The Datsun's door squeaked open to admit a passenger, then slammed shut. Dave Starsky didn't even look up from the newspaper he was reading. "You're late."

"Stuff it."

That usually would have prompted a smile from Starsky, but it was the words' hard edge that made him look up in surprise. His passenger was having none of it, staring straight ahead out the window at the fascinating gray wall of the police garage. Starsky's gaze travelled down to the fingers that were clenched white on the dash, and the rigid posture of the man seated next to him. With a mental sigh, he folded the newspaper and tossed it into the back seat, then started up the old car and pulled out of the garage.

They were well on their way before he ventured to open his mouth again.

"Bad day?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Cold, very cold. Definitely not an invitation to tread further, but Starsky had never been prudent. Besides, he was beginning to learn to read his new partner, and none of the signals were telling him to back off.
There was such a thing as tact, however.

"Everything okay at home?" he asked carefully.

A tense pause, and then a single, clipped word. "No."

"That's good," Starsky said, voice suddenly pleasant, as he made a smooth turn. "Cause I'd hate to think you were gettin' tired of my charming company."

The strangled sound next to him could have been choked laughter or disbelief, then Ken Hutchinson blurted, "You're crazy, you know that?"

Starsky compressed a smile. Probably disbelief and laughter. Even though Hutch had known him since the Academy, they'd only recently become partnered and it felt like they were just getting to be friends, to really know each other. And Starsky got the feeling he still surprised his partner on a regular basis. Vice-versa, too, though Hutch hadn't seemed to have caught on to that yet. As long as it got him out of his funk, however, Starsky didn't care how much he startled the blond.

Hutch released a heavy sigh, the kind a man made when he was tired, and the hand not clamped on the dashboard gave a vague wave. "I don't know, Starsky--you'd think after four years on the job, Van would finally figure out that I'm serious about being a cop."

"Still giving you a hard time, huh?"

"Sometimes." A long silence. Hutch's voice softened. "It's when she's not saying anything at all that's the worst, though."

Starsky pulled up behind a brown sedan and turned off the car before giving his partner a not-unsympathetic look. "Hold that thought, okay? I'll check with Corman and be right back." And without waiting for a response, he ducked out of the car and ran up to the other unmarked unit. Corman was already waiting for him, window rolled down.

"You two are late, Starsky."

"Sorry--car trouble. We'll take over now. Anything goin' on?"

"Not a thing. Hope you brought lots of coffee with you."

Starsky grimaced. "Thanks a lot. See ya later."

The older detective gave him a brief wave, then pulled away. Starsky jogged back to the Datsun.

"They give you any grief for being late?" Hutch asked as he got in, hanging up the mike from having called them in.

"Nah, it was fine. Go on with what you were saying." Starsky made himself comfortable against the driver's side door, angled toward his partner with one eye on the factory warehouse they were staking out. The one where nothing had happened for two days and seemed unlikely to on their watch, but with a partner who had a lot on his mind and who worked through things best by
talking, Starsky doubted he'd get bored. Sleepy, maybe, and he fished out the thermos from behind the driver's seat, pouring himself a cup before offering his partner some. Hutch just shook his head.

"You don't need to hear this. Why don't you tell me about your date with Janine instead?"

It was a diversion, no question, and from anyone else it might have been faked interest, but Hutch never seemed phony when he asked about you. It was one of the first things that had struck Starsky as he'd gotten to know the tall blond. "Nothin' to tell," he said shortly, shrugging. "Took her out to dinner, then a movie, then dancing, and then she got a headache."

"Ouch." Hutch winced sympathetically.

"Yeah. So you were saying?"

Hutch snorted. "Pretty persistent, aren't you?"

Starsky just gave another game shrug, but his eyes didn't move from his passenger. Beyond Hutch, the factory sat silent and deserted.

"You must be sick of hearing about this, the 'Hutchinson Family Soap Opera'." Hutch's arm wasn't so stiff against the dashboard, and his other hand found the frayed edge of Starsky's seat, idly plucking at the threads. Another time Starsky might have told him to cut it out, but Hutch seemed to need some distraction, and that was worth a few more unraveled cushion threads. "It's just that...I don't know what she wants, Starsky. She says she wants me to quit the force, but I don't think that's gonna change anything for long. Besides, what about what I want? What kind of life is that if I have to leave the job I love and be cooped up in some office just to save my marriage?"

Hutch's voice had risen, his posture tautening again. Starsky wondered sometimes why the blond's back didn't give him trouble with all the tension running through it on a regular basis. But the release was good. For all his control and refinement, Hutch sure seemed to bottle up a lot inside. And the majority of it seemed related to Vanessa Hutchinson.

His partner deflated just as fast. "But, God help me, I still love her. I'm not ready to give up on us, not yet. But...what am I gonna do?"

Starsky hadn't said much; he usually didn't. Hutch was the one who needed to talk, and Starsky was a willing listener. But now he stirred in his seat. "I'm not the best person to ask--I ain't married. But it seems to me if you're not ready to give up, only thing you can do is hang on, make it work the best you can. 'S all any of us can do, right?"

Hutch looked older than his scant thirty years as he gave a resigned nod. And Starsky sent Vanessa a mental curse.

Not that Starsky had an aversion to the lovely Mrs. Hutchinson. How could he hate the wife of his partner? Not trust her, maybe, for every time she smiled at him he felt a shiver down his back. Didn't think much of her, admittedly, because with all her breeding and highbrow tastes,
she had less heart in her than most of the street ladies Starsky had met. Didn't like her, absolutely, a feeling she'd made amply clear was mutual. But hated her? Not while Hutch loved her. Starsky just hated what she was doing to his partner. Hutch was a good man, a really good man, but he was too soft-hearted sometimes for his own well-being.

And so the scene repeated itself regularly: Hutch arriving on edge from his latest fight with Van, Starsky coaxing him into talking about it, listening as all the built-up poison of a festering marriage was drained, then just as Hutch finally relaxed and got his head back on straight, he'd go home to let his wife mess him up all over again. Not that he was weak, not unless loving someone was a weakness, nor was he stupid. Starsky knew his partner was very aware of what Van was doing to him, and that Hutch wouldn't put up with it forever, that one day even his incredible patience would be used up and he'd finally get out.

But until then...hey, everyone had their vulnerabilities, right? Hutch had caught Starsky one night at the Academy, soused to the gills despite the rules and mourning the anniversary of his father's death. It had been the blond then who'd sat up that whole night listening to Starsky pour out his life story. Anyone who had that kind of patience and concern in them was worth returning the favor for.

Hutch started talking again, softer this time, more to himself than to Starsky, but that was fine. The point was that he was getting stuff off his chest, working his way to the eventual end of the problem. And Starsky listened anyway, getting a better look inside the man he was trusting with his life now. Hutch was a private person, only fatigue opening him up like that, but Starsky wasn't above taking advantage of that. Maybe one day they'd get close enough that they wouldn't need an excuse. Maybe not.

But privately he rather hoped so.

Seven-and-a-half uneventful hours later, they were relieved by another team of detectives. No one had even approached the warehouse, nor had there been a flicker of activity inside. Starsky would have considered it wasted time if not for how the two of them had spent it.

Returning to the station, he watched his partner walk back to his own car with squared shoulders, preparing to go home. Hutch climbed in, then just sat for a moment in the Alfa Romeo, staring blankly at the dash. Starsky had just started debating if he should go over when Hutch turned the ignition and pointed the car toward home with all the relish of a man going to his execution.

And Starsky thought that maybe Vanessa Hutchinson was worth hating, after all.

There wasn't much time for talking the next several days after that.

The warehouse, it was finally decided, was a wash, but not its owner. Franklin Poindexter wasn't in LA's Who's Who, but he had a sizeable business empire and was a well-thought-of philanthropist. Only a lot of digging had turned up some more questionable aspects of his business and some potentially rotten roots. Drug dealers weren't always confined to shadowy street corners.
As newly minted detectives and the rookies in the department, Starsky and Hutch had been given a huge break, working on a major case like that. Starsky was well aware they had to nail it if they ever hoped to make a name for themselves and eventually graduate to Detective First Class. All the higher-ups would be watching how they did. And looking for any slip-ups.

He still thought about his partner's problem some, but Poindexter had to come first, and there had never been a question of Hutch pulling his own weight. There were still circles under the blond's eyes and a deep-down troubledness Starsky doubted most people would have caught; the fact that they hadn't talked about Vanessa or the marriage was due to lack of time, not fodder. But no matter what Hutch was bottling up inside, the consummate hard-nosed cop image didn't waver a bit. Starsky was impressed--Hutch separated work and personal life as if he'd had practice. He was good at it, fooling everyone but Starsky.

And even Starsky didn't realize for some time just how good.

"Let's call it a night, huh?" Yawning, Starsky tossed the file onto the pile in his box. He couldn't even seem to care when it teetered, then slid off the pile into a messy heap on the table. After working fourteen-hour days for three days straight, most of that tied to their shared desk, it took a lot of energy to care about anything that didn't involve food and sleep, not necessarily in that order.

Hutch blinked at him just as tiredly from across the table. Blond hair lit like a halo by the one lamp that burned between them only seemed to highlight the sallowness of his face and the dark circles under his eyes. Starsky mentally shook his head. After this one, they'd have to ask--no, demand--a few days off just to recuperate. Hutch caught his yawn, letting the file fall shut as he rubbed at his eyes. "Yeah, okay."

They pulled their jackets on like old men, slowly and clumsily, then made their way down the hall to the stairs and out the building, only a few people in sight at that late hour.

Outside the door, Hutch gave him a half-wave and began to turn away to the right. Starsky snagged his sleeve.

"You came with me, remember?" He pointed to the Datsun parked at the curb. Getting a good spot was one of the very few perks of coming in early to work.

"Oh, yeah," was Hutch's only response, and he followed Starsky to the car, folding himself inside after Starsky unlocked the door. "When're you gonna replace this heap with something that has more room?" he complained halfheartedly.

"Soon as I get enough saved up. But I wouldn't talk about room, buddy." They hardly ever took Hutch's sporty little Alfa because there was barely room for one of them, let alone both, and Hutch's long legs had no place to go at all.

Hutch just snorted, gazing idly out of the window. They both knew the Hutchinson car had been chosen by Van for image and price, regardless of her husband's comfort.
The drive was a mostly silent one, both of them too tired to do much talking, but Starsky found he didn't mind. It was a rare person with whom it was as easy to be silent as it was to talk, but Hutch seemed to be one-of-a-kind in that department, too. Vanessa was blind, Starsky had thought more than once.

They finally pulled up in front of the condo. It was as garish as the Alfa, from its manicured shrubbery to the pink-lit, whitewashed buildings, but again Starsky had an idea who'd picked it. He wasn't sure where he could picture Hutch, but it wasn't in a place like that one. A little place by woods, or water maybe. Something nature-y.

They pulled up into one of the nearby visitor spaces and Starsky idled the car, finally glancing at his partner. Hutch was sitting and staring blankly at the building, all animation gone from his face.

Starsky waited.

The blond head finally turned toward him, the expression on Hutch's face trying not to be hopeful. "You wanna come in for a few minutes?"

That was about the last thing he wanted, as anxious to avoid another meeting with Vanessa Hutchinson as he was to go home and collapse into bed. Not that he'd say that, of course, and Starsky just glanced at his watch. "Uh, it's kinda late--I wouldn't wanna intrude on the two of ya..."

Hutch was getting better at reading him, though, too, and his partner's expression closed. "Yeah, you're probably right. I'll see you tomorrow." He opened the door, beginning to climb out.

"Hutch--"

His passenger glanced back at him wearily over one shoulder.

"You got any beer?" Starsky asked.

Hutch was a proud man, and quick. He picked up at once what Starsky was doing and why, and his mouth opened to refuse. And then his eyes suddenly softened and he nodded. How to receive, not just give, was one of the harder lessons of partnership and friendship, but they were both learning.

Starsky found himself strangely pleased as he jogged to keep up with his partner's long gait, up to the condo door.

Hutch inserted the key with care, turning it silently in the lock and then easing the door open.

The living room was lit, as was the hallway leading back to the bedrooms. Starsky looked cautiously around as he came inside. No sign of Van.

He could all but hear Hutch's sigh, and held back his own as he began to shrug out of his jacket.
"Ken? Do you know what time it is? You have a he--"

The bedroom door swung open, the icy lecture stopping in mid-word as Vanessa stepped out into the hall and caught sight of Starsky. Her sheer robe did nothing to hide the nightie that hugged her curves, but there was no self-consciousness in her reaction, only barely hidden annoyance. "Oh. Hello, David."

No one called him David except his Ma when she was particularly mad at him, but Starsky made his mouth turn up into a hard smile, if nothing else than for Hutch's sake. "Hello, Vanessa," he said coolly.

Hutch looked embarrassed for his wife even if Vanessa wasn't, and hurried forward, talking to her in an urgent low voice as he reached her and took her arm. Starsky couldn't hear the words, but he could guess at their content as Van pulled away from her husband's grasp and said loudly, "I can dress any way I want--it's my house, too, you know." Throwing Starsky a glare, she disappeared back into the bedroom. Starsky could see his partner's shoulders sag as the door slammed behind her.

Starsky shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, feeling uncomfortably out of place. What the heck was he supposed to do now?

Hutch half-turned in the hallway, not quite looking at the brunet as he rubbed wearily at his forehead, but the awkward words were directed at Starsky. "Uh, you still want that beer?"

Discomfited for Hutch's sake at what he'd seen, Starsky waffled. Hutch certainly looked like he could use the company and a listening ear, but they were both exhausted and Starsky staying would certainly only make things worse between his partner and his partner's wife. Still, he didn't want Hutch to get the wrong idea. The last thing he wanted to do was humiliate the man further. "How 'bout a raincheck 'til tomorrow? I'll buy."

"Sure," Hutch said immediately, voice neutral again.

Starsky hesitated. He didn't want to leave, not like this. "Hey."

The aged blue eyes looked up at him.

"Tomorrow." Starsky winked, a half-smile on his face.

A corner of Hutch's mouth turned up in response.

Starsky gave him an irreverent salute and pulled the door shut behind him, hurrying back to the Datsun. He'd never been so grateful to go home to an empty apartment.

Or felt so strangely guilty doing so.
It was a much brighter Hutchinson who climbed into the Datsun the next morning. "You get the call?" were his first words.

"Uh-uh, must've already been gone. What's up?" Starsky asked, waiting for a car to pull out from beside him and drive away before angling away from the curb.

"You're going the wrong way. Got another tip from Linus and we're on stakeout duty again."

Starsky made a face as he turned the car around. "Terrific. Where to this time?"

"Santa Monica. Supposed to be something going on at a building Poindexter's company owns there."

Starsky remembered the building, just one of the several properties of a dummy corporation they'd unearthed that belonged to Poindexter. He and Hutch had planned to track them down that day and check each one out. At least a tip would save some time.

Twenty minutes later, they were parking a half-block away from the square building. Starsky reached for the mike. "Zebra-Three to Central. Show us in at...," a glance at his watch. For once they weren't late. "...seven twenty-five. Code Five at 552 Wilshire."

"Zebra-Three, roger."

Starsky hung up the mike, watching with mild interest as Hutch pulled a thermos out. "What's that?"

"Coffee. I figured you wouldn't know we were on stakeout, and it was my turn to make it, anyway."

Starsky half-grinned, accepting the offered cup. Hutch's taste in food was lousy, but he had a definite gift for coffee-making.

Hutch occupied himself with pouring a cup of his own and screwing the lid back on the thermos. His face was still turned away when he said, "I'm sorry about last night--I shouldn't've dragged you in."

Into the house or into the mess with Vanessa, Starsky wanted to ask, but he only shrugged. "No problem, I just had a beer at home." Actually, he hadn't, falling right to sleep, but that didn't matter.

"I'm just--"

This was just what he'd been trying to avoid. Starsky leaned forward. "Hutch--forget about it. I came at a bad time. No big deal." Listening was one thing--you talked to your partner because he was there and understood better than most--but getting involved was a whole other matter. Starsky wasn't sure he wanted to get that cozy. After all, they were still just getting to know each other.
Hutch shook his head. "She wasn't always like this, you know. She was a totally different person when we got married, funny, and kind, an-and--"

"People change, Hutch," Starsky cut in quietly. The stuttering was a bad sign; Starsky had already picked up that his blond partner only stammered like a kid when he was worked up. It never happened on the street, but the personal stuff seemed to knock Hutch for a loop sometimes. Like trying to defend someone pretty indefensible. Now Starsky was sure he didn't want to be hearing this.

Hutch ran a hand over his eyes, his earlier energy gone. "I don't know, maybe she's right, maybe I'm the one who screwed it up when I went into the Academy. She never counted on being married to a cop."

Starsky leaned forward, face flushing with unexpected anger. He'd listened and stayed silent about a lot of things, but he couldn't let that go unanswered. "Hey, I don't care how it went down, she's got no right to treat you like dirt. If she can't live with bein' a cop's wife, fine, you can talk about it, but nobody's got a right to be cruel to somebody else, let alone if they're supposed to love each other. That's not love, that's...

His voice died as he realized he'd gone too far. It was the truth, and, so help him, something Starsky had been dying to say for a while, but it was also his partner's marriage and not his business. Starsky's mouth shut and he watched uneasily as Hutch's face paled. Definitely too far.

"Look, Hutch, I'm sorry--"

"Let's just watch the place, huh?" Hutch turned away, suddenly intent on the building.

Starsky gave himself a mental kick. Terrific. So much for staying uninvolved; he'd just managed to slur his partner's wife and marriage in one thoughtless swipe. He wouldn't blame Hutch if he wanted to talk to him again. Why had he even opened his big mouth?

That one wasn't difficult. It had bothered him to hear Hutch talking about quitting, and he'd liked even less hearing the blond put himself down. Hutchinson was his partner, after all.

And he really was, Starsky was slowly realizing. It wasn't just a title, it was a commitment he took seriously. And that included coming to his partner's defense no matter who the offender was. He'd reacted with the instinctive protectiveness of partnership.

Which meant he'd just insulted Hutchinson in order to defend him. And here he'd thought Hutch was the screwed up one, Starsky thought wryly. Not to mention that Van had been Hutch's partner far longer and in a far deeper way than Starsky had. That bond had to come first.

So why did he get the impression only Hutch felt that way in that partnership?

Time dragged without conversation. Starsky sipped at his coffee, fiddled with the radio, and tried to ignore the strained silence in the car. Hutch was unbending, staring determinedly at the warehouse without even acknowledging that he wasn't alone. Well, with one of them paying that
kind of attention, Starsky could certainly do something different. He leaned forward to fish a
deck of cards from the glove compartment, then idly shuffled them over and over.

"Not enough room for solitaire," Hutch said quietly, eyes still on the building.

The gnawing apprehension in Starsky eased. "Actually, I was thinkin' of building a house of
cards," he drawled.

That finally earned him a startled glance, and he grinned, recognizing the almost reluctant
amused response in the blond. Starsky held up the pack.

"Room enough for poker."

A single-shouldered shrug. "Deal."

It was all the apology either of them needed. Maybe there was hope for their partnership, after
all, Starsky thought, and cheerfully dealt the cards.

"Read 'em and weep," Hutch said smugly, laying out the hand.

Starsky gave the array of royalty an appropriately glum look. "How much do I owe ya now?"

"Eighteen-hundred banana chips."

"Fine," Starsky muttered, reshuffling the deck, "but I'm not countin' out eighteen-hundred banana
chips."

"I thought that was part of the deal. I'd've counted out your jellybeans. If you'd won, of course,"

Hutch added earnestly.

Starsky paused. "You know, you're a sore winner."

"Hey--"

"Zebra Three, come in, please." The summons on the police band caught both their attention,
ending the badinage.

Hutch picked up the mike. "Zebra Three."

"Zebra Three, message for you from a man named Linus. Request you return call at 555-3906."

"Zebra Three, roger," Hutch finished, hanging up the mike and joining Starsky in looking around
them. "There," he pointed at a phone booth a half-block behind them.

"I'll go," Starsky said, dropping the deck into his partner's lap and getting out of the car to jog
down to the phone booth. He dropped in a dime and dialed the number.
The phone was picked up on the first ring.

"Linus? It's Starsky."

"Hey, I got something for you, but you still owe me for the last time."

"If it's good, I'll double it," Starsky answered, glancing back up the street to the silent building they were watching. Nothing.

"Oh, it's good, all right. You're on Wilshire now, aren't ya?"

Starsky started, growing cautious. Linus was an old snitch and the detective trusted him, but only so far as you could trust a junkie. "Maybe. Why?"

"Poindexter just called off the delivery that was gonna go down there. He's startin' to feel the heat."

"Any word when and where it's been moved to?"

"Not yet. I'll let you know if I hear, huh?"

"You do that. And swing by the station some time and I'll have your money for you."

"Aw, Starsky, you know I can't do that!"

Starsky smiled briefly. Yes, he did know but it was fun to push the buttons sometimes. "Yeah, okay. You still hanging out at O'Bannion's?"

"Uh-uh. New place these days. Huggy Bear's."

He'd have to look that one up. "Okay, I'll find you."

"Good." The line went dead.

Starsky hung up the phone, thinking for a minute before he walked back to the car.

"So what did Linus have to say?" Hutch asked as he got in.

"Poindexter got cold feet." Starsky started the car and stared absently across the street while Hutch called in to end the stakeout and put them on the way back to the station. Then he turned to his partner. "What would you do if you had a bunch of dealers breathin' down your neck and the deal you planned had to be scrapped?"

Hutch looked at him. "I'd set up another one as soon as I could."

"Like even that night?"

Hutch glanced back at the building speculatively. "You doing something tonight, Starsky?"
Starsky almost smiled. "Think Dobey'll go for it?"

"Does it matter? I wanna get this guy."

Starsky just nodded, putting the car in gear and heading back toward the station. That feeling was entirely mutual.

"Does it seem to you like we've been spending more time in this car than anywhere else recently?" Starsky asked with a yawn, brushing at his nose.

Hutch snorted next to him. The glow of streetlights and the headlights of the few cars passing by at two a.m. provided the only illumination by which to see the sharp lines of his partner's face, stray strands of blond hair catching the meager light as Hutch stirred in his seat. "You're telling me? I think I've got a permanent crick in my back."

Starsky debated for a moment before speaking up again. "Van give you any grief about being out tonight?"

The pause was so long he was afraid he'd stuck his foot in it again, then Hutch sighed. "No more than usual."

"Sorry." He meant it.

"Don't be--it's not your fault. It's part of my job, and if she can't get used to it..." Starsky could see the flaxen head shake once out of the corner of his eye.

They sat in silence again.

A truck passed them and they both instinctively slid down into the shadows of their seats. The truck rumbled past, slowing as it approached the building they were watching, then turned into the alley beside it and disappeared from their sight.

"You think that's it?"

"Could be," Hutch replied. He thought for a moment, then turned to Starsky with a frown. "Remember that report we got of suspected coke smuggling across the border in shipments of clothing?"

"Yeah."

He turned back to the building that once again sat silent and undisturbed. "Did you see the plates on the truck?"

Starsky was sitting up. "Mexico."

"They'd need a truck for a delivery like that, wouldn't they?"
Starsky didn't even bother to respond. They both knew the answer to that one.

Long minutes ticked by.

Just as Starsky was contemplating suggesting they go in for a closer look, the truck pulled back out of the alley and sped off in the direction it had come from. Once more they scrunched down in their seats, then sat up again to look at the building. It was sitting again in silence and apparent desertion. A shared glance, and Starsky and Hutch clambered out of the car and were running low down the street toward the building.

Hutch motioned he was going around back, and Starsky nodded, crouching next to the entry way. He'd give his partner a minute to get into position, then go in from his end.

_Forty-eight, forty-nine._ He counted to himself, staring at his watch. _Fifty-seven, fifty-eight..._

A car started from somewhere behind him, in the alley the truck had come from. Distracted, Starsky dropped the count and slipped to the corner of the building, peering around into the alley.

The headlights nearly blinded him. Starsky quickly stepped back to safety, listening as the motor gunned. Hutch should've been long inside now, and Starsky's instincts screamed at him to go after his partner, that something was going amiss, but whoever was in that car was a new concern he couldn't just ignore. They should've guessed there'd be someone there besides those in the truck. Dumb mistake. Starsky held his breath and waited, listening as the car in the alley started moving, heading toward him.

The hood had just edged out past the building when Starsky swung out of his hiding spot, gun raised. "Police. Freeze!"

The car jerked to a stop.

The light was too dim to make out faces inside the car, and Starsky licked his lips nervously. Something was wrong, he could feel it. "Outta the car, now!"

The driver-side door opened, and out stepped a chauffeur, hat and all.

Starsky muttered a curse. "You in the back. Out."

The passenger wasn't as quick to obey, and Starsky was about to repeat the order when finally the door slowly swung open. A tailored pair of pants came into sight first, followed by an equally well-fitting suit jacket. The person in it was tall and broad, a man who looked like he'd worked his way up into largess, and Starsky remembered distantly that Poindexter had started out as a lowly dock worker. The detective didn't need the background to know who he was looking at, though.

"Poindexter," he nodded. "Mind tellin' me what you're doing here in the middle of the night?"

The man leaned on a walking stick. Cute touch, Starsky thought. "Checking on some business matters, Officer. But I could ask you the same question."
"We're here on business, too."

"We?" The man repeated. His expression suddenly grew sneering. The alarms in Starsky's head grew louder. "Oh, yes, I think I met your partner inside. Tall, blond?"

Starsky grasped the gun tighter. "Where is he?"

"Still inside, I believe." Poindexter gave an unconcerned wave.

Something crashed inside the building, the tinkle of glass faint, followed by a low whoosh. Starsky frowned, readjusting his sweaty grip on the Smith & Wesson once more. He was the one with the gun, so why did it seem like Poindexter had all the cards? And where was Hutch?

The acrid smell of smoke brushed his nose.

Starsky turned horrified eyes to the building beside him, forgetting Poindexter for a moment. There was a glow and flicker coming from the window just behind him, distant enough to herald a fire somewhere deep inside the building. The building Hutch was still in.

He turned back to Poindexter, knowing the man's vexed expression as he watched the building burn had nothing to do with the possibility of someone being trapped inside. Most likely Poindexter was regretting the evidence going up in smoke, evidence without which Starsky had shaky reason to hold him. Evidence apparently strong enough that it was worth burning a building down--and maybe killing a cop--for.

What was he supposed to do now?

Poindexter stared at him, face hard and cold. "You have nothing to hold me on, Officer. I suggest you go look for your partner before it's too late and let me call for help before my business burns down completely."

Starsky wavered, torn. It was true, they had nothing concrete to hold Poindexter on except possibly for what was burning up in that building that very minute. Starsky could arrest him on suspicion, but it would take a precious few minutes to frisk and cuff both Poindexter and his driver. And already the smoke was starting to thicken, tickling Starsky's throat.

He made his decision, turning away and running for the front door.

Locked.

Starsky put his arm up in front of his face and, without hesitation, smashed the upper pane of the glass door, reaching inside to unlock the door. Smoke immediately streamed out through the new opening, and Starsky pulled his shirt up over his mouth and nose, one arm still raised in a futile attempt to shield his eyes.

It was like trying to see and breathe through mud. His eyes watered and itched, his throat burning as he coughed in the smoke. It had to be a deliberate fire; the smell of gasoline gagged him
almost as badly as the smoke. Which also explained why it seemed to be spreading so fast. Maybe he was already too late, in fact.

Starsky refused to believe that. Trying vainly to cough the smoke out of his lungs, he plunged into the darkness.

The building was laid out with a glass-fronted office facing the street and cargo storage space in the rear. Starsky had already tripped over a desk and two chairs before he finally groped his way to the door leading into the back.

That one was unlocked. Not even able to spare the thought for a prayer of thanks, Starsky opened it. To the flames that filled the other side.

His face felt on fire, the air almost unbreatheable. Even crouching low under the smoke, Starsky's head was already swimming from lack of oxygen. The flames licked at the edges of the door, hungry for the new air he was letting in. They would only grow now, soon making his way impassible. Now or never.

Starsky held his breath and dashed in.

Fire seemed to be everywhere, alive and hungry. Every childhood nightmare of being burned alive suddenly came to life, and Starsky had to fight the panicked instinct to run, chest tightening further from fear. What was he doing there?

And then, dimly, he could see the sprawled figure on the floor a few feet away, and he knew.

Starsky crawled to his partner, trying to stay as low to the ground as possible. Hutch wasn't moving, clothes smoldering in a few spots but not burning, and that was all Starsky had time to see before he grabbed the man under the arms and began to pull him toward the door.

It was the longest trip he'd ever made. Even along the ground, Starsky was breathing more soot than oxygen, and his body was weighted, clumsy. Black spots of fading eyesight filled his vision, his chest was going to burst at any minute, and his face and hands felt like someone had sandpapered them. There was no air left, only a very insistent survival instinct keeping him moving toward the impossibly far front door. Instinct, and a real concern for the one person he was supposed to protect beyond any other.

A sudden flow of fresh oxygen made him gasp for breath, giving him a new burst of strength. And then they were clearing the doorway and breaking into the night air.

Starsky kept pulling long enough for even the trailing gangly legs to clear the burning building, then collapsed next to his partner in a new fit of coughing.

For a moment, all he could concentrate on was drawing in lung-fulls of the sweet, fresh air. The spots receded, clearing enough that he could see the approaching figure through his watery eyes.

Poindexter loomed over him. Starsky didn't even know where his gun was, let alone being able to stop coughing long enough to use it. All he could manage was to drag himself up and over his
partner in an attempt to shield Hutch from whatever attack would come. From that half-curved position, he stared up defiantly at Frank Poindexter.

But the man only pointed at him, his eyes dark and angry. "You've cost me a lot here tonight, the both of you. I won't forget that." And then he walked away, the sound of a car starting up and pulling away moments later only vaguely registering in Starsky's hearing.

He forgot Poindexter the minute the man was out of his sight. With the flushing of smoke from his lungs and the subsequent replacement with air, came new awareness and worry. Like for the motionless form he was draped over, which hadn't coughed or stirred since they'd gotten out of the building. Pushing himself up on still-trembling limbs, Starsky turned the limp head toward him, finally seeing for the first time the grimy, colorless face. A nasty bump just behind one ear gave some indication of what had happened, but Starsky barely noticed, reaching shakily instead for a pulse. It beat under his fingertips in a rhythm even he knew was too slow. Lowering his ear to the pale lips, he found even greater cause for worry as no breath tickled his skin.

"No way...are you dyin'...on me now," Starsky croaked out. Not after five months in the Academy together, then hoping to get partnered for four years and being together only barely three months. Not after half-killing himself running into a burning building. Not his partner.

The siren of an approaching ambulance sounded faintly. Help was on the way--good. But that could still be a minute or more and there was no telling how long Hutch hadn't been breathing. Dragging himself to his knees, Starsky gently tilted the blond head back. This would be fun: he could barely draw in enough air himself. But it wasn't as if he had a choice. Taking as deep a breath as he could manage without starting to sputter again, he bent down and breathed twice.

And already found himself gasping for air. Starsky forced himself to take a few controlled breaths, then bent down to breathe again.

Oh, man, this was hard.

Two more breaths and he was coughing again. Starsky just managed to stop before it was time for the next pair of respirations.

The spots returned, sound wavering. He couldn't lose this second of two battles when the first had been so much harder, could he?

Another pair of breaths and Starsky's world listed.

Someone was lifting him back and leaning him against the wall of the building. Starsky flailed for a moment, fighting the intervention, when he made out the blurry sight of a tan firefighter coat. A mask was fitted over his head, the pure flow of oxygen easing his coughs, and Starsky managed to raise a hand wearily to keep it in place.

The firefighter--one of the city's new firefighter-paramedics--moved away from Starsky's side, crouching next to another paramedic who was already working on Hutch. Starsky didn't even watch what they were doing, his eyes on that white face.
He was the first one to see it wince. And then Hutch's whole body curled helplessly in a paroxysm of coughing and wheezing.

Thank God. Starsky rubbed at full eyes. Had to be the smoke.

A few minutes later and they had stabilized the blond, Hutch responsive if not quite conscious. The ambulance had arrived in the meantime, adding to the conflagration of emergency vehicles and flashing lights. Firemen swarming the scene parted for the two men in white bearing a gurney between them, and between the attendants and the paramedics, they loaded Hutch into the back of the ambulance.

Starsky had just managed to push himself to his feet, wavering as he leaned against the building, when one of the paramedics ran back to him. He leaned down to meet Starsky's eyes. "How you doing? You wanna ride in with your partner?"

Starsky just nodded. Oh, yeah. After all they'd been through, he wasn't about to let go of Hutch now.

He didn't need the oxygen anymore, and the paramedic reclaimed the mask, then helped him over to the ambulance and inside. Starsky settled up near the front of the cramped space, beside the fair head. Tentatively, he reached out to brush a few of the palomino strands with his fingers, then pulled back and absently watched the skinny young paramedic, as dark as Starsky's partner was light, continue to work.

They hadn't gotten Poindexter, though they'd exposed him and put a serious dent in his business. The dealer would have to manage any further pursuits from underground. And the two of them had both survived.

It seemed like a victory to Starsky.

Shivering with aftereffect and fatigue, he leaned his head back against the inside of the ambulance to keep watch over his partner and give some long overdue, silent thanks.

Starsky hated waiting.

The doctor, a brisk young black intern, had checked him out upon his arrival and declared that after a day of rest he'd be fine, even if his windpipe felt like it had been barbecued. A tube of ointment in his pocket for the worst of his reddened skin, Starsky had then been sent out into the Fire & Police ward lobby to wait for word on his partner.

He really loathed waiting.

The TV rattled on in the background, Nixon arguing his innocence yet again. Hutch had been following the Watergate scandal closely, reading the newest developments to Starsky as they rode or sat stakeouts. Hutch was like that, interested in everything, knowing something about almost anything. It had made Starsky feel dumb in comparison, until he'd learned his partner
didn't know the first thing about stripping an engine or about Warner Brothers cartoons or blending in on the street. After that he didn't envy Hutch at all. Starsky figured they both had something to teach the other.

The door down the hall opened, and Starsky turned idly to see who was coming into the ward. He shot to his feet a second later.

Vanessa streamed right by him, a nurse beside her. Coiffed and well-dressed as if she hadn't been roused in the middle of the night, she gave him only an icy glance as she passed. Anything Starsky would have said died in his throat at that look, and he watched the nurse lead her into one of the examination rooms. No doubt Hutch's room. Starsky ran a hand through his sooty hair. Well, wives had privileges partners didn't, which was only fair. It idly crossed his mind to wonder how long she'd delayed coming in order to fix herself up like that, but Starsky cancelled the thought just as quickly. That wouldn't help anyone, least of all Hutch.

It was a half-hour more before the same doors reopened, Van and a doctor coming out into the hallway. Starsky stood again, struggling a little more this time to gain his feet as the night's events were catching up with him, and waited discreetly until they were done.

Vanessa finished talking, then turned and strode back down the hallway the way she'd come, not even sparing him a glance this time. Starsky stared after her in bewildered amazement for a moment, then hurried to catch the doctor as the man began to turn away.

"Uh, excuse me, Doc? Could you tell me how Ken Hutchinson's doing?"

The white-haired doctor stopped and faced Starsky, his expression kind. It softened further as he took in Starsky's bedraggled appearance. "I'm sorry, are you family?"

"I'm his partner."

"Ah, Mrs. Hutchinson didn't mention his partner was still here. Yes, Detective Hutchinson will be just fine. He inhaled a considerable amount of smoke but his lungs look all right considering. We'll keep him on a low-oxygen feed overnight and release him tomorrow if his breathing and eyes are better."

"Eyes? What's wrong with his eyes?" Starsky was tired, his voice rising a little too much with alarm.

The doctor placed a calming hand on his arm. "Nothing to be concerned about, they were just a little singed and we have them covered right now to give them a chance to heal. His eyesight should be fine."

Should be, if, considering--it didn't seem like they knew much for sure despite the doctor's soothing tones and relaxed demeanor. Did they even know how little it took to render a cop unfit for street duty? Starsky took a deep breath. "Can I see him?"

"Detective Hutchinson's asleep--that's the best thing for him right now."
"That's okay," Starsky gave a tired shrug, "he doesn't hav'ta know I'm there--can I just sit with him a little bit?"

The doctor hesitated for a moment. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Hutchinson left strict instructions for no visitors."

Any bit of sympathy or benefit of the doubt left in Starsky for Vanessa Hutchinson suddenly shattered, and he stared at the doctor with mouth agape. "Doc...I was in that fire with him. I didn't even think we'd make it for a while. I just..." Starsky stumbled to a stop, too exhausted to figure out what he wanted to say besides demanding what had seemed a given a few minutes before. Maybe he was taking the whole partnership thing too seriously? After all, he wasn't family. Maybe he was being ridiculous, wanting to see for himself if the man he'd just risked his own life to pull out of a fire, a man he'd sat and listened to and shared with and laughed along with for the past three months--and pieces of the four-and-a-half years previous--was really going to be all right.

And maybe not. The doctor suddenly smiled at him. "I heard you saved his life. I'd say that deserves at least a quick look." His hand shifted to take Starsky's elbow, leading him to the room doorway. He opened the door for Starsky, propping it with his free arm.

Starsky numbly took in the scene. Hutch looked better, cleaned of soot and resting comfortably in a bed, blanket pulled up to his chest. The eye patches were disturbing, but Starsky reminded himself they were temporary. One hand was curled round the blanket's edge, the other lay flat at his side in deference to an IV, but in all it was the posture of a man relaxed in sleep. Even the eye patches and oxygen cannula in his nose didn't ruin that impression. Starsky took a deep breath, his abraded throat hitching only once in protest.

The door gently closed again and the doctor gave him a pleasant look. "It looks like you could use some rest, too, Detective. If Ken is awake in the morning, you can probably see him then."

He meant if Hutch rescinded Vanessa's "no visitors" order once he was conscious, Starsky thought, but he appreciated the doctor's tact. The man really had gone out of his way to be kind, and Starsky managed a wan smile. "Thanks, Doc. I'll do that."

"Good. If you'll excuse me." With another smile, the doctor continued down the hall.

Starsky stood there uncertainly a minute longer. Presumably Van had gone to do the paperwork that Starsky had passed on earlier--he didn't know all that much about Hutch's medical background and nothing about his insurance--but did that mean she was coming back? Or had she simply barred any visitors and then left her husband to recover alone? Starsky would have hated waking in an unfamiliar place, blind, without somebody there to tell him what was going on, and he wasn't too fond of the thought of it happening to Hutch, either. But if no one else seemed worried... Starsky cast an uncertain glance at the door. It was only for the night, and he was dead on his feet. He could always come back later in the morning that was just getting ready to dawn. And there was still Captain Dobey to report to.

Starsky swallowed a heartfelt groan and trudged down the hallway to find a ride back to his car.
It was ten before Starsky returned to the hospital, only four hours of sleep later. Muscles ached, his skin was flushed and his hands peeling, and his throat still felt like tanned leather, but it was amazing what a little rest could do. Even the news he'd gotten that morning couldn't dim his relief at finally getting to see his partner, and Starsky would have whistled as he walked through the F&P ward doors if it wouldn't have stung so much to do so.

Vanessa was just coming out of her husband's room, her face flushed a pink that would have been attractive if not for her anger-twisted features. She saw Starsky and immediately headed toward him, and he stopped in his tracks, shoulders unconsciously squaring in preparation for what would no doubt be an unpleasant scene.

"Hello, Vanessa." Cool but cordial; it was the best Starsky could manage.

She stopped barely a foot from him. "Well, you got your way. I can see what's more important to Ken. He nearly gets killed and he still wants to go back to the job, to you. I don't understand it!"

He almost missed the tremor in her voice, the ever-so-slight stutter. Starsky unbent fractionally. "It's not my way--did ya ever talk to your husband? He likes what he does."

"Oh, I've heard it enough, helping little old ladies, catching the villains." Her voice was frosty calm, but there was a hint of something in her eyes Starsky had never been close enough to see before, or maybe that she hadn't been pressed enough to reveal before, a real fear he hadn't expected. So, Vanessa was human after all. "I just don't see why he has to be the one to risk his life to do it," she finished curtly.

Well, mostly human. Okay, he could see a little of what Hutch had fallen in love with in the first place, but all Starsky could feel for her anymore was pity mingled with his disgust. "You don't know Hutch very well, do you?" he asked quietly.

The chink in her armor vanished, only anger and intense dislike smoldering in her expression now. "You two were made for each other. I hope you're very happy together." And she lifted her chin and walked away.

Starsky stared sadly after her. He had no idea what went on in the Hutchinson marriage and Hutch doubtlessly carried part of the blame, but with venom like that, no wonder Van was slowly losing her husband. Starsky just wondered what had set her off now, at him.

The same older doctor came out of another room and Starsky hurried up to him. "Hey, Doc, can I see Hutch now?"

The doctor nodded. "I believe he's been asking about you." Another friendly smile and he left to continue his rounds.

Starsky sent an absent thanks after him, then knocked on the door before sticking his head in.
The end of Hutch's bed was raised, the IV and oxygen gone, only the eye patches contrasted with red-seared skin showing that all wasn't well. The face turned blindly toward the door, jaw tightening. Before Starsky could say a word, his partner said acidly, "Forget something? I thought you went through every name in the book."

Starsky's eyes rounded. What now?

One angry, if slightly trembling finger, came up to stab the air more or less in Starsky's direction and the smoke-roughened voice continued. "And the next time you try to keep Starsky away--"

Oh. Suddenly Vanessa's reaction made a little more sense. "Hutch," he interrupted softly. "It's me--Starsky."

It seemed to be the last thing the blond expected, and it was his turn to sag in surprise, anger suddenly dashed. "Starsk?" he repeated uncertainly.

Starsky slipped all the way into the room but stayed near the door, unsure of his welcome. "I wanted t'be here when you woke up but they said no visitors--"

"Van said," Hutch interjected bitterly.

"--and the doc said you needed some sleep," Starsky calmly continued. "So, how's it going?"

"Lousy." He could see Hutch's body beginning to untense, and wondered again at a relationship that seemed to upset both parties so much. "T'm--where are you?"

The sudden question took him by surprise, and Starsky stepped up beside the bed. "T'm right here." Hutch's hand lifted inquisitively and Starsky slipped his nearest arm under it.

The blond head dropped back against the pillow even as the long fingers twisted in Starsky's jacket sleeve as if to make sure he couldn't get away. "Good. They wouldn't tell me anything about what happened to you, or to me. I don't even know..." He waved stiffly at his face, and Starsky quickly jumped in.

"It's not permanent--they said your eyes just need to rest a little." He didn't ask why Vanessa hadn't told Hutch as much, nor commented when Hutch swallowed thickly. "An' I'm okay, got a little sunburned, but..." Starsky grinned and shrugged, knowing his partner could sense both actions.

"You sound terrible."

Starsky gave a snort. "You're a good one to talk, buddy--you're not gonna be winnin' any singing contests yourself for a while."

"Did we get Poindexter?"

His grin faded. "Uh-uh. It was either him or gettin' you out of that building, Hutch, and I figured it'd be easier to track him down again later than it would be to get used to a new partner. We shut
down his business, so Dobey's happy. Besides, I didn't have good PC to hold Poindexter, anyway."

Hutch swore softly.

"Yep," Starsky agreed. "But, hey, his building full of coke burned up and we're still around. We'll find him."

"Yeah." Hutch yawned, his relaxation a drastic difference from when Starsky had first come in. But Starsky's jacket was still bunched in one unyielding hand.

He hesitated. "Linus's dead."

"What?" Hutch's head came up again. "How?"

"Dobey called this morning," Starsky said quietly. "Found him in a dumpster."

"Ah--I'm sorry, Starsk."

Starsky made a face. "He knew the risks." He wasn't fooling his partner and he knew it, but Hutch didn't call him on it, just nodding once. That was...nice. Starsky had never had a partner who read him personally, not just professionally.

"Starsky...it's not working."

Starsky's heart sank just as quickly. After all they'd already been through? Just when he thought that maybe they were getting someplace? "Why not?" he managed to ask.

"I've tried. Maybe it wasn't enough but it was the best I could. She's...she's just so angry, she doesn't even listen anymore."

Starsky's breath hitched as he realized who Hutch was talking about. That wasn't good news, either, but he couldn't help being relieved. Starsky sobered, thinking about his partner's words. "You can't win 'em all, Hutch," he offered earnestly.

"I'd really hoped..." Hutch's whisper trailed off, and he turned back to Starsky, asking more strongly, "Did I ever say thanks?" His hand, loosened from its death grip on Starsky's sleeve, slid down to the bed.

"For what?" Starsky automatically replied, going along with the deliberate change of mood. The writing was on the wall, he knew Hutch could see it now, too, but he'd stand by his partner through whatever would follow. Partners did that, or at least the ones who lasted did.

"For saving my life. Not that I plan to make a regular thing out of needing it," Hutch added breezily.

Starsky grinned. "Good, 'cause I don't plan to make a habit out of runnin' into burning buildings, either."
Hutch's smile softened. "Just if I need it, huh?"

"Well, if ya put it that way..." Hesitating a moment, Starsky dropped his hand into his partner's open one in an awkward makeshift clasp. The tentativeness vanished as Hutch immediately crushed his hand, the gesture speaking far more than his words about how shaken the blond had been, and how far the two of them had come.

Starsky squeezed back. As transient as too many partnerships ended up being, he had a good feeling about the future of this one.