Dream Until...

by

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His mind was going now; rapidly catching up to a body that prison had aged quickly and harshly, leaving his features slack and ruddy, eyes clouding over and perpetually runny. A pathetic parody of a once fastidious and well-groomed man, now whiskered, uniformed, and often smelly. He talked to himself, muttering, whispering, holding one-sided conversations around a battered and scarred tabletop in a visitation room. His fading mind seeing only an elegant boardroom conference table surrounded by 'his' people. Mesmerized by the imagined vision of two men projected onto a screen hanging just beyond that table, he spoke.

"Money still talks, gentlemen. Still buys, still kills."

The old man slowly stood, unfolding his body, jerky bits at a time. A bony hand slapped hard at the tabletop, spittle flying from slack lips, demanding the attention of the other man in the room.

"Renolds!"

Bill Renolds gave the old man his full attention. He too knew that money talked. Knew others had failed before him and paid a high price for their failures. Many, many men and women had been arrested, imprisoned, or eliminated the past few years, and Renolds had no intention of becoming another statistic. If James Gunther wanted David Starsky and Kenneth Hutchinson dead--Renolds would deliver. Because money bought other things, too. Power, weapons, and paid assassins would all be at his disposal. Thousands of dollars were set to flow in from hidden accounts, foreign banks, and old cronies wanting one last ride with Gunther.

Renolds had his own dreams. Eliminate Starsky and Hutchinson for Gunther and then rebuild Gunther's empire. Use resources and people Gunther had no idea existed and become the next James Marshall Gunther. Facing the old man, he arched an eyebrow and waited.

_Talk to me, old man...let your money speak...I'm listening._

"They're getting too close, again. My California operations are too important to be compromised. Get on the phone with Bates and get this situation resolved, Renolds."

Renolds wondered if his face showed the revulsion he felt creeping through his body. Wondered if Gunther could see it. Wondered if reading it there was responsible for the sudden, momentary clearing of Gunther's mind. Responsible for the clear anger in the sharp words that Gunther next spoke.

"They've cost me everything! Make them pay...make them suffer. Suffer..."

Gunther slumped back down in his chair, fingertips and thumb rubbing together, staring blindly at the wall over Renolds' shoulder, his visit with reality over in an instant. Doing his best to keep his face impassive, Renolds nodded and called quietly for the guard, handing off a fat envelope as he passed him, buying yet another man's silence. There were no more California operations, and Gunther's assistant Bates was long silent, his life taken by Gunther's own hand. Bill Renolds had no intention of following in Bates' footsteps. Whatever it took, he would live to enjoy his money. Renolds made his way down the corridor, not able to stop the shudder that came with the words that followed him down the hall.

"Now and forever gone, gentlemen. Now and forever." Mumbled and slurred over and over again.
"Now and forever."

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Ken Hutchinson jerked in his sleep, feet pushing and kicking at the mattress, head pressing back hard into the pillows behind him. Images flashed through his mind, fractured into strobe-light seconds: blood spurting from wound-riddled flesh, bullets captured in mid-flight, Starsky's Torino bearing hole after new hole.

*Starsky...get down! Starsky! Starsky!*

Starsky falling, Starsky lying on the ground, Starsky taken from him. Hutch's back was suddenly cold as his body surged forward, hands reaching desperately to touch, to pull Starsky down, to save him.

*Get some help out here...damn...God...please...he's cold, freezing...help him!*

He could hear himself crying out, hear the fear and loss and anger in his voice. He struggled, but sleep held him fast, the terrors that haunted him refusing to let go. A warm weight pressed closer to his side, something metal and sharp-edged pushing hard and dangerous against his belly. A knife? In his dream he screamed, calling desperately for Starsky, calling until his body slumped wearily in defeat, knowing Starsky wouldn't answer him. Too many times he had screamed for Starsky, already knowing the silence to come. Starsky never answered in Hutch's dreams.

"Hey...hey, Hutch. Come on now...wake up, boy. That's it. Okay. It's okay."

The weight at his side shifted, and the metal pressed against his skin was pulled away, clattering to the floor. Hands found his arms, the sides of his face, his hair. Moved over his upper body, soothing away the fear, pulling him back. Starsky came into focus. Starsky. Whole and alive and his. The day floated back in bits and pieces. Morning hours filled with the dredged up filth of crime that wrapped around them day after day as they worked the streets. Days Hutch would always be grateful for despite the pain they witnessed, despite the close calls that toyed with their very lives. For each day they fought was another day to remember how very near they had come to losing everything. How very near they had come to his nightmares being their lives.

Bookings, lunch, a loud and angry exchange of words with their captain. An afternoon of mind numbing reports, bad coffee, and a bored partner immersed in his latest volume of trivia and facts and--*God save us all*--creative and elegant words. Quitting time couldn't have come soon enough.

"Shall we egress, Detective Hutchinson?"

Relief, escape, home. Starsky could use whatever words he wanted to. Detective Hutchinson was ready to go.

Hutch closed his eyes again and remembered the more recent hours just past. The hurry to get home. Nothing special planned--dinner, chores, a mindless night of television. Taking what they needed to turn off their thoughts, to shift their lives back to themselves. Starsky toting an enormous bowl of popcorn to bed, careful, babe, bowl's hot, lots of butter... Settling shoulder to shoulder against the pillows that propped their backs. Starsky drifting away first, the bowl slipping from his grasp as he turned his body to Hutch's, the poke of a bony knee, a buttery hand trailing across his lover's belly. Hutch soon following, the television left to drone on and cast shadows around their bedroom. One of Starsky's favorite 'classics'; an old black and white horror film filled with loonies and screams and gore playing to a sleeping audience.

"You with me now, babe? Should have turned the TV off...sorry I fell asleep." Starsky's hands were there...
with his voice, still soothing...wanting to pet away Hutch's fears. "Hutch? Just some crazy old movie, that's all."

*More like crazy old Hutchinson. Years have passed...still only yesterday in my heart...*

"Sorry, buddy, didn't mean to wake you." Hutch stretched, stabbing the off button with his big toe. Starsky was gathered close, his scent breathed in, skin stroked, warmth absorbed.

"Hutch, was it...?"

"Yeah." *I know I have to let go, Starsk, I know... Let it dry up and blow away. It won't...I can't..."

"I'm here, Hutch. I'm alive. I love you." Starsky's mantra—soothing, sacred words. The answer to Hutch's prayers. Repeated and found by Hutch's lips when they found Starsky's. Hutch's arms tightened again, their kiss gone deep, bodies pressing hot and hard. Hutch drew back, stroking Starsky's face, bothering a curl. Treated to Starsky's smile, the one that said all there was to say.

"I am sorry I woke you."

"Don't be..." A shift of hips, a hopeful erection. "Hey, now that we're awake..."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, blondie. Scoot back up there for me. Just like you were; that's it, let me at ya..." *Let me take you away...*

Hutch did as he was told. Happily. Closed his eyes and followed the paths of Starsky's hands and lips and tongue as they traced down then up, across and then back over his body. Pictured his own cock filling, rising to meet the mouth of his lover, disappearing between Starsky's lips. Pictured Starsky's long fingers entering him, stroking in and out as his mouth brought him to orgasm. Trapped in his favorite place, held fast by an arm around his back, captive to lips and fingers, far away from his dreams.

Starsky's whispered "Babe?" brought him back. He obeyed the hands that pulled him down, spread his legs wider and lifted his ass higher. Starsky swore, making to leave their bed, stopped by Hutch's hands. The soft sound of popcorn spilling on the floor, and the bowl was there, the butter in its base offered to willing fingers, scooped, spread, and Starsky was taking him. Easing his way in, watching his body join with Hutch's.

Hutch pumped with his lover, tiny grains of salt providing new sensations of friction to something so familiar. Starsky snaked his arms under Hutch's shoulders, drawing him close, whispering all the endearments he held for Hutch into his ear. Raising his body to slip a hand in between, finding Hutch's cock, stroking and talking to it as it filled. Sweet words that soon blended with curses as Starsky's moves sped up, a nearly incoherent blending of the two, something obscene muttered about salt, and Starsky was filling Hutch, the endearments back, calling him sweetheart and darling and honey and his. Hutch absorbed it all, soaked in the tenderness, the roughness, the joy of Starsky's body covering him, warming him. Starsky's hands moved again...his mouth and tongue suddenly busy, and Hutch was coming between their bodies. Different from his first orgasm, more soul, more emotion, coming more for his lover than for himself.

"That's it, baby, come for me again...Hutch...Hutch..."

Hutch was tired, his body lax and not quite his own. Gentle hands were cleaning him, caressing, still claiming. Turned and turned again, settled into the bed and kissed. Chuckling quietly against Starsky's mouth at his lover's last words for the day.
"You're cleaning up the popcorn, blondie."

Sleep came. Solid, healing sleep. Dreamless and safe.

~*~*~*~

Starsky slipped through the squad room doors and pulled up short. The man at Starsky's desk gave no notice of his arrival; casually sorting through Starsky's files, tossing mail and paperwork in the general direction of Hutch's side of the desk, testing and frowning over a locked drawer. The swinging door behind Starsky opened with a soft movement of air, and Starsky knew Hutch was at his back watching the stranger with him. Another tug at the locked drawer, and the man cursed and finally looked up. As did the half dozen officers in the room who had been taking in the scene, hiding behind half-closed eyes, reports, and telephone receivers.

"Help you with something?" Starsky schooled his features, doing his best to stay neutral, sensing danger but not knowing what or why.

"I need a key for this desk." Nothing given away there. Starsky tried again.

"Like I said, can I help you with something?"

"And like I said, I need a key for this desk."

Hutch took over, moving to stand in front of his partner. Getting right to the point.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Lieutenant Chapman. Now, do you have a key to this desk or not?"

"Nope. You have a key to your desk, Starsky?" Hutch's gaze stayed locked on Chapman.

"Yep."

"You know anybody by the name of Lieutenant Chapman, Starsky?"

"Nope."

"Didn't think so."

Starsky shifted around his partner, moving in on Chapman until they were eye to eye.

"Talk."

Chapman's only reaction was the tightening of his fist around a manila envelope being crushed in his grasp. Dropping it to the desk, he turned on his heel and rapped sharply on Captain Dobey's door, entering and slamming the door behind him.

Hutch spoke first. "What the fuck was that all about?"

"Don't know, partner." Starsky tilted his head toward Dobey's office, raising his eyebrows at the increasing volume of whatever discussion was taking place between Dobey and Chapman. "Judging by Dobey's yelling, I'd say we'll find out in about two minutes." Starsky dropped into his chair and swung his feet onto his desk, snagging the manila envelope Chapman had been holding. Smoothing the wrinkles out and shrugging at Hutch, he opened the clasp. "Fan mail? Wonder what...?" Pictures. Starsky's words dissolved in
a gasp and a curse and the calling of his partner's name. His feet found the floor, his hands at war with the envelope—wanting to let go of the hurt, unable to do so.

Starsky was vaguely aware of Hutch talking to him and trying to ease the envelope from his hands. He could still hear Dobey yelling, demanding his and Hutch's presence in his office, but Dobey's voice was growing more and more muffled and far away. He felt sweat break out, felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, felt the tremors that made his hands shake as he tried to pull the pictures back from Hutch, tried to not let Hutch see. He failed. Heard Hutch's quiet "Damn. No, buddy. Let me have them." Dobey quit yelling and Hutch started, swearing and throwing questions around the squad room, his voice alternately menacing and pleading. Somebody had to have seen, someone must know.

"You mean to tell me none of you saw anything?"

There were a few quiet answers. The envelope must have already been there. No strangers had come in. Well, a few voices amended, no one but the lieutenant. No delivery person. Nothing. Nobody. Voices began to rise with the denials, desk chairs raked over worn floor tiles, cabinet drawers slammed in frustration. Muttered apologies. In the middle of it all sat Starsky, pale, withdrawn, silent. Eyes locked on his partner, whose eyes were traveling from man to man, searching for lies, for guilt. Finding nothing.

Dobey appeared and took over, demanding Hutchinson get his partner into his office. Calling for order in his squad room. Held out his hand for the envelope and did some swearing of his own. Slammed a few things around and silenced the room with a glare.

"I want to know who left this here. One of you knows and one of you is going to tell me. I'll be in my office." Nearly tripping over a gawking Chapman, verbally pushing him away with an angry growl.

"Captain Dobey, what the hell...?"

It was Dobey who slammed the door in Chapman's face.

Dobey settled himself at his desk and watched his men. Starsky's eyes still hadn't left Hutch. Hutch was hunkered down in front of him, talking quietly, hands moving from Starsky's arms, to his face, to the tops of his thighs. Gentle, intimate gestures that Dobey had been privy to hundreds of times. Better than a decade past in their lives, and Dobey had been there, watched, and learned. Rookies, new partners, best friends, his finest detectives. Gunther. Lovers. Dobey had protected them, lied for them, looked the other way, and accepted them. Now? Now was going to be tough.

This damned morning had brought Lieutenant Chapman. This damned morning had brought an envelope of god-awful, hurtful pictures. Dobey scrubbed at his face and wondered which event would prove to be the most harmful. Replacing his hands with his handkerchief, Dobey gave his face one more swipe and tipped the contents of the envelope onto his desk.

_Sweet Lord._ Starsky in the emergency room. Shots of his chest and belly, more of his back. Black-edged holes, every shade of red blood, unholy shades of white skin. The floor littered with wrappings and stained gauze, marred by red footprints and widening circles of blood. Doctors, nurses, more and different in nearly every picture. Starsky was a stranger, hidden away by tubes and bags and oxygen mask. And in the background, huddled by the door stood Hutch. Dobey had seen Hutch scared before, seen him in pain, and watched him cry. But this--this was the only time he had seen the intense terror and grief and raw hurt that was captured in the pictures. There was nothing else that compared before or after the shooting. As the pile of pictures came toward the end, Dobey recognized himself, standing facing Hutch, his hands on Hutch's upper arms, turning him, leading him away. _I don't remember...there was so much pain._

The last picture showed only Starsky in the room. Alone. His naked body bloody and still. Shot. Cut. Hands
hanging over the sides of the gurney, his face turned away from the camera. Dead, dear Lord, he looks dead...

Dobey slipped the pictures back into the envelope, pushed it to the edge of his desk and wished it would disappear. "Hutch..." Pounding on his door interrupted Dobey. Pounding followed by Chapman's appearance in Dobey's office. Hutch was on his feet and in Chapman's face in seconds.

"You tell me now, you bastard. Tell me what you know." Chapman didn't so much as flinch.

"Captain Dobey, I suggest you call off your man. Now."

Dobey wasn't quite ready to do that; choosing to let Hutchinson get a few things out of his system. In Dobey's opinion, Chapman deserved to be a target.

"You were the only man in that squad room I don't know. You were rifling my partner's desk. And you were holding," Hutch jerked his head toward Dobey's desk, "that envelope. What's your game, Chapman? Tell me what the hell is going on. Now!"

"Captain." Chapman's voice yielded no room for argument.

Dobey stepped in. Facts were facts, and he wasn't about to let Hutchinson's clenched fist meet Chapman's jaw. Not just yet. "Leave him be, Hutch. Chapman came into the squad room and straight through into my office, empty-handed. I saw him myself, Hutch, he was in my office most of the morning. Stand down."

"As far as I know, the envelope was already there, Hutchinson. I don't know what's in it, and frankly I don't care. That's not why I'm here. Your Captain told you to stand down." Hutch didn't move except to counter Chapman's attempt to side step him. "Do your men always listen so well, Dobey?"

Dobey took Hutch's place, beefy finger in Chapman's face. "Do I need to remind you that I am your superior officer, Lieutenant? Your business here can wait. I need to be with my men now. I'll get back to you later."

"Be with your...? For God's sake! Do you really think the chief will wait on this because you need to be with your men? What the fuck does that mean? Give me that envelope, what the hell can be so horrible that the three of you are falling apart?"

There were sounds in the room. Swearing, the hiss and scrape of a chair being vacated. Quick footsteps against the floor. Chapman made his grab for the envelope. Surprised and stopped by a very strong hand on his wrist.

"No. Take the envelope, Hutch. Chapman doesn't have the right to see them. They're ours, yours and mine. Our lives, not his."

Chapman wasn't given much of a choice—the bones in his wrist felt damn close to snapping. The dark blue eyes trained on his face menacing and dangerous. Chapman had more than a fleeting moment of fear before he stupidly talked himself out of it—a bare hand, pissed off eyes? Not nearly enough, Starsky. Unfortunately for Chapman, not enough to shut him up and not enough to realize just whom he was dealing with. Not about to give Starsky any satisfaction, he played his trump card. Voice gone taunting.

"Let go of me, Starsky. Perhaps the chief will want to see the photographs. Is my hunch correct? Somebody manage to catch you and Hutchinson in flagrante?"

Chapman's verbal trump card fluttered to the floor along with Chapman himself, sputtering and groaning, victims of a double punch. Pulling himself up, telling himself he still had his dignity, Chapman found himself face to face with Dobey. Ignoring what he knew was blood and spit running down his chin, he
managed to get half of Dobey's name out before Dobey had his say.

"Get out, Chapman. Get out and be glad you're getting away in the shape you're getting away in. One more word about either of my men and you'll be tasting my fist, too."

~*~*~*~

Starsky and Hutch stood shoulder to shoulder and faced their captain. Two questions were fired.

"Okay, Cap, who the hell is Chapman?"

"And why?" The second question from Starsky. No longer quiet, pale still, but ready to fight. To get back the past three years of his life that that cursed envelope of pictures had just snatched away.

Dobey let out a breath and sat back down at his desk. "Chapman is the chief's boy. Worked for him for years before transferring down to San Diego, came back on loan at the chief's request."

"Why?" Hutch repeated Starsky's demand, warning bells telling him he already knew the answer. Starsky's slumping shoulder against his own telling him that Starsky knew, too. Knew it had nothing to do with the pictures.

Dobey loosened his tie and patted down his pockets searching for his handkerchief, giving up and grabbing a tissue instead. His face was sweaty and his agitation was obvious. *Damn, I hate this. But I owe them; they should hear it from me.*

"He's here on orders from Chief Grimes to investigate the two of you. Someone the chief is determined to keep anonymous gave Grimes an earful; about the house you share, where you go on your days off, friends you see...dammit, right down to the minute your house goes dark at night. We're going to have a fight on our hands."

"Captain...you don't have to..."

"Can it, Starsky. I said we and I meant it. Don't think for a minute that Grimes and Chapman won't figure out that I know." Dobey looked at his men, raising a hand and pointing a finger slowly from one to the other. "Whatever goes down, goes down for all of us. You two have proven yourselves over and over again as the best officers I've ever had. Grimes wants you, he takes me, too. End of discussion. Now sit down, we need to talk."

Chairs were pulled close to Dobey's desk, closer to each other. Starsky grabbed coffee cups, and Hutch took advantage of his turned back to slide the envelope of pictures away from the edge of Dobey's desk and half-under a stack of papers. Busted when Starsky set down his coffee and gave him a look.

"Didn't Cap just tell you we were his best officers? Includes me, blondie...you know, Detective Starsky?"

*It's okay, Hutch, we'll worry about those later.*

Hutch contained the mother hen in him with a small smile and a muttered "ass", but Starsky let the envelope be. He'd made his point for the umpteenth time since Gunther--and Hutch had managed once again to tell him he loved him without saying the words. For now the issues of Chapman and the pictures would be kept separate. Dobey's word that Chapman had arrived empty handed was enough.

"Okay, Cap'n, let's start with Chapman and worry about the pictures later. So Grimes imported Chapman to check us out. Starsky and I have had our run-ins with Grimes in the past, just like we had our run-ins with Chief Ryan. Plenty of them. Why now?"
Dobey gave another of his seemingly endless sighs, and pulled a short stack of materials from his desk drawer: a magazine, a newspaper clipping, a couple of small flyers, some over-sized mailing envelopes. Selecting the envelopes, he slid one across the desk to each of his men. The envelopes bore the city emblem and address in the upper left corner; there were no addressees.

Starsky opened his, shook out a picture, and tossed it back on the desk, taking his anger out on his superior, glaring at Dobey in defiance before his face softened in silent apology. None of this was Dobey's fault. Hutch held on to his, the ill-fated picture bearing the brunt of his anger, torn and shredded and dropped unceremoniously in Dobey's wastebasket. Getting in Dobey's face and banging a fist on his desktop.

"All right, so that's all he's got? I doubt there's an officer in this building who hasn't seen Starsky and me hugging. What else?"

Starsky tugged at Hutch's sleeve. "Hutch, hey, come on. Take it easy. Go on, Cap."

"The envelope of goodies showed up on Grimes' desk yesterday afternoon. According to him, his 'informant' is a hundred percent." Dobey tossed the rest of the papers on his desk, commenting as he did. "The magazine article and newspaper clipping are about gay cops in today's police force and what happens to them when the word gets out. The flyers are making the rounds on your beat. Those are what have me the most worried."

Starsky grabbed first, scanning and handing the flyers off to Hutch. Keeping one to read aloud.

"Feel safe, Bay City? Don't. Pray a gay cop doesn't take your call—he will arrive alone and stay alone. We won't back him up, why should you pay him? Send your protests to City Hall today!"

Starsky quit reading and looked at Dobey. "Grimes is worried about us, too, huh?" Dobey's face told him to lay off the sarcasm. "Okay, Captain, Grimes is after me and Hutch, we the only ones he's looking at?"

"I don't know, Starsky. I don't know who's gay or straight and don't give a damn anymore. But," Dobey's fist hit hard on his desk, "you two are going to have to be careful. You can bet there are men who will flat out refuse to back up a supposedly gay officer. Whoever those men are, looks like they've put it in writing and taken it to Grimes. You both know it's only a matter of time before it gets to the commissioner and mayor."

"Captain?" Hutch's voice was soft and even. "What does Grimes want?"

"You, Hutch. You and Starsky. Gone."

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Bill Renolds slipped his leather briefcase back under the passenger seat of his late-model rental.

"Did you deliver the merchandise?" His question was delivered via the rearview mirror. The kid he addressed squirmed in the backseat, stuffing a wad of bills into his jacket pocket, wanting to be anywhere but in the land of cops this stranger had taken him to.

"I told you, mister, it's done." He'd tested the door handle several times with the same result. Locked. Sinking down in his seat as yet another officer walked by, he had no choice but to wait. Renolds was in charge and Renolds had the money. Lots of it.

"You have another job to do before five. Make sure you do it. Meet me at the empty lot over on Commerce same time tomorrow and we'll go over your schedule."

The kid felt his gut lurch. The money was good. But messing with cops? He had a feeling it was going to get
somebody killed. *Sure as hell better be some lousy pig and not me. Maybe I can get out of...* The click of the door locks releasing broke his thoughts. He opened the door and ran. He had just a few hours to buy what he needed and get across town before anyone got home.

Renolds pulled slowly out of his parking place, braking to let a squad car pass. The kid had done well. Slipped unseen into the squad room on a suit's coat tails and back out again before anyone else was in the room for the start of the morning shift. Renolds allowed himself a smug smile. He'd done his homework well; schedules memorized, habits studied, his timing perfect. And the kid fit in perfectly, too. Needy and disposable--nobody would be looking for him anytime soon.

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"What do you wanna do, Hutch? Do we fight? Lie?" Starsky said "lie" like it was a bad taste in his mouth. "Tell me how you want to play this."

"I don't! I'm sick of playing. I just wish to hell the bad guys would get sick of playing with us."

"Hutch? You talking about Grimes and Chapman, or whoever's responsible for the shooting pictures?"

Hutch got that look he got when he was confronted with some too overwhelming--and too much of it--information. The look that was followed with a quick breath and his hands being thrown up in the air.

"I sure as hell hate to think of Grimes as one of the bad guys. And we don't even know Chapman. Captain, you're positive Chapman had nothing on him when he arrived?"

"Nothing, Hutchinson. I heard his footsteps in the squad room and went out to meet him. He was alone and empty-handed. The door to the hallway hadn't even finished closing when I saw him. We went straight into my office."

Starsky slumped down in his chair, running both hands through his hair before looking first at Hutch, then at Dobey.

"Okay. So we keep on keeping Chapman and Grimes separate from the shooting pictures. That leaves a fucking big hole open. And somebody else to worry about."

"Gunther." Hutch said the name without hesitation. Quietly, fiercely, filled with hate.

Gunther. His web of nightmares, his trail of dead bodies. His very name was an obscenity.

Dobey's voice dropped to a whisper. "Do I need to remind you two that Gunther is in prison, in maximum security for the rest of his life? He doesn't take a piss without someone knowing."

Hutch saw it--the flicker of emotion in Starsky's eyes, the way his back stiffened and his face closed down. Remembered with Starsky about Terry and George Prudholm, felt his loss and heartbreak, and desperate frustration. And bristled at his captain's words. He knew Dobey didn't deserve the words he threw at him, didn't deserve the anger. Still, Starsky was hurting and Dobey was the closest target.

"Yeah, Captain. We know. And we all know how well our fucking system works, don't we?"

Starsky himself ended the standoff between his partner and captain. "Hey, hey, come on, we have work to do."

Hutch allowed himself a few more stubborn seconds, Dobey a longer glare, and then it was back to business.
Starsky grabbed a pencil from Dobey's desk and used the eraser end to pull the manila envelope toward him. Hutch grabbed the pencil and snapped it in two. His actions having nothing to do with the words he said to Starsky and everything to do with the hurt in his soul.

"Little bit late to worry about finger prints, Starsk. Yours, mine, Dobey's—even Chapman wouldn't deny handling that thing." *Let it be, Starsk, I don't want to see them again, let somebody else deal with it.*

"Yeah, well, humor me." *Have to, Hutch, like I said, it's our lives, let's get it over with.* "Got an evidence bag in your desk, Cap?" Handling the envelope by one corner, Starsky shook the pictures out onto Dobey's desk and slipped the envelope into the bag Dobey held open. Carefully laying the pictures out, guessing at the order they were taken in, he heard Hutch swear and knew he had gone pale without looking at him, knew his own face was red. With anger and disgust.

"Nice fucking body, but it's not mine. Poor bastard."

"What?" Dobey and Hutch could have been harmonizing.

"It's not me! Hutch, look. Get over what you think you're seeing and look close."

Hutch did look, looked and fought with himself to keep his hands off the pictures. It wasn't Starsky. The subject's face wasn't shown in a single shot, either turned away or hidden under an oxygen mask. Dark, curly hair; yes, a fit and muscular body riddled with bullet holes; yes. But not Starsky's body. Hutch felt Starsky behind him, felt him press close. Knew Starsky was telling him there were other differences too, intimate differences only they would see. Hutch didn't know whether to listen to his suddenly useless knees or his wildly angry mind. Starsky decided for him, pushing his partner into a chair and touching a shoulder, tracing the back of Hutch's neck. Calming and soothing him as much as the moment would allow.

"It's not you. I...I see that now. But, that is me and that is Captain Dobey. Starsk, they wouldn't let me in the emergency room with you, that picture isn't possible. Dobey needed help holding me back. I thought I'd never see you again and I fought hard but... If that's not you..."

"Hutch, listen to me a sec. A good photographer with a good lab can take a mess of negatives and cut them and splice them and make up his own pictures. Happens all the time, you know that. Whoever made these was good; he put you and Dobey in the emergency room with whoever that dead man is. Listen, they probably took hundreds of pictures of me that day, same as they did of this dead guy. The dead guy's were probably easier to get hold of."

Hutch was looking more than a little green around the gills by that point. Starsky had never seen any pictures of himself immediately after the shooting, and Hutch had made a silent and secret promise to him that he never would. The look on Hutch's face told Starsky Hutch's secret, and he loved Hutch just a bit more for it. And was determined to run damage control as best he could.

"I remember zip about that day, Hutch. Nothing. But I know you and how you would have been feeling and I know how the captain would've had to handle you. So someone took some pictures of you and Captain Dobey. And whoever had these pictures made got hold of them and made sure you were included in the faked pictures of me. It's pretty obvious this guy did die, and that's why these pictures exist. Whoever put together these pictures put you and Dobey in them to shake us up and make you remember. Hutch, every single picture on that desk had the same purpose. To hurt us. But please, babe, they're not real."

"It worked."

"Babe..."
Dobey figured it probably didn't matter if he turned his eyes away or not. Starsky and Hutch had tuned out the rest of the room; they were the only two there. Quietly gathering the pictures together, he added them to the evidence bag and left his office.

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"Hutch..."

A dam built and reinforced over the past three years was finally breaking beyond the point of a few seeping cracks of nightmares and moody silences.

"I was scared, Starsk. When they took you from me and those ambulance doors closed—I thought that was it. Dobey'd been yelling his head off, demanding help, giving orders, asking questions. Starsk, he was crying. Guess he figured all the noise he was making would hide it. But when those doors closed, he just stopped. I remember him coming up to me. He didn't bullshit me, tell me you were going to make it. He looked at me and said he was sorry. His face was wet and he was miserable and hurting." Hutch huffed softly into the dark head of curls that had found the side of his face. "I fell apart, buddy. I was having I hard time standing up. Dobey grabbed me and got me to his car, got me to the hospital. I did fight him, Starsk, think I might have slugged him at some point. Like I told you before, they wouldn't let me in." Hutch kissed the warm spot his breath had left in Starsky's hair. "The only place I wanted to be was with you."

Starsky listened in silence, glad beyond reason that Hutch's arms were around him. Hutch rarely spoke about the shooting, not to Starsky. Dobey had heard him, Huggy, police counselors, his sister. But between the two of them it was always too much, too hard. They'd tried for the sake of Gunther's trial, managing it on a clinical level—facts and events only, allowing no emotions in the courtroom. The nights after court found them inseparable, holding tight to each other, soothing with words and touch, a fleeting press of lips to forehead. Bringing back the days immediate to Gunther when they had just begun to discover, just begun to plan.

They became lovers the night after Gunther was sentenced. Tender, gentle love making that grew from the need to comfort and reassure. To celebrate their lives. Careful with Starsky's still healing body, Hutch had worshipped every mark, found glory in every imperfection. Starsky's first orgasm with Hutch came with his cock in Hutch's hand and Hutch's tongue tracing the incision scar closest to his heart. Hutch came seconds later, with Starsky's whispered "I love you" and the press of a warm muscular thigh between his legs.

"Hutch? You were with me, still are, never were anyplace else. You're what I held on to every way I could. Those fuckin' pictures? They're just pictures, phony ones at that. They can't hurt us, not really. Dobey took 'em away, probably has them in the lab right now. With luck we'll get a print or two and figure out who put them together. Figure out who the dead guy is. It's not me, babe--we made it. You and me."

They sat together for a while. Starsky on the arm of Hutch's chair alternately holding and caressing his lover. Hutch absorbed it all, letting Starsky's love flow over him, feeling himself grow calm, ready to take on the problems that had hit them so hard that day. Whispering against Starsky's palm.

"Everything that was thrown at us today and still you're taking care of me."

"I owe you one or two or ten, Hutch. 'Sides, I like taking care of you. You kind of grew on me, you know." Starsky's eyes set the joke aside, made clear what he was really saying.

Hutch stood and pulled Starsky up with him. Kissed him full on the mouth in the middle of Captain Dobey's office.

"I never want to remember a day when we didn't have this, Starsk. I'm so damn happy where we are."
Another kiss had Starsky moaning and wanting. And surprised when Hutch let him go and grabbed his jacket. "Come on, buddy, like you said, we have work to do."

Starsky was still standing in place when Hutch reached his desk and turned back to grin at him. Verbal cold shower delivered and not too graciously received, Starsky managed to discreetly deliver a suggestive body movement of his own, breezing by his red-faced partner and leaving the squad room behind.

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The boy had no problem squeezing his slim body through the narrow opening in the fence behind the house on Thurston Street. The afternoon sun had yet to break over the privacy barrier, keeping him hidden in its shadow until he reached the edge of the patio. Belly down, he slipped a flat box under a lounge chair, sliding a potted plant just a bit closer, concealing the box from view. Tugging gently on a bunch of fuses attached to the box, he unrolled them and crouched under a hedge running along side the house. Pulling his jacket tight to ward of the cool temperature of early May, he settled down to wait.

~*~*~*~

"Huggy's?"

"Sure. Hey, you're not mad at me, are you?"

"Yep."

"Come on, Hutch, just payback. Hell, you kissed me and got me all worked up right in Dobey's office. Could've at least given me a few more minutes. I was enjoying myself."

"Starsky." Hutch said Starsky's name like he wouldn't need to say any more to clarify the situation. Being Hutch, he said it anyway. "Not three hours ago we found out that the Chief of Police, our Chief of Police, wants us off the force because we're lovers. And some lousy, miserable..." Hutch quit as if he couldn't quite find an apt descriptor.

"Fucker?" Starsky supplied.

Not too original, but Hutch ran with it. "Lousy, miserable fucker sends a little care package, and there you are rubbing your crotch and giving me your 'come hither' smile in full view of the squad room."

"Was empty."

"You didn't know that when..."

"Just needed a few more minutes."

"Starsky."

"You started it."

Hutch figured it was a good time to quit. Besides, Huggy's was just around the corner. With beer and burgers and noise. Appeasement.

Starsky's beeline to the john gave Hutch the minute he wanted alone with Huggy. If anyone knows anything, Hug will. Motioning Huggy with the slant of his head, Hutch edged his way through the late lunch crowd, sliding into a booth near the back.
"I take it you want to talk before Starsky gets back." Huggy wasn't asking. After countless 'what do you have for me' conversations with one half or the other of Starsky and Hutch, it was a given that he knew when information was needed from him. "What's going on?"

"Someone left a present on Starsky's desk this morning. Batch of pictures doctored up to look like Starsky after the shooting. Damn graphic shots of a homicide victim; shot just about the same way Starsky was--only this guy died. Whoever altered them added me and Dobey to the mix, too. Starsky was pretty shook up for an hour or so; I think he's okay right this minute... " Hutch trailed off, remembering numerous times after Gunther when Starsky hadn't been okay. Not even close to it. He'd confided in Huggy then, too, grateful to have him. Trusting Starsky's pain and his own with him. "You heard anything, Hug?"

Huggy didn't answer right away, his face revealing that for him Gunther had never really gone away, either. "Damn. Nothing, Hutch, nothing. Why the hell would anyone...?"

"I don't know. Hug...?"

"You got it, you know you do. I hear anything at all, it's yours. Hutch, what about you? How you doin'?"

"If Starsky can deal with it, I can too, Hug." Hutch gave Huggy a sadly resigned smile. "And there's one more problem. Chief Grimes wants to kick Starsky and me off the force."

Huggy's face did a turn around; concern knocked straight into amazement. "Say what? Because you're...?"

"That's right, Hug." Huggy didn't so much as flinch at the voice behind him even as Hutch did, just slid to one side to let Starsky pass, knowing he would have shown up sooner or later. "The chief got his own little packet of goodies this morning, has one of his dogs sicced on us as we speak. So, anyone turns up making noise about anything other than Gunther or photography, let us know would ya, Hug? Now, how about some food, I'm starvin'."

Huggy grinned at Starsky, Hutch just stared. Starsky winked at Huggy's grin and swiped a napkin and tucked it in his shirtfront as Huggy ambled away, already shouting their order. "Starsk..." Hutch's stare moved on to that how-do-you-do-that-look.

"Did ya really think I didn't know you were talking to Huggy about me? Gotcha' twice in one day, blondie."

Hutch wanted to respond, but why bother? Starsky had him nailed and he knew it. And wondered when and if after all their years together he would ever not be surprised. I hope never...always surprise me, Starsk, always...Shaking his head as if he had water in one ear, Hutch couldn't manage to get a single word out before Starsky was at it again.

"Food first, okay, blondie? You know I think better that way."

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The kid squirmed in his hiding place, fighting dueling desires to bolt or simply take a nap. He'd watched the school buses come and go, dropping off a gaggle of grade school kids, returning a while later with kids his own age. If indeed Mr. Renolds was as accurate as he claimed to be, the two cops would be arriving home in about an hour. Cursing the fates that had him hiding under bushes instead of riding a school bus of his own, he gave the fuses another testing pull and waited.

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Starsky pushed his plate away, drawing his second beer closer, watching with a tolerant smile as Hutch fastidiously covered his plate with his napkin. The smile grew when Hutch reached over and grabbed the napkin from Starsky's collar and covered Starsky's plate, too. *Don't quite get how the hell you were raised, babe, but thanks for the distraction*...

"Okay, Stark, let's talk."

"Wanna make some plans?"

"Yeah." *And talk about everything else, like how you're really feeling...*

Starsky picked a spot over Hutch's left shoulder and gave it a shot. "Okay, let's start with the pictures. We have more than Grimes on our tail, that much we know. Who that is...well, we don't exactly know for sure. Could be Gunther, could be some homophobic cop we pissed off, could be Joe Blow. Cap says it isn't Chapman." Starsky took a swig of his beer, running a finger through the condensation it left on the table. "Damn it, Hutch, I don't have the slightest idea where to even start." Sounding defeated.

Hutch looked at Starsky for a long minute; knowing and saddened that Starsky was having a tougher time than he was letting on. *Be just like him to try and hide it. We've come so damn far, we're so happy...so right. Why now? Why so much right now?* Starsky hadn't looked up, still drawing circles in the water on the tabletop. Hutch slid his hand into the wet circle, interrupting Starsky's finger's path, grabbing the hand that bumped his own. Starsky's hand was cold.

"Babe?"

"Hmmm?"

"Look at me, Stark." It took a good squeeze to get Starsky to comply. "We've already started. Dobey is on it, so is Huggy. Something is going to turn sooner or later."

"I know that, Hutch, and I know we're gonna catch the guy, it's just that..." Starsky looked away, his emotions reading out in his grip on Hutch's hand, the set of his jaw, the way his eyes managed sparks and softness at the same time. "Hutch, like I said before, I don't remember anything about that day. I don't even remember waking up that first time. But I know you remember everything that happened and I know how hard it was for you—I know it hurt. I don't want you to hurt again. I...I just have a feeling that whoever sent those pictures isn't finished. And this shit with Grimes and Chapman? Why the hell can't they just leave us alone?"

"Because they don't get it, Stark. It's as simple or as complicated as that. And that's where our planning has to come in. We're going to have some heavy decisions to make depending on how hot Grimes makes it for us."

"You talking about quitting, Hutch?"

"No. I'm talking about fighting for what we're entitled to. Our jobs, our privacy, our rights as human beings."

"Us. What you're talking about is us."

"Exactly. What it's always been. Us. And as long as we stick together..."

"Hey. Where else would either one of us rather be, huh? Like glue, blondie."

"You're getting mushy in your old age, you know that?"
"Had a good teacher."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Let's go home."

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The powerful, low hum of an automobile alerted the boy the cops were finally home. He changed position, pulling his knees underneath himself, listening to the garage door as it opened, hearing two car doors closing, then the garage door again. Spreading the fuses, he pulled his lighter from his pocket and watched the window on the far side of the patio. A dark-haired man Jimmy figured to be one of the cops entered the room, turning and speaking to someone behind him. The kid held his breath and set the lighter's flame to the shortest of the fuses, quickly making his way to the longest, raising his body to a squat, ready to flee. Stopped cold when a second man entered the room and wrapped his arms around the dark-haired cop, kissing the back of his neck, laughing at something he said. What the... Homos! Renolds didn't tell me...maybe he doesn't know. The boy's mind tripped into high gear. Maybe I can use it, sell him the information...

The first fuse found its mark and the kid ran. He heard the sharp pops, so much like gunfire, counting each off in his head until there were no more to count. He didn't stick around to see the cops hit the floor, struggling to cover each other. He kept running, exhilarated that he had something worth bargaining for. If Renolds wants to hurt these guys...shit! Queer cops? Jimmy started making plans. Money, I'm gonna have tons of it...if Renolds won't pay...other cops...newspapers... Money.

What he had just done with his fuses and explosives was the farthest thing from Jimmy's mind. Cops weren't supposed to be queer.

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Their names shouted into the room were as tangled as their arms and legs, calling to each other—begging really—to be all right. Hutch won the struggle, pushing Starsky under the safety offered by the heavy plank coffee table, drawing his weapon as he ordered his partner to stay still. Starsky wasn't listening. The coffee table found Hutch's elbow and the floor his butt when his legs were kicked out from under him. A surprised blink of his eyes later and he was stretched out half under his partner.

"Stay down, Hutch. Thought I saw something moving out on the patio. I'm gonna check it out."

"No, wait."

"No, wait? You really think this is a good time for a discussion, partner?" Starsky swore at the coffee table, or maybe it was directed at Hutch who had done the pulling this time, introducing it to Starsky's shoulder.

"Starsky...you did hear those gunshots, didn't you?"

"Shit, Hutch, those weren't gunshots. Firecrackers maybe, good ones, but not gunshots. Be right back. Stay put."

Hutch grabbed and ended up with a handful of air, and scrabbled to his feet. Dammit, Starsk! Wait 'til I have your back...He heard the patio door slide open, heard the numb silence that follows gunfire broken when one of their neighbors hollered asking if they were all right. Starsky's answer was a short yes. Hutch could hear the anger in his voice, affirmed when a flowerpot met the patio deck.

"Anything, Starsk?"
"No, Hutch, there's nothing. Nothing except your favorite lounge chair's stuffing all over the place."

Hutch got to him before another hapless plant met its fate at Starsky's hands.

"Better the chair's than ours, buddy."

Starsky leaned back against Hutch, anger suddenly gone.

"I'm tired, Hutch."

Hutch's answering "Yeah, me too," whispered against Starsky's neck.

Sirens sounded, not too far away. The phone started to ring.

"Come on. Cavalry is already on its way...guess someone else thought it was a gun. Bet you that's Dobey on the phone."

"Hey, Hutch?"

"Yeah, Starsk, what is it?"

"Would you..."

Starsky didn't have to finish his request. Hutch's arms wound around him and held on tight. Phone ignored, they stayed that way, wrapped together, until the first squad car pulled up in front of their house.

~*~*~*~

Hutch stood out of the way, watching the crime scene boys pick through the charred batting that until an hour ago had cushioned his patio chair. Starsky's chair, twin to Hutch's own, was pushed off to the side, looking sadly forlorn and out of place. Starsky was on the phone with Dobey, talking as much with his hands and body as with his mouth--body movements that drew Hutch's attention away from the patio. One hand found a hip and Starsky's eyes closed as his head dropped to his chest. *Something else has happened.* Starsky's head jerked up and his eyes found Hutch, turning away--*too late, babe, I saw, what is it?* —and slamming the phone down. Out of the room and out of Hutch's sight.

Hutch figured it wouldn't take much to find him. Starsky always went to the garage. Tinkered with the Torino that was resting on blocks, finding something to do to it that didn't need doing. Breathed in all the familiar garage smells that he took such comfort from, taking refuge from a world that was sometimes too much to deal with. For a long time after Gunther, after Starsky was back on his feet but not yet back on duty, Hutch had been tempted to hire Starsky out--garage cleaning and organization--had to be a market for it someplace.

Opening the door that led from the garage into the house, Hutch thought at first he had made a mistake. The garage was dark, the only noise the hum of the old fridge they kept their beer in. The fridge kicked off and then he heard him—confirming Starsky was there simply from hearing him breathe.

"Forget to turn the light on, buddy?"

Starsky didn't answer, not with anything more than a sigh.

"Starsk? Want to talk about it?"

Another sigh, this one resigned, knowing he was going to have to tell Hutch sooner or later.
Hutch stayed put, hearing Starsky's feet hit the floor, hearing the Torino's door close, hearing the slight snap the overhead bulb made when Starsky pulled its string. Blinking back at Starsky from the sudden intrusion of light, Starsky standing in a halo of it, an unwilling actor trapped on stage.

"What happened, babe?"

"Some asshole called Dobey's house." Starsky shifted his head as if his shirt collar was too tight. "Rosie answered...by the time Edith figured out what was going on, Rosie heard way too much."

"Too much of what, Starsk? What did he say?"

"Told Rosie she was going to burn in hell because she loves us. Told her we were both gonna die soon because God sees us as sinners. Shit, Hutch, she's nine years old!"

"Damn. What did Dobey have to say?"

"What didn't he say." Starsky turned in his circle of light, his right hand breaking through its border, finding the Torino's hood. "You know how Dobey gets when he's not quite sure who he should be pissed at. He let everybody have it; Grimes, Chapman, whoever called him, even God." Starsky studied an oil spot on the garage floor, tried erasing it with his toe, stalled a bit longer before he looked at Hutch. "He," a soft, scared chuckle escaped, "he called us faggots."

"Starsk, he didn't..."

"I know. I know it was pain for Rosie that was talkin'. I just don't know how to make it better anymore. This when we quit, Hutch? Run off to some cabin in North Dakota where nobody can find us?"

"You don't want that, Starsk. Anymore than I do."

"No, I don't, Hutch. I want what we have. I want to be a cop. I want our home and friends. I want to walk down the street and touch you and grab your hand." Starsky stepped out of the light and stood before Hutch in the shadows of the dark garage. "I want to kiss you and not be afraid. I...I just want you."

Starsky embraced Hutch like there would be no tomorrow. Held him and petted, kissed and whispered. Hutch held Starsky just as tightly, comforted him and touched him. Told him he loved him. Together they grounded themselves, salved the wounds that hurt so much. Together they forgave their captain's words, knowing that's all they were, just words. A silent vow was made. Together as always they would fight.

The garage was quiet and warm and still. The springtime fragrance of cut grass mingled with the smell of motor oil. A fly droned near the door, wanting out. Starsky was lost in it: the quiet, the scents, Hutch. He soaked his lover in with his entire being, some part of him touching or being touched from head to feet. Ready to let the day go, his head found Hutch's shoulder. Hutch held him close, feeling the slowing heartbeats against his chest, hearing the deepening breaths, feeling the give and take of their trust in each other. A noise from somewhere within the house nudged at him, sharpening his now sleepy senses.

"Starsk? You falling asleep?"

"Want to."

"Not here. What would the crime boys think, huh?"

"Don't care." Starsky shifted just a bit, nudging Hutch's chin up with his head, his lips finding Hutch's Adam's apple, tracing down, kissing over his collar bone, coming back up for another course featuring Hutch's mouth. Hutch answered with a sound somewhere in between a moan and a curse, letting Starsky
take his fill.

"Starsky..."

A sharp knock on the door into the house ended the moment, and this time Hutch cursed clearly, cursed and gave a nod of thanks that the garage was dimly lit. Hard one to explain, he and Starsky wrapped together, both sporting erections. Reluctantly disengaging himself from Starsky's arms, Hutch tugged at his shirt, hoping he managed to cover all the red marks he knew Starsky had left. Starsky volunteered himself to help, slipping a hand under Hutch's shirt, laughing when Hutch swatted it away.

"Come on, blondie, was just getting started."

Calling out a "hold on a second" to whoever was knocking on the door Hutch allowed one more kiss.

"Hold those thoughts, Starsk, going to quiz you later."

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The kid ran. Raced out of the cops' neighborhood, past the new strip malls that edged Bay City proper and merged with his own block. For safety he ran a few more blocks, circling back around to his back yard. Pushing the rickety gate open he flopped to the ground, heedless of the patches of dried out dirt that lay where grass should be growing. He stayed there gazing at the dusky sky, letting his breathing slow, swatting away insects attracted to his sweat. His mind in overload, he plotted. Plotted to sell his newfound information, plotted to one-up Bill Renolds, plotted to get away from the rundown house he reluctantly called home.

"Jimmy!"

The kid flinched. His stepfather lumbered down the stairs, his overly large body blocking the little day left and leaving the Jimmy cold in its shadow.

"Get up."

Jimmy moved, wary and afraid.

"Where the hell have you been?" Meaty fingers circled the boy's arm, shook him hard. "How many times do I have to tell you I have to work to support your sorry ass? You are to be home when your brothers and sisters get home from school. What's it going to take with you, boy?" The fingers released his arm, found a new target pushing into his chest, forcing him to fall on his backside. Then the man laughed at him. Laughed and humiliated and angered.

"They're not my..." Jimmy trailed off, his mistake obvious to him even as he made it.

The slap threw him back onto the ground; dirt and grit invading his mouth, sticking to the blood that flowed from his split lip. Jimmy scrambled to his feet, standing cowed and hurt before his stepfather, nothing else to say, too afraid to anyway.

"You got something else to say to me, boy?"

"No." Soon enough I will, you old bastard. I'll be getting out—you'll pay.

Jimmy forced himself not to duck away as the big hand came toward him again. Forced himself not to run when his stepfather straightened his shirt and brushed the blood from his lip. The screen-door slammed and they both jumped, Jimmy taking advantage of the distraction to back away and move toward the house. His
mother shuffled out, still in her nightclothes, hair lank about her face, drunk.

"Warren? What's going on?"

Jimmy held his breath. His stepfather had two options: blame Jimmy or confess. Jimmy got the blame. He always did. Not arguing with the claim that he tripped over his own two feet and hit his face. Not disputing how clumsy he was, how he was always getting hurt. Jimmy got the message; shut up and for now his stepfather would leave him alone. Walking backward as far as he could, keeping an eye on Warren, he followed his mother into the house. Let her fuss over him until she passed out at the table. Gathering the little kids close, he quietly shut the door to their room, smiled sadly at the knowing eyes, and settled in for a night of games. Hoping he could forget for just a few hours until the household was asleep and he could slip out into the night.

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Starsky sighed and shifted in their bed, trying to draw the warm body next to him closer. Sighed again when his forearm made contact with Hutch's magnum under his pillow. Sighed even harder at the still immovable body. Giving up, he lay his head on Hutch's chest, kissed his flesh and thumbed a nipple.

"That a gun under your pillow or are you just happy to see me?"

Hutch didn't respond. Didn't move either. Starsky fixed his eyes on his lover's face, waited a few seconds, and decided to take matters into his own hands.

"Hutch." Nothing. "Come on, babe, that's one of my best lines, a new classic." Still nothing. Starsky took taking matters into his own hands one step further and grasped Hutch's cock. Gave him a firm squeeze. That did it. Hutch moved, damn near pushed Starsky off the bed.

Starsky chuckled. "That's better. Now, as I was saying..."

Hutch's hand finding its way to Starsky's cock and returning the squeeze told Starsky Hutch had had him. Was listening all along. Paying attention, too. Starsky shut up. It was obvious Hutch was happy to see him: see him and touch him and make love to him.

The pain of the day floated away on their voices calling out in the dark, and sound sleep came. Sleep and dark that hid a lot of things: memories of the day, worries, a slight figure slipping past the crime scene tape and huddling under their bedroom window sill, listening and planning. The troubles that would haunt them come morning.

~*~*~*~

"Starsky, Hutchinson. My office."

Dobey's face was grim. And tired and worried and angry. Starsky studied their captain. He'd seen that face before, many times. Keeping his thoughts to himself he counted them off, figured he was to blame for most of them, and quit at a dozen. Looking away from Dobey, he wasn't at all surprised to find officers from Internal Affairs had invaded Dobey's office. Stifling the laugh that wanted to answer Hutch's whispered reference to fucking idiots, Starsky made himself at home in a chair he long considered to be his own. Hutch took the arm, ignoring the six eyeballs rolling in three IA heads, and they waited. Didn't take too long for the IA numb-nuts to get things moving.
"Detectives."

Things didn't move too far. Hutch looked at Starsky; Starsky returned the favor. Neither could help the goofy grins. Very good, see how smart they are? Dobey harrumphed; shifting his head from side to side, carefully like he was afraid it was going to fall off his neck, and picked up the ball.

"I'm sure you know Wilson, Shikowsky, and Brames."

"Yes." Hutch answered.

Wilson and Shit for Brames. Starsky settled back to let his partner handle things. Nobody in the room was a stranger to them; pains in the ass, yes, but not strangers. Hutch would do just fine.

"There have been serious accusations made against the two of you. Chief Grimes is very concerned."

Wilson took the first pitch.

"Naturally." Hutch answered and Starsky's nose twitched.

"Are you aware of the nature of the accusations, gentlemen?"

"Yes." More twitching. Starsky loved it when Hutch got so single wordy. Nobody could say yes quite like Hutch.

"Do you have anything to say for yourselves?" IA Wilson was getting rather pissy. IA Shikowsky and IA Brames were doing a little twitching of their own now.

"No." There it was. Next to yes, Hutch was best at no. There was just something about the way he said it. Eyebrows raised, his face all innocent like, and at the same time telling a room filled with senior officers from IA to fuck off. Starsky went past twitching and stood up like he was ready to give Hutch a standing ovation. A wink sufficed. The partners stood side by side, right arm pressed to left, and waited. Dobey's chair moved, and they were aware their captain had their backs. Starsky tossed out a wild pitch.

"There a point to this?"

"A point!" IA Shikowsky was truly annoyed. "You and your partner have been outed as a couple of queers by your fellow officers and you want to know if there's a point to this?"

"I believe that was my question." If Hutch was good at yes and no, Starsky excelled at playing obtuse.

Shikowsky, on the other hand, was good at annoyed and poor at keeping his temper. Starsky didn't flinch when the man got right in his face. Hutch did, though. IA Shikowsky found himself with the fist end of a long arm wrapped tightly in his suit coat. Calling Starsky a pansy-assed-smart-mouthed fag didn't sit too well with Hutch. The room got a bit noisy.

Dobey's voice boomed and settled things down in a hurry.

Shikowsky gave it another shot. "One more time. Do either one of you have anything to say in response to these allegations?"

The atmosphere in Dobey's office tilted and Starsky was back in another office, desperate to protect Hutch and keep them both cops. Hutch had been ready to walk away from it all, then. But Starsky hadn't been. Not being a cop wasn't anything he could fathom. Being a cop without Hutch far too painful to even consider. And so it was Starsky who made the choice and revealed Lionel Rigger's identity as their informant in the case that eventually exposed Gunther. Starsky who had to deal with the icy aftermath of Hutch's fury, and
the near, if brief, hatred of Huggy over the loss of a good friend.

Something burned in Starsky's gut at the remembrance of barely contained fury at Hutch when Hutch accused him of being afraid of whatever consequence they would have faced for keeping Rigger's identity a secret. Accused him of giving in and copping out to the system. Starsky shoved him and threw words of his own back at him. "Damn you! The only thing I'm afraid of in this life is being without you, Hutch." They'droughed each other up a bit more, at war with their emotions, angry, scared, and wanting something they couldn't quite place. Until Hutch's fury finally melted, and their first kiss sealed their fate. A clumsy, desperate kiss that silenced their bitter words and pulled layers of denial off their emotions. Breaking away from one another, going to separate corners to lick their wounds. Coming back for more whenever they could. Nearly separated for good by Gunther.

And now Hutch had had enough of hiding, and Starsky knew Hutch had made up his mind and was waiting for him. But there was danger in a full admission. Danger for them and danger for Dobey. Hating that he had to do it, but knowing Hutch had to be reined in just a little, he let memories of Lionel Rigger guide him. Starsky answered, keeping his eyes on Hutch's face, speaking quietly and evenly. "If you're asking do Hutch and I love each other, the answer is yes. One way or another we always have. If you're asking do our feelings affect our jobs, the answer is no. So no. We have nothing more to say about these allegations."

Hutch kept silent, agreeing, hating the evasion, but knowing where Starsky's mind was at and accepting his response. These were different times and different circumstances—protecting themselves instead of an informant, keeping their own secrets. They had lost Rigger to one of Gunther's hired killers, and he had nearly lost Starsky. There was danger for them again, barging into their lives from every angle. Hutch hurt deep inside thinking that his and Starsky's love for each other could take their careers, could even be life threatening. But the truth of the matter was that it could.

Letting go of Hutch's eyes for just a few seconds, Starsky addressed the three IA officers. "Hutch and I are damn good cops—maybe that's what this meeting should be about and not about us personally." Starsky headed for the door, Hutch moving in tandem. "That's all we have to say. Hash out whatever's bugging you amongst yourselves, Hutch and I have work to do."

"Wait just one goddamned minute..." Wilson was back in their faces, but only until Dobey took over.

"Starsky, Hutchinson, outside." Hutch was back in the squad room before Dobey finished his order. Starsky followed, taking his time, smiling pityingly at the officers from IA, and left the door open. Knowing what was to come from Dobey would be at the very least entertaining. Dobey didn't disappoint them.

Someone in the room started to speak. Starsky figured it was Brames, his voice being the only one not yet heard from. Dobey didn't let him get very far.

"Starsky's right, you know. What the hell do their personal lives have to do with anything?" Brames wanted to answer; Dobey had other ideas and told him to shut up. "Do you have any real idea who the hell you're talking about? Those two men out there happen to be the most decorated officers in this precinct. Individually, they hold more arrests, more honors, and more commendations for bravery than the three of you put together." Starsky had to give Brames credit when he heard him try again. Dobey still wasn't giving him anything. "I told you to shut up." Hutch actually laughed, silenced by Starsky's shushing. Dobey wasn't done, not by a long shot. True to his fashion, Dobey cut to the chase.

"Do you have specific charges against either of those men? Have they failed at their jobs? Endangered civilians? Put another officer at risk?"

Three voices blustered. None of them really said anything.
"I didn't think so. Until you do, and I mean until you come up with charges in writing signed by the chief and the commissioner, stay the hell away from my men."

"Captain Dobey." Wilson was at it again. "You'll go down with them, you know that don't you?"

Hutch cursed, something vile and to the point. Starsky stood at their desk, listening and watching and silently agreeing with his partner's assessment of IA's collective intelligence. There was more discussion in Dobey's office, not much of it audible. Just a low-pitched angry hum punctuated by names and labels thrown like stones.

A good five minutes passed before the IA threesome filed out of Dobey's office, Dobey's bulk in the doorway assuring they marched straight out of his squad room. Hutch turned his back. Starsky stared at them, hoping for just one little word said out of place, any little excuse at all to wallop any one or all of the three. Shrugging off his disappointment, he turned to his captain.

"Captain..."

Dobey ignored him. Quietly turned back into his office and closed the door.

Starsky started to rise; Hutch stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Wait a bit, buddy, leave him be."

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"I'm telling you, Mr. Renolds, those two cops are queers. I saw it with my own eyes—they were kissing and hugging." Renolds looked unimpressed, Jimmy hurriedly backed up the spiel he had just delivered. "I snuck out of my house last night and listened at their window. They were...were doing it!" Unable to read Renolds' face, Jimmy faltered when he next spoke, stumbling over his demands. "What...what's that worth? You're going to pay me, right?"

Renolds slipped his wallet from his pocket and fished out a fifty-dollar bill. Handed it over to Jimmy with instructions to buy his mother something nice. The kid's news wasn't news to him, he knew Starsky and Hutchinson were lovers—Gunther would know it, too, when Renolds wanted him to. That was where the real pain would come in. But not for a while yet, not until the foreplay of dozens of smaller hurts coalesced into loss and injury and anguish. Gunther wanted them played with, and played with he would get.

"You know what time they leave the house in the morning?"

Jimmy was still absorbed by the fifty, looking up only when Renolds spoke his name sharply.

"Yeah, I know. That when you want me to...?"

"Make sure you're there and ready."

Renolds turned away and walked toward a dark sedan. Getting in and closing the door, he lowered the window for a final instruction.

"Meet me here tomorrow at this same time. And, Jimmy? Keep what you told me to yourself."

Jimmy was left alone, swatting angrily at dust swirling behind the departing car. Fifty bucks. Fifty bucks and no intention of buying his mother or anybody else something nice. *Fifty lousy dollars for finking out the cops as queer. Should have been more! After tomorrow I'm quitting Renolds. Plenty of people will pay for my information. Plenty.*
Renolds kept his voice even. Quietly informing the man in the back seat that Jimmy had figured out the cops were lovers. His statement received a muttered curse in response, then silence.

Pulling the sedan into a parking lot a few blocks from Parker Center, Renolds killed the engine and waited. His passenger was silent until he exited the car, coming around to stand at Renolds' window.

"Keep the kid quiet. Threaten him, bribe him, hurt him. Whatever it takes, Renolds. Gunther wants those cops to suffer—the last thing we need is some piss-ant little kid trying to pull one over on us. Keep the ball in our court."

Renolds watched until the man was out of sight, turning the corner that would take him to the main entrance to Parker Center.

_Lousy, dirty cop. And I thought Gunther was a sick bastard._

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"Cap'n?" Starsky had waited until he couldn't wait any more. Other detectives and uniformed officers were entering the squad room. From the fish-eyes cast at him and Hutch, Starsky figured IA had let what little of the cat they had out of the bag. Better to talk to Dobey now, before he had to deal with all the shit that was bound to be flying. Giving Hutch what he hoped was an apologetic smile for leaving him to deal with their fellow cops, Starsky left his desk and headed into Dobey's office.

Dobey sat at his desk, his chair circled around to face the windows. It was late afternoon dark in his office; light enough to see, murky enough to hide. Starsky walked to Dobey's desk and settled on a corner and tried again. "Cap?"

"Starsky." Dobey didn't move. For some reason he couldn't quite pin down, that worried him. Made him uneasy like the so many times Dobey had quietly said to him and Hutch: "We have a situation".

"Captain...I want to tell you...Hutch and I...shit, Cap, we're sorry about all of this." Starsky waited, not really expecting a response, not yet. Dobey sat, still unmoving, still silent. "Captain Dobey, we don't want it to go that way, but if you, and only you, want Hutch and me to resign, we will."

"No."

Starsky felt the anger behind that one little word and flinched. Dobey had every right to be pissed, and seriously so. At a bunch of different people. Starsky stood and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, antsy at not knowing exactly who Dobey was pissed at. _Could be Hutch and me, could be IA and Chapman, could be himself..._ Dobey cleared his throat, and Starsky figured he was about to find out.

"Starsky, I want you to listen to me for a minute. Will you do that?"

"'Course I will, Cap."

Dobey finally turned in his chair and motioned Starsky to sit. "All my life I've faced prejudice. I've watched my family face it, my wife, even my kids. I've fought every step of the way to where I am now on the force. You and Hutch have seen it first hand; racial slurs, bigotry, that hell Ray Andrews put us all through. And I think you've faced your own religious prejudices, though I doubt you and Hutch have told me about too many of them." At that, Starsky's eyes met Dobey's, and Dobey saw the brief flash of angry pain that confirmed his suspicions. "It's what you and Hutch are about to be put through now... Starsky, it's going to be dangerous for both of you. Please understand that."
"Hutch and I can handle it, Captain."

"Can you?" Here came the anger. Here came Dobey's big hand stabbing at the air in front of Starsky's face. "When backup fails to arrive and your lives are on the line? The filth that will be spread behind your backs? Spit in your faces? And now it isn't just the gay issue—somebody else is out after you. Whether or not it's Gunther remains to be proven, Starsky, but whoever it is means business. Can you two deal with that? Can you handle all the pressure and stay good cops?"

Starsky's response was quick and decisive. "Yes." Dobey looked doubtful. "Look, Cap'n...Hutch and I have been fighting to keep what's between us a secret for a long time now. That hasn't been easy, either. We don't want to hide anymore. I'm not sayin' we want to advertise...we just don't want to have to hide how we feel about each other."

Dobey was quiet. Quiet long enough to make Starsky uncomfortable.

"Captain? Is there something else bothering you? You sure you can handle this?"

"Yes...yes, Starsky, I can handle it." Dobey sank back into his chair, swiping at his face with his ever-present handkerchief, and looked thoughtfully at Starsky. "What you and Hutch are goes against everything I was taught by my family and church. I've talked to God about it, prayed about it, read my Bible so much Edith finally hid it." Dobey gave a small laugh, his face clearing for that moment at his mention of his wife's name. "It was Edith who straightened it all out in my head after that phone call the other night. I was ready to boot the two of you off the force. Never in my life have I expressed bigotry and there I was, calling you and Hutch faggots. To say Edith was upset with me is the understatement of the year."

Dobey looked so miserable and embarrassed and chastised that Starsky really couldn't help it. The day caught up with him. He tried, but the nervous laugh bubbled to the surface anyhow, escaping in a rather undignified snort. Dobey helped him to help it and got right in his face.

"You find this funny, Detective?"

Starsky shrank back in his chair, feeling about the size of a pea. Desperately wishing Hutch was with him, saying no for him, pinching him to shut him up.

"Sorry, Captain. Nerves I guess."

"Settle down." Dobey added one more glare for good measure and scuffed at his hair. "Now, where was I?"

"Callin' me and Hutch fags." Starsky couldn't have looked more innocent if he were an angel. Dobey wasn't buying it.

"Damn it, Starsky! Get that look off your face."

Dobey gave a laugh of his own, half-hearted, but breaking the tension nonetheless. "Now, I was talking about Edith, wasn't I? Edith reminded me that the teachings of the Bible are very old, very interpreted, and very much subject to an individual's point of view. And that in more than one instance a passage is contradicted elsewhere. And that some individuals will quote a passage out of context to suit his or her own means. She also feels that more than a few passages are sorely in need of updating. So that's where I placed you and Hutch--in passages in need of updating. I can accept you and Hutch because I know the kind of men you are. I know what you stand for and what you're willing to fight--and possibly die--for. It isn't easy, and maybe my Daddy is rolling over in his grave, but so be it. My father had his own fights to fight--different times, different circumstances. He taught me to choose my fights well, just make sure that I won."

Dobey sighed into his hand and rubbed wearily at his eyes. "So far I have, with one very sad exception. I
lost Elmo—my partner—because he was black." Dobey's demeanor went from thoughtful to intense quickly enough to make Starsky flinch. "Are you and Hutch willing to lose each other because you're lovers?"

"Were you willing to lose Elmo because you're black?" Dobey caught his breath at that, and Starsky knew his words hurt his captain and he was sorry, but on the other hand he wasn't finished yet, either. "Captain...rights are rights, and prejudice is prejudice. You said it yourself. Hutch and I are good cops. We've never compromised our standing as good cops because we love each other. I know Elmo Jackson meant the world to you and I know it hurt like hell when you lost him. But what would you have rather done? Turned tail and ran? Quit the force?" Dobey's answer was all over his face. The sorrow over the loss of Elmo Jackson was still there, always would be. But there was much more: determination, pride, bravery, love for a friend lost.

"It's no different for Hutch and me, Cap. We love each other just as you and Elmo did, and in another way that's just Hutch and me. We're entitled to be cops. We've earned it. Dyin' for what we believe in? We've always accepted that might happen, it's just another part of bein' a cop. We sure as hell shouldn't have to, but if worse comes to worse..." Starsky stood and finished with a gentle slap to Dobey's desktop. "The force has needed change for years now." Starsky took a deep breath, his next words painful to himself. "We knew that when Johnny Blaine died. The pressure was on then, and I thought that maybe, just maybe, things would head in the right direction. Things will change someday, Cap'n. I only hope we're all around to see it."

"So do I, Starsky, so do I."

Starsky returned his hip to Dobey's desktop, the two men sitting in contemplative silence. Dobey turning their conversation over in his head, more determined than ever to keep his men cops. Starsky's thoughts were much the same, with the added fuel of knowing exactly where Dobey stood. The quiet was interrupted by voices from the squad room; an angry buzz that rose and fell, accompanied by chairs scraping on the floor, cursing, and something striking hard at the wood of a desktop. As quick as it started, it stopped before Starsky had the door to Dobey's office opened.

The squad room was filled with officers. Each in his place, be it at a desk or filing cabinet. A dozen heads bowed over reports, a few talking on phones, a red-faced uniform rubbing an even redder patch across his jaw, his partner forcibly holding him in place at their desk. And Hutch. Like a teacher presiding over a class of ruffians, a bit red faced himself—red with anger Starsky noted, not a telltale blush of embarrassment—eyes sharp and his features tight and controlled, Hutch stood at their shared desk and watched each and every officer in the room. Starsky walked to his side of their workspace and sat, pulling a stack of reports closer to his typewriter. Grabbing his phone he punched in the extension for records, watching from the corner of his eye as Hutch sat and grabbed his own reports.

"Lenny, this is Starsky. Pull up all the reports you have on Gunther employees and get them up to me, would ya? And put the files of anyone new on top. Yeah, that's great. Thanks, Lenny."

Could have been the reminder of Gunther, could have been the punch Hutch delivered or whatever he had said, could have been Starsky's apparent lack of concern. Whatever, the noise level of the squad room rose to normal and for that moment it was back to business.

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Jimmy wondered, not for the first time, how Renolds' mind worked. To Jimmy, all this dragged out crap was dumb. Why not just kill the cops and be done with it? Gonna do it anyhow... Shifting his weight back on
his heels, he surveyed his work. The blades were well hidden, the duct tape invisible under the door handles of the unmarked police cruiser. Hearing a door open a few houses down, Jimmy hit the driveway, rolled his body under the car and waited. Watched a small dog trot to the end of a sidewalk and retrieve a newspaper. Listened to an old lady voice praise the animal and encourage it to go potty. More praises, a door closing, and Jimmy was out of there. Taking advantage of shrubbery and fences to hide his progress, figuring he had about an hour to kill, he made himself comfortable in a little park across the street and waited.

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Hutch was doing the things he did best. And the body that alternately quivered and arched from his touch was damn appreciative. Starsky tried to return the favors, finding Hutch's cock with his hand--and finding it very difficult to concentrate. Groaned with relief when Hutch kissed the palm that had stroked him and ordered Starsky to lay back and enjoy. Because this morning was what Starsky wanted and needed--to be made love to, to feel everything that Hutch had to give. Feel with his body and his mind and his heart how much he was loved and how worth it the fight ahead of them would be. Hutch did something then that involved his mouth and Starsky's balls and all coherent thought fled. Sanity followed, fleeing with the progress of Hutch's tongue and hands moving up his body, and Starsky wasn't so sure he could remember his own name. But he remembered Hutch's and yelled for him, silenced by the broad mouth that fit itself over his and the tunnel of Hutch's fist wrapped around his cock. Starsky managed to participate in the kiss--for a few seconds, anyhow. The waves of the second and third pulses of his orgasm found his mouth clamped on Hutch's shoulder, the rest of his body going limp and spent and useless. And very, very happy.

"Starsk?"

Hutch was talking to him. Sounded fuzzy and far away, but the big hands tracing patterns over his back and down his ass told Starsky otherwise. So did the warmth of the body draped over his own. Hutch was holding him and the hands and body belonged to Hutch, that much his brain managed to process, but conversation stayed beyond Starsky's means. Hutch gave it another shot.

"Hey, babe." A tongue found Starsky's ear, breath blowing cool on the wet getting more of his attention. "Wake up for me now. Come on, Starsk...gonna be late."

"Hmm."

"Nope. No hmm. No time."

Starsky muttered something not-so-very-nice about work, and that there were better things to be doing. Asked Hutch very nicely, his voice low and sexy like Hutch liked, for just a few more minutes, please. If the asking didn't sway him, the fingers that found Hutch's penis did the trick. Hutch did some moaning of his own and surrendered, quietly agreeing, gratefuly agreeing, with Starsky's assessment of getting to work on time. Sinking back into their bed, his back to Starsky's belly, his orgasm came fast and hard. Starsky drew it out, not letting go until Hutch quit thrusting into his hand and lay quiet. Starsky soothed with a hand on Hutch's chest and lips on Hutch's shoulders. Hutch drifted away, work forgotten, his world a mattress and tangled sheets and the warm body behind him. Would have been a great way to spend the day, but old Mrs. Belinne calling for her dog Pipper took care of that idea. So did Starsky jumping at the sound of her voice and cursing some more, this time at morning in general and the clock on the nightstand specifically. According to it, they would indeed be late. A little bit of Captain Dobey induced conscience had Starsky awake and thinking they should get a move on.

"Hutch, you awake?"

"No."
"Good. Race you to the shower."

"Sure."

"Ready? Go."

Starsky won the race; hard to lose when he was the only one moving.

But Starsky had a cure for Hutch's lack of participation. Slipping under the water in the shower he started to sing. Quite loudly and very much off key. Making it up as he went along, detailing rather gruesomely what happened to cops late for work. Especially cops under the command of one Captain Dobey. Hutch joined him just as he sang the finer details of traffic control. A well placed bar of soap ended the serenade with a yelp from Starsky and a very insincere apology from Hutch.

Bathed, dried, dressed, and hungry, Starsky wandered into the kitchen, foraged among Hutch's breakfast choices, tisked, and finished off the carton of orange juice from the fridge.

"Hurry up, would ya, Hutch? Need to stop for breakfast."

Hutch appeared in the doorway, hopping one footed in an effort to get his jeans on. "Starsky..."

"Don't even start, Hutch. I am not eating that. Think by now you would have learned."

Starsky was already out the door before Hutch could extol the virtues of his diet--as he had extolled for a dozen or so years. Grabbing a box of dried fruit and bran cereal and his coffee, Hutch followed, tucking his speech away for later. Most of it. The rest was muttered all the way to the car.

Starsky had unlocked Hutch's door and was at the driver's door by the time Hutch caught up.

Hutch gave up on fumbling for the door handle and lifted his breakfast up in defeat. "Hold something, would ya, Starsk?"

Reaching over the car's roof, Starsky batted away the hand offering the cereal and grabbed instead for the coffee. The grin he flashed his partner died fast as Hutch's face went blank then stunned then pained in a matter of seconds. And then he was sinking from Starsky's sight, sliding down alongside the car. Starsky found him on the ground, holding his right arm at the wrist.

"Hutch! Hutch let me..."

"What the hell? Starshk? Jesus, my hand..."

"Okay...okay, Hutch. Let me see, huh?"

Four of Hutch's fingers were cut: three just below the first joint and his little finger at its tip. Cut deep, bleeding badly, already blue and beginning to swell. Starsky tore off his jacket and holster, pulling his T-shirt over his head and wrapping Hutch's hand the best he could. Reaching in panic for the door handle, stopped by Hutch's good hand.

"Starsky! Stop, don't touch that! Oh, God..." A wave of pain took Hutch's head to his knees, his blood rapidly soaking through Starsky's T-shirt.

"Fuck, Hutch! Who the hell...?"

"Go inside, Starshk...call for help. I'll be okay here, just stay low."
"Come with me." Starsky was already trying to get Hutch to his feet. Hutch gasped, pain and shock speaking for him, and Starsky eased him back down. Hutch looked bad: pale, sweaty, and the T-shirt wrapped around his hand showed very little of its original color. "Sorry ...dammit, I don't want to leave you out here." Grabbing his leather jacket, he covered Hutch's legs, carefully pushing Hutch's long body as close to the car as he could get it. Reaching under Hutch's jacket, Starsky grabbed his magnum, wrapping Hutch's left-hand fingers around the weapon. A few seconds to make eye contact and Starsky was gone, running in a crouch for the front door.

The shots came fast; staccato beats sounding over a swell of discordant background music of squealing tires, barking dogs, and screams. A crescendo of sound and then the dogs quit barking--a few howled their fear and then they too were quiet. The roar of an automobile engine faded away taking the screams with it, and the sounds went as soft as the dust settling over the driveway and the smoke of burning rubber that hovered over the street. Faded away until all that remained to be heard was Starsky's name being called over and over again.

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Jimmy didn't know what to do. The shooting terrified him and he found himself wanting his mother and home. The blond cop was yelling. Yelling what Jimmy guessed was his partner's name, until he could yell no more and his voice faded. Jimmy could see he was still saying the name over and over, the cop's lips moving in a now quiet plea like his mother's used to when she prayed. Edging his way across the street Jimmy joined the gathering crowd, listening as voices rose and displaced the eerie quiet. Shouts that ambulances and police had been called, reassurances tossed at the two cops as the crowd pressed closer. The cop on the ground stirred, coming awake with a start, grabbing his head, the lump on his temple and several bleeding wounds on his chest visible even from Jimmy's distance. The cop had scars, too. Scars like Jimmy had never seen, and Jimmy found himself chewing at his lip, wondering just what had happened to cause them.

Starsky managed to get himself seated on his butt, his head cradled carefully in his hands. People broke away from the gawking crowd to help, and a man approached him, squatting down beside him and putting a hand on Starsky's shoulder. Starsky looked up. It wasn't Hutch beside him and Starsky felt the first needles of panic. But a ragged whisper was starting to filter through the pained buzz in his head. Hutch was calling for him. Again and again, a terrified, hollow chant. Starsky grabbed the man next to him and pulled himself up, muttered his thanks and made his way to his partner.

"Hutch? Hey, Hutch. Come on, buddy, it's okay."

Hutch was still whispering Starsky's name; eyes riveted on the dozen or so trails of blood dripping down Starsky's chest and face. Starsky pushed the edges of his own panic away and shook Hutch. Hard. Wondering if he needed to slap his partner. Wherever Hutch was, it wasn't with him. Hutch gave a quiet moan from somewhere low in his chest, his eyes lifting to Starsky's and dropping down again. And Starsky saw the Hutch he had seen in the pictures in the envelope. The heartbroken, terrified man who thought his partner was going to die.

Hutch reached out with his good hand and touched him. Starsky winced and looked down when the shaky fingers made contact with his chest. Oh, shit...he thinks I've been shot again.

"Hutch? Listen to me. I'm not shot. Just a little scraped up where pieces of the driveway hit me. Got a good lump on my head when I hit the deck, but that's all. Do you understand?"

"That's all?" Hutch's eyes were begging Starsky to please be telling the truth.

His hand moved to Starsky's face, traced over the lump on his forehead, and fell limply back into his own
lap, relief softening the lines on his face.

"Yeah, blondie, that's it. You back with me now? Good, now move over, would ya? I need to sit."

That was what it took to focus Hutch. Starsky needed caring for and Hutch would do it. Wobbly but determined, his damaged hand ignored, Hutch pulled Starsky down beside him, checked him over, and told him not to move. The cops and ambulance arrived at the same time and Hutch handled them, too. Rising to his feet, ordering the car checked out for prints and evidence, the crowd on the sidewalk interviewed, and Starsky treated for injuries. Starsky waited for the inevitable, pulling Hutch down on the gurney beside him when Hutch started to wilt.

"Come on, Hutch. They need to check you out now. Come on, look, Dobey's here, let's let him handle things now, okay?"

Side by side they sat. Starsky watched the crowd, looking for anyone familiar, anyone dangerous. Spied Mrs. Belinne, the young couple from next store, a kid who should have been in school. Hutch watched every move the paramedics made, questioned every treatment, gradually calmed, and with Starsky became more aware of the activity around them. The tentative calm they found in each other hitched back a notch as a familiar voice rose steadily in intensity and volume. Cops and bystanders, cars on gaper drive-by, more sirens—it all filtered away with the boom of Captain Dobey's voice. It took a few minutes for it to sink in—the noise that mattered, the noise about them. Dobey was in full dress-down mode. An officer obeyed an order too slowly; another seemed not to hear Dobey at all. No doubt that Dobey was pissed and seriously so. Starsky leaned into his partner, hurting and tired beyond belief, but on full alert. And so it starts, buddy.

A second stretcher appeared and Starsky was moved toward it. The sheets were like ice against his back and he shivered, wanting Hutch back at his side. Cops appeared, mostly cops he knew, and his stretcher was moved toward the open doors of the ambulance.

"Hey, easy!" The words coincided with the jarring strike of his stretcher against the wall inside the ambulance. Nausea threatened, and Starsky had to force himself to lie still and listen as more words were muttered. Words Starsky couldn't quite make out, wasn't sure he wanted to. A face hovered over him, wavering in and out of focus, but focused enough for Starsky to know the man was speaking to him but looking off at whoever was at the foot of Starsky's stretcher.

"Sorry, Starsky...stretcher must have gotten away from him." Todd Erickson, a long-time patrolman, turned away and grabbed for the stretcher bearing Hutch. Low sounds of a brief discussion, and Erickson had a different officer helping load Hutch into the ambulance. Starsky watched a patrolman walk away, watched him kick angrily at an unmarked squad car's tire and exchange words with whoever was inside the vehicle. Wishing he could see better, Starsky settled back and wondered who the officer was, meaning to ask Erickson, but drifting off before he could.

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Jimmy was still standing in place at the edge of the sidewalk when the ambulance pulled away. The crowd had thinned, witnesses reluctantly separating themselves from onlookers. Shifting the backpack slung over his shoulder he followed a young couple back across the street to the park and melted away into the woods. Recognizing the large black man referred to as Dobey to be the two detectives' superior officer; Jimmy started making more plans. Kicking his way through leaves and small branches blanketing the ground, he made a few decisions. If this Dobey didn't care about his information about the two cops being gay, maybe he would want to know about Renolds. Maybe, Jimmy figured, this would be the best way to get back at Renolds for his lousy fifty bucks and pulling that shooting without warning him.

Jimmy latched on to the power of being a snitch and thinking he had it made. Reasoning with himself that
the cops would keep him safe--his information would buy that. Cops paid for stuff like that, he knew they did. That was what he cared about. Being safe, getting money, and ditching Renolds.

"Come on, Hutch. Let's get out of here."

Starsky had Hutch up and on his feet. Adjusting the sling that held Hutch's right arm against his body, he managed a gentle pat to Hutch's chest and a caress to his upper arms, earning a quiet smile from his lover. Getting good at that, buddy...maybe I mean better...touching me in a room full of people, making it look like nothing, at least to them...Starsky's own gaze answered him. That to-hell-with-them-all look Starsky had perfected. A barely perceptible lift of Starsky's chin gave Hutch what he needed to let go of the moment, and they turned together, bypassed the waiting wheelchairs, and left the hospital.

Huggy was waiting, waving them with a flourish into the back seat of his ancient white Cadillac. Captain Dobey had the passenger seat. His straight-ahead stare would have made his men itchy if they hadn't been so tired. Huggy was itchy enough for all of them. Sidelong glances at Dobey were traded off with those aimed at the rear view mirror. He got nothing from Dobey and even less from Starsky and Hutch. Because Hutch was already asleep and Starsky was doing a damn good job of faking it.

Jimmy managed to sneak into the house with his siblings when they got home from school. Needn't have bothered, his mother didn't notice; passed out on the sofa, her day evident in the empty bottles on the coffee table and the soap opera blaring from the television. Settling the little kids down with the few cookies he could find and milk he hoped wasn't too sour, Jimmy checked the answering machine, deleting the call from his school inquiring if he was still ill. His ten-year-old sister silently writing out a note in perfect imitation of their mother's handwriting, slipping it in a school book to be delivered in the morning. Explaining that Jimmy would be missing a few more days, but yes, he was getting better. Jimmy slipped her a few dollars, the transaction smooth and practiced. Checking the time on the old stove-clock, Jimmy figured he had about two hours to meet with Renolds and make it back home before Warren showed up. Taking his sister aside, he handed her another dollar, whispered when he would be back, and got her promise to take care of the kids.

Dobey kept his silence, and Huggy decided that was good and shifted into the role of closed-mouthed and discreet chauffeur, figuring it was the easiest road to take. A loudly pissed off Dobey he could handle with ease, but this one, this uncharacteristically silent and brooding man, was something else again.

Traffic was heavy and the Caddy shuddered to a hesitant stop, steadying as Huggy shifted it into neutral to wait out a traffic jam. Hutch stirred in the back seat, mumbling something about Starsky and blood. Starsky hushed and soothed, and Dobey finally showed some emotion, shifting in his seat, eyes darting from mirror to Huggy to window and back to Huggy. Haunted, sorrowful eyes. Huggy took Dobey's look straight on and felt time slip away, silently cursing whatever god or demon or sick twist of fate that had taken Captain Dobey with it. Dobey at the hospital, Dobey in the chapel, Dobey pacing the hallways. Huggy harbored the same memories, hated every one of them, and wished Dobey would go back to his brooding and Hutch would go back to sleep. The Caddy was big, but the quarters were still tight, and Dobey looked ready to blow.

And he did blow. With Hutch's next muttered words about dying and bullets and Starsky. Dobey sucked in a huge lung-full of air and his bulk seemed to expand and fill in every little empty space the car had to offer, leaving Huggy feeling dwarfed and trapped. A big fist slugging the dashboard shattered the close air like a
mirror. Hutch woke with a shout, Starsky cursed, and Huggy hit the gas a little too hard. Dobey rode a phantom brake pedal hard, swearing at Huggy and demanding he pull off the highway.

"Watch it!" That directed at Huggy. "Damn it all to hell! My own men." Directed out the window, words filled with disgust and anger and disappointment. Dobey just as betrayed as Starsky and Hutch. Twisting in the seat, Dobey locked his glare on the two men in the back. "This is what I warned you about. Still think you can take it? This was nothing compared to what's going to happen: booby-trapping your car, rough handling your stretchers, and turning a deaf ear to me is just the beginning! Why the hell do you have to...?" Dobey trailed off, back to staring at nothing.

"Have to what, Captain?" Hutch was fully awake now and more than a little interested in what his captain had to say.

Dobey grunted at the window and waved a hand dismissively. Hutch wasn't ready to settle. His partner's warm hand on his knee did little to dissuade him. If anything, it reminded him more of what was bothering Dobey. Starsky's squeezing fingers demanded Hutch look at him and his look was met by Starsky's 'come on, babe, please let it go' face. Hutch ignored him. Starsky tried another, more direct approach.

"Hutch, let it..."

"No, Starsk. I want to hear this. Captain?"

Starsky shifted to his 'and you say I'm stubborn' face and held his breath.

Dobey answered. Louder and for far longer than anybody else in the car bargained for. Starsky had already heard it, but Dobey did a fine job of re-hashin that conversation and making it sound like front-page news. His points were made, sharpened, and dug in. Hutchinson and Starsky were in for the fight of their lives. The hell with their jobs and how well they did them. There were officers out there who would just as soon see them dead. That's what they had to worry about. Dobey had been there, Dobey knew.

And to think, just think, an officer of his own had disobeyed him. Starsky opened his mouth to speak, and Hutch rendered his own warning face and added a pinch, hard enough to waylay the thoughts Starsky was about to verbalize. Hutch knew Starsky only wanted to lighten things up, could read it on his face, and figured Starsky was about to remind their captain that they had disobeyed him plenty of times. Figured too that Starsky would be making a big, big mistake. Dobey took care of things for them when he turned around, pointed a finger at the both of them, and reminded them how different this was from their bending of his orders.

"I want you both to remember today! Don't write today off as an isolated incident. It's not. You two are going to get hurt. We all are! What those two street-cops did today was blatant disobedience of a commanding officer. When I get back to Parker, I have to call them in and ream them each a new one. I don't have a choice, I want you both to know that and understand it. And when I do that, I will be declaring my backing of you two to every officer in the department. This is when sides will be drawn."

That was it. Dobey ran out of air with his last sentence and gestured to Huggy to get back on the highway. Took his silent brooding back up, shared only with the window at his side. The big white Caddy slipped back into traffic. Everything to say had been said.

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Jimmy kicked at the dirt with a scuffed sneaker. Renolds was late and making him nervous. Warren would be home in less than an hour, and Jimmy had no desire to make his stepfather angry. Shifting his thoughts away from Warren, Jimmy embraced his favorite fantasy; the one where his mother was always sober and
their home was always clean and food was a given. The fantasy where there was no Warren, no yelling, no slaps and split lips. Where the shadowy memory of a man cleared and sharpened and Jimmy had his dad back.

Renolds' voice calling him to his car interrupted and the world around Jimmy was once again weeds and dirt. The nervousness stayed and Jimmy felt a rush of doubt. Maybe quitting Renolds wasn't such a hot idea. Heat radiated from Renolds' running car; blurring Jimmy's vision, and Jimmy dragged his feet getting to the open window. Renolds watched, sensing the boy's hesitancy, thinking to himself that Jimmy was losing his usefulness. Just as well. Renolds' plans were going to move more quickly now. Gunther was getting restless, starting to make stronger and harsher demands. Renolds tried to placate the old man, remind him of his desire to make the two cops suffer, but Gunther's mind was slipping steadily. Renolds knew he had to end things soon.

"You did a good job today, Jimmy. Your razor blades did quite a number on that cop's hand."

Jimmy's gut twisted. He didn't want to talk about his razor blades. They weren't his. They were Renolds'. Jimmy tried to reason with himself that he was just doing a job, nothing to feel guilty about. Renolds had hurt the cop, not him. An image of the dark haired cop with his bleeding and scarred chest slid through Jimmy's conscience. He could still hear the other cop calling his partner's name. Guilt bubbled, making him nauseous. Renolds was talking again, his silky, convincing voice making more promises.

"Just one more job, Jimmy." Then, much more sharply. "Jimmy! Are you listening to me?"

"No...yes...you should have told me! Told me about the guns!"

"I don't have to tell you anything, Jimmy. You just do as you're told."

"No! No more. You're going to kill those two cops, I know you are. I don't want to get in any more trouble...my stepfather...I just needed some money..."

Jimmy would have run away then and there if it hadn't been for Renolds' hand snaking out the window and grabbing the front of his jacket.

"You listen to me, Jimmy. One more job and you'll be done. Two hundred dollars, Jimmy."

Jimmy wanted to cry. Fear and guilt at war with Renolds and his promises. Money. With two hundred dollars in his pocket he could get out. Convince his mom to come with him, pack up the little kids and just go. One more time. He could do it one more time. Once more for Renolds, and then on to the cops and newspapers. If he played his cards right, Jimmy figured, he could multiply that two hundred dollars a few times over. Swiping at his face with his jacket sleeve, Jimmy pushed away from Renolds.

"One more time. Tell me what you want me to do."

~*~*~*~

Jimmy made it home before Warren. Played the good stepson to the hilt. Keeping the little kids out of the way, cleaning what his mom should have, biting his tongue. Waiting for Warren's snores before he pushed aside his sleeping bag, stepped over the little bodies of the younger kids, and headed downtown.

Parker Center loomed up from the street, pretty much deserted, ominous in the latest hours of the night.

Skirting the Duty Sergeant's desk, Jimmy slipped through a side door and up the stairs. The lighting was dim in the hallway on the fifth floor. Jimmy hugged the walls and quietly entered Squad Room 519. Shifting his backpack he pulled out a small box, quickly and silently affixing it to the underside of the desk bearing
an old plastic piggy bank. The desk Renolds said was shared by the two cops. Digging deeper into his backpack he pulled out a sheet of paper. Startled by the sound of voices coming from an office marked 'Captain Dobey'. Jimmy sucked in his breath as two men walked out. The dark haired cop from that morning and the man Jimmy figured was Captain Dobey.

"Hutch'll be okay, Cap. He'll need therapy and some time, but he'll be..."

Starsky's words came to an abrupt halt. Jimmy froze, his hand holding the piece of paper as if offering it to Starsky.

"Hey, kid, what are..." Jimmy was out of there, moving too fast for a weary Starsky to grab. Starsky swore, kicked the chair closest to him, and turned back to Captain Dobey. Dobey stood in angry silence, studying the paper the kid dropped when Starsky lunged at him.

"Cap'n? What is it?"

Dobey swore, grunted, and sighed. Handed the paper to Starsky and swore again. Grabbed the phone and dialed the duty desk. Nobody saw the kid.

"'BOOM'? What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Starsky settled on his desktop, wishing it was his bed. Dragging a hand through his hair his own sigh slipped into a yawn and he gazed up at his equally tired captain.

"I don't know, Starsky." Dobey was headed very slowly back toward his office, his voice trailing off. "I just don't know anymore..."

Starsky stood and stretched, wincing a bit at the tiny pulls across his chest. His head hurt too much to worry about the paper in his hand. If Dobey was tired beyond knowing, Starsky wasn't far behind. Shoving his chair aside, he reached for the desk drawer, frustrated and wondering what now when the drawer got hung up on something under his desk. Pulling harder on the drawer, he heard something fall to the floor. A glance under the desk revealed a box, duct tape trailing from its sides.

BOOM.

"Captain, get down!" Starsky helped Dobey with a full body slam. The explosion from the box nearly simultaneous. The desk took the worst of the blast that lifted it and rearranged some of the other furnishings in the room. Papers, plaster, and splinters of wood rained down on Starsky and Dobey. Starsky waited until he was certain there were no more chair arms or seats in the air and rolled off his captain. His head hurt even more and there were a few warm trickles on his face and arms. And Dobey was awfully still. At least until Starsky started to panic a bit.

"Cap? Captain? Come on now. You okay?"

Dobey shook off Starsky's hands, rolled, and sat up. Starsky couldn't decide if his captain was pissed, hurting, or about to fall asleep where he sat. Dobey finally spoke, and Starsky decided on all three. When he wanted to, Dobey could make Starsky and Hutch blush and feel pretty much inferior in their knowledge of profanities. Dobey gave Starsky a fine representation of his repertoire, letting Starsky know he was indeed pissed, not hurt too badly, and wanted nothing more than for today to have never happened. Starsky also noted, and appreciated more than Dobey would ever know, that Dobey didn't lay any blame.

"Starsky, get your ass downstairs and see if you can find that kid!" Starsky moved, biting back a groan from the pain in his head. "Starsky? Are you all right?"

Starsky didn't stop, just threw his words over his shoulder. "Yeah, Captain. I'm fine. I'll let you know when I
get the kid. Let Hutch sleep, would ya?" With that he was gone, going against the tide of officers now flooding the hallway, ordering them to see to Dobey, ignoring their questions.

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A dark sedan sat parallel-parked behind Starsky's unmarked cruiser, engine idling, rear passenger window down just enough for Renolds to study the façade of Parker Center. There was a flash of light from an office window on an upper floor, and Renolds cursed. The kid suddenly appeared from the side of the building running for all he was worth. About to instruct his driver to follow the boy, Renolds hissed for him to wait when Starsky bolted out of the building, throwing himself in the cruiser and taking off after Jimmy.

"Move it, Bonner! Follow the cop." Renolds settled back in the seat. The timing was off, the bomb meant to detonate in the morning when the squad room was filled with officers. And now Starsky would be in the way if he got to the kid first. Renolds' plans for Jimmy didn't include the officer, at least not directly. Bonner would just have to take care of Starsky, too. Get him out of the way and then deal with Jimmy. Renolds' gut roiled. Changes of plan ticked him off and made him edgy. Renolds thought fast. A plan formulated in his mind, awful and disgusting and right up Bonner's alley. Leaning forward he filled Bonner in and satisfied with the grunts that acknowledged and agreed with his plans, he leaned back once again. Somebody might die tonight, and Bonner would make sure someone else wished he were dead.

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Starsky's open palm found the steering wheel when it came to him. The kid in the squad room was the same kid he saw standing across the street from his house after the gun shots. What the hell? He can't be more than sixteen years old. Movement caught his eye and Starsky made a right turn, travelling slowly down a deserted street, catching another glimpse of movement, making out the shape of the kid entering an alleyway. Pulling to the curb, Starsky shut off his engine and got out. The kid was there; Starsky could hear him panting.

"Police, kid, come on out. Nobody's gonna hurt you."

Jimmy stopped. There was no way out but the way in, and he cursed himself for choosing the dark alley. The cop was walking his way; he could hear him more than see him, faintly lit from behind by distant streetlights. Jimmy figured his only option was to run. Maybe he could get around the cop. Jimmy bolted, almost even with the cop when blinding headlights turned into the alley, playing with his vision and confusing him. Jimmy froze on the spot; the cop did, too, turning and struggling to see. A car door slammed, and footsteps sounded, slapping sharp and quick against the pavement. Jimmy figured his only option was to run. Maybe he could get around the cop. Jimmy bolted, almost even with the cop when blinding headlights turned into the alley, playing with his vision and confusing him. Jimmy froze on the spot; the cop did, too, turning and struggling to see. A car door slammed, and footsteps sounded, slapping sharp and quick against the pavement. Jimmy moved forward, childhood teachings to seek out a police officer for help kicking in. Cops were scary enough, but whoever got out of the car was scarier. Headlights turned off and the alley went dark again and Jimmy's confusion grew. The footsteps quit, the cop made a funny sound, and Jimmy's feet were swept out from under him, a strong arm grabbing him by the waist and holding him still.

"You set that bomb, didn't you kid? Tried to kill me and my partner. Nobody does that kid. Got that? Nobody."

The cop was strong. Jimmy struggled, fighting without realizing what was happening to him, panic taking over, yelling for help. Hoping whomever got out of the car would help him. Icy fear came with the tearing of his clothing, the cool dawn air on his skin, and the cold dampness of the pavement on his bare genitals. Hot white fear flashed and Jimmy's scream pierced the air as his body was violated, split by the man hunched over him. His hands clawed at the ground, muscles stiffening at the agonizing pain. The cop finished quickly, his grunts and moans a filthy noise in Jimmy's ears. More white lights flashed, rapidly, one after another, blinding him. Hands pushed the boy away, rough dirty hands that slapped him and hurt him more. Jimmy curled in a ball, sobbing for his mother; terrified the cop would kill him.
A zipper was pulled up, and Jimmy heard the cop spit. Forcing himself to look, Jimmy could make out the figure of the cop back-lit by the now rising sun, his shirt open and belt hanging loose. Dark hair tinged red in the early morning light, jeans, and muddy boots. The cop grabbed for him, and Jimmy finally moved, pushing away on his bare backside, his body tender and at the same time on fire. Too weak to move fast enough, Jimmy sank to once again lie on the dirty pavement, stunned from a blow to the side of his head as the dim light faded away.

~*~*~*~

There were hands on his body. Pushing at him, pulling, rough. Starsky wanted to get away but couldn't. The handcuffs that were snapped around his wrists saw to that. Those and the relentless pounding in his head. Pulled too quickly to his feet, he saw stars and slumped against the hands that held him.

"Hutch?"

"Isn't that cute? Calling for his fag partner. Hutchinson isn't here, Starsky. But that kid you did is. Look over there." A hand grabbed his face, forcing him to look at the blanket wrapped body on the ground. Starsky recognized the boy, sickened to see him half-naked, calling hysterically for his mother.

"Happy, Starsky? What is it, asshole? Hutchinson not enough for you?"

"What the hell are you talkin' about? What happened...?"

"Detective David Starsky, you are under arrest for the rape and attempted murder of Jimmy Donaldson. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you..."

"I asked you a question! What the hell..." Twisting in the officer's grasp, fighting to turn and face him.

Starsky grunted when the nightstick made contact with his belly. Held back a scream when it hit his head. Had nothing left to fight with when the third blow struck across his shoulders. The ground rose to meet him head on, the officer at his side doing nothing to stop his fall.

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"What do you mean I can't see him? Get the hell out of my way!" Hutch was livid. Starsky was in an emergency room cubicle under police guard. Cops on the scene steadfastly refused to allow Hutch in the room, stating that Starsky had resisted arrest and threatened the arresting officer. Starsky was brought to the hospital cuffed and under heavy guard in the back of a black and white. It was Captain Dobey who called Hutch and told him to report to Memorial, that Starsky had been injured and placed under arrest. Dobey who ordered Hutch to sit and listen to him for a minute. And Dobey who broke the news that Starsky had been charged with the rape and attempted murder of a young boy.

Rage, fear, and dread circled Hutch like storm clouds. Sympathetic nurses known to both him and Starsky granted information in bits and pieces. Reports came that Starsky was vomiting and fighting to stay conscious, that he had sustained some injuries to his head and bruises to his torso. Hutch paced the waiting room, sling abandoned, bandaged hand hanging at his side. Slammed his good fist into chairs and walls, his face alternating between pale and angry red, his posture stiff with fury. At some point Starsky called for him, and Dobey had to hold Hutch back, threatening to have him removed all together if he didn't calm down. The threat worked, Hutch sinking into a chair, suddenly drained and too tired to move.

"Captain Dobey?" A nurse with a covered tray came around the corner and asked Dobey to go with her. Hutch stayed in his seat, fixed by Dobey's glare, barely comforted by Dobey's promise to tell Starsky he was there.
Centered in the small space crowded with cops and medical personnel, Starsky lay on his side, an emesis basin under his chin, naked but for a thin sheet pulled up to his waist. His neck and shoulders were stained with blood, more blood matted his hair. A doctor seated on a stool with wheels propelled himself up to Starsky's head, gently parting the soiled hair to examine Starsky's wounds.

"Sergeant Starsky, I'm Doctor Seewald. You're going to need stitches for this latest head wound. I'm sorry, but they'll have to wait until after the police have collected their evidence. Your captain is here, he may stay with you if you'd like."

"Cap'n?"

"Yes, Starsky, I'm here." "Cap'n, where's Hutch?"

"Just outside, Starsky. I'm sure that once the doctor is finished he'll be allowed in to see you."

Starsky nodded, gagging from the motion, fighting for control of his body. Failing in misery when the gags turned to more vomiting. Dobey stood fast beside his detective, wiping his face, offering what comfort he could.

"Do you want me to stay, Dave?"

Starsky stayed still, raising only his eyes. Dobey understood and answered. "He can't, Starsky. I'm sorry, it's me or nobody."

"Please."

"Get on with it, Doctor. This man needs rest and medical treatment. The rest of you clear the room." Dobey took charge, and the officers, some clearly uncomfortable, some seeming to enjoy Starsky's suffering, left, with three exceptions. Brames from Internal Affairs and the arresting officer stood fast. Dobey knew he had no choice but to let them stay. Brames had the sense to hover in the corner where Dobey's gaze pinned him. The arresting officer settled himself near the door. Looking like he'd rather be anywhere else but there, was police photographer Tony Perry. Obviously hesitant and embarrassed, not moving into position until Dobey ordered him to.

Doctor Seewald was gentle, instructing Starsky to roll on to his back, examining his genitals, taking the necessary swabs and scrapings and samples of pubic hair. Checking Starsky's hands, digging a bit under his nails. Starsky kept his eyes on his captain's, flinching with each flash of the camera.

"When did you last have sex, Sergeant?"

"Yesterday morning." Still fixed on Dobey.

"Would you tell me what type?"

His eyes closed then. "Oral." Quiet enough that Brames asked what he had said. Asked again when the doctor ignored him. Retreated back to his corner when Dobey took a step in his direction.

"Sergeant Starsky's response will be in the doctor's report, Brames. Pay attention or get out."

To his own credit, Seewald managed to keep an impassive face. Giving Dobey the slightest bit of a nod, he turned back to Starsky.

"Can you sit up? Easy now. Just a quick blood draw and you'll be finished and I can get to work on your head." Calling the nurse back into the room, the doctor sealed the evidence kit and passed it to Brames.
Brames would have stayed in the room if Captain Dobey hadn't opened the door and invited him and the arresting officer to leave.

"Perry, you stay. I want pictures of the wounds and bruises on Starsky's head, shoulders, and back. And, Perry, keep them separated after you develop them. They're for my eyes only. Understand?" Perry nodded, aimed his camera at the floor, finished off the roll and replaced his film. Took the pictures Dobey wanted and finished that roll off, too. Promising Dobey the pictures would be on his desk by noon, Perry left. Dobey didn't see the uniformed cops waiting in the corridor, didn't hear Perry's protests when they grabbed his arm and forcefully led him to an exit door.

The doctor made quick work of stitching Starsky's head wound, taking an extra bit of time to examine the lump left from the previous day's assault. Draping a blanket over Starsky's shoulders and encouraging him to lie back down, the doctor pulled up a chair for Dobey. Neither man spoke, Dobey's gaze fixed on Starsky. The doctor's on Dobey. Dobey cleared his throat and came right out and asked. Knew he really had no right, but this was Dave Starsky. And Dave Starsky was no rapist. "Doctor, can you tell me anything? Anything that will help clear Detective Starsky?"

Seewald took his time, checked his notations, stared at the closed door for half a minute, and told Dobey what he already knew he would hear. "Captain Dobey, there is absolutely no evidence that Detective Starsky raped that boy. There are no traces of semen, blood, or feces anywhere on his genital area. Based on his inability to stay conscious, I would say that at sometime he was struck on the back of his head hard enough to knock him out and give him one hell of a cut. From the size, shape, and depth of the wound I would say he was most likely struck with the butt of a gun. That, coupled with the blow to his forehead yesterday, would have knocked him right out. There is a third wound from a cylindrical shaped object--perhaps a nightstick--which certainly didn't help any. There are two more strikes from that object that left bruises on Detective Starsky's abdomen and shoulders. I can vouch for the absence of any physical evidence of Detective Starsky raping that boy. I'll have to leave clearing him of any other charges up to you, Captain."

"Cap?" Starsky shifted on his gurney, needing to say something else before he passed out. "Tell Hutch...tell him there were flashes..." Starsky was gone.

Dobey studied Starsky for a moment, wondering at his message for Hutch, finally turning back to the doctor.

"Doctor Seewald, were you here when Starsky was brought in?"

"Yes I was. Why?"

"Was he conscious?"

"No, Captain. Sergeant Starsky didn't become conscious until after we got him on the examining table. Is that significant?"

"Yes, yes I think it is, Doctor. Any way of telling how long he was out?"

"No, hopefully your officers can help with that. I do doubt that he was unconscious due to the blow to his head yesterday, more likely from one of the more recent hits. I'll make sure to point that out in my report."

Dobey cleared his throat again at that, drumming his fingers on the frame of Starsky's gurney. "May I ask how long you will keep Starsky?"

Seewald raised his brow at Dobey's phrasing, and stated very quietly that he didn't feel three days would be
unreasonable.

Perfect. Three days Starsky will be safe and off the streets. Three days worth of time. "That's fine Doctor Seewald, now if you'll excuse me, I have some officers to speak with. Detective Starsky's partner is in the hallway. I'd appreciate it if you would allow him to stay with Starsky."

Dobey's request was tossed over his shoulder and left unanswered. Seewald could see no reason to deny him. No way really. Hutch was already in the room, already had Starsky's hand in his, was already questioning the doctor. Questions answered and reassurances issued, Hutch kept his position at Starsky's side, speaking softly and issuing reassurances of his own.

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Outside the hospital, the day was well on its way. Lieutenant Chapman and his old friend Chief Grimes were enjoying an early lunch.

Anyone looking for Jesse Bonner would be disappointed. His body would be found across town from Parker Center. A small and neat bullet hole marring his forehead. Dead for no more than a few hours.

The two cops responsible for Bonner's death dispersed quietly, their missions for the rest of the day already issued: Return the weapon and silencer to the Property Department and obtain another weapon for their next strike. Find the doctor who treated Starsky and eliminate him. Lose the rape kit and switch the doctor's report for another highly fabricated version. Easy enough to do with a contact in place in the hospital.

Tony Perry had already been eliminated; pushed down a flight of stairs beyond the exit door the uniformed cops pulled him through. His neck broken, camera smashed, and film canisters missing.

~*~*~*~

"Hey, buddy? They're gonna get you set up in a room now. I'll go grab some coffee and meet you up there, okay?"

Starsky only stirred in his sleep, the cadence and soothing tone of the voice he knew so well letting him stay asleep. Hutch straightened, rubbing the tightness from his lower back, not leaving until Starsky was on his way. Coffee forgotten, Hutch asked at the nurses' station for Jimmy Donaldson's room number. Pediatrics was one floor down, Starsky was headed two floors up.

Elevator doors on the upper floor opened and Starsky was pushed out to a corridor teeming with cops and medical personnel. Voices woke him, voices that argued sharply, cutting through the haze of safety he felt with Hutch. The now familiar snap of handcuffs circled his left wrist, a second snap fastening with a clang to the side-rail of his gurney. Groggy and slightly confused, Starsky started to ask questions and was roughly reminded he was still under arrest and had the right to remain silent. He recognized the cop doing the talking as the same man who arrested him in the alley. Another voice demanded the nurses and doctors to stand away from the prisoner. Starsky recognized this one as Lieutenant Chapman. The elevator doors opened again. Starsky never saw his room.

Three floors below, Hutch stepped out to a brightly-lit hall decorated with cartoon figures. It was noisy: kids talking and laughing and crying. Nurses soothing and doctors talking with anxious parents. Lunch trays rattling by on wheeled carts. It grew quiet toward the end of the hall where Jimmy's room was. Hutch stood outside the room and listened at the slightly open door. There was no laughter in this room. A woman was
crying, a man was cursing and making threats against the cop who had done this to Jimmy. Threats naming Starsky. Damn! Someone told him his name. Threats to sue the hell out of the city. Hutch moved so that he could see into the room. Jimmy was curled on his side, facing away from the door, a pillow pulled tight to his face. The woman Hutch presumed was his mother, sat off in the corner by herself. The man making threats spoke his last words when he stood at the foot of Jimmy's bed and asked what the boy had done to make the cop want him that way.

Hutch had the man by the collar and out of the room in a manner of seconds. Pushed him up against the wall right next to Bugs Bunny and told him to shut up. Shut up and listen good because he wasn't about to speak loud enough for anyone else to hear.

"David Starsky is my partner. He had nothing to do with hurting that boy. And if I ever hear you speak to your son..."

"He ain't my boy. Came along with his mother."

"You think that makes what you said to him any better?"

Hutch knew he had an unwanted audience and turned to ask the adults present to please clear the hall, easing up just enough for Warren to shake himself loose from Hutch's hold. Not bothering to keep his voice down, he let Hutch have it, threatening both him and Starsky, spouting off names, red-faced and raising his fists. Giving Hutch all he needed for what he so strongly wanted to do. Curving his good hand over one of Warren's balled fists; Hutch spun him against the wall, cuffed him, and informed him he was under arrest. The hallway was quiet enough by then that Hutch heard the elevator door open and looked up to see a uniformed officer running his way.

"Take this guy, would you, Graham." Stepping into Jimmy's room, he addressed Jimmy's mother. Still in her chair in the corner, still crying. "Lady, you have more kids at home?" No answer, just louder crying. Jimmy spoke for her, out of a practiced and deep-seated need to keep his mother and younger half-siblings protected. Lifting his face away from the security of his pillow, he whispered one word to Hutch, then dropped his head back down and closed his eyes.

"Four."

Hutch left the room with a quiet thank you and a promise to Jimmy that the kids would be safe and taken care of.

"Graham, charge this guy with threatening a police officer and creating a public disturbance, I'll deal with the report later. Get hold of Perkowitz and have her pick up the other four kids, check with the station for the home address."

"Sure thing, Sergeant. Listen, you need to get upstairs...that's what I came to tell you. They came for Sergeant Starsky..."

Graham was talking to a closed door; Hutch was already gone.

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The old man curled on his narrow cot. Images flashed behind closed eyes, remembrances of a poor family he only vaguely acknowledged as an adult. Parents, a baby sister, never enough food, the filth and odors that crowded his childhood home. I escaped. I escaped and they tried to take it all from me. And now I'll take it all from them. Kill them. Kill them now. He shivered and clawed for his blanket, his hand falling to the side to dangle from the cot. The stench of urine filled the air to accompany a last shuddering breath. James
Gunther would not live to see his dream realized.

Several hours passed. Guards glanced in, a lunch tray was ignored, evening fell. Gunther slept on, alone in death as in his adult life. The guard who finally found him could only be disappointed. His part-time job was over--no more looking the other way, no more envelopes of cash for doing it. The money had been nice. His heavy sigh had nothing to do with grief. He made a single stop at a payphone on his way to the warden's office. Decided against leaving a message when an answering machine picked up.

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Captain Dobey slammed the receiver down hard enough to crack it. Chief Grimes was in a meeting. Chief Grimes was unavailable. Lieutenant Chapman had just returned to his office, surely he could be of assistance. Chapman my ass. Edith was always preaching at him to count to ten. By the time he reached ninety, Dobey was ready to try again. Grimes' assistant appeared not to have heard of counting to ten, loudly warning Dobey the chief would hear about Dobey's persistent calls and his rather unflattering view of Lieutenant Chapman. But not until he was out of his meeting. Dobey wondered if Grimes' young assistant knew how lucky he was that there were floors and walls and doors and cops between them.

"I don't care what you tell him about my calls. Just tell him now and tell him to get back to me!"

*Fine lot of good it does to be a police captain. Young pup of an assistant... Who the hell does...* Dobey's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door followed by Minnie Kaplan asking permission to enter.

"Captain." Minnie was pale, her small hands shaking as she extended them toward Dobey. "Tony Perry, sir. He was found dead at the hospital."

Dobey didn't need to ask any questions. Minnie couldn't stop talking.

"He was found at the bottom of a flight of stairs. His camera strap was tangled around his leg. His neck was broken. They say he's been dead for about four hours." Minnie took a breath, huge for her size. "I don't understand! Tony wouldn't fall, Captain. Tony climbed mountains, he was a runner, a dancer..." That was when Minnie ran out of gas and started to cry.

Dobey gave her all the time he had, about half a minute.

"Minnie, get Babcock and Simmons in here, Jensen, Waters, Duchwald. Do it quietly. Get an order typed up to examine Perry's possessions; I'll sign it. We're going to need to get to them before anyone else does. Get hold of Hutch, he may still be at the hospital. Tell him to leave orders at the nurses' station that nobody is to be allowed in Starsky's room. Tell him to hand-pick a team to guard the door."

Minnie on her way, Dobey sat, stared at the cracked phone for a moment, then grabbed it and punched in the numbers for home. To tell Edith to get the kids and go visit her sisters up north and stay until he sent for them. Something bad was coming, something already there for Starsky and Hutch and Tony Perry.

Six officers crowded around Dobey's desk—six trusted officers out of the dozens under Dobey's command. Minnie let Dobey know she was still waiting to hear from Hutch as Dobey scrawled his signature on the papers she passed to him.

Sliding the papers back to Minnie, Dobey looked each of his officers in the eyes.

"I want you all to listen to me for a minute before I issue any orders. If any one of you has a problem with what I say, you may leave. No questions asked. You all know Starsky and Hutchinson; most of you have worked with them as long as I have. They're both exceptional officers and friends." Dobey stood, tapped his pen a few times, let something remain unsaid, then continued. "As you all know, Starsky was arrested for
the rape of a young boy. I know Starsky was set up. I didn't need any proof, but it's there. The doctor who treated him found absolutely no physical evidence that Starsky was involved in the rape of that boy. In addition to the vandalism at their home and the incident yesterday, it appears the officers who arrested Starsky beat him. Frankly, I am afraid for both Starsky and Hutchinson."

The six officers stood in their places. Not one of them moved. Dobey nodded a silent thank you and continued. Orders needed to be issued, time could not be wasted.

"I'm sorry to tell all of you that Tony Perry was found dead at the hospital. Perry took the evidence pictures of Starsky. He took another roll of shots at my request of the wounds to Starsky's head and body; shots I asked him to keep secret. Babcock, get down to the morgue and go through Perry's personal effects, you're looking for his film canisters. Bring them straight back here and keep them out of sight. Ward off any questions." Dobey thought for a second, "Lie if you have to. Simmons, Babcock will meet you at the hospital after that. Get a full report from the responding unit and then make full reports yourselves after questioning every nurse, orderly, and doctor you can find. Patients if you can be discreet about it."

Dobey's phone rang. His officers spoke softly among themselves to give their captain some privacy, giving up on the idea as Dobey's voice rose in anger.

"I want to know who gave those orders and I want to know now! Starsky was in no condition to be moved anywhere...Bullshit! We both know... Get back here, Hutch. We'll get him out of there. Just...get back here."

Dobey didn't bother to slam the phone down this time, just let the receiver drop to his desktop as his head bowed in something frighteningly close to defeat. Minnie did the asking.

"Captain?"

Dobey looked up, his eyes hard with anger, his skin ashen. "Starsky has been moved under armed guard to City Jail."

Dobey let his officers get it out of their systems, agreeing in silence with everything they had to say. It was again Minnie who asked another one word question.

"Hutch?"

"No visitors, plain and simple. Starsky is all by himself."

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It took hours to secure permission for Hutch to see Starsky in his cell. Hours of arguments, rhetoric, and threats. Chapman denied Hutch, tried to deny Dobey. It was eventually left up to Chief Grimes who finally returned Dobey's phone call. A few well place reminders and more than a few accusations later that Dobey couldn't have cared less bordered on insubordination, and Hutch was finally on his way down to the isolation cells that City Jail kept hidden in its basement.

Hutch's footsteps echoed sharply in the dimly lit hallway. Cells on either side held shadows--some moving, some non-defined still shapes--and the heavy odors of too many men, too much fear, too little hope. His demands that the lights be turned back up had grudgingly been agreed to, the guard on duty taking his time getting to the control board. Hutch didn't wait for it to happen. There was too much at stake to wait. Starsky was there waiting for him, hoping for him. He didn't need the guard to supply a cell number, didn't need direction to find Starsky. Didn't need more light to see the spatters and smears of blood that marred the light-colored floor.

He was curled on a cot, facing the bars in the cell at the end of the corridor. The lights came up just as Hutch
reached the cell door and he stopped. Startled by the harsh light, his eyes snapped shut, but not before he realized the cherished shape of Starsky's body and felt the too damned familiar ache in his heart at Starsky being hurt. Not before he saw the fresh blood and the bruises and Starsky's body shaking hard in the cool air. Hutch's eyes opened when the cell door slid open, closed again in thanks when Starsky called his name.

"Starsk, hey, I'm here..."

"Knew it was...your footsteps." Starsky caught his breath, fought off a pain from some wound hidden under the blanket draped over his torso and legs. An arm raised, dislodging the blanket, and Hutch's eyes closed again, refusing to look, seeing instead the image of a naked Starsky in their own bed, in their own home. Holding the blanket aloft, his body on its side, cock full and jutting toward Hutch. Eyes bright in the shadows of night, voice filled with wanting. "Come under the covers with me, Hutch. Let me love you..."

Getting too good at it, Starsk...too good at seeing what I want, too good at refusing reality. God, it has to stop... Gunther had made him good at it. Too good at substituting the familiar and beloved for the hurt and pain. But it had saved him. Saved him when insanity edged close, when the grief was too much to bear.

"Hutch?" Starsky wanted him now, too, his voice filled with pain and fear, but still wanting Hutch.

"Let me see, babe. Just lie back and let me see."

Hutch wanted to yell, hit something, cry. Starsky was naked under the blanket, his body a mess. An eye blackened, jaw swollen, ribs mottled with bruises and cuts. The bandages applied at the hospital were now dirty and loose and spotted with fresh blood. Forcing his eyes to Starsky's lower body, Hutch had to fight to keep calm and controlled. The bruising and blood around Starsky's genitals terrified him.

"S'okay, Hutch. They just beat the crap out of me."

Hutch had to turn his face away. Fought desperately to let go of what he was seeing, go someplace else in his mind. He couldn't, not this time. Not when he could feel the heat rise off Starsky's body, smell the blood, feel his partner's pain.

Tucking the thin blanket back around his shivering lover, Hutch hushed him, told him he needed to make a quick phone call, and would be right back. Starsky seemed to be drifting off, but his body jerked and he moaned at some pain the movement caused him.

"Starsk?"

"M'okay...listen. Cops, Hutch, cops...be careful."

Starsky was out. Hutch sat and watched him for a moment, remembering Dobey's warnings, damning himself for thinking his relationship with Starsky could be out in the open. Dobey was right. They weren't safe, and Starsky was paying the price. Stroking a finger over Starsky's cheek, Hutch whispered again that he would be right back and left Starsky to search for a phone, finally commandeering an office with his shield held high for the benefit of anyone who wanted to argue.

"Captain? We have to get him out of here. He's been badly beaten. Yeah, by cops, Captain. He's not at all safe. What do you mean? When..."

Hutch quit speaking at the sound of a commotion in the hallway outside of the office he was in. He recognized the voices of Simmons and Babcock and the jail guard arguing heatedly. Leaving the office, Hutch was stopped by Babcock, hearing only his whisper to just play along, before Babcock had him pinned face first to the wall, cuffing him.
A gurney was pushed through the doorway, and Hutch fought his fellow officer, knowing the medics were headed for Starsky.

"Detective Hutchinson, you are being placed under arrest." Babcock leaned close and asked Hutch to please forgive him. A shove to Hutch's back and Babcock got loud. "Don't resist, you lousy queer." Spinning Hutch around to face him, Babcock read him his rights and pulled him along the corridor toward the exit.

"Babcock, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Just be quiet, Hutch. We're getting you and Starsky out of here. Simmons is with Starsky, they're taking him back to Memorial. As far as anyone here knows, he's still under arrest. He'll be under guard, Hutch. Duchwald and Waters have been assigned; they'll take good care of him. Nobody will get to him again. Dobey said to tell you you have his word on it."

"Wait a minute. What's so different now from when they took him before? He was hurt pretty badly then and it didn't stop anyone." Hutch was having a hard time believing.

"Two things, Hutch. First was his doctor. Doctor Seewald raised a fuss that you wouldn't believe. Had the hospital administrator on the phone with Grimes threatening to call in the press and the Civil Liberties Union. Even threw the mayor's name around. Second, we know someone is trying to frame Starsky. Simmons managed to weed out a plant in the hospital that spilled just enough that we know for sure Starsky was set up. Fella insists he was to be paid for confiscating Seewald's reports and substituting a version that would have nailed Starsky."

There was some noise behind them. Starsky's gurney was being wheeled out, Simmons at his shoulder, directing the medics to take it easy. Babcock led Hutch toward the waiting ambulance, squeezing his elbow before loudly ordering him into the ambulance.

"Not taking any chances getting blamed for roughing you up, Hutchinson. Get in there with your partner, Simmons will ride along." Hutch was pulled sharply around to face Babcock. "Don't try and pull any shit, Hutchinson, we're all watching you."

Hutch read it in Babcock's face. Heard it underlying his words. He and Starsky would be safe now, at least as safe as Dobey and their fellow officers could keep them. He let Babcock push him into the ambulance, stumbling until he landed on his bottom next to Starsky. He pulled his knees to his chest and kept watch over him, tired to his core but missing nothing. Coming to life when Babcock's hushed voice filled him in on Dobey's orders and who was doing what. The news that Tony Perry's film canisters had already been claimed when Babcock showed up at the morgue could have been really shitty news. Babcock and Hutch saw it differently; Chapman had signed for the film.

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Renolds watched from the emergency room parking lot. First Hutchinson, in cuffs and escorted by a detective, then Starsky, cuffed to his stretcher, were taken into the hospital. Dobey's sedan stopped sharply at the curb, keys tossed to a uniformed officer, and the captain was right behind his men. Renolds slid down in his seat and pretended to be engrossed in a newspaper when an unmarked police car pulled in next to his own sedan. Four more plainclothes detectives exited that car. Renolds felt their fleeting glances, felt relief when they walked toward the hospital. He started his car and moved it, opting to move to the visitor's lot. Grabbing a baseball mitt from the back seat, he made his way toward the main entrance.

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It took Simmons, Babcock, Duchwald, and Waters to restrain Hutchinson after the doctors' initial reports on
Starsky. Dobey gave up; his face burning from the glancing blow Hutch managed to deliver. Hutch was exhausted and worried and just about at his breaking point, and wanted one thing and only that one thing. To be with Starsky. Starsky's doctors had other ideas, and Dobey had the uncomfortable position of siding with them. Uncomfortable and most likely impossible to accomplish on his own. Hutch was in no mood to take orders.

"Let them take care of your partner, Hutchinson."

Might as well have been talking to the walls. Hutch was determined, but outnumbered. Babcock settled the altercation when he threatened to cuff him again, cuffs dangling from his index finger, ready to go. To a chair two floors down if necessary. When Hutch gave in, he gave in all together. Sinking into a chair, wrapping his chest with his arms, studying the floor. The five other officers in the room regarded him with caution; one more word about Starsky and they knew Hutch would be running. Babcock took one side, Simmons the other. Dobey took to pacing.

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Renolds made a quick stop at a payphone in the hospital lobby. Chapman answered his private line without any greeting. Knowing who was calling and lighting into Renolds. Telling him in unsubtle terms that he had fucked up. Renolds had his own opinions and delivered them until they both quit and shut-up at the same time. Renolds listened as Chapman drew in a loudly frustrated breath, knowing the order that was about to come, wishing he had never agreed to get involved, feeling a twinge of regret over the boy he was using. Reminding himself of the power Gunther provided him and what his future held, he got over his regret in a hurry. That's when I'll take care of you, Chapman, when I'm done with Gunther.

"Get to the kid. Take care of it now. And when you're done with him, take care of Starsky. I assume you have what you need with you. Hutchinson should be easy to dispose of once Starsky is gone."

"I have it." Renolds wished he also had the ability to reach through the phone line and strangle Chapman. Just as much of a bastard as you've always been. Pompous prick. Never have done your own dirty work. Where the hell do you think you'd be without Grimes to hide behind? Renolds settled for slamming the phone down, returning the glare of the lobby attendant, and heading for the elevator, patting the breast pocket of his suit coat, reassuring himself what he needed was there.

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Dr. Seewald wanted nothing more than to have a hot shower and go home. Telling himself to get over it, he settled a warmed blanket over his sleeping patient's body and gathered his reserves to go meet with the man's partner. The hallways were dim; snores and moans competing for air space, both losing out to the beeps and alarms of monitors, and the hurried footsteps of nurses and doctors. Seewald tuned it all out, focusing on the waiting room doors, relieved that despite the blood and new bruising, despite the contusions and added stitches, despite the fever, David Starsky would recover. Even more relieved he wouldn't have to tell Hutchinson anything to the contrary. Wondered about and anticipated how much relief he would feel when he turned Starsky back over to Hutchinson to keep him safe.

A pair of cops hovered at the end of the hall. Looked to be guarding the waiting room. Seewald grew more than a little uneasy when one of the cops moved a hand to his weapon, the other reaching behind his back. Doctor Eric Seewald reminded himself that his mother hadn't raised a fool, and made a quick right into the nurses' station, down a short corridor, and through the secondary doors to the waiting room. Scared the crap out of Hut, ignored him, and went right to Dobey.

"Captain Dobey, did you order a guard outside this room?" Seewald whispered, thinking his voice sounded like he was shouting.
Simmons and Babcock already knew the answer their captain would give and were already on the move. Swinging doors shoved hard by two fast moving detectives had their way with the two cops on the other side. Simmons and Babcock had weapons confiscated, their own holstered, and cuffs clicking shut before Dobey made it out of the waiting room. And Dobey made his arrival known in no uncertain terms, Hutch looming behind him, fist ready to talk. Read the two cuffed cops the riot act and waited rather impatiently for their explanation. Reminded the officers they had nothing to lose by telling him the truth, and maybe even a little to gain. Maybe he would even keep Detective Hutchinson under control. Maybe.

One cop started talking; the other told him to shut the hell up. Babcock and Simmons took one, Waters and Duchwald the other. Hutch split his time between the two, and Dobey finally got what he was looking for. Made him sick, but he got it. Informants, payoffs, promotions, and Starsky and Hutch gone from the force. And if it got high enough in Chief Grimes' chain of command, gone from life. Grimes hated homosexuals, and the two cops and a whole lot of others like them hated what Grimes hated. Chapman was on Grimes' private payroll, too. Chapman was the high link, Chapman did the orchestrating, and Chapman was running the show. But there was someone else involved, too. Someone besides Chapman. Rumor among the cops working for Grimes was that it was someone with ties to James Gunther. And that someone used people, hurt them, and threw them away. Killed them.

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At the mention of Gunther, Hutch was running down the corridor to the elevator before anyone could stop him. Hollering over Dobey's demands he be calm, Hutch ordered Waters and Duchwald to check on Starsky, escort him from recovery to his room and guard him. Punched the elevator button for the pediatrics floor hard enough to crack it. Jimmy Donaldson was alive, Starsky was alive. The mystery someone associated with James Gunther would want to change that.

The corridor that ran through pediatrics was pretty much deserted. Kids sleeping, parents gone home, nurses studying charts and peeking around doors. Light showed under the door at the end of the hall. Jimmy's door. Hutch approached silently, gun drawn, flashing his badge at a nurse and demanding she keep all the room doors closed, pausing outside of Jimmy's room until she had other nurses there to help her. The elevator doors opened and Simmons and Babcock emerged, moving down the hallway as quietly as Hutch had. The quiet was broken by raised voices. A woman screaming to get away from her boy, begging for help. A man Hutch knew wasn't Warren Donaldson calling her a drunken bitch, sounds of a hard slap to skin. Furniture hitting the floor, glass breaking, and Jimmy calling for his mother. Hutch heard kids starting to cry in the rooms closest to Jimmy's and he knew he had to move, had to get into Jimmy's room. Motioning Babcock to one side and Simmons to the other, Hutch pushed the door open.

Jimmy's mother was struggling with a man. A man with a syringe in his hand. Clawing at his eyes, putting herself in between him and her son. Finally being a mother. Jimmy looked terrified, but he was fighting, too. Hutch took over, ordering the man to halt, identifying himself and leveling his magnum at the man's head. The syringe fell to the bed, helped along by Simmon's hand threatening to snap the man's wrist. Jimmy and his mother fell back on the pillows, nothing tentative about their arms circling each other.

Hutch was all over Renolds. Cuffing him, pulling his identification from his pocket, finding the second syringe. Simmons recited the Miranda, at the same time being none too gentle at directing Renolds out the door, down the hall, and out of the building. Hutch took a number of deep breaths, turning to Jimmy and his mom, needing answers from the boy. Looking them over, making sure they were both all right, and hating to intrude. Feeling hope for the kid resting against his mother's breast.

"Jimmy? I need you to talk to me. I know you're tired, I know you just want to be with your mom. I know it's been a really horrible time for you, but I need your help, Jimmy. Think you can do that?"
Jimmy didn't raise his head, stayed right there where he was by his mom. But he talked. Even as his mother tried to stop him, tried to tell Hutch the cops had done enough to her boy. Jimmy told his story from the beginning. Identifying Renolds, telling how Renolds had singled him out at his bus stop, offered him money to play a few 'pranks' on a couple of 'dirty cops'. A guilty glance at his mom, and a sad and rushed explanation that he only wanted the money so they could all get away from Warren. How the dark-haired cop had followed him into the alley and attacked him and hurt him. That's when Hutch stopped him, had to turn away and get himself under control. Saw Dobey in the doorway and silently begged him for help. Dobey had kids, he could do this better. Hutch surrendered his position to his captain, Dobey smiling sadly at the boy before him. Thinking to himself that sending Edith away with the kids had been the best thing to do. If someone had hurt his children like this...

"Jimmy? My name is Captain Dobey. I'm Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson's commanding officer. You've talked to a lot of policemen and doctors today haven't you? Do you think you can give me just a few more minutes, son? Okay? Good. Jimmy, I want you to describe to me the man who hurt you."

Jimmy described and Hutch's heart sank. The physical description fit Starsky too well, was too damning, would carry too much weight. Hutch's weary mind darted, frantic for questions to disprove the boy; his overloaded emotions fighting with reason, knowing damn well Jimmy was only telling the truth as he had lived it. Also knowing that even though they had Dr. Seewald's report that there was no medical evidence, that he knew without any doubt Starsky could not have done anything so evil, the boy was still the victim, the eyewitness. A sympathetic jury could easily...

"Hutchinson. Did you hear me?"

Hutch turned back to Jimmy and Dobey. He hadn't heard. But Dobey had, and Hutch knew from the look on Dobey's face that Jimmy had said something important. Something he missed.

"No, sir. I..."

Dobey was surprisingly patient with him. "The shoes, Hutch. Jimmy just described the man's shoes. Tell Officer Hutchinson one more time, Jimmy, and then we'll leave you alone with your mom."

Jimmy's voice was flat and tired. "He had on black leather boots. Real dirty with knots in the laces."

Starsky's shoes were brown suede running shoes. Clean and neatly kept as all of his shoes were. Catalogued and numbered for evidence.

Dobey was talking to him again. Hutch vaguely absorbed bits and pieces of what his captain had to say. He heard Dobey lose the patience he had a moment ago and holler after him when he left the room. Come Hell, high water, or Dobey, Hutch was on his way upstairs to Starsky. Jimmy and evidence would just have to wait.

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Duchwald and Waters greeted him at Starsky's door. Tried hard not to grin like fools and stood aside, pushing the door open with a flourish. Starsky was awake, well, more or less. Awake enough to reach for Hutch, try to smile, offer assurance that he was all right.

Hutch felt overwhelmed, needing to grab onto something to keep from falling. He took Starsky's hand, hooked a chair, and sat down hard. The door shut quietly, and they were alone.

"Starsk?" The face Hutch showed to Starsky was bewildered, exhausted, frightened. "I...shit, I just want to quit."
"Don't."

Hutch was surprised at the quiet strength behind Starsky's simple command, was testy enough argue, but elected to settle for a deep sigh and resting his chin on his chest for a few seconds. Sleep was right there, he wanted it badly, but his work wasn't done. They weren't completely safe. Not yet. Starsky knew that and Starsky needed him.

Starsky reminded him of just that with words that had been repeated umpteen times during their partnership:

"Did'ya get the bad guys?"

Hutch stood and stretched, leaned over and let his lips find Starsky's ear. "Some of them. You know there are always more."

Starsky smiled as best he could, cringing a bit at pulled stitches and a split lip. "Yeah...never ending supply. Hey...could you kiss me? Might make things feel better."

Hutch kissed. Every visible hurt, every bandage, every uncovered stitch. Was concentrating on a bruise on Starsky's neck when there was a firm knock on the door. Gun drawn, Starsky's body blocked by his own, Hutch granted entry. Relieved to find Dobey, wary of the look on his captain's face. Feeling the oddest mix of joy and anger at Dobey's words.

"Gunther is dead. I just got word."

Behind him Starsky sighed and muttered something about a sad old man. Something more about Hutch getting the rest of the bad guys and being careful and coming back to him. And then he was out, his face turning into Hutch's hand.

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Dobey gave Hutch half a minute of quiet to tuck Starsky in before he cleared his throat and motioned Hutch to the hallway. Duchwald and Waters took their positions, silently offering handshakes to Hutch. Gunther was gone There was reason to celebrate; they would do it happily when Starsky was better and their work was through. Right now there were at least two more men to arrest. Two high-ranking cops. They watched and noted their captain's slumped shoulders as he made his way to the elevator, Hutch at his side. Taking down dirty cops was hard, harder still when one had at one time been a friend and commanding officer.

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Hutch headed directly to the interrogation room Minnie said Renolds was waiting in. Dobey headed for his office. Calls had to be made, arrest warrants secured, proof offered of their necessity. Chief Grimes, Lieutenant Chapman, officers under their command; Dobey didn't want any slipups. A pink "While You Were Out" note caught his eye, instructing him to call Captain Phillips of the Twelfth Precinct. Trying to place Phillips while he dialed, Dobey hoped there would be no more bad news. There wasn't; Phillips gave him an earful of the best news Dobey had heard all day.

The cop grapevine carried news quickly. Phillips knew what Dobey was looking for and he had it. A body had been found in Phillips' precinct. Male, about six feet, dark curly hair. A single bullet between the eyes. According to the coroner, the man had had recent anal intercourse and had not washed off the evidence before he was killed. Did Dobey think this could be the rapist he was looking for? Dobey rubbed hard at the back of his neck. Asked Phillips to tell him one more thing. What kind of shoes the man was wearing. Hoping hard for the answer he got. Black boots. Good news, Starsky, corroborates what we need of the kid's story...Dobey didn't want any slipups proving Starsky's innocence, either.
Dobey almost missed Phillips' promise to get copies of his reports and pictures of the murdered man to Dobey within the hour. Almost missed Phillips wishing him the best. "Starsky and Hutchinson are good cops, Captain. I'd take both of them in an instant. I know we both hope it won't come to that."

"It won't, Captain Phillips. I won't let it. And thank you."

Dobey was off the phone and back on in seconds. Phillips had given him the news he needed to keep going, the mountain not so high anymore. He calmly identified himself to the person who answered his first call and asked to speak with the District Attorney. Dobey didn't think it was at all unusual that she said the DA was waiting to hear from him so late at night, and put his call right through. *Who was it said that cops were as gossipy as a group of old biddies? Hutch maybe? Whoever it was, was right on...*

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Hutch leaned against the wall in the interrogation room for a good long minute. Renolds seemed to be having a hard time looking him in the eye. Hutch wanted so very badly to help him--decided the man could probably talk better without a busted lip, blackened eyes, broken fingers, the lumps and bruises he so badly wanted to deliver. But Hutch did let his emotions take him away for a minute and in his mind every hit and hurt was in place before he settled in the chair across from Renolds and drummed his fingers on the table.

"Want to tell me who you're working for, Renolds?"

Renolds didn't. He stared at the wall over Hutch's shoulder. And he started to sweat. Hutch noticed and shifted himself into Renolds' line of vision. Renolds didn't have the nerve to move his eyes and found himself trapped in the fury that was Hutch. He squirmed a bit, swallowed, sweated some more.

"Let me tell you what I think, Renolds. In fact, let me tell you what I know and you can take it from there. Lieutenant Chapman is pulling your strings. And you, my highly ignorant friend, have the balls to think that you are pulling James Gunther's and Chapman's. Maybe even tugging at Chief Grimes'."

Renolds paled, and Hutch knew he had him by the short hairs. Let Renolds stew for a few more minutes before he laid it all out: blackmail, assaulting Jimmy, the murders of Tony Perry and Jesse Bonner, assaulting a police officer, and ending with the attempted murder of Detective David Starsky.

"And David Starsky is the closest person to me in this life, Renolds." Hutch smiled at the defeated man before him. Gave him a little something more to think about. "I'm going to see you fry." Hutch took a few steps toward the door, turning at the last moment, wanting to enjoy what he was about to say to Renolds. "By the way, Bill, playing Gunther against Chapman was pretty fucking stupid. Guess you were hoping Gunther's money would come in pretty handy, huh? Give you the upper hand? Too bad the old man is dead."

Hutch took his moment. Watched Renolds go from pale to downright green, start to shake, try to talk.

"What's that, Renolds? Have something to say?"

Renolds gave talking his best shot. Hutch managed to pick out attorney, statement, and deal. Grabbed the phone and requested a stenographer for Bill Renolds' statement. With that Hutch left the room, shutting the door quietly, leaving Renolds in his own mess.

Hutch thought he held himself together pretty well. He made it to the restroom, managed to lock the door, wash the invisible filth off his hands. And then he slid to the floor, dropped his face to his hands, and wept.

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Dobey found Hutch an hour later. Forced the locked door and found him still sitting on the floor, finished with grieving, exhausted and more ready to work than he ever had been.

"Hutchinson? You ready?"

"Let's get 'em, Cap."

Dobey pulled Hutch to his feet and the two were on their way upstairs. The District Attorney had sent a handful of assistants; they and dozens of cops lined the upper hallway outside the offices of the Chief of Police, arrest and search warrants in hand. Dobey quietly ordered his officers in to place, checking faces for anyone he perceived to be an enemy. For his part, Hutch stared ahead at the door they were about to open.

Grimes was busy despite the very late hour. Packing up files, filling garbage bags with papers. To say he was pissed at the interruption was akin to saying Starsky and Hutch were having a good day. Dobey took file folders from Grimes' hands and quietly advised his old friend to keep quiet, remember there was a time and a place, remember all the men who were watching. Ignored Grimes when he just as quietly spewed filth about Starsky and Hutchinson in Dobey's face. Dobey stood aside, handing his cuffs off to Hutch, giving him the moment. Hutch took it, reciting what needed reciting, listing charge after charge, handing Grimes off to a junior officer as soon as he possibly could. Feeling as dirty as he had when he finished with Renolds.

It was Hutch who spotted Chapman getting off the elevator and tackled him when he made a break for the stairwell. It took several cops to pull Hutch away. They didn't try too hard, at least at first. Chapman had made things personal; Chapman was responsible for the doctored pictures, for Tony Perry, for orchestrating Renolds and Billy. The cops who valued Starsky and Hutch as friends and fellow officers let Hutch get in a few licks, let him hit Chapman for Starsky, too. They pulled him off when Dobey bellowed his name, but even Dobey had allowed Hutch time to make his point. Dobey knew when to end it before Chapman would have grounds to press charges of his own. Hutch watched Chapman and Grimes leave cuffed and under guard, knew the press was waiting. Wondered rather idly what Chapman and Grimes would have to say, decided he didn't care, and turned to Dobey to tell him he was leaving to see Starsky.

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Starsky was sleeping. Hutch was content to watch him do so. The day seemed weeks long and he didn't have the energy to do more than sit. A good cop had died; Starsky was almost lost, too. Jimmy's life had been torn apart, but was getting pieced back together starting with the most important of pieces, his relationship with his mother. Hutch smiled softly at his sleeping partner. Starsky would be the first to come up with ways to help Jimmy and his family. There would be no charges pressed against Jimmy--counseling, a home without Warren, AA for his mother...Hutch knew he and Starsky would see to it all. Jimmy's life would not be wasted.

Hutch snagged a wheelchair from the hallway, grabbed a pillow from the empty bed in Starsky's room and stretched his long legs out in front of him. Holding the pillow to his chest, he settled into sleep. Daylight was not far away and the first person he wanted to wish a good morning to was Starsky.

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As it turned out, Dobey was the first person to be greeted with a good morning. Hutch doubted his captain had slept much, if at all. Gray whiskers and yesterday's very rumpled suit pretty much told the story. Dobey wanted to fill his men in on the results of yesterday's arrests and then he wanted a week off. Edith and the kids were due home, and home is where Dobey wanted to be. Hutch promised to take notes for his partner and Starsky slept on.
Grimes had managed to come up with bail almost immediately. His attorneys were good ones, but Dobey doubted even they could beat the evidence that had been found in Grimes' files. Names, places, dates; right down to the hours and minutes of Starsky and Hutch's lives. Grimes had had them tailed, photographed, and tape-recorded. Correspondence with Chapman had been found in file-folders simply marked 'DK'. Hutch knew if Starsky had been awake there would have been some remark about first name basis and who the hell did Grimes think he was anyhow. Hutch commented to Dobey that it seemed Grimes hadn't planned on getting caught. Tried hard not to laugh at Dobey's animated description—including hand gestures—of Grimes' thought processes. Felt a dim sense of satisfaction that Grimes' trove of paperwork would be turned about and used as evidence against him.

Chapman was still sitting in a cell, as was Renolds. As were a dozen cops Dobey himself had named as co-conspirators. Renolds was singing as loudly as the evidence found in Grimes' office—naming names, places, and times of his own. Attempted murder charges were pending against the officer responsible for Starsky's beating in the alley. That cop and his partner had already been charged with Tony Perry's murder and misappropriating weapons from the evidence locker. Hospital employees and prison guards had been fired, and they, too, would face charges.

"This is going to take years to sort out, Hutch. With Gunther dead...shit, the old bastard could have at least lived long enough to go to trial again. Finding everyone on his payroll isn't going to be easy. Even Renolds doesn't have all the names. He was really just another patsy with a high opinion of himself. Had big ones, though. Thinking he could pull off using Gunther and his money against Chapman and Grimes. Man's an idiot."

Dobey looked at Hutch, wondering if his officer was going to offer anything to their conversation. Gave Hutch one more bit before he decided he wasn't. "You know as well as I do that some, maybe a lot, of those people arrested are going to cop pleas and walk." Hutch's eyes closed, his arms back around his pillow. He looked tired and a whole lot older than he had a few days ago. Dobey decided to let things rest for now, stretched, yawned widely. "You going to stay here all day, Hutch?"

Hutch looked up at Dobey. "At least until he's awake, Cap. Why don't you take off, go see your family. I'll call you later today. I'm hoping Starsky will be released by tonight, God knows I can take care of him as well as the staff here. Had enough practice." Hutch stood and offered Dobey his hand. "Thank you, Captain."

"No thanks necessary, Hutchinson. We have a long road ahead of us. You know there'll be more pain, more anger. Just remember, we're in it together. Now, take care of your partner. Keep in touch."

There was a whole lot Hutch still wanted to say, just too tired to do it. Dobey got a simple nod and a parting pat on his shoulder. Hutch scrubbed at his face, kneaded the small of his back, and turned around to find the sleepy eyes of his partner, awake and watching him.

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"Hutch? You coming to bed?"

They were both tired, wrung out to the point where sleep would be elusive. More cops had been charged that day along with a few civilians and the owners of the shop that doctored the emergency room photos. Tension had built in the department and with it came accusations, denials, and enough proof of who had done what to press charges. Dobey, Starsky, Hutch...they had all been taken aback at some of the officers involved. Men they considered to be good officers and friends. Sides were taken; there would be no winners.
Two weeks past since Starsky came home. True to his word Hutch had cared for him, protected him, cherished him, and swam in the puddle of guilt he poured for himself. He should never have thought they could come out and have it be okay, he should have been smarter, should have handled it differently, should have kept his damn mouth shut. Starsky listened, argued each point, disagreed with them all. Finally told Hutch to shut the hell up and get over it. They were alive weren't they? Still had jobs, didn't they? And Starsky wanted his best friend and lover back.

"Hey, did you hear me?" Starsky tossed his question over one bare shoulder as he shed the rest of his clothing and climbed into their bed. Hutch came into the bedroom a few minutes later, still quiet, still dressed, looking like he forgot what their bedroom was for. Just standing there in the near dark.

"Come under the covers with me, Hutch. Let me love you."

Starsky wondered at Hutch's sharp intake of breath, forgot all about it when Hutch stripped and joined him. Starsky was trapped by long arms, anchored in place by Hutch's warm body pressed over his. Hutch's mouth making love to his, Hutch's hands stroking and petting every place they could reach.

Starsky reached between them and found Hutch's cock.

"Come on, baby, get hard for me."

Hutch did. Found Starsky's cock with his own hand, and Starsky's chest with his tongue. Found the raised scarring over Starsky's heart and kissed him there.

"Hutch...Hutch do you remember, babe?"

Hutch gripped Starsky's cock more tightly, whispered how he would never, ever forget. And Starsky came at his words; Hutch following right behind with the press of Starsky's leg between his thighs and Starsky's murmured "I love you".

The End