Countdown

by

Kirsty Welsh
Summary: When Starsky is kidnapped and Hutch finds him, it's just the start of their explosive countdown.

Sequel: The Tao of Starsky
Chapter 1

Hutch raced along the corridor, not able to get to Captain Dobey's office fast enough. His long legs just wouldn't work properly, the adrenalin flowing through his veins sending urgent messages to his muscles, powering him along as if he was back on the Duluth High track team again. His breath whistled through his teeth as his lungs fought to pull in sufficient oxygen, the fair bangs of hair flying in the wind. Those who got in his way were pushed unceremoniously aside as he battled his way up to the first floor and through the squad room, batting the swing door angrily out of the way. Thoughts flew through his mind — visions both good and bad troubling him as he went.

He'd had a call on the car radio to get back to the Metro as quickly as possible. There was news of his partner and Hutch needed to be there to see it. Getting the message, the blond had put the mars light on top of the brown LTD, switched on the sirens and floored the gas pedal, his usually careful style of driving giving way now to a mode more akin with his dark haired partner. Taking the final corner almost on two wheels, in a manner Starsky would have been proud of, Hutch side slipped the big car into the parking lot outside the large stone building, and was running up the steps before the engine had died.

Starsky had been missing now for two days. On the previous Monday morning at about 8.00 am, Hutch had driven round to the brunette's apartment, as he had done almost every day for the past seven years. Pulling up in his customary place beneath the tree, in an attempt to keep the car cool for the day, he tooted the horn. He was irritated that his partner had once again overslept, knowing it was usually a bad start to the day when he had to make up yet another excuse to tell their captain. Getting no response to the horn, Hutch sighed and got out of the car, slamming the door behind him. He walked heavily up the steps, ready to unleash all his venom on his curly haired partner, expecting to see tousled hair and a sleep creased face. Starsky had an annoying habit of looking bedwarm and comfortable even with Hutch's icy stare on him, raising his eyebrows and smiling that sly half smile, knowing the blond wouldn't be mad for long. Hutch banged on the door, then, as was his custom he opened it and went in.

For a moment he didn't take in the sight before him, eyes only looking for the tall muscular frame of his partner, thinking he'd probably still be in bed. It wasn't till he was half way across the main living room that he realised that some of the furniture was overturned, papers strewn across the usually tidy floor, and a bottle of beer spilling its contents onto the rug. Heart beating a little faster now, and his mouth drying, he pushed his way into the brunette's bedroom, ready for anything he saw. The bedclothes were ruffled, as if a struggle had taken place, pillow on the floor and there was a smear of blood on the sheets. Becoming frantic now, he searched the room quickly, shouting Starsky's name, and pulling closet doors open so violently their hinges were in peril. Running from the bedroom back into the main living area again, he checked there was no body on the floor behind the settee or kitchen bar, the bathroom also coming up empty.

Hutch checked outside again and established that the Torino was parked in its usual place, so his partner hadn't managed to get away in that, but there were more blood spots on the steps now he noticed and what looked like drag marks in the dirt at the roadside.

The blond went back into the apartment and using a handkerchief in case there were fingerprints to be taken, picked up the telephone and dialled the Metro. Speaking to Captain Dobey, he swiftly told him of the state of the apartment, the blood and the worry he had for his partner, asking for an APB on Detective Sergeant David Starsky. Dobey agreed and putting the phone down on the big blond, he ordered the All Points Bulletin.
That was two days ago, and since then, Hutch had cruised the streets, using his partners striped tomato, as was his habit when the brunette wasn't there with him. It somehow made up for the absence of the smaller man, a little bit of Starsky there surrounding him. It gave him a measure of comfort. He had tried their usual snitches, using bribes, threats, but no-one seemed to know anything about the disappearance of the curly haired detective. Some seemed almost upset at his disappearance. The two detectives were first and foremost policemen, but they had a reputation on the streets for being fair-minded. And as much as their clientele could, they respected the two men. There was a code of conduct out on the streets, and as much as possible, Starsky and Hutch respected and complied with it.

Hutch's mind kept going back to that time a couple of years ago at the City Courthouse, when Simon Marcus' followers had kidnapped his partner in a bid to lighten Marcus' sentence. He shuddered at the memory of what the brunette had had to endure. Beatings, burns and poisoned water took their toll on his body. Not to mention the bear! The relief Hutch felt when he'd seen Starsky again, after that girl, Gail, had cut him down was short lived when he saw the state of the brunette's hands and wrists. Having been left hanging for however long, they were swollen, raw, purple and bleeding. He shuddered at the memory, shaking his head to clear it of the images.

And now he'd had the message, and he arrived sweating and panting at his superior's office. Flinging the door open he burst in, noting immediately that Dobey was not alone. Two patrolmen were standing uncomfortably at the side of the room, obviously having had a meeting with the big black man. Hutch searched their faces, questioning without words.

Dobey took in the sight of the flaxen haired cop. He was wearing the same rumpled shirt and pants he'd had on the day before, his face lined with worry, making him appear 20 years older than his 35 years. It was obvious he hadn't slept much in the last two days, his face grey with exhaustion.

'Hutchinson, sit down' the Captain growled, making it a command rather than a request. Hutch complied, collapsing into the easy chair in the corner of the office, running his hands over his face as his breathing slowed.

'Tucker and Almond here were coming into the building to start their shift this morning when some flake in a mask jumped 'em an' gave 'em this' Dobey held up a video cassette in his big podgy hand. 'Didn't hurt 'em at all, but there was a note with it. Sergeant Grantly recognised the name it used an' asked these two to bring it up here. You're gonna want to see this'.

He handed Hutch a crumpled sheet of paper. On it in letters cut and pasted from a newspaper were the words. FOR BLINTZ, COME PICK UP THE PACKAGE. YOU'LL BE AN EXPLOSIVE COMBINATION.

He stared at it, like it was going to bite his hand, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling as they stood on end. Licking dry lips he carefully put the note down, it doing nothing to ease the worry he'd felt for the past two days. Only Starsky called him that name. Although a constant source of irritation to the blond, it connected him with his partner.

'What's that supposed to mean, huh?. The "package" is my partner?' he asked quietly. 'Ya dusted this? Any prints?'

Dobey shook his head. 'Must be someone who knows Starsky, or has him. How would he know about the nickname? As for the explosive combination — who knows what's goin' on in their sick minds? Ya need to see the video'.

Hutch realised for the first time that there was a television and video player against the wall of the office. As he turned to it, Dobey came round the front of his desk, and as he flicked the "play" button, he put a
restraining hand on the blonde's arm and sat down on the arm of the chair. Hutch hardly noticed, his attention now fully focussed on the screen.

The television flared to life, the black and white picture at first fuzzy and unrecognisable, wavering about as if the person taking the shot was getting used to the controls. The picture quieted and came into focus. It showed a darkish area in what looked like a far larger room — maybe a warehouse? The floor was strewn with rubbish and the walls appeared quite damp. Boxes and crates were lined against the far wall and Hutch could almost smell the mustiness of the place. It was the subject of the middle of the shot, however, which caught Hutch's attention.

Kneeling barechested on the floor was the bruised and battered body of his partner. Starsky was blindfolded, his arms apparently secured, pulled tight behind his back. Bruises stood out as dark splodges on his chest and the side that was towards the camera, and there seemed to be blood on the lower part of the face — the part that wasn't covered by the cloth tied round those indigo eyes.

Starsky was not taking his captivity quietly; his excitable nature now unleashed full force on his captors. The brunette was ranting at someone off camera that he couldn't see. Hutch could hear some of the words.

'I'm gonna fuckin' kill the lot of ya. D'ya hear? Let me loose and I'll kill ya', the brave, angry man was shouting, his blind head questing left and right to try to get some direction from the people around him.

Calmly a foot came into camera shot and kicked at the bound man, a vicious blow connecting heavily with his side. Blindfolded as he was, it took the dark haired detective unawares and as the blow lifted him slightly from the ground, Hutch could hear a muffled scream coming from behind clenched teeth. As another blow was delivered in roughly the same spot, Hutch tried to get up, trying, illogically to comfort his partner, knowing that his partner would not readily have given his captors the satisfaction of hearing him scream. Those kicks must really have hurt him. Dobey had seen the video through once already and knew what was coming. The calming hand he held on the blonde's arm now clamped down like a vice, keeping the big man in his seat, to hear and see the rest of the show.

As Starsky gasped on the ground, strings of saliva beading in a silver line from his open mouth, he bent over until his forehead touched the floor in front of him trying to ease the pain he was so obviously feeling. A disembodied voice started talking off camera.

'This message is for Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson of the Bay City Police Department. If you value the life of this piece of shit, no good cop, you'll collect him from the warehouse we've directed you to and do the little job we want you both to help us with. There's a blue sign outside advertising Aramis Car Rental. Come alone and follow the directions on the back of the note. If you deviate from the directions, or you call for back up, or come with friends, he'll get more of this'.

The camera panned out as another kick landed with a sickening thud against Starsky's prone body. Another scream echoed around the empty building followed by sounds of retching, then the screen went dead.

Hutch felt sick, knowing his partner was there alone, a prisoner to the whims of whatever these sadistic bastards wanted to do. He stood, grabbing for the original note again, turning it over and reading the typed directions quickly. He headed for the door.

'Hutchinson, you need backup' Dobey gruffed, knowing he was probably going to be ignored.

The blond turned back. 'You heard the man Cap. Come alone, no deviation from the directions. I'm not goin' to give 'em an excuse to do that to him any more. I'll call when I find him, OK?' and with that, he was gone.

He looked at his watch. Wednesday 8.00am
Chapter 2

Hutch ran from the room and out into the corridor. Those who had seen his mad charge earlier stood back, braced against the walls as the wild eyed blond charged in the opposite direction this time down the corridor and into the stairwell. Unable to face the wait for the lift, he took the flights of steps at a breakneck three at a time, bouncing off the walls as each return came up at him, before ricocheting off the cold plaster and charging headlong down the next flight. As he reached the bottom of the steps, he pushed open the door out onto the street and cannoned down the stone steps towards the big red Torino he'd parked earlier.

He ran round to the driver's side and pulled open the door, flinging himself into the driver's seat, where he sat for a moment, catching his breath and studying once again the directions scrawled on the crumpled dirty paper. He hadn't noticed earlier the dried flaking brown/red stain in one corner, but knew with a certainty it was his partner's blood decorating the message. Another not so subtle message to say that he should hurry and that these men were not above inflicting a lot more injury on his friend. And what's that all about — the little job they want us to do? Hutch knew there was no way on God's green earth that he'd do anything to help these sadists.

The day was bright and surprisingly warm for so early in the morning. The day was going to be another hot one. The sunlight and heat seemed to mock the blond as he waited a brief moment, allowing his mind to clear sufficiently to drive off.

Taking two deep breaths, he turned on the ignition and settled himself into the seat for the long drive. From the directions he'd been given, he estimated that it would take him roughly two and a half hours to get to this warehouse and God knows how much longer to get in, taking into account that this was probably a trap. He unconsciously brought his right hand up to the shoulder holster below his left arm, feeling the comforting weight of the Colt it contained. Only six shots per round, but he'd make every one of them count.

As he drove along the highway out of town, Hutch tried to keep his mind away from reliving that damned video. Try as he might, though, he couldn't forget the agonised screams from his curly haired partner as the foot connected time after time with his ribs. God, Starsky had been through so much and the feeling of powerlessness as he, Hutch was forced to watch this mistreatment from such a distance. It created a whole different sort of pain for the blond, an ache in his very bones. He wanted to land right hand up to the shoulder holster below his left arm, feeling the comforting weight of the Colt it contained. Only six shots per round, but he'd make every one of them count.

Out on the freeway, he hiked the speed up, threading his way through the early morning traffic. The commuters hell-bent on getting to the office on time, the mothers in the middle of the school run. All solid law abiding individuals going about their every day business, their main concerns being what to make for supper, or whether they should cancel that 2.00 o'clock meeting and take their secretary out to lunch instead. God, how he envied them! What he wouldn't give for just a month of quiet, mundane life.

He tailgated a station wagon tootling along at a steady 30 miles per hour, flashing his lights insistently to make them move out of the way. He pushed his anger deep down inside him, knowing he would use it later. This person didn't know he was on a journey to save a man from more mistreatment, how could they? The closest they came to his life style was watching those pathetic cop shows on television, where the bad guys were always caught and the cops were surrounded by a bevy of beautiful women. He smiled wryly at the thought — if only!

The road stretched on for mile after interminable mile, the black tarmac leading him towards his partner like a benevolent ribbon across the countryside, the wheels of the big car singing against the road surface. Eventually he saw the turning he needed to take and left the broad highway for a smaller quieter road, leading up into the hills. The big car pulled effortlessly up the rise and as he crested the hill, he looked down into the valley beyond, making out parched dry earth and the occasional farmstead sitting foursquare in its
own land. He pushed the car on, only another half an hour of the journey remaining, although whether he had 30 minutes of patience remaining was another thing completely. He turned his full attention to the road, remembering the last time he'd driven out to a barn in the middle of nowhere. Lured to the place by a fake call from the Metro, he and his partner became trapped in a barn about to burst into flames, compounded by the fact they'd had a stowaway with them. Joey. He smiled to himself as he remembered how his brunette partner had won her over, with his deep blue eyes and goofy Cagney impersonation. They'd made a break for it, more as cover for the girl to run for help than any serious attempt at freedom, but Starsky was still the one who took the bullet. It never failed to happen to the smaller man, and Hutch never failed to be amazed by the bravery he displayed and the stoicism when enduring such pain.

The last turning must be somewhere round here, he thought, reading the directions one last time. "A turning on the left next to a billboard advertising toothpaste". Not easy to miss then! He slowed the big car as he came to the Colgate sign and turned, now driving more cautiously as he neared his destination.

Suddenly it was there, the big blue sign for Aramis Car Rentals and the large warehouse building brooding next to it. Hutch's heart rate racked up a notch as he brought the car to a stop about 50 yards away, not wanting to advertise his presence too early. He got out of the vehicle and scanned the area, looking for signs of life, cars, the glint of a gun barrel — anything that might signal a trap. Nothing caught his eye and he edged forward, gun drawn and held in front of him ready.

There wasn't a sound around him, not even birdsong. There was no other traffic and no human habitation. It was a godforsaken spot. The sun was now high overhead and the heat and anticipation of what may happen made the blond sweat, his flaxen hair now a darker golden against his forehead. Small trickles worked their way down his back, irritating him and threatening to take his full attention from the job in hand. His right hand, holding his gun was damp and he kept his index finger alongside the trigger as he moved cautiously up to the warehouse door.

He checked once more around him to make sure he hadn't missed any obvious signs of life, before cracking the huge door open slightly and taking his first peek inside.

After the bright sunlight, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark musty place. The building was enormous and Hutch couldn't see far enough inside to distinguish the back walls. He could still see no signs of life anywhere, and with a deep steadying breath, he eased his body round the corner of the door and into the cool damp interior. Once inside, he waited a moment attuning his eyes and ears to the different environment, willing his heart to stop beating quite so fast. Still, there were no noises. He moved further in, keeping as close to the margins of the place as he could, hugging the darkness and shadows to him like a cloak. Now that he had gained his night vision, allowing him to more clearly see his surroundings, he realised there were crates stacked up almost to the ceiling in front of him, creating a wall of sorts and obscuring his view of the rest of the cavernous warehouse. He walked along the wall of crates and coming to the end, ducked his head around for a quick look.

His heart stopped for a moment. Right in front of him, about 10 yards away was his partner. Starsky had been tied to a hard wooden chair, his arms pulled savagely back and secured to the rungs of the chair back. His legs were tied to the front of the chair legs, making it impossible for the brunette to move. Not that he looked like he had a lot of movement left in him. The blindfold had been removed and the mahogany curls fell forward covering the forehead, as the detective's chin rested on his chest, a picture of exhaustion. Someone had slipped his denim shirt back on, and incongruously it was buttoned almost to the neck, as if the dresser had taken great care to arrange the clothes in a specified way.

As Hutch walked around the corner of the crates, the brunette raised his head wearily and tried to focus. Hutch could see a cut on his friend's brow, extending down to his right eyebrow and bruises on the right cheek, but any other injuries were covered by the clothing. As Starsky realised his partner had arrived, he
licked his dry, cracked lips and summoned enough energy to talk.

'Utch. Don't come any closer' he rasped, his voice dry and crackly

Hutch stopped in his tracks. 'Starsk?' he said quietly. 'You OK, buddy. What d'ya mean, don't come any closer? You're hurt, let me look at ya'.

The brunette brought his head up and locked eyes with his partner. 'Mean it' he gasped. 'Don't c come any c closer' he screwed his eyes up in pain, but remained rigidly upright in his chair.

'Starsk, you're beginning to scare me buddy! Why can't I come closer?' Hutch was becoming desperate.

The indigo blue eyes bore into Hutch's once more, seeking comfort and understanding.

'Cos, they've wired me up with explosive, an' I'm not taking you with me!' he replied tightly, keeping his emotions in check. The last thing the brunette wanted to do was hurt his partner, but the thought of the big comforting blond being so near and yet so far was almost more then he could bear.

The admission brought the blond up short for all of about a second, before he walked calmly over to his bound partner.

'NO' Starsky screamed, as Hutch knelt down in front of him.

Hutch looked into the dark stormy eyes, sensing the fear there and knowing he would ease it away as best he could. He reached up to wipe away a trickle of blood from the brunette's forehead.

'Hey, partner' he said softly. 'You go, I go. Not leavin' and that's final'.

Starsky let out a shaky breath. 'Always knew you'd have to join in the fun' he mumbled, relief at not being alone any more flooding through his body.

Hutch looked around the brunette's bound body, looking for other wires or signs of explosives, but all he could see was an envelope tagged onto the shoulder of the denim shirt. As he looked closer, he saw the name on the front read HUTCHINSON. Swallowing hard and hoping this wasn't some kind of elaborate booby trap, Hutch reached up a steady hand and gently pried the envelope clear. Nothing happened and the blond let out the breath he realised he had been holding unintentionally.

Turning the envelope over he slit it open along the top with his nail and pulled the single sheet of paper from its interior. Eyes struggling to make out the words in the gloom, he finally read

**Emma Grice, daughter of Detractor Industries' Bob Grice was kidnapped. Last seen leaving Federal Bank, corner of 5th and Wilmslow, Saturday 10.30am She is to be returned to me by 7.00am on Thursday morning.**

Det Starsky has been wired with sufficient C4 explosive to take out a city block. The detonator wire has been embedded in the straps attaching the explosive. Any attempt to remove the harness will cause detonation.

**Bring my daughter back alive and I stop the explosion.**

**Before 7.00am Thursday.**

A colour photograph of a pretty young girl of perhaps 16 was attached.
The two men stared at each other, indigo locked on ice.

'Well, looks like I can breath again' Starsky said as Hutch carefully undid the ropes binding his arms and ankles.

Once free, the brunette groaned as he gently moved his arms round, easing the ache from his shoulders and grunting as the feeling started to return to them. Slowly, he reached up and one by one, he undid the buttons of his shirt.

Hutch let out a low whistle as the metal and leather harness was revealed. Two straps went over Starsky's shoulders and attached to a belt that circled his body at about waist level. Attached to the front portions of the harness were ten white/grey blocks of the powerful plastic explosive, each attached by a small metal detonator to a timing device, located on the brunette's chest, just above his heart. It quietly ticked away the minutes until 7.00am the next day.

'Well, ah, know what they meant by explosive combination' Hutch muttered.

'Yeah, that's me. Real live wire' Starsky retorted, staring down at is leather decorated body.

'Well, you were in the army' Hutch looked at his partner. 'What d'ya know about C4, then?'

Starsky drew a shaky breath, grunting a little as his bruised side responded with a flash of pain. 'It blows things up pretty effectively' he answered. 'But they're right. I can walk around and probably run, drive, sing and tell jokes, an' as long as the detonators don't set off the chemical reaction n the explosives, I'll be safe'.

Hutch helped his partner stand on legs that were numb from the time he'd spent sitting.

Chuckling he retorted 'You? Safe? Now that's something I'd like to believe under any circumstances!'

Chapter 3

Starsky's legs were still wobbly from his enforced immobility and the maltreatment he had received and it took him a few moments to get his balance and follow his blond partner outside. Being used to the dim light inside the building, it also took him a while to become accustomed to the bright sunshine. His face lit up as he saw his car parked a way off and he walked carefully towards it. Without realising, he was placing his feet gently down onto the ground, trying to even out any jarring, so as not to jolt the explosives, even though he knew it would take an awful big collision to set off the plastique that way. Shit, it'd probably survive the collision of a car crash, but not the fire that would ensue.

The harness was uncomfortable and a constant reminder of his predicament. The leather chafed against his already abraded skin and inhibited his movements further. As he got to the car, Hutch was surprised to see that the brunette didn't automatically head to the driver's side. He waited as Hutch got in, and then slid carefully into the passenger seat, trying to get the harness to lie flat enough against his skin to lean back more comfortably. He looked at his watch — 11.00am, Wednesday.

'Well, I got 15 hours to find a girl we've never seen or heard of from a kidnapper who doesn't know were lookin' for him, then deliver her to her father, even though we don't know where he is either' he raised his eyebrows at the blond.

'Piece a cake' Hutch said. 'And for the last 14 hours we can split the atom and design the next moon rocket for NASA'.

'Seriously, Hutch. Ya don't need to do this with me. Why give in to these flakes? Maybe the bomb disposal guys can get this thing off me. Argh' he grunted as the car hit a bump in the road.
'Before the bomb squad, ya need to see a doctor Gordo. They did a pretty good job on your ribs there' Hutch sounded worried, seeing the winces his partner tried to hide from him and remembering the treatment Starsky had received from the video.

'No! Can't do that Blintz. Either we go to the army guys now, or we start lookin' for this girl. Doctors are usually at hospitals an' hospitals are full of people'.

'Agreed. Usually sick people who need their ribs seeing to'.

'Not the point Blondie'. Starsky looked pained. 'need to stay away from crowds, partner. Don't want to blow up more folks than I have to!' he grinned tightly.

Hutch's breath caught in his throat. He reached out a patted his partner's arm gently. 'Won't happen partner. We're gonna get through this in one piece'. Secretly he was worried. Poisoned injections they could cope with. Flakes with guns were an everyday occurrence. But human bombs? No the sort of thing the police manual covered. There were no lessons called 'Blow your partner up 101'.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, wrapped in their own thoughts, Hutch looking for any way out of this, and Starsky wondering if this was the way he really wanted to spend his last hours on earth. Finally Hutch felt he needed conversation, his nerves jangling.

'What happened to you? How come they got you? I went round to your apartment on Monday morning, but of course you weren't there'.

Starsky's eyes had been closed. He felt weary and sick, as well as far too sore to start looking for daddy's little girl, but the sound of his partner's voice was good, and he needed to talk. He needed just for a few minutes to feel that everything was normal again. He listened to Hutch's soft velvety voice, knowing that if this was going to happen, he was glad Hutch was here for at least part of it. There was no way on earth Starsky would allow his partner there at the end. That was unthinkable.

'I went to bed on 'Sunday night, as usual. I'd even locked the door. I went to sleep easily enough, but somethin' woke me about 4.00am. I tried to get up out of bed, but some whippo hit me on the head. Felt like he'd used a demolition ball. I woke up in a car, or van an' my hands were tied. I think they realised I was awake coz some kind soul shot me full of a tranquilliser or somethin'. Anyway, I had a nice nap, an' when I woke up I was at the warehouse, blindfold'. He paused, reliving the past two days in his head.

'I had no idea what they wanted. They never told me anything about this kidnap. Just asked me questions about you an' me. I thought they might have been one of our "fan club", so I tried not to tell 'em anythin' they got to playin' a bit rough. Couple of mothers stood me against a wall and played me for a punch bag for a while. Then I felt 'em inject me with somethin' again'. He looked over at his flaxen haired partner.

'Just kept thinkin' about when they strung you out on heroin, an' how you must'a felt'. He shuddered at the memory. Anyway, wasn't heroin. Think it must have been pentobarbital or similar. Next thing I know I'd have told 'em how to get into Fort Knox, if I'd known. Jeez, Hutch! I knew what I was sayin', but I couldn't stop myself. Shit! They asked me about you, where you lived. Even asked if I called you Hutchinson, or Ken'.

'Well that's where they got it then' Hutch chuckled.

'What?'

'I got a little message of my own, partner, addressed to Blintz, telling me where you were and how to find ya. I thought it was a trap'.
Starsky smiled. 'S'pose it was a trap of sorts' he said. 'Anyway, after that they played nicer for a while. I thought I heard a video camera at one point, then they sat me down on that chair, put this on me' he pointed at the harness, 'put my shirt on and took off the blindfold. Told me I had to keep my eyes shut still they'd gone. There were three of 'em'.

'They had a camera, buddy. They sent us a video with the message. It showed 'em "playin" with ya, which is why I'm here early' he reached out to put an hand on his partner's arm. 'Where d'ya wanna go from here then?'

Starsky considered. 'How far are we from the Metro?'

'Two hours'.

Once the radio's in range, we tell Dobey to meet us somewhere quiet an' outta town, and at the same time, tell one of the guys from the bomb squad to meet us. Kill tow birds with one stone'.

'Hey, a muti tasking partner' he grinned.

Starsky looked hurt. 'What ya mean. I've always multi-tasked. I can type a report an' eat at the same time!'

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

As they got within an hour of Bay City, Starsky got on the car radio and got a patch through to Dobey, telling him in short terms what had happened to him. He asked that they meet at a little diner on the outskirts of the city, they knew the owner.

'Oh, and Cap? Can you get hold of a Major Tom Trafford in the Bomb Disposal Unit. Tell him to meet us there too, and to hurry and bring his kit. Tell him its for Curly, he'll know who ya mean'.

'Starsky, are you alright?' Dobey shouted down the phone.

'Tell ya later Cap', Starsky said shortly, placing the mic. Back onto its cradle. He settled back into his seat, heaving a sigh, his eyes closing.

'Ya want a doze, partner?' Hutch asked. 'Ya must be all in'.

'I am' the brunette agreed, 'but it's difficult to sleep when I'm so wired', he grinned at his joke, but the double meaning wasn't lost on the blond.

'Try anyway', he said, forcing a smile onto his face. 'I'll wake ya when we get there'.

Hutch drove on, eyes on the road, but his mind going over every bit of information they had. Not a lot! He reached for the mic. again and asked for a patch trough to RandI.

'Ernie, this is Ken Hutchinson. Listen, can you pull everything on Bob Grice and Detractor Industries. I need it yesterday. And Ernie, there are lives a stake here, thanks buddy'. He replaced the mic. And continued his thoughts. Within 15 minutes, Ernie was back on the line.

'Hutch? Detractor Industries have a finger in a lot of different pies. Mostly garment manufacturing, but also electrical assembly and a newly emerging computer business. All the industries use 'sweat shops' and they've been watched for some time by the IRS. Seems there may be some question of illegal immigrants — mostly Chinese. That's all I got at the moment, but I'll keep digging. Are you an' Starsk OK?'

Hutch looked sideways at his sleeping partner. 'Hope so, Ernie. I hope so!'
Half an hour later, Hutch pulled the big red car up outside Mo's Diner. He could see Dobey's car there already and an army truck. Dobey was talking to a soldier in military uniform, who Hutch assumed must be Tom Trafford. He leaned over and gently nudged his partner who'd slept peacefully after their initial conversation. Starsky woke and rubbed his hand across his eyes. Seeing his Captain and his friend, he pulled his shirt across his body and gently got out of the car, walking over to the two other men.

Dobey turned to greet the two detectives, eyes flicking from the exhausted face of the blond to the bruised face of the brunette.

'You OK Starsky?' he asked perfunctorily. 'Why do we need to meet here, and what's this crap with the bomb disposal guys?' he asked, impatience in his voice.

'All in good time, Cap' Starsky said, looking behind the big black man to the soldier. Tom and Starsky had been friends in 'Nam. But whereas the brunette had had enough of the army and went into the police on his return, Trafford had continued and specialised in disposal work.

'Hey Traff, how's business?' he asked tightly.

'Oh booming, ya know', the tall, dark haired soldier said smiling at the old joke. 'So, what do you want your old buddy for, Curly?'

Slowly, Starsky opened the front on his shirt, slipping it down off his arms and standing front on, so that Tom could see the harness in all it's glory.

'Got a bit of an explosive situation' he said, as calmly as he could. Dobey's eyes flew wide in surprise and horror, whilst Trafford gave a low whistle.

The soldier walked slowly round the dark haired cop, taking in the type of explosive, the amount, the detonators and the harness. Very gently, he touched the leather and metal, making the brunette flinch unintentionally.

'C4 Traff. Know its fairly stable, but there was a note attached. Said the detonator wires went through the harness'.

The soldier was used to explosives and to difficult situations, but even this hard core professional's voice cracked, as he realised what his friend was going through.

'Well, yeah, its C4. As you said, its fairly stable. Just as with other explosives, you need to apply some energy to C-4 to kick off the chemical reaction. Because of the stabilizer elements, it takes a considerable shock to set off this reaction; lighting the C-4 with a match will just make it burn slowly, like a piece of wood In 'Nam, if ya remember we actually burned C-4 as an improvised cooking fire. Even shooting the explosive with a rifle won't trigger the reaction. Only a detonator, or blasting cap will do the job properly. Difficulty is, Curly, they've integrated the detonator into the leather of the harness, so if its cut, the chemical reaction starts and thats you all over, buddy. There's a sophisticated timer device at the front and there seems to be a way of entering a six digit number, which will end the detonation'.

The soldier was used to explosives and to difficult situations, but even this hard core professional's voice cracked, as he realised what his friend was going through.

'I can sort your ribs out, though, if ya want'. He looked at the multiple bruises and cuts decorating Starsky's torso.

'Hm. Do your worst' Starsky muttered as Tom got to work.
'I'll bind your ribs, I think one might be cracked, but nothing too bad, put a couple'a stitches in that cut on your side, you'll be as good as new'.

Hutch was looking concerned 'You can do that?'

Trafford smiled 'Field medic. Kinda comes with the disposal territory' as he continued his ministrations.

As Hutch continued to fill Dobey in on the rescue that morning, Starsky once again looked at his watch.

Wednesday 3.15pm

Chapter 4

As Hutch finished his summary of events with Dobey, giving him the kidnap note which had been pinned to Starsky's body, Trafford was putting the last dressing on Starsky's side. With the harness decorating his chest, and the three or four white dressings on his chest and side, the brunette's body resembled a game of "tic tac toe", but his body felt more comfortable, even if his mind was a jumble of conflicting emotions, the painkillers Traff having made him take, taking final effect.

The blond and his captain walked over to the dark haired detective and the soldier, as Starsky was fighting his way back into his shirt, careful not to dislodge any of the bandages or worse.

'Traff can't cut this damned thing off, so we're stuck with finding the girl' he said tightly, arranging his shirt to cover the harness.

'So. Where do you want to start?' Dobey asked.

'Well, the note said Emma was last seen leaving the bank on Saturday morning, so logically we should start there — see if we can see anything from the CCTV footage. Traff — you sure I'm safe bein' around crowds with this. Wouldn't want to..........' His voice trailed off, leaving the unspoken meaning hanging in the air.

'Yeah, sure', the soldier said lightly. 'If you're gonna be a human bomb, C4 is definitely the way to go!' he smiled knowing his Vietnam buddy would appreciate the black humour. It lightened the atmosphere and made talking about difficult subjects easier to discuss. 'Is there anything else I can do?. There's no way we can try to force the combination on the timer. With six numbers you're looking at thousands of combinations. Sorry Curly. I can stick around if ya need me?'

Starsky grimaced. 'Short of getting this thing off me, there's nothing you could do, so no. Thanks Traff. Appreciate it'. He allowed his hand to linger on the soldiers shoulder a moment.

Tom Trafford stood back and flipped a quick salute. 'Nice to see you Major, see you again soon?' he turned on his heel and departed, leaving the emphasis on his words floating there — *I'm confident I will see you again!*

Starsky waved his own hand in a vague salute back saying 'Get outa here, you old soldier' and staring fondly after him.

Hutch jumped a little at the reference. It never failed to amaze him that his partner had indeed been a Major in a Special Ops battalion in Vietnam before joining the force. Imagine — Major Starsky!

Bringing his mind back to the job in hand, Hutch walked back to the Torino and reaching inside, called in their location.

'This is Zebra three. You there Mildred honey?'
'Hey handsome, how's that gorgeous partner of yours?'

'Haven't a clue who you're talking about, but Starsky's OK. Can you ring this number and tell the manager that we'll be there in', he looked at his watch, '20 minutes. We need to see CCTV footage from Saturday morning around 10.30am, and we need to see it quickly. Thanks Hon'. He replaced the mic. As his partner eased himself into the drivers seat.

'What ya doin' partner. You're in no fit state to drive' he complained as those indigo eyes blinked up at him. Starsky's face split into a big grin.

'I got till 7.00 tomorrow morning, Blintz. I wanna make sure I survive till at least then, an' with your drivin' that's not a given, is it?' As Hutch reluctantly into the passenger side, the brunette gunned the engine and, spinin' the front wheels, sending clouds of dust skyward, headed for the bank in the downtown area.

As they drove, Starsky started thinking about the ordeal he'd been through, trying to glean any extra information over and above what they had already. He knew he'd heard three distinct voices and he had the impression that two of the men were taller than he was, judging by the angle of the blows he'd received. What did that give them? Zip. These men were professionals, but they'd wanted the two detectives to do a job for them. This was their way of persuasion! He'd hate to be around when they were angry.

He drove the car smoothly, feeling the road through the tyres and steering wheel, alive to the different road conditions. He loved this car and felt more alive when he was driving it than at any other time. It was an extension of the Starsky persona, sometimes flashy and brash, always standing out in a crowd, but still safe and secure, and offering protection when needed.

'Hutch, if this doesn't work out, will ya take the Torino?' he asked, calmly and with no hint of pressure or hurt in his voice.

'What? Aw Starsk. We're gonna get through this buddy. We still got loads of time. You'll be driving this striped tomato around at this time tomorrow and this will all be a bad dream' Hutch said, wishing more than anything that he believed it. He knew what it cost his partner to talk about defeat and the finality that would bring, and he realised just what hurt the smaller man was internalising.

'Yeah, tomorrow!' the brunette said. 'Perhaps we shouldn't book that vacation just yet, huh? Just in case?'

As the traffic got busier, nearing the centre of the city, Starsky carefully threaded the car through the cars and vans on the highway, pulling the Torino into a parking lot outside the bank building. Stopping the engine, both detectives got out and made their way into the air conditioned coolness of the building, asking the concierge for the way to the manager's office.

Mr Zelinska, the manager bustled into the foyer a moment later, shook their hands and showed them into the security suite on the first floor, introducing themselves to the security officer.

They shook hands again, flashing their shields just to prove their identity.

'The message from the BCPD said you needed to see the footage from the front of the building at around 10.30 on Saturday morning. Our CCTV is time lapse and takes one photo every 30 seconds, so the picture will appear choppy' the security guard explained. 'This tape runs from 10.00am till 11.30 and the screen is quartered, showing the tills, the foyer, the outside and the parking lot'. He inserted it into the player and pushed a button, obviously proud of the equipment and his expertise in using it.

Hutch could see his partner twitching, knowing time was of the essence. He leaned forward coughing
'Thank you, officer' he said, smiling. 'I wonder if there's any way we can speed it on to around 10.30? That's the time we're interested in'.

The guard smiled back. 'there's a time counter in the bottom right hand corner of the image, minutes, seconds and hundredths of seconds', he said proudly. He flicked a button on the remote control and the images on the screen went into comic fast forward, until the time at the foot of the screen read 10.25. The images slowed to normal speed and the two detectives leaned in to examine the images.

There was silence in the little airless room for a little while as each man studied the video frames in slow succession. Starsky shifted a little in his chair, the metal element of the harness digging into his waist, reminding him once again of the importance of the images. Suddenly, Hutch jabbed a finger at the monitor. 'There. Do you see her? Second till along'. He reached for the photo in his top pocket and brought it up to compare it with the image on the screen. It matched. Hutch asked the guard to replay the CCTV footage until they had had chance to concentrate on all the four quadrants and images, tracing Emma's movements from the time she entered the foyer of the bank, through her standing in line at the tills, through to her leaving the till. There was one image of her stepping out of the front door of the bank, but the next image showed only the uniformed concierge, standing at the top of the steps, no sign of Emma anywhere around.

'Where'd she go?' Starsky asked, eyes scanning the images for any signs of her. 'She can't just disappear from one frame to the next. 'What's happened?'

The security guard pushed his button again and the images rewound, so that the detectives cold have a look at then again. Still, Emma was there on one frame and gone on the next. It was a mystery.

It wasn't until the tape had been played a fourth time that Hutch suddenly leaned forward intent on the counter at the foot of the tape image. 'Just go back one more time', he said as the guard complied.

'There, do you see it? The tape has a few seconds missing. It jumps from 10.32.25 to 10.34.10. How's that happened?' he looked at the security man, who was frantically checking the tape, the box and the player.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I dunno' he said. 'It should be impossible!'

'Who's the guy at the front? The one with the uniform' Hutch asked the security man.

'That's Geoff, the concierge' he replied. 'Real nice guy. He's worked here for years, but he's off sick. Haven't seen him for a couple of days now.

'That's who we need to find then'. Starsky was on his feet, having had enough of the claustrophobic room, the tape and the inability to get something done. He headed for the door, jerking it open and asking the clerk outside for the manager again.

Mr Zelinska arrived again and without too much argument, he gave the detectives the address of Geoff, the concierge.

'Is there anything else I can do for you gentlemen?' he asked courteously, looking at his watch. 'It's just that it's five minutes to five and the bank will be closing in five minutes'.

Hutch caught the look on his partner's face, and the glance at the big watch on his left hand, knowing the brunette was doing his own silent countdown.
Chapter 5

The two detectives ran to the Torino and got in. As Hutch was closing the door, Starsky had the engine running and as the blond sat back in the seat, his partner had the car turned out into the traffic, edging across the lanes and taking the next exit from the highway, heading south towards the address Mr Zelinska had give.

'So, the plot thickens' Hutch said. 'Who could have got hold of the tape to cut it? Whoever it was, they were either insiders or real professionals. It was a neat job!'

'We're supposed to find 'em, not admire 'em, Blintz', Starsky replied. He looked at his watch again, then forced his eyes way, sighing.

'It's not going to make the time go slower' his partner said, smoothly.

Starsky glared, then his expression softened. 'I know. Dobey once said he never took me to be a clock watcher. I just feel like every second counts, ya know? An' I don't want to waste any of 'em. His mind went back to that time Bellamy had shot him full of poison, gleefully telling him he had 24 hours to live. Going back to Dobey's office, he'd trawled through piles of files, looking for any sort of clue, checking the time every few minutes. He felt now like he had done then — that he was up against two enemies — the bomb and the most deadly enemy of all — time.

Life wasn't fair. He was 34, fit, healthy, not bad looking. He should be out there enjoying himself, marrying, having lots of little Starskys playing in the streets. Instead he was motoring around Bay City with his partner and best friend looking for a girl he had no feelings for one way or another in a bid to stop his life coming to a painful and probably very messy end. He riled against the injustice of it all. Why couldn't they just leave him in peace? Why didn't he just pack it all in and choose a different job?

But he'd always chosen the sort of career that held two elements. The first was the element of danger, because Starsky realised early on in life that the adrenalin rush was when he truly felt alive. The second element was probably the more important. He had an urge, a physical need to help others, protecting the more vulnerable end of society from danger and injustice and the only way to feed this addiction was to do the job he now held down.

Starsky's body was rebelling against the kidnap, the beatings and the emotional turmoil he now felt. He was tired beyond the meaning of the word and his side and chest ached fiercely, despite the painkillers he'd been given. He would really have longed for his bed and the comfort of sleep for a few hours. But the thoughts that he may have a limited time left drove him on. He didn't want to waste the time he still had with sleep. His mind went over a list of all the things he'd thought he'd have a chance to do before he died. He'd wanted to see the world, to have a family, to drive a racing car. Big things and trivial things alike. He wanted to do them all.

Hutch was having thoughts of his own, equally dark and equally disturbing. He had long ago come to realise that his partner seemed to attract trouble. Sure, Hutch had had his fair share — being trapped under his car for over 24 hours after it had been forced off the road was no bundle of laughs. And the time he'd been forced to take heroin was one of the truly gut wrenching times of his life. But when he thought about what the brunette had had to deal with, it made his guts knot. He'd been through enough to make most men buckle under and die. But that spirit his partner had, that sheer joie de vivre he displayed every day kept him going, driving that brunette cannon on through life's ups and downs. His only concern that this predicament may be something that even his stoical brave partner couldn't control. Hutch would do anything he could for his Starsky, even die if that's what it would take. He wondered if that was going to be an option this time.
He mentally prepared for future events, whatever they may be.

As the brunette turned the big car into the street indicated in the directions Mr Zelinska had given them, he slowed, looking at the house numbers. It was one of the poorer neighbourhoods. Obviously, being a concierge was not a lucrative trade and Geoff was not living the high life. The street was fairly narrow, wooden clapboard houses standing on one side in small, mean little yards edged by chain linked fences. On the other side, large industrial looking buildings with gaudy billboards outside. Scrawny dogs barked in the gardens which were dry and devoid of grass and small dirty children played in the dirt at the sides of the street.

'Here we are 879 Division Street' Hutch said, nodding at the house to the right. Paint peeled off the wooden shutters and a gate to the garden hung drunkenly from a single hinge, the other having given up its struggle against rust some time ago.

The two detectives sat outside for a moment, checking the area out and looking the house over. The curtains at the small dusty windows were closed and it seemed obvious that the occupant hadn't risen. A newspaper still lay where it had been thrown, against the door lintel, its pages blowing gently in the small breeze. The heat of the day was dissipating somewhat in the late afternoon, and the street had that lazy, tired air to it, echoing the tiredness both men felt.

They got stiffly out of the car and made their way up the garden path to the front door. Something, call its their cop's fifth sense made them simultaneously reach for their guns. Hutch checked the chambers of his big Colt, Starsky easing forward the magazine on his smaller Beretta. Nodding slightly to each other, they took up their customary positions for when they were going into a situation they were unsure of. Hutch stood tall, back against one side of the doorway as Starsky bent his knees, gun pointing skywards and cupped in both hands as he leaned back against the other side of the door. It had always been their practice. When going in, Hutch went high and Starsky low, two guns covering the whole of the room in front of them.

'Ready?' the blond asked quietly, and at a nod from his partner shouted 'Geoff? Open up. Police'.

There was no answer, and he tried again, accompanying the shout with a rap on the door with the barrel of his gun. Still nothing.

Flicking a look at his partner and with silent agreement, Hutch stepped back and kicked at the flimsy wooden door, springing it open along its hinges. As he and Starsky whipped round and aimed into the room, they were met by a swarm of flies and a familiar, but unpleasant smell. Both men reached for something to cover their noses as they cautiously entered the small house.

Briefly checking the living room and finding nothing, they moved towards the bedroom, and there, lying on the blood soaked bed was the body of the concierge, still dressed in his uniform. He'd obviously been killed as he arrived home on Monday evening by a single gun shot to the back of his head.

'Poor sap' Starsky said from behind his hand. 'He'd never have stood a chance. He must have seen whoever took Emma an' someone made sure he couldn't tell'. He exited the bedroom and Hutch could hear as he picked up the telephone and asked for the coroner's wagon to attend the address.

Hutch poked around the small bedroom, looking for anything which might give him a clue as to what Geoff had seen. He went back to the body, looking at the way it was lying. Geoff must have had his back to the window, looking into the room as his body was stretched across the bed with his head towards the door. The glass in the window itself had one neat hole in it, indicating a hire powered rifle had been used. Anything smaller would have smashed the whole of the glass. A high powered rifle also indicated a professional hitman.
Starsky walked back into the room, sidestepping the pool of dried blood on the floor.

'Coroners wagon will be here as soon as they can, but it's almost 6.00 and the traffics heavy. Is there anything else we can get from this? Its...........' his concentration was suddenly interrupted by the sight of the small red dot dancing across the blonde's left upper arm. Plunging forward, he knocked his partner off balance and both men fell to the floor as a shot rang out, the bullet pinging off the wall at the far side of the room.

For a moment both men lay quiet, the brunette's body on top of the blonde's, both men quieting their rapid breathing and trying to get a handle on what had just happened.

Eventually, hutch whispered quietly 'Starsk, can ya get up? your C4 is digging into my ribs buddy'.

The brunette looked sheepish and struggled to sit up, cautiously peering through the remaining glass in the window, checking to see if he could see any evidence of the sniper's presence. Confident all was clear, he stood shakily and held down a hand to the blond, prising him to his feet.

A small trickle of blood made it's way down the fair forehead and Hutch wiped it away quickly.

'Hey, you hurt, Blintz?' the smaller man asked.

'S'nothin' he answered. 'Your head connected with mine on the way down. Next time ya save my life can ya be a bit more careful, huh?'

He looked around the room and out of the window.

'Well, I guess the folks that have Emma have just discovered we want to talk to 'em' he grunted, easing the bruises he knew were going to appear on his back from his partner catapulting him to the ground.

**Chapter 6**

The forensics guys arrived at 6.30 at about the same time as the coroner's wagon. They bustled into the house, seemingly unaffected by the gore, smell and body lying limply on the bed. Most of the flies had departed, but there were still stubborn ones buzzing around the body, landing , waiting then lifting off again. Hutch hated the pesky buggers, wafting them away angrily, as they seemed to further defile the innocent body on the bed. Once photographs were taken and the body bagged and taken away, the scenes of crime officers came to look at the bedroom, gauging the angle of the shots through the window. Whilst one of the guys photographed the bedclothes then folded them carelessly and stuffed them into a clear plastic sack, another was scanning the bedroom for any other signs of intrusion. The forensic detective assigned to the case busied himself bending down by the bed and looking up at the buildings across the window, tracking possible trajectories.

He took measurements, lines of sight, looked at the two neat holes in the glass and where the body had been on the bed, noting down his figures, drawing diagrams and making calculations in his notepad. As he worked he hummed under his breath, happy in this world of death and destruction. This was the world he'd chosen for himself. Trained originally as a doctor, he took this job because at least here, none of his "patients" answered him back, or groaned and moaned about their treatment. He was definitely not a "people person". Completing his calculations he nodded to himself, grinning at his success. Finally he had some answers for the two detectives.

The men in question had both taken refuge from the stench of the place in the Torino outside. With the windows down, there was a pleasant breeze blowing through the car. Starsky's shoulders were beginning to ache with the weight of the explosives anchored round his body. The C4 weighed about a pound per block,
and there were ten blocks in total. He'd been carrying the extra 10lbs of weight round now for almost twelve hours, and the strain was beginning to tell. His shoulders were dragged down with the weight and he could feel the beginnings of blisters forming beneath the unforgiving leather of the harness. The strap of leather and metal around his waist was also chafing and he knew he'd have a red welt there. The harness was a constant reminder of his own mortality and even with his usual upbeat outlook on life, Starsky was beginning to think about making plans for his demise.

Fed up with his own morbid thoughts, Starsky broke the silence.

'6.50 and the suns going down', he said quietly. 'Did you ever actually watch a sunset, Hutch? I mean really watch it. All the colours chasing across the sky'. He pointed at the magenta clouds on the horizon. 'I've never truly appreciated it before. How the sky gently changes colour like that. Look - its mauve now, it was pink a minute ago'. He looked over at his partner.

The blond swallowed down the lump in his throat. If he could have, he would have wrapped his partner up in cotton wool and put him somewhere that no one would be able to harm him.

'Starsk, you'll see another sunset, I know ya will' he murmured. 'But you're right — it is beautiful'.

Hutch too was feeling the strain of the past hours. He knew his partner wasn't telling him everything about how he felt. God look at him now, admiring the sunset like he'll never see another one. He'd been in too many situations with the brunette to know that Starsky was trying hard to protect him from as much hurt as possible. Just knowing that made the strain on the blond all the worse and although Hutch didn't have the physical weight of the plastique around his body, mentally he carried it around with him, and it weighed him down as much as the stuff weighed his partner.

The forensics expert came out of the front door, seemingly immune to the smell that pervaded the little house. The two detectives had worked with him before and knew he was good at his job, although a quirky person and with a reputation for being difficult to get on with. He took a look around. He'd been so absorbed in the facts he discovered in the small bedroom that he seemed to see the exterior of the house for the first time. He caught sight of the two detectives sat in the car and made his way over to them and squatted down by the side of the car.

'What ya got, Henriques?' Starsky asked, squinting sideways at the figures scrawled on the notepad. Henriques clutched it to him protectively, like a little child who didn't want it's work copied.

'Well, I got a lot of information from how the body lay on the bed and the holes in the glass. Looks like the sniper used a 1200 meter sniper rifle, probably a .338. I'd guess at a Prometheus or Magenta Mist. They're fantastic weapons. They use a Cheyenne Tactical Cartridge and have a brilliant accuracy rate. Beautiful craftsmanship too' the guys eyes glazed over in the way that happens when a fanatic talks about his subject, disappearing into his own little world again.

Starsky clicked his fingers in front of Henriques' eyes, breaking his reverie.

'Hey, Henriques. Hangin' on your every word here, buddy. Kinda got a vested interest in this one ya know?' Starsky urged, parting his short slightly and giving the small man a glimpse of the C4.

'Hey, will you look at that shit' the forensic detective said, awe in his voice. He seemed to shake himself.

'What?.....Oh, yeah, sorry. Well, having tracked the trajectory, I'd say with a fair certainty that the marksman was holed up in that building over there, third floor, fourth window from the end' he smiled at the two detectives, happy he'd been able to give them some positive evidence.

The two men glanced at each other as they got out of the Torino again.
'Thanks Henriques, we owe you one' Hutch said to the forensics man. Looking at his partner he added 'Well, we know where we go next', and headed for the industrial building opposite.

It was getting dark now as Hutch and his partner trotted around to the front entrance of the building.

'Hutch, it's 7.25 an' it's an industrial buildin'. There ain't gonna be anyone home now' Starsky reasoned with his blond haired partner as they neared the door.

But as Hutch put his hand on the handle and pushed, the door gave, and the two men walked cautiously in.

They found themselves in a large, carpeted foyer, such as you would find in a corporate building downtown. There was modern modular furniture arranged in squares around coffee tables piled neatly with magazines. Tasteful flower arrangements decorated alcoves in the pale lilac walls and expensive looking paintings hung below brass light fittings. The place smelt of money and seemed incongruous in this poor neighbourhood. It was as though they'd stepped into a different world and as if to emphasise the point, Starsky's sneakers left dusty footprints in the thick pile of the pale carpet.

The area was quiet, but towards the far corner there was a large window with a 'reception' sign above it. Hutch walked slowly over to it, ready for anything, his right hand resting comfortably on the stiff leather of his holster, feeling the reassuring weight of his piece. Starsky felt his Beretta against the skin of his back, where he'd tucked it into his waistband, being unable to fit his own holster over the bulk of that damned harness. The brunette followed his partner to the window as Hutch leaned casually on the little ledge and tapped with his knuckle against the glass.

From behind the glass a pretty oriental girl stood from her desk and walked over, smiling and making a little bow.

'Welcome to DeMaine Investments' she dimpled. 'How may I help you?'

Chapter 7

Hutch gave her his most winning smile. 'Good evening Miss' he started. 'Is there a Mr DeMaine that we can speak to?'

The girl shook her head, straight black hair floating around her shoulders. 'I'm sorry, Sir. Mr DeMaine doesn't work at this building. This is our manufacturing site. Mr DeMaine has an office down town'.

Hutch pressed on. 'Is there someone in charge of the building that we can talk to, then?'

'We have a caretaker. What is it in connection with?' she asked, trying hard to be helpful.

Hutch pulled his shield from his back pocket and held it up against the glass, allowing the girl to examine it closely. 'Bay City PD. Ma'am' he said, formally. 'We're investigating an offence, and need to speak to whoever is in charge'.

She looked a little abashed. 'I'm sorry, Officer' she said, giving that curious little bow again. 'I'll get Mr Ren, he's the duty manager. Please take a seat, I won't be a moment'. She scurried off.

Starsky sat carefully down on the soft chair at the side of the window, still unable to relax properly into it because of the bulk he was carrying. Hutch perched himself opposite seeing again the exhaustion written on his partner's face and body. It ate him up to see Starsky so tired and knew that before long he would have to order the smaller man to get some rest. He chuckled to himself, knowing however hard he pleaded, Starsky would take no notice.
Hutch had been trying to imagine how he would feel if he was in his partner's shoes now, but was having difficulty. It was unimaginable really. How can you contemplate knowing the precise time of your own death and the way in which it would occur? How could the smaller man function knowing each action he made may well be the last time he does it? God, no wonder he was staring at that sunset for so long!

Starsky was twitching to get moving. He'd known Henriques would have to take some time looking at the crime scene before he could give them any information to work with, and he had braced himself for the wait, telling himself it was a necessary evil, and would pay in the long run. But now he was having to sit and wait again, and the minutes were ticking away. He'd tried to zone out the faint ticking he heard from the timer lodged on his chest, but every now and then when it was quiet, like now, he heard it again, ticking away the seconds. Another grisly dimension added to an already intolerable situation. He got up from the seat and paced the room, anything to trick his mind into thinking he was busy. Something was itching at him.

'Hutch, what d'ya make of this place? Somethin' doesn't seem right. Why all this comfort and excess in such a poor area. Down town I could understand, but not here'.

Hutch was just about to answer as the receptionist returned with another Oriental gentleman. He was small, perhaps 5'6" with a round, olive/yellow complexion, almond shaped, brown eyes and a wide smile which did not light up in his eyes. He was a neat, tidy individual, wearing a conservative navy blue suit, white shirt and navy blue tie. He stopped a little way from the two detectives and bowed slightly from the waist.

'Miss Lin says you wished to see me?' he asked, coming forward again. 'How can I be of service?'

'Do you manage the building?' Starsky asked, eager to be getting going.

'I am the general manager, yes. We have cleaning and portering staff who look after different areas and a booking manager who looks after bookings of various corporate rooms'.

'We need to take a look at a room on the third floor, with a window fourth along from the east corner', the brunette continued. 'urgently, please' he added.

'That would be the room next to our board room, Sir' Mr Lin informed him. 'That room is booked out on a very regular basis'. He turned to the receptionist. 'Miss Lin, please take these gentlemen up to the Grey suite and show them around. Gentlemen, I'll be here when you return' he bowed again and sat down, smoothing his perfectly tailored suit down his short legs.

The two detectives followed the girl to the lift and from there out onto a long, carpeted corridor. Miss Lin took a bunch of keys from a belt at her waist and fumbled one from its friends. Towards the end of the corridor, she put the key in the door lock and allowed them to enter.

It was a big room, again beautifully furnished in palest ash wood and blue walls and carpet. Starsky made his way over to the large picture window and looked out from behind the curtains, seeing immediately that there was a clear shot to the small house across the way. The window opened outwards by way of a small catch at the side. Hutch joined him, both men searching the immediate vicinity for anything the gunman might have left, but there was nothing and Starsky slammed his hands against the side of the window in frustration. His partner was quick to put a comforting hand on his shoulder, empathising with the brunette and wishing something positive could come out of this too. Thanking the young woman, they made their way back down to the foyer and the waiting Mr Ren. He stood as they approached.

'Can we speak with the guy who does the bookings please? Especially the booking for this last Monday, for that one room' Hutch asked.
Mr Ren looked sheepish. 'The bookings manager is on vacation this week; we have a temporary man doing the job at the moment. So sorry', he bowed again, ingratiating himself to the two detectives.

'Well is there a bookings book? Some record? Somewhere we can see who rented the room on Monday?' Starsky tried.

Mr Ren nodded and gave some order in Mandarin to Miss Lin, who bowed and scurried away. She was gone for only a few minutes when she came back empty handed. There was a hurried conversation in Chinese between the two, Miss Lin seeming upset and Mr Ren seeming to be angry, although truth to tell, the language was so alien that anything could have been said and the two detectives would have been none the wiser.

Mr Ren turned back to Hutch. 'It would seem the booking record is missing. Miss Lin doesn't know where it can have got to, as no one other than the bookings clerk would have any use for it' he looked shamefaced.

Starsky looked over to his partner, a look of disbelief on his face. 'Strike two, then' he said bitterly. Facing Ren again, he asked 'Where exactly has the booking clerk gone on vacation?'

Another brief exchange between Ren and Lin. 'He is visiting family in Chicago. I have the name and address, if you so desire'.

Starsky nodded abruptly and waited whilst Miss Lin wrote the name and address down in a neat, round hand. She smiled as she handed it to the dark haired detective. He tried hard to smile back, but his patience was wearing exceedingly thin. Every lead they got was turning up blank and time was running out. He looked at his watch. 8.05.

Thanking the two, the detectives made their way back to the car. As Hutch was patched through to RandI to get back to them, Starsky placed both his hands on the roof of his beloved car and leaned there, head drooping, the cooler breeze ruffling his curls. He felt dead tired. No, scratch that. He felt tired. Dead would have to wait for another 11 hours.

Chapter 8

'So who's DeMaine Investments then?' Starsky asked as they sat in the car waiting for RandI to get back to them.

'Can't say I've ever heard of them, but they're a bit off our patch anyway. But looks like they have a finger in a whole bunch of different pies' Hutch answered.

'I just get the impression that they're into this some way. 'Too convenient that the bookings guy is in Chicago and the bookings book is missing. And that Ren! All that bowin' and scrapin'. I never trust a guy who only looks at your shoes. He gave me the creeps'.

'Know what ya mean buddy. I s'pose it's the oriental way. Little ingratiating piece of......' Hutch answered. 'But Miss Lin was sweet!'

'Down tiger. She probably has a boyfriend who fights like Bruce Lee'. the brunette growled. 'Let's get to Huggy's. He may know something? If there's anythin' goin' down, he's usually one of the first to find out'. He chuckled. 'Don't know why we don't just make the Pits an extension of the Metro sometimes'.

Hutch shrugged. 'Know what ya mean! We've come up blank here' he said 'Shit! Might as well go uptown. Nothin' to loose'.

Starsky started the engine, but then stopped, hunching his shoulders and wiggling them a little. 'Much as it
pains me to ask, Blondie' he said. 'Could ya drive a while? I'm getting' kinda sore'. He pushed his shirt off his shoulders and Hutch winced as he saw the three large blisters, now rubbed raw on top of his partner's shoulders, the hard leather digging into the sensitive skin. Starsky made a wry face and got out of the car, trotting round to the passenger side as the blond scooted over into the driver's seat. Hutch waited until Starsky had settled himself as comfortably as he was going to get in the passenger seat, before pulling out and heading to the Pits, the bar their friend and informant Huggy Bear owned.

'Why didn't ya tell me it had gotten so bad before? We could have stopped an' got some sticking plaster or cream or somethin' Hutch said quietly, knowing just how much it had cost the smaller man to admit he was hurting.

Starsky snorted. 'S'bad enough ya drivin' my car. Don't go all "Mummsy" on me' he grunted, wiggling in the seat. 'I'll get something at Huggy's OK?'

It was fully dark now and with both car windows down it was pleasantly cool, the breeze drying the sweat on the brunettes skin and soothing the chafed areas on his chest and back. The pain killers that Tom had given him all those hours ago were wearing off, and he knew if he was going to keep going he'd have to get some more meds before too long. His body ached fiercely. Both from the added weight of his cargo and from the beatings he'd had earlier and he was finding it increasingly difficult to breath comfortably without disturbing the cracked rib. His whole being ached for sleep, but he knew he wouldn't allow himself that luxury. Not until 7.00am tomorrow morning. Again, he looked at his watch. 8.20pm. Time was running out and as the night wore on, he knew they'd find clues harder to come by.

'Burritos' he suddenly said loudly, the thought coming from nowhere. Hutch, I've gotta have a last burrito. A beef one, with all the trimmings. Can we stop at Joey's on the way to the Pits?'

Hutch looked askance at his partner.

'I would only have believed it of you Starsk' he said with wonder in his voice. 'Only you would think of junk food at a time like this!'

The brunette put a wounded look on his face. 'Hey, humour me. Consider it a condemned man's last meal huh?'

The blond snorted. 'Ya know, most condemned men go for the most expensive things they can think of. Ya know? Caviar, champagne, strawberries and cream. Nah, not you. Burritos and a root beer!

'Hey, watch it! You sayin' I'm cheap?' Starsky protested as they came to Joey's roadside stall.

'No Starsk, I'm sayin' you'd never get a job with the Good Restaurant Guide. Just..........go an' enjoy'.

The brunette got out and leaned through the window. 'Ya want anything Blintz?'

'No thanks. No salmonella burgers for me. I'd like to live to see tomorrow' the blond said without thinking. Seeing the fleeting look on his partner's face he could have shot himself. 'Sorry Gordo' he said quietly.

Starsky sighed, but smiled as he walked away. He really didn't want his partner beating himself up over every little thing he said. 'So, just a burrito for one, Joey, with everythin'. To go'.

A moment later he was back in the car, food in hand and a root beer balanced precariously between his knees as Hutch set off again for the Pits. There was silence for a few minutes as Starsky demolished the burrito, then sipped at the cool soda. Hutch tried not to notice the twitches of his partner's hand as he applied the breaks too savagely, or steered too slowly round a corner. He knew Starsky hated him driving the striped tomato — their driving styles were totally different - , but didn't want to criticise and cause an argument.
Five minutes later they pulled up outside the Pits, the bar just beginning to get busy.

Hutch got out of the car, expecting his partner to follow and looked around in surprise when he didn't. Starsky was still sitting in the front seat looking uncomfortable.

'There's too many people in there' he said simply. 'I know the C4 is safe an' I know Tom said ya could even shoot it an' it wouldn't go off, but If anything went wrong, or if there was a spark or anything............'

Hutch held up his hand, knowing Starsky would always consider everyone else's safety before his own.

'I'll get Huggy out here. Don't go away' he said lightly, and disappeared into the bar.

Starsky sat outside, the first time he had been alone since Hutch had found him this morning. God, was it only this morning? It felt like a lifetime ago. Like all his life experiences had been crammed into one measly twelve hour period.

He'd tried so hard not to think of actually dying. Logically he knew it would at least be quick and he would probably know nothing about the actual explosion. But the time leading up to seven tomorrow morning was another thing completely. He started mentally making a list of all the stuff he had to do before then, wishing for the first time ever that he carried a notebook and pen, realising now that every second counted and that he didn't want to miss a single thing. Crap, why was time suddenly so short?

As Starsky gazed at the door to the bar, he saw Hutch and the lanky barman exit and come over to the car. He hiked over to the middle of the seat so that Huggy could get in, and Hutch got in the drivers side door. They sat squashed together as Huggy gave the brunette the once over.

'Blondie here says you got uno problemo, man' the black man started.

Starsky parted his shirt showing Huggy part of his chest and the harness that surrounded it. He kept his eyes lowered, not wanting to see the look of horror in his friend's eyes. Huggy gave a low whistle.

'Now that is one problem!' he said with awe. 'So what can I do for ya?'

'What do you know about a company called DeMaine Investments? They're apparently into clothing, electricals and computers' Starsky started. 'Just need to know if they're straight, or if here's somethin' that can help with all this. Some flake called Grice did this, coz his daughter's been kidnapped. This is his warped way of encouraging us to find her. We think DeMaine may have somethin' to do with it'.

Huggy pursed his lips, then nodded. 'Word on the street is that this dude DeMaine is into sweat shops and illegal immigrants. He's been employing Chinese workers for months now, but he gets 'em direct from China. They pay to come over here — they're desperate to escape the regime over there - , get a green card and work. He takes their money'.

'The Snakehead is this guy called DeMaine — no first name. He collects the equivalent of $50,000 from each immigrant he takes, gets them work and a place to stay. The transporters who are a bunch of faceless hard hearted dudes take these Chinese from mainland China back to the USA, they pay the fees to Grice who launders the money, then pays it on to DeMaine'.

'So Grice is kind of a go-between for DeMaine and the people who bring the immigrants here. So why the problem with Grice and DeMaine?' Hutch asked, trying to get his head round the convoluted turn of events.

'Another rumour on the street, my friends, is that Grice is owing DeMaine about $3M in laundered money. DeMaine can't call the cops for obvious reasons. Same goes for why Grice couldn't come to you direct about the kidnapping. Well, not in an official capacity' he added with a smile. 'But he certainly seems to have a
way of grabbing your attention'.

Starsky nodded slowly. 'Well, looks like we're on the right rack then, we just need to find this DeMaine to see if and where he's holding Emma Grice, in the next.....nine and a half hours'.

'Hey man I don't know anything about this Emma, but I'll keep my ears to the ground. If I hear a rumble of anything else, I'll be back at ya. You gonna be OK man. Be safe, Starsky', the black man patted the brunette's arm.

Starsky smiled back, tightly, wondering if this was going to be the last time he'd see his friend. 'Thanks Hug.....for everythin. You been a real pal ya know'.

The black man looked sharply at the curly haired detective.

'Hey, that sounds too much like a final goodbye to me. Where'd that come from?'

'Just being realistic, ya know, not too much time left here' Starsky said, shyly. 'I mean it Hug. You've been a good friend. Your beer is warm and your bar needs demolishin', but you've always come through. Thanks'.

Huggy turned away, not wanting the brunette to see the defeated look in his eyes. 'See you soon, Starsky. Hear me?' He walked back inside without a backwards glance.

Chapter 9

The two detectives found themselves alone again in the alleyway leading to the Pits. Sitting in the car in the dark, with the only illumination coming from the neon sign outside the Pits, Hutch couldn't really see the colour of his partner's skin to gauge how he was faring. But if Starsky felt anything like he did, they both needed a drink, a meal and some strong pain meds. Hutch's head was aching so violently he thought it would fall from his shoulders. He felt like there was a steel belt around his forehead, and he eased his head back, trying to iron out the crick he had in his neck from the tension he'd been feeling. His shoulders burned with a tense fire and he realised he'd had them hunched over. He made a conscious effort to relax them, knowing the tension was bound to get a lot worse as the night wore on.

'We need to get back to the Metro, buddy' the blond said quietly, seeing his partner's pained movements. 'You can get some plaster to put under the harness and some more pain killers and we can both get some coffee. Once we regroup and get Dobey and the other guys workin' on this too, we'll get things moving'. He smiled encouragingly.

Starsky was too tired at that moment for any kind of retort. For just a little while he wanted to stop thinking and let the big comforting blond look after things. Things were all happening too fast, but at the same time not fast enough. He wanted everything to snap into place now, so that he could finally relax, but when he thought of everything that still had to be done to try to find DeMaine, and then Emma, he realised it would take a miracle to be done in time.

Hutch started the big car up again and drove it down the familiar roads to Police Headquarters, the bright city lights soothing the brunette as they blurred one into the other as Starsky's eyes refused to focus on any one thing. Even the traffic lights looked pretty. He couldn't help noticing things as if he was seeing them for the first time. Little things that he'd missed before. A sign in a shop window advertising the explosive whitening power of washing powder.

'Do you know how many times we use that word "explosive" Blintz? I never realised till now. Explosive whitening power; an explosive sprint; an explosion of colour. They've no fuckin' idea what explosive really means' he said bitterly, but without a trace of melancholy. For the first time he lashed out, slamming his
hand into the dashboard violently, letting out some of the pent up emotion that had been brewing over the hours. 'They've just no fucking idea' he repeated quietly.

Hutch had no words. Nothing he could say at that particular moment would be adequate in helping the brunette out of this miserable situation. So he sat quietly and drove, hoping his friend could feel the vibes in the car, willing the smaller man into a calmer headspace.

Pulling the car up in its customary parking spot right outside the entrance, both men got wearily out and forced themselves up the steps and inside. Their progress now was a far cry from the headlong flight the flaxen haired detective had made only half a day ago, the contrast being most marked in that for one of the first times ever, they took the elevator to the first floor, such was their complete exhaustion.

They made their way along to the squad room, the building being fairly quiet at that time of evening. Most detectives were either finished for the day or out and about the streets, having started their night shifts.

Hutch pushed the swing doors to their room open and held them as Starsky followed, making his way to his familiar chair in the corner. He almost smiled as he sat down. This was familiar. It was ordinary and he could almost imagine for a moment that all this craziness was a nightmare. Shit, he thought. It's like a bad story written by some feverish demented author. Could it get much worse? His mind was drawn inexorably back to the last time he'd had to count down the hours, when that poison crud had been coursing through his rapidly weakening body. He knew at the end that he'd been so weak and sick he hadn't really known what was going on. When he'd shot Bellamy on that rooftop, he'd aimed the gun with eyes that danced across his line of site like a tap dancer. As Hutch caught him, his last really conscious thought had been that he was glad he'd saved his partner's life.

He remembered little things about the final time in the ER when he got there, but nothing of the journey in the ambulance. Little things stood out for him. The colour of his nurses eyes, a dirty stain on the ceiling of the ER. He'd been well, truly and mercifully out of it towards the end of the 24 hours, and didn't actually remember anything of the final drama. The last 45 minutes or so, he had been as near unconscious as makes a damn, boomeranging between darkness and light, but with no control over events at all. The next thing he remembered was waking up with the Blintz at his bedside and wondering why the blond was there when he, Starsky was dead.

This was different. He would remember every single second up to the final detonation. Now wasn't that special? He propped his head on his hands and closed his eyes for a moment as if to block out the horrific thought. A hand appeared on his shoulder and his Captain was there handing him a cup of coffee and three aspirin which he gulped down, anxious for their effects to take hold of him.

Hutch came back into the room with gauze pads and tape from the first aid box. There being no one else in the room to startle by the contraption he was wearing, Starsky took his shirt off and sat patiently staring into space as the blond ministered to his blisters and red raw skin under the harness, padding the worst areas and making the assemblage a little more tolerable. Hutch was reminded of a little boy who sits on the counter top as his mother puts a band aid on his scraped knee — Starsky sat still, taking no notice of proceedings, not even wincing when the blond hit particularly sensitive areas. Hutch wanted to hold his partner and rock him, telling him everything would be OK and that he'd make everything better. But truthfully, he was beginning to wonder if this was a situation they would really win. Time was running out, although he knew that he would move heaven and earth until the final second to save the man who was closer than a brother to him.

He finished with the first aid stuff and swiped the detritus from his ministrations into the bin under the desk. Claiming his own cup of coffee, he came to sit opposite the brunette at his own side of their desk, calmly looking into the stormy blue eyes of his partner.
'How ya holdin up there, Gordo?' her asked gently.

'Feels better' Starsky responded, wiggling his shoulder a little and acknowledging the gauze padding worked at alleviating the chafing.

'Not what I mean' Hutch pushed, wanting to ease the brunette's mental suffering as easily as he'd taped his physical injuries.

Starsky sighed, lowering his eyes so his partner couldn't see the look of terror and defeat in them. 'I feel tired' he said simply.

Hutch nodded, knowing that feeling intimately.

'I feel like I'm disappearing down into some dark hole an' I can't find my way out. An' what scares me more 'n' anythin' is that I'm dragging you in with me' he locked eyes with Hutch for the first time in ages. Hot, passionate and scared indigo was soothed by the cool ice blue in his partners look, pouring cooling comfort over the brunette. He breathed a little easier and continued.

'Ya remember that time in the alley, after we'd seen that porn studio? I said the optimist said the glass was half full and the pessimist said it was half empty. Well, I feel like its getting to the quarter full stage pretty quickly here, buddy. We got so far to go an' not enough fuckin' time to get there'.

Hutch stood and came round the table to the smaller man sitting stoically upright in the chair. Uncaring of who saw them, or what they may think, he put both arms round the brunette's shoulders and planted a kiss on top of the chocolate curls.

'I'm here for ya, buddy' he said. 'no matter what happens, I'm here for ya'.

The two men remained locked in the hug for another second, and pulled away only as Dobey came out of his office.

'Hutch, a minute?' he said indicating the inside of his office. Hutch reluctantly left his partner and followed the black man, closing the door as indicated behind him.

'Hutch, a minute?' he said indicating the inside of his office. Hutch reluctantly left his partner and followed the black man, closing the door as indicated behind him.

'How's he holding up?' he asked the blond.

Hutch shrugged. 'How d'ya think? He's walked round for the past 14 hours encrusted in C4 explosive with no clear way out of this mess. A lesser man would have gone stark raving mad by now! He's tired, he's got more cuts and bruises on him than I've seen in a long time, and he has to live with knowing he's gonna blow up at 7.00am tomorrow morning. How would you feel, huh?'

The Captain's sympathetic expression said it all. Although never a demonstrative man, Dobey's men knew he cared for them all deeply. But he reserved a soft spot for these two men. They'd seen so much in their relatively young lives, but were the very essence of what a good cop should be — brave, compassionate and feisty.

'Ya found anything else about DeMaine Investments yet?' Dobey asked.

'Well, they're into employing illegal Chinese Immigrants in a big way. DeMaine is the Snakehead. He employs and houses them and Grice launders the money taken from the transporters. Grice owes DeMaine $3M and it seems DeMaine has Grice's daughter until he coughs the money. We're just waiting for RandI to come up with some factories to visit, see if we can find DeMaine that way'.

'Well don't let me keep you' Dobey said tiredly. 'I'll have Ernie in RandI drop everything and concentrate on
this. Go see to your partner' he gruffed, not wanting the blond to see how affected he was by all this.

Hutch stood and left the office. Walking back into the squad room expecting to see his partner, he was faced with an empty room. His heart rate racked up a notch. Would Starsky just bolt now, even though there was still eight hours to go? Surely not. It wasn't the brunette's style to go out without a fight. Swiftly checking the corridor, he ran towards the elevator, hoping his partner hadn't just taken off, leaving him behind. As he reached the stairs, he saw the familiar mahogany curls bent over a big glass display table, showing a huge detailed map of Bay City. He was tracing a finger over the shoreline, looking at the beaches up at the north side of town, where the small dunes were.

Hutch walked slowly over to the brunette, who jumped a little as he said

'Starsk, what ya doin' buddy?'

'Just lookin' the dark haired detective said defensively, looking swiftly up from the map and turning away from it.

'You've seen it all before, Gordo, for the past seven years. What specifically were ya lookin' at?' he pushed.

Starsky sighed, a heart rending sound. Almost angrily he rounded on his partner.

'I'm tryin' to find the least populated bit of the city, coz that's where I'm gonna aim to be at 7.00am tomorrow. And just in case ya missed the last count, that's eight hours and a whole ten minutes from now, Blintz'.

Chapter 10

'Starsk, we'll find Emma. I know we will' Hutch put his arm up to put round his partner's shoulder, but the anger that Starsky had been shoving deep inside him all these hours just had to find a way out. He pushed the arm away bitterly and stood in the middle of the corridor, panting slightly as if he'd run a 100 metre dash.

'I can't do this any more' he yelled, pointing at his partner. 'I can't wander round like everythin' is gonna be OK, coz, ya know somethin? Its not. I'm done with bein' the hero. I'm done with always bein' the one who gets hurt and beaten. I'm done with spendin' more of my time in the ER than in my own home'.

'Oh, I hear 'em, the other guys. Jeez, he's so brave! Like I'm some kinda fuckin' saint. Well, I got news for 'em. I'm not a saint an' right at this moment I am so shit scared that there are no words to express it. So don't tell me its all gonna be alright. Let's just be realistic here shall we? At 7.00am tomorrow morning, you'll need a new partner, and there won't be enough pieces of David Starsky left to put in a matchbox. So, no funeral, no need to buy a coffin. How's that for cheap? How's that for realism huh?' The brunette sank to the ground exhausted by his outburst, suddenly just a puddle of detective on the floor of the Metro.

Hutch was stunned. Not that he hadn't expected something like this. What man wouldn't crack with the pressure they'd been under? But he was stunned at the venom Starsky had put into that speech. He was usually so laconic, his motto seeming to be why use 3 words when 1 will do. The words hit Hutch physically and he agreed with the sentiment of every single one of them. It did always seem to happen to the smaller man, and they had had cause to chuckle about it on more than one occasion — the Starsky luck. But this was no laughing matter. It was down to life or death, and how do you respond to a speech like that without sounding contrite or somehow diminishing the sentiment?

He did the only think he could think of. He walked over to the brunette and silently reached his hand down offering such support as the smaller man needed — a hand up now, a shoulder to hang on to later. Starsky
looked up at that hand, unsure for a moment and hesitantly took it, Hutch pulling him up into a bear hug that both men cherished for a moment. Eventually it was the brunette who pulled away first and locked eyes with his partner.

'Sorry Hutch' he said quietly. 'I shouldn't have said that. You've got enough to worry about without me goin' off the rails'. He turned his back ruffling his hand through his curly hair and walked back to the squad room as Hutch silently followed.

As both men entered, the telephone on Hutch's desk was ringing. He trotted over and punched the line button. 'Hutchinson'.

The blond listened a moment, then said 'Thanks Ernie, we're on our way. Anything else, patch it through to Zebra three. We owe you'.

Nodding for his partner to follow he made for the door. 'Ernie has the address of one of DeMaine's sweat shops down town. Ya comin?'

They covered the distance to the factory in the old quarter of the city in record time, light flashing and siren blaring for most of the way. But Starsky, who was back driving the Torino again, killed the siren before they reached the back street, the mars light lending a ghostly red air to the dingy alleyway.

There was no sign proclaiming DeMaine Clothing Industries on the door to the factory and the door and the wooden steps leading up to it were devoid of any paint or varnish. It was a mean little entrance which held the promise of more meanness inside. Both men got cautiously out of the car and made their way over to the steps. Starsky made sure there was a fresh clip in his Beretta and Hutch checked the rounds in his big Colt, but neither man drew their weapons. They were there just in case, their heavy metal presence affording some measure of reassurance.

Hutch got to the top of the wooden steps first and cracked the door open slightly, peering around the corner. Seeing a spartan corridor of sorts, he opened the door all the way and both men entered. The corridor had bare dusty floor boards and doors off to right and left. Starsky tried the first door and, finding it open, went in.

The room was about 15' square. Again, there was no carpet or any other covering on the floor boards and there was just one small window in the room. It was covered by a spare bedsheet hung from a sagging piece of wire across the window frame. The floor was covered in stained and lumpy mattresses with hardly room to put a foot between them. Some had the rudiments of bedclothes on them, some had sleeping bags and some were covered only by outdoor coats. There must have been eight or nine mattresses in the room all crammed together, and from the smell of sweat and body odour which pervaded the area, it seemed obvious that the small window did not open. A single naked light bulb hung from the stained ceiling giving the room a stark air, devoid of any creature comfort.

Across the hall, Hutch tried the opposite door, flicking on the light switch. The mirror image of the previous room greeted him, again with the mattresses on the floor and the small window. The room was equally airless. Starsky walked a little way into the room, looking around in disbelief.

'How can anyone live like this?' he asked incredulously. 'It's inhuman!' He was about to walk away when he heard a small noise from the corner. Looking closer he realised that the thing he had taken to be a pile of rags thrown in the corner was, in fact, a small child of perhaps nine or ten. The tiny girl was pixie thin, with a sweet round face, almond eyes and black bangs hanging down the sides of her face. She peered shyly at the brunette from behind her hands, still with her back to the wall. Starsky stared back, forcing a comforting
smile onto his face, although he was still disgusted that any human being could be forced to live in such a way.

'Hiya' he said, quietly, hunkering down till he was at the child's level. She hid her face in her hands again, but he heard a faint giggle. He tried again.

'Hey there. What ya called? I'm Dave' he said, smiling a broader Starsky smile.

The little girl dropped her hands and returned his smile with one of her own, her pretty little face lighting up, the smile playing in her eyes as well. She giggled again, a girly sound incongruous in the shabby surroundings. At Starsky's beckoning, she moved quietly over to the brunette and stared earnestly into his indigo blue eyes. As he winked at her, she reached a tiny hand up and smoothed her fingers gently across the cut on his forehead, her head on one side.

'Oh, yeah, I hurt myself' Starsky said quietly, entranced with this tiny creature, sinking into her large brown eyes. Those eyes strayed towards the brunette's chest and her small brow knitted together as she caught sight of the white dressing peeking out from the open neck of his shirt. Once again, she reached towards him, her fingers skimming the hairs on his chest, but this time, the curly haired man clutched her hands in his, terrified she would somehow hurt herself on the explosives. Her hands were cold and he felt her tremble slightly as he held her, but she didn't pull away from him. Instead, to his utter amazement, she leaned into him and rested her head against him, sighing deeply.

Starsky looked over her head to his blond partner, shrugging his shoulders.

'Looks like you've made a friend' Hutch said, squatting down next to the pair.

'What can I say' the brunette responded. 'I'm just a magnet for women!' he stood up, still holding the little girl's hand in his and together they crossed back to the doorway and back out into the corridor.

'Hey, Starsk' whispered the blond, 'Sorry buddy, but ya can't keep her', he nodded towards the tiny Chinese girl.

Starsky knelt down again, disengaging his hand. 'Sorry honey. I know ya go for the older man, but it'd never last' he said, still smiling. He was entranced with her. She smiled back at him as he stood back up and watched as both men made their way down the corridor, opening doors to either side and seeing rooms set up like the first two with mattresses and bedding everywhere. Altogether they counted over 50 beds in a space hardly bigger than an average American single storey home. The more they saw, the more incensed both became at the inhumanity these people were having to cope with.

At the end of the corridor, a slightly larger door opened into the factory and they were greeted by the sight of 50 or so Chinese men and women sitting behind sewing machines at 10.00 o'clock at night, sewing denim jeans as if their lives depended on it, piles of semi constructed garments lying in baskets and overflowing tables as seams were sewn and rivets punched into the fabric.

No one looked up as they entered the sweat shop, probably because over the noise of the machines and the loud music blaring from a cheap radio no one would be able to hear.

The two detectives stood at the top of the stairs leading down into the workroom and looked around for anyone who looked like they may be in charge. Eventually a small man with a work table nearest the door looked up from his sewing. Seeing the two white men in the room, he panicked and started gabbling something in a language the detectives took to be Mandarin. The little oriental was excited and was waving his arms about and shouting as they approached him.
Hutch shouted above the noise in the medium sized room. 'We're policemen' he flashed his shield, which the Chinese man seemed to recognise. 'Do you speak English?'

The little man nodded and motioned the blond to follow him out of the door and back into the corridor. Once there, and with the door closed behind him, they could hear better. Hutch tried again.

'Do you speak English?' he said slowly.

'A little' the Chinese man responded.

'Do you know a man called DeMaine? Is this his factory?'

'Mr DeMaine good man. He give job and bed' the little man said, bowing from his waist, bobbing his head up and down.

'Do you know where we can find him?'

The Chinese man shook his head. 'Mr DeMaine good man. He help us. You go now. I go back to work'. And with that, he bobbed his head once more and turned to go.

At that moment, the little girl ran back into the hallway and bounced along to where the three men were talking. She said something in Mandarin to the Chinese man, who answered shortly, then said something else. The little man's face became ugly as he shouted something at the little girl, and he pulled his hand back and struck her across her face, cannoning her into Starsky's leg, where she melted to the floor silent tears running down her face.

The brunette looked at the Chinese man as of he'd been hit himself, a look of such loathing on his face. Reaching down, he gently picked up the tiny body and handed her to Hutch as he rounded on the Chinese man.

'I don't know about China, but in America we do not beat little children' he spat, pointing his finger into the small man's face. 'Where's her Mother?'

'Mother dead. She here on her own' the little man said, obviously unaware he had done anything wrong.

The brunette looked at his partner questioningly as the little girl glanced between him and the big blond, her eyes still swimming in tears and a red welt appearing in her face.

'I can't leave her here, Hutch' Starsky pleaded, knowing Hutch felt the same. The child had such a way with her, Starsky couldn't bear the thought of her staying in this place all alone, with no comfort, no friends and no family to look after her. His heart had melted.

'Know what ya mean, buddy, but what we gonna do with her. In case you forgot, we got one or two problems of our own to deal with?'

As Starsky was about to answer, a little voice said 'I see Mr DeMaine come here before'.

Both men looked at her as the Chinese man shouted something at her again. She ducked her head against Hutch's shoulder, shutting the man's sight away as Hutch and his partner made the same decision silently. Turning their backs on the ranting oriental, they left, clutching the little precious bundle, keeping her out of harm's way. The clock on the wall as they passed read 10.42

Chapter 11
The interior of the car was quiet, the two men and the small child allowing tensed muscles to relax a moment, the two detectives wondering how this little mite was going to help them, and more to the point, how they were going to help her and what they were going to do with her.

She sat in-between the two men in the front seat, dwarfed by their big bodies, looking up from one to the other her little face alive to their concerns. She seemed so much older than her few years and her hand never left Starsky's.

'So what we gonna do with her?' Hutch asked as she turned her little face to him.

'I dunno, but there's no way I'm leaving her in there' his partner answered, still seething at the mistreatment the little girl had received. He gently ruffled her hair as she looked up at him.

'Ya got a name little lady?' he asked her.

Shyly she answered in a sweet voice heavy with her Chinese accent 'Mae Lin'.

'Well, Mae Lin, ya said you know Mr DeMaine. Can you tell us what he looks like and where he lives?'. The brunette didn't really expect any great detail. This was one very young girl and he was getting fast to the point of no return — too many hours having ticked by with no leads, but a lot of dead ends.

She seemed to ponder a moment. 'He is tall' she began, pointing to Hutch, the taller of the two men, 'like you, but hair is white. He is.....' she seemed lost for the word, but mimed something long and narrow with her hands.

'Thin?' Hutch said. 'He's tall and thin with white hair?'

She nodded enthusiastically.

'Do you mean very white, or pale and blond, like mine?' he pushed. Blond was one thing. There were hundreds of tall blond men in the area. Hell, it described about 50% of the population. But a man with white hair — well that was unusual and much easier to track down.

'Hair is white, like paper' Mae Lin confirmed, her little face screwed up in concentration.

'Do you know where he lives?' Starsky asked, hope hanging on every word.

She shook her head. 'He come to factory two time a day. He make people work hard. He bring in more people to work. But no room for them. Some work day and sleep night. Other people use same beds, but work night and sleep day'. She looked crestfallen that she couldn't give these two nice men an address.

'Thought it'd be too good to be true' the brunette said, looking at his watch 11.30pm. He sighed. 'So what ya want to do with her?' he asked softly, looking at the blond.

Mae Lin sensed she may be separated from her new friend and suddenly her grip on Starsky's hand became vice like.

Hutch saw the grab and smiled. 'I think we have two options. Juvy or your apartment, and I kinda know which you're gonna choose, and what she certainly would want' he smiled at the little girl. 'Do you want to come home with us?' She nodded enthusiastically.

As Starsky disengaged his hand to start the car, Hutch put a call through to Dobey, not surprised for one moment that the big man was still working. When one of his men was in trouble, Edith never saw her husband. Dobey put in more hours than any of his detectives and wouldn't rest until this whole situation was
resolved one way or the other.

Having been patched through, Hutch spoke into the mic. 'Captain? Hutch. We found DeMaine's warehouse. You've never seen anything like it. The squalid way those immigrants have to live. I wouldn't put a dog through that. We met a guy there who seemed to be DeMaine's number one fan. Wouldn't give us zip. But we've got our own little snitch!' he smiled down at Mae Lin, now cuddled up to Starsky's brown leather jacket, his arm protectively round her as he drove.

'DeMaine is tall — about 6'2" with white hair. Can you get an APB out on him? We're going back to Starsky's, but we could do with you or Edith coming over here. We've inherited a little girl'.

Starsky could hear his captain over the air. 'What d'ya mean a little girl? What you two playin' at?'

But the brunette knew they had him snagged. Where children were concerned, Dobey was a champion and he'd come through. There was a pause.

'We'll meet you at Starsky's in an hour' and the mic. went dead.

Hutch put it back on its cradle and sat back, running his fingers over his lower lip, wondering where this was going to get them. This was such an unnecessary diversion. He was glad they'd rescued the little girl from the horrendous conditions she'd had to live in and in truth would never have left her there. But the timing was crap and this wasn't solving their ever more pressing problem. He glanced sideways at his partner, watching the handsome face concentrating on the road, one arm round the little body huddled against him and panic clutched at his guts for the first time. They were running out of time and the only good thing from this was that Starsky had something else to think about for an hour or so.

The car drew up outside the familiar apartment and Starsky gently nudged the little form at his side. Mae Lin had dropped into a peaceful sleep in the warm car and her eyes opened just a little as Hutch gently picked her up and carried her inside, following the brunette. He laid her down on the settee where she snuggled into the bright red throw and fell back to sleep.

Starsky was in the kitchen uncapping the bottles of beer he'd retrieved from the fridge. He stooped a little as he leaned against the counter top, one ankle crossed over the other, the weight of the explosives playing heavily on his body now. His face was a grey mask of exhaustion, the usually unruly mahogany curls laying a little flatter against his head, the fire dimming in his indigo eyes.

Hutch walked over and took the proffered beer. 'How ya doin, partner?'

Starsky seemed calm. A little too calm for Hutch's taste, but if it helped the brunette, he'd run with it for a while.

The shoulders shrugged, followed by a wince as the action caused pain to shoot across the blistered and bruised skin. 'I think I'm OK. We got a lead on DeMaine, an' we managed to look after her' he nodded at Mae Lin, still sleeping on his settee. 'If we get a call telling us where to find him, we can go, beat the crap out of him, find Emma, and we're home dry'. He said it like it was a given, like he'd convinced himself that that was what was going to happen.

Hutch nodded, he hoped convincingly. 'Yeah, it's our best lead so far, so we can deal, get this shit off you, then what say you to a nice little Italian?'

The brunette's eyes narrowed. 'Well ya know what happened last time we went to an Italian an' I've had enough drama for a while'.

'OK, so scrambled eggs and toast. No problem, but you buy the beer' his partner responded, glad of a bit of
light hearted banter. 'You look all in. Do you want to rest?' he asked gently, already knowing the answer.

'No, enough time for that later' Starsky gave his lop sided smile. 'We'll wait till Dobey gets here, and then maybe check out Huggy. He might know where DeMaine's holed up'.

Hutch nodded, taking a final swig from his beer and placing the bottle by the sink. 'I'll go put in a call to him now, forewarn him. He can maybe do a bit of digging, ya know?' he left to go to the telephone and Starsky was once more on his own.

He did feel calm, although he couldn't for the life of him think why. Time was pressing on now with seven hours to go, all night time hours, all dark and all when most activities go quiet. He was getting into the mind set that said "well you've given it your best shot, but sometimes you have to start making other plans". Just what those other plans were he was unsure of. The list he'd made back in the alley way outside the Pits sprang back to his mind. What had he always wanted to do before he died? Well, sailing round the world was out, as was driving the Daytona 500. Having just one more round of great sex was a possibility, but way down on the list of priorities and short of a visit to Sweet Alice, there were few candidates at this time of night. He'd had his burrito, so that was one to cross off the list. The fact of it was, even though he was getting to want to shut down and forget, he just wanted to find DeMaine, Emma, Grice then go to bed for a week.

He heard Hutch put down the phone in the other room and walk back into the kitchen.

'Huggy says he'll meet us in the next hour. He's heard a rumour that a new guy in town, fitting DeMaine's description likes to get his kicks at that new porn place on the outskirts of town. 'Bound to Please'. The one that advertises all the kinky stuff. He's gonna make some calls and maybe have stuff for us when we get there. It's a lead, buddy. We gotta run with it'.

Hutch looked more cheerful than he had done for hours, so Starsky smiled encouragingly at him. They finished another beer as they sat in the lounge, Mae Lin still sleeping in between them. Within 20 minutes, there was a quiet knock at the door and Dobey and his wife walked in. Immediately Edith walked over to the settee and peered down at the sleeping child a soft expression in her big brown eyes.

'Ooh what a cutie' she whispered, mentally comparing the waif thin scrap against her own more robust daughter Rosie. 'She looks like she needs food and cuddles, and lots of them' she continued.

Dobey signalled for his men to follow him into the kitchen as his wife settled herself down to look over the child.

'So what's all this about then?' he asked, his tone commanding an answer right away.

Hutch spoke first, outlining what had gone on at DeMaine Investments and how the Chinese man there had beaten up on little Mae Lin. The black man had listened impassively until that point, but when the blond explained how the man had back handed the little girl, his fist balled and his jaw tightened.

'Well, you did the right thing getting' her out of there. Leave her with us now. You men get back out there' he said. 'You've both got enough on your plate. I'll leave Edith here with Mae Lin an' get back down to the Metro. Co-ordinate things from there'. The detectives nodded and made their way to the front door.

En route, Starsky bent over the little girl and whispered to her.

'Hey, Mae Lin'.

She opened sleepy eyes.
'This nice lady is gonna look after you for a little while. She's a friend and she'll make sure you're OK. We have to go out, but I'll come back, I promise'. He dropped a soft kiss on her brow as she smiled at him and closed her eyes, once again asleep. As Starsky read 12.15 on the clock on his way to the door, he knew he envied her peace and tranquillity.

Chapter 12

Back in the car, Starsky once again back driving, they made small talk on their way over to the Pits again.

'What did Huggy have to say about DeMaine then?' the brunette asked as he drove.

'Seems our friend has gotten himself a real bad reputation. He's only been in the Bay City area for a few months, but already he's got his feet nicely under the table. He started DeMaine Investments about five months ago. Started small — just one factory on the east side. They made high quality jeans for a well known designer to put her name on 'em. Gloria Vanderbilt or someone. Anyway, he used a lot of Chinese in his factory. These were people who no one had heard of here. Even though Bay City has its own Chinese community, they hadn't heard of any of those working for DeMaine. Turns out, they were the first shipment of immigrants he'd brought over. From then on, he opened another three factories. One made electrical equipment, and the other assembled computer components — it's a growing industry apparently. He always used the Chinese, and he always used people fresh from the ships. Brought 'em straight to his factories and didn't let 'em out of his sights. He doesn't pay 'em a wage as such. Just gives 'em spending money and pays for food and lodgings. Well, we've seen what he calls lodgings, so God knows what the food he gives 'em is like!'  

'The Chinese community here is up in arms about him. They feel the new immigrants are taking jobs from those who already live here. No question that they don't have work permits. Anyway, DeMaine found that his little industries were making him a few enemies, so he hired some body guards — the guys you met'.

'Well, they're professional, I'll give 'em that' Starsky said ruefully 'I never stood a chance when they came to get me. They came in real quiet, got me an' went out again. No stoppin' to trash the jint or anyhtin'. He turned the big car down the narrow alley back to the Pits and rubbing gently at his abraded skin.

Once again, the bartender was waiting outside for the detectives, mindful that the brunette would not want to go inside. As the car drew to a stop, he leaned in through the window, a big beaming smile cutting his face in two.

'See, told ya I'd see you again' he smiled at Starsky.

The brunette smiled back. 'Yeah, thanks for doing the grunt work, Hug. Ya got any idea where DeMaine is now?'

'Nada, sorry, but I have strong suspicions that he'll be visiting Bound to Please tonight some time'.

'Yeah? And where's those suspicions from?' the brunette asked, amusement in his eyes.

'From a pretty little masseuse I know. I gotta look after my bad back, ya know?' he responded, a mock hurt look on his face.

'Tell me' Hutch asked. 'Are there any Chinese girls at Bound to Please?'

'The hurt look deepened. 'What? I look like one o' them pervs Man? How should I know?'

'Well, if we see one who looks like she'd do your back good, well take her card' Starsky said as he turned the engine back on. 'See ya Hug and thanks again' As he looked in the rear view mirror, he saw Huggy staring at
the departing car.

Starsky followed the directions his partner gave him along the dark quiet roads through the centre of town and out on the road to the east side, the road getting narrower and the street lights spaced further apart as they got further out from the centre. The building changed too as they drove. The plush city buildings housing banks and corporate firms now gave way to diners, car repair garages and seedy motels, their neon lights half lit. The night was still warm and the two men still drove with the windows down, elbows resting on the rims of the windows, enjoying the cooler air.

Finally, the brunette pulled off the road onto a gravelled lot outside a long low building. The sign at the front of it read "Gentlemen Welcome — entrance at rear". Starsky smirked at the innuendo.

'Well, is that an invitation or instructions for use?' he asked casually.

'Who knows with an outfit like this' his partner agreed, easing himself out of the car and following the brunette to the back of the building. There another sign, smaller and more discrete said 'Bound To Please' with a neon arrow pointing down some steps, as if to go underground.

Following the directions, the two men stepped down and as Starsky looked around, Hutch turned the handle on the door. Opening it, they both went into the dimly lit interior, their eyes taking in the sight before them.

Hung around the dark red painted walls were large glossy framed pictures of beautiful women dressed in various leather outfits, most of them not designed for the sole purpose of keeping their wearers warm. Each woman had on leather collars around their necks and leather cuffs at wrists and ankles, and each posed in sultry fashion for the camera, lips pouting and lids half down over "come to bed" eyes.

In the corner of the foyer, there was a red velvet covered desk, behind which sat a leather clad woman, illuminated only by the desk lamp at her side. She wore a leather bra and leather hipster shorts, connected to the collar front and rear by leather straps which ran down between her breasts at the front and down her spine at the back. Decorated as in the pictures by her own collar and cuffs, she stood as the two men entered and asked huskily

'Good evening Gentlemen. How can we be of service this evening?'

Hutch swallowed hard. 'Erm, could we see the manager?' he stuttered.

'I'm sorry Sir, Madam does not see clients on their first visit. But I'm sure we have a girl who would suit your tastes just as well, if you would care to peruse our brochure?'

'What? No, no, I don't think you understand' the blond said, colouring slightly. He fished his shield from his back pocket. 'We need to see the Manager......Madam.......whoever's in charge'.

Starsky looked on in amusement. This situation was almost worth it to see his partner in such a state. He sauntered over from where he'd been leaning casually against the wall.

'What? You got somethin' against the other girls?' he asked semi serious. 'At least take a look at their brochure!' he reached out and took the one proffered by the receptionist, smiling at her. She smiled back, still eyeing the cops shield.

'I'm sorry officer' she said, suddenly flustered. 'I'll inform Madam you're here'. She rushed from the foyer as the brunette settled himself against the wall again and started flicking through the pages.

'Hey Hutch, some of these girls are gorgeous! Look at this one — Lola. It says she 5'10", blond and can........with a...........Jeez!' he stared open mouthed. 'Is that even anatomically possible?'
Hutch was examining the other decorations on the walls. Bullwhips, floggers and paddles, handcuffs and a few things he's rather not know the use for all added to the flavour of the place. Most definitely not for the faint hearted, he thought, just as the receptionist came back into the room with an older lady following.

This woman was taller, statuesque, perhaps 6'. Tall enough that both detectives could look her straight in the eye. She looked to be around 50, but very well preserved. She had long black hair, pulled very high in a long pony tail at the top of her head. Her entire body was enclosed in a form fitting black leather corset and trousers and she gazed at both men with a haughty air, demanding respect.

'Good evening gentlemen' she said in a deep, sultry voce. 'Tamara says that you are police officers. Am I to be closed down?' she said it in such a way that she defied them to try.

'No Ma'am' Starsky clarified. 'We just want to ask you about one of your clients — a Mr DeMaine?'

She blanched — an incongruous reaction in one who looked as if she sucked men in a spat the out for breakfast.

'Our client list is confidential, gentlemen' she hedged. 'I'm sure you understand the reasons why?'

'We could come back with a warrant' Hutch tried, 'But we wouldn't want that, would we? You'd have to go through all the procedures, and you'd loose your client's trust, and you'd be out of business before you knew it. Just tell us about DeMaine, and we can all go away happy'. He smiled his most winning smile.

The Madam considered a moment, seeming to weigh the possibilities in her head before coming to her decision.

'Mr DeMaine is not here tonight, neither is he expected. His favourite girl is resting. He visited her last night and is not expected again until weekend. Now, will you please leave?' It was a command rather than a request and accompanied it with an imperious wave towards the door with a perfectly manicured, red nailed hand.

There was a moment of defiance in Starsky's eyes. 'Bet you could whip us up a client list' he said winking at her, trying to get some response. She ignored him, turned her back and left the room.

'Terrific' Starsky said, as they made for the door, neither thinking for more than one minute to disobey the dominatrix. The Madam left the foyer back into the interior of her domain, but as the two detectives were about to leave, the young receptionist ran over to them and hurriedly and softly said 'If Mr DeMaine comes back in, I could let you know'. She looked around her as if terrified someone would find out she was talking to them.

Quickly, Hutch took out his notebook and scribbled down the Metro's number and the number of Starsky's apartment, handing the paper to her quickly.

Starsky threw caution to the wind, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her deep on the lips. 'Thanks honey. If I said it was a matter of life and death, would it sound corny?'

The receptionist was no stranger to handsome men, but the brunette's deep blue eyes pulled her in. She put her arms round the brunette to return the kiss and her hands found the harness under his shirt. She traced it's outline over the top of the thin denim material. Looking from one man to the other a look of understanding appeared on her pretty face. 'Oh, are you into the scene?' she asked, hands tracing the leather and metal harness along the shoulders and across the brunette's flat stomach. The hand tickled and made the muscles there jump reflexively.

She looked back to Starsky, seeking clarification. 'Is he your Top? Sorry, will he allow you to answer?'
The brunette was stunned, at first not understanding her meaning. Then it was his turn to colour up.

Stammering his response, he backed out of the club, following his partner up the steps at something more like a run than a dignified walk.

Chapter 13

'Did you hear that? She thought you and i.........' Starsky's words tailed off, for once the brunette being lost for what to say. They were driving back along the road, still reeling at the powerful hold the dominatrix had over them.

Hutch's face had returned to normal colour now and he could at last see the funny side of the situation. 'Well wrapped up in all that leather 'n' stuff it's a natural assumption, but I think for most BDSM fans the C4 is optional'.

The mention of the explosive set both men to thinking again and both heart rates hiked up another notch. Hutch saw Starsky's jaw tighten, although the brunette refused to voice his concerns any more. He knew Hutch was hurting enough as it was and didn't want to add to the blonde's burden. Time was still running and the lead they thought they'd had at Bound to Please had turned up nothing. Damn!

'What now?' Hutch asked, staring ahead, not wanting to see the expression on his partner's face, knowing it cost the smaller man dearly to remain as positive as he was.

'I dunno' the brunette responded, sounding a little forlorn. He looked at his watch. 'Its 1.25. Times running out fast'. He raised his eyebrows at his flaxen haired friend. 'I got five and a half hours until......What do you.........' his words were cut off by the dispatcher's voice at the Metro.

'Zebra three, zebra three, see the woman called Tamara at the corner of Mayflower and 6th'.

Hutch grasped the mic. as if it would save his life 'Hey Mildred, Did you say Tamara?'

'Hi Hutch honey' Mildred's voice responded. 'you still cruising with that handsome hunk? Yeah, that's the name I got. Tamara. She sounded a little panicked, so get there quick huh? And watch yourselves. Dispatch out'. There was a click and the two detectives were left in silence.

'Tamara was the name of that receptionist at Bound to Please wasn't it?' Hutch asked. 'Wonder what she's got for us. She seemed not to be the talkative type before when we saw her. We only just left'.

'Don't think talkin's her forte, Blintz' Starsky said with a sly smile.

He did a U turn in the road and sped off back the way they had just come, anxious now to follow up on anything anyone could tell them. He pushed the gas, flooring the engine, but didn't use the lights or sirens. No use in warning anyone else they were on their way. The powerful headlights lit a broad beam along the roadway, highlighting the slight rises and dips in the road, making the rises bright with reflections and the dips black as ink, leading them back to what? A clue? A lead? At this point in proceedings anything was worth chasing up. Anything at all.

As they got to the corner of Mayflower and 6th, both men looked around and saw a small woman cowering in the shadows by a gas station sign. As they drew up and got out of the car, she darted over to them, looking left and right to see if she was being watched. She was unrecognisable from the leather clad siren they'd seen earlier, now wearing more conventional jeans and tee shirt.

They got out of the car and walked calmly over to her. It was indeed the receptionist from Bound to Please and she cast worried looks over her shoulder as she came towards them as if expecting the Madam to be
following her every move. They ushered her back to the car and she sat in the middle of the front seat as they sat one each side.

'Thank you for coming back' she said, in that same husky, throaty voice. 'When you came this evening asking for Mr DeMaine I wanted to speak to you then, but Madam would have......Well, she would not have been happy. He financed her business and even supplied some of the girls. She said Mr DeMaine had already been to work'?

Starsky chuckled a little at the thought of that place being referred to as work, but acknowledged with a nod.

Tamara went on. 'The favourite he spoke of is Chinese Girl called Zhao Qing. Most men who like the BDSM scene like to be the masochist — the one who gets tied and thrashed. But Mr DeMaine enjoys the other side of the scene. He always sees Zhao but she was so badly beaten last night that she couldn't stand unaided today. I'm really worried for her. So when you two came by, I thought you may be able to help. And she might be willing to help you with information'.

Hutch's hands were balled into fists as he listened to the tale. The one thing he hated more than anything was women and children, or anyone disadvantaged being made prey to unscrupulous men. His blood boiled at the thought of anyone being beaten so badly that they couldn't stand and he wanted to find DeMaine more than ever now that he'd been told of Zhao Qing.

'Why doesn't she just leave?' he asked, incredulous that any living being would want to hang around for more of the same mistreatment.

'Because DeMaine owns her' Tamara explained, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. 'He brought her over from China and now she is his property. In the BDSM world that means he has all rights over her. He can dictate what she eats and drinks, what she wears or not, as the case may be. When and how they have sex and even whether she can use the bathroom or not. It's a real contract. He's bought her body in exchange for her being able to go on living in America'.

Starsky couldn't believe his ears. Sure, he'd seen the kinky aspect of the trade. Janos Martini had been into it in a big way when Starsky had busted him a couple of years back. But this? This was something else. That one person could buy and own another was unspeakable.

'Where is she now?' he asked, trying to keep the anger from his voice.

'I told her to wait at the club and I would bring you if you would help. Will you? She asked although seeing the expressions on the two men's faces, she wasn't really in any doubt.

Starsky started the engine of the car and was putting into drive before she'd finished her sentence. They arrived at Bound to Please minutes later and came to a silent stop on the parking lot. All three got out, their feet making faint scrunching noises on the gravel and Tamara lead the two detectives around to a side entrance, dimly lit and locked. Using her key pass she opened the door and looked to make sure there was no one to see them enter. She motioned them in with a wave of her hand. They walked quietly behind her down a hallway with numbered doors either side. Tamara stop ped at one about half way down the hall and knocked four times quietly on the door. It opened a little and Hutch caught sight of a small delicate woman inside the room. They were invited in.

The room was small, with a tiny bunk, a wash hand basin and mirror and very little else. The occupant had made some attempt to bring colour to the dreary white walls by pinning up a Chinese shawl in red silk with a dragon embroidered in gold across it. A stand containing jos sticks smouldered in a corner, throwing off a heady aroma of sandalwood and patchouli. It was crowded with four people in the tiny room and Hutch waited for the two women to sit down on the bed. Tamara perched on the side of the bunk, hands in her lap,
but as the Chinese woman bent to sit down, her face wrinkled into a grimace and she gave a little gasp.

'What's wrong with her? Is she sick?' Starsky asked, his voice low with concern.

Tamara shook her head. 'You remember I said DeMaine visited the other night? He whipped her, then used a cane. She's sore'. Tamara put her hand on her friend's arm. 'Show them honey, then they'll know'.

The Chinese woman slowly rose and turned. With no hint of embarrassment, she slid her robe off her slim shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Both men gasped. Zhao's buttocks thighs and lower back were criss crossed with raised red welts, some bruising, others still bleeding where the terrible punishment had broken the skin. The skin around her wrists and ankles was red and sore looking too and it was evident she'd been restrained whilst DeMaine enjoyed his little perversions.

Very gently Starsky bent and picked up the light silk robe and put it round the woman's shoulders again, covering her nakedness. She looked into his eyes and bobbed her head in thanks as she pulled it around her, acknowledging that these men were not her usual visitors. That they looked as though they could and would help her.

'Did DeMaine do this to you?' Starsky asked softly.

She nodded, her eyes downcast, as if looking a man in the eyes was taboo.

'Has he done it before?'

'Many times' she said sadly. 'He come here and make me.......' her words tailed off. 'I was teacher in China. Not this' she waived her hand bitterly around her.

'How long have you been here? Haven't you got family?' the brunette pushed.

'I came to find work. I saved for the fee the men wanted for the ship. My parent help me with their savings. I come to America because I hear there is freedom and chance to make my life better. But DeMaine, he see me and bring me here. A year ago'. A single tear rolled down her cheek unchecked. Her face was small and oval shaped, her eyes dark brown almonds set in pale yellow toned perfect skin accentuated by her waist length black hair, pulled casually back into a loose pony tail at the nape of her neck. She was very beautiful in an exotic foreign way and both detectives could understand why DeMaine would want to associate himself with her, although owning her was a different matter completely.

'Do you know where we can find DeMaine now?' Starsky asked hope surging through his veins like quicksilver. He knew his life depended on the answer she gave and willed her to give them a scrap of information they could work with.

But she shook her head. 'He come two nights ago. He not come back yet. Please help me. I must escape'.

Hutch could see the look of sheer despondency and desperation in his partner's face. So near and yet so far.

'Have you anywhere to go?' Hutch asked

'No. I have no one here. I gave everything up when I leave China — my work, my parent. I was......how you say?......independant at home. I earn money, but I was not happy. Too much rules, too much men in charge. I came here with hope in my heart and I bring with me my child but now I think is dead. I have not seen her since we came to America and left the boat. I am alone'.

A bell rang in Hutch's head. The mention of a child, and the fact that a club like this was no place for a child to be — it would cramp the Madam's style to have a child in the place. Could it be? No, surely that
was too much of a coincidence. And yet, he had to ask.

'Your child. Was it a little girl or a boy?'

A look of love lit Zhao's eyes as she remembered. 'A little girl. She would have been nine now. She was so beautiful. I wanted her to grow up with so many more....how do you say?......chances than I had. But I last see her on the boat. Then the men take me away. She shouted my name as I left, but I not see her again. I miss her so much'.

Very softly the blond asked 'What was she called?'

The air electrified as she whispered 'Mae Lin'.

Chapter 14

'I think you should sit down a moment Hutch said gently, and steered the young woman towards the bed. She perched on the edge of the mattress, her eyes still downcast, automatically doing as the man told her, like an automaton. The man commanded, so she obeyed.

'I think we know where your little girl is' the blond told her gently. 'I think we found her tonight at a factory down town. One owned my DeMaine. She's safe and a friend is looking after her'.

The young woman looked as though she had been shot through with a thousand volts of electricity, her eyes flew wide open and the colour drained from her face. In her amazement and against all her training she looked up into the blonde's ice blue eyes, trying to define whether this big man was telling her straight or whether this was just some other cruel joke.

'Mae Lin is alive?' she asked tremulously. 'She is well? I must see her'. She stood on legs that felt like jelly and pushed her way towards the door. Starsky caught her arm gently.

'We can't just run out there right now honey' he said. 'We got your Madam to consider. S'pose by now she's seen the car on the lot, and is wondering where her clients are'. He looked over at Hutch. 'How ya wanna play this one partner?' he asked.

The blond pondered. As he was about to reply, Tamara interrupted.

'You want a diversion? I can give you a diversion. I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm employed here not owned, but I've gotten sick of the way the others are treated. I've been wanting out for a while, so this is my excuse. I'll go see Madam and tell her I quit as of tonight. As soon as you hear the shouting, get Zhao out and don't stop, whatever happens'.

'That's mean, whatever happens?' the brunette asked, suspicious.

Tamara smiled back. 'D'you think Madam is going to want her receptionist quitting on her in the middle of the night? Its 2.40, Where's she going to get another fool to run the front desk coming up to her busiest time of night. She's been know to be a little "persuasive", but don't worry, I'll give as good as I take. Just make sure Zhao is OK, huh?'

Hutch reached over and kissed her a brotherly kiss on her cheek. 'Thanks, but will you be safe?' he asked.

The woman looked steadily back. 'I told you. Don't worry. I'll be fine. And you' se said, looking at Zhao, you go find your little girl and you look after her, hear me?' And with that, she put her arms round Zhao, hugging her close, stepped outside the room and closed the door behind her.
Quickly, Zhao took down the shawl from the wall and stuffed it into a small holdall along with some toiletries a brush and a picture of a little girl in a simple wooden frame. Within two minutes she stood ready, having put on some jeans and a sweater. A moment later there were sounds from a way off down the hallway. The sounds escalated into shouting and screaming. Starsky glanced over to his partner.

'Sounds like Tamara's broken the news. Time for us to go'. He picked up Zhao's bag and the blond opened the door a crack and peered into the corridor. There was no one there. The three made their way along the hallway and out of the door at the end into the parking lot. They ran to the car and as Starsky got in and started the engine, Hutch helped Zhao into the front seat. He couldn't help but wince as he heard the woman's gasp of pain, the sudden movements jolting her injured skin but she seemed almost oblivious to anything else but the prospect of being reunited with her daughter.

The wheels of the Torino spun against the loose gravel of the parking lot, loosing traction as the brunette urged the powerful V8 forward and with a spray of gravel they made the solid road surface and hurtled down the deserted road.

'God, I hope Tamara is OK' Hutch said as they drove back towards town. 'That Madam looked like she could do six rounds with Mohammed Ali and still come off better'.

'We can check tomo.........' Starsky's words tailed off as he continued more softly 'You could check tomorrow'.

Hutch's guts knotted at the simple message contained in that one sentence. You do it partner coz I'm not going to be around. He nodded his flaxen head.

'Sure, someone'll make sure she's OK' not committing himself to anyone in particular. Whilst there was time, there was always hope.

The journey back to Starsky's apartment took a little under 20 minutes and once back there, Hutch helped the small Chinese woman out of the car as the brunette detective walked up his familiar steps and opened the door. Edith was still there in the same position next to the tiny sleeping form on the settee. She'd covered Mae Lin with a comforter she'd found in one of Starsky's closets and was reading a magazine she'd found by the light of a small lamp on the table. The whole room was lit by that one light and it made the interior warm and mellow looking, the margins of the room fading into dark shadow, highlighting just the sleeping form and it's guardian like an old oil painting.

As Zhao Qing entered the room her eyes cast around and settled on the little girl asleep on the settee. She walked slowly over to the recumbent form as if not believing that this could be the daughter she'd thought was dead. As she got to the settee she fell down on her knees and gently pushed the child's hair from the forehead with trembling fingers. Seeing the small face brought the certainty that this was her child and softly she called her name.

'Mae Lin? Mae Lin. Nee how (Hello).

The child's eyes opened sleepily. For a moment there was no recognition in them as Mae Lin had long ago convinced herself she's never see her mother again. The picture of her Mother's face finally registered with the little girl and suddenly she had sprung up and was throwing her arms around her Mother's neck, covering her face in kisses.

'Mama, I thought you were dead. Mr Liang said you were dead' the words ended as Mae Lin dissolved into floods of tears.

Zhao Qing's eyes were also swimming in tears as she caught up the small bundle and hugged her close,
rocking her backwards and forwards and crooning meaningless words into her ear.

Edith and the two detectives looked on, Edith dabbing at her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse. In an attempt to look businesslike, she went into the kitchen to make drinks, leaving the two detectives watching the happy reunion. Zhao Qing raised her eyes over the top of her daughter's head.

'Thank you so much' she said. 'You have given me my life and my reason for living back. If there is anything I can do to repay you, I will'.

The brunette smiled a sad smile. 'Just glad ya found each other again'. He didn't trust himself to say more and left the room to go into his bedroom. Hutch followed.

As the flaxen haired detective entered his partner's bedroom he saw the brunette sitting dejectedly on the bed. He walked over and sat down beside him, putting a hand on the shoulder, feeling that hard unmoveable harness under the thin material of the shirt. Starsky turned stormy blue yes on him.

'Ya know. If nothing else comes of all this. If we can't get to Grice's daughter before 7.00am, then I'm still glad it got those two back together' he said. 'Not that getting' blown up isn't at the front of my mind at the moment, but if I don't make it, I'm just glad something good came out of it, ya know?' He looked to his partner for some glimmer of understanding.

Just like Starsky Hutch thought. Thinks of anyone else other than himself.

He nodded and patted the shoulder, remaining silent.

'I need to phone Ma' the brunette said slowly. 'I just gotta tell her I may not be there for Yom Kippur this year. I don't know what to say to her, but I feel I have to speak to her one last time. It's like there's this list in my head that I have to work through before......well before. An' talking with Ma one last time comes pretty near the top'.

Hutch nodded swallowing down the enormous lump in his throat. With only four hours left, he knew Starsky was taking the pragmatic approach, but shit it would be hard! He couldn't imagine how he would feel in the same circumstance. But he knew his partner had a closer relationship with his Mom than he would ever have with his parents in Duluth.

'Ya want me to leave?' he asked.

'No, no stay.....please?' the brunette made it into a question, and Hutch sat back down on the bed bracing himself as the curly haired man reached for the bedside telephone.

Starsky took a deep breath and picked up the receiver, dialling the number he knew by heart. There was a pause and then a sleepy voice answered.

'Hello? Who is this?'

Starsky took a deep breath. 'Hi Ma, its David'

'Davey? Are you alright? What's the matter son?' the sleepiness suddenly gone from her voice.

'I'm OK Ma, I.......I just wanted to talk, its no big deal ya know?'

'Davey, it's the middle of the night. It must be 3.00am in Bay City. You phoned me to talk now? Don't give me that. This is your Mother you're talking to! Tell me what's wrong'.
Hutch smiled at Rachel Starsky's no nonsense attitude. He'd met her before and liked the woman immensely. She was a real Jewish Mama and proud of her heritage. And the man sat in the bedroom with him was her favourite son. Nothing escaped Rachel when it came to her Davey.

'I...ah.....I may not be able to see you for a while Ma' Starsky started.

'Why? Why can't you see me? What are you telling me? You wait till now to tell me this? The middle of the night?'

'Something happened at work Ma an' its.....ah..........it just means I may not see you for a while' his brow furrowed as he tried to explain without worrying her.

'Are you sick again? Are you hurt? Has somebody done something to you?'

Shit, she was perceptive and the concern flooding down the telephone wire was suddenly too much for the smaller man to take.

'No I'm not really hurt Ma' he replied, his voice failing him. This was so much more difficult than he'd imagined. He took the receiver away from his ear and just stared at it, as if he would be able to see his Mom at the other end of the phone. He longed to fall into her arms and for her to comfort him as she had always done when he was a little boy. He could recall so vividly the smell of her apron, a mixture of baking and coffee and washing powder as she put her arms around him, pressing him to her and smoothing her fingers through his chocolate coloured curls.

Hutch saw the lost hurt look in his partner's eyes and gently took the telephone from the olive skinned hand.

'Rachel, this is Hutch. How are you?' he screwed his eyes up in frustration. How do you think she is moron? Her son's just rung her with a garbled message and now he's gone silent. How would you feel?

He tried again. 'Rachel, Stars... David phoned to tell you that someone has put him in a difficult position. He has to do a job and it's very dangerous, and he just wanted you to know that he loves you very much'.

The voice at the other end of the telephone asked quietly 'Its not poison again is it Ken?'

'No Rachel' Hutch replied as calmly as he could. 'Its not poison again, but there's madman loose and Starsky's his target. We should be just fine, he just needs some time'. Again he winced at his unintended pun.

'I see......... Look after my boy, Ken' Rachel's voice sounded distant and tinny. It was Hutch's turn to be lost for words and he felt his partner reach to take the phone back from him.

Starsky's voice was husky as he continued.

'Ma, just look after yourself. I love ya, ya know. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. I have to go now, I just wanted to talk to ya'.

Mrs Starsky knew her son was trying to make things easy for her. She'd been married to a cop for over twenty years and knew there were times when they couldn't tell anyone what was going down. She respected that, but it made it non the less frustrating and frightening.

'You look after yourself son, and you come back to me in one piece, do you hear me? I love you so much'.

'I love you too Ma. Goodbye' and he put the phone down before his voice failed him completely.
There was silence in the small room. The phone call had tired the two men more than they cared to admit. Not only had they to dance around the issue with Starsky's Mom, but the sheer emotion that played out between the three of them left them limp and raw.

'I'm not goin' to be around at the end'.

Hutch didn't take in the meaning of the stark sentence to begin with.

'What do you mean, you won't be around at the end? What ya gonna do, run away?' the blond asked bitterly.

'Just what I said, Blintz. Not gonna be here if time looks like its runnin' out. It's bad enough I have to go, but I'm not takin' a whole fuckin' city block with me. There's just one thing I need you to do'. He searched his partner's face, asking for acceptance.

The blond raised his eyebrows questioningly, not trusting his voice.

'Just don't try to find me, huh? I need to do the last bit on my own OK?'

Hutch looked askance. 'No, not OK Partner. We're in this together. I said at the beginning if you go I go, an' I'm not about to let you do this all on your own. We'll get a lead by then, I know we will' Hutch's voice raised, raw emotion in his words. There was no way on Gods green earth he'd let Starsky go through this on his own. He'd prefer to die with his partner rather than know the brunette was sat in some godforsaken place watching the seconds on his watch tick down to his demise.

But the brunette wasn't having any of it. 'I mean it this time Hutch. I won't be here an' you won't find me. If it looks like I won't make it, I'm goin' away. I love ya, you blond lumax. Don't ya know how hard this is for me? We've done everthin' together, but this is one step too far. I can't and I won't let you do this with me. I gotta go that final step alone', and with that he got up, straightened his back and walked out of the room, leaving the flaxen haired detective speechless and without options.

Chapter 15

Hutch re-entered the room to see that Zhao Qing and Edith were quietly talking as the little girl sat on her Mother's knee, never taking her eyes off the woman's face as if just blinking would allow her to leave again. He smiled as he saw the young family reunited. Starsky was in the Kitchen ostensibly getting a drink of water, his back to those in the lounge. Hutch knew his partner needed a little time to regain his composure before joining the two women and the little girl.

As the blond made his way over to the settee, the phone started ringing and he diverted across the room to answer it.

Mildred's voice at the other end informed him that there was a patch through from the same girl named Tamara and would he take it. He agreed and there was a click on the line as Tamara's voice came through.

'Tamara, you OK honey. Did she hurt you?' Hutch asked, concerned. He still had a clear vision of that leather clad mountain of a woman and her imperious attitude. He knew Tamara had taken on a lot in confronting her and he was thankful for the diversion the brave receptionist had given them.

The receptionist's voice sounded a little distorted, as if she was speaking through cotton wool. 'I'm OK. A bust lip and some bruising, but she looks about the same, so we're equal. I just thought you ought to know that as I was leaving, DeMaine was coming back into the club. If you're fast you may be able to catch him there. But be careful, he has his two body guards with him'.

But she was talking to an empty phone line. Hutch dropped the receiver and shouted over to his partner.
'Starsk. DeMaine's at Bound to Please. We gotta go now buddy'.

The brunette slammed his glass of water down on the countertop, picked up his jacket en route and ran for the door speedily pursuing his blond partner back out into the night.

As the two detectives ran for the door as Edith shouted to them

'Shall I tell Harold where you're going?' Hearing a shouted confirmation flung over their departing shoulders, she headed for the telephone.

Starsky jumped up onto the hood of the car and across is in two strides, feeling there was not even enough time to trot tound to the drivers door. As Hutch launched himself into the car, the brunette gunned the big engine into life, Hutch immediately on the radio to control.

'This is Zebra Three to central. Mildred, you there honey?'

'Hey Hutch, what can I do for my two favourite men?'

'Mildred, get patrol cars rolling and have them meet us at Bound to Please. We have an ETA of 15 minutes if I survive the drive over in the Striped tomato with Superman driving. Time now 03.58'.

'Confirmed ETA 15 minutes and time now 03.58, will do, dispatch out'.

Hutch hung on to the passenger grab as Starsky flung the big car round the corners in his hellfire urgency to get to Bound to Please. This was their first real lead and he was desperate to get there before DeMaine left. If they got DeMaine they'd get Emma and he'd be rid of that shit awful bomb once and for all.

With the mars light flashing red on the roof of the Torino sending blood red light out onto the sidewalk and the sirens wailing their banshee howl, the traffic still out on the road at that ungodly hour got out of the way pretty quickly, leaving the black velvet ribbon of the road clear, cleaving a way through the darkness to the detective's destination. The powerful headlights picked out the gas station sign on the corner where they'd met Tamara and Starsky nursed the big red car in a sharp left and onto the road lading to the club.

As they got closer to the building, the brunette killed the light and switched off the siren, going in quiet and dark. He pulled up a little way from the parking lot and took a deep breath steadying himself. At his side, Hutch checked his Colt, ensuring there was a bullet in each of the chambers ready to fire. Starsky reached behind him and took out his own Beretta from the waistband of his jeans. He checked the magazine, injecting one of the .22 bullets into the pipe, thumbing on the safety. They called it cocked and locked and the extra second it gave them in an emergency could mean the difference between life and death.

At a silent signal both men opened their car doors and got out. They went as quietly as they could across the parking lot, wishing their shoes on the gravel sounded less like a child munching its way through dry cereal. The front of the building was still gaudily lit by its neon sign, the bright colours illuminating the building and the entrance way in front. The detectives hugged the wall, keeping to whatever shadow there was available, keeping the element of surprise on their side. At the doorway Starsky stayed put as Hutch quickly sprinted the short distance to the other side of the doorway, taking up their customary positions. Hutch aimed high as Starsky bent his knees slightly enabling him to cover the lower portion of their target.

At an almost subliminal nod they whipped round and pushed the door open pointing their respective weapons down the short hallway and into the reception area. It was deserted and it seemed obvious that with Tamara's departure, the Madam had been unable to find a replacement at short notice. It suited the detectives perfectly and they carried on into the back hallway. It was a long corridor similar to the one Zhao Qing's room had been on. Cautiously they went forward, not knowing what they would find, but anxious
that DeMaine should not escape this time.

As Hutch checked the doors on the left hand side of the hallway, Starsky checked the right hand side. Again, this was their standard practice meaning they each left their gun hand free for emergencies. Hutch opened the first door just in time to see a naked man bound on a large bed being soundly beaten by a tiny woman clad in shiny black PVC. The man's body twitched, but he was making noises that indicated that far from being unhappy, in fact he was intensely aroused. Quietly he closed the door, shaking his head in disbelief and carried on down the hallway. Other rooms contained similar scenarios and Hutch was becoming blase by the end of his inspection. Towards the end, the corridor took a sharp right turn and both men approached the blind corner with caution. Once again taking up position, Hutch snatched a quick glance round the corner. He saw two huge men stood either side of a black painted door on the right of the hallway. So, this was where DeMaine was.

He ducked his head back and nodded to the brunette, who took a firmer grip on his weapon, clicking off the safety and cupping the gun in both hands pointed it skywards.

'We go in a rush?' he whispered quietly and received a nod of mahogany curls in confirmation.

He stopped a moment. 'Just one thing Starsk. For Gods sake don't shoot 'em like ya did Bellamy. We....you really need these guys alive buddy. Ya listening?' his eyes held a plea in them that the brunette couldn't ignore.

'I know' the smaller man hissed back. 'Lets just do this huh?'

'I need ya to promise, Starsk' the blond pled, making it clear he would go no further until he'd had his partner's assurance.

The brunette looked heavenwards and tutted. 'OK, I promise on my poor Momma's grave. That enough for ya Blondie? Just let's get goin'. Times a pressin' as they say'.

With that promise hanging in the air, the two men did a silent three count and charged around the corner towards the unsuspecting body guards. The two enormous guys had no chance to reach for their weapons as two human breaking balls hurtled round the corner and cannoned into them, knocking them to the ground. Hutch wrestled with his mountain of humanity as they rolled over and over on the ground each trying to get a purchase on the other. The bodyguard let out a roar as Hutch pinned him to the ground, his knees on the man's arms, stopping him from landing a punch.

'Mr DeMaine, get out now' he yelled at the closed door and struggled to get up. Hutch swung a punch at the man's jaw, landing a blow which would have knocked out a lesser man. The guard's head rolled with the blow, but he was still conscious and Hutch swung another fist into his face. Still the man mountain refused to give in and the blond swung raw and bleeding knuckles one final time, finally seeing the light of consciousness leaving the man's eyes. Sweating and panting he turned his attention to his partner.

Starsky was hampered in his movements by the harness around his body and the cracked rib. The man he was tackling seemed to know of the brunette's earlier injuries and rabbit punched the smaller man in the side on top of the purple bruises already there. It stunned the curly haired detective and his breath whistled through his clenched teeth as sweat beaded on his face. Huddled on the ground trying to protect his injured side and keep the C4 away from further blows he was readying himself for another kick when a blond bomb cannoned into the unsuspecting guards, knocking him to the ground. Starsky balled his fist and swung the best left hook he'd ever taken into the guard's face, knocking him out with one blow. The two detectives slumped across the unconscious body of the guard a moment catching their breath and wiping the sweat from their eyes. Hutch stood and held out a hand to ease his partner into a standing position.
Starsky's face was full of pain, but he refused to give in to it and as lightening shocks lanced through his ribs, he staggered to the black door the men had been guarding and flung it open, his right hand held protectively over his left side. Gun in hand, he crouched at the entrance, covering the room with one sweep.

He saw that the room was an office rather than one of the rooms set up like torture chambers. There was a desk in the corner in dark mahogany wood, a drinks cabinet made to match and a settee and chair in deep red leather set around a mock Adam fireplace. Book shelves and expensive looking leather bound books lined two of the walls, the third wall decorated in red and gold wallpaper and the fourth wall containing a large square window. In the corner the Madam sat behind the desk, still clad in her leather and looking every inch the dominatrix. Unfortunately, she was the only one in the room, the window in the long outside wall being open and the light net curtains floating gently in the breeze, indicating that DeMaine had used that route to make his getaway.

Starsky slumped against the door lintel groaned and closed his eyes against the sight. If he'd had the energy he may have cried. What the fuck was going on? Every time they got a lead it went sour. What was God trying to tell him? Was it truly his time? It certainly felt like it. He'd just needed one piece of luck — just one, but no. The empty room looked back at him, seeming to mock his desperation as did the clock on the wall indicating 4.20.

Chapter 16

Starsky felt his partner's comforting presence at his shoulder as the blond too scanned the room, disbelief etched in every line on his handsome face. At that moment six patrolmen hurtled round the corner of the hallway and skidded to a halt in a black and white wave as they took in the sight of the two detectives peering into the room, looks of dismay on their faces. Starsky turned away from the sight of the room devoid of DeMaine and slammed his hand into the side of the door, cursing. He stood with his head resting on his hands against the wall, a picture of defeat. A tiny drop of sweat fell from his chin to the floor, evidence of the effort he'd used to overpower the bodyguards and keep himself and his C4 cargo as safe as possible.

He looked over at his partner. 'Ya should have just let me shoot 'em Blintz' he said wearily.

'You want any help here?' the lead patrolman asked, taking in the scene with one glance and ignoring the brunette's outburst, knowing what was at stake here.

Hutch came out of the room sidling around his mahogany haired partner and shook his head looking down at the two unconscious men on the ground. 'Nah, I think we got it covered' he gasped, still out of breath from his scrap on the floor. 'But we need to question her and these two. We need to find where DeMaine has gone. And we need to find out yesterday. Its 4.25. We only got two and a half hours left'.

The patrolman nodded, having been briefed on the situation. He motioned for two of the others to take care of the woman in the office whilst Hutch and the remaining four patrolmen manoeuvred the heavy bodies of the guards against the wall and into a sitting position. Enclosing their massive wrists in handcuffs, the blond set about trying to wake them up.

The man Hutch had hit three times was too far gone to get any sense out of, but the other man started lolling his head back and forth and moaning under his breath as Hutch tapped his cheeks, bringing him round. Within minutes the man's breathing deepened and his eyes opened a little. He tried to bring his hands up to rub his face. Finding them bound together, he suddenly realised the situation he was in and turned his rapidly clearing vision on the flaxen haired detective.

Hutch knew what he had to do and he turned to the patrolman with him and said levelly 'Ben, can ya leave us alone for a while. I can take it from here. Go an' supervise her interrogation?' he asked, seeking
confirmation and understanding from the patrolman he'd known for years. Ben nodded his agreement and went away. The action made the man bound on the ground a little more anxious. He saw something in this blond cop's eyes that he definitely didn't like. Hutch was uncomfortable with what he was about to do, but he knew that desperate times called for desperate measures and he braced himself to act completely out of his usual character. He hunkered down in front of the man on the ground freezing his face into impassivity.

'What's your name?' the blond demanded, not really expecting an answer.

The man stared back defiantly but remained quiet.

'Look, I know DeMaine is paying you well, but I got a vested interest in finding him'. He slowly and deliberately laid his shield down on the floor in front of him. 'Right at this moment I aint a cop, so I'm not bound by that little rule that says I have to be nice to you, ya know? I'll do whatever it takes right now to get the information, so make it a bit easier on yourself. No employer's worth that much. What's your name?'

Hutch knew he'd just intimated that he's stoop to violence if necessary to get the information he needed. A part of him was disgusted at the prospect, but he was just so damn concerned in finding DeMaine that he pushed his concern deep down inside and kept them there in a little dark space together with his scruples. There was room for them and for the recriminations he knew would follow later.

The man on the ground licked his lips nervously. He could see a change in the blond man's demeanour. This was a man close to the edge and he could see in those ice blue eyes a steely resolve. This man was not bound by Miranda or any other legal rules and regulations right now. He'd left his cop's persona behind and now he was just a man out to save his friend's life and that meant he do anything to get out the information he needed. Still, the man on the ground could stall and give his boss some time.

'Jose' he said.

Good — a beginning. 'Where's DeMaine going?'

Jose shrugged. 'How should I know?'

Hutch slapped the man open handed across his right cheek, slamming the head sideways. The blow was hard enough that the mark of his fingers remained imprinted on Jose's face. The man was surprised rather than truly hurt, but it was an indication this golden haired dervish meant business.

'We'll try again' Hutch ground out, his voice hard and uncompromising. 'Where DeMaine going?'

Insolent eyes stared back at him. 'Home'.

Another slap, this time to the opposite side of his face and another pause as the sting of the blow settled.

'Where's he keeping Emma Grice?'

Hutch saw a flicker in the man's eyes. So, he knew of Emma, and indications were he knew where she was. Hutch redoubled his efforts. 'Where is Emma Grice?'

'Never heard of her, man' was the impertinent reply. Hitching a breath and hating himself, Hutch rabbit punched the man in the stomach, sending the air whistling through Jose's teeth. The bodyguard doubled over wheezing and vomited on the floor, spitting the fluid out onto the ground in front of him and narrowly missing Hutch's shoes. Hutch was sickened at himself for doing it, but he was by now on the edge of desperation and he sensed this man would tell him what he needed to know very quickly now. He swallowed back the loathing he felt for himself, knowing normally he would never condone violence to get information. He waited until Jose had stopped gasping and grasped a handful of his dark hair, pulling the
face up so that he could stare fixedly into the man's eyes.

'Now, ya gonna tell me where Emma Grice is?' he asked, ice dripping from every word.

Jose knew when he'd had enough, and enough was now. He thought DeMaine would probably be far enough away to be safe by now.

'He has her at his factory downtown' he muttered slowly.

'Which factory smartass? DeMaine has a few. Gonna need you to be more specific'.

Jose glared back at the flaxen haired cop, He'd tell him, but he'd make the pig sweat for it. 'The one makin' electrical stuff' he replied.

Hutch grasped the hair again, forcing Jose's head back so far his Adams apple bobbed prominently in his neck. The whites showed around Jose's eyes as he realised he may have pushed the blond just that little bit too far.

'An address punk, now' the blond snarled.

Jose tried to speak, but the tension on his neck was too great. Hutch realised and slackened his grip a little. The Latino took a shuddery breath.

'On the Interstate out towards San Diego. You'll see a diner on the corner, take a right and about 200 yards down on the right. DeMaine Electricals'.

Hutch let go the hair and slammed the head down so fast Jose's teeth rattled as his chin ricocheted off his chest. Hutch stood quickly, retrieving his shield from the floor and pocketing it quickly. He felt as though he had no right to it any more — that he had overstepped the bounds so much that he should just turn it in right now. But now was not the time and he knew he could analyse and dissect his actions later.

'Starsk' he shouted over his shoulder. There was no reply. He looked round and tried again. 'Hey, Starsky, we got an address buddy. We gotta get rolling'.

Still nothing. A sudden shill enveloped Hutch and he ran into the office seeking out Ben, the patrolman.

Ben was still busy with the Dominatrix and it looked more as though she was in charge of him rather than the other way around. He looked almost thankful as he saw the blond detective in the doorway motioning to him. He stood and left the imperious presence of the woman and walked over to Hutch.

'Ya seen Starsky?' the blond asked, willing the patrolman to answer in the affirmative.

'No. Saw him a while ago going outside. Thought he was going for something in the car. Hasn't he come back?'

Hutch slammed his fist into the door. 'Fuck it! He's gone. But I've got the address. Oh shit Starsk, what ya have ta go now for?' he asked more of himself than anyone in the room.

He was torn between sending someone to get Emma from DeMaine and going to get his partner. Eventually common sense prevailed. If he could get Emma and deliver her back to Grice he had a fair idea of where the brunette would have gone. He checked his watch. 4.55. Not a lot of time left, but enough, he hoped.

'Ben, I'm going to DeMaine's factory out on the Interstate south an' I need one of your men to come with me. Call it in to Dobey for me and tell him what's gone down and tell him Starsky's bolted. He'll understand.
And give me the keys to your car. I'm bettin' my ride is long gone'. Ben handed the flaxen haired cop his keys and motioned one of his youngest fittest men to accompany the blond. Without waiting for confirmation, the blond bolted for the door, time being of the essence.

**Chapter 17**

Hutch ran for the door, the patrolman at his side as he went out to the fleet of black and whites in the parking lot.

‘Which one?’ he yelled, looking at the keys in his hand and the three cars.

The young patrolman nodded at the nearest one and hurriedly got into the passenger side as the blond dove through the driver's door and started the engine. He floored the gas, lurching the big car forward, sending a spray of gravel up behind as the back end of the car side slipped before gaining traction and shooting off up the highway. With the lights flashing and the sirens wailing, the blond cop wasn't going to stop for anything until he got to his destination.

The young patrolman at his side wore an excited look on his face. He'd only been on the force a year and the duel challenge of being in a high speed chase and with one of the best known detectives in the area had his adrenalin flowing right from the start.

'I'm Ray, Mr Hutchinson’ the twenty year old stammered, wanting to ease the tension in the car a little. The big blonde's eyes were set dead ahead on the road and Ray detected a hint of desperation in them as they hurtled along the quiet empty road.

'Please ta meet ya Ray' Hutch murmured. 'An' Its Hutch.....just Hutch OK? You got your piece ready?' he glanced quickly at the young man as he patted his police issue Magnum at his side.

'We're going to a factory out on the south side of town. We need to find a guy called DeMaine. He doesn't want to be found. He has a girl called Emma Grice there and we need DeMaine and Grice in one piece. Got it? In one piece. So no fancy shootin'. No heroics. Just good clean police work, like in the manuals. Keep yourself safe. Try 'n' keep me safe. My partner's life depends on it'. Hutch's concentration returned to the road as Ray digested all the instructions. They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

Ray was trying to remember all his training, but exercises at the Academy could never truly prepare a young man for this sort of reality and he hoped he wouldn't let this detective down. He'd heard a lot about the legendary duo. Starsky and Hutch. He'd seen them round the precinct and they always seemed pleasant enough. They had no edge to them. They didn't swagger around the place trying to live up to their reputations. They were just two damn good police officers doing a damn good job in difficult circumstances on the hardest inner city patch. He liked both of them. Hell, everyone liked them and he wanted more than anything else to be able to say in later years that he'd helped save Starsky's life.

Hutch's mind was also on his partner. God, why did he have to go off at that precise moment? Hutch had a vision of his curly haired partner sitting alone somewhere staring at his watch and counting down the minutes and seconds. How would he feel under the same circumstances? He shivered involuntarily and shook himself. Now was not the time to be thinking those thoughts. He needed his head focussed on the here and now. Get to DeMaine, get to Grice, get to Starsky. That was the trilogy. Get them and everything would be OK. Piece of cake. Oh, and by the way. Do it in — he checked the chronometer on the car's dash — 2 hours.

Hutch came to the turning he needed and flung the car round the turn and down the short road, finding the factory almost immediately. He screeched the car to a halt, the nose dipping at the sudden deceleration. Both men were out of the car before the last notes of the engine had died and were making the way quietly to the
door at the side of the building.

It seemed a familiar set up to the blond. It was almost a carbon copy of the factory he'd found Mae Lin in. Wooden steps up to a faded, paintless door which was not locked.

Signalling to Ray, both men drew their weapons. Hutch hesitated.

'Do you go high or low?' her asked suddenly unsure and uncomfortable. He'd worked with the brunette for so long that stuff like this was second nature. They'd worked as a unit until they could almost read each others thoughts. Now, working with someone else was different. And to cap it all, the someone else was young and inexperienced.

The young cop was looking quizzically. 'I don't understand'.

'When ya go in, do you cover the thigh end of the room, or the low?' Hutch reiterated a little impatiently.

Ray gulped. 'I dunno. I've only been out on the street a short while. Never done anythin' like this. What ya want me to do?' He looked abashed.

Hutch took a deep breath. Shit, this wasn't the time for lessons! 'When I open the door, bend your knees and cover the lower half of the corridor. I'll cover the top half. Don't shoot anythin' unless I say'. Waiting for a nod, he went back to the door.

Opening it cautiously, he signalled Ray and both men whipped round and covered the hallway. It was empty. Raising their weapons and pointing them skywards, they made their way into the dimly lit building. Once again, Hutch found room after room lined with mattresses on the floor, some with bed sheets, some without. There was one room full of sleeping people, the smell of stale air catching in the blonde's throat. He forced himself on, desperately searching room after room.

At the end of the corridor, there were carpeted stairs leading up to a second floor and the cops went slowly up them, senses questing ahead of them, expecting the unexpected. At the top of the stairs was another door. This one painted perfectly. It was incongruous to go from such poor living conditions below to this sudden display of care and the difference was not lost on the young patrolman.

'Jeez, what's this all about?' he asked quietly.

'Sweat shops and buying and selling humans' the blond grunted, still angry at the whole set up. 'DeMaine buys Chinese as labour, then houses and feeds 'em here. And the real sad thing is they're grateful!'

He put his ear to the door, trying to divine what lay beyond. He could just make out voices, raised as if giving instructions and he thought he heard at least three, but couldn't be absolutely sure. Hutch turned back to Ray.

'You Ok with this? We go in quietly. If there's any rough stuff, keep out my way and keep safe. Your job's to watch my back, an' I'll watch yours'. He waited as the young man nodded, heaving a shuddery breath. Although only 35 himself, he felt so much older than this rooky and wanted to protect him as much as possible while still getting the job done. God, had he ever been so young?

Hutch quietly counted one....two.....three and as Ray readied his weapon, the blond flung the door open quickly, hoping for the element of surprise.

The door opened into an ante room decorated in pale blues and greys with a luxurious deep carpet in deep navy blue. Hutch was reminded of the colour of Starsky's eyes as he saw it. He shut out the vision of the handsome tanned face. Now was not the time. He needed to be clear headed.
Ahead was another door slightly open and through the chink, Hutch could see a tall thin white haired man talking to a shorter well built guy — obviously another body guard. Bingo! He had DeMaine in his sights. Quietly they stole into the ante room and took up positions one each side of the connecting door. DeMaine was mad about something and was balling out the body guard. Probably having to make his escape from Bound to Please had angered him. Hutch smiled a grim smile. Strike one for the good guys. They'd thoroughly pissed off the evil industrialist.

As Hutch was wondering about the best way to tackle this, the body guard took the law into his own hands and started walking away from his boss and out into the ante room. The two cops pressed themselves back against the wall trying to remain invisible for as long as they could as the big man exited the room. As Hutch lunged at the guy, he realised his mistake. There wasn't just one man in the room, there were two, and as he leaped on the first, the second was just behind him. Shit! He was in mid flight and committed to the move as he saw Ray leap towards the second guy. Fortunately the action was happening to the side of the room and DeMaine did not have a clear view of what was going on. The noises the industrialist heard he put down to the grousing and grumping of his two employees as they left his office. He had no idea of the struggle that was truly going on the next room.

As Hutch leaped onto the biggest of the two body guards, he caught a fleeting glimpse of Ray grappling the smaller one to the ground. The young cop was a well built guy himself and as he bore his opponent to the ground Hutch saw him land a solid punch making the guy beneath him wheeze, leaving him fighting for breath. But that was the last chance Hutch got to see anything as he became busy with his own fight.

He managed to now his own opponent to the ground and launched himself full length onto him, landing with his knees in the man's chest. With superhuman strength, the guard forced himself up, knocking Hutch off his body and landed a telling punch on the detectives side, momentarily stunning him. Fighting to regain his breath, Hutch lay for a second on the floor as he saw a huge foot swinging in his direction. Lightening fast, he tried to roll out of the way. He wasn't quite fast enough and he felt the heavy boot connect, lifting him off the ground. He felt that horrible snap as a rib gave way, but forced himself back up to his knees. He saw the foot swing back again and braced himself for the pain, knowing he couldn't get out of the way fast enough. He gritted his teeth and waited, but the connection never came. Opening his eyes he saw Ray standing over him holding out a hand to ease him up. As the guard had prepared to kick again, the young man had come up behind him and hit him behind the ear with the butt of his gun, pole axing him. The guard's body slid limply to the floor and the blond took hold of Ray's hand and stood shakily. He bent double as the pain in his side threatened to plunge him into unconsciousness, but sheer gritty determination made him hang on.

'Thanks' he gasped, looking at Ray's own opponent also out cold. 'I owe you one'.

'You OK Hutch?' the young cop asked, seeing the deep pain etched in Hutch's face and the hand the detective held against his side and the trickle of blood running down the blonde's cheek from a cut below his left eye.

'Been better' the blond panted quietly, trying to stand upright. 'Bust a rib, I think'. He pushed himself away from Ray's steadying arm. 'Need to get in there'. He staggered towards DeMaine's office door.

It can be amazing how critical moments in someone's life slow down so that every second is stretched into an eternity. This was one of those moments. Ray stood watching Hutch's back as the pained detective walked towards the office door. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement from the side of the room and as he turned he realised the guard who he had fought with had regained consciousness and was looking around him. He saw the guard clock Hutch going towards the inner office and he saw the guy reach beneath him, going for a weapon.

Time stretched out even further as if in a television slow motion replay. As the guard brought a powerful
Magnum from below his body, Ray launched himself towards the blond detective shouting a warning. 'Huuutch!'

As the flaxen haired cop started to turn at the sound of his name, Ray heard the report of the Magnum and threw himself at Hutch knocking him off balance and backwards. As the blond fell heavily onto his broken rib, letting out an involuntary scream, DeMaine came to his feet behind the desk, realising for the first time that something was wrong.

And Ray turned and fired his own weapon at the guard at the same time as he felt the white hot metal plunge through his upper left back and out of the front of his chest.

**Chapter 18**

The young patrolman looked calmly down at the blossoming wound on his chest in disbelief. The pain didn't come all at once. There was just a numbness and coldness in his chest as his eyes seared out the ice blue ones of the blond detective.

Hutch had recovered from his plunge to the ground and had DeMaine covered by his Colt. He flicked it carefully, indicating DeMaine to sit down and crossed the room quickly, fumbling his cuffs from his belt with hands shaky from pain and adrenalin. He secured the industrialist's hands to the heavy leg of the enormous oak desk. Satisfied the white haired man was going nowhere, he rushed back to the downed patrolman.

He knelt at the young man's side appalled at the colossal wound gaping on the young man's chest. There was no question that it was a mortal wound, and Hutch could already hear the rattle in his chest that precedes death.

Gently he lifted the young man's head up and cushioned it on his lap.

'What d'ya have to do that for Ray? When I said watch my back, I didn't mean like this!'

Ray's eyes opened and sought out those ice blue ones above him, craving a last contact before oblivion. Blood bubbles appeared at the sides of his lips as he struggled to form his last words.

'G glad I could h help' he stammered, a small smile playing on his lips. 'S'bad?' he looked questioningly up.

'Yeah, its bad' Hutch murmured gently. No use lying about it, he thought. This guy was man enough to save his life. He was man enough to take the news.

There was a gurgling sound and Ray's eyes flew wide open, staring into space. 'Oh shit' he gasped as the light of this world left his eyes and his body fell limply against Hutch's.

Sorrowfully, Hutch tenderly laid down the brave young man's head and gently closed the lids over the still staring eyes. Resolve hardened his features and he stood slowly, ignoring the stabbing pain in his side. The movement brought on a fit of coughing and he spat bright red out onto the beautiful carpet, staining it. Crap, he didn't need this! He turned stormy eyes on the tall thin man fastened to the table in the corner of the room.

DeMaine had watched the passing of the patrolman's life dispassionately and his look equalled that now as he saw the blond detective stagger over to him, a look of utter contempt on his face. Without taking his eyes off DeMaine, Hutch took hold of his Colt and standing at the side of the tall man, ground the barrel of his weapon into the industrialist's temple.

The white haired man winced and groaned at the feel of the cold metal, suddenly realising that he was on his
own at the mercy of this angry cop. Like most cowards he had surrounded himself with well paid guards who would deflect any potential threats away from him. And in that way he'd survived in his ivory tower. He'd never really bothered finding out how the Chinese lived and worked. He paid the modest bills for their board and food without too much thought, raking in the profits from their hard labours and salting it away in off shore investment accounts, making himself steadily richer and richer. DeMaine Investments, the holding company was now worth in excess of three billion dollars. But all the money in the world couldn't save him now from this crazed blond wielding what looked like a cannon in his face.

'You listen and you listen good' Hutch snarled. 'You're going to tell me where Emma Grice is right now, or I'll blow your fuckin' head clean off your shoulders. Talk'.

The white haired man whimpered, not enjoying the pain in his temple.

'She's down the hall. Three doors away. She's safe. Honest. She's safe' he gabbled, flinching away from the gun.

'You'd better be telling me the truth' Hutch ground out, checking the desk to make sure there were no panic buttons DeMaine could push to call help. Finding none, he pushed angrily at the cuffed industrialist and staggered from the room, stepping carefully round the dead body of the young patrolman who's blood now puddled on the carpet like a fine ruby wine. He counted the doors down the hallway and stopped outside the third.

Time being of the essence, he kicked the door open and pointed his gun into the room/ It was small, but comfortably furnished and sat on the bed, watching a television was the young Emma Grice. She looked up in surprise at the sudden intrusion and backed off the bed until her back was against the wall.

'Emma? Emma Grice?' Hutch asked.

She nodded.

'Police officer'. He flashed his shield. 'I've come to take you back to your parents'.

The blond crossed the room quickly, taking hold of the teenager firmly by the arm. He propelled her back to DeMaine's office and pushed her towards the big table. Grasping the white telephone, he thrust the receiver at her.

'Ring Daddy and tell him you're OK' he commanded, leaving her in no doubt that she should do as he said.

She took the telephone and jabbed nervous fingers at the buttons. She waited and hutch could hear faintly the sound of a ring tone at the other end, then a voice answered.

'Daddy?' Emma started. 'Daddy it's me. I'm Ok. There's policeman here'.

He could hear the voice at the other end of the phone and thought he heard it ask for their codeword. — What the hell was that all about?

But Emma seemed to know and replied 'Cotton candy' promptly.

Hutch snatched the receiver from her. 'Your daughter is with me. You can pick her up at the Pits bar'. He gave the address. 'You come alone and you pick up your little girl. And you give me the combination to stop the detonation. Ya hear? No numbers, no daughter. I've done too many things I'm not proud of tonight. One more little slip isn't worth a fuck'.

The disembodied voice at the other end of the telephone answered.
'Detective Hutchinson, I presume. How is your partner? Well, I hope? I'll be there, but no double cross, otherwise...........caboom!'

Hutch listened, sick to his stomatch. 'Listen, punk. One dead partner equals one dead daughter. And believe me, I'm not lyin'. The Pits. 30 minutes. Be there'. He slamming the phone down, glancing at his watch. 5.45. God it was going to be close.

He picked up the phone again and dialled Dobey's direct number. The phone hardly rang before the gruff familiar voice responded.

'Captain, I don't have a lot of time, so I'll cut the explanations short. I've got Emma, I got DeMaine an' I'm meetin' Grice in 30 at the Pits for the exchange. Have a patrol car standing by, but not too close, I don't want to scare him. Starsky's gone, but I think I know where to find him. Can you ring Tom Trafford and have him meet me at the Pitts too? Think I'm gonna need backup, and a fast car too — unmarked. One Starsk won't recognise. And Cap, young Ray McFinertys dead. His body is at DeMaine Electricals. You'll need the coroners wagon'.

Dobey listened to the blond, making noted on his pad, now knowing better than to interrupt. As Hutch finished all he said was 'Will do', and the phone went dead.

Grasping hold of Emma by the arm again, Hutch calmly walked around the side of the desk and looked DeMaine in the eyes.

'If you're gonna hurt people, DeMaine, ya need to at least look at them face to face when ya do it'. He checked the cuffs were still secure, tightening them just a little until the white haired man gasped.

'Is there a key to this room?' he asked. DeMaine nodded to the drawer of the desk. Hutch rummaged in it and found it, slamming the drawer shut. He tightened his grip on Emma's arm and pushed her in front of him out of the office. Closing the door, he locked it behind him and pocketed the key. He was certain there would be duplicates, but right now DeMaine was low down on his list of priorities. He could always come back later.

Propelling the girl in front of him, Hutch negotiated the steps and found his way back to the patrol car. He pushed the terrified teenager into the front passenger seat and eased himself into the driver's seat, groaning as his injured body protested the movement. He put the car into drive and sped off back towards town.

The teenager looked sideways at him. She may be young, but she was still caring enough to ask.

'Are you hurt?'

Hutch wasn't in the mood for small talk.

'Yes'.

She tried again. 'My Daddy could help'.

Hutch choked. 'Your Daddy? Your Daddy is the cause of all this. Because of your Daddy, my partner is out there somewhere on his own with 10lbs of C4 explosive strapped to him, due to go off in just over an hour. So don't tell me your Daddy can help' he spat.

She looked as though he'd just slapped her face, and as the road sped by, she remained silent for the rest of the journey.

Chapter 19
As they got toward the Pits Hutch slowed and started to glance around him looking for the black and white support he'd asked Dobey to organise. He spotted it down a side alley about 25 yards from the entrance to the Pits, well hidden, its lights dowsed and its engine off as it waited patiently for a signal from the blond. If he hadn't known to look for it he'd never have known it was there. Hutch hoped it wouldn't have to get involved in anything bad — any cross fire. The life of one cop, especially one as young as Ray was one life too many. He allowed himself to wonder for a moment who would have the terrifying job of telling Ray's parents that he'd died in the line of duty.

Thank God for good cops, there were too few of them around. Ray would have been one of the best and Hutch owed his life to him. It tightened his resolve at destroying Grice and DeMaine's set up. But not till he'd gotten his partner back. Everything was on hold till Starsky was back whole and at his side.

A little way off he also spotted a small, low, sleek car with a single man sat behind the wheel. Even from this distance he could tell the now familiar outline of Tom Trafford. Traff was also keeping his distance, giving the blond plenty of space to make the trade off and get the combination. All involved knew how much this was worth and how the smallest mistake could cost Starsky his life. And it wasn't just duty that made them cautious. The brunette was a popular figure at BCPD. His laughter was infectious, his humour definitely on the goofy side. But more than that, he had a caring quality to him which was evident in everything he did and many of the men working at the Metro had good reason to thank the curly haired detective for either their own life or the life of someone close to them. Starsky would lay down his life for any one of them, and now they were prepared to do the same for him.

Slowly Hutch eased the car down the alleyway to the Pits and stopped, quenching the headlights and waiting, fingers drumming impatiently on the steering wheel, feeling every second counting down now. The teenager at his side sat rigid and silent, feeling the thrum of tension building in the confines of the car. Hutch needed to find and be with Starsky, even if that meant they both went together. The thought of his curly haired friend going through his final hour alone tore at him and left a huge lump in his throat and ache in his heart. But once again he stuffed those feelings down deep inside him. He had to stay sharp for this and the pain nagging at his side definitely wasn't helping matters. That, along with the cut and enormous bruise he had on his cheek ate at him, gnawing at his nerves and jangling them with every breath and every movement. He wished he carried aspirin or something similar in the car and vowed if he ever got through this he'd stock up.

He looked again in his rear view mirror and saw a huge black four by four edging down the alley to his location, like a predatory beast. This was it — the moment of truth. He breathed as deeply as his broken rib would allow, taking the calming air deep into his lungs and letting it out slowly in yogic fashion. Telling Emma to stay put, he got slowly, stiffly and painfully out of the car and walked purposefully back to meet the driver.

The monstrous car drew to a halt and the darkened glass of the window wound down, revealing a short weasely featured man with scraped back dirty blond hair and a shifty expression on his face. So this was the mastermind behind Detractor Industries. A vicious piece of work if ever there was one. A man who had no scruples where his fellow human beings were concerned. What sort of man would take the vast sums of money he did to sell others into a kind of modern day slavery? This man was despicable. Hutch's face was a study in calm and concentration as he stood face to face with the man who'd wired his partner into a harness of destruction. As he stood, the video he'd seen yesterday replayed over and over in his head. Was it Grice who'd kicked the blindfolded brunette on the floor? Or was it Grice holding the camera impassively as the violence played out around him? Whichever, both were cowardly acts and Hutch would see that Grice paid dearly in the end.

'Grice?' he asked carefully.

'Hutchinson?' the man responded. 'Where's my daughter?' Obviously not a man who prevaricated.
Hutch nodded his head at the car. 'She's safe. I get the number, you get the girl'.

'And if I refuse?' Grice's voice matched Hutch's for calm and concentration.

The two men verbally danced around each other each watching for mistakes, for signs of weakness or double cross. Neither saw anything but determination in the other. Eyes locked in conflict. Two men with a single thought. Get back the one they loved. The only difference was one of those loved ones was sat warm and safe in a car not 5 yards away whilst the other was God knows where listening to a detonator on his chest ticking away his final minutes of life.

'I don't get the number, I take your daughter away and hide her somewhere you'll never find her', Hutch's words were icy in their intent.

Grice looked at him carefully trying to detect the level of seriousness and intent.

'You wouldn't. You're a cop. Its your job to stop kidnappers, not become one of them' he snarled, seeking some weakness in the blonde's steely stare. He saw none and for a moment, his resolve weakened.

'Mr Grice, I have done so many things tonight that go against everything police training taught me that I'll probably be busted to traffic for the rest of my natural. My partner is going to die in 50 minutes unless you give me the number. At this point I am so past scruples as you wouldn't believe'. He reached into the car quick as a flash and caught hold of Grice by his shirt collar. Pulling the small man half way out through the window he stuck his golden head six inches away from Grice's and snarled back

'Give me the number'.

He enunciated every syllable, making his intent perfectly clear, and Grice was man enough to accept that this cop would carry out every threat he'd made.

Grice hadn't become successful and rich by being stupid. He was a hard headed, hard hearted business man, and he moved in circles with similarly motivated men. He played poker with the best and won frequently. He could tell a bluff when he saw it and this most definitely wasn't a bluff. He realised he'd have to tell to get his daughter back.

'OK, Ok, just give me Emma an' I'll tell you'. He said resignedly.

But Hutch wasn't so easily fooled. He shook his head. 'Number first, then the girl. And in case you wanna give me the wrong information, I know exactly where you live and all your sordid dealings. If my partner dies, your empire, your family and everything you hold dear dies right along with him'.

With a sigh, Grice mumbled '384522'

'384522' repeated the blond and seeing the nod turned his back and headed to the car, satisfied that Grice was not so stupid as to loose his family and probably more important to him, his money.

At the car, he leaned over and got a patch through to the waiting black and white, calling it over. As soon as he saw it turn the corner, he pulled Emma unceremoniously out of the car and pushed her towards her father's vehicle, watched by the patrolman.

It was a shame. She was a nice kid and under different circumstances, Hutch might even have liked her. But at this precise moment, she represented every evil thing Grice and his company had done to the Chinese, to his friend. And Hutch's brain was so tired he couldn't separate out his feelings for the girl from the feelings he had for her father.
Seeing her on her way, he smiled grimly as he caught a fleeting glimpse of the look of terror and resignation on Grice's face as he saw the patrol car turn the corner. Could he really have been so stupid as to think Hutch wouldn't have called this in and used the perfect opportunity to arrest the moron? The flaxen haired cop bolted for Traff's car. He threw himself into the front seat next to the bomb disposal expert,

'I got the number Traff, an' I think I know where Starsky is. Drive down towards the dunes on the north side. I saw him looking at a map'. To himself he thought God, I hope I'm right. Hang in there buddy, I'm comin' ta get ya.

Traff wasted no time in seeking explanations. He started the engine and threw the car into drive, handling the powerful sports car like a professional. He got out onto the main road and gunned the engine, as the car surged forward towards Starsky, the sudden acceleration thrusting the blond back into his seat.

'You'll clear it when I get the speeding violation?' Traff asked a smirk on his face.

Hutch grinned back. 'Just keep driving. We get through this, all three of us, I'll take care of every speeding, parking and any other violation you car to name'.

Chapter 20

Hutch had liked Traff the minute they'd met. He had a lot of similar qualities to his partner and in some ways looked a little like the brunette. He was about Starsky's height at almost 6' and had a lean muscular frame. But his eyes were a startling green instead of the familiar indigo blue. They looked out of a handsome face whose skin was heavily tanned by years spent in some of the hotspots of the world taking care of landmine clearance and other even more dangerous stuff. The hair too was a curly mess but a more definite black, rather than the chocolate curls Starsky carried.

Traff was still in his military fatigues, the sleeves of his over jacket rolled up past his elbows, showing equally tanned and well muscled fore arms, the left decorated by a Breitling Aviator watch encased in stainless steel. The hands that held the wheel loosely were square shaped, workman's hands, the nails scuffed. The hands of someone who means business. The hands of a capable and caring individual. The hands of someone who could save Starsky's life.

'So what's Curly gone and done now?' he asked calmly.

It suddenly occurred to Hutch that he felt as though Traff would never panic. He supposed it came with the job. No use having a bomb disposal expert who sweated and panicked. The two just wouldn't gel. And it left him feeling a little comforted that if anyone was going to help him find his partner, this was just the man he'd want.

'Gone away to blow up on his own' Hutch answered tightly.

Traff chuckled. 'Never changes, does he?'

'How long did you serve together? Hutch asked, trying to establish just how well Traff knew the brunette. 'Ya know it wasn't till a job went sour last year that I ever found out he was a Major. Always told me he'd been a Captain. When I finally got him to talk, he told me some real gruesome stuff and then said Captain didn't sound as pretentious as his real rank'.

Traff laughed out loud. 'Yeah, that sounds like Curly. He never did take to the title thing. We served for two years together out in 'Nam. He ended up leading one Spec Ops unit, I lead the other. He was into the anti-interrogation stuff, whilst I concentrated on the boom boom jobs. We made quite a team. Then he was captured an' I didn't really see anything more of him for abut four months, till we got news of where he was.
There was a guy called Sharpe in charge of the unit. Said he'd finally found where they were keeping Curly and to go get him.'

'Anyway, I took a team and found him and got him out. They'd done a pretty good job on him trying to get him to talk and we ended up taking him back to the field hospital, but I did a couple of patch up jobs on the way. All his finger and toe nails were missing and most were infected and he'd lost about 30 lbs in weight. He couldn't really hear coz they'd given him the 'telephone' treatment and his lungs were in bad shape where they'd forced his head under dirty water. Anyway, we got him back and after a while he got transferred Stateside. But we kept in touch and at the end, he couldn't wait to get out of the army. But I stayed. Came from a military family and didn't really know any different. A real army brat!'

Hutch had heard most of the story before, from Starsky, but never in such detail. His partner had always dodged the issue of what really happened to him as if it embarrassed him. Hearing it in all the dispassionate detail Traff gave was not easy, but it gave Hutch a whole new understanding of his partner.

Traf turned off the main highway and onto a smaller road leading down to the beach and the dunes. The sudden change in road surface, from smooth to bumpy jarred Hutch's rib and he gasped involuntarily.

'Hey, you OK Hutch?' Taff asked, suddenly realising the blond had got very stiffly into the car.

'Been better' Hutch admitted. 'Had a bit of a set to with a human mountain. Think I've bust a rib'.

The military man let it pass, not making a fuss.

'Do ya want to tell me what we're doing down here?' he asked.

Hutch took a deep breath. Yeah. What are we doing down here? I saw Starsk looking at a map back at HQ. He's told me twice that if it looked like time was running out he was gonna go somewhere quiet so as not to blow anyone else up with him. We got a lead and met a couple of flakes who did this' he put a protective hand on his side. 'I persuaded one of 'em to tell me where DeMaine was, but by the time I'd got the information Starsk had taken off. If my hunch is right, he's down here somewhere'.

'Well if he's taken off, he's not gonna want us around, then is he?' Traff said slowly.

'That's why I asked you to meet me' Hutch explained. 'He'll know I'll come looking for him, but he won't expect you. If we do find him, I need you to go in from the front and I'll go round the back. When he bolts, which he will, I'll get him. The second reason I wanted you was that if this number is kosher, we're gonna need to make sure we use it right. I've no idea really when it comes to explosive, so you'll need to do the hands on stuff'.

Traf nodded thoughtfully. 'What's the combo then?' he asked

'384522' Hutch replied. 'That's the six figure number Grice gave me. But once it's entered and hopefully the timer stops, how do we get the harness off?'

'Leave that to me' Traff said noncommittally. 'One step at a time. First we need to find Curly, then take it from there'. He pulled the car up as close to the edge of the small sandy dunes as he could get and killed the engine. Reaching behind him, he grabbed a green calico tool bag. It looked worn and well used and the chinking sound inside sounded reassuringly like the various tools of Traff's trade. The dark haired man opened the bag and did a quick inventory of its contents. Seemingly content, he closed the bag and both men got out of the car.

The air on the coast at 6.40 in the morning was cool and crisp and there was the beginning of a milky light on the horizon, threatening dawn very soon. Both men started to trudge over the sandy dunes seeking out the
firmer going of the sand down on the shore line. The loose sand on the small hillocks made walking difficult, their feet sinking into the grains, letting them slip back a way with each step they took. Normally, Hutch loved the beach and made a point of jogging on the sands at least once a week as part of his workout. But today he found the grasping nature of the sand set his teeth on edge impeding his progress and wasting precious time as he struggled to find his partner.

Finally they crested the last rise and took huge bouncing steps down the windward side of the dune, plunging forward onto the tightly packed damp sand below.

The beach stretched out to left and right, deserted at this time of morning and this far north of town. Most joggers preferred the immediacy of the city beach. More convenient for a quick run, then a shower and work. Logic dictated that Starsky would go north away from the buildings and populace of Bay City, so Traff and Hutch set off up the beach in that direction, the sea on their left hand side, the tide ebbing now as the first light of a new day cast pale fragile light on the sands.

They walked quietly and quickly, eyes scanning the horizon and the clefts between the dunes, looking for the solitary figure of a lone detective hell bent on saving as many people from destruction as he could. The area seemed vast and the term "needle in a haystack" came unbidden to Hutch's mind. He appreciated the calmness which Traff exuded as he walked purposefully alongside the blond, occasionally putting a powerful set of binoculars to his eyes without slackening his gait.

Suddenly he stopped, brought the eye glasses back up to his eyes and stiffened, searching a small area off to the side and a little way ahead. An area of dunes stood separate from the others and where the two dunes met they enclosed a small valley of sand. And sat in the middle of the valley, a lone figure cold be seen, tiny at this range.

Handing the binoculars to Hutch, Traff nodded, a smile on his face.

'We got him'.

Chapter 21

When Starsky had looked into the room and seen the Dominatrix sat composedly behind her desk, hands folded neatly on the blotter and eyes looking smugly at the open window, he knew he'd just lost his last chance at life. His heart at that moment plummeted into his blue Adidas and he felt physically sick to his stomach. So much had ridden on that one telephone message they'd received from Tamara saying that DeMaine was back at Bound to Please. He had ridden with his blond partner over to the club with hope once again igniting only to find that the bastard had gone, and with it his last hope of salvation. As he stared into that empty room it was like he was staring at his own funeral.

He'd had those last conversations with Hutch and it had cost him a great deal to tell the blond his plans. He re-played them over in his head on a loop as if they were on an audio tape, willing the blond to understand his intentions and to keep the hell away.

'Just one thing Starsk. For Gods sake don't shoot 'em like ya did Bellamy. We....you really need these guys alive buddy. Ya listening?'........

'I need ya to promise, Starsk'........

'OK, I promise on my poor Momma's grave. That enough for ya Blondie? Just let's get goin'. Times a pressin' as they say'.......

'I'm not goin' to be around at the end'........
Not gonna be here if time looks like its runnin' out. It's bad enough I have to go, but I'm not takin' a whole fuckin' city block with me. There's just one thing I need you to do'...........

'Just don't try to find me, huh? I need to do the last bit on my own OK?'.......... 

That had been almost two and a half hours ago. He'd seen his blond partner stoop to handcuff the two flakes who'd protected that bastard DeMaine and knew that he had to go whilst Hutch was busy. There was no way on earth the blond would have allowed him to walk out if he'd known what was happening. So he'd taken a final look at the man who'd been is partner, best friend and confidant for the past seven years. He tried to burn every line of that fair skinned handsome Viking face into his memory to take with him and he turned on his heel and left. Ben, one of the patrolmen saw him go and had stopped him to ask if he needed anything. Starsky had mumbled something about getting something from his car and had shouldered past the uniformed officer, needing to be outside before Hutch realised he was missing.

Once outside he ran over to his beloved Torino and got in, the harness digging into his injured side as if emphasising the futility of it all, reminding him of his own mortality, as if that wasn't the thing foremost in his head! The comforting familiar space of his car settled his head and he quietly turned on the engine and slid off the lot and out onto the open road. Once there he floored the gas pedal, ignoring the speed restrictions. If he was going to die he may as well enjoy one last fling on the open road — he wasn't going to be around to pay for a speeding ticket anyway.

The road in front of him and the steady thrum of the big engine calmed his thoughts and he settled himself into the black leather upholstery and concentrated on the pleasure of the drive, able for a moment to shut out all other thoughts, his limbs moving automatically over the controls as he pushed the speedo up past 90. As he touched 100 mph he entered the coast road and nursed the big car northwards to his final destination, finally slowing and pulling in to a deserted parking lot a little way from the beach. He had no doubts the blond would try to follow him and he wanted to leave as few clues of his whereabouts as possible. They'd see the explosion from a mile away anyway, he thought grimly.

Getting out of his car for the last time and locking it, he lovingly trailed his fingers over the sleek tomato red paintwork, feeling the light ripple as the red gave way to the white stripe travelling up one side of the car, across the roof and down the other. He'd loved the car from the day he'd got it. He'd blown his whole savings on it and it was his pride and joy. It had seen him through thick and thin and had taken almost as many bullets as he had. But Merle had always worked wonders on it and he hoped the Blintz would take as much care of it as he had. He put the keys in an envelope he'd brought with him, addressed to Mr K Hutchinson, with the address clearly marked. The envelope also contained a brief letter giving the deeds of his apartment to his partner too, whilst the meagre savings in his bank would go to Ma. He sealed the flap down and walked over to the mail box across the way. Running his hands over the lumpy package one last time, he pushed the envelope inside the box and walked swiftly away.

With one final backward look at the car, he turned and walked up the road a ways before turning off and into the dunes. He'd chosen this area because few people came this way so early in the morning. There were no condos here and no other signs of habitation this far north of the city.

He took his shoes off and enjoyed the sensation of the sand on his feet as he trudged up the side of the small dune. It was cold and slightly damp between his toes, the sun not yet up to warm it and dry it. Starsky's eyes had gotten used to the dark now and he picked his way slowly up and over the sand hills using the light from the almost full moon and the stars. Finding his way down onto the beach, he searched around trying to find a quiet and secluded spot and picked one between two dunes slightly away from the others. He'd made his way slowly over to the little sand valley and had sat down to wait.

He'd glanced at his watch and noted with a calm that surprised him that he had just over an hour left. The air around him felt cool and he was hot from the exertion of the trek over the loose sand. He unbuttoned his
shirt and sat with it open, exposing the harness in all its deadly glory, feeling the early morning breeze cool his skin.

He sat with his knees pulled up, elbows resting on them and hands hanging relaxed in front. The early morning breeze ruffled his mahogany curls and he enjoyed the sensation of the air against his scalp as he looked out towards the horizon. He dug his toes into the loose cool sand, worming them down until his feet were covered in the pale golden grains and analysed his feelings.

During the early part of the day, after Hutch had found him at the warehouse, he'd felt positive they'd be able to find the Grice girl. Get the combination and get this shit awful contraption off him. As the day progressed and the leads turned up empty, he'd tried to remain positive, not only for himself, but more for the sake of Hutch. He didn't want the big blond hurting more than he had to, but as the evening and early part of the night wore on, his optimism faded. It was replaced by a fluttery feeling of panic that swelled in his stomach like a wave, then diminished for a while, to reappear stronger and more invasive a moment later.

But now, there was nothing. The panic had been replaced by an icy calm the minute he'd turned his back on his partner that final time at Bound to Please. It was as though a switch had been thrown in his head and his emotions had been turned off. It made him feel almost light headed with relief, and he wondered now at the feeling. He'd expected to feel anxious, terrified, and panicky. But instead there was a void and he found he could concentrate on the stuff around him instead.

He looked up at the sky, now turned from velvet black to deep navy above with a line of the deepest orange on the horizon as dawn broke. He stared at the large moon overhead, seeing the markings on its surface as though for the first time, studying their outlines intently. From them, he moved onto the stars and realised for the first time that he'd never really looked at them, sorry now that he hadn't taken the time to learn at least a few of their names. He realised he was sorry about a lot of things. That he hadn't married, that he hadn't gone from the army back to college and got a decent education behind him. Sorry too that he hadn't made more of a mark on this world, but too late for grand plans now.

His thought turned instead to the people he'd leave behind. He was glad he'd had that last phone call with his Mom. Although it had torn at the detective's heart not to tell her everything, he took a measure of comfort from the fact he'd been able to tell her one last time that he loved her. And Hutch. The thought of leaving the Blintz behind was almost too much to bear, but even more difficult would have been the sight of the big blond at his side waiting for oblivion. No, it was easier this way, although he knew Hutch would hurt for a long time afterwards. There was just nothing he could do about that. Time would heal, but just how much time was anyone's guess. He chuckled to himself. Maybe he could be a ghost and come back and haunt the big blond. Hover around and make a nuisance of himself at inopportune moments. He laughed out loud at the thought of floating out of a bedroom wall just as Hutch was reaching the grand finale of a night with a special woman!

And then there was Terry. If there were ghosts, or something after this world, would he meet her again? He shrugged his shoulders and looked once more at his watch. In 12 minutes, he'd know one way or the other.

He gazed around him, looking up the beach as the first of the shore birds started their quest for breakfast at the shoreline in the rapidly brightening light. The horizon had gone from deep orange to yellow and magenta and the promise of another gorgeous day. A fine day to die. The Starsky humour took over again as he realised he wouldn't have wanted his final morning on earth to be rainy. Looking down the beach back towards the city he took in the skyline of the office blocks and thought about his buddies getting ready for another session of grinding the streets in their hot and airless cars. He sent them a silent blessing. His eyes fell from the skyline to the golden sand again, and suddenly his heart stopped.

Who was that walking up the beach towards him? Shit, it couldn't be. But no, he'd recognise that outline
anywhere. The tall muscular frame dressed in combat fatigues, the curly unruly hair. Crap, why did Traff have to find him now and how did he know where to look? Hutch. Hutch must have told him.

He pushed himself further back into the sand, hoping against hope that Traff hadn't seen him and that he'd walk by and put enough space between them before the explosion occurred. The emotions were back in full force now sending rivers of sweat stinging into the cuts on his face and chest and Starsky's heart hammered in that chest as he realised that Traff had seen him and was running towards him up the beach at an impressive speed.

There was only one thing he could do. He levered his stiff sore body up and turning, he started to run.

Chapter 22

Traff saw the brunette looking towards him. He had hoped that Starsky would have been too wrapped up in his thoughts to see him immediately, giving Hutch longer to get into position. The blond had looked old and haggard and Traff had seen enough men in combat conditions to know just how much pain the flaxen haired cop was keeping to himself. He was glad his old Vietnam buddy had a friend like Hutch. God knows everyone needed a special friend, and Hutch seemed special indeed.

As Traff realised that Starsky had seen him, he started to run up the beach towards him, booted feet pounding the sand in an effort to get to his curly haired friend as quickly as possible.

Starsky caught the hike in speed and stood, wanting, needing to be alone at this crucial time. He knew Traff was the bomb expert but truly believed that Traff would try till the very last second before sacrificing himself to help his friend. He turned away from the military man and started to run, right into the familiar strong arms of his blond partner.

Hutch saw Starsky's change in body language from the back, having run in a large circle up the dunes and round to the back of that little sandy valley. His breath was whistling between his teeth when he got there, his damaged rib sending out pain flashes which threatened to plunge him into unconsciousness, but the thought of saving the brunette kept him going. As Starsky turned, Hutch planted his feet firmly in the sand and caught the fleeing brunette squarely by the shoulders, wedging him round until Starsky had his back to Hutch. The blonde's long arms wove themselves under Starsky's armpits and round the back of his neck in a passable imitation of the wrestling half nelson hold.

But the brunette was now frantic, seeing his two best friends so close. He struggled with all his strength, pushing backwards, but couldn't get sufficient traction of the sand with his bare feet to be able to dislodge the determined cop at his back.

'Let go' he yelled, never ceasing to struggle. 'Get the fuck away from me both of you'.

Traff came at him from the front, looking levelly at the thrashing brunette.

'Shut it Curly and calm down. We got the combination'.

But Starsky was in a frantic world of his own. A world where he needed to put as much distance between him and these two men as he possible could. As Traff came closer, he used Hutch's presence at his back as a base board and lifted both feet to kick out at the black haired man, planting both his feet in the military man's stomach and sending him flying back into the sand. The impact ricocheted into Hutch and sent another vicious spike of pain through his side, but he hung on with a vice like grip as Traff picked himself up and came at Starsky again.

'Will ya cut it out?' he yelled at the panicked cop. 'We can help. We got the numbers. Just hold still'.
But Starsky was deaf to his pleas, his mind focussed solely on escape. Traff could see that Hutch was having an increasingly hard time keeping hold of the brown haired banshee and with a look of apology in his eyes he came back again.

'Sorry Curly, but you asked for it' he said as he raised his workmanlike fist and cuffed Starsky on the jaw, seeing the lights go out in the eyes. Hutch held the limp form for one moment longer before dropping his friend's body onto the sand and collapsing in a heap at the side of him, panting and wheezing. He clutched at his side and was assailed by a bout of coughing that threatened to take the last of his breath as he spat fresh blood out onto the sand.

Traff caught the action from the corner of his eye, knowing Hutch's condition had deteriorated, but his attention was focussed on the limp battered tanned body lying in front of him. He gently rolled Starsky over onto his back and took another long look at the harness and the detonator. He studied it from all angles again, conscious that time was of the essence. The timer on the device showed a scant six minutes left to run, but he knew if he did something wrong, something out of sequence, then time just wouldn't matter anyway.

He saw the heavy leather with the inlay of metal, all the detonators in the little packages of C4 leading into one main strand of wire threaded through the main harness and down into the electronic timer and detonator.

Very carefully, he fingered the wires and the harness, trying to get a feel for the device. He'd done this countless times before. Made friends with the bomb, asking it to reveal its secrets to him. Caressing the mechanism as though it would speak to him through his fingertips until he could understand the contraption and know how best to disarm it.

This was one piece of work and on a purely professional level, Traff was impressed. What impressed him less was that it encased his friend so completely.

Finally getting a feel for the appliance, he reached up to the timer, just as the red numbers clicked down to show a blood red three on the timer. With hands that barely trembled, he placed his index finger over the first button, knowing if the combination was wrong, this first button would detonate the bomb and he would know nothing more of this world. He'd been in this place so many times, and each time was like the first — scary beyond belief.

Gently he hovered over the button showing the number three for a split second more, then swallowed once and pushed gently down mentally bracing himself for whatever might happen.

Nothing. No explosion, no sudden countdown on the detonator. Nothing, just the steady tick as before. Traff let out his breath slowly, hitting the other buttons in sequence — 84522 and looked for the signs that the bomb was disarmed.

For a long, nerve tingling second nothing happened. Traff hated this part: the time when the electronics of the detonator read and interpreted the code he'd entered. There was always this jangling delay and he never once got used to it although he'd been down this path dozens of times.

Eventually there was a barely audible electronic signal and the two red dots which had flickered in time with the passing of the seconds stopped their mesmeric winking and remained steady as the LED figure froze on the numeral 3. It had worked and the bomb was disarmed. Traff sat back on his heels and wiped the fine patina of sweat from his top lip, running his hands through his thick wiry hair and feeling the skin down his spine damp with perspiration too. Another one chalked up. He'd live to see another day, and what's more important, so would the two men on the sand beside him.

He raised his head and nodded at the blond cop looking worriedly at his side. Whilst dealing with the bomb...
he'd zoned everything and everyone else out and he suddenly remembered that Hutch knew sweet F.A. about bomb disposal.

'It's done' he said simply and saw the big flaxen haired man visibly slump.

Hutch had held his breath as the bomb disposal expert had examined the contraption on his partner's body. Whilst hanging on to Starsky's fighting form he'd felt his rib move again and was loosing his grip on the smaller man. Although hating that they'd had to do it, he was thankful when Traff had knocked Starsky out. It meant he didn't need to struggle to hold him any more and it also meant that should things go horrendously wrong, at least the brunette would know nothing about it.

Now he slumped on the sand next to the sleeping figure of his friend, feeling the huge waves of relief washing over him like a tide. How the hell Traff could do this for a living was beyond him and words could not express his gratitude to the soldier.

He watched as Traff reached for his bag of tools and rummaged in it, looking for the appropriate device to cut the harness away from Starsky's bruised and torn body. Even in sleep, the brunette looked to be in pain and Hutch remembered that he'd not only had to go through this 24 hours of hell, he'd had two previous days of mistreatment to deal with before. Traff took out a pair of rubber handled sheers and a wicked looking hacksaw with a short serrated blade and proceeded to lay them down on the top of the bag on the sand. Next he removed each of the tiny metal detonator pins from their respective pack of explosive and bent them upwards, away from the dirty grey blocks. Once all the detonator pins had been dealt with and Traff was satisfied that there was no way they could touch the C4, he proceeded to cut though the leather with the powerful sheers and hacksaw the metal core away. After ten minutes of hard work, the ends of the harness separated and Traff prised it away from Starsky's body, rolling the limp form slowly to get the harness from the back. Clearing it completely, he dumped it on top of his back and sat down next to his 'Nam buddy to wait.

Hutch had watched Traff sever the harness and remove it without making comment. This was the final step, and Hutch had been sure there would be another booby trap left, such had been their luck over the past few days. Now that he saw that his friend was safe, he relaxed a little. It was a mistake, and as his muscles unwound, the pain that he'd held at bay for the past few hours redoubled. Hutch was so tired and weary from the search for his friend, the fight and his current injured that he had no reserves of energy left.

With a final groan the big blond slipped sideways onto the sand and gave in to the waves of pain as blackness took him and swallowed him down to oblivion.

Chapter 23

Was he dead? He didn't feel dead. He felt cold and his body felt somehow light as though something was missing. Starsky came back to consciousness slowly, not wanting to go back to a world of pain and worry. He hugged the darkness to him like a security blanket, trying to find that sense of quiet oblivion again, but it eluded him. Finally he acknowledged that he had to open his eyes and he cracked them apart just a little.

He squinted against the bright early morning sun. Well, it wasn't hell, he thought. No fire and brimstone here. No red devil carrying a pointed trident. But it didn't feel much like the other place either. Oh shit, hadn't it happened yet? He didn't think he could wait out the final minutes. He'd lost the mindset he'd had before. He whimpered to himself, finally admitting to himself how bone crushingly scared he really was. Just someone shoot me and get it over with.

He opened his eyes wider and moved his head a little, sand particles catching in his mahogany curls. Instead of being alone, he saw the body of a man in military uniform next to him. The fog cleared from his mind and he remembered Traff running up the beach towards him and the feeling of utter panic he'd had as he felt
Hutch grab him from behind. Shit! Were they waiting with him till he exploded? He couldn't stand the thought. Being alone was preferable to watching his two good friends counting down with him. He groaned as he tried to move, realising his body had stiffened while he'd been unconscious.

Traff had been sitting comfortably staring out at the sea, enjoying the early morning sun on his face as he waited for one or other of the men to wake up again. He was worried about the blond. He'd seen him spitting the blood and had had a cursory look at his side while he'd been out of it. What he saw — the black bruise blossoming over the golden tanned skin and the ominous swelling - worried him, but while Hutch remained unconscious and immobile, no further damage would be done. He'd need to get to a hospital fairly quickly though, to get the fracture checked out and dealt with.

As he felt the movement at his side, Traff looked round and straight into indigo blue eyes looking troubled and angry.

'It's gone Curly. I disarmed it' he said quickly as he saw the beginnings of panic in the brunette, planting a firm hand on Starsky's shoulder.

For a moment, Starsky couldn't take in what he'd said. 'Gone? How'd ya get the combination?' he whispered, the last three days taking its toll and sapping what little energy he'd had left.

'Well if you'd hung around long enough, you're partner there would have told you he hammered it out of one of those body guards' Traff explained patiently, watching the news sink in. He pushed Starsky back down onto the sand as the brunette tried to sit up again.

'Do as you're told for once and rest up a minute' he said kindly.

Starsky massaged the bruise on his jaw, looking hurt. 'Yes Mom. Don't want ya to hit me again'.

'Well you had it coming Curly. I haven't seen you that bloody mad since that day we got you out of Nah Am. I had to shut you up to get at the bomb. If it makes you feel any better, my knuckles aren't doin' so well either'. He held his right hand up and showed bloody grazed fingers.

'I've got to go in a minute and get back to the car. I need to find a phone and let your Captain know you're Ok and then get an ambulance for you and Hutch. I had to wait till one of you woke up to tell you I'm on my way'.

Starsky turned his head and looked at the unconscious blond figure next to him a worried look passing over his face.

'What's wrong with him? He asked struggling to sit up. He realised the light feeling he'd had was the absence of that infernal harness, now reposing on Traff's bag next to him. He shuddered as he saw it and crawled over to the blond.

'He's got a busted rib, I think he's busted his cheek bone and he's probably got a fair sized concussion. He'll be OK but he needs to keep still till the ambulance gets here. Can you sit with him?

Starsky nodded and Traff got up, gathering his bag and the harness together. With a backwards wave of his hand he set off back up the beach to his car.

'Don't go anywhere' he shouted over his shoulder, and was gone.

Starsky was left in the quiet of the early morning, the relief he felt making him almost light headed as he realised just how close he'd come to loosing his life. He looked down at the blond at his side and brushed a wisp of flaxen coloured hair away from the golden forehead.
Even in sleep Hutch looked haggard and bruises showed on his body, standing out clearly against the fair skin. He saw the deep purple bruise under the left eye and the cut laid along the top of it, the bloody, bruised and raw knuckles and, moving the shirt slightly, the horrendous bruise across the lower ribs and round the side.

'Ye Gods, Blintz. What have ya done at yourself?' he said quietly, knowing that his body looked much the same. The matching rib injury and the cut on his face.

But he didn't seem to feel any of the pains anymore. In his sheer joy at being alive, he'd go to hell and back to make sure Blondie was OK. Oh. Wait. He'd just spent the last three days going to hell and back! Starsky shrugged his shoulders philosophically and got back to the job in hand.

He sat for several minutes just looking around him as if with new eyes. The colours of the morning all seemed a little brighter somehow, the breeze a little sweeter and the crash of the waves on the shore a little more musical. He chuckled to himself. Oh shit. I'm getting' all geared up for a soapy scene!

Starsky was woken from his reverie by a low moan. He looked down into the ice blue pools of his partner's eyes staring back at him.

'Hey Blintz. How ya doin?' he asked softly.

Hutch groaned again as he tried to move on the hard sand. 'Been better' he rasped quietly. Truly he felt as though a herd of elephants was running across his chest, but he didn't want the brunette to know just how bad he really felt.

Starsky put a restraining hand on Hutch's shoulder and without having to use too much force held him down.

'Traff says you're not to move. He's gone to phone Dobey an' get a meat wagon for the two of us' he explained.

Hutch closed his eyes as another wave of pain washed over him. He couldn't contain the low groan and he reached for Starsky's hand as he felt another bout of coughing coming on. The brunette took the hand and held it as he watched his partner coughing up blood and fighting for breath. He soothed the blond brow and eased Hutch back onto the sand when his breathing became easier. The blond lay panting and wheezing, his eyes closed for a moment.

Finally he opened them again, locking on to the deep indigo eyes above him.

'Just get me to your car 'n' I'll be fine' he gasped.

'Oh!....Ah.....no can do' Starsky stammered.

'What d'ya mean, no can do? I've ridden with ya in worse shape than this. Come on Gordo, the sands hard an' I'd much rather go in the striped tomato than wait for an ambulance' he panted.

Starsky looked embarrassed. 'No, I mean no can do' he tried to explain.

Hutch closed his eyes and groaned again. 'Starsk, I can't cope with secrecy right now, just help me up an' get me to the car. I'll be fine'.

'Well that's the thing, Blondie. I could probably get ya to the car, but that'd be about it'.

Hutch scrutinised his partner's face. 'You've not had an accident? The car's OK isn't it? Oh my God, you've
totalled it.....'

Starsky cut him off. 'No, the car's fine. It's parked back there a ways, it's just that we couldn't........ah........we couldn't get in it' he finished in a rush.

Patiently, and with the look of a teacher talking to a particularly dim child, Hutch tried again. 'Why can't we get in the car Starsk? You lost the keys?'

'No. Know exactly where they are'.

'So, go get 'em and get us out of here' Hutch ground out.

He realised the brunette wasn't moving and was looking more uncomfortable by the second.

'Starsk, what did ya do with 'em?' he asked quietly.

'I posted 'em in the mail box' the curly haired man confessed, suddenly extremely embarrassed.

'Say what?' Hutch asked in disbelief. 'Ya posted 'em? Where to?'

'You'.

Hutch was lost for words, the sentiment sinking in. He realised how much his friend must have been hurting in those final hours on his own and how much it must have cost the brunette to make those final arrangements. He put a hand out and rested it on Starsky's knee, ignoring the flash of pain in his side. Tears threatened to spill down his cheeks, but he blinked them back fiercely.

'Oh, Starsk. what ya do that for huh? Didn't ya think I'd come lookin' for ya anyway? Starsk, I'd never let you go through all this crap on your own' he whispered.

'I know' the equally quiet reply came. 'That's why I went away. I couldn't bare the thought of you out here with me. Don't ya see Blondie? The thought of you dyin' with me was worse than the thought of goin' alone. It ....it hurt too much' the final was almost inaudible as Starsky rested his head in his hands.

'Yeah, and the thought of you countin' the seconds down on your own would have haunted me for the rest of my life'. Hutch countered. 'You mean more to me 'n' life ya big lug. This is a partnership. Starsky 'n' Hutch. Me 'n' Thee'. He rested his head back on the sand, suddenly overcome with the enormity of what they'd been through, and closed his eyes tight. He was overcome with tiredness and needed some comfort and for this pain in his side and head to go away. He listened for a moment to the eerie call of the seabirds overhead, trying to find a comfortable spot in the sand.

'You've even got my initials on ya, proves were partners' Hutch smiled.

Starsky looked quizzical. 'Initials? What d'ya mean?'

Hutch raised his hand slightly and pointed at the raw red stripes decorating Starsky's body where the straps of the harness had held the explosive. They formed a perfect H.

'Hey, will ya look at that? Starsky murmured. They lapsed into silence.

'Utch?' A whisper on the air.

'Yeah?'
'Thanks'.

'No thanks needed buddy' he groaned.

'Hutch?'

'What?'

'When we get back, can I have the keys back please?'

Chapter 24

Hutch woke the next day sore and disorientated. He shifted uncomfortably in his bed and felt the pressure of bandages around his chest and the needle in his wrist leading to the IV bag hung at the side of the bed. Vaguely he remembered something about haemothorax and some bastard of a doctor sticking a hose pipe into his side. But at least he could breath easier now.

He lay still a moment trying to orientate himself. Yesterday after he'd had the conversation with Starsky on the beach, things started to go downhill fast. He'd found it increasingly difficult to breath and in the end, the world had become a place of sparkling colour and stars as he fought for each lungful of air. Starsky had been right there at his side the whole time, propping him up, soothing him and holding his hand through the worst of the pain and distress, but just as the ambulance crew stormed up the beach, he'd lost his fight with lucidity and had lapsed into unconsciousness. He had vague memories of the emergency treatment on the beach and the painful transfer to the ambulance and then to hospital. And he had far from vague memories of that doctor sticking a scalpel into his side and skipping back as blood spilled onto the floor of the ER. With easier breathing came relaxation, and whether it was the drugs they'd given him, or just the fatigue of the past few days, he'd slept almost 24 hours straight.

Starsky had watched his partner's titanic battle for breath with growing alarm and had been relieved beyond words when the ambulance crew had arrived to take over care of the blond. He'd sat quietly back as the medics had worked over Hutch's body and it wasn't till Hutch was breathing a little better with assistance that one of the medics got sight of him. To say they were staggered that he was still standing was an understatement and he was more than a little embarrassed when he too was carried from the beach on a stretcher.

He'd fallen asleep in the ambulance and was woken by one of the doctor's shining one of those pen light things in his eyes. He'd been more than a little indignant that they'd woken him up, but they were adamant that he'd have to stay in hospital for a couple of days to get thoroughly checked out and have his ribs seen to and his many contusions stitched and dressed. A course of antibiotics was also in order as some of the wounds were showing signs of infection. He had a mild fever, but nothing could make him feel bad any more. He'd survived and he was alive. Who could want for more? The first thing he did was demand a phone and tell Ma that he was OK.

And so here they both were, sharing a hospital room again. As Hutch woke up slowly, he realised the brunette was out of bed and sitting at his bedside keeping watch. He smiled at his partner, seeing the multiple dressings on Starsky's chest and sides and the matching strapping around his ribs.

'Hey look. We match' he rasped, pointing at Starsky's chest.

'Terrific' the brunette retorted with a grin. 'Now shut up an' go back to sleep. The sooner you're better the sooner we can make a bid for freedom'.

But Hutch was snuggling down anyway. 'What's the rush?' he asked drowsily. 'Saw a cute little nurse a
while ago'.

The brunette snorted. 'Ya might have Blintz, 'but we got the eighty year old Joan Rivers look alike. If that's your idea of fun, she's all yours'.

At that moment the nurse in question appeared at the doorway.

'Mr Starsky, will you please get back into bed, you're pulling at your IV. Do you wish me to have to sedate you?' She tutted at his bare chest and feet. 'Walking around the hospital half naked!'

Starsky stood and put his hand to the drawstring of his pyjama pants. In his best Bogart voice he said 'Whatsa matter shweetheart. Ya want the whole show?'

The nurse gave a frightened look and squeaked before exiting quickly. But the brunette grinned but padded obediently over to his own bed and got in. He was tired, sore and stiff, but happy that he and the Blintz were still in one piece. He snuggled down onto the clean crisp sheets and closed his eyes, allowing sleep to claim him.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Later that same day, the cops had a string of visitors. The first was the dear familiar frame of Tom Trafford, hovering at the door to their room, looking uncomfortable in the hospital environs.

Starsky saw him first.

'Hi Traff' he struggled to sit upright, hampered by the drip and the bandages.

Traff walked over to the chair set between the two beds. 'God, I hate cops who lie down on the job' he smirked.

Starsky looked hurt. 'You know me Traff. Do some of my best work on my back' he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

'Well no change there then' Traff laughed. 'Just came to make sure you're both OK. Got a call this morning. I have to ship out tomorrow, so I came to say goodbye'.

Hutch was sorry the military man was going. In the short time he'd known him, he liked the man immensely. 'Thanks for everything Buddy. Couldn't have done it without you'.

'Hey, don't mention it. Anything for the pleasure of belting Curly here' he grinned at the brunette who was fingerling the blue bruise on his jaw.

'Where ya going?' Hutch asked, curious.

Traff shook his head looking apologetic. 'Can't say. Classified' he explained. He got up to leave. 'Just came by to make sure you're both OK, so I'll see you around. Its been.....'

'A blast' Starsky finished for his old friend. 'Jeez Traff, find some different puns will ya? That one was goin' back in 'Nam!' But he put his hand out and pulled his friend into a bear hug.

Traff returned the hug and with a quick wave to Hutch and no backward glance, he left.

'I like that guy' Hutch said after he'd gone.
'Yeah, he's a good friend. I've known him a long time an' he's never changed' Starsky admitted. 'I'd trust my life to him'.

'He told me about your tour in 'Nam' Hutch said quietly.

'Oh shit, he didn't! Yeah, he was the one that found me after Sharpe finally told 'em where I was. Bet he laid all the gruesome stuff on thick. He always likes to brag 'bout how he patched me up an' got me out. Still says I owe him' he smiled fondly. 'Guess I do now'.

Hutch didn't push, knowing this was not the time he wanted to talk about that period in his partner's life, but one day he'd get the brunette to open up. Just not today. Today was for celebrations, not bad memories.

The silence was broken once again as a whole host of people made their appearance. First came a small black bundle of energy in the form of Rosie Dobey. She cannoned into the room shouting 'Uncle Dave, Uncle Ken!' at the top of her voice. She was followed rather more quietly by the little figure of Mae Lin and her Mother, Zhao Qing. As Rosie sat on Hutch's bed with the big blonde's arm around her, Mae Lin climbed up onto Starsky's. She kept a little distance as she eyed the drip and all the bandages, unsure of she should go any closer.

'Hey sweetie' the brunette said gently. 'C'mere an' give me a hug'. Her face lit up and she crawled up the bed, nestling into the brunette's side like she belonged there, smiling up into his face. He squeezed her gently to him and looked over her head to Zhao.

The Chinese woman looked a little better than the last time they'd seen her. The dark shadows had gone from under her eyes and she was moving less stiffly. Very formally she bowed from the waist and stood at the side of the brunette's bed.

'We both wanted to come to thank you' she explained. 'Your Captain Dobey has arranged for us to go back to China. Too many bad memories here, and I miss my parents' she said with a sad smile. 'If it had not been for you and Detective Hutchinson, I would still be in that place' she shuddered slightly.

Starsky smiled at her. 'I'm glad things worked out for you. Sorry you have to go, though' he looked back at the little girl nestled against him. 'kinda miss this' he said.

Mae Lin and Zhao stayed another few minutes but left as the big bulk of Dobey appeared at the door. He stood back to let the two Chinese leave, then flopped down into the chair between the two men.

'Rosie, why not go and get your Pop a soda huh?' he asked his daughter and gave her a $5 bill. 'And some candy for you, but don't tell your Mom' he continued conspiratorially. The little girl giggled, slipped of Hutch's bed and skipped out of the room.

There was silence for a moment. Dobey coughed self consciously. He hated hospitals even more than the two men in the beds and always felt claustrophobic.

'You two OK now?' he asked.

They both nodded.

'What happened to DeMaine and Grice?' Hutch asked, remembering he'd left the white haired industrialist cuffed to a desk in a locked room.

'We picked Grice up right after the trade' Dobey explained, seeing the blank look on the brunettes face. 'Then we went back to that club an' found DeMaine where you'd left him, whimperin' and cryin' about how he was a businessman and how dare we. Well we told him how we dare and now the both of 'em are in
custody without bail, pending further enquiries'.

'Someone want to run all this past me?' Starsky asked, realising there was so much he didn't know about what went on the day before.

Hutch looked over at him. 'Well if ya will cut an' run Gordo, what d'ya expect? I'll fill ya in later'.

Dobey got up to leave, but paused at the door.

'You OK now Starsky?' he asked

The brunette looked surprised at being singled out. 'Yeah, couldn't be better, why?'

The Captain walked back over to the bed, fishing in his jacket pocket. He pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to the curly haired man in the bed. ' Seems you enjoyed your "final" drive a little too much'.

'Whats this?' Starsky asked carefully

'Speeding ticket. You were clocked doin' 100 in a 40 zone'.

Starsky started to protest as Dobey hurriedly left the room, leaving Hutch whimpering in pain as his laughter jostled his broken rib.

The brunette lay back on his pillows looking smug.

'S'OK Hutch. No problem' he looked at the $100 fine.

'What d'ya mean no problem? Hutch gasped between chuckles.

'The fine is against the registered keeper of the car'.

'Yeah?'

'Well, there we are Blintz, I'm OK’ Starsky grinned.

The smile left Hutch's face as he started to cotton on.

'How'd ya figure that?'

'I posted the keys to you, along with the papers. Ya got 21 days to pay!'

He turned over on his side and listened to the shouts coming from the blond in the next bed with an enormous Starsky smile stretched across the handsome face. Some days just got better and better!