

**Category:** Gen

**Summary:** Loyalty becomes an issue when Hutch learns that Starsky is behaving uncharacteristically. Set shortly after "The Las Vegas Strangler".

**Notes:** This was written for [CC](#) as part of the 2005 Secret Santa exchange on the [Me&Thee](#) list. Many thanks to [Rae](#) for providing the title as well as the beta.

**Episode Related:** The Las Vegas Strangler

## Fault Lines

by Izzie

"I'm sick of your stinkin' loyalty to your friends."

Hutch jerked awake, his heart pounding and his breathing ragged. Those words, spoken in his partner's angry voice, still resounded in his ears, as if they were bouncing off the walls of his bedroom.

His bedroom. Hutch frowned, still confused by the vivid dream. He wasn't in Las Vegas, but back in his own place. Jack's funeral was over, the nightmare that had been that trip to Vegas was over—why couldn't he put it behind him? Why was he so upset? He hadn't stayed in touch with Jack Mitchell since they went their separate ways to college—Jack to study medicine, and himself off to law school. On his rare trips back to Duluth, he always heard about Jack, of course; his father couldn't wait to tell him how well Jack was doing or how much money he would be making, and to draw comparisons with his own son's "poor career choice."

Hutch curled in on himself, unable to block out the sound of his father's voice at Jack's funeral as he blamed him for not doing more to help his friend, to help the son of Mr. Hutchinson Senior's close friend.

"You know I never thought you were cut out for police work, Kenneth, and now I believe it even more. You were there, in Las Vegas, while all this was going on, and you couldn't stop it? You say you were working with the local police department, that they called you in knowing that you were an old friend of Jack's, and still you did nothing to stop what was going on? At the very least, didn't you wonder what Jack was doing there? Didn't it cross your mind that his family might appreciate a phone call to tell them where he was?"

The walls of his bedroom closed around him. He and Jack had been so close as kids. How had they lost that? It had been a real shock to see him in that Vegas prison cell when he and Starsky had managed to get thrown into the jail. Hutch had just been delighted to see him, but it seemed his father and Starsky both had strong, if widely divergent, views on what he should have done.

What if they were right? Perhaps if I'd contacted Jack's family, we could have found out about Jack's tumor earlier, and then he wouldn't have been under suspicion any longer.

And as for Starsky's attitude... What was he supposed to do—ignore Jack? The man who had once been his only real friend?

Starsky's angry words wouldn't go away. How could he have said that? Didn't his partner realize that Hutch trusted very few people with his friendship, but that for those few, nothing was too much? Hutch had assumed that Starsky knew how important he was to him from very early on in the friendship. God, the hollowness in his stomach now had nothing to do with the fact that he couldn't remember when he last ate, and everything to do with Starsky's casual dismissal of everything Hutch had believed existed between them. Hutch had believed that that loyalty cut both ways. But maybe not.

He had never had a friend like Starsky, not even Jack; but Jack had been a friend, a close one, at a time when Hutch badly needed someone. And he *knew* Jack, knew him the way you do a childhood friend when you spend days and nights in someone's company, talking about anything and everything. Hutch was a good judge of character when it came to men, and it would have taken a lot more than the Las Vegas police department's unsubstantiated suspicions to make him believe his high school friend could be a serial killer. It was just not possible for the man he knew. To Hutch, this was as obvious as it was that Starsky was a clean cop, a man who would not take bribes. He would no more believe such accusations if they were made against his partner than he had believed those made against Jack. Why couldn't Starsky see this?

~~oOo~~

Hutch got no more sleep that night, and when morning came he barely felt able to face the day. He'd been away for several days attending Jack's funeral and today would be the first time he would see his partner since their hurried return to LA before Hutch had left for Duluth. The time they'd spent together in the aftermath of the case had been strained, and there had been no chance to talk since. Starsky's words festered in Hutch's memory, and he almost dreaded facing his partner.

Reluctantly, he completed his morning routine, although he managed only a couple of swallows of his health shake. Starsky was supposed to be picking him up as usual, but this morning he could not face the intimacy of his partner walking into his apartment like it was his second home. His relationship with Starsky felt bruised, and he needed to keep his distance until he could work things out. Hurrying, he was ready and waiting outside when Starsky arrived.

The Torino slid to a halt beside him, and Hutch climbed in.

"Morning." Starsky's voice was almost tentative.

"Morning," Hutch grunted. He tried to relax, but couldn't. He knew his sunglasses would hide his expression, but nothing would be able to conceal his tension.

Starsky drove for a few moments in silence, then spoke again.

"Uh, everything go okay, back home?"

"Sure. Everything was just peachy." Hutch knew he was being unfair, but he couldn't help it. "Jack's mom cried like her heart was breaking, his dad couldn't manage more than a few words, and my dad thinks I'm—" He stopped abruptly. Jeez, two minutes in this man's company and he was about to spill something he'd sworn would never tell anyone. What the hell was it with Starsky, anyway? Why was it so easy to tell him everything? No more, though. If he didn't like Hutch's attitude toward his friends, then maybe it was time to try and make some changes.

The soft voice next to him was just barely audible over the hum of the engine. "Your dad thinks, what, pal?"

"Nothing."

"Hutch, what—"

"Just forget it, Starsky." Even Hutch could hear the exhaustion in his own voice. He felt his partner turn briefly to look at him, felt the heat of the gaze on the side of his face, but he refused to acknowledge it.

"I just—"

"I said forget it, Starsky. I don't wanna talk about it, okay?"

They completed the rest of the journey in silence.

Hutch had only been away a few days, but of course before that there had been the time spent in Las Vegas. His desk was piled high, and he was grateful. It meant he could bury himself in work and stop thinking about Jack. It also made it easier to cope with Starsky, as he could legitimately confine their conversation to their cases.

By the end of their shift, the tension between the two of them had eased up a little. Hutch still felt unsure of himself with Starsky in a way that he hadn't since the very first days of the friendship, but he was hopeful now that in time he would get over it and they could carry on working together with no problem. That wouldn't be

enough, but it would be a start.

"Hutch, you wanna go by Huggy's for a beer? He's been asking after you."

"No. I've got things I need to do at home. Maybe another night."

Hutch wasn't entirely lying. There were things he needed to do after being away, but less than he'd expected. It looked like Starsky had been keeping an eye on the place for him, watering his plants and picking up his mail. He appreciated it, but he still felt uncomfortable. It was as if a layer of their friendship had been rubbed off, leaving raw skin beneath that hurt every time it was touched. All his old reactions and responses to Starsky seemed thrown into sharp relief. Their relationship, so much closer than mere friendship, had been so instinctive, Hutch realized he had never given any thought to how it worked. It just did. But that certainty was gone now, and only time would tell whether it could be restored. Did Starsky even want it to be? He couldn't tell that, either, and wasn't up to trying to find out tonight. All he wanted to do was get away from everything, and sleep.

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The next couple of weeks were among the longest Hutch could ever remember since he had first met Starsky. He and his partner were working together just fine, but their conversation never moved off the strictly business. Starsky tried a couple more times to get Hutch to talk about his trip back to Duluth, but Hutch just shut him off immediately. He was pretty sure Starsky hadn't given up, deciding instead to bide his time, but he was relieved not to be pressed into trying to talk. He was still trying to find a new way to handle this cherished friendship, but he was afraid it was slipping from him, and he didn't how to get it back.

*If he really meant what he said, about my loyalty, then how can we ever go back to how we were? I don't know if I can live like that. But is it any better like this, not knowing? Maybe I should talk to Starsky about everything and ask him what he meant by that crack. But I don't know how to start.*

A few days later, spending yet another restless evening in his apartment, he still hadn't come to any conclusion, was still unable to settle to anything. The ring of the phone made him jump, and he grabbed it, half-hoping it was his partner. Instead, Huggy's voice sounded in his ear, strained and hurried.

"Hutch, that you?"

Huggy didn't wait for a reply.

"I need to talk to ya, man, ur-gentl-ly. Can you get down here right away?"

"Sure, Hug, but what's the problem?"

"Tell ya when I see ya, bro, but move it. And Hutch, come alone, ya dig?" The phone line went dead even as he finished speaking.

Puzzled, Hutch grabbed his shoulder holster and put it back on, reaching for his plaid shirt as he hurried out of the door. It didn't sound like Huggy was in danger, but the man didn't play games with either of his cop friends, and if he said Hutch needed to get down there fast, Hutch knew he had to do just that.

Less than thirty minutes later, he walked in to The Pits to find Huggy waiting for him. He grabbed Hutch's arm and dragged him over to a booth in the corner, where a blonde woman was sitting with her back to the room.

"Alice?" Hutch was getting worried now. Sweet Alice never came out this way. "Alice, honey, what are you doing here?" He slid into the seat opposite her, noticing how her gaze locked apprehensively on Huggy before returning to his own face.

Huggy lowered himself onto the seat next to Hutch, and nodded once at Alice.

"Tell him," he said sharply. "Just tell him what you told me."

Alice looked away, but started to talk, hesitantly at first and then faster and faster, as though she couldn't wait to get it over with.

"Hutch, you know Tony's place?"

Hutch nodded curtly. He knew the place she meant, but only by repute. It was way over on the other side of town, far off their beat, and not the kind of place he or his partner would ever visit for pleasure. It was dive, known to be the haunt of hoods and whores. A distant part of his mind worried about what Sweet Alice had been doing there, but instinct warned him there was worse to come, and he forced himself to focus on her words.

"I don't go there often, but business has been real bad and I guess I was kinda desperate, so last night I thought I'd see what it was like. I hadn't been there long, when—" She faltered, her hands clenching tightly together on the table.

Gently, Hutch reached out and covered the twisting hands with his own, noting absently how his one large hand swallowed both of hers.

"Alice, just tell me, please?"

She swallowed and went on, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the conjoined hands. "I was a little out of the way, Hutch, ya know? Sitting to one side, so I could see who came in, before they saw me. I wasn't paying much notice to who else was already in there. Then I saw your partner come in."

She stopped, and it seemed to Hutch as if the world had stopped too. Alice hadn't said anything yet that was sinister, but Hutch just knew that what was coming was going to be bad. There was no other reason for her being here; no other reason why Huggy would have told him to come alone.

"Go on," he muttered, his voice constricted by the rigid muscles of his throat.

"He came in, and headed straight for a table in the corner. He looked kinda nervous, and I was real surprised to see him in there, because I know it's not part of your territory, and if he'd come to meet a snitch or something, you'd be there too. I kept waiting for you to come in, but—" She had glanced up for a moment, and the bleak look on Hutch's face silenced her instantly. Looking away, she took a deep breath. "'Bout five minutes later, this guy came in and sat down at the same table. They talked for maybe fifteen minutes before Starsky left. I don't know what they said, I couldn't get close enough to hear, but he looked real bad when he went out. Kinda tight and angry, you know?"

Hutch could visualize exactly how Starsky had looked. He patted Alice's hands, and was about to pull away when Huggy's voice spoke tersely.

"Tell him who it was with Starsky."

Alice closed her eyes and bit her lower lip hard. Hutch's eyes were riveted to it, expecting any moment to see blood. Instead, the mouth opened, and the words that came out of those pretty lips almost blew his world apart.

"Manolini. It was Henry Manolini."

~~oOo~~

"Drink this, bro, then we need to talk."

Hutch was aware of a cool shot glass nudging his hand. Blinking, he looked up to see Huggy's face, tight with worry, peering across at him. He shook his head and looked around, wondering where Alice had gone.

"Don't worry about Alice. She's gone. She don't know no more than she's already told you. But I put some feelers out after she came to me with this late last night, and you need to hear what I found out."

"Huggy, I wasn't dreaming this, was I? She did say Starsky had some kind of meeting with Henry Manolini?"

"Unless we're having the same nightmare, and I don't share my dreams with no one. That's for sure what she said."

"Shit." For a moment, Hutch couldn't think of anything else to say. Then it burst out of him. "What the fuck does Starsky think he's doing, talking to Joe Durniak's right hand man? And what the hell is Manolini doing out here anyway? I haven't heard of any case he's suspected of being involved with in our jurisdiction. I thought he kept himself firmly in New York."

"Yeah, man. That's what I thought, too. But, like I said, I put out some feelers." He pushed the glass closer to Hutch. "Drink it. You ain't gonna like what I've got to say, so I'm just gonna come right out and say it. Just remember, I ain't saying I believe it, I'm just passing on what the word on the street is."

Hutch picked up the glass and knocked back its contents in one swallow.

"Tell me."

"The word is, Manolini is scoping out the chances of setting up for Durniak over here, muscling in on the drugs scene, mainly. According to my sources, he already has a cop in his pay, and he's looking for more. The dude I spoke to was at Tony's place last night, close enough to hear some of what was said."

Huggy looked away for a moment, and when he looked back, Hutch saw an expression close to anguish in his eyes.

"He said it sounded like Manolini was promising Starsky some info on a cop killing back in New York, over twenty years ago. But it sounded like he wanted something in exchange."

Hutch felt as if he had been gut-punched. It couldn't be true. Starsky would never do any kind of deal with someone like Manolini, he just knew it. But a little voice inside his head, that voice that had been awoken by Starsky himself back in Las Vegas, began to argue back. *Are you sure he wouldn't? You know how much his dad meant to him, how much it's always hurt him that he didn't know who killed him. Maybe, if he was offered the chance to find out the truth, he just wouldn't be able to resist it?*

No. No way in *hell* would Starsky sell out to someone like Manolini, no matter what the inducement. Hutch couldn't help it. His loyalty to Starsky could not just be dropped like this. There had to be something behind this that he was missing.

Carefully, he dragged the tattered remnants of his alertness around him. Meeting Huggy's eyes fiercely, he rose to his feet. "Thanks, Hug. I'll see if I can find out what's goin' on, okay? Maybe he's been asked to sound Manolini out, and hasn't gotten round to telling me about it yet." Even to his own ears, this sounded lame. Both of them had reason to know the dangers of working solo on something. "Starsky wouldn't be walking on the other side, you know that as well as I do, Hug. Just leave it with me, huh?"

Without another glance, he walked stiffly out into the night and climbed into his car. What the hell was he going to do now?

~~oOo~~

He still hadn't decided by the next morning. Visions of confronting Starsky had danced temptingly across his thoughts half the night, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He trusted Starsky, and if he confronted him with what he'd heard, it could be the end of their friendship. The relationship was already strained at the moment, and he knew that however he phrased it Starsky would take it as a lack of trust. Somehow, he was going to have to get Starsky to confide in him, but when the fuck he was supposed to do this when they were barely seeing each other outside of work, he had no idea.

Still ruminating darkly on how to achieve this, he was barely aware of his partner speaking to him as they rode into work.

"*Hutch!*"

Jumping slightly in his seat, Hutch turned his head sharply to see Starsky taking advantage of a red light to glare at him. He was sitting hunched over the steering wheel, his grip so fierce his knuckles were chalky white.

Hutch blinked at him. "Sorry. Did you say something?"

The deep blue eyes softened slightly as they raked over him. "Bad night?" The familiar voice was soft, and Hutch felt his heart lift slightly in response to a tone he hadn't heard for weeks. Not since they'd gone to Las Vegas and everything went to hell in a handbasket.

"I've had better." He managed a half smile, and saw Starsky's face lift a little in reply.

"Hutch, you free tonight?"

The light had changed to green, and Starsky's eyes were back on the road. But Hutch could feel the urgency of the question, and how much his answer mattered to his partner. *He wants to tell me. I knew it! It's gonna be okay!*

"Yeah, got nothing planned." He tried to sound casual, not wanting to make a big deal out of it.

"You wanna come round to my place after our shift finishes? Have a pizza? I—I need to talk to you."

"Sure pal. Sounds good."

Starsky muttered something under his breath, but Hutch decided it was probably best not to push at the moment.

~~oOo~~

They spent the morning out on the streets, and after lunch went back into the precinct to try to finish up some of the long-overdue reports. They were more comfortable together than they had been recently, and lunch had been relaxed, even if it was a meal grabbed from one of Starsky's favorite taco stands. Despite the tension over what his partner was going to say to him that night, Hutch felt better than he had in weeks. He realized how much he had missed his partner off the job, and looked forward to rebuilding what they had had between them. Maybe he would even be able to ask Starsky about what he had said in Las Vegas.

A couple of hours before their shift was due to end, the phone on their desk rang. Starsky picked it up.

"Starsky."

The silence that followed shouldn't have been out of the ordinary, but Hutch felt a warning surge through his veins like a summer storm. Looking up, he saw his partner's gaze fixed blankly ahead, his fingers white against

the plastic receiver.

"When? . . . No, you know I can't . . . Okay. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

The receiver hit the base with such force that Hutch was surprised it didn't break. Starsky was already out of his seat and reaching for his jacket before Hutch could get a word out.

"Starsky? What was all that about?"

Starsky halted, his jacket only half on, his face turned away. Hutch saw him swallow hard before speaking.

"Uh, I've just gotta go out. Some information gathering. Shouldn't take long."

"I'm coming too."

\*"No."\* At this, Starsky finally turned and looked his partner in the eye. "No, buddy, not this time. I've gotta go alone."

Hutch didn't say anything. Starsky's shoulders sagged under the look he was getting, though. He pulled his jacket on the rest of the way, and spoke softly, careful that only Hutch could hear him.

"Look, pal, it's kinda complicated, okay? I really need to go now, but I am gonna tell you what's goin' on. That's why I wanted you to come over tonight."

Without another word, he spun round and pushed through the squad room door.

Hutch sat for a moment, frozen. If Starsky was going to meet Manolini, he would be in danger. Especially when the guy who thought he had a cop in his pocket found out his mistake. He was about to get up and follow when Starsky charged back through the door and grabbed his shoulder.

"If I'm not back before our shift's over, wait for me at my place, okay."

It was an order, and before Hutch could say anything, he was gone again.

This time, Hutch didn't wait. Snagging his jacket, he cast a desperate look around the room. He needed a car, and didn't have time to requisition one. With relief, his eye fell upon a familiar figure huddled over his desk in the opposite corner. "Babcock! I need to borrow your car. Now. Haven't got time to explain, just let me have the keys?"

The urgency in his voice must have been compelling, because Babcock handed over the keys without even questioning why Hutch needed them. Hutch was out of the door a second later.

Luckily, Babcock was a creature of habit who always left his car in the same area of the parking lot. Even more luckily, Hutch caught sight of the Torino pulling out as he started the engine of the borrowed car. Starsky was driving in his usual frantic style, but the car was easy to spot and Hutch had no difficulty keeping up.

Twenty minutes later, it was harder. They were in the warehouse district now, and a tail following too close would be easy to see. He had to drop right back, and was afraid he would lose his partner.

Turning left where he thought he had caught a glimpse of red, he heaved a sigh of relief. The Torino was standing to one side, slightly askew as though parked in a hurry. Leaving Babcock's car next to it, Hutch drew his gun before creeping inside the entrance. He could hear voices echoing inside the empty space, and moved cautiously forward, sticking close to the wall.

He found himself unable to go any farther; the line of boxes he had been sheltering behind ended, with no other cover available. He could hear more clearly now, and knew that the voices were coming from close by. Remaining completely still, he listened.

"You said you had some information for me about my dad's killing." His partner's voice was flat with tension.

"I did say that, yes." This voice oozed confidence, and was shot through with amusement. Hutch felt his hand tighten instinctively on his gun.

"What you haven't told me so far is what you want in exchange."

"Haven't I? How remiss of me. Perhaps I should have mentioned that you were just a pawn, Detective Starsky."

A pause, and Hutch heard his partner take a sudden startled breath. Manolini—it had to be him—spoke again. "Take your gun out very carefully and drop it on the floor, please, Detective. Now."

After a moment, Hutch heard the sound of a gun hitting the warehouse floor. He almost rushed Manolini then, but the man started to talk again and it seemed clear he was going to explain what he was doing. He and Starsky both really needed to hear this.

"Yes, just a pawn. My employers back east were interested in exploring the possibility of extending their operations out here, and you know, I'm sure, Detective, that our business goes so much smoother if we have a helping hand from the local police force."

Hutch could feel his partner's anger swirling in the space that surrounded them. "You *bastard*," Starsky hissed. "You thought you could get me to help you out with your filthy operation?"

"Oh no, detective, you have quite the wrong idea. We don't believe in wasting our time. No, we have a cop already, in the Ninth Precinct. He is a great help, even more so as he is in the Narcotics Division. You were, shall we say, a diversion? By offering to give you some information on your father's death, it was easy to get you to meet me a couple of times in public places. That's all it takes, with someone of my reputation, you should know that. By now, I expect the word is all round the street that you've been seen with me. I expect even your partner has heard by now. What will he make of it, I wonder?" A light laugh. "I heard you two were real close. In fact, I half expected you to bring him along to our meetings. Pity, in a way. It might have been better to have you both here." Hutch could hear footsteps, and Manolini's voice drew closer. "We'd already put it out that I had a cop in my pocket, so when they find your body here, no one will bother to look for another bent cop who might be helping me out. You see, Sergeant O'Leary was getting a little worried that he might be under suspicion. He's too valuable to us at the moment to lose, so we needed to draw attention away from him. When I found out that you were a cop here, it just seemed too good an opportunity to pass up."

There was no time left. Hutch knew he had to act now, and he was moving even before his ears caught the sound of a gun being cocked.

"Starsky, *down!*" he yelled and erupted from behind the piled boxes.

What he saw imprinted itself on his mind like a snapshot. His partner stood not ten yards away, slightly to Hutch's left. Manolini's gun was pointed right at him, his trigger finger already tightening.

"Police! Freeze!" The words roared out of his throat, and at the sound of Hutch's voice Manolini's aim shifted automatically to the new threat. Hutch heard his partner's voice cry out in anguish, but couldn't distinguish the words amid the sudden explosion of sound that lifted him off his feet and slammed him into the floor. A second explosion reverberated around him, deafening him further. He tried to push himself up, needing to see what had happened to Starsky. Surely he had been in time? Please, God, let him not have left it too late. His arm wouldn't

work, and he tried to roll over, to get to his knees, but it wasn't only his arm that wasn't functioning. Nothing seemed to work like it should. He couldn't get his body to move. All he could hear were the sounds of the guns going off, amplified in the empty space of the warehouse. All he could see was darkness...

~~oOo~~

Pain encompassed him. He was drowning in it, oblivion beckoning through it. He thought he called out, but he couldn't be sure. Where the enveloping darkness had lightened, blackness swooped in again, carrying him giddily away.

~~oOo~~

This time, the darkness lifted slowly but completely, clearing from his eyes to reveal grayness. There was something he should do, he was sure, but he couldn't seem to make his mind focus. After an eternity drifting, he realized that perhaps he could try opening his eyes. They felt heavy and sticky, and the effort involved in lifting the lids was almost more than he could bear. But he felt an urge to see.

A ceiling. He stared up at it blankly. It didn't look familiar, not like his ceiling at home. He frowned slightly, and decided to try turning his head.

Not a good idea. When the pain diminished to a bearable level, he became aware of a sound. The voice was familiar. He concentrated, and finally was able to make sense of it.

"Hutch. C'mon, babe, look at me. Please, look at me."

The voice sounded desperate, and it needed something from him. When had he ever been able to refuse that voice? With a huge effort, Hutch moved his head just enough to be able to look at the origin of the sound. A strained-looking face came into view, anxious blue eyes burning through him. As Hutch focused, a blinding grin warmed him, easing some of the pain.

"You're awake. Thank God." The voice was husky, and very quiet. "How're you doin'?" The nurse said you could have some ice. You want some?"

Hutch tried to answer, but although his mouth moved, nothing came out. Cool ice slid into his mouth. It felt wonderful. The blue in front of him opalesced, spreading and darkening until there was nothing else.

~~oOo~~

Next time the darkness lightened, he began to comprehend what had happened. At least he realized that he was in a bed, in a hospital room, and that his partner was dozing in a chair next to him. He blinked up at the ceiling, trying to remember what had brought him here. He recalled following Starsky, seeing the Torino turn, and knowing he had to keep it in sight . . .

Memory came crashing back, so suddenly it made him flinch, jarring his shoulder and awakening pain. He groaned, and in the next second a hand was on his good arm, and a voice was tugging at him.

"Babe? You awake?"

This time when he got his eyes to open and focus again, they seemed to be working better. He blinked, just to make sure, and managed a half-smile when Starsky's face stayed put, without any unnerving flickering or surging. The wide grin he got in response was definitely worth it.

"Starsk. You're not hurt?"

"I'm fine, Blintz. You're the one that took a bullet." Starsky's hand on his arm tightened, and he looked away, his face slipping back into rigid lines that looked like they had been there a while. At Hutch's aborted attempt to reach for him, though, his attention snapped back to his partner. "I'll let the nurse know you're awake."

"Wait." Hutch swallowed. His throat was parched, and his voice sounded stale. Wordlessly, Starsky picked up a cup of ice from the nightstand.

The meltwater soothed as it trickled down his throat, and Hutch swallowed more easily this time. Carefully he lifted his uninjured arm and Starsky's hand met and held his.

"Hutch," Starsky's voice cracked, and his Adam's apple jolted up and down. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Hutch, what were ya doing there? You followed me, didn't you? Why?"

"I knew it had to be a setup," Hutch replied, simply. "You needed backup. You didn't really think I'd let you go do something like that on your own?"

"But how did you know about Manolini? You did already know who I was goin' to meet, didn't you?"

Now it was Hutch's turn to look away. "Yeah, I knew. Huggy told me he'd heard a rumor about you being in that creep's pocket. No way could that be true, but if he was offering to talk about your dad's death, of course you'd need to hear what he had to say."

Starsky's face changed. For one moment, relief and joy shone through his eyes, and it was as if a trumpet fanfare had exploded into the silence. Then he leaped up to stare out of the window, unaware that Hutch had to clamp down on his bottom lip as the movement jarred the bed.

"*Shit.*" Starsky's anger carried across the room. "I am such an asshole."

"Starsk—"

"No, I have to say this now, before you go back to sleep. I mean it, Hutch. I'm a stinkin' asshole. Ever since I made that crack about your loyalty to your friends back at that hospital in Las Vegas, things haven't been right between us. I can't believe that you still trusted me enough not to go to Dobby with what Huggy told you, and then how I behaved, going off to meet that creep without talking to you, telling you what was going on. But I couldn't tell you, Hutch. Not after what I'd said. I didn't think it would be fair. I'd pushed you away, and the last thing I wanted was to get you into danger. I knew Manolini would want something from me, but I thought maybe I could get him to tell me something I didn't know before I told him no deal. But if you hadn't been there yesterday, I'd be dead."

Hutch wanted to keep listening, wanted to let his partner spill out everything he'd been keeping so tightly tamped down for weeks, but the pain in his shoulder was staging a take-over bid for the rest of his body now, and he couldn't hold back any longer. His muffled groan stopped Starsky in his tracks, and a second later his partner was calling for a nurse at a volume that would have hurt Hutch's ears if he hadn't already been falling back into the waiting darkness. He tried to resist. There was something he had to ask, but he couldn't get his mouth to form the words. He *needed* to ask, needed to know the answer, but his body won out over his mind and unconsciousness claimed him even while his mind was screaming "*Why?*"

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It was another day, by Hutch's rather vague reckoning, before he had the chance at last to ask his partner the question that had been forming a barrier between them since Las Vegas. It wasn't that he hadn't woken up for twenty-four hours, just that, until now, there had always been someone else wanting him to do things when he was awake. Various nurses, wanting to take blood, to replace IV bottles, to take his temperature; a doctor

coming by to explain his injury and the treatment (Hutch couldn't remember much of this one. He was relying on his partner to pay attention). Even Captain Dobe had stopped by for a few minutes.

But now it was early evening. Supper trays had come and gone, in Hutch's case largely untouched. Not only did the food look unappetizing, but he was too uptight to consider eating. He had been waiting for this moment it seemed forever. Finally, Starsky's constant chatter stopped and he leaned forward in his chair, reaching for Hutch's hand and meeting his gaze. It was a silent invitation, and Hutch took him up on it.

"Why did you say that? About my loyalty to my friends?"

A dull red bloomed in Starsky's face, and he muttered something.

"What?"

"I was jealous." Starsky didn't let go of his hold on Hutch's hand, but he turned his face away and stared at the window for a moment before continuing grimly. "I didn't realize it at the time. It's only afterwards that I worked out why I was so angry." He looked back down at his partner, and grimaced. "Stupid, huh? Only—God, this is so stupid. It sounds like I'm in the second grade or something. But I've never had a friend like you, Hutch. Never. I could trust you with everything, and know that you wouldn't let me down. I—I liked having that special place, you know? And then Jack came along; this rich, smart man, who'd known you since you were a kid, who'd been your best friend, and I couldn't help it. You were so pleased to see him, so sure he was innocent without any real proof, and I knew that's how you'd be if it was me, but I never thought you'd be like that with anyone else and I was jealous, so I lashed out. Said pretty much the worst thing I could think of at the time." He pulled a wry face. "Guess I got that right, huh?"

Hutch felt the wall between them topple into nothingness. Relief made him sag more deeply into the bed, but he didn't let go of his partner's hand. In fact, he pulled on it gently, tugging Starsky nearer.

"You *are* an asshole. No one means as much to me as you do. I thought you knew that. Jack was a good friend when we were kids, but we hadn't seen each other in years, or stayed in touch. How could you think he was any kind of threat?" He looked down at where his hand gripped Starsky's. He still found it hard to express his deepest feelings, but this was too important to get wrong. "I'm not the same person I was back then, and if I met Jack for the first time tomorrow, probably we wouldn't be friends. Childhood friends are important, sure, but the friends you make as an adult are the ones that really last. People just change too much between being a kid and growing up. I'm not going to stay the same forever, but I know I'm not going to be that different, whatever happens. But I'm not the same person as the kid that was Jack's friend." Squeezing Starsky's hand, he forced himself to look up at him. "If I could trust him, how could you think I would trust you less?"

And just like that, the rift between them closed. Hutch had known all along that Starsky was the most important person in his life. It had never seemed necessary to spell it out, perhaps because he had never needed to hear Starsky to say it.

But it did feel good to hear it, so he could say it too, if Starsky needed it. Whenever he needed it.