snapshot was Reina Kendall, the fine bones and coloring attesting to that, but where once glowing health had been, now there was deeply shadowed illness. Where her lovely face had shone with happiness, there was instead bleak misery and defiance. Hell shone in the depths of the blue eyes.

Hutch didn't need to ask the cause. "How long has she been this way?" he asked, fighting back memories of his own hell.

Kendall's manner was brusque. "You've guessed. It's drugs. I sent her over to Italy a couple of years ago for a vacation. She'd been working too hard. End of story . . . she came back an addict." His voice turned bitter.
"She never told me why."

"So you divorced her?" Starsky asked, obviously disapproving.

The blond head shook in denial. "Actually, no. The divorce was her idea. I never wanted it. There are any
number of treatment centers where she could have gone. But she was afraid Flip would find out and he'd
come to hate her. She didn't even ask for visiting privileges, but I saw to it that he spent a lot of time with
her."

The bitterness was back. "Eventually I went to court to get full custody, but she could have seen him any
time she wanted." His gaze was hard and resentful now, and he lowered his head. "I would have given her
everything she wanted, but not Flip. Not while she was in that condition."

Suddenly, Hutch wanted to leave. Wanted to get out in the fresh air, wanted Starsky to reassure him that
things were all right. But until they got the truth from Kendall, they'd be stuck in this cluttered office with
this desperately unhappy man.

"So, why do you think she took him?" he asked. "And if she did, why the money? Surely, with California's
community property settlement, your ex is a rich woman. And if she needed cash, why not ask you for an
advance?" Hutch noticed Kendall's frown. "What's the matter?"

"It's the amount of the ransom that's suspicious," Kendall explained. "I'm wealthy enough, and would
certainly pay any amount to get my son back. So why would a kidnapper ask for such a small sum?"

"Maybe one hundred thou seems like a hell of a lot of money to certain people," Starsky said bluntly.
"Maybe that seemed like enough to last a lifetime in, say, Mexico or Guatemala." His hostility was back,
and the look he gave Hutch said it all: What the hell do millionaires know about reality?

Kendall's face turned red, but he refused to give an inch. "Think what you want, Sergeant, but all that
amount meant to me was that Reina needed it to buy drugs. She's always wanted to live in Mexico - why I
don't know - but that amount, together with her settlement, would buy her the life she wants... and she'd
have Flip to make certain I kept on sending her money."

His features seemed etched in stone, and Hutch saw why Kendall was such a successful businessman. When
met with resistance, he erected barriers no one could scale... those of position and wealth.

Starsky wasn't buying it. He shook his head, his own expression matching Kendall's. He took a pen from his
jacket pocket and began tapping it on the battered desk, its tattoo slightly unnerving. Hutch managed to keep
from smiling. The master was on stage, and he wanted to see what happened.

"So, in other words," Starsky stated very slowly, "you're tryin' to sell us on the fact that your ex-wife - a
drug addict - went to the park, stole your son, collected the ransom, then went to Mexico in order to stay
stoned the rest of her life? Just a few minutes ago you said she insisted on a divorce because she didn't want
the boy to grow up hating her. Ya know what, Mr. Kendall, I don't believe Reina Kendall took Flip and
made for the border."

He put the pen away, and got to his feet. "C'mon, partner, for some reason I don't think Mr. Kendall is
telling us all he knows."

"Not just yet, Starsky." Hutch got to his feet and stared down at Kendall. "We're overlooking somebody we
definitely need to talk to before we make a decision. Don't you agree, Mr. Kendall? You're so hung up on
the idea it's your wife, you're leaving out your partner." His glance flickered to Starsky. "Remember, Mr.
Pete Devereaux? The guy who was supposed to pick the boy up?"

"Ya know what bothers me, Mr. Kendall? Hutch got your letter this morning, but you're tellin' us Flip disappeared yesterday. The post office is closed on Sunday . . ." His head tilted as he watched Kendall.

Hutch snapped his fingers. "You're right!" He dug the letter out of his jacket pocket and studied the front. "No postmark. Damn! I didn't even think to look for one because it was in with my mail. Delivery service, right?" He turned back to stare at the wry millionaire, who merely nodded.

"Okay, so now we know how I got the message. You still haven't told us if your partner is here or not. You told us he went to pick up Flip at Drake Park, but the boy wasn't there. What did Devereaux do next?"

His demeanor now decidedly chilly, Kendall entered another number. "Pete? You about ready to leave? Good. Will you come to my office before you go? I'd like you to meet a couple of people. Thanks." Kendall hung up, then buttoned his shirt and fixed his tie.

"Leave for where?" Starsky asked, getting to his feet and rifling through the doughnuts. He chose a big cruller and sat back down, munching in pleasure at the taste. He winked at Hutch, but didn't offer to share. Hutch merely shook his head. Kendall didn't bother to reply, or hadn't heard the question.

A couple of minutes later there was a tap on the door, and it opened to reveal a tall, slender, rather young man with dark, neatly trimmed hair and piercing dark eyes. His suit was definitely tailor-made, and in one hand he carried an expensive briefcase. He looked the two detectives over with no interest, then turned to Kendall. "You just caught me. I'm leaving on the 1:53 flight."

Kendall nodded. "Pete, I'd like you to meet Mr. Starsky and Mr. Hutchinson. I've hired them to help me find Flip. Gentlemen, this is my partner, Peter Devereaux."

Devereaux frowned, even as he shook each man's hand. "Nice to meet you. But, Phil, I thought you said Reina had Flip with her? Are you saying you don't know where he is?" He was obviously bewildered.

Without wasting time, Hutch offered Devereaux his chair. "We'd like to ask you a couple of questions, Mr. Devereaux. It'll only take a few minutes. You'll have plenty of time to catch your plane."

Still puzzled, Devereaux sat down, now looking quite worried. "Why haven't you gone to the police, Phil?" he asked. "You've had no word at all?"

"None," Kendall replied, "except this." He handed the note over to his partner.

Before either detective could move, Devereaux had taken the note and scanned it, not careful what his fingerprints touched. When told, he flushed, quickly handing the note to Starsky, who said nothing.

"I'm sorry. Didn't think," he muttered.

"It's probably not important," Kendall said, "but your answers are. Then it's off to Rome with you."

Hutch glanced quickly at Starsky, who nodded, then took out his notebook and pencil. "What were Mr. Kendall's instructions to you, Mr. Devereaux? Try and recall his exact words, if you will. Don't be afraid to go back and correct any statement you make." Hutch's voice was calm and reassuring, his manner open.

Devereaux fished in his coat pocket, bringing out a lighter and a pack of cigarettes, lighting one. He blew
out a thin stream of smoke. "Well, as Phil's probably told you, Sunday's his day to take Flip to his soccer game. Only yesterday, after the game had started, we had some trouble in our Rome office. Trouble only he could straighten out, so he asked me to go to the park, wait until the game was over, then bring Flip back to the office."

"You often work on Sundays, Mr. Devereaux?" Starsky asked quietly.

Devereaux smiled ruefully. "More often than you might think for an executive officer. Anyway, when I notified Phil about the impending storm in our Rome offices . . ."

"How did you know where to find him?" Starsky interrupted.

Devereaux never wavered. "Obviously you don't know how devoted Phil is to Flip. Sunday is soccer at Drake Park. They're there. It's a given." He shrugged, inhaling deeply on his cigarette. He held the smoke in his lungs a moment before exhaling. "To continue, Phil asked if I'd go over and wait for the kid. I said I would."

Hutch said to Kendall, "But you didn't wait for your partner to actually arrive before you left for the office." Kendall shook his head, his expression haunted.

Devereaux stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray. "The park isn't that far away, but there was this huge traffic jam at the intersection of Miller and Sweetbriar - some damn fool had lost a load of syrup or something. Anyway, I was tied up for a good twenty minutes." He glanced at Kendall. "I'm so sorry."

"It was molasses. I saw it on the news last night," Starsky said to Hutch before continuing. "So you were delayed. What time did you actually get to the park?"

The younger man stared down at his hands. "I think it was about 11:30. The game was just over and everyone was milling around the park." Dark eyes were reliving a private nightmare. "There were kids everywhere. I didn't - couldn't find him."

"But people remembered him being there, right?" asked Starsky, picking up the picture of Flip and staring at it.

Devereaux hesitated. "It took me a few minutes to find his two best friends. They remembered Flip running off the field the minute the game was over. He was headed for the john."

There was silence in the room while the detectives put their heads together. "You wanna ask this jerk any more questions?" Starsky asked. "We're gettin' nowhere."

"Just a couple, pal, then we'll leave," Hutch replied. "I don't like it, either. C'mon, let me do the talking."

They separated, Hutch going to Devereaux, Starsky taking a seat and getting out his notepad again.

"Had you picked up Flip before? I mean, you could identify his friends, so it seems a reasonable assumption . . ." Hutch's manner was friendly.

Devereaux smiled. "Actually, I've played chauffeur on more than one occasion for Flip and his buddies." He looked toward Kendall. "Sometimes it was to Phil's for a pool party. Others it was to the beach, or Disneyland. I enjoyed it as much as the kids." His mood changed abruptly, and he clenched his fists. "But this time Flip was gone . . . disappeared like a puff of smoke."

The muscles in Hutch's jaw tightened, and he said, "No. Not smoke. Flip's real, not someone's fantasy. He's around somewhere, and we'll do our best to find him." His tone changed. "There's just one more question,
Mr. Devereaux. Why, when you couldn't locate the boy, didn't you call his father?"

Devereaux looked bewildered; even Kendall's eyebrows shot up at the question. "Why? Well, I had no way of knowing if perhaps Phil had changed his mind and taken Flip with him. I never suspected anything was actually wrong until I called Phil later on and found out Flip wasn't with him."

"Did you suggest that he call the cops then?" Starsky asked.

"I most certainly did. I still think he should. What in God's name can two private investigators do in a city this size? No offense, gentlemen." Devereaux's eyes flashed with concern.

"First, they find my ex-wife," said Kendall grimly. "Then we'll see what's to be done. She has to have him. Who else . . .?" Kendall turned away so no one would see the tears.

Instantly, Devereaux was on his feet, gripping his partner's shoulder. "Phil? Do you want me to stay here? I mean, the Rome deal can always be settled next week. I don't have to go."

Kendall got to his feet. "Yes, you do. We can't afford to lose any more time on this merger. I don't want Alta Bena Products to offer something Fiorenzi can't resist." He turned to Starsky and Hutch. "I must tell you that Peter's about to close the biggest deal that Kendall Enterprises has ever made. He's built up the European offices to where our name is known in every town. I trust him implicitly."

The look that passed between Starsky and Hutch was one of understanding. Hutch relaxed enough to smile when Devereaux lifted his briefcase and made a face. "Ugh. These papers weigh a ton. I'll be glad when there's some other way to handle business transactions this big." He faced Kendall. "If you need me . . . I'll catch the next flight back." He glanced at his watch.

"I know. Flight 606. Predictable man . . . always takes the same flight. Get going. I'm counting on you."

They watched as Devereaux hurried out of the room. It was very quiet. Starsky got to his feet, joining Hutch as he faced Kendall.

"I've one question that's bothering me a lot," Hutch said. "If you trust your partner as much as it seems, why didn't you tell him we were cops? Why'd you let him think we were private investigators?"

Starsky nodded, then asked, "You said someone you trusted recommended us. But we work Homicide. Our captain isn't likely to pull us off our cases, especially if you keep insisting your wife took your son."

Kendall paled. "When it comes to my son, I don't know who to trust, Sergeant. Do you?"

"We'll do what we can. In the meantime, if you hear or think of anything that might be important, call us at this number. No police, but a very reliable contact." Hutch handed him the card from The Pits, with Huggy's private number on the back.

"Under no circumstances share that number with anyone else, Mr. Kendall," Starsky said. "We don't want him getting hurt if things get rough."

"Rough? My God, do you actually believe my boy's in real danger?" Kendall's face became haggard with fear. "Reina would never, never hurt him. Surely, you're wrong."

But Starsky didn't spare Kendall. "All I can say, sir, is that you better pray that your son's with his mother. And we'll do what we can." He half-pushed Hutch out the door, leaving Phillip Kendall the Third, a very powerful man, sitting alone in his office. The look on his face was one of total helplessness.
Starsky and Hutch shared a bench at the local Taco Shack, comparing notes to present to Dobey. Starsky, sunglasses pushed high on his curls, talked around mouthfuls of food. "I don't like it. I don't like it one damn bit, Hutch. This whole scene stinks . . . and why you 'n' me are even thinking about helping this bozo, I don't know." Starsky, in his frustration, had eaten as if there was no tomorrow. Two chili dogs and a taco had disappeared in record time. Now checking his watch, he got to his feet.

Hutch, barely hungry, gulped his second cup of coffee, a half-eaten steak sandwich on his paper plate. Limp fries glistening with ketchup sat untouched. "Do you think the boy's dead?" he asked quietly. "Or do you think he's being held for more ransom?"

Starsky wiped his mouth and smiled sadly at his partner. "You aren't gonna let go, are you? Damn dog with a bone. I'm telling you, Hutch, this guy's poison, and so's this case. How the hell are we gonna explain this to Dobey? And we are going to tell him, aren't we? Please tell me we are." He struggled to pull out his wallet. "Waste of money tryin' to keep you healthy," he grumbled. "Get a doggy bag and I'll take it home." He looked up suddenly, alarmed by Hutch's silence. "Hey! Amigo . . . you in there, or did you leave when my back was turned?"

"You never shut up, do you?" Hutch said, grinning. "If you weren't so damn good-looking, I'd get a new partner . . . one like Hugo." But he wrapped his food in napkins, and asked for a box while Starsky paid the bill. Together they strode out to the Torino.

"Back to Metro, Starsky, so we can find out what the hell to do. It's been twenty-four hours so the FBI can be called in . . . if . . . if. Dammit to hell!" Hutch swore, pushing his sunglasses down hard on the bridge of his nose. "I'd like to strangle the sonofabitch who gave him our names!" He looked over at Starsky, who wore an expression as glum as his own. "And yes, you can come over to my place tonight, depending on what Dobey says."

Hutch opened the door and slid onto the seat. Starsky, eyes bright, was mercifully silent.

Ensenada's air was warm, its sun sending slanting rays of gold across the patio of a small, white bungalow. A scarlet bougainvillea burned in the noon light, screening the windows from anyone who dallied on the dusty street. In the front yard, a blonde woman sat offering herself to the sun, while not far away a swarthy weasel of a man sat counting a roll of bills.

"You got any more beer?" he asked in a slight accent. It was apparent that he drifted back and forth across the border when the occasion demanded it. Thick grey hair protected his head from the heat.

The blonde lifted her head, eyes hidden behind huge sunglasses. "You pay for it, you can have it," she said coolly, voice slurred. "When are you going to let us go?" There was contempt in her tone.

The man shrugged, getting to his feet. He came close, leaning over her, his glance washing slowly over her hair. "For what you're getting paid - Mrs. Kendall - you could afford to be nicer." He pronounced her name with tremendous sarcasm.

"Watch your mouth!" she snapped, rising from her chair, her slim body glistening with oil. "All I want to do is get out of here." She slumped as she turned toward him. "Hasn't it been long enough? Can't you take him back now? Please . . . I'm frightened."

"Señora, you are being well paid for what you are doing," he said silkily as he reached out and snared her
wrist; in his other hand he held a tiny packet. He watched her expression change. "Ah, si, that's what's wrong. Come on, and soon you'll forget your unhappiness. When the chico awakes, feed him, then we'll see that he sleeps again."

She began trembling. "You're going to kill him, aren't you? God, I never thought this would happen." But she stared hungrily at the packet. As the front door slammed on the two of them, a child cried out fretfully.

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Starsky and Hutch watched the sunset together, arms around each other. Dinner had been hastily consumed, its only consolation a slice of black-bottom pie for Starsky. Chez Helene never was at a loss for rich desserts.

But when they had climbed the stairs to Hutch's apartment and settled down on the couch, Starsky's first words were, "So, any other ideas, Sergeant?"

Hutch shrugged. "Nope. Just because we can't find her doesn't mean she's left the country. Someone as socially prominent as Reina Kendall - divorced or not - simply doesn't disappear. Unless there's foul play."

"Don't be so naïve," Starsky said, his eyes hard. "I think she's in Mexico . . . and that she's paid a lot for a trail of silence. Sometimes, poor people protect the rich, especially if they think they're being hounded by someone richer." He reached over and ruffled Hutch's hair. "And if it's a mother and her kid, and they're blond and beautiful . . ." He shrugged. "What can the heart do, señor?"

Hutch captured the roving fingers and held them tightly. "Nice try, partner, but despite how naïve I sound, I don't believe she snatched her son." Hutch drew Starsky closer, settling the dark head on his chest. "What have we found out so far? Reina Kendall has always been a wonderful mother, and that she and her husband had a marvelous marriage."

He dropped a light kiss on Starsky's curls. "Family, Starsk. They were a real family, until she became an addict and . . . I still don't think she'd risk Flip's life by dragging him down to some god-awful place . . . just for more money."

Starsky sighed, then raised himself away from Hutch. "One thing you're overookin', Hutch. What if she had no choice? What if she only wanted the dough, and found somebody to help her? Only that someone had his own plans, and they didn't include returning the kid without a helluva lot more money changin' hands. Don't you see?" He grabbed Hutch by the shoulders. "I didn't want to say more in front of Kendall, but what if he doesn't get Flip back? Or his wife? He's still nuts about her, or didn't you notice?"

Giving in to such persuasion, Hutch got to his feet. "I noticed. Look, make me happy. Let's go down to the marina and see if the Kendalls' yacht is still at its mooring."

Starsky sighed. "Well, only if you agree to make me happy when we get back," he said. "Dobey's definitely unhappy about this mess, 'n' you and I both know that good as we are, there's no way we can handle this case without Metro's facilities."

"Yeah," Hutch retorted, "and I know damned well you're going to push me into his office, because I'm his 'fair-haired boy.' Except you and I both know what a bunch of bullshit that is!" He strapped on his holster, then put his plaid jacket on over it.

Laughing, Starsky pulled on his own jacket. "So we know it. Just so long as Dobey keeps makin' allowances for you, I don't care. Now, come on." His grin became a leer. "The ocean always makes you horny as hell."

"Oh, shut up! You don't know what you're talkin' about!" Red-faced, Hutch closed and locked the door, then
followed Starsky down the stairs, admiring the view all the way.

In the few minutes it took them to get to the marina the sun had sunk even lower, gilding the ripples and wave caps with fire. Hutch got out of the Torino and stretched his arms. "God, get a whiff of that! This is where I want to spend my dotage."

Starsky eyed him as if he'd lost his mind. "Figures. The tide's out . . . smells like the alley behind Huggy's place. But this is where you want to end up."

He was ignored. Hutch was watching the lithe young woman busily waxing the teak railing on her speedboat. "Yep. Good neighbors, fresh air . . . you could live to be a hundred down here."

Starsky made a face. "Dream on, lover boy." He stepped between Hutch and the view. "The only way you're gonna see one hundred is if we move in together, right? Otherwise, fftt!" He pantomimed a slit throat.

"Sure, partner," Hutch said, smiling sweetly. "You 'n' me, and a sixty-footer. Sounds great, doesn't it?" His blue eyes held a challenge.

But Starsky refused to be suckered in. He glanced at his watch. "There's only about an hour of daylight left, so let's get going. What's the name of their boat?"

"KAMA, I think. A cabin cruiser . . . sleeps at least ten. Kendall swears Reina didn't take it, but admits he never even thought to check." Hutch made a face. "Must be really tough, not knowing if your yacht's moored or not."

They were on their second pier when Starsky spotted the yacht; it was very large, very sleek, with the name KAMA stenciled in large letters across her bow. They could see no one on deck, but as they approached a burly man emerged from nowhere and yelled, "Hey! Where do you think you're going?" His bulk was awesome, and for his size he moved with surprising speed. "Nobody's allowed on the pier 'lessen I see they got permission."

Starsky and Hutch thought fast, deciding that discretion was the better part of annihilation. "Take it easy," Hutch said calmly. "All we want to know is if Mrs. Kendall's been here in the last day or so." He brought out the snapshot of Reina Kendall and showed it to the clearly suspicious watchdog.

"Hunh!" the man grunted. "That's an old picture. You musta not seen her lately." He turned beady eyes on them both. "What ya want with her, anyway?"

Hutch made a prissy face. "Well, we represent Fuller and Fuller . . . the entertainment insurance company? And we heard that Reina was going to have this really big party on the KAMA, so my partner and I have to check out the boat because she wants special, one-night insurance." Hutch's eyebrows rose a shade and he sniffed. "Lots of damage done at some of these bashes . . . can't be too careful." He turned to face Starsky. "Dave, you remember that awful mess over on the three-master last month?" His mouth pursed and he shook his head.

For a minute, Starsky looked as if he would burst out laughing, but then he cleared his throat and said, "Oh, yes, we took a big loss on that, didn't we?" He leaned toward the now-wary bruiser and confided, "Imagine. They took down one of the masts and used it for a bonfire. Nasty business, can't have that happen again."

The guard took a step backward just as Hutch said, "By the way, sir, if you're interested in marine insurance, we'd be glad to stop by some night and check out . . . What did you say your name was?" He smiled, a vague, friendly smile.

"Name's George," the guard said slowly, still not convinced but weakening. "And you two gotta be mistaken
about the KAMA. She's being outfitted for a voyage. Leaving in the next few days."

Starsky leaped on the news like a dog on a bone. "Really? What's the destination?"

"Is Reina taking it out by herself?" Hutch asked in all innocence. He studied the yacht. "It seems so large for one person."

George slapped his leg, thinking these two twinks were about as seawise as a dairy farmer. "Lookit the size of that baby. You think one little slip of a lady is gonna manage all the work on board? KAMA's got a crew. Besides . . ." His amusement was gone, his eyes narrowed. "The lady ain't been around here for weeks." He folded his arms across his chest, an immovable obstacle. "You ain't getting on that boat, no matter what. Not unless Mr. Kendall or Mr. Devereaux says so."

Starsky decided to use another tactic. He pulled out the snapshot of Flip Kendall, offering it to George. "Can you tell us if the kid's been seen around . . . anytime in the last twenty-four hours? Please."

George's face turned almost purple and he drew himself up, shaking his thick fingers under their noses as he backed them away from the boat. "So that's your real game! Well, don't ever let me catch either one of you around any of the kids on the piers. What kind of perverts are you, anyhow?"

Hutch held up his hand, his affected mannerisms gone. "Just hang on, George. If you've seen Flip . . ." He was hauled off his feet and pushed against Starsky, who automatically grabbed him.

"No! No more questions!" George roared. "Just you stay away from the kids . . . or I'll rip your hearts out!"

"I think he means it, Hutch, so why don't we forget about insurance right now?" Starsky's expression was neutral, but there was a dangerous light in his eyes as he helped his partner up; he was torn between annoyance and the need to keep the investigation low-profile. "I wouldn't try anything like that again, George. Guys like us turn mean real easy. You catch my drift?"

George sized Starsky up, then shifted his gaze to Hutch. No doubt he had felt the gun hidden under his jacket when he had shoved him. "Yeah. Get outta here. But I'm gonna keep my eyes peeled for you guys from now on."

"Shit. That was a close call," Starsky said sourly. "I've seem Dobermans with better dispositions."

Hutch rubbed a hand over his neck. "That guy is one very large muscle," he said, "with a low tolerance for trespassers."

They left the dock, ordered coffee from an all-night beach shack, and sat morosely in the Torino.

"Might as well admit it, pal," Starsky said. "If Dobey says no-go on this case, we're gonna have to let it go. I keep thinking about that poor kid, and what's happenin' to him. Hutch, we have to find him . . . before . . . you know . . ."

"Yeah. Time's the last thing on our side. Maybe we should try and persuade Dobey now, huh?" Hutch drained the last of the muddy liquid from his cup. He smiled apologetically at Starsky's grim expression. "We'll have to postpone our happy hour for tonight, at least. The kid's safety comes first."

Nodding, Starsky got out his car keys. "Yeah. Starsky's 'Torino Tour to the Stars' just ran out of gas." In seconds the red car was roaring toward the west side.

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Night had fallen in Ensenada, bringing with it breezes both languid and cool. Dozens of yellow lights sparkled on the main street; neon signs announced the best food, the prettiest girls, the freshest fish. *Turistas* crowded the streets, mariachi bands serenading their passing.

Only a few blocks from the merriment all was silent. In the small bungalow, a candle flickered on a plate, the only illumination. The blonde woman, her expression vacant, sat on a rickety couch. After a moment she got unsteadily to her feet and walked into the only bedroom, to gaze down at the figure of a sturdy blond boy. From his sprawled position it was obvious he'd been drugged. She stared for long moments, then smoothed back the tousled hair, feeling his forehead with gentle fingers. Then she began pacing the room, finally leaving and closing the door behind her.

She picked up a pack of Kents and lit one in the candle's flame, resuming her restless pacing, pausing to listen for something out of doors. Suddenly, she stopped, slipped into a sweater, and grabbed her purse. She opened the front door, leaving the bungalow as quietly as possible. She hadn't taken ten steps when a figure emerged from the shadows, pulling her back.

"Sorry, *Señora* Kendall, but you mustn't leave right now. I have my orders." There was scorn in the way he spoke.

Biting her lip, she turned obediently, making no fuss. She closed the door behind her to bar the man's way. But he made no effort to follow her, nor did he watch her when she began to disrobe without pulling down the bamboo shade. A moment later she went into the tiny bathroom and turned on the water to take a shower.

While the water was running, another figure loomed in the dark, joining the first. The two men spoke in whispers, then the visitor drifted away, getting into a car and speeding out of sight. The first man resumed his watch, lighting a cigarette.

"Ricardo? You still out there?" came a soft question from the bungalow.

He grinned, stubbed out the cigarette, and walked to where she stood in the doorway. Her hands twisted nervously; she smelled of soap and bath powder. Her hair was backlit by the candle, giving it a halo effect.

"Ricardo, I'm going to have a lot of money very soon . . . please help me. I'll give you half of it if you'll let the boy go. He doesn't look right, you know?" She pressed against the screen in her anxiety.

Ricardo pushed his hands against the screen at about breast height. "Keep your money, *mamacita,*" he said, "you're gonna need it. Besides, in another day or two we'll all be very rich. As for the *muchacho*, he's not going to die - you'll see."

She began to sniffle, wiping her nose, so he said, "Poor *rubia*, are you sick? And so soon after the last one?" His expression and tone hardened as he took his hands away from the screen. "Too bad. There's nothing more until *mañana*, *chica*, so go to bed."

She shuddered, holding back a sob. "Ricardo . . . you and I . . . we could . . ." Her eyes were huge in the pale oval of her face.

He spat on the ground. "You and I? A man could cut himself on your bones. Go to bed, *puta.*" Laughing, he strolled back to his station, losing himself immediately in the shadows.

"Go to hell, you lowlife!" she cried out, this time slamming the door behind her. The candle guttered and went out.

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Starsky lay in bed, half-awake, contemplating life at sea and lazily trying to think about its advantages. So far the only one was having Hutch all to himself, tempting enough for a while, but after that? He smiled, seeing the Torino on a raft, being towed behind them. The smile faded. The salt water would be murder on its paint job and upholstery . . .

When the phone shrilled, he reared up so suddenly that he almost knocked the lamp on the floor. He groped for the phone in the predawn light.

"Hello. Who's this?" Starsky asked groggily just as Hutch came out of the bathroom.

"Is this Sergeant Hutchinson?" asked a male voice. Without answering the caller, Starsky handed the phone to his partner.

Hutch took the receiver. "Sorry I didn't recognize your voice, Mr. Kendall," he said, gesturing toward the bathroom. Starsky sighed and slowly got out of bed.

"I apologize for the hour, Sergeant, but I'm going out of my mind. The phone rang about fifteen minutes ago - only two rings - but when I grabbed it, the line went dead. So far there's been no word at all. Why doesn't someone call?" Kendall sounded close to exhaustion.

Hutch sat down on the bed, fighting the knot in his stomach. "Look, would you feel better if I got my partner and we came over?" He fumbled around for a pencil and wrote down an address.

"Got it. Try to grab the phone on the first ring if there's a next time. No. No problem. Goodbye." He settled the phone back into its cradle and began searching through a pile of folded clothes.

"First Dobey and now this guy. I shoulda gone home," Starsky complained as he zipped up his jeans. "I think we should take your car . . . just in case someone knows mine."

"Yeah. Must be hell to just sit and wait . . . especially for someone who's used to running things." Hutch fished out his car keys and surveyed the bedroom.

"Here," he said, tossing them to Starsky. "Go down and warm up the car. Won't be a minute." As soon as Starsky was out the door, he stripped the bedding off the bed and pushed it into one of the pillowcases, then replaced the spread and smoothed out the wrinkles. The pillowcase and contents were dumped into the hamper. By the time Starsky had the LTD warmed up, he was at the curb. Silently, he handed his partner the directions to Kendall's.

"Changed the bed, right?" Starsky asked casually as he pulled out into traffic. "Dunno why . . . nothin' happened."

"Just drive," was all Hutch replied. They were silent for a few minutes, grateful that traffic was still light, then Hutch said, "I think I should talk to Kendall's secretary. She might be able to tell us some of Reina Kendall's favorite hangouts."

His partner flicked on the right turn signal. "Yeah. I gotta feeling old Minnie doesn't miss much." He glanced over at Hutch. "Cap'n wasn't too surprised to see us, was he? Did you get the impression somebody'd pulled a few strings? At least we don't have to stay at headquarters and wait for phone calls."

Suddenly, Starsky turned onto Santa Monica Boulevard and slowed down. "Don't look now, but I think we've got company."

Hutch sat up straight, loosening his gun in its holster. He glanced at the side mirror. "You mean that white truck? You sure?"
Starsky shrugged and speeded up, staying in the right lane. "Been behind us for about nine blocks. Never more than a couple of cars between us."

They came to an intersection and Hutch said, "Turn here, as if we're heading south on La Brea. I'll try to get his license number."

Starsky turned, but the truck shot across the intersection and disappeared. "Any luck? That s.o.b. was travelin'!"

Hutch made a face. "No chance. The rear plate was all muddied. Back was full of gardening tools, though." He stared ahead as Starsky made a U-turn. "You ever notice how many of those trucks belong to gardeners? Wonder why they always seem to buy white Dodges?"

Starsky grinned. "Because white's cheaper, dummy! Cheaper even than this crummy color. Now, let's quit screwing around and get to Kendall's." He groaned as he tried to push more speed out of Hutch's car, but said nothing. Even kvetching was an effort at this time of the morning.

Hutch yawned. "Maybe there's more to Reina Kendall's disappearance than we know. What if both she and the kid were snatched? Maybe that hundred thou was just for starters." He lapsed into silence, deep in thought.

"Don't look now, but that sucker is back on our tail," Starsky muttered. "Where the hell did he come from?"

This time Hutch took his gun out of the holster and placed it on the seat, his expression grim. "Maybe he never lost us, pal. Maybe he's better than we thought." He slipped his sunglasses on as the first rays of sunlight crested the trees and glinted off the store windows.

Starsky did the same. "Better? Or does he know where we're going? Chew on that for a couple of minutes."

Hutch chewed. The neighborhood was changing, with fewer and fewer commercial buildings. The houses were changing, too. Soon they'd be in an area where there was nothing but huge homes with wide lawns and old trees. "Two things, partner. Either he lives near me and works up here - in which case we're simply taking the same route - or Kendall's phone is bugged."

Their eyes met and Hutch smiled. "I don't believe in that sort of coincidence, do you? Why don't you do a little maneuvering again and see what happens." Without being conspicuous, he picked up his weapon and checked the cylinder.

To his surprise, Starsky shook his head. "How's about this? We just keep on going. Either he's followin' us or he isn't. Besides, I'm getting tired of this cat-and-mouse game." He grinned over at his partner. "Ever think maybe we're getting paranoid?"

Hutch agreed, but he kept a sharp eye on the Dodge. About two blocks later he raised his hand. "Softly, softly, he's turning into that garden shop. Here's our chance to get behind him."

"Yeah. I want a real good look at the right-hand door of that truck because I just remembered something."

Starsky's anger was barely suppressed and Hutch felt a shiver run up and down his spine. "So? Tell me."

"Remember when we went to Kendall's office yesterday morning and that jerk in a white truck nearly took my foot off? Well, if there's a rusty dent in that door, he's my man!"

Hutch whistled. "That would sure put this beyond the realm of coincidence, wouldn't it? Let's get this guy's number and run a check on it."
Starsky immediately parked the LTD, and Hutch got out and strode back to where the truck was parked. Trying to stay out of sight, he crouched down and copied the numbers off the front plate, then hurried back to where Starsky was parked.

"Got it. Let me get on the radio and run it. While we're waiting, move to that alley so we're not so conspicuous. By the way, there's a big, rusty dent on the passenger's side." He arched his eyebrow and smiled.

While Hutch ran the make, Starsky moved the car into the alley. "If this is the same jerk who almost ran over me and he's got a rap sheet, what's next?" He met Hutch's gaze. "Yeah, I know," he said. "Near misses don't count, especially if I'm the one at fault. But I gotta gut feelin' about this, Hutch, only I don't know what it is. If he's clean, we can't do a damn thing. What the hell's taking so long?"

Hutch held up his hand. "Yeah, thanks . . . no, just a hunch. Zebra Three out." He slammed the speaker back on its hook and scowled. "Nada. No wants, no warrants. And he lives in El Segundo, so we're neighbors, sort of." He heaved a huge sigh and briefly squeezed Starsky's knee. C'mon, let's get the hell over to Kendall's and see if he's heard anything."

Starsky nodded and started up the car, not saying anything when he noticed Hutch undoing his seat belt and shifting in his seat. It made sense; trouble never came when you were ready.

"I'm not gonna pull up into the driveway," Starsky announced when they reached Kendall's. A large oleander bush made a perfect screen for the LTD. Just as he switched off the ignition and slid out of the driver's seat, he heard the sound of another vehicle. "Wanna make a bet?" he whispered.

But Hutch was eyeing the vast expanse of lawn; if they left the screen of shrubbery, they might scare the guy off. "Stay put. Let's see where this jerk is headed." He reached across Starsky to reclaim his keys.

The same white truck swung into the driveway, garden tools rattling in the back. Starsky jerked his pistol out of its holster. "Migawd, Hutch, he's going straight to the house! What the hell's goin' on?"

"Uh-oh. Seems our man picked up a passenger at the garden shop. Let's hope it's another gardener." Hutch removed his sunglasses and studied the driver as he slowly opened the door and jumped down. He was short, with a barrel chest and a head of grey hair. He stretched, lit a cigar, took a few puffs, then strolled to the front door. He didn't look left or right as he took an envelope out of his back pocket and shoved it into the mailbox, then returned to the Dodge, tossing the cigar into the shrubbery as he climbed into the cab.

Yanking open his door, Hutch yelled, "Maybe we just got lucky! You see what he dropped in the mailbox. I'll start the car."

Starsky took off at a dead run, racing across the lawn toward the house. The truck sped down the driveway and left the grounds.

The LTD coughed itself into motion as Hutch cursed. Why the hell wasn't there better security around the place? There wasn't even a sign saying it was protected by some agency or another.

Starsky, panting hard, ran up the front steps and yanked open the mailbox lid just as Hutch drove up. He left the car and joined his partner. "What's the deal? More money?"

"Lemme get it open without smearing the prints," Starsky said. Quickly, he opened the envelope and scanned the single sheet of paper, his lips drawing back in a disgusted snarl. "You could say that . . . here." He handed the envelope to Hutch by one corner, then held up the page for him to read. "Let's get this mess straightened out before we go nuts." He rang the front door bell.
Hutch scanned the paper, eyes narrowing. "Wha . . .? It's a bill for services? D'you mean to tell me . . .?" His face reddened as he looked at Starsky's grim expression, but he said nothing.

The door opened; Kendall himself stood there, bleary-eyed and unshaven. Hutch noted cynically that the millionaire had nevertheless taken the time to be impeccably dressed.

"Thank God!" Kendall exclaimed. "Come in. I haven't slept a wink."

They entered, casting quick, appraising glances at the interior of the house. It was filled with fine art and oversized furniture in shades of French blue and dusty rose. Delicately lit alcoves held small, undoubtedly authentic statues of gods and goddesses. Everything was beautiful and valuable, and yet the place seemed incredibly empty, as if its owners had left no imprint on it as yet. Hutch felt a tweak of sympathy for Kendall that leached away his embarrassment.

"We've had an interesting morning," Starsky said as they were led into a smaller, less ostentatious room which was obviously Kendall's den. The Times lay scattered on the floor and couch, its various sections pulled apart and discarded. A coffee cup and silver urn sat on a small inlaid table, along with the remains of toast and scrambled eggs.

Hutch winced when he saw the spark of hope in the father's eyes. Saw it fade, and resignation replace it. He held out the bill. "This belongs to you, but we need to know a few things about the man who delivered it."

"Sit down, please," Kendall said, taking the bill and reading it. He stared at them. "I don't understand. How did you get this?" Absently, he began picking up the paper so they could sit.

Starsky sighed. "Strange as it may seem, I took it out of your mailbox a few minutes ago." He glanced sideways at Hutch, who nodded encouragement, then continued. "For reasons I won't go into, we thought this guy might be mixed up in your son's kidnapping."

Clearly amazed, Kendall shook his head. "But this man works for us as an independent contractor." He saw the detectives frown and hurried on. "We do have our own fleet of vans, but for general gardening we subcontract to the small one-truck gardeners. They maintain the grounds around the Kendall building, and I happen to use Freddie here . . . he's very thorough."

"Freddie. Is he fortyish, stocky, smokes stogies?" Hutch's throat felt very dry, mainly because something was still stuck in his craw. He sat down on the couch.

"Ever had any trouble with him? No salary or discrimination disputes?" Starsky asked. "Did you ever see them talkin' to Flip . . . you know, so he might get into a truck with one of them?"

Aghast, the meaning of Starsky's questions suddenly striking him, Kendall shouted, "I'll kill him! If that bastard . . ."

Hands extended, Hutch leaped up. "Stop! Calm down! What my partner is trying to do is establish what kind of a relationship you and your son had with this man - or men. These are perfectly routine questions. Now, please, have a seat." He remained standing until Kendall got the idea and sat down at his desk. Only then did Hutch do the same.

Starsky, who had remained standing, now went over to face Kendall. "Sorry if you got the wrong idea, but our paths crossed not far from Hutch's and it seemed like more than a coincidence."

He rubbed the stubble on his jaw and compared it to the downy fuzz on Kendall's face. "To tell you the truth, we just ran a check on his truck and I suppose we owe it to you to tell you that, insofar as we can tell, he's clean." From his tone of voice there was no doubt he didn't believe it.
Hutch decided Kendall needed to know the rest. "That's not the whole reason. Yesterday morning Starsky was nearly hit by this same truck when we were across the street from your office building. We didn't see the driver, but Starsky got a good look at the door . . . He thinks it's the same vehicle." He shrugged. "We can't haul him in without more to go on."

"I can fire him!" Kendall said cuttingly. "I don't keep careless drivers."

Both detectives began to talk at once, but Starsky prevailed. "Please, don't do anything out of the ordinary. If - and it's a big if - there is a connection between this guy and Flip's disappearance, he's no mastermind. Do you get it? Don't rock the boat."

Hutch was scanning the Business section of the paper with detached interest. He frowned, reread a small paragraph, then asked, "What time is it in Rome? What's the time difference?"

For a moment Kendall stared blankly at him, then glanced at his watch. "Why, eight hours . . . it's three in the afternoon there. Why? Is it important?"

Casually, Hutch refolded the paper. "Nope. Was reading about the Common Market and wondering if it would ever involve the Eastern Bloc." He sat forward, suddenly very serious. "Frankly, Mr. Kendall, this isn't the way to handle your son's disappearance. We desperately need help from those who have the capabilities we don't."

Starsky broke in. "Last night we told our captain. And don't look at me like I betrayed your trust. Hutch 'n' me work Homicide and we've got a caseload that we can't put on hold for even a few days. Dobey kind of hinted he knew something was up, so what we wanna know . . . did you talk to someone higher up?"

For a moment there was silence, then Kendall bowed his head. "Yes, someone who kept Reina's name out of the paper . . . insofar as he could. I need to talk to him . . ."

"Okay, we understand," Hutch soothed. "But think about this: your son deserves more than we can deliver alone. One of us should be with you in case another call comes in."

"And the other one needs to be able to set up phone taps, do background work . . . Hell, it's not a two-man job." Starsky's eyes flashed with a desperate energy. "Look, Hutch is better at the hand-holding than I am. Why don't you let me have that bill you just got and I'll do a little more checking up for you."

Kendall surrendered the bill and envelope without comment. He bowed his head. "I should have contacted the police as soon as Peter called me. God, the time I've wasted . . ." He buried his face in his hands.

Starsky slipped the gardener's bill into his pocket and stared sympathetically at the grieving man. "Tell ya what, Mr. Kendall. Maybe you and Hutch ought to go down to your office. Maybe that's where the next call will come in." He almost added, "If there is one . . ." but saw Hutch's warning glance and shut up.

"Please. Call me Phil - or Phillip - I feel ridiculous standing on formality at this stage," He glanced up at Hutch. "I'll be grateful to have you with me, Sergeant. Thanks."

"Good." Starsky went to the den's entrance, then turned back to look at the two men.

"Don't forget these," Hutch said as he tossed the keys to his car to his partner. "Be careful, no heroics. Don't go anywhere without contacting me. You know what I mean!"

Jingling the keys, Starsky retorted, "Careful's my middle name. See ya later." He was out the door and a few seconds later Hutch watched him as he strode across the lawn to the LTD.
"Why don't you go upstairs and freshen up?" he said to Kendall, who was aimlessly shuffling papers on his desk. "It's time to get the ball rolling."

For the first time, Kendall smiled. "You sound like my top salesmen, Sergeant. But you're right, I look like hell." He gazed around his study. "What a mess."

The LTD roared away, and Hutch turned back to his charge. "Before you go, sir, Starsky and I were wondering why you don't seem to have any security system around your home. Most people around here do."

Kendall's smile faded. "Give me a little credit. From the minute you and Sergeant Starsky stepped onto my property you've been on videocam . . . I'm far too careful for that."

Hutch felt a rush of excitement as he gazed around, looking for hidden equipment. "What happens to each day's taping? How long do you keep it? You know, there might be something worthwhile on it . . ."

But Kendall had already slipped back into his solemn mood. His gaze was haunted. "Silent alarms . . . the whole works . . . all here, and because my boy was taken from the park, it was useless!"

"You're assuming he was taken from the park, sir; that's yet to be proved. Now, I'll give you five minutes to clean up," Hutch said quietly, "otherwise I'm going to borrow your car and go back to the station." He paused. "I'd rather go to your office." He met Kendall's gaze calmly. "We're wasting time," he said.

"Of course," Kendall murmured. "I'll be right back." He left his study and disappeared. Hutch heard the faint sound of his footsteps as he climbed the carpeted stairs.

Left alone, Hutch felt slightly sick. His gut ached from lack of food and fatigue. It was going to be a bitch of a day. He stared around the room. Suddenly, a glimmer of sunshine came through the study doors, flooding the whole room with light. Hutch left the study and went into the huge living room to stare at the statuary. Their alcoves had become golden shells, lit from above. Curious, Hutch went over to examine one. Looking up he saw what appeared to be a keyhole circle of glass set in the apex of the arch. It bathed the marble figure with a pale yellow wash, then moved on. One by one each statue had its moment in the sun; it was worth waiting for.

Once again, Hutch thought how empty the place seemed. For all the beautiful furniture, the impressive use of space, it had less warmth than some museums he'd visited. Perhaps, if Reina Kendall still lived here, the feeling would be different. He pictured masses of flowers, background music, laughter echoing all through the rooms, and people . . . the life of any home. He turned impatiently toward the stairs. God, he was getting as mushy as some old queen. That's what Starsky was doing to him. He smiled to himself; he loved every damn minute of time they had together.

"Well, at least I feel human again," Kendall said when he joined Hutch. He had changed into a Cheetah running suit and Nikes. "I decided a suit was out. I needed something less restricting." His voice lost its confidence and wavered. "Maybe I'll need to run - I used to be pretty good at it - and those other shoes . . ."

He shrugged.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, sir," Hutch replied. "But it's a good idea because you're far less conspicuous in those clothes. Thank God they're not purple or bright orange, though . . ." He grinned.

And was rewarded with a quiet chuckle. Kendall fished a set of keys out of a drawer and led the way. "Sergeant, you're in for the ride of your life. Come on."

They went around to the back of the driveway, passing a sedate dark-blue Mercedes. Kendall walked right
past it and stopped, beckoning Hutch to join him.

Hutch stared. Kendall stood beside a red Maserati, redder than Starsky's Torino. Redder than Minnie's Christmas dress. It was RED!

"Jesus! My partner would barter off his mother for a ride in this," he exclaimed in awe. "He'd think he died and went to heaven."

Kendall laughed as he unlocked the doors. "Get in and we'll head for the office. You know," he confided, "when I was in college the only car I thought about was a Caddy convertible. I was driving an old, beat-up Chevy at the time, and a Caddy represented real luxury." He looked wistful. "Funny how your value system changes . . . especially right now. I'd exchange everything I own, if I thought it would bring Flip back . . ."

"Don't give up hope," Hutch said quietly as he closed the car door. "Both Starsky and I think you're not done with the kidnappers yet."

"Then why haven't they tried to contact me again?" Kendall said bitterly. He started the engine, revved it a few times, then drove slowly down the driveway.

"Mommy! Daddy!" came a sleepy cry. The blond head moved weakly on its pillow, and thick lashes lifted to reveal dazed blue eyes.

"It's all right, honey," soothed a low voice. "It's going to be fine, you'll see. Now, eat this for me . . . it's a banana." A slender hand lifted the boy's head. "And then you can have some milk. You know you like milk."

"No! Don't wan' nuffin' . . . go 'way . . ." The eyes closed in unnatural sleep.

The woman got slowly to her feet, mouth set in a determined slash. Cautiously, she peered out a side window, watching as her ever-present watchdog dozed in a hammock slung between the bungalow and a sturdy pepper tree. It was the siesta, and she knew few people would be about in the heat. Silently, she changed into a black peasant skirt and blouse, flinging a scarf on her head to hide her fair hair. She jammed a tiny change purse into her bra and slipped on a pair of sandals.

She paused, undecided, then went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Next she locked the front door from the inside before squeezing out the bedroom window. She studied the alley; the road itself was too gravelly, her shoes would make crunching noises . . . a dead give-away. But on the sides, grasses and weeds grew in profusion, so she hurried along them, not even disturbing the sleeping neighborhood dogs.

When she reached the street she crossed it, then darted into another alley. A few minutes later she was lost in the clusters of turistas who ignored the sun and heat. Desperately, she sought a public phone, finally spotting one beside a crowded pottery shop. With a pounding heart she dropped her change and asked for an operator.

"Starsky, my hands are tied," said a scowling Captain Dobey. His voice held a world of disapproval. "I'll do what I can to find out more about this Fred - uh - Rohmer fellow, if that's his name, but without more to go on, how the hell can I explain having him tailed? Besides, if Kendall's already paid them off and he hasn't heard anything more, what makes you think they'll contact him again?"

"Cap'n, we've gotta try!" Starsky held out his right hand, his left ticking off reasons. "First, the guy's a
zillionaire, yet they only wanted peanuts. Second, his wife's missing . . . or at least nobody knows where she is. And third, his partner's in Rome - and I ain't so sure I trust him . . ." Starsky sighed in exasperation. "We can't tail his partner. We can't tail his wife, but we sure as hell can keep track of one lousy, banged-up Dodge truck! You said yourself last night that this might prove to be a big case. Isn't it more important to find a kid alive than waste time on these other murders? Hutch 'n' me, we gotta feeling about this. Myers and Pitassi can wrap up the Juarez case. Bad-Luck Smitty's in jail, so he ain't going nowhere until we can get to him."

He leaned over Dobey's desk. "How'd you feel if this was Rosie? Flip's just a kid, and he's probably scared outta his mind. We're wastin' time."

The captain shifted his weight, rubbed his head with his knuckles, and stared at the detective. "I want to talk to Hutch. Maybe I can pull a couple of uniforms off the streets to do some of the footwork . . . but if there's no word by Wednesday, you two are back here. Is that plain enough?"

"Yeah, but you should've seen the pictures of Reina Kendall, Cap'n. She was gorgeous - until she got hooked on H and decided she had to leave Kendall and the kid." He got himself a drink of water, swallowed it in one long gulp, then refilled it. "She's the key . . . both ways. Find her and we find out if she snatched Flip or she didn't."

The phone rang and Dobey grabbed the receiver. "This is Captain Dobey. Hutchinson? Where are you? Kendall's office . . . Hang on. Let me get a pen. Yes, yes . . . Where? Ensenada? Slow down, will you? Wait! He's right here . . ." He pulled the phone away from his ear and thrust it at Starsky. "It's your partner . . ."

Starsky snatched the phone, staring down at the scribbled message. "Start over, willya? The cap'n's a lousy secretary." He listened carefully, his eyes widening. "Just now? From Ensenada . . . Okay, did she mention the kid? Shit!" His eyes narrowed to mere slits. "No money demand, just that she'd call back later. Did Kendall think it was his wife?"

He listened for a few moments longer, then handed the phone back to Dobey.

"Well? Was it his wife?"

Starsky shook his head. "That's the odd part. Kendall told Hutch it didn't sound like her, but maybe she was disguising her voice. Anyway, Hutch doesn't want Kendall tearing off for Mexico like a nut. Oh, yeah, she also told him that the kidnappers are planning to ask for more money, but she doesn't know how much. She reassured him that the boy's alive, but they're both in danger if he doesn't come up with the money."

"Did she mention what time they'd call?" Dobey looked thoughtful, and sat back in his chair. "Set up a tap on Kendall's phone . . . I'll pull a couple of strings for a court order. Anything else you want?" Sarcasm lay heavy in his deep voice.

Starsky nodded. "We'll need you to get in touch with the Mexican authorities, in case we have to go to Ensenada. Maybe Captain Morales could contact his cousin in Tijuana . . . you know how that grapevine works." He finished off the water in his cup and tossed it toward the wastepaper basket, missing by a foot.

Dobey surged to his feet, roaring, "Starsky! Stop using my office for a dump! Get outta here, now!"

"I'm on my way." Starsky looked back over his shoulder. "If Hutch calls again, tell him not to worry." He checked his watch. "It's almost noon, tell Hutch I'll call him in about an hour - or sooner."

Dobey slammed the door. "Not to worry? What in hell does that mean? I'm the one who does all the worrying around here." Muttering to himself, he sat down and punched in a number.
Hutch stood in the doorway of Kendall's office watching the distraught father, knowing he had to do something to keep the man from going over the edge. Thank God he didn't have any kids of his own to worry about.

"Please, Phil, calm down. They're trying to trace the call's origin now. If it was a legit call, then the Mexican phone company will verify it. You said she was dropping change into the coin box, so it wasn't a direct-dial." Hutch spoke with far more confidence than he felt, but what good would it do to terrify the poor guy at this point?

Still, Kendall at least had something to think about - even if it wasn't much. "Promise me you'll stay by the phone, Phil. I want to talk to the folks who installed your security system. Does your secretary have that information?" He made the query as innocuous as possible. He'd had no time to speak with Minnie since they'd arrived.

Kendall blinked, focused, and said, "Yes. She mails the checks every month. But what good will it do? Flip wasn't home . . ."

"I know," Hutch replied patiently, "but maybe someone paid you a visit this past weekend, and the tapes haven't been checked yet." He smiled. "If you want to do something, why don't you check with your partner in Rome? Bring yourself up to date. Doesn't he call you daily?"

Kendall pulled himself together. "Yes, yes, he does. I suppose I could tell him that I had a call and that Flip's alive. Pete's probably worried to death."

"Then call him," Hutch advised, needing some fresh air. The sorrow radiating from Kendall was more than he could bear.

"Sergeant? I don't really know that, do I? Oh, God! My poor little boy. Why him and not me?" Kendall's voice dropped to a mere whisper as he stared up at Hutch.

Hutch put his hand on Kendall's shoulder. "Look," he said quietly. "Maybe talking with Peter will help you remember something else . . . Or maybe, by now, he's thought of some detail he couldn't recall before. It's important that you stay as calm as you can - for Flip's sake. Now, go ahead and make that call."

Hutch slipped out of the office. Minnie glanced up from her desk and smiled at him, unaware of the tragedy on the other side of the door. "Can I do anything to help you, Mr. Hutchinson?" she asked. Her small, bright-as-a-bird's eyes invited his trust.

He decided to take the risk. Putting his finger to his lips, he whispered, "Your boss shouldn't be disturbed . . . Is there somewhere else we can talk?"

Her eyes grew round, but without asking she led the way to a small conference room - also filled with plants. Any other time Hutch would have been lost in admiration for the greenery.

"Now!" Minnie said. "Just what is going on around here, young man? You can't tell me that something's not wrong. That man looks like he has a broken heart!"

Hutch stared; her uncanny resemblance to Mrs. Tiggy Winkle must mean he was well on his way to a nervous breakdown. "Please, sit down," he said as he pulled out a chair for her. "I need your help." Quickly, he spelled out what was wrong, emphasizing Reina Kendall's disappearance and the fact her husband believed she had taken Flip with her. He didn't tell her about the ransom payment, or the phone call from Ensenada.
The secretary stared long and hard, as if assessing Hutch's integrity. He began to squirm under her scrutiny.

"All right," she said finally. "Since you've told me what's wrong, I'll tell you something that may help. Reina Kendall would never do one single thing to hurt either her husband or her son." The grey head bobbed up and down to emphasize her point.

"Wait. What about her, uh, well, her drug problem?" Hutch asked, testing her knowledge of Reina's private affairs.

"I know all about that!" she snapped. "Do you think you can work for a family for nearly twenty-five years and not know what's happening? And that's why I want you to have this address. But don't you dare tell Mr. Kendall I gave you this."

She jotted an address down on a piece of paper, folded it, then handed it to Hutch. "Now, you go away. I'll take care of my boss!" A little smile played around her mouth as she smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress. "Good luck, dear," she said. She looked more like Mrs. Tiggy Winkle than before.

Hutch nodded. "I'll say goodbye first," he said, feeling he was leaving the industrialist in good hands. He quietly opened the door to Kendall's office so as not to startle the man.

Kendall sat in his chair, staring at a small, crudely carved figure of an animal. Hutch had noticed it on the desk earlier and decided it must have been done by Flip. Just as Kendall turned it over, the phone rang with nerve-shattering intensity. The carving fell from his hand.

Hutch stepped into the room, keeping away from the desk. Kendall lifted the phone with deliberate control, as if it was a seashell. "Hello? Hello? Who's calling? Pete! I can barely hear you!" He put his hand over the mouthpiece and said to Hutch, "We have a terrible connection."

He listened to whatever Pete was saying, then frowned. "Yes! I had a call from some woman . . . Claimed she was Reina, but it . . ." He yanked the receiver away from his ear and slapped it, cursing. "What the hell's the matter? Oh, electrical storm. I said I had a call . . . No, don't stay on the line. Call back when it's over!"

Kendall waited a minute before angrily settling the phone in its cradle.

"I take it that was your partner," Hutch said, coming around to hand Kendall the little carving. "I heard the static. What did he have to say?"

Face flushed, Kendall grimaced. "He wanted to know if he should come home. But there's nothing he can do here." He looked disgusted. "Never had that bad a connection. Damn it! Nothing's going right."

Hutch silently agreed. What he really wanted to do was get together with Starsky so they could compare notes. He hated this business of running around alone without his partner. Starsky meant both backup and support and something far more. Finally, when Kendall looked less tense, he asked, "Can you manage alone for a while? There's an address I have to check out. Starsky should be calling soon. If he asks you anything about that first phone call, tell him all you can."

He suddenly realized he was without wheels. Embarrassed, he returned to where Kendall sat. "Uh, I just remembered that I came with you. Do you have a car I can borrow?" He definitely didn't want the Maserati.

"Certainly." On the intercom, Kendall asked Minnie to make arrangements with the garage so that Mr. Hutchinson could have his personal choice of vehicles.

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Wondering if he was on a wild goose chase, Starsky sped toward the marina. He prayed his luck would hold
and Mad Max would be somewhere else. He was in no mood for a confrontation with that gorilla. At least, in Hutch's car, he wouldn't be spotted so quickly.

His cards held; the big security guard was nowhere in sight. He slipped on board the KAMA and looked around, hoping against hope he'd find something that would indicate either a child or a woman had been here recently.

He wanted to believe that Kendall's caller had been his ex, and that she'd called from the KAMA instead of Ensenada. It would make things so simple . . . But then, his mom had always told him that nothing was ever simple.

There were more supplies than yesterday, but not a soul was around. Where in hell was that woman? And if the caller hadn't been Reina, who else was in on the kidnapping?

He studied the navigational system. A nice big steering wheel, gas tanks, a compass and a few other dials . . . too bad neither he nor Hutch had a license. What a way to go.

He thought about Hutch's dream of a sixty-footer and admitted it might not be so bad. Smiling to himself, he left the yacht and headed back to the LTD. He only saw two people; neither of them gave him more than a cursory glance.

His stomach rumbled so loudly it startled him. He hadn't had anything but three cups of crummy coffee since midnight, and he was feeling woozy. When he caught up with Hutch maybe they'd grab something to eat, unless Kendall had ordered a spread fit for a king. He knew immediately that wasn't the case. The poor slob hadn't even finished his own breakfast.

It was almost one-fifteen. Hutch would be waiting for him. He tried using the LTD's radio, but gave up when all he got was static. Maybe his partner was trying to contact him. Too bad; at this rate he'd be lucky to reach Metro by two.

He thought about the snapshot of Flip, the one with his scabby knee, and how much he looked like Hutch had when he was a kid. Life sucked at times. He was glad he wasn't a father. It was bad enough worrying about his partner.

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"Where the hell did he go?" Hutch asked for the tenth time as he paced the squad room. "He was supposed to wait for me, or me for him. Now that I've got a good lead, I'm cooling my heels."

He tried to keep concern from his voice; it wouldn't do for Dobey to wonder why he was so worried. Partners were one thing, lovers another. Maybe someday they'd say something, but not yet. Not while there was such an undercurrent of hostility in the department. There was plenty of time. The knot in his stomach tightened, and he realized how hungry he was. He went down to the lunchroom and wolfed down a sandwich and two cups of coffee.

He was stacking his plate and cup when Starsky entered the lunchroom. He spotted Hutch immediately and joined him. "Sorry, but your car . . . Well, you don't want to hear about your car, do ya?" He eyed Hutch's plate. "Couldn't wait, huh? Well, I've got to fill my gut now or drink cream the rest of my life. I'll be back directly . . . Wait."

He hustled over to the counter, grabbed a sandwich, picked up a carton of milk, put the straw between his teeth, and hurried back to the table where Hutch sat.

Hutch watched him, loving the energy and optimism Starsky exuded. He felt his own spirits rise; hell,
together they'd get Flip Kendall back, and the mystery of Reina Kendall cleared up.

"Whatcha smiling at?" Starsky asked as he sat down, unwrapping a roast beef sandwich. He grinned back. "As if I didn't know. I'll bet that's the first time you've smiled all day. Same goes for me."

Hutch felt the color rising on his cheeks and suddenly became very busy shuffling the table condiments. "Go ahead and eat; we'll talk afterwards. God knows when the next meal will come along."

"Yeah, my stomach thinks my throat's slit," Starsky agreed. He bit deeply into his sandwich, chewing rapidly, eyes taking note of Hutch's clothes. "We gonna have time to clean up?" he asked between mouthfuls. "I want a shower, if nothing else."

Hutch wrinkled his nose. "Me, too. I kind of hate to go . . ." He glanced around the room, then lowered his voice. "Hurry up, pal, Minnie gave me an address where we might find a certain Mrs. Kendall. I don't want to miss her."

"What about the call from Ensenada? Isn't gettin' the kid back our first priority?" Starsky's expression was deadly serious.

"Of course it is," Hutch said. "But consider this. The dame claims to be Reina Kendall, yet Minnie gave me an address where she claims we should find the lady in question." His expression was like a bird of prey. "She can't be in two places at once - and La Costa is a helluva lot closer than south of the border. You agree? If we come up empty-handed, we head for Mexico . . . but only if Kendall's been contacted."

Starsky grinned wickedly. "Or the whole damn scheme ends up in Freddie's lap. I want that jerk, Hutch." He got to his feet. "Something should've turned up by now. I've got DMV, the narcs, and BIOGROW workin' on it."

"BIOGROW? What's that?" Hutch vaguely recalled seeing the word but couldn't remember where. He pushed against Starsky's back to hurry him along. "So? Tell me!"

"That's what Kendall's synthetic shit is called," Starsky said bluntly. "All his own fleet of trucks have big signs with the name. Anyway, I called 'em, and they promised to look up Freddie's record for me. They knew him, all right. Which makes me kinda suspicious. But we'll see."

Hutch glanced at the big hall clock and scowled. "I'm going to call Kendall and find out if he's had another phone call. Traffic's going to be heavy, if we don't leave soon."

They were out in the hall before Hutch spoke again. "So, where were you? Where'd you go?" He kept the annoyance he felt out of his tone.

"Hadda hunch, so I headed down to the marina. Not easy in your car, I might add."

"For the hundredth time," Hutch commented dryly. "Find anything worth the gas?"

The dark head shook. "Zilch. I sure hope your tip is better than my hunch," Starsky said gloomily. "I really expected to find something, but outside of more supplies . . ." He grinned at Hutch. "At least the Muscled One wasn't around or I wouldn't be here talkin' to you."

Hutch's brows drew together. "I take it there wasn't a crewhand on board, either. So who's doing the loading - UPS?"

"I wondered about that, too, but it was lunch time. Maybe they all eat at the fish joint down on the pier." He stopped a moment, got out his comb, and ran it through his curls. "Salt water makes me feel sticky as hell."
He sighed again. "Hutch, I gotta get cleaned up soon."

Hutch's response was a nod, a low chuckle, and a piece of paper. "You and me both, partner. But not yet. Read this and tell me what you think."

The comb was shoved back into Starsky's pocket and he took the paper from Hutch. "Kendall's office, huh?" He stared at the address, a slow grin appearing on his face. "After you, partner," was all he said.

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The traffic thinned after Tustin, although the number of big rigs seemed on the increase as they rumbled south to San Diego. Hutch, driving a black Cougar borrowed from Kendall's fleet of company cars, kept glancing in the rear-view mirror.

"For some reason, I keep expecting to see that damn white truck following us," he said. "Thank God it's not Thursday."

Starsky ran his fingers over the creamy-smooth white leather seats. "You drive, I'll look for tails, although nobody'll expect us to travel in a car like this. I was afraid we'd have to drive to La Costa in that bucket of yours. Boy, Kendall goes first class all the way, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. I couldn't afford this model, even if it was at the junk yard," Hutch admitted as he increased his speed. "To tell you the truth, I've been thinking about upgrading my car. You know . . ." He glanced in the mirror, eyes narrowed, then relaxed. " . . . maybe a new paint job, some seat covers . . ."

"Clean out the back seat, get a transmission job . . ." Starsky nodded. "Cost you maybe five thou . . ." He laughed, a low, warm sound. "Don't waste your money."

"Hell, where we're headed in La Costa, I can't afford the gas. Minnie seems to feel this is where Reina Kendall's been all along. But she's such a shrewd old gal, I dunno. I've got a feeling there's not much Minnie wouldn't do to protect her."

Starsky was quiet, studying the traffic. "You know what would be the best case scenario? We go to this place. Reina's there . . . and so is the kid. Case solved."

Hutch drove a little faster. "Only happens on TV, partner. I'll be satisfied if we find the ex, and she admits she's stashed the boy safely with her folks . . . or some such arrangement." He let out a long breath. "But we know that's not likely, either."

"Yeah, back to the real world." Starsky picked up the map and began studying it. "Well, about another fifteen minutes and we should be there. Wonder what we'll find."

"Another link in the chain, Starsk, that's all I hope for. You know, Minnie never blinked an eye when I told her about her boss, and Flip's disappearance. But as soon as I said he suspected Reina, she blew. It's almost as if she was relieved to share her secret with someone."

Starsky shrugged. "Let's hope this place doesn't have barbed wire and Dobermans to keep the peace."

They drove by Carlsbad, finally turning off the freeway at Airport Road. The rolling hills with their plushy grasses and acre after acre of flowers were in sharp contrast to the low-profile industrial parks they passed. "Everything to deceive the eye," Hutch said softly, adjusting his sunglasses on the bridge of his nose. "Reminds me of the Hollywood Hills, only quieter."

"Can you imagine tryin' to flush somebody out of all these damn bushes?" Starsky asked, pointing to a
particularly sheltered building. "Jesus! The cops down here must use dogs instead of flashlights."

"You think so? I think it must be kinda nice not to worry about the streets like we have to. You know, kick back, sign out on time . . . live up in a place overlooking the sea or the hills."

"Are you saying you're getting tired of living on the edge, Hutch? We've got a long way to go before we can retire." Starsky gazed absently out the window, the breeze ruffling his curls. Then, when Hutch remained silent, he sighed. "Yeah, I know. To tell ya the truth, I don't think I can handle it for another ten - fifteen years. My ass hurts from all this driving around."

"The end of the world is coming!" Hutch crowed. "I thought you and your Torino were fused at the seat of your pants. Wish I had that on tape."

Starsky laughed, punching Hutch on the thigh. "You're a real smart-ass, ya know that? C'mon, step on it! Let's show these farmers what this flash car can do!"

"Tacky, pal, tacky," Hutch replied. "These farmers - as you call them - aren't exactly from the Grapes of Wrath." He spotted a huge truck and pointed to its logo. "Look . . . BIOGROW. Isn't that Kendall's?"

"Yeah, things grow better in our shit than anybody else's," Starsky remarked. "What I wanna know is - how can it? You buy manure, sterilize it, then add pesticides, caustics, enzymes, you name it. Then, whammo, you don't even need the manure . . . This is progress?"

Hutch pointed to one of the hills covered with exquisite flowers, then hastily rolled up his window. "For the growers, it is. No bugs, better crops, more money. For Mother Nature, it sucks." He slowed down on a curve. "This is Avenida Las Flores. Where do I turn after that?"

Starsky studied the map, pointing to another black line that wandered across a tiny corner of the map. "Says Avenida Tábano. What's that?"

Hutch laughed. "It means horsefly. At one time there must've been stables or farm animals around here."

Grinning, Starsky said, "See? If ya put Avenida in front of a word, it gives it class, right?"

"Not to those who speak the language, but it sure sounds prettier," Hutch agreed. He stomped hard on the accelerator. Starsky's laughter was drowned in the roar of the Cougar's engine.

It was another five minutes before Hutch slowed down, turning onto a wide, well-maintained side street. It curved, becoming a narrow, two-lane road flanked by masses of oleander and pomegranate trees. Each home, already isolated and private, became less visible as they climbed toward the top of a hill.

"Somebody's behind us," Starsky said suddenly, turning slightly in his seat. "Big limo, black. Why don't you pull over and let it pass?" His hand reached inside his jacket.

Hutch obeyed, staring into the rear-view mirror, body tense. Logic whispered that Minnie wouldn't send him this far just to get killed, but experience had etched other, bitter lessons in his brain. The limo passed, disappearing around a curve, only to reappear farther up the road, still climbing. He met Starsky's gaze and shrugged. "Shall we see what's at the top of the hill, partner?" He kept his tone light, but he heard the edge to it, a sharp cutting off of each word.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," Starsky said, sitting up straighter and removing his seat belt for easy movement. "You drive, I'll keep an eye open for buzzards."

Hutch chuckled. "The great white hunter, right? Well, it works for me." He pulled out again, finding
immeasurable comfort from Starsky's presence. No buzzard had a chance while his partner had it in his sights.

Two more turns and the road narrowed down to a paved lane, with brilliant masses of pink ice plant covering the sloping hillsides. Scattered here and there were weeping willows and white birch - the "in" greenery with landscapers for the last few years. He wondered why; they were water-loving and these rolling hills saw little moisture except for the nightly sea fogs. Maybe that was all they asked for. He suspected they were watered by the owners of the huge building that loomed ahead.

"Shit! Is that somebody's home? Migawd, Hutch, it must have fifty rooms!" Starsky peered out the window, his hair bright with sunshine. He cleared his throat. "Gates ahead, complete with guard."

Hutch slowed down. "And a very large dog." Both were regarding the Cougar with long, suspicious stares. "They must have something valuable up there, wouldn't you say?" He stopped the car but kept it running. "Get out and be nice to the man, Starsk. I'll cover you."

Starsky got out and walked slowly toward the guard, who had opened the gates. Both he and the dog looked grim. "Good afternoon," Starsky said. "My name is David Starsky, and I'm with the LAPD." He carefully reached for the slip of paper in his pocket. "And I'm here to see . . . ah, Mrs. Vivienne Zacharias."

"Show me your ID," the man snapped. One large hand held the dog on a very short leash. The animal looked as if he had a very short temper.

Starsky complied as rapidly as possible, keeping his eyes on the dog. Still, he allowed himself the satisfaction of brushing aside his jacket just for a moment. He knew the guard wouldn't miss the sight of his gun in its holster. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Hutch scanning the grounds beyond the gate, not that he could see much with all the shrubbery.

The guard scrutinized the badge and picture thoroughly, then nodded. "Back in the car, Sergeant," he said, his tone only slightly more civil. He went over to the gate and punched a series of numbers on a small metal box, then spoke into the unit. He walked back to Hutch's side. "Your ID the same as his?" he asked, extending his hand, palm up.

Hutch smiled, then handed him his badge and ID. "I'll say one thing, you're thorough. Bet you used to be a cop."

The guard shook his head. "Nope. MP for twenty years." He handed Hutch back his ID, then grinned suddenly. "When you get to the casa, be careful; there are two more dogs." He waved them through, his companion growling low in its throat.

The rest of the drive was over quickly. The curving driveway was paved with pebbles of soft pink, the greenery by Kodak. "Why do I feel like we just arrived at Disneyland?" Starsky asked as they parked beside the black limo they'd seen earlier. "Lookit these cars . . . not one over a couple of years old and most of 'em from out of state." He handed the paper to Hutch. "Hey . . . Do you hear music, or what?"

Hutch got out of the car, locked the door, and buttoned his jacket so his gun wouldn't be so obvious. "Yeah, Montovani - or Lawrence Welk." He smiled at Starsky. "Not your taste."

Falling in step beside Hutch, Starsky said, "True, but I kinda like the wind chimes." He whistled. "Marble steps?" He removed his sunglasses and shoved them in his jacket pocket. His eyes sparkled with mischief, and he laughed as a small black whirlwind launched itself off the top step. Yapping and snarling, the brazen mop made a great show of defending its territory. He was joined by an old, waddling bulldog, nearly toothless, but with a certain Churchillian dignity that the little dog totally lacked.
"I guess these are the two dogs that guy warned us about. Some sense of humor," Starsky remarked.

"I assume you are here for a reason?" a cool voice said.

They forgot the dogs and stared at a lovely woman of indeterminate age. She held something in one slim, beringed hand.

"A tomato?" Starsky whispered to Hutch.

"Uh, how do you do, ma'am," Hutch said, stepping over the dogs as best he could. "My name is Ken Hutchinson, and I was given your name by Minnie Silversmith . . . who felt I should come out and visit you. She said you might be able to answer some questions." He removed his sunglasses and smiled.

Cool, dark eyes raked over him, then came back to study his face. "I am Vivienne Zacharias . . .but why should I trust you? What do you want?" She rubbed the tomato with one palm, then bit into its firm, red flesh, flicking her glance to include Starsky.

For a moment Hutch was reluctant to trust her, then, nudged by his partner, he plunged ahead. "We're looking for a lady who may have been to visit you in the past few days. The former Reina Kendal. Have you seen or heard from her recently?" Hutch hadn't realized how badly he wanted good news about Kendall's wife. His pulse had quickened as he asked the question.

A perfectly arched eyebrow soared to meet dark hair. "Of course, but what do you want with her?"

Starsky came forward, his manner disarming. "My partner is too polite, ma'am, to be abrupt, but this is urgent. It's also confidential. We wouldn't be here, otherwise. We gotta see her, or get in touch with her."

Hutch noticed three rather plump women strolling across the lawn, stopping to greet the fierce creatures that had challenged them. The animals slobbered and grinned all over themselves as the ladies cooed and petted them. "Must be cop-haters," he muttered under his breath.

He turned his attention back to the cool cookie who was wiping her fingers on a tiny handkerchief. He had no idea where it had come from. Maybe it had been inside the damn tomato.

"May I ask what kind of, ah, club this is?" he asked, seeing two more women jogging along an upper path. Maybe a health spa?" Something niggled at the back of his mind . . . Zacharias . . . The name was familiar, but not in connection with anything criminal. He glanced at Starsky whose patience was definitely on the wane.

Just in time she spoke. "Very well, but only because Minnie phoned and told me that you were indeed a nice young man." The handkerchief disappeared into a hidden pocket. Her gaze met his and she nodded. "I certainly hope that Minnie didn't misjudge you. Reina has come a long way. Any upset might undo all we've accomplished."

Hutch expelled a breath, then shook his head. "You're Doctor Zacharias, aren't you?" No wonder he had read something about her. He turned to a mystified Starsky. "This is Dr. Zacharias, Starsk. She's had some remarkable successes in helping people with their addictions."

Starsky's expression cleared and he smiled. "So this's where Mrs. Kendall's been."

The doctor returned his smile. "So, it comes to you who I am. That means you can also understand my concern about your visit. Usually the police are not the bearers of good news, are they?" She waited, obviously still wary.
"You're right, of course," Hutch said quickly, "and if all we had needed was to make certain of Reina Kendall's whereabouts, we could leave. But we can't, we must see her. Worse yet, the news we have will be a great shock."

"It's a matter of life and death, lady!" Starsky blurted out. Sweat sheened his brow and his upper lip.

Without another word, Zacharias walked swiftly up the steps, waving at the three women who were now sitting on the lush grass, each working with a little pink bucket and a shiny tool.

"What are they doing?" Hutch asked.

She laughed, looking ten years younger. "Weeding. The pink bucket makes it less of a chore. They're all compulsive eaters, so the more weeds they pull, the better their meal will be tonight." She smiled at Starsky's expression. "It works very well. My guests all take a lively interest in the landscaping."

"May I ask you how you got a license in this area for a center like this?" Hutch knew of the usual resistance to such places.

She gave an expressive shrug. "Most of my neighbors have been my guests," she replied. "Alcohol, agoraphobia, overeating, drugs . . . The rich are as susceptible - if not more so - as everyone else."

She led them inside, out of the heat, into a huge foyer and anteroom. Immediately, Hutch was struck by the contrast between Kendall's home and this. The millionaire's tastes ran to clean, contemporary lines, and pale, glowing colors. The Zacharias home resembled a potentate's dream.

The doctor smiled at them. "A trifle fussy for two men such as yourselves?" she guessed, then picked up a jewel-encrusted box, fingering it with obvious delight. "The man who sent me this was my guest for six months. He was terrified of the dark because he was convinced one of his brothers, or a son or wife, was going to kill him some dark night . . ." Her smile disappeared abruptly and she set the box down. "I cured him and sent him home, a happy ruler. Sent him home to be murdered by a religious fanatic!" She turned away from them.

"Come, I will take you to see Reina." She led them silently through the house, then out a side door onto a private patio. A woman, hair wrapped in a towel, lay on a chaise, soaking up the last of the afternoon sun. She was sleek, very tan, with beautiful features. It was Reina Kendall - only not the haggard woman in the snapshot. They stared.

"Reina? My dear, I've brought you company. They say it's very important they speak with you."

Gold lashes drifted up, revealing the bluest of blue eyes. Reina Kendall sat up, frowning slightly when she realized her visitors were strangers. "Yes?"

The two detectives nodded, then shook hands with her. Her grip was surprisingly strong. "We have some news. May we sit down?"

Perhaps it was instinct, but Dr. Zacharias suddenly came over and lightly touched her patient on the shoulder. "Reina, do you want me to stay? If not, I have a great deal to do before dinner tonight."

"No. No, go ahead, Vivi, I'll be fine . . ." But there was concern in Reina's voice. She removed the towel from her hair, and a mass of curls tumbled across her shoulders. With a shake of her head they all seemed to settle in place, save for a few which were damp with oil. "Now . . ." she said, looking at Starsky and Hutch. "What is your news?"

There was no easy way to begin, so they quickly identified themselves. "We're here to ask you about your
"Flip? What about him?" Her voice sharpened, rose, and she leaned forward, her eyes wide with fear. Her fingers clutched the towel, and she hung onto it as if it were her lifeline. "God, that's why you're here, isn't it? Phillip sent you, didn't he? Please, tell me my baby's all right."

Their doubts evaporated as they watched her dismay evolve into terror. She had risen from the chaise, gazing around her pleasant patio as if she had awakened from a dream, finding a true nightmare in reality.

Hutch gently took her by the shoulders and pushed her back onto the chaise. She stared up at him, then at Starsky, desperately needing to know the worst.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Kendall," Starsky said quietly, "but Flip disappeared a couple of days ago. His father thought perhaps you might have taken him . . . He said you said you might."

She stared, uncomprehending at first, then anger, swift and cutting, loosened her tongue. "Did he think that I wanted to have Flip when I was . . . like that? In God's name, why would I put myself through the torture of recovery and separation just to ruin everything by running away? I'd rather die than hurt either one of them. I want them both back . . ."

Her anger was gone; she put her face in her hands and wept silently, then wiped her face with the towel. "Tell me what happened," she said raggedly. "I'll come back with you and . . ." She managed a watery smile. "Phil must feel terribly alone and guilty right now, just as I did when I was doing those terrible things."

Starsky filled her in with the details of Flip's disappearance and her husband's efforts to fill the kidnapper's demands. She paled, then said in a monotone, "I still don't understand why Phil thought I had taken Flip."

"Because you disappeared off the face of the earth, lady!" Starsky accused, suddenly hostile. "First you make threats, then you disappear, and then your son's gone, too. What did you expect him to think?"

"Minnie knew . . . Why didn't he ask her?" she retorted defensively.

"Your husband never told her about Flip's disappearance, that's why," Hutch said patiently. "But he's said all along that he knew you loved your son." He stood up. "So far the kidnappers have demanded and received one hundred thousand dollars, and they'll probably ask for more - they usually do, but time is in their favor, not ours."

Hutch shook his head as Starsky seemed ready to speak again. "Why don't you find Dr. Zacharias, and tell her what's happened? We'll wait until you get changed, and we'll take you home."

She rose obediently and walked into the house. They followed at a slower pace, then retraced their steps to the foyer.

"Why didn't you want me to tell her about the call from Ensenada?" Starsky asked as he sat down in a huge rattan chair. "And how do we know we can trust that doctor? Maybe she's behind it. God knows she must hear about everything in this place." He glanced around, his distaste for the oppressively over-decorated house very apparent.

"That's one of the reasons I left it out, pal," Hutch replied, fanning himself with his hand. "Jesus, can you imagine being shut up in this bird cage? Reminds me of a 1920s movie."

"All I know is my brain's shutting down from too damn many suspects and not enough clues." Starsky rubbed his hand over his eyelids. "Or maybe it's the other way around, I dunno." He spied a couple of women carrying little pink pails through the hall. "Bet that's what they hafta eat," he said glumly.
"Dandelion greens and clover burgers, you'd love it here."

"Good for your nerves, hotshot," Hutch chuckled. "While you contemplate the delights of their dinner, I'm gonna call Kendall. Wait here in case Reina changes clothes faster than I can get through to him. Don't let her out of your sight."

"Easy for you to say, wise-ass," Starsky grumbled. "With all this greenery she could climb over a wall and vanish. And don't forget that dog at the front gate."

But Hutch was already disappearing into a side door, hoping to find a telephone. Nothing. Just another mini-museum of bric-a-brac. He had better luck in the second room. A pay phone hung on one wall, lavishly scrolled with gold and cupids. He fished for a couple of coins, dropped them in, and heard Minnie's voice almost immediately. "Minnie? This is Hutch, is Mr. Kendall in?"

"Did you find her?" was Minnie's reply. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, she is. Thanks. We're bringing her back with us, if the doc says it's okay."

He was cut off for a second, then he heard Kendall speaking. There was an underlying current of excitement in the man's voice.

"Sergeant? Your captain's here. I had another call, and this time she gave an address." There was a long pause before Kendall spoke again. "I don't think it's Reina, Sergeant, but your captain wants you both back here as soon as possible!"

"Let me speak to him, please. I've a couple of questions. That's great news about your son." But Hutch's heart sank at the news. Flip wasn't with his mother.

There was no response, so Hutch waited until he heard Dobey clear his throat before speaking. "Captain, this is Hutch. I don't know what's going on there, but we've located Kendall's wife and she swears she doesn't have Flip."

"You've talked to her?" Dobey asked in a muffled tone. Hutch smiled, picturing that ham-sized fist covering the receiver; Dobey's effort to be discreet.

"Better than that, she's here with us. She wants to come back and be with her husband."

"That's good work, Hutchinson. How long is it going to take?"

"About an hour, Cap'n. I've got one of Kendall's company cars. No lights or siren." He shrugged, deciding then and there to let Starsky handle the trip back. "I'll let Starsky drive, maybe that'll save some time."

Dobey chuckled. "If he gets stopped, he pays for the ticket. Tell him that." He lowered his voice. "This Ensenada tip sounds hot, so I want you to leave as soon as you can. Whoever this woman was she sounded desperate."

"Was there any demand for more ransom?" Hutch asked.

"No. That's what bothers me," came the whispered reply.

"We're on our way," Hutch replied, hanging up just as Starsky and Reina Kendall appeared. She lit up the room like a Roman candle, all gold and white.

"You call Dobey?" Starsky asked, his mouth slightly curved in a smile.
Hutch grinned back, not wanting to upset the woman. "Yeah, he's at Kendall's and wants us back as fast as we can get there." He fished the car keys out of his pocket and tossed them to his partner, who caught them automatically. "You drive. I'll see that the lady here isn't scared out of her wits."

"Yeah? Well, maybe she'd rather sit up front and see an expert at work, partner." Blue eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Just so long as I get there in one piece," she said. "Phillip's always loved fast cars . . ." Her voice trailed away and she looked out the window.

"He still loves you, Mrs. Kendall," Hutch said quickly, taking her by the elbow and steering her out of the room, along the hallway, and into the entry hall.

Starsky came to a halt. "Hey, Hutch, didn't you want to talk to Dr. Zacharias? Why don't you let me get Mrs. Kendall settled in the car while you do that?" There was a sudden urgency in his voice.

They exchanged glances and Hutch nodded. "Thanks for reminding me. I'll catch up." He strode away, formulating the questions he needed to ask. He hoped Zacharias hadn't left her office yet.

She hadn't. She sat, head bent, poring over a little stack of papers. He knocked. "May I come in for a couple of minutes?"

She looked up, smiled, and pushed her work aside. "How is she?"

Hutch searched her face for any sign of cunning, but all he saw was an expression of genuine concern. "That's what I want to ask you," he said. "We want to take her back to her husband. There's been an emergency . . . They need each other."

The doctor nodded. "I thought so. But you must impress on her the need to return after that. It's extremely important she continue her therapy."

"How long has she been here?" Hutch asked.

"Almost seven weeks to the day," replied Zacharias promptly, leaning back in her chair. Rings sparkled on her slim fingers.

"Has she been free to leave during that time?" Hutch made the question as casual as possible, hoping Reina could be scratched off the suspect list.

"Absolutely not! That's one of the stipulations for being treated. No communication whatsoever with the outside world." Dark eyes narrowed in shrewd appraisal. "After all, it was her inability to cope with that world that led her here in the first place. Something outside these walls led her to addiction."

She paused. "The guard out there isn't to keep people out, although he does a good job of that when I want him to. He's to see that my guests don't take it upon themselves to wander. Some of my ladies used to sneak down to La Jolla and gorge themselves. My addicts had only a few more miles to the border . . ." She smiled at the detective. "But since I hired Webster, that has stopped."

Hutch chuckled. "Webster? That hulk at the gate?"

She smiled. "Don't laugh. He's a real treasure." She extended her hand. "Don't let me keep you, Sergeant. Both of us have busy schedules. Bring Reina back when this is over. It's nice, sometimes, to look forward to absolute privacy."
Had she read his mind? Hutch pressed her fingers and nodded. "I guess that's every cop's dream, too," he said huskily, then hurried out of the room. He had the impression the doctor knew far too much. He ran down the steps; Starsky had pulled the big car right up to the entry and he got in, noticing how pale and determined their passenger looked. "Don't worry, Mrs. Kendall," he soothed. "It'll be all right." He barely had his seat belt fastened when Starsky sped away. When they reached the gates Hutch said, "Thanks, Webster, for the tip about the dogs."

The guard's eyes never blinked. "Glad to be of service, Sergeant Starsky." Starsky chuckled as they sped through the gates. "Webster? Would never have guessed that."

"Just shut up and drive, pal. See if you can get us there in an hour." Smart-ass guard. Webster knew damn well which one was Starsky.

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Sixty-one minutes later they pulled up in the parking lot, helping a shaken Reina Kendall out of the car. Starsky managed a weary smile for his partner. "Damn, I'm good," he said as he locked the car.

"Good, hell!" Hutch snapped, shaking his finger at his unrepentant partner. "Lucky, yeah, but why we're not dead I'll never know." He heaved a sigh. "Right now, my guardian angel is demanding a new assignment. Ever since I met you, I've been using 'em up like crazy."

Reina caught his arm. "Please, don't scold him. We're here thanks to him."

Hutch stared at her in disbelief. "Well, pardon me, but you're as nuts as he is. You should work with him for eight years . . . You'd see."

"C'mon, we got things to do," Starsky began to walk over to the Kendall building, Hutch and Reina behind him.

"Does Phillip know I'm coming?" she asked, suddenly hanging back. "What if he doesn't want to see me?"

Hutch grabbed her hand. "He wants to, and besides, he needs you. It'll be fine . . ." Together, they raced across the street, against the light, and into the rapidly emptying building.

"When we get up to your husband's offices, we'll wait outside." Starsky said. "You two got some catchin' up to do and sure as hell don't need Hutch and me to help you."

To his vast relief, Reina didn't waste time or emotion arguing. Starsky could see her body tense as the elevator came to its stop. Hutch always did the same thing, like racehorses on the day of a big race. Even now, pressed against Hutch's front, he felt the hard muscles flex and relax, then flex again. Maybe he wasn't aware of his own tension, or maybe he just knew what his body was doing, who knew? Then, strong fingers moved against his spine, and he smiled to himself. Hutch, using their own private signals, saying everything would be fine.

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Starsky and Hutch sat with Captain Dobey in Phillip Kendall's outer office. The meeting between husband and wife had been tearful and loving. They had gone into his office, his tall frame shielding her from staring eyes.

"Makes you believe something good will come out of this, eh?" mused the captain.

Hutch nodded. There was that niggling little something in the back of his mind that had nothing to do with
what was going on now. Starsky was like a restless cat, picking up a magazine, tossing it down, glaring at the bank of phones on Minnie's desk, daring any one of them to ring so he could do something.

Phones! The little thought rolled around like a marble in an arcade game, refusing to fall into a hole. Hutch pressed his fingers to his temples and pressed hard. And the marble fell.

He rose to his feet and approached Minnie's desk. She had stayed on, offering her help if she was needed.

"Minnie," Hutch said. "Can you get some information for me?"

She looked delighted to be asked. "Anything, Sergeant. What do you want?" She took her glasses off and began polishing them with a tissue.

"I was wondering if Mr. Devereaux made his usual flight to Rome. Can you check and see? There was some doubt that he'd be there on time."

She was a sharp cookie. No protests, just a knowing gaze that told him he didn't have to spell it out. "I'll get right on it," she said. The glasses were set firmly back on her nose.

Quickly, he told Starsky about his suspicions.

Nodding, his partner went back to Dobey and whispered a few words to him. Dobey rubbed his scalp, fixed his tie, and got to his feet, leaving the office. Starsky came back to Hutch.

"He's gonna talk to the guy who's got the tap set up." Starsky dropped into a nearby chair. "Ya know, all along there's been something that doesn't fit. Too many loose ends."

Hutch agreed. "I know. Usually kidnappers keep in touch, especially if they want more ransom. This has been a game of cat-and-mouse, with a chicken feed payoff."

"Yeah," Starsky agreed. "Because if this ain't about Reina Kendall and drug money, what's it about?" He glanced at his watch. "Hutch, we gotta get down to Ensenada before dark. All we got going for us is that you speak the language and I drive like a maniac. That poor kid's in deeper shit now that we know he ain't with his mother."

"You said it," Hutch replied. "I figure this Devereaux is the weak link. He's the one who missed picking up the kid. He claims it was unavoidable, but what if he's lying?"

Starsky cocked his head. "Are you trying to tell me that Devereaux set this up, then went all the way to Rome so he won't look suspicious?" His brows drew together and he began rubbing one finger along the side of his shoe. "And that he's got the kid stashed somewhere in Ensenada with a woman who ain't who she claims to be?" Heavy, dark lashes lifted and Starsky's eyes gleamed with anger. "If you're right . . ."

"Yeah, what are best friends for, right?" Hutch said, staring at Kendall's closed door. "It all sounds great - except what's Devereaux's motive?"

"Shit!" Starsky swore under his breath. "Why do you always want all the answers? There's a little boy who ain't gonna get any older if we don't do something soon. Let the business with Devereaux wait, Hutch." Starsky reached out and gripped Hutch's arm with strong fingers. "Flip's only chance is us."

Just then, Kendall and Reina came out of his office. It was obvious they'd reached a decision to postpone whatever differences they still had in order to face this new ordeal.

Minnie walked over to Hutch, frowning. "Something's wrong, Sergeant. However, here's the information
you want. Peter did miss his flight. He caught the backup instead." She tapped her pencil against her teeth. "Frankly, I don't know why he missed the first one."

"Minnie, remind me to tell your boss to give you a raise. Is there a recent picture of Devereaux around? I just had an idea." He dashed out of the office, calling Dobey's name.

Two doors away, Dobey popped his head out, a finger to his lips. "Hutchinson! Shut up! Do you want everyone to know we're here?"

"No time for that, Captain," Hutch said excitedly. "We need a cop to go to LAX and wave Devereaux's photo around." He heard Starsky's soft tread behind him and saw his partner thrust a business shot of Devereaux into Dobey's hand.

"Minnie the Marvel just handed me this," he said. "All the flight info is on the back of the photo." There was a determined thrust to his jaw. "Hutch 'n' me are leaving for Baja right now. We can't hang around here any longer."

Dobey looked doubtfully at the picture. "This is going to take some time. We'll have to chase down the flight attendants, and God knows where they are." With a jerk of his head, he indicated the elevator door. "Get outta here and be careful. You've got no jurisdiction down there. Contact a Sergeant Padilla in Ensenada before you do a damn thing!"

"Come on," Starsky said, half-pulling Hutch. "We've got a long haul ahead of us. Traffic's gonna be bad enough."

Hutch said under his breath, "Yeah, it is, but I've got to visit the men's room before we leave. So do you. You're no camel, either."

"Sheesh! Usta be I could make that decision for myself. When did you adopt me? I mean, where's my dignity?"

Hutch made a face as he opened the door to the men's room. "Dignity? I'm talking about nature and you want to look dignified." He turned his back while he used the urinal, smiling to himself when Starsky did the same. Damn fool!

Hands washed and faces wiped, they left and entered the elevator. "Wish these things went slower, don't you?" Starsky commented. "I always wanted to stop between floors and screw you."

Hutch laughed. "That's outrageous, and yet coming from you it's as exciting as hell. Cut it out."

He saw the lecherous, beautiful smile begin and his insides began to turn to jelly. "You would, wouldn't you?"

"Damn straight I would, but not here." Starsky shook his head. "It's harder than I thought it would be - fallin' in love with you, I mean. I find myself drifting off into dreamland when I need to concentrate on drivin' or the bad guys." He paused as the elevator doors slid open, blue eyes focused on Hutch. A few people hurried toward the exit; none tried to enter the elevator.

"Yeah, I know," Hutch muttered. "Right now, we don't have the luxury to daydream. But, Lord, it's wonderful when we do." He straightened up, patted his jacket to make certain his gun was out of sight, and strode toward the front desk and the two security guards on duty. They gave them curt instructions on what they were to do in case of trouble, then left the building, inhaling great lungsful of the freshening afternoon breezes.
As they were crossing the street, Starsky said, "I told Reina we'd leave the Cougar at Metro because I'm not drivin' to Ensenada in a strange car. Besides, I want the radio so we can call for backup if we need it."

"Have to use the Ensenada channels, don't forget. Hell, we'd be better off with walkie-talkies. I'll pick up a couple of them. Let's move it."

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There was a phone message for them at headquarters. Kendall had received a call from a man demanding more ransom. He had agreed and been given directions for a meet. By the time Starsky and Hutch were ready to leave, they had the location pinpointed on a map of Ensenada. Hutch sat beside his partner, committing the street names and directions to memory. It would be nighttime and the mercados would be filled with people; not a place to study where to find someone.

"I suppose it's lucky there are so many tourists this time of year," Starsky commented as they passed Capistrano. We'd get nowhere fast tryin' to pass you off as a native."

Hutch looked at him in disbelief. "Starsk, have you ever looked at yourself - really looked - in the mirror? Do you think you can pass for a Latino?" He began to laugh. "When I was in Mexico City, there were more blond Mexicans than you could count. Hell, I was just blondier than most, that was all."

Grinning, Starsky said, "Yeah? And how many of 'em were over six feet and had baby-blue eyes?"

"Nice try, but it won't work this time," Hutch said sternly. "Just keep your mind on reaching the border before the tie-up."

Starsky shook his head and turned on his indicator, moving over to the fast lane. The accelerator crept up as the coastal towns were left behind. By six they were out of San Diego and on the road to the border. Bleary-eyed, Starsky pulled over. "I dunno about you, but if I'm gonna be up all night, I need a cup of coffee. That road to Ensenada is still rough and I don't want to end up in some ditch."

Stretching, Hutch agreed. "Yeah, I need to walk a bit. Seems we've driven about a thousand miles today." He pointed to a Denny's. "There! The poor man's oasis. Two coffees to go and a couple of doughnuts for the gut."

Starsky's smile was beatific. "Make them Danish and I'm your man." He moved over to the off ramp, avoiding a big rig heading for the same destination. "Don't know how those guys stand bein' on the road year after year," he commented.

"Maybe it's like being in the navy," Hutch replied. "They love the far horizon. Me, I want a place to park my car, stash the hardware, and forget about what's going on in the world." He looked at his partner's profile. "Oh, yeah, one other thing: somebody to share it with ..."

"Damn straight. When this job's over, we're gonna talk." Starsky left the freeway and headed for the Denny's.

Dusk fell when they were only five miles from Ensenada. By the time they arrived in the little town, the streets were filled with shoppers and visitors. Per Dobey's instructions, they had contacted a Sergeant Padilla, who had led them to his superior, a Lieutenant Cordoba. Two undercover men reassured them everything was ready for the meet. White teeth flashed in dark faces when they saw the red Torino. "Some auto, no one will ever see it." But there was envy in their dark eyes.

"Well, now the challenge begins," Hutch commented as Starsky parked the car and they strolled down to the gaudily-lit entrance to the Mercado Ensenada.
Laughter and shouts filled the spicy-scented air, and a tempting array of fruits and seafood lay spread in nearly every stall.

Hutch used his superior height to read the signs. "Down at the end of the fish row." He watched as Starsky eyed the crowd. "The *pescaderos* are as bad as used-car salesmen." He grinned at Starsky's indignant expression. "They have to be, Starsk, 'cause their cargo can't sit on a lot, day after day."

"Smart-ass. Just lead the way. And we're supposed to look for a blonde who could pass for Reina Kendall." He shook his head.

They had been waiting for almost ten minutes before they spotted her. A woman with huge, terrified eyes, peering from behind a jumble of cardboard boxes. She was dressed in the dark clothes of the stolid *señoras* who moved from stall to stall, arms filled with sacks. Her head was uncovered and nothing could disguise her pallor or the light brows above her eyes.

They approached her casually, aware there must be other eyes watching them, seeing they carried no bundle or suitcase that could be taken as ransom. Stalling for time . . . that was always the way. There never was enough time.

Hutch spoke to one *pescadero*, who beamed when he realized the *rubio* knew his language. Starsky stared as his partner purchased a section of yellowtail, generously tipping the man.

"Are you nuts?" he asked. "What the hell are we gonna do with that, shoot somebody with it?"

As they sauntered along, Hutch said quietly, "He was watching the woman a little too closely, partner. The last thing we need is for someone to tip off the kidnappers." He smiled. "I love yellowtail, damn shame we can't save it."

"Never mind your fuckin' fish!" Starsky snarled, slipping behind a pile of boxes. The woman still hadn't moved except to crouch down out of sight.

"Don't be afraid, ma'am. Me and my partner know about your call for help. That's why we're here."

"You did call your husband about Flip, didn't you?" Hutch saw no reason to hedge.

She hesitated, then nodded, her eyes suddenly wary. "Did you bring the money?" One arm raised to pull the *rebozo* closer around her shoulders, and Hutch saw the tracks on her exposed arm, the hunger in her eyes. He felt sick.

"Look, lady, you said they were gonna kill your boy!" Starsky said impatiently. "We're here to take you back, so let's not waste time. Where is he?"

She flinched, as if struck. "Please," she begged, "not so loud. I'll take you to him. Hurry."

Hutch set his purchase down on one of the top cartons and said something under his breath. There was nothing wrong with the woman's hearing, however, because she quickly said, "One or two . . . I never know where the other are. Sometimes a man drives up to the bungalow, talks to Ricardo, then leaves. I've never seen his face because he only comes at night."

"Is he the one who brings your . . .?" Starsky just pointed to her arm, all the time following her furtive movements.

"My fix. Just spit it out," she said bitterly. "All I want is for you to grab the kid and take him away. I'm so worried about him." She led them up a darkened alley for a couple of blocks and then stopped short,
pointing to a small, deep-in-shadows bungalow with a walled patio.

Hutch came abreast of the girl. "Is he all right? I mean, can he travel fast out of there?"

She shivered, staring up at him. "I don't know . . . maybe not. Please, take him back to his father. Ricardo keeps him drugged all the time . . . He's gotten so weak." She turned to Starsky and cried, "I-I can't go yet . . . just get the boy and leave."

Impulsively, Starsky gathered her to him, patting her back with awkward sympathy. "Hey, Hutch 'n' me won't leave here without you along. So get that out of your head. Just tell us where this Ricardo is and we'll do the rest."

"No! I have to go in and unlock the door for you. Do you have a car?" She was watching the shadows at the back of the patio. "Don't kill him."

"Lady, the last thing we want to do is kill a Mexican in Mexico," Hutch said earnestly. He was getting edgy, beginning to feel the adrenalin surge that sometimes made him sick afterwards. If they didn't move soon, he'd puke. He began to move along the alley, careful to keep to the darkest shadows. He'd never forgotten the time Starsky had rubbed dirt in his hair to dull the reflection off it. It had been a lesson learned, sometimes ignored; but the gesture itself had made an indelible impression.

She nodded, appeased, and slipped past them into the night. "I don't like it," Starsky muttered. "She's too damn scared. I got the feeling she's not telling us everything, don't you?"

Hutch nodded. "She's crawling through that little window on the side, just above that bush. Wait! She's got a flashlight, no, a candle. Come on, let's follow her."

They crept toward the rear of the patio wall, found a heavy gate almost hidden in a sprawl of bougainvillea. Starsky slid along the wall, lifting the gate latch with braced fingers. The latch eased off its wooden perch without a sound. Hutch went in first, leaving Starsky to prop the gate ajar so they could bring the boy out. A light gleamed at the back door, and the woman pushed it open just enough to let them in.

Without a word she led them down a tiny hall, then into a room at the end. The candle cast long, wavering shadows on the walls, but Hutch was drawn to a little cot in the corner. "Starsk, over here," he said softly. "Bingo."

The woman came closer, and the light haloed the child's head. He was fair, pale lashes dusting his thin cheeks. One dirty hand lay against a tearstained pillow. Hutch gently touched his shoulder. "Flip . . . Flip . . . wake up." There was no response and he nudged the boy harder. Behind him he heard Starsky's indrawn breath.

"It's no use," the woman moaned. "He's drugged. He won't wake up for several hours."

Starsky was on her like an avenging angel. "You bitch! How could you let this happen? Even if he ain't your own son, where's your heart?"

She drew back like a snake, hissing her anger. "Shut up! If I hadn't suggested Ricardo drug him, he'd be dead by now! Just get him out of this hell hole and leave me in peace!" She calmed down and turned toward Hutch, "I risked my life to contact his father. I know how awful I am . . . but the kid . . ." Great silent waves of anguish wracked her slim frame. "Take the blanket, otherwise he'll be cold. He never lets it out of his sight."

Without another word Hutch swaddled the child in it, lifting him easily onto his shoulder. "Come on, partner, we've still got a lot to do . . . so let's get outta here."
Starsky drew his gun and backed out of the room, extending his right hand toward the woman. "Are you comin’ with us or not? We gotta go, lady, so make up your mind."

They all heard the scrunch of tires on the gravel in the alley. "Damn!" Hutch swore. "We've got company."

The woman panicked. "Go! It's probably Ricardo . . . if it's a blue two-door Ford. I . . . I know how to distract him. Dear God, get out of here!" The candle shook in her grip.

Starsky hesitated for only a moment, watching as she ran out of the room and into the small bathroom, candle in hand. Before he could make a move she set the ragged curtains on fire.

"Smart move. Now, let's get outta here. I gotta go help Hutch."

She was strangely calm, even returning his smile. "Don't worry about me. There's another way out. Just go!"

Starsky nodded, then raced to the back door and out across the patio. Hutch must have made it out into the alley because he was nowhere in sight. He saw several people converging on the house and his heart sank until he realized these were neighbors. He recognized the word "Bomberos!" Good old phone book. He'd always told Hutch it was invaluable.

Hutch, meanwhile, was running along the alley, trying desperately not to jostle the boy too much. He heard people screaming, then heard the sound of crunching gravel again. He stopped, turned to face whatever was behind him, and saw smoke rising from the little bungalow. Where the hell was Starsky? A shadow detached itself from a doorway. A moment later he spotted two figures emerging from an old car. "Mira! Mira!" one shouted. "Esta corriendo!"

"I know you saw him, you bastard," Hutch said savagely. "But you don't know I see you." He gently placed the unconscious boy in a doorway and drew his Magnum. To his relief, Starsky ducked back out of sight.

They had parked near the waterfront. Just as Hutch was putting his gun back in its holster, Starsky raced up to him.

"Let me have him!" he yelled. "You run ahead and start the car. Run like hell, Hutch, 'cause we ain't got a chance if we don't get outta here."

"Gotcha," Hutch said, crouching low at first to keep out of the car's headlights, then dodging behind a large van. He saw Starsky scoop up the kid as if he were a sack of potatoes, toss him over his shoulder, and run down the alley, pushing trashcans over as he went.

When Starsky passed him, Hutch stepped out. He had drawn his gun and aimed it at the car. "Vamanos!"

One of the men shouted, slamming the car door just as it started up.

Hutch grinned fiercely. "Vamanos, yourself." A shot whizzed past his head, and he pulled the trigger, aiming for the front tires. The right one burst with a loud bang. Hutch turned and raced after his partner. With their pursuers on foot, they had a far better chance of escaping.

Another shot rang out, but he could tell by its sound that the men had dropped back. He didn't try to fire. Ahead he saw Starsky with the boy. "Hey! Starsky. Wait up."

Gasping, his partner slowed down. "What was that gunfire back there? I thought we were goners for sure."

"Nah. Here, give me the kid and you go on ahead. They're on foot now. We've only got a couple of blocks to go."
Starsky handed over the boy without protest. "If we get separated, hide out down by the waterfront... that langosta place."

"Langosta de Mar," Hutch said as he shouldered the boy. "Get going, because if they call the cops and say we kidnapped a kid, we're in deep you-know-what."

"Gotcha. Be careful." Hutch caught Starsky by the arm. "Where's the girl? I thought she was going to follow you." Starsky paused only long enough to shake his head. "Don't ask, we ain't got time. I think she's okay because all the neighbors were out there and the two bozos are chasin' us."

He glanced over his shoulder. "See ya in a few minutes. Now, let's get the hell outta here!" He began to run, darting side to side like a quarterback on his way to a touchdown. In the darkened alley, he soon disappeared.

Hutch shifted the boy so that he had a better grip on him. "Flip, it's too bad you're not awake. This is gonna be an 'E' ride all the way." He deliberately chose to run along the fence lines, ignoring the barking dogs, the startled cackle of sleeping hens.

As he ran, he forgot the child's slight weight; all his senses were on the sounds behind him. How soon the dogs barked next would tell him where their pursuers were. The gravel crunched loudly beneath his boots and he swore under his breath. No need to panic, only one more block until he turned onto the other street and by then Starsky should be driving back to pick them up. But where were Lieutenant Cordoba and his men?

He imagined he heard the roar of the Torino's engine as he ran, but the noise was behind him. Instinctively, he chose to dart between two buildings, cutting across a paved yard with a fountain splashing droplets onto the tiles. He nearly slipped but reached the other street before anyone saw him. Sweat poured off his brow and down his neck. Flip's blanket became uncomfortably warm. He found a narrow pathway, grass soft as velvet, and he sighed with relief as he raced along.

"Wha... what's going on?" It was the boy, struggling to get down. Hutch held onto him for dear life. "It's okay. Don't panic," Hutch said. "I'm a cop and my partner and I are going to take you back to L.A. Just hang on!"

"Bu... but..."

"Sorry, kid, hold on and keep quiet." Hutch let out a deep breath. His lungs hurt like hell and he wondered if he'd lost Starsky in the confusion. From the breeze he knew he had to head left to the ocean. He hoped his partner hadn't turned into that alley looking for him. Now that Flip was awake, he couldn't stash him someplace to find out. He reached an intersection, saw no car even remotely resembling the Torino, and headed toward the ocean. As he ran, his thoughts were on his partner.

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"Where the hell are you?" Starsky muttered as he drove along the crowded street. Hutch should have reached the corner where they were to meet almost five minutes ago. He had watched a fire engine careen around the same corner as it headed toward the fire, but hadn't spotted the woman who was impersonating Reina Kendall anywhere. Probably decided to take her chances with the crooks. She could always claim the kid set the fire. Or, maybe like he and Hutch, she'd slip away in all the confusion and get lost.

Mexico was a big country and there were plenty of little towns to hide out in. They'd gotten what they wanted, and if Lady Luck stayed with them, they'd be safe before dawn. He decided to head for the little seafood bar; undoubtedly that's where Hutch had gone.
He slowed down as a truck came roaring out of the alley, his heart pounding in his chest like a very loud drum. He knew they wouldn't recognize the Torino - unless they'd been followed all the way from L.A.

But where were Hutch and the kid? The truck made a right turn and began cruising along the street, heading away from the ocean. Starsky's eyes narrowed. For some reason Hutch had had to change plans, and those s.o.b.s were after him. Very quietly he made a U-turn and began following them, keeping far enough back that they wouldn't spot him. He hoped that Hutch would spot him first and hide until their pursuers went past.

He drew his gun, put it in his lap, and crept along after his prey.

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"We're almost there, Flip, so keep your head down," Hutch whispered to the boy. "My partner's looking for us, and we'll have you back with your mom and dad in a few hours." Hutch's side hurt, but he dismissed it as merely being unfit for this kind of challenge.

"Mister? I gotta . . ."

The guttural sound of a slow-moving vehicle caught Hutch's attention. "Shhh," he said. "Flip, it's really important that you don't talk. When we're safe and out of here, then we'll have time to get acquainted. Okay?"

He scanned the nearly deserted street and shrank back, trying to hide Flip. Now that the kid was awake, he was tempted to put him down, grab him by the hand, and force him to run. Unfortunately, the boy was too weak.

He saw the truck about the same time the driver spotted him. And about a block away, he noticed the Torino. Without hesitating, he stepped off the curb and into the street, crossing swiftly to the opposite side. He grabbed Flip by the wrists and reached for his gun with his right hand. "Listen, son, this is important. You get down behind my back as far as you can, do you understand? There's a couple of bad guys who want to take you back to that house . . . and I know you don't want to go with them. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," came a muffled, very scared voice. "But I'm not . . . not . . ."

"Not now! We'll get to the intros later. My name's Hutch, and your dad sent me and my partner to find you." He saw the truck make a wide sweep of the street before it turned. He frowned. Where in hell were the Mexican police? A very unwelcome thought occurred . . . What if they were more interested in drug money than in two cops rescuing a kid? What was it Starsky had said? Nothing's simple.

He crouched down behind an old Buick, so solid that he knew bullets wouldn't go through the heavy steel frame. His mind registered the muted screech of tires and the distinctive growl of the Torino's engine. "Attaboy, come to Papa," he whispered.

Suddenly, he let go of Flip, rolled him in the blanket, and ordered him to stay down behind the car. Then, with the truck lumbering toward him, he braced himself along the trunk, sighting the Magnum. "You jackasses never learn, do you?" he muttered.

He heard two shots, each from a different direction, and grunted as a bullet hit the rear bumper and then slammed into his shoulder. Nothing much, but the breath rushed out of him all the same. Who was the jackass now?

There was a loud thump, a howl, and he grinned. His partner had effectively removed the jerk who had come up behind him. The truck slowed down, and now he could see the driver stick his head out the
window, calling to his friend. Hutch raised his gun, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet went through the windshield with vicious force, and a moment later the truck crashed into a parked car, the metal screeching as it rubbed off paint and metal.

Hutch ducked. Starsky had pulled around the body in the street and was now alongside the Buick. He leaned over and opened the door. "Move it! I hear sirens... We gotta get the hell outta here!"

Hutch tossed his gun onto the passenger seat and whirled around to pick up the boy, who hadn't so much as raised his head. "Come on, fella," he said. "It's almost over. Let's go." He grunted in pain as he hefted the child over his shoulder, but there wasn't time to change positions. People were beginning to surge onto the street and they had to get away before anyone got a good look at the Torino. He dumped the heir to the Kendall millions unceremoniously onto the back seat, and as he got in slammed the door shut. "Now or never!" he shouted. Starsky obeyed, the tires squealing in protest. Hutch glanced back, staring at the pall of smoke now hanging over the neighborhood. "Hope the girl got away," he said softly.

"Shoulder hurt yet?" was Starsky's only comment.

"Nope, but it will tomorrow." He managed a grin. "He's okay. We did it."

Starsky slowed the car down and switched lanes. "Thought I'd try another approach to the border. May take a little longer, but I don't trust Cordoba and his flunkies."

"At least you didn't plug a Mexican citizen," Hutch said glumly, leaning over the seat to observe their guest. "Hello, Phillip Kendall the Umpteenth. Glad to be here?"

One small hand wiped hair back from a very pale face. A little voice said, "Yeah, sort of..." Eyelids drooped sleepily. "But my name's... really, I'm called..." The boy slumped back against the seat, asleep.

"Poor little guy," Starsky said, "can't even remember his name. Maybe he thinks we're just more kidnappers and he's afraid to talk." He drove on, avoiding the mercado where merchants were still packing away their goods.

"You know what I always wanted to buy?" Starsky said. "One of those onyx bowls of fruit - watermelon, bananas, peaches. That'd look great on my kitchen table." He sounded wistful.

"Partner," Hutch said fervently, "if you get us out of this without a hitch, I'll go down to Olvera Street and buy you the biggest damn bowl of dyed-onyx fruit I can find." For some reason, picturing his triumphant entry at Starsky's apartment made him forget his aching shoulder.

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They passed through the border without raising so much as an eyebrow. Afterward, Starsky declared that maybe Cordoba had arranged to have both the fire and the shootout put down as drug-related incidents with no Anglos involved. Starsky also said, "It's lucky the kid's blond. Probably figured he was yours."

"Wish he'd wake up. He looks like he could use a good meal," Hutch commented as they sped toward Chula Vista. They'd stopped twice to notify the Kendalls of their success, but each time the pay phone had been out of service - once because it had been ripped off the wall.

Starsky pulled into an all-night service station. "I wanna get a look at that hole in your shoulder," he said, "and see if there's a phone here. You stay in the car while I make the call. Then I'll go to the john and you come in after me."

Hutch shot him a look. "I need to use the facilities, and I want Flip to go in, too. I'd like to clean him up
before his folks see him."

Starsky laughed. "Just be careful that some old biddy doesn't bash you for takin' a kid into a bathroom." He grew somber. "You can see if he has to go, but we'd better clean him up in the car . . . after I look at your shoulder."

Hutch was suddenly tired. A hot shower, his own bed, and a week's sleep. To hell with the shoulder. That reality was hours away; not only the drive, but the reams of paperwork, the questions to be answered. He sagged down in the seat, and when Starsky got out he made no effort to move.

"Mister? Hutch? Can I have a candy bar? And I need to pee real bad."

"Hunh?" Hutch stared dazedly at the small face peering up at him. Woeful as it was, the expression in the eyes was alert - and suspicious.

"Sure, kid, sure. Lemme wake up and . . . ouch!" Hutch gingerly touched his shoulder. The pain did the trick. Wide-awake, he opened the car door and got out, allowing the youngster to clamber over the seat and out of the car. "Come on . . . I'll take you to the men's room. I'll check and make sure nobody else is in there. Oh, wash your face and hands while you're at it, okay?"

But the boy was looking at Hutch's jacket, his eyes wide. "Is that blood? It sure looks like blood."

No use in lying, the kid was too sharp to insult him. Hutch nodded. "Sure is. There was this bull that got loose from the bull ring, and he was running down the street and I tried to grab him by the horns . . . and he . . . well, he got away."

A brief smile crossed the boy's lips, but he didn't challenge Hutch, merely shrugged. "You can't stop a bull like that . . ." He left off what he was going to say, grabbed his crotch, and began to dance. "Hurry up or . . . I'll pee my pants."

Fortunately, the men's room was unlocked and empty. Hutch leaned against the door while the kid did his business. He heard the sound of running water and smiled. He was glad his partner hadn't heard the story about the bull.

Inside the store, Starsky had his back braced against the only wall that wasn't filled with shelving. He held the receiver in his right hand while his left one felt in the coin return slot. Finally, Dobey answered.

"Good news, Cap'n. We got him. Well, just a little trouble. No, the kid's okay . . . Kinda sleepy, but by the time we get to L.A. he'll be fine. Hunh? They want us to take him to the marina? That makes sense. Better yet, it's closer. Sure, we'll be careful."

Starsky hung up. Other than the night manager and his clerk, there was only one other person in the store. They had looked at him, then at his car and Hutch, and gone on robbery alert. It didn't help that he was wearing the leather jacket that permitted a view of the bulge under his arm. He decided to take action before it became necessary. All he needed was some trigger-happy citizen to blast away because he got scared.

The manager stared at him, not the friendly type at all. Starsky went up to the counter. "I'd like two sodas, one chocolate milk shake, and one of those kid's hamburgers." He leaned forward, as if taking the man into his confidence. "Don't worry, I'm gonna show you my ID, so you can relax."

The man turned grey, color draining rapidly from his face. "No sweat, man, I don't need no ID. Whatever you want, it's yours."

Starsky pulled out his badge and flipped it open. "Just so there's no misunderstanding. Make up my order
and we're on our way. You got that?"

The manager shot a quick glance out at the Torino, and nodded. "Guaranteed. Three minutes flat. Anything else?"

"How much? And get that kid out of the back, let him fix the burger." He found his temper getting shorter by the second.

"George! Get out here! Man wants a junior hamburger on the double." The manager's voice was shrill.

Starsky watched George carry out a mop and a squeegee. "One coke, one root beer, one shake, one hamburger," he said. "Now." He deliberately turned his back on them and walked over to the door. Hutch was just bringing Flip Junior from the john.

Hutch fussed with the boy's clothing, shaking his head at the messy tee shirt. "Marshmallow," Starsky murmured to himself.

"It's ready, sir. That'll be $2.25." The manager also was watching Hutch, a frown on his face. Starsky put the money on the counter. "Picked up a lost child. Wanna come out and see if he's from around here?" he asked casually.

The man shook his head. "Naw, anymore we got mostly Mexicans. Bracero kids. Where'd you find him?"

"Just south of here. Been on his own for a couple of days. He's hungry."

The manager looked indignant. "Hey! Don't think I turned him away, mister. Little kid like that. If you'd said something, I would've thrown in the hamburger and shake for free."

This time Starsky smiled. "Glad to hear it. Some kids really have bad luck. Take care." He sauntered out of the store toward the car.

"Think he'll call the cops to check on your story?" Hutch asked after Starsky had brought him up to date. "He sure was giving us the glum eye."

In the back seat Flip was busily devouring the hamburger and shake, making little sighs of appreciation as he chewed.

Starsky took a quick gulp from the can of A&W, handed it to Hutch, and settled down for the next leg of their journey. "Dunno. He was kinda slow on the uptake." He rolled down the window. "Meanwhile, Dobey says that Kendall's worried that someone might have his office and home staked out. Sooo . . . We're to bring Flip to the marina." He glanced sideways at his partner.

"I guess it makes sense." They were already past San Diego and on the part of the freeway that ran parallel to the ocean. There was a full moon, and row after row of whitecaps surged toward the shore. It was an endless cycle, hypnotic in its rhythm; Hutch never tired of it.

Tonight, however, he felt like hell; his shoulder throbbed, blood was sticking to his shirt and jacket, and he wanted to sleep. Still, he looked over at Starsky.

"Want me to drive for a while? You've been at it the whole damn day." He watched the man he loved more than anyone else turn his head slightly and grin.

"Thanks, but not tonight. You don't look so hot, and we need at least one of us awake." Starsky jerked his thumb toward the back seat. Their passenger was already asleep, the remains of his feast spilled in his lap.
Hutch smiled. "Poor kid. He's sure had a rough time of it."

"He'll be fine. Mommy's back and Daddy'll probably take them to Tahiti on the yacht. For some people, that's the way it works."

He was too tired to argue, but Hutch knew the flaws in Starsky's terse summary. Reina had to return to her fancy spa, Flip had to return to school, and he and Starsky had to find out who in hell was responsible for this mess in the first place. "We don't exactly have a happy ending," he murmured, trying to stay awake. "There's still a lot to be done . . ."

A hand, firm and gentle, touched his leg. "Get some rest. I'm too tired to think straight. But there's nothing more we can do until the kid's back with his family."

Starsky began to whistle - an off-key, offbeat, unrecognizable tune. It was just what Hutch needed to fall asleep.

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"Wake up, partner. C'mon, we're only a few miles from the marina." Starsky's voice, husky with fatigue, penetrated Hutch's subconscious like a dull fork, prodding and poking until he had no choice but to respond.

"What time is it?" He sat up, rubbing his eyes, moving his shoulder to see how it felt. It still hurt, but most of the soreness seemed to be in his back, probably from carrying Flip in such an awkward position. "How's the kid?" he asked Starsky as he rubbed his eyes.

Still cuttin' z's." Starsky yawned, winced, then said, "You suppose you could rub my neck for a couple of secs? I feel like it's stretched out of shape."

"Pull over and I'll see what I can do." They were both suffering from adrenalin letdown now, and he knew the last few miles would seem unbearable.

He got out of the car, walked stiffly over to Starsky's side, and opened the door. In the back seat, Flip sprawled in loose, deep slumber, mouth open like a baby bird's.

Starsky got out, groaning as he flexed his legs and arms. "I feel about ninety-seven, maybe ninety-eight," he said when Hutch turned him around and put his hands on the nape of his neck.

"Yeah? Don't get coy. You look about a hundred and ten, wise-guy, even if you do still have all your hair." Hutch knew exactly how to get his partner to relax: banter and massage, insult and massage, snipe and massage. He removed Starsky's jacket, wincing as his own shoulder protested. "Come on, lover, bend over the hood. Pretend it's the couch, or the table, or the . . ."

". . . or that damn piano!" Starsky grunted, head bent as he leaned into the pressure of Hutch's fingers. "I had indents on my belly for two weeks."

"You're a liar," Hutch retorted as he kneaded the tight muscles on Starsky's nape. "We never once did it on the piano. Where the hell were you if you remember that?" But he grinned because he knew Starsky would bring this up later on . . . sex on the piano. Like hell!

"It's true," Starsky swore. "You were too drunk to remember. I sounded like Van Cleef while we were doin' it, so help me."

Hutch choked on his laughter. "Van Cliburn, you hopeless clod . . . although I suppose it doesn't matter because it never happened." Finally, he ran his hands down Starsky's spine, producing the shudder that
meant he was relaxed enough to drive again. He patted Starsky's butt just for good measure. "I pronounce you cured of this malady. Let's go."

"Never said I wanted to be cured, just get some relief," Starsky muttered, his eyes suddenly shuttered behind heavy lids. "You'd make a helluva doctor . . . starve to death in a year, all because you think you hafta cure people."

"Well, in your case I might make an exception, but only because you're cute. Now, let's get going. We've got a couple of anxious parents waiting for their son." Hutch climbed back into the car and slammed the door.

Nodding, Starsky slid onto the seat. "Right. But we're not gonna work all night. Dobey'll have to wait until tomorrow for our report. I'm too damn tired to make any sense out of what went on in Ensenada."

Hutch let out a long breath. "I know. The only thing we do know is that we rescued the kid." He ran his fingers through his hair, then said wearily, "Oh, yeah, there's the matter of getting my shoulder attended to. Doesn't feel like more than a scratch."

The noise of the engine drowned out Starsky's reply. They both knew he'd been lucky. Somewhere, God knew when, there was a bullet with a name on it.

The noise woke up their passenger. He coughed, pushed the papers onto the floor and got to his knees. "Where are we going?" he asked, eyes now wide and bright. He finished his shake with loud, slurping noises.

"Don't you remember? You're going home. Your folks want to meet you on the KAMA. It's all over, Flip." Starsky looked in the rear-view mirror, trying to understand the boy's confused look. He suspected that when he saw his parents everything would clear up. It was the drugs, of course. He remembered Hutch's lapses of memory in those first few weeks after he'd been hooked.

Hutch snapped his fingers. "God! I hope to hell Kendall didn't tell anyone that Flip's safe! The last thing we want to do is tip off whoever's responsible. Did you warn Dobey?"

Starsky shook his head. "Sorry, never gave it a thought. Maybe Dobey did. But you're right. This case isn't over yet."

He found a parking place directly in front of the entry gate to the Kendall dock. As they got out of the car, he saw the lights from the KAMA reflected on the water. It was a pretty sight.

Hutch bent over Flip, pushing his hair from his face, dabbing at the corners of his mouth with his handkerchief. "That's it," he said. "Wouldn't want them to think we didn't take care of you, would we?"

Slowly, the boy shook his head. He hung back as the gate swung open, his bare feet pale in the moonlight. Hutch shook his head. "Hey! It's okay. They're not going to yell at you." He slid his arms around the thin shoulders, and urged him toward the yacht. "Look! On deck . . . it's your mom and dad."

"Here they come! Oh, God, there he is . . . my baby!" A slim figure, dressed in a short white dress, ran toward them, closely followed by Kendall. Starsky, all smiles, beckoned to their charge. "Look! Wave to your folks . . ."

"What the . . .?" Hutch stopped abruptly as two skinny arms wrapped around his leg, and the boy burst into tears. "No! No!" he cried. "No . . ."

Reina Kendall dropped to her knees and reached out to claim her son. With desperate hands she tried to pull him away from Hutch. "Honey, it's Mommy . . . Look, Flip, it's Mommy." She buried her face in her hands.
"Oh, he doesn't remember me."

But Kendall had stopped beside Starsky, a frown creasing his brow. He stared, then turned a puzzled glance to the cops. "That's not my son," he gasped, "... that's not Flip! Good Lord, you've brought us the wrong boy!" At that moment the same realization struck Reina. She reached for her husband, screamed, then fainted.

Hutch swore softly, pried the child's arms from around his leg, and lifted him up to eye level. "I don't understand," he said. "We followed the directions exactly. The kid was lying on a cot, drugged to the eyeballs, and ..."

He looked at Starsky, sick at heart. "If this isn't Flip Kendall, who in the hell is he?"

"I dunno, Hutch. But I get the feeling we're back to square one, don't you?" Starsky let out a long, exhausted sigh.

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"Does it hurt?" Starsky asked quietly as Hutch sat slumped back against the seat. It was a stupid question, one that at any other time might have provoked a reaction from his partner. But Hutch's pain wasn't coming from his shoulder, it was coming from his heart. Despite Kendall's protests, Captain Dobey had been adamant. Tired cops make mistakes, he'd said, and his men were too damned exhausted to work around the clock! They had watched the little boy they'd rescued being escorted by a social worker to another office. He had cried, wanting to go with "his cops." They'd both felt like hell.

"I'm gonna take you home, and get us something to eat, and then I'm puttin' you to bed," Starsky said firmly.

"And what about you?" Hutch asked as his partner turned onto Washington Avenue, headed for Venice Place. It was nearly dawn, grey, and cool, and quiet. He had stitches in his shoulder, he smelled like a bottle of Lysol, and his back hurt from hauling that kid - the wrong kid - around. "I mean, you must feel about the same. Sore back and arms, not to mention the condition of your ass from sitting on it for so many hours. Christ, we're getting too old for this kind of work, partner, aren't we?"

"I dunno about you, Hutch, but another case like this and I'm gonna toss my gun and badge on Dobey's desk and make for the damn hills."

There was so much frustration and pain in Starsky's voice that Hutch said nothing more. Ahead was Venice Place. Even in the predawn light, it was pink. A cool, inviting shade right now, offering warmth within its walls.

Starsky parked around the corner as he always did when he was spending the night. Customers and shop owners needed the area out front. "Come on. Time to unwind," he said.

Hutch snorted. "I'm unwound and unglued already from that shot I had at the hospital, pal. Just lead me to the stairs and I'll feel my way up the steps. You can push me when I stop."

Groaning, Starsky managed to get from behind the steering wheel. He steadied Hutch while they staggered to the front steps. "I'm sure glad the school's not open yet," he said, "cause we look like two winos after a night on the town."

It took Hutch almost three minutes to crawl up the airs, another one to find his key, and at least two minutes to get him deposited on the bed. Starsky slammed the door shut, shot the dead bolt, and return to Hutch. He surveyed the long frame, the bloodstained shirt and jacket, and announced, "I, Sergeant David Michael Starsky, am going to take a leak. And then I'm going to sleep for one whole week. Got that?"
The last thing he remembered doing was removing his jacket and placing it over his head.

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"Jesus," muttered Hutch as he struggled to wake up. "Where am I?" He rolled over and whispered, "Starsk? There's something in bed with us. It's brown and smelly and sitting on your head."

A groan, followed by some fervent swearing, informed him that his partner was in no mood for conversation now or in the near future. He lay there, acutely aware of how he smelled, how sore he felt, and what a mess this whole damn case was.

He raised his head, watching the sunshine trying to penetrate the curtains. Judging by the shadows in the room it was about ten a.m. Shit! He supposed he might as well get up, which he did with great difficulty. He slid off the bed, stood up, and staggered into the bathroom. Once in there, facing the mirror, he gaped at himself in disbelief. He still had on all his clothes, including his boots, and now he knew why his side ached; he was still wearing his gun and holster. The depth of Starsky's fatigue hit him like a blow. The poor guy must have crashed as soon as he'd sat on the bed.

He turned on the shower, stripped off everything, inspected his bandage, and managed a weak grin. "Alive and kicking, what more do I want?" God, no wonder the storeowner had been so jumpy last night. By the time he'd shaved, he was thinking about something to eat. A lot of something to eat. He didn't know how they were going to find Kendall's son, but Starsky and he had to have a break.

Before he dressed he checked the phone. No messages. Dobey had promised them twelve hours, maybe they'd get all of them.

He glanced over at Starsky's unmoving figure. Getting him up was going to prove difficult, but from long experience he knew the secret. Quickly, he donned a robe and headed for the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, he had fresh coffee, instant waffles and ham, and eggs, over-easy. The coffee was the simplest part, the rest he produced by raiding the refrigerator.

But before he called Starsky he phoned Metro, asking for Dobey. He listened soberly, answered a few questions, then hung up. At least one mystery had been solved. Starsky would be pleased about that. He poured himself a cup of coffee, drank it, then fixed one for Starsky, which he carried into the bedroom alcove. "Rise and shine," he said loudly as he placed the cup on the bedside table. With care, he began pulling the jacket from Starsky's head.

Two hands shot out, grabbed the smelly leather relic, and jammed it back over the dark curls. "Touch it again and die!" Starsky snarled. He flopped onto his side and grunted, "What the hell have you got in this bed? Feels like a rock."

"Then it's your rock," Hutch said silkily. "Come on, tough guy, haul ass . . ."

The jacket was tossed across the room, and Starsky rose from the bed, ready to throttle his partner. "Haul ass? Well, I'm gonna haul your ass to the back door and throw it down the stairs if you don't shut up! I'm a dyin' man, Hutch! Dyin' of exhaustion . . .""The jacket was tossed across the room, and Starsky rose from the bed, ready to throttle his partner. "Haul ass? Well, I'm gonna haul your ass to the back door and throw it down the stairs if you don't shut up! I'm a dyin' man, Hutch! Dyin' of exhaustion . . ."

He stopped the tirade and sniffed the air. "What's that? What's cookin'?" He sat back down on the edge of the bed.

"Sausage, maybe. Waffles, possibly. Ham and eggs, probably. But then again, if you're that tired . . ."

Blue eyes watched his every move. "How's your shoulder? What've you been up to?" The gaze ran over
Hutch's clothing and the eyes narrowed. "What time is it?" Starsky asked, reaching for the coffee cup.

"Time for you to shower and shave, partner," Hutch replied. "I'll cook while you wash and change. Your robe's hanging on the back of the bathroom door."

"I know where I left it," Starsky grumbled as he headed for the bathroom. "Think I'd never spent the night here before." He shut the door behind him.

Hutch listened to the sounds Starsky made as he shaved. Drawers banging, shower curtain sliding, water tested, the thump of feet as they gained purchase in the tub. Without seeing him, Hutch could time his exit from the bathroom almost to the minute.

It was different when they showered together. He smiled.

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"Well, you can always get a job as a short-order cook if you ever decide to give up police work," Starsky said contentedly as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. He had eaten a prodigious amount, lingering over a third cup of coffee. He smiled. "Now, who's gonna wash up? You or me?" This was easy. Hutch would get indignant, tell him to get his butt into the kitchen, and then they'd have a hot debate about the rules always changing . . . They'd end up damn near coming to blows . . . but not quite.

"Neither," replied Hutch quietly, all seriousness. "We need to talk." He began stacking the plates, waiting for Starsky to gripe about being unpredictable. But his partner sat very still, a sudden look of unease in those expressive eyes.

"Talk about the kid we rescued, dummy," Hutch said, suddenly realizing that Starsky was still afraid things might change between them. Not even if hell froze over insofar as he, himself, was concerned.

"I called Dobey before I got you up. He told me the kid's name is Nicholas Wingate . . . age nine. And guess where he was playing when he was snatched?"

Starsky set his coffee cup down, and grinned. "Drake damn Park! Same day as Flip Kendall."

"You got it," Hutch said. "And guess who grabbed him?"

There was no hesitation. "Easy! Those sonofabitchin' gardeners! The ones in that old Dodge." He gathered up the cutlery, dumping it into his mug. "But the real question is still - why?"

Hutch shook his head. "Not quite. The real question now is, is Peter Devereaux mixed up in one, or both, or either of these disappearances? And . . . where in the hell is Flip Kendall?"

All the air left Starsky's lungs. He began making bread crumbs out of an uneaten slice of toast. "So why didn't the Wingates report their kid missing? Do you suppose that was Mrs. Wingate, posing as Mrs. Kendall?" He shook his head, running his fingers through his damp curls, then stroking his chest lightly. His eyes darkened with something other than curiosity. His whole body was alive with tension. It was clear he didn't want to talk about these things.

Hutch couldn't stand it. He rose from the table, gathered up the dishes, and dumped them into the sink. The questions could wait; they couldn't. He turned around to face Starsky. "I don't know about you, but the last thing I want to do is play twenty questions. How about you?"

Nodding, Starsky got to his feet and took off his robe. "We ain't wearin' enough to play more than one hand of strip poker, so to hell with games. How's your shoulder?"
The man was beautiful, Hutch thought, watching patterns of light play over Starsky's body. He'd never found the over-developed muscles of the bodybuilders to be a turn-on, but this guy, who moved like a panther, could make his bones melt. "My shoulder's just fine," he lied, removing his robe. He smiled and held out his arms. "Let's go back to bed."

Starsky began to laugh as they settled down, sheets shoved about until they fell on the floor. "Remember the first time - at my place? God, we were so damn modest, I dunno how we ever got around to fucking. All I knew was I had to have you . . . had to actually show you how I felt." He sat back on his heels, eyeing his lover. "It's been a hell of a ride, hasn't it?"

Hutch gazed up at him. "Yeah. Gets better each time. I'm so damn greedy any more that sometimes I . . . I . . . wish . . ." He looked away, unable to say more.

Starsky straddled him and leaned down to kiss him. "I know. You wish you had two of everything, right? 'Cause one just isn't enough, Babe. I been thinking that for months now. It isn't because I don't believe in what we've got, and I know I know how to use it, but I want all the feelings at once."

Hutch reached up and cradled the long face, kissing Starsky's eyelids. "That's it! I want to make love to you while you're screwing me. I want to play double sixty-nine! I want to give you more than I can. I thought for a while I was going nuts." He sought Starsky's mouth and tongue, losing himself in the sensations.

Starsky pulled away, eyes hot with need. "Way I figure it, if we had two of everything, we'd be dead by now. Let's get practical . . . I want you. What can't we do?" He began to stroke his cock, watching Hutch's face while he did.

"Can't put any pressure on my shoulder, for starters, which lets out me screwing you into the mattress, or you hefting my legs up to the ceiling." He grinned, face reddening as he spoke. "Fortunately, the bullet hit something not needed for what you've got in mind, am I right?"

Without smiling, Starsky nodded. "Just give me a second or two, blondie, and we'll be on our way." He stared down at Hutch lying beneath him, almost spread-eagled. "Turn on your left side and relax." He got off the bed, took the phone off the hook, and opened the bedside cabinet. "So, you get off on six inches of steel, do you? Wanna try for seven?"

Hutch turned on his side, shivering as a pair of warm hands slid down his spine, listening to the voice purring in his ear. He groaned as exploring fingers spread lubricant and desire in equal amounts inside him.

Starsky's breathing grew more labored, and Hutch knew his lover was pumping himself to full hardness. It was going to be good - fast and hard at first, then slower and more loving. He heard a sudden exclamation and the fingers withdrew, clamping down hard on his thighs as Starsky slid close behind him. "Wish I had a ruler," Starsky murmured. "I think it's an eight."

They made love twice, Starsky driven by some inner urge to possess Hutch's very soul. Hutch begged for more, using his ass as an enticement his lover couldn't resist. He dared Starsky to invent new positions, then groaned with the pleasure they produced. Only once did Starsky forget about Hutch's shoulder, and a sharp yell only served to incite him further.

Now, sated unto exhaustion, they lay sprawled in each other's arms. "What the hell was in that breakfast you cooked? Spanish fly?" Starsky muttered while he struggled to get up. "I felt like a con being released from prison after ten years in solitary." He ran a shaky hand down Hutch's thigh, then lifted the flaccid organ nestled in blond curls. "Gone from an eight to a four in an hour. I musta done something right."

Hutch ignored his shoulder, reached up and pulled Starsky down across his chest. "Right? You damn near
killed me! But you know what scares the hell out of me?" He rolled over, pinning Starsky beneath him. "It was so damn good, so . . . so . . ." He began kissing Starsky until he begged for breath.

"God, Hutch, with encouragement like that I might be good for another round. Lookit Junior . . . He's revived."

Fingers closed firmly around Starsky's cock, ringing it with gentle pressure. "Do your best, lover, but if I want to walk today, I've got to get in the tub." Bright blue eyes held an invitation and Hutch's fingers relaxed. "Come in with me," he coaxed, "and I'll finish this with my super-deluxe massage that Sweet Alice charges fifty bucks for."

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It was nearly twelve-thirty when Starsky and Hutch spotted Dobey returning from lunch. He looked tired and grim, and they felt a flash of guilt at their own refreshed condition.

He stopped, eyed them suspiciously, then said, "You two, in my office. I'll bring you up to date on what the hell's going on around here." He surged ahead, his detectives following at a slower pace, nodding at the other cops who were all busy with their own caseloads.

"Shut the door," Dobey ordered as Starsky entered, "and sit down so I can look at you both without going cross-eyed." He removed his jacket, loosened his tie, then sat down at his desk. He studied their faces but said nothing.

They sat where they usually sat, not too far apart, casually attentive, and, for them, very quiet.

Their behavior seemed to mollify Dobey for he spread out several sheets of paper, each one covered with notes. "Now, while you were asleep we had a couple of breaks in the Wingate case."

That brought them upright in their chairs, their interest immediately engaged. "You found his parents?" Starsky asked. "What the hell did they have to say?"

Dobey shook his head. "My story, my speed, Starsky. When I'm finished, ask your questions." He cleared his throat. "First of all, the Ensenada police rescued the woman who'd called Kendall. She's Harmony Wingate, the boy's aunt. She's also a cocaine addict with a very expensive habit."

Starsky looked at Hutch and nodded; it was what they had expected . . . at least the drug end of it. "So she arranged the snatch?" he asked, pausing when Dobey's brows drew together. "Sorry, Cap'n, your story."

"She babysits her nephew when his parents are travelling. They make a lot of business trips - they're returning from Canada right now; that's why they knew nothing about their son."

"Excuse me, Captain," Hutch said, looking confused. "Do the Wingates know the Kendalls?"

"Shut up and let me tell this, will you?" Dobey snapped, glaring at them both. "The Kendalls' and the Wingates' sons both attend the same school and are on the same soccer team. They're school pals and live in the same neighborhood." He rubbed his scalp, then pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "Excuse me, but the pollen's killing me. Now, where was I?"

"Trying to make a point about both families, sir," Starsky muttered, not hiding his impatience.

"Yeah, well, one thing came out when we talked to the kid. Both families have the same gardener, have had for a couple of years. The difference is that Harmony Wingate got a crush on one Billy Shale - gardener - who was mixed up in something much bigger than she ever dreamed. She even had a fight with her brother
and moved in with Shale. He talked her into using little Nicky as a decoy."

Hutch had heard enough. He got to his feet and glared down at Dobey. "No way are you going to convince me that some two-bit punk thought up a swap scheme this complex! Only a mind like . . ."

"Hutchinson!" Dobey roared, surging to his feet. "If you don't sit down and let me finish, I'm going to personally assign you to desk duty for thirty days!"

Hutch sat down, still furious. Starsky covered his mouth with his hand and looked suitably meek.

"As I was saying, Shale convinced the girl to go along with their plans, promising her lots of money for drugs."

The captain mopped his brow. "Now, her story is that she didn't want them to use her nephew, but Billy swore it was all sort of a weird practical joke. For a lot of money, she and the boy were to go to Ensenada and pretend to be Reina Kendall and Flip, nothing dangerous at all. Kendall had more money than he knew what to do with, and he'd never miss such a small amount. After he forked over the hundred thou, she could take the boy home. His folks would never know."

"Sure, like Nicky wouldn't tell them what happened," Starsky said derisively.

Dobey glared at him. "Of course, after they snatched the kid they drugged him so she'd play along with whatever they did. To her credit, she stuck it out, finally guessing that little Billy was going to get rid of them as soon as Kendall paid the second time."

"Cap'n," Starsky said slowly, shaking his head. "I agree with Hutch. Those gardeners didn't think this stuff up. I don't care what she says. Somebody else was the brains."

"That explains why they were in Ensenada!" Hutch exclaimed. He grinned at Starsky. "They weren't after us, pal, they were already there to finish off the girl and the kid! We blundered in on their action so they had to stop us." He patted his shoulder. "Talk about dumb luck!"

"Just be grateful he was a lousy shot, partner. I know I am," Starsky said as he watched his partner. "I hope the little accident he had puts him out of commission for a long time."

Dobey pushed away the papers and sighed. "So, Shale and his buddy are under wraps in the Ensenada jail, awaiting extradition. Not that we'll see them without a fight. The Baja authorities want to charge them with smuggling, arson, and attempted murder."

"With our luck, they'll sit down there for six months," Starsky commented, "and meanwhile, what are we doin' about Flip Kendall?"

Hutch's shoulder was beginning to throb and he was in no mood to sit in the squad room and make phone calls. He turned his attention back to Dobey. "Any objection if Starsky and I do a little bloodhounding this afternoon? We owe you some time, but we need to talk to the Kendalls."

Dobey looked at the two of them. Starsky was fidgeting with the slightly frayed cuff on his jeans. Hutch was definitely favoring his shoulder. "You're supposed to get that thing checked today?" he asked, wondering when he would be able to stop worrying about them. Danger seemed their constant companion, controlling their lives most of the time. They had become the worst kind of junkies . . . feeding off adrenalin, taking chances, driving too fast, snatching meals when they had time. Feeding on their own friendship to the exclusion of others. He'd seen many partnerships, some starting out as tight as these two, going their separate ways after either death or marriage changed things. God help the woman who married either one of them. God help the survivor if one of them got killed. All he could do was keep on bullying them. Nothing
"See to it you keep me informed," he muttered, gathering up his papers. "And don't develop radio trouble, either!"

"Wouldn't think of it, Cap'n," Starsky said, answering for both of them. He got to his feet and pushed his chair to the side of the desk. "We've got a couple of leads now that the Ensenada business is out of the way." His eyes narrowed. "The feds still have taps on Kendall's phones?"

Hutch stood up, his hands moving restlessly across the back of his chair. "My money's still on Devereaux, and I think he's down to the wire. Either we locate Flip Kendall within the next twenty-four hours, or we're gonna find his body somewhere." He shook his head. "And then what do we tell his parents?"

He put a hand to Starsky's back and shoved gently. "C'mon, partner, let's show the captain we still have some hustle left."

The remark made Starsky groan, but he walked out of Dobey's office without any protests. "We'll keep you informed," Hutch said virtuously, just as Dobey was about to utter those very words for the thousandth time.

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Kendall's secretary met them as they walked up the hall to her boss's office. Her short figure fairly bristled with suppressed excitement, even her wiry grey hair seemed to contain sparks. She put a finger to her mouth, pointed toward a half-open door, and scurried into the room behind it.

"Looks like Minnie hit the jackpot," Starsky said as they followed her in. Compared to the luxury in Kendall's front office, this was a poor substitute, but at least it was private.

Hutch sat down rather heavily, his expression drawn. "Good news or bad, Minnie? Don't be gentle."

Her sharp eyes missed nothing. "You look terrible. Did they get the bullet out?"

Starsky stared. "Where'd you hear about that? We made sure Hutch gettin' shot wasn't mentioned in the report." He sat down next to his partner and waited for an explanation, suddenly suspicious.

"Don't get on your high horse with me, young man!" she snapped. "My boss told me . . . when he and his poor wife went home. And a more desolate couple you never saw." She sighed, her anger gone. "It was a wonderful thing you did, brave and dangerous, and I'm happy for that other little boy. But you have to find Flip before his mother dies of a broken heart . . . or his father commits murder without ever finding his son."

Noting that his partner had nothing to say, Starsky made the effort. "Okay, I'm sorry I upset you, but me 'n' Hutch don't want any publicity. Because if Devereaux gets wind of it . . ."

Minnie held up her hand. "Will you let me tell you what I found out? My lord, after all the trouble I went to get this for you . . ."

Hutch smiled at her. "We knew you'd do it! Minnie, I'll sit on my partner while you tell us what you dug up."

She sniffed. "You may be tall as all get-out, but you're weak as a kitten, young man." She eyed Starsky with disapproval. "What were you doing when he got shot, Sergeant?" she asked.

"Saving my life - for the last time, I hope. Starsky never lets me down." Hutch wiped the sweat from his
forehead, then asked, "Did Devereaux board that plane or not?"

"Well, let's just say that someone boarded the later flight to Rome, but one of the stewardesses who had flown with Pete several times is willing to swear that he wasn't on that plane."

"Minnie, you're a treasure," Starsky said. "But there's still that call from Rome. Remember? If that's real, then no matter what we've got, we got nothin'."

Hutch shook his head. "Wrong, partner. There're two ways Devereaux could've fooled Kendall. The connection was lousy, so if an imposter made the call, all that static would serve to disguise his voice. The other way would be to send ahead a tape, then have an accomplice play it." He saw Starsky frown and he made a face. "Yeah. That's too farfetched even for me."

Minnie cleared her throat, and looked over her glasses at them both. "Why couldn't Pete simply have made the call from somewhere nearby? With direct dial it's easy to call from anywhere and say what you want. That's what I think, anyway."

She paused, as if to stare out a window that wasn't there. "Go on talking, please, it'll make me concentrate on something that Mr. Kendall said yesterday . . . about the Rome office."

Starsky turned to Hutch. "You don't look so hot; maybe I better take you to see the doc now instead of later."

"No way. I want to find that kid." Hutch's cheeks were flushed and sweat now beaded his whole face.

Starsky sighed. He'd play along for a little bit but not for long. Ever since that damn plague, Hutch seemed to tire more easily. He fought it, and sometimes it made things even worse. Instinctively, though, Starsky knew it was too soon to make a scene.

"So all we hafta do is prove there's a connection between the Wingate kid being snatched and substituted for Flip, and the disappearance of Flip for whatever reason." He looked at Hutch, smiling. "Then all we hafta do is tie Devereaux to one or both snatches. Piece of cake!"

The smile he received from Hutch was blinding. He grinned back, feeling lucky once more. "Minnie," he said. "How tight are you with your boss? I know you go back a long way and that Mrs. Kendall trusts you, but how much does Phillip Kendall trust you?"

She never batted an eyelid. "More than you think. I know he didn't tell me about Flip, but would you if you thought your son's life depended on silence?"

She sat down at the small desk, her eyes big and dark in her round face. "You can't fool me. Your partner there has never liked Pete Devereaux for a minute. It's instinctive distrust. My boss thinks the world of him and his genius. Now, I'm like you, Sergeant. I neither liked nor disliked Pete. He's always been considerate and generous to me." It was obvious the confession was growing painful. Minnie removed her glasses and began wiping them.

"But lately things have changed. Pete's always in Rome, or Paris, or Amsterdam. And something's not quite right . . . I can't put my finger on it. For one thing, Kendall Enterprises has grown too large for an old lady to keep track of. My job now is to protect the Kendalls . . . from being hurt." She settled the glasses back on her nose and smiled, a fierce, raptor smile. "So what do you want this old bird to do?"

Starsky grinned back. "Hutch, what do you think needs doing?"

Hutch leaned forward, voice low and urgent. "Find out where Pete Devereaux is, Minnie, because that's
When the telephone rang in Phillip Kendall's study, it shrilled like a banshee . . . or so it sounded to him. He stared at it, afraid it would be a wrong number, or the cops, or his office. Let it ring three times had been the instructions, then pick it up and wait . . . He waited. On the third ring he lifted the receiver with trembling fingers. "Hello?"

"One time only. Two million dollars to be deposited in a Swiss numbered account by six p.m. Second, forget the Fiorenzi deal . . . it's dead insofar as Kendall Enterprises is concerned. The boy is all right, will be until seven p.m. Is everything clear?"

The voice was male, disguised, but Kendall recognized it. His reaction was to sweep his highball glass off the table and leap to his feet. He fought to keep his own voice calm.

"Anything else? I mean, what's two million when there's a lot more? And why the hell should I pay out more? You let me speak with my son, then we'll talk." He held his breath. This was not what the cops had told him to say. He began to shake with fury. He'd kill him!

"No deal on talking to Flip. He's safe for the moment. But you're right, what's two mill to you? You . . ."

"No word with my son. No Fiorenzi deal. Plain and simple. You've been jerking my strings long enough . . . Pete." Oh, shit, what had he done? He hadn't meant to do that.

There was a harsh laugh on the other end of the phone. "A deal's a deal, Phil, and this one's personal. Flip's alive and kicking, but his fate's in your hands . . . so make up your mind."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Kendall's anguish burst through his reserve. "He's just a little boy . . . why use him to hurt me . . . and Reina? Christ, Pete, I'll set you up in your own business, if that's what you want. I'll give you the two million for capital . . . if that's what you want. Only don't hurt Flip." His anger grew. "So help me God, I'll kill you myself if so much as a hair on his head is out of place."

"Don't make threats you can't keep. As for setting me up in business, what do you think I've been doing all these years as your foreign office representative?" Devereaux had thrown off any effort to disguise his voice. "Do you honestly think I want to work for you the rest of my life? Well, sit down and listen to this, baby, because you've got a shock coming. Who the hell do you think fronts Alta Bena? Kendall Enterprises does!" Pete's laughter, horrible with its distorted sound, rang through the small study.

"You bastard!" Kendall shouted, distracted for a moment by the sound of voices coming from the front of the house. "A deal's a deal, Phil, and this one's personal. Flip's alive and kicking, but his fate's in your hands . . . so make up your mind."

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"You bastard!" Kendall shouted, distracted for a moment by the sound of voices coming from the front of the house. He recognized Starsky's distinctive accent and almost sobbed with relief.

"I don't give a damn about anything but my son," he said softly, waving the two cops in, pointing to the phone. "If you'll tell me where he is, I'll do whatever you want, meet whatever demands you want."

Kendall studied the two men before him; they had immediately grown quiet, their expressions similar . . . hungry, knowing. They knew all about people who committed murder, who betrayed friends. He searched their eyes and found what he sought. A desire to be in at a kill. He could trust them to rescue Flip without thought to their own hides. They'd already proved it for the Wingates, hadn't they?

"Well? Where's the Kendall charm?" sneered Devereaux. "Or has it suddenly occurred to you that you no longer live on Mt. Olympus? How's it going to feel when your favorite errand boy becomes more powerful than you? It almost makes my next news even more shocking."
Wearily, bracing himself to face whatever lay ahead, Kendall said, "What now? Haven't you done enough?"

Starsky and Hutch drew closer, and Kendall automatically took the phone from his ear, grateful for their support.

"How's Reina? Let's hope she hasn't had to sell any of her stock in Kendall Enterprises for her very naughty habit. I had to pay quite a few people a tidy sum . . . but they were willing. She was such an eager pupil."

Frowning, Hutch stared at his partner. Why was Devereaux still talking? Surely the man had enough intelligence to know that by now the phones were tapped.

His heart sank. Was Flip already dead? He gestured to Starsky and scribbled a note for Kendall. "Going to listen in," was all it said. Hutch showed the note to Kendall, who nodded.

"Dobey said the van was in back," Starsky said as they raced through the halls toward sliding patio doors.

"Yeah. It's near the garages . . . dark blue . . . says 'Plumbing' on the side," Hutch responded. "Something's wrong, Starsk, and I can't put my finger on it. You got that same feeling?" He yanked back on the glass door and cursed, fire racing through his shoulder.

"Here! Lemme do that, stupid. If we can catch this joker today, I'm gonna put you to bed for a week."

Hutch gave him a look of total disgust, then dashed outside. The van was only a few feet away, and as they made for it they fell silent. Cautiously they opened the side panel on the van and climbed in. It was warm but not unbearable, and the two men who sat inside wore looks of rapt concentration. Without a word they flipped a switch so that the detectives could listen in on the conversation.

". . . Never mind all that, Pete. Please, I beg you, tell us where Flip is . . . that's all you have to do."

There was a long pause, then a malicious chuckle. "That's nice, but back to business. First, you call Rome . . . get that deal cancelled . . . then arrange for an electronic transfer of the money. Your credibility with the Italians will be in ruins when you're exposed for fronting your own competition . . ."

"Wait! You owe me an explanation, damn your soul! I can understand you hating me, understand your wanting your own business, but what the hell did my wife and son ever do to you?"

Kendall, choking with emotion, made the four listeners avoid eye contact with one another.

"God, you're thick!" Devereaux said. "Reina provided you with an heir so that your stinking dynasty would continue. She never thought I was good enough to move in your circles. Oh, it was all right that I spend my life making money for her to toss around." The laughter was bitter. "But I got my revenge when you sent her to Rome, didn't I? Now where is she? A junkie? Probably hooking for a fix."

Starsky and Hutch stared at one another. Devereaux didn't know! He hadn't found out about Kendall's wife, which meant she was safe so long as they kept her out of sight.

"Minnie's place!" Hutch whispered. "I'll have a squad car take Reina over there." While Hutch used the radio, Starsky turned back to listen to Kendall's response.

"And my son? What threat is he? He's got his whole life ahead of him. Pete, for God's sake, don't do anything to him . . ."

A giggle, low and ghoulish, came over the receiver. For some reason it was more frightening than the laughter. "But he's the whole trouble, old man. He's the heir to it all . . . and I'm going to see that there isn't
anything for him to inherit!"

A red, blinking light came on the control panel, and the two technicians did a thumbs up. The origin of the call had been traced. It was time for them to leave.

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They raced back to the house just as Kendall was hanging up the receiver. "They traced it!" Starsky announced breathlessly. "He's somewhere in the BIOGROW manufacturing complex. It'll only take a few minutes to pinpoint his location, so we gotta go."


Starsky grabbed it. "One more thing, then we're outta here. Since your partner doesn't know your wife came back, don't let him know. That way she stays safe."

"Partner? How could I have been so goddamn blind!" Kendall surveyed the broken glass on the floor. "Sergeant, please . . . we . . . we . . ."

He turned away, and Starsky and Hutch left him alone. The only thing that mattered now was getting Flip out of that psycho's grip. Devereaux sounded as if he was about to crack. Starsky prayed they'd be there when he did.

Hutch took custody of the map as they got into the Torino. It was only a matter of time. By the time they got to BIOGROW, the cops would have a location - at least of the phone. Then he and Hutch would have some place to look for the kid. He put on his sunglasses and adjusted the mirror. More than anything he wanted to be in on the kill.

The partners stared at one another, knowing the danger, accepting it without reservations. "Got nothing better to do," Hutch said in an icy tone. "I want this s.o.b., Starsk."

"Good," came the curt rejoinder. "C'mon, let's go." Like a powerful cat, the Torino roared to life. "Now, take a gander at that map of the plant. You can study it while I drive."

"I just pray we're not too late. That poor kid's been through enough hell." Hutch squinted as he tried to read the map. "Who printed this thing? Can't read half of it."

"You know what scares me?" Starsky said. "Devereaux's really enjoying this. He's a psycho, Hutch, and that means we don't have a clue as to what he'll do next." He glanced at his watch. "I want to get there before the next shift comes on at four."

Hutch turned a puzzled face to his partner. "How in the hell has old Pete escaped detection? And why hasn't anybody found the kid? I don't like it, not one damn bit." He chewed on his lip. "You and I both know if we catch Devereaux but don't find Flip, he won't tell us." He flexed his sore shoulder but said nothing.

"I know," Starsky replied. "Also, why in hell did he stash Flip there? What's wrong with some old apartment?"

Hutch snapped his fingers. "He couldn't! Today everyone's on the lookout for strangers with kids who don't seem to belong to them. Well, Flip Kendall no more resembles Devereaux than I look like Dracula . . . so he had to find a place where the kid wouldn't be seen."
Starsky nodded. "Maybe, but this guy's really cold, pal. He won't think twice about killing a little kid."

As they got on the Santa Ana freeway, they received a call from Dobey saying he was sending reinforcements. They headed south, joined by an unmarked vehicle filled with uniformed cops. Two black and whites passed them, apparently cruising.

Before the two-mile mark both units peeled off, headed down surface streets toward the warehouse district. Starsky and Hutch exchanged looks. "One for the money . . ." Starsky said.

Next, the unmarked car exited the freeway and made a right turn onto a small street.

"Two for the show . . ." added Hutch.

Ten minutes later they left the freeway and began searching through the myriad warehouses for the Kendall complex. Most of the parking lots were emptying out and the traffic was terrible. It was four-fifteen and the shadows now sloped across the buildings, softening the drabness of the area. Starsky swore under his breath as he turned up yet another street.

"Wait!" Hutch said. "There it is!"

They stared, their expressions hard. Beginning at curbside, the huge block of buildings was bordered with masses of green and splashes of color. Kendall obviously felt that even as gritty a neighborhood as this needed the magic touch of his company's products.

"Just goes to show you, partner," Starsky sighed as he checked the clip in his gun, "everywhere we go we're knee-deep in you-know-what."

Hutch agreed. "But at least this kind looks good." Something caught his attention and he swore. "Get us out of here, Starsk, and park around the corner."

Starsky obeyed immediately, backing the Torino down the street. "What the hell did you see?" he asked.

Hutch ducked down in the seat and whispered, "Take a look at the two men working near that BIOGROW van. If they're gardeners, I'm Queen of the May."

Starsky's glance raked over the two men. "So they're upwardly mobile workmen . . . Is that what's bothering you?" Nevertheless, he opened the car door and studied them more carefully, then began walking toward them.

Hutch strolled along just a step or two behind him, pausing to admire a bed of white and purple alyssum. Out of the corner of his eye he saw them keep right on working, putting the clippings into a leaf bag. For the end of the day, their uniforms were too clean.

"Afternoon," Starsky said as he walked by. "You sure keep this place lookin' great." He studied their faces, one white, one brown, filing them away for future reference. He waited for Hutch to join him. "You ought to get a gardener for that jungle you've got," he said in a loud voice. The Mexican was short and stocky with smooth, olive skin.

The Anglo was another story. Tall, slender, his complexion was blotchy. He wore glasses with heavy lugs. His dark hair was greasy.

Hutch approached them. "Do you work for individuals, too?" he asked. "My friend here keeps complaining that my yard needs pruning very badly." He shrugged. "I like it green."
Without looking up, the Hispanic said, "Yo no comprendo, señor . . ."

Hutch appeared confused, cast a helpless look at the Anglo, who deliberately turned away. The cop's expression hardened; he looked scornfully at both men and said in fluent Spanish, "Vete con el cuento a otra parte, señor, no lo creemos." When the Anglo whirled around to glare at him, Hutch grinned, then jotted down the numbers on the side of the truck. As he walked away, he added, "Anotare tu nombre y dirección en mi libreta. Buenos tardes."

"What the hell did you say to him?" Starsky asked. "He turned red as a beet!"

Hutch didn't answer until they were just outside the entrance gate. "I said, 'Tell it to the Marines, mister, because we don't believe you.' Then I said, 'I'm jotting down your name and address in my book. Good afternoon.'" He looked back at the van and frowned. "High school stuff, Starsky, but it was enough to make 'em pack up. Did you recognize either of them?"

"Nah. Both strangers. So why didn't the white guy answer you? He was about as helpful as a fly on a bull's ass." Starsky shrugged. "You must of rattled his cage when you let out that spiel."

But Hutch was still staring at the van and its occupants. "Maybe I'm out of line. Maybe Kendall insists that his gardeners look that neat, but there's just something about the Anglo that bothers me . . ."

"You want to hold them for questioning? They're probably feds and we'll waste a goddamn hour tryin' to explain." Starsky's voice held a note of impatience and he glanced at his watch. "Shift's changing, c'mon."

They walked toward the main gate, watching as semis and small pickups left the yard. They could see row upon row of the huge BIOGROW trailers lined up for loading. At least fifteen cars were parked near a small cluster of buildings they knew to be offices.

"I never realized how many people worked here," Starsky mused as they neared the main gate.

Hutch spotted two of the undercover cops driving up to the gate and being waved through. "Three to get ready . . ." he said.

Starsky was studying the faces of the workers, looking for that sudden flash of apprehension cops recognize. So far he was drawing a blank. He watched an office type complete with briefcase hurry over to a bright yellow Duster. "He kinda looks . . ."

"Nope," Hutch said, studying the man. "Younger, taller, darker . . . than Devereaux."

Frustrated, Starsky clenched his fists. "Hutch, it's getting late! This guy isn't gonna be here . . . He may have already moved the kid - for the last time."

A large man in a dark plaid suit lumbered toward them. His expression was hostile. "You two want something? You got some ID?"

Hutch sighed and looked at his partner. "Everybody wants ID, don't they?" He flashed his badge case. "This good enough to get us in?"

Starsky did the same. The man's expression changed to one of mere curiosity. "You got a name, mister?"

"Sure, Bob Pickens . . . just Pick for short." He was too large to be embarrassed by his nickname.

"Well, Mr. Pickens," Hutch said, producing his notebook. "Can you tell us where the phone with this
number is located? It's important."

Pickens bent to study the number, then looked at them, openly curious. "That's the dispatch number. Whatcha need that for?" His heavy jowls rested on his collar. Finally, he pointed toward the small grouping of buildings. "Dispatch is the third one, closest to the docking bays."

Starsky said, "One more question, then we'll leave you alone. Have you seen Peter Devereaux today?"

Pickens scratched his head, disturbing the thinning thatch of grey hair. "Funny you should ask about him. I been here for at least seven years and only saw him a few times." He broke into a big grin. "Now, Kendall, well he's usually down here two - three times a week . . . makin' certain everything's runnin' smoothly. But young Pete . . ." He scratched his head again, frowning. "Maybe . . . coulda been him . . . but different." He shrugged. "Damnedest thing . . . right on the tip of my tongue . . ."

"You said he looked different. In what way? Please, this is very important." Hutch didn't want to rattle the man. The poor guy was obviously trying to remember.

The frown disappeared and Pickens said, "I know. It was his clothes. Didn't even recognize him at first. He had his hair slicked back, too. Yeah, he had on new glasses . . . For another thing, he wears fancy suits . . . but he had on one of the uniforms . . . like he was going to be working."

His voice lowered and he looked troubled. "He wasn't driving his own car, either. That was one of the reasons it took me a couple double-takes to recognize him."

Starsky's patience was at an end. "Think man! What was he driving?"

"Why, one of the vans the gardeners use. I remember because he had a guy with him, said they was gonna unload some sacks of fertilizer. Said it was a test batch." A thick finger pointed to a shed about fifty yards away. "Never did that before. Hey! Where you guys goin'?"

Starsky and Hutch raced toward the shed. They were immediately joined by three of the other cops who had been mingling with the workers, apparently searching for Devereaux.

The shed was heavy-grade aluminum, its sliding door fastened with a huge padlock. Just as Starsky was about to fire a round at it, Pickens came toward them yelling, "No! I got a key! Don't bust it!" He dragged out a huge ring of keys, selected one, and handed the ring to Starsky.

"How long ago did you see Devereaux?" Hutch asked as Starsky wrestled with the lock. He had a sinking sensation that he already knew the answer, and that he had actually been talking to the man and let him and the Mexican get away. His insides were churning.

Pickens only affirmed what his instincts knew. "'Bout ten minutes ago . . . and the other guy's name was Jorge." He gaped when all the cops drew their guns as Starsky pulled the door open.

"Jesus! What's going on?"

Hutch noticed a crowd beginning to gather and quickly ordered two uniforms to keep them out of the way. Starsky flipped on a switch, flooding the shed with light. A blast of heat escaped, accompanied by the overwhelming stench of fertilizer. A ceiling fan kept the air circulating, but that was all. They stared in dismay at all the sacks. Could a little boy survive in such a place?

There was one small consolation. Trained as they were, there was no smell of death. "Flip? Hey! Flip? Can you hear me?" Hutch shouted. "Yell if you can so we can get you out!" He tried dragging one of the bags away.
Starsky scowled. "Don't even think it, Hutch," he said. "We'll get some of Kendall's men to move these." He met his partner's anguished gaze and murmured, "I don't think he's here. Maybe that's where Devereaux's heading. In which case . . ."

Hutch's shoulders sagged in resignation and he nodded. "Yeah, I could have . . ."

"No, you couldn't," Starsky said quickly. "I didn't recognize him, either, if that's what's tearin' you up. We're so close, partner. Don't give up now."

"Give up! Who the hell's thinking about giving up! I'm just furious that he slipped through our fingers . . ." Hutch's eyes resembled blue ice. "You wait until I get my hands on that son of a bitch!"

The big foreman, Pickens, came forward, and Starsky said, "Are you sure this is the only place you saw Devereaux go?"

Pickens chewed his lower lip, tilting his head to one side. "Well, maybe he went to the tool shed next, and then - yeah - he got some gas. That was just before he took off."

"Let's go!" Starsky shouted as he tried to push past Pickens.

"Hang on, Sergeant," said the foreman. "I'll save you some time and give you the key right now." He produced the massive key ring, removing the needed key and handing it to Starsky.

"Just leave it in the lock and put the chain and all in the shed; I'll lock it later. I'll stay here and we'll get these sacks moved." There was an angry glint in his eyes. "I take it you're lookin' for the boss's boy and you're afraid something bad's happened to him. If he's here, my men and I'll move heaven and earth, don't you worry about it."

Hutch gave Pickens's brawny arm a pat. "Then we'll trust you to let us know if you find something - anything - that might be a clue. You know what belongs in here; we don't. Thanks for cooperating." He dashed after Starsky.

Pickens wasted no time; with a few bellowed orders, he had some of the onlookers busily restacking the heavy bags. Once the word leaked out that Kendall's son was missing, no one seemed interested in going home.

The tool shed was much larger than the storage shed. It was located only a few yards away, but all around it were coils of wire, plastic drums, and stacked maintenance equipment too bulky for internal storage. Starsky unlocked the padlock and grunted when the huge chain began to slide out of the door handle. He grabbed it with both hands and jerked it free, almost losing a kneecap when one end swung back.

Hutch caught it. "Give me that damn thing before you kill yourself." He dragged the chain through the doorway, dropped it with the lock and key on top, and inhaled sharply. Unlike the other shed, there was no ventilation in here and the heat was stifling. Although the building was larger, it was crammed with row after row of tools, paint cans, labelled boxes, and small, locked cabinets.

"At least it ain't fertilizer," Starsky commented grimly as he glanced around. "I guess we don't have to look for anything that wouldn't hold a kid, do we?"

They exchanged looks, remembering cases never spoken of. "C'mon," Hutch said. "Let's get some light on the subject. Over there, those look to be the overheads." He strode past several boxes of truck headlights, shaking his head as it registered how many thousands of dollars were represented in that one area.

He didn't hesitate to flip all the switches; in moments the entire shed was filled with flickering neon light.
"Now, let's get to work."

Five other cops arrived to help in the search. "We're looking for a box or crate or . . ." Hutch hesitated. " . . . or drum or large bag . . . something that could hold a kid. If you've got a hunch, follow it, no matter what common sense tells you. We all know what gut feelings are. Let's do it."

The searchers fell silent as they moved quietly down the aisles. Without orders they split the shed into sections, each man working diligently. Starsky and Hutch, on opposite sides of the shed, avoided one another. The thought of not finding the boy was unbearable.

A shout from the rear of the shed made them lift their heads.

"Sergeant Starsky! Wanna give this a look?"

Starsky hurried over, watching as one of the men stood with a large canvas tarp in one hand. He pointed down to a wooden box that lay next to several more. "Didn't think much about it at first, but when I checked . . . this one has holes drilled in the top and sides . . . the others don't." He bit his lips in anticipation.

Starsky wasted no time. He got down on his knees and put his mouth to one of the holes. "Flip? Flip, if you're in there, try to move. Your dad sent us . . . Come on, son."

Hutch had found a crowbar and a wedge. "Drag that box out into the open," he ordered. "Maybe the kid's tied up and can't move. Or maybe he's unconscious." He refused to believe anything else. Whatever was in there was light, and when the box was set down a muffled noise came from inside.

Grins appeared, and the men gathered to watch as Starsky and Hutch pried off the lid. Inside, damp and filthy but wide awake, lay a tightly bound blond boy.

"You Flip Kendall?" Hutch asked, almost afraid the answer would be no. "Your mom and dad are gonna be real glad to see you." He choked, his voice failing him.

Tears welled up in blue eyes and a sob escaped from dry lips. "I'm Flip, and . . . and . . . I messed myself."

Reassurances greeted the announcement, and several pairs of hands hastened the release of the roped and duct-taped arms and legs. Relief soon turned to anger, however, when the men realized that Flip Kendall had almost died a horrible death. Most of the cops began cataloging the items found in the box, one of which was a brand new soccer ball.

"For God's sake, let's get a message to the Kendalls," Hutch told Starsky. "And this time tell them to come here. And tell them to have the kid's doctor meet them here."

"Why don't you wanna do it?" Starsky asked, not missing the look of pain still on Hutch's face.

"Because I don't want to tell them I screwed up on nabbing Devereaux. Now go! He's gonna be out of the country if we don't hurry."

Starsky nodded, grinning when he saw Pickens carrying Flip toward the restroom. "You feeling okay?" he asked, noting the tape burns on the skinny arms.

"Uh-huh, but I want my daddy. Is he here yet?"

"He will be, tiger. You just hang on. Your mommy's coming, too." On impulse, he slid up both legs of Flip's filthy jeans. There, on his left knee, and still faintly pink, was a large scar. He grinned when he saw it. Without a doubt, this was Kendall's son.
"Uncle Pete was mean to me," quavered the child. "He locked me up and said I had to eat crackers and water." A tear stole down a grimy cheek.

Pickens cradled him closer. "Well, that's all over and done with, young'un. After you're cleaned up I'm gonna take you to the cafeteria and see if we can't find some ice cream." He stared defiantly at Starsky, who merely nodded and waved him on.

"Whatever he wants is okay by me," he said. "I got a call to make."

As Starsky returned from making the call to the jubilant Kendalls, he saw a familiar car pull into the lot. Dobey got out, looking pleased as punch. He'd forgotten what an imposing figure the captain was. Starsky grinned affectionately. "He's fine, Cap'n," he said, anticipating the first question. "The yard foreman, a guy named Pickens, has him at the cafeteria . . . stuffing him full of ice cream."

Dobey nodded, his dark eyes beaming. "Where's Hutch? I want you both to hear this." He looked around, not seeing the Torino. "He didn't leave, did he?"

"Nope. He's asking some of the guys about Devereaux." Starsky briefed Dobey on their encounter, and how bad Hutch felt about not seeing through his disguise. "He fooled me, too, but you know how Hutch is . . ." He shrugged.

"Well, I've got some news that may cheer both of you up. Let's go find him." Dobey began walking toward the main building.

"Hey! Starsky! Wait up." Hutch, behind them, waved to his partner. He covered the distance between them in seconds. "Oh, hi, Captain. Any news of Devereaux?" For all his flushed expression, there was a quiet relief in his eyes.

"Good work, both of you," Dobey said with obvious pride. "And, yes, there's news." As they walked along, Dobey explained that Shale had cracked, linking Devereaux to both kidnappings, promising the gardeners a large enough bribe that they went along with the bait-and-switch kidnapping scheme. Billy told his girlfriend it was his idea in order to impress her, and after she was down in Ensenada, forced her to impersonate Reina Kendall to save her nephew's life.

The first demand for ransom was for Billy and his partner, Fred Stanton, who was in on the actual scheme with Devereaux.

"Migawd," muttered Starsky, "Devereaux's really devious. No wonder things started to unravel."

The captain gave a snort. "You can say that again. A few minutes ago we had a call from the CHP. Seems a white BIOGROW van was doing eighty on the 210 freeway. It cut in front of a big rig and got rear-ended. Shouldn't have done too much damage, but it turns out the rig's gas tank was full. And so was the van. At least ten five-gallon cans. Burst into flames. They're both in critical condition at City of Angels."

"Devereaux and Jorge!" Hutch breathed. He stared at his partner. "Where the hell were they going with the gas?" The truth dawned on him all of a sudden. "Maybe to burn down Kendall's house?"

"Or maybe to destroy all traces of the deals he'd pulled in the office. That sounds more like Devereaux to me." Starsky shook his head. "Who'd believe it . . . hunh?"

Hutch grimaced. "I won't until he's positively identified. That bastard could have given his wallet and everything else to some down-and-outer just to escape."

"I haven't finished," Dobey growled. "The ironic part is that the big rig he cut in front of was one of
Kendall’s . . . on its way up north. The guy had just left here about an hour before. In fact, he'd seen Devereaux and his friend unloading some bags of fertilizer. He ID’d the van as the one Devereaux had been using because the trucker had scraped the front fender of the pickup when he'd left the yard. He figures Devereaux was trying to play payback."

"Always said he was an asshole," Starsky said. "Now maybe we can get back to something simple, like homicide. This corporate crap is too damn dangerous." He grinned at Hutch's expression. "Haven't I always told you that white-collar crime will be the death of us all?" He winked at Dobey. "What I have here, sir, is a partner with a bum shoulder, a wounded ego, and in need of sleep. Can I take him home?"

Dobey stared at them for a long minute, then nodded. "Be in the office at eight a.m. sharp. You've got a mountain of paperwork to do, and after that there's your own caseload . . ."

"Oh, Starsky, what the hell was the Pitassi case doing in your files? That's a robbery division number." He was getting warmed up to the subject. "And no more getting involved in cases that don't belong to Homicide!" he shouted, shaking his finger at their retreating figures. "Just because this one turned out all right . . ."

Hutch leaned on Starsky's arm. "So help me, the man's right. I swear I'm never going to investigate anything more than shootings and knifings and . . ."

"And whatever we've got ahead for us," Starsky added as he unlocked the Torino and pushed Hutch down on the front seat.

"I'm gonna tuck you in. Take the phone off the hook and go to sleep in my own bed. There's no rocks in it."

He started up the car and pulled away from the curb. "This rescue stuff is for the birds, ya know? Takes all your energy just chasin' around like a bunch of nuts. We need vacations, both of us . . . but you, especially."

Hutch groaned and closed his eyes. "All I want now is about twenty hours in the sack. I don't want to even think about anything else."

Starsky drove along in silence, his own body aching with fatigue. He needed about twenty hours in the sack himself, plus the time to think about what they were going to do about their lives together. He let out a long sigh. His damn brain hurt from thinking; he needed to veg out for a couple of weeks.

"Starsk? Pick me up in the morning?" A hand with very strong fingers closed over his thigh.

He gunned the engine. "I'll be there, partner. Then down to Metro. Then," he grinned, "we're gonna walk on the beach in the moonlight . . . and talk."

Hutch's smile was incandescent.

Starsky began to whistle.

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