"You sure you don't want anything?" Starsky had stopped a few paces from the car before returning again to peer through the open passenger-side window.

Hutch lowered his magazine, clearly exasperated. "For the fifth time, no, I don't want anything from Juno's Greek Palace. You know, Juno's not even Greek -- it should be Hera."

"Who cares? They've got this great gyro you just gotta taste to believe. It's got--"

"Starsky." Hutch's glare would have sent a shiver through a suspect in interrogation.

Starsky just shook his head. "Okay, okay. Don't have t' be so touchy about it." He stood and headed once more for the small eatery a few doors down. "Your loss," he muttered over his shoulder, even if Hutch wouldn't hear it. He could already taste the feta…

The world exploded.

White light. A roar. An invisible brick wall slammed into him, then picked him up and pitched him against something -- hard. And then… pain.

Oh, God, the pain.

Starsky curled up, protecting wounds he hadn't even identified yet. His eyes were winced shut against the still-searing light, and the crash of sound against his ears drowned out any other. Direction was lost, sensation other than waves of pain, thoughts other than stark terror.

Hands grabbed him.

No! Ears ringing and mouth full of blood, he struggled to get free of them. Instincts screamed it was a trap, danger all around he couldn't see or hear. Starsky lurched away, only to be caught again.
A rub of his stomach, a swift but gentle swipe of his hair and Starsky paused, the gentleness penetrating his dark confusion. That wasn't the touch of someone who meant him harm. Hutch. It had to be Hutch, propping him up from behind, pushing carefully but firmly at Starsky's knees when he wanted to draw them up. Starsky scrambled for his partner's nearest hand, feeling the skin on the back of his own hand crack and ooze at the movement. What was going on?

Hutch's hand met his palm-to-palm, but didn't curl around the burned back. Starsky seized his instead, trying to restrain himself from crushing it as the first shock wore off and the pain started to swell.

His face and hands burned. His ribs creaked with every breath, making him lightheaded, and every movement seemed to flex bruises. And Hutch wasn't doing anything but trying to keep him close, still, calm. He was out of his league, here, too. That scared Starsky even more.

*Oh, God...* He tried to say it, felt his mouth move, but heard nothing come out. And, opening his eyes felt like he was staring into the sun. Starsky snapped them shut again.

He was deaf and blind and in Hell.

Hutch clutched him a little tighter, as if he was afraid Starsky was slipping away. Maybe he was in Hell, but he wasn't alone.

It was enough to keep him from screaming, for the moment.

Hutch started easing him down and Starsky panicked anew, grabbing on tighter. The pain was becoming agonizing, fire on the outside, knives inside, and his equilibrium was shot, which pretty much was the definition of terror. If Hutch left him adrift in that, sanity would slip away fast.

Other hands started to pull at him, touching places that hurt. Starsky whimpered, backpedaled against his partner. But Hutch wasn't letting go, just held on to him securely with one hand while straightening his limbs, turning his body to give access to the new arrivals, bracing him.

The calm slowly seeped into his muddled brain. Hutch trusted these people, which meant Starsky was safe.

Help. Help had arrived.

He still writhed against the feeling of fire on his skin and bits of bone under it, but he stopped resisting, turning into Hutch with a groan of resignation.

The gentle hand sliding up and down his neck was the last thing he knew before the world tumbled away in a roar of thunder and ash.

Something was wrong.
The awareness sank through the layers of dreams to reach him and he followed it back up. Mild unease turned to growing certainty that something unpleasant awaited him on the other side of wakefulness.

He had never been one to run away from fear.

Starsky took a breath, and woke.

Somewhat, anyway. His body felt heavy, deadened, and his thoughts roused only weakly. He was medicated and, judging from the shadows of pain he felt along his limbs and torso, that was probably a good thing.

Starsky drew up his face, trying to remember, and felt skin pull tightly on his cheeks and something over his eyes, which he couldn't open. Fearful in earnest, he coaxed his arm into reaching up to explore what it was.

Fingers grasped his wrist, gently drew it back down to the bed.

Blindly he turned his head toward the new presence, hope mixing with fear. *Hutch?*

His vocal chords vibrated, he could feel it, but no sound came out. In fact, beyond the background static that sounded like endless waves crashing on an invisible beach, Starsky couldn't hear much of anything. It probably should have scared him, too, except he couldn't seem to think beyond the cloud that had wrapped itself around his mind.

His arm was lifted again, his muffled fingers -- bandaged? -- pressed against something both soft and solid this time. It nodded.

*Hutch. Thank God.*

That seemed to exhaust his thought processes.

He coughed, the taste of blood in his mouth again. Something prodded his lips, and it took a minute before he realized what it meant and opened his mouth. It took even longer to remember he was supposed to suck on the straw, but the cold water was worth the trouble. It washed the worst of the roughness in his throat away and sated a thirst he hadn't even realized he had.

Starsky drank in drowsy comfort until the straw was removed.

*Thanks.*

Still no words. Was he silent or was it the world around him?

Starsky tried to open his eyes again, forgetting they seemed to be covered. Worried anew by the darkness, he tried to raise his arm once more to explore further.

Wrong arm. That one was tied down. It didn't help his spiraling bewilderment.
A hand on his stomach stilled his struggles to rise. Hutch. He'd forgotten Hutch was there. It stayed, gently insistent, until Starsky stopped trying to rise, then gripped his wrist again.

_Hutch_?

A finger on his lips now. Hutch wanted him to lie still. Danger, or just concern?

Hutch's hand slid down to caress the side of his face, then rub his jaw. Concern. His partner was telling him to rest.

And he was tired. Not a lot made sense, but that did. Hutch would keep watch.

Starsky slept again.

He slammed awake to the feeling of falling, feet bracing against nothing, hands clutching at the surface below him. Clumsy hands, wrapped in something that scratched painfully against his skin. Hospital smells assailed his nose and there was the taste of illness in his throat.

Starsky gasped, memory rushing back in. Light, clamor, pain -- an explosion.

He turned on his side, gasped again as it pulled at bruised bone and muscle, and didn't fight it as someone immediately rolled him back flat again.

Hutch. Starsky's breath went out in small hitches. He remembered this part, too.

_Hutch_? Still no volume control on the static. It made him feel oddly helpless, not even knowing if he was speaking or not. If he screamed and no one heard him…

The cold swept up his body like a wave. He was defenseless and there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

A weight on his wrist he'd not even felt before now tapped to get his attention. _Hutch_? he queried again in internal silence, and felt a finger tap once.

Yes.

They were communicating. Starsky relaxed a little, control wobbling briefly at that small bit of progress.

_Can't hear_, he struggled to say.

Two taps. _No._

It wasn't much of an answer, but at least Hutch knew. Starsky tiredly tried to think of what else he wanted to know and how to say it. _Gonna clear up_?

Yes. Emphatic.
Eyes?

Another definite yes.

Starsky took a shaky breath. The possibility of a different answer to either of those questions was just beginning to sink in. The thumb on his wrist rubbed gently back and forth, probably guessing what he was feeling.

His chest hurt. His back hurt worse, and his limbs felt sore and not quite under his control. His hands were bandaged, and at least his eyes.

How d'I look? he asked without really meaning to, almost bringing off a grin, and felt a new ache settle in his chest at the tight squeeze that got. He heard that one loud and clear.

Blew up? It was becoming tiring to talk, but there was still a lot he wanted to know.

A soft tap. Yes.

Starsky turned a little, trying to shift weight off sore shoulder blades and grunting as it brought to life new aches. The fingers on his wrist unexpectedly left, and he stilled, frozen momentarily by the thought of losing that link to the world outside. His vulnerability hit him again with breathtaking force and Starsky had to swallow hard to keep the lurch of panic at bay.

His wrist was touched, then encircled, and even as he was swamped with relief, his arm was lifted and carefully draped around something soft. Puzzled, Starsky felt the fuzzy shape.

Ollie. Somehow Hutch had gotten Terry's bear to the hospital. Starsky clasped the stuffed animal to him, glad for the first time he couldn't see who was there to witness him burying his face in the worn fur, lulled by the lingering scent of his lady.

The straw was back at his lips and he drank again, drowsy now. Hutch was rubbing his other wrist now, reminding him he wasn't alone. Curling around Ollie's soft bulk was the first position that hadn't hurt since Starsky could remember. Two of the people he cared for most in the world were there, in body or in spirit.

Starsky didn't even notice the placid slide back into sleep.

He dreamed he was buried in a pit full of insects that writhed and crept over his flesh, and woke with a jerk to the feeling of fingers crawling over him, hands scrabbling over his body.

No sound besides the static. Nothing to see but blackness. No sensation but pain and that intrusive pawing.

Something in him started to scream.
Starsky's heart slammed against his chest, leaping straight into full-blown panic, and rational thought surrendered to the primal terror. Starsky screamed a silent No! and began to struggle, trying to dislodge all those grabbing claws.

The hands just grabbed him tighter. They pulled at tortured skin and muscle, trying to pin him down, and he fought them with every trick he knew, biting and squirming and lashing out.

NoNoNO. He couldn't stand it anymore. He was going to go crazy, trapped in that tiny box, except the box was his body and there was nothing to break out of, no hope of escape. Starsky screamed again, as much rage as terror.

He was going mad and there was nothing he could do to stop it. But it wouldn't keep him from trying.

One more desperate heave and the hands started to loosen their hold and fall away. Something pricked his arm and with an outraged yell, Starsky yanked away from it, hardly feeling his skin tear and burn. He was losing it, he knew that, but he just couldn't bear it, couldn't stand the sensory amputation that had left him a prisoner inside himself. Chest heaving, he ripped himself away from the last few grasping fingers.

And then they were all gone… except for one pair.

His forearms were held in an unyielding grip, then an arm crossed his chest. Before Starsky could even begin to fight against that new restraint, he was hauled up out of the bed and crushed against a warm body. His arms were let go, only to be drawn to his side as he was wrapped in a bear hug. Trapped in another layer of restraint.

It should have been terrifying, and he kept struggling half-heartedly against the hold. But it was paradoxically soothing instead, limiting his options, making him pay attention a different way.

An unshaven chin, rubbing against his forehead… The smell of sweat and tension in the flannel shirt against his nose… The vibration of the chest he was flattened against, words he couldn't hear but that calmed him anyway… The slight tremor of the hands that rubbed up and down his back, taking the time to introduce themselves, unlike all those anonymously clutching paws before, and avoiding the sore spots.

Hutch.

His chest collapsed in a sob of relief and shame. Starsky stopped fighting and grabbed hold instead, his throat swelling and his eyes burning under their bandages. Frustration and helplessness replaced the rage, less overwhelming but still deep and bitter, and it overflowed now like a flood he couldn't hold back.

In lieu of words, Hutch rocked him and held on, saying everything Starsky needed to hear.

The tears began in earnest then, pain and fear and isolation crumbling natural inhibitions, and Starsky was too weary to stop them. Or the shaking, emotion and fading adrenaline making him shudder even when he wanted to relax, sending stabs of pain into his chest and back. Hutch
tightened fractionally around him, trying to cushion the quivers. One arm went down to his lower back and pressed lightly there, supporting his sore ribs, while the other just kept massaging his back and arms, kneading spasming and tight muscles until they began to loosen their rigor.

*It's okay, you're not alone, I'm here.*

Even in his silent prison, Starsky got the message. Another light squeeze. *I've got you.*

He dug himself further into Hutch in answer. *I know.*

The tears eventually wound down into exhaustion. Every square inch of him ached at the exertion, but Starsky was limp and barely aware of it. With his face pressed against the damp skin that smelled of salt and familiar aftershave, it was like a dozen other times Hutch had temporarily held the world at bay for him. Even now, they probably had an audience, but Starsky couldn't muster the strength to care. He was going to fall asleep at any moment and they could all just… go and…

If and when Hutch finally got tired and put him down, Starsky never felt it.

"…imagine not being able to see or hear? I'd go crazy. He's doing pretty well, considering."

The words were still half-drowned in the background's faded roar, but they were clear enough. Starsky listened to them drowsily, enjoying still having stereo sound at least in his dreams.

"Did the doctor say how much longer it would be?"

Identifying the voices was a little harder. That one almost sounded like Dobey, except he was usually yelling in Starsky's nightmares, not talking low like that.

"The patches are coming off his eyes tomorrow, but his hearing could take up to another week or two."

Definitely Hutch. Starsky smiled to himself. Figured his partner would be there.

"Excuse me, Captain, I think he's waking up." Displaced air, then those warm fingers molded themselves around his wrist. It felt almost like--

Starsky started, suddenly unsure what was dream and what was reality. How could you tell you were awake if you couldn't open your eyes?

His partner would know. "Hutch?"

"Right here, Starsk." He squeezed Starsky's arm. "How you doin', huh?"

"Okay. Sound funny."
Wait a minute… he heard that, Starsky realized with a start. It sounded garbled and weak, but he heard it. And then Hutch sucking in a breath; that was when it sunk in.

A joyful noise from his partner tugged a smile from Starsky. He traced the celebratory touches from his wrist to his shoulder to his neck, then gently scraping through his hair.

"Thank God." There was such fervency in the words… and hoarse exhaustion… and unexpected relief.

Starsky's eyes stung as he moved his free arm across his chest, found Hutch's hand and patted it roughly. "Good to hear ya," he whispered. Definitely raspy, like his throat had been as scoured by the explosion as his skin, but it all sounded great.

"It's good to be heard. Are you all right?" As if realizing that sound was only a partial anchor, Hutch's other hand rested on his side, points of reference in his sightless world. Starsky wondered if Hutch knew just how much that meant.

"Dunno," he murmured and stirred, taking stock. Grimacing as muscles responded. "Sore."

"You got thrown pretty hard in that blast. There was a gas leak in the store next to your Hera's House of Horrors that blew right before you got there."

"Juno's Greek Palace," Starsky corrected tiredly, but smiled. "Body else hurt?"

"Nope, place was empty. You were the lucky winner."

A small relief, at least. Starsky's next question was more hesitant. "Eyes?"

"Flashburn, Starsk. They'll take the bandages off tomorrow and it should clear up."

Starsky lay still, trying to read in Hutch's voice alone the sum of what he usually picked up in body language, expression and glances. There was something… "Scared ya?" he whispered.

Hutch's fingertips dug into the muscles of his shoulder. Starsky just patted his hand again, understanding. Funny how, now that they could talk, they didn't need to.

A throat cleared in the distance. "Starsky, it's good to have you back."

He'd forgotten about Dobey. "Thanks, Cap'n. Hey, Hutch look as bad as he sounds?"

"Now wait a minute--"

"Worse."

"Figured. What time's it?"

"Uh… around six." That was Hutch again. "Saturday," he added belatedly.
Which didn't mean much; Starsky couldn't remember what day the explosion had been. "Go home. Eat, sleep in your bed. Come back 'morrow for the unveiling."

A pause. "I'll get some food and sleep and be back first thing in the morning."

He nodded, knowing a deal when he heard it. "Good 'nough."

Another pause, long and comfortable. There was the sound of a door shutting, Dobey probably leaving to give them privacy. "You gonna be okay here?" Hutch asked quietly.

"Ollie still 'round somewhere?"

"Right here." His arm was wrapped around the bear again.

Funny how the lump of fuzz made him feel better. Kind of like the simple contact of the fingers absenty rubbing his wrist. "I got company then." But still his partner sat there on the edge of the bed, unmoving. Starsky wished he could see his face. "I can call for help now if I need it, Hutch," he said more seriously. "I'll be okay."

"I'll be back."

"You better. You gotta tell me what the nurses look like."

Hutch snorted. "The one with the Bette Davis voice looks like that lady wrestler who had the hots for you."

"Thanks for the tip," Starsky said sourly, then nudged his partner in the hip. "Go home."

"Yeah, okay." The exhaustion was thick in Hutch's sigh as he stood. His hand slid out from under Starsky's, returning a moment later with something small and round. "Here's the call button."

Starsky grunted. His hand couldn't quite curl around it yet, but he could at least palm it.

"Have them call me if you need something."

"Sure. See ya."

His shoulder was patted, his cheek skimmed, then movement retreated. The door shut again.

The dark was a lot scarier when you couldn't turn the lights on.

Starsky listened to the muffled sounds in the hallway. Hutch would probably tell the nurse that his hearing was coming back, which meant a visit soon, probably some poking and prodding and questions. Maybe he could fall asleep first.

He snuggled closer to Ollie, burying his nose in the fur. Besides Terry's faint perfume, there was the fresh-washed scent of Hutch's linen closet, too. The soft fur didn't begin to make up for the hands that had kept him tethered to the world around him, or for his momentary helplessness,
alone and blind in the room. But it helped. And morning was only twelve hours away, another reason to hurry up and go to sleep.

Sleep, thankfully, soon came to him instead, beating both the nurse and the rising loneliness.

"Detective Starsky?"

The unfamiliar touch on his shoulder more than his name started him awake, and Starsky tried to blink sleep out of his eyes only to find he couldn't.

"It's okay, Starsk, it's just the doctor."

Hadn't he sent his partner home? Starsky tried to clear the sludge from his head. His arm that wasn't strapped down to the IV board was resting on Ollie next to his stomach, and he raised his hand just an inch or two. That was all the invitation it took for Hutch to slip his hand underneath it, palm-to-palm again, fingertips on Starsky's bare wrist. They gave his skin an encouraging rub.

"Detective Starsky, I'm going to take the bandages off your eyes now."

The voice was deep, older, completely unfamiliar. Disconcerting in the darkness of his world, but Hutch had been his eyes and would have checked the guy out already. Starsky nodded.

"We've got the lights in the room dimmed, but it's still going to seem bright at first. Just try to relax and let your eyes adjust, okay?"

"Sure -- no big deal, right? Just the rest of my life we're talkin' about, Doc." He meant it as a joke, but Starsky almost choked on the words.

Hutch's fingers slid around to grasp his wrist, pressing it firmly.

Starsky swallowed. "Yeah, okay. I'm ready."

His bed was cranked up so he was almost sitting upright, then cold hands turned his head so he was facing straight forward and began fiddling with the wrapping around his eyes. Several strips were wound off, each a soft grate against the healing skin of his face and a pull of his hair.

"The plastic surgeon said your face and hands are doing great, mostly first-degree burns, a few blisters," Hutch said distractedly on his right side, answering a question Starsky hadn't even formulated yet.

"Yeah?" Starsky still sounded unsteady to his own ears; strange that he was more afraid now when the bandages were being taken off than when they had to stay on. "When's the stuff coming off my hands?"

"Tuesday, if you promise to take it easy on them for a while after. I'm taking you home the same day, and I've got this gel stuff you're supposed to keep on it."
Tuesday. And this was Sunday, if he remembered right. He could stand two more days of lying around and taking it easy -- if he could watch TV.

Hutch's voice dropped a few notches. "Your hair's a little singed, but nothing obvious. You weren't close enough to get hit by the flames or shrapnel, thank God."

Now there was a pleasant thought. Starsky swallowed, wondering for the first time what Hutch had seen the day of the explosion, and not really wanting to know.

Air nipped his skin as the last layer of gauze came off.

"All right, Detective," the doctor said soothingly. "I'm taking off the pads now."

They stuck to his face a little, making Starsky wince as the fibers pulled at the burns, but then they were clear.

He blinked, flinched at the glaring light.

A blinding flare of white light, followed by a roar of sound...

"Open your eyes a little, Starsk," came the soft command from his right.

Starsky gulped, pried open his eyelids a little and squinted at the light. It didn't cut like before and, slowly, things came into blurry relief in the small crescent of room he could see. He dared to open them a little farther.

Two faces were in his field of vision, one dark and thoughtful and frowning, the other pale with fatigue, and concerned. Starsky gave that one a shaky smile.

"Dobey was right," he murmured.

A wobbly grin spread across his partner's face. The doctor's eyebrows just rose.

He'd have new bruises on his wrist, finger-shaped ones, but that didn't worry Starsky too much just then. He just wished he could do something more than just sit there and weakly grin back.

Hutch didn't look like he minded, though.

The next hour was a blur, literally. Eye exams and bright lights shining into his eyes until his head hurt, pulling his eyelids this way and that until the skin around his eyes felt inflamed and raw. Starsky's brain was reeling by the time the last white coat disappeared through the door. Hutch stepped away for a moment, too, but just to turn the lights off, plunging the room into a dimness that felt heavenly. Starsky even managed to pry his eyes open a little longer to enjoy it.

He was reclining again, and Hutch sat next to his bed and propped up his chin on his folded arm, looking as tired as if he'd just gone through all the exams himself, which, considering he hadn't budged from Starsky's side the whole time, he sort of had.
Starsky turned a little so he was half on his side, facing his partner. It didn't hurt so much to move anymore; any day now he'd be taking the plunge and going to the bathroom the less embarrassing way. But, for now, he was wholly content to lie there.

"I wasn't sure they were gonna work again," he confessed softly in the dark.

"I know," Hutch whispered back. "I guess I was a little worried, too."

Starsky blinked tiredly. It still felt like sandpaper on his aggravated eyes. "Maybe I coulda gotten a K-9 seein' eye dog."

Hutch laughed, seemingly involuntarily. "We coulda gotten you a red cane with a white stripe," he answered in the same tone.

"Least I wouldn'ta had to look at that junk heap you call a car anymore." Starsky had really missed this in the silence.

"I could've painted your car black with blue polka dots and you'd never know it."

"I'd know it," Starsky growled.

Hutch's hand finally pried itself loose from his wrist, sliding up to his elbow, then back again, massaging bruised and unexercised muscles. Starsky's eyes sank shut despite his determination, enjoying the feeling of pain draining away instead of rising. Even his eyes didn't hurt so badly anymore.

"Hey," he mumbled.

"Yeah?"

"Can ya smuggle me in a hot dog tomorrow?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Lotsa onions."

"And chili and cheese. I know."

"An' a coke. Real cold. I'm sick 'a water."

"Sure."

In the distance, someone paged a doctor, and the door to the room next door squeaked. Starsky hoisted his eyes open for a moment when a flash of light hit them, but it was just an ambulance passing by outside. It painted Hutch's hair a garish red for a second and Starsky's mouth twitched at the sight before he dropped his eyelids shut again. He could feel his partner move gently on to his upper arm.
There were a million other little things to talk about, every one of them saying the same thing: *I'm glad you're here... I'm grateful you're okay... Don't forget to be here tomorrow... I'm not goin' anywhere.* And, underneath it, *You're my pal.* But, right now, they all seemed too much trouble for his tongue to pull out of his brain, so Starsky just drifted, feeling those magic fingers ease the ache away.

Darkness and silence weren't bad at all if you had company.

Starsky peacefully slipped into the dim quiet of sleep.

The soft, bleached smell and feel of his sheets, his pillow, his blankets all told him he was home. Starsky rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with a smile.

A cozy darkness had settled over his room since he'd lain down for a nap, only a faint glow coming through the blinds now and a rim of light shining around the shut door. His clock ticked beside the bed, and one glance confirmed it was getting late. Starsky had slept a lot in the hospital, dozed on the way home, and still been so worn out by the homecoming that he'd gone right to bed upon his arrival. Maybe he hadn't broken any bones, a miracle in itself, but the explosion had taken its toll. Even now, Starsky had to move gingerly to avoid the sharp jabs of bruised muscles and bones. Not to mention the way light and sound still grated on sensitive organs.

But Starsky wasn't complaining. He'd take that over the alternative any day.

He rolled over slowly in bed, stretching with caution, and caught another scent in the air. Beef? Food, anyway, a lot better than the slop they'd been feeding him in the hospital the last few days. If it hadn't been for the fast-food treasures Hutch kept sneaking in, Starsky would have starved to death before he got out. It smelled like his partner was still keeping busy.

Starsky crawled out of bed like an old man, burying his toes in the carpet for a moment before he stood. He'd never even noticed the worn patches before, but the plush felt good on his feet. With a quiet groan, he pushed himself upright and tottered out of the room.

The lights in the living room were on and Starsky squinted against them, the brightness painful. Distances were still a little blurry, but he could make out the figure in the rattan chair by the couch and headed over there in shuffling, unhurried steps.

Hutch was half-slid down in the chair, an open book propped on his chest and his mouth open in a soundless snore. Asleep, and Starsky's own complaints melted at the sight. Who knew how little sleep the blond had gotten that last week, most of it probably snatched in a chair like this, just so he could always be there whenever Starsky was awake? Feeding him a little sanity in his dark little world --Hutch hadn't even known just how important that was. But he'd done it anyway.
Hutch stirred under the weight of scrutiny, peering up at Starsky with one eye before sitting up. An uncomplicated grin, rare those days, filled his face for a moment, and then he seemed to recall what he was doing there and the worry caught up to him.

"Hey, you okay? You wanna sit down?" Hutch stood, reaching for his arm.

"'M okay. Hungry." Starsky waggled his eyebrows hopefully.

Another smile, amused this time. "I can fix that." He waved Starsky ahead toward the kitchen, a half-step behind, hovering without touching.

The aroma grew richer as they got closer, and Hutch pulled a chair out for Starsky and saw him sink down into it before going on into the kitchen, flicking the main light off as he went. Starsky sighed with relief and watched curiously as Hutch returned a half-minute later, tureen in mittened hands, which he put down on the table with a flourish.

Starsky sniffed, smelling vegetables now, too. "What is it?"

"Irish stew."

His mouth was watering already. "I had all the fixings?" Starsky asked as he dropped a napkin in his lap.

"Nope. Huggy went shopping for me."

Hutch still hadn't wanted to leave him alone. Starsky smiled but didn't comment.

The stew was as good as it smelled, the meat falling apart on his spoon, the sauce thick, the potatoes tender, golden lumps. Starsky inhaled deeply with each bite and savored the taste to the last drop.

"So, when is Dobey expecting you back?" he finally asked between bites.

"Tomorrow." Hutch was busy sopping up stew with a heel of bread. "I figure one of us should be bringing a paycheck home this week at least."

Starsky grimaced at the reluctant truth. Between the hospital bills and the time missed, he and Hutch were quickly becoming the bane of the departmental HR people. Ah, well, that would be a fight for another day. This was still a victory celebration.

Mostly.

Starsky paused, giving Hutch a thoughtful look. "Hey… you remember that episode of The Twilight Zone where the guy's been in an accident and they think he's dead and he gets sent down to the morgue for an autopsy?"

Hutch winced. "You know I don't watch that junk. And do we have to talk about autopsies over dinner?"
"It's important. He's about to be carved up, but he's alive, he just can't move, can't talk, can't tell em he's not dead."

Hutch had stopped eating and was looking at him strangely.

Starsky faltered. He wasn't sure anymore why he'd brought this up now of all times, either. "That's kinda how it felt, you know?" he said more mudded. "Not hearin' or seein' anything like that. Like you could scream and nobody would hear ya."

"I could hear you," Hutch said faintly.

"I know." Starsky nodded. "That's why I could stand it."

Hutch stared at him another long moment, then finally nodded and went back to eating. It looked mechanical now, though, like he wasn't even aware of it.

Starsky pushed his own food around on the plate, suddenly without appetite himself. He hadn't meant to make things awkward; the memories still made him queasy, too, and spiked his heartbeat at unexpected moments. But they continued to loom large in his thoughts, as did his partner's sacrifice. There were good things to talk about, too, not just bad.

"How d'you think Helen did it?" Starsky asked suddenly, another memory from those silent few days falling into place.

"Helen?" Hutch looked up, puzzled.

"The famous one. Blind and deaf?"

"Oh. Helen Keller." Hutch frowned, thoughtful. "Uh, she didn't at first. It took a sign language teacher, Anne Sullivan, to get through to her."

"She had a friend, too, huh?"

A moment's pause and another of Hutch's inscrutable looks. They weren't really as opaque as Hutch thought, but Starsky knew what they meant without looking too hard and embarrassing them both. "Yeah."

"Mmm."

Hutch flushed, shook his head helplessly, but he'd lost the bleakness that had momentarily appeared in his eyes. Starsky tried a grin on him, satisfied when he got a small one back. They went back to eating.

And Starsky silently reached over and rested his hand on his partner's wrist for the rest of the meal.