

Starting Over (Co-Written by Kirsty Welsh)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/40238682) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/40238682>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Starsky & Hutch
Relationship:	Ken Hutchinson & David Starsky
Character:	David Starsky , Ken Hutchinson , Daniel Griffith (OC) , Captain Dobey , Edith Dobey , Huggy Bear Brown , Captain Melville (OC) , Patrick O. Morris (OC)
Additional Tags:	h/c , Supernatural Elements , Stranged friendship , Angst with a Happy Ending , Friendship , New York City
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-07-11 Chapters: 17/17 Words: 45498

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by [ElisaV](#)

Summary

Post SR story. A look at the future of Starsky and Hutch after Starsky recovers from Gunther's assassination attempt.

Notes

I started this story many years ago. And I wrote chapters 1 to 5. But then I had a bad case of writer's block. While writing other stories, I just was unable to finish this one, mostly because I didn't like the very embittered and nasty Hutch I had portrayed in the first chapter (My heartfelt apologies to Hutch; 'cause I wrote him in such a way that I am unable to really picture him, not even in the worst of the fourth season of the show) but the first chapters of the story were already posted, so the "harm" was done. Luckily thought, Kirsty Welsh, a fellow, extremely talented writer came to the rescue, took the story over and finished it, so actually, I think that it's her story, rather than mine. You can find more of her awesome stories in fanfiction net and all over the internet just by searching "Kirsty Welsh fanfic". Sadly, she's quit writing long ago, but her works are still available, and they are worth a reading!

Chapter 1

With sleep still lingering in his eyes and a throbbing headache pounding in his temples, Hutch got out of bed, and headed to the coffee pot on his kitchen counter. Fetching a mug, he poured himself some of the hot liquid.

Absentmindedly, he leaned against the counter slowly sipping the coffee. Hutch was pondering if going out for a run around the block would make him feel better or if he'd rather go straight to the shower.

Finally deciding to skip the run, Hutch put the empty mug in the sink and headed to the bathroom. He took a long shower, trying to get rid of his exhaustion and the edginess that of late had become his usual, invariable companion.

Hutch was reluctant to face it, but the truth was that something had changed for the worse in him. The blond one didn't know how or when it had all begun, but he knew that at some point something had started going wrong with him. He didn't feel his old enthusiasm for his work, his life or, and this is what bothered him the most, his friendship with Starsky.

Sure, Starsky was still his best friend, and Hutch would still put his life on the line for him, any moment, just as he would always do. But somehow, despite how much Hutch hated to admit it, he felt that he could use some time apart from the upbeat, childlike brunet.

Actually, the source of his mixed feelings could be found in the past few years. Years in which Hutch, along with Starsky, had dealt with the ugliest face of the world.

Because of his stay in Vietnam, or perhaps because of his rough upbringing in Brooklyn, Starsky had seen much more evil than Hutch could picture. But maybe because of it, the dark-haired man had been able to go through the nastier side of their job with his optimism and zest for life almost unscathed. However, Hutch hadn't been as lucky or strong as his partner was, and he began slowly sliding downhill, finally reaching the point of becoming totally discouraged and drained of emotional strength.

The climax for that state of things arrived with Kira, the female detective he'd slept with after Starsky had stated that he was in love with her.

After those events, though Kira had left their lives for good, things had been pretty rough between the friends. They had done their best to fix the damaged trust and love they felt for each other. They did it, eventually, but then, when everything seemed to be getting back on track, the assassination attempt on Starsky by Gunther's hit men had added a huge extra strain in their recently tested friendship.

In the months after the shooting, Hutch had been constantly by his friend's side. He left aside his own life to help Starsky achieve what doctors had labelled an almost miraculous recovery. But all that they had gone through had been hard beyond words. In the blink of an eye, both men had to cope with challenges, fears and changes that neither of them was quite ready for. The worst one, once Starsky had recovered as much as he was going to do, had come a few weeks earlier. The review board had refused to clear him for street duty, mostly because of the damage that his lungs had sustained from the shooting. As a matter of fact, Starsky could carry on with a normal, productive life, but as the review board members' had stated, the physical effort required to be a street cop was outside of his current capabilities.

That rough end to their hope of coming back to the streets as partners had hit both detectives very hard. At first, Starsky had felt miserable and furious with the whole world, as never before in his entire life. Soon, though, he began to bounce back, struggling to preserve his buoyant nature. On the other hand, the only feelings left for Hutch were emotional exhaustion and grief. Grief that, no matter how hard he tried to deal with it, was slowly turning into a bitter resentment against everything and everybody.

Along those long, painful months and unable to find a better way to deal with his increasing stress and his sleepless nights, Hutch had begun drinking a little more than he had ever used to do. He didn't drink enough to get drunk, and he was perfectly able to function and help Starsky every day in any way the brunet needed, but a couple of shots of bourbon, tequila or any other hard drink had become a daily ritual before going to bed. One drink sometimes turned to two, and occasionally to three if the day had been particularly hard, or if he'd had to go through another gruelling physio with his friend, but the fiery liquid burning down his throat always made him feel just a little better. Meanwhile, Starsky; too exhausted both physically and emotionally had been unable to take in what was really going on with Hutch. And of course, the blond one hadn't wanted to consider that the dull headache and queasy stomach he'd woke to almost every morning could just be the way his body had to warn him that he was starting to overstep a tricky line.

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Feeling just as tired as when he had gotten out of bed a short while ago, the blond one stepped out of the shower. He was wrapping a towel around his waist and heading to his bedroom to get dressed when he bumped into an unexpected apparition. An apparition that had too much of the real and not nearly enough of the supernatural.

"What the?..." Hutch trailed off, startled, to gaze thoroughly, from top to toe, at the figure standing in front of him. A large red and white Easter bunny smiled from ear to ear, holding a big basket, full to the rim with coloured Easter eggs.

"You ready Blondie?" asked Starsky, temporarily turned into the biggest, most lurid Easter bunny Hutch could have pictured. He blew the limp left ear of his costume away from his eye.

"Starsky, for God's sake! Don't you have any sense of the ridiculous?" The blond one snapped callously. "And what I should be ready for, if you don't mind me asking?"

"The kids, Hutch," the brunet said as his smile faded. "The kids at the hospital. We're going to visit them today, remember?"

"Oh, sure... the kids at the hospital," Hutch lied. Actually, he had completely forgotten about the visit. It hadn't been his idea but Starsky's, who, coaxed by a nurse he had been dating some weeks ago, had keenly agreed to pay a visit to the pediatric wing of Bay City Central Hospital to give some Easter goodies to the little patients.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Starsky asked, placing the basket eggs onto the floor. His question was actually an statement.

"No... I... Damn! Yes, Starsky! I forgot it! I forgot completely about that stupid visit, so sue me!" The blond one burst out. He strode towards his bedroom to get dressed with Starsky in tow.

"Mind?" Hutch asked waving his hand at Starsky in a *get out* gesture. "Can I get a little privacy to at least get dressed?"

"What's wrong, Hutch? What bothering you, huh?" Starsky asked, ignoring his partner's request to

be left alone. He stepped closer to him, fondly placing a felt-covered hand on Hutch's shoulder.

"YOU, FOR GOD SAKES! You bother me!" Hutch answered harshly "Look at you, Starsky! Stuffed into that ridiculous thing and fooling around as if nothing was wrong with your life! Acting and looking like a five year kid instead of the grown man that supposedly you are!" The blond detective snickered coldly before adding more hurting words to the ones that had already passed his lips. "A five year old? No, that's too mild a way to put how you look right now. Actually, you do look rather like a moron, a pathetic nutcase that, if you ask me, I wouldn't feel too proud to be seen around with."

There it was. The harm was done. Once more, Hutch had spilled onto Starsky the venom of his anger and frustration. Once more he was regretting his thoughtlessness and feeling the already familiar pang of guilt squeezing his guts.

But this time, maybe, it was too late to backtrack and amend things...

Starsky's eyes, clouded by a mix of sadness and pent up anger, locked into his. The brunet addressed some quiet words to him.

"I know it, Hutch. I'm not as dumb as you think I am. I know better than anybody else how much I've lost... But, even so, wanna know something, buddy? I'm alive and for first time in months I'm feeling quite good again... Now, I'm just trying to go on; to cope with things and do my best, to not waste the second chance I got in life sitting in a corner and drowning in self-pity. I just wonder why the hell you can't get it...why of all people, it has to be you; the person who has helped me get back my life, the one who is now making things harder and more difficult for me."

"Starsky...I..." Hutch trailed off, too ashamed to find the right thing to say.

"No, Hutch...whatever you got to tell me, I don't wanna hear it now." Starsky stated, dead serious, trying to control his anger. "What I need now is some fresh air. Besides, a bunch of sick kids are waiting for some well-deserved fun. And I'm not going to let them down."

Without giving Hutch time to react, Starsky picked the egg's basket up from the floor, and strode resolutely out of the apartment, leaving a couple of cracked chocolate eggs in his wake.

For a moment, Starsky had wanted to yell at Hutch. He had wanted to tear his living room apart, even punch his partner in the face. But Starsky didn't do it, because he knew that Hutch was hurting. Derision and hostility were just a way for his best friend to hide a sour frustration too strong to deal with it. Actually, Starsky suspected that the emotions impelling Hutch to act the way he had been doing lately were the same frustration and distress that he had been trying to banish out of his soul with all his might.

Right after Starsky's exit, Hutch's first thought was to run after him. He strode towards the door just to stop midway, unable to move further as Starsky's grim words resounded in his mind.

I just wonder why the hell you can't get it... why, of all people, it has to be you, the person who has helped me get back my life, the one who is now making things harder and more difficult for me ...

No Hutch...Whatever you got to tell me, I don't wanna hear it now...

Starsky had stated it in no uncertain terms. At that moment, he didn't want to hear any of Hutch's lame apologies. Once more, his so-called best friend had hurt his feelings, and he was entitled to feel angry and to deal with that anger on his own terms and at his own pace. Hutch only could respect that.

The blond one spent his day off at his apartment, feeling alone and angry with himself, yet knowing deep inside that it was just what he deserved. Later in the evening, he, unsure of what to say, picked up the phone receiver and dialled Starsky's number. Hutch released a relieved breath when at the third ring his friend answered the phone.

"H'llo?"

"Hi, buddy. How was your Easter Bunny performance?" Hutch asked trying to sound nonchalant.

"Oh, fine. The kids had a great time, I guess." Starsky answered. There wasn't any trace of resentment in his voice yet Hutch was aware of a hint of dejection tingeing his words.

"Sure... I'm sure they did...Listen Starsky." Hutch said after a couple of seconds of hesitation. "Mind if I come over with a pizza and a six pack? We could have dinner and some chat."

"Look, Hutch, I'm kinda beat. Today I pushed myself a little hard, ya know? Just now I was about to fix a sandwich. Later I had planned to take a shower and hit the bed."

"You okay, Starsk?" Hutch asked, quickly shifting into protective mode.

"Yep, I'm fine, Hutch. Just a bit tired." Starsky answered plainly.

"Listen, Starsky. I wanna...well; I just wanna apologize for how..."

"Forget it, Hutch, okay?" Starsky cut him off. "Just forget it."

"Okay Starsk... Sleep tight. I'll pick you for work at seven."

"Kay"

Next day both partners had an uneventful day, a day as ordinary as the next ones were going to be. Starsky did paperwork and interrogations while Hutch tenaciously kept dodging Dobby's attempts to find a new partner for him. He spent most of his time doing the same kind of work Starsky did.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the friends, though not awkward, wasn't quite as smooth as it had been in the past. Something wasn't working, and both men were very aware of it. It was not that the affection between them was gone. What was gone was simply the happiness that in the recent years had made them enjoy every moment they spent together.

Finally, things came out into the open when one evening Starsky asked Hutch to come over to have dinner with him at his place.

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"We haveta talk, Hutch." The curled-haired detective said straightforwardly, once they had sat down on Starsky's couch with a couple of cold beers.

"What's wrong, Starsky?" Hutch asked. He was already sure by the tone in Starsky's voice and the grave expression on his face that it couldn't be anything good.

"Listen, Hutch... I don't know how to tell you this, so I'd better do it without beating around the bush, okay?"

The only answer from Hutch was a deepening of his furrowed brow.

"I'm leaving, Blondie. In ten days I'm going back to New York."

"SAY WHAT?" Hutch asked, bolting to his feet.

"A few weeks ago I asked for a transfer to NYPD. Today I got the approval." Starsky explained softly, getting to his feet too.

"Oh, great, Starsky! That's great! You asked for a transfer a few weeks ago but forgot to tell me about it until now, when you're about to leave!"

"I'm sorry. I just didn't want to tell you about until getting the approval." Starsky said soberly. "Look Hutch, I'm not going to argue with you. I know how hard my decision seems, especially at first, but believe me, I'm just doing what I think is the best for us; for me as much as for you."

"Yeah, sure, the best for us!" Hutch snapped "And tell me, Starsky; what the hell makes you think that you're being so damn wise, huh? What?"

"I can't go back to the streets, Hutch. That's a clear fact." Starsky kept explaining in an appeasing tone. "If I don't find another job; if I stay on the force, I'm just going to spend the rest of my working life behind a desk. That's what I have to deal with. It's not what you have to do. And we both know that as long as I am around, you won't move on with your own life. You won't accept a new partner and you'll stick by my side, doing the work that you hate just as much as I do. No, Hutch. Think about it... That wouldn't be any good for us, or for our friendship."

"Is it because of the appalling way I've been acting lately? Because I've been nothing but a fucking bastard to you and everybody else around... Are you leaving because of that?" Hutch asked, forlornly, sitting back down in the couch and staring vacantly at his feet.

"I am leaving because I care too much about you and our friendship to risk it by staying, and forcing you to hold back your life for me, Hutch. I love you too much to let that happen. I owe you my recovery and my life. You are, and you'll be always my best friend. No, more than that. A true brother to me. None of that has changed. And by leaving now, I'm just preventing it from changing."

"But Starsky... You... You can't leave... This wasn't how things were meant to be! It just doesn't seem right."

"Maybe right now it doesn't seem right, Hutch. But it is. And you'll see it eventually."

Starsky had made his decision and Hutch knew that nothing was going to make him change his mind. It was settled. Starsky was leaving to try and start over far from him. And if he was going to be honest, Hutch knew that he couldn't blame his best friend for it.

The next ten days passed in a rush. Starsky spent most of his free time packing up his clothes and some of his belongings to ship them to New York along with his prized Torino. Hutch knew what his friend was doing, but he was unable to gather the courage to offer him his help. Somehow the blond one felt that in helping to pack up Starsky's stuff he was approving his decision, and now that it was too late Hutch realized that he had never wanted his friend to leave.

Starsky, perfectly aware of Hutch's feelings, didn't ask him for help. Instead he managed to talk Huggy into lending him a hand putting the items he wanted to take with him into cardboard boxes. Of course, the reaction of the lanky bartender when Starsky told him about his plans had been one of utter shock and disbelief.

"But, Starsky, my man, you can't do that!" Huggy had said vehemently, stepping out from behind the bar to get closer to Starsky "You belong to this city, bro; you know it as much as I do. Things

aren't going to be the same without you around."

"Oh, come on, Hug, cut me some slack, will ya!" Starsky retorted, feeling somehow uncomfortable under Huggy's scrutinizing look. "I have my reasons to leave. I've already explained them to you and they're good reasons, you know it."

"Sure, good reasons," Huggy mocked. "Good reasons, my ass! Things turn a little rough between you and Blondie and your only way of sorting things out is leaving?"

"LISTEN TO ME HUGGY!" Starsky raised his voice, slamming his palm against the bar, regardless of the other customers' looks. "If I don't leave, Hutch isn't going to move on! He's not going to accept a new partner nor try and go for the lieutenant's exam! He's just going to waste his career and his life because of me. And believe me; I'm not going to let that happen. Not if I can help! Got it?"

"Yeah, of course, man, I got it. Anyway... instead of giving up and retreating like a chicken why don't you give the lieutenant's exam a shot yourself?" Huggy asked candidly.

"No, Huggy. I really don't think I would've much of a chance to pass it," Starsky answered, sullenly.

"And let me guess, you aren't even going to try, right?"

Nursing his beer, Starsky shook his head without looking at Huggy. "I've already made my decision, Huggy. Now, can we drop the matter, huh?"

Even though he knew that Starsky's decision was the wrong one, Huggy had no other choice but to give up. He tried to coax his friend into throwing a small goodbye party at The Pits, but Starsky refused the offer, telling Huggy that he just wasn't in the mood for parties. He would rather just say a quiet goodbye to his closest friends, like Dobey and his family, before leaving.

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Finally, much sooner than Hutch had wanted, he was in the large terminal of the Bay City International Airport trying to hold his emotions at bay as he bid Starsky goodbye.

"Come visit us, Hutch. Come whenever you want. Mom will be very happy pampering and overfeeding you with lots of her terrific homemade dishes. Besides, maybe by the time you've come, I'll have gotten my own apartment. You know... a full time Jewish mom can be a little too much to deal with," Starsky joked, with his patented crooked smile.

"And what about you, Starsky? Are you going to visit me some day soon?" The blond one asked, hopefully.

"You bet, Blondie. I'll do it as soon as Captain Melville gives me a few days off. Besides, I'll phone you often. Every week. I want to be sure that your new partner is treating you well."

"Starsky... Listen Starsky, why..." Hutch began to say in a final attempt to change Starsky's mind.

"No, Hutch. I'm doing what I must do. The right thing." Starsky stated once more before Hutch could continue speaking. "Now go back to work, let Dobey find you the best partner in the whole precinct and keep giving all the bad guys in the city hell, like ya' used to." Starsky's words were interrupted by the first call asking all the passengers for the flight 307 to New York to get to their boarding gate.

"Well, it's time, I guess." Hutch said a little uneasily, fondly smoothing a small wrinkle in the front of Starsky's shirt.

"Yep...Gotta go, Hutch. Take good care of yourself, ya hear me?"

"Sure Starsk... I'll do it..." Hutch couldn't end his words before Starsky pulled him into a bone crushing yet brief embrace. Then, and without further word, the brunet turned and hurried to the boarding gate.

A few minutes later, Hutch, feeling alone and miserable, stood looking through one of the large plate-glass windows in the terminal as the plane carrying Starsky to his new life grew smaller, finally disappearing into the blue Californian skies.

Once the aircraft was out of sight, he spun on his heel and headed to the exit. Still lingering was the feeling of what had to be the last embrace from Starsky for a long time.

Just a few weeks ago Hutch had been craving some time apart from Starsky. But now that his friend was gone he just didn't know how he was going to survive the daunting solitude that already was creeping up inside him, eager to nestle in the deepest part of his heart... **TBC**

Chapter 2

"Hutchinson! My office!" Dobeys bellow welcomed Hutch the very moment he sat down behind his desk after coming back from the airport.

Tiredly getting to his feet, the detective approached Dobeys office. He knocked lightly at the ajar door.

"Come in." his superior officer commanded.

"Did you want to see me, Cap?" Hutch asked. He looked briefly at the young, dark-haired man standing across from Dobeys desk, before turning his attention back to his Captain. The man was Daniel Griffith, a former uniformed officer in his mid twenties who had recently been promoted to plainclothes detective. Hutch had seen him several times, in the halls of the precinct, during departmental briefings, and even at the last Christmas party

"This is Daniel Griffith, Hutch. I think you already know him," Dobeys said.

Griffith reached out his hand to shake Hutch's.

"Yeah, sort of," Hutch answered curtly. He barely looked at the other man as he briefly shook his hand.

"Griffith has just been promoted to Detective Sergeant with homicide division. He's going to be your new partner." Captain Dobeys announced, straightforwardly.

"Wait... wait a moment, Cap...Starsky has just..." Hutch tried to interject.

"Mind leaving us alone for a bit, Griffith?" Dobeys asked the younger detective in a non-nonsensical tone.

"Sure sir. I'm going to go get a cup of coffee... excuse me," Griffith mumbled. He scurried out of Dobeys office.

"Look, Hutchinson," Dobeys said once they were alone. "Let me make something clear here. This is not a kindergarten where we can choose what game to play and whom play it with. We're here to work. To earn our pay and do what our superior officers ask us to do. That goes as much for me as for you or anybody else here."

"Cap, I only..."

"I'm not over yet, Detective," Dobeys cut him off with a seriousness and authority in his stance that Hutch hadn't seen in a long time "This issue isn't open to discussion. As your commanding officer, and so far as you haven't any problem with Griffith or vice-versa, and I do mean a real problem, I'm ordering you to start working with him, beginning now. You're a fine detective, but you're without a partner. Griffith, despite being just twenty-seven is a damn good cop too, and one who hasn't a partner either. And let me tell you something more. This precinct needs all its detectives on the streets, not chasing flies in the squad room. So from now on, you both are going to team up and hit the streets together. Period."

"Captain Dobeys... with all the due respect if you..." Hutch began to say, only to be answered by the sound of Dobeys massive hand slamming down on his desk.

"DAMN IT! HUTCHINSON! WHAT OF ALL THAT I'VE JUST SAID HAVEN'T YOU GOTTEN?" the portly man barked getting to his feet. "Starsky can't be a street cop anymore! You do know that, don't you? You know as well as I do that from now on, there's not going to be any more Starsky and Hutch on the streets! That time of your lives is over! And it sucks, damn it! It sucks big time! But as far as I'm concerned I'm still grateful because Dave has survived and he's healthy again..." The Captain sat back in his chair and continued speaking, but in a calmer tone.

"As I see it, Starsky has come to terms with his new circumstances, faster and in a much more mature way than you're doing, Hutch. Because of that, and despite my efforts to make him stay, he has left. He left to give you room to keep doing the work he can't do any longer with you, so do it! Do your goddamned work or else you'll have to start thinking of a new choice of a career, because one thing is sure! This department has already lost one of its best detectives and it can't afford having the other one only typing reports, interrogating suspects and refilling the fucking coffeemaker instead of doing real detective work!"

Dobey ended his lecture. The two men stared defiantly into each other's eyes for a few seconds until the older one pulled a manila folder out of the top left drawer of his desk. He handed it to Hutch, who took it without uttering a word.

"This is the forensic report of the first case you're going to work on with Griffith. The victim is Melinda Bradford. Sixteen years old," the captain recited mechanically. Hutch looked a few pictures of the girl's gruesomely mangled body.

"A couple of bikers found her body a few hours ago, hidden under the bushes in North Hills Park. She was raped, stabbed repeatedly, and finally strangled to death. And the bastard who did it is still out there, walking free on the streets of this city. Now, no more wasting time, Hutchinson. Go get your partner and start looking for clues to catch the killer! Do you hear me? Move!"

Acknowledging the command with the merest nod of his head and well aware that he hadn't any other choice but to do what Dobey had ordered, Hutch, file in hand, turned on his heel and headed out of the office. He left the door open at his back.

"Oh, Lord! Give me the patience to handle this boy!" the Captain mumbled, running both his hands through his hair. He was a man perceptive enough to realize how rough things were for Hutch, especially now that Starsky had left. Dobey was also perfectly capable of figuring out all the reasons behind Starsky's departure. On the one hand, the curly-haired detective felt that he was getting between Hutch and the fulfilment of his career as detective and maybe even a promotion to lieutenant. But on the other hand, after months of seeing how cold and nasty Hutch had been acting with Starsky, how their friendship had grown increasingly strained, Dobey understood that Starsky needed to put some distance, even if just temporarily, between himself and Hutch. The Captain had been deeply distressed when Starsky informed him of his request to be transferred to New York. He had tried hard to coax his detective to stay, even offering him several different options, from taking the lieutenant's exam, to being the target practice trainer in retraining courses. But Starsky wouldn't change his mind, and in the end Dobey had no other choice but to understand and accept his reasons.

The seasoned Captain only hoped that the distance that Starsky had put between himself and Hutch wouldn't turn into an insurmountable crack in the closest friendship he had ever been given the chance to witness in all his life.

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"Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I hope you've enjoyed your flight. In a few moments we'll be landing at JFK International Airport, so please fasten your seat belts and place your seats in the

fully upright position..."

Absentmindedly, Starsky did as the voice coming from the speaker system in the plane asked, fastening his seatbelt. The flight, though long, had passed uneventfully. Not that he cared. Not even the subtle attempts at flirting by one of the flight attendants, a pretty and shapely red-haired woman had been able to pull him out of his silent bleakness. For Starsky the trip to New York was not the beginning of a vacation, as it had been so many other times, but rather the ultimate end of a mostly happy period in his life and the beginning of a new one full of uncertainties.

In two days he'd begin work in the fifth precinct of NYPD under the command of Captain Charles Melville, a man whom Starsky had never met, but who was well known for being a good superior officer. He was rumored to be demanding yet fair with everybody under his command. Starsky would have to get used to a different way of working and new companions. He'd have to start over, carrying on with boring desk duty that he was sure he wasn't ever going to learn to like, and for first time in more than ten years, Hutch wouldn't be by his side. And though Starsky's only reason to move to New York had been precisely that -to give his best friend some room to breathe and go on with his career- the curly-haired man was already beginning to feel doubt niggling at the back of his mind.

Had his return to his native city been the right thing to do?

Maybe I'm just getting a bit too old for new beginnings, the brunet thought grimly as he picked his suitcase up off the conveyor belt.

He took a cab to retrieve his Torino from the premises of the shipping company that had transported it to New York. Then he drove to his mother's house, where her attentions and badly hidden concern did nothing but emphasize his feeling of being out of place.

Rachel Starsky, despite being unaware of the problems between her son and Hutch, was wise enough to understand how Starsky felt. His job in the force wouldn't ever be again what he had always wanted it to be and it was a loss; a misfortune for any police officer as devoted to his career as David Starsky was.

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Hutch and Griffith's first days as partners went as expected. Actually, the younger detective was as smart and capable as any of his older fellow detectives, including Hutch. He was also brave, energetic and kind, quite as much as Starsky was. As a matter of fact, the newly promoted detective had all the needed qualities to be a fine partner to any man willing to give him a chance... Hutch was just not too sure about whether he himself was the kind of partner Griffith deserved.

Dobey had forced them to work together and though he didn't feel like becoming close with a new partner, Hutch had to admit that Griffith was doing all he could to earn his trust and friendship.

Unfortunately, all of the affable man's attempts to develop a nice relationship with Hutch had been consistently received with cold indifference until, and as expected, Griffith's patience began to grow thinner...

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"I don't know about you, Hutchinson, but I'm hungry... How about stopping by The Pits and getting a bite to eat before going home? My treat." Griffith offered in a friendly manner one evening while driving back to the precinct after their day of work.

"I'm not hungry, Griffith. Anyway, if you want to stop somewhere and get a sandwich or something, just help yourself."

"Oh, come on, partner! Are you telling me that you aren't hungry after having skipped your lunch today? Hasn't anyone ever told you how unhealthy the habit of missing your meals can be?" the younger detective joked congenially.

"Look Griffith, no offence, but right now I have a headache and I just wanna go home as soon as possible, so you can spare yourself the effort of worrying about my eating habits," the blond one, once more unable to restrain his irritability, had snapped at his partner; a man whose only fault was that he had been partnered up with the wrong companion at the wrong time.

"Okay, Hutchinson, it's okay... I give up!" Griffith exclaimed, slamming the steering wheel. "You want me to let you alone, so be it! From now on, I'll stick to my duty, which is to watch your back while we're out on the streets, not to be friendly with you... maybe then you'll feel happier!"

"Griffith, listen, boy... I didn't mean to be..." Hutch began to apologize, chastising himself for umpteenth time because of his growing inability to get along smoothly with people.

"You didn't mean to be what, Hutchinson?" Griffith countered. "Cold with me? Rude? A damn asshole maybe? Is that which you're trying to say to me?"

Hutch opened his mouth to answer, but Griffith, already out of patience after days of dealing with the worst side of his imposed partner, was fuming, and Hutch didn't get a chance to speak.

"These past few days I've done nothing but try to reach out to you over and over! More than once I've tried to coax you into having a couple of beers with me after work, even into having dinner with me and my family at my place. I've talked to you about Karen, my wife and my little Danny, and I've showed you their picture and I've done everything in my power to be a good partner to you!"

Griffith briefly stopped his tirade, trying to control his boiling anger. "And I'll be damned if I get it, but it looks like with you that's precisely the wrong thing to do! For crying out loud, Hutchinson!" the younger man shouted. He brusquely pulled off to the side of the road, ignoring the horns sounding at his back. "I know I'm not your best friend; you aren't mine, either, but I thought that it'd be nice to have a good relationship with you for both of us sakes. Call me naive if you want, but I guess that in our line of work, with all the crap as we have to deal with in a daily basis, a good relationship with his partner is about the best thing a cop can ask for!"

"Listen Griffith... damn! Maybe you're unable to believe it, but I'm sorry!" Hutch apologized earnestly, finally having his chance to get a word in edgewise. "I'm real sorry for how I am treating you. I mean it, I don't have anything against you, it's just that..."

"**THAT I AM NOT STARSKY!**" Griffith bellowed at the top of his lungs. "That's my only fucking crime, isn't? Well let me tell you something, Hutchinson! As much as I like Starsky, and believe me, I do, I'm not a bad guy either! And you could see it if you were willing to give me half a chance! Only half a goddamned chance!"

"It's okay, Griffith, it's okay! You're right!" Hutch conceded, seeing in Griffith's outburst a reflection of Starsky's hot temper. "See, kid; my problem, as stupid as it sounds, is that I'm missing Starsky... I know that he's okay and I'll get to see him some day soon, but I'm still missing him more than I thought I would," the blond one explained candidly. Griffith listened in silence.

"He's been my partner for many years and we've been through a lot together. What's more, we

already were friends before we became partners," Hutch said. "Starsky and I, we met in the Academy. That's a hell of a long time to share work and friendship with a guy... And even though, as maybe you'll have already heard through the grapevine, over the last few months things have been a bit bumpy between us, he's still my best friend. I'll need some time to get used to the idea that Starsky's not here anymore. That he's living across the country, I guess... nonetheless, none of this is your fault, Griffith."

"Tell me something, Hutchinson... Why the hell are you telling me all of this all of a sudden?" Griffith asked, as he put the car back in motion, smoothly pulling into traffic.

"Because I think that you got a point here, kid. I could use a friend; and it'd be nice to get along well with the guy whom I'll be spending most of my waking time with, I guess... If it's not too late to ask you for a second chance, that is."

"Is that supposed to be some sort of apology for your appalling behavior towards your brand new and excellent partner, Hutchinson?" Griffith asked in mock seriousness, briefly taking his eyes from the road ahead him to look mischievously at Hutch.

"Guess so," Hutch answered, following the banter.

"Well, okay, then I guess I can give you a second chance... so long as you let me buy us a couple of burgers and beers at The Pits," the younger detective offered.

"You got it, boy," Hutch accepted, for the first time smiling wholeheartedly at the man driving by his side.

"Fine. Lets go," Griffith said, smiling back.

xxxxxxx

In his first week back in New York, even though he missed Hutch and his old apartment and the city he had been living in since his teenage years, Starsky couldn't complain about how things were going for him.

Captain Melville, a tall and athletic blond man with angular features who looked younger than a man already in his late fifties, had welcomed him very cordially, as one of their own. He was also not restrained in expressing his admiration for the brilliant career Starsky had led in the Bay City Police Department.

"I'm really pleased to have you among us, Sergeant Starsky. Of course I am aware of the unfortunate outcome of your last injury in the line of duty, and I know that you haven't been declared fit to work on the street, but I'm sure that your experience and skills are going to be very useful for us anyway," he said once the introductions were done and they both were seated. "This precinct never has enough men as bright and valiant as you obviously are."

"Well, sir. I feel very honored to hear you saying such nice things about me. I just hope I'll be worthy of them," Starsky answered politely, despite himself feeling a warm flush creep up his cheeks. "Anyway, as you've pointed out, I'm not going to be able to keep doing the work that, along with my partner Detective Hutchinson, I was best at..."

"Listen, Detective Starsky," Melville cut him off. "You were damned good at that, I know. Your record of arrests and cases solved is impressive. Captain Dobey has stated that you were one of his finest men. But we aren't here to look back at the past, but forward to the future. The truth is that I'm not willing to let your talent and instincts waste away behind a typewriter... If you agree, I

have a better and more ambitious plan for you."

"A better plan? For me?... I'm listening, sir," Starsky answered, sitting upright in his seat and feeling an unexpected tingle of excitement taking hold of him.

"How about being the man in charge of our cold cases; you know; missing persons, kidnappings and murders that so far, hadn't been solved. If you agree, I'll introduce you to our best men. I want you to study their academic and professional profiles. You'll have total freedom to ask a couple of them to form a team with you. And believe me, you will not get bored. Currently, and just within this precinct alone, we've got about a dozen unsolved cases. It's up to you, Detective... What do you say, huh?" The tall man inquired, leaning forward on his desk and interlacing his fingers on the polished wooden surface.

"I accept, Captain Melville." Starsky answered without hesitation. "I'll take charge of those cold cases."

"That's fine, Sergeant Starsky. That's just the kind of resolve I expect from all my men," Melville said, pleased. He and Starsky got to their feet and shook hands.

xxxxxxx

Hutch's feelings were mixed. He felt a pang of unwelcome resentment because, apparently, Starsky was able to find reasons to enjoy his new life away from him, Bay City and Metro, though, he was at the same time also genuinely happy for his best friend.

As soon as the curly-haired detective had arrived back home after his first day under Melville's command, he had phoned Hutch, filling him in on the talk he had just had with his new superior officer.

"It looks like that Melville is a good talent scout, huh?" Hutch joked, fondly.

"Do you think I'll be able to measure up to what he expects from me, Hutch?" Starsky asked, dubiously, as if the magnitude of the task he had accepted was only now really starting to dawn on him.

"Are you joking, buddy? Of course you'll be up to it! Your new Captain is a smart guy, if you ask me. I know that you'll do just fine, Starsky. Besides, that job sounds quite appealing."

"Yeah, it could be interesting I guess... Anyway, I'd wish..." Starsky trailed off.

"What Starsk? What do you'd wish?"

"Dunno... To be able to turn back the clock, I guess... Oh, forget it." The brunet changed the subject hastily. "Listen Hutch, I gotta go now. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Sure, Starsky. See ya." Hutch answered, dejectedly. He replaced the phone receiver in its cradle, his mind echoing Starsky's thoughts. He also wanted to have the ability to turn the clock back to a time in which he and Starsky had been equals in the streets; in which the anger and grief for what they had lost hadn't yet turned him into an embittered man no longer able to show how much he cared for his best friend... a time in which none of them had to take the painful decision to part ways in order to salvage their damaged friendship.

xxxxxxx

As the weeks went by, Starsky and Hutch, though staying in touch with each other via phone calls

several times a week, did their best to stay focused on their respective jobs.

Two months after his arrival in the Big Apple, Starsky had already rented his own apartment. By chance, it was located in the same building where an old and rather peculiar retired private detective lived.

The man, named Patrick O. Morris, strongly reminded Starsky of an older version of the fictional Lieutenant Columbo, rumpled raincoat and all. He was 71 years old and had been in the business for almost forty years. In this time, he had acquired a large variety of experiences and anecdotes that, being single and feeling alone in the autumn of his life, he enjoyed sharing. Starsky came to take real pleasure in the times they both spent in Morris's ramshackled apartment or in his much tidier and well-cared place. They used to share a couple of beers or dinner and some chat as Hercule Poirot, Morris's old Basset Hound, slept noisily snoring at the feet of his owner or in the nearest couch.

On the other hand, Starsky, as the officer in charge of the cold cases in the NYPD's fifth precinct, was enjoying his work more than he had thought possible. He had gotten the collaboration of Detectives Ramirez and Ellington, two younger and very efficient plainclothes detectives that were keen to learn as much as possible from Starsky and with whom he had formed a fine team. Besides, he had the whole support of Captain Melville, who provided Starsky and his men with all the necessary resources to carry on their investigations. The brunet couldn't deny the fact that his contentment would be complete if only he could share his work and professional responsibilities with Hutch. Not the discouraged and grim Hutch he had left behind but the enthusiastic and idealistic friend of the earlier years of their partnership.

Meanwhile, back in Bay City, and still missing Starsky as much as the first day he left, Hutch was doing his best to amend his attitude. Though he wanted to eventually give his best friend a good reason to come back, Hutch had come to accept the partnership and friendship of Daniel Griffith. And after that first day when he had allowed his new partner to become more than just a job companion, both men had begun spending time together after work. Often they went to The Pits to share lunch or a few beers and, more than once, Hutch had accepted Griffith's invitation to go to his place and have dinner with the young detective and his family.

His life seemed to be going through a quiet and somehow agreeable time when, unexpectedly, tragedy called once again at his door. As if he was reliving once again an old and much dreaded nightmare, Hutch, once more had to experience an event very similar to the one that on a sunny day in May, more than a year earlier, had nearly shattered his whole world into pieces.

This time though, Hutch wasn't so lucky, and neither was his partner. The blond one could only comfort Griffith in his last moments, while asking him hopelessly to hold on long enough to get to the hospital. Later, after the young man had exhaled his last breath Hutch closed Griffith's eyes while, in the distance, the wail of an ambulance that nobody was going to need sounded closer. **TBC**

Chapter 3

The entire course of events had been so unexpected, and everything had happened so fast, that for a moment Hutch found himself thinking that it was impossible. That all that had unfolded before his eyes in such a very short span of time just couldn't be true.

Hutch and Griffith had been on duty that Saturday morning. At first, the day had been uneventful, but then the detectives heard a domestic disturbance report come in over the radio. Neighbors had reported hearing shouts and loud music, thumps and the cries of a child. They were the unit closest to the apartment block so, after asking dispatch for an ambulance and a black and white, they responded to the call.

The ones making such an uproar were a young man and a young woman who in recent years had been arrested several times for minor crimes. At the time of Hutch and Griffith's arrival, the couple, apparently high on some drug, most likely LSD or PCP, were involved in a violent fight in the half darkness of their untidy and filth living room. Janice Joplin played loudly in the background, muffling the hysterical weeping of the couple's daughter, a little girl, not older than three or four years old. Horrified, she clutched her tattered teddy bear like a lifeline as she watched the nightmarish scene from the threshold of her bedroom.

"Freeze! Police!" Hutch shouted, as he and Griffith approached the battling couple. They had their guns aimed at the man because he appeared to have the upper hand. He was astride his partner, brutally grabbing her hair with both hands and repeatedly pounding her head against the floor, while she, apparently unaware of the pain, defended herself with amazing-drug induced stamina.

The detectives struggled briefly with the maddened man to pull him off of the woman, cuffing him to a radiator in the wall. Then Hutch crouched down to check on her for a moment before heading to the bathroom to get a washcloth to clean her bloodstained face. Griffith, seeing the situation under control, began looking for the kid he had heard earlier.

A moment later, the dark-haired detective spotted her, still paralyzed by fear in doorway where she had witnessed the fight between her parents. Griffith was approaching the little girl when her mother, still on the floor, gathered enough strength to scramble on all fours to pick up a gun. At some point during the fight it had slid under the nearby couch.

"NOOO! GET AWAY FROM MY KID!" She screamed. She shot twice at Griffith before Hutch had time to gun her down, instantly killing the woman.

"Griffith!" Hutch shouted, hurrying to his fallen partner. The impact of the bullets had caused Griffith to collide with the nearest wall, sliding to the floor. Meanwhile, the cuffed husband stared in silent shock at the scene and the little girl ran to the dead body of her mother. But all of this was happening outside of the black hole of panic that already was engulfing Hutch.

"Griffith... Dan... Hold... hold on, please! Help is on the way," Hutch said, wishing the ambulance and reinforcements they had requested were already there.

"Hu-hurts... it hurts, Hutchinson," Griffith mumbled, wincing in pain.

"I know, kid. I know... Don't talk, okay? Save your strength," Hutch said, pretending calm. He quickly took his jacket off and tried to stop the bleeding from Griffith's stomach with it. He held the bloodstained hand that reached blindly out for comfort, much as Starsky had done years ago in an Italian restaurant.

"Everything is going to be okay, Griffith... The doctors are going to patch you up and you'll be as good as new in no time," he encouraged the fatally injured man.

"Y-you are a...a lousy liar, Hutchinson... Did... did you know that?" Griffith joked feebly, despite the pain he was in. "But you're a g-good partner any-anyway... And a good g-guy... too... I-I wish we'd have more time t-to..."

"No!" Hutch cut him off. "You have to hold on, Griffith, do you hear me? You just have to hold on a little longer. The ambulance is almost here." Hutch could hear the wail of sirens in the distance.

"He-help Ka-Karen... and m-my kid... p-please, Hutch..." Griffith pleaded grasping a handful of Hutch's frontshirt "Help t-them... This... this isn't g... going to be e-easy for them..."

These were the young man's last words before his body tensed suddenly. A moment later, a deep breath escaped his mouth and he went limp. His brown eyes opened wide to stare vacantly, until Hutch closed them.

The paramedics and uniformed officers rushed into the apartment to find the corpse of one police officer being held and gently rocked by another whose mind had already fled away, very far away from that moment and place.

xxxxxxx

"Come in on." Starsky said on hearing somebody knocking at his door. He replaced the phone receiver back in its cradle. Over the few last hours he had been futilely trying to reach Hutch, both at his apartment and at the precinct. Though there were plenty of reasonable explanations for the blond one's absence, a uneasy feeling was starting to settle in the pit of his stomach. Starsky made up his mind. If on the next attempt he couldn't reach his friend, then, in the morning, he'd call Dobey.

"Hi, kid. Wanna share dinner with a couple of old guys?" Morris asked, already busy placing a few Styrofoam containers of Chinese food and a six-pack on the coffee table.

Hercule Poirot, shamelessly climbed onto Starsky's couch making himself comfortable and looking at both humans through hazel eyes.

"Sure, pal. Make yourself at home, like Hercule here is doing." Starsky gave Morris a friendly smile, pointing at the dog.

"Didn't you get through to your friend yet?" the old detective asked.

"Nope. It looks like Hutch isn't at home, and he's not at the precinct either," Starsky answered. He picked up one of the beers, opening the lid before taking a gulp.

"Take it easy, son. Maybe he went out with a chick or something."

"Yeah... you're right, I guess," Starsky conceded, though he wasn't too sure about it.

"Are you worried?" Morris asked straightforwardly. He sat down beside his dog on the couch and scratched one of its large ears.

"Yep. A little," Starsky admitted. Sitting onto the coffee table, he distractedly peered at the contents of the takeout cartons. He didn't feel at all hungry.

"Listen, Dave... I know it's none of my business, but tell me something, son." Morris took another

one of the beer cans, opening it. "Do you still think that leaving Bay City was the right thing to do? I mean, your friend doesn't answer your phone calls for a few hours and you're already climbing the walls... Do you think that, with you worrying as much as you do about him, that living across the country is a good idea?"

"I didn't have any other choice, Morris." Starsky shrugged.

"Oh, come on, Dave! Cut the crap! There's always another choice, other than running away!" Morris retorted, taking a swallow of his beer.

"Look Morris, I already told you what..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the story." The older man accompanied his words with a dismissive wave of his hand. "That Hutch guy wasn't going to move on with his career in the force so long as you were there and blah, blah, blah ... I know all of it, but I still think that you screwed up when you left."

"Morris, I..."

"No, kid. You listen to what this old man has got to tell you." The former detective propped his feet on the coffee table, crossing them at the ankle. He made himself comfortable on Starsky's couch, as if getting ready to tell a long story.

"A lifetime ago, when I was much younger than you are now and I lived not here, but in Jersey, I had a best friend too. Rob was his name. We used to hang around and see each other every single day of the year... We were very close. Closer than brother if you ask me."

"Where did you both meet?" Starsky asked.

"In school. When we were seven," Morris explained. "We grew up together, had fun together and went through a lot of stuff together... Until Belinda came into our lives."

"Belinda?" Starsky said, already guessing what was Morris going to say, and feeling an unsettling *déjà vu*.

"Belinda was the girl we both thought we had fallen in love with... Boy, was she something! Beautiful, sexy and hot, sweet... And a damned bitch, if you ask me. She played with our feelings. She claimed to love us, she used us as if we were her toys, and finally, when we found out about her game, she left us. Months later, she married another guy... May God help him," the old man said, smiling sadly.

"But what... what happened with Rob... and you? I mean, with your friendship?" Starsky wanted to know.

"Oh, our friendship... well, at first we were too angry to talk to each other. It was as simple as that. We stopped seeing each other and a few months later I got a new job here, in New York. Before leaving, though, I did call Rob. I asked him to meet me, if only once more, so we could say goodbye, like the good friends we'd been in the past and somehow still were..."

"Did he agree to see you?"

"Oh, sure, my pal Rob was a real good guy. Stubborn as a mule and too proud to make the first move, I guess, but a great guy after all... But, see. We never got to meet that last time." Morris seemed to be lost in the sad memories. "The night before we were supposed to get together, Rob got killed by some fucking lowlife... shot for just a couple lousy bucks. That's all the money he had in his wallet when he was murdered."

"God, Morris... I'm very sorry," Starsky said, sorrowfully.

"It's okay, kid. That's all past and I came to terms with what happened a long time ago... But listen to what I'm trying to tell you here. Whatever it was that made you leave your best friend behind - and I just know that there's more than the line you've been feeding me - it isn't past. It's still in the present and it can still be fixed. Take some advice from this old fox and go back to Hutch, Dave. Go and try to sort things out with him before it's too late... Just do it."

xxxxxxx

The hours following Griffith's death passed in a blur for Hutch. The paramedics, on seeing the state of emotional shock the detective was in, decided to take him to the hospital. Hutch, unable to talk or think clearly, let them lead him to the ambulance, though it was impossible to make the distraught man lie down on the stretcher.

In the ER, the doctor in charge, having made sure that Hutch was physically unharmed, made him take a shower to wash off Griffith's blood. A nurse found a set of clean scrubs for him to wear. As well, the physician gave Hutch a Valium pill. Too shell-shocked to refuse, the blond one swallowed it down with some water.

Finally, after keeping the blond detective for a few hours under observation in one of the ER cubicles, the doctor concluded that his patient would feel more comfortable at home, so long as someone could look after him, so he filled a prescription for more Valium for Hutch and let Dobby take him to his place.

The Captain made a brief stop at a nearby pharmacy to get the pills for Hutch, and then he drove to his house. For a while, both men were silent. Then, finally, Hutch spoke.

"It's my fault... Entirely mine," he said, looking absentmindedly at the road ahead him.

"Hutch, son..."

"Griffith is dead, Captain, and I'm as guilty as if I pulled the trigger of that gun myself."

"Stop that, Hutchinson! Griffith was killed in the line of duty! It isn't your fault!" Dobby said, firmly.

"You're wrong, Captain, very wrong. He was killed 'cause I, the man who unluckily for that poor boy happened to be his partner, LEFT HIM ALONE WITH THAT WOMAN TO GET A FUCKING WASHCLOTH! THAT'S WHY!" Hutch bellowed as Dobby pulled to a halt in a red light.

"Listen, Hutch."

"No, Cap." Hutch cut him off. "Listen, sir, can you take me home? I mean, to my place?"

"Oh, no, Hutchinson, no way. The doc who checked you out in the ER said..."

"To the hell with what that goddamned doc said, Captain! I wanna be alone!" Hutch accompanied his words with a slap on the dashboard, but Dobby continued to look at him, unruffled.

"Come on, Hutch! I can't leave you alone. What you need right now is...."

"Which I need right now is just to be left alone, with no one fussing over me!" Hutch again interrupted his superior officer, this time getting out of the car.

"Hutch! Wait!" Dobey quickly climbed out on his side of the car. "Wait, son...come home with me, please. You can eat something if you want, and then go to bed," the older man coaxed, trotting after Hutch.

He received no answer.

"STOP, HUTCHINSON! THAT'S AN ORDER!" He barked finally, reaching Hutch's side and grabbing his arm.

"I'm sorry, Cap," Hutch said, jerking his arm away from Dobey's grasp while raising his other hand to stop a cab. "I'm afraid this time I'm going to have to disobey you."

"Oh, it's okay, Hutch, it's okay! I don't agree with this, but I know you have to do it your own way, dammit!" Dobey gave up reluctantly. "Go home and drown in self-pity if that's what you want to do! You're old enough to know what's best for you, I suppose... I just hope you won't regret your stubbornness later."

"I'll be okay, cap. Don't worry."

The older man shook his head. He looked down briefly before raising his eyes to look back at Hutch. "I'll call you later, Hutch" Having said that, the Captain watched his distraught detective climbing into the cab. It pulled away from the curb, quickly disappearing from view, leaving a very worried Dobey behind.

xxxxxxx

Once at home, the first thing Hutch did was take off the surgical scrubs that a nurse in the hospital had given him. He undressed, tossing the green articles of clothing in a heap on the floor. Wearing just his boxers, and not caring in the least about getting more clothes on, he went straight to his kitchen. There, Hutch fumbled in the cupboards until he found the unopened bottle of bourbon he was looking for. Then he fetched a glass and made his way into the living room. Without bothering to turn on the lights, the blond one took the phone off the hook and sat down in the couch, pouring himself a large shot of the amber brew.

"For the meanest, more worthless and despicable partner any cop can have." Hutch toasted himself with disdain before gulping down the liquid. He immediately refilled the glass.

"And this one's for the coldest and nastiest sonofabitch a poor newbie detective could ever have the bad luck to be partnered with!" Hutch exclaimed, in the loneliness of his living room. He briefly raised his glass upward before proceeding to drink its contents in a single gulp. A short while later came a third drink and a toast equally filled with self-loathing.

Several times during these miserable hours of solitude, Hutch almost picked up the phone to call Starsky, but ultimately he just couldn't do it. Besides not wanting to worry his friend, Hutch was also simply unable to tell Starsky that another cop - his new partner - had been shot. His partner had been fatally injured and, if only in Hutch's tortured mind, it was once again his fault.

By this time, the sedative combined with the increasing amount of alcohol flooding his system was making Hutch's head float in a haze of confusion. In one moment, he burst into an hysterical fit of loud laughter then, in the next moment, the guffaws turned to heart wrenching sobs that wracked his entire body until eventually, a dreamless and heavy sleep conquered him.

xxxxxxx

That evening, Starsky tried once more, unsuccessfully, to get in touch with Hutch. Feeling a

disquieting foreboding, Starsky had just climbed into bed when the phone on his nightstand began to ring.

Peering at the clock, he saw that it was near midnight.

"H'llo?" The brunet answered, as he switched on the nightstand lamp.

"Dave, son, it's Harold."

Dave...son. Starsky knew without a shadow of a doubt that those two words coming from Dobby's mouth in the same sentence could have only one meaning...

Big trouble. **TBC**

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Having heard from Dobey about Griffith's death and Hutch's worrying condition, Starsky picked up the phone and called the airport to book a ticket for a flight to Bay City. He chose one that would depart from JFK the next morning, at twenty past nine. Starsky would have liked to take an earlier flight, however he was aware that before he left he could have to talk with Captain Melville. In all likelihood, his superior officer would be unhappy with his sudden departure, especially because Starsky wouldn't be able to give him a date of return. The brunet was quite sure that he would have to deal with a reprimand, but he couldn't care less. Though Dobey had only suggested that he phoned Hutch, Starsky felt that it wasn't enough. He had to be with his best friend.

After booking his flight, Starsky went back to bed and tried to get some sleep. However he spent most of the night tossing and turning in bed, too wired to rest. Like Dobey, Starsky tried several times to call Hutch, only to realize that his friend had most likely taken his phone off of its hook.

Finally, near dawn, Starsky got out of bed. For breakfast he had only a cup of coffee. He took a shower, got dressed and after throwing a few clothes and toiletries into a duffel bag, he headed out of his apartment. He made a brief stop at Morris's door before leaving the building. He was about to slide a piece of paper under the door to let the old man know about his sudden trip, when Morris opened his door. Hercule bounced at the end of his leash, delighted to see Starsky.

"Hey kid! Whatcha doing here this early?" Morris cheerfully greeted Starsky. "Wanna share breakfast?"

"I'd love that, Morris, but I'm in a hurry. Actually, I was just about to slide this under your door." Starsky said, holding the slip of paper out for Morris. The man took it, reading it.

I'm traveling to Bay City. Hutch is in trouble and I don't know when I'll be back. I'll call you.

Dave

"What sort of trouble is your friend in, Dave? Can I help? " The former detective asked, putting a comforting hand on Starsky's shoulder.

"His partner got killed yesterday in the middle of some domestic fight they were responding to. My former Captain phoned me last night to tell me that it looks like Hutch isn't dealing well with Griffith's death. He's in a bad way." Starsky explained quickly.

"Jesus..." Morris said. "I'm very sorry, kid."

"Yeah, thanks, Morris. Listen, I gotta go." Starsky said, already heading for the elevator. Morris followed him.

Starsky turned, and said, "I want to drop by the precinct and talk with Captain Melville before leaving."

"How are you getting to the airport, Dave? What are you going to do with your car?" The older man inquired, punching the call button for him.

"I'll leave it in the precinct parking. I can take a cab to the airport." Starsky said, as both men and the dog got into the elevator.

"I have a better idea. I'll take you to the precinct and then I'll drive you to the airport. That way you'll be able to leave your baby safe at home." Morris said, referring the Torino.

"Oh, no, Morris, thanks, but I don't want to bother you..." Starsky tried to refuse. He was honestly wondering if Morris could get him to the airport as fast as he'd like, especially if after talking with Melville he found himself in a hurry to get there.

"Bullshit, kid. You aren't bothering me." The old man cut him off as they got out of the elevator. "It's settled. I'm coming with you."

"Listen, Morris, I..."

"You're afraid I'm going to drive at an old man's speed and you'll miss your flight, aren't you?" The old man asked, straightforwardly. "Don't sweat it, Dave. You'll be doing the driving." He dug into his pants pocket and tossed the keys of his black Chevrolet Nova to Starsky, who caught them in mid air.

"Okay, Morris, you win. Let's go," Starsky agreed with a smile, already trotting towards Morris's car.

xxxxxxx

Hutch slept through the morning, unaware that, a while earlier, Dobby had tried to pay him a visit to check on him.

Finally though, near noon the sunlight oozing through the blinds of his living room woke him up. Feeling sick and miserable, Hutch got unsteadily to his feet, and stumbled to the bathroom. His head hurt more than he could put into words and waves of nausea tightened his throat. Slowly, he reached the bathroom, falling to his knees as soon as he got to the toilet. He emptied the scarce contents of his upset stomach, the retching making him feel as if his head might explode at any moment. By then the ghastly memories of the day before had come back with a vengeance, and despite his hangover, Hutch yearned for the blessed oblivion the alcohol and Valium had given him earlier.

Slowly, the blond one got back to his feet. After rinsing his mouth he put on his robe and headed towards his living room. The sudden buzz of the doorbell made him wince in pain, as he felt his headache climb up another notch.

At first he tried to ignore it, but when the doorbell rang a second time he decided the only way to get rid of his unwelcomed visitor as quickly as possible would be to open the door.

"Oh..., it's you," he said unenthusiastically.

Dobby stood in his entrance way looking worried and tired.

"Are you okay, Hutch?" he asked. "I tried to see you earlier but you weren't answering your door."

"I was asleep, I guess," Hutch answered in a hoarse voice.

"You left your phone off the hook all night long," Dobby stated.

"So what if I did?" The blond one asked, defiantly.

"Hutch, son, you shouldn't..."

"Now not, Cap, please. I'm fine, but if you don't mind, right now I don't feel like listening to a lecture." Hutch cut his captain off impatiently.

Dobey took a deep breath before answering. "It's okay, son. It's okay... However I'd like to ask you something. Will you at least attend the memorial service I've arranged with Griffith's pastor?" he asked. "It'll take place today, at six P.M, in the Saint John Baptist Church. I think, if you feel strong enough, you should be there."

"Sure... Though I don't know how the hell seeing the mug of the partner who failed to cover his back and prevent his death is going to do his family or friends any good. But I'll be there anyway."

"Listen, Hutch... I know how hard this is for you, but..." The distressed Captain began to say.

"I'm okay, Cap, thanks." The blond detective said, curtly. "Now if you don't mind..."

"Okay, son. See you later." Dobby said. He gently squeezed Hutch's arm once, before turning on his heel and heading back down the stairs and to his car.

After closing his door, Hutch looked at his wristwatch. Griffith's memorial service would take place at six P.M. so, presumably, he would have plenty of time to compose himself.

Too tired and achy even to take a shower and get dressed, Hutch looked in his medicine cabinet for some aspirin. He found only an empty bottle.

"Shit!" he exclaimed, slamming the medicine cabinet's door shut. Back in his living room, he plopped onto the couch. Though it was possible some coffee might help ease his hangover, the mere idea of drinking even a few sips of the dark liquid made his nausea return. Besides he felt too worn out to make coffee. But even as his body felt like a dead weight, Hutch's mind was once more on overdrive displaying again for him all the grim images of the day earlier. Images and memories that at that moment he just wasn't strong enough to deal with. In a desperate attempt to ease the unbearable pain his soul was in, Hutch reached for the bottle of pills he had left on his coffee table the night before. He swallowed one of them down with a long gulp of bourbon...

xxxxxxx

Starsky got to the precinct and sat down his desk in the squad room. While waiting for Melville's arrival, he killed time by catching up on paperwork. Every few minutes he looked nervously at his wristwatch, afraid of the possibility of missing his flight.

Finally the Captain made his entrance. He headed straight for his office, saying good morning to the officers and detectives in the large room.

"Excuse me, Captain... We need to talk. Can I come in your office, please?" Starsky got to his feet and strode towards Melville before the captain had time to leave the squad room.

"Sure Starsky. Come in," Melville invited, walking into his office with Starsky behind him.

"Well, tell me detective. What's wrong?" the Captain asked, as he sat down behind his desk

"I have to return to Bay City, sir. Hopefully I'll only be gone a few days. I'll try to be back as soon as possible, but I can't give you a firm date for my return."

"You have to go back to Bay City? Now?" Melville asked, looking at Starsky with a severe expression.

"Yes, sir. My best friend, and former partner, Detective Hutchinson needs me," Starsky said frankly. He briefly explained the reason for his departure.

"Listen, Detective," Melville said, his expression softening a bit. "I'd like to think that you're a responsible man, so I assume that you must be aware that what you want to do is very irregular. Now would you care to tell me when you are planning to leave?"

"I'm leaving right now, Captain Melville," Starsky said, feeling a little uncomfortable under the gaze of the imposing man. "Actually, I only came in to talk to you... I have to catch my plane at twenty past nine."

"Okay, Starsky... I understand why you need to go back to Bay City, but I want you to be aware of the trouble you can get yourself into if you are gone for too long."

"I know, sir... I know it and believe me, I wouldn't leave if I thought that there was any other way to..."

"It's okay, Detective. Save it." Melville raised his hand, cutting him off. "I'm going to give you a week-long leave of absence. Given the current circumstances, by which I mean that neither you nor any close relative of yours is seriously sick or injured, it's the most I can do for you."

"Well, sir, I don't want to lie you. Actually I... I don't know if a week will be enough." Starsky dared to say.

"I'm sorry, Detective. It'll have to be," the Captain said curtly. He reached for a document and began filling it out, before signing it.

"Here it is, Starsky. Your leave of absence for a week." Melville handed the sheet of paper to Starsky.

As Starsky took the form, a memory of Dobby came to his mind. Sure, Melville was fair and as good a commanding officer as Starsky had heard he was. However, no matter what the older man said, he was unable to really understand. He wouldn't bend the rules the way Dobby, despite his short temper and all of his shouting, would've done in the same circumstances.

"I hope you'll be able to sort things out and give your friend the help and support he needs right now. However, try not to forget your own commitment to this precinct and your duties here, Detective." Melville said, dismissing him.

"I won't, Captain." With his leave of absence papers in hand, Starsky left Melville's office. He hurried to the precinct parking lot where Morris was waiting for him, leaning against his car with Hercule Poirot lying by his side.

"Well? How badly have you pissed off your Captain?" Morris asked nonchalantly. He ordered his dog into the backseat, and then climbed into the passenger seat himself.

"A little, I guess." Starsky said, shrugging as he slid behind the steering wheel and started Morris's car.

"See, kid?" The older man said. "There's nothing like being your own boss. When you run your own business nobody tells you what to do, or not to do. Nobody bugs you if you're late to work, there's no one to lecture you if you have to leave town for a while."

"And nobody pays you your salary every month, either," Starsky answered back.

"Oh, money, money!" Morris complained. "There's more important things in life than money, Dave."

"I know it, pal. Believe me, I do." Starsky said, turning serious. "Because of that, I'm going back to Bay City to stay there as long as Hutch needs me, no matter what. However, I still like to pay my bills and eat every day, so I hope a week will be enough to... well, I dunno. To help Hutch in any way I can."

"Hey... I've got an idea," Morris said, placing a hand on Starsky's forearm. "Why don't you bring Hutch over here, with you, to take his mind off of things for awhile? After all, you haven't seen each other for a while now. It might help him feel better. It'd be good for you too, actually... And who knows, maybe I could even talk you both into leaving the force and becoming PIs," the old man joked. "After all, considering all the crap that you and your friend have been through as a cops, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea... Seems to me that being a PI would be a safer way to, as you say, pay the bills and eat every day."

"Yeah, and quite a boring one, too," Starsky countered.

"Boring? Boring, my ass!" Morris exclaimed. "Let me tell you something, kid. The guy you're looking at here has done some very exciting stuff while working cases. Stuff like travelling to the Cayman Islands and staying for four days in a five stars hotel. You know, one of those fancy places where even a greeting from a maid costs you some bucks," the old man mocked. "But I stayed there for free. All expenses covered by my client; a healthy woman who suspected her husband was cheating on her with his secretary."

"Oh, I don't think I've talked you about it, but years ago, Hutch and I, we went to solve a case on a Caribbean island. And we stayed in one of those luxury beach hotels too," Starsky explained, recalling their stay in Voodoo Island with a pang of melancholy, despite all the scary events that had happened back then.

"Anyway, I'll bet I solved my case without risking my neck nearly as much as you both did." Morris stated, unaware of how accurate he was being.

"Yep... I have to admit that you've got a point there," Starsky answered, looking at the road ahead him.

"Besides, as a rule, private detectives don't have to do the kind of stuff you haven't been cleared for, like racing after the bad guys, or getting in the path of their bullets. Instead, we discretely watch people and follow them wherever they go. We look for clues to solve a given case and even, once in a while, help the cops by working closely with them. All of that without having to worry about stuff like limited jurisdiction," the former detective explained. "In a nutshell, we primarily use our brains and our instincts, two things that I believe you have plenty of."

"Yeah, whatever you say, pal." Starsky dismissed the subject as he was already pulling into a parking place in the airport's large parking area.

"Well, Morris. I gotta go. Thanks for letting me use your car." the curly-haired man said. He reached for his duffel bag in the back seat, stroking Hercules's head before getting out of the car.

"Don't mention it, kid. Call me, please," Morris asked. "Call me and let me know how things are going with that friend of yours."

"Sure Morris, I'll do it," Starsky agreed. He fondly squeezed Morris's shoulder before heading for the airport building.

xxxxxxx

In Bay City, relatives, friends, and fellow policemen listened respectfully the words of the priest at Daniel Griffith's memorial service.

"... We are here to honor the memory of our beloved friend, Daniel Griffith. To give him our last goodbye. To pay him the tribute he deserves," the priest said, as Hutch walked with unstable steps closer to the people attending the service.

"Daniel was a fine spouse and father, brother and son, and a good friend to all of his friends. He was also a very valuable member of this community. One who has left us too early to go with our Father, the Creator," the old pastor said. "There are many good things we can say about Daniel. We should remind ourselves how much he cared about everyone, even to the extent of giving his life for others in the fulfillment of his duty..."

"He didn't give his life... He was killed because I fucked it up big time," Hutch interjected with an alcohol-filled voice. All the people in the church raised their heads to look at him in astonishment.

For the last few hours, almost against his will, in a desperate attempt to catch the ghosts of remorse and chase the horrible memories away, Hutch had been drinking again... Unfortunately, he hadn't gotten drunk enough to forget his last commitment to his deceased partner. However, his disheveled black suit, his askew tie, his unshaven face and matching blood shot eyes spoke volumes about the sorry condition he was in.

"Yep... I was his partner. The same one who treated the poor guy like worthless scum for most of the time we partnered together," he said. "But I'd like to state something for all of you... I am the only worthless scum here..."

"Come with me, Hutch." The speaker was Dobby. He had approached his detective and grabbed him firmly by the arm, trying to lead him away from Griffith's mourners.

"No Cap... these people have the right to know why Griffith got killed... And I mean the real reason... Why Starsky almost got killed, too, and isn't going to ever be the same man he was before the shooting."

"That's enough, Hutchinson! Shut up!" Dobby commanded curtly, in a low, hissing voice.

"They've the right to know what kind of lousy partner Griffith had..."

"What we have the right to do is pay my brother the tribute he deserves without a drunk and pathetic idiot ruining it, Detective," Griffith's oldest brother groused. He had stepped closer to Hutch during his speech and was now facing the blond detective, standing just mere inches away from him and staring at him with an incensed expression.

"Griffith was a good man. And a great partner... But see... he only had one flaw. Same as Starsky... One for which they'd end up paying way too expensive a price... That flaw was to trust his life to the asshole you're looking at," Hutch said in loud, drunken voice jabbing his own chest with his thumb.

"Yeah... Griffith was..." Hutch had no time to say any more. The iron-like fist of Griffith's brother crashed against his jaw. He stumbled backwards and fell gracelessly, sprawled face down on the floor.

"I'm warning you, Detective. Get the hell outta here. Now." The man snapped, before turning back to join the group of his relatives. **TBC**

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

After Starsky boarded the plane, things quickly began to slide from bad to worse. His initial contentment at having arrived at the airport in plenty of time to catch his flight began to turn to impatience and frustration.

To begin with, Starsky and the other passengers spent almost an hour sitting on the tarmac, waiting for the plane to take off. Eventually, the captain informed them that something was wrong with one of the aircraft's engines and they would have to board two different planes. The transfer unfortunately included a three-hour stop in Kansas City. After another long delay, due to a violent summer storm, Starsky finally landed in Bay City, six hours later than scheduled.

By then Starsky was tired, hungry, upset, and truly frantic to reach Hutch.

Once off the plane and in the terminal, Starsky hurried to the rental car desk. After a quick greeting to the lady behind the counter, he handed her his driver's license and credit card, and then filled out the necessary paperwork to rent the first vehicle she offered him. The car turned out to be an LTD like the one Hutch owned. This one, though, had been painted white and was also, as Starsky noted with a hint of amusement, much cleaner than Hutch's.

During some minutes, Starsky drove uneventfully, though exhaustion for the sleepless night he had, plus the many hours he had spent in planes and airports was starting to take its toll on his stiffening body. In the last hours he had pushed himself quite hard and that was just what doctors had advised him not to do.

He was already near Bay City limits when suddenly, the LTD hit a large oil patch on the road and skidded out of control. Starsky struggled to hold onto the steering wheel and straighten the vehicle, but due to his fatigue, his reflexes weren't at their sharpest. For a moment he thought he had regained control of the car. Then he saw the large commercial truck bearing down on him from the opposite lane. Starsky jerked the steering wheel towards the hard shoulder, and his car crashed violently through the guardrail. Starsky's car plummeted off the road and down the cliff, finally slamming into a tree.

The momentum of the fall pushed Starsky forcefully forward, his head impacting against the shattered windshield. He passed out momentarily, but the agonizing waves of pain radiating from his legs and chest and the acrid smell of smoke coming from the car's engine soon dragged him back to consciousness.

Slowly pulling his upper body backwards, Starsky leaned his head against the headrest. He gingerly prodded his hurting body. His hand made contact with a lukewarm substance... It was his own blood, dripping down from a gash in his forehead and soaking through the fabric of his jeans. His nostrils filled with the unmistakably coppery scent, and he felt light-headed and nauseous.

With his senses obscured by pain and his strength fading, Starsky struggled to open the car door. He pulled weakly, twisting his upper body in an attempt to get out of the LTD. He quickly realized that his legs were firmly pinned under the mangled dashboard. The vehicle had become a heap of twisted metal and broken glass; a deadly trap about to explode.

All of a sudden, Starsky realized that he would not be able to comfort Hutch and help him get over Daniel Griffith's death, that he would never see Hutch again, and that his own, inevitable death

would be another hard blow for his already suffering friend.

"S-sorry, Hutch... I... I'm very sorry... buddy..." Starsky whispered, as the shadows engulfed him.

xxxxxxx

After he'd helped Hutch to his feet, Dobey led him out of the church and to his car. Only after they had left, did Griffith's memorial service continue.

"Where are we going?" Hutch asked groggily, as they reached Dobey's car.

"My place," Dobey said, curtly. "And I don't give a rat's ass what you want or don't want to do, Hutchinson! Have I made myself clear? You're staying at my place, and that's that!" The captain yanked open the passenger door of his vehicle.

"Cap... I am very so-"

"Don't, Hutchinson! Don't you dare say you're sorry," Dobey grumbled in a low voice. He raised his hand in a warning gesture. "Right now I'm too pissed off to listen. Just shut that big mouth of yours and get in the car, or I swear I'll..." The infuriated captain trailed off as Hutch meekly obeyed his command, climbing into the car. Without further work, Dobey slammed the door shut. Striding around the hood of the vehicle he climbed into the driver's seat.

"Put your seatbelt on, Hutch... If you aren't too drunk to do it by yourself, that is," Dobey ordered, dryly. When Hutch had done as requested, the Captain started the engine and drove to his place.

The ride passed in tense silence. Dobey drove, occasionally stealing a few furtive glances at the wretched man by his side. Hutch simply sat slumped in his seat, absentmindedly looking down at his hands, resting in his lap.

Once they had arrived at Dobey's place, still without speaking, the captain helped Hutch get out of the car. He led him into the house where Edith was waiting for them. Upon seeing Hutch in such bad shape, and after catching the meaningful look Dobey addressed at her, the understanding woman didn't ask any questions. She greeted Hutch affectionately, and helped him off his jacket, before seating him on the couch. Then she headed to the kitchen to make some coffee.

"Did you really have to do that, Hutch? I mean, show up at Griffith's funeral fucking plastered?" Dobey asked. He was standing in front of Hutch, unsure whether he wanted to comfort the distraught detective, as he would one of his own children, or slap the man's face. "For God's sake! Don't you think a fellow cop deserves more respect than that, especially at his memorial service?"

"Captain, look... I-,"

"Harold..." Edith interrupted them, emerging from the kitchen with a tray of steaming coffee mugs. She placed them on the coffee table, and sat down by Hutch's side, gently taking his hand between hers.

"Oh... Okay. It's okay, Hutch. We'll talk when you feel better," Dobey conceded, sitting down in the armchair across from Hutch. "Drink some coffee. It'll make you feel better."

"Actually, I don't feel very good, Cap... I think I could use some rest, if you don't mind."

"Sure, Ken. Come with me," Edith answered before Dobey had time to say anything. She got to her feet, intending to lead Hutch to the guestroom.

"Wait, Hutch," Dobey said, standing as well. "There's something you'll want to know."

Silently, Hutch turned to look at his superior officer.

"I know you'll think I've been putting my nose in your personal business, but, guessing you weren't going to do it... Last night I called Starsky," Dobey announced uneasily. Edith stayed at Hutch's side, quietly watching both men.

"You did what?" Hutch asked, clenching his fists. His face hardened into a mask of grim anger.

"I really believe you could use your best friend's help right now, Hutch. And, as I see it, he has the right to know what happened. Last night I called Starsky, and filled him in... Well, I told him about Griffith's death, and I asked him to call you."

"Starsky left, Cap. He moved across the country to start his life over, far away from me. Far from the friend who was doing nothing but make his life hell. In his own words, the one who was preventing him from enjoying his second chance at life. Try not to forget that," Hutch said, calmly.

"Oh, come on, Hutch! That's not why Starsky left, and you know it," Dobey answered in the same calm tone.

"Listen, Cap. I've got a nasty headache, and right now I don't feel up to arguing with you. Let's just say he's gone. Period. And, wanna know what I think?" the blond detective asked. He didn't wait for an answer. "I think Starsky's earned the right to be left alone and start over without me around to ruin his life. I already did that once. And once is more than enough if you ask me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm really bushed."

Having said this, Hutch turned and slowly began climbing the stairs to the guestroom. Edith followed him.

xxxxxxx

Drifting in and out of consciousness, Starsky was unable to free himself from the car. He was going into shock, when he suddenly saw someone by his side.

"Ge... get outta h-here... the c-car is going to blo-blow up," he struggled to form the words and warn the man crouched down beside him. "You can't... can't h-help me... a-anyway."

"It's okay, Starsky. Don't worry about me," the stranger said. He gently picked Starsky up into his arms, effortlessly extricating him from the mangled car. He carried him some feet away from the crash site, and very carefully put him down on the grass.

"Who... who are y-you?" Starsky asked, making a huge effort to keep his eyes open and look at his saviour. He was a tall and fit dark-haired man, some years younger than Starsky, dressed in casual clothes. His face seemed vaguely familiar to the detective.

"Don't you remember me, Starsky? I'm Daniel," the young man said, smiling softly.

Just then, the car Starsky had been driving finally exploded, erupting red-hot pieces of metal in all directions, Daniel quickly bent forward, using his own body as a barrier between Starsky and the blazing metallic debris.

"Don't worry, Starsky. You'll be fine... And Hutchinson will be fine, too," Daniel said, still kneeling beside Starsky.

"You... you kn-know Hutch?" Starsky asked, unsure if he wasn't talking to some sort of delusion.

"Tell him it wasn't his fault, that he didn't do anything wrong, will you?" was the mysterious man's only reply. He gently squeezed Starsky's shoulder, before getting to his feet and disappearing so quickly that, in his foggy state of mind, Starsky honestly thought that he had just vanished before his eyes.

Unconsciousness quickly claimed Starsky again, so that he was unaware of the paramedics who soon surrounded him. They tried to stabilize his vitals as, some feet away, firemen worked to extinguish the fire that was consuming the car and threatening to spread to nearby trees.

A short while earlier, the driver of the eighteen-wheeler that had forced Starsky to swerve off the road to avoid it had radioed for help. After making the call, he took his first aid kit, a blanket, and the small fire extinguisher he always carried in his vehicle, and hurried down the embankment. He was hoping to, if possible, prevent the smoking car's engine from blowing up, and give some help to the unfortunate driver.

Once off the road, the truck driver spotted Starsky, whose limp body lay on the ground. Somehow the injured man had been able to crawl out of his car in time to avoid certain death. Though, at first glance, the trucker was unable to make out if Starsky was still alive. He hurried to his side, checking for a pulse in his neck. He found one, though it was weak and unsteady.

"Hey! You're still alive, pal!" the man said, surprised. "Okay, I've called for help and the cavalry's already on its way, so you just hold on a little longer..." He continued to talk to the unconscious Starsky, as he covered him with the blanket. He was careful not to move him, afraid of inflicting further damage. The only thing he dared do, on seeing how profusely Starsky's right leg was bleeding, was to apply a makeshift tourniquet, using his own belt. He also cleaned off some of the blood covering Starsky's face with a pad of gauze and some peroxide.

A few minutes later, the wailing of the emergency vehicle's sirens could be heard over the traffic noise. The truck driver, raising his eyes to the highway, saw the red and blue lights glaring in the distance.

"See, pal? Help is on the way," he said to the unconscious Starsky. "I have to leave for a couple of minutes to guide these guys down here. But don't worry - I'll be right back, boy. You just hold on!" The man yelled these last few words to Starsky, already having climbed half way up the embankment, to come back short later with the promised help..

The hardest part of the paramedics job was to stabilize Starsky enough to move him to the ambulance. Besides the suspected cracked ribs - something they couldn't be sure of until their patient had been X-rayed in the hospital - Starsky had also broken both his legs in the collision. The fracture in his left leg was compound. His tibia had pierced through his skin, protruding out in a ghastly manner, tearing the material of his jeans.

Starsky's breathing was laboured, his heart rate was fast, and his blood pressure was dangerously low, all facts which suggested to the paramedics that he was bleeding internally. It was likely that one or more of his internal organs were damaged.

They worked for long minutes on Starsky, assessing all his injuries as precisely and swiftly as possible. They removed the makeshift tourniquet from his leg and instead put pressure on the limb, raising it to slow the bleeding. They also started an IV and put him on oxygen, before carefully strapping him onto a stretcher.

Finally, with the help of the two police officers who had been guiding traffic on the congested

highway, they began the trip back up the steep slope, carrying Starsky. It was anyone's guess whether he'd even make it alive to the hospital.

xxxxxxx

Silently, Edith Dobby guided Hutch upstairs to the guestroom. She opened the door to let him in.

"If you want to take a shower, just help yourself, Ken. You already know where the bathroom is," Edith said as she opened a large closet, producing a couple of towels and a bathrobe for Hutch. She placed them on the bed. "And try to get some sleep, okay? You'll feel better after you've rested," she advised, maternally.

"Thanks, Edith," Hutch answered, smiling weakly.

"I have an idea, Hutch. If you don't mind lending me the key to your apartment, I can pop over and get a change of clothes for you," the woman offered.

"I'm okay, Edith, don't worry. Tomorrow, I'll go back to my place. I'll change then," Hutch said, as he sat down on the comfortable bed.

"Are you sure, Ken? I really don't mind going there myself, or asking Harold to drop by and get some stuff for you."

"I'm sure, Edith. Thanks."

"Listen, honey." Edith tentatively dragged a chair closer to Hutch and sat down across from him. "Maybe you think I'm not the right one to understand what you're going through right now, but you'd be surprised... I know you need to talk. You need to give vent to that grief you're feeling, or else it's going to eat you up."

"My latest partner, a good man, young and married and the father of a small child, got killed yesterday because I wasn't able to cover his back properly, Edith. All the talking in the world isn't going to change that fact," Hutch said. He stared into the woman's eyes a moment before forlornly lowering his head.

"Harold is right, isn't he? You haven't called Dave yet?" Dobby's wife inquired, candidly.

"Well, he already did it for me," Hutch retorted, sounding quite a bit harsher than he intended. "Sorry Edith... I didn't mean to sound that mean."

"It's okay, Ken. Don't worry," she said, getting to her feet. "Anyway, I really think you should call Starsky, dear. Or even ask Harold for a few days off and go to New York to see him. It'll do you good."

"I'll think about it, Edith. Honest," Hutch agreed, humouring the kind woman who for many years had treated himself and Starsky as if they were members of her own family.

"Thanks Edith, for everything," he said, earnestly.

"Don't mention it, Ken. Harold and I only want to help you as much as possible. You know how much we care about you, son," Edith said. She gently brushed Hutch's cheek before leaving the room.

Once he was alone, Hutch took off his tie and removed his shoes. Actually, despite feeling bone tired, he didn't think he would be able to sleep. Too much grief, pain, and awful memories were

there, ready to prevent him from getting even just a few hours of much needed rest.

He picked the towels and terry bathrobe up off of the bed and headed over to the bathroom near the guestroom, hoping that a shower would help him relax.

Hutch took a long shower, and then returned to the bedroom, climbing into bed. He turned off the light and closed his eyes, trying - if only for a short while - to banish the painful thoughts and memories from his mind.

Eventually, the exhausted man fell asleep. Unfortunately, sleep was no refuge for him and Hutch was soon dragged into a surreal landscape of nightmares in which Griffith and Starsky's faces mixed together and he had to watch helplessly as they were both gunned down in the apartment, or in the parking lot of Metro, over and over, dying in his arms.

After about an hour of nightmares-ridden sleep, Hutch woke up abruptly, drenched in sweat. He sat upright in bed, trying to catch his breath before turning on the nightstand lamp. Convinced that a wakeful night lay ahead of him, Hutch got out of bed and put on the bathrobe. Leaving the bedroom, he headed down to the kitchen to get some water, or maybe a glass of milk.

He didn't want to admit it, even to himself, but what Hutch really yearned for at that moment was a shot of bourbon, tequila, or any other strong drink to help him unwind. Or maybe some Valium... but he'd left the pills at his apartment.

What he wanted was a small dose of the blessed, if artificial, nothingness that last night had plunged him into a sound sleep. However, appalled at the idea of Dobey or Edith catching him red-handed, either searching for a drink or drinking it, Hutch made do with a glass of water.

He was already back in his bedroom, pondering the idea of getting dressed and calling for a cab to take him back to his apartment, when he heard the phone. Somebody picked it up at the third ring. For a short while there was silence, and then Hutch heard the heavy steps of his Captain approaching, down the hallway.

Dobey rapped on the door with his knuckles. "Hutch, son... Can I come in?"

"Sure, cap. Come in... What's wrong?" Hutch asked.

"It's Starsky," Dobey said, gravely. "Starsky had an accident..." TBC

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 (Written by Kirsty Welsh)

"Accident?...But...What? What's happened?" Hutch asked taken aback.

"Car crash. The nurse who's called didn't give much more away, though. She just asked me to go to the hospital." Dobby informed "Get dressed, Hutch. We're going there."

"We're going there?" Hutch echoed Dobby's words. "Do you mean you're going to travel to New York, with me?"

"Starsky isn't in New York, son. He's here, in Bay City; in Memorial Hospital" The captain said "Come on, Hutch, get dressed." he asked again before leaving the guestroom.

For a moment, Hutch stood in the middle of the guestroom, stunned and just staring at the closed door as Dobby's words sunk in. *Of course Starsky is back in Bay City...* He Dobby had told him about Griffith's death, he, rather than just making a phone call to his best friend had decided to hurry by his side.

That was just how Starsky was...

Feeling a huge lump in his throat, Hutch shook himself from his musings to get dressed and short minutes later both men were already in their way to the hospital.

"Did you know that Starsky was coming back to Bay City, Cap?" Hutch asked all of sudden.

"No, Hutch...I...I just asked him to call you. But I assume he decided to travel over here, instead." Dobby said staring at the road, unable to look at Hutch and see in his detective's eyes the anger he guessed was boiling under the surface.

See, Hutch?...not all that happens around you is your fault. Dobby thought grimly.

The Captain was expecting for some response or reaction coming from his detective, but Hutch just kept silent as if that sudden turn of events was too much to deal with.

Anyway the hardest part to cope with would come in the hospital when, more than three hours after Hutch and Dobby's arrival to the emergency waiting room, a tired looking doctor still dressed in his surgical scrubs who introduced himself as Doctor Jefferson asked them to follow him to his office.

Once there, and after offering Hutch and Dobby to have some coffee, invitation that they refused, Jefferson sat behind his desk and went straight to the point, informing them about the condition the injured Detective was in.

"Detective Starsky was brought in with two broken ribs and his left lung punctured and collapsed" The doctor informed them in professional tone. "He's broken both his legs; one of them has a compound fracture which means that his tibia bone was sticking through the skin. Actually, we had to deal with a substantial internal and external bleeding and also, he's got a severe concussion and several abrasions and cuts in his face and body, though actually, which worries me the most is the blood loss. Because the early stage of hypovolemic shock he was in when the paramedics came to the place of the accident, we did almost lose him when he was brought to the ER, though luckily we managed to stabilize him enough to take him to surgery The surgery was also compounded by

the fact that Detective Starsky has undergone previous massive surgeries to his thorax and abdomen and we had to cut away through the adhesions. He must have been in an inordinate amount of pain in his daily life. The one good thing that came from this terrible accident is that, should all things be equal, he will have relief from those pains later.

"I don't understand everything you've said. Bottom line Doc. Is Starsky going to make it?" Hutch asked bluntly, interrupting the surgeon's explanations.

"Unluckily, and though we're doing as much as possible to help him to recover, at this moment, I can't give you an answer one way or the other, which reminds me that if he has family, somebody should call them"

"What do you mean by that?" Hutch snapped staring in astonishment at the doctor.

"Listen, Detective. There's something that I need you to understand." Jefferson answered in calm tone. "Currently, Detective Starsky's condition is critical, and though he's a fighter, there are still many things that could go wrong in the next days. Besides, the massive damage his body had to endure not so long ago isn't going to do any good to his chances to survive..."

"Do you really know all the details about the shooting and the recovering process and surgeries Starsky went through after it? Dobby wanted to know.

"Of course, Captain. I've pulled Detective Starsky's case history the minute one of my nurses recognized him." Jefferson answered before giving Hutch and Dobby a few more explanations. He also assured them that the patient was going to be closely monitored and watched. Finally, both men left somberly the office to come back to the waiting room.

In there, the blond detective had to wait for more than two hours while Starsky was in recovery and later being settled in a private ICU room. He paced the waiting room, his mind, still befuddled by the dregs of the valium and alcohol refusing to take in the possibility that once again he might be in danger of losing his best friend. Too many thoughts crowded his head. Too many memories of Starsky hurt in the past.

'Hurts Hutch... oh God it hurts ...'

'Don't antagonize the people I need huh?...'

'What happened Hutch? Will somebody tell me what happened?...'

'Hey four pain killers, feel no pain !...'

Memories of long hours spent at the curly haired man's bedside, elbows on the cover as his back protested the hardness of the chairs. Hours of watching in sympathy as a sweat slick partner battled through months of agonizing physiotherapy, trying to hide the tears of pain and forlornness from his friend, so that Hutch wouldn't hurt. And the days when Starsky had just been too exhausted to get up out of the bed. When Hutch had brought in the Monopoly board and taken the smaller man for every dime in his make believe bank account.

And at the end of it all, his best friend had taken the final agonizing step and taken himself away from Hutch so that the blond would be able to get on with his life.

"... FOR GOD SAKES! You bother me! Look at you, Starsky! Stuffed into that ridiculous thing and fooling around as if nothing was wrong with your life! Acting and looking like a five year kid instead of the grown man that supposedly you are!" A five year old? No, that's too mild a way to put how you look right now. Actually, you do look rather like a moron, a pathetic nutcase that, if

you ask me, I wouldn't feel too proud to be seen around with."

Hutch sat down and put his head in his hands. Those words had been burned into his brain over the past weeks and he couldn't get rid of them. A word on a page can be erased as though it never happened. A word spoken remains there, indelibly in someone's mind, never to go away. And he'd uttered those hurtful words to his partner. And yet the smaller man had still decided that he would make himself uncomfortable and would uproot himself in order to bring some peace of mind to Hutch.

Hutch looked up as Dobey handed him yet another Styrofoam cup of black coffee.

'Thanks Cap. Is there any sign of anyone yet? It's too freakin' long. It's not good; I know its not good news'

'They'll let us know as soon as we can see him' Dobey said gently.

Hutch paused. 'Cap, if it's OK with you, can I see him alone first? Please? There's just so much gone on, I kinda....'

Dobey smiled tiredly. 'Sure, whatever ya want'.

Family for David Starsky?' The voice finally sounded down the corridor and Hutch was on his feet in a moment. He pushed himself down the corridor anxious beyond words to see his friend, the friend who had left Bay City to start a new life far from there. The friend Hutch had left in the airport terminal just a few months earlier, healthy and unharmed. The same one who had promised to come to visit him and who, as soon as he thought that Hutch needed him had carried out his promise.

The pretty nurse ushered Hutch into an all too familiar room containing a bed, several large intrusive machines and the body of his friend. He paused at the door, his breath hitching in his throat and vague sounds of ping pong balls and paddles playing through his head. This was too much like the last time. Too much like Gunther and Hutch panicked. His hand left the lintel of the door and he backed into the corridor, his eyes never leaving the limp form of his friend lying on that hospital bed, waiting for a kind touch and a familiar voice. He felt dizzy and sick to his stomach, the room taking on a distinctly rakish angle as he tried to keep hold of the meager contents of his stomach. He bent down, his hands on his knees and his butt leaning up against the wall behind him as he tried to stop his heart from hammering in his chest.

C'mon ya cowardly bastard, you can do this. He needs you. Starsky needs you. He has come to see you because you're so much of a wash up that you needed your hand holding, and then this happens. Life isn't fair. Why should he have to suffer this again? Why should he have to go trough life picking up the pieces that other people breaks for him? C'mon get your ass in gear and get into that fuckin' room and show him you can still be a good friend to him. Just like he is to you.

Hutch pried himself from the wall and walked on rubbery legs and with a new determination into the small room, closing the door behind him. He heaved a deep breath to calm himself then walked to the bed and looked down at the swollen face of the man he knew he loved more than he loved his own family.

Starsky looked pale, his face bruised down the whole of the left side and with an enormous gash that started in his hairline and bisected his eyebrow, ending just short of his left eye. One more millimeter and he would have lost that wonderful indigo blue eye for good. Starsky's mouth was pulled sideways in a parody of his usual grin by the ventilator machine which was bandaged in place at the side of his mouth, the machine making the familiar hissing and whooshing noise that

Hutch remembered from the last stay in Memorial. Starsky's arms were pierced down their length by various drips leading into bags hung high above the bed. Some had clear fluid; smaller ones held colored drugs, all dripping lifesaving fluids into his partner.

Yes, Starsky would always be his partner. Even if they never got to work together again, Starsky would always remain his partner in Hutch's mind. No-one, not even Dan Griffith could take the place of the ebullient curly haired man, and belatedly, Hutch realized that he couldn't bear to be apart from this man for longer than absolutely necessary.

Yes, you stupid son of a bitch, and it took the death of another good guy to make you realize!. God Dan, I'm so sorry. Would you ever forgive me?

Starsky's legs had been set, but his broken tibia could not be encased in a cast until the wound from the surgical reduction had healed sufficiently. It was held at an unnatural angle by a set of pulleys and weights dangling over the end of the bed whilst its partner was cased from toe to hip. The rest of the familiar body was a mass of cuts and bruises to the extent where Hutch couldn't tell which part of his partner he could touch, and which would hurt the least.

He bent down over his partner's unconscious form and whispered into the blood encrusted ear

'Starsk, I'm here buddy'.

There was no response and Hutch sat down on the chair at the side of the body to start his long vigil.

After Gunther, he'd sat in exactly the same position, afraid to touch for fear of setting off some alert or disturbing something which would lead to another threat on Starsky's life. This time, he was afraid to touch because he didn't know just how Starsky would react.

Get a grip Hutchinson. He was coming here to help you. Would he have sat back and talked? No, this is Starsky. He needs contact. He told you he felt you last time even though he couldn't open his eyes to talk to you. Stop thinking of yourself and start thinking about him for once!.

Hesitantly he reached out and tentatively took hold of the left hand, careful not to dislodge one of the many drips. The contact sent a flash of memories through his hand and up into his chest. This felt so right. Just a touch to let his best friend know he was there. How could he have thought not even for a moment that a touch would hurt!

And he realized in the last difficult months that it was the one thing that had been missing. They had been so used to acting almost as one. Of finishing each other's words, of eating from the same plate, drinking from the same cup.

'We're together 75 percent of the time and you aren't even a good kisser...'

After Starsky had made it back to the boring work of reports, he'd been exhausted at the end of each day, his stamina levels not up to what they once were. He'd been so bushed that he had no energy to go for drinks at the end of the shift, and fell asleep watching the game, a slice of pizza still in his hand when Hutch came around. And they never touched.

In the hospital, Hutch had massaged Starsky's chest, easing out the pains of the day. When Hutch had been sick, Starsky had done the same

'Tell me what I can do for you buddy'.

'You can take away the suckers that are tying a knot in my chest... you did it... You did it... now

get outta here'.

But when Starsky came home and went back to work and they were both battling the boredom and the realization that things would never be the same again, they'd never touched. Never shared the same sandwich or eyed the same girl, or finished the same sentence. After Kira, things had changed, they thought, too much.

But now, as he sat once again at his partner's side, holding onto the cool, almost lifeless hand, Hutch realized that if Starsky and Hutch could no longer regain that part of their work relationship, there was no way forward. No way for them to ever pick up the pieces of their shattered relationship. And life without Starsky, be it as a friend or a partner was something Hutch could no longer contemplate. He'd had a taste of being away from the brunet and it was as though someone had severed his right arm. There was no way that he wanted to put so much distance between them ever again and so he held on to that hand, trying to pump life back into his friend's body as if by sheer willpower.

And Hutch began to talk.

xxxxxxx

An hour later, when Dobey put his wooly head around the door, he found Starsky still unconscious on the bed, with Hutch sitting next to him, still holding his partner's hand and his voice becoming hoarser as the time went on. But he was talking. Pouring out his heart to his partner. Apologizing for his anger, reliving good times, planning for a future he was trying to get the unconscious man to commit to.

'Hutch, the nurse wants us to go. He needs to rest' the black man said gently.

'Not goin'.

'Hutch, son. You need your rest too. C'mon. You can come back tomorrow'.

'No'

'HUTCHINSON! Get your butt out of that chair and come home. Edith has supper ready'.

The blond one turned baby blues on his Captain and gave him a resolute stare.

'You go home Cap. We've been apart too long and I have catching up to do'. He turned and once more focused his whole attention on the unconscious man. **TBC**

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 (By Kirsty Welsh)

Hutch huddled over the bed, never letting go of Starsky's hand. He had no idea how long he stayed there, not moving, hardly breathing in case the precarious balance of his partner's life was tipped into oblivion. The brunet looked so terribly delicate laid in the hospital bed, a single white sheet covering his nakedness. The nurses explained it was easier, with such sick patients if they didn't have to fuss with pyjama pants and shirts. The added movements caused by removing them for various procedures adding to the patient's discomfort. But truth to tell, with the terrible state of the smaller man's legs, it would have been almost impossible to put pants over them, not to say downright murderously painful. The bag from the catheter dangled over the side of the bed, making sure that once again the brunet didn't need to move even for that most basic of functions.

All in all, there was not a thing that Starsky was able to do for himself, save for allowing his heart to beat rhythmically inside his damaged and bandaged chest.

Hutch closed his eyes, wondering what to say to his partner. Once upon a time, words came so easily to him. Once upon a time he would have started prattling about anything and everything. Once upon a time, their friendship had been as strong as Everest, and it had seemed, just as unbreakable. This felt more as though he were starting over with a new friendship, as though he hardly knew the man he'd spent the last 10 years with. And yet, in a way, he was starting over.

When they had the massive falling out over Kira, he'd felt as though life was coming to an end. Starsky was angry at him. No, scrap that. There was more than anger. There was hurt and betrayal and fear. Fear that what they once had, had come to an abrupt and mindless end. When they'd finally gotten to talking again, it had been strained but they'd both worked at their friendship all over again and it had healed, mending almost all of the cracks in their relationship. And although it was never quite as good as new, it was still closer than most men get to a partner, male or female in a lifetime.

But when Starsky had walked out of his life those months ago, Hutch felt as though he would most likely die. What was the saying? You don't know what you've got till it's gone? He'd berated himself all over again for the things he'd said: the vitriolic tirade he'd used back that Easter when his still healing partner had arrived at his house in the Easter Bunny costume. Shit, it was Starsky that was hurting. It was Starsky who'd been told that the life he loved, and lived for as a street cop was at an end. And it was Starsky who was trying bravely and without recriminations to get on with his life in the only way he knew how – with humour and a virtual two fingers at the world.

But what had Hutch done? He'd felt sorry for himself. He'd shut himself away from the one man who understood what not having a partner at his side meant to him. He'd closed down, trying, he supposed to ease the burden of having to look for someone else to watch his back. And, more importantly, from going back to the same job he too loved and hiding his happiness at his return from Starsky. Because that would hurt both of them too much. However Starsky might tell the blond that he was happy for him and he should get right on with his life, Hutch would never be able to ignore that tiny little bit of unhappiness and jealousy in those indigo eyes.

The nurse came into the room and shook him from his reverie. She went to the bed, checking flow rates on the drips, measuring vitals and noting her observations down on the chart which she hung at the bottom of the brunet's bed.

'How's he doing?' Hutch asked, his voice cracking.

'He's holding his own. He's no worse than when he came in here' she said.

'No worse? But no better either?'

She grasped Hutch's shoulder and patted it gently. 'No news is good news. Especially at this stage of his recovery. We just need to keep watching and monitoring. The rest is up to him. So long as he has the will to live and something to fight for he'll pull through'. She looked at the haggard face of the blond, his mussed flaxen hair, his five o'clock shadow of bristles and the slight tremble in his hands. 'Can I get you anything?'

Hutch thought for a moment. He longed for some "down time" when the pain of seeing his partner like this didn't hurt quite so much. He longed for someone to wave a magic wand and make it all better, but that only happened in fairy tales and his life was more of a tragedy than a child's story. He longed for oblivion and he made his decision.

'Erm....its kinda embarrassing' he said, forcing a smile. 'My Doctor gave me something to calm me down a little. I was erm.....taking work too seriously, ya know the thing? Anyway, he gave me some....erm....Valium tablets and said I really needed to take them regularly, but in my rush over here, I forgot 'em. Is there any chance you could....'

'I'm sorry Sir. We aren't allowed to give out medication without sight of a doctor's prescription'.

Hutch felt the hunger claw at his stomach, the yearning for the drug more intense now that it was so far away. He put a winning smile on his face and tried again.

'And that's a very sensible approach. Do you think maybe you could ...erm....ring my doctor? His surgery should be open soon. I'm sure he'd verify that I am who I am. I don't look like a junkie do I?'

The nurse appraised the flaxen haired man. She saw a tired face, but she put that down to worry for his friend. She saw black circles under the eyes, but that too would be the worry. And she saw a handsome, open countenance, asking for her help. He was a policeman wasn't he? And all cops were good guys. She dithered between rules and regulations and maybe scoring with the handsome blond.

Hutch saw the indecision and went in for the kill. 'I'd go home for my own supply, but I don't want to leave him here on his own, just in case he wakes up. We've been through so much together. I'd hate for him to wake and think he was on his own. He'd be so scared'.

That did it. He saw the indecision flee from her eyes, knowing that she'd probably been told about the brunet's heroic recovery by her friends on the ward.

'I'll see what I can do' she dimpled and left.

Hutch felt weak for asking, but the pull of the drug which made him feel warm and fuzzy enough not to notice how much pain he was really in, was just too much. He'd battled heroin and had never gone back to that most pernicious of drugs, but somehow, with a Doctor's script in his hand, Hutch didn't feel that there was anything too wrong in the Valium. It was just one more way to see him through the day, and coupled with a half bottle of bourbon at night to wash down his final tablet, he got reasonably good night of sleep too.

He clutched at the hand that was shaking against the white sheet of Starsky's bed and held on to it, despising the fact that he couldn't get through the days without some chemical messing up his body. He looked at the unconscious man in the bed next to him.

God Starsk. You used to high as a kite on a couple'a aspirin! And here am I hitting the bottle every night and drowning my sorrows with cheap liquor too. Ok Hutchinson, enough is enough! He's gonna need you now more 'n' ever so sort yourself out. No more pills. No more booze. You've gotta clean up your act and soon. If he recov.....NO. When he recovers he's not gonna want a lush looking after him. You can do this. You kicked the heroin. Ya can kick this too.

At that moment, the nurse returned with a tiny paper cup containing the Valium and a glass of water. She held them out to the blond. 'Doctor says take this it'll make you feel better. We wouldn't want you being sick too, would we? But he says not to broadcast the fact we've given you the meds. Its so against the rules. I'd be fired immediately for persuading him' she smiled.

Hutch's hand went out instinctively for the pill, and he took the cup and glass. 'Thanks' he said as she departed, busily going on to the next person she had to fix.

The flaxen haired cop looked down at the small brown and white pill nestling in the bottom of the cup. His hand shook so that it wobbled from side to side dancing a "come hither" dance for him, taunting him to swallow the blissful peace that he knew it would bring.

You can't. You've just made a promise to yourself that you'd clean up your act. Don't take it. Don't... but the doctor said it would be good for me. He told the nurse I hadn't to get sick... but it's still a tablet Hutchinson. It's still another chemical in your body... I know, but this is the final one. After this one, I won't take any more; ever... you're weak... I'm not, the Doc said... you're hiding behind his words. Stop it. Have some guts for once in your life!... I have, just, just not tonight... hurts too much tonight. Tomorrow I'll be stronger. Tomorrow's another day and I can start over. Yes, that's it, better to start over on a new day.

Hutch poured the pill into his mouth and washed it down with the water. The doctor had said he should take it, right? Well who was he to argue with the doctor's orders? He sat back in his chair, head back, and closed his eyes, waiting for the effects of the antidepressant to kick in. his hands jittered at his side and his body craved the fiery burn of the bourbon, but that he could hold out against. For tonight, Hutch wouldn't take a drop, he knew that. Starsky needed him to be here for him and although the Valium would calm him, the bourbon would just send him to sleep and he didn't want to sleep. He wanted to be here when Starsky awoke, so that his blond friend would be the first thing those indigo eyes saw when they opened.

He looked again at the man on the bed. Just how many times had he been in this same position? The time of Bellamy's poison, when Starsky had had his lifespan counted in hours rather than years. That time he'd managed to save his partner, finding the antidote in the nick of time and allowing the doctors to concoct an antitoxin. The time in the Italian Restaurant had been no joke either. The lie he'd told his friend about having a little shoulder wound hadn't really be believed. Starsky had known that a shoulder wound wouldn't hurt so much and sap all the warmth from his body. That night at the hospital, Hutch had, as usual, paced the tile floor waiting for news and had been relieved beyond words when the doctor had told him they'd taken the slug from the very top of Starskys left lung.

Too many times , friend. Too many times I've had to wait for news of you. Too many hours in these hospital chairs.

And then there was the real doozy, when Gunther's hitmen had driven past the Torino peppering it with lead. Three bullets the newspapers had said. Three bullets had hit the curly haired cop. Dobey had seen four. He told the guys in the makeshift squad room down the hall that Starsky had been hit four times. But only Hutch and Starsky knew that five white hot pieces of metal had impacted on olive toned flesh that day. Five slugs that tore up his partner's insides until they were just so

much red meat, and Starsky had battled each and every one of them until the tears ran down his face and he'd plead with Hutch for just a little more morphine and maybe just a little earlier than the six hours between doses.

Hutch felt the pull of the Valium in his system now. It slowed down his heartbeat and made the pit of his stomach feel warm and full. He cherished the feeling for the numbness it brought to his mind. He didn't need to think. He didn't need to worry or hurt. For just a few hours he could be happy and peaceful.

Until the next dose was due.

In six hours.

'Please Blintz, just a little now. It hurts so much it... ungh... please gimme some now. I know its only five hours, but it's so bad today. Please... c'mon. JUST GIMME SOMETHING, anything... a bullet maybe?...'

His partner's pleadings ran through his mind. The weeks of agonising pain the brunet had endured was for the most part accomplished in tight lipped stoicism. But just occasionally, maybe after a dressing change or a fresh procedure, not even Starsky with his almost superhuman tolerance for pain could stop himself from longing for a needleful of morphine.

And you can't get through six hours without some drug to take your mind away to lala land! Oh Hutchinson, you really are one messed up, shambling so n of a bitch! It doesn't hurt... well not physically and yet you can't do without your fix.

Hutch sighed. Enough recriminations for tonight. He pulled himself up straighter and tugged at the corner of the sheet on the bed, straightening out a minute crease there. He stood and ran a hand through the curls on his partner's head, his fingers gently tracing the long cut down the forehead.

'C'mon buddy. Wake up. For me huh? Coz I think I need you as much as you need me'. **TBC**

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 (By Kirsty Welsh)

The night stretched on in an endless routine of nurses coming into the room, checking the various drips, inflating the blood pressure cuff around Starsky's arm and noting down the readings and shining pen lights into the indigo blue eyes. Each time they came in, they would smile at Hutch, perhaps pat him on the shoulder and mutter encouraging words to him.

He watched them all come and go in a sort of hazy fog, realising what they were doing, but at the same time allowing the procession to invade his consciousness without any effort to understand it. With the drug in his system, he felt warm and contented. Starsky was there with him and was maintaining his precarious hold on life. For the moment, that was as much as Hutch could hope for.

Towards morning. His eyes began to droop, the emotions of the past hours, the funeral, the loss of Daniel and the shock of Starsky's accident tipping him over into a depressed sleep. The next time the nurse came in on her hourly checks, she saw the blond slumped over the bed, his hands till entwined with the brunet's, his forehead resting on the bed. She smiled at the sight of the man, amazed at the bond that appeared to exist between the two. She tiptoed out and half an hour later, a porter arrived with a small guest bed, which he wheeled through the door and set up in the corner of the room. Whilst not the most comfortable bed, it'd beat the hard wooden chair. The same nurse tapped Hutch on the shoulder and he looked up, his eyes bleary with a combination of sleep and drugs.

'Is he ok?' he asked, wiping his hand across his face and scrubbing at his hair with his fingers. He sat up straight in the chair and groaned as his back muscles cracked.

'He's doing ok. He's not out of the woods, but he's holding on'.

Hutch let out the breath he'd been holding and sagged back on the chair. 'Thanks'.

'You look all in. I got a small bed for you' the nurse said and pointed at the corner of the room. 'You look like you're in for the long haul and he's going to need you fresh as a daisy when he wakes up'.

Hutch stood and stretched. The Valium was receding from his system now and he found he could think more clearly again. He shivered in the air conditioned room and stretched, his arms above his head and his fat stomach showing between his shirt and the waistband of his pants.

'Do you think he'll wake up today?'

The nurse smiled. 'I don't know. He's had a lot of trauma happen in so short a time. The shooting compounded the effects of this accident. I'm sure Dr Jefferson explained. He had a lot of pain medication because of the pain he was likely to have from his leg fractures, but that should be wearing off now. But the fact is, his head injury is what we have to be concerned about and the longer he remains unconscious, the harder it will be for him to recover fully'.

'I see. Yeah... I can see that. It's just... He's been through so much and he went away for a while. After the last shooting. He couldn't work with me any more and he decided to take a different job up north. I was getting sick and he was coming to visit me when he had this damned accident. I feel like part of this is my fault'.

She smiled sadly. 'this was no-ones fault. The driver of the truck that swerved to avoid him is

feeling just like you. As if it's all his fault too. Truth is, everything happens for a purpose, but we never really know what that purpose is. We just have to take each day at a time, get through it, and move on to the next. The only advice I can give you is that, just now, there is no yesterday and no tomorrow. Live for today. Live for this particular minute and when that's done, move on to the next. You can't change yesterday and tomorrow is probably too scary to contemplate, so just concentrate on getting through today huh? And don't forget, he needs you and you have friends to help. Never be afraid to ask for help'. She stopped and giggled. 'Oh my God, I sound like the psychology professor from nursing school! Just shoot me someone!'

Hutch grinned. 'Seems to me you make perfect sense. What's your name?'

'I'm Kelly'.

'Hi, erm....Ken....Hutchinson, but everyone calls me Hutch'.

'Well Hutch, I suggest you get some rest, on the bed and I'll check on you later. Are you going to go home to get your medication later?'

'No.....no I'll be fine. I don't want to go in case he wakes up'.

Kelly patted his arm. 'He's lucky to have a friend like you'.

'No, I'm lucky to have a friend like him' Hutch murmured as Kelly went about her business.

At midday, the doctor came back, made various observations and nodded. 'I think we can take the respirator away now'.

'That's good isn't it Doc?'

'It means he's making attempts to breathe on his own, but don't build up your hopes, this is only a first step'.

Xxxxxxxx

Starsky was floating. He had an odd feeling that he'd been here before, although he didn't really know where "here" was. Looking around the landscape was featureless and slightly hazy. It didn't look like Bay City, nor did it look like New York. Come to think of it, it really didn't seem to look like anywhere he'd seen on earth, but still he had the distinct feeling that he'd seen the place before.

He seemed to be on a vast, undulating plane. He saw no signs of life in any direction, just miles and miles of green grass, creating verdant waves in the breeze that blew across them, ruffling his curls across his forehead. Starsky looked at his hands, expecting to see blood, cuts and bruises, but they were clean. He couldn't understand it. The last thing he remembered was being in the car on the mountain road. He remembered seeing the bright headlights of the truck bearing down on him and jerking the wheel hard to the right. If it had been his beloved Torino, he'd have understood how the steering would behave, but in the hire car, he was at the mercy of the car's own ways, and he'd felt the sickening feeling as the back end slewed sideways and he'd started to slip down the mountainside.

After that, he remembered being stuck in the car, his feet and legs wedged beneath the steering column as he pulled frantically. Oddly, at the time, there seemed to have been no pain, although he knew at least one of his legs was broken. And yet it never occurred to him to question it. Starsky remembered thinking that life had been good. Short and with its fair share of trials and tribulations, but good nonetheless. He'd had the best friendship a man could ever have in Hutch and his last regret was that he'd never have the chance to say goodbye properly.

And then, there had been the man at his side, lifting him effortlessly, it seemed, from the wreckage and laying him gently down on the ground, safe from the conflagration caused when the car exploded and set fire to the tree it had caught on.

"It's okay, Starsky. Don't worry about me,"... "Don't you remember me, Starsky? I'm Daniel," the young man had said, smiling softly. "Don't worry, Starsky. You'll be fine... And Hutchinson will be fine too. "

"You... you kn-know Hutch?"

"Tell him it wasn't his fault, that he didn't do anything wrong, will you?" was the mysterious man's only reply.

Starsky wanted to thank Daniel for getting him out of the car, but he'd disappeared as quickly as he'd appeared and Starsky had been left to lapse into unconsciousness.

And now he was here.

The brunet looked around him again. No-one there. No buildings. No birds or animals. Nothing. He didn't hurt. His legs were fine and when he breathed deeply, the nagging pains he had ever since Gunther's men had shot him full of lead had also disappeared. He breathed in as deeply as he could and there was nothing. No pain in his chest and abdomen. No hutch to his breath. He tried it again, just to be sure, then laughed, his voice sounding strange in this wilderness land.

OK Davey boy. What d'ya do now? Walk? Where to? Anywhere? OK pick a direction and go for it.

The brunet set off, reveling in the fact that he felt no pain, and specially, as plenty of energy as he hadn't feel in a long while. It had been so long since he'd felt this good. Not since before Gunther. No, scrap that! Not since before Bellamy, because although he'd never voiced the pains, he still hurt on occasions when it was cold and his body had still to battle the long term aftereffects of the poison that had been driven into his body. Experimentally he started to run, the first time he'd managed to do that in months. His legs pistoned beneath him and drove him on as he enjoyed the sensation for a while. No pains and the freedom to enjoy himself.

Half an hour later and with sweat trickling down his back, he stopped bending over to put his hands onto his knees as he caught his breath. Looking around he looked in the direction he'd come from, but in the featureless landscape it was difficult to tell. For all he knew he could have run in a big circle. It suddenly struck him that, good as it was to be this full of stamina and painless, what was the point if he could find no-one to share it with. And, he reminded himself, he still needed to get back to Hutch.

Starsky sank down to the ground, trying to make sense of it all. Where was he? Where was everyone else? And why did he feel so damned good when he'd been in a car crash?

He looked up, and in the distance he saw a black speck – a figure walking towards him. He stood and waved his hands above his head and the figure waved back, walking more swiftly towards him. As it drew closer, he saw it was a tall young man with a shock of dark hair above an open and honest face. The face cracked into a grin.

'Enjoying yourself?'

'What?'

'Well you got a long way in a short time. You must be enjoying yourself'.

Starsky looked carefully at the young man. 'Do I know you?'

'Don't you recognize me Starsky? It's me, Daniel' ...Jeez, man! It looks like you keep doing nothing but forgetting about me over and over!' The younger man chided gently.

'Hutch's partner? Daniel? But you're d...'

'Dead? Yeah, s'pose I am'

The brunet got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. 'Does that mean I'm dead too?' he asked carefully.

'Not yet'.

'What d'ya mean, "not yet"?''

'Well, the choice is yours. Do you recognize where you are?' Daniel asked

'No, I have no idea. I was just... it felt so good... I was enjoying the moment. I kinda thought I was... I don't know what I thought' the brunet finished in confusion.

'This is no mans land, so to speak. At the moment, your body is in the hospital in Bay City. You're bad buddy. Real bad. Its not a pretty picture',

'So I'm gonna die? Is that what you're sayin'?''

'No, I'm saying it could go either way. The choice is yours' Daniel said with a gentle smile.

'Mine?' Starsky asked, almost afraid of the answer.

'That's right buddy. Biggest choice of your life! You can either come with me now and carry on with no pain, as fit as a flea, or you can go back there and see what hand fate deals you'.

Starsky blew out his lips. 'Some choice huh? Where would we go from here, if I was to choose to come with you?'

'I can't tell you that. All I can tell you is that there would be no more pain and no more struggling'.

'And if I choose to stay?'

Daniel's face winced. 'Pain, recovery from your injuries – and they're bad buddy, but another chance at life'.

'What about Hutch?' Starsky asked uncertainly.

'I won't lie to you Starsky. He's a mess. He's with you right now, but he's got his own baggage he has to deal with. You have to make this decision for you, buddy, not for Hutch'.

Starsky sighed and sat down heavily in the ground. He put his head in his hands and closed his eyes.

'I dunno Danny. I feel tired. So fucking tired all the time. Life is much of a struggle all the time. I can't run anymore. Actually, I can't do many things I used to before the shooting, and it pisses me off. However, all this felt so good. Such a relief. Don't like the idea of giving this feeling up'

'Then you've made your choice?' Daniel asked.

Starsky looked at him through troubled indigo eyes. 'Yes, but not the one you think. What's the point of feeling good and running and breathing and walking when it's so empty? There's no-one to enjoy it with. It'd be like... dunno... sucking on a lolly with the wrapper still on – the concepts fine but the enjoyment isn't there. I'd always worry about Hutch. What he was doin' How much he was hurtin'. I can't be that selfish'.

'Do you realize what you're giving up?' Daniel challenged him.

'More 'n you'll ever know. But I'd give up more if Hutch wasn't here with me. As good as I felt, it'd be hollow without his friendship'.

'So you have made your choice'.

'Yeah'.

Daniel stood by him, seeming to start receding into the mists suddenly swirling around the two men. 'Then you'd better get back there. I'll be around. Be careful. And remember to tell him it wasn't his fault. Good luck Starsky. You'll need it'.

Starsky panicked. 'Hey hang on, what d'ya mean I'll need it?'

But he spoke to an empty field that seemed to be shrinking and getting smaller.

xxxxxxx

Hutch heard the very weakest of moans from the bed and was instantly on his feet and bending over the body of his partner. It was the first noise Starsky had made since the hose had been removed from his throat and Hutch ran his fingers fondly through the chocolate curls.

'Starsk? Are ya with me buddy. It's me, Hutch'.

The blond watched as the indigo blue eyes fluttered, then cracked open, closed, then opened again, staring straight ahead.

'Hey there buddy. It's good to have you back. Starsky?'

The brunet licked his dry lips, all the pains in his body hitting him at once. He rode the crest of pain and knotted his eyebrows in concentration. He was sure he'd opened his eyes. He blinked experimentally. Yup, they were open again. Panic welled in his chest.

'Ut....sh?'

'Yeah, I'm here buddy. Not goin' anywhere. I'm here'.

'Utch.....' the voice came back, rasping and dry and with a hint of fear. 'I ... I can't see... '

TBC

Chapter 9

Chapter 9- By Kirsty Welsh

There is one defining moment in any person's life when their perspectives change; one moment when suddenly the earth disappears from beneath their feet and they hang, precariously balanced over space, unable to go forward or back for fear of the consequences their actions might cause.

'Ut-ch. I can't see'.

The voice was so weak, so rasping, and yet those words were burned into Hutch's consciousness as though they'd been shouted from the highest mountaintop. Starsky's familiar indigo blue eyes, the windows to his partner's soul were open and staring unblinking at the ceiling, but they were not seeing. The blankness in them seemed obscene and Hutch clutched tighter at Starsky's hand as he bent lower over the bed.

'I'm here Starsk. S'me Hutch'.

'Ungh.....hurts.....Utch.....where?'

The initial panic of being left sightless seemed to have passed and been replaced by other more immediate concerns, and the relief the blond one felt was beyond measure. Thank God he didn't need to deal with that particular problem for a moment. The coward's way out, he knew, but he kidded himself that he didn't want to spook his partner by dwelling on that scariest of scenarios – that he was blind. He hadn't the strength to deal with that himself now, so how would he help his friend? Not when his heart had just soared high as a lark because his friend had shown signs of life.

'Ssh, don't try to move Gordo. Just lie still huh? You're in the hospital. D'ya remember?'

'Hospital? ... yeah' the word came out as a sigh and the brunet swilled his tongue around his dry lips, the legacy of the tube that had been removed that morning. 'Dan?'

The name took Hutch by surprise, a cold shudder gripping his spine.

'Dan?... No, Starsk, 's'me, Hutch'.

Sightless eyes dipped sideways. 'Know that, mushbrain... where's Dan... Danny Griffith?'

Hutch staggered back, his head feeling as though it would explode. What was his partner talking about? What was going on? He'd come from Dan's funeral to be told Starsky was in a hospital. Closure for one saga in his life, although a painful one, and now a whole new miasma of psychological pain. He giggled inside his head.

You're going mad Hutchinson. You're losing it big style...hearing things....this isn't how it's meant to be.

He looked back at the bed, seeing Starsky's drip infested hand flapping feebly against the sheet.

'Hu... sh? ... buddy?' he quavered in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

The flaxen haired man took a deep breath. *Ok ok you can do this Hutchinson. Get a grip. What did Kelly say? One step at a time? The future's too scary. Just one small step. Iddy biddy baby steps. Go on ya coward, hold his hand. It's Starsk that needs the comforting...*

Yeah, but I do too.

Well hold his hand then. Show him you're still here for him...

But I don't know if I am. What if I can't do this? What if I'm too fucking weak and looped on pills and booze? Isn't it better to just leave now and let him find someone else to look after him? Someone who isn't hell-bent on his own damned destruction? ...

Shuddup. Just shuddup, you're making excuses!...

Am I?

Yes. Now get back to that bed and act like a man!

Slowly Hutch reached again for his friend's hand and as Starsky felt the first brush of fingers, he grasped it as though his life depended on it.

'Utch... thought you'd gone'.

'Nah, can't get rid of me that easy buddy'.

'Don't want to... Utch?'

'Yeah buddy'.

'Where's Dan?'

The blond swallowed.

You can do this Hutchy, you can do this, one step at a time.

'Dan's dead Starsk. Remember, I was at the funeral?'

'Dead?... yeah... no... saw 'im'.

Don't push this Starsky, please don't, buddy. I'm not ready for this yet'.

'Starsk, I saw his coffin lowered into the ground. He's gone'.

A look of concentration swung across the bruised, battered features. 'Don't understand... said... not your fault. He was... there'.

'Where? Where was he?'

The brunet let out the tiniest of snorts, then grimaced at the pain. 'Dunno ... he was just... there'.

'You were dreaming buddy'.

'No... this is dream ... you're not here ... nightmare'.

'This? Why's it a nightmare Starsk? I'm here. I'm really here. Not goin' anywhere. Feel my hand? Why d'ya think it's a nightmare?'

'Has t'be. Can't cope.....if I c can't see'.

Ok well, he was back to the real difficult bit now. No shirking away from it this time. Hutch knew he had to face it, and be some sort of support for his partner. Partner? How could they ever be

partners now? He could understand Starsky recovering enough fitness eventually to run with him on the streets, to fire his gun, to maybe even chase down a perp if this was his wildest fantasy. But whoever heard of a blind cop? It just didn't happen. His heart bled for the brave man in the bed.

'You're awake buddy, an' I know it feels like a nightmare now, but let me get the doctor. Maybe this is just something he expected huh? Maybe it just gonna be short lived'. Hutch hated himself for the hollow platitudes but it was the best he could come up with and he reached above the bed and pushed the button to call a nurse.

Starsky couldn't believe it. First that he was still alive and second that his life was completely screwed again. Well, more than screwed. He'd fought so damned hard against Gunther's bullets, weeping with pain and frustration through the agonising physiotherapy sessions and the exercises and boredom that followed. And he knew deep down that he could probably fight again to return to some measure of fitness after the car accident. But how do you fight something that in effect doesn't exist? Break a leg, and the bone mends, the muscle gets back to working with exercise and massage. Lose your sight and then what do you do? There was no exercise on earth that Starsky had heard about that healed sightlessness.

A life of being plunged into darkness scared him senseless. He'd always secretly been a little afraid of the dark. On the occasions he'd been taken by some flake or other and they'd blindfolded him, he'd always felt more panic than if they'd just bound and beaten him. A psychological thing. Monsters under the bed or in the wardrobe. Like when he was a kid and his Dad would check out the dark corners of his room before he could settle down for the night.

That was the only good thing about 'Nam. That it was never truly dark. Even in the depths of that rainy, wet, leech infested jungle, there was always some light – from the stars, the moon, rockets overhead. Some flash of brightness to ease away the fear.

But now? His heart hammered in his chest as Starsky concentrated on trying to make his eyes see. He blinked again to check. Yes. His eyes were most definitely open. He stared straight ahead. He was on his back so he should be able to see a ceiling right?

OK so ceiling where are ya?

The brunet bit back the tide of panic that rushed up his body from his toes in a sick wave. He saw nothing but cloying blackness. No ceiling, no hospital room and no beautiful blond face looking down at him earnestly.

*This can't be happening,....can't be happening. Dan didn't say anything about this. He said there'd be pain and I was prepared for that. But this? I can't cope with this. Don't wanna live my life in the dark! Oh shit. Wrong decision, Davey, boy. Is it too late to change my mind? Daniel?
DAAAAAANNNNNNYYYYYYY?*

Right, fine, he's gone. Rat leaving a sinking ship huh? Some guardian angel he turned out to be. OK let get with the programme huh? Maybe it's like Blondie says. Maybe it's not permanent. Just wait 'n' see what the Doc says.

At that precise moment, Dr Jefferson came bustling into the small room and looked from Hutch to his patient and back. He walked to the bed and put his hand on Starsky's bare shoulder. The brunet jumped at the contact and Jefferson furrowed his eyebrows.

'Good to see you awake David' he said calmly, checking pulse rates and observing the slight flush over Starsky's chest, neck and face. 'How are you feeling?'

Starsky tried to look in the direction he thought the doctor was standing. 'T'riffic. Doc, I can't see'. He tried to keep the pain from his voice, but it held a plaintive quality, showing just how scared the brunet really was.

Jefferson looked over at Hutch who shrugged and nodded and then focussed on his patient. 'OK David, lets take this one step at a time. First of all, I'm just going to check the rest of you over. Have you got a lot of pain?'

For the first time since he's woken, the scared man thought about the rest of his body and not just his eyes. Not being able to see himself, he guessed his leg or legs were broken. He could feel that one was encased in something hard and heavy – a cast? And the other seemed to be hovering above the bed. He felt cool air on that one and suspected it was uncovered. Now that he thought about it, he did have pains in both legs, but it extended into his back too, settling somewhere around the area of his kidneys. His chest hurt too with a deep stabbing pain which radiated out and round to his back, but most of the throbbing and pains were centred around his head, hovering more towards the left hand side. And once again he felt the all too familiar pull of a surgical wound somewhere around the middle of his abdomen.

Oh jeez, Davey, why not just have a zipper put in huh? Save everyone a lot of time. You've really done a number on yourself this time aintcha?

He told Jefferson of his pains, rating them on a scale from one to ten and trying to keep his mounting panic from his voice.

'OK, well that's to be expected. You've broken both your legs, the right one is in traction at the moment until the surgical scar heals sufficiently for us to put it in a cast. You had a collapsed lung when you came in – one of your ribs had punctured it and I'm afraid we had to remove a little more of your small bowel, although you don't have a bag like last time you were here. There was some internal bleeding which we managed to stop. Tell me David; were you in a lot of pain before the accident?'

Starsky wasn't in the mood for prevarication. He wanted to cut to the quick and find out about his eyes, but he answered anyway.

'Doc, I was shot five times. Go figure...' Starsky paused briefly before explaining further 'Things got a bit better with time, but the first months...they were just hell'

'Well, I think this last surgery may make you more comfortable. We found massive adhesions through you abdominal cavity. Adhesions are internal scars, strand like fibrous tissues that form an abnormal bond between two parts of the body after trauma, through complex processes involving injured tissues and the peritoneum. For most patients they don't cause too much trouble, but the amount of surgery you had last time meant you had far more than most. You must have been in agony'.

'Yeah... for quite a while, I was' Starsky agreed softly, thankful he couldn't see the horror he knew would be etched onto Hutch's face.

'Well, we've managed to deal with the adhesions, so once you're up and around again you should feel more comfortable. Now, let me look at your eyes'.

'Bet ya say that to all your patients' the brunet said to cover up his anxiety.

Jefferson bent over and took out his pen light. Gently he lifted the brunet's right eyelid and shone the light into the deep cobalt blue eye, noting that the iris pinpointed in the bright light. He did the

same with the left eye as Starsky hissed softly at the additional pain from pressure over his large cut and deep blue bruise.

At the end of a minute or so, which was interspersed with *hmms* and *aaahs*, from the doctor, he straightened.

'Well, David. At a preliminary glance, I can't see anything untoward in your eyes, they should work, but obviously don't. This may be temporary, but I'll order a series of tests now that you're awake'.

'Doc, you said it may be temporary. How temporary? How certain are you of that? Could it be... well... Oh shit, I don't wanna be blind!'

Jefferson patted Starsky's shoulder gently. 'I can't give you those answers at the moment. It may be that your sight will return later today, tomorrow, next week. I just don't know. Try not to worry too much and I'll get those tests scheduled and something for your pain'. He turned and left, leaving the two men alone in the room.

Hutch felt as if he was in freefall. The world around him had dissolved into a blank nothingness, his whole mind now focussed on that one word – blind. Starsky was blind. His partner couldn't see. His hand shook as he walked softly back to the bed and reached for the brunet's hand. Starsky jumped at the contact.

'Hutch?... Sorry. Guess I need to get used to that now huh?' he mumbled.

'It'll be temporary Starsk. You'll see. It'll all be fine'. Hutch reached up and ran his fingers through the chocolate curls and Starsky closed his eyes and sighed.

'Yeah, sure it will' he sighed. 'Be back to normal before ya know it' although whether he said that for Hutch's benefit or his own, he had no idea.

Kelly came into the room a small silver tray in her hands. 'Someone called for an armful of liquid bliss?' she asked as she inserted the needle into the port of Starsky's drip. 'David, I'm giving you something for the pain. It'll make you sleepy, okay? Just rest Hon, and we'll see how you are when you wake up'.

The brunet closed his eyes, looking for a few moments of peace and quiet to try to process all the information and as his breathing eased, Hutch too knew that he needed his own brand of oblivion, if only so that he could come back refreshed and stronger to help his blind partner later. **TBC**

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 –By Kirsty Welsh-

Starsky slipped into a black sea of unconsciousness, relaxing for a while into a world where he didn't need to make any decisions or worry about the fact that that most precious of senses, his sight, had been taken from him. It scared him beyond belief, but at the same time, he was almost accepting of it. Wasn't that strange? To accept something so fundamentally wrong to his being? His mind rebelled against the acceptance. It was wrong. And yet he'd managed to accept not being an active street cop any longer although that had taken work. Now he was kind of consciously making the decision to accept not being able to see?

No! He couldn't. One step too far. He'd taken in stride everything that life had thrown at him. From his Dad being killed when he was still such a young boy in New York, through being drafted into the army at 18, and being taken as a POW at 19. he'd lived through the leech infested jungle. He'd lived through the two months of torture at the hands of the Viet Cong and he'd lived through the four months of recuperation.

He'd felt like all his birthdays had come at once when he'd hooked up with a tall, dorky, accident prone blond at the police academy, and even that early relationship hadn't been short of incident, especially when on their third day at that hallowed establishment they'd been walking home from a night out on the town, tried to help a young girl and been held hostage by a notorious mass murderer.

And through the long years of their partnership he'd endured without complaint, the poisonings, the shootings, the loss of loved ones, the sight of his partner's sickness ravaged body as he tried desperately to corner Thomas Calendar. And he'd said nothing. Sure he'd gotten angry at the folks around him, but he'd never lost his spirit. He'd gone about his business as if this was all just meant to happen. Karma. Fate. Whatever it was called. He'd never really riled against it. Never complained. Always Starsky, the stoical brunet.

But this was too much.

Broken bones he could handle. Sickness he could cope with. But sightlessness? ... No.

Starsky floated on the tide of morphia. He opened his eyes and found himself back on the flat plain where all this had started, the breeze still whispering through the long grass and the sun still shining from its cerulean blue sky. Perfection. Too perfect!

The brunet looked around and in the distance he saw the familiar tall dark figure. Dan was standing still, watching him, but made no effort to come and join him. Instead, Starsky waved his arm over his head and set off to meet the young cop, the stalks of grass tickling against his legs as he walked.

Dan watched him approach, a look of suspense in his eyes.

'Hey, Danny' Starsky said when he finally got close enough.

'Starsky' the younger man greeted him. 'So you chose to see me again'.

'Chose? Didn't do nuthin consciously. But there's a few questions I wouldn't mind askin'.

'You're mad at me aren't you?' Dan asked carefully.

Starsky snorted. 'Now why should I be mad at ya? Hell you gave me the chance to go back to Hutch didn't ya?'

'Yeah...sort of.'

'Oh, but there was that one little point ya missed'.

'Starsky, I can explain'.

'Well; so explain away buddy. Explain to me how ya can warn me about the shitload 'o pain I'd have from broken legs an' ribs an' God knows what, but ya just happened to miss mentioning that I wouldn't be able to see. Not exactly a minor point now is it?' Starsky snapped.

'Its all for a purpose'.

'Yeah? And just what "purpose" would that be, huh?'

Dan looked sad. 'I can't tell you'.

'Well that's fuckin' convenient aint it?'

'I'm sorry Starsky, I wish I could explain, but I can't'.

'What's the point of me being allowed to choose when you don't give me all the facts? Like missing out that one little snippet. It might have been nuthin to you, but believe me buddy, it'd have made a whole lotta difference to me'.

'Don't you think I didn't know that?'

Starsky snickered. 'This just gets better 'n' better. So you *chose* not to tell me. And why exactly did you do that Danny boy?'

'Because it would have made a difference to you, and I needed you to decide to go back' Danny said; his eyes downcast as he waited for the brunet to ask THE question.

'You needed me to go back. Well, I got news for ya buddy. It's my life we're talkin' about, an' my life that's pissed around because I can't see. So tell me, oh forgetful one. Tell me why you wanted me to go back'.

Daniel stared into the defiant angry eyes and said simply 'Because of Hutch'.

Xxxxxxxx

Hutch watched as his partner's eyes slowly closed and his breathing assumed the quiet regularity of sleep. He was just as relieved as Starsky that they had this intermission. A break to be able to get their heads together before they had to face the very real prospect of living with blindness. He stood quietly.

'How long will he be out?' he asked Kelly.

'At least six hours. He has a lot of resting and sleeping to do. The more he sleeps, the faster he'll heal... and you need to rest also'.

The blond smiled at her. 'That's just what I'm going to do. I'm gonna go home, have a shower and change and I'll be back before he wakes up, ok?'

She tutted. 'I mean a proper rest. You can't do anything more here. You need to sleep too, you know'.

'I know, but I'll rest when I know he's getting better. If he wakes, tell him I'll be back'.

She nodded and Hutch headed out of the small room and back down the corridor. He'd come to the hospital with Dobby, and there were no passing black and whites, so he dialled the number over the payphone for the local cab company and stood at the entrance waiting until the yellow car came. Minutes later he got in and asked for a ride to Venice Place.

As Hutch sat back, he looked out of the window of the taxi cab. It was getting towards sunset, and the range and pink glow from the sun reflected off of the windows in the office blocks, casting everything in a rosy glow. For a second, Hutch thought how beautiful it looked, and then he shuddered. Maybe Starsky would never be able to see that rosy glow again. If things didn't make a turn for the better in the upcoming days or weeks –and Hutch didn't foresee that as a real possibility- Starsky wouldn't be able to see the plants in Hutch's apartment ever again, or the sunset over the ocean. He'd never be able to see the photo of Terri on his bedside table, or focus through the viewfinder of his beloved Nikon. He'd never be able to take his wonderful photographs again.

Shit!

Hutch tried to think what it would be like to be blind. For a few minutes, he rode with his eyes closed, trying to internalise the sensation of movement without being able to see it. He tried to capture the different sounds as the car sped past buildings, the dull thunder of the echo from the bricks and glass contrasting with the emptier sound as they drove across an intersection. But by the end of a couple of minutes, he felt nauseous and had to open his eyes again, relief flooding through him as his sight returned. But his partner would never have that relief, would he?

The cab drew up outside his apartment and Hutch paid the driver and got out, walking slowly up the steps to his front door. Pushing it open he went in, closing it behind him and, closing his eyes for a moment he leant back against it. Sanctuary!

He opened his eyes and looked around his untidy living room. Then his eyes rested on the bottle of Vallium pills on his coffee table.

No, not this time... This time he'd be strong and clear headed.

He danced around them keeping his distance as though they would leap into his hand unbidden and went to the bathroom, turning on the shower. He shouldered out of his jacket and shirt, tossing them into a heap on the floor by the side of his laundry basket and padded into his kitchen to the fridge. As he passed the coffee table, his hand jerked reflexively in the direction of the pill bottle. He stopped himself angrily and balled his hand into a fist.

STOP IT

Once in the kitchen he reached for a beer from the fridge and went back to the bathroom. Taking off his pants and boxers, he stood beneath the shower and let the steaming hot jet of water wash off the anaesthetic smell of the hospital. It clung to his hair and skin and he scrubbed hard with the sponge, soaping his hair and holding his breath as he ducked his head under the cascade.

The blond stayed in the shower until the water started to run cold, the comforting warmth easing away the tension from his shoulders and back as he braced his arms against the tile wall. Eventually he reached over and switched it off. Draining the last of his beer, he wrapped a towel round his hips and rubbed another briskly over his hair, finger combing the mussed dark golden

mess into some sort of order.

He padded into his bedroom and emerged five minutes later clothed in clean jeans and tee shirt, his holster and gun once again hidden beneath a plaid overshirt.

He looked around.

The apartment was quiet. Too quiet. When Starsky was with him, there was always noise. Always laughter or some mad cap quip. Now all he had was himself and... the pills. They called to him. One more bout of oblivion. One more period when he didn't need to think about his partner being blind. A few more hours' block where he didn't have to contemplate the finality of the situation. Starsky was blind... And for Hutch, it was entirely his own fault.

Trying to divert his mind from the alluring bottle of pills, he put on the radio and sat down, picking up a magazine. His eyes danced over the page and he read the same paragraph twice, three times. He closed it and threw it down, the music on the radio getting in his nerves. He switched it off, needing to be back with Starsky. Regardless of what Kelly said, there was no way he could rest if he was apart from the brunet. He stood; ready to get back to the hospital, feeling jumpy and at the same time exhausted. The blond longed to feel relaxed and back to his old self, but the months of stress and worry, coupled with the last days' events had taken their toll.

As if drawn by a string to the bottle, he walked mechanically toward it, reaching out for the small glass bottle with a shaking hand. He withdrew it, balled his fist, and then thought better of it. With renewed strength, he reached for the bottle and unscrewed the top. He shook out his single dose, but two pills fell onto his palm. He looked at them for a moment.

What the hell? They're only small. One more won't make a difference. Tiny little pills.

He looked at them, his hand ready to cram them into his mouth, but the tiny voice of Hutchinson's reason sounded way back in his consciousness. Very slowly he put them back into the bottle and screwed on the top, putting it in his pocket along with the flask of bourbon. Deep inside Hutch knew that what he was doing was wrong, wrong and plainly stupid, but even so, he couldn't help himself. He needed a break from the overwhelming sense of guilt and distress he was feeling. At that point the blond one didn't care if such relief came in the form of a chemical compound and a few drinks.

Getting into his car, he felt focussed, needing to be back with his partner.

Just get back to the hospital you can rest when you get there. It's safer with Starsky... What're ya talking about? You should be looking after him! ... OK, OK, just get back there, then ya can relax.

He arrived back at the hospital building and made his way back inside and up to Starsky's room. The brunet was still sleeping and Hutch pulled up the chair so that he could sit by his friend's side.

He sat on the hard chair, holding on to the side of the bed for support. Now that he was back in the brunet's presence, he could relax. He felt he deserved the quiet peace of the Vallium now and with a shaky hand he took the bottle from his pocket shaking out one, two, three white tablets. He'd denied himself so far, now he sought oblivion, just for a few hours. Hutch reached for the flask in his pocket and unscrewed the lid. He took a deep draft of the bourbon and let it blaze a fiery trail down his throat, warming his blood and calming him.

For a little while all was quietness in the room, but then, all of sudden, Hutch's blood seemed to be too loud in his ears and his heart began hammering in his chest as though he'd just run a five mile race.

He felt sick and his head hung down as he tried to breathe deeply. But the effects of the Valium mixed with bourbon in his empty stomach were having an effect on his body now and his reactions were becoming slow and uncoordinated. He tried to raise his head to look at the brunet, but his muscles weren't playing the game and he panicked. With his last vestiges of clear thought, Hutch realised exactly what he'd done.

Grabbing for the covers on the bed, he tried to reach out with a wobbling hand for the nurse call button, but it was hooked on the opposite side of the bed, close to Starsky's left hand and he had no strength left to reach it. Hutch groaned once more, berating himself for the stupidity of his actions.

Great Hutchinson, you're supposed to be looking after him and now ya go an' ki ll yourself. Absolutely fuckin-lutely wonderful. M'sorry Gordo. Forgive me?

As the blonde's body fell sideways off the chair to land with a thud at the side of the bed, Daniel looked into Starsky's eyes.

'I couldn't tell you because you need to be there to save Hutch. Go to him. Now. He needs you'.

And the green plain faded into the background as Starsky woke to the blackness of his blindness, and the sound of a thud on the floor of his room.

'Hutch?' he called, but there was no response

'Hutch?... Buddy, answer me... Hutch!'

Starsky, feeling a cold, sudden terror grasping at his heart felt for the call button by his left hand. Repeatedly he pushed it, while feebly calling out for help; the sound insistent in his head until he heard a presence at his room door and a female voice shouting for someone to get a doctor. **TBC**

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 –By Kirsty Welsh-

Starsky's heart rate increased as he heard footsteps running towards his room, stopping, then hushed voices giving orders. He heard the rattle of instruments against metal, more hushed orders and then wheels on the tile floor.

Half way between wakefulness and sleep, the brunet really couldn't make out what was going on. He remembered Daniel telling him to push the nurse call button and he thought he heard the young cop's voice in his head telling him that this was the beginning and it was all up to him now.

He sorted to himself.

Oh yeah, sure. What'm I s'posed to do? Two broken legs and not a jot of sight. I'm gonna be a real big help!

He searched his mind for the last vestiges of Daniel's presence. He wanted to question the young man more, to find out who he was supposed to help and how. He kind of assumed it would be Hutch. Although he hadn't been able to see his friend's face, he was so accustomed to the blonde's voice that he knew he'd heard something there. There was a brittle quality to it. Hutch was doing his best to hide his hurt from Starsky out of, he supposed, a misguided sense of loyalty – that he shouldn't burden his best friend with his own troubles when Starsky lay so sick in the hospital.

Daniel wasn't there. Starsky could find no sign of him. The green plain had gone. The acres of green, wind blown grass had disappeared and all that remained was the blackness and the sounds of medical staff working over the body of his partner. He called out for the dark haired cop in his mind, wanting and needing answers, but he heard nothing. Had Daniel ever really been there? Had the young man helped him make his decision to live? Had he coloured the brunet's judgement in order to fulfil some higher purpose? Starsky had no idea. He'd been looped on so many pain killers and sedatives that he could have dreamed that the moon was a hunk of blue cheese and a great cosmic mouse was gonna eat it, and he'd probably have believed that too.

But the final result was that Starsky had chosen to live and that it now appeared that he was going to have to put his own problems aside to help his blond friend. And once Hutch was better, he could begin to help Starsky to heal.

He made a conscious decision to make his way fully back into the world of the living and cleared his throat.

'Hutch?' he called; his voice still rasping and raw.

The brunet felt someone take his hand and jumped at the new sensation. God, he needed to get used to this darkness thing!

'David, it's Kelly'.

'Hey Hon. Where's Hutch? What's goin' on?'

'Hutch took a little tumble. He was unconscious when we found him. Didn't you know? You pressed the call button, otherwise we'd never have found him so quickly'.

'I...erm....is he OK? What's up with him?' Starsky asked.

'We think he's just exhausted. There was a smell of liquor on his breath. Tell me, does he take any medication as a rule?'

The brunet snorted. 'Other than liquidised liver and cod liver oil; all the usual freakish health food stuff, no'.

'OK, well I know he asked for some Vallium earlier. Has he taken that before?'

'Hutch? God no... He hates chemicals. Says they pollute his body. Why?'

'I think he may have taken too many pills' she said gently, 'Combined with the booze, he's just done too much'.

Starsky caught at the nurse's arm, pulling her close. 'Ya mean he tried to kill himself?' he asked.

'No, I don't think so. It doesn't look as though he's taken so many. I think he's just been exhausted and has tried to, shall we say, lighten his load a little. The doctor is with him now. They're going to take him to a side room and admit him for a while, just so that they can make sure there's nothing else to worry about'.

'Like what?' Starsky asked anxiously.

'We just want to find out how many pills he took. It doesn't look like it's a lot. He's responsive now, just very sleepy' Kelly explained

'Don't take him away' the injured man said desperately.

'We've got to get him into a bed honey'.

'Can't he stay here, with me? Is there room in here?'

Kelly heard the desperation in the voice and she also remembered the look of anxiety on Hutch's face when he'd seen his injured friend. She was touched by the bond the two seemed to share.

'Well, you need your rest too' she said doubtfully.

'Hey, I've been asleep for an age; I just need to be with him. Please Kel? Honey, go ask

'em if he can stay with me?'

'Okay, David. Let me see what I can do. Be right back' He felt her leave his bedside and heard murmured voices and then Jefferson's distinctive voice next to him.

'David? Do you feel you can cope if we put another bed in here for your friend? You need to get your rest and we'll be in and out checking on Hutch'.

Starsky smiled. 'I'll get more rest if he's here than if I'm worrying about him in some other place. Is he ok? Can I talk to him?'

Jefferson shook his head. 'No, he's still very sleepy. I don't think he took a great many pills. Certainly not enough to warrant pumping his stomach. But I do want him to be admitted so that we can help him. I'll have another bed brought in here, to your right, and then we'll be getting him into bed and settled. We'll let you know what's going on'.

'Thanks Doc' Starsky said, settling back onto the bed to wait. He desperately wanted to be able to see what was going on, to check on his partner. But this time, he knew he had to lie back and let

others look after Hutch for a while, until he was strong enough to get out of bed and do it for Hutch.

Starsky listened to the sounds in the room. He heard the squealing of tires on the floor as the bed was wheeled into the room. He heard his friend groan and mumble something under his breath as he presumed the medical staff picked him up from the floor and got him undressed and into bed.

Then there was an interminable wait while he heard muffled voices and the rattle of plastic wrappers being torn open. More sounds, then silence as the two were left alone. The brunet strained to hear and could just make out Hutch's steady breathing from the other bed. It sounded relaxed and peaceful and quite close. He reached out his right hand as far as he could stretch and could just brush the edge of his partner's bed with his fingertips.

Lying back, more comfortably now that he knew where his friend was, Starsky let his mind wander over everything he thought had happened, from Dobey's phone call, to, his accident, his rescue, Daniel Griffith's appearances in his dreams, and finally, Hutch's desperation.

OK pal, how are we gonna get outa this one huh?

xxxxxxx

Five hours later, and after Kelly had been back to check on Hutch and change Starsky's drip bags, the brunet heard the first stirrings from the bed opposite.

Hutch had been dreaming too. He'd felt spacey and fuzzy after he'd taken the pills, a fluttering feeling happening in the pit of his stomach as he realised that he'd probably done something pathetically stupid. As the room began to spin, he'd tried to get someone's attention, but he hadn't had the strength to get to the door of the small room. In his desperation he tried to rouse Starsky from his sleep and had tried to stand to bend over the smaller man, but at that point the Vallium had taken its insidious hold on him and he'd felt the room dip sharply to the right. As the floor came up to meet him, Hutch's last conscious thought was that he hoped no-one thought he was trying to end it all. Far from it. In his tortured mind, he wanted only to have sufficient rest to be able to look after Starsky, but now, in his last seconds of lucid thought, he realised booze and pills were not the answer.

The blond had also dreamed of a grassy landscape. He'd been reminded of the huge fields of his youth, working his Granddad's farm near Duluth and he'd pulled a stalk of grass and put it contentedly between his teeth as he started to walk through the flat terrain. He was just beginning to wonder where he was going when he jumped at a tap on his shoulder. He turned and his face cracked into a wide grin.

'Danny!'

'Hey Hutchinson. What're you doing here?'

Hutch looked around as if seeing the place for the first time. 'Could ask you the same question. This is my dream. What're you doing here?'

'Just passing through'.

'Uh huh?' Hutch continued his walk, the younger man at his side.

'I'm glad I got this chance to talk. I told Starsky to tell you that this wasn't your fault, but I don't think you believed him'.

'He was delirious. I thought it was just the pain arguing with him' Hutch said, surprised.

'No....no it was me. I saw you hurting and I just needed to tell you. It wasn't your fault'.

The blonde's face fell. 'I was supposed to watch your back. That's what a partner's supposed to do. Watch the other's back. But I got sloppy and now that's two partners I've killed off. I'm sorry kid, truly I am'.

'Oh my God it's the "Hearts and Flowers" routine! Will you give yourself a break Hutchinson? IT... WASN'T... YOUR ... FAULT.' Daniel said carefully, emphasizing each word 'I can't say it any plainer, Hutchinson. Besides, as far as I know, Starsky isn't dead, is he?... Now tell me; What're ya gonna do?'

'Do? What do ya mean?'

'About you and Starsky. Remember the partner ya didn't kill off? He's still there. He needs you and you need him. So what are ya gonna do?'

Hutch stopped walking and just stood. 'What am I supposed to do? I'm tired; I'm a wash-up! I get my kicks with pills and bourbon. How am I gonna help him?' Hutch ran his fingers through his flaxen locks.

'So you're just gonna give up?' Daniel asked, disappointment written all over his face. 'You're just gonna wallow in self pity and let him stumble around in the dark, coz the great Ken Hutchinson thinks it's all his fault! Well, I got news for ya, buddy. You aren't the only one in this universe, ya know. We're all in it together and each one of us impacts on the next. And right now, your behaviour is gonna impact pretty damn big style on Starsky's life. Sure it's a trying time, but it'll get better'.

Hutch snorted. 'Oh sure it will. Maybe some day he can get a Seeing Eye dog and get around on his own!'

Daniel lifted his hand and struck Hutch across the cheek, a stinging slap that brought the blond up short, his hand rising to rub the sting away. The younger man looked shocked at his own actions.

'Sorry' he mumbled.

There was a silence for a split second then Hutch grinned, rubbing his cheek.

'I guess I had that coming huh? But Jeez, this is my dream. It ain't supposed to hurt!'

'Well, you were getting pretty damned hung up about the whole thing. Actually, I'm not supposed to tell you any of this. I've interfered too much already and this'll be the last chance I get to speak to either of you guys, but what the hell, I've come so far...' Daniel trailed off.

'Oh hey wait, you mean you get into trouble here too?... wherever here is' Hutch said, looking around the green plain again.

'You'd better believe it buddy! Ok, gonna go for broke here. You'll both make it, and things will work out, so long as you both work at it. I can only give you one clue. Seek out another friend to help. He'll have your answers'. Daniel looked over his shoulder. 'They're gonna come for me in a minute, and I'll have to go. Remember Hutchinson, this was never your fault. We all make mistakes in this world. It's how we deal with them that defines who we are. I made my mistake in that room with the girl. Now it's up to you, to deal with your mistakes. They're coming, I can feel them. Don't have too long. Find your friend, let him help... and for Gods sake don't beat yourself up. Help each

other... '

Hutch watched amazed. The young man was beginning to fade from view.

'Don't go Dan! I still need to talk to someone. I don't want to lose you again!' he shouted out, trying to reach for the young man's arm, but his hand went clean through.

'You don't need me. You've got each other' Daniel said, as if from a distance. 'Tell my wife and kid I love them, talk to Starsky... and find your friend. Everything will be ok...'

And with that, Daniel winked out of existence, leaving the blond alone in the green wilderness, looking around him.

Hutch started to walk again, his mind going over what the young cop had said. Find a friend. Talk to Starsky, clean up your act and find the friend. All things that were doable, and when Hutch had a plan he was a happy blond bunny.

Slowly, he came to a new understanding with himself, a new beginning. Today was the first day of the rest of his life. Starting over. Onwards and upwards. All those euphemisms for telling himself to get off his butt and start taking life by the horns again. And slowly he began to realise that maybe this wasn't all his fault, just as Daniel had said.

As he walked, the plain began to take on a hazy appearance and he seemed to be walking through fog. The fog got thicker and his feet seemed to be floating on insubstantial ground until that too disappeared. The fog cleared and Hutch awoke to find himself on his back in a hospital bed, drip needles in his hand and the mother of a headache.

Slowly he rolled his head on the pillow, feeling slightly nauseous as the room spun with him. But there, to his left and only an arms length away was the familiar curly haired man he knew he'd still give his life for.

'Hey' he mumbled thickly. 'You awake Starsk?'

The brunet turned his head in Hutch's direction. 'Blondie? Good t'have ya back'.

'Uh huh, good to be back... I got a headache' he said.

'No sympathy there, pal. Next time you bring in the booze, at least let me have some before you fall off the seat!'

xxxxxxx

Life outside the hospital kept moving on. At that same moment, a few miles away, in the Ninth Precinct Headquarters Captain Dobey was reading for second time the report that regarding Starsky's car accident, the firefighter's chief had sent his way a short while ago.

The document was customary in its form; however, there was a point that left the portly captain pretty much befuddled. In there, and among several pages of technicalities, the Firefighters Department was clearly stating that they couldn't find a way to explain how Starsky had been able to free his badly damaged legs from under the crushed car's dashboard, and what's more. They could assure that without the proper tools, training and help, no one could've extricated the detective either. That plus the fact that the truck driver that had called for help had stated to the police that he saw no one helping Starsky, did open a big question mark.

No matter how thoroughly the Firefighters Department had worked to find logical answers. For all

accounts, the fact that Starsky had been found alive a few feet away from the wrecked car instead of burnt to death and trapped in it was simply unexplainable... **TBC**

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 –By Kirsty Welsh-

Hutch slept well that night for the first night since Starsky's original stay in hospital after Gunther's attack. During the long months of the brunet's recuperation, he'd fought every step of the way by his partner's side, both men always hoping against hope that Starsky would somehow regain sufficient fitness to be able to get back into the Torino at Hutch's side. The car had been almost as much of a mess as its owner, but the men in the squad room had had a collection and wheedled sufficient work out of Merle to get the big red car back to its former glory.

When Starsky had been released that first time, the only thing bigger that drove him on, other than Hutch, had been the prospect of driving his baby again and the first day he'd gotten back behind the wheel was the first day he felt he was truly recovering.

But the brunet's recovery had taken so much out of Hutch: more than he ever really comprehended. Each night, Starsky would slump into an exhausted sleep while Hutch would read through his reports, finalise his work and set about getting ready for the next day. He'd lived on a knife edge for so long that it began to feel like it was the norm. And when the day had arrived for Starsky to depart, he'd touched rock bottom, or at least he thought so. The real crisis though, had come with Daniel Griffith's death. In seeing the state of shock the blond detective was when he'd been taken to the ER, the doctor in duty had prescribed him some help of the chemical variety. The Valium had provided some release to begin with, but pretty soon the effects wore off more quickly than he wanted and so he'd started to mix the drugs with alcohol and the combination of booze and the pills had become a dangerous trap

Now in the cold light of day, the blond felt exhausted, more than a little ashamed and too embarrassed to talk about the incident to anyone. But in that fact, he had little choice and when he'd woken refreshed, he'd been made to face his error.

'What were ya thinking of Blondie?' Starsky asked, with his usual direct approach.

'Not now Starsk'.

'Well when? It aint gonna go away buddy. We need to talk'.

'I know, but not now. It just doesn't feel right now. Like there isn't time' Hutch blustered.

The brunet in the next bed snorted and folded his arms across his healing chest. 'Yeah, know what ya mean. Between all these books I gotta read and the soccer game I'm due to play this afternoon, I don't know when I'm gonna have time to listen'.

Hutch propped himself up on his elbow. Was his partner feeling sorry for himself? He just couldn't cope with both of them feeling like that right now. But instead of a mournful face he saw the beginnings of a grin on the handsome face as Starsky's sightless eyes stared upwards at the ceiling. He sighed and flopped down on the bed again.

'Jeez ya know how to push the buttons!'

'Yup, that's me. Button pusher extraordinaire. Now start talkin' the curly haired man said happily, knowing he'd crumbled Hutch's defences.

'There really isn't a whole lot to tell. Can't we just...!' He tailed off as he saw the brunet's imperious

hand raised high.

'Tell it to the hand, Blintz' he said.

'OK. Don't say I didn't warn ya. Where d'ya want me to start?'

'Well...duh! At the beginning?'

'Ya know you really are an irritating son of a ... Ok, the beginning'.

Hutch tried to get his thoughts in order. How could he tell his best friend just how much he'd been hurting all these months without making it out that some of it was Starsky's fault? Of course it wasn't, but sometimes it kinda felt that way.

'Are you ready for all this?'

'Hutch, so help me, if I could see ya, I'd smack ya!'

'Ok, ok. Just warning ya there.' Hutch paused briefly to collect his thoughts and then, he began talking.

'When Gunther shot you, I knew it was bad. I thought you'd die, an' you did for a gut wrenching few seconds. Then you started to get better and I felt like we were gonna make it, like we'd be back out there together and nothing would change. I hated seeing what you had to go through, especially at the trial, but there wasn't a helluva lot I could do about it. And I felt so powerless. It was all down to you – your healing and your physio'.

'When you came home from the physio and you were so badly beat, there was nothing I could do then either, no way I could take your pain away, although what I really wanted to do was to take the exercise for you, just to stop your pain for a while, and it cut me up. And I started drinking. At night, when you'd gone to bed. Just the odd glass of bourbon or tequila to begin with. Nothing really, just some fire water to ease out the kinks of the day, and at first it helped'.

'Then when I had to go back to work, and you weren't there, the alcohol took away some of the... dunno... loneliness I guess. Coz I missed you not being there, it was like I was doing a familiar job with an arm tied behind my back. And the paperwork wasn't my bag, but I kept at it coz I thought we'd still get back out there. And then when the review board's doc told you you'd never be fit enough to get back on the streets, the bourbon helped again, but I needed more of it. Pretty soon I was getting through a bottle every three or four nights, but it wasn't helping the same anymore'.

'I could see you battling through. Always tryin' to be cheerful and it got to me. Half of me wanted to hug you and tell you to stop being so damned brave and just let it out, and the other half of me wanted to knock your block off and tell you to cut it out. You made me feel so... incompetent. As if I couldn't match you. You were the one who was hurt, and whose life had been fucked up, but I was the one who was cracking up.'

'The day you said you were going, I felt so hurt, as if even after all we'd both been through, somehow you rejected me. Deep down I know why you went, but it hurt, buddy. It hurt more 'n' you'll ever know' he looked sideways at Starsky, trying to decide whether he'd gone too far and hoping his partner had heard enough to make him stop. But the brunet was lying with his head pointed towards Hutch, a look of concentration on his face as he listened.

'I hurt too buddy. I guess I was just so crazy with everything that had gone on to think straight. I was the only thing I could think of to do to stop you wasting your life away with a... a cripple' he said with a shaky laugh. 'Go on. I need to hear this, and I think it's been too long for you. You need

to get this off your chest'.

Hutch sighed. Where had he gotten to?

'So when you went, Dobey made me sign up with Daniel, and I was a complete bastard to him. I hated that it was him in my car and not you, and, to be honest, I didn't trust him to watch my back like you did. But after a while we straightened things out and it worked well for a short time, till ...' Hutch stopped. He was going to say "till I got him killed" but Dan's voice seemed to resonate in his head "It wasn't your fault. IT ... WASN'T... YOUR ... FAULT" He chuckled to himself – *listen to the dead guy why don't ya?*

'It worked till he was killed. After that I lost it big style. I'd lost you, I'd convinced myself I'd got Dan killed and I couldn't function. That's when Dobey telephoned you and asked you to talk to me. That's when I hit rock bottom. Shit, I was so stoned at Dan's funeral that I made a complete ass of myself and Dobey had to take me home. That's when we got the new of your accident and I came straight here... After that, you know what happened'.

'Yeah, ya got stoned again and took a nosedive onto my floor' Starsky said, breaking the tension that had grown in the room. He sighed, wriggling in the bed to try and get more comfortable. 'I did what I did because I thought it would be best for both of us. Turned out I was wrong in so many different ways. I thought I was doing great. My new boss thought so too, but there was always something missing. Something I couldn't really put my finger on. I met an old guy, in the apartment next to mine, Morris is his name. He was good to me; real kind. Once he told me that he had too a close friend many years ago, a guy called Rob. His friend and he went through quite a lot of the same things we did, and Morris was the one who made me realise that things change, but sometimes we can't escape the inevitable'.

'When Dobey rang, I went to speak to my boss, Melville. He gave me one week to sort everything out and get back up there, but I knew I wouldn't be going back any time soon. Coz I knew I needed to be here. That's what was missing'.

'Starsk, I've messed up your new job and your new life'. Hutch said, feeling the deep dark depressive thoughts trying to claw their way back into his head.

'No you didn't. That's the point Blondie. I think in a way, you put me back on track. Sure it felt good to be out there doing a job again, the kind I enjoyed instead of paperwork, but it wasn't right. Being here is'.

'But if you hadn't come back, you wouldn't have had the accident and you wouldn't be lying there with broken legs and...'

'Blind? You can say it Blintz. It aint catchin'.

'In a way I wish it was' Hutch said quietly.

'Oh sure. Then all we'd need to do would be stick Huggy in the eyes and we could do a "Three blind Mice" routine! C'mon Hutch. Don't beat yourself up over this. You weren't there. The juggernaut was, unfortunately'.

'Unfortunately? Is that all you can say? Unfortunately? Starsky you can't see!' Hutch snorted.

'Hey, ya don't have to remind me, pal. But I'll get thr... *we'll* get through this. Just at the moment, and don't ask me why, but it doesn't seem so bad. Ask me again when I start walkin' around and canonin' into furniture and I might feel a whole lot different'.

'You mean you think you'll be able to see again?'

Starsky sighed. 'I have no idea, but I had weird dreams while I was out'.

'Weird? How weird?' the blond asked suspiciously

'Would you believe I dreamed of Dan?' Starsky said quietly.

Hutch gulped, his heart skipping a beat. 'Dan? Daniel Griffith?'

'Yeah... quite weird thing, huh? He was kinda there, as though he was still living. We talked a lot. You're gonna think this is so crazy. He told me this was all for the best and things would get better. It was Dan who told me that you needed me' Starsky said almost shyly. Hutch had never been one for the voodoo mumbo jumbo as he called it and the brunet felt the connection he'd had with the dead cop was too real for his partner to start making fun of it or him.

But Hutch didn't say anything and for a moment Starsky thought he might be laughing to himself. Eventually, though, Hutch shuffled to the side of his bed and reached out until he could brush his fingers over Starsky's arm, making the brunet jump slightly.

'Hey buddy, if Dan told ya things would work out I think I'm inclined to believe him.'

Xxxxxxx

In the next 2 weeks, things went on as expected. Right after learning about the accident, Starsky's mother had travelled to Bay City to stay with her oldest son for as long as he needed her –Of course, she arrived without Nick by her side, something that neither surprised nor disappointed Starsky or Hutch- During her stay, the brave woman, while constantly fussing over Starsky had managed to gather enough fortitude to keep her fears regarding his future to herself. However, the brunet was too perceptive where his mother was concerned and she was unable to effectively hide her feelings from him. Her distress pained Starsky and Hutch too, and it was causing the three of them too much added stress. A worry that none of them needed at that point, so finally, and after days of gentle coaxing and once she was convinced that her son would be well cared for by Hutch and the hospital staff, Starsky and Hutch had managed to talk the woman into going back home.

As days went by, Starsky's injuries were healing well. Finally, his left leg had been well enough to be placed in a cast from knee to toe and he was at last free of the traction. His ribs were continuing to heal and without the confines of the pulleys and weights attached to his leg, he was free to move in the bed and even, momentarily, sit in a wheelchair for Hutch to push him around the hospital for, as he laughingly put it, a change of scenery.

During the few days when he was up and around, Doctor Jefferson had ordered scans and other tests on Starsky's eyes. Hutch couldn't believe sometimes that his friend couldn't see. The familiar indigo pools still flashed and twinkled and looked as clear and animated as ever, but still the nerves refused to work. Jefferson had finally told them that he could find no neurological reason for the blindness and that sometimes things were beyond medical reasoning, telling the duo that he was sorry he couldn't come up with better news.

Starsky had sighed and nodded, but had refused to accept the diagnosis and had continued as though everything was going to be ok. And this time, instead of driving Hutch crazy, the blond accepted that this was his partner's way of coping, and that something would eventually go right for the two of them.

And so, almost a month after the accident, the scar down the left side of his forehead now healed

and adding another dimension to the ruggedly handsome face, Starsky and Hutch packed up their things from the small room and prepared to meet the world head on back at Hutch's apartment. **TBC**

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 –By Kirsty Welsh-

'Who scored? Will someone please tell me who scored?' the brunet shouted as Hutch and Huggy both cheered the final seconds of the game as Starsky tried to hear what the commentator was saying. Eventually he gave it up as a bad job and concentrated on the whoops and shouts from his to friends.

He'd been home at Hutch's apartment now for over a week and had even been able to walk a little way on his own, albeit very slowly and painfully now that a walking heel had been attached to the plaster cast on his right, less severely injured leg. The fact that he couldn't see where he was walking to was an added problem, but he'd been to Venice Place so often that it was like a second home to him, and until he could get back to his own place in New York, he was happy to be home and in the company of the blond.

'The Chargers. I think Blondie owes you \$10' Huggy said taking the empty beer bottle from Starsky's hand and replacing it with a full one.

'Yeah? Hey. My lucks changing all the time! I only need anther thousand or so wins an' I can live the life I wish to become accustomed to'.

Huggy drained the last of his beer and stood up stretching his long lanky back. 'Okay folks, Huggys a busy boy tomorrow, so I'm gonna love ya and leave ya to your fantasies of wealth and fame. I'm gonna hit the sack'.

'Night Hug. Thanks for comin' over' Starsky said from the sofa as Hutch rose and saw him to the door. After waving him off, the blond came back and threw himself down on the chair at the side of the brunet.

'What sort of life would ya like to become accustomed to?' he asked, out of the blue.

Starsky seemed surprised. 'What d'ya mean. As I am now, or if everythin was fine 'n' dandy?'

'I just wondered what you'd dream for yourself' Hutch said quietly.

'Sight. That'd be a biggy. I'd love to be back on the streets, but that's not gonna happen. But it'd be kinda nice to still work with you. I guess that's my dream'.

Hutch smiled to himself. 'That's the sum total of the Starsky fantasy? To work with me. I don't know whether to be flattered or sorry that you don't have a better imagination'.

'I'm a man of simple tastes, what can I say? Why did ya ask?'

The blond sighed, resting his head back on the chair back. 'I just wondered where we go from here. What's next'.

'Well there is something I need to decide. I have the apartment in New York, and I have you here. You made it pretty damned obvious that you don't want me being up north, but I don't know what I can do here. In the words of the song, "I need to know, Do I stay or do I go?" Whatever I decide, I need to make the decision with you this time'.

'Would you still be able to do your new job up there now that you're...'

'Blind? Ya can say it Blintz. And no, I guess I wouldn't. Too much reading old files and checking micro fiches. Unless there was something else I could do there, I guess that's the end of that little episode too'. He said it with no recrimination in his voice, but yet still, Hutch felt the loss of his partner's independence keenly.

'You can't travel yet' he said doubtfully. 'Just give it a while longer, things may change'.

'I know. And I don't' want to make a snap decision, but I have to face the reality that I can't work on cold cases if I can't see. And that was the reason the Captain wanted me up there. I guess what I'm trying to say is that of the job aint there for me, then there's no point in me living up there. My friends are here'.

'But your Mom's still in New York'.

'Yeah, but now she's moved out of the city to Rochester, the pull of inner city living isn't the same. And she could always move down here. The climate would be better for her rheumatism'.

'Sounds like you've made some kind of decision buddy' Hutch said

'Sounds like I have. Now I just need to get back up there and sort out my things and then decide what to do with the rest of my life. I'm sure there's loads of guys who can't see but who work. It's just that at the moment I can't see what I could do. No pun intended. And there's no way I can live on disability pension'.

Hutch snorted. 'When you were really sick this last time, the nurse, Kelly, told me to take iddy biddy baby steps. One at a time. That's what you need to do. Take one step at a time. We get you well enough to travel, then we drive up to New York, do the thing with your apartment, then come back home'.

xxxxxxx

Next day, Starsky picked up the phone and dialled the NYPD. It felt strange to once again need to talk to Captain Melville, but there were things that needed to be done and stuff that needed to be said. He asked for Melville by name and waited as he was connected, his fingers curled around the phone's receiver as his other hand played with the loops of wire.

'Melville here' the curt voice sounded over the phone.

'Good morning sir, its Dave Starsky'.

'Sergeant Starsky, how are you. I tried phoning the hospital, but I couldn't get much confirmation – I wasn't a relative. But your previous Captain has kept me informed. He tells me your legs are healing well, but.....'

Starsky was getting used to the fact that people were seemingly more uncomfortable with his blindness than he was and he put the man's hesitancy to one side.

'Yes, at the moment, I can't see. Which is a problem we need to discuss'.

'Captain Dobby did say that it may be temporary?' Melville's voice held that quality that people get when they are trying to soften the blow of bad news.

Starsky snorted. 'Well I don't think either of us are willing to play the waiting game are we Sir? I was ringing to hand in my notice. There's no way that I can investigate the cold cases when I can't read the files and I've tried to think of ways around it, but I don't think there are any'.

Melville sounded relieved and sorry at the same time. 'Is there nothing else we could offer you Dave?'

'Well I don't think a job on the marksmen's team would be much use, do you? No, I think my days in the force have finally run out. I still need to adjust to this sightless lark and having the job at the back of my mind is an added worry'.

'Sounds like you've made your mind up for sure' Melville said. 'But I'm not going to do anything at the moment. I accept that you can't do this job, but maybe there's something. No pressure and don't think of it as a sword of Damocles hanging over you. Just take your time. One step at a time'.

'You're the third person to tell me that' Starsky chuckled. 'And thanks Sir, I appreciate it'.

The brunet put down the telephone and dialled another New York number, waiting for the phone to pick up and as it did, he heard a dog baying in the background.

'Hey Morris. Ya ought to feed that hound ya know. Hercule Poirot needs his bone'.

'David! Good to hear from you. Are you ok? I tried to find out how you were. Was it bad? Are you coming back?' The questions came thick and fast and Starsky grinned into the phone.

'In order Patrick, not bad, yes and maybe. I had a car accident. Broke both my legs, so getting around's a bit complicated at the moment'.

'There's something else, isn't there?' Morris asked

'Well yeah. Just a small thing, it's just....ungh....hold on' Starsky dropped the receiver as a sickening pain lanced through his left temple, almost choking off his breathing in its intensity. He gasped, bending over in the chair as he pressed both hands to his head, trying to stem the tide of pain. He could hear Morris shouting down the phone, asking if there was anything he could do, or anyone he could call, but it took the brunet's total concentration to keep from passing out. Bright white lights flashed across the blackness inside his head, each one accompanied by another blinding pain.

In desperation, he grabbed for the telephone in his lap and managed to wedge it to his ear.

'Morris....call 'Utch...BCPD....help' he groaned into the receiver before slamming it down and grabbing at his pounding head again. He'd had migraines all his life. The sort that made him want to bang his head against the wall and caused him to vomit. But this was ten times worse. There were noises in his ears like the interference from a radio, static building up inside his head so that he couldn't think straight and with a last agonised breath, he fell forward from the chair and landed in a heap on the ground, unconscious, his broken legs sticking out at odd angles from his body.

Morris put his phone down and rattled the cradle until he got the operator's attention. 'Hey honey, I need you to connect me to Bay City Police Department, quick as ya can' the old man shouted into the telephone. He stood and waited, drumming his fingers impatiently as he heard clicks and whirs on the line. Eventually a woman's voice came on the line and asked him who he wanted to speak to.

'Is there someone there called Hutchinson? Ken Hutchinson?' he asked.

'Please hold while I transfer you'.

Again the nerve shattering wait and then another velvety man's voice. 'Hutchinson'.

'Is that Ken? You don't know me. I'm a friend of David's from New York. Patrick Morris. Erm... David was ringing me to talk and he's in pain. The phones dead. He asked me to call you'.

Hutch's senses went on "partner alert". He managed to yell "thanks" into the receiver, then slapped it down and ran for Dobey's office.

'Starsky's sick. I need to get home. I'll let ya know' he shouted at the dazed looking Captain, then ran for the door, his powerful long legs powering him down the corridor and back to his car.

He'd gone to work that morning feeling like shit. Although he'd resolved not to take any more of the drugs, and had poured the rest of the bourbon down the pan, his body still craved the relaxants and he was having great difficulty sleeping. If it hadn't been for the promise he'd made to Dan and to Starsky, and the fact that the brunet truly needed him, Hutch doubted whether he would have had the strength of character to stay clear of either substance. But he was working through his addictions, and the fact that Starsky needed so much care at that time was a godsend, keeping the blonde's mind off of his problems until late at night.

It was only then, when Starsky was in bed and asleep and Hutch tossed and turned on his bed that the seductive pull of the chemical oblivion got to him.

But Morris' words had shaken him out of his stupor and his mind went immediately to his partner. He'd had a thought to try ringing, to see whether Starsky would answer, but decided that that would waste too much time. And so now, he got into his battered brown LTD, slammed the mars light on the roof and set off for his apartment. Screeching to a halt outside Venice Place, he took the steps up to his front door two at a time and pushed the door open with such force that it ricocheted of the wall and closed on its own.

Hutch saw immediately the crumpled body of his friend and without thinking, reached for the phone and asked the operator to send an ambulance to his house. He checked the operator had gotten the message then replaced the receiver and crossed to Starsky.

The blond pushed the coffee table out of the way and knelt by his friend's side. Starsky's face was bathed in sweat, the heat radiating from his body like a blast furnace. The face was pale and the eyes closed, thick black lashes like dark smoky smudges against his cheeks. His breathing was slow, but he didn't struggle for breath and Hutch put a hand on his shoulder.

'Starsky? Hey Starsk. Can ya hear me buddy?'

There was a low groan and the indigo eyes cracked open a little. 'Utch?'

'Yeah. What're ya doin' down there buddy?'

'Floors nice 'n' comfy' Starsky said indistinctly.

'Yeah? Sure it is. Just lay there till the ambulance comes huh?'

'Don't want an amb'lance. Not sick'.

'No? Then why'd ya decide the floor looked a good place to rest up?'

'Hutch?'

'Hmm?'

'I saw some colours. They've gone now. But I saw 'em'

'Yeah? Well maybe they'll come back soon. Just rest up till they get here'.

'Hmm, rest...sounds nice'...**TBC**

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 –By Kirsty Welsh-

Hutch paced the small corridor outside the treatment room to which Starsky had been brought. He was beginning to come around a little more by the time the ambulance arrived, but the paramedics and his blond partner were adamant that he should go to the hospital to be checked out.

In the ambulance he'd been tired and had drifted in and out of sleep, but by the time he'd gotten to Memorial and Dr Jefferson had been sent for, the brunet was wide awake and was beginning to make his feelings on once more being in the hospital known.

'I don't need to be here' he said as the paramedics lifted him from the gurney onto the bed.

'Well why don't you just walk out then?' Hutch said, not unkindly.

'Oh ha ha, very funny! What I mean is I'm not sick. Hospital is for sick people and I'm not. Just a bit frayed around the edges'. The brunet whined. He opened his eyes wider, hoping to maybe see something. The colours he's viewed when the pains had been at their worst had given him a crazy sense of optimism, but now there was just the cloying blackness again.

Dr Jefferson arrived and pushed his way into the room and took a look at the curly haired man. 'Can't stay away huh?' he asked good naturedly. 'What happened?'

'Nuthin' Starsky said sullenly.

'He fell' Hutch explained. He tapped his partner on the arm. 'Tell him'.

'About what?'

'About the colours. You said you saw colours' the blond persisted.

'What colours? What did you see? Jefferson asked.

Starsky sighed. 'It's probably nuthin. I was on the phone, I got a blinding pain in my head, saw all these psychedelic colours like I was on LSD or sumthin, then I passed out'.

'Where was the pain?' the doctor said, shining his pen light into the deep indigo eyes.

'Kinda over my temples. Like someone was tightening a band around my head, but it was intense. Why? What's it all mean?'

Jefferson paused. 'I don't know. Maybe nothing. But I want to run a series of tests.

'And if you do these tests you can tell if I might be able to see again?'

'There's a possibility. Although I don't want to raise your hopes. I couldn't see any damage to your optic nerves. There's nothing to say why you can't see. But at least these tests will rule out certain other factors'.

'I dunno Doc. I just get the feeling that if it's gonna come back it'll do it on its own. But it's been weeks now and nothing has happened'.

'Are you saying that you don't want them done?'

'Starsky! The pain was so bad that you passed out. You've gotta do something!' Hutch said.

'I know. I'm gonna go home and go to bed and then tomorrow I'm gonna plan my trip up north'.

'Partner, listen to me. One night here and maybe the Doc can sort something out for you, put our mind at rest. Or at least make me feel better?' Hutch persisted.

The brunet sighed, resigned to his fate. 'Fine. Give it your best shot. But ya won't find nuthin, I know ya won't'.

xxxxxxx

'David we're going to do a new test. It's called a CT scan and it'll take photos of your head and brain, like slices through a cake. It's a slow process, but it might give us the answers we need. And the good thing is it isn't painful. You just need to remain absolutely still for a couple of hours' Jefferson explained as Starsky sat in front of the huge doughnut shaped machine. The room was quiet and although he couldn't see the scanner, he felt it's presence in the room, as though it were looming over him. It was hot in the big room and he could feel the prickle of sweat down his spine, but at least this was one test where he didn't have to take off any clothes – a first for him and a matter for which he was grateful. Being on those stupid dresses always made him feel vulnerable. At least with his sweat pants on, stretched tight over his casts, he felt almost normal.

He lay down on the gurney, flat on his back, arms at his side as the nurse smiled at him and draped a blanket over his legs. He felt her tighten a strap of some sort across his body at waist level, trapping his arms to his sides and stiffened, crazy memories of rough hands on his body and pain making his breath hitch in his throat. God sometimes he longed just to be able to see a comforting face or smile.

'It's ok Dave. I just need to do this to make sure you don't move. A lot of our patients fall asleep during the test, and I'd hate to have you move and we start it all over again!'

He relaxed.

'K' he said softly, but braced himself anyway. He'd had the misfortune to be on so many of these so called "painless" tests that had, in fact, left him sweating and panting as sympathetic doctors and nurses looked on. He had always preferred that they just tell him straight out that things would be painful, then at least he could prepare himself. But there again, maybe this time might be different?

'I'm going to put a strap across your forehead too. It will be tight, but hopefully not uncomfortable'.

Starsky nodded his consent and felt the pliable plastic strap tighten across the top of his head. It pressed against the fresh scar over his left eye and he hissed a little, but said nothing. He felt the gurney move and the nurse told him that the test was about to start. He felt nothing, the only sign of anything happening being the whirl of the machine. The soft sounds eventually lulled him into a sleep and he dreamed happy dreams of running down the perps that he and Hutch had dealt with over the years. In Starsky's dreams it felt good to have the reassuring weight of his Smith and Wesson in his hand again and to feel his legs powering him along as the wind rushed through his curly hair.

Two hours later he was almost sorry when the technician shook his shoulder gently. His muscles felt cramped from having to remain in one position for so long and as he sat up he felt a little dizzy, but he also felt an odd calmness. He knew they wouldn't find anything, but at the same time had the sense that all of this would eventually come right. How he knew he had no idea, but thoughts of what Dan had said kept coming to him. It was all for a purpose. And maybe that purpose wasn't

something for himself. Maybe it was to help another. Maybe Hutch? The blond had been clear of the drug and booze for a week now, and although Starsky still heard him prowling the living room in the middle of the night, he had no sense that Hutch was looking for more Vallium. He seemed less agitated and more focussed and that in turn, comforted the brunet.

Starsky returned to his little side room and knew that Hutch was there waiting for him. He'd sent the blond home the previous evening. He wasn't sick, and Hutch deserved a night on his own without having to keep an ear cocked for Starsky's needs. One thing about this blindness thing, Starsky mused. Although people's sentiments about "other senses taking over" was a load of crap designed to make them feel better, he did understand that there were times when he could smell something or hear something that he would not have noticed before. Now, it was the lemon fresh scent of Hutch's shampoo and the rasp of his partner's fingers over the stubble on his chin.

'Hey Blondie. Sleep well?' he asked.

'Sure. How was the CT test?'

'Piece o' cake. Best test ever. I fell asleep. They should make 'em all like that' the brunet replied, leaning heavily on the orderly as he transferred himself to the bed, the chair being taken up by Hutch.

'Did they tell you anything?'

'Nah. Nuthin. Doc says it'll be a while before they can tell me the results. It's all so new they're just learning how to interpret the readouts. Good news is, I can go home now' Starsky smiled happily'.

Xxxxxxx

The next day, Starsky rang Pat Morris back to thank him for calling for Hutch. The old detective was relieved to hear from Starsky and settled easily into conversation.

'I've been looking after your place. When are you coming back up here?' Morris asked.

'I'm planning on getting up there soon. Hutch is gonna drive me. I should get these casts off fairly soon, then we'll drive up to New York and take care of business. I need to pack up. Gonna move back down to Bay City'.

'You do what ya think is right, son. Have you given any thought to what you might do? For a job, I mean?'

'Only every waking hour. Pat. I just can't over the sightless thing. Who's gonna want to employ a guy who can't see? One thing is for sure. It won't be BCPD'.

'Seems like a waste to me. You have so much talent and such a good career history. Will ya let me think about it? I got one or two more years in than you, an' I got talking to your Captain Dobey while I was askin' how you were. We may have something cooked up by the time you're back on your feet'

'Yeah? What?' Starsky was intrigued, but at the same time didn't want any favours. He knew Dobey. The Captain had a gruff exterior, but at the same time a heart of gold. If there was any way he could make this work for the brunet he would do. But Starsky wanted a proper job, and not just something cobbled together as a give away. He may be blind but he was no charity case. And he still had Hutch to consider.

'Never mind for now. You need to rest, boy. Rest and get better, an' give me a call if you need

anything, huh?'

'Hey, you've done enough. You're looking after my place. Maybe in a couple of weeks I'll be back up there. Doc says my legs are healing well and the ribs are doing great. I can't fly for a while, which is why we'll make the trip by road, but I'm doing good'.

'You sound good' Morris said, an edge of surprise in his voice.

'Ya know, I feel it. Dunno what happened while I was out, but somehow I feel more at peace now than I have done for years. It's almost like the blindness has given me permission to think about me for a while... Jeez, I sound like that police shrink! I guess what I'm trying t'say is although not being able to see sucks big time, its not as scary as thought'.

Morris listened to the young man, amazed at the fortitude of the curly haired cop. He and Dobey had talked for over an hour on the telephone and had finally come up with an option for both Starsky and his blond partner to work together again, in the PD and still at the sharp end of proceedings. They both agreed it was too early to discuss any of it with the two men, but at the end of their telephone conversation, both Dobey and Morris were happy with their ideas and knew both former detectives would leap at the chance they would be offered.

Now Morris prepared to say goodbye. 'Some things are just meant to be, boy. Sometimes we have no idea why they happen and they seem so unfair at the time. But I'm a firm believer in Karma. What's gonna be is gonna be. You look after yourself son. Be speakin' to ya'. **TBC**

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 –By Kirsty Welsh-

3 weeks later.

Starsky hissed as his feet landed on the floor gently and he stood unfettered by the plaster casts for the first time. It felt sickeningly strange to not have the heavy structures surrounding his legs any more, and not exactly comfortable. Pains shot down his shins and up into his thighs and the bottom of his feet felt spongy and cold. He'd had a broken leg before and a broken ankle when he was young, so he was no stranger to the sensation, but he hated it all the same.

'How does it feel?' the young doctor asked.

'Just gimme a minute' Starsky grunted, trying to get his balance. He grasped Hutch's arm and swayed, his balance not being helped by his sightlessness. Then he let go and stood under his own power.

'There's nothing in front of you buddy. You can walk at least ten steps before coming to the wall' the blond told him.

'Don't you want a cane?' the doctor asked

'No! Canes are for losers. Stand clear' Starsky grinned into the blackness.

Very slowly and a little unsteadily, Starsky made his way the ten fumbling steps to the wall, arms outstretched at the last moment, questing for the end of his range. He felt the hard plaster, turned and rested his back against it, panting, but happy. He'd managed his first steps on his newly healed legs and this was the first real step back into the real world. Now all he had to do was battle his sightlessness and he'd be back in the land of the living!

Today was a big day. Not only had he had his casts finally removed, but he was off now to see Doctor Jefferson to get the results of the CT scan. The doctor had apologised for the delay, but the science was still so new that it took a long while to interpret the results.

The brunet had brought specially for the occasion, a pair of his old jeans which he'd kept at Hutch's house. Now, without the bulky casts to stop him, he pushed his legs painfully into the butter soft denim and pulled them up. The material chafed against his legs, the sensations strange after them being protected for 6 weeks and as he buttoned the waistband, he realised they weren't as tight as they once were. He cinched the black leather belt a notch tighter and smiled happily. A Starsky in jeans was one step closer to normality.

The happy brunet said goodbye to the young man in the plaster room and was about to set off towards the door.

'Don't ya want a ride Gordo?' Hutch asked.

'Blondie, I've been riding around for the last 6 weeks. Gonna walk. It'll take me a bit longer, but just gimme a bit of independence huh? The curly haired man said, holding onto the door handle he'd found.

'But Starsk....'

'Not now Blondie. Gimme some independence!'

'I will, but....'

'Hutch, just shudup. I need to do this on my own' the smaller man said proudly as he pulled open the door and stepped through it, closing it softly behind him.

Hutch waited for a moment, a slight smirk on his face and then the door opened again and a crestfallen face limped back.

'You might have told me that was a cupboard' he said.

'Hey, you were the one who wanted to do it all on his own' Hutch grinned. He walked over and allowed his partner to take hold of his proffered elbow. 'Shall we?'

Together they made their slow way to Jefferson's office. Starsky limped heavily, his usual strut replaced by a rolling type of limping gait. He was in pain, Hutch could see that by the patina of sweat blossoming across his forehead and cheeks, but Starsky proudly carried on, tight lipped, his hand on Hutch's arm being the only aid he would allow. It hurt. A lot. But the pains felt good. They were healing pains and he hugged them to him. Of all his injuries, these were the ones he needed to heal, so that, even sightless, he could start to get some more independence and begin to get the rest of his life in order.

Hutch watched proudly. He was happy for the both of them. In the preceding weeks he had only lapsed once, hitting the bourbon one night when sleep just would not come. He'd lain awake worrying for Starsky, sorry for himself and his lost life and scared of the future. He'd dared to look the undiscovered country – the future – in the face and it was too much. In the wee small hours of the morning, when the shadows had crowded in on him and life seemed once again hopeless, he'd got into the car and found an all night store. Without really thinking about it, he'd bought the bottle of bourbon and had taken it home, polishing off over three quarters of it before the sun came up.

When Starsky had gotten himself out of bed, he'd called out for Hutch, hearing his deep, unnatural breathing. Examining his friend with his hands, he'd found the blond dead to the world and face down on the sofa, a bottle still clutched in his hands, his hair mussed and a pool of vomit on the floor.

It marked a turning point. Silently, and with a great deal of effort, Starsky had cleared up the mess and poured the remains of the bourbon down the sink. He'd brewed fresh black coffee, achieving a scald to his hand in the process, and had made his cautious way back to his partner. He'd roused Hutch, who felt like shit and was so full of contrition that Starsky couldn't be mad at him. The brunet had poured the hot black brew down Hutch's throat and then the blond had lain on the sofa, his head in Starsky's lap as they'd talked, not for the first time about the future.

Since that time, Hutch hadn't touched a drop. He'd gone back to his healthy diet and had even interested Starsky in his power shakes, the brunet realising that they'd help him heal too, and Starsky had waited at home while Hutch had started his regime of early morning runs again.

The two men stopped outside Jefferson's office and Starsky heaved a deep sigh. 'Hutch. If it's not good. If the tests show this in permanent, are ya gonna be ok?' he asked.

'Don't you have that the wrong way round partner?' Hutch asked gently.

'Ok. Are *we* gonna be ok?'

'Yeah. We've come this far. What's one more doctor's visit?' he pushed the door open and they

went in. Starsky lowered himself gently into a chair and Hutch sat at his side as they waited for the doctor's pronouncement.

'Jefferson greeted them. 'Well, it's nice to see you walking around finally David. How do you feel?'

'Sore, and then some. But it's good to be walking again' Starsky answered, wishing the small talk was out of the way.

Jefferson saw the impatience and looked once more through his papers. 'Ok well, there's no easy way to say this, so I'll just cut to the chase. The CT scan didn't reveal anything sinister. No tumours or masses and no blockages. On the other hand, it also didn't reveal the reason why you can't see. I'm sorry. We have no explanation for it and no idea whether it's permanent or not. But having said that, it's been over 2 months now and apart from the colours you said you saw, there's been no change. Have you seen them again? Have you had the pains again?'

'No, not since' Starsky lied. There were a few occasions, which he'd kept even from Hutch, when the sickening pain had returned and he'd had to lie down, panting until they'd passed. And yes, the colours had been there, giving him false hope, but they were always replaced by the cloying blackness and so he'd kept his silence.

The news of his sightlessness, he felt, should have left him depressed and angry, but still there was the calm acceptance that he'd felt all along. He had no idea why, but he seemed to know that this was for a purpose, although he had no idea what that purpose could possibly be.

'S'ok Doc. I kinda knew. Don't worry. At least I know now that I can start to make plans. Get myself back together. Thanks for all you help'.

'I'm sorry I couldn't do more David. But if anything does change, you know where I am. Anything at all, just come straight back'. He stood and Starsky heard the scrape of the chair on the carpet. He stood too, his hands once more seeking out Hutch' steady arm, and reached out his hand. Jefferson took it and shook it and the two men departed.

oOo

The next day saw them on the road up to New York. They planned to take the journey nice and easy, over a five day stretch and had booked in at various motels along the way. Hutch was concerned that Starsky's still sore legs wouldn't take kindly to the long rides, but Starsky insisted that so long as they took it easy he would feel better getting a grip on his life and putting his affairs in order.

After four days travel and a stop over on the final night at his Mom's new house in Rochester, with its usual emotional reception, the two men made it into the city and at 4:30 they knocked on Pat Morris' door. Hutch had never, of course, met the old cop, although he'd spoken to him on the phone, but he was looking forward to seeing the man who'd befriended his partner, and in fact, Starsky had made arrangements for Morris to come back to Bay City with them, two days later, when he'd packed his own apartment up and organised for the contents, and his Torino to be shipped back to California.

Hutch had not had the courage to ask Starsky why he would want to go to the expense of taking the car back. Starsky would be able to do many things even though he was blind, but driving would never be one of them. But instead, the blond kept his counsel for himself, not wanting to shatter the last of his friend's dreams and even helped Starsky organise for keys and packing and all the rest.

On their final night in the Big Apple, the three men went out for a meal to the Italian Restaurant

the Starsky's grandmother used to live above. It was the one that the brunet always told Hutch about whenever they ate Italian back home and it was good for the blond to finally see it. It bore an uncanny resemblance to the bistro they'd been in when Starsky had been shot in the back all those years ago, and of course the tale was told as they consumed their spaghetti and penne. The brunet steadfastly refused to even consider the linguini with clams! At the end of the evening, they made their way back to Morris' apartment and sat with three sodas in honour of Hutch's fourth week of sobriety.

'Has Dobey been in touch?' Morris asked casually as he ticked Hercule's silky ears.

'He's been in touch, but he's like a clam when it comes to your plans. Said it was all your idea. The opening's there and you should have the honour of telling us. He was real mysterious about it' Starsky said. 'Are ya gonna tell us? Or do I have to set the dog on ya?'

Hercule Poirot looked up, yawned and rested his head back on Starsky's hand.

'What would you say to the two of you working together back for BCPD?'

Hutch's head jerked up sharply. 'I'd say you're living in a fantasy world' he said. 'Not wanting to put a dampener on the night, Pat, but what can we do together? It'd be great. It'd be the answer to all our prayers, a dream come true. But we've been through the list. Starsky's b...' he swallowed. 'He's blind and I don't wanna work with another partner',

'You don't have to. You can both work together and still for the force. Oh this is so good. Gonna have to savour it' Morris crowed, rubbing his dry wrinkled hands together. 'Give an old man a couple of minutes to enjoy this, hehehe'.

Starsky grinned in his direction. 'Morris, so help me. If ya don't tell us now, a few minutes is all you'll have! C'mon, don't be cruel!'

'Ok ok. Oh you'll love this! What do you say to you both being back on BCPD's payroll. Working as a team. Doing what you love best, which is working at the sharp end... '

'Morris...' the brunet growled, but he could feel the excitement mounting.

'Oh fine. Cut my moment of glory short! If you accept, you both start four days from now, on Monday....'

'You hold him an' I'll rip his finger nails out' Hutch mumbled, sitting on the edge of his seat.

Morris enjoyed his moment of happiness as he announced to the two waiting men. 'You're gonna be Bay City's first dedicated team of hostage negotiators! **TBC**

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 –By Kirsty Welsh-

Monday

The weekend had been spent in preparation. Starsky had worked steadfastly at the exercises the doctor had given him to get his wasted leg muscles back into good working order, whilst Hutch had started to gather brochures together for a new apartment for him. Having sold his when he went north, the brunet was effectively homeless and both he and Morris were bunking down at Hutch's until the brunet could get something more permanent.

They'd made it back from New York in record time, arriving back on the Saturday evening. They'd made immediate arrangements to meet with Dobey and the big black man had come around to the apartment to tell them the deal that had been cut. Both men had welcomed him with open arms. Offered him drinks and had listened to the proposals Dobey had made.

Whilst they would lose the "detective" title, they would in effect receive a pay rise. Whilst not getting promoted as such, both men would have enhanced pay to reflect the specialised work they would be doing. Whilst on active duty rosters as from the following Monday, they would undergo specialist training from police psychologists and would be "on call" from that time on. When they weren't used as negotiators for Bay City, they may be called upon to go to neighbouring precincts to use their skills there, and further down the line, would be expected to train others in their techniques.

At the end of the meeting, both men were delirious with happiness. Never in their wildest dreams did they think that they would be able to work together again, much less in the department that they'd grown to love in a perverse sort of way. There was no way they could express their thanks to the two men involved and so they told them with quiet dignity that they do everything in their power to make the job a success.

On the Sunday, before they were due to go back to work, Hutch had driven Starsky around the block to see an apartment that he'd seen advertised. It was only a hundred yards or so from his own place and he'd had a preliminary look around. Morris came with them for the ride and was amazed at what he saw.

The two bedroom apartment faced onto Venice Canal with a small garden area to the front. It was a single storey building accessed by a short level driveway. As Hutch lead Starsky around it, the brunet could feel that it was light and airy. The living room opened out onto an open plan kitchen and from there onto a small patio at the back, surrounded by high trees for privacy. Back inside the two bedrooms were of equal size and Starsky could feel that both had big windows looking out from under deep eaves, giving plenty of light and a sense of airiness whilst keeping the rooms cool from the sun. It had a good feel to it, the rooms flowing from one to the next in a logical pattern. When Hutch lead him into the bathroom, he felt as though he'd been elevated to one of those LA celebrities he'd seen on the TV. It was a large room and Hutch described it as having black and white marble effect tiles, a huge walk in shower and separate tub, toilet and wash hand basin. There was storage for linen and towels and another window opening out onto the back porch.

Starsky fell in love with the place and organised with Maureen, the owner to rent the house on a long term lease. As Morris pointed out, there was nothing to walk into, and the brunet had already started counting paces between one place and the next, feeling right at home. With his home now safely dealt with, only one thing remained – work and by that evening, both men were feeling

excited and at the same time a little concerned about what they'd let themselves in for.

oOo

2 weeks later

Starsky had finally moved into his new apartment and was adjusting well to life on his own in his blind world. Although to say "n his own" wasn't quite right as he'd invited Morris to stay for a while. A holiday as a thank you for all the old detective had done fro him. During the days, he and Hutch worked alongside each other and their instructors had all agreed that they both had a flair and an aptitude for the task they had been given. While Hutch's voice was calm and able to talk down a tense situation, the blindness that had once been a curse now came into its own as the brunet heard the different inflections in people's voices, interpreting their mood and likely actions without the need to see their body language. What one lacked, the other made up for and by the beginning of their third week of training, they'd settled into a routine of Starsky being picked up by Hutch at 8:00am, an hour in the gym at the precinct, strengthening Starsky's legs and giving back the muscle tone Hutch had lost during his period when he'd spent his time looking after Starsky.

After that, it was 6 hours of talks, practical exercises and even some deep self analysis. But nothing prepared them for their first job.

The day started as normal and they were literally just getting dressed from the showers when one of the uniformed officers came running into the changing rooms.

'Hutch, Starsky, Dobey wants you. Your first shout!' he said excitedly.

Shouldering into the rest of their clothes they. Made their way up to the squad room and sat in their old familiar positions on Dobey's chair – hutch on the seat and Starsky perched precariously on the arm. Dobey got a lump in his throat seeing them like that, but he quickly dismissed his romanticising as he got down to business.

'There's been an armed robbery first thing this morning at Bay City Banking Corporation. So far we know there is only one man and fortunately at that time of morning very few customers. Even so, he's taken one member of the public hostage. Our guys managed to get a picture through the window'. He handed a grainy black and white image to Hutch who took it and examined it. He looked up at the Captain, questions in his eyes and Dobey shrugged silently.

'Hutch? What's up?' Starsky asked, stunned at the uncomfortable silence in the room.

Dobey shook his head wordlessly as Hutch continued to stare at the picture.

'Erm....nothing' he said quietly.

'Hutch? I may be blind but I aint stupid. What's up. Ya've gone all quiet on me'.

Hutch cleared his throat. 'sorry Starsk. They've got a picture. Of the hostage'.

'And?'

'And its Pat Morris. M'sorry'.

'If this is too close to home, I'll get someone else' Dobey continued. 'The robber is making allsorts of demands and is threatening to kill the hosta...kill Morris unless he gets them'.

'Who're ya gonna get Cap? Hutch 'n' me have trained for this. We're goin' got that? Now. What sort

of demands has he made?'

'Half a million dollars in unmarked non-sequential bills and a 'copter to take him to a private airfield. After that, he wants safe passage to any country that'll have him'.

'Not gonna happen' growled the brunet. He turned to Hutch. 'We need to get over there, now'.

'I know partner. We've got everything we need. Who's the officer at the site?' he asked Dobey.

'Its Bill Malcolm. He's expecting you'.

'Ok tell Bill to keep the gunman happy. We'll be there in 15 minutes' Hutch said, reaching for Starsky's hand and placing it on his elbow. 'Ready?'

'Am I ever?'

The drive down to the bank was done in next to no time with the mars lights and sirens, but Hutch cut both of them as they neared the bank, not wanting to do anything to upset the precarious balance they had with the robber. As they pulled up, he trotted round and took Starsky's arm, guiding him through the maze of cars until they found Malcolm.

'Bill? Has he made any more demands yet?' Starsky asked.

'Nothing. Its all gone quiet in there' the burly sergeant said. 'Boy am I glad to see the two of you? How d'ya want to play this?'

'Soft and gentle' Starsky said.

Hutch looked around, describing the scene to his partner. 'bank to the front. There's a door on the corner, windows along the side of the building facing us. Two storey building, and access looks restricted to the front door. if he's gonna come out, that'll be where he does it'.

'Can you see him? Can you see Pat?'

'No nothing yet. We need to get around to the front. Hold on and follow me' .

Hutch felt Starsky take hold of his belt and, accommodating the limp his partner still had, they made their way slowly round to the front of the building, using the various cars and trucks surrounding it as shields. Once there, they hunkered down behind a convenient black and white and an officer gave Hutch a loud hailer. He took it.

'Well, we'll see how good the training was' he muttered and thumbed down the switch.

'This is Ken Hutchinson, speaking to the man in the bank. If you can hear me, you can ring 555 172 1884. That's a private line through to my telephone and we can discuss your terms'. He put down the loud hailer and waited and within 30 seconds, the extension phone next to him rang. It had two receivers and both men picked one up simultaneously.

'Is that Hutchinson?' a voice sounded in their ears.

'Yeah, who is this?' Hutch asked calmly.

'It's the guy with the power, that's all ya need to know pig'.

Starsky heard the fear in the voice and signalled to Hutch who nodded. *Take it calm buddy, he's dangerous.*

'I was kinda looking for a name. I always talk better when I know who I'm talking to' the blond tried again.

There was no answer.

'Ok, well, I'm gonna go with Steve. So, Steve. The guy you have in there with you. He's got nothing to do with this. He's just an innocent bystander. Ya wanna let him go?'

"Steve" snorted. 'Nice try, but no can do. I need some leverage'.

'OK, I can see that. Can we at least know that the guy is OK? Will you let him talk to me?'

'Fuck off. He's alive, take it from me'.

Starsky had been listening intently, and in the background he thought he heard Pat Morris groaning, but couldn't be sure. He put his thumb up at Hutch, who was sweating now. *You're doin' great buddy. keep goin'. He's gonna cave soon, I'm sure.*

Hutch tried again. 'Fine Steve. Have it your way. Buddy, I need you to come to the door. No guns, I promise. Nothing at all. I just need to see that you're ok and that your hostage is. The 'copter will be here soon. They'll have the money. Can you hear it?'

'Do you think I was born yesterday? I come to the door an' you'll shoot me'.

Starsky made a winding motion with his hand, hearing the note of panic in the voice. *Take it slow Blondie. Don't spook him. You're doin' great.*

'No, no we won't. No-one's gonna shoot you. Promise. If I show you I'm unarmed, d'ya promise to come to the door? You're gonna have to come out to get to the helicopter. So make it easy huh? The 'copter is close now'.

Very slowly, Hutch stood from his hiding place, hands above his head and slightly out to his sides showing he was unarmed. He looked directly at the door and muttered under his breath, his lips hardly moving.

'I can see the guy. He's got Morris by the throat, but Pat is moving. He's doin' great. Not struggling. The guy's seen me. He's walking towards the door. c'mon buddy. One more step, that's it. One more step'.

'Hutch, get back down here' Starsky hissed, fearful his partner was taking too great a risk. 'Hutch!'

The blond stood his ground, eyes fixed on the door to the bank as he saw the robber reach for the handle. He took a swift look around. There were various marksmen hidden behind cars, all out of sight, but the air was tense. Starsky shuffled himself around until he was at the blonde's feet, shoulder pressed against Hutch's leg to feel the movements.

The blond continued his low commentary. 'He's on his way Starsk. C'mon pal. One more step and we can getcha outside. That's it, nice and slow'.

He saw the man's hand on the door handle. He saw the door pull open and Morris was thrust outside as a human shield. Morris stood calmly, his old police training kicking in and telling him to try to stay out of the way. Hutch saw Morris make his move a split second before Pat shouted and ducked.

And then all hell broke loose.

Morris rolled himself onto the floor as the marksmen stood to take a shot at the robber. The guy took a step forward, bringing his own shotgun up and as one of the marksmen fired, the robber's shot went wild as his arm was flung upwards and he fell with a bone crunching blow to the ground. The policemen around were all shouting, surging forward to cuff the robber and get the hostage out of the way and some were clapping Hutch on the back, telling him he'd done a great first job. The blond felt elated, the adrenaline still surging through his bloodstream and it took him a moment to realise that the one person he hadn't heard from was his partner. He looked down and fell to his knees in horror.

Starsky was still slumped against his legs, where he'd been during the last moments of the negotiation, but now, his head had fallen forwards on his chest. As Hutch gently reached down to tip the face back, he saw blood and a fresh gash on Starsky's left temple, almost exactly where the previous injury had been. The robber's shot had gone wild, and had hit the brunet in the head. The indigo eyes were closed and Starsky was unconscious. **TBC**

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 – the epilogue –By Kirsty Welsh-

For what seemed like the hundredth time, Hutch paced the corridor of the hospital ER department, waiting for news of his partner. His heart was in his mouth. Starsky hadn't regained consciousness since the shooting and as the paramedics had loaded him into the ambulance, the only casualty in the whole affair, he'd looked pale and was deathly still, although he was still breathing.

Throughout the journey to the hospital, Hutch chanted the same mantra under his breath

Don't die Starsk, please don't die. Not now ... Please don't leave me now.

But his chanting did nothing to alleviate his worry and as they unloaded his partner's body at the other end, he grabbed the payphone and telephoned Dobey. The Captain had already made arrangements for cover and was on his way down to Memorial where Dr Jefferson was once more on duty.

As was usual, there was a long and deathly wait while the doctor examined the brunet behind the curtained cubicle and when at last he came out, it was to inform Hutch that fortunately the bullet had been a glancing blow, that the wound had been cleaned and stitched and that Starsky was still unconscious and on his way up to a ward.

Hutch followed the gurney, questions flooding his head and he sat down by the side of the brunet's bed to wait as the doctor tried to answer his questions.

Yes he was concussed.

Yes the bullet wound would leave another scar

No there shouldn't be any permanent damage apart from a raging headache when the brunet finally woke up.

Hutch looked at the clock 2:00pm. The middle of the afternoon of a day which had changed from elation at having got their first job to once again sitting in the hospital room. Hutch hated the waiting and he felt the need for something to take away the hurt more keenly than he'd ever felt it before. He fought against it with every fibre of his body and would have lost out if his Captain hadn't shown up, just as he was about to go see what sort of drugs he could wheedle from the nurses.

'How is he?' Dobey asked.

'Unconscious. Doc says he has another concussion. Good job it was his head. Where there's no sense there's no feeling' the blond joked. But the joke was mirthless as both men sat by the bed to wait.

Evening came and went, and with it, Edith. She brought the men an apple pie and some coffee, and while Dobey managed three or four slices, Hutch sipped at the coffee and waited, his mind wandering back over all the other times he'd waited in this same sort of room, sitting on this same sort of chair as he prepared himself for whatever news there would be of his partner.

During the night, Starsky became restless, his arms and legs kicking out at the bedclothes so much that the doctor on duty was about to give him a sedative. The restlessness became more violent and

in his sleep, Starsky moaned and his hands went to his head as though he had terrible pain there. But try as they might neither Hutch nor the doctor could get through to the curly haired man and it was hours before the seizures stopped and once more Starsky slipped into a relaxed sleep.

Dobey slipped away back home as the sun was coming up. Hutch had fallen asleep about an hour ago and he left a note that he would be back later on in the morning. And so neither man saw the beginnings of normal movements from the man in the bed.

Starsky had been in pain for most of the night, but it had felt to him as though he had dreamed the whole thing, the lancing pains in his temples, the psychedelic colours and the smells around him. All seemed to overpower his senses to the extent that he'd wanted to hide his head under the pillow to escape them and at one point he'd tried to cover his eyes to keep them out.

Now, he began to surface from his stupor. He realised that once more he was laid in a bed and he recognised the smell of antiseptic and other things he associated with the hospital. Shit! He was there again. He opened his eyes and stared into the darkness, then closed them again.

Hutch felt the movements and they shook him awake. Slowly he lifted his head from the edge of the bed and looked at the clock on the wall, its luminous hands pointing to 6:30. With a groan he stood, easing the kinks from his back and went to the window, winding back the blinds to let the early morning sun stream into the room. As he looked back at the bed, he saw that Starsky's eyes were open and the curly haired man had put his arm up to his head.

He crossed to the bed and gently took hold of his partner's wrist. 'Don't touch it Starsk. Doc said to leave it alone'.

Starsky gazed steadily back. 'You look like shit' he said slowly.

'Well, it's been a long night. You were thra.....what? What did you just say?'

'I said you look like shit' the rasping voice said.

'How can you...you can?...can you... can you see me?' Hutch asked, almost afraid of the answer.

But the grin on his partner' face said it all.

'Uh huh. I had those pains in my head all night. Kinda like it was gonna explode. And towards morning I put my hand up to feel my head and shocked myself coz I could make out a shape. Since then, it's been getting clearer and clearer. You're still kinda fuzzy, but I can see those beautiful baby blues'.

Hutch's face cracked into an enormous grin. 'Oh shit Starsk. I don't now what t'say. I'm so....'

'Happy? Yeah, me too. In fact happy don't begin to cover it. I'm over the moon. D'ya wanna go get Doc Jefferson? Soon as I can I want out of here'.

'Well it's good to see you're feeling yourself' Hutch said happily.

'I always did feel myself' Starsky said thoughtfully. 'The only time I didn't was when I went back to New York before the accident. Then I felt like someone else, but now? I never felt more like myself than when I couldn't see. It brought us back together and it gave us the opportunity to work together again. Can't have been all bad'.

'That's just what Dan said' hutch mumbled quietly.

'Did you see him too?'

'Yeah, but with the shit I was drinking, I didn't want to say anything. But he said it was all for a purpose. Maybe that was it. To get us back on a level playing field'.

'Well if there was ever a next time, let's hope he could find something a bit less drastic huh?' Now. where are my pants?'

'Doc hasn't said you can go yet'.

'You're stalling aren't ya?' Starsky said doubtfully. 'Where are my pants?'

'Sorry buddy' Hutch grinned. They cut them off of you. And this time, I don't even have your watch!'

END

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