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As he stepped forward Hutch had his first clear look of what looked like a cut and the beginnings of a nasty bruise just below Starsky's left eye.

Covering the remaining distance in a couple of strides, Hutch got to the door just as the entire Starsky-built edifice was about to crumble. Reaching around his partner's left side, he instantly hauled most of the weight off Nick and clamped his left hand onto Starsky's, wrapping it across his neck and shoulders.

HUGE thanks to my betas Izzie and Kaye.

Hutch blinked awake with a start, unsure of what had startled him out of something bizarre involving a Christmas tree, a rabbit and a train window. He squinted. The TV was on, an unfinished beer was next to his propped up feet and his neck hurt. It meant one thing and one thing only. He had fallen asleep on Starsky's couch, and it was all Nick Starsky's fault.

Starsky had bounded into work late that morning, talking a mile a minute, and brandishing his brother and the surprise visit like the prize he always assumed them both to be. To give Hutch credit, his performance at that moment had been flawless. The downward jolt of his heart had been concealed by the smallest of jaw clenches, and the smile he came up with had hidden both pretty quickly. Declining their offer for a boys' night out had been quick and easy, and Starsky, with a knowing elbow squeeze, had not pressed it.
Hutch felt something in the back of his neck crack painfully back into place and realized, not for the first time, that he wished Starsky were an only child.

He sighed and tried to force a more charitable thought into his head.

Nope. Couldn't do it. He had blown a perfectly acceptable date in favour of an evening dozing in front of the TV, and on Starsky's uncomfortable couch to boot. He had followed his partner home for the offer of a quick beer and had ended up staying because, of all things, 'Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid'. Upon learning it was on, Starsky had insisted that they all sit and watch it together. Not being the fanatic for it that his partner was--there were, in Hutch's view, very few things in life that demanded repeat viewing--Hutch had grunted something non-committal and prepared to leave. Nick's scowl and obvious displeasure at having his exclusive time with his brother cut into changed his mind. At that point, Hutch had taken a beer, swung his feet up on the coffee table and cheerfully settled in. Now as he reached into his pocket and brought his legs off the coffee table, he shook his head at the petty childishness of it all. He should have gotten up and left when his partner had, as soon as the damn thing was over. Not stayed with the stupid intention of finishing his still unfinished beer.

10.30. Great. He slipped the fob watch back into his pocket and got up to stamp some feeling back into his legs. So much for meeting up with Gayle. He'd have to call--

There it was again. The noise that had woken him. Sounded very much like a quiet fumbling at the front door. Cop instinct snapped him awake, taking him to his gun and a balanced stance in a second. He was just easing forward, when the door gave up trying to open quietly. It crashed inwards to reveal one unsteady Starsky being held up by one soon-to-be-collapsing-under-the-weight Nick.

Everybody paused.

"Trrific. 'M gonna get shot by my own partner."

Hutch sent a withering look his way as he relaxed out of his stance. "Well, you could try actually putting the key in the lock next time."

Hutch's head went down as he reclipped the gun into its holster. If it hadn't, he might have registered the fact that neither Starsky's unsteadiness, nor Nick's hesitant had anything to do with their being drunk.

"Uh... Hutch? Could you...help?"

Hutch looked up. He was sorely tempted to let them both fall where they stood. Or rather, leaned. But it was clear from Nicky's rather squeaky appeal that hauling them both up from the floor afterwards would be the harder task.

"Your days of soaring with the eagles are gonna be long gone, Starsk, if you keep getting this drunk this qui--"

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“Hey, I’m not a sack-a potatoes!”

“You wanna enlighten me here, Nick?” Hutch’s tone was even and betrayed nothing as he ignored his partner, all the while propelling him towards an armchair. “Easy, easy.” This last was directed to Starsky, who he had felt draw in a breath. Consciously slowing their trajectory into the chair as much as his back would allow, Hutch eased him down and took another look.

“You okay?”

Starsky’s fingers caught his shirt front and kept him from rising. “’S just a bar-fight, Hutch.” He attempted a smile. “Lucky punch is all.”

“Yeah? Is this the part where I’m supposed to ask how the other guy looks?”

“Guys,” interrupted Nick, who then wished he hadn’t at the look both men sent him. “–plural,” he finished weakly.

Hutch turned back to his partner.

“Guys?”

“Losers, man.” Nick snickered behind him. It was unwise and sore as he was, Starsky read his partner’s body language effortlessly. He knew Hutch was seconds away from treating his brother like a perp in a crime.

“Hey, I’m bleedin’ here. Think I could get some ice?” He tugged Hutch’s shirt front again, and looked up with what he knew was his best wounded puppy dog look. “Hmm?”

Well aware of the deflection, Hutch nevertheless decided to allow it. He’d fix his partner up first, then learn just how idiotic the pair of them had been. As he ordered Nick to the kitchen area to fetch the first aid kit and wrap up some ice, Hutch couldn’t help but notice that he didn’t seem to have a mark on him. He shook his head.

Figured. Starsky would take on the hounds of hell before he’d let his baby brother swing a punch to protect himself.

As he patched his partner up -- once the blood was cleaned off, it really was not that bad a cut -- he picked his way through the two accounts he was given of what had actually happened. Not an easy thing to do, since Starsky’s pride was clearly trying to play the whole thing down while Nick’s misplaced sense of adventure was just as clearly embellishing it here, there and everywhere.

As far as Hutch could tell, it really had been the classic, garden-variety bar brawl. Nick had apparently stumbled into a heavy-set pair at the bar and spilled a drink. His apology and Starsky’s good-natured offer of a fresh one had been violently and instantly refused, with Huggy’s muscle stepping in before anything spread. Whole thing was over in less than five minutes.

Starsky squinted up over the ice bag he was holding onto his cheek. “See? Not my fault. I was trying to be nice, they were the ones bein’ all hostile. Nicky was just--” He changed position slightly and tried not to wince. Hutch placed a knowing, but gentle hand on the right side of his ribs.

“Another lucky punch, Starsk?”

Starsky smiled at the softer tone. He knew his moments with his partner, and he knew that this was one where he could give it up a little. “Lucky foot,” he whispered at the crouched head near his
own. "Hurts like hell when I laugh."

Hutch lightly pressed again and was relieved to feel no fractures. They exchanged a look as Hutch whispered back. "Then don't laugh, buddy." He lifted his partner's shirt; no broken skin, no swelling -- just the mottled colors of another bruise.

"How's it look?"

"Colors of the rainbow, Starsk, but you'll live." Hutch straightened and glanced around. Nick was standing off to the left with a rather distracted look on his face, pulling on his lower lip. Great, just what the world needs.

Shaking it off, Hutch called for Nick's help to get a protesting Starsky up and as far as the bedroom. It amused Hutch no end that Nick was allowed no further. Not having grown up with a younger brother Hutch had no idea how that whole machismo-fraternal thing worked itself out. But in the Starskys it clearly meant showing as little pain and discomfort as possible to the younger one, if you were the older one.

Having Starsky use him as a drunk would a lampost should not have given him the satisfaction that it did, but standing steady as Starsky slowly winced his way into a pair of sweats somehow made up for the frustrations of that wasted night. His partner had a blind spot the size of Montana when it came to his brother, but he had a heart which trusted that big, too. And lifting his legs up onto the bed as Starsky eased his way down, Hutch took yet another second to appreciate that he was the one on the receiving end.

Hutch had allowed Starsky one pain-killer. Concussion was doubtful, but judging from the heavy-lidded way Starsky started blinking, it had been the right decision.

"Gonna stay?"

Hutch had stood and was on his way to click the light off when the question came. He turned back. No way his back, or neck, was up to another few hours on that couch. Especially if he had to watch Nick rest up on the mattress hastily dropped off by Minnie at lunchtime.

"Sure."

He was such a sucker sometimes. "Try not to roll out of bed. You'll hurt more than your pride on the way down, tough guy."

Something slurred came back at him. He smiled, switched off the light and left the door ajar.

Time to intimidate that mattress off a certain someone.

________________________________________

This time, neither of the Starskys could be blamed for waking Hutch up. Disoriented by sleeping on the floor, he simply rolled too far at some point and whacked his toe on the metal frame Starsky used to keep his model ships in place. Cursing silently at the luck he was having with his sleeping arrangements, he turned over and gripped his toe. He then realized that he was not the only one awake at that hour. Outlined in the early dawn light at the window was Nick, looking out onto the street below.

"Everything okay, Nick?"

The flinch was a mile high.
"Christ, you scared me!"

Little too much anger there for Hutch's taste, but he supposed it was justified. Hell, it would have been entertaining if it weren't... he squinted... 5.42. He sighed. Wrestling with the covers as he tried to sit up and take his leave of Minnie's mattress, he couldn't help wondering if it weren't all some kind of conspiracy.

On his way back from the bathroom, he clicked on a lamp and decided to head to the kitchen for juice. The gods clearly had something other than sleep in mind for him, so he might as well start such an early day right. He glanced across at the now seated figure and idly wondered how long Nick had been awake. Hutch opened his mouth to ask, but then realized that truth be told, he didn't really care that much.

"Juice, Nick?" There. That took care of the necessary pleasantries.

No answer.

Fine. Be like that.

That Nick resented the hell out of him Hutch had known from their first wary back slap all those years before. That the feeling became mutual was something which could not be helped. Once Hutch saw the pain Nick's recklessness had twisted deep into his brother, his fate was sealed. The first time Starsky hung his head, face pinched with embarrassment, the goodwill Hutch had automatically extended to his partner's younger brother iced over, never to unthaw. They had managed only an uncomfortable civility with each other since then.

This visit looked like it was going to be no exception.

"It was... I mean, it... uh... might have been because of me, Hutch."

Hutch turned, but Nick wasn't looking at him. He was sitting on the chair near the window, knee bouncing and pulling on his lip again. Hutch was instantly suspicious, but he had no idea of what. "You talking about the bar-fight?" He paused a moment, then got distracted by the faint sounds of snoring coming from the half-open bedroom door. "Hear that?" He called out, and continued on his way to the kitchen, speaking over his shoulder. "If it's Starsky you're worried about, relax. That hard head gets him through a lot."

"No, you don't get it. It's my fault, man."

Hutch was non-plussed by Nick's sudden desire for martyrdom over what amounted to little more than a 10-second bar brawl. Unless... Hutch stopped and turned again, juice forgotten. Cop training narrowed his eyes. Something was indeed amiss -- Nick's eyes were everywhere and what he had first thought of as wakefulness now seemed a lot like nerves. Instinct of a different kind also reminded him that this was a man whose every error in judgment ended up haunting his partner.

With a mental count to ten, Hutch just about resisted the urge to shake the man in front of him. Instead, he kept his voice soft and his movements smooth as he sat himself across from Nick.

"Is there something you want to tell me about what went down?"

Nick gulped, unsure if he should have come to this point with a man he had never particularly cared for. Still, nothing about Hutch's tone was condemning -- just the opposite, the man seemed genuinely concerned. Like a deer caught in the headlights, Nick felt caught in the inevitable.

"I think I recognised one of the guys," he began, "y'know, from the bar."
"From the fight?"

"Yeah, yeah. I mean, I wasn't sure -- it all happened so fast, man, but I think they've found me, Hutch. I don't know how, but I think they have." A touch of panic raised his voice on the last.

"Wait, wait," Hutch held a hand up, "who's found you?"

"Don't know about you, Hutch, but I'm a helluva lot more interested in the why."

Both men started at the sound of Starsky's voice from the doorway behind Hutch.

"So, how about it, Nicky? How about the who and the why?" Starsky's voice was calm. Hutch heard the effort it took.

Nick's agitation at his brother's sudden appearance jumped him to his feet. "Davy, it's not what you think, honest! I didn't do nothin' wrong."

As Hutch silently tacked on 'this time', Nick turned away from them both and what came out was little more than a mumble, "I just kinda saw somethin' I shouldn't."

Starsky said nothing, and in the fraught silence that followed, Hutch was suddenly uncertain. The urge to walk over, grab Nick by the shoulders and shake him until the truth rattled out of his teeth was back, but there was Starsky to consider. He had no wish to negotiate an uncomfortable path through this fraternal minefield. Yet neither was he willing to let Starsky hear this without him. Also, Starsky's blind spot needed Hutch to listen to whatever was coming, whether he knew it or not.

Starsky stepped forward. At the feel of fingers squeezing lightly onto his right shoulder, Hutch glanced up. A faint nod and a small smile told him all he needed to know. His presence was both required and appreciated. Relieved, he turned back and took his cue.

"Who and why Nick, remember?"

Nicky's eyes flicked from one to the other. Telling the story in his head to Hutch was one thing, telling it to a brother he had spent a lifetime disappointing was going to require a whole other kind of courage. Understanding he had little choice, he took a breath and began.

As Hutch listened to a somewhat erratic confession of sorts, his reaction was two-fold. First, he had to admit, there was relief. It was not the worst case scenario he had started dreading for his partner. However, as Nick jabbered his way through, Hutch's jaw still tightened at the disappointing predictability of it all. That Nick's stupidity and sheer bad luck would hurt his brother was as dependable as the sunrise.

Seemed that Nicky had himself an illegal card-game in the back room of an Italian restaurant in Brooklyn every Friday night. One particular Friday night, Nicky had slipped out into the alley behind the restaurant because it was closer than the restroom, and because he was about to hit a winning streak he didn't want to break. Hutch tried to exchange a glance with his partner at that, immediately worried that the whole thing was going to end up about an unpaid debt or two which Nick would try to pity-pull out of his big brother. But Starsky's full attention was on the tale being told, and he didn't return the look.

What Nick had seen in that alley, apparently, had freaked him out and taken him quickly out of the poker game with the excuse of a blinding headache. Unseen, Nick had had the bad fortune to
witness a guy being strangled with piano wire by two men under the directions of a third -- Frank Peregrini, a significant player in the local mob turf. The three had finished their gruesome business, brushed themselves off and left. Nick had stayed, thrown up and excused himself out of the game.

And brought this right to his brother's door in the guise of an I-missed-you visit. Nice work, Nick. Hutch decided to let Starsky have at it, afraid the distaste he felt would be too obvious.

Starsky gestured to his cheek. "So, you think the guy who gave me this is one of the guys you saw in the alley?"

Nick nodded, reluctantly.

"But you said no one saw you, right? I mean you're sure of that?"

Nicky nodded, more fervently this time. "I don't reckon I'd be sittin' here, if they had."

"Man's got a point there, Starsk." Hutch, deciding on the benefit of the doubt for now, joined the fray. He looked back across at Nick. "And you didn't say anything to anybody?"

"Not a soul, I swear."

"What do you think?" Starsky asked his partner, all cop now.

"Hey, it's your brother. Your bruise." There was no sting in it, and a brief smile was exchanged. "But," said Hutch, becoming serious. "Something is off here, because if no one--"

"--saw him, then how are they here?" finished Starsky.

"Right. So...?"

"Well, if we..."

"Davy, you mind cluein' me in here? I mean, what am I gonna do? Where are you going with this?" Nick's pride in getting through it all and relief at not being yelled at was rapidly diminishing.

"Me?" replied Starsky, "I'm going back there to get some clothes on. You," he pointed at Nick, "are making yourself comfortable out here, while you," he gestured at Hutch, "are comin' with me so we can figure where to go with this."

Nicky sighed noisily, reluctant it seemed to be left out of the proceedings. Hutch wanted to smack the petulance right out of him. That Starsky was still being so even-tempered despite the usual shady story his younger version had turned up with, was the only reason he didn't.

The touch of hysteria to Nick's whining also disturbed Hutch, if not his partner. What? Did Nick think he was in charge of how they would handle this now?

Standing in the bedroom watching his partner's breath hiss in as his sweats slowly came off, Hutch knew damn well that Starsky had asked him back to help get him dressed as much as to discuss Nick's little bombshell. Hutch shook his head and smiled at the transparency. Be a cold day in hell before Starsky let his brother see him as anything other than Mr. Capable.

"What?" Starsky straightened, having caught the smile.

"Nothing," replied Hutch amiably. "Just reflecting on how pleased I am that the apple fell a mile from the tree with you two."
"Yeah, well," Starsky paused. "Hold my pants open for me, willya?"

"Now there's an offer a guy doesn't get every day of the week, Starsk."

"Cute," he growled and handed over the jeans, a looser pair than usual, Hutch was pleased to notice. Taking hold of his partner's right shoulder, he steadied himself in as upright a fashion as possible. With a minimum of fuss and grunting, Starsky eased into the jeans. He stepped away, breathing a little loud.

"Sure you're up to this right now?" Hutch studied his partner critically. His cheek was shining and it was clear his ribs were sore. "We could all take a couple of hours and work something out over a late breakfast?" Starsky was aware of his partner's intentions and was grateful, but his mind was buzzing with the need to do something, to fix things. It couldn't be helped. Nicky in trouble brought the big brother in him rushing to the fore, regardless of blame.

Hutch saw this and nodded.

"Okay, so where to with this?"

"Huggy, not Dobey -- first off," amended Starsky quickly. "Let's see what the word on the street is about the goons from the bar before we get all official, okay?"

Hutch nodded again. He had expected such an answer. Feeling more settled now that a course of action had at least been decided, his gaze swept his partner again. "Uh..." he smiled, "you're still half-dressed there, buddy. Want to pick out a shirt or something? There are laws you know."

Starsky shot him a look as he moved towards his closet. Hutch made to follow, but Starsky held up his hand.

"This I can do." He gestured towards the door and out into the living area. "Why don't you go out there and play nice?"

"Starsk--"

"I'm serious. Kid's been through God knows what." He forestalled Hutch's expected protest by stepping closer and lowering his voice, "I know he ain't your favorite pencil in the box, Blondie, but what he needs right now is us." He took hold of the back of Hutch's neck, in the familiar gesture he knew his partner could not resist. "Okay?"

Hutch was irrationally grateful that Starsky had said us instead of me. "Okay," he responded, both touched and somewhat resigned to his fate.

"Hey," Starsky's soft call turned Hutch's head just as he was reaching the door. There was a definite twinkle to his eyes. "Remember, tiger. Claws in."

Hutch stepped out into the living area. Claws in. Really. He glanced across.

Perched on the edge of the couch, right leg jittering in time to an anxious heartbeat, Nick's head shot up at the sight of Hutch, and he swallowed nervously. Something still seemed off and promise aside, Hutch had to admit that he was tempted to have some fun with the effect he knew he had on this man. He pinched the bridge of his nose and decided he could try to play nice. Bygones were most certainly not ready to be bygones, especially with Starsky hissing around like an arthritic eighty-year-old. But fear was coming off Nick in waves, and kicking a dead horse when it was down had never been Hutch's style.
"You okay there, Nick? Bring you that juice now?"

"Uh... Yeah, okay, thanks, Hutch."

He smiled at the suspicious tone. Nick was obviously not used to a friendly Hutch. See Starsk? No claws.

Handing him a glass, Hutch took one for himself and settled into the chair at right angles to the couch. Both of them put their feet on the coffee table. Hutch's reaction to this was a genuine smile, but Nicky simply looked away. Deciding to be unruffled about it, Hutch returned to his drink. Nicky was busy being absorbed by some black and white Western re-run, giving each man something to focus on.

The silence as they sipped and stared could hardly be called companionable. Hutch sighed. They needed an ice-breaker, something to get things rolling.

"So, what can you tell us about this Peregrini?"

Neutral enough question, Hutch felt. Not so, judging by the sudden snap-to in Nick. He jerked his feet off the coffee-table.

"Nothin'! Get off my back -- jeez!" He shot to his feet and glared at Hutch, the juice and the film forgotten. "Why the hell should I know anything about a creep like that?"

The thin ice Hutch had let Nicky skate on broke then and there. Hutch also stood. Mindful of keeping his voice lowered so as not to reach the bedroom, he grabbed a handful of shirt and pulled the wearer towards him.

"Now you listen, and listen good, because I am only going through this once." His eyes flinted. "The only currency you got with me," he jerked a thumb towards the bedroom, "is him."

He tightened his grip. "You been here five minutes and he's already black and blue, so you'll forgive me if I don't lay out a red carpet, or believe every word that comes out that mouth of yours." He paused, lowering his voice a notch. "You should know, Nick, that if it smells for even one second like you're the wrong side of level, I will drop you where you stand."

Although he had spoken in little more than a whisper, Hutch saw some of that brash arrogance wink out in the eyes inches from his own. Sounds of a pitched battle between the Indians and the cowboys exploded into the tense pause, and Hutch suddenly had one more point to make.

"You like Westerns, Nick?" Hutch still had Nick's shirt balled up in his hand, and his sudden conversational tone threw the other off balance.

"Hope you do, because I got an image I want in your head the whole time you're around me." Hutch nodded his head towards the screen. "Know what the settlers did to protect their own?" Nick shook his head mutely, unable to look away.

"Circle the wagons, Nicky, that's what they'd do. Everything they valued went in the middle, then they'd circle the wagons." Hutch let Nicky's shirt go, but his raised finger kept him in place just as securely.

"You better live up to his expectations this time," his eyes flicked to the bedroom, "or so help me, I will leave you the wrong side of that circle."

Hutch held the wary eyes in front of his a moment longer, allowing the tension between the two to
level off. For a moment it looked like Nicky would find it in himself to retort, but he merely nodded once, tight-lipped.

As if on a perfect cue to rescue one from the other, the bedroom door banged open and Starsky came through, muttering about car keys. Stopping dead in his tracks, his gaze switched from one to the other, taking in the relieved glances they both sent his way, and the rather uncomfortable stance of his brother.

He smiled wryly, "Sharing the toys were we?"

Chuckling, Hutch stepped away and visibly relaxed under his partner's knowing gaze. "Just getting reacquainted, Starsk." Hutch's tone was lighter as he looked squarely at Nick, almost daring him to contradict. Nick looked away and said nothing.

"Nicky, you stay here," Starsky raised his hand, all business now, and cut off his brother's expected complaint. "Hutch and I are gonna go give Huggy a heart-attack at this bright hour, then we'll be back." He put his hands on his brother's shoulders and pushed him slowly back into a sitting position on the couch. "Don't answer the phone, doorbell, whatever," Starsky paused, "and I don't care if Lucille Ball herself appears outside," they both smiled at some shared reference, "you do not stick your nose out." He squeezed down briefly on Nicky's shoulder, took a breath and slowly straightened.

"I'm sorry, Davy, 'bout your ribs 'n' everything... you know..." Nick faltered.

Starsky smiled, all indulgent big-brother again. "'S okay, I know. 'Sides, gets me out of Officers' Bowling Night tomorrow, so it ain't all bad."

Hutch held the door open and gave his partner an indignant look as he came level.

"You signed us up for that again this year? After the disaster that was last year?"

"Hey Hutch, how is it my fault if a guy slips just as I'm lettin' loose a perfect strike?"

"You were in his lane at the time, mushbrain, so..."

Nicky couldn't hear the rest, as they had moved away from the closed front door. He swallowed, unnerved by the sudden silence, and by the way everything jumped around. Juice to threats to bowling. He shook his head, he might as well have been invisible once the two of them got into it. He thought back to the cold steel in Hutch's eyes, inches from his own, and felt his own anger flicker.

He'd show them invisible.

"Well, that wasn't much."

"Oh, I don't know, Starsk. Least Huggy got to make fun of your fighting skills."

The smell of coffee and fresh doughnuts had gotten Huggy past the shock of the hour, the taste had gotten them all past the profanity. Duly placated, all Huggy could tell them was that the two guys were definitely from out of state -- which fit. And that they were supposedly in town to arm-twist on a debt -- which didn't.

"If these two flakes are here to collect money, then where the hell does that leave us?" asked
Starsky once they were back in the car, ignition keys in his hand.

"Got another question for you, Starsk."

"Shoot."

"How come you're the one who got bust in the face?" Hutch held his hand up. "I know, you jumped in. But if Nick is who they're here for then they're a little sloppy, don't you think?" He twisted round, towards his partner. "I mean, no offense, but he's still walking around and you basically got your pride dented."

"Pretty sorry hit-men, then."

"Lousy."

Starsky looked across. "Unless they're not."

"Precisely."

Each contemplated the other.

"So," began Starsky, "what we're both sittin' here thinking, is that this whole bar thing..."

"...could just be a coincidence." finished Hutch.

Starsky wasn't sure he liked the stretch of it, "Nah, don't buy it, Hutch. Gotta be another connection."

Nick.

Hutch cleared his throat. "Who knows? We've still got two out of town goons here for no good reason, but they sound more like spare muscle to me." He paused, knowing that Starsky knew what he was going to say next, but having to say it anyway. "Got to get official with this, partner." He kept his voice steady, and his eyes on the windshield. "And you might not like what we find."

"What's that supposed to mean?" The flare was instant.

Size of Montana, Starsk.

"Nothing, buddy. I'm just..."

"Well don't."

Starsky looked down at the keys still in his lap and said nothing more. He looked away, out the driver's side window. Hutch allowed it, silently cursing Nick for the nth time in less than 24 hours.

"Yeah, okay, let's get official." Starsky's voice was quiet, a little lost. He caught his partner's watchful glance. "S just..." He shrugged, unsure of how to sum up that fraternal mix of love, guilt and frustration.

He didn't have to.

"I know," came the echo, together with a light squeeze on his shoulder. "I know."

At that moment, the radio crackled into life. Hutch took it as Starsky bent towards the ignition. "Zebra Three to Control. Over."
"Zebra Three. Be advised of a domestic disturbance reported in the vicinity of Detective Starsky's apartment. Over."

The two exchanged an urgent look. Starsky shook his head and roared the Torino into life as Hutch responded. "Ten Four, Control. We are in the area and responding immediately." He replaced the mike and slapped the mars light on the roof, gritting his teeth at the unwelcome deja vu of it all.

"Well, it's official now."

Cutting through the morning traffic with grim determination, Starsky said nothing.

________________________________________________________________________________________________

By the time Starsky had bounced the Torino off the curb in front of his apartment, whatever had taken place was over. The door to Starsky's apartment hung open, but a quick guns-drawn sweep revealed nothing untoward. No upturned furniture, no sign of a struggle and more significantly, no Nick.

Starsky re-clipped his holster and tried not to take his annoyance out on anything breakable around him.

"This is nuts, Hutch! Where the hell's the disturbance?"

Hutch flicked the door handle "No sign of a forced entry either." Starsky looked at his partner, not really liking what that implied.

Aware of the short leash his partner's frustration was on, Hutch held his hands up. "Starsk, stay here. Call Huggy. You never know, maybe it's nothing and he's there. I'll go check with dispatch and find out who called it in, okay?"

Starsky was still glaring at the couch where he had told Nick to stay put.

"Hey," Hutch's voice at the door brought him round, "Call Huggy, okay?" Starsky caught the no-nonsense tone and understood. Cop mode. That's what he had to be in now. Not pissed-off, worried big-brother mode.

He shot his partner a grateful look and waved him off. "Yeah, got it."

The phone rang just as he was reaching for it. Unnerved, Starsky pulled it to his ear before the first ring had even finished.

"Nicky?"

"Well, ain't you the prompt one Officer Starsky?" A voice he didn't recognise let out a B-movie style chuckle.

"Who's this?"

"All in good time, Officer, all in good time. I got someone who'd like a word in your ear." Starsky's knuckles on the receiver tightened. He knew what was coming.

"Davy? 'M sorry, I just..." The sound of something muffled, then the B-movie voice was back before Starsky could reply. "Did you hear that Officer? Seems we need to talk."

"Listen, punk, I don't know who you are or what your game is, but I guarantee you this. If my brother has so much as a curl outta place when I find him." He paused, suddenly aware of Hutch at
his back. He took in a steadying breath as a hand went to his shoulder. "And I will find him, there ain't gonna be a hole deep enough. Understand?"

"Hey, who's hiding anything? You think I want this snot-nosed pissant cluttering up my place?" The voice suddenly hardened, all trace of mock hilarity gone. "Garment district. There's a back room in a laundromat called Harvey's. Thirty minutes. Come alone, and cop?" There was a pause and another laugh. "Bring your checkbook, if you know what I mean." The line clicked dead.

Starsky closed his eyes and pressed the receiver into his forehead, willing his guts to stop churning. Hutch squeezed his fingers in and with his other hand slowly eased the phone out of his partner's grip. "So," he asked quietly, "where to, buddy?"

Starsky opened his mouth to protest, an automatic response. Hutch just waited, not even raising an eyebrow or grabbing any elbows this time. Starsky gave a small nod in acknowledgement. Those days were long gone. Lessons born of the years had taught each man that neither listened when it came to the other going in alone, regardless of instructions from psychos and kidnappers.

Starsky repeated the bones of it. "So, what did you get from dispatch?"

"Not much. Seems the disturbance part of it didn't start till outside. Neighbor called it in. Saw two men walking another out. Words got heated, he was bundled into a car, and that was it." Hutch saw no reason to share the fact that a couple of blows were also imparted. Starsky opened his mouth as they moved towards the door and Hutch anticipated "Yeah, they got it, dark-blue sedan. No license number, though."

Hutch paused, forestalling Starsky's exit with a hand on his arm. "You ready for this?" It was said with no judgement, only concern for what could come.

Starsky surprised him with a hand-pat over his. "Not really. You?"

"Nope."

"Well, then we're set."

"As always."

Starsky squeezed the fingers under his, absurdly calmed by the brief exchange. "C'mon, clock's ticking. We'll talk strategy on the way."

________________________________________

Hutch felt the grit of the wall press into his back. He pulled away and turned to peer through to about twenty feet in front of him, where his partner was easing toward a closed door. Starsky caught his eye and dipped his head. Hutch dipped his in return and slowly clicked the safety off his weapon, not liking the situation one bit.

In truth, they had been lucky. As they had flashed their badges and emptied the place quickly and quietly, an opening to a small annex before the back room had revealed itself. A fire-door, long rotted off its hinges, lay to one side giving Hutch the perfect opportunity to both stay out of sight and back up his partner from close quarters. On the way over Dobey had done his usual dance about back-up and channels, and with a curt 'no time Cap'n,' Starsky had done his usual dance and promised not to be cute.

Hutch glanced around. Cute was one thing, but this was making him uneasy. A cautious sweep on the way in had revealed nothing out of place. No lookout, no covering gunfire. Other than an
empty blue sedan, it seemed that everything really was concentrated in a dingy room with a one
door exit. Hutch gave himself a mental head shake. No Kidnapping 101 skills here. He tensed as Starsky
flattened into position to the left of the door. Which, of course, made the whole enterprise
easier and more dangerous.

Starsky reached out and tapped the door with his gun.

"Anyone here order a pizza?"

The muffled sound of scraping filtered through as a voice called out. "Officer Starsky! Glad you
could make it. Got the money?"

Starsky looked back, the puzzlement clear on his face. What the hell are we talking about here?
Hutch, hackles raised, sent back a got me gesture as he willed his instincts on Nick to be wrong.

Starsky turned back and raised his voice. "Need to see what you got, punk. You're just wind in my
hair so far."

"Davy? I didn't..."

Starsky bit down at the sound of his brother and his voice got louder. "You wanna open up and
dance, turkey?"

A short bark of laughter came from inside. "It's open!"

Starsky exchanged another look with his partner. Either this guy had the most delusional sense of
his own kidnapping skills, or he was high on something other than stupidity. Not an ideal situation,
whichever way you looked at it. Taking a breath, he turned the handle and swung the door
inwards.

"Gun down, detective! Then you may step forward."

Complying, Starsky straightened and a predictable scene revealed itself. Like a bad movie, was his
first thought. The small room was dimly lit by a single bulb and bare, save for a chair behind a dark
metal table in the middle of it. Hastily gagged and bound to that chair with his hands behind him
was Nick. And standing behind Nick, aiming a gun barrel at the head beneath him, stood a
swarthy, heavy-set man with dark, army-short hair and dressed in a suit that didn't fit.

"Well, Officer Starsky, we meet again." Starsky's jaw tightened. It was the guy from the bar. Hutch
was right; the coincidence stunk. He took another step into the room, mindful of what he knew to
be his partner's line of fire.

"Sorry about the... uh..." the gun came off Nicky's head momentarily as the man grinned and
gestured vaguely at Starsky's face. He ground it back in place, eliciting a yelp.

Starsky schooled his face to betray nothing and his eyes did not even flicker down. "Had
girlfriends do worse, punk." He took another diagonal step. Timing, Hutch. It's all going to be
about timing.

"So, we gonna get to whatever this is? I got laundry waiting..." he paused, theatrically, "is there
something I can call you besides punk..." Starsky spread a grin across his face "...punk?"

Outside Hutch sweated it out. He heard the last and almost groaned. Jesus, Starsky. Hump a bear
trap why don't you? The ploy of rattling a guy with a gun into a lapse of concentration was not an
easy one for a partner to listen to. Especially a partner who had to stay back and out of sight.
"Hey!" The man clearly was thrown by Starsky's less than compliant attitude, and the gun wavered up... but not enough. "Some respect for the guy with the piece, cop." He ground the muzzle back into Nick's head. "Though why anyone would put it on the line for this sorry-ass piece of shit is beyond me." He bent down, close to Nick's left ear. "Did you really think that drink got spilled by accident?" He straightened and looked back to Starsky, who had managed another step. "Name's James, Officer Starsky, but everyone calls me Jimmy." Said on that cusp of instant friendship and instant menace that men with guns on people liked to use. "Couldn't believe my fucking luck, man. There I am, having a drink, making enquiries, looking for this ass-wipe -- and in he strolls. With his cop brother no less!"

Something stabbed at Hutch as he blinked hard to focus. He suddenly knew what was coming, he knew without a shadow of doubt what this was all about. He felt the distance between himself and that room stretch out. That son-of-a-bitch Nick had done what Hutch feared he would all along.

Oh, Starsk.

"Now, I don't know what fairy tales he's been spinning you. But let me tell you something, Officer Starsky, nothing makes a pathetic loser pay up faster than a threat to family." He grinned again. "When I heard you two was brothers from the gent behind the bar, I gotta say, it was a gift horse I couldn't ignore."

Starsky ground his teeth as the room began to buzz in his ears. No witness then, no back-alley murder. Just another gambling debt and a handful of lies. Against his better judgement Starsky pulled his eyes off Jimmy and turned them on his brother, whose head hung down as if in unspoken confirmation. Starsky swallowed and shifted his gaze back

Unaware of the sudden emotional shift in the room Jimmy continued, "So, if you'll just leave me the ten grand he says you'd have with you, Officer Starsky, I can take the good news back to Mr. Peregrini, and you can take this sorry carcass off my hands. You think--"

He took them all by surprise. In a blind instinct of rage and shame, the almost-forgotten Nick suddenly reared up, chair and all. Not so much bravery as a desperation to cut off the words. Words which were doing irreparable damage to his relationship with his brother.

At that point Starsky's fraternal instinct beat his cop one. He lurched toward his brother, unintentionally blocking his partner's line of fire as the gun Jimmy had trained on Nick swivelled up and out in wide-eyed surprise. As if in slow motion, Hutch saw it all. He anticipated Starsky's move to his brother even before his mind could scream at the hesitation it would force on him. When it came, the bullet from the kidnapper blistered into Starsky at little more than point blank range, jerking his trajectory back and away from the table. Nick then hit the floor in a mess of chair and limbs as the boom of Hutch's magnum took Jimmy's chest apart. Starsky heard the retort of Hutch's gun as he fell. He felt the bite of it whistle past him, and as the world grayed, a disconnected part of him felt relief at the knowledge that the bullet would find its mark and Hutch would take care of everything.

The smell of gunfire hung in the air. A chair scraped. Hutch snapped forward, an unwavering gun held on the tableau in front of him.

"Starsky!"

A faint groan to his left as he entered the room took his heart-rate down a notch. The cop in him kept his eyes ahead just long enough to realise that behind the table it was all over, and that Nick could lie there and scrabble until his fingertips bled.
In a flurry of movement Hutch turned and dropped to where his spread-eagled partner was vainly trying to lift his head.

"Hu-tch?" No blood bubbles, but a worrying stain was radiating out from Starsky's left shoulder, turning his pale shirt darker by the second.

"Don't move, buddy. Don't move." Shrugging off his jacket as he spoke, Hutch rolled it up and eased it under his partner's head. A hand flailed. "I know, I know." Hutch took the hand, squeezed the fingers and laid it down. "Just take it easy." Working quickly and trying not to think too much, Hutch stripped down to his T shirt. Smoothing back a non-existent curl, he let his hand linger on the side of Starsky's head.

"This is gonna hurt, Starsk. But I need to put pressure on it, okay?"

"Kay," Starsky's Adams apple bobbed just once as he nodded into the hand.

As Hutch pressed his balled-up shirt down onto the wound, the smell of his partner's blood filled his nostrils, sending a shaky breath through them both. Hutch blinked hard and tried to smile some reassurance into the very pale eyes under his.

"Hey, Hutch." Starsky's whisper drew him in.

"Yeah?"

"Call that giving cover?"

Hutch's smile slipped. It returned as he remembered what came next.

"Well, if I'd known you were gonna stroll..."

As Hutch pressed down, the quiet banter did its work, it closed out the world around the two men and allowed each to draw what he needed from the other. An intimate, blood-filled dance which never failed to tether the wounded one to the other. Starsky let his eyes drift shut as the noisy beat of his heart quieted and the pain lessened. But then something other than Hutch tugged at his consciousness.

"Nicky?" His eyes struggled open.

"Fine, Starsk. Fine." Hutch's voice was cold and clipped, but he couldn't care less. The flow of blood seemed to have eased, so Hutch reached out and found his partner's right hand. "Buddy?" Starsky swallowed and tracked his eyes to the soft voice. "Need you to listen." Hutch held Starsky's hand over the wound with his own. "You keep as much pressure on this as you can. Dobey's got to have units around out of sight and I need to get word out."

Hutch took a breath and watched a second as he stood. He was relieved to see Starsky manage a grip on the darkened ball of shirt, though he knew it was temporary. His partner's strength would wane fast. Hutch cast a cursory glance at Nick who, still bound to parts of the chair, had nevertheless managed to get to his knees. Hutch had no hesitation, he left the room at a run. Nick could rot in that chair, Hutch was not going to be the one to free him from it.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours Hutch cricked his neck back into place as he sat on yet another uncomfortable chair. This time it was a plastic one under the harsh artificial lights of a hospital corridor. He looked to the wall clock. 3:22pm. He closed his eyes at the headache the
lights were making worse. He had been allowed into the recovery room briefly -- an unspoken leeway cops were often given -- needing to confirm for himself what the surgeon had said. Starsky was pale, cold to the touch and still under, so Hutch had simply tucked the warm blanket around his partner a little tighter, lingered a moment at the door, and then left to take up the vigil they had each done too many times.

Starsky's surgery had taken less than an hour. The surgeon, a man clearly used to gunshot injuries, had crisply told him it was a clean through and through, which had been too high to be of any profound danger to the heart. He was going to be kept in for a day or two to treat blood-loss and to watch for any signs of infection. What Mr. Starsky was looking at, he had continued as Hutch nodded, was torn muscle and a badly bruised collar-bone that would take time, a sling and some physiotherapy to put right. And that's going to be such a barrel of laughs for his left-handed ways. Hutch sighed and thought about what was ahead for both of them as he pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to let his gratitude at what the doctor was telling him persuade his negativity to back off. Hutch knew he was grateful, but he had also recognized the other emotion that was keeping the pain right between his eyes. It was anger. Pure and simple. And he knew just who to direct it at.

As Hutch now made his way to the floor and room number he had been given, he reflected that he had no idea what had happened to Nick. He and Dobey had conferred briefly while Starsky was being loaded into the ambulance -- a conversation nowhere near finished, on either side -- but he had paid little attention to the sudden bustle of units and lights which had encircled the laundromat. A door swished just ahead of him and Nick exited into the corridor. Hutch felt a stab of resentment as he realised it was Starsky's room he was coming out of. He had been delayed by the usual insurance requirements for five lousy minutes, and Nick had somehow found the room ahead of him. That Nick should be the first person his partner saw after coming round filled him with a possessiveness he didn't quite know what to do with.

Nick clearly sensed it. His step faltered. "Hutch," he said, cautiously. Not the start of anything, just a wary acknowledgement.

Hutch ground his first response down. Now was neither the time nor place. He felt gratified to see a few cuts and bruises around Nick's face, together with a bandage on his arm and an apprehensive look in his eye.

"Nick," he managed.

"Hutch, I..."

"Later," said Hutch as he pushed past, uninterested. He turned at the door. "Oh, and Nick?" He kept his voice even. "Make no mistake, there will be a later." Hutch swung the door in, his attention already ahead of him.

He paused at the entrance.

"Hey." All trace of anger gone, pulled out by the tug his heart always got at seeing Starsky in a hospital bed.

Starsky's open eyes turned and found his. "Hey yourself." Weak and a little strained, but Hutch's relief was instant.

Noticing the swathe of white Starsky's left side was wrapped in, and mindful of the IV which hung there, Hutch walked round to the right of the bed, hooking his leg around yet another plastic chair and pulling it in close. He took a moment to just lean across and look, the image of a pale and
bandaged Starsky so much better than that of the backwards-flying one his brain kept insisting on. He found the still-cool fingers of Starsky's right hand and covered them with his own.

"Doc says you were lucky, Starsk."

"Yeah? He should try gettin' shot in the shoulder."

Hutch couldn't help but smile at that. "What is it with you and shoulders anyway, buddy? Trying to sabotage the bowling again? Be easier..."

"You mad?" It came out quiet, barely above a whisper, but it stopped Hutch mid-sentence.

Starsky knew what Hutch was doing, he knew it was part of their hospital ritual and he knew it was a much needed balm on them both. However, he had to cut to the chase. Pain-killers and a blessed immobility were keeping him lucid for now, but he could already feel a lethargy and incoherence hovering at the edge. He couldn't even begin to focus on the muddle of emotion the sight and sound of his brother when he woke up had caused. But he could focus on Hutch with what energy was left, focus on the tension that was thrumming through his partner, despite the soft banter. The fingers under Hutch's hand were jolted the second the question left his lips, and Starsky had his answer.

"Aren't you?"

Starsky grimaced as the bandaging cut off an attempt to sigh. "It's complicated, Hutch."

Not to me, buddy. Not to me. Hutch had Dobey to talk to first, and the facts to sort out and sift through, but the germ of something was already starting to form in his mind. Had been forming since following the ambulance in, hanging onto the mantra of lastfuckingtimeNicklastfuckingtime as his hands had tightened on the steering-wheel.

"Hey," Starsky's tired call jerked him back to the here and now. "I mean it. Let it go." Hutch leaned in so Starsky could talk without straining himself. "Might as well blame a rock for bein' heavy, Hutch." His eyes caught his partner's and Hutch's throat tightened at the heart he saw there. A heart that was trying desperately to find a way out of the betrayal his blind spot had hidden.

"Okay, Starsk, I hear you." He let go of the fingers, which were starting to feel warmer, and laid his hand gently on Starsky's right shoulder instead. "Just go to sleep now, buddy. Relax, everything's going to be okay." Starsky valiantly battled the soothing words; there was something he had to make sure was taken care of, something he had to ask Hutch to do now that he was in here.

"Hu-tsh?"

"SSh... C'mon, just... What?" Starsky was clearly not to be shushed until it was out.

"Nicky... too much... sorry."

Hutch had no idea what Starsky was talking about, but it didn't matter. He said the words Starsky seemed to need to hear from him."Sure, buddy. Now sleep." He pressed down ever so slightly on Starsky's forehead with his palm, and saw his partner's face relax as pain-killers, blood-loss and exhaustion finally pulled him in.

Hutch stood slowly. He watched and waited, and as Starsky's breathing deepened, so did his resolve. Your blind spot, partner. Not mine. He bit down on any doubts.
By the time Hutch turned the key in the lock at Starkey's apartment his anger had cooled and solidified into a plan of action he had almost sold himself on. It was late, very late, but there were things to be done. Now. Sincerely hoping that Nick was fast asleep, Hutch slammed the door home the last foot or so, and was content to hear a muffled curse and thud from the darkened living room.

"Evening there, Nicholas." Hutch turned the main light on and moved forward to study the man now blinking up at him. The air of nervous belligerence almost made Hutch smile.

He had left the hospital and gone straight to Metro. A few hours sorting through the aftermath of the laundromat had turned up a couple of interesting surprises, one of which he was planning to share with Nick. The second surprise was tucked inside Hutch's jacket pocket. It had nothing to do with the case and everything to do with the Montana-sized heart of his wounded partner.

Hutch eased onto the coffee table, effectively cutting off any escape route from the couch Nick might have been planning. It was deer in the headlights time again.

"What I'm still puzzled about, Nick -- and I'm really hoping you can fill in a few blanks for me here -- is this. At what point exactly did you decide to sell Starkey down the river?" Hutch's voice was deceptively calm. "Was it when you left your business partners in New York? Or was it when they showed up in the bar and sent you a warning you didn't quite know what to with?"

Nick had the grace to stutter out the words. "B-business partners? I..."

Hutch leaned forward. "I know, Nick. I know that it's not quite a gambling debt. Oh, you owed them ten grand, I'm sure of that, but not all cards, right?"

Nick swallowed, "I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Oh, that's right, you don't." He continued in the same vein, almost teacher to child. "You see, Nick, Peregrini is now a guest of the NYPD. Taken out in a sting operation about five days ago." Hutch was gratified to see Nick's jaw drop open. "Jimmy the dead debt-collector was here for you, in an incompetent freelance kind of a way, but he didn't just collect debts now, did he Nick?" Nick looked down as Hutch's eyes flinted and his voice steeled. "He was one of Peregrini's dealers, mostly coke, some heroin. And you, little Nicky, are sounding an awful lot like the descriptions coming through from New York of one of Jimmy's distributors."

The pounding of Hutch's heart as he had pieced that information together to form the most unsavory whole he could have imagined, took him to his chair at Metro for a good five minutes. It was too vague for anyone else, and besides, Peregrini was the prize and the focus in New York. But Hutch needed nothing more than his guts and the empty chair across from him to know. He was right, and this would destroy his partner.

Nicky stared at the hands in his lap, unwilling it seemed to contradict or even speak. With a noise of disgust, Hutch stood. "I'm guessing sticky fingers in the wrong place. Couldn't play, lose and earn fast enough, right?"

"Look, I didn't use, okay?" Nick had finally found his voice, "it... it was just a way to earn some extra cash, y'know?" At the sneer that curled Hutch's lip, Nick's defensiveness flared. "It's not like they're not gonna get it elsewhere if they don't get from me, so what's the fucking difference?"
Hutch had paced off a ways and turned at the last, startled by the sudden mixed message his brain got at seeing the dark head of the man in jeans on the couch. That fucking difference is what would kill his partner. Starsky had had little enough truck with drug dealers. Since Forest he had problems seeing straight around them, such was the fury they brought to the surface. So alike, yet poles apart in every way that matters. The bile began to rise.

"Did no one ever tell you that stealing from drug dealers to pay them their own gambling debts is just about the stupidest thing you could have done? What the hell did you imagine the outcome from any of this was going to be?"

"I was gonna tell him, Hutch, honest..."

"And then what?" Hutch used his height to full advantage as his voice rose. "Guilt him out of ten thousand dollars? Which -- god love him -- short of hocking the Torino and everything else he has, still wouldn't cut it."

"I know that!" snapped Nick. "I know he doesn't, he already..."

Nick bit his tongue. Hutch's blood froze.

Low and deadly, Hutch moved in. "Wait up one second, here. Are you trying to tell me that you asked him for the money at the hospital?" He remembered the garbled words Starsky had struggled to say just before Hutch had left:

'Nicky... too much... sorry,'

Not anaesthetic then. Not blood-loss and exhaustion. They had been said with all the distress of a torn conscience.

The last of Hutch's patience snapped clean off. Like a cobra, his right hand went out, grabbing Nick's shirt and chest hairs as he yanked him to his feet.

'Nicky... too much... sorry,'

Not anaesthetic then. Not blood-loss and exhaustion. They had been said with all the distress of a torn conscience.

The last of Hutch's patience snapped clean off. Like a cobra, his right hand went out, grabbing Nick's shirt and chest hairs as he yanked him to his feet.

"You mean to tell me he's lying there with tubes coming out every whichway," Hutch's voice rose again, "and the first thing he's got to listen to when he wakes up is his miserable son-of-a-bitch of a brother -- the reason he's there in the first place -- hitting him up for money?" As if he could bear no more, Hutch turned away. But not before he had heaved Nick back down onto the couch with a force to see stars.

Nick's shredded nerves finally found a voice. He looked up. "I'm an idiot, Hutch. Is that what you wanna hear? I'm a fucking idiot!" The militant tone undid itself with self-pity. Neither of which cut any ice. Nick saw this in Hutch's eyes and seemed to finally realize it was too late for him with this man. His shoulders sagged and he mumbled something.

"What?" snapped Hutch.

"I said, 'he's still my brother.'" A last defiant look.

Hutch reached into his jacket pocket and threw the second surprise on the coffee table. A white envelope.

"Not any more."

Nick gulped. Suddenly unsure and deathly afraid of Hutch's quiet, ridiculous words. Each man held a breath as all the energy and anger faded into the sharp relief of that single white envelope. "I-I don't--" At Hutch's silent gesture to open it, Nick did just that. Out spilled dollar bills. A lot of
them.

"I don't... What is this?"

Hutch had thought this would be one of the hardest decisions of his life to live with. But all compassion for Nick had turned to ice and the words came easy.

"This is me leaving you the wrong side of the circle." Hutch paused to see if Nick remembered. He did. Hutch continued. "Now you and I both know, Nick, that Peregrini inside and Jimmy in the morgue means there is no more debt. No-one is going to come after you for the ten grand."

"So...?" Nick gestured at the money, lost.

"So, this is what I figure a chance at a new life is going for these days. This is for you Nick. Five thousand dollars. From me."

Nick blinked up, a tentative expression of gratitude forming. It faded when he saw the steel in Hutch's eyes. Something was terribly wrong with this offer.

"Afraid so, Nick. Not quite what it seems. You get this, but not free and not clear. Nothing is ever free and clear." Hutch sat down, across from Nick and held his eyes. "You will not come to Bay City again. You will have no contact with your brother whatsoever from this point forward, other than a phone call at Thanksgiving, Christmas and his birthday, which, by god, you'd better start remembering. Your mother sees less of you than he does, so if you wish, return to New York. But you know, Nick..." Hutch leaned forward, "...we never did find the second guy Jimmy came here with." In truth, a weak threat, but Hutch's whispered confidence sold it beautifully.

"So, there you have it, Nick. Go somewhere new, where no-one knows you and fix your life before it's too late. Of course, if you want to whine to Starsky about any of this, at any time, I can't stop you." He held up his hand, slicing off any words Nick might have been about to add. "But know this. Starsky does not, and will not, know the drug-dealing connection until I tell him."

There. His aces were all played.

Hutch sat back, relieved and disgusted all at once. That it should have come to this. He hated Nick for doing this to himself and his partner. He watched Nick's face and saw the calculation as Nick figured the odds and ever so slowly put the envelope in his pocket. Hutch suddenly wanted to be gone. To be gone from this room, this envelope and this man whose resemblance to another was making him nauseous.

Tired, Hutch stood and made his way to the door.

"Where you going?"

Hutch turned, surprised. It almost sounded like Nick didn't want him to leave. Then again, I wouldn't want to be alone with his thoughts, either.

"Well, first I'm going to swing by the hospital because my partner is probably awake, sore and alone. Then, I am going home for a few hours sleep. Then, I'm going to pick you up here in the morning and take you to him so that you can say a few suitable goodbye words. Then, you are going to get on with your life, and we will get on with ours."

The deliberate split in the last few words was what echoed as the door shut.
Epilogue -- two years later...

Hutch looked at his watch. 8.30pm. He sipped his beer and tried to summon up the energy to ease himself off his partner's couch and wend his weary way. Couldn't. Not just yet. Far too comfortable where he was. Starsky was whistling something behind him, banging away in the kitchen, and he had just opened this bottle of beer. Besides all that, his back was playing up and Starsky's still fairly-new couch was firm enough to make him not feel it. That and the beer. A light smile touched his lips as he let his head fall right back.

"Hey, Starsk."

"Yeah?" Punctuated by a clatter.

Hutch then realised he had nothing to add. "Nothing... uh... that was just a 'hey Starsk'."

Starsky stopped what he was doing and looked over his shoulder. He caught the upside-down angle of Hutch's head and shook his own. "Goofball." He turned back to what he was doing.

Hutch contemplated his partner a second or two longer until his neck muscles forced his head forward again. The move to Robbery had turned out to be a good one. Starsky's return to active duty after Gunther had been a thing of wonder. But it had had to be a tempered one. Starsky's endurance now had a limitation the streets would show no mercy to, and Hutch's nerves and exhaustion, quite simply, had deserved to be given a break. So Robbery it became. They were still out and about, but the cases tended to come one or two at a time and often took longer to puzzle out and write up. Something which had ultimately turned out to be more satisfying than either could have hoped for. Everything had been allowed to knit back together away from the pressure cooker of driving in the streets all day.

"Hey, Hutch."

"Yeah?"

"Nothin'. That was just a 'hey Hutch.'" He opened the fridge and reached in for two more beers.

"Hey, Hutch!"

"What?!"

Starsky grinned. Getting under Hutch's skin was always too easy. "Guess what's on tonight?"

Behind him Hutch groaned. "Don't tell me I'm trapped here with you, a lasagna and a creature feature."

Starsky plopped himself down beside his partner. "Ha-ha. And no." He handed a beer over and swung his legs up to join Hutch's on the coffee table. "Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid," he announced with a flourish, unaware of the shadow which crossed the features of the man next to him. "So, how about we stuff ourselves with the last of Rosie's lasagna and watch the Hole In The Wall gang do their thing?"

"You just want to watch Katherine Ross undo her thing, pal." Hutch continued on before Starsky could retort. "Anyway, I... I'm tired, Starsk." He became interested in the label on the beer bottle. "Think I'll just eat and go home, if that's okay."

A little puzzled, Starsky decided Hutch just needed some grade-A wheedling. "Aww... c'mon, Hutch, we haven't watched it together in ages. Not since..." Starsky thought back. "Wow. Not since
Nick... hell, that's been like... two years. Jesus, can't believe it's been two years since Nick was here." Starsky quieted, momentarily lost in an obvious memory. Hutch was powerless to do anything but focus on the label as the air thickened around him. He willed Starsky's attention to move on.

"Got a postcard the other day. Did I tell ya?" Mutely Hutch shook his head and kept his eyes down. Starsky had moved on, but in the worst possible direction, and the increasingly wistful tone was doing nothing for Hutch's conscience.

"Yup, boy's doing okay, finally. Settin' down in Arizona and getting married -- you believe that?" Starsky took a swig of beer. "Never figured him before me." He looked down at his beer, and took his turn examining the label there.

Hutch swallowed. The pause was too long. Starsky was about to drift into some kind of melancholic musing that would undo his partner's resolve.

"Still can't believe it's been two years. I mean, whatever, Hutch, I'm his goddamn brother and he doesn't even tell me when the wedding is, never mind send me an invite. It's like..." Hutch heard his partner's throat work and wondered how much more of this his scruples could sit there ignoring. "I mean, even after Gunther, man..."

And there it was. The limit. "It's because of me, Starsk. Not you."

Gruff and sudden, the words pulled Starsky's gaze around as he roused himself and finally registered that all was not right with his partner. Hutch was hunched over, plucking at the label and staring into his beer as if the bottle contained the meaning of life. Starsky was at a loss. That Hutch and his brother didn't get on was about the worst kept secret among them all. Still didn't account for the tension now radiating off his partner. Starsky leaned sideways to bump against Hutch's left arm and shoulder. "Not to disappoint that ego of yours, Hutchinson, but I don't think Nicky's getting married has anything to do with you and him scratching at each other like alley cats."

Hutch shifted away. "You don't understand, Starsk." The words had gotten even quieter, and as the atmosphere in the room inexplicably darkened, Starsky went from puzzled to scared in an instant. Something was wrong, and he had no idea what. He wrapped his right hand around the fingers still picking at the neck of the beer bottle, stilling their agitation.

"Hutch?"

It came out in a rush. "I paid him off. When Jimmy shot you. I put five thousand dollars in an envelope, told him to get a new life and stay the hell out of yours." Hutch disentangled his hand and pulled himself up, ignoring the twinge in his back. He couldn't do this if he looked at his partner or sat anywhere near him. And it seemed that he really was going to do this. As he paced and related the tale of that long ago exchange, he felt the consequences of it flare, like a toothache he had always known would hurt him one day. He was tempted to vindicate himself with the drug-dealing part, but he didn't. Nick had not broken his side of the bargain, and he could not wound his partner to salvage his own ego.

"What can I say, Starsk?" He reached the bookcase and fiddled with the leaf of a plant before turning his back on it. "I thought to tell you, I truly did. But then Nick got a job, you got happy and then..." He lifted his hands helplessly. "...and then six months after Jimmy, Gunther took us to a whole other place where, excuse the hell out of me, it really didn't cross my mind anymore." He finally raised his head. Starsky was still regarding him from the couch, now on the other side of the room. Hutch looked him straight in the eye. "I'd say I'm sorry, Starsk, but I don't know that I am."
Confession over, Hutch leaned back into the bookcase and braced himself. Said to be good for the soul, all Hutch could think was that it had better be, because it certainly wasn't doing his guts any good. Now all he could do was hope for absolution.

Hutch expected anger. He was hoping for forgiveness after Starsky ranted, railed, even popped him in the mouth, but he was expecting anger first. A lot of it. After all, close as he and Starsky were and shit that Nick was, he had stepped between family. Hutch figured about thirty seconds to a minute for Starsky to digest what he'd been told before the first explosion. So as a minute passed and he heard what sounded like a tired chuckle from the couch, he looked up.

Starsky was watching him, his face oddly unreadable. But whatever was on his face did not seem to be anger.

"Been there, done that, Hutch." Said on an even breath, Starsky's strangely hesitant manner and words threw Hutch for a complete loop.

What the--? He wondered if he had heard right. He moved away from the bookcase. "You mean... you paid Nick, too?"

Now it was Starsky's turn to regard the floor. He shook his head slowly. "No. Not Nick." He looked up and found Hutch's eyes again. "Gillian."

It was a name neither had thought of or spoken of in a very long time. So long, in fact, that 'Gillian-who?' nearly came out of Hutch's open mouth. A rusty chain on a wheel somewhere turned, as Starsky spoke and brought it all back.

Hutch knew of Starsky's visit to Gillian's apartment the day before her death, and of the pressure his partner had put on her to tell. It had been another spontaneous late-night confession, if Hutch remembered correctly, about a month after she died. Swimming in remorse and alcohol, Starsky had blurted it out across a Monopoly board. Hutch had hung on his every word and made him repeat everything she said, again and again, until Starsky had thrown the dice at him. Starsky had then crawled across the board, asking forgiveness. It had been given, without regret. But this was the first Hutch was hearing of a white envelope.

"So, there you go, Hutch." The laugh was bitter and didn't reach his eyes. "Can't have you thinking guilty thoughts all by your lonesome." A mesmerized Hutch found himself back on the couch, staring off into space. Neither man looked at the other as each digested this new information, trying to fit it into the whole that was their lives together.

Starsky, being Starsky, broke the silence first.

"You mad?"

An uncomfortable echo of another time and place made Hutch wince at his partner's choice of words. He considered his answer.

"No idea." He glanced left, curious. "You?"

Starsky shrugged. "I'm sure I should be." He examined the profile of the face he knew so well, and in his heart of hearts could find nothing in it to rail against. The fearful uncertainty there tugged at him, as it always did. He nudged a knee with his own. "If it makes you feel any better, she told me where to get off and didn't take it."

Hutch looked sideways. "Yours did," he replied dryly, nudging the same knee back. "Every damn cent."
Against the odds, the moment held. After all they had survived. All the Gillians, the Terrys, the Jimmys and the Gunthers, to see it all as anything other than water under a very strong bridge just made no sense. Each realized as they sat there, drawing strength from the well of their years together, that they had no heart or energy left to waste on outrage. Blame, as Starsky had grown fond of saying, was for God and small children.

"If it makes you feel any better," Hutch added grudgingly, "he paid me back about a month ago. Every cent."

"Yeah?" Starsky brightened instantly. It did. Besides, he was not so foolish as to see that Hutch had probably ended up doing Nick a favor -- in the most backhanded way possible. His blind spot had been a rather necessary casualty in the last two years.

Starsky got to his feet, still absorbing the odd turn the evening had taken. He turned back and asked, almost as an afterthought.

"What were we both thinking, Hutch? I mean, really?"

Hutch looked up and his voice caught.

"We circled the wagons, babe."

"We what?"

Remembering that Starsky had no idea about that particular conversation, Hutch attempted to wave it off. "Something I said to your brother a long time ago." Starsky was looking at him, hard. Oh boy. "I mean..."

Starsky cut him off, touched more than he could understand. "I get it, Blintz." He cleared his throat. "I think you're short an oar or two, but I get it." He smiled. Time to move on. He stood in front of his partner, beer in his left hand and extended his right one down. Hutch looked at it, eyebrows raised.

"For you. To move your ass up off the couch and help with dinner so that we don't miss the knife-fight."

Hutch nodded, relief that everything had changed and still stayed the same choking off any kind of reply. He took the outstretched hand and let his partner pull him up. Starsky halted Hutch's forward momentum with a hand across his waist, fingers loosely curled around his partner's left side.

They were hip to hip, facing in opposite directions as Starsky leaned right and whispered. "You just keep thinkin', Hutch. That's what you're good at." He pulled his head back and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

For a second, Hutch blinked, unsure. It had been a while since he'd seen the movie and had Starsky repeat his favorite bits ad-nauseum. It seemed to matter. He smiled as his mind dredged it up for his partner. "Man, I got vision, Stark." He even tried to imitate Newman's drawl as his left hand came down to rest lightly on the forearm across him. "Rest of the world wears bi-focals. But I got vision."

Starsky squeezed once and stepped away. "Close enough. Now get your long legs into my kitchen so I can eat and enjoy the real thing."

Hutch moved to follow. "Okay, but no running commentary this time, Stark. No shouting out the lines before they're spoken and so help me, if I have to listen to 'raindrops keep falling on my head'
all day tomorrow, you will have something other than raindrops falling on yours."

*Most of what follows is true...*

The opening credits rolled and as both men settled in side by side some twenty minutes later, replete with full stomachs and a beer each, Hutch reflected there were worse words to live by.

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