The chill that blanketed him numbed his mind, separating him into a different reality where all that was important was that he stop the two gunmen and get help for Starsky. That focus led him to act with purpose, voice firm, hands steady. The idea of failure was confusing nonsense. Failure meant Starsky would die, and that wasn't possible. Impossible... and yet the idea, the feeling, thudded around his heart with physical pain.

His concentration was complete. Time had slowed, allowing Hutch to notice every detail of the bad guys' faces and dress, remember each word they exchanged. Colors were bright, the rain very distinct in the background, and no sound escaped his attention. But their case that day, all life outside, even the others in the room slid into his thoughts only as they became important and he had to add them to his equations, otherwise they, too, stayed on the outside. Rich tomato and the lingering smell of gunpowder sharpened his awareness further, making his every move precise, almost inhuman. He stood back and watched himself act from a distance even as he deliberately chose his every movement. Beyond the tunnel vision of that hour, he saw nothing.

He was very aware, though, of the panic that lay right outside the icy numbness. He had felt it for a moment when he first saw Starsky shot; when he had carried his partner into the back room and tried to patch him up, then found him again minutes later on the floor, unconscious; when he'd tried to laugh at Starsky's weak jokes. But each time, training had kicked in and he'd been able to put off the terror for a while and let instinct take over so he could do his job. And save Starsky.

Otherwise...

The Officer Hutchinson part of him knew that criminal psychology had rules of its own. Criminals did things that didn't make sense to him and never would, nor was it his job to try to figure them out. But his mind struggled to now, anyway, trying to understand how someone could hold Starsky's life in his hands and be careless with it, how it was possible to suddenly lose
a person so important to another's caprice. His mind worked futilely at it in the background, and grew increasingly confused at finding no answer.

So he went on, following his training and keeping everything else at bay because otherwise he'd never survive the hostage situation. Neither of them would.

The bad guys were taken care of and help was finally on the way, but Hutch had to force himself to stay up front, watching the surviving gunman, instead of going to be with his partner. He had reassured Starsky that it was over, and Starsky, being Starsky, believed him. Hutch tried to believe it, too, and it wouldn't have been hard to give in for a moment to the relief that made all his bones weak. But even as he sat, spine straight, and guarded his prisoner, he kept seeing the shooting over and over again. In black and white, slowed with the peculiar heightened detail that the crisis had brought and that was only now beginning to dissolve into a puddle of muddled sensations. Starsky coming into the room--despite Hutch's silent plea for him not to--seeing the blond held at gunpoint, going for his own gun. The shove from behind Hutch, then trying to watch what happened even as the room tumbled and he lost his bearings. The shots came then, too loud in the closed room and definitely not Starsky's familiar Smith & Wesson. Starsky jerked and fell and lay very, very still, and everything became unreal. Hutch almost curled up into shocked numbness right then and there, except he had to know for sure. If the two hitmen would've stopped him, it was quite possible Hutch would've killed them right then and there, or been killed himself, and any other action wouldn't have even occurred to him. It wasn't until he got close that he heard the fragments of breath and saw the tremors running through the broken body, and the blood . . .

At that point, memory stopped itself, rewound, and played it all again. Black and white, still, cropped to those single images: Starsky coming in, being shot, lying still. Click. Starsky being shot, lying still. Again. Starsky being shot. Again.

Regardless of the prisoner, Hutch squeezed his eyes shut and ground his free hand into them. But his memory didn't need vision. It played the nightmare just for Hutch, over and over.

The police car's sound broke the cycle just as he was beginning to lose his hold on the reality around him, and it made him gasp with surprise. A few moments later, uniformed officers started streaming in. One seemed to know Hutch and came up to him, and although Hutch stared up at him and knew he knew the man, he could go no further than that in identifying him.

"Detective Hutchinson?"

Hutch abruptly stood and pressed the gun into the young man's hand. "Mob hit. Attempted murder, assault, for starters. Starsky's been hit; send the paramedics into the back when they get here."

He didn't wait for a response, and his expression didn't invite one. Hutch immediately turned and stalked back to the rear office.
Starsky looked asleep, or unconscious, sagging uncomfortably to one side despite the sofa he was propped up against. Hutch sat carefully beside him and straightened him up to lean against the blond, settling one arm around him.

"Cav'lyr come?" came the tired mumble from against his shoulder.

Dear God, the gratitude was so intense, it made him want to sob. Or the fear, maybe, or both. Instead, he held on tighter. This was the first thing that made sense all evening. "Yep. Gonna get you to the hospital in no time."

A sigh was his only answer, no energy available for jokes anymore. Their silly banter was so much more substantial than the life and death arguments he'd had with the two hitmen, but somehow the silence contained even more.

And then time and space finished shifting back again, slowing down from overdrive, sound and sight dimming back to normal and the tunnel disappearing. Hutch just felt very, very tired, and relieved, and terrified. He leaned his head against the blood-stiffened curls and concentrated on the labored breaths of the injured body in his arms, using the focus to hold his thoughts from tumbling together. Listening, feeling Starsky tremble with each inhalation, seeing his chest rise and fall. Hypnotic.

"Coming through! Officer, could you move out of the way?"

A man in a uniform was leaning over him, while behind him another man was unpacking a gurney. The paramedics had arrived. Hutch's every human and friend and partner instinct wanted to stay the way he was, cradling that warm, heavy, alive weight next to him. Too often that evening he'd been denied the chance to do just this. But rationale and training prevailed. He wearily processed that taking care of Starsky now meant letting him go. Hutch untangled himself gently, earning a sleepy mutter of protest, and with a whisper that soothed almost subliminally, moved to one side.

Nobody seemed to care that he kept his hand on Starsky's shoulder, and he wasn't going to say anything. Instead, he watched closely as they began treatment, his eyes sliding to the faces of the paramedics. They looked intent, determined. Good, Hutch nodded to himself. One even had dark curly hair much like Starsky's, only it was shorter, like Starsky had kept it when they were rookies. Of course, they'd have to cut his hair now around the crease the bullet left on his head. . .

"Ready to move him."

The words weren't spoken to him, but they jerked his attention back and he shifted with Starsky as one as they transferred his partner to the gurney. Always as one. It took time to find that rhythm in a partnership, but he had found it with this disparate equal shockingly fast. It had seemed to surprise Starsky nearly as much as it had Hutch, but then again, maybe not. His partner was the one who always believed in miracles.

Starsky was wholly out now, whether from the drugs they'd already given him or the injuries, Hutch didn't care to know. But he fancied that his partner was still aware of his presence, of his hand on Starsky's shoulder. Hutch moved with the gurney, eyes fixed on the rising and falling
blood-stained chest. The restaurant's main room fell silent as they passed through, cops pausing respectfully, the freed hostages sympathetically, and Hutch ignored them all, didn't even look up to see if the body and his prisoner had been cleared out yet or not. He'd think about them. . . later.

No one argued when he climbed into the ambulance behind the paramedic, who silently pointed to him where to sit out of the way. He did as he was told, also without a word, and reclaimed his hold, listening to the ambulance begin to wail as it sped off. He'd never listened before to the sound, but it sounded lonely and pained. Hutch didn't need to ask the paramedic how Starsky was doing, and with only watching and listening left for him to do, his mind began to replay the film from before in tune to the banshee wail of the siren. The cycle made him nauseated, and listening to Starsky breathe--though how he could hear it over the shrieking, he wasn't sure--helped him remember to breathe, too, and kept him from being sick. Was it selfish to need Starsky to recover for his own sake? Maybe. But how could he help it when it was the one thing he wanted in the world?

At the hospital, they rolled Starsky away.

They'd been with each other in the emergency room before for little things, bruises and cuts, a stab wound once for Hutch. This time, he knew he'd not be allowed in, it was too serious, and so he didn't even try. One sympathetic nurse noticed him and walked him over to admissions to help him get started on the paperwork.

Pages and pages. Hutch would've minded the endless progression of paper except that he was grateful for the distraction. Most of the questions were mindless, things he knew about his partner off the top of his head. That'd been his idea some time back, spending one evening with Starsky and catching up on stuff like that, just in case. Starsky, with that damnably eternal optimism of his that Hutch admired and derided, didn't seem to think they'd ever need it, but he'd known it was important to the blond and hadn't argued. And now Hutch was pulling out his copy of Starsky's insurance card and filling out the medical history that grew every year. How long, he wondered. How many entries?

He hesitated at one of the questions. Next of kin. Rachel Starsky, of course, except Starsky hadn't wanted her listed. He'd changed it to be Hutch in only the second year of their partnership, and then solemnly announced his choice to the blond, without embarrassment. The memory nearly brought a smile to Hutch's face. Starsky was like that, carefree about everything but his feelings, and even those he shared matter-of-factly with the ones he loved. With Starsky's straightforward thinking, if he thought or decided something, it was only natural to reveal it. Hutch had silently gone and made the same change a week later, and yet he didn't actually tell Starsky. He'd only found out much later that was how Starsky had filled the paperwork out on him after the stabbing, but he'd never asked how the brunet knew.

Rachel could wait until he knew something more. He had no wish to consign her to the limbo he was in.
Hutch finished the paperwork and turned it in, including the hospital’s mandatory shooting report. By then, an IA man had arrived, too, one of the detectives Hutch knew, and they withdrew into one of the waiting areas where Hutch told the whole story in monotone. The detective was sympathetic, not asking more than he needed to know, then silently collecting both Hutch's revolver and Starsky's Smith & Wesson and withdrawing, leaving Hutch to his thoughts.

That was a cruel fate. His thoughts were all too active that evening.

A gun, a gentle pull of the trigger. One man's whim. It was a staggeringly small gap between life and death. For an hour, two men had held Starsky's life in their hands and they couldn't have cared less. It just didn't make sense; didn't they know what a precious gift that was? A whole universe of thoughts and ideas and joy and love in one person, the one person who shared many of Hutch's memories and who had evolved with him, so close to being gone forever. How could they not care? It was a prize Hutch would've given his own life for. And yet he'd been forced to watch, helplessly, while Starsky had been hurt and incapacitated and was dying. The hitmen had no idea how close they'd pushed him past the line of not caring.

Spots were dancing before his eyes--where had they come from?

Hutch realized he was gasping for air, and lowered his head between his knees to try to find some equilibrium. Crisis training came back to him, how to deal with the overwhelming, the symptoms of shock. Stress was supposed to drain more than the most strenuous exercise, which was maybe why he felt like he'd just run a marathon--and lost. The human mind was just not unprepared for some strains, and after a while it simply stopped and tried to make sense of the senseless. Cops had an advantage--they managed to keep a certain level of distance, but even there it wasn't turning off their feelings, for that wasn't possible, but rather walling them off for as long as was needed. And then. . .

His breathing was easier now that he made himself concentrate on it, and he finally lifted his head. Next to him on the seat was a bag, though he had no idea how it had gotten there or when. He picked it up to find that it was Starsky's belongings, probably brought to Hutch for safekeeping.

He absently dug into his pocket and pulled out Starsky's army knife that he'd borrowed earlier, moving to drop it into the bag. Then stopped. There was a reddish-brown crust in the white Swiss cross of the knife, and it wasn't hard to figure out what it was. The same stuff that was caked under his fingernails and that stained his jacket and dark shirt. *Out, out, damned spot. . .*

"Detective Hutchinson?"

Startled, Hutch nearly dropped the knife as his head jerked up. "Yes?" The hoarse answer was nearly unintelligible and he cleared his throat and repeated it.

He knew the woman, too, the head nurse, who was more knowledgeable than some of the doctors. He and Starsky had talked to her repeatedly during different cases. She smiled pleasantly at him, losing her fatigue and about ten years with the sincerity of her smile. "Detective Starsky has been stabilized and is being taken to surgery to repair the damage to his shoulder. His head should be fine; it was only a graze."
His stretched-thin spirit loosened only a little at the news. "What about his arm? He couldn't feel anything in it."

"I'm sorry," she shook her head apologetically. "Dr. Franklin will have to talk to you about that after the surgery. We just don't know yet."

Hutch nodded, dredging up a smile that was probably pretty grim. She didn't seem to mind.

"Can I get you something, Detective? Some coffee, tea?"
"No. . . Thanks."

The nurse hesitated. "Would you like to take a shower and get cleaned up?"

He slumped a little lower. Changing would take more energy than he had, and besides, they'd put him in a private waiting area so there was no one to upset with his bloodstained clothing. If they didn't care, he wouldn't. He shook his head.

She nodded and left and Hutch forgot about her. But he was grateful for the report. It wasn't standard procedure, he knew, but cops were family to hospital staff, one of their own, and rules were bent for them all the time. Especially for partners. There wasn't a much closer relationship than that, except perhaps spouses or children, and firefighters, paramedics, medical staff-- everyone in the business of saving lives--knew it. It was a small bit of comfort, but it was something.

"Hutch."

Another familiar voice, this one deep and male. Hutch looked up again, absentely slipping the knife back into his pocket. "Gabe."

His fellow detective stepped fully around the partition and met Hutch as the blond stood, shaking hands as he grasped Hutch's shoulder. "I just got done at the scene," the black man said. "How's he doing?"

The air of unreality was still thinly around him, and it took a moment for the question to make sense. The question was if Starsky would live and would be okay, or not. Hutch's heart shrank a little more in confusion. "They said. . . his head was grazed, but that's not serious. He also took a bullet in the shoulder. They've got him in surgery for that now. I don't know, Gabe, he couldn't feel anything in his arm. . . ."

The detective's eyes were dark with sympathy. Bonhomme was one of their closest friends in the department, and he understood what was going on. His hand clasped Hutch's shoulder more firmly. "He's out of danger, then. Hey, man, the rest you can handle. Even if his arm needs some work, have you ever known Starsky to listen to anyone tellin' him he couldn't do something?"

That prompted a laugh out of Hutch despite himself. It was certainly true that if willpower and positive attitude helped recovery, Starsky was way ahead of the game.
Gabe grinned at him, too, but with understanding, not humor. "Sit down and tell me what happened," he gestured to the chairs.

Hutch obeyed. There was nothing for him to do now, no standard operating procedure for waiting and praying and being lost and confused. It was a relief to have someone else tell him what to do, just for a little while.

"Starsky wanted Italian. . ." The story stumbled out of him, but it wasn't the same one he'd told the man from IA. The facts were the same, only this time it was about Starsky's stupid jokes and the blood that soaked through the red-checked tablecloth and Joey's cold eyes as he offered to put Starsky out of his misery. Hutch had never hated anyone that deeply before, not even Monk.

Gabe's hand kept its contact, for which he was grateful. Without it, he was too close to getting lost in the memory. The scents and colors and sounds of it were still more real and present than the hospital around him.

The words slowed and stopped, and Hutch blinked, then looked up to find that his audience had grown. Several more of the detectives were there; Babcock, Eney, Lewis, had silently arrived and gathered around. An attack on one of their own was personal and had brought them all together in support of each other and the two victims, physically and emotionally. More were arriving, too--looked like most of their colleagues, including the captain, and he thanked them all with a look and then sank back into his thoughts. Hutch was grateful for the company, more than he could say. But it didn't change how alone he felt, unique in his pain. No one else possibly be feeling as he was. Hurting like this was a lone occupation.

The news appeared good. Surgery always carried risks, but Starsky was stable. The nurse who'd stopped by to bring the gathered detectives coffee had been optimistic, too. But Hutch couldn't seem to make his body believe what his ears heard. A fraction of an inch this way or that. . . All at the mercy of two men who had no conscience or soul. Would that ever be all right?

The burning on his fingers registered just as Simmons barked his name and smacked something out of his hand. Hutch stared, confused, first at the man and then at his red fingers.

"It's okay," a voice soothed. Someone was holding his arm, while somebody else down at his feet picked up a crushed cup and wiped at a spreading stain. Red--no, brown. . . coffee. He'd forgotten about the styrofoam cup in his hands. A cold, wet towel was wrapped around his scalded hand, and it felt good, but the burning hadn't been that severe. Already it didn't hurt. He mumbled as much, but nobody looked like they believed him. Well, it didn't matter.

There was a movement around the partition's edge, and the group abruptly shifted and cleared a path for a new arrival.

The doctor appeared, a graying man with glasses and an air of authority and fatigue. Hutch thought he looked vaguely familiar. The man glanced over them all, eyes resting on Hutch for a moment, flanked protectively on each side by a large colleague, and his eyebrow quirked a little bit.
"Detective Hutchinson, I don't know if you remember me, I'm Dr. Franklin. Officer Starsky has just come out of surgery for his shoulder. There was muscle damage to be fixed, as well as pressure on the brachial plexus nerve that we were able to relieve. That should account for the numbness you reported Sgt. Starsky felt. The shoulder is very delicate, with several critical nerves running through it and great potential for permanent injury, but Officer Starsky was very fortunate. It appears there was no serious damage beyond a cracked collarbone and torn muscle, which may make the shoulder a little stiff, but with proper physical therapy it won't be disabling."

Hutch sat trying to process the simple explanation that still seemed to be beyond his reasoning capabilities.

Bonhomme glanced at him, then at the doctor. "So you're saying that he's gonna be fine."

Franklin hesitated. "I'll make no promises, gentlemen; the shock to Sgt. Starsky's body was severe. But he's doing very well and he should make a full recovery in time."

"What about the shot he took to the head?" another voice asked. Hutch winced.

The doctor shook his head. "That was only a graze; we didn't have to do any more to it than put a few stitches in."

There was a noticeable loosening of tension in the group and smiles of relief were exchanged. Hutch just stared at the doctor. Shock to the body . . . Several pieces of high velocity lead did that to you. Cracked bone and torn muscle and nerves . . . But Starsky was going to be all right. He was supposed to be. Oh, God, please let him be.

Bonhomme was talking again.

"Doc, can Hutch sit with him? Just for a little while? You know, just make sure he's okay?"

The doctor opened his mouth, and the group closed around Hutch, daring the doctor as one to refuse them. Franklin's eyebrow rose again, but there was humor in his eyes as he looked at Hutch.

"There's no reason he can't," the doctor said easily. "Detective Starsky's still in recovery, but you're welcome to go wait for him in the room they'll be moving him to shortly. I'll walk you over myself."

That's what he needed. The words made a little more sense this time. Hutch turned to Bonhomme, smiling a little at his friend as he handed him the now-unnecessary damp towel. "Thanks," he said quietly.

The detective patted his arm and pushed the bag of Starsky's things into his hands. "Tell him we're all pulling for him," he grinned.

There were nods of the head and an echo of the sentiment all around, and several of his colleagues also clapped him on the shoulder as he passed. For the first time, the burden felt like a
shared one, and Hutch felt himself move easier with the slight decrease of weight and the promise of seeing his partner again. With a last thanks and an admonition to go home--most of them had probably come from home, from their beds, to be with him--he left to follow Dr. Franklin.

He had no idea how long he waited; one of the detectives had returned his watch, but Hutch was loath to look at it. He'd counted enough minutes that night already, or rather, he mused, looking out at the slightly lighter sky outside, the night before.

It was still hard for him to be in a hospital and not remember the last time he'd spent considerable time in one. His grandfather had been dying then, slowly and with difficulty. Hutch had been there nearly every day with him, suffering along with the older man but unable to stay away. As much as it was painful to be, it would've been worse not to be there, and he never regretted it, even though the memory ached like the injury that it was to his past. Hutch had learned to hate hospitals then, and vigils even more.

But finally the door opened and two orderlies wheeled in a gurney, a nurse following them. Hutch got out of the way as they rolled up to the bed and transferred the patient, then the nurse covered him, checked several readings, and finally smiled at the blond and left.

Starsky. Hutch stole up to the bed timidly, studying the immobilized arm and bandaged shoulder, then the gauze at the patient's forehead. His partner didn't look as pale and ill as he had at the restaurant, but his unnatural stillness and lingering pallor ruined the illusion of mere sleep. Hutch curled his hand around Starsky's good wrist, feeling the pulse that beat against his fingers. Listening to each breath, no longer as labored as before, but deep and even. Watching the chest rise and fall. Starsky was alive, and safe.

He stood and wrapped all his senses in that knowledge until he felt it begin to penetrate the numbness in his mind and heart. Everything had paused, frozen, when Starsky had been shot, and was only now beginning to flow again, and the returning sensation hurt. But as the realization of how close it had been seeped in, so did the knowledge that Starsky would be all right. It was an impact that nearly knocked him off his feet, except that he didn't have the strength to let go. He was still standing there, counting heartbeats and breaths, when the nurse came to coax him away.

*Late for work!* The panic jolted Hutch awake and he scrambled up in bed. . . only to unceremoniously fall off the couch. Dazed, he looked around. Starsky's apartment, and it was at least noon, and he'd been sleeping on the couch. Then he remembered the rest and sank back to the floor with his eyes shut.

He'd taken the Torino the night before and made it home somehow, then almost immediately turned and left and ended up in Westchester, Starsky's place, around dawn. The adrenalin and
emotions that had been collecting all evening crashed on him there, and it was all he'd been able to do to keep from tearing the house apart in reaction. But only one broken glass later he'd ended up on the couch, drained in body and spirit, and gone to sleep to the feeling of his partner's presence.

The weight of fatigue from the strains of the past twenty-four hours was still oppressive, but it didn't drag him down so much, and he finally resisted its pull, getting to his feet. It was another day, and one that held more hope than the one before.

Hutch dragged a hand through his tousled hair, then yawned as he rubbed at his chest, grimacing as his fingers encountered fabric crusted with dry blood. He had plenty reminder without that gruesome momento, and he quickly tore the black turtleneck off, followed by his slacks. Feeling a little calmer, he waited until he reached the bathroom to finish disrobing and to shower.

Showers, despite common belief, didn't do much to cleanse when one's soul had been assaulted. But they were good for distraction and relaxation, and Hutch stayed under the blast of hot water until it began to get cold, before reluctantly turning it off and going in search of clean clothes. An old pair of his pants at the bottom of Starsky's closet and one of his partner's sweatshirts made do.

The idea of food didn't seem as revolting as it had earlier, but finding something edible for breakfast was another challenge. Hutch finally settled for a banana and some raisins, noting automatically the perishables he'd have to replace before Starsky came home. Then he shrugged his jacket on, locked the door behind him, and set off in the Torino for the hospital.

Starsky was still asleep, they informed him, and hadn't been fully conscious since he left, nor probably would be at least until that afternoon.

Hutch stopped in nevertheless, once more standing and watching his partner's breathing. It was natural sleep now, not drug induced or unconsciousness. The doctor might've scoffed, but he could tell from the breathing. *Starsky's alive and getting better.* He'd have to keep telling himself that to make it through the day.

Sighing wearily, Hutch touched the warm, lax hand.

"Rest easy, Starsk."

Message received. He slipped out the door.

Next stop was Parker Center. Despite his subconscious alarm clock, he wasn't due at work that day--nor probably for the rest of that week--until IA officially cleared him for duty and lifted the automatic suspension. But he still wanted to check in with his boss, and there was paperwork left over from their involvement in Colby's attempted hit. Hutch shook his head at the reminder. His old friend's betrayal had been a pain of loss of a whole different kind. Thank God Starsky had been there to ease the sting. . .
Hutch abruptly pulled the car to the side of the road and squeezed his eyes shut. He'd felt so good since he'd woken up, it had been easy to forget how unsteady he'd been earlier. But his world had been rocked hard not that long ago, and it would take a little while to find balance again.

Breathing deeply did the trick. Feeling better, he finally eased back into traffic and went on. Mood swings were normal after shock, he reminded himself, and nearly losing a second friend—his best friend—within the space of a month qualified. It had just been more than he was ready for at the moment.

Hutch rarely had Starsky's luck finding a place right in front of Parker, and the trek to the station nearly wore out his newfound strength. Maybe coming in hadn't been such a great idea. But he was here now, so he went in.

News traveled fast; nearly everyone he met, including several people he didn't know, stopped to ask him for an update and to offer sympathy and good wishes. Hutch thanked them all, but it was an emotional drain he could ill afford. He hardly had the strength to push the squadroom door open as he reached it.

The first sight that met his eyes was of Starsky's desk and the invader, the stranger, who was sitting there, writing something. In Starsky's chair.

Hutch's battered control was nearly non-existent, and he forgot his fatigue as he lunged forward, grabbing the startled cop by the lapels and yanking him to his feet.

"What're you doing sitting at that desk?!

The kid paled in face of Hutchinson fury. "I didn't--I mean, I wasn't--I just--"

"That's my partner's desk. He'll be back soon, so don't go trying to replace him."

The intruder's eyes were huge. "I'm sorry--I wasn't trying to--I didn't mean--"

"Hutch," came the deep, urgent voice next to him, "let it go. He's just a rookie. He didn't mean anything by it, he just didn't know."

The calm voice cut through the red haze of anger and suddenly he saw the supplanter for what he was—just a scared kid. Ashamed and more than a little shocked at himself, Hutch loosened his grip on the newbie, mumbling an apology, and watched as the young cop skirted him and escaped as fast as he could. Hutch shuddered. *I'm not ready for this.*

He turned to meet Donner's concerned expression. "I'm sorry, Jake, I don't know what got into me. . ."

The older detective smiled understandingly. "It's okay, I'll talk to him. At least I doubt he'll ever sit anywhere without asking again."
Hutch smiled weakly at the attempt at reassurance, seeing the faces of other concerned friends and colleagues watching him from behind Donner, but he was still embarrassed. Fumbling an excuse, he slipped into the captain's office.

Harold Dobey looked up at him as he came in, studying his face with more than just professional concern. Hutchinson and Starsky had been under him for nearly three years now, and despite his tough reputation, the black man had become a paternal figure of sorts to them both. Even when he was yelling at them. Hutch felt himself relax his guard a little in the older man's presence.

"Hutch. How's Starsky doing?"

No questions about his being there, Hutch was relieved. He swallowed, took a breath. "He's okay. Still sleeping when I went by." The words came out faster than he intended.

The captain nodded. "Good. Did you get some sleep?"

"A little. At Starsky's."

That didn't seem to surprise Dobey, either. He nodded. "IA's asked for your report on last night's incident by this afternoon. Do you think you can get it done?"

"Yeah. And we--I've still got some work to do on the Karpel/Colby wrap-up." Different pronouns now, he reminded himself. One more change.

Dobey was openly studying him now. "The report on Colby's not urgent, Hutch. Why don't you go home and finish the IA report there; they can send a courier out to pick it up if they need it that fast. But go home and rest, or go to the hospital. Starsky's gonna have my head if I let you be a loose cannon around here. Next time you might chew somebody's head off for using the wrong coffee cup!"

Hutch's cheeks burned; it figured that Dobey had heard what had happened in the squadroom and figured out the rest. His embarrassment was nearly complete.

Dobey's face suddenly softened. "Son, you almost lost a partner last night. I lost one once--I know what it's like. It's normal to need some time to get back on your feet."

Hutch stared at him blurrily. Get back on his feet? When had he gotten off? It was Starsky who was lying in the hospital.

Dobey must've guessed his thoughts because he quietly added, "Starsky wasn't the only casualty yesterday, Hutch. Some injuries are just more obvious than others. Trust me; give it some time."

Some time. Hutch closed his eyes for a minute. *Starsk, this would sure as heck be easier if you were here to do it with.* He made himself meet the captain's gaze. "Thanks, Cap'n. I'll try."

The other man gave him another long look, then nodded. Hutch took his cue and left to find his way home.
The next few days were one long struggle. To be Starsky's strength for him as his friend began to regain awareness and started his long recovery. To fight the overflow of fear that his subconscious shared with him in his dreams. To learn all the medical details and instructions and techniques he would need to know for when Starsky could go home with him.

The brunet was improving with a speed that reassured Hutch, but Starsky didn't yet have the energy or concentration to deal with his own demons, let alone Hutch's. So once more, the blond packed away his conflicts and hauntings and concentrated on Starsky's comfort. The giving soothed his spirit, as did being together with his partner again, and he didn't let himself think about the pain it caused him to see Starsky so incapacitated and to devote himself non-stop to another's needs. It was a strange paradox, the giving of comfort hurting so much. But there simply wasn't time to dwell on it.

And the love that nearly upended him every time he thought about what he'd almost lost, did a lot to make up for it.

His own Activities of Daily Living had blurred into his partner's needs; eating and sleeping, mail, shopping, bills for both of them, were all relegated to while Starsky slept or was in therapy. Starsky had been coherent enough to call Rachel himself by the time Friday had rolled along, releasing Hutch from that responsibility, and, frankly, he didn't care about anyone else. Funny, they always said you couldn't choose your family, only your friends. Hutch had found it to be the reverse. He was stuck with "friends" who often only came to him when they needed something, but he'd been able to choose someone to be a part of his family. And right now, his chosen family needed him.

The hardest part was the evenings at home, alone. He'd lived on his own ever since high school, but for the first time it seemed lonely, too quiet. And when the nightmares woke him up gasping, there was no one to turn to for solace. The mandatory counseling session with the department shrink hadn't helped much with that. The only good sleep he seemed to be getting was in the goshawful hospital chairs that left him all bent out of shape, with his partner snoring softly next to him. His subconscious was the hardest to convince that Starsky was really okay, but even it couldn't argue against that audible proof.

Thus the day Starsky was released was a freedom for him, too, and it was with soaring pleasure that he signed out all the paperwork and helped the invalid get dressed and bundled into the Torino for the trip home. It didn't matter at all that Starsky wore a sling or that he walked like an eighty-year-old or that he slept through most of the trip. He was home, and getting better, and Hutch's world made sense again.

Dinner that evening was light, soup and toast, and even that was tiring for them both, so after slow preparations for bed and the round of medicines, Hutch was grateful to get his patient settled in bed. As for him, he quietly went out into the living room. He knew sleep wasn't coming soon for him, no matter how tired he felt.
Which was how he found himself browsing Starsky's bookshelves as he'd had often before, always finding some surprise among his partner's eclectic reading material. This time, he was amazed to come across a large anatomy book hidden away in one corner of the shelf. Pulling it out with some reverence, Hutch seated himself on the couch and began to flip through it.

A human shoulder was there on one page, with all the muscles labeled. Hutch found himself tracing the path the doctor had explained the bullet took, studying what it had damaged as it had gone through. The next page was the nerves of the shoulder, and he examined them in turn, marveling at how narrowly permanent damage had been missed among the spiderweb of nerves. Then the bones, including the collarbone Starsky had cracked. Shaking off that line of thought, he continued to flip through the pages, reading the captions and scrutinizing the pictures, amazed at the complexity of the human body, the delicate balances of God's design. Resilient but fragile, just like the lives they contained.

"Hutch?"

He wasn't too absorbed in the book to miss the soft call he'd been unconsciously listening for, and book and previous thoughts forgotten, in a moment he was standing in the bedroom doorway.

"Yeah, Starsk? Are you okay?"

"M fine." Hutch could see the light behind him reflect off the mostly open eyes that were fixed on him. "You?"

The question took him a moment to understand, honestly confusing him. Why wouldn't he be? "I'm okay, just reading. Did you need something?"

"Yeah. C'mere."

Hutch obeyed, drawing closer.

Starsky patted the empty half of the bed on his right. "C'mere."

Puzzled, Hutch rounded the bed and sat down on the edge. "Starsky, what--"

"Lie down."

Hutch sighed with exasperation as he stretched out on the bed. "If you think I'm going to sleep here with you . . ." He trailed off with a frown as he watched Starsky gingerly turn onto his side to face Hutch, wincing as he did. The sleepiness was gone from the dark blue eyes, only solemn intensity remaining. That was the sole thing Hutch saw clearly in the dark room.

"What was it like?"

The question was soft but firm. Hutch's confusion grew, touched with a little bit of unease he couldn't quite trace. "What was what like?"
"That night. After. Waiting. IA. Everything while I was out of it." The words held none of the blur of sleep, either. Starsky had been waiting to ask him.

Hutch's mouth worked for a moment without sound. What was it like? All the memories poured onto him. How could he even begin to describe it, any of it? Words couldn't contain the destructive hurricane of emotions, or the choking weight of the fear that pulled him down so far into the dark, he wasn't sure he could ever get back up again. It was the kind of lostness that made men seek God, for there was nothing on earth strong enough to remedy it. And God had given Starsky back to him. Hutch had no idea why that confused him even more.

Starsky was watching him steadily, understanding it all even without the words. He'd already been there once. He wasn't asking because he wanted to understand, he was asking because he wanted Hutch to say it. It was his turn.

And, in the dark of the room and with that quiet support, Hutch found himself starting to talk.

Words still weren't enough, and he ran out of them more than once. But it all continued to tumble out of him in jumbled pieces of feelings and tears and soundless expression. Pain that intense destroyed coherent language. It was a good thing he and Starsky didn't need it to understand each other.

His throat hurt when he was done, but the relief was unbelievable. He hadn't even noticed the pressure of the dammed up fears and pain until it was released and dissipated. Now it was the difference between dark and light.

Was caring worth that?

His partner hadn't said anything throughout. The warm hand tucked into the crook of his neck between the pillow and his shoulder was ruffling the golden hair a little bit, though, gentle comfort that did more than any platitudes, and the blue eyes were even darker blue with emotion.

"S'okay, Hutch," Starsky finally whispered. "I'm gettin' better and you are, too. You've carried the ball by yourself long enough." That was true. Hutch hardly ever had to do it all by himself since he'd met Starsky. Maybe that was his answer right there. If he'd ever even really needed one.

Starsky was interrupted by a yawn, and he grinned that slanted grin of his. "But first I think we both need t'get some sleep. Stay here tonight."

At that point, Hutch wouldn't have disagreed with anything Starsky said. He nodded tiredly, every bone in his body aching with fatigue, though so full of peace he was nearly afloat with it. It had been a high cost, but worth every bit of it.

"Go to sleep, partner," Starsky said softly, his own eyes having trouble staying open. "You deserve it. Thanks." It sounded so inadequate, but what was another word between friends? Hutch had had his payment already.

He smiled again and closed his eyes. "You're welcome."
Hutch had never meant anything more.