Summary

Part 3 of The Ryan Series, Starsky and Hutch.

Starsky and Hutch are trying to reconnect the dots after Ryan Lancaster has blown away their norm. Can they get back on track with their careers, their lives and their friendship? Will they be able to go forward and wipe away the grime that Ryan has left on both of them.
Less than ten minutes in and he knew Hutch had been right.

Hutch was so often right - about so many things. If Hutch had been here at this moment, beside him, he would happily concede to him on this point. Happily concede and reach out for a steadying hand because any moment now Starsky knew with utmost certainty that he was going to find the ground coming up to meet his face.

A hot shaft of pain brought his flagging pace to a complete standstill and he doubled over clutching desperately at his side. He squeezed his eyes shut against his tunneling vision as blood thundered in his head and nausea roiled in his gut.

Oh fuck – not now – not here in the middle of some public place…stay with it…stay with it. You can't go down here. Hutch will know straight away what you were doing...

But he was losing the battle with consciousness and he knew he was going to pass out if he didn't get his body down and fast.

Two more steps and a side-sways stagger brought him alongside a grassy embankment and he fell ungracefully into a heap, the hard fall barely registering through the clenching grip of agony.

"Triffic, just triffic." He managed a moan as his graying vision restored just enough to show him a perfectly clear sky, his head flat on the cool grass. The blazing fire in his side continued to flare and he lay still trying to breathe through the cramping hold of its spasm.

OK – so obviously he was as Hutch had so knowingly predicted, not yet ready to put his recuperating body through the paces of a run. He cursed again to the blue sky above – filled with self-disgust and disappointment that his treacherous body had yet again failed him. Two weeks! Two full weeks since they'd arrived here, more than two weeks since he'd been discharged from hospital and still he was a total crock! He and Hutch had been holed up here in this gingerbread town and he had done nothing more physically taxing than tag along with Hutch on some of his nature exploring forays into the local forest near the house. These gentle walks could hardly be termed "hikes" because whenever Hutch knew Starsky was accompanying him he kept the pace to less than a crawl and the inclines zero. The fact that he knew that Hutch would have wanted nothing more than to set off of a physically challenging cross-country hike and instead opted for a geriatric stroll, irked Starsky even more.
God he hated being weak.

Hated how his physical and mental fabric had worn thinner and thinner over the past weeks, the very substance of him wearing away to gossamer thin fragility.

His body and mind were going stir crazy with cabin fever and when he'd announced last night that he was going to take his sorry body out for its first run in God knew how long, he was ready for the sermon that he knew would be forthcoming from his zealous partner. Hutch didn't hold back. He had put up his usual heavy blockade whenever Starsky talked about what he perceived as trying to "punish" himself.

Not that Starsky could see how the mere mention of a simple run could be termed as self punishment - but Hutch would find a way to turn it into something akin to Starsky's need to flagellate himself psychologically.

In fact it was the same reaction Hutch let forth whenever Starsky talked about anything that involved radical measures to break free of the suffocating hold that Ryan Lancaster had taken on his life. In these first two weeks since they had been forced to take refuge in this quaint semi-rural "safe house", Starsky had explored and examined quite a few ways to shake the demon that was Ryan from his mind and body. Most of them had been simply talk, and as he and Hutch both probably knew represented coping mechanisms - albeit drastic ones. Christ help him, he needed something to cope with the memories and the images that flooded his brain and terrorized his sleep. Despite his better judgement and despite the damaging effect it had on his Hutch's own emotional well-being, he'd used sick humor and bitter self recrimination in massive doses, alluding to what he wanted to do with or to himself to purge his inner torment. None of it was pretty and all of it terrified Hutch. But like so many things "since Ryan", Starsky felt powerless to stop lashing out at himself and others - particularly his partner. So he went on, finding almost perverse satisfaction in suggesting new scenarios that might end his self-hatred or at least dull it into submission.

Starsky knew it was killing Hutch bit by bit.

The momentary release he received to see first the open-eyed horror on Hutch's face, blurring into sadness and grief gave him only a brief respite. He felt better once the sadness turned to anger and Hutch lashed back at him in furious retaliation.

"Don't you say that shit Starky! Don't you let me hear you say that fucking bullshit about yourself – I never want to hear it you understand! You take that fucking shit back right now! You take that back or I swear I will knock you down for even thinking that way."

There it was. Exactly what he had wanted from Hutch. Incessant rage. That is how he felt every time their arguments reached this fever point. This was what he had been striving for, even if unconsciously. To bring that anger out in his stalwart, dedicated, loyal partner. At least he had achieved that. In those words and in that tone of Hutch's fury, Starsky found some small measure of relief. Fleeting and cruel to both himself and to Hutch. To push and push until his own pain could be eviscerated, turned inside out, and reflected in his partner's tortured features. Relief for just a short while. Hutch's eventual anger, disgust even.

It was so much better than having to look at light blue eyes filled with pity.

But in the end Starsky didn't have the strength or resolve left in him to keep punishing Hutch for his own self loathing. His hot headed impetuosity and callous threats of self harm or self destruction cut Hutch down to the quick, dragging his best friend lower and lower into his own dark waters of despair. It was just like watching Hutch drown.
In the end that was worse for Starsky, far worse than his own sense of drowning.

With the crisp morning air cooling his heated body he continue to lay still, tracking the blueness of the sky above. The clarity of the blue made him think of Hutch's sky blue eyes which in turn of course had him thinking back over yet another one of their relentless arguments. It seems that since Ryan had re-entered their lives their arguments were plentiful and the sky blue of Hutch's eyes seemed only ever to be troubled and pain filled.

Had he done that – put that look into his partner's eyes? Had he done that to Hutch? Maybe it had started with Ryan, but Starsky knew that his own troubled behavior kept the trouble in Hutch's eyes.

This morning when he'd driven off down the laneway he knew that Hutch would awaken, hear the car and immediately start to worry – if in fact he'd stopped worrying at all since their raised voices last night. And although he had known what Hutch would be thinking and feeling - he had driven on regardless. Last night's argument had still been sitting leaden and heavy in his gut as he had dressed quickly in the early morning light, pushing his constant fatigue aside as he psyched himself up for the task ahead. Their heated words dogged him all the ways down the stairs and out the front door.

"Hutch don't start with me again. Not tonight. Just don't. I'm so tired of this same crap and I'm damn sure you are too."

"I haven't started anything Starsky. I'm merely saying to you that you know full well your body is nowhere near ready to begin strenuous exercise."

"Since when the hell does a light run qualify as strenuous? I need to get back in shape or I'm going to vegetate here."

"OK I – I'm not getting into this again. You're right Starsky. Let's leave it. I don't want to start up again with the same broken record we've had playing between us almost every night since we've been here."

"Well you brought me to this Godforsaken place and forced me into this Godforsaken exile, so you should damn well be prepared to listen to the crap I have to say!"

"You just got through saying you didn't want to cover this again. And for the record - the same broken record partner - I have listened. I have listened to you threaten and berate yourself for over two weeks now. I – I – I'm trying my best to stay with you on all of this, but until you finally agree to start those sessions with the counsellor, I don't – well – I just don't know. I damn well don't know anything - anymore!"

"Oh Shit, here we go again. So just because you have started sitting on a couch somewhere talking to some psychobabbling stranger about what happened to your partner with some freakin' mad colleague called Ryan – you think I have to as well. No - worse than that! You think I SHOULD DO IT. You think that I MUST do it - or what? What? Otherwise I will burst into flames? Fade away? Crumble into a pile of ash?"

"No - none of those things Starsky. Just perhaps - perhaps find a modicum of peace inside yourself...and then - well then go from there to get back to where you were in your life. Where we both were. I've lost that place Starsky. That place where we were before Ryan came and ripped our world to pieces. I'm just trying to find ways to get back there - to get back to the everyday that we used to share. It wasn't fantastic, I know that. We had stress and we had worries and risks and dangers. But we were better than this. Better than this shattered pile of rubble."
"Shattered pile of rubble? Jesus Hutch - you've been reading too much poetry or whatever bullshit it is you read every night after dinner. This IS life - this IS where we're at now. Ryan has fucked me up sure, but I'm still here and still alive. Don't sure as hell need some prissy spectacled Jane Doe - because that is sure is how she seemed to me - like some corpse sitting upright with a pad and pencil...don't need her to tell me how I should be feelin' or livin'."

"You said you would do it Starsk. You made me think you'd do this with me - that we'd be in this together. Using our time here to work ourselves out..."

Starsky tried not to look at the forlorn and lost picture Hutch presented right at that moment.

"What the hell do you need to work out anyway Hutch? This didn't happen to you. Last time I looked it sure wasn't you strapped down on that fuckin' bed gettin' his ass ripped open!"

He knew then he's gone too far.

"You - you - bastard. You bastard Starsky..."

But even Hutch's strangled words couldn't stop him.

"Fine! You wanna play the tortured emotional wreck - then go for it. You go do it. Sit all day every day with some stupid nerd pretendin' to be interested in what you have to say about the shit you hold in your head. But I can tell you – I went once and once was enough for me. Total and utter fucking crap. I don't know what you could have to say to her, because I had nothing I wanted to share about my "traumatic experiences.""

He sneered out the last words, parodying the expression.

"No? No Starsky? Nothing to say? Nothing to share? Well then why is it that for the past two weeks you've done nothing BUT share your fear, pain and self hate about everything EXCEPTwhat happened to you with Ryan? You say you want to hurt yourself, drive your car into a pole, cut yourself with a knife, put a gun to your head? But you won't begin to share any of that pain with someone who might be able to help you? Simple fact is that you have had "traumatic experiences" Starsk – that is the sad truth. You need to start to deal with them, because I can't help you the way you need to be helped – and - Starsky its killing me. You agreed to do this when we first came here – you said you'd try. Now – I don't know what to do with all of your pain."

"Shut up Hutch. Please just shut up. Fact is you know all that shit I say about eating my own gun – which I don't even fucking have anyway… or driving off a mountain – you know its just all shit. I'm just getting the pressure off my chest. You know that."

"Do I? How? How can you expect me to know anything about what you won't even begin to try to share with me on the levels you need to? You talked to me about it all – when we were still back in the city, that night after the IA suits came – you shared some of it with me then. But since then, since we've arrive here, you've closed off. You've done nothing but play with me and taunt me about your real feelings and you've left me….you've left me feeling scared and useless."

"Oh for God Sake Hutch. We're getting no where fast here. Let's drop this. This whole thing started with me saying I felt like I needed to go for a damn run. Just a run Hutch. I'm not threatening to kill myself. I know I've been a first class asshole with all the crap about hurting myself. It's all a joke – nothing more than hot air. Hey don't you think it's healthier to go for a run to clear my head rather than seeing some shrink? Seein' a shrink! Like I'm a complete basket - case or somethin'."

"What do you want me to say to that Starsky? I'm seeing a shrink. Does that make me a complete
basket-case? Maybe I am. Christ knows I feel like it…"

They could go on and on in this vein and they both knew there was no short answer to their battlefield of emotions. One of them showing his heartfelt fears openly, the other hiding and deflecting every real shred of pain and angst beneath layers of protective denial.

In the end, Hutch had simply turned away with a weary dry face rub and a heavy sigh. As if momentarily lost he had walked away from the dining table where they had just finished their evening meal before disconcertingly walking back to begin clearing the dishes. Starsky thought he looked numb, empty, desolate. Starsky thought he looked nothing like the man and the friend he knew and loved for so many years.

His vibrant, smart, caring partner was a candle burning away to nothing but a small puddle of molten wax.

The combined impact of witnessing Hutch perform such a simple domestic act while fighting through emotional overload was too much for Starsky to hold onto his resistance any longer.

He was as frustrated as Hutch was about warring over the same issues, and too tired of seeing his partner worn down to abject despair.

Capitulation and surrender seemed a quick easy solution to a complex web of conflict.

"Hey. OK. I got you. I heard you. No running yet because I'm not ready to put my body through the paces. Alright. I'll wait. Forget it Hutch. I won't do it. I won't run and I won't drive off a cliff either – there. Feel better? Forget I even brought it up. Let's clean up this mess and watch a movie OK? How about it?"

So they had. Cleaned up their mess – the dishes and the debris of their meal.

But the real mess – the thick, solid stinking mess that lay behind them, between them and in front of them – the mess created by Ryan Lancaster – couldn't even begin to be tidied up. They both knew it. Since being here Starsky had managed to make not a single inroad into confronting the spectre that this man had brought into his his life.

So here he was now. Acting out his deceit, and adding another layer to his betrayal of trust. He'd woken early this morning, taken the keys to the car and crept out of the house like some damn slinking teenager on a mission. It wasn't until he was driving away that he felt the full extent of the anger. Why should he be made to feel like this – like he had to be accountable for every action and decision he made, like his life was nolonger his own – like he needed someone to guide his way? Why the hell should be feeling guilty about carrying out a simple activity like going for a run for Christ's sake? Just because some bastard psycho fellow cop had raped him, why did that automatically make him incapable of independence and personal responsibility? Did being raped strip him of autonomy?

With grim-faced determination he floored the accelerator and kept it suppressed until he felt that the speed had dissipated the worst of the burning resentment. He drove out toward the township until he came across the first sizeable park. Squealing the car to a stop he slammed out the door with ferocity and began mentally mapping out the track his run would take. Without even bothering to attempt a warm up, he flexed his legs just a few times and then with his blood pumping and his muscles pent-up with a need for release, he set off at a lightning pace.

And within minutes his pig headed bravado had ended up like this. From a screaming pace to a complete stand still his body had shuddered to a violent stop.
Soft grass still damp enough from the late morning dew cushioned his dizzy head and throbbing body until the worst of the pain began to abate. His tender side was still throbbing and he lay a shaking hand over the wound site to splint and support the tender flesh beneath his damp t-shirt. His finger tips brushed over the highly sensitive skin surface and traced out the still raw and puckered suture line of the surgically repaired knife wound. The smell of damp earth and open sky above did little to blank out the memory of the filthy alleyway and the cloying sweet smell of male aftershave. For terrifying moments he fought against the clash of the present and the past.

What was now a healing wound was then the thrust of a keen and glinting knife and brutal probing hand.

The dizziness that had just begun to settle, threatened again as the harrowing mental images pushed forcefully at the barriers he had erected in his mind.

He couldn't let them in – couldn't go there, be there, feel it or remember it. It had to stay deep and hidden or it would rise up to overpower him completely.

His anxiety levels were mounting and his side still throbbed with sickening ferocity. He deeply regretted his decision to put himself in this invidious situation. Lying on his back, overwhelmed with debilitating exhaustion and cramps in the middle of some park, flattened by pain he feared for the worst. Why the hell had he done this? He needed to get back to the car but the fear was crippling whatever was left of his stamina and he felt paralyzed and overwhelmed.

Humiliation and self loathing, his constant companions the past weeks, rose up in him.

Rolling to the side he attempted to pull himself into a half sit and groaned at the effort.

He saw the shadow fall across his face and chest before he heard the voice.

"Are you OK? Can I help you in some way?"

A female voice and a scent of light fragrance wafted down to him but the glare of the light in his eyes and his chaotic senses made it hard to focus on a face.

Then a moist snuffling around his neck had him jerking in surprise before he felt the unmistakable sloppy lick of a tongue – and the tickling rasp of whiskers and coarse hair. A dog? A damn dog was slobbering all over him – but the rhythmic long licks against his sweat slaked neck was almost comforting and he felt the black force of anxiety pull back just a little.

He turned his head to come eye to eye with a shaggy mutt face with a wet nose and an industrious tongue.

"Oh God I'm so sorry. Max – get back! Get back boy now. I'm sorry – he likes people too much - what can I say? He probably thinks he's helping you – Oh Max please."

"No – isss – isss – alright. He's ok. It's ok. I don't mind really."

"Here do you want me to help you to sit up? You looked like you were trying to before but that you couldn't manage it. You're in pain aren't you? Oh goodness – look should I go and get help? Ring someone – an ambulance?"


He was trying to see her now – put a person to the voice and he realized that she was now kneeling
on the grass beside him, holding firm to her wriggling dog and staring hard at him with worry and a frightened look on her pretty face. She was suddenly familiar but he couldn't place her and his mind gave up too quickly on any effort to think beyond getting himself together.

"Could – could you just brace me a bit so I can sit up? My side – oh shitttt –"

He let out another deep groan as she managed to lever him up while he held his arm and hand tight over his mid section and tender side."

"Sorry – sorry for the language. I'm – it just –"

"Oh don't worry about that for a second. Say what you need to say if it helps. Are you sure you don't need some medical help?"

"Positive. Really. See I'm up now and the world has stopped spinning and – yep – the pain is starting to back off."

"You've had an injury or you've been unwell. I remember your friend saying so –"

Starsky was again confused. She knew Hutch? She knew he'd been sick? He should know her but he knew no-one around these parts. He and Hutch, had kept to themselves and the house the last two weeks. He in particular really hadn't ventured out into the little community at all.

She could see his confusion and hurried on.

"I met you the day you both arrived in town. To pick up provisions – at the store. You and your friend – Ken. You're Dave aren't you? Your friend told me your names. I'm Katy – Katy Reynolds and I work in the main store in the town. This is my dog – my very badly behaved dog – Max."

"Katy. Nice to meet you again Katy. Yeah – I remember now. Sorry, my mind is a bit fuddled up – I was probably still on some pain medication then – memory gets messed up with that stuff. Yeah – well – I had been sick like you said. I'd been in hospital – an operation. That's why – now - well I thought that I was ready to get back to exercise. Obviously not by the looks of me."

"I saw you fall down when I was way back behind you. I always come out in the mornings to give Max his early walk and I thought you looked like you were going to pass out. I wasn't sure whether to come up to you but – well you look pretty bad Dave."

"No – I'm OK now. Seriously – I'm fine. Perhaps Max cured me with those sloppy licks."

"Your friend is not with you running?"

Starsky wanted to laugh at that one.

"Err – no. He'd probably think it was a very bad idea, which it seems to have been after all. I'll feel better after a hot shower and a few asprin. I just need to get back to the car –"

"Dave I don't think you can drive like that."

"Hey – I've driven in a lot worse states than this Honey."

Had he not been trying to work through another burning spasm of cramp he might have caught the quick blossom of a blush on her porcelain skin at his easy use of the simple endearment.

"Perhaps – but it won't be safe. You'll be at risk of having an accident doubled over like that. Please let me help you. I can bring your car closer to you here and then drive you to your place. I
can walk back into town with Max – we haven't had our walk yet anyway.”

Starsky thought about how far away the car was and he thought about how he felt and then he thought about how he hated the fact that everyone but him seemed to be right about things at the moment. He thought it might be best not to even try to think with the way his head was swimming right now.

"Well – can you drive Katy?"

She laughed at the question.

"Of course I can! Everyone in these parts drives from a very young age and we can drive just about any vehicle. That's life in the country for you. Now gives me your keys and I'll go and bring the car up. I saw you arrive before so I know where it's parked. It's a good distance back, I'll be a little while. You just sit and relax."

He wanted so much to lie back down again but couldn't let her see how astute she was about his condition. It would be easier to agree with her and go with her suggestion. The sooner he was back at the house the better.

"If you're sure – then thanks. It's really nice of you to offer. I'll wait here then."

As if he could wait anywhere else he thought. He was incapable of moving more than a few feet at most. God how bad could it get? Falling down and being rescued by some light weight girl who happened by?

SHSHSHSH

Fifteen minutes later when she pulled the Ford up to the picturesque house that he and Hutch called home for the foreseeable future, Starsky was feeling even worse than he had when the pain had started. He guessed that he had pulled a muscle or something damn vital that supported his wound site because the fire in his side was scorching his insides and making breathing nearly impossible. An attempt at even the most basic conversation with the young woman called Katy was proving impossible and he knew by the sidelong glances she was throwing him that he must be looking even worse than he felt.

With his face pinched with pain and still bent low over his middle he winced out directions to the house and thought longingly of a bed and his bottle of pain pills that he had stubbornly weened himself off over the past five days.

Starsky made a valient attempt to climb out of the car without aid but was failing miserably at the task. He managed to get his legs out and under him but as soon as he took his own weight and tried to move forward he stumbled precariously. Katy was trying to help him while at the same time keep the gleeful dog from pouncing over both of them when suddenly the front door of the house swung open and Hutch came running down the steps.

"Starsky! What the hell?" What's happened here? What's happened to him?"

Hutch pushed hard at the dog and grabbed Starsky's flailing body up into a firm hold while he glared at the girl.

"You – you're the girl from the shop in town. Why are you with him? What's happened here? What's happened to him?"

Starsky was caught three ways - between being impressed with Hutch's ability to recall faces,
needing to explain to him that Katy was the good guy in this little fiasco and succumbing entirely to the support of his partner's strong supporting hold.

"Hutch – Hutch – not her fault. Mine – oh – hell - really need to lie down now."

Katy pulled away at the harsh reprimand from the tall blond man whom she thought was called Ken and trailed uncertainly behind as he half carried his friend into the house.

She was again confused by the nomenclature that the two men used with each other – referring to each other as the names she had heard them use the first day in the store.

Unsure what to do with herself and feeling locked out by Dave's friend who had been so friendly to her when she had first met them – she followed slowly through the front door.

Hutch or Ken or whatever he might be called had gently eased his friend down to a lying position on one of the big wide couches. He was hastily removing his shoes, loosening the tie on his running track pants and running his hands tentatively over his body all the while talking softly to him.

"Where does it hurt Starsk? The wound? Or someplace else? Can you tell me? Take it easy and just tell me what happened."

Her discomfort grew and now in this lovely big light filled room there didn't seem enough space for her and the two men. She was an intruder, an interloper that no-one was noticing. She had secured her dog outside quickly before coming in, knowing that the last thing the blond would want would be for the dog to jump on top of his sick friend.

Hutch peeled off the damp and sweaty t-shirt and grimaced at what he saw.

"Yeah I can see – its your wound site isn't it. It's inflamed and hot. How bad is the pain?"

"Not as bad - as it was – nope that's a lie – shit – need some pills Hutch. Rippin' me up inside."

Hutch whipped around and flung at her – and she hadn't even thought he'd known she'd been there – "Watch him will you? Just support him so he doesn't roll off the couch. I need to get his medication and some water."

She did as he asked but he was back in moments with the tablets, water and an icepack wrapped in a towel. She was once more pushed to the side of the proceedings. Quietly she made her way over to sit mutely on the edge of one of the armchairs wondering all the time if she would be better to just slip out the door again.

After he had helped him sit up enough to swallow the tablets, and cajoled him into drinking the whole glass of water, she watched as he pulled cushions under the curly head and around the side of his body to support his tender side. He picked up a light blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over the bare chest before gently laying the cool compress over the tender area of his side.

"Hold on Starsk – the pills should kick in soon. Let me hold this pack here for a few minutes until they do – it should numb the area a bit. Is it hurting anywhere else or just there?"

"Just the damn side Hutch – damn side. Christ when is it gonna heal? Thought I was over - the worst of it – but….Hey Hutch?"

"Yeah buddy?"
"You were - right - again. Always damn right Hutch. How do you do it?"

"Oh, just my natural awesomeness I guess." He smiled such a beautiful smile that it reminded Katy of how he was in the store - so kind and caring. It made her want to smile too but she still felt too intimidated by him.

"What was I right about this time Gordo?"

"Can't tell you Blintz – if I tell you you'll kill me and I'm in too much pain to fight you off. Wait till I feel a better than you can try it…"

She was starting to feel like she was in some sort of charade – they were changing their names for each other with ridiculous frequency.

"Starsk? What did you do? I need to know – I need to know how you've ended up like this when the last time I saw you-"

Katy felt the light blue eyes turn once more toward her and she baulked a little at the probing intensity.

"So? Katy – isn't it?"

She noticed that Dave or "Starsky" or "Gordon" is that what she had heard him call him? "Gordon"... or whatever his name, was starting to look more than a little glazed in the eyes.

"Hutch is always better at names than me – see – he remembered your name straight away. Katy – he's – I think – yep I think that Hutch is about to ask you - some questions. About me - and why I look like this. Now - if you need to wait for a lawyer – "

She thought Dave was trying to make a joke with her but she couldn't be sure. This whole interaction was making her feel out of her depth.

"Shut up Starsk and just rest."

"Oh – Oh no Katy – I think he's gonna be playin' bad cop today – don't let him scare ya' – he's all bluff – not a bad cop at all – big blond softie...Don't tell him nothin' ok? Protect me here please...Hutch is not gonna be very happy with me. "

But although he cast a whimsical smile to his friend who was rapidly succumbing to the drugs the man she now thought of as "Hutch" did not offer her the remotest congeniality.

She wondered who these guys were when she first met them and she wondered even more now. But before she could think much further Hutch fixed her with a grim determination all the while remaining seated on the edge of the expansive couch next to the semi-coherent Dave.

"Perhaps you start at the beginning. How is it that you wound up at our front door this early in the morning, driving our car with my partner as passenger and with him looking like he is ready for hospital again?"

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Katy felt strangely self conscious as he followed her outside onto the porch where the bright morning sun was now warming up the day. It might have been better she thought if he had bid her
farewell at the door and allowed her to take her leave quietly. Perhaps an understated departure might help to balance out the dramatic arrival she had made over half an hour earlier.

She could feel him regarding her while she wrangled a little with her happy little mutt as she somewhat clumsily untied him from his post near the front steps. Max now awakened from his lazy contented slumber in the shady alcove of the porch was raring to go as soon as his mistress had made her re-appearance.

"Nice dog – energetic."

Sparse words seemed to match his minimal engagement with her on any level other than purely civil and polite. He smiled, but his eyes remained just that bit distant, his voice was kind but just that little bit disinterested as he held out his hand to the small bundle of fur currently launching itself at him, wriggling and mewing with excitement. His mind seemed elsewhere, his light blue eyes preoccupied, and still more than a little troubled.

She offered up some social repartee nonetheless, wilting a little more inside with the disconnection she had perceived since arriving at the house.

"Yes that's why I have to make sure he gets a good walk every morning, otherwise for the rest of the day when I have to leave him to go to work, the neighbours all hear about how energetic he really can be."

"Sounds a bit like Starsky - well when he's not…ill. " The smile started and then died away completely on the last word and he looked back into the house as though thinking about the word as it hung in the air between them.

"I can see that in him. There's that spark you know – but I can see also…I realize that he's far from recovered. Thank goodness that medication you gave him helped so quickly with his pain. He – he really went out like a light didn't he?"

"Yeah – I don't think he's been sleeping too well since – since his operation. So when he made that stupid decision to try to go for a run – well it was just too much for his body to handle. But – really he's getting better every day – this is just a small set back. He'll be fine once he's rested up."

"Of course he will be. Like you said, it was all too soon to try to do what he did this morning."

"Look – I – I need to apologize for the way I – for the way I jumped down your throat when you first arrived at the house with him. When you first drove up and he looked so bad – I didn't know where he gotten to – or what might have happened. I know that I flew off the handle a little – and I'm afraid you were in the firing line. Hell, look I'm sorry ok? If you hadn't been at that park to help him and get him back here – he could have passed out or fallen badly…"

"Ken – Hutch – Ken…"

"Call me Ken, Katy." She blushed a little at his direct suggestion – a more than subtle message that "Hutch" was not up for public use - or at least not acceptable for her to use. It left her a little confused but she took it then that she should also refer to his dark haired friend as 'Dave'.

"OK. Ken it its. I'm just glad that I was there to help out. Don't apologize for being upset - I understand that you were worried about him – I can see that you're very close. You weren't to know what had happened when I arrived him with him in the car. I hope Dave doesn't get angry for me telling you about the run – or for approaching him in the park at all. I think he thought he could manage by himself."
By the time she had begun to explain the situation to Ken, she had looked over to Dave for his input and realized that he his eyes were closed, his face finally relaxed in sleep.

"Katy I'm grateful that you did. If you hadn't I would have ended up getting a phone call from the nearest hospital when he finally recovered enough to tell them who he was. Stupid damn fool that he is. Anyway – let me lock up the house and I'll drive you and your dog back into town. Sleepy Head in there is out to it for now and I don't think he'll wake up in the next fifteen minutes or however long it takes me to drop you to your home."

But she could easily discern that he seemed uneasy about leaving the house and his friend and that he was pulled by social etiquette to offer her a lift back to town.

"No. No really. As I already told Dave, I needed to give Max his exercise, so a brisk walk back into town is what he needs."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes – yes of course. Thanks for the coffee and the water for Max. I enjoyed meeting you and Dave again – even though it wasn't in the best of circumstances."

"Maybe next time we meet, both of us will be conscious and upright to talk to you."

She laughed lightly as his statement – thinking all the while to herself that she truly hoped there would be another occasion when she could meet talk with them again. She had gleaned little or nothing out about their background and what had brought them here to her own little corner of the world. The oblique references that Dave had made regarding cops, just before he zoned out had her more than curious about who these men really were. Who were they, and what had brought them here? She wondered how long they might be staying around.

She wanted so much to know more about them both but already her opportunity was fading fast. After filling him in on what had happened with his partner he had prepared coffee for both of them – Dave already having fallen into a drug induced slumber. She had shared some limited conversation with Ken while he moved about the sunlit kitchen but she could see that his concentration was divided between her and his partner in the adjoining room.

"I'd enjoy that Ken. How long are you both staying around town for anyway? Do you need to get back to work soon? I gathered from Dave that he was recuperating some after his surgery."

"We – we really aren't all that sure just yet. Yeah- we've both taken some time from our jobs right now."

She took the risk of asking. "Are you – are you really a cop Ken? I thought maybe Dave was half joking….about you…?"

It was no surprise to her to see the tall blond falter a little as though caught unawares. She sensed that he was about to parry her question before he seemed to make a quick decision on how to answer her.

"Yes I am – we both are. But we're on leave so we're not cops up here. No secret undercover operation or anything like that - we're harmless, honestly."

She giggled a little.

"Oh that's a shame - our quiet little town could do with a bit of excitement."
"Sorry to disappoint you Katy but we don't plan on any excitement - so let's hope your quiet little town stays quiet so we can enjoy our down time. Look – are you sure you don't want a lift back in to town? Don't you have to get ready for work today? It's almost nine o'clock."

"No thanks – really – I want the walk. I don't start work till late morning. OK well, say hi to Dave when he wakes and I really do hope he's feeling better soon."

"I'll be sure to tell him Katy. Thanks again. I might see you when I drop into town for some more provisions later in the week. I didn't see there you last time."

"I only work there on and off. I have two jobs. I'm trying to save up to go back to college next year and finish my study. I work at the pizza place - "Angelos" a few nights too. It's a great little trattoria – you and Dave should stop by and eat there one night - if you like pizza of course."

"Pizza? Only Starsky's favorite word. We'll make sure to do that Katy."

She knew she had to move away and finish this stiff, almost awkward conversation. It was clear that Ken wanted to go back inside and that already his mind has shifted from her.

Before she knew it he had waved her off with a courteous smile and she was left looking at his tall form as he disappeared back into the house.

The wave of disappointment and emptiness that engulfed her as she made her way through the front gate, Max pulling excitedly on his lead beside her, was she knew out of proportion to the event.

She felt it nonetheless.

What was she doing wrong here?

If possible she felt even more off base than she had felt more than two weeks earlier when she had first met these two interesting, attractive but so it seemed to her, impenetrable men.

She gave once last look at the almost picturesque house as she rounded the laneway to the main road. In her mind she saw the man lying inside on the big comfy couch and tucked snugly under a blanket. On the way out of the door with his partner she had snuck one last long look at him.

A mixture of vulnerable and tough, playful and dangerous – sexy and cute.

Even now she felt her neck and cheeks flush with the physiological effect of that perfect image.

That image stayed in her mind all the way on the long walk back into town.

Riley hadn't been back to Huggy's bar in quite a long time.

He had developed an almost natural affinity with its surroundings from the first time that Hutch had brought him here when Starsky was still in hospital after the Kalzo case. Then, when he and Hutch had been together on the streets during their temporary partnership while Starsky had first been suspended, Riley had grown to feel as at home inside its smoke-filled walls with its noisy clatter and jarring juke-box music as his senior officer obviously did. The fact that the lanky coffee skinned, flamboyant bar owner Huggy was never anything but fraternal to him meant that he had taken to patronizing the establishment more often than he probably should. Huggy was always at hand with an oversized helping of the Special of the Day and quick on sliding another frosty beer.
under his nose when the first was not yet even done.

Tonight Riley slid easily onto the bar stool and greeted two of the evening's female wait staff, calling them by name with easy and friendly familiarity.

There were many things that Hutch had taught him. More importantly there were many things that he had given him. Those gifts were evident now in the new way he walked and talked and dealt with others. He had grown a new layer of self confidence and inner maturity and he could almost feel it like a protective armour about his previously lesser self.

Hutch had made feel like for the first time in his professional adult life that he mattered, that he was valued and most importantly - that he belonged.

And here – in this bar, in this small but significant social niche, Riley belonged.

And it felt good.

Perhaps his sense of inner satisfaction was transparent – shining out like some beacon for all the world to see because after he spent a good five minutes chatting happily and perhaps just that bit flirtatiously with the two very attentive waitresses the man himself was suddenly in front of him.

"Well if it ain't the good officer Riley himself – how would you be my man? This is the second time I've found you sitting up at my bar in the past week. You'd better be careful or I might take to thinking that you choose to come here not just because our mutual friend introduced you to the place but because you like my food, my wine and …." He cast a raised eyebrow at the pert little waitress at the end of the bar. "Perhaps my fine bar staff."

"What can I say Huggy? You got it on all three."

"So how has life been treating you down at the precinct without my big blond friend there to pull you into line?"

Riley looked thoughtful. "Well it's different – not the same being partnered with another officer – but still good. I'm just glad that Captain Dobey has given me the opportunity to stay on the streets and keep moving toward my Detective's exam. Can't imagine going back behind a desk now and working in Communication. Too damn boring after I've seen the other side."

"Oh I'm sure of that. When you ride with Starsky or Hutch you ain't ever going to do "boring" again. Those two dudes invented the word 'action'."

"Yeah well, maybe a little less action for a while will do me good. Last month was more action than I want to see again in a long while."

Huggy looked serious.

"So you doing ok now – after everything?"

The "everything" that Huggy alluded to was Riley knew, what had added yet another new layer to his persona – one that had been put there by all that was wrong with humanity. A hardened and implacable layer, honed by dangerous violence and treachery. Riley no longer saw the world though the eyes of the unitiated and the guileless. The day he had come face to face with Ryan Lancaster in a shockingly violent encounter had been the day he had stopped being a boy.

"Some days Huggy I wonder if – well if all that really happened to me y'know? If I think about it too much I get a bit messed up in the head. I guess it takes years to roll with the punches like Hutch
and Starsky seem able to – to keep going on when that sort of stuff blows up in your face."

"Hey – don't sell yourself short. You've come out of this whole thing a tougher man – just look at you. You don't even resemble that wet behind the ears kid that Hutch dragged in here with him all those weeks ago. Still – don't think that this shit hasn't been hard on the boys either. I just hope that my curly-haired friend can pull through this mess and get back to clocking up his bar tab. Hell – I can't remember how many years it is that I've been cash flow positive. Don't ever tell Starsky but I sorta miss nagging him about that shy-rocketing bar tab of his and Hutch's."

"Well your secret is safe with me Huggy – I never so much as get near Starsky and even if I did he wouldn't give me the time of day to listen to anything I said."

Huggy frowned at the pained look on the young man's face.

"It won't always be like that Riley. He ain't like that at all – its just – this whole thing with Ryan has fucked him up in the head big time. There's only one person he's going to allow close to him now and that is how these boys get when the chips are down. Over the years they've always been like this. They close ranks – tight. Tighter than a drum – and no-one and I mean no-one gets in 'cept the two of them. You ask around the station and I'm sure you'll hear this story from lots of the other guys who have worked with them over the years."

"Hey I know that objectively Huggy – and of course I always knew about it even before I got to know Hutch – their tight bond is famous. But something about me just seems to really piss Starsky off – it feels like he has pigeon-holed me as being the enemy. Its more than not trusting me, its like he hates me Hug. I don't know what I've done or how to fix it. It means too of course that I can't be a friend to Hutch."

"You miss him don't you?"

Riley knew that the reference was about Hutch.

"Sure do. But – with the way Starsky feels about me – I don't see that I'll ever have an opportunity to share stuff with him again. I've never met anyone like him Huggy – he – I know it sounds sappy – but he has changed my life and I feel like I owe him for that and that I want to be part of his life too. He's – well I guess he's the older brother I wish I …." He nearly went on to say "still had " but pulled back at the last moment, catching himself when he saw the caring interest reflected in the dark man's face.

Two beers in and Riley knew he was starting to reveal more than he ever had in years about his dead brother. He didn't want to go there now.

"Anyway – listen to me – better serve me some food Huggy because any more beer on an empty stomach and you'll be hearing all my deepest secrets."

"Hey what's a barman's job if not to be the receptacle of all man's inner secrets? But before we end this conversation Riley, take it from me – I've been around the dynamic duo for some years now and I can tell you – if Hutch respects and likes you which he does – it is only a matter of time before Starsky will come around too. He just needs time. Time to move past what that number one Creepo Lancaster did to foul up his life. And speaking of that Creepo – he was in here just two days ago."

Riley slammed his beer glass down hard. "Ryan? Was here? What the hell did he want? What did you do?"
"Riley – it isn't against the law for him to come into a public bar for a drink. I didn't do anything – just kept him under watch from the corner of my eye. He just sauntered in as casual as anything looking like he might be meeting up with someone, but I knew that it was just a ruse. He only stayed for one drink – looked around, nursed his drink for about twenty minutes or so and then left. Never asked me anything – saw me but kept his distance of course. Never spoke to anyone. Just sat there looking all dark and mysterious. Plenty of the ladies noticed him. I can tell you that for someone who prefers his own sex he certainly doesn't mind attracting female attention."

Riley was only half listening to Huggy's analysis of Ryan's flawed and ruthless personality.

"He was obviously looking for them. I know from the surveillance teams covering Starsky's place that he has been there most days to check whether he has returned."

"For sure. He knows that this place after their apartments and the station is their main rabbit hole. I got the feeling he didn't expect to see them – but was just – hmmn – getting the lay of the land."

"You know there is a restraining order on him for Starsky. If you see him again you'll let me know?"

"Sure but like I said – can't stop him from dropping in. If however he starts to raise his profile in anyway that I don't care for, I'll let you or Dobey know. Now – don't let the mention of the Evil One's name ruin your appetite. Check out the specials and let me know what you want."

"I wish he'd walk in here right now….

"No you don't Riley. Nothing good would come from that and you know it. Put him out of your mind for now or I'll be regretting that I mentioned it to you at all. You've got a life to get on with and a career to build. You've got to keep a bit of perspective and distance here."

"Like the distance and space he gives Starsky?"

Huggy sighed heavily and leaned forward, his words heavy with warning advice.

"Riley, you have a choice to pull yourself away from this man - unlike our friends who are up to their necks in this shit and had to go underground to shake him out of their lives. I think Ryan will leave you alone if you keep your distance from him. Let the law handle that prize sicko from now on."

"Huggy – you know, two months ago I would have thought you were right. But now I've seen what a truly evil man is capable of and I have a fear that Ryan will never stop until something stops him period. I just don't know if the law is big enough to do the job."

"Well then – if it takes something or someone bigger than the law – don't let it be you Kiddo. You've already fought one battle with him. Let him run himself into the ground with his own badness. Karma, my young friend Riley, will eventually prevail."

With that Huggy swept away the empty glass and tossed Riley a food menu.

Riley sat there with the menu in front of him, not seeing it but thinking only of Huggy's wise prophecy.

Karma.

Fact was Riley knew, Karma was already lurking in the wings for Ryan Lancaster – hungry and yet patient, enduring and unwavering. It was in the form of one tall blond haired cop with a hideous
score to settle. The point was whether or not Karma would prevail or if fate intervened to change
the ominous course that Riley knew had been set in place that night when Ryan had done what he
had done to Starsky.

Done what he had done to him and left Hutch alive to remember it.

It was probably the biggest miscalculation of Ryan's sorry sick life.

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"How long have I been out?"

Hutch came in from the kitchen when he heard the the groggy voiced question coming from the
living room.

"Oh a good four hours. Its lunch time and I'm guessing after your exercise this morning you're
feeling a little hungry. I made some sandwiches – if you're up to solid food or I can blend you up a
shake if you'd rather."

"Cut it out Hutch."

"OK then - no food, no shake. Maybe later when you wake up a bit."

"You know what you have to say – so do I. So say it. Let's get this out of the way now."

"Nope."

"Nope what?" Starsky was moving experimentally, shifting about on the couch and trying to get
his elbows under his torso to sit up a little.

Hutch stayed back and refrained from helping him - seeing in his partner's eyes that he needed a
little space.

"No – I've got nothing to say. Now do you want to sit up or stay resting?"

"What I need to do is piss – and damn soon otherwise this couch is gonna get flooded. So – I just
need to … get my damn body to co-operate –"

"Come on you invalid – let me help you get on your feet. I don't feel like cleaning up a flood of
your piss as you so tastefully describe it. I'm already snowed under with all the damn housekeeping
duties in this relationship."

"Bitch bitch bitch – its all you dutiful housekeepers do. OK – I'm up. I'm vertical and I'm moving.
That's gotta be an improvement on how I felt before. Maybe all that agony in my gut was just a
dream – " Starsky was moving gingerly toward the bathroom.

"Don't think so – not unless we both dreamed that girl who drove you back here when she found
you nearly passed out in the park - Katy – the girl from the store in town. " Hutch stood at the
bathroom door and watched the unsteady figure swaying as he lifted the toilet seat.

"Who put the damn toilet seat down? We're two men – how the hell did this happen?"

"It's hardly a national emergency Starsky – and my guess is that your little friend Katy might be the
guilty party – she used the bathroom before she left."

"She's not my 'little friend'."
"OK – she's not your little friend. Now, you sure you're ok standing there?"

"Hey – I'm not about to sit down to do a pee so yeah. Are you gonna just hang by the doorway and watch me? I've got to have some dignity you know."

"You sure about that Starsky? I think maybe you left your dignity in the park this morning."

Starsky finished up and hobbled to the basin to wash up – scowling at his drawn features in the mirror as he splashed water on his face and rinsed his dry mouth.

"Thought you said you had nothing to say?"

Hutch smiled a little.

"Guess I overestimated my ability to restrain myself. You've got to give me points for trying though. You've been awake for at least five minutes, maybe more and I haven't throttled you for being a complete and utter idiot this morning. Not yet anyway."

"But you're warming up to it – I can feel it – aint ya' Hutch?"

"Come on. Hobble back to the couch and I'll bring you in some lunch. Plenty of time to throttle you after you eat."

Starsky considered whether to flick him with the hand towel but realized he was not up to the manoeuver and instead allowed Hutch to help him back into the living room and the couch.

He also allowed Hutch to serve him up a tray of sandwiches and milk which he was surprised he managed to partly consume before he sagged back against the couch.

"Better now you've got some food back on board?"

"I'll have to think about it for a while – but yeah I think so. Thanks for the sandwiches – I've lost count of how many paybacks I must owe you in the kitchen."

Hutch threw a glance over his shoulder at the kitchen where even from the living room the disarray and piles of dishes were clearly evident.

"When you're fully healed you can make up for it by doing the cleaning. You know I hate that side of things. Do you need any more medication for your wound or is it settled?"

"Nah – at the moment it is manageable….." There was a moment's pause and it felt heavy between them. "Hutch?"

"You want something else to drink? Some juice or a coffee…."

"Hutch. Stop. I need to say this. I need to and I want to and – it's damn long overdue."

"Alright?"

"You know. You know what I owe you. You know what I've been like the last two weeks. You know how I've treated you and how I've acted."

"Yes?"

"Then you know – you must know that – I'm sorry Hutch. I'm damn sorry for the shit for brains behaviour, for being the complete jackass, the completely insensitive moron – and anything else
that I may have been. I've treated you so – I've treated you like dirt buddy – and its not good enough. I'm ashamed – I'm freakin' disgusted at myself. Then this morning….this morning – I felt so sure I could get out of bed and do it. God knows what I had to prove – to myself maybe, I had nothing to prove to you because you know exactly what I'm capable of, or incapable of since the – since the injury. I don't really even know why I tried to do it this morning Hutch. I guess it was based on pure pigheaded arrogance."

"No – not arrogance – stubbornness."

"So you think stubbornness covers it? Is that better than me being an arrogant bastard?"

"Definitely. More your style. You're not arrogant Starsky – never have been. But by God you can be stubborn."

"Better than being arrogant though?" Starsky gave his half smile.

"Better. Star – when I woke up – heard the car…. I was worried. I didn't know what – what you might be doing – after the way you've been talking. I waited here for nearly an hour Starsky. That was one long hour, but I thought you'd come back. Then the car drove up and you weren't driving and you looked like hell on earth – "

"I know. I know Hutch. I was lying there on the ground with my side feeling like it was gutted open all over again and I was battling for a breath and all I could think of – all that would come to me was that – you were right. Totally right. I was no where near ready to push myself into a run."

"This isn't just about the fact that you tried to go for a run Starsky..."

"No, of course it's not - and you're right about that too. The problem is Hutch – ever since this – this – thing happened to me – I've been trying to run away from it. Run – bolt – clear the hell out of my own mind. But I can no more run away from this mess than I could run around that damn park this morning. I've got to stand still and deal with it don't I Hutch? Stand still, turn around and confront it face on. No more running. It's bad for my health and wearing us both down. There – I've said it! How did it sound to you then? My big revelation?"

"It sounded to me Starsky like you're brave. Damn brave and incredibly strong and determined. I'm proud of you partner."

Starsky hurried on when he saw Hutch's eyes looking suspiciously moist.

"Hey don't lay it on too thick - I haven't earned it yet. I think that I might give the Therapist lady with the pen and paper and the - well I hate to be judgemental, but Hutch – you've got to admit it – those damn ugly glasses – I might give her another try."

Hutch looked ridiculously happy and his glowing relief was almost too much for Starsky to look at. It just made his guilt all the more intense.

"That's great news buddy. Great news. I'm so pleased to hear you decide that you're prepared to go and see her again."

"Well – I can hardly have my partner being the only basket case in this house can I? If you're getting your head shrunk, I suppose the least I can do is go out in sympathy with you. Can't have you being the only crackpot in the house."

"Noble. So noble of you Starsky."
"And tomorrow my noble behavior will increase even more. How about we make a plan to get out and explore this little town we're stuck in. After all if we're gonna be stuck up here for God knows how many weeks we should at least take a look at it. From what I saw of the place in my brief drive this morning, there's plenty of pretty sights around."

"Including your friend with the nice dog?"

"Hey will you stop calling her my friend?"

"I think she likes you Starsk. Maybe you should make a point of visiting her in town and thanking her for saving you from yourself. You sort of crashed out and didn't get to say goodbye."

"Yeah – you've got a point I suppose. Poor girl. I was worried you were going to reduce her to tears with your cross examination of her. "

Hutch looked contrite but then smiled a little wickedly.

"Hey! How was I supposed to know she hadn't had her wild way with you and dragged you back here half dead when she'd grown tired of you?"

Starsky snorted.

"Glad you're seeing that shrink buddy – I think the boredom of this town is sending you crazy. Had her wild way with me my ass! She's just a nice, quiet country girl - shy as hell if I not mistaken."

Hutch just shrugged as he picked up the dirty plates and glasses.

"She might be shy and she might be quiet - but unless I'm completely wrong Starsky, there was nothing shy about the looks she was throwing your way this morning while you were crashed out on the couch."

Hutch walked back toward the kitchen, his parting comment drifting back into the living room for his partner to mull over.

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He could be certain of it now. It had after all been a long time.

Over two weeks and he had not seen hide nor hair of either of them – anywhere around the city.

Hutchinson hadn't been near his precinct since before the day Ryan had received his marching orders to leave his own and Starsky hadn't been re-admitted to any of the major city hospitals.

His personal stake out of their black friend's bar had proved to him that they weren't even touching base with him.

Not only were they not in their own places or usual haunts – they were out of town completely.

Ryan threw his jacket down on the passenger seat and slid in behind his wheel. It was late – almost one am. but he was not at all tired after his ten hour shift. Not mentally anyway. The new job he had been forced to pick up in the security firm was hardly enough to tax him mentally. The walking was a killer - around and around the patrol areas on foot – in and out of the car, up and down floors.
What a boring, mind numbing shitty job.

He almost wished for some action – almost hoped for an opportunity to run, pursue and pull out his gun, throw an armlock around an intruder, knee-cap a hooded thief who might try to pull a knife on him. But in one week of the job it had brought nothing to him but monotony. A pay check which he needed - but boring monotony and more than a small dose of humiliation.

He was better than this crap job. He was a top notch homicide detective for Christ sake and he should rank so much higher amongst the other muscle bound losers who did this gig for a living.

Before ramming the keys in the ignition he took a quick look in the rear vision and side mirrors but he already knew there would be no car there to see.

At least the stupid dick surveillance cars had pulled back from following him around town like some hungry stray dog. Only a couple of days ago he had come close to walking up to the driver's window of the car and putting his fist through the rookie cop's face.

Stupid damn Fucks. Who did they think they were, fooling crawling around after him where ever he went – sniffing up his ass and pushing his buttons? He wouldn't let them push him to the point of losing it though. Dobey would like that – so would his ex-Captain Dobson. Like him to put the wrong foot forward. Like him to fuck up his own position and have a charge for assaulting a police officer thrown in his face.

No way that was happening.

No matter how satisfying the thought was of spraying some blood around the inside of the cop car that was trailing him day and night.

He had to keep it all steady.

On course.

He had a plan – and plans took time and perseverance.

It just meant he had to learn to delay gratification. He'd have to find other outlets for his physical and mental tension.

Not nearly as enjoyable as violence, but still a sublimation to get him through till the wait was over.

He had become good at waiting. After all hadn't he waited for Starsky for all those years since the Academy?

Wait. Wait, plan and prepare.

In the end it would all be worth it.

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Perhaps he was being overly optimistic. Perhaps he was trying to see more than was really there. Maybe he just needed to see more than what was really there, and God how damn pathetic was that?

Still, he was almost certain that the man who was exiting the small office block across the road
looked like a different man to the one who had entered it over an hour ago.

More familiar than the one he had lived with for the past weeks.

More like the one he knew and understood better.

More like the Starsky of old, the Starsky before Ryan.

He couldn't clearly recall the last time he had seen his partner swagger out toward the car the way he was doing now – that easy strut and athletic effortlessness back in place for the first time in such a long while. As Hutch watched his partner trot lightly down the steps and over toward the waiting vehicle he tried to think back to how long it had been since he had seen that half cocked smile and that almost self-satisfied tilt to the head as he bowed down to pull open the passenger door?

A long time. Too long. Everything that was normal and taken for granted seemed to be set back in the distant past – before what happened to them both had happened.

Forrest had happened to Hutch and Ryan had happened for Starsky.

Two men who had come into their lives, bent them completely out of shape and left them emotionally burned.

Somehow, Hutch had come out the other. With Starsky's unwavering support he felt as though he had healed as much as he could hope to after the impact of his forced heroin addiction. For a while it had ripped his world apart. The scars would always be there – deep inside of him - but he was better – so much better than he had been.

But Starsky? After Ryan?

Hutch wished he could say with conviction that his partner was making progress with the rebuilding of his shattered psyche after having been subjected to his ordeal by the highly disturbed Ryan Lancaster. He had never seen Starsky so beaten down and demoralized. Never seen him so withdrawn and almost unreachable. Since being in the safe house up here away from the city, away from the ghost of Ryan, his recovery had been patchy and inconsistent.

The first two weeks were the worst – when Hutch had to hold on tight to weather his partner's mercurial moods and scathing temper. Some nights when Starsky had filled the void between them with terrifying ideation of self-destruction, Hutch had barely felt able to hold on. But then finally there had been a watershed; some sort of turning point and Starsky had agreed to try again with the therapy. Whether Starsky had conceded to do the therapy to make him happy alone, Hutch didn't care. Greedy for his friend's return to health and feeling way out of his depth with the severity of the issues Starsky was dealing with, Hutch had grabbed at Starsky's decision to at least try again with the professional help.

Since then things had been a lot better. Not great – just better. Starsky had stopped using him like an emotional punching bag and had refrained from any further talk of harming himself or giving up on life. They were talking again, had stopped taking verbal swipes at each other, and there was more of the old feel to their relationship. It was as though they had returned to each other after some great separation even though in reality they had been physically living in each other's pockets since the night of Ryan's attack on Starsky.

So there was progress of sorts, and room to breathe again and some days Hutch could almost see the road back to their old life. And yet, in all honesty he knew that there was a lot of ground for his partner to cover before healing would be more complete.
Now - looking at him and seeing a hint of the old exuberance flashing across his unguarded and open face, Hutch began to feel some hope.

Something seemed to have shifted – whatever it was. Starsky looked better. So Hutch would take that – God he had been at the point two weeks ago where he would have taken anything, anything to prove to himself that Starsky was pulling away from the hold of the agitated depression that had plagued him since his discharge from the hospital in Ventura.

When Starsky swung easily into the car with a return of litheness to his body, Hutch had to apply restraint from asking him what lay behind the renewed brightness in his demeanor. However he knew better than to push his luck with catching Starsky unawares with any psychological exploration. Better to keep the conversation in safer territory. He didn't want to risk Starsky closing the door on him by pushing for answers he was not likely to get at this stage. The Starsky of late was prone to slamming the door on him far too easily.

He waited until Starsky had settled into the car.

"So – what gives? You've got a self-satisfied look on your face Buddy. Did the lady Doc take off her glasses and shake down her hair to reveal that she was in fact a stunning sexy siren under that white coat and those thick stockings?"

"Ha ha Hutchinson. So uncouth – especially for you. I'm actually shocked that you should make such sexually offensive remarks about a professional lady. Aren't you meant to be the one who takes this whole therapy thing seriously?"

"Hey – I'm just saying, you suddenly look a little too much like the cat who just got the cream – and you're still purring about it."

"Have you ever considered that it might be because I've been making some progress here? You know, what's the jargon? That I could be finally 'getting in touch with my feelings' and all that shit? Not everything comes down to my manly urges you know. I've got a brain too. You think you're the only half of this operation who can get the hang of this psycho-therapy game?"

Hutch smiled at the fake hurt in the pulled face of his partner.

"Oh? I see. Well in that case I retract my thoroughly sexually inappropriate comment. I believe I may have insulted your Therapist. I don't mind about insulting you Starsk – but not that nice lady shrink of yours. She's a smart lady and sort of pretty too – even with those terrible thick stockings and ugly heavy framed glasses."

"Hutch – admit it. You're just pissed because I pulled a female shrink and you got stuck with that grey wrinkly relic who looks like a mad Einstein."

"I like him. We connect."

"Yeah well good for you. If you ask me, I think he's the one who needs to connect - or be connected. Like up to a power supply to get him started. You sure he ain't really dead and has just been propped up in that chair in his office? You ever wonder why it's you who does all the talking in those sessions and he never seems to say anything?"

The splutter from Hutch was explosive.

"You've got a point there Starsk. To be really honest with you, I'm starting to wonder if they're actually related."
"You mean your shrink and Einstein?"

"No you idiot! My shrink and yours. He could be her father. Now wouldn't that be a Freudian landmine."

"Oh yuck - don't go there Hutch. No way. Thick stockings and tortoiseshell glasses are bad enough - I don't need that image in my head when I'm sitting in my sessions. Jesus! Listen to us! Who would have thought we'd ever be analysing our own shrinks? What have we come to partner?"

That brought them both to a helpless splutter until Starsky ended it with a serious frown.

"Seriously Hutch - I'll be just damn glad when we don't have to do any of this crap anymore….even if….even if it is helping I guess."

He looked over at Hutch with begrudging acknowledgement.

Hutch smiled as he turned the ignition and pulled the car out of drive.

"I hear you buddy. So, anyway? Seriously? You feel good? Good session?"

"Yeah – yeah it was. Maybe – maybe the weight is starting to lift a little bit more each time I talk to her. Yeah – it's good. It's better. Hate to admit it – but I guess there's somethin' to be said about spilling ya' guts to a complete stranger...with thick stockings."

Hutch paused before pulling out into the local afternoon traffic – not that "traffic" was a word he would use to the couple of cars that were passing their parked car. The small town had nothing really equal to his real concept of a traffic flow.

He turned to the side to face Starsky and squeezed his shoulder lightly, a smile lighting up his more relaxed features.

"Starsk – I'm pleased for you and so damn proud that you've pulled out the stops to go and get this therapy. You're using your time here exactly how Dobey and the brass wanted us to – but I don't care about that. What I care about is that – compared to two weeks ago you sound a lot more positive. You're looking good Starsk. Looking good – and I 'm so damn happy for that."

The ridiculously happy glow on Hutch's face at his simple admission had Starsky reaching over to squeeze at his shoulder.

"Jeez – all I said was that I felt I was talking about things more. Hell. It ain't no big deal. Will you just get us home before you completely lose it Hutch. I don't want a sloppy scene out here in the middle of town. Enough that I fell down on the ground in the middle of the local park. Can't have us both putting on a show for the locals with you getting all mushed up over stuff."

"Ok – I'll back off with the mush. See, hardened face back in place. Now, you want to go back to the house or stop by Angelo's for an early dinner?"

Hutch made sure to look at the road – he didn't want Starsky to see the slight amusement in his eyes at his seemingly nonchalant suggestion.

"Pizza – again? Hutch, you don't think that is pushing it too far?"

"Pushing what too far?"

"You want me to believe that suggestion just came off the top of your head? Like some casual
What does that mean? It's pizza for damn sake. It's hardly some radical idea. It's not as if I suddenly threw it out there that we go join a monastery Starsky. It's a small town, there aren't too many places to eat and I suggested your favorite food? So what's not casual about that?"

"I mean – you don't think that hitting us up for a third dinner of pizza in one week is not just a bit extreme? Back home I'm lucky if you'll agree to eat it once a week. You don't think I don't know what you're doing?"

"What am I doing Starsky? Besides trying to feed your bottomless stomach with your chosen dietary mainstay?"

"Set me up."

"Starsky, maybe this psychotherapy stuff is making you see meanings behind every simple sentence and social gesture. Anyway - you're wrong, about the dinners. One of those three meals you mentioned was in fact lunch. So in effect that is only two dinners in one week. Lunch does not count."

"Dinner, lunch, breakfast - it doesn't matter Hutch. It's all part of your devious plan. And - don't forget we just happened to stop by Angelo's for lunch on a day that Katy was working the day shift – and the other nights just happened to be when she was rostered on for the evenings."

"So – pure coincidence. She works a lot of shifts there."

"Perhaps – but then at the grocery store last week, I did hear you asking her about her work roster while you thought I was out of earshot."

Starsky smiled cunningly at him.

"You're getting rusty Hutchinson. Very. Soon you'll be useless for any sort of undercover role if you can't work your angle with a little more finesse."

"Look smartass – do you want pizza or not? There's not much at home and I for one don't feel like cooking. What's the big deal? It's not as though you have to even talk to her if she's working there this evening."

"Oh she's working all right – you wouldn't have suggested it otherwise would you? Ok – yeah – let's hit the joint. After all that therapy and soul searching I could kill a pepperoni with extra cheese. How about you?"

Hutch didn't want to admit that the mere thought of another meal of Angelo's heavy cheese laden pizza was the last thing he felt like eating. He didn't know how his digestive system was going to keep up the pace. But it was a sacrifice he was prepared to make. He knew Katy was more than interested in Starsky and sensed that Starsky might feel the same way about her. Still, at the moment, Starsky, never a man lacking confidence in the male prowess department seemed to be more than a little lost in the wilderness. It wouldn't hurt for him to play shepherd to his partner's lost sheep behavior. Even if it was going to give him hardened arteries and indigestion.

Besides, he reasoned, if Starsky didn't want to move the fledgling friendship further along the relationship spectrum, she was still nice company for the two of them. And – importantly to Hutch, ever vigilant of his partner's precarious psychological state, Katy couldn't hurt him.

What could such a nice, quiet girl possibly do but to help with get Starsky back to some better
The man was still cowering on the floor of the toilet block, begging in unintelligible gasps for the beating to stop. His lay where Ryan had dropped him, slumped in the corner with his head wedged near the stinking clogged up urinal, the blood that was seeping steadily out of the gaping gash on his head mixing with the overflow from the cisterns and pooling in puddles around his shaking body.

"Stupid fuckhead. You should learn to listen when someone bigger than you tells you to stop and put the knife down. This is my beat you dickhead, and when I'm on duty I own this whole block and every floor in this block you understand? You make sure to tell your friends that too in case any of you decide to try again to pull a little B and E in my zone. OK? I don't like it when smart little fuckers like you and your gang try to mess up my beat. Makes me look bad when I creeps like you smash windows in my block and rip out cash drawers. Makes me look like I'm not on top of my game and I don't like looking like I'm not on top of my game creep. You get my drift now you dumb shit for brains?"

He toed the folded body with his steel capped boot and tipped his head on the side as he waited for a response.

"I asked you a question dickhead! Do you understand me!"

He ground his boot down savagely on one bloodied finger and smiled at the howl of pain.

"YES YES…your turf. Your beat. Won't come back here. Won't smash your windows again….won't ma….ke you look bad man…."

"Good. Good. You be sure and tell that to your two pussy friends who ran off and left you won't you? They should have hung around a little longer – we all could have had some fun. I might've been able to play with my knife a bit more."

"We won't – we won't come back here – won't mess up your beat. I prom-ise you."

Ryan leaned into the basin and washed the blood from his hands and arms, swiping at some spots of bright red on his crisp white shirt with distaste.

"Shit shit! I should fucking send you my laundry bill. Look at this shirt! Stupid Bastard! You sprayed blood on my shirt, and I only fucking nicked you."

He kicked out with his boot and sneered at the cowering man as he whimpered and held his hands up beseechingly.

"Pl-eas-e. Just go and -leave me. I'm sorry. Sorry."

Ryan balled up the wad of paper towel that he had been drying his hands on and let it drop onto the bleeding head below him.

"You're messing up this floor. You're getting blood everywhere. Filthy scum – and – what is that? Is that piss? You pissed yourself too? Jesus look at you! Pathetic heap of shit. What makes you think you have what it takes to be a thug and a crim hey? Without your shiny knife you're nothing are you? Without your backup of pussy friends you're less than nothing. I need to get out of here. Can't stand looking at your sorry ass anylonger. When I do my next sweep through this zone I expect to see you off my territory."
Ryan yanked hard on the flimsy outer door smashing it back hard against the tiled wall. Blackness from the unlit corridor had him snapping on his torch.

The arc of his torchlight picked out the length and breadth of the empty desolate corridor.

"Well look at that will you? No-one out here lurking in the shadows to help you out. No friends waiting to carry you home. Looks like you're on your own. Nice friends you've got there. Pussies. Pussies with sharp little knives and no balls."

The taunt of his deep-throated laughter bounced off the empty tiled corridor as he walked away from the scene of his latest victim.

This job he thought, this job that was so monotonously tedious when he'd first begun, was proving to have limitless side benefits. Once he realized its potential he had begun using the opportunities to slake his thirst for gratuitous violence. Far more opportunities than he could have found whilst being a cop – particularly of higher rank. Cops had to be accountable on the job – always. Bloody, injured and pulverized victims needed to be explained away and rationalized in reports. Scrutiny was everywhere – someone was always watching his moves as a Detective Sergeant.

But working as a security guard on a solo beat – he was his own counsel. No petty crim was prepared to accuse him of assault when he had learned to use his bargaining power. Bargaining, coercion and ok – some heavy-handed threats too – but it all meant he was assured of some action without ramifications or consequence. No Captain was going to haul his ass into the office the next day and demand an explanation for a suspect with a beaten in face. These "suspects" were on their own – lowlife petty crims who just had to take what he was prepared to dish out to them if they wanted to walk free without him calling in the law.

It was a win win situation – and if it went more his way than the criminals, tough shit. The crim got to walk away – albeit at a hobble and with a few cuts and bruises, maybe more depending on his mood and his boredom level. He got to sublimate and express himself with his fists, his baton and sometimes his knife.

And when he really struck lucky and he came across someone like this crazy hood tonight who decided to take him on with his own knife, which put his rage levels through the roof – Ryan got the ultimate kickback from this job.

He could thrash the shit out of the scum while his wild imagination ran riot. Once he let loose on the subject he quickly lost himself in the frenzy of the fantasy. The crim's face and body became that of a tall blond man, so that every blow became a blow to a long lean body, every kick aimed to his gut, every snapping small bone a new fracture for him, ever cry for mercy, his cry. His pale face and light blue eyes begging for respite.

Vicarious, mind-blowing sublimation.

Practice makes perfect – and Ryan figured by the time he got to the real thing he would be have perfected the art of annihilating the one thing, the single most obstructive force that had always stood in the way of his and Starsky's relationship.

Hutchinson.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

On the way to Angelo's Starsky noticed how they both fell into companionable silence – each of them deep in their own thoughts.
He could see that Hutch was so much happier since he had admitted to feeling better about being in therapy. Likewise he could see that Hutch was keen to encourage something more between him and Katy. A variation on Hutch’s seemingly tireless need to make everything right and better for him, Hutch would no doubt think that this too was in his best interests. A budding relationship with a nice girl.

So, hell why not? He would let Hutch do what he thought was the best by him. Let him try to match him up with Katy, an admittedly cute and unassuming girl. She was easy to like and he wouldn’t mind liking her better. It seemed like a long time since he had allowed himself to get involved on an emotional level with a woman. A long, long time.

He knew how important it was for his partner to feel as though he was doing whatever he could to help him get back on top of his life. He loved Hutch for his utter selflessness and generosity in putting his own life on the back burner to make it all as good as he could for him.

So it made him feel like such a heel for letting Hutch believe he was turning the corner emotionally with the help of the matronly shrink.

Not that he had exactly lied to Hutch when he had told him that he had felt as though some of the weight from the strain of the past weeks had finally begun to lift. The last couple of sessions with the therapist had left him feeling more in control, more sure of where he needed to head. The revelations had been liberating and once made the new decisions had given him a much-needed sense of renewed purpose.

Since Ryan had ripped his body open with his sexually depraved violence Starsky had been devoid of any sense of mastery or ownership of his emotions. For weeks he had lived in a vacuum of self-hate.

To please Hutch more than anything he had returned to the sessions with the shrink and stumbled and struggled through the agonizing, confronting process of examining what Ryan’s assault had done to him. He had begun attending every two days – an intensive treatment plan to maximize the recovery process. At first of course he had been as silently disparaging of the sessions as he had once been openly disparaging. Nothing had really changed for him; he had simply learned to keep his mouth shut to save Hutch any further pain. He had let Hutch drive him there and wait for him outside and even though he had thought it was all a complete waste of time, he kept up his end of the bargain. He owed it to Hutch to try and so with grim determination he continued.

Then somewhere along the line – somewhere in the middle of yet another seemingly interminable hour of painful talk and protracted silences, he had begun to understand. Begun to understand what he needed to do, what he had to do – in order to be cleansed of all the layers and layers of filth that Ryan’s hands had left upon him.

Hutch had again been correct. Therapy had brought clarity. There was no healing yet – but perhaps in time and when he could meet his goals that would come too.

The sessions in the small beige room had produced disclosures that had surprised even himself. Mostly himself. The shrink, he imagined, probably couldn't be surprised by many things. Somehow as he began to talk, he realized he was actually remembering all of that long, sordid, sick night at the beach house. Words and thoughts so long locked up in his throbbing head, hidden from everyone, even Hutch - most of all Hutch, spun out into the room, as he disgorged himself of all his fear, anger and total desolation.

For the first time since that night he confronted head on the fear that he would wake up on that blood smeared bed and look over to find Hutch dead. Dead in the chair where Ryan had bound and
cuffed him and forced him to watch the nightmarish performance of his partner's violent rape.

Then came an understanding of what lay at the base of his hideous anger. Anger that was a growth that was strangling not only him but also trying to strangle his friendship with Hutch. Anger that Ryan had stripped him of so much of himself and left him so bare and empty and in total desolation. Angry and resentful that the experience had fucked him up so completely that he would be forever unable to live with himself because he was stained and dirty.

Today's session had been particularly powerful. He really felt as though he was making progress and as the time for the session to end crept around Starsky felt something like an audible click sound in his head. He had in fact been tempted to share the strong sense of accomplishment with the therapist, but something in the way she was regarding him stopped him from doing so.

She had slowly removed her heavy spectacles and methodically cleaned them with a tissue as she always did after their interview was drawing to a close. As though the sheer effort of studying him hard, looking at him closely, had left a film of grime on the thick glass of her spectacles. It was a dirty business listening and watching him. He brought filth into this small room every time he came because he brought Ryan in and laid him on the table between them.

And he imagined that he left parts of Ryan behind each time he left – carried away less and less of him – unloaded his shitty, fetid emotional baggage onto her. Starsky supposed that might be a very fanciful way of thinking except he knew it was true. Poor woman. She didn't deserve to have Ryan, even bits of him, dumped on her. But he hadn't asked for this therapy and it was expected of him. He was doing the best he could do.

"We doing ok here Doc? I'm moving forward don't you reckon?"

"Do you feel like that David? Is that what you're feeling? That you're moving forward and making gains? What is it that makes you say that exactly?"

"Just that – I feel clear, sharper, that I have an idea of where I need to head to."

"That's good David. Clearly those thoughts are positive. But you need to also be wary of the way your mind works."

"How my mind works? Hey ain't that your job?"

There was a light challenge in his words.

"Our minds – and particularly yours right now because it has been put through a grueling set of events, can try to deceive us – make us think that we're getting over things, getting through things. Like when we think we've gotten over a death of a loved one and all of a sudden the grief surges back to engulf us again."

"Sure – I understand that. Seen that plenty of times with guys on the force and with friends who have lost family. Even remember it clearly enough of my mother when she lost Dad."

"Well in a similar way your mind might be tricking you a little too. Telling you that you feel a lot better. But it could be that you're mistaking this new sense of recovery with a new set of angry feelings. You might have begun to climb free of some of the fear and grief – even let go of some of the initial anger. But the strength you are feeling could be based on foundations of fresh anger, cold anger – almost as though you are clinically detached from it."

Starsky looked unconvinced and a little peeved. He shrugged, more to disregard, to put down her observation than out of any sense of confusion. He didn't want her going down this path. Hard
enough that he had to work with the past. No one was going to force him to question his future.

Her professional astuteness was dangerous and he resented it.

She had him pegged but he would not allow her any closer. In future sessions he needed to be more careful about what he said and how revealing he was about his own plans for getting back in control of his life.

His anger was new anger. She was damn right on the money with that one. New, fresh, hot anger. Built on resentment, loathing and foremost vengeance.

He knew with certainty now that this new anger would not be taken from him. No amount of therapy sessions would diminish it. It would stay inside of him, growing hotter and brighter until he could harness its power to do what he needed most.

To kill Ryan.

The waiting was not really an issue. It simply delayed the gratification and increased his anticipation. Sometimes the knowing, the thinking, could almost be as satisfying as the doing, the action. Not always of course. A lot of the time it was the act itself that took him to the pinnacle of ecstasy.

Like when he had Starsky next to him, beneath him and was all over him.

When he was finally, finally inside of him.

But the waiting for what he was about to do soon took him to different levels and degrees of pleasure and excitement. This was a different sort of satisfaction, and in the past year or more he was realizing that it was becoming almost as big a part of his primeval urges as hot, unbridled sex could be for him. Violence – pain – hurt – all of them vehicles of pleasure. When the violent overtures were coupled with a sense of balancing the scales of justice, righting what had been wronged against him, Ryan felt the satisfaction tenfold.

Tonight as he waited outside the suburban home, Ryan could feel that promise of satisfaction humming in his head. He needed this. This was owed to him. Tonight he would call on a debt that was overdue. Already he had waited over a month to call to collect it. It was time enough.

It was one month since he had allowed Dobson to humiliate and cast him aside. One month since his traitorous Captain had sold him out to the IA and withdrawn all support, turning his back on him and stripping him of his badge and his honour.

Now, Ryan wanted payback.

He looked down at his hands and knuckles - they were still marked up from the beating he had given the hood in the toilet block a few days earlier. But it didn't matter because he wouldn't be using his fists tonight.

Plans were already well mapped out in his head for Dobson's fate and they didn't involve him using his own body as a weapon.

The Captain of the Nineteenth Precinct had already been home for over fifteen minutes. Time for him to have relaxed some, let down his guard, shed his holster and gun as well as his on duty persona. Time enough that he would be getting into citizen mode and out of his cop mode.
Time for Ryan to make his move.

Leaving his car three blocks away he walked through the quiet suburban streets until he reached the house. Normally he would use the intercom to gain access through the front gate, but somehow he didn't think his captain would feel inclined to admit him as a guest. With little effort he scaled the outer concrete fence that shielded the big house from the road and the neighbor's prying eyes. Dobson liked his privacy and tonight it worked in Ryan's favor.

It was important that he showed no signs of forced entry. His passage into Captain Dobson's home tonight had to be low key and without any physical repercussions. He rang the bell and waited. Such a simple, normal action – one he had in fact carried out several times over the past two years or so. It was not uncommon for him to arrive unannounced at the door of his Captain's home with some news of a case or some development in an investigation to be discussed. A commonplace behavior for a senior detective to carry out with his Captain.

There was however nothing common about his visit tonight and Ryan doubted that his ex-captain would receive his arrival well.

With the second ring to the bell he heard the footsteps inside approaching the door. Ryan steadied the gun and prepared himself.

The door opened a fraction to show the chagrined face of Dobson – which quickly changed to surprise and then anger when his eyes met Ryan's. His coat and holster were long gone and Ryan could see that he was already well into preparing for winding down time, with one hand holding a tumbler of straight whiskey.

Behind him the living room was dimly lit with flickering images from the television transmitting a somber speaking news commentator's voice – the volume turned down low.

"You. What the hell are you doing here and what do you want at this time of night?"

"Cozy night at home Captain? Aren't you going to invite me in for a drink?"

"I want you nowhere near me Ryan. We've got nothing to say to each other and I don't like you coming here – to my private home."

"But you're so wrong, I have plenty to say to you Dobson. There's a lot I need to get off my chest. Things you need to know before – before we say goodbye for good."

"Goodbye? Where are you heading to?"

Ryan had already put his big body up against the door, holding it open against any attempt to close it on his face. He pressed in closer, moving further in past the open door and carefully drew out his gun to position it at waist level. It was aimed directly at Dobson's lower belly.

"Oh, it's not me who's taking a journey Dobson – it's you." Moving forward into the room he closed the door firmly behind him and directed Dobson back to the couch. "Sit down and finish that drink – you might as well enjoy it. We're going to have a talk and you're going to tell me how very very sorry you are for fucking up my life and my career. If you're lucky, I'll tell you some stories too – about what fun I had with Starsky and all the fun I plan to have with his partner. Then I want you to write me a little story. You can do it on that nice letterhead stationery of yours that I
know you keep in your office."

"You came here to kill me Ryan?"

Dobson's question was matter of fact and his face betrayed no fear but ready resignation – almost as though he had waited to be caught out doing something illicit and the game was finally up.

"Astute of you Captain. You haven't lost your skills despite all those years behind a fucking desk giving out fucking orders and playing the untouchable superior. But – no I didn't come here to kill you. I came here to watch you kill yourself."

"So you about ready to head out?"

Hutch pretended casual indifference as he poked about in the refrigerator, his back to Starsky when he heard him calling his name from the living room.

"Yeah told Katy I'd pick her up by seven. You sure you're not going to be needing the car tonight?"

"Starsky where do you imagine I might need to drive to hey? I'm not the one with a hot date. Just me and my leftover casserole here to heat up and some peace to finish my book."

Hutch turned from the fridge to face his partner, a baking dish and a beer in his hands and hoped he looked convincingly disinterested. Starsky remained uncertain – jiggling the car keys in one hand and dancing a little on his feet.

"It's just – I dunno…"

"Don't know what?"

"Well this is the third time this week I've gone out for a - for - well gone out and left you at home. I'm thinking it's not really fair that I leave you here staring at the walls."

Hutch quickly dumped the dish on the bench and flipped open the bottle of beer.

"For God's Sake, will you stop being ridiculous? I like my free time – you know we need our own space every so often – and anyway what else would we be doing hey? You'd only force me into watching some crappy repeat show or B grade movie on TV while you whine about the channel selection up here being hopeless. Now get going will you – you're going to be late picking her up."

"I guess – but –"

" Starsky! Just go. Really – it's fine. More than fine. Besides – it's nice that one of us has hit pay dirt with the ladies up here. She's a real honey."

"Yeah – like you're really trying Hutch. You haven't even looked at a female since we've been at this country barnyard in the past five weeks – and don't think I don't know why. You've been too busy worrying about me and now it would also seem, about me and my love life."

There was little point in denying it and Hutch could see that his partner was not about to leave the house tonight with any sense of easiness if he didn't set things straight. It was obvious that Starsky had not brought the nonchalant disinterested act he had been trying so hard to convey.

"Yes – you're right. Truth is Starsky, I just need this time up here for me. That is solid fact. I'm not looking for anything else. Not while I'm putting myself back on track with things."
"You mean – putting me back on track."

"No, that is not what I mean at all, and you know that full well. This isn't just about what happened to you Starsky – this is about what happened to both of us. Look - don't let's start this conversation when you're about to head out. It'll only put you into a negative frame of mind."

"Hutch – just so you understand, there isn't a day since it happened that I don't think about what you were made to go through when ….that night. I would do anything to take that away from you but I can't. What worries me is that ever since that night you have done nothing but try to put me back together and not bother about dealing with your own needs. You're burying yourself in this house here while running around in circles trying to put me back together."

"Hey, listen to you Dr. Starsky." Hutch smiled. "Go out with Katy and have a nice evening. Just because you've got into the groove of this therapy, you don't have to analyze everything and everyone. I've got one shrink to contend with – I sure as hell don't need another. "

"I'm not interested in analyzing everyone Hutch, just you. Alright – I'll go and meet Katy and have a nice night with her – but I want you to stop this now. Time out. I am sorry I scared the shit out of you in the first days we were here. I'm sorry I made you feel like you had to absorb all of my pain so I wouldn't turn my own pain against myself. I think – I hope - I'm through the worst of it Hutch."

"I think so too Starsky. I've seen so many changes in you in the last week, I'm not having any problems believing you. "

"Good – glad you agree. So – are we straight here? You can take a breather now. Drop a bit of your vigilance. I'm going to get all the way through this – without you helping me every little step of the way anymore. Look after yourself a bit now. Please? And –" Starsky held up his hand in a gesture of finality " This is my last word before I walk out the door, because I want the last word on this subject tonight. "Because if you don't? I'm gonna' haveta' start doin' the same thing with you that you've done with me. You'd better believe that partner. "

He turned on his heel and strode to the front door, calling back as he opened it.

"If I'm home early enough I still expect you to sit out that B grade vampire flick with me that's on late night TV. You know I get scared watchin' those horror movies by myself."

His partner's parting throwaway lines kept a smile on Hutch's face all the time it took him to throw his food in the oven and settle onto the couch with his book.

Over Five weeks in and I think we're getting somewhere.

Starsky getting back in his rhythm and Ryan is getting further and further out of our lives.

Not more than thirty minutes later, the phone rang and automatically Hutch flinched. It could only be one of two people – Dobey or Starsky.

No one else had the number to this house. Dobey's check-in calls were like clockwork and occurred between nine and nine fifteen every morning.

He lifted the receiver – mild anxiety mounting to something more as he waited to identify the caller.

"Hutch? It's me – sorry about the evening call – hope I'm not interrupting anything."
"Cap'n. No – just reading. Not exactly a busy lifestyle up here."

"Your partner there?"

"No – Starsky's out – he's ah – he's seeing one of the local girls for dinner. Seems to have hit up a bit of a friendship with her. We met her early on when we first arrived in town."

"Well that sounds promising – sounds like he's doing better then. Getting back to his old self?"

"Getting closer every day. He's finally tuned into the therapy sessions and says he's feeling more in control of things."

"So – have you got any thought on how much longer he – the both of you need up there? I have to keep the Commissioner filled in and the IA will probably want to schedule another meeting with Starsky when he's up to it. His suspension review is coming up in a couple of weeks…""

"Hard to say just yet Cap'n, but if things keep on like they have been this past week, I would be hopeful that we could look at returning at two months."

"Two months will be good Hutch. I need you back here, I can't lie. But you've got to be ready for it. You've both got to be ready for it."

"Cap'n? Any news on him? Any problems? Surveillance team still tailing him?"

"No, had to pull them off after the first couple of weeks. He's been lying low. I know he's been into Huggy's place sniffing around a little – but no action or trouble. Got himself a job as a security guard with some downtown firm. That's all I really know about his personal life."

"So – this call?"

"This call?" Dobey sounded distant, hesitant.

"The phone call now. Is there a reason for it, or are you just checking in at a different time than usual?"

"No – there's a reason. Just wanted to hear how things were with the two of you first. Before I went and threw a spanner in the works."

Hutch frowned and gripped the phone more tightly.

"Shit. What is it? To do with him? To do with Ryan?"

"No – not directly. But indirectly yes. It's bad news Hutch. I hope this doesn't get in the way of Starsky's progress."

"God Cap'n? Just tell me will for Christ Sake."

"Just got word a couple of hours ago. I was debating whether to tell you or not tonight or to leave it till tomorrow. But – you have a right to know. It's about Dobson."

"Dobson? What are there repercussions about his stance with Ryan and the IA?"

"You could say so. It was in the note and it – well – it alluded to the IA's investigation and his handling of his department over the past couple of years or more – and most recently. He even made mention of Starsky which is the part that worries me the most for your partner."
"The note?"

Cold ran up his spine and his gut clenched in anticipation of his Captain's next words. Hutch let himself slump onto the couch, the phone feeling light in his hands, his head feeling light on his shoulders. He knew what Dobey had to say next.

"Dobson left a note – referencing his guilt and remorse over the way he had handled the whole Ryan debacle within his precinct. His body was found in his home late this afternoon. Didn't show for work this morning and when he failed to front for an important scheduled meeting at midday and he remained uncontactable, a black and white was sent around to his home. Dobson was divorced – lived alone. He was found inside his home – at his desk. Slit his own wrists and bled out. The note was beside him. Estimated time of death was last night between nine and midnight."

"Fucking hell Cap'n. Fucking hell."

"Not much different to what I said when I got the news Hutch. I've known him for years. Just never know how a man is going to deal with heavy shit and stress at work. He's sure been dealing with a lot of it the past months with Ryan Lancaster. He must have been covering that sorry cop's ass for years in one way or another and with what happened to Starsky – well it must have all just too much for him to handle. You think you know someone – I thought I knew him. Obviously I had no idea."

"You know how I felt about Dobson Cap'n. You know. I made no secret of it. He let Starsky down, he refused to listen to me. He could have stopped what happened with Ryan – could have stopped any of this mess starting up and kept Ryan away from Starsky. He knew about Ryan's proclivities – his track record with other officers. Don't tell me he didn't. I'll always be resentful of that."

He took a long calming breath.

" But he didn't deserve to let that prick drive him to suicide. "

"No – but then living every day with what he let Ryan get away with was obviously too much for him to take. This must have been the easier option for him."

"Forensics looking at it?"

"Sure – but preliminary reports are conclusive of suicide. His squad are all going to be questioned as to his recent mental state – the IA will open it up some more – but I think that they already have a handle on Dobson's role in keeping Ryan on the payroll in the Nineteenth when maybe he should have been shafted long ago."

Hutch felt the bitterness well up in him as he laughed coarsely.

"Oh for sure they have a handle on it. Probably know all about what Dobson did to cover Ryan's ass and keep him sitting pretty in his job. This is going to make them look bad too. They won't come up too shiny when Dobson has spilled his guts about his own guilt in covering for Ryan. I already told them that there would have to be other shit on record somewhere about Ryan's dirty games with other officers. Don't tell me they didn't dig a lot more up on Dobson. They just took the easy way out and let Dobson send Ryan walking out the door so he would take the whole dirty mess with him. Easier than cracking open what was probably a deep pit of covered up negligence on Dobson's behalf."

"Well whatever the IA have on Dobson or not – he's decided to end the guilt trip prematurely. He's well and truly paid his price Hutch. He was a damn fine Captain in his day and I did count him as a
friend."

"I appreciate that. I know that."

"And I also know that you harbored a lot of anger toward me too and how you perceived that I sided with Dobson during the Kalzo case."

"It was a difficult time for me Cap'n – I'm not apologizing for wanting Starsky pulled off that op."

"We can't change anything now. It's history – and so too is Dobson. I'll get back to you with any developments. Forensics should be in by tomorrow afternoon or later. You'll let Starsky know?"

"I'll have to of course."

Hutch suddenly had a thought.

"Cap'n the funeral?"

"No, stay lying low up there. I don't want you back here for it. Ryan could be there – certainly can't stop him showing his face if he chooses to attend and he would see it as a chance to needle Starsky if the two of you are there."

"Good. I didn't want to run that risk either. OK. I'll wait to hear from you. And Cap'n? I'm sorry. For you and the loss of a friend. I understand, despite how I may have felt about him – I understand how you must be feeling to have lost a friend. He was your peer and your colleague."

Dobey merely grunted, sighed heavily and grunted again.

"He made mistakes. Lots of them. But he was a solid Captain in his day. A good man. It's not his fault that Ryan Lancaster got assigned to his precinct but it's his fault that he didn't deal with him like he should have from day one. Dobson had the power to stop Ryan before his behavior escalated and he never did. He let Ryan call the shots too many times."

"You're right. He never did. He had the power to cut Ryan out of the Department a long time ago."

The call ended and Hutch was left to his own thoughts, dinner forgotten, his opened book cast aside where it had tumbled from the couch.

If Dobson had pulled Ryan up earlier would Starsky have gone through what he had? Could any of Dobson's actions or interventions prevented Starsky's pain? If the Kalzo case hadn't raised its head as an opportunity for Ryan to corner Starsky, would he have found another avenue to get to him?

The man is dead. Ended his own life in a lonely, violent, frightening way. He was driven to this endpoint by his own making.

Dinner forgotten, Hutch opted for another beer instead. The wash of the cool liquid in his mouth did nothing to dilute the taste of his own guilt. The guilt that he could not help feeling that Dobson had gotten what he deserved. After all, it was a fraction, a mere fraction of what he had let Starsky go through.

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"The problem with this town is that within two weeks you run out of places to eat."

He took Katy's hand as they exited the homey restaurant where he had eaten at least four times since being in this town, twice while dining out with Katy.
"Oh – well you get used to it. Living up here away from the big cities, we make do with what we have here. People in this place make their own fun. Besides – you could always offer to cook for me at home. Cozier and more comfortable than always going out."

"Ah – if you want home cooking then you've hooked up with the wrong man. You should have gone for Hutch. He's the cook – I live on take-outs."

"Well I can cook – and I'm more than happy to do a meal for us at home – your place has a great kitchen. My little apartment is a hole in the wall – well you've seen it – and there's never any privacy there anyway. It'd be nice – cooking a special meal for you while you sat at the counter talking to me and we shared some nice wine. Lovely."

He caught the far away look in her eyes and the soft smile as she described the setting.

Why he felt suddenly uncomfortable with the conversation he couldn't say but something about the direction her logic was heading was feeling decidedly illogical to him. He just didn't get a mental image of her in the kitchen back at the home he and Hutch were staying in and, in the same vein he felt vaguely uneasy about bringing whatever it was he had or was beginning to have with this girl into his and Hutch's private lives.

He merely shrugged and took her arm, not bothering to follow where her imagination had been taking her.

"Come on, it's warm enough to take a walk before we head home."

"Oh – ok then." There was a little despondency as though she had just been cut off.

She looked disconcerted, a little disappointed – and he didn't know why. What had she wanted him to say or not say?

It wasn't very late at all and he felt weariness wash over him. God he was becoming positively geriatric stuck up here in the boondocks. The peacefulness was almost too much. He needed some action, something unexpected, something more than just community harmony and law abiding citizens. This town was like a fairytale setting – no dirt, no scum, no graffiti and no surprises. And it was really starting to bore him.

It was then he realized it. For the first time in weeks he could feel the deep parts of him inside that had been numb and burned out – flickering into life again. Whereas weeks ago he had craved isolation and aloneness, he now thought about the buzz of the busy city, the cut and thrust of his job as a street cop and waking up to a different set of challenges every day. Challenges that weren't just about himself and his emotional state – but about what was happening around him and to him. He was getting tired on living in inside his head and what was there needed to be kept at bay with some activity until he could bring it to fruition.

He understood that it must mean progress of sorts – his body and his mind healing enough to no longer flinch at life and instinctively avoid anyone that might be seen as a threat or an intrusion into his self made cave. Better – he was getting better and with each day his resolve was becoming stronger.

A resolve that was steadfastly stuck on one thing – Ryan.

"Dave? That's twice I've asked you that question and you haven't answered. You're a million miles away tonight. You were like that all through dinner too. You make me feel as though I am boring you."
"Huh? What. Sorry Katy – not at all. I was just thinking about – well how different it is here compared to where I live and work in the city. So much quieter. So much more peaceful." He added the last observation more for the quick flicker of disappointment that crossed her face. Home proud as she was he knew her well enough by now not too criticize the town.

"You're going back soon? To work?"

"Well – I'm not entirely sure. That's up to other people not me. There are - well processes in place after illness or time off for sickness. It's not just my decision, but yeah, I feel I'm ready for it – or almost."

"You have never told me what happened to put you in hospital. There are lots of things and parts of your life you haven't told me about. "

"And that is best. For a lot of reasons. Katy – don't go there. I've asked you not to before. My life as a cop is full of stuff you don't need to hear about or know. Not alot of it is nice. It's not important to you in anyway and makes no difference to us knowing each other. You don't need to know that sort of stuff about me."

"Why not? It seems perfectly natural for a woman to want to know things about her … about the man she is seeing. Sometimes I feel strange – around you and Ken. Neither of you seem to want to open up at all. I feel like you put on an act in front of me, for me. Particularly Ken. It's like he wants to be all nice and considerate without ever letting me get even the tiniest bit close to him."

"Why do you need to be close to him? It's me who's seeing you."

Her statement confused him.

"He's your best friend Dave. If he's that – and as close to you as I know he is, then it's important to me to know him too. I want to be close to everything you value and enjoy. I don't like feeling cut out with the two of you – always on the outside. It doesn't feel good. You've got to start trusting me like you trust him. Open up to me, let me in."

The adamant declaration stunned him. Could she really mean that? Could she really believe that? That a couple of weeks and a few dates brought you a ticket to trust and intimacy? That she would be granted a place in his life equivalent to Hutch for God's sake?

The momentary flash of anger he felt at her open demand was quickly displaced when he realised that of course the bold comments were born from Katy's naiveté and immaturity. She was really an inexperienced country girl with dreams about how she wanted her first important relationship to be.

He softened his voice when he tried a little to explain.

"Katy just because you and I are doing some dinners and having some nice outings doesn't mean that you need to get involved with Hutch or our friendship."

The conversation was definitely starting to make him feel uneasy and just a little irritable.

"Generally that is what does happen in close relationships Dave. I would like be close to your friends as well as close to you."

"Hey enough of this heavy relationship talk – lets shelve it. I'm a guy remember? I get nervous when you start talking about that sort of thing. Why don't you close that pretty little mouth and let me do something with it that will make it feel real nice Ok? I haven't even kissed you tonight."
They had stopped walking up the street now and Starsky led her over to the wall of the building – pressing her small body up against the window display. Her soft brown hair lit up in the spilling light from window's display.

Bringing his hand around to the back of her head he pulled her face up towards his and let his lips settle easily on her open mouth. Testing a little, letting his tongue dart out to touch her lips, he felt his pulse kick up when she readily responded to his exploration and opened her mouth hungrily to his searching tongue. He pushed harder against her, molding his body into hers and sliding his hands beneath her soft cardigan, where he easily found the soft mound of her small breast. He gently cupped it with his open hand.

At the contact she pulled back just a little, startled and breathy and turned her face sideways so that his lips and tongue lost their point of entry.

"Dave…we're in the main street."

"So? We're in the main street. Come here – where did your mouth go?"

"Dave – everyone can see us."

"Katy there's no one out to see us. This town is a ghost town after nine at night. Relax."

His attempt to reclaim her mouth was met with resistance and he let his hand fall away from its soft caress of her breast.

A little frustrated he stepped back from her but kept his hand on her neck.

"Ok – you're uncomfortable. You want me to take you home?"

"No – Yes. Look why don't you come back to my place for a coffee or another drink. My roommate is interstate visiting her folks for another day to so. I've got the place to myself."

Starsky scratched absently at his lower jaw and looked up and down the street in thought.

It had just been a kiss. An engaging kiss and a moment of closeness and now it was gone. What his mouth and hand were seeking from her was far less than she was seeking from him with her proposal of going back to her place. They had been down this track on the last date and he had diverted her and dropped her home before she convinced him to come in with her. He knew she wanted more – he sensed it in her every move and statement. Somehow to her the concept of taking him back to her place was another step to claiming a part of him that he was not ready to give or to share.

Her eyes were shining with expectation – it was not hard to see that this was a big step for her. It was not hard to see where she wanted him to be in her life. A nice girl. A nice simple attractive girl and he just didn't have it in him to hurt or disappoint her – not tonight anyway. Not with how her face was looking up at him with that want and that need to own and to make him part of her life.

So complicated. So damn complicated when all he wanted was to deepen a promising kiss and stroke warm flesh.

Confusion was in the mix now and he felt his ardor cooling rapidly. Moments ago his loins had been clenching in answering response to what his tongue and hands were discovering, and now he felt the blood draining quickly out of his groin.

"Come on. Let's go." She was pulling him almost urgently by the arm back toward the parked car,
her eyes alight and her fingers possessively wrapped about his upper arm.

Once in the car her excitement seemed to mount, her hands touching him more daringly than she had ever done before, her eyes promising him what she had never offered of herself to him so far.

He smiled indulgently at her almost frenetic behavior and pushed her creeping hand away from its provocative journey toward his upper thigh.

"Hey – you want to get home in one piece than it's best you keep that hand away from that part of my anatomy while I'm driving ok?"

Her laughter was a tinkling cascade in the dark confines of the car and he felt almost sad already that he knew he was going to be the one to disappoint her – to take that laughter away.

Even as he pulled the car out onto the road and headed for Katy's pokey little apartment he knew what the problem was of course.

Selfishness.

Understanding now that he was happy to selfishly take a sample of what he had been missing for so long but was totally unprepared, maybe totally unable, to give anything of himself back in return.

He knew then – he was happy to take but not to give.

He wondered when he would be ready for that.

He wondered if he ever would be again.

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From the moment the door closed behind them he felt instantly trapped, hemmed in, cornered. The apartment, if it could be called that, was no more than a tiny studio and the walls were closing in on him before Katy's hands even begun to do the same.

It had been a terrible mistake to come here with her tonight – when he felt again so close to a fear that hadn't plagued him in the past two weeks. All at once something that he had thought he had left behind him, was coming back to reclaim its suffocating hold on his tense body.

Katy didn't understand of course. How could she? She didn't understand that she was inside a small room with a man who felt like he was captive, under pressure and therefore very dangerous.

In no time she had reasserted herself and took up where the kiss in the street had been left aborted. Her mouth was the aggressor this time – seeking his with abandoned passion and urgent demand. Fingernails scraped in his scalp as she pulled his curly head closer and harder against her mouth, her lips almost grinding in their insistence.

Her words were breathy as she smiled in her most provocative fashion at him through lowered eyes and he couldn't help but think it seemed so out of character for her to be almost unconvincing. Did she really want this or was she doing what she thought was expected of her? By him? By societal standards?

When her hand snaked under his shirt to find his furred chest she murmured in a sultry low voice. He pulled back just a little at the surprise of it all and she redoubled her grip on him in response.

"This is better isn't it Dave? Here? Together? You can show me now what you want and I can
make you happy. I so want to make you happy. You know from the moment I first saw you I thought you were so beautiful, so …so masculine, so tough. I want you Dave. Touch me – touch me like you were doing back there on the street. I want to love you – to touch your beautiful body."

When his hand stayed in place loosely draped around her hip, she seized it almost frantically and brought it up to her gaping flimsy top, guiding his hand in under the fabric as she smiled foxily into his face.

"Katy…"

"Yes? This is good isn't it? No one here but us. She's not coming home, so we have all night together – and in the morning too. You can sleep over – stay with me. Be with me. Just us Dave."

When her hand crept lower under his shirt, and began its descent downward toward his hard belly the first shock jolted through him. Unconsciously he gasped lightly and rocked back on his feet.

"Oh Dave! I'm sorry. Did I hurt your wound? Oh my God, I'm sorry."

"No – no it's fine. Really. Just a little sensitive that's all."

It wasn't of course the wound that was sensitive, it was his whole lower body – but the surgical site provided a good cover for his off kilter response.

"I should have thought. How stupid of me. Are you ok?"

Irritated now with her solicitous droning, he removed her hand from where it was busily applying pampering strokes to his side.

"I said it's fine Katy. Really. Forget about it."

She frowned a little at his tone before reverting to her sultry overtures.

"Alright. You're fine. Good – because I need this body to be fine. I have plans for us tonight. I was sorting of hoping we could come back here after dinner. I've got some wine in the fridge and some glasses chilled. Why don't we take them into the bedroom with us and relax some more."

"Hey – what's gotten into you tonight hey? All of a sudden you are some kind of sex siren? What did you do with the Katy I've been dating for the past couple of weeks?" His smile was genuine and so was his question.

"Do you like her? This new Katy? I hope so, because she has been waiting to finally let her body have what it wants. And her body wants yours Dave."

Another provocative murmuring followed. She had angled her body so that she had maneuvered them both against the wall and he realized that their roles were reversed from where they had been standing outside the shop window.

"If I need to keep my hands away from your side where it is sensitive, then it's best that they make themselves busy elsewhere. There are plenty of other areas they can go travelling on your body….how about this area Dave? Is it sensitive too?"

Her fingernails scraped boldly lower, catching the top of his pubic curls as her hand disappeared well beneath the top of his snug jeans.
As though discovering something enticingly delicious her face reflected sensual pleasure.

"I wondered about it and now I know. You don't wear any underwear under these jeans do you? I think I like that Dave. It just seems so much sexier – and it means I can touch –"

Her final utterance never left her lips because as her hands fluttered over the head of his cock, the second shock rammed into his body – not just a jolt this time, but a full on thundering blow.

"What the fuck? What do you think you're doing? Get your damn hands offa' me!"

Springing away from her he thrust her bodily from him and she stumbled a little as her footing adjusted to the force.

"Dave? Dave? Please…what did I do?"

"Don't you see? Can't you work it out? I don't want that from you Katy. I don't want that."

"But what did I do?" she repeated with tears in her shaking voice.

"You didn't do anything. You just don't understand."

Shock was in her eyes, the blood drained away to leave her face a mask of white before it quickly suffused again as a deep pink blush which crept up her neck and into her cheeks.

"Don't understand what? Tell me what I did!" she cried in a high-pitched strangle that had his strung out nerves screaming.

"Will you just fucking stop asking me that! This is not about you. This is not about us. It's about me. ME!"

It took only that one instant, that one miscalculated move by her for him to lash out and leave her looking like she looked now. Like he had just hurt her terribly. Like he had just ripped away her dreams. Like he had just let her know what he couldn't be for her, would probably never be for her.

The car was already gunning under his hand, the gearshift ripping violently into place as he reversed from the tight park, his escape already well into play before he realized what he had just done.

Taken his own emotional baggage, and made it someone else's.

Share it around Starsky, you've got enough of this shit to smear over everyone and anyone who comes near you. No one can deal with what I can lay on them, what pain I can cause them.

Except one man, who took and took and took his shit, his inner pain and his cruelty and refused to walk away. He just kept standing there - prepared to take more.

Picking up speed, as though by putting as much distance between him and what he had just done might bring some small relief, he sped toward home.

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Not even a half hour after he had finished his phone conversation with Dobey the ringing of the phone startled Hutch again. Lost in thought about the now dead Dobson and what it would mean to Starsky when he heard the news, the shrill buzz cut through his consternation.

"Cap'n? That you again?" He snatched it up to still the intrusive sound and was a little surprised to
hear no response.

"Captain Dobey?"

Still nothing, but not a dead line – just muteness, empty space as though with no voice or sound to fill it. The void remained for a few more seconds before the connection was cut.

Hutch shrugged and dropped the phone back into its cradle, staring a little at the device before turning away again and flopping down on the couch.

Starsky would be home soon from his date with Katy and he needed a little time to ponder more about the new-found information about Captain Dobson's suicide death.

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Ryan held the line open a few seconds after he heard Hutchinson's voice before pressing his hand down to sever the line. He opened the slim file that he had placed beside the phone while he made the call and carefully placed the slip of paper with the phone number back inside of it.

His visit to Dobson's house had yielded more than just a sense of retribution. Watching Dobson bleed out in front of him, fear and anguish etched into his colorless face, had been reward enough. The bonus of the steadily weakening Captain finally caving in to his own fear was an unexpected jackpot. As Dobson's pulse became threadier and his breath shallower he had begun to beg for his life - pleading with his ex Detective to staunch the flow of crimson from his wrists, crying pitifully for a torniquet to save his life blood from seeping steadily into ever increasing pools at his feet. In a frantic last bid he had offered up the file with the information about Starsky and Hutch's whereabouts as a desperate ploy to buy back his life. Dobson's bid had been futile, Ryan presented him with the clinical facts - even if he had wanted to save him, it was too late. The ratios were all wrong. There was by far a hell of a lot more of Dobson's blood on the carpet than there was left in his failing body.

Unfortunately for the Captain, the visit by his once promising Detective Sergeant had been anything but profitable. On the contrary for his uninvited guest, it had been a resounding success.

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The sound of the front door being more smashed shut than closed was the first thing that alerted Hutch to Starsky's mood. The grim set of his mouth as he tossed his keys onto the hall table was the second.

His terse greeting as he strode past him and into the kitchen to rip a beer from the fridge confirmed it, but it was the closed face denial that proved undoubtedly that something far from right had gone down with his partner that evening.

"Well I'll bite. What's got you in such a happy state of mind? What's wrong?"

Starsky pulled back on the beer and deflected the question.

"Not lookin' for you to bite and - nothin'. Just felt like a cold beer. So how did ya' peace and quiet go? Get some reading done?"

Hutch looked more closely at the downcast eyes that refused to meet his and decided that the news of Dobson's death could wait a few more minutes.

"You just about shattered the glass in the front windows with that door slamming performance and
you're going to tell me that nothing is wrong?"

Starsky scraped at the label on the bottle but kept his eyes averted.

"Nothin's wrong. Just gettin' sick of this small town and this backwater environment. It's startin' to really get to me now Hutch. I miss the city."

"So this is why you are all steamed up? Because you're bored? Miss the big smoke? That's all?"

Hutch wasn't buying it.

"Yeah – well that and – and I'm starting to feel trapped here. Need to get back into real life."

"I see."

"You see what?"

"I see that you're not telling me what's got you all fired up. You've been feeling bored and trapped here ever since we arrived – that's nothing new. But you've just been out on a date with a nice girl. You shouldn't be feeling bored after that. Dinner with a pretty girl usually doesn't cause you to slam doors and blow steam out of your ears."

"Since when am I doin' any of that? I'm sittin' here talking to you aren't I? Anyway – I'm pretty sure I've had enough of the dating game in this Hicksville town. As of tonight I plan to cool it with Katy, get a bit of breathing room back."

So that was it. The something that went down was between he and Katy.

Hutch read between the lines and tested the waters with another question.

"So – you want to talk about it?"

"Oh God…don't let's do this ok? Don't let's turn this into another 'show and tell me your true feelings' shit talk. I've had enough of all of that. I just had a crappy dinner and a pretty borin' evening. The real issue is that it just tops off how I feel generally. Like I'm suffocating in this place. At first it was aright. At first it was peaceful – kinda restful. But now – it's closing in around me. Katy is a nice girl. You're right. But she's also just like this town. She's too quiet and too different from what I'm used to."

Hutch was genuinely surprised at the unexpected comments about Katy.

"She is? I thought you liked her. I thought she and you were really hitting it off. Did something happen to change your mind about her?"

The warning look Starsky threw him was a clear signal that Hutch had been on the right track, but it also showed him that he needed to back off with the probing. Starsky was not going to bend and whatever had happened was still to raw and close to put on the table between them. Yet. Perhaps by tomorrow he would have a better chance of getting a handle on what had caused the troubled mood in his partner tonight.

Right now he knew better than to push. Starsky didn't do pushing at the best of times – and with his recent fragile moods, Hutch was determined not to push him to the point where he shut down the lines of communication which had only just been re-established.

Hutch held up his hands.
"Fine. We won't go there. But – if you feel like unloading later, I'm here to listen."

Starsky smirked.

"You trying to cut in again on my lady shrink's job? You keep this up and I'll have to warn her that you're trying to muscle her out of a job."

"What are you talking about? Who do you think has been doing her job with you for the past how many years? Just because you don't always sit on some fancy couch when you're spilling your guts to me doesn't mean I haven't been doing my bit to sort your problems out long before she came on the scene."

"Hey that goes both ways ya know. I seem to remember many a time my passenger seat in the Torino has been used as the 'Chair of Truth' with you Detective Hutchinson."

Hutch smiled at that.

"So when is your next session with your Therapist?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. She told me last time that we could look at cutting the meetings down to weekly. Obviously she thinks I'm no longer certifiable. How did she say it? That's it...she said, 'I'm showing good signs of being able to reconcile with my traumatic external events.' ...So see? Sounds like I'm not quite so crazy anymore."

His attempts to belittle his own progress fell short of getting a laugh from Hutch.

"Hey that's all positive news. You know the IA is going to want to see it in print before they're going to let you put that holster back on again. Same for me."

"Don't give me that shit. You're just along to give me company Hutch. No-one's got your badge in their top desk drawer."

"Maybe I didn't get an official suspension but you know we both are under scrutiny here. And – you know that I needed the time out as much as you."

"Yeah. I know, I know. We both arrived here wrecks. But you seem to like this sort of rustic livin' - it's all native to you country boy. Me? I'm just burning now to get back into some sort of normal pace."

"I miss our old routines as much as you do, but - we needed this Starsky. We had to do this."

"Well we have done it - but I can't see myself going the stretch for much longer."

Hutch waited wondering now whether was the right time to interject with Dobey's news but was cut off as he was about to speak by Starsky's determined voice.

"So, I've been thinkin' and – I'm going to put the hard word on her tomorrow – the Doc …"

"You are?" Hutch ventured a grin. "Damn it Starsk. I knew you secretly had the hots for her. Tell the truth, those specs of her really turn you on don't they?"

Hutch got a cushion in his face for the smart remark.

"Hey – if she writes me a clearance you never know how far I would be willing to stoop. Who knows, I might even be allowed back into the real world soon. I have to tell ya' Hutch in this place, I damn well feel like I'm in some sorta' straight jacket."
"Oh come on. It's not that bad. I'd say there's more to your mood tonight than just small town syndrome wearing on you, but seeing you're not in the mood to talk – "

"Like I said – ain't nothin' to talk about. Anyway, I'm gonna' hit the sack."

He stood up to make his escape from any further close questioning when Hutch leaned forward and motioned for him to sit down again.

"Starsk. Wait. I have something else I need to tell you."

"Tell me or ask me? Coz', I can sure tell you Hutch, I'm not up for any more questions about my mood. I'm done with the Chair of Truth tonight."

"Dobson is dead."

Quick and blunt his words were enough to have Starsky dropping down onto the couch again.

"Come again?"

"Dobey called earlier tonight. Dobson was found this afternoon at his home. Apparent suicide – slashed wrists with accompanying note crying about his liability in Ryan's messy professional life."

"What the fuck…""

"I know, heavy news."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I just did didn't I? When you first came in I was more concerned with your mood."

"Jeez...Just forget my mood will you? Tell me what happened?"

"That's all I know. Dobey said he'd call again in the morning with any further developments. He said that Dobson hadn't fronted for work, didn't answer his phone, lives alone, not married – missed some big meeting apparently - and then when they sent a patrol car to his house they found him. Most likely died late last night. No suspicious circumstances noted."

Hutch looked over to gauge his partner's reaction and was gut hit by Starsky's quiet revelation.

"Ryan. It was Ryan."

His calm but steely conviction cut across the quietness of the room.

"Starsky - he slashed his wrists and bled out – left a note."

"So? Set up to look like a suicide. Not exactly that difficult to do. He was forced. Don't tell me you're buying that he offed himself? Didn't Dobey say that Dobson was the happiest he'd been in a long while once he shafted Ryan outta his precinct? Why would he do this now? What? A month or more later? They interviewed his men? How's his mood been?"

Despite the gloomy subject matter, Hutch couldn't help but notice how energized his partner was in exploring the contradictions in Dobson's mode of death.

"His team will be questioned tomorrow. Forensics haven't given a full report yet – but so far it looks like a straight suicide."
"Course it does. Not hard to make it look that way when someone forces you into killing yourself and then walks away without any evidence of their involvement. Ryan's a damn good detective - or was. He'd have made sure he did a clean job."

"You seem pretty convinced on so little to go on partner."

"Hutch – you think I'm going to believe you're not thinking the same?"

Hutch pushed his hands through his hand and left it standing up on end as he considered the question.

"I didn't at first. Just took it being the poor bastard couldn't live with himself. Hell - it would have been hard given how deep he was into covering Ryan's ass. I could have killed himself myself when I was trying to deal with what he let you go through with the Kalzo case – so, no, I didn't think twice about his culpability and guilt. But in the last two hours – just sitting here…."

"Jesus Hutch. Killin' his own Captain in cold blood – watchin' him die while he sat with him...and he would have had to, to make sure of it. Takes one freakin' evil mind to do that."

Hutch was momentarily taken off guard by what Starsky said and how he said it. Should he not point out that what might have been done to Dobson was nothing worse than what the same 'freaking evil mind' had done to Starsky? Instead he let the words gag in his throat. This was not the time to lift the lid on that box of pain. He couldn't however help but worry about the way Starsky could not denote what had been done to him as comparable to what Ryan might have done to Dobson. In his own mind the cruelty and the pathology was equally severe.

He wanted to think about what Starsky's remark might mean. Had he begun to compartmentalize the violence dealt to him by Ryan and sealed it away in his head - learned to talk about it in academic terms only? Had he really been making headway with his therapy?

Hutch pulled himself back to what Starsky was saying - his own head in a different place entirely to where his partner's was at that moment. Starsky was knee deep already in a fresh crime. And to think he had been worried that this news would set Starsky off again, reliving the past few weeks. In contrast - the news seemed to have brought Starsky back to an even closer version of his old self.

The possible implications of Dobson's death had been like giving him a new mission.

"Dobey's gotta' set in place a fresh investigation – open this wide up. Get the forensic boys back there while the scene is still fresh. Did he say anything to you about his intentions? He gonna pull Ryan in for questioning?"

Hutch was less convinced about what Dobey would do.

"No. Dobey never mentioned any slant other than the suicide. Somehow I doubt there will be much to find on the scene and even if his men say he was smiling all day every day for the past month, that doesn't prove he wasn't eating himself up from the inside. Psych consults would say anyone could hide suicidal intentions."

"We gonna' get hauled in for questioning about it ya' think?"

"Depends on what forensics and the investigating team turn up. But Dobey said no to us attending the funeral – for obvious reasons."

"Gonna' have to see him some time Hutch. I can't hide from him forever."
"Why? Why should you ever have to? He's out of your life now. No longer on the force – no longer in our circles. If he shows at the funeral then best you're not there."

"Hutch – Ryan might be off the force and he might be working elsewhere – even moved elsewhere, I don't know. One thing for sure though – wherever he is, whatever he is now – he ain't outta my life. Not yet."

"What the fuck does that mean – not yet?"

Hutch's forehead was creased with concern at the cool calmness of Starsky's words.

Starsky, suddenly seeming to realise he had gone too far in showing parts of himself that he had not meant to show to Hutch - backtracked.

"I simply mean that until I get this shit done with here – get a tick on my worksheet by the good doctor to be fit for return to work, get my badge back in my pocket and my gun strapped back on – Ryan is still in my life in every way. I want my life back Hutch – it was not the shiniest life but I was fond enough of it and Ryan stole it from me. Until I'm back there – he ain't ever, ever gonna' be outta my life."

It was a good try to save the situation and undo his verbal slip but he had already put it out there. Hutch didn't even have to read between the lines or listen to the energy in Starsky's voice to get the clues. It was all there for him to see and hear. Something had shifted in the past weeks in Starsky - and Hutch had been wanting to believe Starsky's spiel that the therapy sessions were doing their magic.

He wanted to believe Starsky. He wanted to think therapy had helped him become strong again. But somehow Hutch knew, that Starsky's strength might have been fuelled by something else - something deeper than he was prepared to share.

A deeper, darker intent.

Years and years of long drawn-out stakeouts had hardened his body against physical discomfort and increased his stamina for extended periods of downtime.

The view was pretty. He would give it that much. Green and woodsy, so green - that vibrant reflective green that seemed to shimmer with silver in the early morning light. A shimmering light that pierced his brain. He pulled his shades down over his eyes and squinted into the bright glare.

In the confines of the car's front seat he stretched out his long muscular body, working out kinks and cramps and stretched tight muscles. The coffee was long cold and stale but it had been strong enough to do the job of keeping him awake for the past two hours. He'd arrived here just before dawn. He had overestimated how long it would take for him to find the place and with no traffic in the still darkened early morning hours, he had made excellent time.

Taking one or two cruises past to scope out the small laneway he had found an unobtrusive area near some trees in which to tuck the car. He was satisfied that the park was concealed well enough to anyone driving by. When he had first arrived and it was still dark he had trekked down the lane with a small torch to check out the house. The presentation of the quaint bungalow set like some suburban dream house amongst the trees and flowery gardens almost had him laughing.
Fucking safe house! Looks like something out of some magazine for Country Living. Picket fence and rose gardens, tidy porch and easy chairs – what a joke! Is this where they were hiding out? Tough cops living in a perfect little house - stupid bastards all of them! Dobey, the IA, the Commissioner and Starsky and his pretty boyfriend. Hiding their tails from him?

It was a damn long way from the dirty facades of reality – the reality of cop life. It was a damn long way from where any of them were really from.

He’d sauntered back to the car to wait.

For what - he wasn't sure – but it was only a matter of time before something would present itself for his viewing pleasure.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Nervous.

So nervous she was almost brimming over with sickness. It rose up in her now as she left her car and made her way slowly toward the front porch. Last night she had been all bravado. Buoyed up with it. So sure of herself – and what she wanted. And then? Well then it had all come crashing down around her. Dave had rejected her.

Pushed her off him. Pushed away her hands. Pushed away her offer to love him and be with him.

She had been so sure that she was on the right track with him. So convinced that he wanted her body as much as she wanted his. Hadn't he tried to touch her in the street outside of the restaurant? She had wanted more than that though. She didn't just want a kiss and a cuddle in the street and then to be dropped home. She wanted him. She wanted him to need and want her fully - like a man needs a real woman.

Deep down she knew she simply wanted the concept of being part of a twosome with a real man. Not so much the sexual side – but just to win him over so that he would want to be with her, belong to her – and she be his. So she had done what she thought real woman do – and it had turned around and blown up in her face.

Not one bit of sleep, not one bit of respite from her anguish and her tears had she had since he had fumed out of her small apartment last night. She had waited as long as she could before getting in her car and coming here. Not one moment longer could she hold inside her fear that he might be lost to her because of what she had done.

Desperation was mounting now. Anxiety was bubbling up and although she knew she may nearly be irrational with her thoughts and her wants –she had to plead her case to him.

Pushing back her limp hair from her tear-swollen eyes, she swiped at her nose before leaning on the doorbell.

Somehow she just knew that it wouldn't be Dave who would answer it. In the short time she had known the two men she had already pegged Ken as the earlier riser and knew that Dave loved his sleep. As desperate as she was however it almost didn't matter that she had to face down the more reserved blond before getting access to his friend. Humiliation surfaced as she met his already slightly disapproving eyes and countenance. He was a mixture this man. He could be so kind, so gentle and caring - and then - he could be like he was being now when he had opened the door to find her standing there. He was looking at her in a way that left her feeling sliced open. Like he was looking right into her and finding some fault that even she didn't know was there to be found. It
was his eyes - the clearest lightest blue - that did it. Left her feeling like he saw too much.

She shook herself mentally and stood taller – telling herself that he had done or said nothing that had suggested he was angry with her. She was merely been hypersensitive.

His words were neutral and as they had been since the first day – the day in the grocery store - kind and friendly. Yet there was something – something that gave away that he regarded her as someone he was no longer so sure of.

"Katy? It's not even eight – is something wrong?"

"No – I mean yes. I – I've come to see Dave."

"Of course – but he's still asleep – or at least not out of bed yet. Come in – I'll get you a coffee, some breakfast?"

"NO!"

"Sorry? Katy what's wrong?"

She knew he was looking at her puffy eyes and her mangled hair, her hurriedly thrown on clothes and hands that wouldn't seem to stop twisting in front of her chest.

"No – I want to stay out here. I want some privacy. Can you get him to come out? Can you wake him up for me?"

"Sure I can wake him up - but come in and have some coffee while I do. "

"Ken just get him for me. Now. I need to see him. "

She could hear her tone, too sharp, too demanding, even to her own ears.

"Alright. Calm down Katy. I can see you're upset. Did – are you ok? Did something happen last night?"

For a moment deep concern creased his face and she watched as his cool eyes looked her over critically, quickly checking out her face and her neck, her arms.

She knew then what he was thinking.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Well because Starky seemed upset when he came in last night."

It still unnerved her that he called the man she had been seeing by a completely different name to what she called him and that she was expected to address 'Ken' with a different name to what Dave called him. It accentuated her sense of not belonging.

"What did he tell you?"

She knew her voice had raised too quickly, become too heated for the context.

"Nothing Katy. He told me nothing. I was worried about him and so I asked. Now I'm worried about you and I'm asking. What happened that brings you here like this all upset?"

Anger snapped in her and jealousy was laced in her words.
"Why do you think you need to know about Dave and me? It's our relationship. Ours! He shouldn't be talking to you about us – telling you stuff."

"Katy he told me nothing – he just appeared upset."

She could see that he was becomingly increasingly frustrated with her but her own mood was quickly souring against him and his conciliatory tone.

"Don't try and use that voice with me. Like you are so concerned about everything. I know how you two are anyway- he would have told you. Well – he shouldn't have just run out like that. I didn't mean to – to ... Look, I just want to make sure he's ok. I've been worried all night."

She stopped. Shut her mouth firm and looked past him into the house as though the man in question might actually be lurking behind his friend and the door.

"You didn't mean to do what? What happened?"

Fresh concern was on his face, and the concern was no longer for her. His question was devoid of the previous silky kindness.

"Not your business Ken. Dave and I need to talk."

"Alright then. I'll go and wake him up. It will take a few minutes, he doesn't wake that easily. Just try to calm down a little and if you change your mind come inside. Door's open for you."

But she didn't and she waited. Rubbing at her arms and twisting her hands, she did the very opposite of calming down.

Five minutes later a sleep tousled and thoroughly unhappy looking Dave stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind him.

**SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH**

Ryan stood back into the foliage of the shrubs and settled down for the second act of the show. Although he couldn't hear all the words, the distraught girl was demonstrative enough to get her point across and Hutchinson's attempt to settle her down was more than enough to give him the flavor of what was transpiring.

As he waited it became apparent that the woebegone girl on the porch had come calling at this ungodly hour for one reason. She was having some sort of relationship with Starsky and all was not well in paradise.

When the front door of 'Quaintsville' house opened and the curly dark haired head emerged Ryan was unprepared for the sudden constriction in his chest at the sight of the man he had not stopped thinking about for the past month.

Starsky was clad in what appeared to be his customary worn jeans, no doubt pulled on quickly. Ryan noted how much better he looked compared to when he had last seen him - just before their night of savage passion when he had still been weakened by his hospitalization after the Kalzo case. His chest seemed to far better fill out his threadbare t-shirt and his lean face seemed a little fuller even if right now it was strained and severe looking as he regarded the girl in front of him.

Ryan fondled himself lightly as he crouched low in the shrubbery, running his hands over his crotch where all ready he could feel his hardening response to the visual image of his lover. The early light caught in Starsky's dark curls and even from this distance Ryan could discern the
morning stubble on his chin and cheeks. He watched Starsky lift his hand now –his rings glinting in the dappled sun as stroked his neck and jaw with obvious tension. Ryan was almost mesmerized by the hand and its pathway down the darkened jaw and neck.

As Starsky stroked his stubbled cheek and jaw and addressed the girl, Ryan deftly slipped his hand inside his fly and stroked and addressed his burgeoning erection.

"Katy? Why're you here like this so early? Hutch said you're upset and perhaps - a little hysterical."

Eyes narrowed against the morning glare he rubbed tiredly at his chest as he took in her distressed face.

"Oh he damn well wouldn't he?"

His sleepy face seemed to jolt awake at her biting return and he rubbed one bare foot up his jean clad leg.

"I'm not standing out here for all the world to see us – come in and I'll get you a tea or a coffee. God knows I need a coffee right now."

He rubbed at his face as he cast his eyes uneasily around the front garden and driveway. She followed his tracking and rolled her eyes.

"This isn't the city Dave – we're here in my hometown and there aren't any neighbors to see or hear us. The most you'll get out here is a stray dog. No humans. Besides – I'm not going in there with him. Forget it."

Her snide brought his eyes back to her in a hurry.

"What? What is this crap? Referring to Hutch like that? This isn't like you at all Katy. Last night. This. Not like you."

"You are the one who is not like you. You are the one who has rejected me. You!"

He shoved his hand through his mussed hair and groaned a little under his breath.

"Look – what happened last night. It's – I don't want to go there. Don't want to talk about it. But it wasn't about you and it was unfair of me to leave you thinking that it was – ok? I just had to get out of there."

"Away from me?"

"Not you exactly Katy – but what – it took me back to some bad place alright? It's history. Nothing to do with you. My shit, not yours. I'm sorry that I left you feeling hurt and rejected."

"Then tell me about it! Talk to me!"

"No – that's not going to happen Katy. I don't choose to go there with you. It's personal and private."

"You don't choose to go there with me? How does that make me feel when you say that do you think? Personal and private? But we have a relationship. We need to share this stuff. You need to talk to me if we are going to be together."
He scrubbed even harder at his face and looked to the side, took a breath and then looked back at her.

"Katy. Listen to me. I have only really just met you. I came here, to this place – we came here – Hutch and I – because big shit went down with our job ok? Big shit. I ended up in hospital. That is all you need to know. That stuff happens with cops sometimes. Most of the time we get through it and move on. This time – it wasn't so easy. The road was tougher. We got sent here. We didn't ask to come here. Sent here because of the job. I can tell you that much. What happened? You don't need to know – but it messed me up pretty badly. Very badly. That's why last night – I reacted. I'm sorry for that. I had no control over that – it just happened. That is all I plan on telling you. No more. For your own sake as well as my own."

"What do you mean for my own sake Dave? I need to know everything about you – everything. That's what relationships are about."

Too much. Too much from her – she wasn't listening and she wasn't hearing and he was wearing out too quickly – weary before the confrontation had already begun. Something was not right – all of this was not right – the context, her dialogue, and her behavior and moreover the feeling in his gut, in his blood, that this whole little drama was unstable and unsafe. Like he was being captured on film. Like at any moment some candid camera was going to declare itself and announce that his early morning showdown with an emotionally overwrought young woman had been sprung. He squinted into the low sun and scanned the perimeter of the yard, the hairs on the back of his neck rising, his skin tickling with a frisson of awareness.

"You are not even listening to me. Oh my God Dave!"

"I am listening to you Katy. It's you who isn't listening. Last night is over. Done. Let's forget it."

"Then how do we move forward with us? If you won't even try to share with me. I'm the outsider here. He –" she stabbed her finger at the front door. "He knows everything about you, you share everything with him – and so little – almost nothing with me. Since that first day in the shop when you came to town – you share with him, but not me. You keep me locked out."

"Now you're starting to sound – Katy stop this. Stop it now. Hutch and I are partners and friends – of course we share things. Of course he knows me and me him. I only met you a few weeks ago. We don't have a proper relationship Katy. We were getting to know each other. That is all."

"Now you're just trying to hurt me."

"No – no I don't want to hurt you and I would never do that if I could help it – but you are blowing this all out of perspective and I have to try to get you to understand. Right now I think you are too upset to do that. Go home Katy. Please. Just go home. Give the two of us and all of this some space and leave it be."

"Dave please –" In a rush she was up against him, lifting her hands to his face, fresh tears welling in her eyes.

He removed her hands from him - careful this time to be measured in his movement and held them pressed down against her side, away from his body.

"Katy - just go."

He was already turning toward the door, shoulders slumped with the fatigue that she had layered upon him with her irrational demands and petulant overtures. Suddenly he wanted to be inside,
away from her fraught face and body and her accusatory words. He didn't need this and he certainly
didn't want it. Whatever she was trying to make him be for her was far from what he had envisaged
they might have together.

He stood inside the front door and took some steadying breaths until he heard the eventual sound of
her car starting up and driving away.

Only then did he breathe a little more freely.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Ryan waited until she had exited the driveway before turning his own ignition. He'd trail her back
into town and to her home. It was still too early for her to be at work and he could see by her style
of dress that she wouldn't be going straight there anyway. Poor stupid bitch was too beside herself
anyway at the moment to go anywhere but home and to cry into her milk.

What a whining clinging female – she made him cringe just watching her pathetic attempts to woo
over Starsky – pandering and simpering and then when that didn't work coming on heavy with the
theatrics.

He had wanted to crush her hand when he saw her put it up to his lover's face. Touching him,
trying to own him with her body language. Who the fuck was she anyway? He and Hutchinson had
only been here such a short while and already he had a bitch rutting at his side. Couldn't she read
that Starsky wasn't interested in her or her sex?

But his lover looked good. Really good, and the searing memory of the stubbled face and tight
worn jeans slung low on those narrow hips warmed Ryan's crotch all the way back into the center
of the small town – his eyes on the car he was trailing but his mind anywhere but on the road.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Captain Dobey answered the firm knock on his office door with a customary curt bark.

"Come in!"

He looked up, his perpetually harried look lightening a little at the sight of the young officer
standing at the doorway and addressed him with his usual respectful tone.

"Captain? I was wondering if I could have a minute of your time? I know I didn't have a meeting
planned – and if you're busy I can come back later."

"Riley. I'm just following up some calls, but I don't have to be anywhere at the moment. Come in,
close the door."

"I wanted to have a word about what happened sir – with Captain Dobson?"

"No doubt the news has spread around the precinct?"

"Yes – we were all shocked to hear it Sir. First of all may I offer my condolences – I know being of
the same ranking you must have been well-known to each other."

Dobey sighed and nodded.

"Well for some years I suppose we were. Earlier on in our careers we were fairly close. Used to
hang out as brother cops do – and yes we were friends of sorts. Then as the years passed and we
each got into our Captaincies – we saw less of each other, but still kept in contact, professionally more than personally. Nonetheless – it cuts deep to lose a peer."

"Do Starsky and Hutch know about it yet?"

"I called Hutchinson last night. He'll let his partner know. I'm sure it will be unsettling for them both."

Dobey could see that the young officer was chewing something over with some deliberation, unsure perhaps of how much to say.

"Did – did Hutch have to say much about it?"

The question had the Captain narrowing his eyes at Riley.

"Meaning? About the fact that Dobson was dead or how he died? You got something you want to say here Riley? Is this what your visit to me is about? Then spit it out. What do you think Hutchinson would have to say about it? Dobson killed himself – sad story but a common enough theme in this job. I'm sure he's seen it enough times already over the course of his career – not as many as me – but – but, that is not your question is it?"

"Sir I was wondering if the case is going to be treated as suspicious in any way? Whether in fact Dobson might have been coerced or forced into doing what he did and leaving the note."

"And – you think my two detectives are also thinking the same don't you?"

Riley colored in his still habitual way whenever a superior officer put him under scrutiny.

"Well – sir – it occurs to me that – "

"Riley – I think it's best if don't inform me of your personal opinions on what might or might have happened in Captain Dobson's death. We'll leave the investigation to the boys who are fronting the case ok? I'm still waiting on some forensic details but at this point I can tell you that there are no suspicious circumstances linked to the scene where the body was found."

"Sir – I was wondering if I have your permission to re-establish some surveillance on Ryan Lancaster."

Dobey felt the urge to blow out his exasperation. Of course he had known where Riley was going with this little meeting since he first came into the office.

Riley had given up on being subtle and went straight in for the more direct approach.

"We've pulled that for now Riley – you know that."

"Yes – but – I am happy to do it in my own time Sir, outside of my shifts."

"I don't approve of junior officers going off half cocked by themselves on sideline jobs that have personal agendas attached to them. One it's not safe and two, if it's not sanctioned it could blow up in your face and mine."

Riley stood and pushed his chair in.

"I understand Captain."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Now – just remember – I particularly do not sanction any face-to-face
contact with parties under police surveillance unless I am first informed of your intention to speak or approach the subject. Particularly subjects with a history of violence and dangerous behavior. Surveillance is one thing – personal contact or harassment of a subject is another. I hope we are absolutely clear on that."

The tone was gruff but the dark eyes and the stern creased face were full of warning and concern.

"Definitely Sir. If I was following a known dangerous subject I would always refrain from intervention without the appropriate backup."

"Then we're clear. I sanction no formal surveillance by you in relation to Ryan Lancaster – in particular I sanction no direct face-to-face contact or communication with the subject. I cannot however keep tabs on what you choose to do in your free time if you choose not to follow my warnings. Now get out of here – I have at least ten phone calls to make before I head out of this office for an early lunch time meeting."

"Thank you for your time Sir."

Riley was half way out of the door when another gruff directive followed him.

"And Riley? Make sure you're riding with that new partner of yours whenever you might get it into your head to do any "unauthorized" watching. No solo heroics ok? - Lancaster is an unknown quantity, especially now that he is off the Force."

Riley smiled and tipped his fingers to his superior before closing the door behind him.

Dobey made a "humped" sound, scratched behind his ear with a pencil and wondered not for the first time whether Hutchinson knew what a loyal apprentice he had in that boy.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Ryan was on her heels as soon as she entered her small apartment. Once he saw her door close he stood in the hall and listened. There was no sound of another person with her. With his ear against the flimsy door the only sound he could hear was that of her pitiful female wailing, and her clear distress was not intercepted by any inquisitive or caring flat mate or friend.

The mousey bitch was alone inside.

He pulled the hooded soft coat up over his head pushing his thick hair beneath it and donned his dark sun visors – not that he intended for her to get any more than one quick look at his face before he diverted her concentration.

It took a few insistent raps to get through the grating sound of her racking sobs and for a moment he thought he might need to change his plans and break the door down. It was a good chance however that in her typical female way – the workings of her dumb bitch brain – that she would be convinced that Starsky had in fact pursued her back to her home. No doubt she was thinking that he was here on her doorstep to declare his love and to express regret for his treatment of her.

He rapped again more loudly and predictably the sobbing halted mid jag. He could hear hear the sickening hope in her trembling voice and it turned his stomach.

"Dave? Dave – is that you?"

Using his best rendition of the caliber of Starsky's voice he came back with a simple, "It's me."
The door opened a crack and he had only one second's gratification of catching her wild-eyed fear when she took in his hulking dark and unfamiliar presence before he pushed the door open wide, reaching up to smother her nose and mouth with his gloved hand before she could scream.

He kicked the door shut behind him and pulled her hard against his chest, her back and legs pressed firmly against his tall frame. She kicked and squirmed, her muffled cries vibrating against his gloved palm.

Needing to release just a little of the sexual tension that still throbbed through his crotch and drummed in his brain, he indulged himself in whirling her around swiftly to face him. He looked down at her small wriggling body and fear filled face and felt his cock swell even more as he pulled back his arm and delivered one hard resounding backhand across her creamy white cheek. The impact snapped her head back in a satisfying cracking echo. It would have been more fulfilling to send her sprawling face first onto the hard floor but he couldn't risk the noise of the fall inside the small apartment complex.

So crushing was the blow that all sound from her was silenced and she crumpled limply in his grip like a sagging rag doll. A savage wrench of her hair had her wet face up close to his own and he pressed his hot mouth against her ear, his warning words too late for her now, his hunger for her punishment already pulsing in his groin, demanding to be fed.

"That's the first slap to show you how unhappy I am with what I saw you doing to what is mine. No one – no one – especially some dumb broad touches what is mine. Should have kept your hands off him you stupid fucking whore."

From nowhere it seemed to him, a blur of movement to his left appeared at his leg, barking and growling and making a snapping lunge for his ankle. He kicked out at the ball of fur but failed to make contact with the canine attacker, which scampered away, physically distancing itself, but doubled its efforts with the barking. When the dog returned again for another pouncing attack Ryan swung out hard with his leg, this time his balance faltering when he felt his boot sink into the dogs hind quarter. A high-pitched yelp and a withdrawal of the snapping teeth meant that the dog had got the message and it retreated into the corner of the room, snarling and whining but no longer trying to flay his skin from his bones.

Ryan considered the situation. He had not counted on the dog and wondered briefly whether he should let go of the girl to deal with it in a more permanent fashion. He quickly discounted the idea. He could not risk having the dog bark more or howl and bring neighborly attention so; wary of its position in the room he looked back down at the moaning girl. It was clear now that she had been able to get a good full view of him when the attacking dog had intercepted.

No longer sure of what he wanted to achieve with his visit he decided then that to shake her up and leave his mark on her body would be satisfaction enough for him.

Sexually she did nothing for him and even the brief spark of erotic excitement he had experienced when he had dealt her his first blow had quickly dissipated. More than anything he felt simple resentment toward her and what she may have shared with Starsky.

The best mileage he could hope to achieve with the intrusion would be to instill as much fear into as he could before he left.

With his hand still over her mouth, the broken sobs muffled and distorted; he squeezed her body to the point of marking it while he whispered crude words and threats against her throat.

"Stupid girl aren't you? Stupid dumb bitch, trying to win over someone you can't have. You think
he'd want to fuck you? Want to fuck your scrawny body? He doesn't want you, you dumb bitch. I saw you trying to put your hands on him. I don't like that – he's not yours to touch, do you hear me? What do you imagine hey? You want him in your pants? You want him to fuck you? Grab your tiny tits and fuck your pussy? You want that?"

He shook her violently and her head snapped back and forth, her teeth clattering with the vibration and savage jerking.

"This what you want girl? You want him to touch you here?"

He had his hand thrust down her panties, digging cruelly into her warm moist center, laughing as she bucked and cried with the pain of the assault. In one easy rip he had her top torn off her and was delighting in pinching her breast and nipple till he felt her gagging under his hand as the nausea rose in her. Excitement was mounting in him once more as he felt the fear in her body and saw the terror in her eyes.

The dog, cowering and snarling, began to bark again, advancing a few steps closer to his overpowered mistress. Circling and retreating but not advancing close enough for another blow.

"Shit! Shut up or I'll have to gut you open with my knife you stupid little mongrel."

The girl squirmed out from his grip, eyes wide and hair wild and tangled as she pulled out of his arms while the dog momentarily distracted him. Sucking in a large mouthful of air, her breath jagged and torn, he knew she was gathering herself for a scream and so pulling back his fist he smashed it into the side of her face. The beginnings of her scream for help were effectively aborted as her body smashed down hard onto the coffee table before slumping to the floor.

Miraculously her eyes were still fixed on him, and he was surprised that the blow had not rendered her unconscious. She lay on her side, the eye nearest the floor quickly filling with blood from the deep split on her cheek that his fist had opened. Standing over the top of her body he looked down at her twitching on the floor beneath him, her body filled with the aftershocks of his ramming fist.

"Why do women always have to scream? I wouldn't have had to do that if you had just kept your mouth shut. We might've even been able to have a bit of fun together – but now see what you made me do? I can't stand the sound of screaming females and right now that would cause me a whole lot of problems. Have I made my point about not touching what is not yours – Katy isn't it? I think I heard correctly - that's your name. So Katy, try to remember my warning next time you feel like putting your hands anywhere near the body of someone you don't have the right to touch. Starsky is mine. Only mine. "

She was pulling herself, or trying to pull herself up into a small shaking ball, her eyes skittering away from his face, warding off his threatening taunt.

"Look at me before I go." And when she didn't – he dug his fingers into the bare flesh of her chest, the tender skin already florid with early bruising. "I said look at me!"

Her one non-blood filled eye focused on him, terror flickering across its surface while Ryan pressed with the threat.

"I'm going to go now. You're lucky I didn't punish you more for what you did – but you gave me a bit of fun and my visit here will upset things more than a little for my two friends" He smiled at the terminology. "Now that you have seen my face and I couldn't resist warning you about not going near Starsky again, I need you to forget anything you might remember about me. Anything and everything that you might remember. Are we clear on that Katy?"
When she failed to respond he dealt her a swift kick under her ribs, not so hard as to knock her out, but enough to add some depth to his warning.

"Are we clear Katy?" Although his voice was softer the tone had doubled in its danger.

She was nodding frantically now, sobbing and nodding and begging with her one clear eye to leave her alone.

"Good. That's good – because otherwise I'll come back for another visit – your little friend over there in the corner will be the first thing you'll see die and then you and I will have another fun time together ok?"

Yes! Yes! Yes! – Her eyes were emphatic and seemed to be trying to scream the words that her weak moans could only struggle to voice.

Snaking his fingers into her tousled hair he pulled her face up roughly so that it was closer to his own.

"Look at you! What makes you think any man; especially a man like Starsky would want you? You're one messy bitch."

Pulling his hand away suddenly he let her lolling head smack down onto the hard floor, her last cry mingling with the dog's deep snarls as he closed the door behind him and jogged down the steps.

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Hutch stood in the entrance outside his partner's bedroom, two steaming mugs of coffee in his hands. He was pleased to see that at least Starsky hadn't closed himself away after his and Katy's heated words out on the front porch.

"Hey there? Made you a coffee? You want it in here or are you coming out?"

Starsky was stretched out on his bed, two pillows bunched up behind him, his hands locked together behind his head, and his face showing clear evidence of his mulling thoughts.

He looked up at Hutch and stood up, walking over to him at the doorway, almost absently accepting the coffee. Leaning back against the door frame he gulped down a large swallow before he spoke.

"Thanks. Need that." He said simply.

"So breakfast too or just the coffee?"

Starsky was absorbed in the contents of his coffee mug and the question went unanswered.

"Starsk?"

"Huh? Sorry?"

"You want to talk about it?"

"Nope."

"Something did go down with Katy last night didn't it? She said to me that she wanted to make sure you were ok with things…? And well, she was pretty irrational out there on the porch before."
"Yeah, well she'll get over it I guess. Look thanks for the coffee – I think I'm gonna go back to bed for an hour or so. I've had enough of this day already and it has barely even started."

Hutch sighed and pulled back from the doorway, holding out his hand for Starsky's mug.

"Alright, you do that – but later, if you want –"

"All I want later Hutch, is to drive in and see if I can talk to the Doc about writing me a clearance report so we can look at wrapping up our time here. I want to get back to the city."

He was already pulling back the covers and climbing back into his unmade bed, jeans and all – the conversation that had barely begun, effectively terminated.

One step forward and two back, was all Hutch could think as he left his partner be.

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"Hey – just me out here. I'm home! Hope that's you in there and not some stranger using our facilities. Didn't expect you to be home yet."

Starsky called through the closed bathroom door, his voice raised so as to be heard over the sound of water running in the basin.

Hearing only a muffled response he sauntered into the kitchen and pulled out a carton of juice, pouring himself a drink while he munched absently on some leftover apple pie. Taking his snack into the living room he settled down on the couch and threw his legs up on the coffee table.

Hutch walked out of the bathroom, a towel draped around his bare shoulders and chest as he towelled off his damp hair.

"What were you yelling through the door?"

"'Hey thought you were goin' for a long run this afternoon? Did ya' change your mind and pike it?"

"No I did over five miles – that was enough for me. What about you? You're home early from your appointment. Couldn't you get into see her after all?"

"Yeah – but she could only have a brief session with me as it was unscheduled. Good news – she is prepared to write me the clearance and sign off to Dobey that I am fit for return to work on the condition that I check in for a one month follow up appointment with one of the Departmental Psychs when we're back home."

Hutch didn't answer, merely nodded while he rubbed absently at his damp hair with the towel.

"What?" Starsky scowled at him, brushing crumbs from his shirt front.

"What do you mean what?"

"That look on your face. I've seen that look too many times and I know what it means."

"You do? And that is?"

"It means you don't think I'm ready for this. You think I'm pushing it. It means that you don't agree that I'm at the point to return to work."

"That's a hell of a lot of meaning to put on a guy who is standing here doing nothing more than
towelling his hair off after a shower."

"Yeah well, you just happen to be one of those guys who can pack a whole lot of meaning into one look. Plus I know you remember. I know every one of your looks Hutchinson."

"If the shrink gave you clearance who am I to argue. So I won't - but it doesn't mean I won't worry. "

"Hutch – there's nothin' to worry about. I'm gettin' there – I've come out of this thing. I'm goin' to be ok – and I damn well need to get back to work."

"You see here's the problem. I hear you say that Starsk. You stand there and say that to me and then – like last night, and then this morning with Katy? Something happens, goes wrong – and then to me it seems that you get left screwed up all over again."

"That's total bullshit. She had a little spat with me and got upset. She stormed off – women do that sort of shit all the time. We know that. That's nothing to do with what's inside of my head."

"Sure and whatever happened with Katy last night, that you won't talk about - didn't affect you. It didn't affect you and leave you like you were this morning for three hours after she left – withdrawn and irritable. The way you dealt with it tells me that you're still not on the other side of all of this – of the mess that Ryan has left behind in your head."

He watched the anger flare on Starsky's face – it was an inevitable enough response to any attempt by Hutch to try to break through his resistance. The knee jerk anger was never far away when Hutch tried to get closer to him in the past weeks.

"Oh God this is getting so old now Hutch. We've got to break free from this place. Safe House! Shit is that was this place is? I think it's like being anywhere but safe. We're gonna' surely kill each other with these same tired arguments. We're trapped in this house twenty-four seven and all we do is play psychological sparring games. I am so fuckin' sick of it. I want to go home. Simple. I think you do too. Too much navel gazing going on here for both of us. I think we're creating our own drama. And- if that ain't bad enough, even the locals are startin' to give us a hard time. Katy wants far more than I can give her. I'm startin' to think work on the streets is easier than all of this."

He watched as Hutch pulled the towel from around his neck and stared hard at it for several moments.

He nodded slowly, intently and then surprised Starsky with his response.

"Maybe you're right Starsky. Maybe we do just need to get back to some sort of routine and move on. I'm sick of hearing myself worry out loud and I'm damn sick of watching myself watching you for signs that everything is not ok. I'm sorry. You did the right thing and sought a clearance from the female shrink. She gave it to you. I – I should just shut up and be happy you've got to this point. And - you're right about Katy. You don't need the stress of a difficult relationship if it's not working out for you. I'll phone Dobey tomorrow morning – check in to see if there's any change on Dobson's death – and let him know our plans to head back soon."

Starsky looked nonplussed.

"Hell – what just happened then? I'm reeling from the shock that we have actually reached a point of agreement here."

Hutch rubbed his fingers along his lips, a small smile tugging the corners.

"Just because I agree that we need to break out of this hothouse of self-analysis doesn't mean I still
won't worry - or feel guilty that I let you convince me that everything is better than it really is."

"Hutch – I know better than to try to separate you from your permanent state of guilt tripping – so I
ain't even gonna try with that one. It's enough for me that you're in agreement to get us back to the
city and back to work. I'm happy with that. Hey – go finished gettin' dressed and I'll grab us both a
beer. We need to celebrate me officially bein' declared no longer crazy."

Their joint laughter filled the room and staved off the creeping sense of frustration and anger each
had begun to feel for the other only minutes earlier when the issue of Starsky's mood had been
again up for debate. Starsky loped into the kitchen in search of alcoholic fortitude as Hutch
chuckled to himself, bent down to retrieve his towel and began to head toward his bedroom.

He was halted in his tracks by Starsky's expletive sailing out of the kitchen.

"Hey – where the hell is the beer? Don't tell me it's been stored out in that damn spare cooler in the
garage? Why do you do that Hutch? Beer should be in the kitchen fridge."

"Because dumb head – if I didn't there wouldn't be enough room in that fridge for all the food we
need to keep on hand for you to consume."

"Well beer is a food group too - it should be readily accessible at all times."

"Shut up whining will you, you haven't even heard the bad news yet. It's your turn to go and get it.
I'm getting dressed."

Retreating to his room Hutch smiled again at the petulant whingeing as Starsky banged out
through the rear kitchen door toward the external garage.

He was still smiling and shrugging on his clean sweater and pushing into his casual shoes when
the screech of car tires and the banging of car doors pulled him quickly out of the bedroom.
Starsky's raised voice proved that he too was in the driveway with whoever had driven up.

The first thought that came to him was that Katy was back for another round with Starsky and he
hesitated to investigate further. He'd taken a few steps back toward his room, not wanting to invade
their privacy when the sounds from outside stopped him still. Raised male voices had him spinning
on his heel back toward the living room and by the time he caught the unmistakable sound of
Starsky's outraged cursing his conditioned cop reflexes were springing alive. With one hand
flinging open the front door and the other instinctively reaching toward his flank for a weapon that
was not there, the sight in the driveway stopped him in his tracks.

A highway patrol car was parked in the drive – its doors open and its two-way buzzing. A droning
voice from dispatch was addressing one uniformed cop who leaned down into the car's interior –
one eye trained on Starsky while his partner had Starsky pressed chest and face up against the cop
car. He'd obviously ordered him into a spread-eagled, hands up position.

The cop was brandishing a set of cuffs, and as he completed a quick body pat down he wrenched
one of Starsky's hands down, pulled it roughly behind his back and deftly swung the open cuff up
to snap it over the tightly grasped wrist.

Despite Hutch's indignant shout as he ran down the steps toward the men and the car, the officer
never hesitated in his task of securing the second cuff with almost detached, cool finesse.

"Hey, what the hell is going on here? What the fuck do you think you're doing? Starsky what…?"

Hutch skidded to a halt in front of the cop who was now spinning his partner around to face him,
his cuffed wrists now behind his body. In the instant Hutch heard the cuffs snick into place he saw Starsky's remaining belligerence fall completely away. It was quickly replaced by a grim faced desperation as he pulled almost frantically at hard metal bracelets, his eyes alive with real fear and panic. Hutch looked at the cuffs and then at Starsky and knew immediately where his mind had taken him. Beads of sweat were already forming on his partner's forehead and his face was paling with shock as Hutch forgot about all else but the urgency in getting Starsky free of the cuffs.

"Get them off him NOW! I want them off him. Why the hell have you cuffed him anyway? Jesus – what is this all about?"

He turned his attention to Starsky – forgetting the cops for a moment.

"Breathe Starsk. It's ok – they're just cuffs – not the same ones. Don't struggle – It'll rip your wrists up again. Stay still, try to relax."

He swiveled again to the cop and ground out in a low voice. "Unlock them. He – the cuffs are going to send him crazy. You don't understand…"

"Sir stand back and let us deal with the suspect in our own way or you'll be the next one we'll be cuffing. We need to question your friend here and he's been restrained as a safety precaution. When we first approached him he was verbally abusive and resistant. We have good reason to believe he may be violent."

Yeah well maybe you good ol' boys should work on improving your interview techniques – tearing into someone's house and throwing them bodily against your car is hardly going to make for a nice, quiet, co-operative interviewee.

"Look we can all talk and sort this out – whatever confusion seems to have brought you here and to have done this – we're cops ourselves for Christ Sake – we're both Detectives – just – could you please remove the cuffs? He's not going to be able to tell you anything while he is full of panic. He's recently had a traumatic experience on the job – the cuffs have to go. If you don't take them off, I'll make sure that this whole thing is reported to your superior. Be reasonable for God's sake, you're both armed and he isn't carrying – neither am I for that matter."

The whole time he was talking he tried to get Starsky to look at him – to calm him with his eyes and his voice, and although he was still sweating and pale, some of the fear had receded from the dark blue eyes.

The cop who'd been on the radio motioned to Hutch to move against the police car. Hutch allowed himself to be frisked. The cop then nodded to his partner and gave a look of assent to Hutch.

"Alright. Undo them. But you – David Starsky – stay up against the police vehicle until we tell you that you can move. And you Sir – stay standing there away from your friend."

"Just get them off him and I won't move. It's ok Starsky – cuffs are coming off. You going to be alright? You still with me here?"

Free of the cuffs Starsky closed his eyes for a long moment and then when he opened them again Hutch was relieved to see that the flat-eyed stare of panic had left his face.

"Yeah - ok now. I'm good."

"Now – " Hutch turned to the cops "I'm waiting to hear why you've rolled up here and cornered my partner like he's some wild animal. We don't like being treated like common criminals in our own home with no explanation."
The cop who had played the heavy with Starsky's body search and cuffing, seemed to take definite satisfaction in filling Hutch in on the background of their visit.

"We told your friend Mr. Starsky when we first arrived. We're here to ask him some questions and most likely to escort him down town for further assessment."

"Questions about what? We're two Detectives off case and staying here at this holiday home – taking some downtime between assignments. What could you possibly have to question him about?"

This time Starsky spoke – seeming to have shaken himself out of his panicked numbness.

"Hutch they want to take me in for questioning. It's Katy – Katy's been badly beaten up." His face was lined with grim disgust.

"God no! But she was just here this morning – she was fine. When? How?"

"That's exactly what we're here to find out from your friend. Katy Robertson was found by her room-mate a few hours ago – the room-mate had been away for a few days and returned to their shared apartment. She found Katy badly beaten and unconscious on the floor of their home. Neighbors have since reported hearing a disturbance and the dog barking loudly earlier this morning. The room-mate gave a statement that Katy phoned her very late last night – highly upset following a fight with her recent boyfriend " the cop tipped his head at Starsky. "Your partner here – David Starsky. Seems that the fight might have left a bad taste in your mouth Mr. Starsky – bad enough that you went to your girlfriend's place early this morning to pay her a visit? Someone sure left your girlfriend knocked around pretty bad."

Starsky looked up hopelessly at Hutch and shook his head slowly, a look of complete defeat on his shocked face.

"You know what Hutch?"

"What buddy?" Hutch's mind was in overdrive trying to compute every angle of what the cops had just told them.

"What was I sayin' just before about this place not feelin' much like a Safehouse?"

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Hutch's face was livid.

He remained where he was, in the hard backed chair positioned next to Starsky and gave the cop who was holding the door open for him and commanding him to exit the room, a withering glare.

"Hold the door open all you want. I'm not leaving. I want in on this interview or whatever it is you're calling it. You haven't even presented us with the full story. On what basis have you dragged my partner in here? Have you got any clear evidence that he was involved with what happened to this girl? She hasn't even provided you with a statement yet."

"Sergeant Hutchinson this is not your ballgame. This is not your jurisdiction. Your partner here is a suspect in a crime. You know that you are not permitted in the interview room while we question the subject. You chose to follow us here but that does not automatically make you privy to this meeting."
"The subject who is present in front of you, is my partner, a fellow cop and of course I damn well followed you here. Any thing you had to ask Starsky could have and should have been done back at our place. This whole thing is overkill. The least you could do is extend us both some professional courtesy here. I don't see how my sitting in on the interview is going to be disruptive to the process."

"Sergeant Starsky can call his lawyer if he so wishes but that is not necessary at this stage."

"Lawyer! We're miles from where we live and you're right – it is far from necessary. This is simply a preliminary questioning isn't it? Unless you can establish right now that you have some firm reason to hold my partner in custody then I will be staying in this room."

Starsky shrugged at the two cops who had brought him into the station and tipped his head nonchalantly toward Hutch.

"Have to warn you officers. This guy here is not an easy man to shift when he digs his heels in. Why don't you save us all some arguin' time here and just get on with whatever it is you think you have to ask me or tell me. I'm gettin' sick of this power play game and I can tell that my partner here is too. We do this shit for a livin' too you know. Just get on with it for Christ's sake. My partner will promise to stay quiet and behave himself won't you Hutch?"

"Sure – as long as the officers here do their bit to keep this civil."

"There you go. You've got his word – now - what happened to Katy?"

"If you do this for a living Sergeant than you'd know that we get to ask you the questions."

"Here that Hutch? Just because we're in the sticks don't mean the officers here haven't got the toughs. Ok - ask – I'm gettin' bored waitin'."

"You have been dating Miss Robertson for some time now?"

"I've taken her out for some meals, chatted at her at the restaurant she works at and the grocery store too – for I guess over the past three weeks. Hutch and I haven't been here all that long."

"Why are you here Sergeant Starsky?"

Starsky and Hutch looked briefly at each other and Starsky tossed his chin a little.

"Holiday – extended break between cases. We've had some heavy shit going down on the job. We were advised by our superiors to lay low for a coupla months till the heat clears. That - I'm afraid is not up for discussion."

"So how would you describe your relationship with the victim?"

"She is a new acquaintance – a nice girl who I've gotten to know a little while I'm here. We met one day in the park – I was running, she was walking her dog – the rest as you say – is history." He quirked his mouth a little to the side and raised his eyebrow fractionally.

"Being smart mouthed isn't going to help you Sergeant Starsky. What was the nature of your interaction with Katy Robertson last night?"

"The nature? What does that mean exactly - 'the nature' - last night?"

"You spent the evening together. According to her account to her room-mate the evening ended
badly. Describe the evening."

Hutch’s eyes were on his partner now as he waited for Starsky to respond.

"I picked her up early – around six forty-five. We drove into town to the bar and grill – had a casual dinner. Been there before in the past coupla weeks – low key dinner. Conversation, food a coupla drinks. Took her home. Early end to the evening – nothing kicks along in this place late as I am sure you guys know."

"Did you go inside with her to her apartment."

"Yes. She wanted me to come in for coffee or another drink. I did."

"How long did you stay?"

"No more than thirty minutes – probably twenty tops."

"Not long for an after dinner …. Follow up."

"Wasn't an after dinner ‘follow up' as you so poorly term it – I simply showed her in, we had a kiss goodbye, I left."

"According to her account to her room-mate by phone last night - you were angry, upset and highly agitated when you left her."

"I don't know how she felt when I was gone."

Starsky looked at the floor and not at Hutch.

"No – we are not talking about her state here – yours Sergeant. It was you who left the apartment angry and upset.- your mood highly volatile, irrational."

"Who said this shit? Katy? You haven't been able to interview yet. You said she was still heavily sedated."

"We have clearly stated Sergeant that the room-mate translated what she'd been told by Miss Robertson about your behavior last night. Is it true that you had a dramatic outburst and left the apartment suddenly? Were you angry toward her? Violent?"

"Starsk?"

The question was barely audible and the officers let it go.

"I was not violent toward her. I did nothing to hurt her physically. I can't damn well help it if she was upset by my actions."

The rising agitation in Starsky's body was obvious now as he rocked back on the chair and chewed hard at his lower lip.

"What actions Sergeant?"

"I wanted to leave. Simple. Wanted to cut out. I'd had enough. I'm bored with this small town and sorta bored with Katy. She was gettin' – starting to get too demandin', wants too much I guess. Women get like that – we all know what it's like."

He paused and looked up before repeating once more, firmly as if to prove the point to himself
more than to the officers.

"I just wanted to get out of there. That's it. Nothing happened to her. I did nothing to her."

Suddenly one of the officers turned to Hutch.

"As you're here Sergeant, did you see your friend when he arrived home last night from his meeting with his date?"

"Yes I did."

"And how would you describe his mood?"

Hutch never even hesitated and looked straight at the officer when he spoke.

"He was fine. A little tired – a little frustrated. Had a beer and chatted with about – a few cases."

"He showed no agitation, no sign that he had an altercation with Miss Roberston?"

Hutch rubbed his brow, once more not looking at Starsky.

"He was his usual self."

The officer looked hard at the two men and raised his eyes.

"Usual self? Helpful answer Sergeant."

Hutch scratched at the side of his jaw. "What can I say? He's a creature of habit."

The cop paced up and down a little, frustration barely contained.

"Sure, well let's forget about your partner for a moment then. This morning. You've already told us that the victim turned up at your house early – around eight. Did you talk to her at all?"

"I thought I already told you this before back at the house - but I'll tell you again. Yes - I answered the door. She was obviously upset and demanded that I wake up Starsky so that she could talk to him. I asked her in – she refused. I found her almost... maybe hysterical is too strong - but she was verging on losing control emotionally. I did as she asked and got Starsky up to talk with her."

"Did she say why she was so distressed."

"No – just that she needed to talk to Starsky – make sure he was ok or something like that. She was really quite strange - not how I had come to know her to be over the past weeks."

"And have you got anything to tell us Sergeant Starsky about why she wanted to see you this morning?"

"Just more of how she was last night. Needy. Same stuff – wanting me to – "

"To what Sergeant?"

"To – to – ah shit – I dunno - I guess wanting me to commit to her."

"And when she left?"

"I went back inside and returned to bed. She drove off – not happy. Don't even know for sure why she came. Who knows? Hard to figure women out sometimes...."
"Did you follow her back to her place?"

"No he damn well didn't! Like he said – he went into his room. I took a coffee into him. He crashed for a couple of hours and didn't get up till he had to get ready for a private appointment."

"Thankyou Sergeant Hutchinson – but we were directing the question to your partner."

"A private appointment. What time was that Sergeant Starsky?"

"Around midday."

"And the appointment? You can provide us with details of that for the record?"

Starsky looked across at Hutch, eyebrows slightly raised and something passed between them that might have signaled the end of both their limited patience with the interview and the questioning.

"Sure I can – but I won't."

"Being obstructive is not going to win you any points Sergeant."

"Well that's just as well ain't it, because I'm not out to win any points – Officer. I know my rights as well as you do – so leave it alone."

Any retort by the cop was cut short when a knock sounded on the door and a third officer's face appeared, requesting a word with one nearest the door.

The cop stepped out of the room and Starsky tossed a question over to the remaining cop.

"Look if we're finished here, I'd like someone to give me an update on Katy's condition."

"You are not permitted near the victim."

"Did I say I wanted to see her? I sure as hell don't know how you jumped to that statement. What is it Hutch? You think these cops speak a different dialect up here or somethin'?"

His partner merely smiled at Starsky's taunt.

The second officer walked back into the room and pulled the other into the corner. He said something brief and low, causing two sets of eyes to look over at Starsky.

"Ever feel like you're being talked about Hutch? Now that's just plain rude when I'm sittin' right here."

The one who had gone outside spoke.

"The victim is now awake and talking. She has stated that you were not her attacker Sergeant Starsky. You're free to go," Before tagging on. "For now."

Starsky blew out a small whoosh of air as he felt the grip of Hutch's hand on his upper arm.

"Thank God for that buddy. Come on let's get out of here Star. Don't know about you, but I'm more than ready for those beers we were about to have when we were so rudely interrupted."

The partners stood in unison and moved toward the door.

As they all converged near the doorway, the more belligerent of the two cops spoke singularly to
"We'll be in touch if we have any further questions. Make sure you stay available."

Starsky shot back "You want me, you find me. I'm not staying put for more of this shit." He walked on past the cop into the hallway.

Hutch stopped directly in front of the cop and leaned in toward his face, one steely index finger stabbing toward the cop's chest, but stopping short of making bodily contact.

"A bit of professional advice – you can take it or leave it. I didn't like your attitude with my partner. I didn't like your style much either. I suggest you work on both. Brother cops usually afford each other some respect. You don't give it – you sure as hell won't earn it."

Hutch held the finger in place for a moment longer before tapping the doorway lightly as he walked through it to join his partner in the hall outside.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

The late evening light was just beginning to fade when Starsky walked out onto the front porch to find Hutch sitting on the steps a beer in his hand and a six pack beside him. He accepted the beer Hutch thrust into his hands as he settled down beside him.

Hutch looked questioningly at him in the looming darkness.

"Well that was sure as hell a waste of a phone call."

"Did they give you any information on her condition?"

"Limited. Sounds as though she is more shook up mentally than physically – her face is badly bruised, cut cheek, extensive bruising, no fractures. At least that is what I got out of the Head Nurse of duty. There was no way they were going to put me on to the treating Doctor."

"Any sign of –"

" Didn't go there Hutch. Just didn't. I don't think the nurse would have told me anyway. It wasn't mentioned today so - "

"They let you talk to her on the phone?"

"No, said she was still too upset, and anyway I didn't push it. I was thinking that I'd go by the hospital in the morning and see if she'd talk to me."

"Christ Starsky, what a mess. Quiet little town. Quiet girl. Who the hell would do this to her – out of the blue like this?"

"No idea – but surely she'll have something to give the cops to go on in her statement."

"You know, I have to tell you - I was so damn worried. After the way she was this morning, here, standing on this porch – she seemed so irrational. I kept thinking – what if she – what if she tries to pin this on you?"

"Well one thing for sure – if she hadn't cleared me like she did, I wouldn't be sittin' here downing a beer right now. One minute we were sposed to be celebrating packing up and getting back to life and the next I was looking at the inside of a concrete cell. Just t'rrific."
"Starsk – what did happen last night?"

"I knew that was going to be on your list of questions tonight. Just knew it."

"I covered for you in that interview – only because I knew it had nothing to do with what happened to her. But now I want to know. You wouldn't talk about it last night. You obviously tore out of her place and left her feeling insecure – that's why she was crazy this morning. You going to tell me what made you bolt like that?"

Starsky reached for a second beer from the pack and popped the top. He nodded in agreement, hesitating for a beat before answering his partner.

"I guess you could say I'm all fucked up by being fucked up. Not sure how long this fucked up state is gonna last – but it's sure got a hold of me for now. " The words were bitter and self-deprecating.

"You want to try to explain this fucked up state to your friend who has been in a similarly fucked up state since what happened to you? "

"Ok...Katy went a little bit – got a little bit – ahh shit. How do I explain this? How do I tell you this stuff without it sounding ridiculous, without me sounding like some sort of weak, self absorbed nutcase?"

"Starsky just say it. I'm here to listen, I want to know. Whatever got her so riled up and crying to her friend, got you a number one seat in that interrogation room this afternoon."

"Last night I sorta lost it. But I didn't hurt her – well not intentionally, and certainly not in any physical way. That crap about me being violent last night – not true. "

"I think I worked that one out – it was you not her that was hurting wasn't it? Why?"

Starsky swallowed the mouthful of beer down hard.

"She came on to me. Out of the blue – for her character I guess – but she did. I just – lost it Hutch. Freaked out, freaked out completely. I couldn't cope – it scared the shit out of me. How fuckin' hopeless is that? A pretty woman makes a move for my crotch and I – I panicked. More than panicked. It was as though – as though –"

"It brought it all back to you. What you went through with Ryan. Brought back the fear. It is understandable Starsky. Your reaction, your shock – totally understandable. "

"Not to her it wasn't – and not to me either. I felt, no I feel, like such a limp dick loser. Can't even get turned on by a warm, soft hand. Is this it? Is this how I'm gonna be from now on? Useless sexually? Washed up in my thirties? "

"No of course it's not. Anyone – male or female who has gone through the hell you went through would have readjustment issues. Everything will be back to normal for you in time. Give it time. "

"Yeah the Doc said the same thing – but until it happened – until Katy made a move on me, I guess I didn't realize how much it had messed me up in that way."

"It mightn't have been this bad for you if things had been a little different. You probably would have been ok if the ...the action had moved at your pace. For some reason it sounds like Katy was coming on way too strong. What the hell was she playing at?"
"Probably doin' what she thought a tough city cop expected her to do. After all I'd been coming onto her a bit when we were outside the restaurant. Maybe she thought that was the next logical step."

"And you were feeling ok – when you were still in control of the situation with her – outside the restaurant?"

"Home strike Dr Hutchinson. You've got me all figured out."

Starsky's look was one of gratitude and surprise.

"Am I that damn transparent?"

"Only to me Starsky – only to me. Don't worry, your deep inner workings of the mind are safe from public interpretation."

"Yeah – well you're right. I was happy for some light play – but she wanted to take it indoors, make it private, put her signature on it. I didn't want that. Sad thing is Hutch – I think she did it for me to try to win me over. She's been crossing the line into that 'I want a relationship with you' phase and I guess she thought the most direct way to win me over was to invite me directly to home base." Starsky smiled a little sadly now – "I realize now what she was tryin' to do and I feel sad for her."

"So this morning was her attempt to figure out where she'd done wrong with her come on moves last night?"

"Yep – and she just got more desperate and more angry. She's pushing too hard from all angles now Hutch – and I'll admit I just wanted her to go. So – I brushed her off again – and someone was waiting for her when she got home. So I'm a double heel."

"For Christ's sake Starsky – you had no way of knowing – and anyway – we don't even know anything about the assailant. He might well have been waiting and watching and if it hadn't been this morning, it could have been any time soon."

"Well let's hope she can shape up a good enough description of him and the event to pin the bastard."

"So – with the way things have gone here – with Katy and all … you still feeling like you want to get back? You're not wanting to stick around to sort this relationship out?"

Hutch was surprised by the determination in his partner's voice when he answered.

"Hutch – no matter what happens with Katy – I can't make it my issue. I don't have a relationship with her, nor do I want one. What has happened is terrible and I feel bad for her – but it doesn't change that I can't give her what she wants. I can't even look after myself at the moment – let alone a needy woman."

"So we move ahead with letting Dobey know we're coming back?"

Starsky's face was solemn as he nodded. "This time next week I want to be choking on city smog and sittin' in Hug's bar with a beer and fries. How about you?"

"God – when you sell it to me like that – smog and all – how could I resist?"

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH
So here he was again – waiting – waiting at the hospital for his partner. Thankfully however this was a far less emotionally fuelled experience than other hospital scenarios he had been exposed to over the past years. He had opted to wait in the car while Starsky went in to see Katy. Starsky had phoned the ward that morning and she said she was happy to see him. Of course this hospital visit, waiting for Starsky to return to the car and tell him how she had been with him - it all unnerved him – Hutch would be a liar if he couldn't admit to that. Something about the whole scene with Katy and Starsky outside on the porch and then the subsequent assault on her only a short time after she drove home, was all so very wrong.

Yesterday, despite his brash confidence with the local police, Hutch had been secretly terrified that Starsky was going to find himself in a cell, very much in need of formal legal representation. It was of course a logical pathway and sound police work that brought the two cops to their home to question Starsky. He knew it, Starsky knew it – and so of course did the cops.

If Katy had been in any way vindictive toward Starsky or – if she had been so badly beaten so as not to be able to clear him of the crime, then at this very moment he would not be waiting here outside of the hospital to drive his partner away from his meeting with the injured girl. He'd be sitting in the station near the holding cells, anxiously awaiting legal representation to show up, wonder what sort of evening his partner had endured in the small town cell. Wondering how the attending cops might have treated him given their far from friendly overtures toward them both yesterday during the interview.

Obviously the local cops didn't like them – and their distaste was based more likely on what they represented and not who they were.

Something had happened in this small town where nothing like this usually happened. He and Starsky were recent transplants here, to this place with a history of nothing much ever happening. They were the strangers, the foreigners, the unknown quantity in a town where everyone knew everyone else. Worse still – the only real social connection they had made since being here, a girl that Starsky had been getting to know – had been at the epicenter of the drama.

It was only natural for the local officers to feel instant resentment and suspicion toward the two of them. Knowing that however didn't make it any better for Hutch yesterday when he had to watch the way they shoved Starsky around as though he was some lowlife criminal. Seeing it from their perspective, that they were protecting their own from a possible external threat didn't mean he was any less irked than he was with their abrasiveness and propriety.

He knew that Starsky would be doing more during the hospital visit than just checking on Katy's medical status and offering his support. Starsky had the bad feeling too – he knew it. He would be doing his best to try and glean some more information from Katy – information that she may not have offered the cops.

Of course he would.

It remained of course, whether Starsky would be prepared to share the information with him. Normally that would never have been an issue – but lately there was little of what was normal to hang on to with Starsky. Therapy and what ever went on in that process might have strengthened his partner up again psychologically, but somehow in Starsky finding that inner strength again, Hutch had felt that he had closed him out of a lot of what was ticking around in his mind.

Starsky was holding back from him – parts of himself that he wanted to keep hidden.

And it was the stuff that he was hiding that worried Hutch the most.
It was so hard to look at her like this.

The face was so very different from the face he had looked at only yesterday morning – and it wasn't the horrific bruising, swollen eye and sutured cheek that that made the difference so marked – it was the fear and the shadows. Somehow her body was smaller and shrunken and more fragile than yesterday’s –even though he knew that was a perceptual distortion caused by her defensive body positioning.

It took considerable effort on his part to keep looking at her without revealing the shock he felt at the transformation.

The person on the bed, the young woman in front of him was not the Katy he had come to know but instead a face, a body and a spirit ripped apart by traumatic experience. Physical damage was only one part of it –it was the deeper damage that took its toll.

Overnight Katy's body had been inhabited by a force that had visibly diminished her.

Then it came to him – is this how he also looked in those first few days after Ryan had broken him apart? Is this how he looked to those who knew him well – to Dobey to Huggy and most of all to Hutch? A hollowed out version of himself.

He clearly remembered the way Hutch had looked at him, had looked right inside of him as if he was trying to see the inner damage not just the surface wounds.

Katy's weak tremulous voice filtered through his heavy thoughts and he pulled himself back to the now. Back from his own ugly experience to hers.

"Dave? Hi - you're there. Sorry - I guess I was dozing. The drugs – make me so sleepy. How long've you been sitting there?"

"Hey there. Not long at all – really. Do you want me to leave again so you can sleep?"

"No! No – stay a while please and – well – I mean – only you want to. I want, I need - to say some things to you. "

"Katy. Of course I want to stay. How do you feel? Is the pain bad? Are the drugs keeping it under control?"

"Yes. I just feel dreamy and a little drunk really. No pain really."

"Katy – I'm sorry about what happened to you. I'm sorry that we had words the night before – and in the morning – I know I must have upset you –"

"Dave. I'm the one who should be apologizing. I heard what happened --the police came and took you to the station – Oh God! I'm so sorry. My stupid room mate – told them what I'd said to her about – about me getting upset and you not wanting me. I didn't know that they had you like that, treated you like that – as a suspect. I told them of course – I told them it wasn't you Dave."

"Ssssh- don't get upset Katy. Please just stay calm – you'll end up hurting yourself more. It's no big deal ok? Hey I'm a cop remember? I know how the system works. It's only normal that I'd be taken in for questioning."

"Yes but not treated like a suspect. I know one of those cops – I know what he's like. He can be
really mean and – well he's well known around town for his mean streak."

"Oh well that explains some of it then –" he gave her his best smile designed to brighten her sad face. " Here I was thinkin' it was just me he hated."

"Ken – must hate me for what I put you through with the cops."

"One – Ken does not hate you, and wouldn't blame you for any of what happened and two – he knows that you were still out of it and unable to tell the cops what happened."

He hesitated now as he moved in closer to the bed and took one very pale hand.

"Katy what did happen? Can you talk a little about it with me. I know you probably sick of going through it with the police - but I need to know too and they have only given me limited information."

As though she was reading the question that he had not yet asked she gave him the answer quietly.

"He - he didn't rape me Dave. Just - just really hurt me."

Some of the tension in his body lessened as he nodded solemnly and brushed his hand down her bruised arm.

Can you tell me anything about the man who did this to you?"

"No – I – I've already told the officers – twice they've interviewed me –a lady cop too. I didn't see him. I can't tell them or you anything about him."

"Nothing? Not his voice, his height, his mannerisms – what he was wearing? What he said to you?"

"Dave! Please – I can't recall a thing. I was so scared. So terrified he was going to - to rape me – or kill me. He was going to kill my little dog – said he'd do it if I – "

Abruptly she stopped, her eyes widening at the realization of what she'd just disclosed – let slip out in a moment of neediness.

"Katy? He did talk then. He said things to you? You didn't recognize the voice?"

"No – I had never heard that voice before Dave." Her own voice was barely a whisper now and her eyes were darting about the room as though by looking at him he might see too much, learn too much from her – things she was not prepared to tell him.

"But you were very frightened – and he threatened you? Threatened you – what – in the future – about hurting the dog – if – you said 'if' - if what Katy?"

"Dave I don't want to talk about it. Please do not ask me. The police have already said I wasn't to discuss it with anyone else."

"I'm not just anyone else Katy – I'm both a Detective and a friend who is closely involved to what happened to you remember? It was me who was sittin' in the station last night as the major suspect and I'm only trying to help you to find this man and put him away so he can't do this to anyone else. Anything could help us to find him – any little piece of information could be useful."

"But I've told you- I've told them and I've told you. I don't have any little pieces of information - nothing. I either can't remember or I just didn't take it it as I was so terrified. I was terrified, out of
my mind with fear Dave. There is no point in pushing me to remember something I can't give you."

He could see she was becoming increasingly agitated and emotional so he made a deliberate effort to pull back.

"Alright. It's alright. Just calm down. Maybe later tonight, maybe tomorrow - something will resurface for you. It happens like that often - when the initial fear passes -"

"No. I won't remember anything about him. I have pushed him out of my mind - entirely."

"Katy - we - I - want to get this bastard who did this to you."

It was evident that her thoughts had already moved on and she was looking at him wistfully, almost tragically. He wondered if it was the drugs she was receiving for her pain or it was her over-wrought emotional state after the event that was causing to look at him in that way. As though she had to tell him something he didn't want to hear, wouldn't want to hear.

"Dave I need to tell you - "

"What is it Katy? You look so sad. It's over now - all over. He can't hurt you now."

"No it's not that. Dave - I'm sorry I tried to get you to love me, to want me. I'm sorry - I - pushed myself onto you."

"Hey - I'm the one who is sorry Katy. I've been goin' through some bad stuff at work - I should have told you some more, but I don't talk about it. It's just too damn messed up. All you need to know is that the other night - I - I reacted badly to your ummm - your approaches - and I left you feeling hurt."

"You don't want me I know that now. I saw it yesterday morning on the porch. I saw it so clearly in your eyes."

"It's not you I don't want Katy it's just -"

She went on as if he hadn't spoken, as though her lines were already mapped in her head and she needed to get them out.

"You don't want me. And - I guess - it's just as well you don't. Better for both of us now."

"You're losing me here. Better for both of us? What do you mean?"

He was already feeling worried about how he could layer onto this this self-effacement, the news that he would be returning to the city in only days time. Leaving her behind - leaving behind whatever it was they had or might have had if things had been different. If so many things had been different, not least of all the way he felt about his own recent past.

"I mean - if you don't want me it makes it easier to never see you again. Because - I won't see you again - not once you leave here today."

Confused by the statement he saw the tears spring up in her eyes, already red and swollen from the blows to the face, the pooling tears just added to the miserable caricature of her normally pretty face.

"Well that is one mixed up sentence. Sounds like you're punishing me for something. I know I hurt
you the other night by walking away. I know you were upset yesterday morning - but comin' to the 
house and gettin' mad at Hutch - . Look, I know I was short with you. I'm sorry and I'm so sorry 
that you drove away and this terrible thing happened to you. Don't cry - Katy - I don't do well with 
girl's tears, please, don't cry - " He reached up to gently brush a fat tear away from her bruised 
cheek and was shocked by the force with which he slapped his hand away and held it firmly at bay.

"Don't touch me - please just don't touch me."

He tracked her furtive eyes now as they skittered toward the window and then over to the doorway 
and then back to his hand which hovered half way to her face, still trapped in her own. Her eyes 
grew to see her hand clenching his and she dropped it as if his touch, his hand, was anathema to 
her.

"Hey come on Katy. This is me - Dave. I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe in hospital. There's 
no one at the window, no one watching at the door. You're safe here."

"I'm not safe with you."

"I don't deserve that. Even though I know you've had a big shock - I don't deserve that."

"You have to go Dave. Even coming here now - even seeing you this last time like this was a risk, 
but I just had to see you again. But no more."

"This is just the after effects and the drugs talking. Tomorrow you'll be thinking more clearly. I'll 
go now, let you rest - but I'll come by again in the morning." He stood, but once more brought his 
hand down to touch her lightly on the head.

Again she shrank from his touch.

"No - no tomorrow. I can't see you again. I got to touch you once more - that's it. But no more. I 
won't risk it again."

Starsky narrowed his eyes at her words.

"Katy are you saying that he threatened you against seeing me?"

"Just go Dave."

"Is this what this is about? A jealous boyfriend from the past? Someone who can't or won't let you 
be with other men? Did he do this because of me? Jesus! That's what I've been worried about..."

"NO!"

"I think you're hiding the truth from me because you're scared. Just tell me who he is Katy. I'll 
arrange to have him picked up and we'll have him away from you for good. He won't threaten or 
hurt you again. Tell me who is dammit! You can't live like this. What happens when the next man 
meets you and tries to get to know you? Will he beat you up again - and again?"

"Other men aren't the problem Dave."

"Oh - so just me?" he gave a strangled laugh. "I must be some threat then!

"You're not the threat Dave. I am. Once I get out of your life completely, the problem will be gone 
- that's what I think he meant."

"You're not making any sense now. Once you get out of my life? And who is he anyway?"
He watched as her back stiffened and her face hardened - even under the bruising and the swelling, he could see her resolve harden. It caught him off balance. And then something shifted in his awareness and he saw her words more clearly as though they'd been written on the wall in front of him. Katy was the threat, not him. Even before she answered him - he knew - fully knew what she was going to half tell him.

He already heard in her voice that she was not going to tell him all that he needed.

She couldn't tell him all of it of course.

For he had scared the shit out of her obviously and she was sufficiently burned to heed his warnings of non disclosure.

"He? He was an animal. He was the devil."

"Katy..."

"You must know who he is? I can see it in your face. Of course you do - don't you?"

Odd how the feeling of the rising panic was becoming almost familiar to him now. As the glut of it rose up inside of him, swelling and squeezing until his chest was constricted with the pressure of it, he thought of the man who had done so much in such little time to screw his head up.

" My God. He's been here."

"Whoever he is - whatever he is to you - I'm not prepared to go through what he put me through again. You understand? Tell me you understand that Dave."

"Oh Katy - we can get him if you -"

"Your silence, my safety."

"You have to tell the police all of this and then -"

The look she shot was a strange mixture of desperate plea and unforgiving fury. The repeated words held more gravity as she ground them out between small sobs.

"Your silence. My safety. I'm not asking you much - and I would deny any of this if you took this further."

"Katy - I need to bring him down. With your statement - your help I can -"

"And what about my needs Dave? My need to know that I can be safe in my own home?"

"But do you realise -"

"All I need to realise is that I can be safe and you need to realise that I need that. Goodbye Dave. Go back to your big city life, your own life. It's how I want it. Close the door behind you please."

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

He knew of course that if he didn't get up very soon and make a move back to the car Hutch would come swinging through the foyer door at any moment to come and look for him.

And then how would he explain it? This?
How would he explain that he was sitting here on a plastic chair in the foyer of the hospital looking like he'd just be served a massive blow?

Because without doubt Hutch would see it in his face straight away - no matter how he tried to explain away the fact that he was sweating, shaking and fighting down roll after roll of rising nausea.

Safehouse!

What a fucking joke!

No house, no place, no mind space and most of all - no-one, was safe from Ryan.

Ryan was a disease that wanted to proliferate, insinuate and infiltrate his life.

Even poor, innocent and hopeful Katy had not been exempt from his savage cruelty. Ryan had a seemingly never-ending need to hurt and punish.

Ryan simply cut down obstacles in his path. The sick path that he was treading in his sick life.

Dobson had surely died at his hands because he had pulled away his support - Starsky was convinced of that now.

Katy had been too close to what he himself wanted so he had brutalized her for her involvement - moreso to prove something to Starsky than to punish the girl herself. The message left with Katy was surely just for him.

Ryan's pathology, that deep, inherent violence - was escalating.

It was clear to Starsky now - clearer than it had ever been. What he had to do.

The shaking and the panic began to subside just a little as he firmed up his mind.

There was now every likelihood that Ryan would continue to deteriorate, continue to cut down anything that his sick mind thought stood in his way of his 'relationship' with the man he seemed to want to possess.

If Starsky's need to avenge what had already been done to him was not already a fire in his belly, then now when it was sickeningly apparent where Ryan was going with all of this - his motivation was stronger than ever.

Ryan had thought nothing of doing what he had done to Katy - someone whom Starsky had barely come to know. A young woman who was in reality still quite peripheral in his life. If Ryan had been prepared to do that to her - then how far would he be prepared to go with hurting the single most significant person in his life?

Starsky was certain now.

There was only one way to keep Hutch alive and to get them both back to some form of normal life.

One whiff of this to Dobey and he and Hutch might find themselves being moved on to yet another out of the way location and it could well impede his chances of being reinstated for a hell of alot longer yet. And all that fallout could well be for nothing because unless pushed heavily Starsky believed that Katy would not come forward with a testimony against Ryan.

Schooling his face into an expression that would hopefully mask the shape of his real thoughts, he
pushed to his feet and walked out the door toward the hospital parking lot.

Partnerships as a rule did not function well with one half of the team withholding information.

Deception was not an art that Starsky liked to practice - and one that he had rarely if ever used with Hutch, except under the most extreme circumstances. Their continued survival on the job depended on open two way communication. Partner, 'what I know, you know too.' - was the name of their game.

Deceiving Hutch was also not an easy feat to achieve and Starsky knew he would have to pull out all stops to bring the show off. He drew closer to their parked car and at once he saw the blond head turn toward him with expectant concern. Just that look alone was almost enough to have him faltering.

Lying to Hutch was already hurting him.

Starsky stopped. He turned and looked back at the hospital. Then he looked up at the perfect blue sky in this picture perfect town where evil could find its way to just the same, just as easily as it could into the grimey backstreets of his city.

Reality was shit and right now his seemed the shittiest of all.

He pulled open the passenger car door and tried not to look at his friend's sympathetic eyes as he climbed in. Instead he stole one more glance back at the hospital - where Ryan's latest victim lay battered and demoralised.

This last private moment of hesitation divided him from the line he was prepared to step over.

From this point on till some shadowy endpoint he couldn't yet define, he would do what he had to do to keep Hutch safe.

Starsky slipped into the car and felt the pressure, the intensity instantly.

Hutch was already searching his face for some measure of what had just gone on back inside the hospital with Katy.

He went straight to a diversionary tactic.

"Let's get outta here ok? I hate hospitals."

Obviously the tactic fell short of it's intended goal as Hutch's eyes were boring into him, the perennially perceptive gaze trying to sum up his partner's mood.

"Ok – you want to go straight back to the house or catch a coffee somewhere first?"

"Or a fuckin' drink?"

"Sure... we can do that too if you want. Though it's kinda early for a drink Starsk."

"What? Since when did we need the clock to decide on havin' a drink?"

Hutch nodded slowly and looked in the rear vision, looked to the side window and then looked back at his brooding partner.
"That bad hey?"

"Well she sure don't look too pretty at the moment. He did a number on her face and I'm sure he bruised her up in other places. At least though - I got a report from the staff nurse before I went into see her – at least she wasn't raped. Small mercies right?"

His shaky laugh did nothing to disguise his stress.

Hutch exhaled and squeezed Starsky's shoulder.

"Thank God for that. Though violation is violation. She was prepared to talk to you?"

"At first she was ok with me….but in the end. I guess she felt I was pushing her too hard to recall something, anything – to help get a handle on her attacker."

"What? Do you mean she can't provide a rough description – not a thing?"

Hutch looked genuinely shocked and more than a little unconvinced.

"Yep – hardly believable is it? She says she has nothing to give us – not a single damn thing. She's scared Hutch – terrified. Just wants to get on with her life and put it behind her."

"Well we've seen this a few dozen times before in investigating rape and assault cases – but this – this is such a small town. Surely – "

"Nothing. She has nothing."

"And – what you believe her?"

Hutch's inspection of his partner intensified and with the intensity Starsky's scowl deepened.

"Hey! Don't give me that look as if this has anything to do with me. Whether I believe her or not makes no damn difference does it? If she ain't gonna open up, she ain't gonna open up – and especially not to me the way things went with us the other night and morning."

"But the local police – they surely won't buy this. They need to get a female officer involved – give her a bit of time. She's just scared, bewildered. Maybe after she –"

"She won't talk Hutch – I'm tellin' ya."

"You seem pretty sure about that partner."

Starsky averted his face and made as if to adjust the side mirror. He could feel the light confrontation in his partner's statement.

"Yeah – well – you weren't there to hear her. She's determined, really determined."

"How did she take the news of your plans to head back home? That must have been hard to deliver to her after what she's been through. I was worried how you were going to manage that one."

A short bitter laugh revealed a little of Starsky's mood.

"Well – you wasted your worry time buddy because in the end it wasn't even an issue. It makes little difference to her now."

"What?"
"Katy froze me out – completely. Wants me out of her life. Whatever she felt or wanted is no longer – finito."

"Seriously? Shit. She must be badly rocked by this."

"Either that or I proved to her the other night that I am not exactly the man she is looking for."

"Oh Starsk – it has nothing to do with you. She came to the house the next morning trying to get you back didn't she? This is just the icing on the cake for her I suppose. First of all she knew she had messed things up with you and then walked right into a violent assault."

"You tryin' to make me feel better about my role in all of this? You don't think I should shoulder some of the blame for her being an emotional wreck at the moment?"

"You did nothing wrong Starsky. You just reacted. Reacted to her inappropriate behavior."

"Maybe – but you and I know men jump ladies bones all the time and make no excuses for doing it."

"Starsky, you want to feel responsible, feel responsible. Katy's getting assaulted had nothing to do with you walking out on her the other night. Just because she has been made a victim by this doesn't mean she should have handled herself differently with you. She knew – right from that day she brought you home from the park that you'd been through a bad time."

Starsky raised his shoulders in a half hearted shrug.

"Maybe…Anyway, at least I didn't have to cause her more heartbreak by telling her I was leaving."

"And what about you? You looked pretty raw when you walked up to the car. I was thinking something really heavy went on up there between the two of you. Are you ok with all of this?"

"I will be – soon. Let's drive Hutch – changed my mind about a drink. I just want to go home. Can we just do that?"

As Hutch revved the engine he was in no doubt that Starsky's reference to 'home' had little to do with the pretty homely bungalow they had lived in over the past weeks.

Riley was there early. He made sure of it. He wasn't even sure why. Why or what was the purpose of what he was intending to do over the next week or so. What the hell it was even going to achieve. As if watching and following Ryan was going to change anything, fix anything, make him repay for anything and everything he had done?

All he knew is that he felt the need to get a handle on this man, to understand a little bit more about how he moved through life, his daily routines, his affiliations, his agenda with the world.

Ryan had planted himself in his gut – low and hot the burn of what he had made Riley feel that night at the beach house was still there – smoldering away at his insides, a nagging, fiery ball of resentment that he needed to dispel. This man had pushed him to this point. A point that led him to be here - sitting low in his car, waiting, watching, and spying. So suspicious and untrusting that he felt the need to prove to himself more than anyone else that this malicious cop had even more to hide than he was showing.

True to his word, he was here on his own time. It would be two more hours before he had to clock
on for his day shift at the precinct and while he sat low in his seat he staved off a large yawn of the fatigue that would only get worse at the pulling of interfaced double shifts, one for paid work and one for clandestine surveillance. Already he had committed himself in his own head to tailing Ryan later on that night.

After all it wouldn't kill him. He was young. Young, but no longer naïve. No longer guileless.

Which was just as well Riley decided. Just as well because after that night at the beach house he knew. Better than anyone. Better perhaps even than Hutch, better even than Starsky. After all, he was the one who had seen Ryan's eyes just before he pulled the trigger on him. He was the one who had looked into those eyes and glimpsed what Ryan was capable of doing if he chose to do it.

Somehow Riley had got the thought, the belief into his mind – maybe a zealous and overly idealistic mind due to his age – but it was there nonetheless. Ryan had been allowed to walk away far too easily and justice had not been served. In his head now was the idea that if he waited and watched this monster for long enough, he would find the answers he needed.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Once in the house Hutch was not surprised to see the retreating back of Starsky disappear into his bedroom, the door closing behind him with a mumbled explanation of needing to chill out for a while.

Fine. He might have accepted that rationale – just that it was not normally Starsky's style to take to his room to chill out. Starsky's version of chilling and unwinding habitually occurred in front of a television screen, slumped out on the couch, a beer in one hand, food in the other. However since Ryan there had been more and more sojourns to the privacy of his bedroom to ostensibly 'chill'. Hutch knew that the closed door was all about not wanting to be asked any more questions or to be scrutinized any further about what transpired between him and Katy at the hospital.

During the drive back to the house Starsky had broached the subject of Dobson's funeral and stated in his stubborn tone that he intended to be there. Hutch had been surprised that the subject was even an issue with him and when he learned that Starsky had in fact called the Nineteenth Precinct to get the details on the funeral, he was even more surprised.

His surprise was not well received. Nor was his concern that Dobey had warned that the funeral could turn out to be a venue where Starsky might once more cross paths with Ryan if he also chose to attend the ceremony. Starsky had snapped at him and said that it was his basic human right to pay his respects to whomever he wished to pay his respects. Therefore if he chose to attend Dobson's funeral, no one was going to stop him – least of all Dobey.

Starsky's word had been final, his tone definitive and his look defiant.

The rest of the drive home had been yet another one of resilient silence and Hutch had found no way in to find out more about Katy and her attacker.

Yet again Hutch had found himself very effectively stonewalled.

Whatever. He could do little about it now, not when Starsky chose to segregate himself. He would leave him alone and hope as he so often hoped these past weeks, months, that when the door opened once more some of the moody darkness might have lifted.

Hutch decided there was no point in delaying the call any longer. Starsky wanted out of this place and wanted back to what was his home and his life. He had given this whole time out and safe
house thing a respectable go and his patience was nearing the end.

Whether Dobey, the IA or anyone else involved in this effort to put physical and mental distance between them and Ryan Lancaster were ready for it – they were coming back.

Dobey took little time in coming on the phone.

"Hutch – I've already called you twice this morning. Where the hell have you two been? Yesterday evening too – no answer."

Must be in a good mood – this morning I get 'Hutch' and not a growled 'Hutchinson'.

Hutch thought on his feet. Dobey could not know about what had gone down with Katy. He would be immediately concerned that it would set Starsky back and worry about his readiness to return to work.

"Oh you know Cap'n – this place has such a wild social life, Starsky and I are always out and about."

He hoped his lame chuckle didn't sound as lame as it did to his own ears.

"Is that so? What in hell would you find to do on Sunday morning there? And don't try to tell me you were both at church!"

Hutch's laugh was genuine now.

"No I won't try to tell you that. Just driving around having a bit of a last look around – caught some breakfast out."

"Ok – what the hell is that supposed to mean? "Last look around"?"

"Captain," He could hear himself dragging the full title out slowly, preparation for what he had to say to his superior next. "Its time to come back."

"How do you know that Hutchison?"

"We're ready, that's all."

"I thought it was up to me to decide that."

"Starsky's got a full clearance from the shrink and – "

"And?"

Hutch looked toward Starsky's bedroom door and scrubbed at his face.

"And, I won't be able to hold him for much longer. He wants out Cap'n. He's had enough and frankly I have too. We need to get on with our lives."

"How soon? When are you thinking of doing this?"

"Tomorrow Sir."

"Tomorrow! That's not going to work. Dobson's funeral in late tomorrow afternoon."

"Cap'n you don't want to push him anymore to stay. He's ready to leave and there's nothing to be
gained by riling him up making him stay another few days. Besides – " and he knew that Dobey would not want to hear this. "He's already mentioned to me this morning that he wants to pay his respects to Dobson. He – he – ah found out about the funeral himself anyway. He plans to go no matter what your advice to him on that matter."

Dobey cursed.

"And what if Lancaster shows up, which in all probability he'll do – more to try and stir up trouble then because he cares about his ex boss."

"Then – we'll just have to deal with it."

"You'd better be sure of that Hutchinson. I sure don't want to find that the first day back in this city, you or your partner go head to head with that man. Just what the Commissioner would need to see to seal both of your fates."

"I said we'll deal with it Captain. Now – have I got your verbal approval to head back tomorrow morning and will you sort out with the Commissioner about us leaving here?"

"Just worry about yourselves – I'll arrange to get the home cleaned and closed up. Bring the keys with you – the local firm that looks after it has their own set. And Hutch?"

"Yes?"

"You sure about this? You really think he's ready to come back and have his suspension lifted?"

In all honesty, Hutch knew he didn't have an answer to that one.

"What I know Cap'n is that he's stronger than he's been in a long while, but he's also getting angry, frustrated. He needs some purpose again. He needs to get back out there. He's starting to eat away at himself. So yeah – I think its time."

Yes it was time. Whether either of them were ready or equipped to cope with what life might throw at them when they stepped back into their world was another thing altogether.

Those thoughts remained unspoken.

There would be no point, no gain whatsoever in voicing that to his Captain.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Hutch hated funerals as much as everybody else on the planet. Funerals for cops who had died in the line of duty though had to be especially difficult to endure. So much pain, so much waste, so much cut short or snuffed out violently, senselessly – suddenly.

Except Dobson's funeral was different. A cop – revered in his own way, respected, liked by many, tolerated by some, his was a life cut short too – suddenly gone, snuffed out – perhaps not in the call of duty but in the name of it.

Whether he had killed himself or had a helping hand - it was the job and its stressors that had ended his life.

Right now Hutch couldn't call up the energy to think too much about how Dobson might have ended up in a coffin that before his eyes was being lowered into the ground.

His energy had all been used up in running an internal debate since last evening about whether the
decision to pack up and head back to the city with Starsky was going to be something he was forever going to regret.

Of course they had to come back eventually. Perhaps though their hasty evacuation from the house and almost frantic need of Starsky to get them up and out of the house and on the road by mid morning seemed all too desperate, all too panicked. It was as if Starsky was racing back toward something – agitated and frenetic in his attempt to close the chapter of their past weeks in this sleepy retreat.

When Hutch asked him again if he didn't want to go and see Katy once more before leaving, Starsky had been frustrated with the suggestion and irrevocable in his dismissal of the suggestion.

So with the house empty of their possessions and largely devoid of any sigh that they had been the home's occupants for the past weeks, Starsky had turned the car back toward the city.

The fact that Starsky was suddenly certain that he wanted to drive surprised Hutch before he realized of course that it shouldn't have. It was symbolic of his partner's return to the norm, to re-establishing his equilibrium.

After weeks of Starsky being the nominated "invalid", the one to be looked after, and the one to be the passenger and not the driver in their lives, Starsky was reasserting his role as chief navigator.

Back at helm, the wheel of their everyday lives. His straight back and firm thrust of chin and dark intense eyes, reaffirmed to Hutch that he was back not just as the pre-Ryan Starsky, but as a more vigilant, more wary, more predatory Starsky than he had been before. It was as though Ryan had scarred him up and his resistance was tougher and more impervious than before.

Despite Hutch's suggestion that they make an off main road detour to take in an early lunch to break up the drive, Starsky had been quickly dismissive of the idea.

"Funeral's at three thirty. We're gonna hit afternoon traffic as it is - so need to keep ahead of the time. We'll have to cross town to where the church is, so we'll just go directly there and not bother unloading the car till after."

He'd tried again with the rationale about the funeral not being a good idea.

"Starsky – you sure about going to this? After all – it's not entirely necessary professionally or personally – Dobson was not our precinct."

"You know I had a hell of a lot of do with him in the last months Hutch. You even more so. Gotta pay respects to our fellow cop."

"Yes – but …"

"Don't say it again ok? You're worried about Ryan?"

"Aren't you? You should be."

"Why – if he's there, I'll keep my distance."

"But what if he doesn't? What if he tries to give you a hard time?"

"Then I have you to take care of him. You can't help yourself with that."

Finally Hutch was rewarded with a teasing smile to break the hard implacable face profile that he
had watched all the way back on the journey.

"That's the whole problem Starsky. It would be disastrous if he caused either of us to react to him at an event like that – the brass will be watching all us – especially you to see that you're ready to move on and get back to work. You let him, I let him, get under our skin – then we're both fucked."

"Then – we won't give him the satisfaction. We won't play into his hands. You can do that can't you Hutch? You can ignore him if you have to."

"I'm not so sure Starsky – I'm not so sure. He makes my blood boil, my fists ache. If he takes you on…"

"Alright – let me tell you something. That won't happen. He might try – but he won't take me on."

"What do you mean by that? Now it sounds like you're taking the offensive. I'm not liking the sounds of this already Starsky."

"Hutch – you've done nothing but stand between me and that creep and try to protect me from him. You don't have to do that no more now. I'm through it. Remember – the therapy? I told you. I'm on the other side of him. Maybe still got a ways to go with my own hang-ups after what he did, but as far as that fucker is concerned – no more. He doesn't get to fuck me around anymore. He won't move me around on his playing field ever again. You don't have to stand between us anymore Hutch. Believe me. Look at me - trust me on this ok? "

The look that Starsky shot him as he turned his head in the car, taking him eyes from the road long enough to convey his conviction, left Hutch no room for anything but total belief.

Starsky had made up his mind on many things so it seemed. They would return to the city, he would resume his role as driver, he would attend Dobson's funeral, he was ready for return to work and – Ryan was going to be dethroned as Chief Fucker Over of his life.

Standing at the graveside Hutch thought about all of Starsky's resolutions and adamant statements. It should have made him feel better. It should have made him think that it indicated a natural end to the havoc that Ryan had brought into their lives. Starsky firm and no longer disempowered. Ryan no longer possessing the ability to break Starsky down because Starsky had found the strength to deal with what he had done to him.

It didn't though. It didn't make Hutch think of any of that. He wasn't feeling at all optimistic right about now. Looking down into the bowels of the grave, seeing the packed hard soil that would soon be layered upon the coffin, Hutch could think of only bad things.

Wasted life, pain and suffering, fear and hatred, but most of all he thought about what he had seen in the cold flat dark of Starsky's eyes when he was speaking about Ryan. The look in those eyes that Hutch had caught before Starsky quickly turned back to watch the road.

Vengeance.

This wasn't the end of Ryan in their lives at all.

No matter how Starsky thought he could frame it up for his partner to make it all sound like he was in fact on the 'other side', that he was 'through it.'

Nothing was over at all.

It was just different.
Riley had been standing off to the side of the crowd at burial. He wasn't even sure he would go beyond the church proceedings – funerals were still unbearably difficult for him.

In the end he had followed in his car with the rest of the procession of vehicles filled with mourners, friends, professional associates and polite acquaintances who had come to lay Dobson to rest.

He'd seen Starsky and Hutch as soon as they entered the church, but wasn't sure they had seen him. In fact he wasn't sure they had seen anyone else. So intent as always of course were they in only seeing each other, being aware of each other. He'd tracked them from his pew on the end, tucked inconspicuously between a couple of other young officers from the Nineteenth. He watched them as made their way to an unoccupied pew – almost as though they wanted to be separate, apart from the crowd. They never once indicated or communicated with each other that they were going to do so – just silently moved in tandem to slip into the long empty seat both knowing without speaking that that was where they would position themselves.

A few of the officers raised their eye in silent surprise at their sudden appearance having been absent from the force for weeks now. One or two looked as though they might have been about to lean forward and say something to them but stopped short when it was obvious that the two detectives were not acting in any way approachable. As they moved into place in the pew one had a hand on the other's shoulder, the other offered a touch on the other's arm. Both of them looked like they were there to help the other.

Only once they were seated did he see them begin talking to each other, murmuring to each other, the two contrasting head's of hair merging together as they shared some words. There was at once something different to the Starsky that Riley had been hearing about and seeing since the Kalzo case. There was an edge of threatening menace to him, as though he was short on patience and tolerance and was barely able to contain the simmering mood that was etched on his hardened face.

Hutch's eyes seemed to be taking in the whole congregation, scouring for a dark head with a thick curtain of black hair. Riley knew that Hutch would be searching for Ryan of course – forever on guard. As if sensing his partner's anxiety Riley watched Starsky reach up and touch the back of Hutch’s neck – as though to quiet him, steady him. It was as though now it was Starsky who was trying to pacify Hutch – because of course Riley knew also, Starsky would know who Hutch was looking for, would know the anxiety that he would be feeling on behalf of his partner.

They were almost fascinating to study and not for the first time since he'd known them did he feel compelled to continue watching, trying to understand their unique chemistry, trying to work out what made them tick as they did. Whether or not it was their forced isolation away from the mainstream of society, their weeks spent in close confinement together that was making them see all the more exclusive, Riley wasn't sure, but whatever it was clear that they were as much as a tight reinforced unit as they ever were.

Riley wondered if the time away had eased Starsky's total non-acceptance of him. Would he still harbor the same hostile attitude toward him as he had on the morning that they had left the city for the safe house? If he did and judging by the solid tightness of the partners' bond today he might as well say goodbye to any friendship with Hutch.

After the service he had lost track of Starsky and Hutch and presumed that they had left for the burial in their own car as soon as the church emptied.

Having arrived at the cemetery he had not moved down to the area where the minister was
mingling with mourners and relatives, waiting for everyone to arrive for the final part of the funeral. He wasn't even sure yet whether he would – feeling more comfortable hanging back, keeping a good distance from the grave.

He'd been leaning lightly against one of the big trees when he felt the bulk of the figure beside him and smelled an almost sickly essence of aftershave. Even in the open in was too strong.

"Well if it isn't boy wonder Officer Riley. How are you kid? Come to pay your respects because you knew the man or because you want to earn some brownie points from all of the bigwigs floating around here today?"

"Respect is something you probably don't know about Ryan. You've hardly earned any yourself over the past few months."

"Well hardly seems to matter now does it given the stiff in the coffin over there decided to shaft me. The day he did that he lost my respect, and I stopped needing anyone else's."

"You sure you ever wanted it? Didn't seem much like it to me?"

"Where do you get off being so full of yourself Junior? Don't remember rookie officers ever having the right or the belief that they can judge fellow officers more superior to them."

"You're not though are you? More superior to me? Not anymore. Its not a judgment call Ryan – its an observation – a fairly accurate one I'd say. Why are you here anyway if you aren't crying tears for Dobson's death?"

"Now, that's not very nice of you. I got the shift off for this specially and you ask me that? You dare to question my sincerity boy? Anyway – you'd know that wouldn't you? Know that I'd taken the shift off?"

Riley hoped he wasn't blanching, hoped his breath hadn't kicked up at the taunting cold sneer that challenged him face on.

"You like to watch me Riley? You like to sit outside my place in your car and watch and wait and look? You think I don't know you stupid little fuck? What do you hope to see Riley? What's your fantasy? You want another opportunity to be a big tough cop? You gonna shoot me again if I try something Riley?"

"Let's say Ryan that I don't trust you. More so since you've been kicked off the force. I don't trust you, and I don't believe you. Like I don't know why you've shown up here today – even though I suspected you would try it."

"Dobson was by boss for more than five years. I think that buys me rights to throw a flower on his casket don't you?"

"Except for the very obvious fact that he and you parted ways badly and I know you resented him for that - deeply."

"I think the asshole resented it more deeply than me – he treated me like a piece of shit and in the end the guilt of doing that got to him. Gutless wonder took his own life because he couldn't live with himself."

Riley could hardly believe the twist and spin this man could put on anything – it was almost as though he believed his own story.
"Well then – convenient for you that he ended his own life. I must admit though someone like Dobson – someone so strong didn't strike me as someone to do that? The way he did it."

Ryan narrowed his eyes and paused before giving off a shallow laugh.

"The way he did? You testing me out Officer Riley? You trying to catch me out here Junior Detective? You mean by taking the pussy way out and letting himself bleed out painlessly like a girl? No magnum to the mouth?"

"The M.O was not public knowledge."

Ryan was laughing harder now, sneering blending with faked mirth.

"Not public knowledge? Am I not a former cop you stupid fuckhead? You don't think I keep my finger on the pulse with what's happening in my own backyard. Just because I'm out doesn't mean I don't keep my useful connections. Oh Riley – its almost fun playing with you Junior Detective. Trying to solve the fucking crime like one of the big boys. No wonder you've been tailing me."

"Told you Ryan – I don't and won't trust you. I came here today mainly to prove to myself that you'd show up."

"You don't have to worry about me being here Officer Riley. Think I might go after your blond idol, big brave Detective Hutchinson? You can put your gun away, you won't need to draw on me at my ex Captain's fucking funeral. I'm seriously just here for the party. All the drama and the mystique, watching all the emotional shit that people will carry on with now he's gone. Plus – who knows I might just get to bump into some old friends. Funerals, just like weddings have a way of bringing everyone together again. All that sentimental crap."

"You already know that he's here."

"Oh – and I thought that the city's two finest had slipped out of town never to be seen again. Hidden away like two fucking celebrities. I seriously didn't imagine the luck of bumping into them here today."

"Cut the act Ryan. I may be young but I'm learning fast from you. You've seen him. You weren't in the church but I'm sure you've already seen him over near the grave."

"Of course I've seen him Riley. And doesn't he look well? You think I'd waste my valuable time coming to a man's funeral who threw me to the lions otherwise?"

"You've done enough to them Ryan. You've put him and Hutch through hell. Pick up your sorry life and move on why don't you?"

Ryan pushed off from where he had been leaning languidly against the tree and paused to give Riley a sneer filled with pure condescension.

"What a loyal little soldier you are Riley. Supportive and loving to him. Like a sloppy, drooling pup. A dumb and trusting pup. Maybe you want to do with Hutchinson what he does to Starsky. You want to suck his dick? Is that it Junior? You got the secret hots for the blond beauty? I bet you do."

"You're utter filth Ryan. Complete filth."

"Yeah? You don't like me? Then take my advice and quit hanging around the same parties I do. Like this one for a start. Like waiting outside my apartment and following me all over the town.

"Well then – convenient for you that he ended his own life. I must admit though someone like Dobson – someone so strong didn't strike me as someone to do that? The way he did it."

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"Yeah? You don't like me? Then take my advice and quit hanging around the same parties I do. Like this one for a start. Like waiting outside my apartment and following me all over the town.
You don't like me or what I have to say to you? Then keep your distance and maybe you'll manage to keep your face intact too. Otherwise don't complain about my habits."

Ryan cast a glance over to where the small knot of people who had been gathered about the gravesite were slowly beginning to disperse.

"Nice chatting to you Junior, but now it seems that they've finally put Dobson in the ground, I want to catch up with that old friend of mine."

"Leave him alone you freak."

Ryan whirled on him in an instant and was close enough now for Riley to smell the pure vapor of his cologne and see the bristling of his five o'clock shadow.

"And you Riley boy – you make sure you leave me the fuck alone too do you hear? No more early morning I spy in the side streets outside my place or late night shadowing when I leave work. Fuck you and your amateur detective games. I don't like being watched get it? At least not by some sniveling boy wonder cop. Take that as a warning – the first and only one you'll get from me. Now – I need to go and pay some condolences to Starsky. Maybe not for losing Dobson but for the fact that he has been missing out on me for the past six weeks or more. It seems that his blond bodyguard has finally moved away from his side to talk to his captain. And – if I am not mistaken the man is looking right at me as we speak."

"Hutch won't allow you anywhere near him."

"Oh listen to yourself for Christ sake! Hutchinson is no obstacle to me. Besides – now is your chance to get him off to the side yourself. I am sure you have missed your mentor while he has been sequestered away from you."

Starsky pushed Hutch off toward Dobey. Their Captain was standing with a small group of higher ranking officers across the wide expanse of lawn on the opposite side of the cordoned off private zone.

"Go will ya' – he'll want to talk to you before I come on the scene. I know he'll be wantin' the full report on 'how is your partner really going?' before I arrive to make him feel awkward."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Hutch you need to ask? You know me...."

His face was starting to take on the all too familiar pinched look, a slight discomfort readily visible on his face. His body too had begun moving a tell tale dancing jive from one foot to the other - a dance step Hutch was way too aware of in his partner and one he had seen for years.

"God Starsky, you and your bladder. Didn't you go just before we went into the damn church?"

"Watch your tongue will you! We're on sacred ground here. That's almost blasphemy Hutch – and I did – but – well – that drive down. No stops and it's all backlogged I guess."

"Then go – come back to where I'll be talking to Dobey."

"You go get him buttered up for me first like you do so well. I'll hit the john and when I get out he'll be pushover material."
"Oh sure – you want miracles now just because we're on 'sacred ground'?"

With a light laugh he waved Hutch off – impatient to find the nearest john which he knew was only just back at the entrance to the gates. Casting his eyes about once more to get his bearings he stopped dead in his tracks.

There they were – both of them – as large as life and blatantly together.

He took in the sight of the two of them, standing close, deep in conversation. Starsky saw how Riley nodded his head in the direction to where he was standing and a moment later Ryan turned to settle his sights on him also.

Riley with the enemy, enmeshed and conspiring – almost flagrantly throwing it in his face.

He would have liked to catch Riley's eye to show him his open disgust but the kid seemed too intent on listening to Ryan.

Somehow through his haze of silent rage he navigated the route to the john more now to give himself a moment's reprieve from the rage boiling up form deep inside of him than to take care of nature.

By the time he came out again, neither of the two men was visible.

He knew Hutch was most likely waiting for him to meet with him and Dobey but the anger of seeing the two of them like that together left him shaking with rage and so when a couple of other people came up to greet him he took the time to exchange a few words. He needed to shake off the tension of seeing Riley with Ryan before he fronted Dobey.

Turning away from a female Sergeant from the Nineteenth he found himself face to face with Ryan.

The shock of finding himself in such confined proximity to his own personal nightmare was extreme but he was quick to reassert his coolness.

Neither of them spoke and neither moved. Starsky held eye contact and waited. He was damned if he would be the first to succumb to breaking the suspended tension with words.

After what seemed like five minutes of protracted animation but was more likely only seconds – Ryan's resonating voice broke the silence.

"Starsky."

Just that one word. Dropped between them and left there, stark and bare and tinged with reverence.

Starsky almost flinched at the sound of his own name and the way it was delivered from Ryan's tongue.

He had nothing to say in response.

"I see you're back – back from wherever you went to hide from me."

"Come to gloat at the dead Ryan?"

"Dobson was a fair enough boss for many years. I owe him something."

"I'm sure you felt you owed him something. That's why we're all here today watching him get
lowered into the ground."

Ryan made a sound that was half way between a ragged hiss and a shocked intake of breath.

"Careful Starsky. I don't much like your tone. Someone could easily take that the wrong way. Keep your smart comments to yourself."

"Seems to me Ryan that you're starting to unravel – and fast. You're on a downhill track with no brakes – the only way for you to stop is crash into something or someone hard enough to stop your fall. You probably won't live through the impact."

"All these threatening metaphors Starsky. You been schooling up while you've been away playing house in your pretty little bungalow with your pretty lover boy?"

"You motherfucker – you were there weren't you? Watching us? How many times did you sit outside pulling yourself off? You sick, pathetic lowlife."

The nauseating smile that Starsky so hated was in place - smug and tight.

"Just long enough to see your little woman pawing you, begging you for attention. You can be quite a mean bastard when you choose to be Starsky. Rejecting the poor girl the way you did. I was quite surprised. By the time I got to her she was beside herself with grief. Crying and upset because of the way you treated her."

"Shut up now. Shut the fuck up now."

He won't get to me. He won't break me down - not already.

"Its true. Do you know that I think deep down she almost believed she deserved to be slapped around and hurt – it was as if I was her self-induced punishment. When I rammed my hand up her tight pussy I really think she felt she deserved to be treated like that. You made her feel that way Starsky. You made her drive off from your house feeling like a low life whore."

Even the fresh open air couldn't provide enough oxygen for his brain right now. The sky was coming closer and the ground was rising up – his rage tightening his chest to the point where he could not seem to extract even a hint of air.

He turned away and looked anywhere but at the man beside him. Took long deep breaths and tried to calm down before he spoke again.

Somewhat recovered he turned back to see the look of gloating anticipation on Ryan's handsome face. He was so hungry for reward – the reward of Starsky's capitulation.

But he couldn't let it happen.

He wouldn't let it happen.

"You won't do it Ryan. This won't work. I'm not going to let you do this."

"Do what? I already did it Starsky – I already left my mark on your little woman, and I told her I'll do it again if I need to."

"Forget Katy. She's in the past. Leave her be. But you won't push me to the point now where I'll lose it here. Here in front of Dobey, two of the I.A guys over there and all of these fellow cops. I'm over your mind games Ryan. Don't try to fuck with my head anymore because I will not lose
control."

"I can see you're worried about the crowd around us - quite an audience. After all you are still on suspension aren't you? Still not well Starsky? Still a psychological mess?"

"I'm well Ryan. Well enough to not let you walk around in my head anymore."

Ryan didn't respond to his declaration but instead looked up and over to a small group of people in the distance. Starsky looked too and saw what had drawn Ryan's attention.

The all too familiar gut clench of fear punched low and hard. Hutch.

The unmistakable blond head, almost white in the late afternoon dappled sun, turned toward them. Starsky knew the moment Hutch saw Ryan. He immediately stepped away from his rotund Captain, his whole body visibly preparing to move. His partner's tall form leaned down to quickly disengage himself from the conversation with Dobey.

"Look at that Starsky – look at him. He's seen me, seen me standing here with you. He's like your own personal radar system isn't he? Picks up any signal that you may be in danger or under threat. He'll be over here by your side in no time won't he?"

Ryan studied Starsky, searching for a slip in composure.

"So – you say I can't walk around in your head anymore? Can't find ways to get close to you, to get what I want from you."

"Certain of it."

"I'm know you would like me to believe that Lover but surely you realize I know you too well for that."

"I've told you before Ryan – you don't know me now and I realize you've never really ever known me."

"Oh so so wrong Starsky. I don't even have to know you that well to know where your real vulnerability lies – most people in the department know it. And because I do in fact know you fairly well I know to what lengths and extremes you would go to ensure and protect that vulnerability."

He should have known it was going to come to this – after all that is why he'd come back.

That is why he needed to be back here to deal with this threat head on.

It was only a matter of time of course. A matter of time before Ryan took the inevitable step; and a matter of time before he needed to take his own to block that step.

"I want you to walk away from me now Ryan. Turn around and walk away before Hutch gets here."

"So full of anger today Starsky – it's all just beneath the surface isn't it – that cold hard rage. Don't like me threatening him do you?"

"You won't get a chance to hurt him Ryan. I won't let it happen."

"Like you didn't let me get near that stupid bitch Katy?"
"You say you know me? You bring my partner into what is between us? Then you should know...already. When Hutch is in the equation, I don't miscalculate."

Starsky walked away toward Hutch who was pushing through a small milling group to get to him.

Behind him Starsky knew Ryan had not followed.

For now - just for now, there was a reprieve.

Starsky wanted to cut him off at the pass, get the first word in before Hutch could let go in a mini explosion, which he could clearly see brewing inside his partner. By the time Hutch aborted his conversation with Dobey when he saw Ryan he had to push through the small throng of people to reach Starsky on the other side of the grave. By then Ryan had peeled off to the side and walked away.

As Hutch drew up in front of him, Starsky reached out and pulled down the finger that Hutch was bringing up to shoot in the direction of Ryan's retreating figure.

"So Hutch - " with one arm firm on Hutch's wrist he didn't have to look at his friend's face to pick up on the steel-like tension. "You manage to get Dobey all buttered up for me? Gonna put me back on the street tomorrow morning you reckon?" He aimed to quickly divert the flash of anger before Hutch stormed up Ryan.

"Forget Dobey – what the hell was that all about?"

"Nothin'. He's gone now anyway. Leave it."

"What the - ! I turn around and you're face to face with Ryan and you expect me to leave it? Where the fuck did he come from? I leave you alone for two minutes and he's – Jesus, Starsk."

"Leave it alone Hutch. It's what we agreed about isn't it? No scenes here today in front of the brass or the other brothers. No risk to me gettin' my badge back. I handled him – he's walked off. No big deal."

"Starsky – "

"Listen Hutch – you've been interceptin' Ryan long enough. Now it's my turn to do some limit setting with him. I dealt with him - ok? I need to put the bastard in a zone where he can't get to us – where he can't needle us. I told him – not here, not now, no action between us will go down. And see? He's walked. Behaving himself for once. "

Not really but it was all he was prepared to tell Hutch.

"Did he threaten you?"

"Hutch – come on – Dobey is looking at us both. Let's just walk over there and act cool. Put Ryan out of your mind. I need to do everything I can to make Dobey believe I'm ready for reinstatement."

"Did he threaten you?"

This time the tone was coarser with less worry and more quivering rage.
"Stop it will you? No – he didn't. He just gloated. Gloated like the fuckin' shit that he is. Proud of showing up here at his dead boss's funeral and laughing at everyone because you and I and probably a few others – Dobey included – know Dobson never really killed himself. Now – enough. Dobey. Hold it together Hutch – put Ryan out of your mind."

Had he said enough to convince Hutch that he and Ryan had shared anything but what he had said. Could Hutch hear the undercurrent in his voice that belied the central crux of Ryan's threats to him? Threatening him yes – but by using Hutch as the leverage.

For now it was all he had because Dobey had walked up to them both now. He was already giving his dark-haired detective the beady eye – his natural astuteness and his cop's instincts quickly looking Starsky over, assessing his physical and psychological state, his preparedness to take back on a badge.

"Starsky? How are you son? Good to see you're back with us."

"Cap'n -" the two men shook hands and each amplified the greeting, brought it up a notch in familiarity, in solidarity, with a heavy slap on each other's back. "It's damn good to be back in the city, damn good to think I can end this suspension? Have you been able to read the shrin – the ah – Therapist's final report on me?"

"Yes though I only had it couriered to my desk this morning – but I managed to speak with her on the phone."

"And ….. Ah ….Sir?"

"You talking to Lancaster just then Starsky? I thought I thought I made it clear I didn't want you here today."

"Sir – I had no control. He just walked right up to me and started a conversation."

"You think I don't have eyes Starsky? I saw that. So if you hadn't been here like I'd requested, he couldn't have walked right up to you now could he?"

"I can't hide away forever Cap…gotta get back to life sometime."

"I know that – but this was a perfect opportunity for him to corner you. Anyway good to see the two of you managed to keep the interaction civil – damn good. Don't think the Commissioner could have handled any more drama in the department at this point."

"I understand perfectly – we both do, don't we Hutch?" He looked at Hutch quickly. Didn't I tell you? Didn't I tell you we had to exercise caution?

"Good to hear it – but that's not my point. My point is – you're back and he's already in your sphere. Is this going to be a problem – is he going to be a problem? You want me to crank back up that restraining order?"

"Sir – Cap'n, all I want is to get my badge back and get back to work. I'm ready and I think the Doc thinks I ready too. Where do I sit with the IA?"

Dobey looked sideways at Hutch and then back at Starsky.

"Your partner already warned me you were biting at the bit. Ok – be in my office by nine tomorrow morning and we'll talk details. I've already prefaced your return and the report with the Internal Affairs. I have to warn you though Starsky – you know it won't be street work just yet."
Starsky's sigh was heavy but resigned.

"Never is that way is it? I'll take what I can get for now. I just want this all behind me."

Dobey looked suddenly frayed around the edges, his suit wilting at the end of the extended day, his heavy jowls somehow heavier and his eyes bleary.

"I think we all do Starsky. We all do. Let's hope laying Dobson to rest is the last of this difficult time. It's been a terrible couple of months."

He pulled awkwardly at his crumpled tie, loosening the constraints its noose like hold placed on his thick neck and gave Starsky a thinly disguised affectionate pat.

"I'm glad you're back – both of you. You look good son – you had me worried there for a while. Let's hope the next months are kinder to you both than what you've both been through. Now – I'm heading home – I'll see you both at the station tomorrow."

They were both opening their car doors when Starsky looked over to see Riley approach Hutch from his side of the car.

He waited only long enough to see Riley smile broadly at Hutch and for Hutch to reach out and clasp his hand in greeting before he slid into the driver's seat and slammed his door with a ferocity that had the whole vehicle shaking. He derived a small amount of satisfaction out of seeing Riley jump at the sound but was less proud of the flinch his churlish action caused in Hutch.

Through the windows he could hear Riley's eager young voice and see Hutch's respond with his own warm smile. As they talked he watched them both turn almost at the same time to look toward him inside the car, both of their faces clearly transmitting wariness, guilt, awkwardness - as though their apparent pleasure at seeing each other was somehow worthy of censorship.

Starsky controlled the urge to lean over, wind down the window and let Riley know what he thought of him. Instead he forced himself to look away from the two of them – forced himself to stare out of the driver's window and pretend that right now his partner was not being sucked in by this kid who paraded as an ally, a support – a Goddamn friend.

Starsky knew after one quick glance at Hutch's face that he was heavily conflicted – it was all there in his naked face for Starsky to see how badly he was being pulled both ways. Generous, kind, warm and totally too trusting a hell of a lot of time to the real world's takers, Starsky felt his protective loyalty toward his partner rise to the surface. The whole simple exercise of catching up with Riley was causing Hutch unbearable discomfort. Despite the fact that Starsky felt anything but acrimony towards the junior office, he also couldn't help but feel concerned for his partner who was so obviously torn in half by the scenario.

Nonetheless he could not forget what he had witnessed only such a short time ago back in the cemetery grounds, nor could he blank out his own analysis of what had gone on between Ryan and Riley that fateful night at the beach house.

By the time Riley had turned and walked away and Hutch settled himself into the car Starsky was biting down hard on his need to vent.

Hutch gave him a hesitant, testing look from beneath the veneer of throwing his sports jacket on the rear seat.
"I can tell you're not happy with me so don't sit there holding it back. Spit it out Starsky, the look on your face is probably worse than what you've got to say to me anyway."

"I just don't get why you have to associate with him – why you would even want to."

"Oh come on Starsky – "

"Did you ask him what he was talking to Ryan about for so long when the burial was taking place?"

Hutch looked genuinely shocked.

"Riley? With Ryan?"

"You heard it right. Riley and Ryan – tight as freakin' thieves."

"That's absurd. Just because they were talking doesn't mean they're allies. Look at you and Ryan before. I look around for you and find you locked in deep conversation with Ryan also. Almost the exact same situation. Ryan just made sure he rattled lots of chains here this afternoon – while he had the chance."

"And that is what you want to believe?"

"It's not what I want to believe Starsky – it's what I believe happened."

"Look Hutch. Maybe now you're back, you'd better take a good hard look at your junior rookie friend and work out where he stands in all of this. I've worked him out – I'll let you do the same."

I've worked out how Ryan found us at the safehouse. I've worked out that Riley must have given him all the details he needed to get to us. But I can't tell you that Hutch….you can't know about Ryan being there. You can't know that Ryan is the one who attacked Katy after watching me outside our house.

"I just hoped that this would be finished with – this suspicion and freezing out of Riley – that the time away would allow you to see reason."

"I do see reason – plenty of them, and I don't need your sentimental, biased view of him. Time will tell you all you need to know partner, but I'm warning you Hutch. Watch him – tread carefully with him and keep your eyes open."

"Jesus! What does that mean hey? My sentimental biased view? He was a great support when you were going through all that danger while you were under in the Kalzo case, his was my partner for a few weeks, he saved your life, both our lives probably, he took Ryan down, he was there when you were in hospital picking up all my broken pieces and keeping me together when I nearly lost the plot - Starsky what more can the kid do to prove to you that he's on our side, not Ryan's? What more hey? You are being so terribly one eyed about all of this, I just don't know where to step next with him and you."

"There is no fuckin' him and me. I want nothin' to do with him and frankly, for both of our well beings I'd prefer if you cooled it with him too."

"For my well-being? What the hell do you think Riley is going to do to me huh? He's a friend. He's been nothing but a friend and reliable temporary partner through all of this, and you treat him like some leper. This is crazy! Look – did you go through all this stuff, this irrational suspicion of him during your sessions with the Doc?"
"Are you for real?"

"Yes – I'm for real. That is a valid question Starsky, because the way you keep thinking that Riley is somehow mixed up in all Ryan's shit you is unhealthy. It proves to me that all that talk about being through the bad experiences with Ryan is something you're just saying to make me think you're all ok now. Maybe you're saying it to prove it to yourself as well."

"Now you're just pushing my buttons Hutch. What I talked about in my sessions ain't none of your God damn business and for the record, I told you – I'm through the "shit" as you call it that I carried because of Ryan. If the shrink made that judgement than it's time you listened to it."

"I know you a hell of a lot better than any shrink, no matter how good she is at her job - and I think you've still got some stuff to work out. The way you judge Riley and are always jumping to conclusions about him only proves it. I'm not listening to it anymore Starsky. Finished! Conversation finished. I gave the kid the wide berth like you wanted for weeks – now I'm back, I'll be damned if I'm going to treat him like he's the enemy. He's confused as all hell."

"So how do you think that makes me feel hey? You're my partner and you flaunt your friendship of him in my face when you know I don't trust a single part of him?"

"Then all I can suggest Starsky is that you hurry up and start trusting ME again. Saying that you can't trust Riley is one thing - but not trusting me is a completely different thing. You know that I would never do anything that I thought would jeopardize your safety with Ryan. If I trust and like Riley and I know him a hell of alot better than you do - then you should accept he is a good person."

Hutch was pleased to see that his sharp delivery hit home as Starsky chewed over his words.

"And – to really make you happy I might as well tell you that I asked him to come over later for a beer and a catch up."

"You asked him over for a beer? Great. Fine. So much for me asking you to keep your distance from him. So now we both know where we stand." Starsky turned the ignition over before making a conclusive statement. "I'll drop you home so you can get your shit sorted for work tomorrow."

"Oh for God's sake. So this is going to stand between us? After all we've been through since you got out of hospital, now you're going to make this a barrier between us? Riley - a kid - another cop."

"Ryan was another cop too in case you've forgotten Hutch. Besides, we need some breathing space. That much is sure. I need to get my place sorted out too. It's weeks since I've stayed there."

"Starsky –"

"What?"

But all he could come back with was an exasperated mutter. Hutch flopped back in his seat in weary resignation as though the argument had left him exhausted.

"Nothing. Forget it. Just drop me home will you?"

Starsky felt slightly ill for the duration of the long, silent drive home. Since he had rammed the car into reverse and skidded out of the cemetery gates, he had done little else on the journey other then
berate himself for his stupid, knee jerked behavior. They were once more at loggerheads and he knew he was to blame for the stalemate. Each of them sat stewing in heated isolation and he knew this time he might well have pushed Hutch too far.

The resentment and strange sense of betrayal he felt at the realization that Hutch was openly going against his wishes to continue a friendship with Riley was, he knew, bordering on petty and stubborn. And yet? The image of Riley and Ryan locked in earnest conversation and their sideways furtive looks at him as they talked, still made his blood curdle.

To be brutally honest with himself, he knew that it was not so much the issue of his mistrust of Riley that was causing his stomach to knot. Nor was it even the fact that he and Hutch had just yet another spat among so many spats they had battled through over the past two months. No the real issue that was making him angry with himself was that he realized that stupidly, foolishly, he had effectively boxed himself and Hutch into separate corners.

After Ryan had delivered his chilling warning about putting Hutch in his target Starsky had already decided he would somehow find a way to suggest that they bunk down at one or the other of their places over the next week or so – just till he knew where they stood with Ryan now that they were back in the city and within his easy reach. It would not have been hard to arrange – in fact it was most likely what they would have done anyway, given Hutch's ongoing fear of Ryan going after Starsky.

Now – after their argument, that plan was totally trashed. He had shoved too hard and Hutch had shove back and now once more they stood on divided sides.

Even worse – he was about to drop Hutch off at his home to await for Riley to turn up and no doubt give Hutch the third degree about everything that Ryan might be wanting to know about them.

During the drive home, the protracted silent void between them was making him increasingly uptight, but each time he opened his mouth to break the icy stillness, he quickly clamped his mouth shut again.

Hutch for his part looked just as uneasy and sat thin lipped and closed off until he brought the departmental car to a resounding stop out in the laneway near Hutch's small canal cottage.

The silence was still a dense layered wall between them when Hutch pushed open his door. His body language was representative of his mood – he used sharp, exacting movements to hurriedly empty the trunk of his luggage and items, tossing them onto the ground beside the car and slamming the trunk and rear door closed again.

"Ok that's it then." He leaned back in through the open front passenger window to Starsky who sat staring straight ahead. "I'll see you in the morning then – at the station."

Implicit was the message that they would not share their drive in as usual and for the first time Starsky scowled and looked at him, trying to read his face.

It was however too late to read anything because Hutch was already striding toward his house, arms laden with bags, his rigid back clearly signaling his pissed off mood.

Starsky cursed and revved the car.

"Shit! Triffic, just triffic."
By eleven thirty that night Starsky's guilt and niggling worry could not be staved off any longer. For the third time that evening he reached for phone. This time however he proceeded to actually make the call.

"Yeah?"

Hutch's curt phone etiquette was his hallmark.

"It's me."

The voice changed instantly, as it always did when he realized it was his partner on the other end of the line. Tonight however Starsky expected the curtness to remain and was surprised when Hutch slipped quickly into his worried tone.

"What's wrong? Everything ok?"

Hutch's knee jerk concern almost had him smiling at the irony of it all. Well, had him smiling if the situation wasn't so ass up. It was he who should have been asking that question. Here he was calling his partner because all night he'd been kicking himself that he had fucked up so badly with his outburst about Riley. His little tantrum had effectively left Hutch wide open to Ryan's threats – the exact opposite to what Starsky had planned. After Ryan's continued mind games at the funeral that afternoon, it was clear that until he had found a way to deal with him effectively, decisively - he would need to shadow his partner. Need to keep Hutch in his sights without allowing him to know why.

He certainly didn't want to give Hutch anything else to use, any new reasons to try to take on Ryan. In Starsky's mind was the firm, irresolute decision. Ryan was his. His alone to break apart and destroy. Instead, he had allowed his temper to creat the exact opposite situation. Hutch was alone in his home and he was in his – and even worse – Ryan's protégé was in the prime position to set Hutch up for danger. Starsky had smarted all evening thinking about what Riley might take back to Ryan after his little visit to Hutch that evening.

"Yeah..yeah, everything's fine."

He could almost see Hutch sagging against the wall.

"It is? You sure? It's late? The call….Ryan hasn't tried to contact - "

Starsky cut him off.

"Riley gone?"

"Starsky if you've phoned me up this late to start up again about him…"

"No – look – seriously I haven't phoned for that. I needed to speak to you and didn't want to catch you in the middle of your drink with Riley."

"He's gone - ages ago. I was tired - it was a hell of a big day with the drive down and all, then the funeral and - "

He stopped there with the sentence but Starsky knew what he really meant to say. With the fight about Riley.

With fight number xx of so many many fights since Ryan first walked back into their squad room over two months earlier. Too many disagreements, too much stress, too much of everything that
was out of synch in their normally synchronized relationship. All since Ryan.

Starsky was wholeheartedly tired of himself and his own volatile moods.

"I'm sorry about how I flew off the handle this afternoon ok? I was out of line - again. I understand you're pissed off at me because I don't accept the kid - "

"Good, because you're right. You're attitude needs some work partner. You've got to look at why you have this – this distrust of Riley and work it out. Work it out Starsky, because I'm not prepared to freeze Riley out just because you've got some perception –"

"It's not a perception Hutch – I saw them this afternoon – together."

"Yeah and Riley told me it was exactly as I knew it would be. Ryan cornered him and tried to provoke him."

"Alright. Look – let's not argue anymore about him. "

"I'm not the one who keeps bringing up an argument Starsky – it's you. You're the one here who needs to do some work – not me."

There was a significant pause – where neither of them said anything further – Hutch having said his piece, Starsky left absorbing the intent.

"So, tomorrow morning, I'll pick you up?" Starsky's offer was an attempt to dig under the bristles of Hutch's sharp tone.

"Thought we were meeting at the station?"

"Why? Why do something different just because I couldn't hold my tongue?"

"You said something about needing space..."

"Hutch, I've said alot of shit since you found me that day in the alley with the knife in my guts. I'm getting sick of hearing myself say alot of shit. Let's get back on track like we agreed. I'm sorry Ok? I really am."

He could actually hear the tension seeping out of Hutch and his softened tone echoed the shift.

"Fine - see you at eight then? Make a good impression on Dobey by being there before he calls you in for the big pep talk."

"Maybe I should pick you up at seven. I've got alot of impressing to do."

"Starsky, you've been sleeping in for the past six weeks, don't push your luck. I'll be surprised if you even wake up before nine."

"Crap - good point. I'd better hit the sack right now. Goodnight Blintz."

Hutch chuckled lightly and Starsky put down the phone hoping they had reached an impasse of sorts.

He would deal with Riley in his own way from now on – and keep Hutch out of it.

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Huggy eyed the burly solidness and cool haughtiness of the late night customer as he placed yet another double scotch with a beer chaser in front of him. As a bartender who had seen many a hardnosed drinker with seemingly endless stamina, even he was impressed with Ryan's fortitude to hold his drink.

"You thinking of leaving my establishment anytime soon? I need to start closing the tabs down and pack up for the night – err, should I say morning."

It was after all, nearly two am.

"Sure – this is my last. Gotta long shift starting at midday so better make this the last."

More like, Huggy thought, he should have made the third one back his last. More like he should never have graced Huggy's bar with his surly presence in the first place. More like – he couldn't wait to see the back of him and didn't much relish the thought of having to see him again.

Somehow though, Huggy suspected this would not be the case. For obvious reasons, Ryan had earmarked Huggy's bar as he preferred drinking hole over the past two weeks – and despite the fact that having the man on his premises made his skin crawl, he also knew it gave him the opportunity to keep his eye on the creep. Ryan might be lurking around the bar to get the lowdown on Starsky and Hutch but it worked both ways. Huggy knew that come the next day, whenever Riley got the chance during or after his shift, he would drop in to tap Huggy for any new information about Ryan or his moves. Huggy wasn't entirely sure what Riley was doing with the information or if in fact it was of any value or served any purpose, but in the last two weeks the habit had formed. Huggy felt in his own way he was doing something to watch the backs of his two friends while they were hidden away out of town.

So the pattern had been established. Ryan cruised into the bar late at night and the next day Riley would do the same.

Huggy wondered what would happen now the boys were back in the city. This whole game with Ryan was one weird and strange situation.

Like tonight.

Ryan had arrived – late as was often his style. He had put away a few shots before he began sprouting off to two cops who were already sat at the bar when he arrived. Huggy knew of them also. They were both uniforms from one of the downtown precincts and occasionally shared a beer with Starsky or Hutch when they crossed paths in his bar.

In full earshot of Huggy, which Huggy knew was a purposeful ploy, Ryan had openly discussed Dobson's funeral that afternoon and the return of Starsky and Hutch.

The cops for their part had looked immediately uncomfortable and wary of Ryan and his clearly vindictive proclamations.

"The way the two of them showed up for the fucking funeral – as if Dobson was anything to either of them. Hutchinson couldn't stand the man in fact – made that more than clear many times. So what does he do? Puts on some sentimental performance in front of the big boys by standing at Dobson's freaking graveside. What a crock of shit. Glory boy! He's nothing but an ass licking golden glory boy."

It was little wonder that a short time later the two cops made good their departure. Before that however one of the cops had turned toward Ryan as he threw some bills on the bar.
"Lancaster – you're out of the game now, so it would be wise to not go around bad mouthing a fraternity you no longer belong to. Hutchinson is a good cop, a good man – he would have only been there to be respectful. What's it to you what he does?"

"To me? I'll tell you what it is to me. Hutchinson is the main reason I am no longer on the force that is why! Simpering pretty boy went crying to Dobson and Dobey about the way I handled an undercover job with his partner. He fucked up my career that is why. If it wasn't for him, getting in the ear of the IA and Dobson – I'd still be wearing my badge. I can tell you too – Dobson would probably still be alive. Poor bastard topped himself because he thought he had fucked up so much. Hutchinson made him believe that."

The cop frowned.

"That sounds like total crap Lancaster. Total crap. Sounds to me like you're making this whole thing too personal with Hutchinson. Story out there is that you roughed up his partner badly while undercover. Far rougher than was called for. Left a knife in his side. It's understandable that Hutchinson was unhappy with how Dobson handled the case. Maybe you had better keep your mouth shut about what you have to say about him" he cast his eye toward the bar and Huggy – "Especially in places like this. Might just get back to him – or worse – get back to Starsky. Throwing around false accusations about his partner is not going to win you any favors with Starsky."

Ryan had let out a twisted laugh and snarled at the cop. By this time the cop's partner was grabbing him by his arm and signaling for them to both leave. He was looking at Ryan with a healthy amount of trepidation.

"And you think that worries me? I know Starsky better than you do – Officer. I was in the Academy with him when you were still in high school so hold your fucking advice to me, you wet behind the ears uniform. And you know nothing about Hutchinson – nothing. What I could tell you about that pretty boy would make your toes curl. He's not as good and golden as he likes to make himself out to be."

"You know what Lancaster?" he nodded at his partner and made ready to leave with him as he had been urged. "Save your breath and your stories for someone who is interested. If you can find anyone. I think most people know enough about you now – how you treated people on the job. What we've heard on the grapevine is that the squad at the Nineteenth is a hell of a lot happier since you left."

"Is that so? And I think that maybe Dobson's little soldiers are alot happier since their pussy weak Captain topped himself."

Huggy remembered how both of the cops had looked genuinely shocked at his callousness.

"Have some respect you asshole, the man was only buried this afternoon. We're leaving – enjoy your drink and your own company."

Ryan had waved them off with a dark smile and turned back to the bar.

That had been three drinks back and Huggy had watched as the clientele thinned as the night wore on and Ryan still remained – one of only three customers still remaining in the bar.

Huggy was drying some glasses and turned away from the bar when he caught Ryan tracking his movements in the bar mirror. His dark eyes, only minimally glazed from excessive alcohol were watching him intently. Huggy swore he could feel the pure evil as Ryan's gaze settled on him,
crawling up his spine like a cold current.

"So what do you think black man?"

It didn't shock him, just angered him – purely racist or socially inflammatory – it was the tone that angered him more than the words. As though Ryan had the authority to talk to anyone like that. With such deep contempt.

"What do I think of what – white man?"

Huggy countered, turning to face him down.

Ryan slammed his empty glass down on the bench.

"You know the two lover boys well don't you? You think you really know them? You think you really know Hutchinson?"

"Ain't any of your business what I know or don't know about anybody."

"What I was saying to those two cops – Hutchinson thinks he has everyone suckered into his perfect college boy routine and moral standing."

Huggy tried to look disinterested, rubbing his bar towel hard at a stubborn mark on a glass, but his wariness was pricking up more than a few notches.

"Don't rightly know what you're getting at – but make it quick coz, like I said – this bar is closing."

Ryan pushed the empty glass back and forth on the bar's sticky surface in front of him before looking up into Huggy's wary eyes.

"Well how many other cops, how many people who think they know him, do you think would know about his filthy habit, his filthy, illegal addiction? Not good for a higher-ranking cop on the force – not good at all. Trying to cover up his dirty game, his weak need."

Alarm bells were clanging loud and clear for Huggy.

"No idea what you're talking about man – makes no sense to me at all. Sides – like those other dudes told you – I don't think you are doing yourself any favors by badmouthing one half of a tight team. Might blow up in your face big time. The curly headed one has quite a temper when someone crosses him. And trust me my man - you put Hutch in a precarious position you put yourself in a doubly precarious one with Starsky."

"I can handle Starsky. He and I – we have our ways of working things out. Besides this isn't a case of badmouthing – this is a case of the truth. Hutchinson has one very unclean, unsavory and totally concealed problem. Did you know he likes to live on the end of a needle? Did you know that he was once - very recently nothing more than some filthy heroin addict who used his partner to cover up all the trails of his sick habit?"

He watched Huggy's face carefully for his reaction. Huggy was pleased with his own performance. It wasn't hard to act because so surprised was he that Ryan knew about the heroin saga that it made him looked sufficiently shocked at the declaration. Ryan would not have guessed that he had not only known all about it but that he had been intimately involved in the whole nightmare with Starsky at the time. He had stood beside Starsky while both of them had lived through the terrible process of getting Hutch through his withdrawal of the forced addiction.
Huggy simply stood looking suitably nonplussed, the glass he was wiping suspended in mid air, transfixed and slack jawed with what Ryan had just disclosed.

Ryan was obviously triumphant with the impact he had made on the willowy black man.

"See? And you think you knew him. Not such the perfect cop now is he? Not so high and mighty after all. Your friend Hutchinson could turn back anytime into some low life dirty junkie. I bet every day he is still holding out for the sweet nectar of a fresh heroin fix. You know as well as I do – as a bartender you've seen it too – just like I've seen it on the streets. Once a junkie – always a junkie. I bet that Sergeant Hutchinson, Mr. Purity himself, is no fucking different."

"Even if this shit you're sprouting has any basis of truth to it - anyone can see he is clean and well. Don't look like no junkie I ever seen - nor you for that matter. So what? Big deal - even if in his past there was something like this which I'm sure is all based on cheap street talk - he's no more a heroin addict than you or I."

Huggy was surprised at the defensive anger he felt mounting in him at Ryan accusations. The man was beyond belief - evil in it's purest form.

"Sure - he might be clean - for now. But Starsky can't always be around to hold his hand. One day - the pretty boy might slip, might fall back down the hole - might reach out for that nice warm needle. He's tasted the good life Mr barman - and just like any other addict, he can always be tempted back to the fix. Just depends on what happens in his life doesn't it?"

He stood - only now a little unsteady on his feet, only now a little slurred in his voice, as he pulled out a hefty wad of notes and pushed them across the bar.

"Say hello to my friend Starsky for me won't you? Tell him I'm thinking of him - always thinking of him."

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"So - how does it feel to be back?"

Hutch waited only long enough till they were safe inside the swing doors of their squad room to pose the question.

Stupid, rhetorical question he knew – as soon as he uttered it he thought as much. One of those shallow, off the cuff questions that was really not typical of the calibre of their relationship. As if he would even have to ask the question. As if he didn't know already how it would feel for Starsky.

Nonetheless he had put it out there, even if more to fill the empty almost awkward void between them, so he might as well wait for the answer. Not that he expected a hell of a lot of honesty to be found in the response. Something about Starsky today told him that he had a guard up around him as solid as a concrete wall. Some platitudinous remark was hardly going to get through his resistance.

He knew his partner too well to not see that his mind was already outside of this room and far away in another place, another mindset. A place that intensified the dangerous glint that was so evident in his eyes, and the tightness in his jaw and upper neck.

There had been the usual overtures from other officers and staff in the garage, out in reception and in the corridor when they first walked into the building. All had offered up warm words of
welcome and solicitous smiles and handshakes. Hutch could easily tell though that many of them were treading carefully with the whole welcome back bit. They were unsure of exactly what had gone on with Starsky and his protracted absence. Rumors in the station house spread like viruses and mutated every forty-eight hours at least. There would be many versions of what lay behind Detective Sergeant Starsky's two months or more away. Not many of them would resemble the truth. Those who knew the many sides of David Starsky were playing it safe and conscious of not saying the wrong thing or saying too much. As a personality he was unpredictable and capricious as his moods. He could be fun, playful and spirited one day and brooding, sullen and dangerous the next. No one was prepared to get him off side, or his partner for that matter by putting a foot in the proverbial. For those who had not seen nor talked to Starsky in weeks and weeks, it was obvious which side of the coin his mood lay today.

The last well wisher was behind them now after they had both run the gauntlet down the long corridor from the lift to their offices.

There had only been one other officer inside the workroom when they made their entrance and after a hasty greeting and he had grabbed his jacket and departed. Hutch wondered briefly if he too had seen the look on Starsky's face and hightailed it out of there – or perhaps he was just being mindful of them both needing some space with this being their first day back.

Either way it was just shy of the morning rush hour in the squad room and they were alone in the open office area with a window of a perhaps five minutes before the day shift began shuffling in.

Hutch seemed to have become quickly overly interested in getting the coffee pot heated up and making a cursory flick through his in-tray while all the time trying not to look too interested in how Starsky was re-acquainting himself with the surroundings. Beneath the guise of sorting out his desk he studied Starsky more closely.

Yesterday, after the little showdown about Riley his face had taken on a harder edge but then Hutch had imagined that it would have been displaced somewhat after his phone call last night. During their conversation on the phone Starsky sounded to have been mollified somewhat - to have been gentled by his sense of guilt toward Hutch for his behaviour concerning Riley. This morning though, that hardness was not far below the surface. Brittle and cold lay just beneath the quick easy half smile and the ready comebacks that Starsky had in place as responses for all the singsong greetings that followed him down the corridor.

Hutch was particularly wary of it and more than a little concerned. Since he'd climbed into the car that morning for their first drive back into work in a long while, he could sense the darkness that had settled about Starsky's features. It was as though he was letting the world know in advance that he was not in one of his more playful, ebullient moods today – far from it. The man waiting in the car for him this morning was the Starsky not to be messed with – already jaded and a little surly and the new day barely begun.

Taking in the look, Hutch decided very quickly that it would be wise to leave whatever it was alone for now and he said little of any substance apart from light hearted commentary until they arrived at the station.

Not that he expected this day to be easy for his partner.

He knew from his own experience – they'd both had more than their fair share of returning to work after injury or illness – the feelings of initial alienation and sense of not quite belonging that his partner might right now be experiencing. It was never easy – these first few moments, this first re-immersion after a protracted absence. Like the world had gone on without you and no one but you had noticed your absence, or could sense how out of kilter everything that was once so normal
could feel.

After a significant pause Hutch got an answer to his question and he was a little suprised to hear something in Starsky's response that might have been the truth.

"Strange. It's – a little – no a lot - weird I guess. 

"Don't worry – by midday it'll be like you've never been gone from the place. You know this is how it always is. You've been in this seat before Starsky. We both have, you know that." 

"Don't remember ever being back from a formal suspension though – nor you for that matter. This is a completely different sort of weird and I have to tell you Hutch, it's sure not a good feeling. I feel like I should be reporting for parole meetings – clocking in with the counselor to freakin' cover my ass for any back slidin'. Never know – I might just go and throw a loony attack again – end up all weak and smashed up after some traumatic event comes my way. You know Hutch – you never can be sure when you wake up in the morning – you never can be too certain – that today could be that fuckin' day when some bastard puts one over you – rapes the livin' daylights outta you. Leaves ya' as close to a nutcase as you can get – so messed up in the head, there ain't no one gonna trust you with a loaded baretta in ya' hand again. 

Hutch saw the humiliation mix with the anger that was already settled in the dark blue eyes.

Maybe then this was the problem – ill ease at having to face people and the job after a formal suspension. He responded instantly to the whimsical tone of Starsky's words.

"Hey – hey" Hutch dropped the file he was holding and moved over to him quickly.

"Starsky – enough now. I don't want to hear you painting it like this. You're not this person – you're not some fried brain nutcase. Listen to the real you. The strong you. It's all over now buddy. All behind you. The suspension was only ever for your own health – Dobey's way of making sure you got the time you needed to put everything back in the right place with your life. Now you're free of all that shit – free to move on. 

Hutch didn't much like the snorted shorted laugh and flare of anger that chased away the brief cloud of shame.

"You think so? Free of all that shit? Just because I said I was getting to the other side of everything doesn't mean the same as being free of it. One thing is for certain Hutch – I ain't free of nothin' – not yet anyway." 

Hutch knew Starsky had the right to hold onto that anger. Hell he had a right to so much anger and so much resentment – it would take more than a few heartfelt "Great to see you back Starsky’s" from peers to wipe away what he had gone through. The steely edge to Starsky's voice however was more than holding on to some left over resentment – there was a recharged force of negative energy about him now. A fresh supply of pent-up aggression that had not been there until now. Hutch was trying to think when he had first seen it – this new anger. Since Dobson's funeral yesterday? Or maybe even earlier – since he'd walked out of the hospital from seeing Katy? Like a boxer who had gone down for the count and come back at the final moment – stronger and more lethal for having taken the fall, Starsky was bouncing off the ropes, adrenalin pumping, and fists ready – primed for something that only he could see.

And it was that bit – the bit about what Hutch couldn't see but Starsky seemed to be keenly focused on, that chilled Hutch to the core.
The decision whether to push him to expand a little more on what he meant by the last bitter statement was taken away from him when Dobey threw open his office door and summoned Starsky in.

As Starsky stood, kicked in his chair and rounded the desk to his office, Dobey threw Hutch a quizzical raised eyebrow. He knew his captain was asking him how the lay of the land was this morning with Starsky's first day back. The part of Hutch that wanted to make everything alright for his partner vied with the part of him that knew that running any interference with the Captain on him would be destructive to Starsky's and his relationship right now.

For that reason alone he met the question in Dobey's eyes with a mild shrug and a nod - and then tried to tell himself that maybe that was the case. Maybe everything with Starsky was fine, was cool, and was ok.

Hutch turned away from Dobey before his own face gave anything else away.

First day back at work and he was already covering for his partner in all the wrong ways.

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By the time Hutch came out of his own meeting with Dobey, Starsky was already looking bored and was poking aimlessly at the stack of files teetering haphazardly on the edge of his desk.

Hutch had to suppress a smile. Starsky was never ever amused with desk bound work and could never see it as anything other than something to be suffered and endured with liberal amounts of graphic and colorful complaining.

"It's pure torture for you isn't it buddy? Putting you beside a tower of files and outstanding reports?"

"It'll get worse when he expects me to crank up the typewriter. I think I'm going to volunteer to go down to Records to dust the filing cabinets. Anything would be better than thumping that piece of metal with two fingers all day." He pushed the paperwork to one side with a grimace, as though it was something offensive.

"So where's he putting you to work for the next week while I'm stuck here with this mile high pile of freakin' reports and cross referencing?"

"They need another man down in Robbery for the rest of this week. They're down at least two officers. So….."

"So – you're takin' on the role of two officers? Great. What – do they think you're a super cop or just going to work you double time?"

"I'll soon find out I guess. Things are often a bit slower in Robbery anyway, so maybe it won't be too bad."

"Why the hell did Dobey have to take you outta this squad? It's our first week back and already he's splittin' us up?"

"Starsk we already knew he'd have to be on desk work. It's the way it goes when you come off – off leave."

"Suspension. I came off Suspension, you came off Leave. It's just a word – you can say it Hutch. And yeah – I know that – but why do they need to send you to a whole different unit?"
Hutch could see the anger rising again and with it some worry, some concern.

What was it about?

Was it return to work insecurity? Guilt over his bad mood yesterday with Riley? Was it Ryan? Was he worried that Ryan was going to come back into his life now that he was a free agent, no ties to the Force?

Whatever it was – there was something there, something he wasn't saying.

"Hey – no big deal Starsk. You'll be here bored and I'll be down there bored too – We can catch up at the end of shifts."

"With two men down on the team you won't be bored Hutch. You'll be running your ass off on the streets and getting called out to every freakin' slimy break in. They'll be sending you all over the damn city chasing cases."

"So nothing different than we're used to here. I'd be doing the same thing even if Dobey put me out solo here for a week – or with a temporary partner."

"Yeah – 'cept at least I know what your moves are. Down there – who knows what you'll be assigned to."

"Starsky? What's the issue here - ?"

And then just when he was about to push him for some reasoning behind the bitching about his Robbery assignment, Starsky reverted quickly to half hearted humor.

"You're right. It's no different at all. Hey after a solid eight doing this crap, I'll be hanging out for a beer at Huggy's – so make sure you clock off and don't volunteer for any overtime ok?"

"I'll do my best – but – "

"Hey – give me a call when you're due to wrap up for the day ok? So I know your moves."

"Ok….

Hutch was looking at him a little curiously as he packed a few things away on his desk and pocketed pen and notebook and checked his holster.

"Just so – you know – I'm not left here wondering if you want a lift home or free to catch a drink or whatever."

"Sure – I'll do my best. But head home at five if I'm not done by then – I'll catch a lift with a patrol or something if I have to."

Hutch walked out of the squad room convinced now that Starsky was unnerved about them being apart. It was just another thing to stew over as he tried to get his mind into gear for his brief secondment in another team.

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It took him at least the next two hours for the boredom and tedium of the mindless paper shuffling to still his inner agitation.

Starsky swilled another cup of bitter coffee and stabbed mercilessly at a pad of paper with his pen.
Bad enough that Hutch was out on active duty without him and he was deskbound, but to be seconded to another unit altogether where he had no idea of where he was at any given point during the day was playing right into Ryan's hands.

How in God's name was he supposed to keep tabs on Hutch now? Ryan couldn't be tailing Hutch right this moment for all he knew – cruising around the Department garage just waiting for him to make an exit and to follow him. He clamped down on his fears and told himself that all his thinking was a long shot and hardly realistic. Ryan had no idea of Hutch's work situation yet and could not afford to wait around on the off chance that he would get an opportunity to corner Hutch by himself.

Just when he thought he had convinced himself to stop worrying about nothing the next phone call he took unnerved him all over again.

Surprised that it was his extension that was ringing and thinking that the only call he was likely to be getting today as no one much even knew he was back at work, would be Dobey or Hutch – he picked up expecting his partner's voice.

Instead it was Huggy.

"Heard you had that nose of yours back at the grindstone."

"You heard correctly – and it is a freakin' grindstone I can tell you- I'm stuck on desk work."

Surprised when there was no colorful Huggy comeback, Starsky waited. There was obviously a reason for the call, and this was not Huggy's attempt at social chitchat to divert him from his boredom.

"You planning on coming into the bar anytime soon?"

"Yeah – well I'd hoped that we'd both make it in there tonight for a catch up and a drink with you – since we're back from the wilds of the countryside. Trouble is they've got Hutch posted in another unit and I don't know when he'll be free to get off from work."

"Better that way anyway. I need to talk to you - alone, not with Hutch."

At once the fear rushed back in.

"What? What is it? You got somethin' you want to talk to me about without Hutch then I need to know now. Does it concern him or me?"

"Both of you I guess. But not here – not on the phone. Come in when you can cut free."

"Shit… Look I'll get in there as soon as I can. I'll pull an early lunch break. You sure it can wait that long?"

"Yeah – look it may be nothing. Don't go gettin' too strung out Starsky. I just thought you'd wanta know that's all."

Putting down the phone, Starsky could not help but agree.

It could well be about Ryan.

And if it was about Ryan – he most definitely wanted to know.
Less than an hour later he was in at the Pits hunched over yet another coffee his stomach could well do without, in the booth he and Hutch always seemed to gravitate toward. He was fast irritating himself with the jarring tapping sound of his spoon against the cup while he watched and waited for Huggy to finish up with his phone call.

A few minutes later his tall gangly black friend sidled up to him and slipped into the bench seat opposite.

Starsky's first words to him were clipped and tinged with irritation.

"'Bout damn time – what am I invisible to you? I've been sittin' here for over ten minutes."

"Well hello to you too stranger. Haven't seen you for nigh on two months and your first words to me are straight from the heart. What suddenly made you so important Prince of the Poleeeece? I had a phone call to finish up. Anyway - I'm all yours now. So how you been hanging my friend?"

Huggy was half joking and half waiting for an apology. Starsky could see it, but wanted to tell him not to hold his breath. His mood was not up to Huggy's theatrical behavior today.

"Long time no see. I get it Huggy. I know it – but push that aside for now will ya'. You called me about something I need to know. I rushed down here – I'm here – and I wanna know. No games, no smart words – just give it to me. What do I need to know about?"

"Damn man – but whatever that time away was s'posed to accomplish hasn't made you any smilier since I last saw you."

"Huggy – please. Just tell me what the fuck is going on."

He knew he had cut into him, could tell in the way that the chocolate brown eyes already heavily hooded, looked down at his hands before looking back up. He felt a pang of guilt but then quickly swept it away. Anger and resentment were his energy source now and he was getting better each hour with harnessing the fuel supply to drive his engine.

Somewhere along the line he had set himself a course, a mission, and staying angry somehow kept propelling him forward toward the end goal.

"The man you most love to hate has been frequenting my bar of late. Over the past two weeks I reckon he's been in here more than five times – generally late at night."

"And…"

"And so he's taken to spilling his guts here and there – some of it might be of interest to you."

"Why the hell haven't you told me 'bout this until just now?"

"How the hell was I meant to, right back at you? If I'm not mistaken you and Hutch have been stashed far away in the land beyond, and that is the very reason that this creep is prowling around your haunts trying to shake up your lives. I didn't have a direct pipeline to you as you well know – while you undercover cops were undercover altogether."

"You could have contacted Dobey if there was anything important."

"Well until last night there wasn't – and anyway – thought that young Officer Riley would be passing on all the lowdown to the good Captain. I filled him on anything I thought he should know about Ryan's late night visits."
"You've been relaying information to Riley? About Ryan? About what he talks about in here? About us? About me?"

He could hear his indignation kicking up a few notches and saw Huggy's confusion.

"Sure. Riley's a brother cop and tight with Hutch – he was as keen as mustard for anything I could give him on that bad excuse for a human being."

That piece of information didn't make sense – not at this moment anyway. Not now when Starsky was more concerned with what Huggy hadn't yet told him. Why would Riley be interested in news about Ryan from Huggy? When he was already aligned with him? Or was it that Riley was fishing for any possible feedback from he and Hutch via Huggy that Ryan might find useful?

For the moment he pushed it aside. He had other priorities right now.

"Last night?"

"Last night – after that other dude's funeral – the other Captain….

"Dobson – Captain of the Nineteenth…And?"

"Yeah - well. Ryan came in here –late – put away an impressive amount of alcohol in a very short time, and in an even shorter amount of time he made himself pretty unpopular with a couple of other uniforms from a neighboring precinct. You'd know them – you've shared a few beers with them over the past year of more. But that's not important. They took off fairly soon after Ryan started up his best obnoxious act – yelling out about how much he hated Dobson, how his staff were happier without him – that sort of stuff."

"None of that is surprising." Especially Starsky thought to himself since he more than likely killed the man himself. He kept those thoughts from Huggy. It seemed that there was nothing in Huggy's information arsenal that was going to get him all fired up or worried. Most of this stuff was background on a man he already knew was heartless and sick.

"So? Ryan Lancaster is the prick of all pricks. Not a humane bone in his body. None of this is news to me. You called me down here to tell me this? Damn it Huggy - "

The spoon still in his hand was now flung down with a clatter onto the table.

It was Huggy's turn for indignation.

"Jeez Starsky – you are one short tempered prick today. First you go at me for not keeping you informed and then you get all high and mighty over the fact that I call you down to talk. I didn't have to call you down here at all my man - 'cept I was worried. Now I'm beginning to think I shouldn't have bothered. If it weren't for Blondie maybe I'd get up and walk off right now – leave you sitting here with your dark cloud over your head for company."

Huggy's ire didn't seem to reach him.

"What do you mean – if it weren't for Hutch? Is this about Hutch?"

"Seems to me that someone other than the select few know about Hutch's run in with the needle – and when that someone happens to be Ryan that bodes very badly for our blond buddy."

Starsky leaned forward and grabbed Huggy's wrist.
"What exactly did he say?"

"Just made heavy hints that Hutch might find himself up against the draw of the fix – that he might find he gets pulled back into the addiction. Once a junkie always a junkie sort of line. It was all bad anyway. The man is one piece of shit."

"I should have known he wouldn't leave that alone…"

"So he has known about this for a while?"

"I don't know how – but yeah – and it was a threat he has used against me before. Saying he would come forward to the Department and expose Hutch's heroin ordeal…"

Huggy was frowning.

"Well – I don't know if that was what he was hinting at last night. Seemed to me Starsky – that he was letting me know – so that I would quickly let you know, that Hutch might find himself in danger with the drug again."

"I'll kill him before he does that to Hutch again."

Huggy pulled back, narrowing his eyes at the menacing vow.

"Yeah – well that would leave you feeling good for all around five minutes and then you'd fuck up the rest of your life – goodbye Ryan, goodbye life as you know it and hello life sentence."

"It will be fuckin' worth it – just to have those five minutes."

Huggy did a quick glance around – wary that the vehemence and pure chill in his friend's words were somehow being picked up by others.

He lowered his own voice.

"Will? Starsky – I don't like the verb tense you're choosing to use there my friend. I suggest you think carefully 'bout where your rage is taking you. What's the point in saving Hutch if you lose him for good anyway?"

"He'd be saved. He'll be safe. Ryan won't be able to hurt him ever again – finality, closure."

"Listen to yourself man – what is with you! You think for one minute Hutch would want to be safe at that cost? That price is way way too high for him to pay."

As though he realized he'd gone too far with Huggy he broke the intensity of the moment, and dropped some of the ice-cold conviction in his voice.

"I just don't want Ryan to destroy our lives anymore – he's done enough. It's as though he won't be happy until he has wiped us both off the map. Such a sick sick fuck Huggy."

"I get that. I hear you – but I don't want to hear you thinking the only solution to get him out of your lives is to – to –"

Huggy thought it was almost possible to see the gears shifting in Starsky's mind as he attempted to shake off his concern. He knew he gotten too close, knew that Starsky had bled out too much of himself to him and now he was trying to pull it back.

"Don't worry – just me and my less than smiley mood lettin' loose. You said it yourself – I'm acting
like a prick today – and this is just the prick in me talking."

"What if the prick in you doesn't go away? What if you lose control of him completely? What then my man? What then?"

"I've got it under control ok? I told you, it's just the heat inside of me trying to get out. I've gotta get back to the station – first day back and Dobey will have my ass for lounging down here with you. He knows I'm not covering cases or hunting leads so he'll be gunnin' for me if I don't get back to that damn desk."

He stood up.

"And Huggy. None of this – and I mean none of this, gets back to Hutch. We clear on that?"

"Why wouldn't you just assume I knew that would be the situation? Give me some cred here Starsky. I think I know how the two of you work by now. The rules of the game with you two never change."

"Ok – good. And also – I'm telling you, not asking - to keep Riley outta the loop with any of this too."

"Oh? You're telling me are you? You know what – I'm going back over to my bar and getting back to work. I've seen enough of your bully act today. Next time I see you in here, I hope you've sorted out some of this heavy shit that's making you act like this."

Shrugging into his jacket Starsky seemed to reflect on that for a moment.

"Yeah well? Blame it on the Department for lockin' me in a room with a shrink for weeks on end."

It was after two in the afternoon when he got back to the station.

The conversation with Huggy had rattled him so badly that he was putting the call through to Robbery before he had a moment to think about it.

"Hey there. Not out on a scene? Thought you'd be busting your balls with back to back call outs today?"

"Hi yourself. Just got back in fact – solid busy first few hours but hopefully we'll have a lull now. Did I say that Robbery was quieter than Homicide? I need a damn coffee and some food. What about you? Are there any typewriters still in working order in the office?"

"Ha ha – just so happens I haven't broken one – yet."

"Yeah well, it's only your first day – give it time. Hey – by the way, one of the guys in the unit asked after you – said he saw you driving out of the garage a while ago? Don't tell me Dobey's let you off the chain already?"

Starsky twisted his mouth up. Seems they were keeping tabs on each other as usual. There would be nothing achieved in hiding the fact that he'd gone to Huggy's and nothing lost by admitting that was where he'd been. A usual enough event in their daily routine.

"No such luck. Just took an early lunch and dropped in to catch up with Hug. Haven't seen him in a while you know. He said Hi – and wants us both in for a drink soon. I think Hutch – he really
means he wants you to settle your tab for the past six months."

The usual tab debate would help divert him from further questions.

"You mean our tab and by the way, it's your turn and you know it. Just because you went to hospital doesn't exempt you from your debts."

Yep – the tab thing always worked. Guaranteed to make Hutch lose his line of thought and no doubt, questioning.

"Great – such empathy for a sick friend."

"No doubt you added something else to the running bill. Anyway, good you got to see him. Somehow I don't think I'll be making it in there tonight. An afternoon like this morning and I'll want bed and nothing else. Look not sure what time I'm going to finish up here today – so maybe I'll call you later at home. Don't hang about – like I said, I'll tag a lift with someone else and bring my car in tomorrow."

"Alright – I was thinking of going into the Range later this afternoon anyway. Get some practice in."

"Guess that's not a bad idea. Ok – catch you later. Take it easy on the typewriter. Save your fingers for the trigger at the Range."

Starsky heard him chuckle lightly as he put down the receiver.

Another two hours to kill before he could legitimately and decently make an exit to the Range.

The idea of hitting the target range had come to him yesterday – around much the same time that he had first laid eyes of Ryan again.

Riley had rounded the corner from the washroom and was headed toward his locker when he saw him. Fleetingly he wondered whether it wouldn't be wise to simply back out of the door quietly and avoid the face-to-face meeting. After all not another soul was in the locker room except the two of them and some form of acknowledgement or communication was inevitable.

Somehow he didn't think the communication was going to be in the realm of friendly or pleasant.

Starsky was turning away from closing his own locker, a small booklet in his hand, his eyes running down some penciled notes. He recognized it as the standard issue Record book for the Target Range.

Too late now. Too late to avoid what in the end had to be faced eventually anyway given that they were both stationed in the same unit on the same floor.

It was always going to come to this – he just didn't expect it to be the first day Starsky was back and in quite this way. Just the two of them in a barren room together.

Starsky's head raised at the sound – perceptive and quickly responsive. His cop like reaction time was definitely not rusty and for the first time when Riley saw those eyes track straight to him he could imagine what a formidable force he might be on the street.

The man standing in front of him now showed little trace of the wounded, hurt and psychologically
worn down victim Ryan had abused. Instead Starsky was poised, hyper-alert, his concentration acute and fixated.

Palpable fury was emanating from him in waves and Riley knew that most of the fury was in honour of him alone.

He looks like some wild animal, something feral. Is that dark look on his face from thinking about me? Did I make him seem that way? Face this now Riley – face him. Don't back away.

Riley looked fury head–on and waited.

Somehow he knew Starsky's first words to him would be in his enigmatic style – and they were – but with such a heavy lacing of menace that Riley could never mistake Starsky's intention. To intimidate the shit out of him.

"Well look who it is. Is this the dumbest luck or what Riley? You walk into the locker room – a room I rarely even use these days – and who should you find standing here? The person you'd probably least like to be in a room with by yourself."

"I don't feel that way at all Starsky."

"You don't? Well ain't that nice? That's good - real good. I'm glad you feel like that Riley because you know - I've been waiting for a chance, just like this one, for the two of us to be alone - no Hutch - no big brother for you. Just us - so you and I can have a little talk. A talk that is long overdue."

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If Riley had held out hope for even a moment that there might have been a shift in Starsky's attitude toward him it was quickly dashed. Any lightness that might have been in his face fell away completely when he looked up from his notebook and realized who had just entered the locker room. Never - or at least not in a long while could Riley ever recall being even noteworthy enough to make another man look at him like Starsky was looking at him at that moment.

Venomous.

As though he despised him.

Starsky cocked his head on the side, casually slipping the notebook in the inside of his jacket as he gave Riley his full attention.

"So, I guess this counts as our first encounter as cops on the job – when I left for that undercover gig you were only a pink-faced rookie down in the Radio Room. I seem to keep forgetting that in my – absence – you've gone up in the world. Got yourself a street job, got yourself a shiny gun, even got yourself a partner that wasn't yours for a time."

"Yes – guess all those things have happened Starsky. Time moves on and things change. Got a new partner now – I guess you may have heard. It's not like being partnered up with someone as experienced as Hutch of course – but it's still feels good. I - I'm sure you know how much I appreciate having the opportunity of working with Hutch when you were away."
"Don't thank me if that's what you're doin' – had nothin' to do with me. If I had the choice it'd never have been that way. Hutch would've been better off without you – "

"Why? Why are you doing this?"

"Oh Riley, Riley. Don't tell me that ya' gonna stand there and look at me like that? Stand there and put on that wounded voice and ask me that stupid question? I wish you could see yourself and the way that you're lookin' at me with that dumb expression on your face and fake confusion in your eyes? You practice that act for long before you put it on Riley? Because I can tell you, it ain't winning it with me. You have the balls - or hell - the stupidity, to ask me why I have this anger and resentment toward you? Why I don't want you hangin' around my partner, messin' in our lives, fuckin' up his head with all your pretense at loyalty and devotion?"

"None of it – none of it is pretense. It never has been. I do feel that way. I have respect and admiration for him – yes and loyalty too. He's been – a wonderful mentor to me. I owe him a lot."

"You're damn right you do. He showed you how to keep your nose clean, how to get through a shift without a bullet in your back or a knife across your throat. He showed you how to stay alive – and how did you repay him? Answer me that Riley? How did you repay a man who by your own admission did so much for you?"

His breathing was almost laboured, his voice deeper, grinding out the words with something close to savagery. With each punctuated phrase he moved closer to Riley – the bank of lockers behind him, the room quiet except for Starsky's menacing voice.

"I know where you're going with this Starsky, but it's far from what happened."

"Really? You think just because I wasn't fully with it, not totally conscious that I haven't worked out how illogical the whole series of events were that night?"

"Even if it seems illogical to you - the events on record describe clearly how it happened. Hutch was there and he was conscious - he can tell you the same thing."

"Hutch probably wasn't much better off than I was after he'd finished with us both. And, his viewpoint might be a little biased. After all, he seems to feel a certain amount of - responsibility for you I guess. You were his Trainee - he would have felt some of his own loyalty toward you."

"It's still the way it happened." Riley persisted. "I arrived at the house and intercepted Ryan abusing you and restraining Hutch - forcing him to watch what Ryan did to you."

"You think I need you to tell me again what was going down in that room huh? I don't need your little recap version Riley so save your breath."

"All I did was my best. I did my best to save you both and get you out of that room in one piece."

"Well you were fuckin' too late by about an hour! It's gonna take me a hell of a long time to ever be in one piece again. And Hutch - he should never have had to watch what that Motherfucker did to me - never."

The ragged starkness of the statement and the pain beneath the words was an indicator of Starsky's brewing rage.

"I would have stopped it all if I could. I would have - saved you both from what he did. You're right - I was too late. Too late, but at least I ended it."
Despite the undercurrent of anguish and self recrimination from Riley, Starsky's anger seemed only to escalate.

"Cut out the shit! What do you think you ended Riley? You had a gun – a big powerful loaded, police issued gun in your newly trained up hands. You walked right into an active crime scene where one man was tied to a bed, battered and bleeding – and the other – your partner, your partner Riley for fuck's sake, was tied to a chair half crazed with what he had endured. You faced down the armed and dangerous perpetrator, who was openly threatening you with his weapon. You knew he intended to kill Hutch – you must have seen it in his eyes – he hates him. And what? What Riley? What did you do?"

As though unable to stop himself he brought his hands up to Riley's collar and pushed him back noisily against the lockers – the force of the shove reverberating down the bank of them, metal clanging against metal and echoing across the tiled floor.

Riley didn't flinch. Instead he held his ground and brought his own face even closer to Starsky's darkened fury – only an inch between their noses.

"You know what I did Starsky! I took control of the situation – just as Hutch had taught me to do. I wounded Ryan and restrained him – I called for backup and got you and Hutch free and you to hospital and Ryan taken in by the local police. You know what I did Starsky – you're just seeing it how your mind is telling you to see it. I understood that. I understood that at first and I was prepared to accept that you needed to do that – but -.

"But what Riley, what?"

He shook the younger man hard as he himself shook with vibrating anger. Riley knew his next words were a risk – the man in his personal space was one breath away from smashing his fist into his face.

"I'm over this Starsky. Over it! I'm not going to let you treat me like this anymore. Hutch is wrong too. He'll go on protecting you from facing the fact that this is all shit – all in your head. He'll do that for you Starsky – until you can come to terms with it yourself. He even said it again last night. Thinks that time will make it all clear to you – doesn't want to push you. Well I'm the one in the middle here – between you treating me like a criminal because you think I'm with Ryan and Hutch expecting me to take it because he will never let you do it the hard way."

Riley felt the hands loosening, could see the first doubts creeping into Starsky – caught the moment when he thought he might have hit a nerve.

"You were talking about this last night with Hutch?"

"Of course we were – or I was. I saw the filthy look you gave me at the funeral, I know what you thought when you saw me with Ryan. But it had nothing to do with me – he came up to me. I never approached him – though I might be tempted. I've been following him, tailing him for a week or more – he was pissed off."

"Why should I believe that?"

"You don't believe it obviously – I saw that yesterday. You wanted to rip me apart for even being near Hutch. I'm sick of it Starsky – I'm sick of being made to feel like this and not being able to even talk to a man who I consider a friend because his partner has somehow got everything screwed up about me."
"Tell me Riley. What have I got screwed up about you? That you had the perfect opportunity to take Ryan out but you opted to wing him with a bullet. That you always seem to be one step behind him – turning up at the beach house – so conveniently, having a little 'tete a tete' with him at Dobson's funeral. You even told him where to find us at the Safe house didn't you?"

"What the hell? I didn't even know he came near you when you away – Hutch said nothing about that."

"That's because Hutch doesn't know Riley and I don't want him to know. But how else would Ryan find us?"

"He's a cop – and a good one – he'd have found a way – just like he found you at the beach house."

"Or – you simply make it easy for him by handing it all to him. And – now I find out from Huggy that you're sniffing around after him at the bar – stickin' your nose in what he has to say about Hutch and me."

"I know nothing about him coming up to the safe house – but I'll admit I'm tailing him since Dobson's death. I've made no secret of that."

"Why? Tell me why you would want to do that?"

"Because I consider Hutch's welfare important – and I'm concerned that Ryan has more in store for the two of you."

"Just get your face out of Hutch's and my lives will you? No one asked you to get involved. You had your chance to take care of Ryan when he nearly killed Hutch in that room and you chose not to take it."

"You know as a cop yourself Starsky – you know I had no other way to play it. I managed to contain him without killing him. I'd have lost my badge if I'd wounded him mortally."

"And I know as a cop that I would never have left my partner at risk like you left Hutch at risk with Ryan."

"I took care of Ryan – I did what I had to do to stop him shooting me and I took control of the situation."

"You knew Ryan was never going to shoot you didn't you?" You took a gamble on Hutch's life by not taking Ryan out as soon as he raised his gun to you.

"I would never have put Hutch at risk. I went to that house because I was desperate to try to help him from what I knew was going to be a bad scene."

"You went to that house because you knew where Ryan was and what he was doing. All I know is I want you out of my life – and Hutch's. Am I clear Riley?"

Starsky stepped back a little now – dropping his hands from Riley's collar suddenly as though he was only just aware they were still gripped around his jacket.

"It'll be a lot better for all of us if you keep your distance from us until this whole fuckin' mess with Ryan is over – then I won't have to keep worryin' about your role in it."

"Starsky you can't tell me how to live my life. Even though I'm a Rookie – you have no say over my professional or personal life in any way."
"Damn - I guess I mustn't have been clear enough or you're more of a slow learner than I took you for kid. I want you to stay away from me, stay away from Hutch."

"You know I think the real issue here isn't about Ryan anymore. I even think you are starting to realize that. I think you've got an exception with me – probably would have had with anyone who took your place beside your partner while you were out of action."

The flare of anger rekindled instantly and Starsky brought his hand up to rub hard at his forehead – pressing his fingertips in hard enough to leave indentations on his skin. Riley thought that it looked almost as though he was trying to rub away the rage that was building again.

Riley could see it, he could sense it, but he kept on.

"Hutch has been there every step of the way for you. I've watched him turn himself inside out for you, worry and agonize about your safety, pitted himself against two Captains, put his own job on the line – all for you. You have no idea."

"Don't try to tell me that I do not know my partner kid. Don't even go there."

"Then if you do then why are you letting him keep twisting himself in knots to make it all better for you? He's not even had a life since all this started – been too busy putting yours back together. You've been nothing but selfish and self centered since all of this happened. Now you think you can tell him who he can and can't have as friends. You don't own him Starsky – as much as you might think you do."

"Don't you fuckin' talk to me like that Riley – you have no right to make judgments on Hutch and me. You know nothing about me or him or what a real partnership is."

"Is that true? Why not? I walked beside Hutch as a partner only for a brief while but I still consider him as my friend too. I know it's been a shocking time for you. I know you've been through hell and back. But so has Hutch. So has he. I want to be there for him as a friend. I'm not going to get out of his life unless he wants me to, unless he asks me to – and not just because he needs to do it to make you feel better."

"Stop now Riley – shut your mouth now. Not one more word about Hutch. Walk away while I'll still let you."

"While you still let me? That's the real issue you see? When I first found about you two – the famous partners in the precinct, maybe even the whole Department – I thought it was so cool. To be like you two were, are. Tight and inseparable and totally loyal to each other. And now I see what price there is for that relationship. I've watched Hutch wilt away over the past months while he suffers right along with you. And he will keep doing that without complaint."

"Enough…." The word was barely more than a ground out hiss but the leverage behind it, the implied threat should have been enough to balk further provocation.

Riley however felt powerless to pull himself back from the cusp of danger.

"You can't be the one who decides what people can and can't do or say around Hutch. You don't own him Starsky. That's the real problem here isn't it? This isn't just about Ryan and me all tangled up in your head because of a traumatic event? It's a lot simpler than that."

He paused only briefly before he said it in the softest of tones. The simple bald assumption was not thrown out as a taunt or a jibe. Instead he laid it in front of the chilling rage that was Starsky, more as an analysis, a proposition.
And, Riley knew in himself – because more than anything – he really wanted Starsky to give him the answer.

"You don't want to share him do you?"

The blow would have sent him flying across the room if the bank of lockers were not directly behind him. Later on he wondered if his jaw and mouth would have come off better if he had gone sailing away from the force of the punch rather than taking it full on at close range with nowhere for his head to go but smashing back into the hard metal behind him.

Starsky's compact left fist cracked down hard and sharp and Riley felt the blossoming electric white pain fill his whole being. It was over in an instant and no other blow followed, no other assault layered upon his screaming jaw. Riley would think later on that this was just as well – there was enough behind that single punch to ignite his head into a shattering explosion of agonizing pain. His stomach twisted in protest to the pain, spasmming and throwing up thin vomit which he tried to swallow back down as it mixed with the blood that was already pooling in his burning mouth.

Somehow Riley managed to stay upright while Starsky pulled back and clutched his grazed knuckles in his right hand.

His head was swimming, his jaw and neck were on fire and his teeth were loose and coated with blood – but he pushed away from the locker and brushed the first rivulet of blood from his chin with a steady enough hand.

He was proud of that – proud that he could do that and still look his assailant in the eye.

Starsky was not reciprocating and had instead already turned around and walked about ten paces to the water basin where he was dousing his raw knuckles and slewing water on his face. Even under his own semi dazed fog of pain and rattled brain Riley could hear him cursing furiously – each obscenity interjected between each slew of water across his face.


With a viscous kick he sent the wastebasket under the sink crashing against the wall. Straightening up only long enough to shake his hair and face free of water droplets he made a swipe at the towel dispenser still cursing beneath his breath. He bundled a wad of paper towels, slammed them under the cold water and then pulled them back, smashing the tap off with almost enough violence to rip the fixture from the sink.

Striding back over to Riley he stopped in front of him and thrust out the wet wad of paper. This time he looked Riley in the eye and this time Riley couldn't do the same. The intensity that he knew he would find there was more than he could take right now that the initial shock of the blow had worn off and the reality of the situation was sinking in.

Instead he focused on taking the sodden pile of paper and pressed its coolness to his bloodied throbbing jaw.

"Wipe your face."

Then he turned again and strode back to the door.

Pressing his own injury to his mouth he sucked hard on the grazed knuckles before swinging back and looking once more at Riley.
Riley took a quick stock of what Starsky might be seeing. Despite shaking limbs and waves of nausea he still somehow managed to stand upright against the lockers.

Through a mist of pain and confused thoughts Riley tried to focus on being proud of that fact.

Never in his young life had he taken such a severe and unguarded blow without succumbing to blackness or wretched groaning and tears. Somehow it seemed incredibly important - paramount almost, that Starsky not see him withstand the lightening strike blow he had just dealt him.

Hard nosed cops like Starsky, surely respected the currencies of pride, stamina and fortitude and Riley sucked in gasps of air as he dug deep inside himself now for a handful of each while he willed himself to hold it together.

Just a few more seconds, a few more seconds and then I can let go...Once he walks away...

Starsky still hadn't moved, just stared hard at him while his face creased in deep lines of frustration.

"What did you expect from me Riley? Really – what did you expect?"

Riley had no hesitation in responding, but the delivery of his response was a tortured effort for him and he railed hard against his abused jawline and inner mouth.


Starsky only shook his head and muttered something indeterminate before slamming out through the locker room doorway.

Only after the door had banged behind him and Riley was alone in the locker room, did Riley give himself permission to slump heavily down the side of the lockers where he ended in a tidy heap on the cold tiled floor.

Finally he emitted a resounding gut wrenching moan and let himself admit for the first time what he had known for a while.

Starsky really did intimidate him.

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His residual anger had to find an outlet and the Range seemed like as good a place as anywhere to expel it. With earpieces on and the wire stall around him he was pleased to have a physical barrier separating from the other two men who were on the range when he had walked in. Not that it was likely that they would make an attempt to approach him – he doubted that would find him approachable with the intensity he was carrying around. It was even weighing his own shoulders down. The double load of waning fury and creeping guilt.

Damn Riley to hell and back. The kid had fucking provoked him – pushed and pushed until he got what he should have gotten a long time ago – a taste of his wrath that he had held in check for too long since that fateful night at the beach house. Well it was done now and Riley had a souvenir from him for his efforts, no doubt right now he would be nursing one hell of a swollen jaw and loose teeth – something to remember what happens when you drive a point just a little too far with someone who doesn't want to see the point. Let alone have their face pushed into it by some smart ass kid who hadn't learned how to keep his thoughts to himself.

He had it up to his eyeballs with people trying to analyze him, walk around in his head, work out...
the whys and the hows of his recent behavior. Freakin' shrink, doctors, the IA, Dobey - and Hutch of course.

Hutch most of all because in the end it was always Hutch who liked to try and get inside his head and find out things that even he didn't know were lurking there. Hutch of course he was used to - the others he simply had to tolerate in order to do what was necessary to get his badge back. But Riley for Christ sake! Seemed that everyone had become an expert on what was making him tick the way he was ticking after Ryan laid his filthy hands on him.

And Riley had stepped way over the red line today. Pushing his nose into his and Hutch's partnership, trying to tell him how Hutch must be feeling and thinking. As if he knew Hutch better than he - his own partner knew him.

Damn kid was lucky he got away with what he got away with and that he didn't in fact break his jaw and cheekbone.

He turned to reload his gun and adjust his earmuffs and took a moment to look down at his grazed knuckles. The sullied flesh was the mark of his transgression, the evidence of his guilt. Now that he had stopped shooting he could see the tremor in the bruised and dominant hand and pressed it firmly against his stomach for a few moments to contain the shaking.

Despite his agitation or maybe because of it – he knew he was performing in top form. He didn't even need to see the thick paper target perforations to know that he hitting pay dirt with almost every shot.

Not that it surprised him. He had always known that he did better workouts in the gym and better shooting trials when he came laden up with excessive negative energy to dispel.

Adjusting his legs he returned to his preferred shooting stance and brought the gun up again, his hand steadier now that he had the cool metal to wrap it around and the familiar feedback of the weight of the firearm in his grasp. In the distance a fresh target had popped up and he brought it into his sight.

The silhouette was dark against the white background. Two sets in and his mind was only just starting to settle, the crippling tension only now easing away. When he had first walked onto the Range, the scene in the locker room and Riley was foremost in his mind. And now – with the fresh, clean target ahead of him he eyed it with calculating reserve. This time when he released the trigger guard and pulled back the hammer the black silhouette morphed into a tall rangy form with dark – almost black hair. It was too far away of course to see his eyes, but as the first shot of the new set thundered out into the void to find its target, Starsky liked to think that the black eyes would be looking right at him. He imagined how those dark eyes would open wide in surprise when he knew it was too late to move and would then close shut in reflexive shock the moment when the bullet shattered his chest.

Starsky emptied out his chamber and only then let himself suck in a breath and wipe the trickle of sweat from his furrowed brow. For the first time in hours he felt better. Some calm had been restored; some sense of righting had been done. He rubbed at the now tender heel of his left hand where the repeated kick back of the gun butt had made it's mark felt and thought about the philosophy of shooting at a paper silhouette of a man. There was something to be said for practicing a skill – albeit a violent one – for clearing his head of mental shit and gratifying his growing hunger for completion of a goal.

Today his aim was true and his form was better than it had been in a long while. Starsky wondered about that.
Wondered about motivations and drives, about closing circles and rebalancing dues. Wondered about targets that were not made of paper but bone and flesh, that were 3D and not 2D, that bled and writhed instead of tearing and ripping open and flapping in the breeze.

Today, this moment, he thought about how much he needed 3D dreams to take care of 3D nightmares that would never leave him alone.

Lately if he was honest these quandaries had occupied his head too much and too often to be healthy.

The thoughts had made him stronger for sure, brought him back from the pits of despair and self-disgust at what he had allowed Ryan do to him. He understood what was happening for him, he understood this since those long drawn out sessions with the female shrink. Revenge amplified and fortified his strength – it gave him direction and fuelled his reserves.

Strength for sure, power and endurance, a bottomless pit of reserve – but at a price.

For revenge, even the conceptualization of it, let alone the act of it, was highly self-destructive.

It shaped his moods into hot fury and cold antipathy and transformed him into something he wasn't sure even he could tolerate for much longer – let alone those closest to him.

Let alone Hutch.

He knew that too.

He just had to find a way to get the timing right and make sure that he used revenge to accomplish what he needed to do.

Before it used him up completely.

Before in turn the cancerous growth of it made him use up everyone he cared about completely.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Hutch stood to the side of the shooting stalls and waited. He'd been watching and waiting for a while now but it gave him some time to think.

He needed that time.

He needed to convince himself that his worries were all for nothing and that he was way off on his suspicion.

He needed to reassure himself that his partner, who was right now heavily engrossed in decimating the central chest region of the silhouette, was not involved in any way in what he had recently walked away from in the precinct garage.

The second half of his first shift in Robbery had been quieter than the morning had promised and in the late of the afternoon when there had been a hiatus in call outs it seemed safe enough to sign off and hand over to the next rotation. A quick call through to his own squad room proved that Starsky had already called it quits for the day too and remembering that he had mentioned the idea of the Range earlier on, a call to the desk verified that Starsky had only just arrived at the Range himself. Hutch had begged a lift with one of the other officers winging his way home and the two of them had walked down together to the garage to his personal vehicle.
In the near distance he had spotted the familiar figure of Riley as he was unlocking a rust bucket of a car which was fit to rival his own.

Hutch had a quiet smile to himself about the fact this was tangible proof for Starsky that people other than himself chose to drive around in metal disasters. Somehow though he suspected the mechanical eyesore might be more a product of Riley's financial situation and not his preferred choice.

He had walked toward him meaning to ask him about the car and signaled to Rick, the cop beside him that he would only be a moment.

Riley had seen him – or at least he had thought so. So when Riley pulled open his car door and all but leapt in behind the wheel he had quickened his pace toward the car calling out to him as he did.

Confused now because there was no way that Riley could not have heard his shout if not seen him, he was baffled why he hadn't turned around to greet him.

Riley had already closed the car door when Hutch had reached the car and was standing by the open window with what he knew was perplexity on his face.

"Riley! It's me – didn't you see me? What's with the big rush? Late for a hot date or something?" He had leaned down into the open window with a conspiratorial grin in place.

Riley had remained elusive. His head was turned to the side, as he appeared busy rummaging in the console for something.

"Riley?"

Riley had turned slowly, a handkerchief held up across the lower part of his face that was facing away from the window. It was obvious that he was trying to conceal something.

"Hutch. Hi – no I did hear you but – but – geez I'm running so late that if I don't get going I will be – I'll be in real trouble."

"OK – sorry, just thought I'd say hello and thanks for the drink and the talk last night. I appreciate your concern – but –"

He lost his train of thought when Riley grimaced in pain at his own ministrations. "Hey? What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No – no. Just late that's all. Gotta' fly."

"What's with the handkerchief – your face? Are you ok?"


"What's really nothing? You've got blood there – I can see it on the handkerchief. You have a run in with a perp or what?"

It was then, as though the game was up that Riley dropped the cloth he held to his lower face and turned partly toward Hutch.

"Look I'm really late Hutch. I'll catch you soon – I need to get to this meeting and –"

"You don't need to get to a meeting Riley, you need to go home and ice that jaw up. What the hell! Look at it. You are going to have one hell of a swollen jaw tomorrow kid. You really took a slug
"Hutch it's fine ok. Just leave it. I need to go."

Riley turned the key and the car groaned, stuttered and rumbled but the engine refused to start.

Perhaps he wanted to go – to make the exit as soon as possible, but like his own ill-fated cars with an added emphasis on the plural, his engine refused to kick over.

By this stage Rick who had been standing off to the side waiting had sauntered over with a look of vague interest on his face.

"Car trouble over here?"

Riley tried again but all he got was a weak splutter and strangled choke of engine.

Now Hutch and the other officer were standing by the window and Hutch noted that Riley was every shade off red imaginable.

"Riley – I hate to be the one to break it to you, but your pride and joy sounds flat as a tack. You want some help looking under the hood? You want to call your road help company?"

"No."

"No? Just like that – No? Then what? You just sit in this garage and keep ramming down on the clutch and twisting the ignition until it's completely flat? You need some ice on the jaw Riley. Why not lock it up and come with us? Rick can drop you somewhere near your place – maybe you can get a cab home from there? I haven't got my own car or I'd drop you myself."

"No! It'll turn eventually. Always does."

It was when he had turned to face them full on that Rick just as Hutch had done, demonstrated his shock at Riley's face by letting out a low whistle.

"Man! Look at that jaw. Ouch. Someone sure landed one on you. Must be hurting that's for sure. Who gave you that little present?"

Hutch noted that his comment seemed to be the limit for Riley who grimaced – probably more in pain, but with some frustration also and turned away to pump the clutch and turn the ignition even more furiously than he had been doing. It was clear that Riley wanted out of there and or at least was not prepared to share the story of how his face had come to look like it had just been slammed by a steel door.

This time the engine took and Riley revved it so heavily and with such desperation that Hutch wondered what was really the issue – the malfunctioning car or his face.

"Ok – well I'll catch you soon Hutch ok?"

"Sure – but, Riley? You sure you're ok to drive. You seem more than a little unsteady there? Your head feel ok? That sure is some blow. Did you black out at all?"

"Come on will you Hutch. Enough with the questions. I'm not your partner anymore alright? I'm responsible for my own shit – I can handle my own stuff. I'm out of here."
And then he was.

In a trail of thick trail blazing smoke and heavy oil laden pollutant.

Hutch stood nonplussed at how out of character Riley had just been. Totally out of sorts with himself and with Hutch.

Rick was standing beside his own car when Hutch walked back toward him.

The two gave each other something of a knowing look.

The other cop grunted lightly.

"Well he couldn't get out of here fast enough. Something to hide do you reckon? Scared maybe? "

Hutch was still looking at the bomb of a car as it turned out onto the main road and his vague response belied the true concern that was already creeping into his guts.

"Yeah – maybe. Maybe he's just young and his first big slug from a perp on the job shook him up more than we remember how it did to us. He's still pretty green after all and still just a kid Rick."

The older cop merely shrugged. "Well I guess you know him better than me. Still he'd do well to learn to open up a bit when some dick in an alley beats him up – can't just keep it to himself if he's gonna survive for long in this shit of a job. Need your support backup back up in the squad room if you're gonna keep going back more of the same. It sure won't be the first smack in the face he gets in the line of duty."

And of course that was crux of Hutch's concern.

If Riley had been slugged on the job then why wasn't he sitting up in the office with an icepack and some solicitous offers for the ubiquitous bottle of aspirin? Why trail blaze out of the garage as though he should deal with the injury himself? Where had his partner been when he got assaulted?

"Hey Hutch, you coming dream head or just gonna stand there and look at the ground. You want a lift then jump in - You want me to drop you at the Range right?"

Hutch shook himself and climbed in. "That'd be great. I can bum a lift for home from there with Starsky – he's down getting in some practice."

"Ol' sharpshooter Starsky getting in some practice? From what I remember of lefty back in the Academy he was a hotshot then and still is – don't reckon he'd need practice."

Nor did Hutch for that matter.

He chose however to keep that to himself.

"Being off for a while I guess he wants to get back into the feel of it."

"How is he? Heard he went through hell on some damn undercover drug job?"

Hutch was grateful for Rick's broad comment even though he was certain that the rumor mills would have churned out far more detailed fodder than was covered in the word "hell".

"Oh – getting there. Getting there."

And that much was true – Starsky was getting "there". Hutch just wished he knew where "there"
was exactly and, if the stirrings in his gut about Riley had any validity to them, then Starsky was further from "there" than they both realized.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

The cessation of cracking gunfire conversely broke the chain on his inner musings.

Strangely it was the quiet that seemed loud and almost harsh to his ears after a full ten minutes of standing deep in thought with the thunder of multiple shots firing not more than twenty feet from him.

Starsky was the last man on the Range and now deafening silence rang in Hutch's ears.

He waited for his partner to lower his gun and to turn around and see him.

It seemed important to remain quiet, wait and watch. He wanted to be totally still and observant to read whatever was going to be on his partner's face when he first looked at him.

Then he would know. That was the only proof he would need, the only measurement he would go by. He wouldn't even need to look at his friend's left hand to know. Starsky's expressions were the best way for Hutch to read him and he had been doing it well for years now.

Starsky turned, did a quick double take when he saw him and looked down too quickly. He knew too, he had also been reading expressions and no doubt Starsky could clearly see what was written on Hutch's troubled face. No secrets when they could look at each other. They knew each other that well, that perfectly.

Within a second Starsky lifted his head and met the evaluation head on.

"You get off earlier than you thought or did you do a runner? First day weigh in heavier than you expected?"

"I didn't do a runner but you got it right. First day back has been more than I expected. How about you? By the way you've been pumping out those shells partner, you sure look a little het up."

Something has made him look like that. Like he has just purged himself of some terrible pent up load by shooting the crap out of some cardboard cutouts.

There is something in his eyes – a look that hasn't been there for a long while.

Hutch knew it was the representation of guilt and he also recognized how Starsky immediately moved into questioning mode to take the focus off himself.

"You been watchin' for long?"

"Long enough to see that you don't need any more trips down here for target practice. Glad you're on my side buddy. Wouldn't much want to be on the receiving end of that weapon with an aim like you're showing off at the moment."

Starsky had pulled off the ear protectors and picked up his notebook and keys from inside the stall and had walked back toward Hutch.

"Can never have too much practice. Didn't we get that rammed down our necks during our Rookie training? Just aim to keep getting better. Ain't that what we were told?"

"Sure, but there's no denying that you've shot the hell of those targets so looks like those weeks
away didn't do any harm to your gun skills. You did what – must have been more than three sets? That's a fair amount when you've been wounded and laid up. How's your hand holding up with the reverberation?"

Did he ask the question purely to get Starsky to bring his left into better view? In that moment Hutch knew he almost didn't want to look more closely and see what he strongly suspected he would see.

So he didn't and instead kept his eyes on Starsky's face, watching for the instant he looked uncomfortable with any reference to his hand.

"It's fine. No tingling…"

He shrugged but didn't look down at his hand but instead bent down to start packing up the two guns and the ammunition cases.

"So you wanna cut out, go home? Someone drop you here?"

"Yeah pegged a ride with one of the guys from Robbery."

Hutch moved forward when he knew it was inevitable. Any second now he would get a clear look. Starsky was juggling with the guns, extra ammo and his jacket and notebook. Hutch held out his hands and waited for Starsky to do the same as he offered up some of the load.

"Here – give me the ammo and the book to carry."

And Starsky did just that.

And then the blatant evidence was staring Hutch in the face as he somehow knew it would be. For hadn't he already seen the evidence in the eyes and the tight line of Starsky's mouth?

Guilt on his face and blood on his hands.

Dried and crusted in the small fissures of his cracked and swollen knuckles.

The fact that Hutch chose to say nothing at that point made Starsky look even more uncomfortable. As though he was twisting in his own disquiet as he watched Hutch appraise the damage to his fist and simply put it aside.

Not until they were in the Torino and headed for Venice did Hutch address what he would normally have mentioned as soon as he had seen the damage to Starsky's knuckles.

"Must have been tough holding that gun for that long with that swollen fist."

"Done it plenty enough times over the years when we have to. You know what it's like – don't notice it once you've got your mind on the target or you're trying to shoot your way out of a hell hole."

"True – but you didn't need to shoot anything today. You were just practicing. Needed the feel of that gun in your hand Starsky? Needed the buzz? Didn't get enough of what you needed from whoever it was you laid into with your fist?"

Hutch could feel the electricity sparking up inside of the car, could see in Starsky's profile the tic in his throat and cheek, could hear the uptake of both of their breaths as they readied themselves. Again. For more of what Hutch would have liked to have thought they were through with doing to
each other. Tearing and picking at small shreds until it gave way to ripping great pieces off each other.

And yet he wasn't strong enough to stop himself from picking away at the corner of Starsky's defenses until he opened him up enough to find out why.

And yet Starsky still held out. Breathing more obviously but still holding out. No doubt he was as tired as Hutch was of the same war-games between them.

"Target practice fills a need - yeah for sure."

"And so? You didn't manage to get your need filled with your busted up knuckles?"

"What's the question here Hutch? It ain't like you've never seen me with a fist that's been cracked open before. And visa versa. More times than we can remember I'd say."

"More times than we can both remember, you're right. But I don't remember seeing you with a busted hand like that from driving a desk all day. Where between me seeing you this morning and then this afternoon did you do the number on your hand? What did you do Starsky – have a round with the typewriter? The desk? Dobey push you just that bit too hard with the backlog of paper work? You decide to lay one on our Captain?"

A silence hung in the air for the time it took for Hutch to forcibly calm himself. He heard the curse beneath Starsky's breath just before he felt the car swerve toward a wider shoulder of the road.

Starsky jerked the hand brake on with enough force to leave the stationary car rocking and then turned to Hutch.

"You gonna lay it on the line Hutch or are we gonna dance around for a few more rounds? I'm fuckin' tired of this shit, I can sure tell you that."

"You and me both buddy. So let's cut to the chase. Did you get those spilt knuckles from letting loose at Riley sometime this afternoon?"

A grunt of something approximating disgust and disbelief stuttered from Starsky's mouth.

"He tell you that? Well he sure works fast I'll give the kid that."

"He didn't tell me a thing. Ran into him in the garage and he was trying his best to avoid me. Something about the fact that he was doing that was a dead giveaway. One look at your left hand doesn't leave much room for doubt."

"Yep – burned like a bitch for the first half hour. Too late to ice it up now though."

The smart ass glibness grated on Hutch.

"That all you've got to fucking say? You smash Riley in the face and that is all you've got to say?"

"Had my reasons. He wouldn't have got one in the jaw if he'd kept his opinions to himself."

"So only you can have opinions of others? That right? Is that how it is now?"

"You weren't there Hutch – it was just between the two of us. He's a big boy. He can handle himself. He chooses to go around pushing people's buttons, he's gotta be prepared to take the fall."

"Whatever he said surely didn't warrant that you slug him in the face. This is me Starsky, me – I
know how easily you let the left fist fly."

"Told you he pushed. You know I don't like to be pushed."

Hutch nodded slowly and looked straight ahead at the street, not trusting his own rising temper.

"No you don't like to be pushed."

Hutch had the door open before he even realized he was doing it.

"What ya doin? This is a busy road. You wanna get smeared all over the blacktop?"

"I think I'll walk the rest of the way."

"Now ya' just bein' stupid. Calm down. It's at least five miles to Venice from here. Close the damn door will ya?"

"I'll catch you tomorrow. Go put some salve on your knuckles."

"Hutch!"

However the tall blond form was already navigating his way across the strip, weaving his way through the slowly moving late afternoon traffic and Starsky's frustrated call was lost in the drone of a car engines and beeping horns.

Too late he slammed his hand down hard on the steering wheel and cursed again as fresh pain fired across his tender hand and up his forearm .

"Ah Shit!"

Not caring that he risked a near sideswipe he bullied the flow of cars until he sandwiched the Torino back into stream of traffic.

He barely noticed the earful of horns he got in response.

\[SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH\]

Beneath lashes thick with dark mascara, she took a long sweeping look at him. Her gaze ran appreciatively over his tall muscled physique and openly admired the aesthetics of his angled face and dark hair. Like just about any other female she was so easily captivated by his physical attributes and smooth confidence.

"Sorry what was the reason again that you said you'd be needing the apartment for the short-term rental? I'm sure of course that you mentioned it when you first phoned up to enquire about our listings."

"I didn't."

He had turned to face her now, pulling his attention away from his view from the apartment's window and the cold disdain in his eyes for her was like a slap in the face. The flirtatious poise she had effected instantly faltered.

"Oh – well – I thought – that -"
twisted a little on her ridiculously high stilettos and smoothed her skirt down almost subconsciously.

It amused him how quickly women could have their chic personas dismantled when he chose to treat them in this manner, to give them the look he knew he wore now on his face.

"You thought what?"

She had driven up to the property for their appointment in her gleaming European car and his first glance at her as she stepped prettily out of the car and glided sleekly toward him told him all he needed to know about her.

Within the first few minutes of introducing herself to him it was not difficult to see that she was giving out all the signals that she was interested in him. He had her summed her up before she had even extended her business card to him, held in one elegant, bejeweled hand. She was no doubt used to rubbing shoulders with the higher echelons of the city's property magnates and by virtue that her professional life intersected their personal ones this woman considered herself elite.


Toffee nosed slut with her fashion gloss and flawless makeup.

As if he would be remotely interested in her. Still it was always fun to go through the steps of reelng women like her in then cutting the line with a cruel flourish. He'd enjoyed the beginnings of watching her begin to flounder. A bit pathetic really, because he had barely had the chance to begin before she showed signs of crumbling.

"I didn't think anything - what I mean is that I didn't mean to say - it's just that, we generally like to know a little about your background, your needs for the property, so that we can - "

He cut her off with a slicing action.

"I need an apartment not a relationship. You don't need to know anything about my background or my personal life – just what I am looking for in a property. That is all you need to know. If you don't want my business than don't waste my time."

"Of course – of course Mr. …ah Mr. Copeland. That's perfectly understandable."

He liked watching her color up again as she hastily retrieved the name he had given her from her clipboard, the memory of it so easily forgotten with the unease he had caused her.

"And – of course I am more than happy to assist you with your search for a suitable apartment. "

"Good – we are on the same page now. Let's hope you can stay there. Now is this apartment available because it suits my requirements and I would like to take the lease as of the next day or so."

"I think this listing is available immediately and it comes as you see it, fully furnished. I can call you later today with the exact details of the lease and maybe you can come by the office in the morning to arrange the paperwork. That is, if it suits you to do that of course."

"Call me on the number provided and we can get the matter settled. I'd like to take possession by tomorrow evening."

Bored with her and bored with the little game Ryan strolled toward the door to leave her standing in
the center of the room, her cheeks still flushed and her initial glamour a puddle on the floor.

**SHSHSHSSHSHSSHSSHSSHSSHSSHSHSHSHSHS**

Four bottles in and Starsky knew that beer wasn't going to do the trick. He'd be prepared to try something harder but that would require him driving out again and he just couldn't summon the energy to do that.

Pacing and cursing didn't help either, nor several practiced role-plays of his dialogue down the phone for when he eventually summoned the nerve to call Hutch. All useless antidotes to the gripe in his gut – the one he was always left with after fighting with his partner.

There was little relief for his swollen fist either. Despite - or - perhaps to spite Hutch's suggestion of the salve, he'd left the raw knuckles untended. The niggling discomfort almost like a penance, the scraped raw skin testimony to his precipitous temper.

Eying the clock he wondered briefly about whether he should eat but dismissed the idea when his gut clenched painfully again with the thought of swallowing solid food. Fancifully he considered that he had already choked himself to the hilt with a hefty dose of self-recrimination. After all he had been shoving large helpings of it down his own throat since Hutch had stormed off across the busy boulevard earlier in the evening.

Another beer down and he put in the call to him.

No answer.

He tried again fifteen minutes later and then again in half an hour. Still no response.

The first trickle of coldness coursed into his veins.

Had Hutch in fact gone straight home? Had he gone to Riley's to try to make amends? Had he even made it home intact across that pulsing stream of traffic once he'd had lost sight of his blond head disappearing into the distance?

Was he out on a bender? Pissed off to the point where he was finding solace in a bar?

The next call was the obvious one that he and Hutch made when either of them was trying to locate each other in any place other than their homes.

It too was another dead end. The staff at Huggy's bar reported no visit from Hutch that evening – at least not so far. Nor did it seem that Riley had graced the bar's premises.

The night was getting old and Starsky felt his worry levels rising with each passing half hour.

Finally he had to let the ultimate fear in through the door he had held firmly shut all evening. He'd tried to use rationale logic to keep the fear at bay for he knew that once he allowed it in the fear would run wild. He couldn't allow it to hijack his tendency to paranoia about Ryan. Ryan was not in any way connected with Hutch being out of touch. And yet still the fear mounted and the rationale part of him was beaten down.

By midnight he succumbed. He needed to find out for sure. He needed to check out the situation before he could possibly go to sleep tonight.

Pushing aside the last beer he could stomach to even sip at and reached for the Torino's keys.
Hutch wasn't answering his phone but that didn't mean he wasn't at home. He'd know for sure it was Starsky calling and was probably just too pig headed to pick up. Simple reason – simple and straightforward. Even going to Hutch's place was possibly only going to escalate their interpersonal conflict tonight. They both needed to step back and think about what they were doing to each other.

And they would. As soon as Starsky could satisfy himself that Hutch was sitting and stewing inside his own place, just as he had sat and stewing all evening.

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Less than twenty minutes later with a clean ride through mostly traffic free streets, Starsky pulled up outside Hutch's place. There were dim lights shining out from the interior so it seemed that he was home.

The brown clunker was in its usual parking position and when Starsky lightly ran his hand over the neglected surface of the hood, the engine beneath was cool. It seemed that Hutch had been playing the avoidance line at least for most if not all the evening. Starsky felt the remnants of his worry about Ryan fall away and his chest filled and exhaled more expansively than it had done all evening.

Pausing at the door for only seconds Starsky took the time to tap lightly, signaling their customary tattoo of arrival. With no sound of greeting or footsteps coming toward the door he tapped again a little more loudly. Familiarity of entering each other's homes with their own keys leant him the nonchalance, which he now carried in through the front door.

His nonchalance received a rude awakening when he took in the scene in front of him. It would have been a challenge to say who was more shocked out of the three of them. In fairness to the situation Starsky had to give the prize to the woman.

Hutch was caught in a still frame shot midway in the act of extricating himself from the couch and the woman on it. In on quick movement he was up and making a long legged lunge for his holstered gun on the side table. The woman, who remained nameless for now because Starsky had no idea who she was, bounded up off the couch and let forth a very female high-pitched small shriek before scuttling back a few steps. Starsky stood half in and half out of the open doorway, the offending key in his hand and fully aware that his face registered the unexpected jolt he had just received. The woman looked open mouthed at him and then back to Hutch before pushing ineffectively at her hair. It seemed as though the mild state of its disarray was in itself telling of what activity she and Hutch had just been embroiled in. Taking into account Hutch's fully unbuttoned shirt and bared chest and his discarded belt across the chair, Starsky thought it was a fairly safe bet that the activity they'd recently been embroiled in didn't involve a lot of talking.

Hutch cursed rudely, dropped his arm from its quest in reaching his magnum and then scowled hard at his partner.

"What the FUCK! Jesus Starsky, what the hell are you doing smashing open my front door at 12.30 at night?"

More than a little stuck for words Starsky found the way the woman kept looking at him and then back at Hutch was unnerving him more.

"Called ya. Called and ya' didn't answer."

He left the explanation at that.
"So? I didn't answer. I might have been busy." He threw a quick look at the nervous woman and the couch behind him. "I was busy."

He swung his glance back to Starsky and then back to her again this time with a shade of apology for her in his tone.

"Umm – Susan. This is David Starsky – my partner. No doubt you've seen him around the building."

The woman looked up from where she was drinking in the sight of Hutch's tousled hair and unbuttoned shirt. She dragged her eyes away and over to Starsky. And then when he looked at her more closely it occurred to Starsky that he did in fact recognize her – at least he had seen her face before. One of the admin staff from another floor in Metro. A nondescript but pretty woman who he had not ever really paid that much attention to in the past. Her name was not familiar to him. Whoever she was she had found her way into Hutch's bed tonight.

Anger and relief flared up inside him in equal measures. He was good and angry that while he was stirring himself into a frenzy of worry and remorse, Hutch had been pounding some girl, oblivious and totally undeserving of his worry. However at the same time he was full of relief that Hutch had been pounding some girl, safe inside his own home and had not in fact been walking aimlessly about the streets of Venice in a heavy funk after their argument.

"Yeah – ah Hi, umm, David. Nice to finally meet you. Yes I have often seen you around the corridors, though not a lot lately. You're not partnered with Ken at the moment?"

Starsky bristled at the question and gave her nothing but a curt reply.

"Not at the moment. No."

When she looked confused Hutch offered more.

"While I'm in Robbery, Starsky is on light duties as he hasn't long been back from medical leave. We'll partner up again as usual within the week."

"Oh, I see. Well that explains it. Look ah Ken, I might get going now. Got to be at work by eight in the morning."

"Wait, I'll walk you to your car."

Interestingly Starsky noted Hutch hadn't tried to dissuade her from leaving which was good because Starsky felt a distinct discord with her. He felt more than happy that he had been the instigation behind getting her out of Hutch's home. Not of course that he imagined Hutch was likely to see it quite the same way.

"No – really. My car is just in the laneway – only a few steps from your place. Well – thanks for the evening and I guess – well – I – I might hear from you."

"Of course. Sure – sounds great Susan. I'll catch up with you tomorrow no doubt. I'll be in Robbery for a few more shifts at least I think this week."

He walked her to the door and scowled pointedly at Starsky until he turned and sat on the couch feigning a sudden interest in an empty wine bottle and glasses on the coffee table. Hutch gave her a quiet goodbye and offered her a parting but chaste kiss to the cheek.

Within a moment Hutch was back and standing over his partner, the hard glare on his face a
preview of a storm that might or might not break.

Starsky got in first.

"I see you found a way to get over your mood from this afternoon. Earlier you asked me if using my fists helped me with my moods. I could ask you the same question. Did a quick fuck bring you some relief? Feel better?"

"Tell me Starsky, are you trying to perfect this moody bastard act because it seems to me you're getting really good with saying all the right lines to really try to piss me off. Your sense of timing of delivery is spot on too. Christ Almighty you have a nerve!"

He walked away toward the kitchen, fuming beneath his breath. Starsky heard the fridge door and a beer crack open. When he stalked back into the living room area Starsky noted there was no offer of a beer for him.

"No, thanks all the same Hutch, but I'll pass on the beer. Sunk enough tonight waiting for you to answer your God damn phone."

Hutch didn't bite to the smart comment but instead came back at him with an almost weary reply.

"Then you should have stayed at home and had a few more and left me alone to some privacy. God it's not like I didn't need it. We've been in each other's faces for weeks now."

"So you go ring up the first girl you think of and invite her over for some in between the sheet action. I get that. I see that you need do that – but why still couldn't you answer your phone? God knows you pick it up every other time when we don't want to be called in."

"What's the big deal about me answering the phone anyway?"

"I'll tell you why Hutch – because I might have been worried! I was worried."

Hutch looked confused.

"You knew I'd be smarting from this afternoon – why get so worked up about me not wanting to make friendly on the phone tonight? I'd have thought you'd have figured out where I'd be standing."

"That's the damn point you dumb head. I didn't know where you were standing. You didn't answer, I couldn't locate you at Huggy's. How was I supposed to know where you might be or what might have happened to you?"

"What's going to have happened? I think I know my way home to Venice from where we were today don't you?"

"You usually don't jump out of the car and bolt like that."

"You're damn lucky I waited until you stopped the car I was so angry with you. And then to come busting in on me like this just now. Jesus – that's the last time I'll be seeing that chick. She won't trust me not to have you throwing the door open anytime you damn well feel like it."

"Yeah well that's what you get for leaving me thinking you could still be out walking in the dark in some of these seedy back streets near the beach. That's what you get for walking off all hot-headed from the car and flinging yourself into peak hour traffic."
"And that's what you get Starsky for acting like an out of control thug with Riley!"

"So you the guilt in my face when you stalked off like that. You made your point and left me feeling like a heel. But then you go and play missing partner tonight as well. Why'd you have to act like that when you'd know I'd be stewing in my guilt already? Laying here screwing some chick while I'm sweating bucket loads worrying you'd gone and put yourself at risk."

"Put myself at risk? What the hell are you going on about Starsky? You think I was going to go and jump off the pier because you happened to piss me off big time with your behavior?"

Starsky didn't want him to know that his real concern centered on Ryan and the threats he'd made to Huggy about getting to Hutch.

"Well…. look at what you did do. Went straight out and threw yourself at some. …Some…virtual stranger. Not exactly a healthy way to deal with us arguing."

"Oh? You don't think? My God, who or what are you turning into? First you tell me I can't associate with Riley in any shape or form and now you're preaching at me from your damn pulpit about who I choose to date."

"Sure didn't look much like a date from where I was standing. I know you well enough buddy to read you when you've had a lay. Your eyes had that 'cat got the cream' sort of look about them when I first came in."

"Maybe I was just about to get the cream you idiot. You ever think about that?"

Starsky smiled a little with his head on the side and waited a moment appraising the blushing Hutch.

"Nope - you had already left the dish boy - besides - she looked pretty glazed in the eyes too and even when I was talking to you she was still oggling your bare chest."

"Oh for God's sake you make it sound like -"

"Listen Hutch – you have no idea who she really is? She works in the Department doesn't she? How do you know she isn't feeding information back to Ryan? How did you get together with her in the first place?"

"Starsky! You are starting to scare me with this Ryan stuff. Of course I know who she is. You think she just wound up here tonight from nowhere? I've seen her around in the corridors over the past couple of months and I have gotten to know her a little. She wound up here as you say – because I gave her a call and asked her over. I was in the mood for anything other than thinking about our differences and I sure as hell didn't want to go another round with you on the phone tonight. I knew you'd get the guilts and try to call – you always do. But – I just wasn't up for it. So – I asked her over and she accepted. We had a nice time, hell we were in the process of having a nice time – until you showed up out of the blue."

Hutch stepped closer and flourished his famous jabbing index finger. Starsky however, long familiar with this habitual manifestation of anger in his partner anticipated the move and stepped back to avoid getting drilled in the chest by the digit. Hutch dropped the finger and threw his hands up.

"What are you all of a sudden? The Hutch police? You and only you decide who should come within a ten-foot radius of me? So now you're going to tell me that Susan is not on your approved list of people I can spend time with."
"Now you sound like Riley."

"Like Riley? What -? Wait…. Is that right? Is that what went on this afternoon? Is that why you laid one on him? Did he accuse you of being controlling of who I mix with?"

"Told you he needs to watch his mouth. Thinks he's got me all worked out. Thinks he's got us both worked out. He doesn't get to say that stuff and expect me not to let loose Hutch. "

"Well – well at least he had the balls to say it to you. I think that he's been worried about this – this problem you seem to have with him since he and I got partnered up while you were on suspension. Maybe he thinks that it's more than you being concerned that he's in with Ryan. I think he believes you've always shut him out from me because deep down you resent that he was my partner while you were in a bad place mentally. My question is – is this how it's always going to be Starsky? You always going to have Riley pegged as an undesirable, always going to hate him? Because if you do, it's really going to take it's toll on us. That's why I walked off this afternoon. That's why I left the phone ringing tonight."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning – I would never do anything to make you unhappy or angry and, if I thought the consequences of my actions were in any way detrimental to you I'd put an end to them immediately. You know that. I was even prepared to give you the space you needed while we were at the safe house by not contacting Riley or discussing him in any way. But now we're back and things are different. He's a colleague and a friend and both of us are going to keep seeing him around at work, whether you like it not. You can't ask me – not when there is any good or sound or rational reason why - to totally block Riley out of my social circle. And – even if you do ask or expect it of me. Even if you do act out angrily when I refuse to do as you ask, I won't do that to him Starsky. I won't. You have to work it out – and soon. For yourself, for me, for Riley and most importantly for us Starsky. You've got to move through this hurdle."

Starsky's scowl was severe but there was the beginning of a sense of resignation in it at the same time.

"Ok- Ok. Maybe I shouldn't have slugged him. Well - at least not quite so hard anyway."

"Starsky, stop being a complete dick. Do I look like I find that amusing?"

Starsky had to admit that Hutch looked anything but amused.

"Alright, alright – so I'll back off with my animosity toward him. Still he has no place telling me how to act with my best friend."

"Maybe not. But he is looking out for me I suppose and look at it from his point of view. Since day one you have frozen him out and aligned him in your head with Ryan. He's just trying to make sense of it. And anyway – you know it's true."

"What's true?"

"Riley is right and he got frustrated enough to lay it on the line I guess. Today I suppose he was really blaming you for the exclusivity of our partnership. He hasn't known us long enough to know it's how we are, how we've always been. We do tend to lock others out of our lives. You know that. We're damn notorious for it. He's just experiencing it first hand and up close because he partnered up with me for a while and I was his older role model I guess."

"You're not wrong about that. He makes no secret that he's got you up on a pedestal. You sure got
his vote for Perfect Partner and Mr. Virtuous."

Hutch shrugged lightly at Starsky's half teasing grin.

"At least someone appreciates my greater attributes. My real partner fails to realize how incredibly virtuous I have to be to put up with him sometimes."

"No – no he doesn't. Your real partner has just been fucked up in the head for the past two months but never forgets to appreciate how patient you are and how much shit you take from him."

Then before Hutch had a chance to say anything about this highly sentimental comment Starsky went on.

"So – you didn't go see Riley tonight? Check he was ok?"

Hutch seemed a little surprised that Starsky would ask such a question without any judgement in his voice.

"No – I decided to let the dust settle. It just wasn't the best thing for me to do tonight. Not after I wanted to screw your neck when I realized for sure it was you who had left him with the swollen jaw."

"So you called up this...what was her name... Susan and went a few rounds in the sack instead?"

Hutch smiled a little tiredly.

"Hey? You know as well as I do that it's a tried and true cure for lots of things."

"So you never answered my question before. Did it help tonight? I'm sort of wondering how good of a time you were having because you haven't exactly ripped my head off for interrupting your heavy seduction scene. She looked a lot more upset than you did when I walked in on the two of you."

Hutch's next smile was not only weary but held a hint of mischief.

"Err…I don't know. Let's say it took care of a few needs. It's been a while and you how a ….."

Biting off the sentence Hutch rubbed at his chest and bit at his mouth.

"Shit Starsk – that was insensitive. I know how badly it went for you with Katy, when she - ".

However Starsky was already holding up his hands.

"Hey don't worry about it. At least one of us is getting some action again. I'm sure I'll get back on the horse once enough time has gone by."

"You will Starsky – of course you will. Now it's damn late and you're not driving back home at this hour. I'm grabbing a shower and you can set yourself up on the couch."

Starsky was already heading for the linen closet, yawning loudly.

"Even the couch sounds good right about now. I guess I should feel lucky that you didn't kick my ass out onto the street after I crashed in on your hot sex fest tonight."

"Starsky – believe me if it had been a hot sex fest that you crashed in on you would be out on the street."

"That mediocre huh?"

"Yep – and most of the blame was down to me. I think you and I both have some healing to do in that department before we get back to our super sexual powers in the bedroom."

It gave them both something to splutter about as Hutch hit the shower and Starsky hit the couch.

Crazy to be there at this time of night he knew. It was way too late for anyone to think about going out and there had been no action since Ryan had arrived home earlier in the evening.

Crazy, certifiable really – to be sitting cramped up in his car with a sonofabitch burning pain coursing through his jaw and down into his neck. Even his damn teeth were throbbing with pain and his head was pounding despite having swallowed more than four aspirin in the past hour. He couldn't even say why he was here, doing what he was doing, achieving nothing but listening to his battered face screaming abuse at him for not attending to what it needed. He should have been at home lying with icepacks pressed to his jaw and drinking some cool brew to soothe his burning insides. For he had been burning – burning up with indignation, humiliation and resentment for what Starsky had done to him. For what he knew in all honesty he had pushed and needled Starsky to do to him.

It was not as if he didn't know that Starsky would go for him. He knew enough about him and his fly off the handle temper to know that he was playing with fire as soon as he encountered him in a one on one in the locker room. That in itself was contentious, but to challenge him - no to accuse him of keeping a monopoly on Hutch was really testing Starsky's combustion point.

And then to run into Hutch in the Precinct Garage and have to let him see the obvious fact that he'd been on the receiving end of a direct fist to the jaw was just such rotten luck. When he'd seen Hutch that afternoon there was a part of him, the junior Rookie in him who wanted to blurt out to his former senior training officer that he had been damn well wronged. Wronged by Hutch's own partner no less.

In the end though he held it all back in and chose to drive off having said nothing about his and Starsky's altercation. If he was honest he knew why. It was because deep down he was not so sure that Hutch would be impartial about the event. Hutch would always, always defend Starsky – even if his actions against Riley had been extreme. And Riley just wasn't up for that. A thump to the face was bad enough but to see in Hutch's eyes that he would not side with Riley against Starsky would have really cut to the quick.

So he'd revved his bomb out of the garage and driven around till he settled down. He'd gone home only long enough to wash his face and get some pain relief. However when he realized that he was going to remain more wired than groggy from the punch he did the first thing that occurred to him to take his mind from his self wallowing.

Somewhere deep amongst all of this Ryan Lancaster was the root of everyone's imbalances. His sheer badness had tipped so many people's lives out of kilter, leaving each of them bouncing off each other with anger, fear and for Starsky irrational mistrust. It seemed somehow befitting that Riley go in quest of him tonight after he had been misjudged by Starsky. So Riley would wait, watch, measure and evaluate him for any chance or clue to bring him down.

So here he was parked outside of Ryan's apartment, hunkered down in the shadows, miserable with pain and sour with mood – but totally ready. Ready and primed for whatever might present itself to him as an opportunity to evict Ryan completely from all of their lives.
Despite the fact that he felt that he had already done his level best to deal with the open threat of Ryan once already, his efforts had been judged and found lacking by Starsky. Now and especially after this afternoon he felt more determined then ever to be the one who would take Ryan's head on a platter to Starsky and Hutch.

If he could somehow achieve that then maybe some of the imbalances would be righted.

With only four or less hours sleep Riley was back on his watch. If he had thought his jaw was sore the previous night it was doubly so this morning and there was going to be no way anyone at work was not likely to pick he'd taken a violent jab to the face.

As he lay back in the car seat mulling over probable storylines to explain the swelling and the steadily purpling bruising, Ryan exited his building. Intent on unlocking and getting into his car he didn't scan the street and there was no sign that he had seen Riley at this post.

Finally Riley had something to at least tail. He'd been starting to think he was wasting his time keeping Ryan under surveillance. What did he possibly imagine he was going to discover about him anyway that could do anything to change what was still a festering sore in his, Hutch's and Starsky's lives?

A quick glance at his watch told him that he would have only enough time to tail Ryan for this early morning trip before he had to clock on for his shift. If necessary he would have to use his beaten face as a ruse for his late arrival.

Keeping a safe enough distance on the car he was following Riley was able to track him all the way to what appeared like a modern block of apartments on the fringe of the inner city residential sector.

Ryan disappeared inside.

Less than twenty minutes later he re-emerged with a woman beside him. The two were talking as they walked out of the entrance of building. Riley couldn't get a clear look at the woman except to see that she was well dressed and perfectly groomed and obviously a professional of some sort. Their manner toward each other and the paperwork she held in her arms further supported the likelihood that their relationship was not a personal one. So what were the two of them doing meeting early in the morning in some sort of residential building that looked new?

Before Riley had the chance to lift his binoculars to get a better view of the woman it was apparent that Ryan had dismissed her – brusquely it would seem, as she was left standing as he walked away from her and right toward the direction of Riley's car.

All thoughts of zeroing in on the woman were lost when Ryan looked straight down the street and apparently right at him. Riley knew the second he'd been made. Ryan stopped in his step for just a moment and looked hard at him. Almost defiantly Riley looked him right back. After all Ryan already knew he had taken up the pastime of following him about the city since Dobson's death.

Time froze while Riley tried to guess Ryan's next move. As it happened Ryan did nothing but laser him with his black eyes until Riley shifted in his seat with the intensity of the visual burn. After that Ryan broke the gaze and crossed the road to his parked car.

Riley sat for a moment already late for work, sifting through the information.

It was then that Riley saw the Agent's sign for leasing of the building and he wondered whether
Ryan was planning on changing his address anytime soon.

If that was the case, then what were the probable reasons behind the move?

Starsky's phone was ringing when he let himself into his apartment the next morning. He'd been slow to get moving after sharing some coffee with Hutch and he was already running at least thirty minutes late. He walked right past the insistent buzz on his way to the bedroom to retrieve a change of clothes. He decided to leave it ring out or for the answering machine to pick it up. Talking would just delay him further and he couldn't afford to get his Captain offside today. Not when he was planning to try to sweet-talk him into an earlier than scheduled return to street duties.

One step into his bedroom and he heard the unmistakable voice which stopped him dead in his tracks.

He still couldn't deal with the jagged barb of hatred that speared him when he heard the supercilious tone.

The receiver was clenched in his hand before he remembered crossing to the phone and he cut impatiently through his own recorded voice message, ramming his finger violently on the stop button to clear the line.

"I'm here – "

"Oh you are there? Good, good. Would hate to think that I'd missed you or even worse, you were avoiding me. I'd like to think you haven't gotten so - umm – so fragile that you can't face up to even my voice Starsky."

"I can't stand the sound of your fucking breath let alone your fucking voice. Why are you ringing me?"

"Call it brotherly support – you know how we cops all like to stick together and make sure each of us are doing ok with our personal hurdles? I wanted to see how you were coping with your return to work Starsky. Must be somewhat stressful to have that badge back in your pocket."

"Feels damn better than you must be feeling Ryan - considering the IA eventually came to their senses and ousted you. How's it feel NOT to be carrying a badge in your pocket?"

"Now you know that's not true Starsky. The brass never ousted me – I made it easy for them, you and your pretty partner by walking. Made it easy for that spineless Dobson too. Not that anything matters for him anymore of course."

"You ring me to chat about your pride Ryan or you got something important to say because unlike you I've got a job to do and secondly I don't have any interest in chatting to you. It turns my guts."

"A job to do? From what I've heard you're doing nothing more than being the squad room's filing clerk. Seems Dobey doesn't trust you back on the streets yet."

Blood pounded in Starsky's neck and head as he cursed himself for being stupid enough to start to believe that Riley was not involved with Ryan.

"Heard? Where did you hear that from Ryan? You still lurking in the shadows watching me like some dirty pervert with a baggy raincoat? Or are you getting information from someone?"
"Me? Lurking in the shadows? No – that sounds more like your heroic but stupid Rookie friend. Would have thought Hutchinson would have told him that cops don't like being tailed by their own, especially by some junior who likes to think he can play with the big boys. You set him on to me Starsky?"

"What the hell are you talking about Ryan? You trying to crap me about Riley following you?"

"Why don't you tell me Starsky – I'm sure you know what Hutch has set his little lap dog to do for him?"

Ryan's comments and the obvious resentment in his voice when talking about Riley had Starsky nonplussed. Distracted for a moment he jerked back to Ryan's words.

"No now you're back in town – I like to use more streamlined ways of keeping tabs on you two – you and your blond lover. So he's been hauled off to another team and left you playing all by yourself? Must be hard for you Starsky – to be separated like that. Can't watch each other's back so well can you? Not when he's somewhere else? God knows where else he can end up with Robbery call outs. Robbery can be a bitch of a job – you never know what's going to be waiting for you when you get to the scene. Bit like Domestic call outs. They're always open season for crazy behavior. People get real dangerous when they're cornered. Hope Hutchinson watches his step without you there to protect his every move Starsky. I know how you'd hate to see that pretty face of his all smashed up."

"You fucker – you motherfucker. You trying to scare me now Ryan? You trying to scare me into thinking you're going to get to Hutch? "

"I don't know about that. I'm only passing a comment on the nature of the job. Remember Starsky I was a cop for as many years as you have been. Scare you? Well – do you feel scared Starsky? Scared for your partner's vulnerability? Actually you do sound a little worried."

"You're the one who should be worried Ryan. You know the score with Hutch and me. You come get me if you want me again – come and get me. But – you make one move toward Hutch and – "

"Oh and what? You really think you've got it all covered? All sewn up? You really fool yourself into thinking you can stop me getting what I want to get from Hutchinson – what he owes me for what he has done to destroy my life? What he has done to take you away from me?"

"Yes – yes I do you cocksucking psycho. I know for certain that I will stop you. You won't fuck us around again – you won't hurt me by hurting Hutch if that is what you plan on doing. I won't let you do it. You know Ryan – I will never let you do it."

"That's so low level of you Starsky. Calling me that name. Stooping so low to use such cheap and demeaning terms Starsky. I'm sure you have no qualms about letting Hutchinson be your number one cocksucker whenever he wants you. But – you're just not happy to let me do you the same service. Which – when I think about it is so unjust. After all – I have waited for you Starsky. Kept myself just for you. Unlike your partner who has no hesitation in dipping his cock in any pussy that comes his way. Not so chivalrous after all is he? Using women like that – even his - "

Starsky felt a little sick and if he could he would have stopped the rest of what he feared Ryan was going to say because it would prove once more Ryan had the inside take on their personal lives.

"- Work associates."

"Work associates? You make no sense you sonofabitch."
"Yes. Work associates. Still, I understand what he was really doing? She was just a fill in for you wasn't she Starsky? When he couldn't have you because you're still out of action sexually since you and I had our tryst."

"She – she?"

"She? Oh you mean you don't know? The woman from Reception on floor two of your building? You know I can't for the life of me even conjure up her name. But – she has been very helpful to me over the past couple of months – right back from when you were in hospital. Stupid fucking whore. Well - she spread her legs for Hutchinson so I suppose she got her just desserts."

And suddenly he was gone, the dialtone a whirring buzz in Starsky's ear and his own anger a pulsing beat in his head.

The phone went dead.

Cut off and dead. Not unlike how Starsky was feeling inside about his trust in human mankind.

A woman from their precinct.

The woman who Hutch had only just got to know in the last couple of months.

The woman who had been more than useful to Ryan in the last couple of months.

A conduit, an information source who had probably been selling them out to Ryan for the last couple of months.

Not Riley but this woman.

The "virtual stranger" who had probably manipulated herself into meeting up with Hutch last night. Who had used him and run back to Ryan with the information he wanted on them both.

She had a name, this virtual stranger. "Susan". That's how Hutch had introduced her Starsky remembered.

For once however Starsky felt more aligned with Ryan's opinion. At least on the name he had used for her.

"Stupid fucking whore" fairly much covered it.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH!

At around four pm Starsky picked up his phone to hear Huggy's voice.

"It's strange man. Usually when I put through a call to you two dudes, nine times out of ten you are never at your desks and now what? Two, three times in the past coupla' days I get you straight away when I call. You tied to that office chair or what Starsky?"

"Don't rub it in Huggy. I'm already at the point where I've told Dobey that if I'm not back on street duty by Monday I'll hand him back my badge willingly."

"So? He go for it? You and the blond crusader gonna be cruisin' my neighborhood in that red hot rod of yours soon?"
"Jesus I hope so. Once Hutch gets released from this stint with Robbery it'll be business as normal. If not – I can't be held responsible for my actions."

"Just try to curb yourself Starsky, because you've already told me how low you feel after losing it with our young Rookie Riley."

"I don't recall using the word "low". When I called you earlier it was to say that I wanted you to give me the nod when Riley was next coming into the bar. I said I felt a bit bad about how I'd treated him, maybe need to clear the air a bit that's all. I just need some time and space without Hutch around him so that I can begin to get a few things straight. And, by the way, he's not "our" anything. He's a junior cop who happens to be assigned to this precinct."

"He's a junior cop who is a nice kid Starsky and remember, he was good to your partner while you were laid up. I think Riley helped keep Hutch together when you were giving him grey hairs every day with that undercover job and the way Ryan was messing around in your life."

"Ok I've heard it enough from Hutch – don't need you on my case as well. So is that why you've called? You know when he's coming around to your place?"

"Yep. He dropped in briefly at lunch, as he seems to do these days. Nice handiwork on the face by the way. You sure laid one on him poor kid. Not that he was complainin'."

"Shut up Huggy."

"Just lettin' you know you left your mark that's all. Now if you want to just happen to bump into him for your little talk and make-up session he let me know that he's planning on dropping in for a meal tonight around six. Told him I'd fix some of that special shrimp gumbo he loves seeing that it'll be a few days before he can manage to chew solids."

Starsky could just picture the big wide grin on his black friend's generous sized mouth as he put in the extra elbow jab.

"Thought I told you to shut up with the wise cracks smart ass."

"Can't miss an opportunity to push your guilt levels a bit more Starsky. Anyway there you have it. He'll be here then – if you want to meet him like you told me you did."

"Thanks and yeah I do. It'll seem more natural if I approach him at your place. Don't think he'd be too pleased to see me turning up on his home doorstep."

"Starsky – if you'd left my jaw that black the last time I saw you I don't rightly think I'd be feeling very hospitable if you came to my front door either."

"See you after six Hug – and remember, don't mention this to Hutch. This is between Riley and me. Keep Hutch out of this one. He'll be caught up at work till later anyway."

Huggy's eye roll came down the phone in his tone.

"You think I don't know the drill by now? Hutch gets kept in the dark, I get it. But Starsky?"

"What?"

"You better promise me that you're going to be cool with Riley tonight and not lay any more fury on him. I don't rightly think I'd feel too good if I knew I was the one who had set one him up if you do."
"I promise ya' Huggy. All I want to do is talk. We've got some stuff to clear and if he's on the right side of Hutch which he is sounding like he might be then I owe him some apologies."

"Good to hear man. I'll be seeing you later then."

The alley out the back of Huggy's bar was poorly lit but when the low purr of the Torino's engine filled the narrow laneway the early evening sky was still bright enough for Starsky not to have to use his headlights. It was still light enough for him to instantly pick out the two figures of a couple of black teenage boys huddled down over something near the trash cans against the wall. Nosing his car into his preferred parking spot he realized that the something they were huddled over was in fact a someone.

Two sets of eyes jerked up to regard him when they heard the Torino's engine and he half expected them to take off in a run. They held their stance but their faces looked shocked and fearful. Jumping out of the car he heard their urgent distress in their call to him.

"Hey Mister! Mister! Over here! We need some help."

He jogged across the lane to where they were crouched and up closer now he could see they were no more than perhaps fourteen or fifteen.

"What's going on here? Someone hurt there? You boys been havin' a rumble?"

"No – we didn't do nothin' man. Nothin'. He's real bad, the dude wouldn't stop kicking him even when he saw us here."

Starsky indicated for the boys to move back from the figure.

"Is he one of your friends?"

"No man – we don't know him. We were just cuttin' across the alley on the way to the street and we saw it goin' down. We didn't do nothin'."

The kid repeated his lack of involvement for good measure and Starsky could sense he was telling the truth. The boys looked too shocked for them to be involved.

"Ok – alright. Let me have a look. I'm a cop."

At Starsky's declaration the boys sprang back stepping back enough for him to move in closer to the figure. He kneeled down and quickly assessed the situation. The victim was on his side facing away from them huddled into a protective fetal position, his face turned away. Gently and with care not to move the victim's neck too much he leaned over the body to get a better view of the injuries, positioning his fingers into the carotid space to feel for a pulse which was still strong but rapid. The face was pressed hard against the still warm ground and as carefully as he could he relieved some of the pressure against the cheek and eye that was pressed into the loose gravel of the road. Sticky warm wetness of fresh blood that was largely covering the beaten face clung to his hands.

Even before he saw the features beneath the blood he knew. The hair, the body and the build all gelled together to deliver the sickening drop in the gut that told him the victim was someone he knew and knew well.

"Jesus Christ! Boys one of you run inside and tell the bar staff to call an ambulance. Ask for Huggy
– Huggy – he's the owner. Tell him Starsky is out here and needs to see him urgently."

One of the kids took off with the lightening speed reaction of the very young.

The other one moved back toward Starsky and crouched down beside him again watching as Starsky removed his jacket and fashioned a pillow to slip as unobtrusively as he could beneath the bleeding head. The boy was looking at Starsky astutely.

"You know him don't you Mister?"

"Yeah I do. He's - he's a cop too."

"Man! You mean that dude beat up on a cop?"

Starsky was quickly assessing the body for any wounds or signs of major blood loss but he looked at the boy sideways.

"You two boys need to tell me everything you saw here just now. Everything. Once the ambulance comes I'll need you to give me a proper statement. This is a serious matter so think carefully when you tell me what you saw ok?"

The man beneath him was barely conscious but Starsky spoke to him nonetheless.

"Riley can you hear me? It's ok now – we're calling an ambulance and we'll get you to hospital as soon as we can. It's Starsky. You're in the back alley of Huggy's and your safe now. Just lie still and try to relax. Can you understand me?"

The mildest of groans and a flicker of the hand that Starsky was holding told him that he could.

A commotion to the side heralded the return of the other boy.

He was breathing hard from his quick jog and his eyes were bright with a mixture of excitement and awe at the situation he had found himself in.

"They're callin' the ambulance and I got your friend. He's comin'."

Huggy was right behind him, wide eyed with shock and confusion as he took in Starsky kneeling on the ground.

"Oh Man Starsky! What the hell? The kid said you were out here with someone who's been smashed up. Hutch – is it Hutch?"

"It's not Hutch."

Even as he said it he felt the familiar guilt that always accompanied his own relief that the victim he was dealing with was not his partner.

"It's Riley Hug, Riley."

"Shit Starsky…No wonder he hadn't shown up. How did this happen?"

The boy who had stayed with Starsky answered the question.

"A big guy just laid into him. This guy here was walking into the back of the bar when this big tall dude called out his name. The guy walked over to him and then – pow! The big dude just went ballistic. This guy on the ground didn't stand a chance. He had him on the ground in no time and
then he was laying into him with his boots and screaming at him man. He didn't even care that we were at the entry of the alley and could see what he was doing. Didn't stop him. Then he just walked away – back out onto the street out there as though he was as cool as mustard man."

The distance shrill of the ambulance was getting nearer when Starsky asked what he already knew the answer to.

"Can you describe to me the man who did this? Even roughly?"

The boys looked at each other with acquiesce, a silent agreement passing between them. One nodded while the other spoke.

"Big man, well over six foot, real dark hair, black hair I guess – sorta' long and straight you know. Good-looking dude I guess you'd say – but he had real bad eyes– real bad. You know what I mean? Freaky bad. I guess it's hard to try to explain to you how he seemed. You'd have had to have seen him for ya' self man."

Starsky nodded with pained understanding.

"You don't need to explain. I know. I know the look."

"And so this big Dude – he was yelling at this young guy here on the ground all the while and he seemed – jeez man he seemed like he didn't even care what he was doin' to him. He just kept kickin' him."

Starsky grimaced and looked up into Huggy's soulful dark eyes and then back down at Riley's now shaking body. He still his hand tightly. It might not seem nearly enough but with the constraint of the distance he had put between the two of them over the past months he knew it was more than a step forward to bridging the divide.

The youth was speaking again.

"We didn't know what to do. It's not like he would've stopped if we'd tried to do anything anyway. He didn't seemed to care that we were able to see what he was doin'. It was – it was like he won't gonna ever stop for no-one. "

This time Starsky looked down the alleyway as though he was tracing the steps that Ryan might well have taken when he walked away from his latest carnage.

"Stop? He won't. He won't ever stop. Not until someone makes him."

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Chapter 2

Under Starsky's instructions Huggy put yet another call into the Ninth Precinct as soon as the ambulance had arrived in the laneway. He had left Starsky there with Riley and some officers who were now taking down the boys' statements while he went back into the bar to contact Hutch.

As he waited on the line for Hutch to be put through his unease steadily increased. Anxious to let Hutch know what had gone down he was also equally pulled by the reluctance to be the bearer of yet more bad news. The sheer monstrousness of Ryan was overwhelming.

"Hutchinson."

"Hutch is Hug. I'm going to cut to the chase here – I've got some news for you Man, and it sure ain't good."

Hutch's sharp intake of breath had Huggy instantly realizing his mistake in leaving the sentence hanging.

"Hey chill man. It's not Starsky."

He heard the rushed exhalation of relief coming down the phone. It was not lost on him that it was almost the exact same reaction he had heard out of Starsky only minutes before out in the laneway when he had proclaimed that the victim was not Hutch.

Huggy knew these two guys too well now not to understand the mechanisms of how they functioned. In the hierarchy of their world the balance of disorder and order was governed primarily by the status of each other's security and safety. As terrible as it seemed Huggy knew that to Starsky and Hutch any other chaos was manageable so long as each of them could be assured that the other was ok.

"Starsky is here though – at the bar, out the back in the alley. He's with Riley Hutch. The ambulance is about to take the kid to the hospital. He's pretty badly knocked about."

Another gasp indicated Hutch's reactive fear that Starsky may have again incriminated himself in harming Riley. Fleetingly Huggy thought about the bruised jaw that Riley had worn courtesy of Starsky and wondered how far Starsky could take his grudge against Riley without Hutch withdrawing all support. If in fact it had been the work of Starsky that had laid Riley out in the alley as he was now, would Hutch still stand by his partner?

As unjust as it might seem Huggy knew that he wouldn't like to be betting against that likelihood.

"Starsky? No – he wouldn't –"

"He didn't Hutch. He just found him. Two kids witnessed the whole thing and Starsky drove up when they were still there."

"Is Riley badly hurt? Did the kids see who did it?"

"I'm not sure of his condition but he sure don't look good Hutch. And yeah – the kids' got a good look at him. It was Ryan Hutch. That bastard is one crazy cat."

"Oh My God. Riley. I'll have to get there – I'll cut out of here straight away. Where? Which hospital are they taking him to do you know?"
"Lincoln West, it's the nearest. Starsky followed up behind in his own car. He said to tell you that he'd wait for you there."

Normally time was not a big factor in Ryan's life.

He resented being pushed into action or having to make rash and off the cuff decisions purely at the whimsy of time. Cool, calm and proud of his single minded collectiveness he did not like feeling ambushed by extraneous temporal factors. Factors that might in some way cause him to lose his tight control on his plans.

It was paramount that he always go forward through life looking fully in command.

However right now Ryan conceded that time was of the essence.

For the first time in a long while he actually gave consideration to the possibility that he had let his control slip. Perhaps it could even be said that he had acted impulsively and a little dangerously, letting his hunger for violence dislodge his tight hold on self monitored regulation. Following Riley to the bar had been in his plan as was the acute need to confront the young rookie and rip the shreds off him for daring to intrude on his life. However stepping over the line from verbally threatening him to crushing him physically was not something he had planned on doing.

The little party he had just experienced had been purely spontaneous and albeit a thoroughly enjoyable party, he now appreciated that his actions had set off a chain of events that required him to act fast.

Driving quickly through the back streets to get to his destination he savored a smile as he remembered the event in the back lane of the bar less than half an hour ago.

Riley had exited his beaten up bomb of a car in the side street adjacent to the lane and was walking down toward the back entrance to the bar. Ryan who had cruised behind him all the way to the bar was close on his heels. He needed to catch him before he got inside.

"Hey! Rookie boy! Riley!"

As he hoped Riley turned and stood his ground while Ryan walked toward him. Ryan had to admire the kid's fortitude. If he was nervous he didn't show it and he was worried he didn't look it. There was even a sheen of belligerence beneath his scowled youth.

The two faced each other and Ryan gave a taunting harsh bark of laughter when he caught the sight of Riley's swollen jaw.

"You been playin' with the big boys again Junior? Gone and got yourself a big bruiser there haven't you?"

"None of your business Ryan."

"You think I care about how you got yourself smashed in the face kid? I'm just admiring the handiwork. It's a wonder you haven't got yourself creamed more often the way you push your face into people's lives."

"You don't like me following you Ryan? Get used to it – I intend to keep doing it until I get tired of it or you slip up and make a mistake that helps me nail you."
"Nail me? You sound like some amateur cop. Oh wait – I forgot. You are an amateur cop. Little lap dog amateur of Hutchinson's."

"Not any more – he has nothing to do with my actions."

"Well somebody fucking better be responsible for your actions Riley because you are really starting to piss me off. You have a nice time watching me this morning? Think you've got this tailing game down pat don't you?"

"You tell me. New real estate Ryan? You planning on moving house soon? Why? Get kicked out of your last place or trying to make yourself invisible to the cops?"

"You fucking little shitface. You think you can say that crap to me and get away with it? You are one dumb piece of work Officer Riley. First you follow me and try to shit all over my personal affairs and now you have the audacity – or the sheer stupidity more than likely, to stand there and tell me what you think I'm doing in my life?"

"Just an observation Ryan – seems logical that you're moving. Seems logical then to assume you are moving to hide. Unless of course like I said you suddenly have found yourself homeless."

"You know Riley I don't get why you are so concerned with me and what I do in my life. You did your bit. You stood up for your senior officers and put a bullet in me in their defense. Brave young cop made your training officer proud. Hutchinson thinks you saved the day. You got some kudos for that didn't you? But now? You're still trying to play hotshot detective. Can't get enough limelight, is that it?"

"I got no kudos for what I did to you at the beach house. That was standard operating procedure and I acted in accordance with how I was trained. In fact – kudos is the last thing I got out of that incident."


Nonetheless Starsky's opinion of him was not something he wished to share with Ryan. He quickly changed tact in case Ryan questioned him on it.

"But you're right Ryan. I'm not finished with you yet and I am still concerned with what you do in your life. However it's not limelight I'm looking for Ryan – it's justice. I want to help – no, more than that even - I want to be the one. The one to bring you down. Bring you down for what you've done to Hutch and his partner."

Another snide laugh escaped Ryan as he put one hand on the wall behind Riley, effectively pinning him in a cornered position. Once more he had to give the kid a grudging admiration for neither flinching nor looking about for a means of escape.

"Hutchinson. Hutchinson. Your master. Not sure what you see in that pretty boy. You think you're ever going to be his equal, his partner Riley? Because if you do, you'd better think again. Blond beauty only has eyes for one person and that's Starsky. Hutchinson won't appreciate your efforts to stand up for him you stupid little bastard. If you think you're going to win him over by pissing me off you're wasting your time. Why don't you wake up and see what is in front of you. This is not your game. This is not your business. What I do with Starsky and what I plan on doing with your pretty Hutchinson is not your concern. So back off now. That is not a suggestion Officer. That is a demand."
Ryan recalled that it was at that exact moment when Riley dared to smile at him that he sealed his own fate. The smile was sudden and glaringly provocative and it took Ryan off guard. It was so out of character for the young man and so filled with spirit that in it Ryan saw a blatant act of challenge.

"You know what Ryan? I'm getting sick of your bully tactics. Where do you get off exactly thinking you get to wreck everyone else's lives while you get left alone to do it? I might make my own demand to you. Get out of Starsky's and Hutch's lives or you'll find that your job isn't the only thing you're going to lose."

The smile and Riley's words was his symbolic throwing down of the gauntlet. It gave the younger man a fleeting moment of supremacy which was quickly lost when Ryan's barely contained ferocity ignited.

Ryan struck like a viper. As the heat erupted in him and he let forth with a double pronged assault of verbal and physical attack, there remained in the back of his fever pitched thinking that Riley had somehow wanted this. That Riley had somehow manipulated him into devolving into a frenzied state of crazed fury. Powerless to curb his grisly lust for retaliation however, Ryan quickly pushed the thought away and proceeded to kick the proverbial shit out of the kid who had dared to needle him to provocation.

In the distant haze of his own bloodlust Ryan was aware that eyes were observing him. With delivery of his finally boot into Riley's chest he turned. His chest heaving with exertion he found that two black backstreet boys, their whiter than white eyes saucers in their faces, were watching on with horror.

Flicking his long hair back on his face where it had fallen across his eyes with forceful efforts, he straightened his shirt, looked down at the bleeding Riley and bade him farewell.

"Looks like it just isn't your week Junior. First your jaw and now – well now – it's a whole lot fucking worse for you I'm afraid. Remember Riley – you don't get to fuck with me even though you think you're big enough now. I warned you to stop hanging around with the big boys. I resent your game of tailing after me. Now you've got to deal with the pain. You hear me Junior? I hope so – because I want you to tell Starsky that what I just did to you is only a sample of what I want to do to his Lover Boy. I hope you can tell him that for me Riley. I think I left enough of your head alone for you to remember that."

He could still feel the shocked scrutiny of the two black boys following him as he walked away up the lane and toward his car. The bonus points came when he had no sooner revved his engine and pulled out onto the main street when he saw the unmistakable flash of red and white rounding the corner into the laneway behind him.

Unbelievable timing. Fate had intervened yet again. Starsky would be the one to find Riley. It was a shame now that time was an issue otherwise he might not have been unable to resist the urge to sneak back and find a vantage point from which to relish the sight of Starsky scraping Riley off the ground.

He might even have done it except for the fresh constraints of time that were driving him to keep moving. Now more than ever there was an urgent need to find another new home. This time he would make sure that he left no trails and that the home was well out of the city limits.

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Hutch rounded the corner of the Emergency Department already scanning the rows of chairs for a
familiar face. Not finding it his eyes tracked over to the large expanse of the busy and chaotic Reception area until he caught the dark head standing at the desk. Starsky was scowling with intent at a clipboard, his face crinkled in concentration, a pen poised tentatively – hovering above the documents.

At the sight of him in the all too familiar atmosphere of the hospital’s clinical setting Hutch once more breathed relief that his partner was on the outside of the partitioned off assessment bays and for once was not lying maimed or hurt on a gurney behind the closed curtains.

Not this time. Thank God not this time.

This time it was someone else. This time it was Riley. Hutch swallowed down on the guilt of the mixed relief, which churned in his chest with the hot anger that Ryan had this time targeted the innocence that was Riley.

At his approach Starsky looked up – the innate sense of each other's proximity coming into play despite his absorption in his task.

"Hutch."

The single word said most of what he had to say and what was left unsaid was conveyed effortlessly in the depth of the dark blue eyes as they locked onto his partner's concerned features.

Hutch closed the distance and reached automatically for his partner's shoulder, his touch translating his still quaking nerves.

"I got here as soon as I could. Huggy called – "

Starsky squeezed the shaking hand back.

"Is he still in the Examination Bay? Anyone spoken to you yet on his condition?"

"Heard nothin' yet. Ambulance got here over half an hour ago and I wasn't far behind – but nobody has come out to see me yet. Trying my best to put down some details here for the admission – you'd be better to do it, knowing him more - like you do."

The statement had Starsky faltering a little, the words implying Riley's connection and familiarity with his partner while underlining the lack of his own with the young Rookie.

"Yeah – leave it there – I'll try to give them some facts. Starsk – "

Starsky took in the blanched face and swept up the paperwork with one hand while pushing Hutch toward the row of seats against the nearby wall.

"Hey – Come on. Sit down. You look terrible."

"I'm ok – just a shock that's all. When Huggy rang and said – told me – shit Starsk I thought it was you again. You in an alley again. That Ryan had - had -"

"No – not me. I'm sittin' here lookin' at you Hutch and I'm fine. But Riley –"

"How bad Starsky? Huggy said you found him? How bad?"

"He's going to be ok Hutch. He's taken a thrashing but he'll live. He knew me – I'm sure he knew me and understood where he was and what had happened so his head is ok I think. The rest is just gonna be pain and bruisin'. Sick son of a bitch just probably wanted to show us again how he likes
to fuck with people."

"Why Starsky? Why go for Riley? Why would he do that? He's barely more than a kid?"

"Who knows with the sick bastard? Christ Hutch….this time Ryan's got to go down. We've got two eyewitnesses and the makings of a solid statement. The kids are down at the precinct. It's got to be enough to bring him in."

Hutch sat slumped and hollow eyed, the hospital documents mashing in his overly tight grip.

"Say it. Say it to me Hutch."

"Say what to you?"

Hutch's listless response and lifeless face concerned Starsky.

"That I'm a complete ass – a complete shit for gettin' it all fucked up about Riley. For putting Riley in the same corner as Ryan. For makin' your life hell the last months because I wouldn't believe you that Riley was not who you told me he was."

"Saying any of that makes no difference to the fact that Riley is lying in there now. None of this is your fault. Thinking that Riley was in with Ryan didn't make this happen. Ryan made this happen. Ryan made all of this happen."

"If I hadn't been so damn one-eyed about Riley and given him just a little of the support that you have, allowed him into our lives more - Ryan might not have gotten to him like this."

Hutch's response was sad and disconnected.

"You think so? You think you could have prevented this from happening? Prevented Ryan from doing this?"

"Perhaps. It might have changed things. I didn't accept that Riley put that bullet in Ryan to save us both. I didn't accept that he risked putting himself on the line with that psycho by doing that for us. Then these last weeks, I pushed the kid away from you and effectively left him as a sitting duck for Ryan. Even gave him a crack on the jaw for good measure. Jesus – Hutch why don't you just give it to me?"

"You think your guilt is going to help change anything for Riley now?"

"Well at least if you called me a few choice words I'd feel better. Maybe you'd feel better to. You look like you need to let loose right about now Hutch. Go on say it. Tell me that I am responsible for what Ryan just did to that poor kid. If I had been less of a self centred asshole these past weeks than Ryan might not have done this."

The already pale face turned ashen and for a moment Starsky feared Hutch might be sick.

"Like I could have stopped Ryan doing what he did to you? Like I could have stopped him nearly killing you in that alleyway, leaving you with a knife in your belly. I could have stopped him from - from – tying you to that bed and beating you and - raping you? I could have stopped all of that from happening to you – but I didn't. Ryan got to you all the same."

Starsky grabbed at Hutch's twisting hands and the now sweat dampened paperwork cascaded to the floor.
"You stop that shit right now. What are you talking about here? Don't you go dare go drowning yourself in that deep pool of guilt that you love to sink into. I can't stand the way you do this, the way you punish yourself senseless. For God's sake Hutch….you are making me angry here with this shit."

"It's how I feel Starsk – it's how I feel every time I think of that motherfucker and what he did to you. It's how I feel despite the fact that I sat through hours and hours of sessions with a shrink. Sure I came to understand that rationally my thoughts are all wrong. But in my darkest moments it is still how I still feel. I know it's not true – but it burns all the same."

"Hutch you've got to stop this. It's always this way with you when something happens to me."

"Then listen to what you're saying yourself Starsky. You say it is shit to think like this. Then I can say the same about you. when you tell me that Riley is lying in this hospital because of what you did or didn't do, it's no different. No different Starsky. "

"Alright – enough. I won't say another word about how I feel like the heel that I am for what I did to Riley – how I've treated him and you since what happened to me happened. I've got some mending to do with him and whether you believe it or not the reason I was in the alley behind Hug's, the reason I found Riley is that I had gone there to meet him earlier this evening. I had planned on telling him that I had made a mistake, that I'd figured him all wrong. I had Huggy let me know that Riley was gonna be there so that I could do that much at least. I just never got the chance because that son of a bitch beat me to him."

"Why? What changed your mind. Feeling bad about hitting him?"

"That I guess – and more." Starsky hesitated but then seeing the confusion in Hutch's eyes he went on.

"Look Ryan called me when I got back from your place this morning."

"And you didn't think to tell me? Starsky – what the hell?"

"It was only this morning Hutch – and I wanted to clear the air some with Riley first. Hutch – that woman you were with last night? Susan? She's been feeding information to Ryan."

"Oh come on Starsky. Not another person you don't trust."

"Listen to me Hutch. She's in with him – he enjoyed letting me know. He knew about you and her. Maybe she's been filling him in all along, and I I've been thinking it was Riley. Who knows what information she might have given him?"

Hutch looked paler than before.

"Great. Just great – I pick one woman to loosen myself up with and it happens to be one that Ryan has in his pocket. Good to see that my dismal track record with women is as bad as ever."

"She would have put the moves on you – dragged you in. How were you to know? Don't be hard on yourself."

Hutch gave a wry little smile and rolled his eyes at Starsky's attempt to save Hutch's ego.

"Oh – I feel better already. Now I know that it wasn't my irresistible self that she was after merely my connection to Ryan. Shit…she wasn't even a good lay." He let out a puff of frustration with himself. "Now that was low wasn't it?"
"Yeah - even for you that was low Hutchinson. But hey? She deserves it. I'll make sure to tell her when I come across her in the hallway. Evil woman, bad lay. Bitch for using you...for using us really."

Hutch slumped deeper into the hard chair and looked morose. His thoughts had moved on from the woman and his dented pride.

"What's he doing to us Starsky?"

"Like I said – fucking with our lives and doin' whatever he can to jerk us around. It's become a game to him."

"A game? More than that Starsky. What he did to you? Makes it one fucking dangerous game. And now Riley? He's losing it fast."

"Yep – and because he's losin' it, we're gonna get him. This is no longer just about Ryan and us Hutch – about three cops in a bent up situation because one of the cops is messed up in the head. Now it's about Ryan being a criminal – openly assaulting another man in an unprovoked attack – with witnesses to prove it. Fuck him – Dobey has to let us collar him for this."

He took only the bare necessities.

Anything could be bought elsewhere. Anything could be bought or acquired if one had money and attitude. Anything but time.

It was paramount that he clear the city within hours and find another base, at least in the short-term.

His earlier idea to re-locate to another part of the city to the new apartment that the agent had found for him was no longer viable given that Riley had trailed him to his new apartment. The whole idea was even less viable since he had vented his spleen on Riley for disrupting his plans.

It would only be a short while before they would come for him. Hutchinson would not be happy that he had trampled all over his Junior Rookie and Starsky would have wasted no time in acting like the diligent Detective by ensuring the two black street kids would pin the beating number on him.

The scenario for Ryan had just shifted and reshaped.

The triangle had opened up and taken on more corners and sharp edges. This was no longer neither just about him and Starsky – nor about him and Starsky and Hutch.

He had escalated his role in the drama and changed the name of the game entirely. Ryan knew he had to go under, lay low, slink in the shadows and wait.

The law would be after him very soon – spearheaded by Hutchinson and Starsky. Hutchinson, Ryan knew would use this as the opportunity to put him where he had wanted him to be ever since he had first dared to bruise and break the skin of his beloved Starsky.

He threw the last few things into the back of his car and slammed the door. Time to hit the road and move onto safer ground.

He knew how it would play out.
He had begun to understand the mechanisms of how these two partners worked. Over the past weeks he had figured out a lot more about how they functioned as a single unit, how they had grown into one entity since those early days when they were all together at the Academy.

They would rally to Officer Riley's side. Hutchinson would be incandescent with rage and Starsky would be supportive of Hutchinson's concern. Then they would take stock, gather their arsenal by putting together a sound witness report.

Then they would come for him.

Hutchinson in particular would be livid about the caning he had delivered to Riley. He would be wanting blood.

Like the blood he had vowed to get from him the night after he had raped and beaten Starsky. Recalling the night back in the beach house, the memory of the blond's ferocious hissed threats and his vow for revenge for what had been done to Starsky filled him with excitement. Ryan could clearly remember the snarling lips, and icy cold eyes that had lacerated him with their cutting sweep. A dull ache in his shoulder reminded him of when Hutchinson's powerful non-verbal threat quickly became verbal. The big blond had leaned over and pressed his vengeful fingers into Ryan's open shoulder wound, gouging deeply as he promised Ryan that he would one day kill him.

As he accelerated away toward the outer city limits the thought and imagery of Hutchinson coming for him like he had promised to do was like an intoxicating allure.

Hutchinson had promised to come to him – come to him one day and kill him. What was he had said? "....unless Starsky kills you first...."

It was all drawing to a close now – Ryan could feel the acceleration in his internal fervor just as he felt the car beneath him accelerate away from the city. Hutchinson would come to him. Hutchinson would get to fulfill his threat – he would get to face off Ryan in the quest to kill him. Ryan was already planning how that would be arranged. However the outcome would be different to what the blond had preordained. It wouldn't be Hutchinson that would be doing the killing – nor Starsky – though Ryan was certain that after he followed through on his plans for Hutchinson, Starsky would be breaking down all the barriers to put the proverbial nail in Ryan's coffin.

The inner city traffic thinned as he made fast work of cutting a path to the freeway that would take him well out of the city parameters and beyond to longer, wider open roads. Roads that took him toward a more isolated more private and well hidden location.

To a place where he could do what he wanted to do.

Soon Hutchinson. Soon. There will be payback for what you've withheld from me all these years you bastard. All these years since you saw me in the locker room at the academy. All these years that you got between me and what was meant to be mi

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When the attending doctor had eventually come to fill them both in on Riley's condition Starsky had not hesitated to urge Hutch to be the one to go in to the side treatment room and spend some time with him before he was taken up to the ward.

He had only just sat down again with a coffee when he saw the bulky form of Captain Dobey approaching him, the ever-present sheen of perspiration shining on his creased up forehead evident even from a distance.
"Cap'n. I wasn't sure when I put the call through to you that you'd be able to make it in."

"Of course I'd make it in Starsky. You think I'm not going to come in and see one of my men when he's been hauled into hospital after being left beaten in an alleyway? What sort of Captain would that make me? And what in hell is going on now? I got a dispatch from a black and white that you have two kids being taken in to give a witness statement?"

"That's right. I had to leave them with two uniforms to follow up with Riley until Hutch got in here. Cap'n it was definitely Ryan who worked him over. Once we've got the formal statement I want you to let us bring him in."

"Let me put through a call to the station and see how close they are to getting the statement in the bag. I'll arrange to send a car out to Ryan's place, though I doubt he'll be there - "

"NO! No." Starsky was vehement as he sprang to his feet. "Ryan has to be stopped now and I want it to be Hutch and me who ends it for him. You know how much we need to do this – both of us. I'm asking Cap'n that you let me back on street duty as of now. I want off the desk and back with Hutch. I'm damn well ready for it."

"You might be ready to hit the streets again Starsky but I doubt you're ready to deal with this particular situation. Of course I know what you want Starsky – Hutchinson too. The two of you want nothing more than to Lynch Lancaster. And you're not alone I can tell you that. Get in line. But you've also got to know it puts me a difficult position to allow you to collar him. You're too involved – hell both of you are too involved. Hutchinson even more so than you. He was hard enough to handle when you were on the undercover job let alone now after what Ryan's put you through."

"All the more reason I need to be with him on the streets. He might take it on himself to go for him now after what's happened to Riley. I need to be operational again, need to be beside him not stuck on some damn desk. Cap'n come on – please. You know that sending out a couple of uniforms to nab Ryan will be useless. He's already probably gone to ground. It's not going to be a simple matter of closing in on him. This is our case – Hutch's and mine. I need to have Hutch's back. I need to be with him Cap'n."

"What you need to do Starsky is to follow my directions!"

Starsky's face hardened, his voice dropped as he looked past Dobey's shoulder to the doorway where his partner had walked through to see Riley.

"Cap'n. You gotta give this to me. You gotta let me back with Hutch as of now. If you don't…I'll do it my own way anyway. I think you know I will."

The Captain's hallmark handkerchief made its appearance as Dobey swiped at his damp forehead and jowls. Dark eyes rolled upward before coming back to focus hard on his Detective.

"I am going to put what you just said down to the heat of the moment. Once I've seen my officer in there I'm heading back to the station and I'll sign you back on – effective as of this evening. If the statement from the witnesses holds you have my direction to bring the assailant in. I don't however hold out much hope that you're going to close in on him tonight. Ryan's no fool as we all know. This attack might not have been planned – but he's too cool not to manage the cleanup of what he's done. He'll be gone already."

Dobey watched his Detective exhale with relief, his tight posture relaxing a little with the formal consent of his Captain.
"Thanks Cap'n. Thanks. Once Hutch has seen Riley we'll come back in and arrange the necessary paperwork. We'll find him Cap'n. It might take time, but we'll find him."

"I don't doubt that Starsky. Not for a minute. But but I'm more worried about how you handle the situation once you do find him. Don't make me regret putting you back in action Starsky. Don't."

Dobey's mouth was pursed tight as he delivered his entreaty to his Detective. He had fixed Starsky with an expectant frown which intensified when his Detective failed to allay his bald stated concerns. And then the moment was lost. Starsky's concentration jumped completely away from him as he turned quickly toward his partner who was walking back toward him.

With Hutch's arrival Dobey knew the he had missed the opportunity to wrestle a reassurance out of Starsky that he would play by the rules. Dobey knew better than to bring up the issue of what lay between Starsky and Ryan while the ever protective other half of his team was present. The sideways look Starsky shot him just before he turned his attention back to his partner seemed to warn him of the same.

Don't Captain – don't mention your fears of my intentions toward Ryan in front of Hutch.

And accordingly Dobey found himself closing his mouth of any further questioning of Starsky's motivations toward Ryan. He watched the two of them quietly talking, communicating as much with looks and gestures as soft words. Dobey mused on just how damn complicated a job it was to be the captain of these two intermeshed men who played their jobs and their lives by a set or rules that only the two of them really seem to understand. God knew he struggled every day with the complexities of being in command of these two. Their enigmatic way of functioning as single unit, albeit a highly effective single unit often left him feeling out of his depth, bewildered and more than he liked to admit, severely worried for their welfare. With Starsky and Hutch - one officer down, both officers down. They was just they way they were. And it more than evident right now as they had zoned him out of their inner circle, so engrossed was Starsky with how Hutchinson was dealing with Riley's ordeal.

Finally he gave a grunt and then a cough as if to alert them both to his presence, for Starsky seemed to have completely forgotten him and Hutchinson had yet to even acknowledge him, so immersed were they in their quiet interchange.

Another cough had Hutch turning to his captain and Dobey was shocked when he saw the mask of pained grief on his face. He knew full well how fond Hutchinson was of the young Riley and it was clearly evident now in his sad blue eyes.

"Sorry about that Captain. I just needed a minute."

"That's ok Hutch. I can see you're upset. How is he?"

"Oh – I suppose he's lucky if you can call it that. The blows didn't land on his head and most of the damage is too his upper legs, gut and lower chest. Got a few broken ribs, multiple contusions and bruising but the Doc thinks there is little risk of internal bleeding, though he'll need to be monitored for that for the next twelve hours. He's – he's in a lot of pain but when I left they were giving him another load of painkillers via infusion. He's a strong kid – he'll – "

He stalled on the last word, choking a little as Starsky rubbed his back firmly, his hand coming up to grip at the nape of the blond head, his fingers threading through the fine blond hair.

"He's strong Hutch. Very strong." Starsky could give clear testimony to this fact. After all he had put Riley to the test himself. The still vivid memory of how the boy had stood his ground after the
blow he had delivered to his jaw seared in Starsky's mind. He bit down on the bilious guilt of his own assault of the man his partner was so obviously upset about.

Hutch recovered himself and went on to fill his Captain in.

"They're going to get him up to a bed soon and so he might be more comfortable once he's settled, Thank God that they've finished with their prodding. You might want to see him once they have him in the ward."

"Yeah – I'll do that. I need to go and make a few calls. Edith will be wondering what is going on. I was packing up to leave when I got the news about what had happened. I need to check on the statement those two kids are giving too. Your very stubborn partner here Hutchinson is determined to be with you when the two of you try and bring Ryan in. I've agreed to sign him back on for active duty. I'm depending on you to rein him in if he pushes things too much. In fact that goes for both of you. This case is just too personal for the both of you. Now Riley is a victim it's just got a lot worse. I'll catch you two back at the station so we can get the paperwork squared away and then you can move on it."

Hutch looked a little surprised with Dobey's declaration and looked at Starsky who simply shrugged and smiled lightly as their big Captain held up his hand in parting before he moved toward the bank of phones in the outer reception area.

"Why are ya lookin' at me like that? So I forced the Cap'n's hand a little? I'm not having you go after Ryan without me officially beside you, and I know you'll want to do the collar on him for putting Riley in that shape."

"Are you sure you're ready for this Starsky? Ready to go after him? Ready to try and bring him in?"

"You know the answer Hutch. Anyway who knows how long it's gonna take us to tag him? We need to head back to the station to get organized."

"Ok – I've already told Riley that I'll see him first thing in the morning. He needs his rest now anyway."

"Hutch – do you mind if I have just a very quick word with him before we leave? You said he was alert and I want, I need to say what I had planned on saying to him earlier this evening. I don't want him to spend another night with him thinking that I have it in for him. Do you think you can swing it with the Doc? Just a few quick minutes?"

Hutch's smile was broad as he patted Starsky's stomach.

"I'll make sure of it. Thanks partner – it means a lot to me that you would do that for him now. The poor kid needs me behind him now more than ever - and I – I really want you to be behind him too Starsk. It matters to me. It matters a lot."

That was the problem, Starsky thought. He knew exactly how much it mattered to Hutch and yet it still concerned him that he might not be able to come with what Hutch wanted from him. Even now. Even now that Ryan had kicked the living shit out of Riley - ostensibly marking him as the enemy.

As he waited while Hutch went in search of the medical staff he thought about how he really did feel toward Riley. He couldn't in all honesty say that he had a totally new outlook on the boy for there still remained some clouded doubt about the whole Ryan and Riley interplay. However his
black and white judgment had now become a hell of a lot greyer and he could feel his earlier assessment of Riley mellowing to a gradual acceptance that he really might be able to be trusted. Still he could not, would not tell Hutch that he still harbored some residual uncertainties about the boy. Not when he saw the joy leap into his partner's face when he said that he wanted to see Riley and clear the air.

The treating Doctor granted Hutch's request that Starsky be allowed in to see Riley while he was still in the Triage area awaiting transfer to the ward. Starsky nodded reassuringly at Hutch as he left him in the waiting room to make his way to the cubicle. He knew that Hutch was trusting him to be considerate with the Rookie and Starsky had no intention of being anything other. Caution and trepidation were still lurking at his heels as he quietly slipped into the partitioned off area, but he the only motivation bringing him to Riley's side now was the need to express an apology.

Only yesterday Starsky would have felt animosity at being so close to young man lying so still on the gurney and would have had to restrain his angry judgment. Now he just felt confused about his feelings toward the boy and angry that it had come to this, that Ryan had been able to wreak even more damage on others.

Quietly he moved closer toward the still figure unsure of the reception he might receive given that his last encounter with Riley had been such a hostile and openly combative one.

Would Riley remember that he had been beside him in the alleyway, spoken to him, reassured him? Or would he only remember the fist to the jaw and his threatening words? Close enough to see the damage that Ryan's assault had left on Riley's body, the thin sheet not disguising the mottled bruising already blooming on his legs and arms and chest, all Starsky could focus on was the dark presence that his own violence had left upon the young man's body. The whole side of Riley's face and upper neck was a vivid dark tattoo and again Starsky felt the claw of regret that he had allowed himself to lose his self-control and inflict such notable damage. The poor kid was now lying there with layers of physical assault to his body. Self-disgust filled him that he was now somehow linked with Ryan by being the first to lay assault on Riley's body.

Dragging his eyes off the bruised jaw he felt Riley's clouded eyes surveying him. There was no fear in his eyes and no judgment either. Somehow that just made Starsky feel worse.

He could see that Riley was trying to garner the strength to speak.

"Don't try to talk too much Riley. I know you're in pain and you need to lie there and rest. I asked Hutch if I could have a moment with you. I need to say a few things. Are you ok with me being here? With me talking to you? I don't want to upset you and I'll go if ya want."

Riley raised his hand slowly and ever so minutely he shook his head, closing his eyes briefly as if to communicate that he didn't want Starsky to go.

"It's fine. I remember you talking to me and - and being there with me. You didn't leave me. Waited there with me until the – the – am—bulance came. Thank you."

The pure boyishness of him his ingenuous naked gratitude left Starsky swallowing down something he wasn't entirely sure what. But he needed to swallow hard before he spoke.

"Hey someone had to move you outta' the way of the thoroughfare. You were blockin' up the roadway. Couldn't get my car in and you were bad for Huggy's business lying all over the road like that."

The attempt at humor broke the tension and he could see Riley's mouth quirk at the corner.
"Hutch always said you were the funnyman – never heard it from you so far though."

"Yeah well I haven't exactly been in much of a humorous mood these past coupla' months, I know. In fact I've been a bit of drag all round and I'm sure Hutch is sick of my dark moods. I'm comin' out of it now so you might get to hear more of my lame jokes."

He paused to collect himself.

"Look Riley, I'm not here to talk about me. Well I guess I am sorta. I'm here to apologize for slugging you like I did. You say that ya' know about my humor? Well then I'm sure you know about my famous quick temper too. I had no right taking it out on you like I did. There's no excuse for me belting you like I did."

"Doesn't matter now anyway – can't really feel it with the rest of me busted up like I am."

It was Riley's turn to make an attempt at humor and Starsky appreciated his effort to minimize the damage he had done to him.

"Yeah – well that might be the case by the look of you kid, but still it was wrong and I am sorry. Hutch wanted to kill me for doing it to you and after I did it I wanted to kill me too."

"It's over and done Starsky. Ok?"

"Ok. Riley? Why did he do this to you? Why did Ryan go for you like he did?"

The clouded eyes closed again and for a moment Starsky thought he might have fallen into a drug induced sleep but then he roused. His words were clear enough to make out but disjointed as the drugs seeped into his system.

"Pissed off with me for tailing him, tracking him. I wanted to pin him for ...I wanted to catch him out....he's done so much damage....he saw me, following him...angry, so angry, crazy with it. Told Hutch – he had new place to move to...I stuffed up his plans."

Starsky looked hard at the damaged face and into the eyes that he did not know as well as Hutch did. Was this the truth? Was Ryan really the enemy of this boy or were they having a massive disagreement? Had Riley and Ryan ever been aligned or was that all just his own paranoia following what he had gone through with Ryan? What was the truth and what was his own irrational suspicion and doubt?

Either way for now he could see that Riley was fading and his time was more than up. Starsky felt better for assuaging some of his guilt by admitting he had been wrong to hit Riley and at the moment that might be as much as he could hope to achieve. He knew no other way to prove to himself that Riley was definitely one hundred percent not involved with Ryan.

"I'll go now Riley. I know you're tired and they'll be taking you up to a bed soon. Captain Dobey is going to come up when you're in the ward and Hutch will be back in the morning to see you."

He thought for a moment before saying what he hadn't been sure he was going to say before this moment. Given his lingering doubts he could not be certain how Riley might react to what he was going to tell him.

"Riley. Ryan did this to you. He's really worked you over for whatever reason. He's already worked me over well and truly. I just want you to know that we're going out there to get him – Hutch and I will get him Riley. We'll will find him and I will make him pay for all of this. You can be sure of that."
He watched carefully for any reaction. Would Riley be fearful that he had openly stated he would confront Ryan for what he had done to him? Was he frightened that in doing that whatever the truth was about him and Ryan would then come out in the process?

The look that crossed Riley's face caught Starsky off guard. Fear leap into his eyes and gripped his body. Riley's hand reached out unexpectedly to claw desperately at Starsky's arm.

"Please – no. No. He's mad, completely mad. I saw it in his eyes before he got into me. He's crossed over something Starsky. Don't go – don't go to him. He – he wants to hurt Hutch this time – he wants. I don't want him to kill Hutch Starsky. Please. Please listen to me. He won't stop until he does that – kill Hutch because that will hurt you most see?"

He was struggling to sit up, pushing frantically at the sheet, fumbling with the IV line, his face a picture of pain and fear and desperation.


"God! You won't listen to me. He's crazy now – can't get through to him. Keep away from him, keep Hutch away from him. He wants you, but he will kill Hutch don't you see? I can't watch Hutch now – I'm useless."

His mood was so frantic now that Starsky could see his eyes alight with anxiety, his bleeding and bruised face suffuse with sweat and anxiety.

"Riley you don't have to watch Hutch – that's not your responsibility kid, although I admire you for wanting to. That's my job. I have Hutch's back Riley. We always have each other's backs. I won't let him get to Hutch. You know that I won't let him hurt him Riley."

"Don't you see? You can't stop him? He'll find a way – always does. Like the beach house – how he got to you. Like you said he found you at the Safe house. Like Dobson…..dead Dobson. He finds a way Starsky. He'll find a way to Hutch too."

And there it was.

It wasn't the words or the declaration itself about Ryan finding them at the beach house and the safe house – for that in itself was not proof that Riley had not passed on information. It was the sheer and utter terror in Riley's face as he uttered the words. For the first time Starsky could see it and believe it. Hutch mattered to Riley. A lot. He could not possibly be aligned with Ryan against him. The sheer gravity to Riley's anguish proved that without a doubt.

Starsky reached out and applied a steadying hand to Riley's full-bodied agitation. Two thoughts collided in his mind. One, a clarity that Riley could not possibly be aligned with Ryan. The other, a growing certainty that Riley was right.

Ryan would do everything to get to Hutch.

Ryan had escalated the game to a higher dimension. He had called enough shots. Now it was Starsky's turn to do the same.

From now on in the rules of this game were all about to change.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH
"So here we are buddy, not even one hour after we get to hit the streets again and our first re-united effort is some lightweight Break and Entering. You think all this time off the job has left us a bit jaded?"

Hutch asked the question while he was rummaging through the small shoulder pack that held some small tools and a torch. They were walking together in the inky night toward the next block and their destination.

Starsky spluttered lightly in response, patting down his side to feel the familiar and reassuring weight of his holstered Beretta under his jacket.

"Jaded? Us? I think there might be a better word but if there is, right now I can't think of it. Besides, a good cop needs to keep his hand in with some "creative" entry techniques. Don't want us gettin' rusty do ya?"

Despite the late hour and the fact that the paperwork for the warrant had still not come through both of them knew they would still be making a visit to Ryan's place that night.

It was not of course as though they expected to find him waiting there for them, though both secretly knew that nothing was out of the question given Ryan's psychologically bent mind. Who really knew what his next move would be in the sick tormenting game he was playing with the two of them?

The two silhouettes quickly merged into the tree lined shadows and made their way to Ryan's apartment.

Minutes later after casing the apartment from the outside and seeing no sign of life within they set to work on the lock. With rattled nerves and slightly unsteady hands that they both stood poised in the shadows while one held the torch and the other worked the lock open on the side door of Ryan's apartment. Into the silence of the night there was the quiet snick that signalled that the lock had given and then the door opened quietly into the dark interior. Each gave the other a careful look before preparing to step inside.

They had already checked their weapons before leaving their car back one block away from the address while they had alluded to their shared thoughts about Ryan's unpredictable functioning.

"Asshole better not be sitting on the couch with his gun drawn." Hutch muttered beneath his breath as he pulled his jacket back over his holster before stepping out onto the curb. Starsky had pursed his lips and nodded in understanding.

"Keep that pretty blond head of yours down buddy – it's glowing like some beacon in the night as usual. You make one easy target."

"Somehow Starsky I don't think he's going to be waiting for us, so my head should be safe enough. He won't make it that easy to bring him in but who knows with him? Remember, take no chances partner – we'll go in as we always do – he might even have the damn place rigged."

It took only moments to perfect their less than legal entry to the tidy apartment and even less time to execute their trained efficient sweep through the abode to determine that the Ryan's home was empty, it's occupant long gone. He had taken with him only the daily necessities of living. The bathroom was devoid of toiletries, his gun and holster (of which he probably had several) were also noticeably absent and and his wardrobe doors and drawers lay open – evidence that he had made a quick pack of an overnight bag.
Starsky lowered his weapon but was not yet prepared to let down his vigilance enough to holster it.

"Well at least you still have your head Blondie. No gun wielding madman on the couch took you out after all."

"Glad you sound relieved."

"Hey – I happen to be quite fond of that blond head. I like it where it is, placed in just the right spot on top of your shoulders. You'd look sort of strange without it and you'd make for damn poor company."

"Is that so? Then we should be so lucky that it wasn't splattered against the far wall when we came in."

Starsky winced and grimaced.

"Eww…come on that is more than I can even think about. Lighten up will ya? No more images of your head being shot at."

"Hey you're the one with the horror images tonight buddy."

"Just lettin' off the build up of tension." And then his voice dropped all pretense at the breezy tone. "Where the fuck do you think he's gone Hutch?"

"Hell he could be anywhere by now – he's had a good few hours to clear the city or just dig down deep. Deep or far field? We won't know for a while. You want to wait for a warrant or go though the place now?"

"No point in wasting a slick B and E job – might as well do a once over and see if he was dumb enough to leave us any leads. I'm sure as hell not holding out any hope though."

"So this is obviously his main bedroom here." Hutch swept his hand across the room they had surveyed. "Then what's the other room over there?" he indicated with his head toward a closed-door leading off from the small living room. "Must be a spare or an office?"

He had moved away from Starsky and was already trying the door, turning the handle, his big gun poised in front and Starsky covering his back.

When the door didn't give the two paused and looked at each other.

"You want to bust it Starsky or leave it till tomorrow when we have the warrant?"

"Makes no difference whether we bust it now or in the morning. Not like he's going to be back tonight to spring that we've been on his property without a warrant. Nothing to say we didn't bust it tomorrow morning anyway if we do it now. No one is gonna be in here after us tonight and right about now I don't really give a fraction of a shit if there are any repercussions."

"You going to do the honors or will I?" Hutch asked but Starsky had already turned back to the living room, preoccupied with an intensive hunt through the drawers in the small phone table.

"Oh right. I get it. Leave the hard work to me. Thanks buddy."

"Hey – I seem to remember it's your turn to put your shoulder to the door."

"How the hell can you remember a detail like that? And since when do we keep tabs on whose turn it is to do the grunt work?"
"Stop your bitching and just bust it open will ya?"

Hutch took a moment to scowl and swear a foul expletive back at partner but gave the door a hefty ram with his shoulder nonetheless. The door's woodwork was light and gave way easily on the second shove. It was dark and unoccupied and Hutch lowered his gun once more. Starsky having seen there was no threat in the spare room had already turned back to his own task and so Hutch scanned the small dark room before feeling for the light switch and flicking it on.

He took one look at the interior of the small room which held a desk, table and large comfortable sofa chair before casting his view up to the walls. Sucking in a shocked deep breath he groaned low in his throat. "Ahhh – shit. Sick Motherfuck."

Starsky turned quickly, alerted by the tone, his gun once more in front of his pelvis, held low but ready.

"What? What is it? You ok? Why you lookin' like that Hutch? You got somethin' in there?"

"Guess you could say that. Yeah I got something alright. Don't think you're going to like it Starsky. I sure as hell don't."

Starsky was at his partner's shoulder in seconds and when his eyes landed on what Hutch had been seeing he too cursed low and crude before he managed some words.

"Freakin' sicko. What sort of Kook head would have this stuff up on his wall? All this stuff about one of his colleagues? Surely he'd know someone would see it one day. Ryan needs one big and very solid bullet to the brain before he has the opportunity to contaminate the rest of the world."

"That's clearly why he's got this side room locked. Not really something you'd want your visitors to see when they popped by for a drink. Particularly if they were female. Oh sorry sweetheart those are just a couple of ...hundred shots I have of, fellow cop, co-officer. Let him try to explain all this away. What a complete head job he is."

One whole wall of the office come private reading room was lined with a massive corkboard on which was pinned a multitude of photos, some black and white, some color, some close up and others from a distance, some as recent as days ago and others from further back over the years. And each and every one of them featuring the same subject.

Starsky.

"I can't believe it Hutch. He's been – hell he must have been taking these for years. Christ there's even a few here from when we were all in uniform and hell – look – back in the Academy."

The image of the locker room and Starsky's nude wet form standing vulnerable and unknowing while Ryan gave him his voyeuristic study slammed jarringly into Hutch's head. He swallowed down on the mild nausea of the memory of Ryan's perverted fervour. He looked once more at the wall of photos. For Starsky's sake he should be pleased for small mercies. At least there were no shots of his partner's naked body.

While he been lost inside of that festering memory yet again, Starsky had begun sliding open the drawers in the corner desk. His strangled howl rocketed through Hutch who turned to see Starsky's hand clamped onto to a framed photo which he had just seized from the depths of the bottom drawer.

"I'll fuckin' rip his heart out!"
Before Hutch even had a chance to see the photo that had evoked such a violent response in him, Starsky pulled back his arm, snarled viscerously at the frame in his hands and then hurled it with incredible force out of the door toward the living room. It careened into the far wall with forceful impact, smashing loudly as the glass and broken frame shattered into pieces and scattered across the room.

"Starsky – No! Come on. Don't mess up the scene. Come on – calm it."

Hutch grabbed hard at his friend's arms as he once more dived toward the drawer to extract another framed print. Starsky pulled away from his grip and swore loudly and for a moment the two struggled together for supremacy.

"Scene? What scene? It's just the fuckhead's home. No crime here except for it being a pervert's den. I want to smash this shit into his teeth, ram it down his fuckin' throat and choke him with it."

"Calm it. Starsky! Smashing anything here isn't going to help us. Leave it."

Unexpectedly Starsky pivoted away from him and strode toward the living room where the mangled photo now lay free of its glass confines.

"Calm it? How the fuck am I s'posed to calm it when I see this?"

Hutch joined him quickly and standing beside him he now had a clear view of the photo that had caused his partner's uproar.

It was a shot of the two of them – a clear front view of each of their bodies and faces as they were standing together near the Torino. Hutch couldn't even imagine how the photo might have been taken without them knowing unless Ryan had paid some professional for quality zooms from a hidden vantage spot. The gravity of Ryan's obsession hit him. How long had he been stalking the two of them like this?

They were both happy in the photo, Starsky giving his usual lopsided smile in response to something that Hutch must have said to ignite it. It was in fact Hutch supposed a typical enough snapshot, insight into their average daily life together as friends and partners.

Average. Typical. Except for the added enhancements.

A great photo of the two of them in fact, Hutch thought. Except the moment in time was forever marred, by an added special effect applied after the shot was developed and before framing. Starsky's image was intact but Hutch's chest area was scratched away with something sharp – the point of a knife perhaps; worked back and forth just lightly enough to shred the glossy photo paper where his chest should have been. Then the whole of his chest was covered in bright red ink, it's vivid color seeping into the frayed slashed image of his chest. Beside Starsky's laughing image there were three words in capitals also written in red. 'MINE, NOT YOURS'.

For Starsky sake Hutch summoned up a casual level of nonchalance he couldn't honestly say he felt and shrugged lightly at the graphic depiction that so effectively obliterated him.

"Starz, it's just a defiled photo. It means nothing. Just more of Ryan's pathetic illness showing itself. Don't let it get to you."

"Means nothing? Means nothing? Of course it fuckin' means something. How the hell can you be so offhand about it? Look at you!"

"So what? I have some red ink splashed across me. And I'm not being offhand. It's no damn
surprise that Ryan hates my guts. Hardly news to me or you that he would like to see me out of your life. It's just some creative manipulation to feed his fantasies."

"Trouble is Hutch – and this is why I can't calm down - it's no longer just fantasy with Ryan. He's gone way beyond that hasn't he? He nearly killed the both of us that night at the beach. He certainly killed Dobson – we both know that. Katy didn't even know him, just because she was involved with me, she got smacked around. And now Riley – "

"What! Back up a second Starsky. What did you just say? You said Katy? What the hell are you talking about?"

Starsky distanced himself from Hutch's scrutiny by walking away a few steps. Broken glass crunched under his shoe while he kicked savagely at the broken frame.

"Ah shit!"

"Starsky? Talk to me here. You mean to tell me that Ryan was Katy's attacker? You know that?"

Starsky cringed and pushed his damp curls back from his sweat flushed face.

"Ah shit Hutch!" He cursed again for good measure, more at himself than anything else. "See? It's all gettin' too fuckin' hard to keep all this mess in my head. I'm sorry. I didn't tell ya'."

"Slow down and explain. When did you find this out? About Katy? That morning you went to the hospital? She told you then didn't she? She told you then that Ryan was the one who attacked her?"

"She didn't offer me the information if that's what you mean – no. She was scared witless by what he had done or said to her. But yeah – by the time I left the hospital I knew it was him."

"And you didn't tell me? Why? Why do this to us when we need to be totally open with each other if we're going to deal with this predator?"

"I didn't tell you no. Made my mind up not to. Why? Christ who knows really? I guess because you see too much of what I'm thinking in my own head. You know me too well Hutch and you'd have seen the truth."

"The truth? Seen what truth? Why didn't you tell me this as soon as you got in the car that morning? I don't understand. Is it because we were still on different wavelengths after all the crap you were going through since Ryan?" Hutch felt the uneasiness in him well up. He thought he knew where this was going and he also knew he didn't like it.

Watching the pained look on his partner's face Starsky struggled to make sense of his own confusion at what had motivated him to withhold what he had discovered from Katy. He no longer wanted to put up barriers with his partner in the name of protecting him. The time had come to be totally honest with each other. The little tour of this apartment had revealed to them both the true extent of Ryan's pathology. They were both privy to what Ryan held in mind for them and there was no sense in hiding anything from each other any longer.

"No it wasn't that. It was - Hutch I was, no make that I am - terrified that he is going to try to harm you, even worse to kill you – just to punish me for not being with him. I don't want you to feel responsible for stopping me or trying to stop me. Anyone he sees allied with me or with you for that matter will suffer. Poor Katy did nothing but go out with me and Riley just wants to protect you. Dobson didn't support him against us I suppose – all of them targeted. Now I know he's after you. I'm scared Hutch – shit scared that unless I take him first he will take you. I didn't want ya' to know because you'd figure how much I wanted to take him down. You'd know how much I want to
"Then we both feel the same way. I've wanted him dead since I watched him rip you pieces body and soul on that bed in front of me. You talk about fear? You talk about being terrified? How do you imagine it was for me to have to be there unable to lift a finger to help you while he did that to you? I made myself a promise to repay him for that Starsky – to kill him whenever I could get the chance. I know we both have that desire burning deep in our bellies. But – it has to stay as a desire, a fantasy just like Ryan's sick fantasies. We can't make it come true unless we both want our lives destroyed. You have to accept that Starsky. I've been working so hard to come to terms with accepting it. You must to."

"I can't. I can't. Not when I know what he wants to do to you. When I see this photo – " he stroked his thumb gently over the mangled center of Hutch almost as though he might be able to repair the damage with the tending stroke, "When I see you ripped open like this, I know he has to die first. I've known it for a while. I hated him enough for what he did to me alone, what he took from me. Now, when he threatens you, your life…."

Hutch took the photo in his own hand and carefully disengaged Starsky's grip from it so that it fell to the floor.

"Let's just get out of here ok? Let's get out of this hell hole and go home. We can't achieve anything tonight or what is left of it and we both need some rest if we're going to find Ryan and put him away."

"I just don't want to put him away Hutch. Putting him away for what he did to Riley is not enough, not nearly enough. I didn't mean for you to see that in me, but now you have I'm not going to lie to you about what I want to do when we find him. If he does time for what he did to Riley he'll be out in no time. You know that as well as I do. This has to be ended."

"Starsky…Starsk, listen. Just listen to me please?"

The sheer capacity of Hutch's concern and empathy nearly swallowed Starsky whole and in truth he could do little else than to listen when he saw the gravity and worry in Hutch's face. Starsky did his best not to lose every bit of conviction when he looked into Hutch's soulful blue eyes.

"Ryan has nearly destroyed you. He has totally rearranged your life and your sense of control. I know you want him dead, but no more than I do for what he has put you through. I don't have the answers to how we will deal with him in the long term. We will figure it out – together. We're back on the street together, we're back as we're meant to be. Ryan has not dealt with the two of us together since this whole thing started. He's effectively made sure that we've been kept apart. Now he has the both of us to contend with, the combined force of the two of us. We'll work it out. I know we will."

"Hutch you have to believe me when I tell you that I will not let you stop me from stopping him. I'm not going to let him take you down. I won't lose you to him."

"Then you know of course Starsky that I'm not prepared to lose you to him either. You kill him then I lose you. He wins. Ryan wins the whole big sick game. Now we both know how we each feel, we know where we stand ok? Like I said we will find the way, but we'll find it together. Ryan has taken way too much from both of us already. From here on in, we have to work together to stop him from taking anymore from us."

"Hutch – this is not something you can rationalize away or talk our way out of. It's a clean-cut, one-way solution. Ain't no other way to get to the end of this nightmare."
"Are you telling me that you won't consider anything else but to hunt him down and kill him? I won't believe that you won't. I won't believe that you can't respect my fears in all of this."

"I just want to keep you alive Hutch. That is all I want to do."

"So you don't care what I need and want?"

"Not when I need to keep you alive."

"So how would you feel if I found him first and killed him? If I killed Ryan and went to prison for life or got the chair? How would you feel?"

"Stop it! Jesus this is all such a mess. We're both fuckin' up each other's heads with this. I had it covered Hutch. I had it all covered. It was so easy and so black and white till you started with all this psychology crap."

Hutch moved in and put his arms around the distressed and sagging form of his friend.

"No it wasn't buddy. It was never black and white because you see all the shades of grey as much as I do. You are just letting your anger toward Ryan and your protection of me make you think you could take the law into your own hands. You know deep down, and I know deep down, you won't do what you most want to do to Ryan. You can't, just like I can't. Not just because we're cops and believe in some form of higher moral code but because to do it would mean severing us. No more partner, no more Me and Thee, no more us. We'd end up losing each other anyway."

"Jesus Hutch I hate it when you get into my head like this and turn my thoughts inside out."

Hutch merely smiled.

"Well if I had to wait around for you to lay it all out in front of us, we'd never sort out our shit."

"So what now Hutchinson?"

"Like I said – home for now. Home, beer and rest. I'll phone the hospital and see how Riley's doing. Then we talk more and tomorrow we hit the streets and do what we do best. We act like cops and think like cops and somewhere among all of it I'm banking on us to work it out. Whatever happens Starsky we don't do anything that will mean one of us loses the other. I don't aim to die and I don't aim to lose you to a death sentence either. So let's go home and drink to that partner."

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

The roadside hotel was seedy but not seedy enough that he drove past it in favor of finding something of a higher caliber. Although he hadn't planned it he found himself pulling the car into the driveway and taking a room before he had time to even think about it.

Where he was heading wasn't too much further but the day's events had been such that his body was tired, his muscles protesting now as the dull ache of the physical exertion spread through him. He had pushed his muscles to their extreme with the work over he had given Riley. Despite his physical lethargy his mind was anything but fatigued and despite the hectic pace to return to his home after he left Riley in a splattered heap, pack up, and plan a route of escape he still feel energized and alive. Having to make a series of snap decisions since he had let loose on Riley had only served to invigorate him and he was left now with a pulsing, renewed sense of excitement.

Ryan Lancaster Detective Sergeant was no more and as of this evening Ryan Lancaster, Mr. Free Citizen was also a role lost to him. He was now essentially on the run, a free spirit, and a man of
his own making with a whole canvas on which to re-create his near future. The fact that he was essentially a marked man wanted by the police did not overly concern him.

No longer bound by a job, the law, or social expectations he had crossed the line into a new dimension – a reality that was his for the taking. However there was really only one thing that he wanted to take now, two if he included removing the obstacle that would bring the one thing he wanted into his possession.

Whatever happened to him, and he was resigned to whatever fate threw at him, he wanted to go out blazing. Blazing and with Starsky in his reach and Hutchinson no longer standing in his way. Once he would have been happy to simply possess Starsky – that prize alone would have been his ultimate goal. Now he was greedy. Now he wanted to watch Starsky suffer first. He needed to pay for making him wait, for not coming to him, for holding himself away. He needed to pay for not wanting him from the very start, from way back in the early days of the Academy when he had so wanted to put his hands on Starsky's compact muscled body, to feel him writhe beneath him, to hear him writhe beneath him, to hear him call out his name in wanting and passion.

There had never been any fruition to his dreams. No matter how hard he wanted him, Starsky never saw it, or if he did never wanted it too. He had only wanted the tall, blond, ice cold Hutchinson. Even when he gave Starsky the chance while they had been undercover - even when he had opened up to him and offered himself for the taking, Starsky had denied him.

In the end he had no choice but to take what he had always wanted by violent means. And still it had not been enough to satisfy his hunger for the man who rejected him for his blond lover.

Now he craved Starsky's suffering. His suffering would do something to appease his sexual frustration, maybe not enough but something to make up for all that Starsky had denied him.

Hurting and abusing Starsky physically, sexually and mentally had not made him suffer enough. Not nearly enough. Starsky suffering would be at it's extreme when the pain was exerted externally. To the extension of himself. To the part of him that was enmeshed with him so tightly that to maim it, destroy it, sever it - would be the pinnacle of Starsky's suffering.

Ryan had known for a long time now that in order to actualize his ultimate revenge for Starsky's denial of him, he had only to make Starsky watch something.

To make him watch his partner die at Ryan's hands. This final act might even be enough for Ryan. It might even overshadow his unquenchable desire to own Starsky.

Ryan walked out of the shower, the steam from the small bathroom drifting in warm wisps into the dingy room and fogging up even the mirror near the bed. Standing before the mirror he surveyed himself carefully, turning to the side and then back to the front to appraise his tall rangey body and solid build. He pulled the towel from his taut waist and rubbed hard to clear the speckled mirror of the condensation while he continued to stare admiringly at his own reflection.

The brightness in his black eyes told of his inner excitement and buoyed up psyche. He felt better than he had since Dobson and the IA stiffs had given him his marching orders. After that day he had felt weighed down for so long by the injustice of having his whole life ripped from under him.

Dobson's fault. Dobson was dead now and yet the resentment of the loss of his status had still not diminished. Killing Dobson had not restored it for him. It had been Dobson's fault but killing him did not repair the damage.

So someone's fault must be explored.
Hutchinson's fault for setting in process the series of events that had led to his professional demise. Hutchinson's fault for probing Dobson's role in keeping Ryan employed and functioning as a high-ranking cop.

Hutchinson's fault for bringing into question Ryan's professional behavior during the undercover assignment where he had been partnered up with Starsky.

Hutchinson's fault for crashing in on his private party with Starsky at the beach house.

Hutchinson's fault for having his little lap dog Rookie come blasting into the house and nearly blowing him away.

Hutchinson's fault for taking Starsky away from him out of the city to the safe house where that stupid little tart Katy had got her talons into Starsky.

All of it Hutchinson's fault – from that very first day when he found him watching Starsky in the shower room and took him to task for it. Threatened him. Took Starsky from him.

The memories continued to fill his head and the face that looked back at him in the now unclouded mirror was a younger face – a face from when he was still back in the Academy. The Academy. From when his infatuation with David Starsky had first blossomed and flourished but was never allowed to be fulfilled because one man had always prevented it.

In the mirror he was the younger Ryan who was sitting in the locker room surrounded with a few of the other class members, changing into their gym gear, hanging their uniforms in their lockers and chatting about the morning's drill in the field.

The program had been up for two weeks and this morning they were all aware of the nature of the exercises that they were to undertake. Today there was to be nets, beams, ropes and wall climbing; tactical training for scaling and negotiating heights in pursuit of fleeing felons.

Ryan smiled at the memory as his younger self smiled back at him, the years falling away. He could no longer see the small lines around his eyes and mouth and his face was thinner and fresher, his eyes livelier, lighter and less opaque than the murky depths of his now black eyes that told of many years of bitterness and quiet rage.

He heard his younger self speaking.

"So boys, who's going to blitz the obstacles on the field training today? I'm ready to put down five dollars on myself for taking the prize for getting the best times."

One of the other recruits piped up with a laugh as he snapped his locker door closed.

"Don't be so sure of yourself Lancaster you cocky bastard." The recruit waved his arm at Hutchinson who was tying up his shoes. "Blond cowboy here is pretty damn fast in the field – look at those long legs. He's like some colt from one of his midwestern farms. We've all seen him run. I'm thinking I'll put my money on Hutchinson."

A few of the other class echoed his sentiment and pulled out their wallets to offer up the bet.

"Yeah but running is not the same as scaling heights and climbing. I have more upper body strength." Ryan persisted while trying not to let the others see his distaste at having Hutchinson pushed into the limelight.

Another voice chimed in from behind a locker door and Starsky emerged with a smile breaking out
all over his face as he flicked his towel teasingly at Hutchinson.

"Sorry Ryan – I'd have to put my money on my blond friend too. Hutch is lighter and agile. I reckon he'll make mince meat of you on the bridges and ropes. He'll fly across those high obstacles."

Ryan looked unconvincing and turned the attention away from Hutchinson.

"What about you Starsky? You are consistently in the top three performers in the field. See how you creamed all of us the other day in the defense class and so far you haven't been beaten on the shooting range. Maybe you'll be my main competitor on the field today. I'm definitely not backing your blond pretty boy there. He might fall and scrape his knee."

Ryan hoped his barb struck home with the cool blond who didn't seem to react to the blatant slight. Feeling angered at the lack of reaction to his jibe Ryan pushed again. Hutchinson's quiet reserve unnerved him.

"So Hutchinson? Not going to agree with me? Don't you think you're buddy Starsky has what it takes to beat you today. I don't hear you supporting him like he supported you. Maybe you're a bad sport? Or maybe you're jealous of his prowess? After all Starsky is more muscled than you and stronger. Starsky could easily pull himself up on those heights."

If Ryan thought that would get a reaction he was soon disappointed.

Hutch shared a knowing smile with his dark headed friend and the two of them laughed together.

Ryan felt the now familiar sense of being shut out by these two, by their increasingly close connection, inside jokes and silent banter. It irked him that these two had struck up such an unlikely comraderie because in the first days he would never have picked the rather aloof and proper Hutchinson as being a potential friend for the rough and ready more street-wise David Starsky. It did more than irk him. It left him confused and jealous for the dark haired Starsky had caught his eye immediately and he had made up his mind to test out the waters with him sexually. He still hadn't gotten the chance to make a move. The unexpected and rather unconventional union between this East Coast Jew and the Midwestern conservative had left him on the outer.

"Ummm Ryan, I think you'll find that Hutch is actually saying nothin' in order to support me. He knows better than anyone that I would be the least likely to succeed out there today. He and I talked about my little aversion when we first hit the field exercises."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" One of the other guys wanted to know.

Ryan refrained from asking. He was too busy silently fuming at the way the Starsky and Hutchinson kept looking at each other with Starsky looking thankful and Hutchinson looking back in almost silent sympathy.

"Hutch won't tell you – but I'm happy to admit it. You see boys turns out that I'm a complete girl when it comes to anything in the field to do with heights. Freakin' hate heights. I freeze up completely – have done since I was a kid. So bridgework, dangling from a rope or hanging from some damn high wall is gonna scare the shit out of me. I mean scare the shit out of me! I won't be able to move at all let alone move fast. Already told Hutch he'll have to talk me through every damn obstacle. Just hope the drill sergeant ain't lookin' too closely today or I might get a fail on today's course."

There followed some light hearted laughter and good natured teasing all round before Ryan
watched as Hutchinson cuffed Starsky around the back of his curly head and promised him there would be no fail for him whatever happened.

"No way Starsky. You'll pass it easily. You'll get through it, I'll make sure of it. Just keep your eyes on me and not on the ground."

The small crowd dispersed, the locker room emptying as they all filed out to the sunshine and the physical tests ahead. Only Ryan remained in the locker room. He stood still and waited until the resentment ebbed away. The resentment that was now frequently welling up in him every time he witnessed the affinity and rhythmical interaction between Hutchinson and the man he had begun to covet sexually.

Ryan's closed and opened his eyes and the image in the stained mirror was once more that of a man in his thirties, the young fresh-faced recruit now a more hardened mature man. The brighter eyes once more dark and deep, pools of hate and resentment.

The words however stayed in the air, lingering and echoing in the semi squalid hotel room.

Starsky's words, Starsky's uninhibited admission of his weakness, his fear of heights.

Ryan heard the younger voice of Hutchinson echoing still.

"Don't you worry Starsky. You get into trouble just remember I'll be right underneath you just waiting to catch you if the fear gets too much. If you really need to let go, you let go. I'll be there to catch you."

Then Starsky's tinkling laugh was in corners of the dingy hotel room and Ryan turned his head toward a sound that was only just a memory but eerily real.

"You big oaf – don't you think I might just squash you to death if I come crashing down on top of you from a height?"

"It doesn't matter because you won't drop anyway. Knowing I'm there for you buddy will be enough to get you across. I'll be your safety net."

And apparently it had been enough for Starsky. For true to Hutchinson's words Starsky had managed to complete the course. Rocky and tentative in places and more than sweating profusely with concentrated psychological effort at the end of the series of obstacles, Hutchinson had been there with him all the way, talking him through, steadying his nerves and waiting for him with open arms at the end.

The image of them laughingly hugging, slapping each other's backs and Hutch congratulating Starsky was as clear in his mind as though the event had been yesterday and not many years before.

Ryan flung himself down on the narrow hard single bed and closed his mind on the journey back into that day at the Academy.

"But you won't be there for him this time Hutchinson. I'll make sure of that."

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Unspoken words of unspoken plans found them both back at Starsky's apartment for whatever remained of the pre-dawn hours.
It was a silent given for both of them now that they would stay close to each other. The specter of Ryan hovered far too close to risk leaving either one of them as a prime target for his twisted games. Together they were a force he would not as easily overpower.

Too tired and overwrought for food and or even the anticipated beer, they bundled their weary bodies into Starsky's big double bed, never questioning the mutual decision to share the bed, never questioning their mutual need to remain close. Starsky was already succumbing to sleep when he felt the mattress sag and Hutch's weight press into the bed beside him only minutes after he had laid down. He pulled himself back from the brink of unconsciousness to check how Hutch's call to the hospital had gone.

"Did ya get through? They tell ya somethin'? Howzzz isss he?"

"He's 'stable and comfortable.' You know the usual lines and terms you get given every time you call the hospital about someone? But – I think he must be ok or they would have told me. They remembered me."

"Thazzzz good. Must feel like hell poor kid."

"Yeah I'm sure he's sore as all hell."

"Hussshhh? "

"Go to sleep Starsk you can barely speak for tiredness."

"Soon. Hutch?"

"What?"

"We're gonna end this soon ain't we? We're gonna get him?"

"Yeah. Yeah Starsky. We're going to get Ryan. It'll all be over very soon. No more Ryan. No more fucked up lives."

"Thazz good because….. feel so….. damn fucked right now."

"Me too buddy – me too."

Once uttered, his soft words hung in the quiet dark space above them and Hutch knew Starsky never heard them as he was already snoring softly. And as was often the case it was the reassuring sound of his partner's steady rhythmic breathing that pulled him under as well moments later.

SHSHSHSSHSSHSHSSHSSHSSHHSSHSHSSHSHSSHSHSHSSHSH

Despite the limited hours of rest they were back in at the station by nine the next morning. At least Starsky was. He had dropped Hutch at the hospital and left him visit with Riley by himself while he drove in to collect the warrants and check in with Dobey. He aimed to head back later to grab Hutch and double back to Ryan's apartment. They intended to do a quick round of door knocks with neighbors to see if they could glean anything of note, any possible lead on where he might have headed to when he had packed up and bolted. Given the nature of Ryan's anti-social personality they already knew that their efforts would be purely academic and were not likely to yield anything of note.

Having had a brief interview with Dobey, Starsky left instructions with another officer to begin following up with Ryan's ex colleagues at the Nineteenth Precinct. It was possible that one of them
Starsky deferred the task because there was another more pressing task he wanted to take care of himself – and soon. It was a perfect opportunity to take care of this little job while Hutch was not with him. This was something Hutch didn't need to know about. Starsky doubted it would yield him any leads on Ryan, but it would sure as hell make him feel better and right now that was something he needed to do for himself. He was running on empty and kicking ass might replenish his spluttering engine.

He saw her as soon as he came down the internal stairwell and he supposed she saw him at much the same time because he caught her facial expression change. When she next looked up he could not miss the play of mixed emotions that flew across her face. A pretty enough face he thought dispassionately.

She was at first a little joyful that he was looking at her, then a little uncomfortable that he was looking at her in such a fixated way, then she seemed to blanch and color when his look promised something more than she thought she was going to get from him. He could feel that he had confused her. He knew when he saw the flicker of uncertainty and the wide-eyed look of fear that his own face must have translated his latent anger, and his stored up negative energy.

Almost unconsciously she began to move backwards away from him, stepping back a few paces from the desk as he approached his mark.

Early enough that there was little action in her work zone, and the rest of the staff were loitering around the coffee and food dispensers for their early morning fixes of caffeine and sugar – Starsky had her as his own audience of one. Exactly as he preferred. Social was not how he felt and social was not how he aimed to be in the next five minutes.

"Hey there? Look at that will ya? It's you. Small world here in the station. Susan? Is that it? That's your name isn't it?"

"Yes. Sergeant Starsky, that's right."

"Oh no need to be deferential to me now Susan. After all we're all servants of the people. Like I was sayin' small world here ain't it?"

"I guess. After all I don't usually see you down here – down from Homicide."

"No I suppose you don't. So it's really not that small a world is it? Even in a police station – big busy police station. So how is it I was wondering that you and Hutch got to meet – that he got to ask you out. Kinda amazin' really seein' as though he would never usually come down here to the main enquiries desk. Not like you work in Records or Research or some place we often come to visit. How did you and Hutch meet again?"

"You know I don't exactly remember. Maybe in the cafeteria?"

"Not likely given that my partner has an aversion to anything that comes out of the cafeteria. In all the years we've worked together don't recall him goin' there by himself - least not voluntarily."

"Well I don't know. Just – in the hallway somewhere."

"Guess that must have been it. You know my partner is kinda shy and restrained with girls normally – a bit of a klutz you could say. I am so proud that he was able to approach you in the
hallway, a stranger, and ask you out."

Her face was now almost crimson and she stepped back as he stepped in closer and leaned across the counter.

"Why are you talking to me like this? You're making me feel like I've done something wrong. I just went over to your friend's house. What is the problem?"

"I know you did. Remember I was there. I came knocking on his door – or rather I barged in on the two of you. Sorry about that."

He looked sheepish for one second before he dashed the innocence from his face and replaced it with a hard stare.

"That's ok – I was about to leave anyway when you arrived."

"Got what you needed? Got what you'd come for?"

"What?"

"What did you go there for? What did you want from Hutch?"

"That is none of your business!"

"No – no you're wrong there – Susan. It's very much my business. Tell me how did you meet Ryan Lancaster? Or how did he meet you? I was thinking before that you might have purposely sought out Hutch, put the word on him for a date, that you didn't just happen to "bump in" to him in the hallway like you said. Like you'd like me to believe. So that got me thinking. About Ryan. And I was thinking that knowing Ryan like I do, and I do know him very well Susan, that it's a wonder how a cop from another precinct happens to get to meet you. I mean Ryan meets you, another employee in a precinct miles from his? So I wonder if Ryan purposefully got to know you Susan – just like you purposefully got to know Hutch? What do you think? Sound about right to you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Well that don't matter because I do. I know enough for both of us. You can just keep playing dumb, something you do so well darlin'."

"I'm going to call my senior supervisor and put in a complaint about you harassing me."

"Oh? Well people are already lookin' at us, so you could do that easily I'm sure. While you're talkin' to your senior I might have a word with him or her too. Let it be known that Susan here from the Main Reception is playing some dangerous games with a wanted felon. Maybe involved with him in illegal activities. Handing him information that leads to people gettin' hurt, gettin' put in hospital, even gettin' killed."

"What? I have no idea what this is about Starsky. Ryan a felon?"

"Oh so you do know Ryan?"

"No – yes – look please. I don't know half of what you're saying or what you're talking about."

"You probably don't so ain't it lucky for you that I've taken the time to come down here and put you straight about a few things? You wanna mess with Ryan Lancaster, that's your choice sweetheart, but you gotta know he is one sick and dangerous ex cop. Ex! He's been kicked off the
force and is now wanted for violent assault of a police office and - other crimes. You play with him Susan, you'd better be prepared to get burned."

"Look – I didn't know he was dangerous – I only just told him a few things, kept my eyes open for him that sort of thing."

"Like what things? How long have you been feeding him information?"

Once more she retreated as he leaned in toward her with brandished hostility.

"Just phoned him to tell him what your partner's moves were – if I knew that he was leaving or going somewhere. Like if he was leaving the station. Just stuff like that - if there was some action going on in your Captain's office. You know - stuff that might have concerned him, Ryan I mean. He seemed to like to know that stuff, I don't know why. I – I used to keep my eyes open and ask around to the other staff. It wasn't hard to find out things and seemed pretty harmless information to pass on to him. But – well, he seemed to appreciate it."

"I'm sure the asshole did. Why? Why did you put yourself in this position? What was in it for you?"

I – I thought it would help for him to get to know me better and ask me out. He's one attractive man. Kinda hot you know? "

Starsky had to laugh at that and watched her cringe at the indirect offense directed at her.

"You think I'm pathetic don't you?"

"You are if you keep holding out for Ryan Lancaster to ask you out. He prefers his dates in pants and shirts. Perhaps you haven't worked it out for yourself just yet, but Ryan is not particularly fond of women and one day real soon when you aren't playing sweet with him anymore like he wants ya' to – well let's just say, you might not be keeping your face intact."

It gave him a modicum of satisfaction to see her blanch and suck in a small gasping breath.

"I – I wondered….why... why he never seemed interested in me, even when I gave him opportunities."

"And your latest little game? With my partner? The other night?"

She paled again.

"Ryan called me. I haven't heard or seen of him in weeks. He just wanted me to get a feeling for what was happening with the two of you since you've come back to work after your absence. He is always so interested in knowing about the two of you – I don't know why, but he is always happy for whatever tidbits I can give him."

"So you thought nothin' of usin' Hutch?"

"It wasn't like that. Hey – I like Ken…I've always found him attractive and it was no hard task to spend an evening with him."

Starsky saw red and decided the best way to disperse it's hold on him was to throw his anger onto her.

"Really? Next time you decide you want to use my partner for your own advancement lady you had
better be prepared for me to come down here to your little work station and do a whole lot more than just talk to you. We clear on that?"

The low growl in his words must have reached other staff as now all eyes were on them.

Suddenly Starsky had enough of her and pulled back from the desk. However he decided not to waste the opportunity of a good audience and looking around at the other curious staff he scratched absently at his stubbled cheek before throwing his parting caustic shot.

"And Susan? Ryan was probably smart not ever trying to get you in the sack. From what Hutch told me you sure weren't worth wastin' a free night on. "

He turned and walked away before he saw the damage he'd left to her pride.

That one was for Hutch you bitch.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHHS

Hutch was waiting for him when he slid the Torino into the No Standing Zone out the front of the Emergency Entrance to the hospital.

"Hey, you didn't even give me a chance to flaunt with danger. I was happy to park here and wait for you – I was even go to come up and see how things were with our patient."

Hutch gave him an exasperated roll of the eyes.

"No thanks. I'm not in the mood for you going head to head with the traffic wardens today. You'll have to get your parking fines on your own time. No sense in you going up to see him now anyway, he zoned out on me – fell asleep with the last round of meds."

"Still in a lot of pain?"

"I'm sure he is, but he's not letting on. He's a lot like you in that regard partner."

"Jeez – bit early in the day for compliments from you Blintz."

"Well maybe I'm just feeling good that we're back on track – that we're going about this 'Let's put Ryan away' as partners and not trying to do our own thing."

Starsky was busy negotiating the merge with the street traffic but he looked sideways and somehow still managed a fathomed look at Hutch.

"That's what we talked about last night I know. So – just to make sure? We're in this together? No heroics or risks by either of us alone?"

"Starsky – I'm not the one who is up for questioning in this decision. It's you who has to be reigned in. I made my position clear to you last night. But we're heading in the same direction now aren't we?"

"Yeah – yeah – we'll work this out the right way together. End it the way we need to end it. I know that you're worried – but it's cool."

"Good. I feel better that we've got it laid out in front of us."

Somehow though there was a sense of discordance in his Hutch's words. He couldn't say why or what, and perhaps the sudden heaviness in the car had nothing to do with words not matching
intent, but Starsky felt the disconnect between them like a falling hammer. Hutch's tone didn't match the deep shadow in his eyes. Starsky kept driving, said nothing else, but felt the chill in his bones nonetheless.

"Freakin' useless Hutch. We can't find a needle in a hay bale for Christ's sake!"

"Stack."

"Huh?"

"Stack – Starsk – Stack."

"You got problems with my name this afternoon or what?"

"Oh forget it…" and as soon as Hutch blew his fine hair off his forehead and slammed the telephone business directory book to the side, he caught the grin on his partner's face and knew he'd been taken again.

"Like I was sayin' Hutch – we can't find a needle in a haystack. So we tracked down this property that Ryan was supposedly lookin' to move into before he realized that Riley was onto him. The woman who was handlin' the sale of that apartment was about as helpful as …..well I can't even think of the words right now."

"She was next to useless. She didn't even know Ryan's true identity. Gave us nothing. Nothing to move forward on. And – and – she was supercilious."

Starsky looked baffled for one second but then quickly recovered. He wasn't going to let Hutch win the round.

"Yeah – she sure was. So now we have a dead lead. Riley obviously put the wind up his ass with the tail and Ryan's pulled out fast and split the city limits most likely. How the hell are we meant to trace down where he might have gone lookin' for another property to hide? Lookin' at real estate agents is damn useless, so let's stop looking down that alley. His neighbours didn't even seem to know he existed let alone where he might have gone. He could have just driven north or west till he found a hotel for a long stay. Who the hell knows?"

"And you said that when you questioned Susan she had nothing for us to go on either? You know you should have let me talk to her. Don't know why you bothered to do that."

Hutch was looking down at some paperwork and missed the way Starsky bit down on his lip at the mention of Susan. He had only given Hutch a very edited version of what went on between him and the woman who had used Hutch.

"You were at the hospital and besides it was another wasted ten minutes. Ryan had obviously made a career out of keeping himself to himself."

"Then although it's late lets head over to the Nineteenth. That officer who put in the calls before said he got no where over the phone. We can talk to anyone on duty about who might have know Ryan best. He might have some preferred hidey-hole they know about. At the very least they can give us his snitches and street leads."

"Ok – it's still not four. We can cover a lot in the next coupla hours. Somehow though Hutch I've got a feeling that it'll be another dead end. I can't imagine Ryan would have even got on with any of
his colleagues."

"Yeah that and they didn't want anything to do with him. I don't think he would have won any "Colleague of the Week" awards. Probably the happiest day of that squad room's recent history when he got his marching orders from Dobson. Could work in our favor though if some of them want to see him go to the wall for the trouble he's caused in that station over the past couple of years."

It was the best and the only opening they had left to explore for the time being. Earlier in the day they had hot-foot it around Ryan's neighbor's looking for any information about his whereabouts. Their door knocking had yielded nothing. Ryan as they had both already expected was a closed book, a silent neighbor, an invisible community member. Most had not even realized he was a cop, let alone that he was single and lived alone.

It had made his quiet departure all the more undetectable.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

He was where he had to be – or where he had planned on being. Not his place of choice, not by far. But – a base and a secure and for the most part secluded and untraceable one. There was little likelihood that he could be tracked to here, at least in the short term, and he didn't plan on needing that much time. Just long enough. Long enough to do what he wanted to do.

It was a property that had been in his family over the years through friends of his family, not the family directly and importantly it was not linked to his work or his contacts or past in any way. He had not been here for many many years. However the property, the place, the physicality of where he was not sitting was not important or significant.

It was purely a place to wait and lie low. To lie low and to think and to plan. To plan and to dream about endings. Endings that could match desires so far never realized.

It was chilly in the sparsely furnished and utilitarian atmosphere that the minimalist décor afforded. The starkness of the rooms spoke of the emptiness of the emotions of the people who had once used this small house. It was never touched with human spirit or loving detail – nothing more than just a place – not a home – not a refuge – just a place to come and stay, to use. It suited his mood right, allowing him to centre in on himself and his own thoughts and memories. He didn't want his self-absorption and introspection being disturbed by external factors.

Slinking low in the firm unyielding armchair and nursing his fourth whisky he let the present and the room around him fade and blur.

It didn't matter. Memories about his family did not matter. They had been lost to him such a long time ago.

The whisky was warming those parts of his brain that were already beginning to feel numb from the onslaught of pure alcohol on an empty stomach. He'd arrived, unscrewed the cap on the bottle and sat with a tumbler in one hand and the full bottle in the other. Unpacking, settling in or sourcing some food after the long drive had not been so far negotiated. The amber fire in the bottle and the seat by the window had called him first. Once sat and once the whisky slid into pathways that bathed his whirling mind he was lost to the world.

Memories assailed him. Memories that mattered to him. Not his family or distant past as a youth. The memories that visited him tonight were more of the same of the last few days.
Starsky. Starsky and all that stopped him from being with Starsky.

Hutchinson.

Perhaps the drink had dulled his senses and reflexes but to his own judgment, it had also sharpened the pictures in his mind. The recollections flooded in now – unbidden and flurrying as he watched himself doing what he had done that day. A day that came to visit him now as clear and as fresh to him as it had been in the Academy.

Barely one week after Hutchinson had confronted him in the car park of the academy and issued him with the ultimatum to back off with whatever intentions he had toward Starsky sexually, Ryan had conceived a solution. It had seemed such an easy and foolproof solution to ensure that he rid Hutchinson from the Academy and his and Starsky's proximity. All he had to do was to make sure that Hutchinson got ousted from the training program – not for good, not forever, but for the rest of this intake. He would then be forced to break his rapidly developing friendship with Starsky and to wait on the sidelines until he could resume his training.

Perhaps, and if Ryan was honest with himself, it was not until right at this moment as the hot bite of whisky found his raw empty gut that he had to be face the facts. Deep down Ryan knew that if the worst-case scenario ensued than Hutchinson might indeed meet his end. He could have died. He could have ended up dead. Fatally injured in the line of duty – well at least in the line of training duty.

Maybe that is what he had wanted and now, with the night closing in on him and his memories taking on a life of their own, Ryan knew what he had really wanted when he made the move to mess with the ropes. Ultimately it would have changed his life completely if Hutchinson had died way back then.

Sinking lower into the seat and watching the shadows chase the fading rays of light across the worn floorboards, Ryan was back in the moment. In the field, fresh air in his face and exhilaration in his breath as he punched the air marking his own personal victory.

"I made it! I freaking made it! Shit that was a tough one." He had just pulled himself up onto the small landing platform after letting go of the rope and launching himself at the narrow ladder. He pulled his aching body up a couple of steps to rest on the horizontal.

The last recruit patted his back and moved away to give him room to get his foothold.

"Nice work Lancaster. I'll leave you to guide Hutchinson across. There's only room for one of us up here. Make sure you check the ropes and the clasps before he starts across. The Sarge will kill me if I don't remind you. It's quite a way to fall."

A fact of which Ryan was more than aware. A fact, which Ryan was more than counting on.

"No – it's good. I know the drill. There's only the last two to go now – Hutchinson and Starsky. Hope the rope is still going to hold – what if the knots have worked loose with all of the guys that have been over? I sorta thought it felt a bit sloppy on my pass."

He pitched the concerned query with just the right amount of balanced worry to his voice. It would be a nice touch to the inquiry that would follow the events that were about to play out, effectively covering some of his ass if he was under suspicion.

"You don't think we should get the drill Sergeant to check 'em? The ropes I mean?"

Not surprisingly the other trainee was in no way interested in such a measure and brushed off
Ryan's caution with a wave of a hand after taking a quick look at the knots himself.

"What? No - why do that? The Sarge won't like being called up here to do that. I'm sure it's all fine. Just check the knots and the clamps when you get your breath and give him the signal. He can't start until you do."

"Ok – I guess you're right."

And already the young recruit was scampering away down the ladder, Ryan already forgotten and now left alone in charge of the landing platform.

He'd made short work of what the job. He has already worked out what and how to do what was needed to decrease the patency and viability of the thick rope. Early that morning, before dawn break and with the golden early light showing his way he had scaled up the platform and worked out the mechanics of his intervention.

It was not hard to place himself just in front of the two friends in the line up for the course. After all they were already stuck together like glue and the pattern of Hutchinson always preceeding his friend on the high obstacles had become the norm so Ryan's only aim was to be in place on the platform before Hutchinson did the manoeuver. Since the shower incident Ryan still hung around them, for he was not about to give up his proximity to Starsky despite the blond's threats to him. He wondered what Starsky made of the now constrained mood that settled on his friend whenever Ryan showed up around them. Sometimes he would see the look of uncertainty and confusion on Starsky's face when he perceived the tension between the two of them. Of course, Ryan thought bitterly, Starsky was so unwaveringly loyal to Hutchinson that he never took Ryan aside to ask him about what could be wrong.

Ryan waited until the other trainee was well gone. Then he got to work manipulating the ropes and the pulley system to his required standard – a standard that would mean certain danger to the next bodily weight that dragged on its tension.

The weight of Ken Hutchinson.

Ryan watched the two friends from a distance as he used a surreptitious hand to interfere with the ropes under the pretense of checking their patency. He needn't have been so careful as neither of the two friends seemed to be paying him the least bit of attention.

They were involved in what seemed to be a fairly active, almost agitated conversation with Hutchinson pulling every second or so on the lax give of the suspended rope but maintaining eye contact with his partner. Ryan held his breath concerned that at any moment Hutchinson would twig to the fact that the rope had been tampered with from the other end. What the hell was he doing? Every second or so as Ryan continued to work away at adjusting the rope he noticed how Hutchinson kept looking down - down to the distance between the suspended rope and the hard ground below and then over at Starsky. Their verbal exchange now finished Ryan watched as Hutchinson reached out and patted Starsky's shoulders as he said something that did not carry across the pass.

Ryan gave the rope one last experimental tug and bellowed across the divide to the other side of the carved out drop.

"You ready over there Hutchinson? You're good to go from this end!"

And then Hutchinson's voice rang out and Ryan had to repress the irrepresible, "Sure. Ready to move. Take your post Ryan and watch the rope."
I'll be watching the rope you bastard, you can be sure of that.

"Ok ready! And three, two, one! and Go! " Ryan shouted.

Go you controlling bastard. Let me watch you start and then falter. Let me watch you panic and then completely lose it. Let me watch you frantically scrabble to save yourself and then…..then… let me watch you fall as I try so hard and so …..valiantly to save your fucking interfering, dominating, possessive self from falling! Break your arm, leg, crack your head open – even freaking die if you have to. Whatever it takes to get you out of the training program. Whatever it takes to get rid of you and leave Starsky to me. To me and who he belongs to."

The recall of his bitter thoughts surged inside of him and he gulped greedily at the pure liquid balm of the whisky as the next part of the memory flooded in. He could still feel the shock in his system as the memory unfolded.

Instantly he could see that something had gone terribly wrong. Too wrong – so wrong – so fast – so out of nowhere.

For, it was not Hutchinson who launched himself onto the rope but Starsky.

Starsky was swinging his way across the rope, his strong forearms already visible in the golden rays of the late sunshine, rivulets of sweat already tracking down to his equally robust upper arms and biceps. He was making fast progress his arm and upper back muscles straining with the weight of his own body as he threw arm over arm to shimmy along the rope.

He was almost half way across the divide before Ryan snapped out of his stunned reaction to call out.

"What! Starsky! Why are you on the rope? It's Hutchinson's turn. He always go before you on heights. Starsky!"

Ryan saw Hutchinson wave at him in agitation before he cupped his hands about his mouth and called across at him.


Ryan could offer him nothing but frozen fear before he grappled quickly with the rope fixtures – desperately trying to take the tension out of the rapidly giving knots. With both hands he pulled hard to support Starsky's weight as the rope continued to slip from its hold.

Blood pounded in his ears and head as he heard Hutchinson calling encouragement to his friend.

"Keep going Starsk – you're getting across so quickly. Only a few more meters and you'll be – STARSKY ! Shit! RYAN!"

Through the roaring in his ears Ryan could hear Hutchinson's now strangled cries piercing the air as he realized that something was wrong.

"Starsky GO! GO GO! Push yourself faster! the rope is giving! Ryan – the fucking ROPE! Hold it, hold it, pull back on it, till he makes it closer."

Starsky was now close enough to Ryan for him to see the abject fear spring into eyes as he heard Hutchinson's warning and felt for himself the change in the tension of the rope. The knot slipped
suddenly pulling away from it's firm hold. It jerked wildly dropping Starsky a good few feet lower toward the ground and swinging his body violently in space. For a paralyzing second Ryan cried out thinking that was it, that Starsky would lose his grip. It was only at the last second that he was able to pull his lower arm up again and steady his swinging body, his feet cycling crazily in the air, his breath labored, his arms sweating rivers with the exertion of holding himself in place.

Ryan looked him in the eye and called to him with encouragement.

"Come on – keep coming. Look at me Starsky – keep coming. It might hold but you've got to move. I can't - can't hold on ...it's giving..."

But Starsky didn't look at Ryan, didn't even seem to compute that he was in front of him or that he held his only chance in between his white knuckled straining hands. He was tossing his head back frantically , looking back over his shoulder his eyes jerking back as he tried to see something, someone out of his visual range.

"HUTCH! Huuu….ttt….ch! Shit – gonna fall. Gonna go!

"NO! Starsky don't stop. Throw yourself forward now. Go on – only a few more feet and you'll be there. GO. Go Starsk! "

Grunting with effort he propelled himself another few feet forward but his energy seemed to have left him as the fear ripped through his body. The rope continued to pull free and drop away in violent jerks from the supports. Ryan was heaving and gasping with the effort of holding the fixtures, his hands already bleeding from where the rope was cutting through as it pulled through his grip.

"Come on Starsky don't stop. Just two more overhands and you'll be here...." Ryan struggled to speak while he struggled with the load.

Once more his words when unheeded as Starsky called out to the man behind him.

"Can't do it Hutch. The fear….the ground….can't think….Hutch….."

"YES YOU CAN THINK STARSKY – YES YOU CAN MOVE. MOVE IT NOW!"

The violence in Hutch's voice shook through the air and was loud and strong enough to summon other recruits who until then had been oblivious to the drama. They stood beneath Starsky's flailing body and watched in desperate helplessness at the events. Someone was screaming for a net, others were climbing the structure to get to Ryan to help him hold the rope and others just looked away in fear that they might soon be watching their classmate's body plummet to the ground.

Starsky inched forward with shuddering movements, his body straining massively under the fatigue. He stopped and groaned and the scream that rent the air from his partner was deafening.

"YOU WILL FUCKING DO IT YOU HEAR ME STARSKY! YOU WILL DO IT. DON'T LOOK DOWN. MOVE! MOVE FOR GOD'S SAKE!"

And he did. Hutchinson's screamed order was enough to pull him out of his transfixed fear and gave him the last jolt he needed to pull himself up and all but fling himself at the small platform now barely a meter away. As one hand made a swipe at gripping the structure of the platform's rigging, the other still held the rope. There was a collective gasp and yell as the rope completely gave way and fell out of Starsky's hand as he scrabbled desperately at the rigging with the other. His feet now grappled and scraped at the rigging too to find a foothold to support his sagging weight. Ryan dropped the rope and he and another trainee reached down to offer Starsky a hand.
As he reached up weakly he lost his footing completely and slid hard down the flat surface of the structure. He dropped a good four meters before he managed to get a loose hold on a jutting piece of the structure.

Everyone was yelling and calling out to a man who was no longer within reach of anyone. Ryan looked up to see that Hutchinson had left his post. He had made short work of skirting down the side of his platform then jumping from a substantial height and rolling onto the ground before pulling himself up with the litheness his long lean body afforded him. He was running hard toward where his partner was only just managing to maintain his hold.

It was over very shortly after that.

Starsky gave one last strangled cry and seemed to lose all hope of holding on as he went crashing down the side of the structure, half sliding, half in free fall to crash hard on the sawdust below. His body thumped cruelly as moving flesh and bone met solid earth. The whooshing grunt as the trapped air in his lungs was forced out of him with the impact was still in the air as Hutchinson came skidding to a stop beside him, his own knees giving out as he fell down beside the crumpled form of his partner.

Ryan watched on as his own mind was in turmoil.

Starsky had fallen. Starsky was the one to get the damaged rope meant for Hutchinson. Starsky might possibly have died if he landed badly – could have died. Most certainly he would have been seriously injured if Hutchinson hadn't been there to provide the stimulus to move him forward and onto the platform at the last possible moment. Hutchinson had in effect been the one to save him, his unfailing determination to keep his friend safe is what pushed Starsky over the line.

That was the bald truth and Ryan knew. That was the bald truth and it stuck like a rock in Ryan's dry heaving chest. Starsky had taken not a shred of notice of him during the traumatic minutes of the ordeal. He had not noticed how he had been there for him too, how he had cut his hands to pieces holding the rope to try to save him. Starsky had not been aware of him, even for one moment. The truth was on the ground below him. The two of them re-united after the scare. Sickened by himself and his inability to look like everybody else, he watched the emotional scene playing out between the dark haired man and blond haired friend. Two classmates, two friends, already two partners – fused and interdependent, totally locked into each other's spaces as one reached out for reassurance and the other reached out to willingly provide it.

Starsky was hurt. It was obvious from the way Hutchinson was holding him and touching him with tentative hands while looking about quickly for assistance. Someone called out that the medics were on their way and another called out that it looked like a broken leg and possibly an arm too.

Ryan sagged heavily against the platform, the immediate danger passed and his mind now sifting through the ramifications of what would be the end result of this attempt by him to put Hutchinson out of the picture. Already he could hear people trying to climb up behind him to examine the rope.

He moved aside and began to descend the platform. The logistics of how he would cover this tracks in this misdeed was not his major concern – although he would need to conduct himself carefully as the matter was investigated. Of more pressing need was his overwhelming fury that somehow the whole exercise had been futile and wasted. Hutchinson had escaped unscathed and more than ever the two of them, his now nemesis and his coveted lover were even more cohesive.

His own actions had served to push them closer together and him further away from Starsky.

The whisky was overwhelming all of his senses now and the heaviness that dragged at his legs and
arms at least lessened the pain of how much he felt gutted by that fatal day.

Ryan forced himself to stay and watch the way Hutchinson cared almost reverently for his friend while the medics loaded him onto the field stretcher and applied some immediate first aid and much needed pain relief. In the end it was nothing more than a broken ankle and two crushed bones in his foot, a fractured rib and some heavy bruising.

As the medics carried the injured cadet past the small crowd of cheering classmates Ryan tried to step forward to say something to Starsky. The words that came out were not the ones he had intended but he was momentarily off center by the churning that was still ripping his guts about.

"Starsky – why did you go first? Hutchinson always goes before you?"

The venomous look that Hutchinson threw him had him stepping back in reaction. "That's the second time you've mentioned that Ryan? Fact is he did go first and he nearly took the whole fall."

Starsky looked at the two of them and dazed and in pain as he was he frowned at the look on his partner's troubled face and the way he had spoken to Ryan.

"Hey – hey Hutch. I didn't. In the end I didn't fall all the way. Better that it was me on that rope than you. If it had been you on the rope - I - couldn't have held it together like you did up there for me. You got me across Hutch. You did it, you saved me buddy."

And as quickly as that Ryan had been closed out of the discussion.

Young and fit and otherwise well, Starsky recovered fully and quickly and managed not to have any interruption in his training program. He had to defer some field exercises for the term but that was the extent of the encumbrances that the accident placed on his professional and academic life. Of course there were so many other deeper ways that the accident touched him and only those closest to him could see the psychological scars that the near catastrophic fall had on him. It set him back considerably with the gains he had begun to make on his fear of heights, and left him on shaky ground with any maneuvers that involved climbing or scaling above the ground.

For Ryan the biggest fallout of the day was his own losses. He was left alone to wallow in the irony that, the very act that was designed to remove Hutchinson and to free Starsky up so that he himself could make a move on him, in fact turned out to accentuate the formidable bond between Starsky and Hutchinson.

After that fateful day the two were closer then ever, the center of their union tight, their loyalty unwavering and their trust of each other mutual and exclusive.

Ryan laboured to recall in his alcohol infused state whether Hutchinson ever wondered about the mechanics of the accident. Whether Starsky or his partner ever did suspect anything Ryan never knew, but he did know that since that day, the antipathy from the blond toward him was nothing short of extreme. If Ryan had thought he was in the bad books with Hutchinson since the shower room incident, this was nothing to how he treated him after Starsky's accident.

Never again did the big blond look at him with anything other than distrust and wariness.

Thinking back now Ryan remembered the day months ago when he had walked into the squad room of the Ninth Precinct. The day when he saw Ken Hutchinson after such a long time. He might have tried to hide it, cover it, suppress it, but thinking back Ryan remembered that Hutchinson had done a poor job of it. He still had that same look about him when Ryan walked up to him.

And when Starsky had walked back into the room with his lunch tray laden with food and the
three of them were together in the same room for the first time in such a long while, the look only intensified.

After that day in the field, Hutchinson had not ever let go of his vigilance with Starsky whenever Ryan was around.

It was always a little strange for both of them being inside the bowels of another precinct that was not their own. Everything was at once so similar and yet so different, so foreign, so out of step with what they were used to.

Late in the afternoon the hive of activity of the squad room of the Nineteenth had settled as officers were finishing up reports and filing cases with their Captain before pushing back from the desk to head home. Dobson's replacement had been as helpful and accommodating as he could be with the questions that Starsky and Hutch had run by him regarding Ryan Lancaster, but of course having not worked with the man himself he had little to offer.

"Feel free to ask around in the office – most of the men and women out there would have worked with him at one time or other over the past few years so if maybe one of them can pull something up for you about him. You have to know of course that Ryan Lancaster was not one of the most well liked officers in this precinct and he himself from what I've heard did not mix socially with many of the team."

Hutched nodded and agreed as they were already shaking hands with the superior and moving back toward the outer office. "We're more than aware of that Captain – and prepared for most of the officers to have a cold reception to anything to do with Ryan."

However what they weren't prepared for and felt almost instantly once they entered the squad room from the Captain's door, was the cold reception awaiting them personally.

Within minutes the initial stony, quietly hostile looks of some of the officers translated into verbal barbs as they responded to Starsky's opening attempts to seek out information.

He had approached the nearest two men who were seated at their desks and watching him with an unfavorable stare.

Starsky caught the look and saw quickly that Hutch had too. It was obvious that their presence in this room was not welcome and contrasted dramatically with the open acceptance given to them by the unit's captain.

"Ahh – Officers? I'm Detective Sergeant David Starsky from the Ninth – this is my partner Ken Hutchinson. We've just been in with your Captain and he's ok'd it with us to ask around out here for any information that anyone of you might possibly have to help us in our search for Ryan Lancaster – your previous colleague."

The bigger of the first two officers spoke up first, his expression tight and grim. As he stood up to meet Starsky eye to eye a few other officers moved in closer to stand by him. Hutch frowned slightly at the body language of the five or so male officers who were now all standing together in a small group, their eyes all on Starsky. Their expressions all bordered on distaste and hinted at a belligerence just beneath the surface.

"We know full well who you are Starsky – and your partner too. Don't you think enough has gone down between this precinct and yours for us not to know all about you both?"
He shrugged at that and decided to keep his tone friendly despite the more than blatant aggression emanating from the tight little group.

"I guess it has. Some of you would have been acquainted with the undercover job that our two precincts shared – the Kalzo case? I'm sure some of you were even directly involved in the operation itself. So yeah - you know of me and you know of what has gone on with Ryan Lancaster."

The men said nothing to that, just looked at each other and back at Starsky.

Hutch picked up that the negative visual force field was solely directed toward his partner and stepped a little closer to him as he addressed the officers.

"Look Starsky and I are here because of Lancaster's recent disappearance. He has savagely assaulted a junior officer, left him badly injured and hospitalized. He's now on the run – he's left his apartment and gone under. We need something, anything, some possible information from his work life or private life that could be a lead to where he has taken cover. Perhaps some of you knew him well enough that he might have mentioned a place, a holiday cabin, retreat, favored location – anywhere that he might have gone to in the first instance that he fled the scene of the assault?"

Another officer looked at Hutch stonily.

"So sounds as though Lancaster is up to his old tricks again, beating the shit out of rookies who don't do what he wants? Not nice is it when it's one of your own Hutchinson?"

Hutch didn't like the tone and might have snapped back if Starsky hadn't intervened when he saw the crease in the blond's brow instantly deepen at the words.

"No. Sure isn't and so we need some help. Ryan's got to be brought in and soon. He's done enough damage and he'll do more if he's not stopped. Now can any of you help us here?"

The big man who spoke first was speaking again his attention now focused singularly on Starsky as though Hutch's presence was invisible.

"Help you? Help you Starsky? You come to us for information on Ryan Lancaster? You come to us for help?"

He turned now to address his peers and gave a barking laugh.

"Hear that guys? Detective Starsky who knows Lancaster better than anyone, who knows Lancaster a whole lot better than anyone – comes here to ask us about his - his - what exactly is Lancaster to you Starsky? We'd all like to hear you say it."

Starsky was ready to hold Hutch back before the blond even coiled his body for the lunge, probably before Hutch's brain had sent the message to his limbs to act. He knew his partner's reactionary time and his emotional responses better than even Hutch understood them. His arm shot out to hold to block Hutch's advance toward the man.

"Hutch NO! Just leave it. It's cool. Just - don't ok?"

He had turned to give Hutch his fall concentration knowing that if he didn't quickly talk him down there would be a dramatic turn of events inside the now simmering hotbed of a squad room. Flying fists and vitriolic uproar inside a precinct between fellow cops would mean certain death to any further investigation into Ryan's whereabouts. He and Hutch would be locked out of the case with
swift finality.

Hutch rubbed at his face and glared at the big officer and then swept his angry gaze over the whole group.

"What the hell sort of reaction is this? What the fuck sort of question is that? Where do you get off talking to us like that?"

Yet another officer interjected.

"Boyd wasn't talking to both of you. Just Starsky. We know how you hate Lancaster Hutchinson. We're not questioning you in this. We all heard how you came in here and dragged him out the back and then continued to give him hell on the streets. So back down, we're talking to your partner not you."

The officer reared back when he earned himself a stabbing finger and hissing reprimand from a retaliatory Hutch.

"You, him or anyone of you says that to my partner then you're saying that to both of us. You get that? You throw that crap in Starsky's face, you throw it in both our faces. Look at you men all standing here with accusation on your faces, looking at us like we're the fucking enemy."

A restraining hand on the vibrating arm brought Hutch's pointing finger down.

"I think Hutch that unless I'm really dumb here and missing the subtle innuendo that – that these fine officers are questioning the quality of my relationship with Ryan Lancaster. It seems that I have been branded, labeled as something, something that I don't feel too much like being labeled as. Am I right?"

The man called Boyd – the small group's spokesman took the helm again.

"All we know Starsky is that you and Lancaster were in some sort of deep situation together and during whatever it was you two had going, he completely went off the rails. In his last weeks here – when he was messed up with you and whatever had gone on in the undercover job, he went completely ape shit. So ape shit in fact that he made all of our lives hell." He faltered a little at the words. "And then, well then he sent our Captain to hell."

A female officer pushed forward now from behind the group and although her look was not as hostile as the men's she was obviously emotional when she addressed Starsky.

"He didn't just make Dobson's life hell – he killed Dobson. Killed him. I know that – I believe that. Everyone wants to think that he killed himself but I know he wouldn't have done that. He was too strong for that. And what does the Department do? Nothing! Not a damn thing. And you two come here looking for help now? Why? Because a Rookie gets roughed up by Lancaster? Where were you and whatever power is backing up this investigation of Ryan Lancaster when we were all feeling the pressure from that creep? Every day of our working life? Every day on the job? He made everyone's life here difficult and it was a damn lot more than one rookie he left with bruises over the years. Bruises and a lot worse when they wouldn't co-operate and play his sick games with him. No one in establishment tried to stop him or to help Dobson. Now because it has affected your men you want our help."

Hutch nodded and sighed.

"We know all of that. I was the one who kept pushing the IA to look more closely at him and his shocking track record on the job. We can't comment on what he might have done to Dobson."
Discussing that in the open like this is nothing but dangerous – but that is why he needs to be brought in. He needs to stand up and be held accountable for everything he has ever done. That includes what he has done to my partner who is a victim like everyone else Ryan's filth has touched. In fact if you understood the situation better, than you'd know just how much he's had his life trashed by Ryan - whatever distorted and misplaced conclusions you want to make about Ryan's connection to him."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"Why the hell wouldn't you believe it? The facts are there and I know you all know what has gone on over the past couple of months. Our two precincts were both involved with this whole messed up situation, starting from the Kalzo case. Some of you were in those briefing meetings with me before the bust. He nearly killed my partner. Stabbed and left him for dead in an alleyway and two times after that he tried again. He would have killed me too if my Rookie didn't get there on time to put a bullet in him."

"From what we all heard he would have been more than happy to see you dead Hutchinson. But not your partner here. Ryan made it more than clear that he and Starsky have a lot more going on between them than just two cops who fell out during an undercover job."

Boyd turned to look questioningly at Starsky now – as though daring him to deny it.

"It's no secret in this squad room about how you and Lancaster had been an item since the Academy days. That's why he said you were stationed in another precinct. Kept yourselves apart to keep the heat off you and your … your dirty little affair. When you got thrown in together in the drug case it all heated up between you. Must have had some lover's tiff or something for it to end up with you in the alley. Then Starsky and Ryan's little love affair got to hot to handle all up and they both started playing violent games with each other. Dobson got caught in the middle, dragged in by the damn IA who tried to crucify him. He couldn't take the stress. All those years of solid Captaincy and some dirty little tryst between two cops fucked up his work record and he topped himself."

"Oh my God that is just a pile of total utter shit. You've let Ryan's lies…" Hutch's voice was a mingled twist of painful anger and sadness and he stepped in front of Starsky as though his body could shield the force of the cop's damning words.

"Hutch – just stop. I don't want this. I'm tired of all of this. Let's just go…" Starsky stooped shoulders signaled his defeated mood.

"Go? Go and leave this? You expect me to walk away and take this complete fucking shit from our brothers and not correct them? Not tell them how wrong they are?"

Starsky had shaken his head and walked a few steps toward the door, resignation in his stricken face. Maybe it was Hutch's words, maybe it was the uncomfortable look on a few of the other officer's faces that were sitting away from the small belligerent crowd.

Whatever it was he stopped and turned back.

"They aren't our "Brothers "Hutch. Not if they choose to think like this. Anyway it's not all of them – it's just a few. Isn't that right boys? Just a few of you big tough cops who are looking for a scapegoat to bring down because you still got all this resentment to a fellow officer who none of you ever had the guts to stand up to yourselves? You say that he made Dobson's life hell? Well let me ask you why Dobson chose to do nothin' about the asshole's record for more than two years before all the shit hit the fan? And some of you think he killed Dobson in the end? Well ask
yourselves why? Dobson stopped playing the game his way that's probably why. And you ask us why we dare to be here? To ask for your help? We're here because we want to catch the son of a motherfucking bitch because of everything he has done. Most recently to Riley, a young cop who dared stand up to Ryan which none of you few here were prepared to do. Riley is Hutch's friend and his rookie partner while I was out of action after Ryan Lancaster left me to die. Hutch cares about Riley and he wants payment for what Ryan did to him. If your Captain and all of you too, had cared a tenth as much as he does for the junior officers you say suffered at Ryan's hands, than I am bettin' that Ryan Lancaster would have been out of all of your lives and this precinct a hell of along time ago. Maybe then he would never have got so damn sick and twisted that he needed to start attacking people and maybe, finally, killing his own Captain.

You say you all know me. But you don't. You know of me and you know what you want to believe about me because it fits into how you want to see your dead Captain and all the sick things he let Ryan Lancaster get away with, all those things that were kept covered up over the years. Well I ain't the person you want to pretend I am just so you can blame me for all this shit. I ain't and never have been that asshole's lover or fuck bunny if that is what you're trying to pin on me.

He fucked my life up as much as he could fuck anyone life up and when we do find him – without any of your assistance or good wishes, it'll be one of the finest days in my life to bring him to justice for what he made me feel about myself. Now I'm sorry we intruded on your sacred place here where you find it easier to blame others for what one bad cop did to mess up your precinct and your image of what your Captain was to you, but I've had just about enough shit thrown in my face over the past coupla months. More than I can ever hope to deal with. I don't need the shit from my own fellow cops to be piled on top of it."

With that he turned and walked slowly out of the room not bothering to wait for his partner. He knew better than that. Knew that Hutch would not be finished yet with Boyd or the other ringleaders of the lynch group. Knew too that his partner would handle himself and what he needed to say and that he would do in his own way when Starsky was far enough away.

The Hutchinson last word. And so he left his partner to do what he would.

Hutch waited for the door to swing closed behind his the retreating back before he let loose with his acerbic tone. Its knife-edge cut threw the heavy silence in the wake of his condemned friend's departure.

"Boyd? Can I ask you something?"

"For what it's worth go ahead? But from the expression on your face I get the feeling it's going to be something aimed at putting me down."

"Putting you down? I would have thought that was your field of expertise? No – I wanted to know who your partner is? Is he in this room?"

"Sure, I am, I'm Boyd's partner – Ranklin." Not surprisingly he was the second most outspoken of the small group and sadly it made sense to Hutch that they would have been allied even in condemnation of an innocent man. "I've been Boyd's partner for close on five years since we both made Sergeant."

"You two close? Tight partners?"

"Course we are. Known each other since our training days. We're solid, we work well together, depend on each other you know."
"I know. Yeah I know. Good partners. Like Starsky and I – we've been together since the Academy – long time, long time to be together. Long time to trust and know each other and care about each other's well being."

"Yeah. Yeah?"

"Let me ask you Boyd. How would you feel if Ryan Lancaster had tried to kill Ranklin? Cover it up as a glitch in the undercover operation? Leave him for dead in a filthy alley with a knife sticking in his side and his bones broken, his face smashed up? Lied to protect himself against what he did to your partner? Then how would you feel if he tried to kill your partner because of some sick deep-seated sexual perversion he had held for Ranklin since the Academy days. How would you feel if he left your partner so messed up in his head he didn't even know who he was anymore for a long while and still probably doesn't? And then how would you feel when just as Ranklin got his head and body back together to get out on the streets again to track down this sick animal who has fucked up so many lives – how would you feel if your fellow cops stood judgment on him? Blamed him for being victimized? For nearly being killed? Blamed him for having the fucking bad luck to have been chosen by the disturbed Lancaster to hang his obsession on?"

Boyd shuffled and coughed and exchanged long looks with Ranklin who scratched self-consciously at his chest because it gave his nervous hands something to do.

"When you figure out how you'd feel – if you can get yourself into that place and really try to connect with how you would feel, stay with that feeling for as long as you can. Do you have any sense of how it might be for you?"

"Come on this stupid…what are trying to do here, guilt me out? Make me feel bad in front of my own partner?"

"No neither of those things. No – I am just asking you to get into a place where you might understand how you would feel if all of the things that happened to my partner happened to Ranklin. And – you could to nothing about any of it. Maybe you can feel even a small part of what I'm feeling right now Boyd. Like a few minutes ago when I just had to stand here and watch my partner walk out of this squad room where he has just been treated like you have all treated him. Like a leper.

"Starsky's right. I know it's only a few narrow minded bigots among you who are so poor in your judgment of human character. Thank God it's only a few of you. But it still leaves me astounded as to how any of you can walk around with a badge. You don't deserve the respect and faith that the community places in you. You don't deserve anyone's respect."

"Hutchinson listen–"

"Don't say it Boyd. Just keep whatever it is to yourself."

"But listen –"

"If what you want to say is going to damn Starsky more than you already have, then you had better know that it would cause me to lose control of what little control I have left. If it's to try and repair what you have done and said – it's too late for that. Too late by far."

At the door he swung back and addressed his last sentence more to those who had not spoken up.

"If any of you want this man brought to justice and you think you have anything, anything – to help close in on him and where he might be hiding out, I think that you all know where the Ninth is and
I think you all know who I am. I'd appreciate it if you direct any calls to me and not to Starsky. I don't want to hear that any of you from this precinct have tried to contact him – for whatever reason.

Hutch climbed into the Torino, its engine already purring, its driver obviously eager to leave.

He took in the now sun-glassed Starsky who was staring straight ahead through the windshield. He hesitated, unsure of how to pick up from the distasteful experience they had just left behind them. Starsky obviously unsettled and restless beside him, shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"Well that sure was a freakin' waste of an opportunity to clock off early. Should have just listened to what the duty sergeant told me before about not gettin' any satisfaction with the staff at this precinct when he phoned through earlier. Dobey won't be happy to hear we're now at a complete dead end with any leads."

"Starsk –"

The look that Starsky gave him over the top of his glass stopped him.

"Don't Hutch. Just don't. Like I said back inside just leave it. Leave it. Ok?"

"Alright, if that's what you want. I'll leave it."

"That's what I want. How about you? Did ya' say what ya' needed to say back in there?"

The lines were deep and grim on Hutch's brow.

"Yes. I guess I did."

"Then we're both happy. Now let's get the hell out of this part of town."

"So we're heading home?"

"Yeah – already called us in for end of shift while you were back in there doin' your little partin' speech."

"Ok. Then home."

"Ah Hutch…I want to go and see Riley."

Hutch looked a little surprised, and felt a little more than happy at Starsky's open suggestion to visit the young man.

"Sure. We can do that – I'd like that very much Starsky."

"No Hutch – I want to go by myself. I'll drop you home first and head back to the hospital by myself. If – if that's ok with you?"

The conviction in Starsky's words and the sincerity evident even behind the dark shades was enough to remove the concerns that sprang quickly up in Hutch as to why his partner wanted a one on one with Riley.

"If you want that, then sure. Drop me home. I can start preparing something for dinner. Might even manage to get in a run."
"You're awfully accommodating to my wants all of a sudden. That's the second time in a few moments you've said I can do what I want. Better watch it Hutch or I might just get a little worried about you bein' so agreeable and all."

Hutch donned his own sunglasses.

"It all depends on the quality of what you want buddy. You don't want to talk about what happened at the station back there – fine. You want to talk to Riley by yourself – fine. You want to suggest we have some crap food again tonight for dinner – not fine."

"Let me get this straight? You're happy to allow me to avoid the famous Hutchinson interrogation of my deepest feelings and happy to leave me alone with defenseless sick Riley, but not happy to allow me a simple food preference for dinner?"

"That's right. I have my limits." Hutch sat up a little straighter and looked over the top of his glasses as he spoke.

"Good to see you ain't easily compromised then."

A soft chuckle preceded the flick of the back of Hutch's hand against the dark curly head.

A full minute of silence passed before Starsky ventured the question that they both knew was inevitable.

"By the way, what are you planning on preparing for dinner because, well you know - you know I don't like it much either when my appetite gets compromised."

"Starsky, just shut up and drive will you."

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Now that he was here he felt completely out of place. Self conscious and stripped bare and totally unsure of his place with this man and in this setting. Starsky couldn't even fathom what it was he had even planned to say or to do.

Why the hell did I even come here in the first place?

He looked over at the man he had felt so compelled to come and talk to straight after the bitterness of what was thrown upon him at the Nineteeth Precinct. Riley lay passive and still in the bed and yet was at the same time alert and watchful of him as he paced from the bed to the window and back again for what must have been the third time in the few minutes since he had entered the hospital room. He looked back at the window and then at the door and then suddenly made a grab for the ward chart on the foot of the bed. His troubled eyes stared unseeing at a clipboard of temperature charts and fluid records.

Riley couldn't take the tension of the extended silence any longer.

"Let me tell you Starsky, my daily fluid intake and my daily peeing output makes for pretty boring reading. If you want to stand there and completely ignore me then why don't you try that newspaper over on the other chair? Far as I know it's today's. You can even hide behind it if that would make you feel more comfortable – and even sit down to do it if you'd rather take a break from pacing. Maybe then both of us will feel a little less agitated." 

"Being in hospital suddenly make you a funnyman Riley? Or is it all those happy drugs they're pumping into your system?"
"No, but it makes me bored enough to notice the obvious and then to state the obvious. Why are you here Starsky? Without Hutch? Does he know you're here?"

"Without Hutch? You make it sound like we are tied at the damn hip or somethin'."

That only earned him a cocked head and raised eyebrows.

"You think?"

Starsky cursed lightly.

"Look for your information, sure he knows I'm here. Dropped him home, told him I wanted to visit ya'. He seemed pleased."

"He might be more pleased if he thought you were actually going to visit with me and not just stare out the window or become engrossed in my pee chart."

With a deep frustrated sigh Starsky tossed the chart back onto the bed rail and flung himself into the bedside chair.

"Jesus – I swear that you must have been takin' lessons from the Blintz over the last coupla' months. You're even startin' to talk like him. Next you'll be wantin' to know what I'm feelin' bout things."

Riley gave a large smile and pulled himself gingerly up the bed. He held out his hand when Starsky moved forward to offer him some help.

"No – I need to get myself moving no matter how small. So? Let me do my best Hutch impersonation for you. What's got you all strung out right now Starsky? Obviously something – that's why you're here now. That's why you're here without Hutch. So what is it?"

"Damn it Riley - I don't really know myself…only today, this afternoon Hutch and I were over at the Nineteenth – you know Ryan's squad. Well, after being there, when I walked out and had a moment to myself… Well it got me thinkin'."

"Of what?"

"Of how really wrong people can be about other people and how much those wrong attitudes and beliefs can really cause a lot of damage to the person who is the one bein' - well – misjudged… yeah misjudged is the word I'd use I guess."

Riley frowned. "What went on there today Starsky? You and Hutch get a bad reception or something?"

Intuitive kid. Scarily intuitive.

"Doesn't so much matter 'bout what went on there and there ain't that much I can do to change it – though I'm not sure Hutch would agree with me on that. In fact I'd lay bet that Hutch will do a whole lot more yet to try and change what went down with some of the officers there today. But - well that's not the point. That's not why I needed to come and see you again and say what I need to say. Clearly say it to you. Not just talk around it."

"I'm listening." And he was. Riley had a good idea of where this conversation that Starsky was struggling with was going and could see that it was something that he needed desperately to get off his chest.
"Ok – Jeezzzz….shit. All these weeks, all this time since I wound up in hospital after the Kalzo case and I first started to hear about you and how you were starting to be a part of Hutch's life – well I began by putting you in a framework in my head, like a part of me that identified you with other things. Other bad, dark things. Your name was getting' mentioned, a lot by Hutch, sometimes by Dobey and Huggy and even by Ryan. You'd come from nowhere and you dropped into my life at the same time that lots of bad shit happened to me. When Ryan happened to me for God's sake. You were there at the same time and always in the background like he was. It's like – it was like – like I identified all the bad shit about Ryan and what was happening with me with you. I know that doesn't make a lot of sense. It doesn't make sense to me and I wasn't really even aware of it myself until just before Ryan attacked you. When I was comin' to meet you to tell you how I'd been wrong about thinking you and Ryan were working against Hutch and me together. God – this probably sounds crazy doesn't it?"

"Keep talking Starsky – keep going. I'm listening and it's not sounding crazy. Just try to explain it for yourself as well as me."

"Hutch tried to tell me, I know he did. So many times he tried to say it. He's so much better at understanding this sort of stuff than I am and in expressin' it. But it was sorta' useless when he tried to make me see. I had to see it for myself I guess. To feel it and know what it was that I had been doin' to you and why."

"And?"

Riley was careful not to say too much to divert or distract Starsky. He could see the concentration straining on the older man's face as he labored with the concept he had only just been able to begin to articulate.

"And – I know now why I felt like I did toward you. What made me feel that way. It was irrational and so totally wrong, as Hutch told me over and over…but worse than that, it was just so unfair of me to do that to you. I knew deep down you weren't a bad kid, knew you couldn't have done anymore to help Hutch and me that night at the beach house, knew you weren't corrupt or evil enough to be in on any of Ryan's sick game playing. But it was easier for me to believe it, to put you in that position of blame and distrust than to face the fact that I'd put you there in the first place when I was really fucked up inside my head after what Ryan did to me. You were all mixed up with him in my head – you were new and came at the same time as he did what he did to me. So in my mind you were like him. Bad and evil and untrustworthy. As time went on and I had those therapy sessions and I knew Hutch was hurtin' because of how I treated you, I started to see that it was all in my sick head. All my suspicions about you were just a part of the distorted thoughts I had about myself after Ryan. Christ I am really rambling here …"

"Not rambling. Talking and thinking and explaining. There is a lot to get out, a lot of stuff inside of you Starsky. Get it out."

"Just as well I 'm admitting all of this now while you're indisposed, otherwise you might want to leap off that bed and go at me. You're not the skinny kid I remember from a couple' months ago when I first saw you in the hospital corridor."

"Take a swing at you? Guess I do owe you one don't I? But right now you're safe Starsky. I can always do that when I'm better. Now what else?"

"One last big thing. My temper and its consequences. The fact that I lost it so badly when I slammed you in the jaw."

"Oh that. Oh – well… you've already apologized for that."
Riley ran his hand over the still discolored older bruise on his face.

"Yeah but I didn't explain more about what was goin' through my head that made me do that with my fist. Turns out were right about what you said to me. That's why I hit you. You told me the bald truth and I didn't want to hear it. I was jealous of you taking Hutch away from me, from partnering with him when I was sick, of him depending on you when he couldn't depend on me, of you saving him that night when I couldn't save him because I was the one who nearly got him killed by makin' him come look for me after I hightailed it when he wanted to go to Dobey about what Ryan had done to me. All of it – all of it was tied up with resenting you for being there for Hutch when I felt I had failed him."

"You never failed Hutch. You were a victim."

"Maybe, but still I acted like an idiot by endangering us both by clearing out of the city and lettin' Ryan close in on me and then corner Hutch like he did. If you hadn't of shown up Riley, I know Ryan would have killed Hutch that night. Not me – but Hutch definitely. So it was easier for me to blame you for not killing Ryan with a clean shot than to blame myself for being such a fuckhead in the first place. You were there for Hutch, always have been since this thing started and Goddamn it I'm not used to havin' anyone else take care of my partner except me. That's my job and in my mind you stepped in and took my role. You sort of – well I felt you took Hutch away from me. That made me go a little crazy too and only made my mistrust of you so much deeper."

"I sensed that early on and I tried so hard not to let it be like that for you. I know how incredibly close the two of you are and I never intended to try and get in the middle. I understood that you felt that I did. I know that. "

"You worked that part out right and you had the guts to tell me. Stupid of you but you told me. That's why you got the smashed jaw. I don't like having the truth forced down my throat even when I need it to be."

"Thank you for telling me all of this Starsky. Thank you for having the courage to come here and say all of this to me. You cleared the air enough straight after I woke up in here and we could have gone on from there – but you've been prepared to open yourself up to me and I really appreciate it."

"Yeah well – maybe again it's all about havin' the truth rammed down my throat. That's what happened at the Nineteenth this afternoon. That's why I'm here."

"Ok I'm not keeping up with this now. I've lost you? What's going to the Ryan's precinct got to do with having the truth forced upon you? "

"It made me see the truth of how I had misjudged you and how unfairly I had treated you. You asked me before whether Hutch and I had been given a bad reception at Ryan's precinct? Not Hutch – the guys know that he hates Ryan's guts with a deep passion - but me, they let me have it. Dobson's staunch followers preferred to listen to Ryan's sick lies about what he and I had together. They decided I was a guilty party who was willingly involved with Ryan, actually happily involved with him. So, I was in their minds guilty for getting Dobson killed or killing himself. I was their scapegoat. Someone to blame and hate and resent because it was easier than looking for the truth. Sound familiar?"

Riley nodded and added quietly.  

"I'm sorry to hear that you had to get that thrown in your face Starsky. Must have been hard and painful for you."
"Yes but it gave me a kick to the head too and got me doing this which is something I don't know if I'd have the guts to do otherwise. I'm sorry Riley. Sorry for everything I've said and done to you and the trouble I may have caused you and the fact that you're probably lying in this hospital bed because of me."

"No that is entirely my own doing. I knowingly put myself in a dangerous position with him to try and find some loophole or lead to bring him in. He's dangerous and he's not going to stop. I should have known he would eventually turn his insanity in my direction."

"You're right about him being dangerous. We've got to find the son of a bitch and now he's gone underground and we have no clue how to track him."

"Hey I'll be out of here in a coupla' days and I'll be joining forces with you. Something will give. It has to."

"Coupla' days? What! You think you're superhuman? You takin' more lessons from the big blond on how to cut short your hospital stays?"

"Don't think it's only Hutch who likes to check out of hospitals early so don't blame my attitude all on him!"

"Speaking of the big blond I'd better make my way home or he'll start to think that my friendly visit to you was something a whole lot more and he'll hit me up with twenty deep and meaningful questions about our chat."

"Knowing Hutch he'll do that anyway."

Starsky laughed and honored Riley with his first genuine warm smile. "You've got that so right kid. So right!"

"Starsky?"

"Yep?"

"When Hutch does hit you up for what we talked about, I hope you tell him. I'd like him to know that you've come to me with all of this. It would make him rest easier knowing you have."

"Well Officer Intuitive, given that you've proved to me how well you know my partner, next time you see us both you can tell me whether I did or didn't. Ok?"

"Ok - you're on. I think I know him enough by now to be able to tell."

"You know kid, I don't doubt it for a minute."

Then he left the room with a step far lighter than the one which had brought him into it.

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Ryan smashed the hand piece down and punched the small side table for added grunt.

He'd been calling intermittently through the late evening and all through the night and had received nothing but the burring tone of empty airspace.

He's not at home. Either not coming home or not staying at his own place. No doubt then they are holed up together like the two rutting dogs that they are. Rutting dogs holed up in Starsky's apartment.
Lovers, fucking.

Fucking lovers.

Fucking fucking Hutchinson, fucking Starsky, my Starsky.

Tomorrow. I'll find a way to contact him without Starsky knowing. Find a way to speak to him, threaten him, draw him to me. Without Starsky knowing, without Hutchinson letting Starsky know.

He would find a way to make the contact, find the words and the enticement to bring Hutchinson to him. That was all he needed. Words, words that would engender fear and entice a response. The right words to bring Hutchinson to him.

And once he's here, once I have him – I will have them both. And then finally, at last, just the one, the only one I want. The one I've always wanted.

I'm so fucking tired of waiting for him.

I've waited too long.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow is soon enough.

Sleep now and dream of pain and suffering and fear.

He laid his head down on the firm narrow bed and mentally took each concept one by one. He crammed them all in to his pressured head. Pain, suffering and fear. Pushed them all into his whirling brain. He let them dance and drum, pulse and burn.

The he conjured up the face of the man he now hated beyond reason and overlaid that image on the maelstrom of emotions.

Pain, suffering, fear and Hutchinson now filled his pounding head to over brimming. The combined force of the exultation was almost too much. The shearing pain was so strong he feared for a moment his skull would rip open with the vibrating force of it all. He forced himself to breathe deeply and slowly, quieting, damping down the tempo of his excitement.

The waiting was starting to take its toll. Degeneration was overtaking exhilaration. Wild dark eyes looked at him from a mirror and a smile he didn't always recognize twisted his handsome face into a caricature of himself.

Flashes of incoherency and confusion between the present and the past dogged his waking hours and pulled him in and out of time frames at its wild discretion. He'd been living in the years and the memories behind him now for so long that he was no longer sure what was then and what was now.

His sensual body too was betraying him. The endless tension and the stabbing pain in his head was a continuous backdrop to the throbbing, burning, relentless unmet need in his groin and genitals. Half of him wanted the climax of the desire, half wanted the desire to go away and leave him in peace. Mind over body was starting to hurt and to weaken him, just as it had once caressed and strengthened him.

He was being ravaged from within by unmet desires. Desires that demanded physical aggression and destruction as well as release of unbearable sexual tension.

An insatiable hunger had to be fed and the body demanded some form of endpoint to this state of
Orgasmic and mental release seemed always to outrun him and he feared that if he didn't have them soon he would crack right open and his life force, stored semen and pent up rage would leech from his body and bleed him dry.

Ryan curled on his side, one hand massaging his aching sexuality and the other pressing hard against his aching temples.

There was a way to end this deep, cruel and relentless suffering.

Soon. It had to be soon.

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The aroma of something delectable, homely and fresh hit him square in the face when he opened the door. His mood already lifted by having cleared the air with Riley lifted just a little higher. Hutch was doing one of the many things that he did very well when he wasn't tied down to being a cop. He was cooking. Starsky closed his eyes and let his sense of smell go into overdrive. The prospect of a satisfying meal rarely failed to take him to new heights of pleasure.

"It's your better half and he's home and he's famished." Shrugging out of his jacket he called out. "You better have my favorite meal in the oven because this is one hungry man out here and he needs food as a matter of urgency."

Starsky threw his jacket on the couch, peeled off his holster and kicked off his shoes before padding into the kitchen, sourcing out the smell of the rich and pungent cooking, sourcing out his friend who he could hear clattering around with pots and pans.

Hutch had turned from his cooking preparation to watch his partner pull a beer from the fridge but was quick enough to swat away the hand that darted sneakily over his shoulder to seize on a small handful of rich grated cheese.

"When has your hunger ever been less than a matter of urgency? Hey, put that down! That's for the sauce not for your beer snacks."

Starsky ran his eyes over the impressive array of fresh ingredients and gave an appreciative whistle. "Hell even I didn't know that I had all that stuff in my fridge. Sometimes I surprise myself."

"You didn't – and you know that very well smart ass. So don't be surprised at yourself."

"I didn't? Oh."

"Starsky if we had to eat a meal with the ingredients you had in your cupboard and fridge it would be a toss up between a bowl of stale sugared cereal and what looks like the left overs from the meal I threw together last week – with added penicillin for flavoring."

"Now you're just exaggerating. I got more than that in my kitchen."

"Yes you're right. You've also got this – maybe you can tell me what it is? I found it by smell – behind the beer and the soda bottles. I can't even recognize what it might have started life as."

Hutch moved his foot to flip up the bin cover and Starsky moved closer to peer inside. A fetid almost putrid smell assailed Starsky nostrils before he jerked back with a shocked yelp. He
screwed his nose up and waved at Hutch to drop the lid.

"Hmmm, probably just as well that you got some fresh stuff in hey?"

"Probably. Otherwise we'd both been in hospital tomorrow morning with botulism. Now take that stinking garbage outside and dump it will you while I serve up."

"Thank God Hutch because I'm at the point where I might be tempted to eat those week-old leftovers if I can't get anything else."

A few minutes later they were sitting down to the fresh pasta and rich meaty sauce. It was a compromise dinner that Hutch often made for Starsky who preferred meals based on identifiable ingredients and classic style when he couldn't always wheedle his way into getting his own way with ordering in greasy pizza for every meal.

"I gotta tell you Hutch I had my suspicions that you were comin' back here to cook me up some of that scary type food like somethin' vegetarian or super healthy. Mind you I might have been inclined to eat it anyway the way my gut is crying out to be fed."

"And what would be the point of that? I'd sit here listening to you whine and we'd both wind up not enjoying our meal." Hutch pushed his plate away and stretched back in his chair. Starsky couldn't help but think that he was trying for all the world to look nonchalant and only semi-interested in what he was so predictably about to say.

Starsky waited while trying to look like he wasn't waiting for what he knew was coming. He had perfected the look a long time ago and wondered if Hutch recognized it because he was fiddling about with his empty beer bottle as though he didn't want to ask the question.

"So – ahhh - I was going to ask you - "

And here it comes.

As Riley had told him and Starsky had already known of course, it did not take long for Hutch to attempt to discern how the spontaneous hospital visit had panned out.

"Yeah? Ask me what?"

"So. How's Riley? Now you've got two full plates of spaghetti down you might be fortified enough to take a breather and tell me."

"How's Riley? You mean health wise? You sure that all you want to know?"

"Of course it's what I want to know. You visited with him didn't you for God's sake?"

"Don't need to get tetchy Hutch. Sure I did and I've been wonderin' when you were gonna ask, startin' to get worried about you. But Riley was right. Look's like he's onto you."

"What? Riley? Onto me? What's that supposed to mean?"

Starsky smiled and shoved another piece of cheese bread in his mouth, chewing hard while he focused on his partner's faint blush.

"Just that he's got you all worked out Hutch. Said you'd give me the full interrogation when I got back here. That you'd want to know what I had to say to him, why I needed to go and see him this afternoon…"
"Well he must be feeling better if he's making smart comments like that." Hutch's was just a little indignant. "It's fine Starsky – I don't need to know what the two of you talked about. Just as long as you got on and he's recovering. It was – well it was considerate of you to go and see him."

As he expected Hutch was more than a little miffed at being left out of what Starsky and Riley had talked about. The look on the blond's face had Starsky spluttering and he couldn't resist smacking him on the shoulder as he stood up to retrieve two more beers.

Returning to the table he handed one to Hutch.

"Look. You don't need to pull that face and look all worried. It went well – really well. I feel a lot better after talking to him."

"You feel a lot better?" There was confusion now in Hutch's voice.

Starsky signaled for them both to take their beers to the couch and leave the debris of the meal behind.

"Well it's a bit of a long story. And it's more about me than it is about Riley. Come on. Sit down. I'll tell ya' ok. I guess I've been waiting to tell ya' since I got in the door."

And so he did.

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The high after his meeting with Riley and the lightness of the night spent sharing the inner revelations to Hutch soon paled into disquiet for Starsky. Soon paled into disquiet for both of them. By the end of the next day they had yielded nothing but another fruitless round of enquiries and phone calls. Their interviews with the staff of the Security Firm that Ryan had briefly worked for, any street snitches he had used over the years, right down to staff at his local gym presented them with zilch in the way of some sort of lead to follow up. There was not a single clue or possibility as to where he might have slunk away to. Both men were irritable and frayed at the edges by the close of the day, deeply frustrated by the dead end at which they had found themselves.

Their moods darkened even further when Dobey caught them just as they had conceded that they had both reached their natural end point for the day. He took little time in stating the obvious, succinct as only their Captain could be. He informed them both that as of the next day they needed to put aside any further search for Ryan and resume their normal duties. With a sweep of his chubby hands he quickly dismissed the outcries he had fully expected. He noted however that neither of them displayed the full force of opposition he knew these two men to be capable of when committed to a case that was being dumped. Obviously then his directive did not surprise them.

"Christ Captain – if we don't keep looking for him while it's fresh we have no hope."

"While what is fresh Hutchinson? He's gone. There's no one who knows where and that's it. He's not the type to have messed up and left any leads. Ryan doesn't want to be found and he won't be. There's no way I can allow you to keep using your manpower for something like this. I can't authorize anymore of your time for wasted rounds of interviews. At the end of the day we have an assault of a police officer – that's all we have to pin on him and you both know it. It's not as though he is wanted for any crime beyond that."

"You know that is utter crap Cap'n. " Starsky bristled.

"What I know doesn't mean Jack shit Starsky because unless we can prove he had anything to do with Dobson which I am damn well sure we can't as the forensic team didn't turn anything up,
then all we have is the assault. Your … umm... experience with him has been dealt with already by the IA Starsky. He was essentially cleared when he walked and left his badge behind. And unless you want that re-opened that's a dead issue now."

"So you just want us to drop it all together. Leave Riley's case wide open?"

"Hutchinson when you can suggest to me what you think we need to do to make this whole thing end up the way we all would like it to, you let me know. In the meantime I think you both knew I was only going to allow you a limited time to track him down. That time is up. I know you both aren't really surprised by my decision to pull you off this and put you back on the street tomorrow."

The two detectives looked at each other. Their Captain was right. It was futile and pointless to keep on this tangent and another twenty-four hours of chasing such futility was more than they both could tolerate.

"So Captain?" Hutch was wanting something from Dobey but he wasn't even sure what when he posed the rhetorical question " We just leave him go? We let Ryan walk away?"

Their big leader pursed his lips, nodded his head a little and turned to leave the outer office.

"You know boys, what I hope more than anything right now is that Ryan Lancaster has walked away. That he has gone under for good. Taken his last bow, shown his last violent hand and disappeared after the show. Trouble is – my fear is that he hasn't done that at all. My fear is that once you stop looking for him he'll come looking for you. One of you or both of you."

He reached his office door and felt their continued presence behind him. Turning to look at them he could see that each of them was deeply immersed in their own reactions to his stark portent about Ryan. Neither of them looked at each other. It struck him and then concerned him that their very singular and insulated behavior was at odds with how they usually processed any ominous information linked to a case. If they thought they were working together on this one then they had fooled themselves. They were both working alone – each with an agenda, each with a goal involving one very disturbed man. He had been their captain long enough to know this spelled danger for both of them. Years of watching their total dedication to each other also meant that he understood their individual agendas. It was etched so clearly in each of their faces and had been since Starsky had first returned to work.

Each wanted Ryan for what he had done or could still do to the other.


An ominous road for anyone to start down. A catastrophic road for a cop.

How would all of this end?

There was little to be gained by putting voice to his hidden fears. In the end he would we powerless to sway them or dilute their vengeance. In the end they had make their own final decisions - and those decisions and the actions they took would affect not only their careers but their well being, their lives.

There could be jail for either or both of them.

There could even be death for both of them and probably even more tragic for these two - there could be death of one of them.

"Go on get out of here and get some sleep. You've done nothing more for two days other than
interview civilians and you look worse than when you've both been in an alleyway fight. Go home. Keep your damn wits about you, both of you – and stick together till – till this damn thing is all over. I mean it. That's an order."

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No amount of dry rubbing of his face would seem to clear his vision or rub away the fatigue. Eyes gritty with no sleep and nerves taut from the constant pull of his physical needs and the effort in sublimating his escalating violence, Ryan pressed hard at his brow as he tried to concentrate on the road ribboning out in front of him in the early dawn light.

He'd risen early and threw a few items in a bag once more. It seemed these days he was always moving his tortured body from one physical location to the next. In his earlier plans he had not intended to return to the city until some more time had passed and the heat was off him. Knowing the department any investigation of him would soon be dropped in favor of more pressing matters in the daily grind of a crime ridden city. No self-respecting Captain would allow time, money and man power to be wasted on a cold case. Still it had only been a few days – and yet it felt like years to him. Years since he had laid eyes on Starsky. Years since he had heard his characteristic east coast twang, years since he had looked directly at flesh that his own burned to touch.

Powerless to wait any longer, to endure any more suffering of unmet needs he was heading back to where he could be closer to what he craved for. The few days he had spent by himself had drained rather than refreshed him. Restraining himself from what he wanted to do was sapping his strength and his clarity of thought. If he spent another day alone with just his memories he feared that he would begin to crumble from the inside.

The past could only provide him solace for so long. Now he needed the present, and the reality of the touch of flesh.

Now he wanted Starsky. He wanted him so damn much.

Disciplined, he knew that there were still tasks to be done before he could take the prize. Preparation and foundations though tedious would yield results and maximize his pleasure.

Planning to arrive in the outskirts of the city before the peak hour rush he wanted to spend some time at his first destination. It was important that he have every thing worked out, everything thought through, and everything ready as he needed it to be.

The venue was familiar to him – familiar enough anyway. He had come across it during his job with the Security firm through one of the businesses that he patrolled on the weekends. This morning he would take some time to walk around the site again, running through what he planned to do, how he would use the space to position himself and his quarry. The legwork was imperative and he was too much of a cop to not school himself to run through his game plan properly. It had to be worked out carefully otherwise he would fail at his primary goal. He would fail at drawing Starsky to him and ultimately overpowering him.

All morning he had entertained himself by mapping out each step to his plan. The vivid graphics his overwrought brain was producing were sending him into a full body spin.

Gradually his fatigue gave way as bursts of adrenalin flooded his body.

The site appeared before his eyes and for quick pulse he was momentarily confused as to how he had arrived here. The two buildings, grimy and sad stood side by side so close as to be almost one when taking in the dual edifices from the ground level. Two abandoned concrete boxes stood side
by side spoiled with graffiti, their many windows smashed and the grey decaying air of neglect permeating their external facades. They were well known habitats for the homeless, the street junkies and the small time drug dealers and yet they still held the promise of some real estate potential. Gentrification of the local neighborhood was just beginning and the potential to sell the blocks to developers was enough incentive for the owners to employ the services of a hard-nosed security firm. The aim being to continually move the local riff raff and unkempt street urchins on to the next best locale. For that reason Ryan retained a sets of keys.

In his mind there was no better place to stage his theatrical showdown. The buildings had what he needed. Firstly they were isolated, secondly no one cared about them and most importantly they offered him the dimension of height.

And height equaled fear for Starsky.

Height would test fear against loyalty.

Height would punish Starsky in so many truly terrifying ways when he had was forced to make a choice.

So buoyed up was he by his imagination that he made short work of making it from the car park to the roof top in little time. He jogged up the six flights of fire escape stairwell and levered open the door to the rooftop. And then it took him. No longer sure whether the shortness of breath and the constriction in his chest, the thumping of blood in his temples was from exertion or from excitement, he stood and breathed though the elation of the moment. The first sweeping view of the expansive rooftop gave him more than just white glaring reflected concrete and early morning smog. It gave him the fantasy of what would soon be his.

It was all so close now that he could swear he could hear the voices, the cries, and the pleas.

His head twisted suddenly to the side trying to pinpoint from where exactly he could hear the whimpered moans arising. His eyes found nothing but bare concrete and steadily brightening blue sky as the early morning light was overtaken by the fresh day.

There was no one out there on the rooftop. Not yet anyway. For now it was still pictures in his mind, but very soon he would make it real.

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By the next morning the level of irritability had ratcheted up by several notches for both of them. Back in the squad room after a terse night where neither of them had been prepared to broach the ugly quagmire of their frustrations with the situation, they had arrived at work short fused and ill tempered. Short on patience and fit to explode Starsky took the first opportunity to vent some of his spleen when the first cup of coffee he attempted to pour went anywhere but in his mug.

"JES – SUS H CHRIST! Can't this fuckin' stupid office ever provide a God damn coffee pot with a proper spout. I God Damn nearly burned my freakin' hand off here!"

"Maybe if you held it straight it might pour into the mug and not all over your hand Starsk. Put it down will you – you're making a mess all over these files." Hutch sounded worn around the edges.

"Who gives a shit about the files! My damn hand is half burned and all you're worried about are some stupid files. It's not my pouring technique partner, it's this stupid pot – oh shove it!"

And he did with a violent push that sent the whole coffee pot flying across the desk and the mug smashing to the floor. One of the uniforms, an older man glared hard at Starsky and the mess he
"God Starsky – look at that mess. Who the hell do you think you are throwing your weight around like that? Some of us might have wanted a cup of that brew and now thanks to your tantrum none of us will get one. Go take a chill pill of something will you? Maybe better you should go back home and forget about today. You've been bitching since you walked through the door."

"And maybe Walters, you should try shuttin' your mouth and -"

"Starsk – Enough! Enough. Come on, calm down. It's just some coffee. You too Walters – it's no big deal. I'll clean up this mess and get a fresh pot going for all of us. Ok? Everyone – just settle down. It's no big deal."

Walters swore lightly but eventually shrugged and returned his attention to his desk work. Hutch, satisfied that the crisis had been averted turned his attention to his partner who still stood with fire in his eyes and a hyper vigilance which suggested he might easily decide to deck anyone who attempted to intersect his road trip of fully experiencing a particularly bad mood.

Hutch bent to retrieve the pieces of the broken coffee mug, having already thrown a handful of paper towels on the small lake of now tepid brown coffee pooling on his side of the two facing desks.

Starsky had already thrown himself in the office chair, all thoughts and ramifications of his coffee-throwing tantrum long forgotten.

"You know this is shit don't you? Total, deep stinking unmoving and up to my chin shit? I can't breathe for all this shit. By this afternoon, by tomorrow – I'll be fuckin' well suffocated with the huge piles of this stuff we're havin' to live and work amongst."

Hutch pushed the soggy mess into the wastepaper basket and then took the time to set the new pot of coffee brewing before turning back to Starsky, indicating the door with his hand before leaning down closer to him. Despite Starsky's obscure ramblings he knew exactly what his hot headed partner was alluding to.

"Come on outside now. Let's take a walk and cool down."

"What the fuck for? You think taking a little walk in the corridor is gonna change how I feel?"

"Perhaps not but you need it and I need it – and by the looks of a few of the men in here they need it too. Come on – out."

Starsky followed him glowering all the way.

Outside in the hall Hutch turned quickly to him.

"You've got to stop letting this eat at you like this Starsky. You've only just got back on the job and you can't afford any more limelight with lack of mood control. Dobey will pull you or both of us off active duty quick enough if the other guys give him grief about us."

"Hutch look at this mess will ya? Weeks ago we hightailed it up to Hicksville to hide out from this sicko, cowering away like two damn pussies when we should have been taking him down then. He was there for the taking and we just walked away and left him and now we come to get him and he does the hiding. This whole game is insane. What are we doing here – chasing each other's tails like this?"
"We never hid like pussies – we were given an ultimatum by the IA and the brass to get ourselves cleared in the head about the attack on you and all the allegations surrounding it. They, hell the damn Commissioner, needed the whole damn thing to be smoothed over and no one was going to take Ryan down because you know that Dobson cut a deal with the IA to let him walk. Now we're back – and yeah he's gone. But Dobey's right and you know it Starsky. We can't keep using resources to sniff him out. You know that he's right. So yeah – it's back to some sort of normal life, which is what we want, what we need."

"Uh uh – I want one thing and that is Ryan gone. You and I were supposed to do that, to put him away. Now – now it's all just slipping away from us."

"Only for now. Maybe something will break and –"

"Hutch you know that ain't gonna happen. You know we're not gonna turn anything up on his whereabouts. Look – let's just get this day started and get out on the road. I need something to take my mind off this and the only thing I got to do that is hittin' the streets."

"Alright. But I don't much like your tone when you say that and I sure as hell don't want to spend the whole day dragging you out of compromising situations because you need to let off some steam. Keep your fists and your bad mouth to yourself while you're in this mood if you can ok?"

Starsky only offered a shrug before walking back toward the squad room.

"If I can – sure. " But there was little in the way of sincerity in the words.

Hutch groaned and followed.

It was going to be a long day.

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He had promised the afternoon to himself to be a time where he would be rewarded for his diligence in preparing for what lay ahead. He returned to the nondescript hotel room he had taken as a base for somewhere to shower and change and catch some sleep and readied himself for the next phase.

Depending on how safe it appeared when he cased the area he wanted to pay a visit to his apartment. There were some items there he needed to gather up. From there he would permit himself the glorious pleasure of once more taking the risk to get as close to Starsky as could manage. It was his hope to indulge in one final episode of watching him from a distance. These secretive, stolen moments fuelled his body and restoked his flagging energy levels, exciting him to almost fever pitch.

And then, he would take the step that would kick his fantasy into reality. If all went to plan it could be as soon as a matter of hours till he had Hutchinson. Finally then he could hope to release the molten core of violence trapped deep inside his head and nervous system.

The time and effort he anticipated spending on Hutchinson would hopefully clear his mind and body for what he truly wished to savour. It was important however that he not tire himself out too quickly with his physical efforts involving Hutchinson. He would need to be careful not to allow his body to suffer too much abuse (for he knew that Hutchinson would not be an easy man to overpower) before he could enjoy himself with the main prize.

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Darkness had descended when they reached Starsky's home. As Hutch had anticipated the day had been as long and as grueling as he had feared. Starsky's mood had been off the barometer all day and Hutch was exhausted from grappling with him over every small issue that presented itself to them during the course of their call outs that day.

The night was punctuated by Starsky's slammed car door and his raised voice pierced Hutch's throbbing head.

"You said you wanted to come home – I drove ya' home didn't I? You made it clear you don't want to come with me for a drink so here we are - I've delivered ya' to the doorstep. So why the silent treatment you've been givin' me for the past twenty minutes?"

"It's not silent treatment, I've got a damn headache and I'm tired and yeah – I wanted to come home. I don't want to hit some bar and get plastered, not after the day I've had. I'd rather just go inside and have a quiet beer and I think that's what you'd be better off doing too."

"What do ya' mean by that hey? After the day you've had – what day? Seems to me we were having the same day as each other. So why the big pity party about the day you've had?"

"Because Starsky - I'll tell you why. I've spent my whole day pulling your face out of someone's else's face and holding you back from trouble that you would have landed in knee deep if I hadn't been there to drag your ass out of every fight you felt inclined to start."

"So? I gave some snitches and dirt bags a bit of attitude. Long time since I've shown my face on the beat and they needed to remember who we are – who I am. It's part of the damn job and you know it Hutch. It's the to and fro of the streets."

"It's the to and fro of your damn moods is what it is Starsky. And today you were a liability to yourself and to me starting from when you threw the coffee pot across the desk. Now forget the bar and come inside, have a cool shower and chill. We need to talk."

"Oh Bullshit we need to talk! Talk talk talk. I am fuckin' sick of talkin'. And you've said it. After a busy day of me bangin' heads I need some liquid refreshment. You may not want to come and drink with me but I for one need to. I can't face another night of sitting in my apartment knowing that nothin' is goin' to change the fact that we've let Ryan get away and we're now doin' nothin' about it."

"Oh for God's sake. Alright. Alright. Go and get shitfaced if that's what you think will help you. You think blowin' your mind on stiff liquor is doing something constructive to find Ryan? Obviously you do. Then go. We need to each have a corner tonight anyway Starsky, so yeah, you go to yours and I'll go inside."

"That happens to be my corner you're going into Hutch – my home. Hardly your own corner." He regretted the harsh words as soon as they were out of his mouth.

"Oh I see? Ok. So you want me to head back to my own place? That far enough into my own corner for you? I thought Starsky that the aim was for us to stick together until – until –"
not leaving here until you come home from your bar crawl and I can see that you're ok. So don't think you can manipulate me into leaving. You come home alive and we can talk about me going home tomorrow. Watch yourself and call me if you need to come and get you ok?"

He was up the steps and in front of the door when he sensed that Starsky had yet to move.

Looking down into the darkened night he picked out the familiar features on Starsky's face so clearly illuminated in the street light. He was still standing with his arms atop the Torino, watching Hutch walk away, his face now uncertain and his eyes confused. Hutch knew Starsky was battling with himself internally just as he knew that a few gentle words from him would be all that was needed to bring his partner to follow him inside and shelve the idea of hitting the bar.

A few seconds passed where their gazes locked with each other.

Hutch broke the communication first, and unlocking the door he pushed it open and went inside.

This time he had to let Starsky work it in his own way. A corner each. That was that they needed tonight.

Hutch walked around the rooms flicking on the lamps, all the while telling himself that he was right.

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Three hours later when the phone rang he was sure that it would be Starsky. So sure that he was already grabbing up his own car keys in readiness.

He'll be half plastered and feeling sick and sorry for himself and want me to come and pick him up, load him into the car and get him home in one piece. Hopefully he's worked something out of his system tonight by diving into a glass, or ten….

Inordinately relieved to get the call out rather than feeling justifiably pissed off for having to venture out at this late hour to scrape his friend up from some bar stool, Hutch snatched up the receiver with a half smile. Before he had time to utter a word the smile died on his lips.

"I'm surprised you let him out of your sight like you did tonight. I thought at the last moment you'd call him back – but you didn't. You just let him drive away."

For one lurching second Hutch thought he might vomit. He staggered back with the phone in his hand and his back hit the bookcase hard. He reached out to steady himself. His voice refused to work as his brain fell into turmoil.

"I'm standing here waiting and I'm wondering why you've made this all so ridiculously easy for me. For weeks and weeks I've been thinking this final act where at long last I'd get what I've always wanted was going to be difficult. I thought that with you being so vigilant and all, such a tough bodyguard to break through that I'd have a battle on my hands. You've always made it hard for me haven't you Hutchinson? You've always made sure of that. But now – now it's like you're gifting him to me. You've literally handed him to me on a platter."

"Where – where are you?"

Where is Starsky? Is he with you? Oh My God has he got you already Starsky?

"Me? Where am I?" The harsh laugh scraped against Hutch's pounding skull.
"Well I'm somewhere you'd really rather I wasn't and obviously where you're not Hutchinson. You know where that is don't you? That scare you Lover Boy? I bet the fuck it does. Close enough to know what Starsky's doing. Close enough so that soon he'll be right next to me and far enough from you that you won't be able to do a thing about it. So when you ask me where I am - well let's just say - I'm exactly where I want to be."

Hutch pressed his thumb with relentless force into the crease of his mid brow, trying to still his frantic thoughts enough to form a coherent line of dialogue. Fighting a tidal wave of fear he tried to seize the upper hand of a conversation that had knocked him sideways from the start.

"You're full of shit Ryan. Full of total shit. This is just more of your sick twisted game playing. No doubt you're phoning from some dirty hole that you've hidden in and you're trying anyway you can think of to catch us out."

"Stupid, so stupid of you to talk to me like that Hutchinson. You should know that I am a man of action – Christ you've seen me in action with your partner enough to know that. And action is what I am starving for. Action with Starsky."

"Starsky is here with me at his place." Even to his own ears Hutch knew he sounded like a floundering man.

"Oh? How sad are you Hutchinson to have to try to come across with all that false bravado. Do you think that I am that fucking dumb you shithead loser that I would phone you up to describe to you what is about to happen to your partner if I didn't know for sure that he is not in fact with you? That he is here – here very close to me."

"I don't know anything about how your disturbed mind works Ryan except that you are very sick. If Starsky is there with you – then prove it."

Ryan gave an exaggerated sigh. "You know you really shouldn't let him go out and drink in bars by himself when he's in these sorts of moods. I've seen what can happen when he's like that, in those deep sullen lows he gets into and then decides to drink solo. It's not good Hutchinson. He did it when we were undercover together on the case. He got himself all melancholy about missing you, being locked away in that shitty room with me. Did he ever tell you that Hutchinson? Did he ever tell you about what happened that night when he came back drunk and dazed after finding a bar to drink away his sorrows and call you up?"

The voice on the end of the phone was so frighteningly familiar that for a moment Hutch was mesmerized by it's ominous lull. Resonating with hateful taunting, the deep cadence of it filled Hutch with dread. He gripped the receiver tighter and tried to focus. He couldn't quite make sense of what was happening. Had he in fact fallen asleep and this phone call was in his dreams, a very realistic nightmare? Was this real? Had he conjured up this barbaric scenario himself out of his deep-set worries for what was happening with Starsky since he had driven off? How could Ryan know? Know that Starsky had gone out, gone out without him? He couldn't – not unless he had been here. Outside. Watching and waiting.

He snapped himself to attention. This was no dream, this was really happening.

The worst had really transpired. Ryan was back.
"Where the fuck are you?"

"Your thoughts are getting a little scattered Hutchinson. You already asked me that and I already answered. Are you paying attention to me? You should be you know. You need to sit up and pay attention to me right now. I was telling you about Starsky and me – that night he went to the bar to call you. I know you can remember that night Hutchinson? You would have been waiting for a call from him just as he was waiting to give you a call. Pathetic both of you. Needy and pathetic."

Hutch grimaced. Of course he could remember it. The night and the phone call Ryan was referring to came back to him now. He could recall the quiet unspoken distress behind Starsky's softly slurred words. Why hadn't he read the level of his distress properly that night? Starsky was calling him to try to tell him what was happening with Ryan. Trying to tell him how Ryan was treating him. He had known there was something wrong that night but he had not explored it any further. He could have stopped the operation then. He could have had Dobey drag Starsky out of the role way back before Ryan got his fixation set so obsessively on him that it ended up with him nearly killing Starsky in the alley.

Forget that night. Forget the undercover job. It's over and done. It's now that matters. Where is Ryan? Is he near Starsky now?

"Have you got Starsky? Just tell me."

"You're still not listening are you? Here I am sharing very personal, intimate information with you about Starsky and my time during Kalzo's operation and you're not bothering to listen to me."

"I don't care about the fucking past right now Ryan, I want you to tell me that my partner is safe, that he is ok, right at this very minute."

"Then shut your fucking mouth and listen to what I'm saying!"

Hutch gasped in oxygen and ground his knuckles so hard into his thigh he felt the crack of bone pushing aside sinew as he dug his fist deep into his flesh.

"I'm listening so tell me. TELL ME!"

"That's better. I'm trying to warn you about looking out for your partner's well being. You let him go out tonight, a little upset, a little agitated wasn't he Hutchinson? You know what I think? I believe that all of this – this relationship stuff between he and I is wearing him down. Like me he needs for us to get together. So you see I'm worried that he's out here at this bar by himself Hutchinson. I saw what happened to him last time when he went out by himself to drink away his worries. I had to help him get into bed, had to help him undress and look after him. I don't think he even knew what was happening to him you know. He just kept repeating your name in a drunken haze. Lucky I was there to look after him, otherwise God knows what might have ....well you know what can happen I'm sure."

Hutch stifled a groan. The implications, the sick, twisted implication of this wretched man's story brought another wave of nausea and then the ever-present blanket of icy cold fear.

Terrified now that Ryan would simply say what he wanted, play the taunting game that he so enjoyed and then hang up. He would leave him marooned with no knowledge of what was going to happen to his partner. Hutch knew only that he had to keep him talking. To what end, and what it would achieve he didn't even know yet, but at least while he had Ryan on the phone he wasn't doing unspeakable harm to Starsky.
"You're – you're telling me that you – that you –"

The deep laugh was cruel.

"Can't quite get it out can you Lover Boy? He never told you did he? Maybe he can't even remember that I had him? He was so out of it. Maybe he thought I was you? I always wondered about that. I always thought the way he kept saying your name was because he was drunk and distressed about being stuck in that undercover shit hole. But maybe it was because he was so drunk that he thought I was you. How about that Hutchinson? I'm not happy about that but well – at least I had him. You see – the time at the beach house wasn't the first time."

"Please just - " Hutch felt the overwhelming powerlessness. Once more he was at the mercy of this monster. One wrong word or move and he knew that the mecurial Ryan could fly into a rage, fling the phone down and leave him stranded. Leave him here not knowing where Starsky was, not knowing what this maniac might do to him.

"Please what? Please – Ryan what? You sound so fucking pathetic. Not so gallant now are you oh great protector and savior of David Starsky. Not so heroic when you can't do a thing to change what is already in place. You are so stupid and so negligent. You don't deserve him. You left him left him tonight, left him drive off alone upset and confused. You – you stupid bastard. You left him to me. And it was so very simple. So very easy for me to follow him, to watch him and to wait for him. I'm waiting for him right now did you know that Hutchinson? I'm waiting for him to stagger out to his car in this very dark alley way where I am standing talking to you on this payphone."

"Don't. Don't hurt him anymore. I don't want you to touch him Ryan. Please, please just stop this madness and leave him alone. Tell me where he is and I'll come and get him."

"But you're still not hearing me are you? I have waited so long for this. So long. And now it's all going to fall into my hands, so effortlessly. And then – then I'll do just what I did for him last time. I'll take care of him. Only this time we won't be in some seedy flop house as undercover cops. This time I'll take him far away with me where we can be alone – totally alone – always alone forever. He won't call your name this time Hutchinson – not when he knows you won't be coming for him."

The temper overtook the fear and he closed his eyes hard at the whiplash of his threat. "I want you to fucking die in front of my eyes Ryan. I want you to die. I told you before I would come to kill you. I meant it Ryan – I meant it then and I mean it now even more if that's possible."

He couldn't have stopped the words if he wanted to and he hated himself for risking losing the tenuous contact he had with Ryan because as long as he had Ryan on the phone in his mind Starsky was safe.

"Oh I remember very clearly. How could I forget your threat that night, how could I forgot that pure hatred in your eyes. You wanted to kill me that night didn't you? You probably would have if your rookie hadn't called for back up, if you thought there was anyway to cover up my death and not incriminate the kid. You were so full of fucking anger toward me, I thought you'd take me out there and then. It frightened me a little at the time I have to admit. You are formidable when you're in a rage but I think you know that already. But you're not going to get the chance are you? That's a shame because you know I'm not afraid of you at all now. You used to think I was didn't you? Years ago. At the Academy. Threatening me whenever you got the chance. But not now. You don't have any power over me anymore Hutchinson and you certainly have no power over what I do with Starsky. You can't stop anything this time. It's all done."
"What's all done Ryan?" he had to draw him out, take his mind off Starsky and divert the incensed mental chaos of his mind back on to him.

"My fate has been decided. It has brought Starsky to me and soon we'll be far away from you and the rest of this world, this filthy city. I have our destinies planned out. Starsky's and mine. You know what Hutchinson? I'm ready to die. I'm happy to die. If I can be with him forever it is all worth it in the end.

Ryan might just have well have plunged a knife into his heart. The declaration of his preparedness to die and take Starsky with him was more than he could tolerate. The living room tilted around him and the monster's voice was a tunneled echo.

"Nothing to say to me Hutchinson? I know you understand that quality, that level of loyalty to Starsky. You see, I have it too. I feel the same way as you do. We can be as one Starsky and I. Just as you are with him. I can take him from you, I will take him from you. We can be as one in death."

"No no – no. Please. I - I can't let you do that. I can't let you take him away."

"Can't let me take him from you that's what you really mean don't you? But I can and I will. After all you have kept him from me for all these years."

Hutch ripped at his brain for some desperate measure, some ploy to divert Ryan from his plan. Any moment now Starsky could come ambling out of the bar and when Ryan saw him, caught sight of the object of his obsession, it would be too late. Hutch would have lost all hope of changing the outcome of this nightmare. Ryan would easily overpower an alcohol infused Starsky and force him into a car. The rest, the brutality of what would come after was too hard to contemplate.....

There had to be something he could do or say to change the outcome of what was about to unfold.

Frantically Hutch commanded himself to think. Jarring his thought processes he tried to shift from bargaining for Starsky's life to throwing down the gauntlet for it. Quickly changing psychological gears he shoved his real fear into the background and conjured up his most belittling tone. He needed to incite the arrogance that he knew ran deep in Ryan.

"You can lie to yourself but don't try and lie to me. I don't believe any of it."

"What part don't you believe?"

"You say you're not afraid to die. You say you're not afraid of me. But you're not here are you? You're not here challenging me face to face and telling me as you stand in front of me that you're not afraid of me? No. Instead you're standing in some backstreet like some wilted pervert with a limp dick that needs to be yanked alive by your own sordid fantasy. You're probably jerking off right now in the public phone booth waiting to jump the bones of a drunken cop who staggers out toward you. You're the pansy all the men down at the Nineteenth said you were."

"The fuck they said that about me. The fuck they did! They were all scared of me, scared of what I could do to any of them anytime. I was formidable in that precinct."

"Not what I heard Ryan. Not what I heard when we were in there interviewing them about you. They said that you were nothing but a sexual weakling – a sick queer who preyed on young rookies. I think they're right Ryan. You never could fight like a real man could you? I remember now from the academy and I remember now that first day I saw you again when you walked into our squad room."

"You remember what Hutchinson?" The mention of the Academy and his shared past with Starsky
was quickly beginning to excite him. Hutchinson's sudden diversion into aggression was also stirring his appetite for action.

"I always remembered your hands – so – so feminine. Not cut out for fighting. I noticed them when you were talking to me while we were waiting for Starsky to come back from the cafeteria. Weak hands, weak all over. You're sick and weak. That's why you've taken the easy path to Starsky. That's why you never cut it as a cop. If you're not afraid to die, then prove it. Show me. Show me that you'll let me take you on. I want to do that Ryan. Don't you want to punish me for all the years I have kept Starsky from you? Don't you? Or are you as weak as the officers at your precinct said you were."

"Hutchinson do you really think I would walk away from what I'm about to have with Starsky to come and brawl with you?"

"Why not? If you're so powerful and so frightening, all you have to do is take me down. Once you do, Starsky is yours anyway. Isn't that true? You're right. I stand in your way of him. Take me out of the picture and and you can punish me the way you want as well as having Starsky for yourself. You can watch me suffer as you have always wanted to – I know that's what you've always wanted. Right from that day when I caught you in the shower room at the Academy. "

"Having you dead is the only way I want you Hutchinson. I've wanted that for years."

Hutch's voice was deathly soft now. The decision was hanging precariously.

"That's the way I want you too Ryan. We both want the same thing from each other. Are you up for it?"

"And how do you propose we do this Lover Boy? You want some sort of fucking duel at dawn?" His laugh was laced with derision and danger.

"You tell me. I'll meet you where you want. Just leave now and drive. I want this now while I'm bleeding inside to take you down. But it must be now. Tell me where and I'll come. A duel of sorts but no guns, no knives – just the two of us. Now. Right now while we both feel the burn to do it."

It has to be now. Before Starsky comes out and shows himself and Ryan is lost in the moment of wanting to take him.

"You really want to do this for real Hutchinson? You prepared to lay yourself on the line with me like this and not baulk? Not bring back up or weapons? For me to walk away now and leave Starsky –"

"I've made it clear that I am. What about you? Are you too gutless to do it Ryan, because I have never been more serious than I am about this?"

Come on…come on ….come the fuck on! Hutch could feel the perspiration trickling down his neck as he waited for Ryan's capitulation.

"You're right Golden Boy – I have always wanted to watch you suffer. Ok. I know a place where we will be alone and not be interrupted. I worked the beat on my security job and it is an unoccupied site. Safe. It will take you no more than twenty minutes from Starsky's place. I'll be waiting for you. Alone. No one but us. Get a pen and take down the address. I don't want you getting lost and not showing up….."

It took him a few minutes to give the eager blond the required information and when he was finished his hand actually shook as he replaced the hand piece.
It had worked! He was never quite certain of how the deep thinking Midwesterner would react or act. His ace of course had been Starsky. Hutchinson's greatest weakness. Throw that card on the table in front of Ken Hutchinson and he could take the whole game.

Hutchinson had just made the clear offer, no he had all but begged, to walk right into his hands. Ryan leaned heavily on the plated glass of the payphone and bathed in the glow of his own narcissistic elation.

Just as he had hoped, just as he had set out to do, the blond cop was about to get in his car and drive right toward him.

Ryan forced himself to appear casual as he backed out of the phone booth and walked the few steps to his car. He needed to calm himself down now, to quell the almost crippling expectation that was mounting inside of him.

As he climbed into his car he gave one final glance at the dimly lit bar. He felt no small amount of remorse that he would in fact have to leave behind the one he really wanted. Leave him behind inside the smoke filled noisy bar. It was a comfort to him to know that it would only be a matter of hours before Starsky would come as willingly to him as his partner was now in the process of doing.

Starsky had disappeared inside the door hours ago and when enough time had passed that Ryan knew his story would be both convincing and as terrifyingly real to Hutchinson as he needed it to be, he had put through the call. Ryan battled for three hours over the insatiable desire to walk into the bar and watch Starsky from an obscured table but he couldn't risk it. He had dared to walk past two times with his cap low on his face and that brief glimpse alone of the curly dark head bowed down low over a drink at a corner booth was almost too much for him to manage. He stopped himself going back a third time, afraid that he would do something to alert Starsky to his presence.

Ryan rolled the car slowly passed the grimy exterior of the bar and gave one last look in through the shadowed windows. He wondered how it would be for Starsky when he returned home to find his blond buddy long gone.

He would have loved to have stayed and watched the show. The chance to watch Starsky dissembling would be so gratifying. However he had another role to fulfill now and one that required all of his attention. It would be impossible to be an audience in one venue while he needed to be in the starring role in another drama that was soon to premiere.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

As he swerved around the corner the piece of note paper slid across the seat and fluttered to the floor of the car. It reminded Hutch again of the finality of this journey. The paper, the directions didn't matter. The route to his destination had been fused into his brain over the time it had taken his shocked body to fumble and stumble his way out of Starsky's apartment and toward his beaten up car. He had taken longer than he should have to make his exit and hit the road but he considered the time well spent. The note would buy him time and space and Starsky peace of mind. The note or rather small letter that he had taken the time to leave for him had started as a sort of red herring nothing else. However once the pen touched the paper and the words started he knew the message could be of monumental importance. It might well be his last communication, his final chance to translate some meaning to his closest friend. In the end he pulled the pen away – emotion choking his throat and trembling his hand. There was too much to say and most of it he couldn't. It had only to be enough.

Enough to stop Starsky from looking for him tonight. Enough to keep Starsky and the police far
away from Ryan until he had done whatever it was the two of them needed to do to finish what they had promised each other they would. Anymore than that could bring Starsky looking for him prematurely and could bring him to Ryan before Hutch did what he needed.

As he sped toward the address, coming off the main thoroughfares and winding into smaller and darker backstreets, Hutch knew that from this point on the finale was between him and Ryan.

His unequivocal decision, abrupt departure from the apartment and a note had effectively cut Starsky out of the picture.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

By the time he pulled himself listlessly up the stairs to his door he knew that his lethargy was now more a product of fatigue and mental exhaustion than drunkenness. He squinted hard at his watch as he began to mount the stairs and did a rough calculation of hours spent consuming liquor over quantity of liquor consumed and considered that he was well on the way to sobering up completely. What had begun as a "fill me up and keep 'em comin' " night soon lapsed into a " I'm sittin' pretty for now. Catch me next round..." sort of night. The urgent need to get 'shitfaced' as Hutch had so aptly termed it had quickly lost its appeal. By the end of hour one and once the bite of the pure alcohol had taken the edge off his frayed temper he was no longer quite so certain why he was at this bar in the first place. By the end of hour two he was wishing he was someplace where he could be horizontal rather than sitting ramrod vertical at some smoke filled two -bit bar. By hour three the taste for the burning alcohol had totally diminished to the point where even a sip of the fiery water was more than he could stomach. He had moved from the uncomfortable bar seat to a side booth where he had slumped dejectedly in the confines of its sticky cracked vinyl while he commiserated with himself for the remainder of the evening.

By one am he had all he could take. Home and bed were long overdue.

He had stood with the determined resolve of the drunk who was convincing no one but himself that he wasn't stumbling. He had waved good naturally at the barman, swept his hand back to the booth to indicate the bills he had left and saluted gallantly with his fingers to the waitresses as he sauntered somewhat unsteadily toward the door. He was proud of the fact that he could still in fact master a saunter and had not been reduced to weaving.

Once outside in the fresh air he knew he really was past the heavily drunken stage. Crazy to drive his car he knew but he was still inebriated enough to take the risk and angry enough with himself and the world to see it within his capabilities and his God given right, he settled into the Torino. Leaning forward to key the ignition he saw the phone booth.

It was sitting there so conveniently.

All he had to do was phone him.

No matter that it was late and no matter that he would be tired and more than likely in bed, he knew that Hutch would come and get him.

He knew he should – make the call – not drive. Hutch had been adamant about staying there until he returned home ok.

What the hell… he wasn't going to call his friend out at this hour just because he had minced himself up with booze. Just because he had driven off in a mood and not listened to reason. Just because Hutch had been right as always and the best place he could have been tonight was lying crashed out of his couch with a beer and pretzels and not sitting like some lonely lush in a sleazy
backstreet bar.

What the hell…drunk or not - he was driving home.

Once on the road the cloying blanket of haziness left him and by the time he pulled the Torino up close to his garage he felt all but sober.

He was at the top of the stairs and reaching for the door when he spun around and looked down at the street.

Hutch’s monstrosity of a wreck was no longer parked in its spot.

Had he gone out after all?

Shit did he go looking for me? God I hope not…

The door was locked. Not altogether unusual but normally if Hutch was inside he would have left it unlocked for his return. Stupid, but that was Hutch for you. Never took too many precautions with his own home security.

Starsky let himself in.

The lamps were on. No one was home. He could sense the emptiness as soon as he entered but nonetheless he pushed open his bedroom door and the bathroom before heading for the kitchen for much needed water. Parched, he gulped down two large glasses of cold water from the fridge before rubbing at the headache forming quickly behind his creased brow.

Gone home? After the big statement that he wouldn't? And there I was about to phone him to come and get me…. 

Didn't make sense that he would have taken off home…not when his overnight duffle bag was clearly still strewn a la Hutch style all around the couch and his toiletries were still in the bathroom. A small twinge of something close to panic pushed through the residual fog of drunkenness. Of course Hutch often left his belongings at Starsky's place and visa versa so that in itself was no cause for alarm. Perhaps he just got an overwhelming burst of pissed "offness" at everything and slammed out of the apartment?

Starsky refilled his water glass and prowled slowly around his apartment while he digested the information at hand. He needed some aspirin before the whisky burned a hole in his skull. Coming out of the bathroom once more he saw the piece of paper. Unsure of how he might have missed it on his first round of the apartment he snatched it up now where it lay so blatantly obvious on the coffee table it's corner pinned by Hutch's preferred coffee mug.

Holding it to the yellow lamp light Starsky's bleary eyes tried to focus on the words.

" Starsk, changed my mind and decided after all to go home tonight. I wanted to wait and make sure you were ok that you got home safely – I really did, but in the end this is the best thing I can do for you. This is what you need and what I need to do for you, for both of us. Don't be angry with me for what I've done. Try to understand. When you do you'll know I had no other option. I only want to keep you safe.

You drove off tonight upset and angry and I wish it hadn't been like that between us when you left. It's been hard on both of us now for such a long time, mostly for you I know. There is no easy way to make this better for you – otherwise I wouldn't chose to act this way. Get some sleep.
Love you buddy.

Hutch

The inkling of panic subsided. He had simply gone home. Starsky was relieved to see in the tone of the note that he didn't sound resentful, the opposite if anything. The paper slipped out of his hand as his loose grip weakened further. Fatigue and alcohol overload were fast claiming him and he let himself fall back heavily onto the couch, his eyes already closing.

It was ok then. Hutch had gone home and was not angry with him, he had come home in one piece despite his miscalculated decision to drive while still drunk, and had not fallen down in the gutter or been beaten up by some alley thug. In the morning he would call Hutch early to reassure him he had survived the night and life would go on.

Of course nothing had been resolved by drowning himself in over a full bottle of whisky, just as Hutch had prophesized. At least however for one evening he had wiped his brain functioning out to such an extent he couldn't conjure up the brainpower to worry about Ryan. Some respite of sorts he figured even at the cost of the blinding headache he would most certainly wake to in a few hours.

Sleep claimed him before he could formulate another coherent thought.

Hutch had no idea of what to expect when he arrived at the destination to which Ryan had directed him. Preconceptions of what would transpire between them were beyond him. He could only focus on his deep seated fury. In those last moments before he arrived he was entirely within his own body, riding the crest of the adrenalin that crashed through every cell. His entire being was centered on a deep basic anguish, his own driven need to destroy.

Whatever Ryan presented to him, whatever he had to say, whatever he tried to prove – none of it mattered now. Hutch's body was poised and ready. Rational thoughts would not find a place in his broiling mind. He was in overdrive, geared for all out full destruction of the man who had done so much to change the course of his and Starsky's recent lives.

He had never known hatred like this.

He had never known he could hate enough to want to do this.

He was walking toward a dangerous demarcation. One step over and the consequences were huge - he could not come back. Hate so caustic and so deep was making certain he no longer cared about the consequences.

The street was dark and empty, the shop front as bare and ugly as its surrounds. Through the filthy, partly papered over windows Hutch caught the glow of a low wattage light burning inside. The door was unlocked, it's rusty bolt thrown to the side. He sensed Ryan was waiting for him.

Reduced now to something akin to wild animal instinct his smell of bloodlust was heightened.

Nearly two am. Two am. Starsky should be home by now. Must have seen the note by now. Must be surely asleep by now.

Must believe that I am at home too. Not here about to do what I am going to do.

Hutch swallowed down any throat catching second thoughts and put his weight against the heavy security door.
A few strides brought him to within arm's distance of Ryan. The dark haired man's tall bulk was
trapped half in half out of the dirty yellow light but even in the shadows the menace of his body
language was unmistakable. He leaned back fractionally against what was once the shop counter,
his arms folded over his chest, his head high, his eyes dark and hard as he chartered every step by
Hutch.

It sickened Hutch that Ryan's next small movement was so familiar to him. It appalled him to think
that any part of this animal could be familiar to him, nonetheless he recognized the slight tip, the
smallest cocking of the dark head to the side. A calculated move that Ryan had mastered and used
over the many years that Hutch had known him. It signaled his contempt and it was the hallmark
of his sinister arrogance.

He cocked his head even further as he arched one heavy brow.

"I was beginning to think that you were going to disappoint me. Beginning to think you weren't up
for what we had agreed upon. I wasn't going to wait for ever Hutchinson. As you know I have a
better thing I could be occupying myself with and – I know just where I can find him."

"I'm here now. You won't need to occupy your lowlife scum self with anything else again you
Motherfucker. You won't get the chance to touch him ever again. Starsky is out of the picture now.
For good. Now it's just you and me."

"You think so? You think he really is gone from me? You think you can protect him? You say it
with such absolute conviction, as though you and he are not mortals. That you share this higher
power that insulates you. Well it hasn't work so well up to this point has it? Didn't work so well
when I had your partner tied to the bed did it? When I was ripping his gorgeous ass wide open? Or
when I had you cuffed to the chair so that you could enjoy the show? Yet you still come here with
that superior look on your perfect face and tell me you will stop me from getting to Starsky."

"That's right. That's why I'm here. To make sure of it." Hutch ground the words out, his lips a feral
snarl.

"And what if I was tell you how wrong you are? This supposed trust, this infallible belief in each
other will be the undoing of you. Look at you? Why do you think you're here? You think you're
here because you talked me into letting Starsky go so I could come and take you down? You do
don't you? You think you masterminded me to take my focus off Starsky so that you could
annihilate me before I can finally get to him? You stupid dumbshit!"

Ryan was pacing around Hutch, circling him closely, his hand punching the air with each forceful
statement, his body tensing as he leaned into breathe the threat of each word directly into his face.

"Lambs to the slaughter. Or, stupid fucking dumb sheep that follow one another's tails as though
they have no other course in life to choose but one of unerring, absolute loyalty to each other. And
that is why you're here with me, because I designed it this way. You're here because I knew you'd
come to save him from me. Just as he'll be here when I call him – to save you from what I have
planned for you. Dumb fucking sheep, following each other into any trap, any enemy's camp. All
because you misguidedly think you can always save each other. Well not this time Hutchinson.
You won't take me down now and Starsky will come but he won't save you. And in the end, in the
end this wolf gets you both."

A little breathless he paced in small circles gloating with superior satisfaction and the surety that
his threats had hit their mark.

Hutch was as still and quiet as Ryan was animated. As paralyzed as the other man was innervated.
Seconds ticked by and Ryan continued to preen in his self proclaimed supremacy.

Had he been less caught up in the aftermath of his own glory, basking in the thrill of his small speech, he might have noticed the lethal glint in the icy blue eyes staring back at him. He might have sensed the coiled preparedness of the long lean body that pulled back fractionally as it stabilised it's core. However even if he had noticed the hallmarks of imminent violence, the warning sign of attack, Ryan could not have stopped the full on force that erupted in the small dingy room.

Hutch was on him within seconds. Ramming the solid mass of Ryan back against the counter top, he smashed his fist into cheek and eye socket. Grabbing hold of the thick sheaf of hair as leverage he slammed another round into the lower jaw. Off kilter by the train-like impact of Hutch's howling rage it took little for Ryan to lose his balance. Hutch put his full body weight and height into the slam sending Ryan first sideways and then backward to the ground. Before Ryan had time to even lift his bleeding head Hutch had pounded his right fist into the firm midriff in a series of three sharp tight jabs. Taking only a moment's rest he brought his focus back to the face that was already discoloured and split.

"Fucker! Fucker! Fucker! Give me your fucking face – look at me! Look at me while I do this to you – give me the retribution I want from you!"

Once more he grabbed a fistful of the long black hair and wrenched Ryan's lolling head till it faced him square on.

"Look at me you monster! Look at me and see my hatred for you! I want retribution - I need retribution. God Damn you!"

Struggling to draw a torn breath Hutch gathered his force once more to bring back his fist.

"Going - to put my - fist into your face… enough times that I can't see your eyes, can't see that fuck'n… mouth – can't –"

He never got to finish the sentence nor deliver the next blow before Ryan had him toppled, rolling the blond beneath him in one swift movement and taking the top position. Though weakened by the unexpected attack that Hutch had launched on him he quickly reasserted himself. With one thick arm pressed cruelly to the blond's throat and upper chest he levered down his whole body into the action. Hutch spluttered and choked, squirming and kicking out to free the obstruction cutting off his air supply, but Ryan's own rage now unleashed was formidable and relentless. Laughing raucously, blood streaming from his gashed eyes and cut lip he levered himself up just enough to pull back his hip and rammed his knee hard into the firm underside of Hutch's lower back. Aiming for the kidneys he smiled now when his violent contact elicited a sharp cry from the body pinned beneath him. He wasted no time in repeating the action and relished the evidence of it's effect when Hutch's face contorted with the visceral shock.

Rebalancing his weight he released his hold on the throat but kept his knee planted firmly on the other man's midriff.

"Don't want you to pass out on me you blond bastard. Get up! I've got my own need for retribution and I have it all worked out. You think your few early punches are going to win you the title? Get up I told you. Lift your head and look at me this time. This little battle is a long way from being finished."

 Barely two full breaths of inhalation had passed Hutch's mouth, a cough and a semi strangled splutter before he writhed beneath Ryan's loosened grip. For another moment he lay limp and
seemingly broken until Ryan sat back on his haunches, weighing up the reserves of the man beneath him. In that one moment that he paused to recalibrate himself and his energy levels, the long lean body beneath him sprang back to life.

"You're right. The battle is far from over. I haven't begun to make you suffer yet you depraved fuckhead. You haven't even felt a twinge of the agony I need to put you through for what you did to him."

They rolled, tossed, scuttled and danced on the hard, greasy floor. Gags of air were greedily sucked in, ragged exhalations and painful gutteral gasps for oxygen were the only noises in the room. The sound of flesh on flesh, sweat and blood slicked accompanied the primeval horizontal dance where they both rolled and fought like two demonic dogs. They spoke no intelligible words only barked out cries, hissed and spat and grunted. The muted battle carried on for long minutes as each of them continually vied for supremacy, two sets of vibrant eyes burning with the need to conquer and prevail.

Amongst the fray of their two warring bodies momentum somehow found them upright once more and the close knit wrestling moves morphed again into a boxing match where each of them executed more punches and kicks, now less sharp, now less co-ordinated as exhaustion and abuse overtook their bodies.

Spatters of bright red blood intermingled with sweat droplets danced in the muted dirty yellow light as each bone on flesh blow smacked the still air of the closed in shop.

Hutch staggered left of center, bending low and teetering on collapse. He kept one swelling eye trained almost maniacally on the bleeding weakened form of Ryan who seemed now barely able to remain upright. Brushing the back of his trembling and grazed up hand over his beaten and bloody face he choked out his unwavering intent.

"Said – sai-said wazzzz gonna killlya- fuck – fucker. Sta- stand up and lemme do – "

As he laboured to speak he lurched heavily to one side, his tall frame sagging beneath the beating it had sustained. Somehow through his cut and swelling eyes he discerned that his opponent was in even worse shape. Ryan was swaying heavily while he reached out behind him for the counter needing some external support. Speech seemed beyond him.

Hutch waited fractionally for some form of response. None was forthcoming.

Stumbling forward he pulled his wrecked body up as straight as he could manage grimacing with the pain of torn flesh and muscles. Resilient but battered he addressed the nearly defeated Ryan.

"Can't stop yet Ryan…can't leave – it here. Got to finish this - after all you've done - I need to finish this. No more - no more risk to Starsk..."

At the mention of Starsky's name the deadened dark eyes came alive.

"You won't keep him from me any – any….more. " Ryan doubled over gasping with pain, biting at oxygen that wasn't attainable, grimacing with the impact of the bodily injuries his enraged blond enemy had rained down upon him. "Won't take him from me Hutchinson. He's mine – mine - made him mine that night...going to have - have him again."

With an animalistic bellow Hutch summoned the last vestiges of his strength to hurl himself once more toward his target.

Ryan staggered back several steps, his battered body now in self protection mode. His eyes, dark
muddy pools in sockets smeared with blood reflected exhaustion and the end of physical tolerance. In
the instant that Hutch moved in close enough to smell Ryan's fresh blood, sweat and cologne, he
saw something else in the wild eyes. He saw the flicker of what could be fear just before the dark
eyes averted sideways to focus on a point somewhere behind Hutch's right shoulder. Momentarily
confused by the behavior, Hutch steadied his own shaking body for his next onslaught.

He was still determined to take this to the end.

Maybe Ryan saw that determination in the cold blue eyes. Maybe he knew the other man was
beyond giving up.

For that was when he turned his head and shouted out loud, his cracked voice cutting across the
room.

"Now you fucking idiots! Now! What are you waiting for?"

It was enough to disconcert Hutch and his raised fist lowered fractionally before he narrowed his
eyes and locked on Ryan's expectant face. Suddenly he knew, suddenly he understood that once
more he had underestimated the sheer corruption of Ryan.

"No! No!"

Too late his half raised right arm was grabbed and wrenched back at a cruel angle while on his
other side a second shadowed presence kicked him viciously behind the knees. Instantly he
buckled to the floor.

Like vultures to their prey two thick set figures descended on his body, kicking out hard at his
chest and upper legs. Instinctively he rolled to his side trying to pull his arms up to shield his head
and face from the brutish strikes. Too late, the side of his head exploded in agony. The well-placed
kick had left him teetering between darkness as shaft after shaft of exquisite pain ripped through
him.

Ryan lunged forward and cut the air with a sweep of his arm yelling in agitation.

"Stop! Stop! Enough! I don't want him dead. Back off! Step back. Where the hell is the syringe?
Tell me you've got it for Christ sake?"

The blended voices muted further into the distance and try as he might to pay attention to what was
being said Hutch was fast losing the ability to comprehend.

Doubled in on himself, cascades of pain rippling through his beaten frame he was now only dimly
aware of what was unfolding. Unconsciousness was hovering enticingly close and though he
wanted to go willingly toward its haven he was pulled back by the need to stay awake long enough
to tell Ryan what he thought of his gutless cowardice. If he could have found the strength he might
even have laughed at him. All his talk of wanting to match him one to one, hand to hand, foe to foe.
All just talk, all just lies. But he couldn't speak, he couldn't laugh, he could barely breathe as he felt
his descent into blackness.

At the same time as he was falling into the abyss he smelled Ryan above him and was only dimly
aware of him wrenching back his bloodied collar before plunging the proffered needle deep into his
thick neck muscle.

He should have told Ryan to save the effort. He was going now anyway. Deep down and far away.

He didn't need a drug to lay him out.
Chapter 3

Confusion hit him when he tried to stretch out and found he couldn't. Restriction met his body's attempt to extend and roll and the patterned fabric of his worn couch was the first visual message he received when he opened up one bleary eye.

Obviously he hadn't made it to the bed last night. He rolled onto his back and was relieved to feel a relative absence of the usual mind blowing stabbing pains behind his eyes and the churning nausea that were the hallmarks of a major hangover. He remembered now that he was well on the way to sobering up when he got home and that he'd managed to down some water and aspirin. Ok then – he was not going to pay too big a price for spending the night with a bottle and an indulgent self-pity mood. At least he could face Hutch with a modicum of self-respect and not be hugging the toilet bowl when next he saw his partner.

Thinking of Hutch he creased his forehead with the effort of recollection and eased himself gingerly into a sitting position lest the dreaded signs of nausea jump him from the sidelines. Up and alert he was relieved that the hangover had still not ambushed him and he rubbed absently at his stiff shoulder while he thought.

Last night. Hutch had gone home? He had left a note. Dimly the content of the message played back in his head but most of it was gone. He'd said something about deciding to return home after all and didn't sound pissed off about their little spat in the driveway the evening before. The note was gone from the coffee table and Starsky moved a magazine and a newspaper looking for it before his full bladder took precedence and he walked to the bathroom scratching at his chest and yawning loudly.

Morning ablutions attended to and his mouth and teeth feeling less like a furred dead animal he headed for the kitchen to start his morning coffee.

It was still relatively early – not yet seven thirty. The custom of waking at an ungodly hour after a heavy night of alcohol had never left him and for once he was grateful for getting booted headfirst into the morning. He needed to phone Hutch and set things right before they started their day.

Taking his mug he sat down with the phone to make the call. He thought little when the phone rang out. He'd try again when Hutch was out of the shower or the john or maybe even finishing up his morning run. Starsky stood to take his coffee in with him to take his own shower.

He was surprised that he was feeling lighter in spirit this morning. Maybe he and Hutch had just needed a bit of personal time. 'Corners' Hutch had termed it, each taking to their own corner. The concept had merit obviously. Hutch usually knew best or liked to think he did - and Starsky smiled at that as he turned on the water. Maybe he had just needed to wallow deep for a while in his frustrations with all of the Ryan shit. Either way he felt a bit clearer headed and less burdened by the irritable mood that had followed him around all of the day before.

He resolved to himself to make it up to his partner for being such a prig yesterday.

Fifteen minutes later with his second coffee poured the phone rang out again at Hutch's.

Could he already have left to come here himself and clear the air of last night? Highly likely given his sensitive partner's way of thinking –and given the tone of that note.

Thinking again of the message he put down his coffee and looked for it. He had remembered
reading it just before he'd crashed out last night. On hands and knees now he found it underneath the couch where it must have ended up last night.

He read it again. Then read it again more slowly.

"Jesus Hutch. What the hell?" he shook his head as he mused about his partner's propensity for deep thinking. The sentiment in the note seemed out of proportion to their differences last night. He really wished Hutch would lighten up a bit more about simple altercations they so often had. Surely he knew that he hadn't meant it when he'd driven off with a burr in his ass. Obviously though it had concerned Hutch more than he realized it would have and Starsky felt bad for having once more allowed his friend to be hurt by his moodiness.

He called Hutch's house once more and deciding that he obviously was in transit sauntered into the kitchen to fix himself some food while he was waiting.

Nearly an hour later and close to nine am he was still waiting. Shit they were already way late for work and Dobey would be spewing. Where the hell was Hutch? Two calls to the station had revealed that he hadn't gotten in a shit and gone to work separately without letting his partner know.

Starsky was tired of waiting. Grabbing his keys he headed for the door. It was only when he was about to lock it that he stopped and went back in. He retrieved the now crumpled note from the coffee table and pocketed it with no real reason to do so except that something about the note niggled at a part of his brain. The part that he had come to think of his mind – gut connection. That mind – gut connection was starting to vibrate and not in a good way.

In the Torino he patched through once more to check that Hutch had not shown up at work and then left a message for Dobey that he would be late on the pretense of he and Hutch both checking out something before hitting the station. He made sure that he didn't speak to Dobey directly as he knew his big Captain would start to ask too many questions.

It was only logical that he would try the hospital and Riley. Hutch may well have stopped there to visit him still feeling put out by their disagreement last night and needing some support.

Starsky was pleased to realize that he didn't mind that scenario at all and hoped that it proved to himself that he was really over the whole jealousy thing with the young Rookie.

Hutch had not been there either and Starsky felt the niggles of worry build to a burning friction.

"You haven't seen him at all this morning – or last night?"

"Hey Starsky, do you think I'd lie about it? Why? Hutch hasn't been here. Got a call from him yesterday in the middle of the day and he said he'd hoped to get over last night but he never showed."

"Yeah well last night he probably couldn't manage it after I put him in position where he wanted to wait for me to come home – make sure I was in one piece."

"What do you mean by that?"

Starsky sighed and explained. After all Riley might as well know.

"I'd been on a major downer all day about Ryan and then last night I took off in a tear to get plastered. He wouldn't have probably have wanted to leave my place in case I called him to come carry me home. Said he was gonna wait in fact till I did…." Starsky frowned at the memory of
Hutch’s firm resolve to do so and wondered what might have changed his mind to go home in the end anyway.

"And you mean he didn't wait?"

"No. Got home eventually. In one piece. Late – after 1 am. He was gone. Don't know what time he left, but he left me a note saying he had decided to head off after all."

"So he went home? Why are you worried about that? Maybe he decided you were big enough to lick your own wounds this time." Riley tried a smile but could see the concern etched in Starsky's face.

"Because, he's no where I can find this morning. Thought he might be here visiting you first. I'm already so late for work, might as well be totally screwed and drive out to the beach. See if he's at home and something's amiss."

"You want me to come with you?"

"What? Of course not! You're in damn hospital in case you haven't noticed Riley, not lying in a hotel bed for Christ's sakes."

"Look, I'm ready to split this place. Sick and tired of lying here when I could be just as easily be lying in my own bed. Not even on medication now except for aspirin. Nothing that time and healing won't take care of."

"You got it right. Healing. That's the word and that is why you're in hospital you idiot. Hospital to heal. Hospital to get medical care. Remember?"

"Starsky you're the last one who should try to lecture me about staying in hospital and you know it. I've seen you in action and Hutch has told me enough about your aversion to medical treatment for me to know. Now give me some time to get dressed and discharge myself and I'll come with you to Hutch's. I'm as worried as you are."

"I never said I was worried."

"No you didn't but you didn't have to either. You know it's not like him not to let you know what he's moves are."

Starsky hesitated for a moment, walked to the window looked out at seemingly nothing and then turned back to face Riley who was by now climbing out of the bed.

"The note. The note's got me worried."

"The note he left you? Last night?"

"Yeah. It's just….. I've read it a coupla times now and it sounds …how the hell do I explain it? It sounds – well final. It sounds damn final Riley, like he wasn't just scribbling down a quick message about goin' home. More like, more like he had made a decision to do somethin' I wouldn't like. Shit – here – you read the thing and tell me it's all in my head. Maybe it is."

He thrust the crumpled sheet at the younger man and paced back to the window but never took his eyes off Riley as his eyes tracked the words.

Riley looked up.
"Well? Am I being paranoid about this or what? Just a note eh?"

"Starsky you know Hutch better than anyone but I have to say this is one emotionally charged "catch you tomorrow, decided to crash at my own tonight" dashed off scribble. Of course it could be he was just feeling mellow about your – argument."

"We didn't really have an argument. Hell this is gettin' me nowhere. I'm off and you're stayin' put. Talk to your doc about getting out in a day or two ok?"

"I want to help."

"Maybe nothin' to help with yet Riley. Just let me get over to Hutch's and I promise I'll give you a call alright? But you have to stay here. Hutch'll kill me if he thinks I've spooked you into early discharge. Thanks for the ear Riley. And you're right – I am a little worried."

"I'll be waiting for the call Starsky."

The door had barely closed behind him when Riley put his feet to the ground and took a few unsteady steps toward the bathroom. Time to get moving around and packing up his things. If the worst was going to eventuate, if Ryan was once more in their midst and if Hutch had disappeared, there was no way he wasn't going to be out there with Starsky.

Starsky would just have to get used to the idea.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

"Fuck! Fuck!"

He'd pulled up at the cottage to find not only no sorry assed car of Hutch's parked in its usual spot and that got him started. Then using his own key to enter the small house he took only moments to conclude the place had not been visited the evening before or that morning. The shower was dry and the towels hanging on the racks were too, the kitchen showed no recent activity, no coffee mugs, no warm water in the kettle, no fresh food scraps or freshly soiled plates – nothing of anything. It was as he imagined it would look when someone had not been home for a few days – musty and closed up, stale food odors and an over-riding sense of human neglect. The biggest tell-tale sign of course was the slight wilt to the plants and the dry to the touch earth and compost beds when Starsky stopped to push his finger into the small terracotta pots. Hutch would never neglect to water his precious babies if he had paid a visit back home.

Starsky knew for certain now something was wrong and he let himself crumple to the side of Hutch's bed as he sat to gather his thoughts. To gather his fears in fact, because it was fear and panic that was bubbling in him now and rational clear thoughts were not doing too well finding a place to take hold.

"Fuck - No…" he said again, the rough expletive the only word he could suited his need to express his dawning fear.

Starsky leaned forward on the edge of the bed and gripped his forehead in his hands trying to push the ragged panic down so he could think in a logical systematic way.

Be calm and think. Think like a cop. What are the freakin' facts Starsky? The facts?

Hutch had told him when he left him last night that he was going to wait at his place for him to return. He had changed his mind about that decision. Or - something had made him change his mind. Hutch had not come home like he said he was going to. Had he intended to come home, was
he heading that way? Had he been intercepted on the way? Hutch had left his place last night while he was out at the bar some time during the hours between nine and twelve thirty am. Maybe he had never had his home as a destination but someplace else entirely? Hutch had gone someplace in his car or been taken someplace in his car. Hutch had left him a note written in his own hand. Had he been coerced or forced to write the note? Not likely given the heavy content. What had happened in the intervening hours to change his mind, to make him leave, to make him write such an emotional note?

One name kept swimming sickeningly in his head.

Ryan.

Starsky thought back to when he had returned home last night. Sure he had been intoxicated to a degree but he saw no evidence of intrusion or a fight – no sign that Hutch had been overpowered and taken by force. No sign of any one else having been in the apartment at all unless it had been a peaceful visit. If it had been Ryan it would not have been peaceful and it would not have been without violence. Hutch would not have allowed himself to be simply walked out of there by Ryan? Would he? Unless Ryan threatened him in such a way that Hutch felt he had no option but to go quietly, without a struggle.

It was all too pat, all too tidy.

Hutch had walked out of his own volition; Starsky felt it in his guts. Thus the note, thus the tone of sadness, remorse and the sense of having been ripped away from Starsky.

Hutch had felt he had no choice.

"No Hutch…no."

And yet he knew it was very much yes. He knew deep in his heavy heart that something had happened to make his friend make the decision to do what he felt he had to do – to leave – to go…..to go and get Ryan?

"This is what you need and what I need to do for you…..There is no easy way to make this better for you, otherwise I wouldn't chose to act this way…"

Starsky would leave now. Lock up Hutch's small house, drive back to Metro, hope against hope that Hutch had turned up to work with some left of center loopy reason why he had fallen off the earth since last night. Starsky would bitch and rail at him for worrying him and Hutch would gripe that Starsky owed him plenty of worry paybacks. They would bait and push at each other verbally for a while and then get on with the day, Dobey in the background, full of vitriol for yet another late start by the wayward duo.

It was a soothing fantasy and kept Starsky putting one foot in front of the other as he closed the house and walked to his car.

It was just a fantasy. None of that was going to happen Starsky knew. Hutch wouldn't be at the station, he wouldn't have shown up back at his apartment since Starsky had left it either, nor would he be with Riley. Hutch wouldn't be anyplace else where he could be found. Dobey would be full of vitriol but it would be because one half of his team was missing.

Hutch was gone. Gone to kill Ryan Lancaster.

Starsky was sure of it and the realization was starting to kill him too.
In the end he headed to the station though he knew there would be no partner waiting for him. He needed to check nonetheless and to let Riley know as he had promised. He wanted also to call Huggy and inform him of the situation in case Hutch had happened to make contact with him or whether Hug had any fresh word on Ryan's reappearance.

All of this had to be done under the radar without Dobey knowing. He would concoct some story to explain Hutch's absence for the first half of the day. Dobey would stay out of the picture until Starsky could marshal a plan of what he could do. To bring his captain into the play now could mean any chance of him acting independently to find Hutch before the law did and to forestall Hutch's intentions would be dashed.

Of course he knew he had nothing to plan and nothing he could do.

Ryan was as invisible as he was yesterday and all the days preceding. The only difference now was that Hutch was also missing.

The only difference now was that as well as his rage at Ryan's continued disappearance Starsky was now crippled with the terror that his partner was about to or had already destroyed his life or had his life ended.

Dobey could not know.

The squad room yielded no tall blond-haired Blintz and the yawning reality of the nightmare opened wider for Starsky as he found a quiet spot to phone Riley.

In a spare interrogation room he put the call through.

It wasn't until he heard his voice, youthful in its cadence and yet somehow at that same time filled with a promise of firm control, that Starsky felt his composure truly slipping. All at once the voice on the other end of the phone became some form of lifeboat for him to grip on to with desperation. A desperation he knew he was fast losing the ability to hide.

"It's me Riley. It's...shit he's nowhere. He's nowhere Riley. I can't find him and – I'm afraid ...I'm scared that – Ah shit. Look I told you'd I'd let you know so I have."

"You don't think I can hear it Starsky? You don't think I know you fear the worst? Where he's gone? Where he might be at?"

"There's no evidence that he's anywhere Riley. Nothing. Zilch. No clues."

"But the note. He told you in the note didn't he?"

Suddenly and inexplicably Starsky felt the anger rise in him and he gripped the phone with unbearable force.

"You said nothing about the note like that when I was with you earlier! You were very careful to make no strong comment either way."

"It's stacking up Starsky. The picture is getting clearer. Now the point is what are we going to do? You and I? How are we going to work together to find where Hutch has gone to get to Ryan and how did he find him in the first place?"

"I can't let you in on this Riley. I won't even let Dobey know. If Hutch has – if he's gone to – meet
with Ryan then this is my job entirely. No one else's. Hutch's life and at the very least, career is on the line. It's gotta be me to get to him before it's too freakin' late."

"Starsky Ryan wants you. Remember that. He wants you. Hutch is leverage, nothing else for him. Don't sell me short here Starsky. I know something about this man after all of this time too you know. Give me some benefit here."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Ryan won't be found by you but my guess is that he'll invite you to find him. If Hutch hasn't killed him already, Ryan will find you – and soon. I want to be with you when he does. You owe it to me to let me see this out, let me be a part of this ending. I saved you both once and I want the chance to be there for Hutch again. Ryan beat the shit out of me and I have a right to take him in for that alone. And – if - if Hutch is still – "

"Don't you say it! Don't you fuckin' dare say that Riley!"

But Riley continued, talking over Starsky's desolation.

"If Hutch is still alive Starsky, I want to be there for him and you can't stop me. Come and get me or I'll meet you at your place – please. Don't make me beg for this. I owe Hutch so much and I think he would be pleased to think you allowed me in on trying to help you find him."

Starsky wrapped his shaking hands around the receiver and leaned hard on his elbows, the earpiece leaving a visible indentation on his forehead as he considered his position.

"Starsky? Talk to me."

Nearly eleven in the morning. Hutch had been gone for around twelve hours now, give or take.

Give or take death. Fuck NOOOOO. Don't think that. Don't think that.


So much could happen to a body, be done to a body in twelve hours. So much could be done to a body in minutes. Did he even get one hour? After twelve hours was his body still of this world? Again he bit back on his own treacherous thoughts that Hutch could be dead.

He sat back in the hard chair and stared at the bold-faced clock face on the bare wall of the utilitarian interrogation room. Everything suddenly seemed bare and stark, bold and hardened.

"I don't know what to do next Riley. I have no direction to take." He breathed out into the earpiece, his whispered terror a terrible force inside his soul.

"Get in your car. Come and get me. We'll take it from there."

And just like that Riley became his only signpost.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Cold, wet, pain.

Something was dripping and sliding off his head and down his neck.

Rain? Was he in the rain, why was he in the rain? And cold and so aching, so sore?
He felt a rough push, a kick against his shin. Darkness prevailed and he ignored the external stimulus.

Then another kick, another painful bolt shot up his calf and into his upper leg. The wetness clung to his tender chest and chilled his torso. As the icy air pervaded his skin it brought to life a thousand small zaps of electric pain through his whole body.

Had he been jumped in an alley chasing some shady perps? Where was Starsky? Were they in an ER cubicle? What was the kick to the leg all about?

Christ the pain was unbearable. If he was in hospital where the hell was the pain relief meds?

"I have another bucket of cold water if you need it Hutchinson so either open your eyes or I'll douse you again."

The deep voice invoked a memory not too far below the surface. He labored to connect the dots in his aching head. Still he came up short.

The baritone was addressing him again.

"Those skinheads gave you way too much juice. You've been out to it for fucking hours. I'm getting to the point where I can't wait any longer before I phone your partner for a little chat and I'd like you to be part of it so wake the fuck up!"

This time an ear shattering blow to the side of his head – an open palm smacking hard against his excruciatingly painful eye and upper jaw had him rocking hard in his upright position. He tried to force his sticky eyes open with the shock of the blow but it was the pain that was driving his movement not awareness. He was lost in his throbbing head, confusion and pain filling it to explosion point.

The deep voice had a face or at least a set of fuzzy features equating to a face. The features danced in front of his sensitive eyes and though he could see that were bloodied and bruised, misshapen by swelling and tissue damage, the composite of their parts came together in his memory to form a familiar pattern.

He knew this face.

The thin-lipped mouth, generous and yet too thin at the same time, the dark liquid pools of black which were almost luminous in the half-light, the long sweeping curtain of thick dark hair swept back from a forehead tall and arrogant. The face represented something evil, something inherently bad and as his clouded mind struggled to find the name to the image it came to him now in a bilious rush.

His own lips felt odd as though they were swollen and pulled tight but he hissed out the word almost involuntarily.

"Ryan".

"Yes, Ryan. Me. Remember now Hutchinson? Coming back to you? You came to kill me. Came to end it all for me so that I could not have Starsky. You didn't win Hutchinson. You didn't win. I'm standing above you and you're tied to a chair smashed up and pathetically broken. Not the hero you thought you'd be are you?"

Hutch twisted his throbbing head a little to the side and tried to survey his surroundings.
Memory and the full onslaught of pain returned in force to his body and mind in equal measures.

The room around him, what he could make out of it through his puffed up eyes was the same room he and Ryan had fought in earlier. The same room where –

"Where - are your - goons Ryan? Slunk away now they've done your work for you? You fucking coward."

That earned him another blow to the face, not as severe as the first but enough to reopen one of the cuts on his cheeks that had begun to dry up. He felt the fresh warm trickle of blood sliding down his cheek and throat, warming the cold flesh where the droplets of icy water still clung chilling his aching head. He stifled a moan in a long series of moans that he wanted to produce and stared back with disgust at his tormentor.

"Not a coward Hutchinson, just strategic. I couldn't let you take this to the end – couldn't finish this off, what is between you and me. This is not about you. This is about Starsky. You are here only for that reason. I told you remember, or is your brain too rattled by that nice kick my hired muscle landed to your skull?"

"I can think enough to know what you're going to do."

"Good. Then you know why you're still alive and you know why I need to be in one piece. Starsky is going to come Hutchie boy. That'll make you happy won't it? You get to see him again before you die. He'll come as soon as I let him know that I have you here and that I'm pumping you full of your favorite cocktail. He'll hate that won't he? To think that I've plied you full of heroin again? Just an extra touch that I thought would ramp up his anxiety levels. I always told him I knew about your filthy habit. I'm not the only one with secrets am I Hutchinson?"

Hutch had closed his burning eyes in an effort to block out Ryan's face, his demonic smile.

"Got nothing to say Mr Perfect Cop? Not going to defend yourself with righteous indignation? Maybe you're still muddled in the head. Maybe that tranquilizer I shot into you is dumbing you down? You seem dumb – dumb and half dead."

From deep inside Hutch summoned the strength to fight back verbally. It was after all the only weapon he had left and he rallied himself to show this psycho that he still hadn't given up the battle. Each word tore at his broken chest.

"Motherfucker. From the day I met you, you've always been a Motherfucker. Riley should have put a bullet between your eyes that night when he had the chance. God knows you need it you sick sick sick fuck…"

"You know I always get a little shocked when I hear those filthy words come out of that pretty blond head of yours. Your mouth looks almost too perfect to be defiled with such profanity. Then again – I suppose your mouth has been used to enjoying the a lot more than just dirty words over the years hasn't it Lover Boy? I bet your lips are used to wrapping around something more sinful than foul language. All these years you've had Starsky to yourself."

"I didn't come here to listen to you gloat on your own innuendos Ryan. But if you're talking about cocksuckers then I suppose you'd know better than me. After all you littered your police career with your own perversions. Trying to force your mouth around every poor innocent rookie you could threaten into pleasuring you."

"Oh touché to the college boy. Always were quick on the uptake weren't you? Always thought you
were the smartest dick in the class, the brightest one of all of us. Always thought you were so superior. Right from the start you tried to lord over me and tell me what I could not have."

"That is such shit. All in your sick mind Ryan. The only thing I ever tried to prevent you from having was Starsky. He was not yours to take. Not the way you tried to anyway."

"But you think he was yours?"

"No. He was not mine and he is not mine still. He is his own person."

"You believe that? You really believe that? What lies! You've always marked him as yours. Taken him and held him away from me. Turned him against me when he might have wanted me as much as I wanted him. You never ever let him have the chance to find out."

"If Starsky had wanted you Ryan he would be with you now. If Starsky had wanted you none of this would have happened and we wouldn't be standing here like this now with me feeling the way I do toward you."

"You've never given him the space to know that he wants me! How can he come to me willingly when you have tainted his mind against me and stood between us?"

"Tainted his mind! Ryan you sick fucker you've nearly killed him twice. You've done nothing but hurt and abuse him and drive him down with your tormenting madness. How could he not be tainted – how could he not hate you like he does when you have done everything to break him?"

Ryan had stepped closer, and what had been sneering contempt had begun to turn to twisted pain and grief. Both hands reached up to hold the thick veil of his heavy dark hair from his forehead as he moved closer to Hutch.

"No that is not how it was. Not at first. At first it wasn't him. It wasn't him. I never meant to break him, just to have him to myself. It was you I had to break. It was you who had to be destroyed."

"But it is Starsky you have hurt. Can't you understand how sick you are? How fucking crazy and messed up in the head you are? Can't you see what you've done to him?"

"You! You should have died that day. Or at least been hurt so badly that you had to leave the training program. It was you not him. But you made him go instead. You ruined it even then. You made me hurt him. You made me nearly kill him when it should have been you."

Hutch frowned heavily, shaking his head and peering into the half-light at the crazed looking eyes looking down on him. He tried to make sense of what Ryan was saying, pain clawing like a wild animal through his whole being.

"What are you talking about for God's sake? What day? Wh – "

He stopped mid-sentence as clarity clicked.

"The rope field exercise. Starsky – fell. You did it. You fucking tampered with the rope! It was you. All those months after I wondered….couldn't believe anyone could be that sick, that evil. You. Starsky could have died. Jesus Christ you were sick even back then."

"But he didn't die did he? I helped to save him. I held that fucking rope till my hands were cut and bleeding. Did he remember me? Did he even see me trying to help him? NO! Not while you were there. Not while you stood in my way. He followed your words, your directions. Always following you, you always following him."
"Trust. It's called trust and I've told you before Ryan. You'll never have it or know it. It's what stands between you and us. It makes us who we 's why you can't have Starsky and why I won't let you."

"Yes – you're so right." Ryan nodded in agreement as he checked the restraints on his captive's bonds, before straightening up slowly, grimacing when his own tortured body protested with the moves. "And that is exactly what I am counting on to bring my lover to me when I make this call. One of my 'goons' as you so correctly termed them is tailing your partner all around the city this morning. I know where to get him."

Hutch tried to slot facts in some systematic order.

Through the grimy papered over windows he could see daylight. The drug must have put him out for hours. Starsky would no doubt know he was missing by now. He would be frantic. It was never meant to be like this. It was all meant to be over now. Over and finished, one way or the other.

Instead Ryan had them again. Desperate, lost and hopeless. He showed Ryan only what little bravado he could dredge up.

"He's not a fool. You think he'll come running to you just because you throw out some shit story about me and heroin?"

Ryan shook his head with a low laugh.

"Will he come for you? Oh Hutchinson. Lover Boy. You really think you have to ask me that question?"

Hutch could no longer look at the sneering supremacy and bowed his head in sickened defeat.

Of course his partner would come.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

"Tell me again why I'm sitting here in my damn apartment and not out there looking for him – for them, for God's sake?"

"Try to settle down Starsky. Where else do you propose we be for the moment? At the station with Dobey knowing straight away that you're hiding something from him? If you want to play this without police involvement then we have to take the logical steps. It's ok for now because legally this is not yet a police issue. Hutch could be anywhere and perfectly safe –"

"The hell he is and you know it!"

"I know that, or at least I fear that….but you tell Dobey and he'll want to go about it his own way. If Hutch has gone after Ryan then we need to stop and think. What have you told Dobey about why you're not in there anyway?"

"Phoned through and said I was bringing you home from hospital – hopefully he won't call the hospital and find out you checked out yourself against medical advice. Said that Hutch had personal family business to deal with today and he couldn't be there for you. It's damn flimsy and it's only a matter of time before I have Dobey either calling me or knocking on that door."

"Well it gives us some space at least. Something will happen soon. It's been hours since he went missing."
Starsky face was angry, his patience thin and brittle.

"What do you mean something will happen soon?"

"I mean Starsky – think about it. One or other of them will call you here if they are able to, depending on what – what happened in the end. Hutch won't leave you hanging if he can find a way to get to you – and Ryan – well Ryan will want to give you the news or get you to go to him."

"How the hell can you be so sure of that? You talk like you have some freakin' inside knowledge of -" 

"Starsky! You have to trust me. I am not and never was involved or connected with Ryan so don't go letting this mess with your head again. Hutch left here last night. He wouldn't have done that suddenly like that if something hadn't happened, something hadn't changed. He got some news – some more information that made him take off out of here and leave his damn gun behind. Something unrelated to anything with his job or other cases –otherwise he wouldn't have left unarmed. It was something arranged – a decision on his part to leave the magnum."

They had found the gun soon after they returned to the apartment from the hospital. It was bundled inside his duffle bag among his clothes where Hutch must have hastily concealed it. The sight of the holster and gleaming gun was almost enough to turn Starsky's bowels to water. Hutch had left the apartment purposely unarmed.

"You know he went to meet him. You know he tried to hide it from you – at least for a while. Now we wait. Here. It is the logical place for either of them to contact you."

"I could be getting a search out for Hutch's car…"

"Sure but do you want to do that until we know… we can do it now if that is what you want. What do you want Starsky? What do you want to do? It's your call?"

"You think he's in deep deep shit don't you? You think he's done it already – fucked up his whole life for me?"

"I don't know Starsky. All I know is that Hutch would do anything if he thought it would save you. Now we can wait and see if he wants to tell you what he's done, what he plans to do – give him some time to -"

"And what if he's lying injured or dead? While I sit here on my fuckin' ass waiting for some call that he can't ever make?"

"It's going to take a long time to track him anyway. He could have dumped the car straight away and zigzagged across the city in taxis or another vehicle. He could be half way out of the state by now. Putting out an APB on his car may get you nowhere but will mean you're putting the law onto him."

Starsky looked tormented. Riley's almost calm demeanour and quiet unrushed voice did anything but calm him. If anything the younger man's composure unsettled him even more and highlighted his own tenuous hold on sanity. He rubbed at his face, tore at his hair and held his hand hovering above the phone as though it was a molten piece of metal.

"I can't risk it Riley…I won't risk leaving him wounded, hurt. I'd rather blame myself for putting him in jail then having to find him dead and alone. I have to contact Dobey, tell him my fears –"

Riley stood and put his hands on Starsky's shaking arm.
"Your decision Starsky. Only yours. No one else's and certainly not mine. Talk to Dobey."

He didn't get to make the call for as they both looked toward the phone its shrill tone rang out in the sombre leaden atmosphere of the room.

Both men looked urgently at each other.

It could be anyone on the other end. It could be no-one of note and no-one that would do a thing to ease Starsky's personal agony.

He picked it up and readied himself for the anticlimax, already angry that it would be anyone but Hutch.

It wasn't Hutch.

It was Ryan.

"I knew you were there waiting. Waiting to know where he is, waiting to know what I have done to him."

"I won't come to you if he is dead. Remember that."

"Oh? Not even to claim his body? I'm surprised to hear you say that Starsky."

Somehow he managed to fall into the chair that Riley had pushed beneath his quaking body, his face pale, and bloodless as he closed his eyes against the dizziness.

Suddenly he opened his eyes and spoke with force.

"He's not dead Ryan. If he hasn't killed you and obviously he hasn't - you won't kill him because you want me to come to you. You know the only way I'll do that is to get Hutch back."

"Got it all worked out Detective Starsky?"

"I know the stink of you, the sound of you and I how your sick mind churns."

"Well that makes everything so much easier then doesn't it? I've got what you want and you are what I want. You know he really thought he could make all your problems go away Starsky? Did you know that he would do it? Noble cop, upright citizen, upholder of the law – all the things your blond hero represents to the world? And then just like that he was prepared to shit it all away by killing me with his own bare hands."

The holster with the big magnum hung from the chair and Starsky thought about his partner's bare shoulder devoid of his harness with nothing but his two big capable hands to fight for his life. He swallowed against the nausea that surfaced when he swore he could hear the sound of flesh pounding on flesh.

"He can fight your big blond hero. He always was good with that athletic body wasn't he? Is he as good as that in bed I wonder? Fast and rough? You like it like that with him Starsky?"

"I ain't interested in your lurid sex fetishes Ryan. Fuckin' give me the game plan here. That's all I'm interested in. You think I wanna hear about what turns your dick hard?"

"You wouldn't want to piss me off now Starsky. Not when I'm the one standing beside Lover Boy here. Pretty blondie with his head all smashed up and his body not much good for anything. He's moaning with agony. Seems my boys were a little too rough on him. Don't you worry though – I've
decided to put him out of his misery with some pain relief. He'll like the cocktail I've prepared for him. A little liquid medicine he is familiar with and one that sends him wild. Your partner will be in his own little heaven by the time you get here.

"You fuckin' touch him with a needle and I swear I'll hold you down and rip your fuckin' eyes out Ryan. You go near him with heroin and – "

"And what? Just get here and then we'll see how much bargaining power you have Starksy. At the moment from where I'm sitting and impatiently waiting, you have very little of it."

Starsky stood and leaned hard against the wall, his forehead pressed into the plaster as he held the phone against his chest for one moment.

"I want to hear him. Let me hear him."

"Why? You've already said that you're convinced I haven't already killed him."

"….Still..... need to hear him before I come."

"I'd like to oblige you in your little dream Starksy but I don't think your big blond lover can come up with the goods. Don't think he's capable of saying too much of anything."

"Put the phone to his ear. If he's there like you say he fuckin' is and this is not just another lie than put the fuckin' phone to his ear."

There was a shuffling sound and the line became nothing but a hum of background noise and murmurs and grunting bodily sounds.

"Here Lover Boy – Starksy wants you to talk to him." Starsky heard the cruel laughter and the sound of a phone being pushed against flesh. Again he wanted to gag.

Soon there was no sound but a tortured, ragged breath and what might be a guttural moan.

Starsky felt the tears swim in his eyes and pressed his forehead harder against the unyielding wall, the earpiece held tight to catch even the barest sound of what could be Hutch. In truth the amputated gut wrenching sounds could have been from any wounded animal.

"Hutch. Listen. I'm comin'. Soon – I'll be there soon. Just breathe, keep breathing and know I'm comin'. Hutch – I'm comin' babe."

If he'd hoped for a reward, the barest reward that indicated Hutch was able to communicate with him, he was left empty handed.

The ragged breath picked up in intensity and there was one longer shuddering inhalation, but that was all. It was the only indication that Hutch had understood he was not alone.

It would have to be enough to carry Starsky through what he had to do next.

"RYAN! RYAN! Get back on the phone."

"Not the most satisfying lover's exchange I take it?"

"Tell me where. I'm on my way. But – if I find one needle track on him, don't think I'll give you what it is you want."

"Just come Starsky. I've waited far too long."
The phone was still clutched in his sweating hand long after the line had gone dead. His fingers couldn't seem to break their grip.

"Starsky - put down the phone now. He's gone. Ryan's gone."

Waiting. Everyone was waiting for him. Riley behind him, Ryan the full away across the city, and Hutch.

Hutch was waiting for him and he still couldn't seem to move.

His breath was coming so fast and so shallow that when he spun to face Riley he steadied himself against the wall before the rush of light-headedness floored him.

Riley stepped forward, his arms extended as though at any moment he might need to break a fall that seemed precariously imminent.

"Why don't you sit down? Take a moment; get your head in order."

"I'm going Riley. Now."

"Wait – stop. Look at you. Just take five minutes to collect yourself while you tell me what's going on."

"You know what's goin' on. You heard him – don't tell me you didn't hear every word that crazy fucker was threatenin' to do. I have to get there – Hutch…"

Starsky pushed past the supporting frame of the younger man, brushing away the firm hands that tried to hold him in place. He slammed toward the bathroom leaving Riley unsteady now in his wake.

Tracking him to the door of the bathroom Riley yelled over the noise of the spray as Starsky doused his face and neck in cold water and hung with his head low over the basin as his white face slowly regained some color.

When he stood up and turned he looked slightly more composed but his eyes were still glazed with shock and the hand that reached out for the towel that Riley proffered was still shaking.

He stalked to the bedroom, the towel tossed to one side.

About to follow him again Riley jumped back at the resounding impact of a door shut violently in his face.

"Starsky! Are you ok?"

Unsure of whether to open the door and enter Riley held back when he heard noises from inside the room as though Starsky was moving about, opening drawers, slamming wardrobe doors.

"Starsky? Tell me what's going on. Don't shut me out of this. Please. " He called again, not as urgently but still concerned with what was happening.

What the hell was he doing in there? Why retreat to his room in the middle of all this?

A minute or two later the door opened and a dark faced Starsky re-emerged. He was wearing a different jacket and Riley knew his holster was now firmly in place beneath it.
The man that exited the bedroom was a contrast to the one who had entered it only minutes before. The tremulous shakiness was now gone and in its place a rock hard determination and a menacing certitude had the younger man stepping back to allow the force to pass by. Starsky swept past to snag his Torino's keys from the coffee table.

He fixed Riley with a look of finality, defying any challenge the younger man might throw up at him with an ominous fierceness.

"Star-"

"You're not coming Riley."

"That's not what we agreed and you know it Starsky."

"We agree to nothing. I agreed to nothing. I haven't got time for this Riley. He has Hutch. You heard him. He's threatening to dose him up with heroin --"

"That's just a ploy to get you there – he's using the sickest way to ensure you come running right into his trap. He's been laying down that threat for a while now."

"Well he's smart because it's damn well worked. I won't let him put Hutch back there Riley. No one is gonna dope him up again with that shit. He fought too hard to come out of it last time."

"What are you going to do when you get there and he's waiting for you? With no back up, no support? You're walking into a death trap – this is insane. Both of you will have done exactly what he wants you to do."

Starsky's eyes flashed, his intense rage dancing in their deep blue depths.

"Of course we are. Of course. But it had to come to this. Don't you fuckin' understand Riley? It had to come to this. No other way to close this demon off, no other way for it all to end. Hutch knew that – that's why he went and I know that and that's why I'll go too."

"There are other ways to close this out. Let me come with you. He won't change his plan of attack whether I am there or not. At least let me be in the car for you, so I can call for backup if you signal me somehow. We can work out a strategy when we drive there. I heard where he's at. It's a long way across town in the middle of the day with lunchtime traffic. We'll have time to put a plan together….."

"No plan. No strategy. No you Riley. Just me. Stay here. Dobey will call soon, I know it. You can tell him what I've done – when it's all over."

"When it's all over? But this is total crazy stuff! You're too filled up with revenge to even think like a cop here Starsky. Do you even understand how this is all going to end for you and Hutch when you walk out of here and go to Ryan by yourself?"

Riley's voice had risen to an almost desperate high-pitched plea as Starsky's hand reached for the door and opened it.

He stood for a moment poised on the outside – ready for flight. There was no reassurance in his small sad smile, only a world-weary grimness.

"Like I said before Riley. It's simple when you think about it. Simple. Hutch, Ryan and me. Showtime."
The heat woke him this time. The burning bite of hot sun-scorched his bared chest where his torn shirt was open to the air and his battered cheek was turned toward the vibrant rays.

Swollen eyes already sticky and with dried blood were pried open with effort but were quickly shut again when the white glare of light and heat blinded his sensitive ocular tissue.

Where the hell was he now?

He tried to grasp on to the brief flash of coherent thought but within seconds he was immersed again in his physical discomfort only, his mind not able to compute much of anything.

The heat was all around. Beating down and emanating upward in steamy waves from beneath his thick-soled shoes. The light was extreme and impossible to ignore when he once more opened his lids to narrow slits. Still constrained and bound, he was no longer was in the dark grimy room of the shop on the ground floor where Ryan's henchmen had overpowered him. He sensed the openness and the air as well as the powerful heat sapping his already depleted body reserves.

He was outside now, high up near the sky – the blue haze penetrating his peripheral vision and the thin layer of smog clogging his nostrils.

Reflected shafts of dazzling rays bounced off concrete and metal surfaces and intensified the bright light into white sheets of shimmering heat waves. His pupils now constricted his eyes adapted enough for him to get a better sense of his surroundings.

A rooftop. He was on a rooftop of a building with a large expanse of flat concrete. Metal air vents and fixtures dotted the surface and their surfaces absorbed and radiated the heat turning the entire area into an open topped bake house.

So dry, his torn mouth and bruised throat were parched and his raw skin was already drenched in stale sweat. His head was throbbing from so many forces – dehydration, drug hangover and concussion from the savage kick landed there by Ryan's thug.

Where was Ryan?

Where the hell was Ryan?

Had he left him up here, tied to a chair and so weakened by drugs and beatings that he stood no chance of freeing himself from this smoldering furnace of white-hot light.

Is this the death that he had planned for him? Slow and agonizing as the heat sucked out his bodily fluids and baked him alive?

Turning his aching head gingerly to the side he could easily see that he was above most of the surrounding buildings – or at least he had no view of any neighboring buildings of similar height or higher beside him. No one would see a man bound to a chair and desiccating by degrees. No one would have seen him being dragged here and positioned?

Spasmodic flashes of clarity had him grappling to problem solve his dire predicament.

Dragged here? Ryan as big as he was couldn't have dragged him up here without assistance? Couldn't have managed all of this on his own. His sidekicks must still be in the picture.

As though thinking about him conjured up the horror of the reality, the sun was blocked out on
from behind his right shoulder as the tall dark haired man, the personification of Hutch's personal hell, occluded the light. He felt the breath and smelled his sweat and dried blood before he heard the distinctive deep silky voice.

"Little warm for you Hutchinson? Little too much sun for all that pale skin and fair complexion?"

The darkness moved and stood in front of him. Hutch didn't know whether it was better or worse that he no longer had to swivel his head to the side to try to see Ryan. Still he hated the sensation of his ghoulish specter behind him. Better to face him down with what little fortitude he could still muster.

"Another hour of this baking heat and you are going to be one very roasted pig. I had the men position you just at the right angle so that you could benefit from the reflected heat coming off that metal sheeting over there. It's incredible how hot it can get on top of these concrete blocks isn't it? I'd offer you some water but that would only delay your demise and drag out your suffering."

"An…imal. You're no …thing more than an… an'ml."

"Save the bit of spit you've got left Hutchinson. Don't waste it trying to insult me. Those drugs have dried out what bit of fluid you've got left in your mouth and soon you won't even be able to swallow. No point in wasting your breath, your precious breath. I believe I heard your partner tell you to just keep breathing didn't he? "Just keep breathing Hutch"….ain't that cute? He wants you to live. Wants you not to give up. Looking at you now you broken up piece of crap, I'm not so sure you're going to be able to do it. "

Starsky?

Hutch screwed his eyes closed again to shut out Ryan and tried to remember what happened before he was here on the roof. It was all a blur. A blur of pain and heat and overwhelming fatigue.

Had Starsky spoken to him? Hadn't he heard his voice since he had been beaten up? How could he have? But somehow he recalled the familiar twang and the soft but urgent words of encouragement.

Did he dream his voice? Imagine his words about him coming? Was that reality or all part of his head wound and drug overload?

When he opened his eyes again Ryan was surveying him with almost analytical perversion. He felt as though the monster was taking him apart with his eyes and his mind, squirming his way into his head and soul and dissecting him with almost sexual curiosity.

"You're so fucked up right now aren't you Lover Boy? I think it's so interesting to see you so … so…depleted like this. You don't deal too well with the drugs do you? Surprising – I know we loaded you up with a hefty dose but still I would have thought a dirty junkie like you could absorb the shit. Instead you look like you can barely stay conscious. Guess that head wound of yours has minced up your brain too. Can you even remember what happened before we loaded you up with more juice to get you up here?"

Ryan was right. Hutch could feel the light receding and he could think of no real reason not to go toward the pull of its dark curtain. He continued to slide into it, the cruel heat lifting as his body tried to make its escape.

Ryan's voice was becoming a lulling echo.

"He should be here very soon. I don't imagine he will keep me waiting – or should I say, keep you
Hutch jolted upright from his sagged position, the deadened glazed eyes wide and staring as he tried to make sense of the words coming from the black haired devil's mouth.

Confused fear was washing him one-way as darkness pulled him the other and Hutch grasped frantically for some mental foothold.

Cracked lips got the word out.

"Starsky? Here? Coming? Starsky?"

The name, and all that it personified gave his fuddled brain some purchase, something to latch onto.

He couldn't go into the blackness. Not now. Not yet.

Oh God, Oh God….it's not just me here with Ryan. Starsky too. Starsky will be here too.

He fought the seductive allure of unconsciousness and clawed his way back into the blazing heat and the relentless pain.

The deep voice leaned in close again and once more Hutch could detect the sharp smell of Ryan's sweat as distinctive to his own.

"Of course Starsky. Of course. That's why you're here you stupid drugged up junkie. You think I took the risk of hiring two dumb fuck meatheads to haul your ass up here and get you all trussed up like this for no good reason other than I like to waste my time and money? Could have left you down stairs, but this works so much better for me.

First of all you're crisping up nicely and if the head kick doesn't kill you, the broken ribs and dehydration will leave you really fucked up. Maybe got a lacerated spleen in there too the way those boys aimed those kicks. Either way you're not looking too good and all this heat is speeding up the injury process.

But we're not up here because of you blond boy. No – we're – you're up here for Starsky. I chose this place, this building all for your partner. Starsky hates heights doesn't he Hutchinson? You and I know that very well after the academy. Has he gotten over those fears I wonder? Hmmm?"

Hutch kept his head bowed and breathed as deeply as he burning chest would permit. He couldn't let Ryan's sadism put him off his need to stay conscious.

"I asked you a fucking question and you will damn well answer me! Your partner still hate heights?"

Maybe Ryan slammed his boot into his leg again, or his side? Hutch couldn't be sure, his body was no longer able to detect location of assault. All he knew was that something had hit him somewhere because his body bounced wildly in the chair and he grunted loudly in reflexive responsive.

He didn't answer the blow but stayed inside his own head.

Yes ….You still hates heights don't you? Never did come to the point where you could feel ok working high above the ground did you Starsk?
Hutch's thoughts tracked elsewhere at the cruel prompt and for silent moments he lost himself in the contemplation of his partner and his aversion to anything that required the ground to be well below his feet.

His brave and tough nosed friend baulked at jobs where it called for him to climb, scale ladders or fire-escapes or to teeter on window ledges or narrow balconies. Of course no one liked jobs that entailed such risk, but Starsky had an aversion that was extreme and bordered on debilitating. Whenever humanly possible Hutch would find ways to shield his partner from any such odious tasks that called for Starsky battle with his fear of heights.

But why was this bastard interested in this? What was he even talking about?

It was getting increasingly difficult to keep his mind thinking in a logical sequential pattern. Thoughts and memories and verbal stimuli were all muddying together, swirling and buzzing in his aching head.

Starsky?

Starsky was coming, or was he? He had heard his voice hadn't he? But how?

So hot and so dry and so thirsty. Up high and still no breeze. Up high and just scorching white light and searing blue haze all around and above him. Up high above the streets where he could hear the distant drone of traffic and honking horns and the occasional piercing siren.

Up high…..

Starsky was coming. Come and get me please. Come and take me down from this searing pyre of concrete and away from this brutish face that wants only to hurt and taunt.

Come up and get me Starsk…

Come up…

Up.

Up.

High.

Squinting against the brightness once more he focused on the face that was still there – so persistently still there – just watching him with flat black eyes that never seemed to stop staring, staring so closely that Hutch flinched at the violation of his soul.

"You …. Brought – me here – so…so…..high up….be - cause - Starsky?"

"You worked it out Blondie? Still got enough cells firing in your broken head to work it out. Good. And yes. You're right. We're all the way up here for some added fun. Going to make your partner work hard. Going to make him show me how far he is prepared to go to save you Lover Boy. You think he'll like the ambience I've chosen for him? "

He had held out his arms to encompass the rooftop, and spun on his heel as he swept the vista into his embrace. It was an extravagant gesture, almost theatrical and filled with frenetic desperation. Even with his dimmed perception Hutch sensed the frightening edge of madness in the behavior. The man before him was fraying at the seams, the fabric of his sanity falling at his feet as he cast off his flimsy cloak of mental balance.
Suddenly something, a movement, a motion caught his attention and his head jerked up and away, his small private performance forgotten.

He looked up and beyond his captive and raised enquiring brows at whatever had caught his attention.

Hutch strained to pay attention himself.

Someone must be behind where he sat bound to the chair. He had no hope of turning to take a look but could a presence. He heard the creak of rusty metal as the door onto the rooftop swung on its hinges.

Ryan spoke, his question directed to someone behind Hutch's back. His tone lashed like a whip in the hot dry air.

"Don't show your face and interrupt me unless you've got something to report. I don't like you skulking at the doorway like some sewer rat. You were told to stay away from here unless you had —"

"You said you wanted to know. He's here. Arrived. Just pulled up outside."

Hutch didn't miss the instant change in the expression – the black fury was replaced by elation and excitement. Sheer hunger animated the sinister face.

Hutch recognized the hunger. It was for Ryan's one true obsession and meant only one thing.

Starsky was here.

At the thought of his partner's nearness, Hutch's own spike of elation, and his overwhelming joy and relief crashed into a dark abyss as an avalanche of fear like he had never known bore down on him.

Starsky had arrived but for what?

To watch Ryan kill his partner?

Hutch was certain of that part.

And then what? What did he have in store waiting for Starsky?

Ryan had it all planned out.

Neither of them would make it out of here today.

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut tight against the film of tears he would not let this animal see. Ryan had already seen too much of him.

Misunderstanding the other man's actions Ryan looked down with something close to disgust at the sagging, lifeless victim in the chair. His hand came down to wrench back the sweating cap of now darkened hair plastered to the bleeding head.

"No you're not going to check out on me now. Try to stay with it Hutchinson. The show is just about to start and you've got to look alive for your part. You want to see him as much as I do after all. He's come for you Lover Boy. For you. Don't you want to welcome him here?"

He dropped the lolling head and barked again to the man at doorway behind Hutch.
"You got one last job to do for me like we talked about before you to clear out. Where's your brother? Has he already gone?"

"Yeah. You said after we rigged the ladder you only needed one of us."

"Good. And as soon as you do the door you clear out too. I don't want you fucking up my performance. This is a private showing for just me and my two very special friends."

"What about the rest of the payment?"

"I told you that you'll get your money in full once I know you've done a clean job for me. I'll contact you like we arranged. Now get the fuck out of here before you stuff up the most important part of the first act."

Shshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshsh

The Torino's front tires bounced hard against the curb as he swerved the big car to a screeching halt. Up and over the bonnet he crossed the narrow footpath and pressed his back to the graffiti scarred wall. He took a moment to take stock of his surrounds.

The neglected shop that fronted the street level was the only accessible entry point now to the tall building it was housed in. This was the address that Ryan had given him and it fitted the bill of the sort of venue Starsky was expecting. Its polluted grey exterior promised an even uglier interior. The tall building was shadowing the already gloomy street and in turn its side façade was shadowed by another high-rise block directly next to it. A dark stinking alleyway ran between the two structures and would no doubt serve as a home to vagrants, drunks and drug addicts. The area was on the fringe of the city and isolated enough from the city's central pulse. Straddling the heavy industrial areas and the outer commercial zone it was devoid of human traffic. Starsky realized very quickly why Ryan would have chosen this landmark for his finale with them both. The building and its neighboring block seemed abandoned long ago and their hulking ugliness brooded over the desolate street below waiting for the day they might be reclaimed for redevelopment.

Perfect havens for corruption and crime. Perfect havens for someone who needed a base to peddle their goods, sell their stock, and bargain their way in and out of nefarious deals.

A perfect haven to stash a person, hold him and use him mercilessly for whatever ends or purposes the captor thought he would serve.

Hutch was here somewhere. Inside this perfect haven.

He sidled up carefully to the main door. That was when it struck him.

This whole set up.

It came to him in a clear single realization. Ryan was far more in tune with this other side of the tracks, the life of the criminal, than he had ever been as a cop.

Starsky assumed his usual defensive stance, checked his piece, flexed his gun hand and prepared to enter.

It took him only moments to realize the careful entry with bated breath and defensive agility was all for nothing. The entire downstairs area was empty. Most of the space was open plan, interior walls having been half pulled down or broken away with age and decay. It had been a business of sorts but now was just one empty shell of dust, grime and broken glass. He quickly ascertained that the ancient lift was non functional and the internal stairs rose up to what looked like eight flights.
Each landing housed several doors, some swinging open on their broken hinges and others tightly closed, their greasy, scarred surfaces testimony to the downfall of the property over the years.

Sucking in a frustrated curse he bellowed up the stairwell from his place on the ground floor.

"What the fuck is this Ryan? You call me here for your little game and then you hide like some weasel behind one of those doors up there? You gonna show your fuckin' hand or do I have to come up there and kick down every damn door before you stand up to me like a man?"

He waited.

Then yelled again even louder.

"Ryan! Come out and face me you coward!"

Pivoting on his heel he cursed again before striding back out into the open room where he had first entered.

"Shit! Ryan! Shit!"

He knelt down to examine the floor where relatively fresh blood had pooled and congealed, still slightly sticky to the touch. Chairs were tossed and tables that had been stacked in the corner were toppled over.

They must have fought here. Ryan and Hutch.

Fought hard. He recalled Ryan's words about Hutch being a strong adversary. Again he closed his eyes against the image of Hutch's flesh being pounded, his blood spraying wildly, pooling on the floor as it drained from his body.

When he opened his eyes and his vision cleared he saw it and wondered why he had missed it when he had first entered.

He berated himself as he stalked to the chair in the center of the room and snatched up the scrawled note in marker pen that had been taped to the back of the chair.

Not acting like a cop that's why Starsky. Act like a cop or you'll lose before the game has already started. Push the fear and emotion to the side or this is all over now. All over for Hutch before you can even begin to save him.

Pleased to see that the hand that held the note was steadier than he felt he scanned the content.

Sparse and cold. Ryan's style.

"We're waiting for you. Come get him while you still can. He's on the rooftop. Door is open for you."

The sprint up the stairwell did little to burn off the building anxiety and he stopped only fractionally to regain his breath. He could do nothing about his pulse rate. Since the phone call from Ryan it was set automatically to rapid.

The door opened easily as promised. No traps, no surprises, no terrifying scenes awaited him. Just white, hot bare concrete seemingly stretching before him forever. Pivoting, he crouched and scanned the perimeters of the rooftop. The near distance shimmered and danced in front of his eyes. But it was quiet and bare with no sign of a human. He approached each air vent, each
concrete wall with care and trepidation, his gun out in front, his focus sharp. But there was nothing
to be found except concrete and brick, metal and more concrete.

No Hutch.
No Ryan.
Nobody.

Sweat was running off him in rivulets now as the intensity of the rooftop heat beat down on him.

Once more he bellowed, this time to the clear sky above and for anyone else who could hear him,
his voice thick with hate and violence.

"Ryan! Don't you dare fuck with me anymore!"

Then in the still heat he sensed a movement in his periphery, a flurry of action, a shimmer of color
against the white concrete. But it was in the distance and he turned rapidly to catch what had
danced in his side vision, momentarily confused because he had checked the entire surface of the
rooftop.

And as turned, his eyes scoping out the arc of space before him, he saw him.

On the rooftop of the twin building opposite. The building across the dirty dark alleyway.

Ryan stood tall with his feet widely spaced and his hands open wide as though inviting the world to
capture his arrogant stance, his beguiling entrée. It was clear that he was just waiting for the perfect
moment when it dawned on Starsky that yet again he had taken the upper hand and bested him.

"You fuckin' fuckin'....." Starsky supposed the hissed out abuse was lost to anyone but himself but
it didn't matter. The words spilled out of him and wasted, falling into dead space as he stumbled to
the edge of the rooftop, closing the distance between himself and where he imagined Hutch might
be located.

Perilously close to the edge of the sheer drop he backed back a few steps and grounded his shaking
limbs and torso, careful to tear his eyes away from the void beneath as he screamed across the
divide.

"More of your sick games Ryan? More of your torment? Where is he? WHERE IS HE! Show me
him now or I leave, I leave right now I swear, you fucker. You show me Hutch alive or I walk
away NOW!

When the distinctive baritone came back at him he knew that they were close enough and the
background noise was low enough for them each to hear their raised calls.

"He's here like I said. Waiting for you. Just like I promised you he would be. Look!"

He stepped aside and Starsky saw him. A bent over crumpled caricature of his best friend.
Strapped to a hard chair, his head lolling listlessly to the side, the marks of his recent abuse evident
even from the distance between them.

"Hutch! HUTCCCCCHHHH!"

The head, blond hair now dark from sweat and blood moved fractionally at first before lifting and
turning toward Starsky's frantic call. Starsky's stomach lurched to see the weak but discernable
response and he screamed out Hutch's name again and then let loose a tirade.

"What have you done to him you bastard? I told you if you touched him with heroin I would....."

"That you'd do what Starsky? That you would do what? You want to help him? You want to save your lover here from his own bad medicine? Then you'd better come and save him. What are you waiting for?"

Ryan bent over to the ground and fumbled in a bag before standing upright again, a syringe and needle brandished in his hand.

"It's almost time for his next fix."

Starsky flung a strangled howl across the divide before he pulled out his Beretta and aimed it directly at the unwavering human target that was Ryan. However in that split instant that it had taken for him to pull out his gun Ryan's own handgun had materialized and was now pressed cruelly against the pale flesh of Hutch's exposed neck.

"You think shooting me will solve his problems Starsky? Seriously? Maybe it will, maybe it won't. You'll never know anyway because you pull that trigger and he's dead in the same instant I let go of this one."

Starsky stifled a muffled choking cry as he felt his gun hand lowering with indecision and uncertainty.

"What the fuck is it that you want me to do Ryan? WHAT? JUST TELL ME!"

Starsky's throat was already raw from the forced yelling across the divide. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the broken doll like figure of his partner in the chair and the tall menacing figure beside him wielding a gun in one hand and a syringe in the other.

"Simple. Come and get him – before it's too late. I'll wait for you. I won't touch him again if you come, but only if you come. "

Then he was running back toward the door to the internal stairwell almost before Ryan had finished the sentence, already calculating how long it would take him to run to the other building and reach the rooftop. He rammed his gun into his holster and reached for the door handle. The door didn't give. He turned the knob again and felt the constraint. Twisting it violently he pulled the door forcefully shaking the lock, as the dread rose up in him. Pointlessly he kicked out savagely at the reinforced surface but the external door opened outward so it was a fruitless exercise. He kicked it again purely to release the edge off the overwhelming distress that was flooding him in waves.

"NO! NO! NO!"

He swung around and ran back to edge of the precipice – to get as close to Ryan as he could dare with the chasm between them.

"WHY! WHY?" Despair filled his cry, doom dawning all around him.

Ryan was waiting for him to come back to the edge, waiting for him to ask. He had moved away from Hutch and was now sitting against a small wall in a shadowed shaft of coolness. The lounging posture was a display of pure arrogance. He was holding a wet cloth up against one of his many facial cuts and looked almost bemused when Starsky's cry rang out.
"Because I could."

"What is the fuckin' point of all of this? If you want me then let me off this rooftop so I can fuckin' come to you."

"Oh, you can still come Starsky. Just because the door is locked doesn't mean you can't come to us. Think like a cop. Find another way."

He motioned with his hand to the right of him.

Starsky paced and groaned.

"What the fuck are you talking about? I'm on top of a building for Christ's sake and you're on the opposite building – what do you expect me to do? Fly over there you motherfuc – "

He stopped short, his raw throated curse dropping away when he saw it. When he saw the object that Ryan had indicated with his hand. It had gone unnoticed by him until then, so focused was he on the two men and not his surrounds.

An extendable ladder.

Spanning across the relatively narrow divide of the two adjacent buildings it formed a tenuous bridge, a shaky overpass between the two.

He walked toward it slowly; approaching it as though it was an animate object that might suddenly spring to life. He looked at it, tested it with his hand, looked at the other side where it rested on the ledge of the far building.

Then he looked down at the ground beneath, the dirty laneway eight stories down and for a moment the concrete beneath him tilted and flexed as though it was shifting beneath his feet.

He breathed through the panic and turned away from the precipice to stare fixedly at the doorway exit. His only way down from here and to Hutch and it was blocked. He willed the drop to the street behind him to disappear. Willed himself to not be here high above the ground below. His head dropped in self defeat and self disgust.

This was a challenge he could not meet.

Ryan had remembered. Ryan knew.

Ryan knew that because he was weak he could not save Hutch.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Starsky stumbled forward a few feet before he brought his Beretta up to the solid door. Bracing himself reflexly against the assault that the ricocheted bullets would make on the reinforced metal, he pumped in six shots in quick succession.

He didn't have to fumble and pull at the door to know it was an exercise in futility, but he did nonetheless before sagging bodily against the scarred up door.

His heart rate hitched higher as his breaths quickened to nothing more than shallow gasps.

A locked impenetrable door in front of him, a sheer drop behind him and his wounded hurting partner across a seemingly impassable divide, separated from him by air and depth of space.
No way down, no way across and no way to get to Hutch before the mad man who held him either killed him or helped him to slowly die.

But there is a way across. Ryan has made sure of that. There is a way across to Hutch, I only have to manage it. He knows I can't. I can't. Hutch will die while I sit here and watch it happen.

He couldn't turn around and face the sneering black-haired man who was calling out to him, urging him to make a decision, urging him to act.

He couldn't turn around and see the face of his best friend, his body battered and baking in the scorching white light while he, his own partner was too shit scared to do what it took to reach him.

Unbidden, the view of the dirty street far below him and the flimsy ladder above it filled his head. For a few spare seconds he put himself on that ladder, felt it swaying and bending beneath his weight while he was caught midway across the pass between the two rooftops….his fear made him look down - even confined to his imagination it was too much for him.

Instantly the swirling vortex of panic had him well and truly within its grip. The tell tales signs that he was going to be pulled in entirely, lose control entirely were all there. The numbness was creeping in, the blackness was encroaching, and the fear of falling was now so great that already he was spinning wildly away from his own center.

He commanded himself to drop to his haunches and then to go even lower, his legs splaying out in front of him, before he pitched face first onto the ground.

His trembling fingers dug into the dusty concrete, scratching for something to hold onto, something to tether him to the earth.

The heated concrete felt almost soothing to his body as he let himself crumple to a heap on its hard surface. At least getting closer to the horizontal helped to ground his body somewhat. His mind however was another story. Adrenalin was coursing through his veins in such volume that he felt his blood pounding behind his eyeballs while all coherent thought was swamped by a tsunami of irrational fear. His mind stood little chance of being stabilized.

Landing on his ass with his legs half crossed and falling loosely to the side he bent over himself and sucked in slow long breaths. Sun merciless and harsh went unnoticed as it bathed his shaking form.

Behind him and in the background he could still hear the intrusive deep voice prodding and goading him – playing with him and his phobia. Clutching his chest and rocking slightly he channeled all of his effort into to his own silent mantra to re-establish his control. With great effort he breathed and focused, using all of his ability to screen out the sound of Ryan. The voice intruded with bullying determination nonetheless. Every callous word found its mark. Each biting taunt was like a gut punch to his solar plexus.

"Starsky. All these years and you still haven't got the balls to face it have you? You're still a pussy when it comes to heights. Tough cop, tough street savvy Starsky, but put you hovering above the ground and you completely fall apart."

I'm falling apart. Falling apart.

"Just like the Academy. All those exercises in the field and you fell to pieces whenever we were called to work with heights. You would never have coped with any of it without Hutchinson would you? He held your hand didn't he Starsky? He sweet-talked you through every step of every
exercise. Without him you would never have passed the tactical field courses… and look you haven't changed. Without your blond partner to cheer you along you're a complete and utter loser."

Without Hutch I can't do it – any of it. Terrified of it. Terrified of heights.

Without Hutch I can't do it.

Without me going to Hutch he will die.

Hutch will die.

"So is this it? This is what you amount to? You just going to walk away with your back to your lover and leave him to me? Is that all he is worth to you? You prepared to leave him with me because you are just too much of a gutless wonder to face your fears? He worth that little to you?"

He is worth everything to me. Everything. My partner. My best friend. Nothing matters more to me. Nothing has more worth.

"I can take him now then? Cut him loose from this chair and drag his fucking sorry ass down the stairs to my car and drive off with him? You don't care? He's stoned off his face and half way to hell already on the heroin I have pumped into him. I can take him now and finish him off – throw him in some side street alleyway behind some trash cans. Like when they found him last time. Crawling in the dirt behind trash cans. The junkie that he is. I don't have any further need of him. You want me to do that Starsky? You want me to do that while you sit with your back to us bent over like some freaking wilting flower?"

No. No. I don't want you do to that. Don't do that….  

"Or…. maybe when I rest up a little from this heat – I can try to rouse him some. Drag him over here into the cool shade with me and – well – what do you think I could do to Lover Boy? You think he might be worth some entertainment value for me Starsky? I have to admit I have never had the urge to touch the big blond but maybe…just maybe….

What's he like I wonder…what's he like to fuck senseless? Maybe I should have him, pathetic and as broken as he is now, just so I can know what you've had all these years with him. Maybe – maybe Starsky you could find a shady spot over there on your rooftop and watch the show? After all Hutchinson got to watch you and me didn't he? Seems only fair that you reciprocate the interest in him."

Ryan's voice was fading, hoarse and catching in his dry throat, the baritone finding new depths with each forced rasp.

"How about it Starsky? Might take your mind off your little bout of panic. Watching me get off on Hutchinson, sullyng up his pretty ass a bit will help you forget all about your fear of heights."

Shut up! Shut up! Please shut the fuck up…

Starsky pressed his eyes hard with the heels of his sweating hands and retreated behind the kaleidoscope of dancing colors and blackness of his compressed lids.

The relentless barrage went on and on. Ryan fantasized out loud his filthy depictions of a brutal rape, crudely outlining graphic descriptions of each depraved act that he promised to share with Hutch and have Starsky bear witness to.

A discordant half laugh bubbled in Starsky's throat. He thought about this entire set up. This whole
situation that Ryan had engineered was a re-run of a nightmare where the characters and the content were the same, just the roles and the scenery had been shifted around.

Ryan wanted to do it all again. Just like the night at the beach house. Only this time the roles were reversed. This time it would be Hutch and not him on the hard ground beneath Ryan. It would be Hutch being ripped and sullied, abused and used. This time it would be him and not Hutch who was forced into the role of agonized spectator, forced to watch his best friend suffer unspeakable acts before Ryan had enough of the game and would then certainly kill him.

Then in the middle of the nightmarish thoughts Starsky stopped.

The scenario was not in fact the same at all.

At the beach house Hutch had been bound to a heavy chair with his own cuffs. He was impotent, entirely impotent to alter the course of what Ryan was doing to his partner. There was no way – no possible way that Hutch could have intervened to change the course of that night. Starsky heard Hutch's soulful screams and cries coming from where he was bound on the chair as Ryan was attacking him on the bed that night at the beach house. He could still hear them even now as he sat huddled over with his face in his hands.

Hutch didn't have a choice to stop Ryan and on that night at the beach house a formidable chapter in Starsky's personal history was created.

Starsky knew Hutch would have done anything, anything to stop Ryan if he had only had a way to do so.

Yet another deep breath and he allowed back into his mind the image of Hutch as he was now. The terrible image of a broken Hutch, collapsed and beaten on a different chair, out in the wide open blue sky, the heartless sun burning his sensitive light golden skin, his weary head struggling to lift up enough to respond to his voice.

This Hutch, subjugated and beaten, drugged and abused was pulled into the forefront of his concentration. This image of his partner, the one that Ryan had created filled his senses.

Testing himself he brought the image of the ladder bridging the two buildings back into his forethought and breathed steadily through the first panicky seconds.

He allowed the ladder to stay. He allowed the image of the distance spanning the two buildings to stay.

Starsky finally let his hands fall away from his eyes. It took a moment for the dancing blackness and starbursts of light to recede and the sunlight to fill his vision once more. His breathing was more settled, the dizziness had abated and the concrete ground was no longer swinging up at ridiculous angles to tip him sideways over the building edge. The debilitating anxiety that had peaked so rapidly, seduced and fed by distortion of thought, was gradually ebbing away. The wild, heart-stopping fears were beaten back into submission by more rational thought.

He flexed his hands, looked down to see the muscles in his forearms pump up with his concentrated intent. He pulled up his lax legs, tucking them tighter beneath his torso, feeling their former rubbery state replaced by a steadily increasing rock hardness. His body was once more within his control.

His mind too was now back under his control.

Hutch. The two buildings and the divide between them. A ladder, the bridge to the other side. The
way to Hutch. The way to stop Ryan.

He spoke out loud, only loud enough for himself to hear his own ruthless determination in his voice.

"I have a damn choice."

"So what's it going to be Starsky? You want to keep facing that damn door like it's suddenly going to open up and let you off of there? Maybe you can unload your entire clip into the fucking wall and see if it gives way!"

Starsky fantasized about emptying his entire clip into that callous thin-lipped mouth as he held him down, his mouth agape and screaming for mercy. Ryan pinned beneath him watching his eyes before he pulled the trigger and his flesh and blood exploded and his taunts finally, finally stopped forever.

"You going to turn around and watch me with your big blond boy here or are you going to sit like a zombie and ignore the fun?"

Starsky turned on his butt to face Ryan. He put his hands behind his back and levered himself up into a kneeling position. He could see that Ryan was assessing him, trying to work out where his head was at.

A cop to the core Ryan was taking no chances and once more the barrel of his gun was pointed directly at Hutch.

"That's so much better isn't it? I want to be able to see your face when I talk to you, when I promise all the things that I am going to do to Lover Boy here for your enjoyment. Now pull out your piece and throw it over here to my side. I think you've held onto it for long enough and I'm tired of training this gun on Hutchinson. How the hell am I going to enjoy fucking him if I have to worry about you trying to blow my head off?"

He smiled when Starsky complied so readily, holding the Beretta up in the air as a show of conciliation before tossing it underhand across the thirty foot more or so gap between the buildings. Its metal clattered on landing and it spun on itself before coming to a stop against an interior wall on Ryan's rooftop. Ryan walked over toward it and picked it up, tossing it in the same bag from which he had pulled the needle and syringe.

"What a surprise. A co-operative Starsky. I do believe that I could get either of you do just about anything when I have the other one in my possession. It's all so easy this way."

He walked back over to where Hutch sat and began to drag the chair closer to where he had been sitting, toward the shaded area where the shadows now fell. The chair scraped and screeched on the concrete as Ryan labored to pull the chair to where he wanted it.

Starsky looked only at Hutch.

His only focus now had to be Hutch. Both visually and mentally.

That focus would carry him forward and keep him going until he reached his endpoint.

Ryan had succeeded in moving Hutch and the chair a lot closer to the edge of his building's rooftop, a lot closer to Starsky who now stood rigid at the edge of the building.

Ryan swiped at his face with the back of his arm, the effort of the exercise and his own weakened
body state having taken its toll on him.

He looked up to catch Starsky staring at his partner. Something about the other man's look had Ryan cocking his head to the side in his customary habit. The sound and movement of Hutch stirring had him turning back toward the chair.

"Seems as though Lover Boy is starting to come to. Maybe all this talk of me fucking him has got his interest stirred up. Maybe it's got your's all stirred up too. You don't look so ill anymore. I like that Starsky. I like to think that you're going to be sitting there watching me perform for you with your friend here. "

Without looking down and keeping his eye only on Hutch Starsky walked to where the ladder was strung out between the two buildings.

Ryan watched his more agile movements and noted the return of the other man's characteristic strutting gait. Starsky arrived at the point where the ladder was laid down and loosely tethered on the lower ledge of the rooftop and then turned to let his eyes settle on Hutch's head.

Ryan followed the actions of Starsky's body with intense interest noting how the other man would not look at him.

Suddenly Starsky called out, his voice stronger than before, his words defiant and clear despite the rough hoarseness of his throat.

"Hutch! Can you hear me? Hutch, look up if you can hear me and show me you understand that I'm here."

The sweat soaked head raised slowly and turned toward Starsky's voice.

From the distance Starsky heard the choking cough followed by a croak – and then another attempt to produce a word that was clearly discernible if only to him, despite the strangled effort.

Hutch had called his name and then a moment later he called it out again, stronger this time.

Starsky's own voice was choked, but thick from emotion rather than effort, as he called back reassuringly.

"I'm here Hutch. How ya doin? You keep breathin' like I told ya to do?"

Hutch's attempted response was cruelly cut off when Ryan reached out and caught Hutch by the chin, turning his head around forcibly to face him. He could see that the blond was alert enough again to fix him with hate filled eyes. Once more his handgun was perilously close to the bleeding head.

"Enough of this fucking sweet talk between the two of you! I want some damn action and this big boy here is going to provide it for me aren't you Hutchinson?"

He hand reached down and pulled away the already tattered and torn shirt baring Hutch's chest entirely and pushing the garment down off his shoulders and arms till it caught at his bound wrists.

"Such different skin to yours Starsky. So light and golden and bare. All together different to you...But hey, different is good too. I wonder how else he is different? You know Starsky, "

He had his back half turned so that he could watch Starsky as he ran his hands up and down Hutch's smooth chest and then very slowly around the waistband of Hutch's pants.
"All that time at the Academy and I don't think I ever got to see Golden Boy's body nude – fully nude. He was always a bit of a stuck up prig like that if I remember. Covering his cock and his ass with a towel like he was hiding the freaking crown jewels! Weren't you Hutchinson? Weren't you? A stuck up prudish prig? Except maybe of course when it came to Starsky over there. Always happy to show him your cock I'm sure! Isn't that right Starsky? I bet over the years you've had more than your full share of pretty boy's cock. Well now I get to see it too."

Ryan yanked back hard on Hutch's damp hair, pulling back his head with one hand and reaching down to the buttons on his waistband with the other.

Starsky heard the frantic growl from Hutch as he bucked in the chair and fought Ryan with his torso. With every limb pinioned and his head held fast it was his only means of defense.

"RYAN! LET HIM GO! GET YOUR FUCKING FILTHY HANDS OFF HIM!"

Ryan's laughter rang out.

"But I'm only just beginning to enjoy myself, and so is Lover Boy here. Look at him! Thrusting up into my hand like he can't wait for it. Shit, this is going to be hotter than the fucking temperature up here. Once I get him untied and off this chair, I can ride him like the bucking bronco he is –"

Starsky screamed out again.

"Ryan. I know what you really want."

The declaration had Ryan turning, his hands momentarily stilled in his quest of Hutch's body. His brows raised when he found Starsky poised on the ledge of the rooftop, one leg up ready to climb over and then down to the ladder which was suspended from the lower ledge of his rooftop wall to the corresponding lower ledge on the opposite building.

"You know what I want?"

Still Starsky refused to look at him directly, his gaze centered on Hutch's wild eyes, wide with a new terror now that he understood his friend's intentions. Starsky merely nodded slightly at him and gave him a small smile. Even though Hutch was in a terrible physical state Starsky knew his unspoken dialogue was understood.

You have to understand Hutch. It is the choice I have. My choice to save you. I can do this.

Starsky answered Ryan but kept looking directly at his partner.

"You don't want Hutch. You only want to hurt him to hurt me. What you really want is me. Leave him alone – step away from him and I'll come over to you."

The laugh that Ryan let forth now was tinged with hysteria and twisted up with uncertainty.

"You'll never do it. You can't do it."

"I will do it."

"No – it's not something you can do. You were never meant – I never meant for - "

Fresh fury rose in Starsky now, as realization dawned.

"What are you saying Ryan? This whole set up was purely a mind fuck for me so that you could watch me shrivel and cower, piss my pants with fear while you laughed on the sidelines and – and
"Yes – Yes! And fucked your partner in front of you. Fucked him and hurt him and beat him till he was dead – in front of you. You can't make that climb. You never could and you never will! Face it Starsky. Your partner is dead. He was the moment he thought he could come here and take me on to save you from me. I never meant for him to live. Only long enough for you to get here and be forced to watch me finish him. We dragged him up here and drugged –"

Starsky took his leg back down from the upper ledge.

"Wait? What? You said "we." ...."We – we dragged him up here". Who the fuck is 'we'?'

Ryan shook his head and held up his hand for Starsky to calm.

"They're long gone now. Served their purpose. It doesn't fucking matter does it? What does it matter how I got him up here? What does it matter how I organized all of this? It only matters that I get to have you in the end. It only matters that you are finally mine and he is no longer between us."

But it did matter. It mattered so very much. Starsky thought of the magnum Hutch had purposefully left behind in his apartment. He thought of the desperation in Hutch's voice in the note also left in his apartment. He thought of all that Hutch had done to try to save him. From the moment Ryan had re-entered their lives, hell, even well before that point. He was sure there were lots more that he never even knew about. All the ways and all the times that Hutch would have stood between him and Ryan.

And in this final act he had come here to face Ryan down, for him, only to save him, and Ryan had cowardly cut him down by ambushing him with reinforcements.

His strong, loyal, loving partner had done all of this for him and now Ryan wanted to make him suffer even more, suffer the most indignant way before his death.

"You complete and utter coward. You total motherfuckin' sonofabitch! You called Hutch here for a showdown didn't you and you didn't have the guts to face him alone? You made him leave his weapon behind. Told him it would be just him and you didn't you? But it wasn't was it? WAS IT? You…..You were always afraid of him weren't you Ryan? You're still afraid of him. You couldn't take him on by yourself. You gutless bastard."

Ryan merely shrugged.

"Academic now, all just academic. I simply needed him so that I could get you. Who gives a fuck if I played dirty? This isn't a game of fucking honor Starsky! I'm not about to sacrifice myself for you like your big blond hero here. I just wanted you. Point is I have him now and he's messed up badly already. I can easily take him now, right in front of you. Here, on the hard hot ground. I can ram my cock into him until there is nothing left of him. And then – then I can come and get you. We'll be together finally, you and I with Hutchinson out of the way…Starsky – Starsky!" Ryan's voice escalated rapidly.

Starsky wasn't listening. He was pulling his second leg up and over the ledge and was in the process of carefully climbing down to the ladder a short drop below the upper ledge.

"NO! STOP. I don't want you to – it wasn't meant to be like this. The ladder, it was just a way to make you suffer. I knew you couldn't do it – not with your fear of heights."

"Shut up Ryan you fuckin' fool. You gave it to me. You handed this choice to me…Now I'm damn
well takin' it."

"No. It's not a choice because you can't do it. You'll die. Go back, go the fuck back!"

There was real horror on Ryan's face as his eyes followed Starsky on the ladder. On hands and knees looking straight at Hutch he was already inching forward, lips tight and drawn, the soft early afternoon wind blowing his dark curls about his head, the distant traffic droning in his ears.

Ryan had run to the edge and was yelling frantically at him.

"Stop now. Don't come any further. Go back before it's too late. He can't help you this time. He's all fucked up and he can't help you this time can't you see it? Without Hutchinson you won't do this. Like the other time – like the other time….he got you across the other time but he can't now. I don't want you dead Starsky! I don't want you dead. I want you for myself!"

Starsky tried to blank out Ryan's rising hysteria but his presence at the opposite side distracted him from his focus on Hutch. For one moment he pulled his eyes from Hutch to look to the where the ladder was tethered loosely onto either end of the two buildings' lower ledges and in that moment he stopped his progress forward.

He rationalized the situation. It really wasn't that far at all. No more than thirty feet at most.

Such a short distance physically. Such a long way to travel emotionally.

Then once more his eyes found Hutch who had not moved his eyes from their target, not let his tired, bruised eyes waver a fraction from their gridlock on Starsky's intent face. Quiet and soothing, gentle and coaxing, his eyes gave Starsky strength. Hutch had no words of encouragement; no voice of reassurance but his eyes gave Starsky everything he needed. All that he needed.

With the silent strength Hutch afforded him, he filtered out Ryan's near maniacal yelling. The shaky ladder bowing and bending under his crawling weight with the sheer drop below it, did not exist in his mind. Instead it was a narrow causeway on solid ground that he needed to transverse on his knees.

Keeping his body low and stabilized, he began to move forward again – toward the blue eyes that called him on.

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Riley wondered about his timing. It certainly wasn't the best time to think about dreams.

Not now. Now was more of a time to think about nightmares.

Buffeted wildly from side to side in the backseat of the taxi he gasped as his still tender torso rammed yet again into the seat door. His diligent (diligent because Riley had offered him an extra fifty bucks if he could get him to the address in half the time he had originally quoted) taxi driver was careening the vehicle around corners like he was in some high speed car chase.

The guy was going to kill them both with his high speed antics. Just because he had said he wanted to get there in double time didn't mean he want him to drive like some ...like some...well like Starsky not a damn taxi driver.

That thought made Riley sad and angry at the same time and he didn't even know why.

Grimacing with the effort of staying upright in the seat he used his arms to splint his tender side.
He had been a fool to dive into the nearest taxi anyway. He'd talked himself in and out of the idea at least six times before he could no longer hold himself back from what he knew he was always going to do as soon as Starsky had bolted from his apartment.

This whole escapade was more than likely going to lead to nothing but disaster. He should have done what any sensible cop would do, what any sensible sane person would do – call for backup and leave it to the cops. The cops with able bodies and strength, not some still green, semi invalid Rookie who had just checked himself out of hospital and had a burning mission thumping in his chest. A mission to save the day and to stop whatever it was that Starsky and Hutch were currently doing to end their careers if not their lives.

Still he had to at least try and he seemed powerless to use logic over desperation that he might just be able to salvage the messed up lives of these two loyal friends.

How the hell did he think his intervention would achieve that he wasn't sure. But – and he clung to this – he had done so once before hadn't he? At the beach house.

And the dreams – the dreams must mean something. It all must be for something. Why else was he in the middle of this reality, as terrifying as it was? Why else had fate taken him and dropped him in the midst of the tumultuous lives of David Starsky and Ken Hutchinson?

Months ago he had been living a completely different life. His life was on a steady course of predictability in the police department's career ladder.

Then he had been thrust up against the turmoil of Sergeant Hutchinson's life.

Soon after the dreams had started again.

It was the wrong time and the wrong place to think about the dreams. God knew his head was exploding with so much else, his mind galvanized for action and not for contemplation – but there it was anyway. The dreams and what they represented.

So many years without them and now they were back with force.

The dreams were still about what he had lost but they were different somehow. Not as heart wrenching, not as grief inducing. Now they offered some hope and some new beginnings too.

But – they were still about his dead brother.

He recalled that they had recommenced just after the time he had been privy to Ken Hutchinson's deep pain, his desperate fears for his partner David Starsky. It was early in his friendship with Hutch. No, in fact before their friendship had not even begun. It was so early in his knowing of Ken Hutchinson as a cop, and a man. It was straight after Hutch had found Starsky lying in the alleyway half dead from Ryan's knifing.

That time when he had sat beside Hutch in the waiting room of the hospital, waiting for some medical word on Starsky's condition. It had been such a grueling time for Hutch and he could still remember the handsome drawn and exhausted face, could still see the utter desolation in those light blue eyes, windowing his grief, and his terror that the worst could happen. That his partner might not make it.

Hutch had turned to him in despair and asked him how he would cope. "How do we get through this time? How do we do it Riley?" He had begged of the younger man.

Riley had never forgotten and would never forget that moment. The moment when a man older
than him, years ahead in life experience and emotional maturity, who had seen the worst sides of humanity, had sought guidance from someone like Riley.

And Riley had never forgotten that he had the answer, the right answer for his senior officer. It wasn't much of anything, just his simple heartfelt belief but it had seemed enough for Hutch all the same. Just those few words . "We just do sir. We just do."

And Hutch had looked at him then for one fleeting moment as if he saw in Riley a maturity beyond his years.

Hutch had never asked him and Riley had never offered to tell him how his wisdom had come about at such a young age.

Riley wondered about that now as he thought about the dreams and their significance. He wondered if he would live to regret that he had never shared his own story with Hutch. And he wondered now if he would ever get the chance to do so.

Suddenly it seemed imperative that the opportunity would not be lost. It was more important than ever that he share it with Hutch, this man who meant so much to him for reasons that he was still not fully able to understand.

Maybe it was what the dreams were all about. Linking up his past to his now. Linking his brother with a man he had only know for months but who had become to be such a significant force in his life.

He had never told his brother how very much he had meant to him – at least not as deeply enough as he wished he had.

If there was a chance he express to Hutch his importance to him, he would make sure he didn't miss it.

Life was too short not to tell people what they meant to you. He had learned that and was understanding it more each day.

Hutch had already shown him enough about this in the way he shared and valued his remarkably close relationship with Starsky.

The sudden sound of a blaring horn ripped into his deep thoughts. The taxi driver swerved violently and then stepped hard on the brakes sending Riley slamming chest first against the front seat. The impact of the blow to his tender flesh brought stars to his eyes and was more than enough to bring his attention solely back to the situation at hand. Pulling in a stifled oath at the fresh wave of pain he let forth an uncharacteristic bellow at the taxi driver.

"Hey! That extra fifty only sticks if you get me there alive you fucking moron! You're meant to get me there fast not fucking smear me all over the road! Now watch it will you!"

Caught unaware by his own hostile outburst Riley sat back and reigned in his temper. It wouldn't do to upset the guy now when he depended on the ride. He focused on shutting up and saving his energy for what lay ahead.

Looking up he caught the driver eyeing him in his rear vision mirror - a measure of uncertainty in his look. Obviously he was taken aback by the display of hot venom from such a deathly pale looking young man.

No wonder, Riley thought. The little tirade had left him shocked too.
He couldn't help but think how he had sounded exactly like Hutch.

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The short journey across the divide was something that Starsky would never have thought he could accomplish and yet now that he had begun, now that his purpose was clear and his goal was so tangible, he found in himself what it took to keep going forward.

There was of course no other way for him to reach Hutch. It was as frightening and as clear as that.

With that one conviction pulling him on and Hutch holding his very centre in his eyes, Starsky pushed through the mental obstacle Ryan had erected for him with obstinate determination.

Only a scarce few feet from the edge of the other side Ryan stopped yelling and ran back to Hutch's side.

"You weren't meant to come over here! This is not how I planned it Starsky. You won't even look at me, just like you never looked at me that time when you were on that rope at the Academy. I called and called to you and you never gave me your eyes. Not once. Only him. You'd only listen and communicate with him. I could have saved you – but no. Him! Him! Always him and not me."

He tossed his head wildly toward Hutch, the blackness and the weight of his hair falling across his face, as thick, heavy and dark as a funereal curtain.

Starsky stopped crawling.

Ryan's words were giving rise to fresh anxiety in the pit of his stomach. It was clear to him that Ryan was losing control fast. He had pushed back the hair from his face and the dark eyes shone with pure madness. Starsky felt adrenalin pouring again into his bloodstream. Once more Ryan had his hands on Hutch, the gun in one hand while he work feverishly at his ankle ties with the other. He still had one feverish eye on Starsky.

"I'm looking at you now ok? Ryan I'm looking at you. Stop what you're doing and talk to me."

"I didn't want you here with him. You were meant to stay over there. Now you're trying to come to him again. I won't let you! I won't let you be with him you hear me! Stop there. Stay there or I swear I'll shoot him in the throat!"

By now Starsky had one hand on the upper ledge, his body weight still largely on the ladder while he tensed his body to pull himself up and over the wall.

At Ryan's threat he froze.

"Alright. Alright. I'm still. I'm not moving. But leave Hutch and come and talk to me. You said I wasn't looking or listening last time. That time at the Academy right? All those years ago when I nearly fell from the rope? I can remember that day Ryan. I remember you tried to call out to reassure me, to guide me, I remember you held the rope in place Ryan."

"No you fucking don't you fucking liar! All you remember is blond boy's words to you. Not mine! Not me. It was him who was supposed to fall that day do you know?" He gave a half laugh- half choked cry.

"Not you. Not you who was supposed to fall Starsky. I was trying to hurt Golden Boy here not you. It was meant for him, only for him. I rigged the rope so Hutchinson would go down. He was supposed to cross that day first, not you. Hutchinson always went first. You weren't meant to cross
because he always insisted on going ahead because you were so scared of the above ground exercises. He went ahead and then called you on remember? But - but you argued with him that day. You made him let you go first. You stuffed it up Starsky! Just like you have done now! You fucked it all up by climbing over here."

Starsky felt himself sag as the crazed admission translated in his head. Ryan had intended to make Hutch fall. Hell he could have been left crippled, head injured - left dead. All those years ago….even back then, Ryan had been so full of hate for Hutch. Pure evil.

He couldn't talk with the memory of the day crowding his mind. Had he known then that Ryan was so unbalanced then none of this would have happened. Had he known what Ryan was capable of even as a young police cadet, he would never have gone through what he had gone through with him and Hutch would not be where he was now. Hurt and smashed up, being sexually mauled by a psychotic ex cop.

"You came here to this side for him! Not for me. Well now I will make you watch anyway. Now you still have to suffer with what I'm going to do to him. You stay there Starsky! You stay there right where you are on that ladder or I'll kill him."

"Ryan…"

"Shut up! Too late to look at me. Too late to talk to me. Now you watch. Wait and watch or he dies."

He had the binds off Hutch's ankles and was roughly pushing at his legs, pulling them roughly apart, wedging the side of his body between the seated wide v of Hutch's spread thighs as he watched Starsky with flickering narrow eyed glances. Training his gun on Hutch's neck with a hand that was now noticeably shaking he used his other hand to fumble with the top of his pants, ripping savagely at the fastenings all the while muttering short sharp expletives. Tugging and pulling with jerky desperate moves, buttons flew across the concrete as he released the fly of Hutch's pants and rammed his hand into the exposed opening. Grabbing roughly at the soft undergarment shielding Hutch's soft cock he rubbed his palm hard on the soft mound, squeezing and pulling the shaft beneath the thin cotton. Hutch cried out, a throaty agony filled rasp as Ryan's fingers and thumb closed around his balls and squeezed them ruthlessly, one of his knees pinning down the leg Hutch tried to kick out with in protest.

"Ryan, Stop. Ryan stop now and come and talk to me. I'm waiting here for you. I need you to pull me up and over the ledge - please. Ryan!"

Starsky's pleading and the sight of the weakened man beneath him squirming and writhing only served to drive Ryan's sadistic enjoyment to higher levels. Laughing now he ground the barrel of his gun hard into Hutch's neck forcing his head back, exposing the long column of his throat while he continued to apply heavy handed abuse to Hutch's genitals.

All but climbing onto his lap down Ryan was in full flight, and for a moment he took his eyes off Starsky completely as he brought his parted lips down onto the moisture laden pale skin of Hutch's long neck. He bit down hard with a savage animal growl and Hutch cried out afresh, violently trying to throw the large weight that covered his body and assaulted his flesh.

At the sound of Hutch's cry Starsky jumped up from his stable perch, no longer able to stay in place as directed by Ryan. He was not sure what he was trying to do his only thought was to deflect Ryan's attack on Hutch. Extending his arm he reached up to the higher level of the roof ledge. There was little but smooth concrete, rounded and wide with no area to grip onto.
Another howl from Hutch rang out, this one laced with muted rage and was quickly followed by the unmistakable sound of flesh being backhanded.

"You try to knee me in the balls one more time and I'll put a bullet through yours you smart assed whore! That's all you are, aren't you? Starsky's whore!"

"Here! Come here Ryan, I need you to help pull me up." Starsky called.

"Told you to stay there Starsky. Told you I'm doing your whore here first."

Starsky could no longer hear Hutch only Ryan's crazed ranting and fumbling of Hutch's clothes.

In desperation Starsky made a frantic swipe at the top of the ledge as he extended himself up to make the climb, bouncing off his toes to wrap his hand around the upper ledge. He foot slipped from the narrow edge of the ladder and his whole body destabilized and rocked perilously in space, his centre of gravity no longer close to the ladder.

Somehow by clawing at the ledge wall he righted himself and brought his foot back onto the ladder.

And in doing so, in righting himself, his eyes raked over the deep drop beneath him. Empty air.

For the first time since he had started the climb the terrible fear flooded back. The cool dark narrow alley far below rushed up to hit him between the eyes in a nauseating rush. Still teetering unsteadily in the upright position and at risk of losing his precarious balance he dropped his body back down hard and fast onto the slatted surface of the ladder. The impact of the short hard fall knocked the air from his lungs and rocked the base of his internal equilibrium. He struggled to place his body in alignment with the ladder, lying flat and clutching desperately at the rungs.

For interminable seconds terror blackened his vision and cut off his air supply.

Not now! Not now when I'm so close to reaching Hutch.

Sweating fingers numb with stiffness couldn't hold him onto this narrow platform of a ladder, not when he felt himself tipping and sliding in midair. He no longer knew where his body was in relation to the space around him. Adrenal hormones were flooding his system and his brain could no longer give him accurate information about his body.

It was running him down again, the roaring train of panic. It was going to hit him at full speed any moment and when it did he knew he was going to fall just as he had always feared he would.

Maybe he was already falling.

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"Give me your hand Starsky! Hold out your hand to me for fuck's sake! Let me try to help you."

The dark voice was tremulous, terrified and excited at the same time. Even in the very depths of his anxiety Starsky could hear the incongruence in the demand. Ryan was offering to save him from one fate so that he could deliver him to a fate of a completely different kind. He didn't want to lose Starsky to the panic that consumed him, but saw an opportunity to consume him himself, in his own sick way.

Starsky thought that his odds of survival at that moment were pretty damn fucked up. Die now by succumbing to his own crippling fear or die later when Ryan played out the last act of his twisted
Ryan had come back to the ledge above him, distracted quickly from his cruel occupation with Hutch when he'd realized that Starsky was in trouble. Starsky could feel him hovering over the edge, could almost smell the rotten badness of him, stale cologne mixed with dried sweat and congealing blood. The smell that was so distinctly Ryan filled his nostrils while every other one of his senses were bombarded by the assault of full on panic.

He closed his eyes against the rushing air beneath him, shivered as the light wind that rocked the ladder danced on his own sweat soaked skin and closed his ears to the distant thrum of city traffic far below.

Christ how he despised his weakness - this fear of heights. How he resented that it could take his strength and his determination to get to his partner and turn it against him so that his own reflexes and drives literally broke him into a thousand scattered pieces.

Starsky took stock of himself. His fingers still gripped the ladder so tightly he could barely feel them, he had pressed his face into the hard rungs and moulded the length of his body with the ladder.

However he was still here.

The world had not tipped him off after all and yet he remained frozen in his protective huddle, clinging to the cold metal rungs of the ladder as though it was a lover he could not bear to relinquish.

Ryan called again.

"Starsky for God's Sake let me help you this time ! You wouldn't take my help back then – that day. You wouldn't even listen to me then. Now I am here for you. Look up, take my hand and let me pull you up. I can save you this time."

Whether there was a hand outstretched to take he didn't know. He would not, could not look.

Instead he concentrated on a sound – so feeble and so strangled that he doubted at first that he in fact heard it above the background wind and traffic sounds.

He opened his eyes when he heard it again.

Hutch was calling to him. Croaking out his name, a little stronger each time as he managed to articulate the sounds through his ravaged vocal cords.

The sound and its concern penetrated his rational brain. Once more he scrabbled to pull his disassociated self into one piece. Pulling his hand up under his face he bit down hard on his bared wrist – hard enough to draw blood, hard enough to reawaken himself to himself. The immediate feedback of pain did its trick and he lifted his head higher to call back.

"It's ok! Hutch, it's ok. I'm alright. I'm still here."

There was barely two feet to the edge of the wall, barely two feet to finish what he had almost achieved before he had allowed the panic to take the upper hand again.

He had the burning urge to kick his own ass into Kingdom Come.

Fuckin' get a grip of this! Get up on your knees you loser! Move now and finish this.
The kick in the proverbial ass of his mind helped.

Action before thought, he was up on his knees and then reaching for a hold of the wall before he could second guess himself.

His upper body strength and fitness took over once he had the grip and even though the tilting sensation was still there he pushed it aside as his pulled himself up and over the wall in one economic and fluid movement.

Ryan's face registered surprise as Starsky appeared before him dropping from the ledge to the concrete ground of the rooftop.

There was a strong temptation to sink to his knees with the after effects of the adrenalin rush but he resisted the luxury and instead held onto the ledge for longer than he cared to until his legs would hold him unsupported.

For a shaky few moments he stood face to face with Ryan and both of them seemed displaced by the sudden turn in events. The same amount of moments it took for each of them to realize the next phase of the game had begun.

He was here. He had made it.

Ryan stole another long look at Starsky and then backed up to Hutch, gun once more at the ready, his initial shock replaced by a renewed energy.

Testing his legs Starsky moved away from the low wall and took his first good look at his partner.

His reaction was out before he could stop it.

"Oh Hutch…." His arms reached out automatically toward him as he stepped forward but Ryan stopped him quickly with a shake of his head and a quick wave of his gun.

"Back the fuck off Starsky. You don't come near him if you want what is left of him to stay alive."

Maybe Hutch tried to shrug, maybe he even tried to smile a little, whatever it was he did the sight of his broken, bleeding body had Starsky swallowing hard to keep his emotions in check. Still whirling from the overload of the near fall, the impact of seeing Hutch up close like this was pushing him closer to a precipitous reaction more deadly than the one from which he had just escaped.

He felt close to some edge, an edge where the drop from it was so much deeper than the one he had only just eluded.

Ryan sensed the coiling in Starsky and moved even closer to his captive, walking behind him and leaning over the crumpled body as he ran his gun up and down the naked smooth chest.

Starsky pulled himself back from mental cliff. Dropping into free fall now, allowing his animal rage to take over was not what was needed to bring him and Hutch out of this alive. He was pitted against an animal as wild as himself. He and his opponent were more or less equally matched in power, physical tactics and defence. The teeth gnashing inner wolf in him might be ready to attack but to sink his teeth in now would not guarantee he would win the fight. Either of them could take the prize of ripping the other's heart out.

Something more than sheer ferocity would decide the winner of this final battle.
He stayed where he was and dragged his eyes from Hutch.

"I made it here Ryan. I made it. I'm here with no gun, no defence – just me. You hold all the cards Ryan. You've got Hutch just like you planned, just like you wanted. It got me here just as you knew it would. What now then?"

"I told you Starsky. You get to see him suffer some more, and I get to have some more fun and then – quite simply, you get to see him die. You came to this side, I never wanted that – but now you're here, you get ringside viewing of the show. And you don't move, you don't come near him, or the show will be over with one blast to his head."

"Come on for fuck's sake Ryan. You know me. You know us. You know why I risked falling to my death just now with my stupid fuckin' fear of heights. It's because I don't want him to die – and I particularly don't want him to suffer anymore than you've already made him suffer. Why pretend here? You have the fuckin' upper hand. You have it all. I just want him alive. You know me well enough to know I will do anything to make that happen. Don't you? Don't you Ryan? Hutch can't die at your hands. I won't let you do that to him while I have even the slimmest chance of stopping it. You tell me Ryan, tell me what I have to do to make you not kill Hutch. To make him get out of here alive? Tell me."

Ryan's dark head tipped to the side in its characteristic way as he surveyed the dark-haired man in front of him. He looked down at the beaten up semi conscious man beneath him. Starsky looked too. Hutch's clothes were in disarray, his body more so. His shirt had been peeled from his chest and flapped lightly in the hot breeze as it hung from his bound wrists, and instead of fabric covering his torso vivid red welts heralding darkening bruises splayed across his ribcage. His pants were undone and his fly wide open, his briefs beneath pushed down so that Starsky could see the light golden pubic hairs and his partner's partly exposed cock left as it was when Ryan had abandoned his game to go to Starsky. His head was bleeding even now from what must have been a hefty blow some time earlier, his face bruised and discoloured, eyes puffed and bloodfilled, his lips cracked and whitened with dehydration and crusted saliva.

Starsky looked hard at the destruction of Hutch and knew that his own face could not disguise his anguish at Ryan's work. He hoped that Ryan could read the degree of pain in his eyes, and measure what it meant – what it meant for what had to happen next.

He needed Ryan to read in his face the resolve that he would do whatever it took to stop him from breaking Hutch anymore than he already had.

"Yes I know you Starsky. I know you so well. I'm glad that you finally realize it. You've taken so long to tell me that. I've waited so long to hear it from you. Waited. Waiting – always for you."

Once more he was leaning in to Hutch, nudging his hands southwards toward Hutch's groin, smiling indolently as he played his fingers over the downy pubic hair, catching Starsky with one shuttered lust filled eye as he did so.

"Then what are you doing? I'm here for you now. Let him go. Take your hands off him and walk over to me. It's me you want – or so you say. Maybe it isn't. But I'm standing here now, unarmed and offering you to tell me what you want from me."

Ryan's contemptuous laugh grated on him.

"You know very well it's you I want and always have. But – this – this is just too tempting. I can have him and have you too…"
"Ryan. Listen to me. Look at me. Look at me damn it."

Ryan stopped the sensual rubbing of his hands over Hutch's groin. He looked up and directly at Starsky.

Now he had his attention Starsky continued.


The echo of his ultimatum remained between them as he held his hands up in the air and walked a few paces away to face a small supporting wall. Once there he turned to face the wall fully, his body flat against its surface, his arms raised up and over his head. He looked to the side toward Ryan.

One wolf submissive to the other. Yielding. Supplication in his body, but hot hate behind his eyes.

As he waited for Ryan's move Starsky felt the pull of his partner's worried contemplation. He looked briefly again at Hutch.

For a split second he caught the entreaty in the glazed blue eyes that implored him more than any grandiose statement could ever do. He could not afford to see Hutch begging him not to do this. He quickly dropped his eyes from Hutch and closed out the image of his stricken face.

Don't try to dissuade me from this Hutch. Don't.

And when he caught the soft, mangled "No…Starsk…No" – he pressed his hot cheek harder against the cool side of the wall and swallowed convulsively.

"Ryan?" He managed to call him again, the name bitter on his tongue and clagging his throat. Even saying the monster's name was traitorous to his own ears.

And suddenly his own living nightmare was beside him, so close that he could again smell the sweetness of his perfumed skin and feel the hot breathiness of his mounting excitement on his neck and face.

An unexpected shove had Starsky grunting as Ryan's body covered his completely from behind, pushing him hard against the wall, the gun that had only so recently tormented Hutch's neck now against his own. Ryan played the barrel through the thick dark curls as he enveloped his tall body against Starsky's. One hand came up to nudge Starsky's arms and hands even further up the wall above him, pushing them up so high that his body was taut and tensed under the maximum stretch.

The resonance of the deep voice was close to him Starsky could feel the lips forming the words as they brushed the edge of his ear.

"Now what? I've left the side of your precious boy. Now what Starsky?"

"Like I said to you. We go. Just you and I – outta here. Away. Now. When we get clear of the building you gotta call the cops, an ambulance to come get Hutch. Only when I see him clear can you get what you want Ryan. We'll go. Just keep your damn word and I'll come with you."

"You expect me to believe you? After all the shit you have put me through? You and him over there? You think I believe you'll let me walk you out off this rooftop and down those stairs without a fight?" Ryan laughed against his cheek, so close Starsky could feel the deep reverberations of his chest as it pushed firmly against his back and side.
When Starsky shrugged his shoulders and nodded, his own body moved almost intimately against Ryan's and the sensation sickened him.

"Ain't no other way I can see for this to work out so that Hutch stays alive and right now that's all I can think about. One thing at a time Ryan. I can't promise you how I'll feel when we're on the road but for now, yes, believe me. I will walk outta here with you if it means you leave him alive and get him help straight away."

"Gallantry. Pure gallantry – from both of you. So admirable. So enticing. I've always wanted you Starsky. Always wanted this body, and probably your mind too in many ways – or at least your spirit, your energy." He insinuated his spare hand up and under Starsky's leather jacket, till it found the shirt buttoned low beneath and skimmed in the opening to stroke the pelted chest. "But – I could never bring myself to die for you. To die for anyone. It is your greatness weakness and your partner's too. I told him that, now I'll tell you. Hutchinson is your weakness and in turn in gives me my strength. Feel my strength all around you Starsky. Feel it."

Starsky wanted to take the blanketing stench of Ryan's "strength" and beat it senseless till it was nothing but a pulpy mass of flesh, but he forced himself to stay still, to accept for the moment the clinging, cloying body as it wrapped and pressed more tightly about his legs and upper chest. Drawing the beast to him and away from his partner was his only aim at this point.

Whether Ryan was ill enough, deluded enough – obsessed enough by him to be drawn away from his desire to destroy Hutch, Starsky couldn't be sure. Ryan had become an unreadable entity in the past months and had deteriorated to such a degree psychologically that anything and everything about him was precarious.

Behind him Starsky could feel Ryan's guard slipping. His long body twisted about Starsky's, his legs pushing between his thighs wedging them further apart as his roving hand pulled the shirt out of the confines of Starsky's jeans and belt. His lips, dry and bruised from his fight with Hutch became more wetted as he ran them over the stubbled dark cheek beneath him and licked at the neck beneath the collar he pulled aside.

Ryan's quick arousal was pushing for attention at Starsky's rear and he took slow pleasure in grinding his erection against the worn seat of Starsky's faded jeans. Groaning now as he moved in a rhythmic sway he rubbed his stiffened groin with bone crushing ferocity into the firm ass beneath him. Instantly Starsky was taken back to another time not so long ago when he had heard the same sounds and felt the same insistent pressure from this crazed man. As though reading his thoughts Ryan crooned against his neck, the constant grinding unrelenting.

"Remember how it was last time Starsky? Remember? You were unwilling last time. You rejected me, you spurned me. I had to be rough, brutal - too brutally. I had to take you unwillingly. Will it be the same this time or will you want me? Do you want me Starsky? Do you want us to be together as one? I can be gentle you know? I don't always have to hurt you. I like pain in others, I admit that. I like to watch pain. But – for you – I can be different. If you want it too. I can be different. How do you want it to be this time Starsky? Talk to me lover, tell me. Tell me how you want it when we go from here and we are all alone. Tell me."

Starsky felt the hand that had been caressing his tight lower belly descend lower. When he felt it cup the tight denim where it strained over his crotch he took two deep breaths and pushed his hips forward just enough that Ryan could perceive the movement. He waited and knew instantly Ryan had sensed the small thrust. The burgeoning prod of Ryan's erection pushed more demandingly at his ass as the hand fondling his denim clad cock and balls now moved more insistently. Starsky rocked a little more, spreading his legs and willing himself to answer the physiological
stimulation.

Closely his eyes he tried to lose himself in the pure raw physicality of the moment. Tried to relax enough to allow his manhood to do as it wanted with the external stimulation.

He was anywhere but here and with someone other than this freak. The hands lightly squeezing fondling his crotch were the hands of someone else.

Slowly but surely he felt his own cock swelling in response, hating himself at every motion that he forced his body to perform and for every flicker of his growing erection.

"I think my body's tellin' ya itself Ryan. Maybe it likes it better when you're not so rough. Maybe – " He fought against the gagging sensation as he realized what he was doing. "Maybe I can turn around…"

"No!" Ryan jumped back a little before reaffirming his firm pressure on Starsky's back. "No you stay like this for a while. I like you like this. Like you pressed hard against me, your ass pressed into my hard cock. Your face roughed up on the wall, pushed away so you can't see what I want to do to you. It's all here in my eyes. If you saw my eyes Starsky you would know how much I want to touch you more right now, how much I want to rut against you like you are my bitch, my bitch on heat beneath me. Oh yeah.. yeah – I can feel you getting hard for me lover. Feel your cock. Rocking into my hand. Hard, getting hard for me aren't you? You like it – my bitch. You dirty bitch."

This time when Ryan brought his head against his face and rubbed his lips against his abrasive cheek Starsky turned a little more toward him, his own voice now intimately close to Ryan's ear.

"Hey I'm only human. I gotta cock that likes action when it's treated nicely, treated the way I like it treated."

"And is this how your cock likes it Starsky? You like me? You like my hands doing this to you, you want more don't you?"

How deep was this man's pathology? How much should Starsky risk? The risk of course was that even in his most obsessed trance Ryan would still objectively know that Starsky hated him for what he had done to Hutch, to both of them.

Starsky turned a little more toward him and this time his words were harsh and real but laced with sexual promise.

"You know I don't want you – not you, you fuckin' bastard. You know I hate you with all my being… I want you to pay for what you have done to us, just like Hutch wanted it when he came here to get you. I can't forget any of that, can't stop hating you for what you've done – but – but – oh shit – oh fuck that - " and this time he rocked his pelvis more, pushed back against Ryan's hard rod with a definite signal of enticement, a definite invitation that he wanted more.

"But what Starsky?" Ryan's excitement was evident. Starsky's harsh threats spurred him on, the menace of his voice contrasting so seductively with his body's almost wanton betrayal. "You want this too don't you? You want the fire but you want to stamp it out too. You want me but you hate me too. I can take that. If that is all you can offer me for now I'll take it."

And then he felt it. Ryan's gun hand came down and behind him Starsky heard him fiddling with the safety catch before his holstered it. Both hands free now Ryan brought them around to the front of Starsky's groin and began unbuckling his belt, all the while moaning softly and thrusting
rhythmically into his ass from behind.

Starsky chose then to dare one final look at his partner, almost too frightened to see what he would find in his face. Almost too frightened to see his own thoughts of himself mirrored in Hutch.

Taking his fill of the beaten but achingly familiar face Starsky wondered why he was surprised to find what was there waiting for him. No condemnation. No disgust. Gentle encouragement, total understanding and deep-seated concern were all so clearly discernible even among the swollen contours and bruised contusions.

Starsky pulled his head a little further around toward Hutch, his face entirely averted from Ryan's own busy face and body. Ever so briefly he took the risk and winked at the sad drawn face. His own succinct way of letting him know he had it covered.

Of course he knew Hutch wouldn't buy it, but it made him feel infinitesimally better just seeing him manage the barest nod back in acknowledgement. Each had gotten something from the other to go on with and that had to count for something.

Starsky turned back to face the wall and garner his fortitude for the next step but not before he saw Hutch let his weary head fall, his chin to his bruised chest.

I don't blame you partner. I wouldn't want to watch me do this either if I had a choice.

Letting his extended arms slide slowly down the wall to his sides he was pleased to see the change in his position did not set Ryan off into a defensive retaliation.

"Damn arms are going to sleep. Have to drop 'em. Can't feel a thing."

Slowly, carefully and warily he turned himself around to face Ryan as he rubbed hard at his forearms, all attention seemingly focused on his discomfort.

Ryan stepped into Starsky's space and took both of his arms in his. With slow deliberate moves he began massaging his forearms and kneading his shoulders, at the same time pressing his tall body in close to Starsky's chest and pelvis.

"Take this off – take off your jacket so I can feel your body better." He began peeling away the leather and it cracked in resistance as Starsky shrugged out of it, letting it fall to the warm concrete beside him. He stood now with his shirt tail pulled out of his jeans, all his buttons undone, his belt unclasped and his fly half down.

Ryan purred deep in his throat as he surveyed the man in his grasp before pushing him roughly back toward the wall behind him with a fervoured spike of sexual hunger. The wall on Starsky's back was rough and textured and still warm from the sun. Letting Ryan ram him so firmly against its solidness he imagined he might meld right into the brick and mortar.

"Better?" Ryan crooned raggedly. "I want you to get feeling back so that you can feel me wanting you. Feel what I have for you Starsky. Look at it, touch it. Look at me, touch me."

Correspondingly Starsky moved in closer, accepting the demand for what it would achieve – an outcome. His hands still tingling with the returning blood supply he brushed against the distended mound of Ryan's khaki trousers and opening his palm he pressed it against the sizeable bulk of Ryan's cock beneath the hard fabric of his trousers. Starsky watched the lust drugged look enter the black eyes, the dark hair sweeping low across the enraptured face as his bowed his head to look down at where Starsky's hand lay.
"Oh Christ I want more. So much more from you ...." Ryan snaked his own arms behind Starsky and seized the hard rounded ass pulling it in hard against his crotch and Starsky's hand caught in between.

It was moving quickly now and Starsky brought his hands up with reckless abandon to shove roughly at Ryan's jacket which he still wore over the gun harness.

"Get it off. Why the hell ya' still go this on huh? Get it off so I can get at you."

Ryan didn't even hesitate and relaxed his arms down to allow himself to be divested of the jacket.

"Better bitch?" He smiled down at the shorter man, quickly moving back into grab at Starsky's crotch, frantically reaching to insinuate his fingers into the half-open zip.

"I want what is hiding in these tight jeans. You know I can see every trace of you through them? I've watched you so many times striding your fuckin' hot ass past me in these threadbare jeans and I can see every part of you move beneath them. You like turning me on Starsky? You like strutting around in these barely there jeans just so you can get my cock jumping? Or maybe it's not me you want to excite. Maybe not me or anyone else except him, your blond Lover Boy."

It was the first time he had mentioned Hutch since they had begun this erotic dance and Starsky flinched momentarily at the reference.

"Why ya talkin' about him hey? Why bring him up now? You wanna ruin my hard on? You wanna make me feel guilty for what my cock is crying out for here you bastard? Keep his name out of it will ya? This is just between you and my cock. Not you and me. Just your cock and mine. Both of us are hot. I know you are and you can fuckin' see and feel that I am. But hey? Keep him out of it will ya'. I feel shit enough doing this in front of him. You don't think it makes me sick that I want your hands on my cock like I do right now? You don't think I feel ashamed for imagining what I want to do to you with my fuckin' hard on? "

Ryan smiled with his twisted lips, dark desire and raw sexual need bleeding from his half shuttered eyes.

"Calm down. Look how angry and hot you get when I mention "Him". Ok – just us. Just what is between us now. I want it all though. I want what you have never given me willingly before."

"And I might just fuckin' give it you you big bastard. You want it from me – the same as I got from you in the beach house. You want that Ryan?"

His tone deadly serious and full of barely veiled menace Starsky grabbed a fistful of the dark swatch of hair into his hand so hard that Ryan jumped a little. Starsky growled into Ryan's face, the thick long hair wrenched back so hard that he could not move his head away from Starsky's snarling teeth.

"You want me to fuck you up the ass hot and fast? You want me to ram my cock into you, leave you gasping with the white - hot pole-axe sensation ramming up through your centre, leave you writhing with the force of it? You want me to rip you open from behind and ride you till you can't take anymore?"

He smiled just a little to soften what he knew was a tone too many shades in the threatening zone.

He need not have bothered. Ryan was getting off on the darkness and the vestiges of the past that were pulling Starsky into an almost sadistic role.
Ryan's grip on him tightened, pulling and grappling with him so forcibly that Starsky knew his big size and body weight was going to topple them both to the ground. Ryan rammed his pelvis against him so forcibly that Starsky lost balance and trying to right himself they both went down in a tangled heap.

Losing no time Starsky rolled to the top of the pile and straddled the bigger length of Ryan. He saw the quick flash of uncertainty in the dark eyes as the lust hooded lids opened wider. Gauging the other wolf's intentions.

Not yet…not just yet.

Never taking his eyes off the holstered gun Starsky grabbed brutally at Ryan's arms pulling them above his head. Starsky upper body strength was superior to Ryan's and he used this now in his favour.

Before Ryan had the chance to doubt him he brought his head down to his the dark head and allayed his fears.

"See - Maybe I don't want to be your bitch Ryan. Maybe I wanna be the one to give it to you. Are you man enough to take it from me? You bitch enough to want it?"

The wariness dropped away and Ryan relaxed into the hold Starsky had around him.

"Like I said before lover, what next?"

"Lets get outta here now. I'm feeling uncomfortable doin' this with you now in front of my partner. You agreed to go. Let's do it. Let's take this dirty little show someplace else more private and I can ring for help for Hutch."

Ryan looked disappointed, his crotch still a pulsing force beneath Starsky's legs.

"Shit – don't know if I can fuckin' walk like this. My cock is on fire."

Starsky pushed him further. He drew his hand once more up the rock hard column before pulling back and smiling teasingly.

"Put this away for later. We have to move - now!"

" I can't. I fucking can't. Pull me off now. Jerk me off now Starsky. Do it. Consider it a little preview of what we can have later."

"What do I look like your fuckin' whore? I just got through tellin' ya that I wasn't goin' to be your bitch Ryan. And I said I don't wanna do this in front of Hutch – now –"

"Starsky for God's sake just do it please. I'm fuckin' leakin' for you. I want this so much I'm can't take it."

On cue….now

Field tactics Week One…

Disarm, destabilize the aggressor.

Starsky's breath was hot and suggestive and he dragged the words out for maximum gain seeing the instant score his approach made, seeing Ryan's eyes closed in sexual anticipation.
"Then do it for me. Pull yourself off for me right now. Here. Where I can watch you do it, and know what you have to offer me for later. You want to show me? Do it."

He rubbed his still hard cock against Ryan's big thigh and waited, a part of him still unsure how far along the spectrum of total dis-inhibition his foe had progressed. Far enough to do this? Far enough to abandon all control of his mental and physical body to give into his sexual urges.

Far enough to be easily taken off guard and overpowered?

Never taking his smouldering eyes from Starsky's Ryan moved his hands from their imploring journey over Starsky's torso and groin and settled them on his own. Rising up a little, hoisting his ass off the ground he took the tension off his pants and unzipped his fly, releasing the waistband that had ridden low and was slung firmly across his hips. He wore briefs Starsky noted almost academically and then thought nothing more while he waited for the action to proceed. Both of Ryan's hands now plunged greedily beneath the elastic band of his briefs to delve around for his hardened cock.

Moaning now as he pulled the rock hard member free of its light confines he wrapped both hands around the length of it and began his solo journey into libidinous ecstasy. Starsky was nolonger focused on his hands, but the holster swung to the side of his chest.

"You like that big boy? You like pulling yourself off you big motherfuckin' bastard? Like playing with your cock and your balls? I like you doin' it too you dirty bitch. You gonna come for me while I watch? You gonna make that cock work for me so I can get hot watchin' you?"

Ryan was all but gone.

Lost to the world around him, drowning in his own building crescendo toward sensual climax.

In another time, in another space where the only awareness was the mounting thrill of friction on his sensitive swollen cock.

No longer – or barely aware of the man who sat astride him, he made one more appreciative deep whisper as he tensed himself for his own climax.

Running his hands down the long strong torso Starsky played a little with Ryan's left nipple , stroking and rubbing, with his right hand as his left poised above the pumping chest.

He did it quickly. Once Ryan felt the move it would be all over.

Starsky's left hand moved deftly, taking hold of the gun in a single sweep and pulling it free of the unclipped holster.

Gun in his hand now, he already had his legs poised to stand. With lightening speed he rose to his feet in one smooth clean motion while Ryan still lay beneath him, draped out on the warm hard concrete floor like some adulterous lover caught in the act.

Ryan saw the score and his hands dropped away from his self ministrations with a howl.

Venom was already filling Ryan's bulging neck veins and beating at his temples, the blood from his recently erect penis draining away to his central system and pumping furiously at the threat of attack.

Starsky backed away a step or two, clear of the long strong legs which he knew would not miss the chance to kick him down with a quick scissoring.
He held the gun with both hands pointed down at the man beneath him and shook his head in silent
disgust. Disgust for the man whose body was still a contorted parody of himself and disgust for
himself that his own actions had brought this man to this crippled, impotence.

He had seduced Ryan Lancaster with ease. And yet the game had left him more battle weary than
if he had fought him for a solid hour in hand to hand combat. Battle weary and personally
accountable for the strategies he had employed.

Never had he been so repulsed by another human being nor felt so sickened by his own actions.

Despite his own misgivings he galvinized his internal fortitude. Time enough later for self-
reproach.

If there was a later.

He watched as Ryan tried to pull himself back together and shook his head at the big man as he
tutted out loud.

"Didn't your Mamma ever tell ya' not to play with ya'self in public Ryan? It only ever gets ya' into
trouble."

Was it the gun that made the difference Starsky wondered? The gun or the shift in the flow of the
energy between them?

Either way, the scales were tipped and the balance of power swayed his way. Now he held the
upper hand, both in the cool hard set of his mind and physically in that his dominant hand was
closed around the compact piece of cool metal. His hand shook with the effort of restraining
himself from using it.

God how much he wanted to use it.

Ryan scuttled back on his ass, trying to right himself and his composure but it was still obvious
that he had been knocked sideways by the sudden turn of events. The usual self-assured contempt
had been ripped away from him. His attempt to come off as collected missed the mark as he
fastened his disheveled clothes and scooped back the heavy fall of hair from his shocked face. For
the briefest moment there was mortification in his flushed cheeks as he awkwardly manipulated his
still partially erect penis back into his pants. It didn't last long and very quickly the mask of
arrogance was back in place. Starsky wondered briefly whether this immoral creation could truly
be shocked by the act of duplicity that he had pulled on him. Ironically it was this small sign of
humiliation so quickly dashed away again that had Starsky's repulsion for Ryan hitting an all time
high.

How dare this evil incarnation be shocked by another man's strategy to win out against him.

No longer able to control his pent up rage and so unbelievably sickened by the act he had had to
perform to bring himself to this position of power Starsky worked up enough saliva in his dry
mouth and spat hard at his feet. He would have spat in his face but to go that close to him so soon
after what had just transpired was too much to bear.

Ryan looked at the glob of spit and back up to the thunderous faced man, and his eyes were filled
with condemnation.

Starsky cut back at him savagely.
"What? You stupid dumb fuck? You thought that was for real? You really think that I would want you to ever, ever touch me again?"

Ryan recovered enough to speak, the near sneer already back in place.

"You asking me or yourself Starsky? Or perhaps you're saying it to cover your ass with your blond boy over there? Wonder what he thought of your little act? Hope he was awake to see it. You did a pretty fucking good job of looking like you wanted it? That you wanted me?"

"Yeah well Ryan it sure ain't hard to play your game. Not with someone like you that's led around by the dick between his legs. You talked about my weakness before being Hutch and him mine. Well yours you sick bastard, is surely that lump of sorry flesh that you can't seem to control."

Ryan was regaining his equilibrium.

"Don't sell your own need for sexual gratification short lover. All this trouble to get my gun? All this showmanship? That was one big fucking performance just to relieve me of my weapon. I think you enjoyed it – a part of it at least if not all of it. I know damn well you did. You think I can't read another man after all these years? You think I don't know what's real and what's not?"

"So I got a hard on? Big shit. You think that makes you some sort of sex God go for it. I got my dick to stand to attention long enough to make you lose control of yourself and that's all that matters. You think you know me? Like you said you did before? You think you've got my measure? Then you must realize I would do whatever it took to take control of this barbaric situation you've staged up here on this rooftop. I don't take chances with my partner's life. I needed to be fuckin' sure I got the control straight up. No more damage is gonna' be done to him, and I sure don't fancy taking another bullet anytime soon either. If I had to watch you rub your dick for a while and whisper some sweet nothings in your ear – hell it was worth it. Christ, I'd do more than that if I thought I could get you away from Hutch. Now shut the fuck up and do as I say. I've wasted enough fuckin' time on gettin' to this point. I need an ambulance for Hutch."

He threw a frantic look at his partner and was freshly appalled at his rapidly deteriorating level of consciousness. He no longer seemed to be aware of what was happening, his head hanging rag doll style to the side and he breaths rattling and rapid.

Ryan looked over at Hutch.

"Well he might just fuckin' die waiting because I'm going nowhere with you. So unless you put a bullet in my head now, there won't be any chance of you getting help for him. You could have saved him. You had the chance - I was handing it to you. All you had to do was leave with me like we planned and there'd be an ambulance here by now."

"There was never any plan you fuckhead! I was never going to leave with you. You wouldn't have let me call for help once we were out of here. You think I would walk away and leave him on this roof like that knowing you would more than likely turn the tables as soon as you got what you wanted."

Ryan looked bemused.

"Well now you'll never know will you? Maybe I am more a man of my word than you are you fucking liar. Like I said - you've brought the situation to this now. Figure it out yourself."

Starsky caught sight of the overnight bag on the ground off to the side near Ryan's leg.

"That bag of yours. Kick it over here to me. Now!"
With the gun trained on him Ryan shoved the bag with his foot toward Starsky.

"Take it. Nothing in there that's going to help you or your boyfriend. Unless of course you want to put him out of his fucking sad misery by shoving another load of juice into him. At least he'll go out happy hey?"

"Your mouth Ryan. Shut it. Shut it or I might be tempted to disconnect your jaw from your face with a bullet from your fancy little handgun here."

Ryan smiled and shrugged.

Starsky toed the bag open. Ryan was right – what he had been hoping for wasn't there.

No cuffs. Shit no cuffs.

He saw the syringes - one empty, one still full.

He couldn't go there - not now, not yet. Not when he couldn't do a thing about it.

He leaned down carefully and pulled out the half empty water bottle that he had seen Ryan drinking out of earlier. It was warm but it was wet and it was fluid.

"Don't move from there Ryan. Not one inch either way from where you are right now."

Not taking his eyes from him he moved over to Hutch and made his first tentative move to touch him. Up close he looked even worse and with only one free hand there was so little to offer him and so much he needed. Starsky poured a little of the water on his hot head and did his best with one hand to moisten his dry cracked lips and coax him to open his mouth. He got no intelligible response.

The binds were tight on his swollen and torn up wrists but without two hands it was too unwieldy to loosen the cut of the rope. More than anything he wanted to untie him, to gather him up to him but he knew already he was risking losing control of the power he had only so recently gained. Ryan was not to be underestimated. He would need every ounce of focus to keep him in his place, to keep himself on top. He was painfully aware that the dark eyes were following his every small move with Hutch and enjoying his obvious sense of powerlessness and frustration. The sick pleasure in Ryan's eyes ratcheted up the hatred he felt for the man.

He dragged Hutch's chair and his sagging doll-like body as far into the shadowed area near the walled in vent and did his best to position his lolling neck and head into a more comfortable angle tipped back against the support of the wall.

At the moment it was as much as he could do for him.

Slipping in and out of semi consciousness Hutch no longer trusted his assessment of the situation around him. Right now he could swear that Starsky had been touching him, his reassuring voice soothing as he moved in close to him, and his familiar scent all around him. But then he couldn't be sure. Not now when he was so detached from the hot dry heat beating down and the blinding light that he could no longer bear to open his tired eyes to see.

Maybe it wasn't him but even the illusion gave him a respite from the relentless discomfort and the despair that filled him at feeling as though he had somehow let Starsky down.
In the hot quiet center where he drifted in and out of oblivion he remembered why he felt so wretched.

Ryan had been mauling him, brutishly invading his most intimate body parts, biting, pinching and squeezing. Inflicting pain was his only goal and Hutch's tender groin told him that he had been doing a damn good job of it. Then it had all stopped as quickly as it had began. The punishing, cruel hands had left him. Hutch remembered why. The image of Starsky moving to face the wall, surrendering, offering himself to Ryan settled once more into the smudged edges of his mind.

A thousand haunting images of another time and another place swamped Hutch and his ravaged body. He could not allow Starsky to do this to himself. Not again.

Weak and beaten down his pitiful body could throw up only a few words of resistance.

"No ….Starsk, No."

The words were such an effort to produce and he felt each syllable clawing on the lining of his ravaged dry throat. As soon as they were out he wanted to take them back. As soon as he watched Starsky bow his head just a little and look away he wished he'd never uttered them. They were the wrong words altogether, so hopelessly short of what he wanted to say, needed to convey. The few useless words said nothing of the sick to the gut, anguished and traumatized way he felt. His utter fear and deep deep sadness.

He was once more back in his chair at the beach house, bound and useless, unable to do anything but watch and listen to his best friend suffer. And now was not so different to that other horrific time. At least then however he had been able to call out to him, to be there for him in voice and spirit. Not a lot he knew. Not when a wild beast in the form of Ryan was ravaging Starsky. But it was something.

Now he hated his pitiful attempt to do the same. Hutch hated that his weakened state had shortchanged him on his ability to communicate with his partner, now of all times. When Starsky needed so much more than what sounded like recrimination and judgment. Too late it would seem. Too late if Starsky actions and expression were any indication. Starsky looked at him with apology in his dark blue eyes, as though he should be ashamed and guilty for his actions.

Shame and guilt and apology had no right to be etched on Starsky's face. Hutch tried to call out again to tell him that in the best way he could but nothing would come. He was still so damn tired and increasingly confused. His parched mouth and throat had no power to even swallow let alone produce coherent speech.

Starsky had faced the wall again, looked away as and Hutch knew for sure then that his ill-placed cry was taken as rebuke.

Never. Never had he wanted it to sound like that.

If only he wasn't so weary and utterly defeated he would stand up and go to him. He would tell him how proud he was of his actions, how much he loved him for his courage and his verve to win out against Ryan at all costs. To win out against Ryan in order to save him. His brave partner was risking so much for him at a great cost. A cost that must be surely cutting him to the quick so reminiscent, so agonizingly close it was to that one terrible night at the beach house.

Although he waited and hoped, Starsky didn't turn back to him again. With his face pressed to the wall, ready to take what Ryan was going to dish out to him, Hutch wouldn't get to say it. He might never get to say it…
Sometime later – he couldn't be sure how long, but when the sun and heat were still a potent force all around him, Hutch rose again to the surface to hear Starsky's voice. It dragged him up from the cooler dark hole to where he had retreated – its solid familiarity calling him back to a level of awareness. Head pounding and pulsing with bone jarring pain it took a lot of effort to prize open his swollen eyes but he wanted to see the face that went with the familiar comforting voice. As his consciousness cleared Hutch was initially confused again. He wondered why Starsky was not with him and why he was still full of pain and so confined in this tortuous cramped position.

Barely able to move his head and neck he was glad when his eyes quickly tracked to Starsky. And then the gut punch when he saw Ryan so close to him, all over him, pressing and pushing at him like an animal on heat. And then he remembered afresh what must have only been minutes before when he had slipped into partial oblivion, what it was Starsky was doing with Ryan. And then like a replaying dream that can go on terrifying and hurting, he felt anew the sadness for what Starsky was subjecting himself to in order to help him.

The fact that Starsky tried to soften it all with a wink, an attempt to convince Hutch that he was going to be fine and it was all in a day's work didn't help him one bit.

Still he knew what his partner needed from him and although it hurt him to give him permission to hurt himself – he managed to nod back.

It's ok Starsk. I understand.

It wasn't ok of course. His brave, strong partner was doing the unthinkable. Letting Ryan take him back to that windblown bedroom on the beach the night he had changed his life irrevocably.

This time though Hutch knew he would not be around to witness the agony of the proceedings. He could barely hang on any longer to his thoughts, to his perceptions around him. It was all slipping away and there was not a vestige of strength left in him to stop it.

His head dropped down heavily again. He had the last clear thought that, as hard as it was to know that Starsky was putting himself in this position of pain he at least understood why he was doing it. He was doing it all for him.

Hutch fought to wake up enough to test out the validity of Starsky's presence. Was the supporting hand on his head real, the caress of his fingers across his lips, the stroke down his fevered neck? Any of it real?

He slipped away again before he could know.

Starsky tried to tell himself that taking care of Hutch at this point in the proceedings was ill conceived and a poorly judged move on his behalf. Granted it might fulfill his own need to comfort his partner in even the smallest way. Right at that moment that was something he so desperately needed and wanted to do. However making himself feel better in the short term would solve none of their bigger problems and given the severity of Hutch's condition it would not really provide him with the real assistance he so badly required. It could even hasten his death. Hasten both of their deaths in fact. Hutch needed medical attention. He needed off this rooftop. And the only way to do that was to keep Ryan at bay and to stay on top of the power game between them.

With great effort he pulled away from Hutch and schooled himself to get his priorities in order. First thing first was to get them both out of this hellish situation alive. Releasing the damp blond
head he had so carefully supported, he pressed his hand down firmly on the bared skin of his neck, infusing Hutch with a strength he wished he felt himself.

"Soon Hutch. I'll get you outta here soon and everything will be ok. I don't know if you can understand me but I think you can sense me. This'll all be over soon. I - I – it'll all be ok."

The habitual words of promise so often uttered between them in times of acute distress died in his throat. In the end he couldn't say them. In the end he knew he couldn't promise anything.

He steeled himself to turn back to Ryan.

"We're getting off this rooftop. You and me. But unlike how you "planned" it, this way it will me who has control of the situation, not you. We're going through that door and down those steps. When we get to the street you're going to get into my car while I call for backup and medical help for Hutch. Now get up. Get up off your sorry fuckin' ass and do as I say."

Ryan looked up at the sky and down at hands, which he held out in front of him. He extended his fingers and flexed them and then turned them as though he was appraising their potential. They were his only weapons now that Starsky held his gun.

Seeing Ryan look down on his two bare hands tripped something in Starsky's memory. Hutch's words came to him then – straight out of left of center as disjointed and fragmented recollections often did.

"You know Starsk, have you ever looked at Ryan's hands? Really looked at them? I always thought they didn't look like hands that were meant to fight, to throw a punch."

Starsky looked at the body parts in question. Long and fine fingered, they belied the damage they could produce with their touch if not their power. Cold, cruel and sadistic hands. Just like the brain that governed their actions.

"Hands above your head and on your feet."

"Already told you I'm not going anywhere with you willingly so unless you down me with a bullet and drag me out of here you've got a fucking long wait ahead of you and plenty of time to watch your partner over there fade away."

"You don't think I'd do it Ryan? I don't much care about anything right now except calling an ambulance. Now last time, get the fuck on your feet, hands in the air and MOVE!"

Ryan smiled his demonic half smile and made a show of rising indolently.

He tipped his head toward Hutch where he was propped with his head up against the cooling wall.

"So you going to say your goodbyes to Lover Boy over there? Might be that you won't ever see him again Starsky. Might be that he dies before you get the help he needs."

"Hutch is gonna' be fine. He'll be alive and well when you are either dead and rottin' in the ground or in some cell."

"Looks like shit to me. Pure shit. Heat's finishing off what the drugs and the beating started. Bringing him up here close to the sun had a double bonus. Got you all weak at the knees and him baked dry."

"You're not goin' to push me to do anything now Ryan so save your stinkin' asshole breath. You
can stand there and provoke me all you like but if you don't move your feet in five seconds I'll put a bullet in your shin."

"You like what I did to Hutch in front of you Starsky? Did it turn you on watching me fondle him I wonder? Did it? Watching me hold that big soft cock in my hands and squeeze it hard like I did? He's got such golden soft skin – bruises up so nicely. You see the colors my boys left on his flank? Does it turn you on to see him messed up so badly? I think it does. I saw the way you tried to touch him up just before. Even when he's fucking three quarters dead you can't keep your hands off his pretty face and neck. He's –"

The crack of the bullet as it hit the cement next to Ryan's foot had him jolting backwards as the broken concrete particles bounced up and white dust filled the air. Ryan brought his hand to his cheek and caught the trickle of fresh blood as it snaked down his face. There was a fresh deep cut where a piece of flying debris had nicked the flesh under his eye.

Ryan rubbed the glistening blood between his fingers and chewed the inside of his cheek.

"Guess I hit a nerve. Don't like me talking that way about him do you?"

"Don't fuckin' like you talkin' anyway about him – don't even want to hear you say his name. Now the next shot isn't going to tear up the concrete – just your flesh and bone."

Ryan fingered his bleeding cheek again and moved, finally holding his hands above his head.

At the entrance to the doorway Starsky stole one more glance back at Hutch before he shoved the gun hard in Ryan's kidneys and motioned him forward.

"Open the door, slowly. Then put your hands back over your head."

Ryan gave another half assed shrug as he extended his arm forward to open the door.

He never got the chance.

The handle rattled briefly and then the heavy metal door swung outward.

"What the Fuck?" Ryan stepped back a fraction as the door swung close to him. Framed in the darkened backdrop of the cool interior of the stairwell stood Riley, gun up and face alive with tense apprehension.

All three men stared in shock at the surprised encounter and in the one second that Starsky's focus was lost Ryan rounded on him and a fresh hell broke lose.

Ryan had Starsky in a man hold, forcing his gun arm up as he brought his own hand up to snare Starsky's left wrist, the gun now pointing skyward. Ryan's height gave him an advantage in keeping Starsky's arm from bringing the gun down again and now with his big body hard up against Starsky's Ryan twisted them both so violently that the two entwined bodies went down hard. Starsky's shoulder smashed against the cement and the shaft of pain that shot up his entire upper limb loosened the tight grip his hand had on the gun.

Lifting Starsky's arm up off the cement a few inches Ryan brought it smashing down again, and the fresh round of agony had Starsky crying out and the gun clattering away from his grasp. Lying virtually on top of Starsky, Ryan crawled his body up over the top of Starsky's chest and head, his own arm extended and his fingers reaching, crawling on the cement toward the metallic prize now up for grabs.
Anticipating Ryan's intention Starsky gave a massive grunt before wrapping his arms around him and rolling him over with him, leaving the gun effectively out of Ryan's reach. Tangled together they rolled further across the expansive rooftop, grunting and cursing as they vied for supremacy, each trying to best the other beneath him.

In the same second that Starsky had lost his focus, Riley had lost his. Staggering out onto the glaringly bright rooftop, he threw his arm up across his eyes shielding them against the sudden burst of brightness that blinded him momentarily. With his own gun out in front of him and in a semi crouched posture he stood firm waiting for his eyes to adjust enough to read the situation. When he had first eased open the door Ryan's all too familiar face was almost directly in front of him and Starsky was standing closely behind. Then in an instant it seemed the two men swung away from him before crashing down on each other to the ground and rolling away, their bodies meshed almost as one huge human rolling mass.

Riley blinked hard and squinted against the light, his vision better as he stepped out further onto the rooftop. Sweeping his eyes across the expanse of the roof his eyes caught what he had first missed when his attention had been drawn to Ryan.

Hutch. Bound and still, pushed near the wall at to the far side of the doorway he sat huddled and unresponsive. Riley thought he resembled a one-man audience propped up like a lifeless mannequin to be a spectator in a show he couldn't see or hear.

Obviously this was now Starsky's battle.

Riley stepped closer to the warring men. He took aim though his hand was unsteady as he tried to keep his target in range. His voice was more commanding than he felt.

"Get up Ryan! Move away from him now or I'll shoot!"

Paying no attention to Riley's warning Ryan's grip on Starsky only seem to intensify as the two men rolled again. The hot air was filled with coarse sounds of flesh rubbing on flesh and deep throated grunts punctuated with guttural cries as muscled forearms pushed and pulled and fingers gouged and pressed.

Riley called out again, circling the men but keeping his distance so that Ryan didn't trip him into the mix.

"Move the fuck away from him Ryan or you'll have a hole in your back!"

Despite his threat Riley knew he couldn't get a clear shot of Ryan. Not while he was all over, under and around Starsky, rolling and squirming, the two bodies levering up together before being dragged down again and twisted into another tangled pile.

"Shit! Shit!" Riley paced and watched, the gun ready for any clear shot; sweat sliding into his eyes with the fevered concentration and suspended intent. He couldn't risk it but if he didn't....

Neither had the gun anymore and now it was down to a test of will and strength. Until one pulled away from the other he had no option but to let them go and wait for a clear opportunity to intervene without risking Starsky's welfare.

Ryan eyed Riley and his gun and in what was no doubt a strategic move he rolled heavily from top position so that he was underneath, Starsky now covering his body. Taken by surprise at Ryan's unexpected play, Starsky readjusted his grip on the big body. It gave Ryan the opportunity to free his arms and hands up long enough to bring them up to wrap around Starsky's throat with a vice-
like hold. Starsky pulled back at the assault but only intensifying Ryan's clawing, squeezing hands.

Starsky's face darkened with the lack of oxygen, his face contorted as he fought for breath and struggled and kicked against the body beneath him.

Cursing and circling Riley knew his options were all bad but the need to do something soon was imperative. Either he took a shot, threw himself into the fray or allowed Starsky to be choked into unconsciousness if not death.

Deciding on taking aim at Ryan's bulk all but blanketed by Starsky's now contorting body, he looked once at Hutch before cocking the gun.

Was he seeking approval for what he was about to do? Some guidance from his mentor? Either way Hutch could offer him nothing now. This was his decision and he was truly on his own in making it. He felt the same nerve wracking uncertainty he had on the night he had stood in the doorway at the beach house, Ryan in his sights and the carnage of his actions strewn about the room.

His deep thoughts were torn apart by a sudden howling scream from Ryan. For one insane second Riley faltered, thinking for sure that he had lost it completely and had fired the gun without being aware of doing so.

He jumped forward, the gun still at the ready as Ryan spat out another deep cry his head arching up and his shoulders falling back against the flat cement ground. His strangling hands fell away from Starsky's throat. Gasping for air, coughing wildly Starsky pulled himself up off the top of Ryan onto his knees.

"What the hell? ...." Riley stuttered.

Starsky pulled back further and brought his hands up to clutch at his throat. His hands smeared blood, bright fresh blood all over his neck and Riley started at the sight of it.

"Starsky! You're bleeding – how - ?"

Gagging and coughing and sucking in desperate mouthfuls of air Starsky shook his head and held up his hand waving away Riley's concern.

Then Riley saw it and knew what Starsky wanted to tell him.

Not him. Not his blood.

Ryan. Ryan's blood and lots of it was pooling around him as he writhed on the ground moaning, splinting his side with both hands.

It was then that the sunlight caught it. The unmistakable metallic glint of a knife. Starsky's knife that Riley knew he was sometimes in the habit of wearing in his ankle strap. The recollection of Starsky disappearing into his bedroom back in his apartment came to Riley and he understood now what Starsky had been doing. Strapping on the concealed knife.

No longer in Starsky's ankle strap the knife was now imbedded deep in Ryan's gut.

Starsky sucked in a lungful of air through his burning throat and gave a half wretch half cough.
His view of the world remained speckled with black and red dots and which was only just starting to come back into focus. He was still on his knees having pulled his body back from where Ryan had held him in a forced bear hug before tumbling off to the side of the now still and gasping body.

Still clutching his hand tainted with Ryan's blood to his throat he spoke in a roughened voice to his downed opponent.

"Like the - the feel of that Ryan? Like the feel of my knife in your fuckin' guts - you bastard?"

He leaned in close and hovered over the top of him to ensure eye contact. Pure hate was carved in every hard-set feature of his face.

"Maybe I should - twist it a bit – bit –" he gagged and choked "…more for you? Really set you off screamin'. Christ, it's what I should do…..want…want to do. What you – fuckin' deserve."

He could barely manage the words before a paroxysm of harsh coughing overtook him and he fell back a little battling for air.

Ryan eyed him back with equal measures of hate but said nothing.

Riley was now at his side, down on his knees.

"You ok? You 're not hurt anywhere else?"

"No – just ….can't breathe yet. Got to get my breath back for a moment. Shit – "

Still breathless from the fight, the effort of trying to extract enough oxygen from his shallow gulps of air left his face contorted and strained. He ran his hands down his throat trying to relax his tight throat muscles.

Riley supported his back as he coughed but Starsky waved him away, motioning instead with his chin over toward Hutch.

"Don't worry – 'bout me… get Hutch. Go – untie him. Lie him up against – the wall - and – put my jacket – it's over there – his head – under his head. "

Yet another cough stopped the flow of his words as Riley nodded, touched his shoulder and stood to go to Hutch.

"Don't worry I'll take care of him. Stay here till you can breathe better. You look like you're about to keel over. I'll get Hutch off the chair and more comfortable before I go down and call in help. You can wait with him and watch Ryan."

Relieved that Riley was able to go to his partner while he was wary of leaving Ryan's side, Starsky watched him approach the still unconscious Hutch.

Control of his breathing was returning gradually and the dizziness that had nearly claimed him was all but receding. He had to clear his head and formulate the next steps.

He looked again at Ryan, who remained still except for the shudders of pain that were rippling through his body from the deep knife wound. Although he was heavily compromised and dazed with heavy pain, Starsky would have preferred to have him cuffed to some solid fixture until Riley could call in some back up.
Automatically his hand went to reach for his gun and met with air. Christ he wished he had his Beretta.

Ryan's gun? The gun he had dropped – shit.

He needed to retrieve the gun wherever it was and get Ryan covered. He looked over at Riley where he was kneeling beside Hutch's chair, his own gun now holstered as he worked away quickly at the binds on Hutch's wrists. Looking about the expanse of rooftop his eyes could not pick out the grey gun on the dull white landscape. He tried to recall where it might have ended up during their extended wrestling match.

"Riley. Riley. I – need – your gun." He could barely throw the words across the distance so that the younger man could hear him.

Riley stopped his progress and looked up at that the call. He had successfully thrown the ropes aside and was in the process of trying to gently hook Hutch under the armpits to lay him on the ground. It was awkward and difficult with Hutch being so tall and such a dead weight in his current condition. Starsky grimaced at Hutch being pulled and maneuvered so uncomfortably. So used was he to being the one to move Hutch around whenever he was hurt or injured, his body and its proportions as familiar to him as his own, instinctively he felt the pull to be taking care of his partner. A quick glance down at Ryan found him moaning deeply with his eyes closed. With a knife buried in his gut and his body weakened by their extended wrestling bout, he didn't see Ryan going any place soon.

Starsky called out as best he could with his throat still catching painfully. He could only manage disjointed phrases.

"Riley! Wait – let me help you move him - need to - support him up against the wall. His ribs …he can't breathe well - I also need – your gun – over here –"

It would take only a moment for them both to work together to get Hutch into a better position for his comfort and breathing and then he would get back and cover Ryan.

As he took his weight on his feet, his legs still felt unsteady beneath him. Feeling like he was about to fall he went to grab at air when an unyielding arm grabbed at him first. Held upright and pinned against a chest he was no longer at risk of falling. He smelled the bloodied metal of the blade before he felt the press of it on his neck. The thick forearm wrapped about his chest urging him roughly forward a few jerky steps.

Starsky wondered if he would ever forget the picture of shock on Riley's face. He had stopped in his tracks with his efforts to move Hutch, mouth wide with shock. His face was so pale and bloodless that Starsky thought he was going to be sick.

In contrast, Starsky knew his own face would hold a completely different expression. He had the bizarre desire to laugh out loud at the sheer absurdity of it all.

Fuckin' unbelievable! Just fuckin' unbelievable Starsky!

Was there no end to the living nightmare that was Ryan? What was this whole living hell he had been thrust headlong into? He was starting to feel like he had stepped into one of his favored late night horror flicks. He should have realized he couldn't really win out against Ryan. He no longer seemed human, but an evil force that defied reality, a man who seemed to defy the parameters of normal life.
Behind him Ryan breathed raggedly into his ear as he held the knife firmly in place.

"Yeah well – yet again as a cop you're off your game Starsky. Told you before – Hutchinson makes you weak. Should of let Junior over there handle your partner."

"Nah wrong again asshole. My real weakness is that I keep thinkin' like a damn cop and not like the man who does what he FUCKIN' needs to do! I should've jammed that blade in your eyeball when I had the chance you son of a bitch."

With his body pulled back against Ryan's front Starsky's hand brushed against the warm sticky wetness behind him. He recoiled at touching something so integral to Ryan - his life force. He did note however that the the bleeding was substantial.

"Still at least I get to see you squirm with the pain of the wound. Ya' shouldn't have pulled the knife out Ryan. Dumb, stupid move. First rule in basic first aid. You could bleed out in no time now."

Ryan's last stand was not without effort and Starsky could feel the tremors running through his big body as he fought back the excruciation of the gut wound.

"I'll last and the knife is working better for me on your neck than it was in my gut."

And yet the statement lacked power and Ryan's usual contemptuous surety.

He continued propelling Starsky toward the stairwell doorway and called out to Riley weakly.

"Get down on your knees beside your blond friend there but first get that gun off me and slide it across to here. I don't want a repeat performance of your rookie ballistic skills. You don't get to be the hero of the day this time Riley."

Starsky directive was harsh and firm.

"No! Riley. Don't you fuckin' dare give that gun over to him."

"You want your throat slit from ear to ear Starsky? You want Junior there to have to live with that?" He asked the same of Riley. "You prepared to watch me sever his jugular? I'm damn good at severing arteries. Made short work of Dobson's when I slit his wrists. Took a little longer to die than Starsky will with this nice plump jugular – but it still isn't pretty for you to see."

Riley started at Ryan's admission of Dobson's death.

"You killed him. I knew it. I always knew it."

"Want do you want a fucking gold star? Just know that I'll do the same with Starsky if you don't hand me that gun."

"Don't listen to him Riley. He won't kill me. Take your best shot Riley! Take it. I don't want him walking away from here."

Starsky could see the pain in Riley's young face. The agony of indecision and terror so clearly tearing him apart.

"He's mad Starsky. Insane. He'll kill you. Even if I keep the gun I can't get a shot at him with the knife on your throat. I have no choice."
"Listen Riley. Are you listening to me? You give him that gun and he'll find a way to use it against us both. Right now he has me – not you. He doesn't have you Riley. You can take a shot. Please Riley – take your best shot and save Hutch."

Ryan was pressing the knife harder now as he forced their slow progress to the door. Starsky knew the stink of blood filling his nostrils was no longer just the blood from Ryan's wound but his own as it trickled down his neck.

Riley saw Starsky's blood too.

"Starsky? I can't – don't make me – I can't let this happen. Hutch would – if you died like that - it would…"

There were tears in his eyes and his face was crumpling under the stress.

Sadly Starsky understood the kid's agony.

Riley couldn't risk Starsky's life in the quest of trying to take Ryan down. If Starsky were to die at the hands of Ryan this way, it would leave Hutch with the realization that his gruesome death might have been averted. Starsky understood that Riley knew as well as he did it that for Hutch to wake up to that…to find his body sprawled in a bloody heap with his throat cut….. It would be the end of him.

It was just too much to ask of Riley.

Starsky spoke quietly and carefully to him. It was obvious the young cop was breaking under the pressure.

"Ok. Its Ok. I understand. I understand Riley. You don't have to do it. You don't have to take a shot."

But even if he doesn't take the shot there's still the gun. Ryan wants his gun and then Riley's life will be on the line too.

"Forget his gun Ryan, forget Riley. You've got me, it's all you need."

Ryan didn't answer and Starsky could feel his body still and intent behind him – tensing and preparing to move. The next words surprised and confused him.

"Bend down with me as I go or you'll be the one bleeding out. Bend now."

Pulling them both down in a semi squat Starsky half wondered if he was fading out from blood loss. Then he felt Ryan reaching down and across. The movement had him grunting with fresh pain.

"Riley?"

Starsky called but could see that Riley was almost paralyzed with his own fear, the gun still up but his arm shaking noticeably as he tracked Ryan's moves.

Then he heard the click behind him and figured it out.

Ryan had just located and retrieved his missing gun.

"Forget your gun Junior. I've got my own weapon and it feels so nice in my hand. Just as nice as
having Starsky's throat under the knife in my other hand."

Riley's eyes darted to Starsky and in them Starsky could see that the situation was all too much for the young cop. He was neck deep not just in a dangerous situation but also a highly emotional one. The game plan just kept shifting and sliding beneath him and he was losing orientation fast.

"Your fuckin' odds just keep getting better and better don't they Ryan? So now you have me, a knife and a gun – "

"And you. I've still got you don't forget that Starsky."

"Yeah that's right – me. Like I said, then we can go now. Leave Riley – he's just a kid. This isn't about him, this is about you and me. You've got two choices Ryan and you better settle on one fast. Hand yourself over now or take me with you."

"Hand myself over? After all of this? After what I've waited for and gone through?"

Ryan attempted a laugh – desperate and halting.

With each word he was edging closer to the doorway and with his body pressed hard up against his back, Starsky felt the vibration of his pain filled body and the tension in his limbs as he poised for something. It was not knowing what that 'something' was that had every hair on Starsky's neck standing on end.

"Your choice Ryan. You'll have a chance of living if you get that bleeding stopped. Even if you live through this part Ryan you're gonna' need surgery and soon or you'll be dead by the morning. Take the knife away Ryan and drop the gun. It's a dead end for you either way if you try to walk away from here and go under someplace with no medical attention. You're screwed – screwed whether you run now or pull me along for the ride."

Ryan attempted to suppress a deep groan but Starsky felt his torso buckling as he fought against the urge to bend over and support his wound.

"You know I'm not going to make it much further with you as a human millstone around my neck. You know I'm on borrowed time to get clear of here. You'll only slow me down. But you're not about to make it easy on me are you Starsky? You'll fight me tooth and nail when I go to run."

Starsky merely shrugged and felt the knife's edge again as he raised his shoulders.

"Your call Ryan."

"There's another way. I could swipe this blade across your neck now and drop you in seconds. No Starsky to drag with me, no Starsky to stop me making a break."

"You won't do it. You won't kill me. You're too sick, too entrenched - too - just too completely fucked in the head about what I am to you. So that brings you back to just two choices Ryan. Make one."

Starsky's goading declaration appeared to snap Riley out of his immobility.

"Starsky don't provoke him. For God's sake just let him go."

Ryan's voice, weaker with each moment was soft and almost caressing against his ear.

"But you know you won't ever let me go will you Starsky? It's not in your nature is it? You'll stop
me at whatever price. I can't let you do that Starsky. I can't."

Starsky heard the resignation in the pained voice before the body pressed so closely to his once more tensed. He could feel that Ryan was garnering his wilting reserves.

His arm, the arm that held his gun dropped away and Starsky exhaled with the sudden release of forced pressure. He could feel Ryan's shoulder extending back as he rattled with the door. His other hand, the one which held the knife remained steadfastly in place with the blade scraping skin as a reminder that it was still deadly close to its target of a vulnerable pulsing jugular. The door grated, hinged metal on metal, as it levered open a little behind them.

Ryan was going to make a break. Starsky readied himself for his own move.

He wanted to make eye contact with Riley one last time to reassure him, to steady him enough to do whatever he might be able to do to help him in the next few crucial moments. However the younger cop's eyes were fixated on what was happening behind Starsky's back. He was zeroing in on Ryan's hand – Ryan's gun hand. Starsky felt the blood rush into his head, alarms clanging in his temple, every cop instinct in him on red alert.

Ryan's lips were brushing his hair, the deep voice so close that his words were a whispered kiss on his cheek. Starsky held his ground, saving his move for what really mattered and fought down the need to recoil again - always - from the repulsive touch.

"What you told Riley is right. I wouldn't have used the knife on you. The day I stabbed you in that alley you became mine Starsky. The wound you carry on your side is my mark. Mine. I could never kill you. I can't kill what is mine, but I have to go and I have to make certain that you won't stop me."

"You'll never make it Ryan. You'll be dead before the evening falls."

"You lived. You lived through the night, lying in a filthy infested alleyway where I left you."

"I lived because Hutch found me. I lived because I got medical help. You can't do the same when you're running from the law Ryan. You're gonna die."

"I'm going and you won't stop me."

"As soon as you drop that knife from my neck you know I'll round on you Ryan. You know it. Either you'll have to knife me now or shoot me when I turn because I'm not fuckin' lettin' you walk away from this."

"You will. You'll have no choice."

The clinging presence of Ryan shifted from Starsky's back at the same time that the sharp press of the blade lifted away from his throat. A freedom, a release of sorts – but only until Ryan's next words filled him with dread.

"Remember what I said to you? Your greatest weakness is my strength."

NO!

Starsky went to pivot, to dive at Ryan and get hold of his arm. He understood with cold certainty what was about to happen.

He never got to move even a fraction because three things happened in quick succession.
The discarded knife clattered and bounced on the concrete at Starksy's feet, then almost straight after the knife fell the door opened to its widest as Starksy felt its edge knock his shoulder and heard Ryan step backwards. The last sound trumped the other two. A blast from Ryan's gun shattered the air behind Starksy's shoulder. The whistling bullet had Starksy forgetting all about turning around. All he wanted to do now was to run forward.

Forward toward Hutch. Forward to where the bullet had been directed.

One, two, three.

Three things that changed everything.

Starsky saw them all lined up in his mind for months later, like some hideous short list to prompt memory in a test.

On the count of one Starsky gets to live, on the count of two Ryan gets to run and on the count of three Hutch gets to die.

Starsky would always remember the sequence of the events but not the sounds that went with them.

He would never be able to call back the sound that the gun blast had made, nor the sound of Ryan finally making good his escape through the door. The sounds were lost to him but not the clarity of the emotion that they elicited and the visual aftermath that they caused.

The sight of his partner's body being slammed in the chest with a bullet as he sat slumped already unconscious was hard to compete with after all. Hutch's body was thrown back violently as he sat in the chair, his lifeless arms that Riley had just released from the tight binds twitched wildly with the force of the bullet's impact. His body jolted once then twice with the sheer physical assault of the attack before the chair tipped and swayed but held its ground. Its occupant however was not so lucky at holding his center. Starsky had only enough time to watch the blood bloom and spread across Hutch's chest before his partner toppled sideways and crashed heavily to the ground.

Riley's cry was deep and soulful, the reverberation of it bouncing across the concrete before it flew away into the afternoon sky. He had dropped to his hands and knees crawling the last few feet toward the bleeding body.

In contrast Starsky's scream was so very different, something silent and primeval. It filled his chest and his lungs but found no outlet. Exquisite agony trapped inside of him. It ripped and clawed at his insides demanding release. In that one terrible moment when he saw Hutch's body slam backwards he felt his own flesh and blood being pulled asunder as though his centre, his heart was being torn from his chest.

His greatest weakness was dying in front of him, if not already dead and his own life force was ebbing away with him.

Ryan had done the very thing that would give him clear passage.

He had made Starsky choose between the man he hated the most and the person he loved more than any other.

Of course Ryan had known.

For Starsky there was no choice.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH
Dealing with Starsky just became Riley's biggest problem.

That is, since Ryan's gun blast had blown his world up just a whole lot more.

Of course he shouldn't have expected anything less in this ongoing horror show or anything more of Starsky under the circumstances.

He saw it in Starsky's face as soon as the shot had whistled past his ear and he watched his partner crash sideways to the ground.

It had blown Starsky's mind.

Traumatic events were like tornadoes. Impacting on everything in their path. Catalysts for transformation their tremendous stress could cause dramatic shifts in human behaviors, thinking and responses.

Riley had studied the syllabus in his training courses at the Academy. However like so many things in life, experiencing gut-wrenching trauma first hand was something for which he could never be prepared, no matter how many classes he took in the subject. As a cop, even as a relatively inexperienced one Riley knew enough about trauma to understand that Starsky was reacting to the shock of what had just happened to his partner. And he was reacting by raining down on him - hard.

Riley had thought that making a choice was a big enough problem for him.

He had been torn in half emotionally by wanting to stay with Hutch for what was most likely his last minutes on earth and needing to run for medical help. Medical help that he felt was futile anyway. His choice to do either right at that instant took second place to dealing with the onslaught of Starsky.

In the mind lurching void that immediately followed Ryan's heartless act, Riley had walled himself off from everything but the body beneath his hands. When he was nearly knocked off balance by Starsky descending upon him in a screaming storm it took all his strength to stop himself tumbling heavily onto Hutch.

"Starsky! Jesus! Stop it! Stop pulling at him. Don't – just don't. Let me do this. I'm trying to staunch the bleeding. Don't try to shove me away."

"Move away! MOVE AWAY! Get your fuckin' hands offa' him! Get off my partner! Get away from him."

Pushing and pulling at Riley he attempted to wedge himself as close to the twitching, shaking form as he could, and to effectively disengage Riley's stubborn hold on him.

"No…No…. Please No. Hutch – Hutch!" Starsky's cries were echoes of a wounded animal.

The dark blue eyes said it all. Riley could see in them the shock and fear, but also the denial. He wasn't sure that Starsky was dealing with the real situation in front of them both or whether he was reacting to his own skewed version of reality.

"This is not the time to push me 'round Starsky! Look what's happening here – we've got to get some pressure on this wound and get help urgently."
"Just move away Riley. You've done enough. He's my partner, let me hold him. He just needs to know I'm here – that's all. He'll be ok if he knows I've got him. Hutch – Hutch its me and everything is gonna' be fine now you hear?"

"Starsky please! There is no way Hutch's is going to be fine if we don't control this bleeding. Don't do this to me – don't do this to Hutch. I need you. You can't lose it now. The wound Starsky – push on the wound with your palm. See – look? It's – it's – bad. It's real bad Starsky. He's taken a bullet near the top of his chest and there's no damn exit wound. Christ, the blood is just oozing out."

"You don't know what he needs – you can't help him. Don't – Oh Christ, oh Jesus Christ…Hutch. Hutch. I'm here, I'm here babe. It's all ok now."

"No – no it's far from ok Starsky. One of us has to get help and fast. Now you want me to go or will you? But – if you stay you have to clamp down on the bleeding and keep him still."

Starsky stared at him as if he was insane.

"You think I'd leave him like this? You think I'd leave him all alone lying here like he is – so hurt, so – so - frightened."

"Alright. I know you want to be with him. I'll go – give me your car keys – do you still have them?"

Starsky seemed to have forgotten about Riley again and had become immersed in talking soothingly to Hutch as he stroked his fine hair off his forehead. Riley still held one hand on the wound, appraising Starsky with concern.

Riley could see that Starsky was approaching the scene from a whole different viewpoint.

One far removed from the severity of the situation.

"Aw babe, your head is bleeding again – shit that fall opened up your cut again. There's blood all in your eyes...and there's blood here too, on your chest. The bullet must have hit you Hutch. I'll – let me just get it. There, that's better. I got the blood outta ya eyes, but there's too much blood here on your chest for me to wipe away. Here - let me get my shirt off Hutch so I can wipe the blood of your chest, clean you up some ok? You're safe now. Ryan's gone – he's gone. He can't hurt you anymore. You can wake up now. Open your eyes Hutch and show me you can understand. Please Hutch."

Riley let out a howl of frustration.

Smaller in musculature than Starsky and no match for his physical or tactical strength Riley was surprised by his own show of command. With one hand still on Hutch's bleeding wound, he wrenched Starsky violently with his other.

"Starsky! Starsky listen to me. Forget about his comfort! This isn't about Hutch's comfort for God's sake! This is about saving his life. His life! We need to worry about this entry wound. I've got to go now – we're out of time. I've got to radio in for medical help. I need you to try to staunch the bleeding why I run to your car. Give me your car keys. It's the only damn chance he has now."

Starsky was sobbing softly, touching Hutch with caressing strokes and pats, wiping gently at his bloodied face.

"I need to hold his head and tell him I'm here for him."
"Oh God Almighty! Starsky! Will you – look at me – look at me! Ryan has put a bullet in Hutch's upper chest. He's expiring fast. Too fast. We've got minutes maybe less to get a paramedic team here so stop acting crazy on me will you? Give me your fucking car keys or I -"

"Can't you see I've gotta' get him comfortable? I need to lift him up and get him someplace more comfortable. This sun is still so strong, he's burnin' up and so thirsty and dry. All this blood – all this fuckin' blood....."

"Stop it will you! You can't move him. You know that. There's no way can you move him. Forget about the freakin' sun - he's not hot Starsky. Look at him, feel him - he's cool to the touch. He's losing too much blood. Push down here hard. Really hard, don't be afraid of hurting him. That's it. You've done this so many times before Starsky. Pull it together for God's sake. Here…. – yes that's it. Now I've got to go. I'll be as quick as I can. Look – look at me. You have to concentrate for Hutch. Hold it together for us both. I know I was the one losing it before and I'm sorry – it's so damn easy to break apart with all of this. Now you've got to be strong – as strong as you have been all through this. Don't – don't lose it on me now. Just keep that famous Starsky strength in place will you?"

His words seemed to penetrate the wall Starsky had put between him and reality.

"So much blood, so much blood. Oh Christ the bullet wound - its placement - Riley look where it is. Oh fuck, fuck...someone has to help him."

"I know, I know that. And I'm going to get it. Now will you look at me and let me know that you're going to be able to do this while I'm gone?"

"Just go will ya'? Ya' think I don't know what he needs? Ya' think I don't know how to take care of him? Go already. Here - take the damn keys – I don't even know – I don't know if I even locked it? I don't think - Just get the fuckin' ambulance here. I won't move him and I've got the wound covered. He's gonna' be fine though – aren't ya' partner? You're just tired and hot and dry from this fuckin' bakin' rooftop."

Riley never heard the last words Starsky uttered. He had wasted enough time already trying to make Starsky snap out of it. He had to make the break to call in help and just prayed that when he had gone Starsky's cop survival instincts would kick in and he'd do what was second nature to him with a critically wounded person at his feet.

Disappearing through the rooftop doorway where only minutes earlier Ryan had done the same, Riley could no longer hold back his own tears. One of them had to go for the ambulance and of course the job fell to him. He had done the right thing in leaving Starsky have his last private moments with Hutch but God it hurt for him to have relinquished the chance to have done the same.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH

Just the two of them now.

No one else – just him and Hutch.

No more Ryan to taunt and torture and destroy.

No Riley to take his place at Hutch's side, to put his hands on Hutch's body, to tell him how to manage his best friend, how to care for him, how to – to – save him.

Riley had said this wasn't about comfort, that it was about saving Hutch's life.
Didn't Riley know that for him it was always about Hutch's comfort? When Hutch was hurt, frightened or lost in the world – it was his job to provide him the comfort that he needed. His job, and his own need to do so.

It was always about comfort for Christ Sake! Always.

He could do that, he was good at that. He was the Fucking Master of providing his partner with the comfort he deserved and needed. No one knew Hutch like he did and visa versa. His hands alone could settle the hottest raging fever, unravel burning knots of pain, quell agitated nerves and calm the fieriest flame of violence in Hutch. Just with a touch.

How often had other cop's joked that each of them held the power of the 'laying on of the hands' for the other? They joked to cover the intensity and the power of the truth of the phenomenon, something that was so indescribable it was unearthly.

Something that the two friends simply accepted as fact. It was what they shared between them.

Starsky looked down at his hands now.

A constant trickle of blood passed through his fingers, welling up beneath his palm and sliding out to shimmer and track down over the dorsum of his hand and wrist as he held fast to Hutch's blood covered, chest. Already his arm and wrist was stiff from the sustained pressure and static position and his hand was cramping up. He registered the sensations but ignored them.

His blood coated hand and wrist, Hutch's blood coated chest, the whiter than white face, the blue lips and the ailing rasping breaths all came together to form one terrifying snapshot.

This wasn't comfort. His hands weren't comforting any part of Hutch.

Riley was right. His left hand numb with the strain, now joined by his right hand to double the effort was providing nothing but pressure. Enough firm and sustained pressure to hold back the precious blood, to keep enough in the beaten depleted body so that Hutch's heart could pump effectively, so that his brain received enough oxygen, and his vital organs were perfused.

But his hands weren't doing anything else but pushing down.

Who the hell was he fuckin' foolin here anyway?

Only himself it seemed. Riley was gone now and he had known anyway.

He had tried to tell him when he had fought Starsky off from pushing him from Hutch's body.

This was not about comfort, but about saving.

Such a difference. Such a terrifying difference. Starsky didn't want it to be about saving his partner. Saving was about finality, black and white, success or failure. Comfort was about gradients. Smoothing and softening.

When he had first fallen down beside Hutch's stricken body and tried desperately to shove Riley away, it had been clear to him what he needed to do to make it better. If he could just hold Hutch, touch him and talk to him as he always did – it would be ok. He would do what he always did for his partner whenever he had been hurt or injured and they were waiting for medical help to arrive. It was just about time. Time between now and when the ambulance arrived to take him to hospital and make him feel better. They'd done that gig so many times before in their dangerous, fucked up lives of law enforcement.
But Riley had yelled at him and tried to break through his denial. This was about saving – trying to save Hutch from dying.

Saving, saving was a word unto its own. If he had to save Hutch, then there was so much more involved. There was the razor sharp line between saving him and not saving him. What if he couldn't save him? What if these two bloodied shaking hands pushing down and holding tight weren't enough to save his partner? What if he failed Hutch? Failed himself?

And with saving the issue of time was so much more crucial. A critical factor – just as Riley had driven home.

There was so much more than just waiting for the ambulance to come and taking Hutch to hospital. There was the difference between keeping him alive and not keeping him alive until they arrived. And then even if medical help did arrive in time – what chance did they have to keep Hutch saved? How could he then trust them to go on doing what it took to keep his partner alive until he got to the hospital? What if they ran out of time? And then at the hospital there would be surgery. Saving was a long drawn out pursuit and time was its curveball. How much time was involved before the medical powers could say that Hutch was really saved, completely saved? That he wasn't going to – to -

Die! Die – face it, say it, believe it.

This wasn't about saving either! This was about hoping against hope that Hutch didn't die. That was all that was happening now.

Riley had known it – even young, fresh-faced Riley had faced the truth as soon as Ryan had fired that round at Hutch. That was why he had stopped and looked wide eyed with horror to what was happening behind Starsky's back. He had known that Ryan was going to take Hutch down. And when he had Riley had known immediately that the dire situation had just become catastrophic.

How can he live through this?

Already so weakened, so destroyed and now – a bullet to the chest?

Starsky's soft sobbing turned to spluttered cries of anguish. The denial was falling away, crumbling from under him, leaving him standing grief stricken and disempowered in the face of the truth.

Hutch was beyond comfort. No amount of comfort could change the situation for him now.

Hutch was dying.

And Starsky couldn't even hold him in his arms while he died. His arms and hands were too busy, occupied with holding back the inevitable descent of the specter of death. He could feel it perched on his trembling shoulders, like a black vulture crouched low and menacing, poised to dive in and feast hungrily at the first sign that Starsky was losing the battle to keep it at bay.

I won't let it have you. I won't let it take you Hutch. It has to get past me first and I won't give up, I won't give you up. You're gonna keep on breathing and keep enough blood in ya' body to stay alive. Nobody and nothin' is takin' you away from me Hutch. Never!

The words were only for him. His personal mantra against the darkness.

He wanted to scream the words out into the open, fling them at the universe but he couldn't risk Hutch hearing them, hearing the chilling fear in his voice. Hutch had only to know that he was there for him, that he would take care of him – until -
"So sorry Hutch – bet you're wonderin' where my hands are huh? Why I ain't holdin' ya. I can't – I can't comfort you babe. I want to touch ya' face and hold ya' hands in mine, stroke your back – all those things I know ya secretly like me to do when you're in pain and scared. I can't do it – none of it now. I have to – have to – to save you Hutch. Gotta save you babe by keeping pressure on this wound. Means I can't – means I don't have a free hand to do what I need to do for you. I know you'd feel it if I did. Like you always do when you're knocked out cold or hurt real bad and unconscious. I know you'd feel me here beside you, feel my touch, know it was me. But now – I can only do this. This is important see? You need this blood so you can stay with me and I ain't lettin' anymore out of your body than I can help. Ya' hear me Blondie? I'm gonna make sure you get to live ok?"

His knees were aching from the concrete and his back was knotted from sustained bending over Hutch's chest but he would not allow himself to move his hands from this protective hold on his partner's rapidly beating chest. If his hands could not touch and soothe he would make damn sure that they did the best job they could do to stop the flow of life force from his partner's chest. Hutch's pulse fluttered weakly in his pale throat – so weak, so rapid. Starsky swallowed against the memory of all the times he has watched that pulse jump strong and steadily as his partner had concentrated hard on questioning a suspect or facing down a perp in some seedy hotel. Always so strong, always so vital. No strength now, no power, no vitality, no – no life.

The face he knew so well was whiter by the minute, pale beyond the palest he had ever seen Hutch, and so very still.

"Can you hear me babe? Can you hear anything? I always think you can in times like this, so I'm gonna keep talking to you now ok? I know you feel weak, I know you want to go someplace where there's no more pain, no more fear – but – but – Hutch I can't let ya' do that ya' know? I can't let ya' leave me? Not now – not yet babe. It's too soon for you to leave me. We got a whole lot more life to live you and I. So much more. We've come through all of this shit and – you're not gonna leave me alone now. Selfish I know. Listen to how selfish I sound? But right now I can't help it. I'm so terrified of you – goin' away. Just please, please, keep breathin' and tryin' – just a bit longer till the help arrives. They'll come like they always do you know – pushin' their way in and jabbing ya' with needles and takin' ya' pulse. They'll get fluid into your veins so fast that this blood you've spilled – it'll mean nothin'. Nothin'. They'll make me move aside like they always do – and how they make you do too. We're both public enemies no 1 to the paramedics like that aren't we Hutch? Always gettin' their way – always thinking we know best for each other.

Ya' just gotta hold on – for me. For me Hutch. Because I'm – I'm too scared to live without ya'. I don't know how to live a life without you anymore babe. You're – so much a part of me."

Exhausted by his long monologue he slumped a little to the side and his hands slipped a little off Hutch's chest.

He looked down to readjust their position.

Perhaps he was losing perspective, perhaps he was hoping against hope, – perhaps Hutch was simply running out of blood, but the slow insidious ooze bubbling from the bullet hole seemed to be slowing, the blood around the site, clotting and sticking more to the skin as though the never ending fresh supply was drying up.

Tentatively Starsky moved his fingers, gently spreading them a little apart and trying to see beneath his hand.

The flow had definitely slowed a lot in the last minutes.
He removed his top right hand and shaking out his arm to free up the stiffness he dared to shift if from Hutch's chest to his face. He cupped the side of it carefully sliding his hand under the cheek and neck that was pushed to the concrete and cradling it gently he held it away from the hard surface. Although the concrete still held heat, Hutch's face was like a block of ice.

The temperature of Hutch's skin sent a fresh wave of terror through Starsky.

Don't think about what it means. Think about keeping him alive with your presence.

"Can you feel my hand here Hutch? Here on your cheek, on your neck? You feel so cold Hutch – your skin is icy so take my warmth. Feel it. Can you sense it there against you? That's me Hutch. Me. I'm here right next to you buddy, close as I can get to you. It feels so good to be able to hold you now, even just a small bit like this. I'm gonna sit down now, take my weight of these old knees and sit right up close to you. Sit here with you and hold your face, touch your head. Still got my hand on that hole in your chest so don't worry about that – but for now it feels right to be able to finally touch ya'."

How long had Riley been gone now?

How long before the ambulance came?

The variant of Time. It felt like Starsky's enemy.

The factor that could make or break every event in life – or death. The factor that could mean Hutch would die.

"If I could stop time Hutch – stop it for you now, you know I would. I could stop it here so that you stayed just like you are till the medics got you stabilized. Better still – I'd go back in time. I'd stop time when Ryan took aim at you and I didn't know he was doing it. I would have – I would have – taken that bullet for you without a question. Ya' know I mean it don't ya Hutch? Ya' know I would have done it for you. He shot you just to make sure I didn't follow him. He did this to you Hutch – because of me. All because of me. I'd stop all of this having happened to you if only I could Hutch. But I ain't got super powers and I ain't magic. I can't stop time Hutch. I can't stop what's happened either. All I can do is – try to give you the strength to hold on. I'm not lyin' to ya ok? I know we sometimes try to sugar coat stuff for each other when we're hurt – we both do. But this time I reckon ya' know it's bad. So – I'm askin' you to fight hard Hutch. Fight. Take my strength and use it. I got a lot to spare right now coz I tell ya' I could fuckin' tear down this whole building with my bare hands I feel so – so – full of useless strength.

Take my strength, feel it in my hands. It's yours. Make it work for you like we've done for each other in the past. Please, please , please Hutch. Don't give in."

Streaming tears dripped from his nose and his chin and fell as fat salty droplets on Hutch's face and chest. Starsky watched his tears as they blended with Hutch, forming crimson rivulets out of dried patches of blood.

He was becoming tired of his own voice, his own need to fill up the empty void where Hutch responses were non-existent, and he could feel himself flagging. Trying to believe that Hutch could possibly hear him, and understand him kept him talking, kept him hoping. What he said was for himself as much as for Hutch. It was his only way to keep himself connected to Hutch and he was terrified that if he stopped talking to him, Hutch could very well just slip away. He swiped uselessly at his nose and eyes, and then even more ineffectually at Hutch's heavy closed eyelids and bruised cheeks.
"Shit. Shit – making a beautiful mess out of ya' pretty face Hutch. Smearing blood and tears all over the place. I'm sp'osed to be makin' it better for you and all I'm doin' is –"

He stopped mid sentence. He couldn't keep going. Could keep the flow of one-sided dialogue up any longer. The grief was eating up what little reserve he had left.

"Aww Hutch. I'm so sorry. So sorry it all ended like this. So sorry I didn't listen to you and just go inside with you the other night. So sorry I drove off in a dirty selfish mood to get plastered and left you at home to take the call from the sonofabitch. We shoulda' stuck together – I knew that in my gut. Knew it. Knew he was gonna try to lure you to him at some point. It's all my fault. My fault. My fault that you're laying here like this. My fault that I took the damn undercover assignment with him in the first place when you tried to tell me not to. All my fuckin' fuckin' fault Hutch...."

Emotionally needy beyond belief, Starsky lowered himself to the ground. He stretched out his entire length alongside his partner, his left hand still in place on Hutch's shallow breathing chest, his right finding a new place on his face to hold tenderly. Head to head and body aligned to body, he lay beside his partner as he carefully turned Hutch's face to meet his own.

He wouldn't talk anymore. Exhausted, spent, empty – he wanted only to be as close to his friend as he could be now. To watch him, to take in every detail of him – to store up every last memory...

His hand stroked the severe brow that only ever seemed to lighten in repose, the deep expression groove between his eyes, and the planes of his cheek and the fullness of his lips. How badly he wanted to see the light blue eyes ...just once more – how he willed them to open and look at him – just one more time. He bit down hard on his fist at the thought of 'just once more' in relation to anything to do with Hutch's body and choked back a loud cry.

The pulse in Hutch's neck was even weaker, the power of its force fading more and more, the skin beneath his fingers so cool now that Starsky would have put his jacket over him if he dared to leave him to reach for it.

Extending his arm across he pulled Hutch as tightly toward him as he dared with the risk of making the wound bleed afresh. He let his hand find Hutch's cold one – cold to the point of icy – and he brought the hand up to his own face – so warm by comparison.

"I'm still here Hutch. I won't leave and I won't stop asking you to be strong. But – but – I know you're gettin' tired. I know – this might be all too hard for you – I don't want to say goodbye. I can't. I just can't. But – you're getting weaker and I can feel it. They haven't come yet. No one here but you and me. Maybe I can't ask ya' to wait any longer. Maybe it's time for me to accept that I'm being too selfish askin' it of you.... But. ....Shit...shit...oh God help me here...."

He rolled himself into Hutch's side, pushed his head hard against his neck, and seizing Hutch's hand he brought it to his face, pressing his lips to the the dry cool palm and held them there.

In the stillness and the emptiness of the stark landscape of white concrete Starsky lay there just listening to his own hitched sobs as he drank in the smell and the taste of Hutch's skin beneath his lips. With a final kiss to the cold he laid the big hand across his neck, draping it about his jaw and throat as if Hutch was really holding him – just once more. Closing his eyes he lay as still as he could and savored the pretense, his body shaking softly with his each silent sob.

It was then that he felt the long fingers move.

He lifted his head carefully, almost too scared to check out his own reality.
It happened again. Hutch was moving his hand!

"Hutch? Hutch?" he barely whispered the name, barely forced it out.

The hand curled around his jaw and when he brought his own hand up to meet it the fingers gave his hand a light a very discernible squeeze.

"God! Oh God! Hutch – can you hear me? Can you understand me?" Starsky released his hold on Hutch's hand to see what he might do.

The lightest curling of fingers around his was his answer.

Fearful of losing this tenuous but precious form of communication, Starsky spoke again.

"Jesus you can! Hold on. Not long now – not long now Hutch. Help will be here in a little while. You've been so strong for me, so very strong."

He lifted the hand once more to his lips and this time Hutch's moved enough to trace along Starsky's lip and cheek.

This small movement rocked Starsky to the core and a fresh flow of tears erupted leaving his body convulsing with the force of their expression. Hutch's fingers moved again, a decided response to the outpouring of emotion and Starsky felt a small sad smile forming on his lips.

"I'm ok, I'm ok Hutch. Just stupid happy. Happy to feel your touch, happy to know you can sense me with you and just so damn happy to know you're here with me."

A sudden loud sound at the doorway broke through the spell of the moment and Starsky jerked his head up to see a small brigade of heavily equipped paramedics pounding through the doorway with Riley leading the way.

Exhaling so hard with relief that his breath lifted Hutch's fine blond hair from his pale forehead, Starsky closed his eyes and prayed that Time would stay on his side just a little while longer.

"They're here Hutch. Riley and the medics are here. We're blowing this popsicle stand, you and I."

Dobey had been trying yet again to persuade him into going home. Starsky silently wished he would just give up already. His Captain's tone was laced with heavy frustration and weary resignation. He already knew his words would fall on deaf ears but seemed prepared to go through the exercise nonetheless. Starsky had to concentrate hard not to erupt at the constant badgering. It seemed everyone wanted to push his face out the door and toward home.

"Just go home for God's sake will you? Get some rest – even if you can't sleep, just get some downtime Starsky. You can't go on like this. There's nothing else you could have done. Nothing – so stop kicking yourself in the head will you? There's also nothing here that you can do that we're not already doing. The whole damn precinct is out looking for him. You're not achieving a thing by running yourself into the ground like this. I don't want to see you back in here, anywhere near here in fact, until you make yourself scarce for twenty-four hours, is that clear?"

"There's still the further reaches of the city limits and the closest big towns. We haven't even begun to scratch the surface yet of places he could have slunk into."

"That's the damn point Starsky. It's limitless and our reserves aren't. However Ryan was also
critically injured. The knife wound would have left him severely incapacitated and slow on his feet. Someone in that poor physical condition couldn't have gone too far afield, though he could have gone deep."

"My point. We keep lookin' and if you're prepared to pull the pin I'm not. I keep lookin'."

"Look! This is not just about what I want to do or not do. It's been two weeks Starsky! Try to look at this logically. Whether you want to look at yourself or not you'll hear it from me. You're losing perspective with all of this. You think Hutch would like to see you like this? You think he'd like to see the way you're treating yourself and everyone around you? If you won't think of yourself then at least think of him."

Dobey knew immediately that he'd pushed across some invisible line with his Detective but held his ground.

Pure resentment radiated from Starsky and Dobey inwardly flinched at the cut of his response.

"Think of Hutch? Oh My God! You think that there isn't a minute of the day that I don't think of him? Do you? Everything I do, everything I think is about him and what that bastard did to him!"

Dobey absorbed the rebuke, his own big jowled face the picture of haggard fatigue and emotional exhaustion. His tone softened considerably seeing the fresh pain in the other man's face.

"Look Son - Just give it time. Give yourself time. I know that's what Hutch would want for you."

Similar statements and other heartfelt snatches of advice and support had been dispensed to him for the past two weeks as he had wandered blindly through the corridors of the station.

Everyone and anyone it seemed knew what was best for him during this terrible time and did not hold back on handing out their homilies and their homespun psychological therapy.

It seemed too that everyone had become an expert on Hutch and what Hutch would want from him, for him. More than anything it was these comments, these references to Hutch that tested the limits of what little control Starsky still felt he had on his ability to hold back from a complete blowout. Each time someone uttered his partner's name it was like a hot lash on raw skin. He didn't know why, couldn't understand it and yet it was almost unbearable to hear others talk of him - their casual referencing of him almost offensive to his ears.

Only yesterday he had rounded savagely, unexpectedly onto one of the other duty sergeants when he dropped Hutch into the equation while throwing out advice to Starsky about what was "best for him".

It had taken two other officers to pull him off the shocked sergeant who had only narrowly escaped the full onslaught of Starsky's wrath. It was obvious to everyone who witnessed the event that a full body slam against the filing cabinet and a severely rumpled shirt front was far less than he might have gotten given the way Starsky had snapped and turned on him.

"You don't try to tell me 'bout Hutch ok? You've got no idea, no fuckin' idea about him! And you especially don't get to tell me what my partner would think. You fuckin' hear me?"

Starsky knew he was being harsh. Knew he was short on the frustration and long on the temper. Knew it was all just too damn much for him, and he was unravelling, his tolerance and his control spinning loose. Every person around him seem to grate on his nerves.

Not one of them could possibly understand what he was going through. Not one of them. Sure –
Maybe some of them had suffered the loss of a partner over their years on the force; many of them had watched their partners succumb to injury and disability on the job. And yet, it remained in his mind that none of them could possibly have shared, have even glimpsed the depth of his and Hutch's connection and the unique bond shared between them. Their platitudes, as well meaning as they were intended – left him feeling wretchedly disassociated from his peers, colleagues and his small universe.

Even Huggy's words seem to fall short of what he needed. He hated himself for thinking that of his long time friend – for even a fleeting moment, but even he didn't get where he was at.

Truth was, not a soul in the world had the right words for him.

Truth was he didn't even begin to understand himself what he needed to hear or to do to make things better. Maybe there was no getting to a better point.

No one could understand or imagine what he had gone through on that rooftop, or what he had gone through since then for the past two and a half weeks. No one of course but the one person who couldn't be there for him.

Riley of course was close to being the one exception - having been inside of the raging hell with him when it had all gone down. And yet Starsky knew Riley had his own ghosts to battle, his own emotional shit to trudge through as a consequence of what they had both been through with Ryan. Even in Starsky's darkest hours straight after the rooftop drama had ended, even when he was barely able to communicate so torn was he by grief, he sensed in Riley that there were deeper issues at play for him than just the present. Riley was plagued by something other than just what had happened on the roof with Ryan but Starsky had neither the energy nor the emotional space to question it further.

They had talked, the two of them, since the ordeal. Their "talks" had been safe exchanges, skirting around the true horror of the whole experience, neither of them able yet to delve too deeply into each other for any answers. It was as though that by some silent mutual understanding that they were not yet ready to go there just yet. It could be a long while Starsky knew - for both of them.

So Starsky had kept it mostly to himself. Without Hutch at his side, wading through the emotional aftermath was a solo pursuit. It was a one-man journey across waters he had to circumnavigate by himself or remain forever lost in the middle of its murky expanse. An expanse as deep beneath him in guilt as it was wide all around him in regret.

So eventually after his outburst in the squad room he had done what they all kept telling him to do. He'd gone home to rest – to find some private space to regroup and pull himself back into some semblance of … something that didn't look like a man who had suffered an interminable grief.

The self-imposed down time lasted all of one afternoon before he couldn't take anymore of himself or his circular thoughts. Sickened by his futile introspection and self cross-examination he eventually slammed the door on his apartment and made his way back to the only place he felt he should be, or wanted to be.

The only place he felt truly understood.

The only place where he could begin to know who he was anymore.

With Hutch.
Starsky was not a man who liked to wait.

Starsky and waiting quite simply did not go hand in hand.

As a norm he was not a man who tolerated drawn out situations well. Easily prone to boredom and impatience for action, it went against his nature to wait for extended periods without some sort of short term payoff. Point in fact, stake outs sent him teetering to the edge of craziness. However, that was not the case in which he found himself waiting at that point in time. Not while he could sit so close to and ponder the miracle that was his living partner lying safe and whole just next to him. It gave him the chance to reflect, here in this white-boxed room with nothing to distract him but a constant view of his breathing, healing partner. Here, beside Hutch, in the quiet and the stillness he didn't have to make sense of anything except one fact - real and oh so reassuringly beautiful.

Hutch had lived.

Despite of all of Ryan's barbarism he had not died - and day by day he was getting stronger.

Clear-cut facts that stilled his tumultuous world.

When he wasn't here, wasn't affirming to himself the evidence of his living breathing partner he would start to feel the anxiety creep back. The doubt and the fear would once again begin to blossom and the anger would overtake him to the point that he knew he was at the edge of his control. That's what Dobey would see in him. That's what others saw in him – the anger and the fear. That's why he always ended back here. More than he should be, more than the hospital staff appreciated and more than was healthy for him given that the hard chair took the place of a bed in his dozing hours.

Waiting. Watching. Anticipating the reassurance that would come when Hutch would once more open those sky blue eyes and look directly at him.

He could see the signs now that Hutch was rising to the surface of his drug-induced sleep. There would not be too long to wait this evening for him to wake up.

In the first week after the long and difficult surgery there had been no waiting for Hutch to wake up. There was just the waiting for glimmers and snatches of lighter consciousness and semi coherence. A word shared, a facial gesture communicated, a touch reciprocated and amplified. Not a lot of anything really when he had spent hour after hours beside the bed in his seemingly endless vigil. And yet to him it had been enough, more than enough reward for him. Small but clear signs that Hutch was coming back to him and had not succumbed to the death that had tried to steal him away.

In the past week Hutch's periods of wakefulness and coherency had increased to the point where he could talk with his partner, open his arms for a light but full body hug and for the first time since his surgery, begin some tentative shaky steps back to mobilizing.

Leaning back in the chair, relaxing for the first time since he had left the hospital very early that morning, Starsky enjoyed the show of his partner coming to wakefulness bit by bit, pulling himself up through the layers of altered consciousness.

Unable to stop a small smile he leaned forward.

"And finally he opens those baby blue eyes."

As soon as the words were out he felt the pull of the dark memory. The reference to Hutch's eyes reminded him of the last time he had thought about those distinctive blue eyes. He pushed back the
flash of pain at the vivid recollection of his desperate wish up on the rooftop to see those light blue eyes just 'one more time'. Too late he knew Hutch, despite his fuzzy sleepy state had already read what was in his face.

"Hey? Starks? You ok?" Hutch extended his hand toward him, his deep vertical 'worry-line' as Starsky termed it, etched deeper with concern.

"Your Blintz radar is damn indestructible isn't it? Can't hide a thing from you."

"Don't hide anything from me – I don't want you to. We know after this – after everything, not to do that with each other ok?"

Starsky gave the slightest nod and moved his hand to cover Hutch's.

"Ok. I – when I was so damn scared that I was gonna lose you Hutch – that you weren't gonna make it – well the one thing I really wanted was the chance to see your eyes again. Just one more time – it seemed to matter so much that I could just get the chance to look you in the eyes again ya' know? Maybe I even thought that if I could do that, I might somehow make you stay alive – "

He dashed his fingers across his eyes and shook his head fast.

"Ahh shit, look I'm not gonna do this again. I told myself – enough. In the last week I have damn well drained myself dry from these cryin' jags. Hell the way I'm goin', soon they're gonna have to hook me up to a damn IV for re-hydration."

Hutch smiled and waved his hand toward the now discarded IV stand in the corner of the room.

"Be my guest. I think the evil night nurse is just waitin' for another victim to stick a cannula in and to tie up to that metal pole. I swear she looked disappointed when the Doc finally gave the orders to take mine out yesterday. 'Sides it might at least restrict you to a bed for some sleep. Talking of eyes – look at yours. They're so bloodshot I can't see the whites, let alone the color. "

It was not lost on Starsky that his friend was trying to avert another tear-laden deluge from him. Hutch knew his partner was wrung out from a week of heavy emotion and needed a chance to regroup. Starsky, not normally known for showing tears, had done little but cry since Hutch had surfaced from his heavy post operative sedation and had his first opportunity to communicate with his critically injured partner.

"Nothing that a few zzz's won't take care of."

"Well why aren't you at home getting those few zzz's? I thought you weren't coming back tonight. You promised me you'd go home and crash all afternoon and tonight. Starsky – we talked about this –"

"Hutch, don't nag. Try to remember which one of us is wearing the silly hospital dress with the big gap in the back where your ass is bared to the whole world. Clearly you're the patient. Patients get nagged at - not the other way around."

"And pretty soon buddy you might find yourself wearing the same silly garb if you don't take care of yourself. You don't want me to nag? Then start acting like you can look after yourself."

Starsky sighed and fell back into the chair with frustration.

"Hutch. You know what it's like. You know. I – I just can't settle at home. It's too damn quiet, and there's too much of me with my own thoughts."
"Then go into work and get some company. Dobey told me that when you do go in, that you're avoiding people, tying yourself to the desk and hunting through the entire city by phone."

"So? You agree yourself that it's good to have company around. At work I've got company."

"Starsky - you might be at the station, but you sure aren't communicating with anyone or allowing anyone to give you support."

"So, I'm not in the mood for socialising. Christ - "

Hutch went on to talk over him.

"You're not only not socialising, you're unapproachable. Giving a few people the full Starsky fury treatment."

"I got things to accomplish - people want to get in my way with nice words and advice. Pisses me off. I can't help lashin' out. You know what I'm like."

"You're hurting Starsk and doing nothing about it except pushing yourself more every day. The gentle tone was laden with worry.

"You're nagging again Patient Hutchinson."

Once again Hutch persisted, gamely choosing to ignore the flash of warning in Starsky's eyes that said he was tiring of the inquisition.

"That's only half of it isn't it? Then I hear that you're ringing every hospital, homeless shelter, morgue and cop precinct from here to San Francisco. And when you're not doing that you're out cruising the streets for hours from midnight till dawn when you leave here, and think I'm finally out for the count for the night. You've told me that you're heading home for the night and instead you're hitting the streets. Dead on your damn feet!"

"Oh? And let me guess who gave ya' that last piece of information?"

"Yeah – Riley. So what Starsky? Of course he'd tell me. I want him to tell me, because I know for damn sure you won't. He still has his connections in the Communication's Room and every damn squad car knows you're prowling alleyways and back street hideouts. And then Huggy says you haven't been in for a meal or a drink – for days. He's wondering what you're doing for food or if you're even eating?"

"Jesus! They should know better than to come and unload on a freakin' invalid. Fillin' your head with all this shit about me. Look. They've got you all worked up and worried. Huggy should know better and Riley should shut his - "

"Starsky! They're worried about you – like I am…like everyone is. You think because I'm stuck in this hospital bed I don't have the right to worry about you anymore?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. Not by a damn long way."

"Don't be stupid. So I'm a bit frazzled. Cutting it close to the bone with sleep and not eatin' my greens. They should be worried about you, not me for Christ's sake."

"You're letting this eat you up from the inside. You've got to start to let it go now."
"No. Can't do that. Won't be doin' that. Not for Dobey, not for Riley – not for anyone."

Hutch watched as Starsky's face suffused with something seething, a latent fury that was still there, hidden behind tired eyes and fatigue. In the first days of his recovery he had not noticed it, only seeing the dragging worry on Starsky's face. Now with his friend's guard dropped Hutch caught the clear sign that even now the anger had not faded. He squeezed the hand next to him tight to reinforce his request.

"Then what about for me? Would you do it for me? Let it go for me Starsk. Let go of the anger."

Sucking in a jagged breath Starsky was unable to look into the two pools of shimmering blue, eyes that had the power to move him in so many ways. He wrenched his hand from Hutch's and stood up, scraping the chair back as he face lit with temper.

"Let what go? Huh? Let what go? What do I let go of here Hutch? You tell me. The fact that Ryan's gone? Maybe dead, maybe not? Barely alive but hanging on somewhere and I can't find where that fuckin' somewhere is? Should I let go of looking while there is a chance, even the slimmest chance that we can still find the son of a bitch? Even his body? Let go of that? Or should I let go of what he did to you? Let go of my need to find him and finish him off for that? For bringing you to the point of death up there on that rooftop, havin' goons beat the shit out of you, fill your body full of dope then terrify the shit out of me for lettin' me believe it was heroin?" He'd paced frantically to the window and back several times before coming to an abrupt halt where he faced Hutch. He wrapped his arms tightly about his chest, his body slightly bent over as though trying to contain a deep pain that was finally surfacing and taking hold.

"Or should I let go of what he did in the last moment? He could have made a run for it with nothin' but courage to give him speed. He might have made it anyway Hutch. But he was too much of a coward, or maybe just too sick of a monster to just leave it at that and run. To even try. So he used you as insurance against me. Like he always said he would. The motherfucker – the sadistic motherfucking bastard had to go and slam your beaten body with a bullet."

Hutch said nothing, allowing his friend to get it out.

"You want that I let go of that one Hutch? Just brush over that little detail? Let go of you lying there with a bleeding hole in your chest and your poor body already broken apart from what he'd done to you?"

Tears were mixing with rage as he spat out the words.

Hutch rubbed at bridge of his nose before holding out his arms in as wide an arc as he could manage with his chest tightly bound.

"Starsk…come here – please. Just come here."

Instead he watched Starsky step back a few steps, almost staggering under the weight of his first real venting of the pain he had suppressed since the medics had carried Hutch down the stairwell that afternoon more than two weeks ago.

"No. No. Don't. Don't Hutch. You gotta' understand me here…"

"I do. I understand you Starsky. Everything about you, everything you say and everything you don't. I understand you Starsk. That's why I need you to come here."

With a sputtered cry Starsky almost fell toward the bed and to Hutch's outstretched arms.
"You fuckin' nearly died Hutch. I thought you had. I thought you would. I – I'd all but said goodbye to you in my head and was just waiting there with you while you took your last breath. When the paramedics came they pulled me away from you, took one look at ya' and basically gave it to me straight. They didn't think they even stood a chance of keepin' ya' heart goin' till they got you to the hospital - shit, maybe even down the stairwell. I – I gave 'em a hard time – screamed at them to shut the fuck up and just move. Told 'em you'd shown me you were gonna make it. Told 'em I knew you'd live. But even Riley – Oh God, Hutch even Riley tried to prepare me for you dyin' before we got you to the hospital. When I think of what I said to that poor kid –"

"Starsky, it's ok. I know what happened. Riley's told me it all – "

"I guess he would have spoken to you. He trusts you so much. With me, I think he's still got to find his place. After all I hardly made it easy for him in the beginning did I? You know he and I have barely talked about it? Those last few awful minutes up there."

"You will when you're ready. He said that you've not talked to anyone about it. He feels so bad for taking away your hope. I think he'd like you to clear the air with him about it."

"I'll find the time to sit down with him and talk. I know you want me to and – yeah – you're right. We need to do it."

"I'm just pleased that you're finally talking to me about it – even this much. For days you've skirted around it, diverted me from it, tucked it away so you didn't have to share any of it with me."

"You've been too weak. Too damn sick …"

"No – not in the last week or so I haven't. I've just been waiting for you to be ready. You do things in your own good time partner, I know that."

"I can't let go of it Hutch." The sigh from Starsky was pure distress. "I don't know what to do with that memory, that feeling. The terror that you were actually gonna die right there beside me and there was nothing I could do to stop it. When I go home, when I'm with anyone else, anywhere but here, with you, beside you – I can't deal with that feeling. It is so real. Real everywhere but here when I can sit and watch you breathe and feel you warm. You were so cold. So cold. And I can't forget it. I can't just let it go and I'm so scared that if I let go of the anger, the rage, the need to find him - "

"What? What will happen Starsky? Tell me. Remember – no more holding back stuff from each other? Try to tell me what you're afraid will happen."

"I'm – I'm terrified that if I can't find him and see him dead that somehow – someway I won't be able to keep you alive. That, it'll all happen again. I can't live through that again and I won't watch you go through it again."

"Which is exactly how I felt when I took that call and I went to him, as he knew I would. As he knew we both would. I wanted nothing more than to eradicate him in someway. I don't even know how I planned on doing that Starke – stupid hey? Or how I was going to face the rest of my life after doing it. I just wanted to use my hands – just my fists and my hands. I wanted to see him dead too Starke. I never thought much beyond just wanting him dead. It was the only way he would stop hurting you. And he knew – he knew I would go to him for that alone. Like you – I couldn't take another nightmare where he messed you up. Remember I had to watch him nearly kill you too Starke? More than once. So I do know how it feels – oh God I know how it feels babe."

Starsky pulled back a little from the light embrace, mindful of Hutch's chest wound, and lifted his
"Fuckin' hurts like shit doesn't it? Feeling powerless? Feelin' like there is no hope – no way to stop – to hold back the worst. He's a crazy sicko Hutch. Insane. Why didn't we see it, even back at the Academy?"

"He's gotten sicker with time. More disturbed. More obsessed and more disordered. After all he's got nothing to lose like we do. Death doesn't mean the same to him as it would to us. He set us up so good Starsk, he played us to the maximum. In the end, I guess we fucked up completely – both of us. We each took terrible risks, trying to take him on like we did - and lost to him. Well at least I did. You just came in and cleaned up the mess I started. I should never have agreed to meet him, unarmed and with nothing to back me up but my own need for revenge."

"Hey you started nothin'. I'm the one who got us into this whole fuck-up right from day one when I argued with you about goin' under with the creep for the drug bust job. Shoulda' listened to the famous Hutchinson wisdom and given the whole thing a wide berth."

"Not sure if that would have stopped him in the long run Starsky. Ryan came to our precinct that day with a plan in mind. Going under and taking you with him in the Kalzo case was probably one of several other ploys he might have had up his sleeve to get you where he wanted. I was out of action, just getting back from all the shit with the heroin and Forrest. In the end he even used that against us. He had it figured that you were minus one street partner and would be a good choice to go under with him on the drug bust case. And anyway if I'd told you how I felt about him, really felt about him, since the Academy days you might have listened to me and told Dobey and Dobson to get another man to partner Ryan. I knew how sick in the head he was about you back when he was younger – I just thought with maturity he might have -"

Hutch baulked on the words, sighing a little and fell back against the pillows. Starsky supported his shoulders as he could see the signs that his partner was starting to wilt with discomfort and emotional strain.

"Hey enough. We could freakin' go on all night with this stupid blame game, guilt trippin' shit. It's like you said Hutch. Ryan had us pegged from the start. Played up to what he knew about us and used every move to bring us both into his sick world of obsession and hate. In the end I'd say he came out feelin' pretty damn cool about how well he reeled us both in. About how much he got to punish me in the end by nearly killing you…"

Starsky adjusted the sheet and blanket more comfortably about Hutch's upper chest and pulled the pillow a little straighter behind his head, all the while averting his eyes from Hutch's.

Hutch snatched his hand as it came up to fuss with the blanket again, forcing Starsky to look at him.

"Hey – hey – Ryan didn't kill me Starsky. He didn't succeed and I'm still very much alive. I didn't die up there on that rooftop Starsky – as much as the nightmare of it won't leave you alone. Don't you think that I have regrets about that stinking hot day up there, just as much as you too? In the end I didn't get to save you like I planned on doing. I didn't get to wipe the filth of Ryan out of your life forever. Not entirely sure how that might have all ended up if I had been successful anyway. One thing for sure is that I wouldn't be lying in a clean, secure private hospital room with my best buddy simply debating the fact. I'd most likely be in lockup waiting for you to try to raise enough cash for my bail. But I'm not. I'm here – I'm alive and you're alive too. Can't we just take that and move on? That's got to be enough for now. Take it and let go. Let go of Ryan - just let go of him."

"Hutch, what if I can't do it? What if I can't let it go?"
"Then there's the risk that he'll destroy you in the end anyway. It means that what we both did was all in vain. It means that me getting beaten and bashed and filled full of drugs and then shot in the damn chest was all in vain. Because if you keep going down this track of never ending vengeance and fuck up your career and your life, I might as well have died anyway."

Starsky blanched at Hutch's proclamation and looked away, not wanting to hear the words.

"What? You don't think it's the same? If I'd died up there on that roof Starsk, if I'd let go and didn't claw back from that terrible dark edge, hadn't felt you there beside me pulling me back to you and to life and I'd let death come and take me from you – then I know you would have screwed up your life within a month or less. Just like it would be for me if you'd be the one gunned down."

"I couldn't – couldn't go on if you weren't around in my life Hutch. I just can't make it work in my head anymore, a life without you as my buddy, my partner, my best friend. You dyin' – you not bein' here with me anymore, it scares the fuckin' shit out of me."

"As it scares the shit out of me too Starsk. Every time something happens to you. I guess it'll always be like that for us. But this time I lived. I'm still here. We got through it – again partner. Again. But somehow you don't seem to have accepted that I am still here. Each time this past week that I've woken up here in this bed and look over I can see in your eyes that you're still letting Ryan screw with your head and your life. I hear it from everyone else too – but I don't need Dobey, Huggy or Riley or anyone else to tell me what I can read on your face every time you look at me."

Starsky reached forward and swiped his hand down the side of Hutch's bruised cheek.

"How come ya' still get to have all the wisdom even when you're half dead?"

"Because Gordo, I'm still half alive – and the part of me that is still working perfectly well is my superior intelligence. I got slugged in the chest remember, not the head. And anyway, even if I was nine-tenths dead I'd still be able to read my partner better than anyone else ever could. I know how this thick skull of yours works."

Getting his own swipe in he tapped on Starsky's head and tugged hard on one of his longer errant curls before suddenly turning serious again.

"We've been through so much with this Starsky. From the day he walked back in our lives, Ryan has put us through so much, too much. So he's not lying on a bunk in a cell or a body bag, and we don't know if he died rotting with a slow infection from that knife wound you gave him, doubled up in some room in a two-bit bar or a hotel bathroom somewhere. We don't know if he tugged on some long forgotten contact and got driven out of the city, given second-rate medical care and a safe place to hide. We might never know. But we have to make a decision now – together, both of us. To make this the end. The end for us. To let go of Ryan Lancaster from here on in."

"Sounds so easy when you say it like that Hutch. Sounds so easy when we both know it's so much fuckin' harder than that. This monster, he just won't go away and play dead. This – this –maniac is the one who won't leave us alone remember? As far as I recall we didn't ask him into our lives."

"I know. But think about it Starsky. Since this all started – since he did what he did to you after the Kalzo case, one way or the other we've both wanted him put in his place. I can say in all honesty after what he did to you at the beach house that I wanted nothing less then to see him suffer, to pay for what he did to you. Then Katy, Dobson, Riley – it just kept mounting up. We both wanted him gone. We both wanted to wipe him out. It's like he's been a festering disease in both of us. We've let that happen. Our need for revenge has nearly killed us both."
"We've let that happen? You make it sound like we could have controlled any of what he did to did – all the evil he spread around."

"No of course not. But we can control how he makes us react to him. From now – dead or alive – he's now dead to me. Ryan will not make me to anything again that will only endanger us more than he already has done."

"You think it's that simple Hutch? You think I can just forget about all of this –" he waved his hand at the hospital room, at Hutch's bandaged chest, his bruised face. "And move on in life?"

"Yes I think you can. Otherwise it just keeps going on and on. You can't make looking for Ryan, hoping to uncover him your soul purpose. Eventually it'll wear you down and ruin your life. I'd like you to do it Starsky. I'd like to know that when I get to sleep tonight that you've gone home and are doing the same. That you're not out scouring the streets or planning what other tactic you'll use tomorrow to look for him. I don't want to be lying here worrying about you like I have been for the past few days."

The response was quiet.

"I didn't ask you to worry about me Hutch – you think I want that?"

"Then listen to me for God's Sake. Take it in and don't just brush it off like I know you want to do. Go home, get some rest and think about what I've said. What I'm asking of you."

Starsky sighed as he dry rubbed his face.

"Asking a lot of me Hutch….to just close the door on all of this and what he did to you –"

"Then think of it as me asking you not to let him one do anything else to me. Not another thing. To take no more from the two of us than he already has. It stops now."

The sheer weight of the words and the intensity of Hutch's unwavering gaze hit Starsky in the mid-gut.

The forearm beneath his grip was thinner than the forearm of three weeks ago. Gently, but purposefully Starsky turned it over to expose the pale flesh of his partner's inner arm, his fingers lightly tracing over the skin's surface. A surface that was unmarred, free of irritation or redness or any signs of self-mutilation.

"Look at that, your skin's perfectly healed. I knew you'd finally get over the need to keep hurting yourself."

Diversion of sorts, but maybe this was going somewhere along the same track, Hutch thought, watching Starsky, watching him.

"The needle tracks scars are still there if you look closely enough."

"Maybe. If I squint long enough. But that's not the marks I'm talking about. You ain't responsible for those scars Hutch."

"He made me feel like I was for a long time. Forrest, Monk – they made me feel that I was responsible for getting hooked on that junk."

"I know that. And ripping at your arms like you did every day for so long after it was over was your way of letting them still control you – still let them fuck up your life and how ya' felt about
yourself right? But – you've stopped it now. Your arms are clean and maybe your head is too. Right? Forrest is behind you now, he didn't break you even though you thought at one time he had. You've moved on Hutch."

Hutch closed his eyes, overwhelmed with the clarity of Starsky's message to him, Starsky's personal, private analogy, meant just for him. Overwhelmed with his partner's ability to capture the very essence of a complex concept and bring it back to the basics.

He looked up, a grateful smile on his lips.

"Now who's being the wise one? You see it's the same really isn't it? Forrest – Ryan ….others we've dealt with, others we will deal with in the future? Goes with the territory I guess. If we don't learn to let go, we get used up even if we survive the hell we went through."

"Forrest is locked up, serving a long long sentence Hutch. Maybe not enough punishment for what he did to you, but more than we know for sure Ryan's going to get if he's still alive."

"Doesn't matter that he's behind bars. It'll always be there Starz – Forrest and the whole sordid shitty experience. You know better than even I do that I still carry the fear that the event somehow made me a different person."

"It's a whole fuckload to carry around isn't it? What this job does to us? Don't you ever wonder when the load will get too damn heavy for us to carry anymore Hutch? Don't you ever wonder when we'll reach a point we just can't move on anymore? Can't just keep lettin' go?"

The room was quiet for a few moments before Hutch responded.

"Sure I do. I'm just hoping that you'll decide that it won't be this time. I need you too much partner. If I can move forward after Ryan put a hole in my chest, after he did all he did to you, then I'm asking you to as well. If it's too much to ask of you Starz, then I'll just have to stay back with you."

"Stay back with me? Now what does that mean hey?"

"It means that if you are hell-bent on not giving up on this quest to finalize Ryan, I won't let you do it alone – even if it means that we both jeopardize our careers and possibly – once more – our lives. I know you would have done the same for me if I hadn't been able to get past my heroin ordeal."

"Jesus Hutch. Don't feel ya' have to pull back from puttin' the pressure on me or nothin'."

It was a tongue in cheek remark but Hutch ignored the lightness of Starsky's words.

"What do you say Starsky? Sink together or strike out for the shore?"

"I say you're in no fit state to go anywhere on land or water. Ya' need to quit with your fancy descriptions involving sinking and get some rest."

"And I say you need to get your exhausted ass home and sleep. Sleep and consider what we've talked about."

"Can't promise the sleepin' bit. That's up to my body to decide and the last two weeks my body is not decidin' it wants it."

"Alright then, I'll settle for you just going home and staying there. Let me know how the considering side of it goes tomorrow ok?"
"Now you're sounding far less smart than the Hutch I know. You think I really need to take time to consider what you've said to me? You'll put your neck on the line again if I don't give up on Ryan. You won't let me go it alone. And you said it with that worry line of yours all bunched up which means you're not just throwing out an idle threat. You'd do it."

"Got that right Starsk."

"Some choice to consider. You think I would ever willingly let you sink? Ever consider doin' something that would hurt ya"? "

Hutch smiled and slid down further in the bed, unable to hide his yawn and slight grimace of pain. He was already starting to drift as Starsky smoothed down the blankets and pulled his sheet a little higher over his bandage bound chest.

His voice was drowsy but still held a touch of amused triumph.

"No – not for a moment partner. That's my ace in the hole. You're inherently –" he smothered another yawn " inherently incapable of – of doing anything that would hurt me."

Starsky settled back a little in his chair, inexplicably more relaxed than he had been in days. He'd wait a while yet to make sure Hutch was more deeply asleep before slipping out to try to get some of his own.

Into the silence he repeated the echo of Hutch's words.

"Got that right babe. Ya' sure got that right."

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

THE END

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