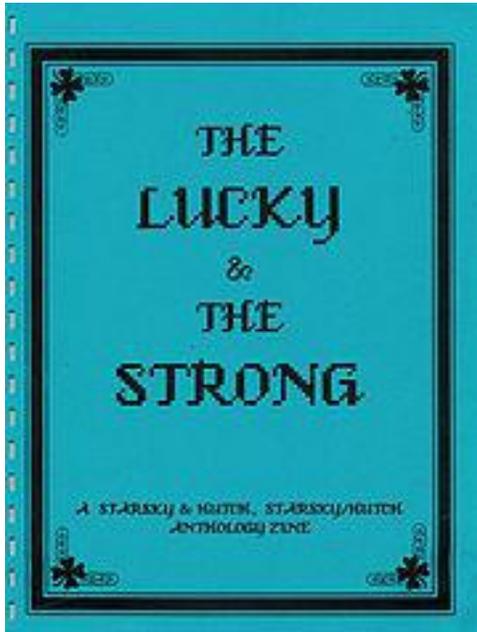




"FOREVER"
by
Linda McGee

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Summary: Will a past relationship affect Starsky and Hutch's new love affair?

"FOREVER"

by **Linda McGee**

Satyr. Dark head tossing against pale yellow sheets, sweat-sheened form taut-muscled with sexual need, Starsky was the embodiment of desire. Kneeling between his lover's spread thighs, heart hammering with love and lust, Hutch devoured him with his eyes.

Their lovemaking had begun slowly, with lingering touches, exploratory kisses, and whispered encouragements—the initiative shifting easily back and forth, both participants becoming bolder and more aroused with every shared intimacy. At one point Starsky had been in command. His hungry mouth consumed Hutch's, then moved to nip at his throat and chest with just enough force, marking him, inciting him to greater heights of desire. Talented hands roamed freely over Hutch's body, demanding response from his cooperative flesh. Straddling his companion, Starsky rubbed their sweat-slick groins together in an irregular rhythm that intensified their need. Combining newly-learned skills with a long-time, symbiotic understanding of his partner, he tantalized the blond deliberately, molding him, manipulating him, increasing the pleasure maddeningly without delivering completion.

At last, Hutch had grabbed the muscular buttocks in both hands and rolled them over, claiming a turn at ascendancy. Starsky had made no protest, watching him through slitted, predatory eyes, lips curved in an enigmatic smile.

Leaning forward, Hutch pinched both dusky hard nipples, eliciting a gasp and an involuntary thrust of the hips. Starsky reached for him but Hutch resisted, toying with the aroused nubs and massaging flat-palmed along his chest and abdomen, flying him higher. Starsky moaned and twisted beneath him, and the blond reveled in the evidence of his power to give pleasure, sliding his hands downward to knead at sculpted thighs, deliberately avoiding the rampant manhood.

Starsky crooked his left leg over his lover's calf, stroking the sole of his foot along it. "Hutch..." Breathless plea. Hutch knew what he wanted. What they both wanted, and would have. But not yet...

"Shh..." Edging backwards, he took the wine-dark cock in a firm grasp, squeezing encouragement. Eyes falling closed, Starsky gave a pleased moan and began pushing into his fingers, arms stretching above his head in unselfconscious abandon.

"Do you love me?"

Passion-darkened eyes flew open in disbelief. "Jesus," Starsky panted. "Are you crazy? What else do you think I'm doing here?"

Embarrassed by his insecurity yet relieved by the spontaneous reply, Hutch lowered his head and closed his mouth over the dusky crown of his lover's sex, Starsky's strangled choke making Hutch's own organ harden in empathy. *Love you, too, Starsk. Gonna show you now...*

Too soon, hands gripped his shoulders, pushing him away. "Stop, sweetheart. If you keep that up, it'll be over too soon, and I wanna come with you in me."

The words, the endearment, and the sentiment behind them sent lightning charging throughout Hutch's nervous system. Wordlessly he moved away, leaning over to retrieve the lubricant from the bedside drawer. As he opened the tube, Starsky turned to one side, drawing up his left leg to allow access to his body. Hand clenched in the pillow, he was making a visible effort to steady his breathing.

Hutch worked in one lubricated finger, then another, gently coaxing the passage to open. His lover was eager for him, impatient for completion, crying out and thrusting back as Hutch found his prostate gland. Sympathetic electricity jolted him once more at the sight, sound, and feel of Starsky's desire. By the time the blond felt confident of his partner's readiness and his own self-control, he had to assist his nearly incoherent companion to turn over and come to his knees. Starsky clutched the bars of the brass headboard, arching his back, freely offering his body. "Come on, Hutch. Do it," he demanded.

Applying the KY to himself was a torture Hutch kept as brief as possible. Moving into position, he rested one hand on Starsky's hip, using the other to guide himself to his goal.

In spite of his eagerness, Starsky flung his head back with a sharp cry as Hutch entered. Knowing from past experience what to do, Hutch waited before pressing forward just a bit, repeating the start-stop action until he was fully sheathed.

The spasming anal muscles around Hutch's cock demanded that he move, plunder the hot, silken haven, but Starsky's staccato breathing, his white-knuckled grip on the bed rails, and the rigidity of his body betrayed agony. Ignoring his own need, Hutch shifted carefully to lie pressed along his lover's back, warmth to warmth, covering and surrounding him. Weight supported by the other man's grasp on the headboard, he wrapped his arms around the sweat-damp torso, nuzzling the clustering curls at Starsky's nape, waiting for the initial discomfort to pass. "Shh... It's all right, love. Go easy. No hurry." One hand stroked soothingly along the silky chest, the other reached to encourage the stiffening sex.

Gradually the harsh breathing eased, the taut body relaxed, and Starsky sighed with relief. Hutch kissed a shoulder tenderly, squeezing the cock again, giving a tiny, experimental push. "Better?"

"Mmm..."

Hutch continued his ministrations, kissing, fondling Starsky's chest, manipulating his sex, and moving in minute increments inside him until Starsky gave a gasp that wasn't pain and shoved back against him. "Oh, that's good..."

Relief and a sense of triumph bathed the blond as he withdrew further and thrust back inside again, allowing his own desire to resurface. The merging of their two bodies thrilled him beyond any experience he'd ever dreamed. Starsky filled up all the empty places, making him whole at last. Hutch plunged into the welcoming warmth, mind and body flying free, overwhelmed by myriad sensations, of which sexual delight was only one. Completion. Comfort. Joy. Starsky heaved under him, sharing his body, his heat, his mind and heart. Starsky's sex filled his fist, hard and hungry, and Hutch knew exactly how to hold it, how to pleasure him, as if he was making love to himself. Delight skittered along his nerves at the thought.

Starsky was uninhibitedly vocal, crying out his satisfaction in rhythm with Hutch's possession of his body. With only slight surprise, Hutch heard his own voice echoing the cadence. Their union enraptured him, stroked him to his soul, until thought was no longer possible and he was ruled only by the drive for completion.

Orgasm roared over him like a hurricane of fire. It seized him, shook him by the throat, held him for a brief infinity in its blind eye, and scattered his charred remains to the four winds.

Somehow they had fallen to lie on their sides in a jumble of limbs, still joined. His face was buried in warm tangled curls, his heaving chest pressed against a slick wet back, close enough to feel the throb of his lover's racing heart. His arms still enfolded Starsky, his damp right hand cradling his lover's spent cock, and the pungent smell of sweat and sex filled his nostrils.

"Mmm..." With a satisfied rumble, Starsky shifted position, stretching slightly, giving a soft "ouch" as Hutch slipped free.

Hutch kissed his nape, rubbing his face into that fascinating hair. "You okay?"

"Mmm..." Starsky took Hutch's hand, guiding it to massage the semen into his belly. "That's an understatement." He rolled to his back and lay with eyes closed, one hand coming to rest on Hutch's thigh.

"You're going to make a mess of these sheets."

Starsky didn't stir. "Shoulda thought of that when you were on my back, doin' what you were doin'."

Lying there beside the other man, a separate entity once more, Hutch felt his earlier euphoria shift into vague depression as the doubts began their insidious niggling. Rising silently, he padded to the bathroom, where he used a damp cloth to clean himself. The mirror showed him a shaggy-haired, mustached man with the reddened souvenirs of passion on his chest and throat, and a disturbingly lost look in his pale eyes. Grimacing at the reflection, he left the room.

Starsky lay as he had left him, apparently dozing. The light from the bedside lamp cast his relaxed form into a relief of gold-toned flesh and shadowed mystery—luster of red-highlighted curls, fan of dark lashes on high cheekbones, black-and-tan contrast of lightly-furred chest and thin-fleshed ribs, leanly muscled legs tapering to feet which matched his hands for fine-boned delicacy. The still-angry scars left by assassins' bullets didn't reduce his attractiveness to his partner. Rather, they made Hutch cleave more desperately to the soulmate he'd almost lost.

Settling beside the supine man, he stroked the cloth gently over the flat belly and the lax sex in its dark nest, removing the drying remains of their lovemaking. Purring like a pampered cat, Starsky rolled over to facilitate Hutch's attention to his backside, remaining in the same position when Hutch had finished and tossed the cloth aside. For a few moments, Hutch sat watching him, sighing with undefined longing before lying down again and focusing his gaze on the ceiling.

The low-voiced question was unexpected. "What's worrying you, lover?"

"What do you mean?" Defensive, too quickly spoken.

Turning to face him, Starsky propped himself on an elbow, sending him a look of fond exasperation. "Come on, Hutchinson. Spill your guts." He reached to cradle Hutch's suddenly heated face. "You can start with why, after all these weeks of me telling you—in great detail—how I feel, you're suddenly asking me if I love you."

"I know you love me." He sounded sullen to his own ears.

"But...?"

One month into this sexual relationship, Hutch was still coming to terms with the changes it brought to his life, helpless to deny the newfound passion yet uncertain of all its implications. Hutch didn't like uncertainty. It made him feel vulnerable, and vulnerability was to be avoided. Unable to meet his partner's expectant gaze, he closed his eyes and said nothing.

The bed shifted and warm lips pressed against his forehead, his mouth, his cheeks. Starsky's tone was undemanding. "You know I love you. So what *don't* you know?" A pause, during which the hand continued its comforting caress of his face, coaxing his response. "What do you need, Hutch?"

Forever. The security of a committed relationship, the guarantee of permanency. Starsky may have assumed the understanding to be tacit, but Hutch was finding he needed the words. Unable to ask for them, he remained silent. The standoff continued until he could actually *feel* his companion's eyes burning into him, demanding that he return the contact.

"I'd marry you if I could."

His eyes shot open and his head snapped around to stare in astonishment at this man who could apparently reach into his mind at will to discern his innermost thoughts. "Wha... I..." He trailed off, tongue-tied in the face of such uncanny perception.

"Thought so," Starsky murmured. His hand stroked back Hutch's hair, petting him as if he were a frightened animal.

Hutch found words at last. "When did you take up mind-reading?"

Starsky smiled indulgently. "The day I met you."

Hutch took the gentle hand in his own, turning it over to kiss the palm. "All right. I know this sounds dumb. I know I oughtta just *know* this without us having to discuss it, but I guess I needed to *hear* how you feel about...us." He rubbed his face into the warm palm before continuing. "Not that you love me. God knows you've shown me that. But what loving me means to you."

"I'd marry you if I could." The words seeped into his bones, their significance healing his pain, banishing uncertainty.

His newfound peace of mind found expression in a satisfied smile. "And you told me. So I'll tell you, Starsk." He squeezed their joined hands, staring deeply into his lover's dark-fringed eyes. "I accept. Me and Thee, for richer if possible, but probably for poorer, forsaking all others, until death us do part."

Starsky blinked as he absorbed the words, eyes bright and mouth a bit quivery, before pulling Hutch into his arms. Hutch went willingly, burying his face in his shoulder, soaking up the comfort.

"Ah, Hutch." The tender whisper ruffled his hair. "What am I gonna do with you?"

"Love me," Hutch replied. "Forever."

"Forever. Guaranteed."

They lay together, sharing a few minutes of silent communion, before Starsky yawned. "Ready to go to sleep now?" When Hutch murmured assent, he turned off the light and returned to the embrace. Hutch lay in drowsy contentment, contemplating their future. To spend all his days with Starsky, to share the same bed each night, wake up next to him every morning...

He was smiling when he fell asleep.

The bride is beautiful.

The eggshell satin bodice, adorned with tiny seed pearls, hugs her torso; rosette-trimmed puff sleeves display her shapely shoulders. The veil is a fantasy, a flowing cascade of sheer lace that frames her face like petals of an exotic flower.

From the beveled glass of the full-length mirror, her reflection smiles back at her. She turns slowly, examining her image from different angles. The embroidered satin skirt flows with the motion, revealing the appliqué-and-pearl-trimmed train. Perfect.

Shifting her left hand slightly causes the light to refract from her engagement ring. Watching the sparkle, she feels intoxicated, euphoric, as if her veins are filled with champagne. At last, at last. Her dreams are coming true at last. *This time things will be different. This time things will be perfect. This time we'll be together, forever.*

She lifts the veil, imagining it is her new husband performing the task. Remembering the large, capable hands that held her so tenderly, delivered rapture previously unimagined. In her mind's eye she sees his face—gentle, attentive. Beautiful. A discordant note tugs at the memory, but she refuses to allow it admittance.

"What does your fiancé do?" The saleswoman interrupts her reverie, banishing the disturbing thought. She smiles again.

"He's a police officer. A detective. But he'll be giving that up, once we're married, so that we'll be able to spend all our time together."

She can tell the woman is impressed, both by her fiancé's bravery and his devotion. "You must be very proud of him."

Suffused by a warm glow, she agrees. "I am. He's perfect."

"When *is* the wedding?"

A frisson of unease flits like a raven's shadow across her rosy-hued satisfaction. Realizing that her hands have begun to tremble, she stills the motion instantly. "Well, we haven't set the exact date, yet. But soon. Neither of us wants to wait."

She steps back from the mirror, rejecting the momentary confusion. "In fact, I need to be going. He'll be waiting for me." She examines her reflection again. "I'll take this one. It's perfect."

She has prepared herself with care for the reunion—dress of pale blue linen, ultra-feminine; Shalimar perfume behind her ears and at her pulse points; and fresh flowers in her hair. Everything perfect.

Approaching her fiancé's building she cannot see his old junker car from before, and wonders briefly if he's driving something different now. As she imagines their upcoming meeting her heart flutters with such giddy anticipation that she has to pause on the stairs to catch her breath.

The tree-motif door is just as she remembers it. Hand lifted to knock, she pauses. *Surprise, surprise, my love.* Easily locating the key he has left over the door for her, she lets herself in. Poising on the threshold, she calls, "Honey, I'm here!"

Silence answers her. Where is he? A peek inside the bathroom shows it to be empty. The brown plaid shower curtain draws her attention. Didn't it used to be white...? The question trails off into vague disquiet as an unwelcome memory struggles to surface. With the ease of long practice, she strangles it, backing out into the openness of the living room. *He's just not home yet.*

Disappointment is quickly overcome by the joy of being once more in his home. *Their* home. It is reassuringly unchanged, a welcoming amalgam of eclectic furnishings and green, living things. Arms outspread, she closes her eyes and breathes deeply, soaking up the atmosphere.

Familiar with the layout from her last visit, she begins drifting through the small residence, dreaming their future. She trails her fingers along the sofa back, strokes a satiny philodendron leaf, admires an abstract painting.

Her tour brings her to the bedroom. The double bed, with its cozy Indian print spread, beckons. She picks up a pillow, hugging it to her, burying her face in its softness. Catching the scent of aftershave—sandalwood?—she conjures up the image which has filled her dreams. Her beloved. The chiseled perfection of his features, his silky golden hair, the honey-tan smoothness of his body. She inhales his new fragrance deeply, remembering the sensitive curve of his long throat under her worshipful lips, the slight prickle of evening beard stubble. And the adoration in those azure eyes as he made love to her. She moans aloud, and tears of longing fill her eyes. *Soon. Soon we'll be together again.* She kisses the pillow before replacing it.

As she turns away from the bed, she spies a framed photo on the dresser. Her intended. And the Other One. In the full-length shot, they stand close together in front of that fancy red car, arms around each other's shoulders, smiling into the camera. Frowning, she addresses the darker man. "He's got me, now. He doesn't need *you*." With a thrill of satisfaction, she turns the photo face-down.

Her watch tells her it's dinner time. She pictures herself with her man, sees them gazing into one another's eyes over a candlelit dinner. In the kitchen, where she cooked for him before, a vase of deep red roses stands on the table, a confirmation. He'd known she was coming. *Oh, darling, you're so sweet...* Fingers trembling in anticipation, she opens the card.

"H—

Forever.

S"

The world lurches sickeningly, reality spinning away.

Faithless. Just like the others. *How could I have **trusted** you?*

Confronted unexpectedly with this evidence of betrayal, she shrieks her outrage.

The card is torn to small pieces. A furious arm sweeps the flowers against the wall, where the vase shatters satisfyingly. Snatching up each rose, she rips off and shreds its petals, ignoring the pain and the blood from the thorns. Panting, enraged, she looks for something else to destroy.

Suddenly she sees herself, realizes what is happening. *Nooooo...* Clutching the back of a chair, she battles for restraint. She closes her eyes, takes slow deep breaths, concentrates on calming her body. Control the physical manifestations of stress, They had taught her, and let the mind focus on tranquil images. Relax. *I am calm. I am still. I am at peace.* She repeats the words like a mantra until the hurt and anger subside and she is able to examine the situation rationally.

How could her loved one betray her? Answer: He couldn't. She has learned the fallacy of allowing irrational jealousy to guide her actions. Some part of her mind remembers making that mistake before, leaping to conclusions that later were shown to be erroneous.

Her fiancé is a beautiful, wonderful man. Of course, other women pursue him. But that does not mean their interest is reciprocated. He is hers, and always will be. So "S"—Sara or Sally or Susan or whatever her name is—had better get the hell out of their lives before someone got hurt.

Now that the situation has been explained to her satisfaction, she is overcome by relief, and ashamed of her mistrust. *I'm sorry, honey. I'll make it up to you.* She does not doubt his forgiveness. After all, he loves her.

Looking around the kitchen, she sees the mess she has made. Quickly she locates the broom and dustpan and disposes of the debris. Then she washes her bloodstained hands and sets about preparing her fiancé's welcome home dinner.

At 9:30, she sits curled at one end of their sofa, hands twisting in her lap. Dinner is a dried-up ruin and he has not returned.

Over the hours, her mood has swung between irritation at his failure to comply with her plan and concern for his safety. The disloyal thought that he is out with another woman is murdered at birth, and she seeks alternate explanations before the obvious answer presents itself. Of course. He is where he spends so much of his free time. 'Bachelors together.' She frowns disapprovingly. Once they're married, things will be different. That Other One has no place in their new life.

Wanting to be perfect for him, she stops to check her makeup before leaving. But the bathroom is claustrophobic, haunted by the ghosts of a history she does not want to confront. Hastily powdering her nose, she abandons the room and the apartment.

The red car from the photo is parked outside. Leaving her own vehicle several spaces away, she makes her way stealthily to her former observation point.

Crouched outside his sliding glass doors, the watcher discovers that the dark-haired cop has rearranged his furniture since her last visit. Now the narrow gap in the closed drapes affords her a view of the rear of his sofa, draped with a woven, brightly striped blanket.

A light is on somewhere off to the left, but at first she can see no one. Then Dave Starsky's head and shoulders appear above the sofa back. His bare skin and position, lying lengthwise and propped on his forearms, clearly convey the activity in which he is engaged. She curbs her immediate disgust.

His lips move as he speaks to his lover, and his head dips below the sofa back. For a kiss?

She wonders who his companion is. Can it be that bitch, Kathy? Her lip curls as she remembers the attractive flight attendant breezing into their apartment with Starsky, confident and outgoing, interrupting their plans. Pretending to be friendly while flaunting an easy familiarity with both men. And later, at the club... All over her man, forcing him to dance with her, making him abandon his date. Slut. She was lucky to escape with only a wine stain.

The watcher returns abruptly to the present. Realizing that her hands are twisting in agitation, she brings them under control. She tells herself that her lover's partner is unlikely to have kept the same girlfriend for this long, not having impressed her as the faithful kind.

Her attention returns to the room and Starsky. She has never liked his type—all Slavic good looks and Peter Pan charm. Watching him now, immersed in the act of sex with an unknown partner, she experiences the antithesis of attraction. Even in profile, she cannot miss the expression of ardor on his face, or mistake the rhythmic rise and fall of his body. Nausea arises to replace her previous detachment. His dark, swarthy hairiness is so like that of her father. On top of her, sweating over her...

The old revulsion rises like a tidal wave, trying to engulf and drown her. Falling back on the habit that has become instinct she shields herself, stifling the memories, though the struggle is exhausting. *Everything's all right. Things are different, now. He'll take care of you. Everything's all right. Everything's all right...*

Eventually she calms herself enough to peer through the drapes again, in time to see Starsky climax, head thrown back in the ecstasy of release. Then, body slumping, head dropping forward, he sinks again out of her line of vision.

She feels unclean, soiled by the act she has witnessed. Her beloved is not here. A chilling idea intrudes. Is he with...*her*?

At that moment Starsky rises, providing a disturbingly clear view of his nude form as he turns away from the window. He has an excellent body, trim and fit, but his torso is marred by ugly pink scarring that her nurse's eye tells her is fairly recent. The sight of him elicits nothing in her but distaste. Throwing a smile and an unintelligible comment for his companion over his shoulder, he leaves her line of vision.

She is rising to abandon the scene when a forearm flops into view over the arm of the sofa. It is bent at the elbow, fingers loosely curled, as if its owner lies in a state of boneless repletion. A terrible premonition rushes over her as she focuses on the frighteningly familiar conformation of sinew and muscle. She observes the large, well-shaped hand with its long, graceful fingers. Masculine, definitely. Yet even now, her mind refuses to accept the possibility. She presses her face against the glass, careless of being seen. *Who??*

Starsky returns, carrying some kind of blue cloth, but she barely looks at him, her entire being concentrated on that section of arm and its unbearable implication. The dark-haired man, who has been bending over the sofa, completes his task. As he shifts to sit down the arm is removed and his companion's head and upper torso appear.

For an instant she doesn't recognize him, the long hair and mustache alien to the image she has cherished, but before relief is more than a glimmer, the profile registers. Older, heavier, but unmistakable. Starsky cards his fingers through the rumpled hair and, holding the tawny head captive, draws the man to him for a deep, intimate kiss.

At that instant, her universe shatters.

A Force Ten hurricane roars in her ears. Her heart, throbbing like a wild thing, tries to climb up out of her throat, and the very ground seems to rock beneath her.

Rage, crimson-hued and blood hot, sears her mind and seizes her soul. The fury born of deceit and betrayal unites with the agony of crushed hope and lost dreams, and she is consumed by the thirst for vengeance, the compulsion to hurt as she has been hurt.

Traitor. Faggot. I'll kill you. I'll kill you both, bastards. Queer faggot bastards. You Judas. I trusted you, and you made a fool of me. You and that faggot Jew. I'll kill you. I swear to God I'll kill you both. Faggots...

The madness is too much to bear, and her mind ceases to function, cocooning her in merciful darkness.

She returns to the present to find herself curved into a protective huddle, shaking and clammy, fighting the urge to vomit. Her thoughts batter frantically at the bars of her mind like the wings of captive birds. *He can't. He can't do this to me. I love him. This **can't** be true!*

She pauses, raising her tear and mucus-smearred face from her arms as the truth registers. *He loves me. He **wouldn't** hurt me!*

Kneeling there on the hard boards of the deck, she begins to see things more clearly, and realizes with whom the blame truly rests.

Her beloved, her sweet Hutch, was never *this* way before. Before They made her leave.

It was that...Other One. That Starsky. That fiendish monster took advantage of her absence.

She understands. *You were lonely without me, weren't you, my darling? And that...that **faggot** took advantage. You trusted him, and now look what he's done to you!*

Possessed by a powerful strength of purpose, she closes her eyes and begins the ritual that brings serenity to her mind and body. She has learned the self-destructive potential of misdirected fury. She will not allow the violence within to consume her. Instead, she will focus it on the guilty party. *Don't worry, my love. I forgive you. And I'll save you. Everything will be fine. And **he'll** be **so sorry!***

All night she sits in her car, mind working diligently at the situation. By the time daylight arrives, she sees clearly what must be done. A few minor details remain nebulous, but she is confident that all will fall into place. It is Destiny.

At 7:00, she conceals herself in the shrubbery near the steps leading to Starsky's apartment. At 7:45, the front door opens and her quarry appear on the landing. She can hear their conversation quite clearly.

Starsky: "I still say it stinks that you get to spend the day in court sitting on your butt while I'm stuck in the squad room, writing reports."

Hutch: "Well, you didn't see Newman make the payoff to Mendoza, now did you?"

They descend the steps, looking absolutely normal, as if the...abomination...she witnessed had never taken place.

"Ain't no justice," Starsky grumbles.

Hutch nudges him with his elbow. "If I get through ahead of time I'll get a message to you, and maybe you can sneak out early. Otherwise, it's back at my place at six for dinner."

The ease with which the information required to implement her plans has been presented to her confirms the rightness of her mission. She watches the two men cross the parking lot to Starsky's car, and smiles to herself. *Oh, yes, you faggot Jew. There will be justice. Just you wait...*

When they have gone, she returns to her own auto, eager to begin the necessary preparations. As she settles into her seat, she notices brown stains, acquired while she knelt on Starsky's deck, near the hem of her beautiful new dress. Her face in the mirror—puffy, strained, mascara-streaked—testifies to the trauma of her emotional ordeal. Yesterday's lovely blossoms, tucked into her hair with such innocent optimism, are wilted and lifeless now, a metaphor for her disillusionment. But, empowered by new determination, she refuses to be daunted. She will fight for her future. Temporary obstacles will be crushed, and happiness will be hers. *Everything will be all right.*

It is so easy. Once again, she selects clothing appropriate to the occasion, dressing herself in red, the color of Vengeance. At 3:30, she leaves a message for Starsky with Detective Services, stating that Hutch has finished early and will meet him at 5:00 instead of 6:00. Then she returns to her future home to prepare for the next phase of her plan.

Anticipation has her shaking with eagerness as she waits, and she must apply the concentration techniques They taught her to maintain the necessary state of cold purpose.

Her adversary is completely unsuspecting as he enters the apartment. The newly acquired baseball bat arcs down smoothly, with just enough force, and he falls. She stares down at the prone form, savoring her triumph. Her mind flits frenziedly through a kaleidoscope of compelling images—the defeat of a foe, the removal of a threat, retribution for wrongs done—until the reality of her *bête noire*, helpless at her feet, overcomes her hard-won control.

Bastard! The bat swings down again, smashing into his shoulders. Then she drops the weapon and begins to kick him, gaining measureless satisfaction from the impact of pointed-toed high heels against unprotected sides, back, legs, and head. *You...pervert! It's all your fault. I hate you. Hate you.* "...Hate you, hate you... *I HATE YOU!*"

A groan from the fallen man stops her, recalling her to the necessity to render him harmless before consciousness returns. Quickly she pulls the gun from the holster under his right arm. It is dark and ugly and surprisingly heavy, and she handles it gingerly. Unwilling to leave her captive, she wedges it behind the nearby piano. The bulky leather jacket impedes her efforts so she removes it, rolling the inert body as necessary to accomplish the task. Then, using the electric cord and wire cutters purchased earlier, she ties his wrists tightly behind his back and fastens his ankles together.

By the time he begins to stir, he is lying on his belly, securely bound, and she kneels beside him, waiting. He groans again, shifting, then stilling as he discovers the bonds. His eyes blink open, close, then struggle open again, dazed and unseeing. When they focus on her, they widen in surprise.

"Go ahead," she gloats as he tests the wire. "You can't get loose."

He rolls clumsily onto his right side, and wary blue eyes rise to meet hers. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't play innocent, faggot. I'm here for what's mine." She leans close, hissing into the hated face. "Did you really think you could get away with it? Did you think you could take him away from me?"

She shows him the knife, then—brand new, razor sharp, deadly—and is gratified by the flicker of apprehension that crosses his features. She places the point at his throat, in the sweat-dewed hollow between his collarbones, and presses carefully, drawing blood. "I could kill you right now." She wants to do it, quivers with the need. But Hutch must be here for the end. Must see, must understand that she and he are destined only for each other. "He's mine. He's the only one who ever cared about me, and you tried to ruin it. But he doesn't need you. He wants *me!*"

The Jew offers no response, lying absolutely still under the threat of the knife, pulse fluttering visibly in his vulnerable throat. The temptation to plunge the blade deep is too great; she withdraws the knife to lessen it.

He moistens his lips and speaks. "You don't want to do this."

That presumption ignites her fury like gasoline on flame. Grabbing a fistful of hair, she yanks his head back, snarling viciously, "You don't know what I want to do!" Hand trembling, she brushes the blade carefully across his throat, leaving a thin, ruby line.

He flinches back the limited degree possible with her hand gripping his hair. Looking into her face he cannot, for a moment, conceal his panic, and she exults in it, feeding on it. The bloodlust grows within, the craving for red-handed vengeance that will purge her anguished, abused soul. This is wonderful. It feels so right, and she is going to enjoy every minute of it.

"I want to cut your heart out. But first, I'm going to make you hurt." Yielding to the intoxication of revenge, she allows her fantasies to flow unchecked, all the hatred spilling from her lips, revealing to him in ecstatic detail all the ways in which she will make him suffer before he dies.

Hutch was whistling as he came up the stairs, cheerfully reviewing the success of his courtroom testimony. Two fewer thugs on the street, only a few thousand more to go. As he let himself into his apartment, his mind shifted focus toward the evening ahead, wondering if Starsky could be talked into a quiet dinner at home.

The door swung open on a tableau that wrenched his mind from its pleasant thoughts and froze the blood in his veins, all in the space of a heartbeat.

Facing him from ten feet away in the Windsor chair sat a specter from his past—Diana Harmon, clad in flaming red silk, dark eyes glittering insanely—with Starsky kneeling captive at her feet. One of her hands was twisted in his hair, tugging his head back toward her chest. The other held a wickedly gleaming butcher knife across his throat.

In a single glance, he registered the oozing ribbon of blood banding his partner's neck and the desperate blue eyes which leapt to meet his, wide with fear. He curbed his hand's automatic reach for his gun.

The face that had haunted many a nightmare was set in an expression that combined psychotic malevolence with unholy satisfaction. She smiled at him. "Hutch, welcome home. We've been waiting for you."

"Diana, what are you doing?" he asked tightly.

"What does it look like?"

It looked like some pagan rite: Diana, the scarlet-clad, demented high priestess, wielding the executioner's blade; Starsky, unwilling acolyte—bound and helpless, the sacrificial offering in the profane ritual. "Why?"

Her face contorted into a hate-filled grimace that chilled him with the memories it triggered. "I saw you last night," she spat. "Both of you. I saw what you did. What he's turned you into."

Hutch's heart flip-flopped in his chest like a trout on a riverbank as he remembered this woman's homicidal jealousy. She continued her tirade, voice rising and becoming more strident as bitter, irrational resentment joined forces with homophobia. "What about us? I've waited so long. It could have been so perfect, but this...this...*faggot* ruined it."

The hair at the nape of his neck prickled at the evidence of Diana's fanatical obsession with him. She continued, every word underlining the depth of her madness. "He has to be punished, don't you see? Everything will be fine, once he's out of the way."

Disbelief rendered him speechless. But inside, overriding the anxiety, a soul-deep, primitive violence began to smolder—outrage that this sick...*bitch* could threaten, had already *hurt*, his Starsky.

Once again, his gaze dropped to his lover, to discover Starsky's eyes fixed intently on his in a determined attempt to communicate without words. Body completely still, seeming not even to breathe, his partner looked down, then jerked his eyes upward toward his captor, eyebrows arching. Hutch realized that he was prepared to seize any chance to escape, but was powerless as long as the knife remained at his throat.

"Hutch? Honey?" She was waiting for his response, crazed eyes demanding his understanding.

In Diana's sick, sickening delusion, Hutch saw their salvation. Pasting a gentle expression on his face and commanding his voice to calmness, he reached out a hand to her, palm up. "Diana, listen, baby, we can work this out. You're back now, that's what counts." He gestured dismissively at Starsky. "He's not important. Don't let him spoil things for us. We'll send him away; then it'll just be you and me."

Though the knife did not move and she still held Starsky helpless she was watching him, listening, and Hutch's insight told him she wanted to believe his loving, lying words. Concentrating all his acting skills on this life-or-death role, he lowered his voice caressingly. "Remember how good it was?"

Her face softened at the ersatz memory. Sensing the wavering of her attention from her captive, he held out both arms. "Come on, darling. I need to hold you."

She hesitated, irresolute, her hostage apparently forgotten in the effect of Hutch's plea. The knife dropped a few inches.

Starsky exploded into action, flinging himself up and back, his head smashing into Diana's face and rocking her backwards in her chair. Her hand released its hold on his hair and he threw himself forward onto the floor, squirming away from her towards Hutch. Hutch's hand snaked inside his jacket, closing gratefully around the grip of his Magnum. As he drew the weapon, Diana recovered and surged to her feet, face a mask of insane rage, vengeful gaze fixed on Starsky.

"Diana! Stop! Drop the knife!"

She didn't seem to even hear the command, all her attention focused on her intended victim. Screaming with hatred she lunged after him, knife gripped in both upraised hands, ready to plunge it into his vulnerable back.

Hutch aimed for her heart and pulled the trigger.

The discharge echoed like a cannon in the enclosed space. Diana was flung back by the force of the blast, knocking the Windsor chair backwards and crashing onto the coffee table, then bouncing off to land on the floor, the knife skittering away in the direction of the kitchen. Hutch sprang after, shoving the chair aside, intent on eliminating any remaining threat.

She lay on her back to the left of the coffee table, eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling, limbs sprawled in the ungainly laxness of death. Blood from the chest wound had blossomed like a

darker red, surrealistic flower against the scarlet of her dress. Looking down at her, he felt nothing but relief.

Satisfied that the jeopardy was over, he replaced his gun and returned to his partner. He knelt by the prone form, light-headed with the release from tension.

Starsky twisted his head around awkwardly. "Get me out of this, will you?"

Hutch moved quickly to untie him. The wire had been wrapped tightly, and now Starsky's hands were swollen and dark. Gently untwisting the strands, he discovered bloody lacerations on each wrist. He rubbed the chilled flesh carefully to restore circulation, wincing in sympathy at Starsky's quickly-stifled whimper.

When he had released his partner's legs he attempted to examine him for injuries, but Starsky was having none of it, propelling himself at Hutch to cling tightly, arms locking around his waist. Automatically Hutch shifted to accommodate him, enfolding him in an equally desperate grip. "It's all right now, babe. I've got you."

The neediness of the action, with the danger already past, took Hutch by surprise. His habitually macho partner was quivering in his embrace. What had the bitch done?

"Shh," he soothed. "I'm right here. I have you. Are you all right, lover? What did she do to you?" Instead of replying, Starsky buried his face in his companion's jacket, the trembling increasing. Hutch's voice sharpened with alarm. "Starsky, are you all right?" When that question received no response, he shook his comrade insistently. "Starsky. Talk to me."

Starsky mumbled something unintelligible.

"What?"

"My head hurts."

Concussion? His hand cradled the curly skull, discovered the blood-encrusted lump. "I'm going to get you to the hospital."

Starsky lifted his face from its hideaway, strained features heart-wrenchingly vulnerable. "Not yet, huh? Just hold me awhile."

Concern warred with empathy. At the moment, it seemed, his partner required the reassurance of touch more than he needed medical attention. The need mirrored Hutch's own, and he found himself acquiescing. "Okay, sure."

The sofa offered a better haven than the hard floor. Starsky clutched at him as he shifted away. "Come on, babe. Come on up here. You'll be more comfortable." Gripping the other man under the arms, he pulled him to his feet. Arm around Starsky's waist, supporting much of his weight, he assisted him the necessary few feet.

Hutch settled at one end of the sofa and Starsky curled against him with his upper body enfolded in Hutch's arms, pressing closer than close, as if he wanted to crawl inside him. Hutch smoothed the sweat-damp hair back off his face, noticed an emerging bruise on his forehead, and brushed at the blood on his throat, overcome with relief. A small smear of blood from a cut high on Starsky's left cheekbone caught his attention, and he licked it off tenderly. He couldn't take his eyes off his companion, couldn't keep his hands from reconnoitering the firm musculature, reassuring himself that his beloved was indeed safe and whole.

Starsky stiffened suddenly, struggling to turn his head. "Where is she?"

Hutch looked over at the body. "She's dead," he replied tonelessly. At that moment, he felt void of every emotion concerning Diana Harmon. Nothing mattered except the reality he held in his arms.

Grip tightening, Starsky snuggled closer, his warm breath caressing Hutch's neck. "Good."

Once again, Hutch wondered what had transpired between his partner and the vengeful psychopath before his arrival to affect him so. He rocked him like a child, crooning love words, offering succor and gaining security from the living rhythm of his breathing and the beat of his heart.

"She really had me scared," Starsky muttered suddenly.

Hutch rubbed his cheek against the soft curls. "Me, too." Hand sliding in a circular motion over his partner's back, he asked quietly, "Are you okay?"

Starsky nodded against his shoulder. "Yeah. Just a little bruised, I think. But I'm glad you got here when you did." There was a pause, during which Hutch felt the body in his arms tense. "She had plans, and she was just about to get started when we heard you on the stairs."

He shuddered, and Hutch's stomach lurched in sympathetic horror, imagination providing ample justification for his partner's current fragile emotional state. At some point Starsky would need to share the grim details of the experience, but now was not the time to press for information. Now was for thanking whatever gods were responsible that he hadn't been fifteen minutes later, that their luck had held once again. He continued the caresses, offering wordless support, and was pleased to feel the taut form relax.

Legs curled on the sofa, upper torso cradled against Hutch's chest, Starsky seemed content to rest peacefully, soaking up the comfort of their closeness. And Hutch was delighted to hold him, sharing his space, reaffirming his safety and absorbing the solace that sprang from their unique empathy.

Spying a baseball bat on the floor near the door, Hutch suddenly realized that the other man's slowed breathing and passivity might indicate more than an improved frame of mind. Thoughts of concussion returning, he gave him a gentle shake. "Hey, don't go to sleep on me."

Starsky didn't open his eyes, but a tiny smile crooked the corner of his mouth. "I'm still here." His arms squeezed Hutch's waist. "Man, you feel good."

"You, too. I love you, Starsk. Oh, God, I love you." To Hutch's surprise, he realized he was shaking, and heard tears in his own voice.

So, apparently, did Starsky, who peered up at him out of heavy-lidded indigo eyes. His hand rose to touch Hutch's face in an odd reversal of comfort. "It's okay, babe. I'm okay." He paused. "You're okay. We're okay." He chuckled weakly. "We're together, aren't we?"

Hutch looked down at him, returning the irresistible smile, before their lips met in a tender, cherishing kiss. "Yeah. Forever."

A few minutes later, still holding his lover, he reached for the telephone.

~end~

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