Dark Night of the Soul

by Elizabeth Lowry [archived by DaveandKen_Archivist]

Summary

The aftermath of Sweet Revenge.

Notes

Note from the archivist: this story was originally archived at Dave & Ken's Diner, which experienced a drop in traffic to low levels following the opening of the official Starsky & Hutch archive. Still wanting to preserve the archive, Open Doors began manually importing its works to the AO3 as an Open Doors-approved project in August 2016. An announcement was posted to OTW media channels, but may not have reached everyone. If you are (or know) this creator, please contact the archivist using the e-mail address on Dave and Ken’s Diner collection profile.
The weight against his body was warm and comforting. A head tucked safely under his chin. A small fist half clutching his shirt. Chubby legs curled in his lap. Hutch felt very powerful with the small boy asleep in his arms, very protective—and very masculine. The rapidity with which the child had come to depend on him had been startling. At first reticent to come near him, the boy had gradually circled closer and closer, attracted by the father-like behavior he obviously missed. And Hutch had, surprisingly, encouraged him, using ball-tossing games and tickling sessions to establish an intimacy that was oddly satisfying. “Odd,” because Hutch had never thought of himself as particularly fatherly toward children.

Brotherly, yes. Fatherly, no.

“Fatherly” feelings were saved for Starsky. Starsky’s most recent chance at life rested directly on Hutch, on his ability to nurse and nurture and renew. The true tasks of any parent.

Of course, Starsky’s chance at death had also rested totally on his negligence and inattention. So it was only right that Hutch parent Starsky’s recovery.

So why did he now welcome the attentions of this boy? A thrill went through him every time the child ran to his arriving car and flung himself toward Hutch for a massive bear hug. He relished the feel of the boy’s hand tugging on his fingers to come see some wondrous discovery. At first the boy’s need for him had been scary, and he’d been hesitant to give in, but he’d found it was less overwhelming than the need another “child” had lately demanded of him.

And perhaps that was why. This child was easier to manage.

Hutch hugged the child closer, stroking the coal-black hair, caressing the smooth flesh of the boy’s bare arm. To be able to sleep anywhere, he thought. What I wouldn’t give for just one night to sleep the sleep of a child. No worries, no cares, no suffocating pressures. Just pure, simple sleep.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” Elisa stole back into the room and slipped down beside Hutch. “Both of you.” She stroked her son’s cheek. “Time for bed, I think.”

“Both of us?” Hutch looked at her, feeling all innocence and youth.

She rose, smoothing her skirt without looking at Hutch. Black tendrils of hair curled about her face and fell down her back. Skin that was more cocoa than olive betrayed her mixed heritage, as well as her jade green eyes. She was slender but full-figured, and just tall enough to lay her head comfortably on Hutch’s shoulder and fit perfectly into his arms. She was exotic and erotic and seemingly unaware of her gifts, which only made her more alluring. And she was mother to the boy. Elisa brushed a curl back from her face. “Will you bring him?”
“Sure,” Hutch smiled. “C’mon, Mateo.” He slipped an arm underneath the boy's bottom and lifted him up against his shoulder. The boy shifted, murmured something, but didn't waken. Hutch stood, rocked the child a bit, then followed Elisa to the bedroom.

Together they removed the ketchup-stained T-shirt and grass-stained jeans and maneuvered Mateo into his pajamas. Elisa tucked a fuzzy gray rabbit under his arm, and Hutch tucked both of them under the bed sheet. He glanced at Elisa, then gave the boy a gentle kiss on his forehead. Elisa kissed her son goodnight, and the two left him to his dreams.

Hutch slipped an arm around Elisa's waist and walked her out into the hall. They took only a few steps before he stopped and pulled her to him. She didn't resist, but brought her hands up to his chest. She kept her face down.

His free hand traced a dark curl in her hair. “You're beautiful,” he murmured. His hand stroked her cheek. “I can't tell you how full I feel inside, how much you and Mateo mean to me.” He lifted her chin, brought their lips together.

She moaned, broke the kiss, and buried her face in his chest. He was afraid she was going to cry. Not now, he thought. Please don't cry now and spoil this.

“It’s all right,” he said softly, stroking her hair, staving off her—continual—concern. “I understand.”

“You don’t,” she shook her head. “But if you'll just keep trying—” She looked up at him, eyes pleading and distressed.

He clasped his hands against the small of her back, felt his instincts awaken as he held her within the circle of his arms, felt his irritation lessen. “What's important to you is important to me.” He smiled down at her, sure he'd chosen the right words. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but he stopped her. “Elisa,” he said more firmly. “If I weren't happy here, I wouldn't keep coming back. I'm just not that masochistic.” He waited, searching her eyes, and was relieved to see them slide from disbelief to resignation. He smiled again, outwardly for her and inwardly for himself, and tried to coax them into full belief. He was rewarded with a kiss at the base of his throat.

“You are, truly, the most amazing man.” She pushed out of his arms, a smile finally gracing her lips. He grabbed for her, but she twirled away. “Are you coming over Sunday?” She danced back toward the front door, just out of reach. Hutch followed, enjoying the game, finally cornering her in the small foyer.


“And how...about Mass...before dinner?” she managed between languid kisses.

Hutch shook his head. Damn! She always had to spoil the mood! “Elisa—” he admonished, backing off from her. He knew when to retreat. Hutch turned to fumble with the double bolt.

“Okay,” she sighed resignedly—too easily, he wondered? She ducked under his arm and opened the door herself. “Klutz.”

“Not at everything,” he grinned, hinting, and found her for one last kiss.

She pushed him out the door. “Sunday,” she waved.

Hutch took a couple of backward steps, stumbled, and barely caught himself before he found the lawn with his ass. He grinned sheepishly, wagged his fingers, and walked carefully out to his car.
Once inside, he waited until Elisa had shut the front door, disappeared from the side window, and turned out the porch light. Then he gripped the steering wheel with both hands, took a deep breath, and held it. He held it until his eyes began to water and his heart beat hard in his ears. He held it until he thought he could no longer hold it, then held it one second longer. It was so easy for her to dismiss him! So easy for her to obstruct him! Didn’t she realize what she was pushing him toward? Abandonment, that’s what she was pushing him towards! He could only take so much rejection before he’d abandon her! Had any of his other lovers kept him waiting this long? Not counting Vanessa, of course; marriage had ruined that relationship.

But Cindy? Nope, hopped into bed on the first date. Marcia? First date. Jeannie? First date. Abby? First date. But she’d lasted a little while beyond that. They’d had a few things in common, such as keeping their bodies healthy together. And she’d had a little education, which kept their brains healthy together. Maybe he should have taken better care of her, better protected her. He had definitely loved her, even though it was a different kind of love than he’d felt for Vanessa—sweeter, not as frantic and desperate.

But he hadn’t bothered—hadn’t even realized he needed—to set up barriers to keep others from harming her. And she’d been harmed, so she had left him.

But then he wouldn’t have met Gillian. Funny, she hadn’t hopped into bed with him on the first date. Nor the second. But that third date…fireworks and explosions and everything else that was supposed to go along with it. And while she hadn’t been educated, she’d been very smart, and very well-read, and conversation was sometimes as satisfying as the sex. It’s what he should have had with Vanessa, what might have been possible with Abby. The physical, the emotional, the intellectual. He’d felt love for her, too. It was similar to what he felt for Abby, only richer, deeper, even more complete.

But he hadn’t protected Gillian, had he? Been blind to what was going on, blinded by the excitement of a new and effortless relationship. Didn’t see the danger, both to her and himself. And she died because of it.

So back to back to the sexual, and drop the relationship crap. Annette. First-dater. Diana—should have stopped the first-date sex there, but didn’t. C.D.? Get-there-before-Starsky-sex. Didn’t count. All wonderful orgasm-producers but not one worth thinking of outside of the bedroom.

Judith? Now there was another possibility lost. No sex, although he’d been startled and slightly appalled to discover he could feel lust for a woman even as his guts were threatening to flee his body by any means necessary. But she was so smart, and that made her sexy. And she was so committed to her work, and that made her sexy. What a team they could have been! An intelligent, sexual, vibrant couple. He could actually see having children with her. He could imagine them raising a family, continuing their work for the public, growing old together. Even in old age he could see them together, maybe not as sexually active, but still enjoying each other’s company and companionship. He could have loved her, if she’d stuck around.

But she had a career, and no place for him—unless he followed her. Which might explain Anna. She had her work, he had his. Careers were of no importance, since they both knew they’d only be together a short while. Two ships that met in the night and then sailed back to their ports. Any storm in a port for a while, then. A series of women whose names might have been Lisa and Amy and Angela and Laureen. Or not. Nothing wrong with any of them, but nothing exceptionally right. Just a blast for his balls.

So why, if that kind of woman wasn’t doing it for him anymore, didn’t he take the opportunities offered by the reappearances of Laura and Kate in his life? He’d known both of them a long time; Laura since his days in the Academy and Kate since his pre-L.A. days. Both women were attractive,
both smart; both were his friends as well as his lovers. Either one might have, could have, offered a
life of love and commitment and companionship. He’d felt at ease with both women, comfortable
and able to be himself. He could tell them secrets, he could not tell them secrets, and neither would
push. There was no reason to be anxious around them at all. And yet he’d let both fade back to their
memory status. It was just like that saying, he loved both of them but he was no longer in love with
either of them. He cared what happened to them, but not enough to work at it. There was too much
else to care about, too much else to worry about. Too many cases, not enough personal time.

And then—Marianne. Honest to God, he’d liked her. Maybe even loved her. He’d never meant to
use the sex to bind her to him, it had just felt right at the time and he wanted her to understand what
he felt about her. That she was a person, a good person, and worth being loved. Really, there were
no games in the relationship, if that’s what it had been. Someone on the outside might have called
them games, but their actions were merely reflections of their circumstances. He could, she couldn’t;
he couldn’t, she could. For musicians, their rhythm had been lousy. He truly wanted to know how it
would have felt to be relaxed around her, instead of constantly on edge. In another life, they could
have been another kind of couple he fantasized about. No children, but creative, artistic, passionate
about their work; flawed but accepting of each other. Loving and loved, with all its speed bumps and
detours.

It still might have worked, if he’d been more aware, more conscientious, not so pressured by outside
forces that he’d cut off his nose to spite his face and ignored their warnings to the detriment of
Marianne. His fault, again; she was now a protected witness out there somewhere, and he was here.

Sitting here, in his car, tired of the whole female thing. It wasn’t worth the effort anymore. If women
came easy, he grew too lax. If women came hard, he grew too careless. And what had any of it
gotten him? A lot of sex, a little comfort, and none of it enough to blot out the crises that just kept
coming and coming….

Elisa. Worth the effort? They’d been dating for maybe six months. The drive out to her place gave
him the illusion of distance from Starsky, or at least it put some miles between them. It seemed his
thoughts on those drives, however, always focused on Starsky: what he looked like that day, what he
looked like compared to yesterday, had he taken his pills, had he eaten his meals, how much time
would it take with his siren blaring and his lights flashing and his accelerator floored to get back to
Starsky if something should happen while he was away….

Elisa. Worth the effort? Elisa wasn’t coming across with any reward for his exertions toward her. At
least Starsky had rewarded him by coming back from the dead. Elisa just gave him meals and time
with her boy.

Were any of them worth the effort? A couple of them, maybe? A couple of them gave him
contentment as well as pleasure. That was a long time ago, though. Did he want to go back to being
that contented person? The person who felt safe and carefree in his love? The person who’d let that
joy lull him into a false sense of security, and ultimately, horrible loss?

And what was the cost to be that person again? Was Elisa worth paying the price for? The price of
carelessness and laxity and loss?

She certainly wasn’t tonight.

Hutch started the engine and drove off.

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL
Starsky was a model of professional detachment.

Hutch watched him: Casually, carefully, secretly he measured Starsky's every move. Of late Hutch had become expert at this game, spying under half-closed lids, watching from behind dark glasses, listening when he couldn't look. He'd become a master of detection, the Sherlock Holmes of the LAPD. And all his efforts were devoted toward one man. One man who needed all his skills. One man who needed all his attentions. One man who constantly *needed* him….

It had begun simply enough, a vigilance born of necessity. Watch for signs of fatigue, the doctors had warned him. Watch for signs of body stress. Watch for signs of internal bleeding. Watch for signs of muscle atrophy. Watch for signs of impaired mental capacity. Watch for signs of any number of physical calamities that could occur after such a death-defying trauma. Watch for it all. And then his vigil had grown to encompass the psychological aspects of Starsky's recovery. Watch for signs of depression. Watch for signs of anxiety. Watch for signs of changes in personality. In effect, watch for signs of God-knows-what kind of warp that could worm its way into Starsky's psyche and destroy the recovery Hutch had invoked. It was a taxing duty. One from which Hutch could never rest. And it had become that much more difficult of late, now that Starsky had demanded he stop his vigil. But Hutch was an expert at stealth, and Starsky would not catch him at his task again. If Starsky was chafing against this duty, then Starsky would never again discern this duty.

This morning, Hutch observed, Starsky was dressed in khaki slacks, a slate gray shirt with dolman sleeves and large pockets, a loosely knotted light gray tie, and a waist-high jacket that coordinated with the shirt and slacks. A new look for Starsky. Not exactly fashionable, but neither totally ignorant of fashion. It made Starsky look more—mature. Not less youthful, but less—immature. Starsky, of course, was oblivious to Hutch's scrutiny. He had not noticed the attentiveness to his every move, nor Hutch's inspection of his dress. Not at all.

Starsky was leaning over the dead body “positioned” on the bed. It hadn't been hard to deduce the body had been purposefully arranged; most people didn't die flat on their backs, hands folded across their chests, hair carefully combed, and their bodies scrubbed to a state of absolute cleanliness. Not to mention this was the sixth body that had been found this way. These bodies seemed to pique Starsky's curiosity, presenting a new challenge to an eager, under-used mind. They only made Hutch uncomfortable.

Hutch leaned against the door frame of the tasteless motel room and tried to catch what breeze he could without actually leaving the room. His navy suit coat lay folded over one arm, having been early on abandoned in the morning heat. He pinched at the white-on-white shirt that stuck to his chest, trying to pull some air over his skin. Sweating was the body's cooling mechanism, but the sensation this morning was decidedly more uncomfortable than cooling. There was a time when he reveled in his body's sweat, when it signified his physical prowess on the field, on the job, in bed. Anymore, he brooded, “outperform” meant “overexert.” Today it just meant hot. Hutch took a deep breath of muck and held it, fingering the silk tie that lay plastered to his shirt. With his jacket off, his sleeves rolled up, his tie loosened, and the top two shirt buttons freed, there was nothing more he could do and still maintain the decorum his status called for. He exhaled resignedly.

“Did you get shots of these marks on the neck, wrists, and ankles?” Starsky pointed at the appropriate body parts.

“You bet,” Garcia answered from behind him. “Lots of nifty close-ups.” He opened his camera, removed the exposed roll, and replaced it with a fresh one.

Garcia grinned. “You bet!” He tossed the exposed roll into the air, whirled, and caught it behind his back.

Starsky, smiling, shook his head at the photographer’s antics. He stepped past him to speak with Lieutenant Harry Grimes, who stood next to an old, battered dresser.

Hutch followed Starsky with his eyes.

“Anything?” Starsky asked. He glanced at Hutch. Hutch deftly averted his gaze.

“Clean as a whistle,” Grimes shoved a small notebook into his suit jacket pocket. About four inches shorter than Starsky, Grimes was about 40 pounds heavier, and it was all in his belly. Gray hair bristled from his head, emphasizing his 52 years, but the tidy beard and moustache remained jet black. Pale blue eyes peered out from under heavy eyelids and black brows. A dark blue suit hung haphazardly from his frame. Grimes was a career cop—no wife, no family, no outside entanglements. And no wonder, thought Hutch. What woman would want to be trapped under that basketball of a belly two-point-five times a week?

“Bathroom, dresser, table, doors—everything’s spotless.” Grimes was cataloguing the room. “Looks like the maid was through here after the guy died. I’m sure the lab will find the usual traces of commercial cleaners and cleansers all over everything.”

Hutch finally found some energy to move and pushed away from his sentry position by the door. He joined Grimes and Starsky.

“I hope you’ve got something—” Starsky greeted him, as though he hadn’t known Hutch was leaning all that time by the door, “—because we’ve got nothing.”

“I heard,” Hutch glanced at Starsky to see if he’d caught his admission of eavesdropping, and getting no reaction, turned his attention to the body. “Sorry, but I can’t add much. Our Mr. Morris checked in as ‘J. Richards’ around 11:00pm, and the desk clerk didn’t see anybody with him. The drunk in the room next door thinks he heard music all night.” Hutch’s voice took on a mocking tone. “He’s not sure, but he thinks it was The Doors. No one else heard anything or saw anyone. The maid who came up here to clean this morning said the door was unlocked, and when she wheeled in her cart she found the victim like this. The guy’s car is outside, and doesn’t look as if it’s been touched.” He addressed himself to Grimes. “Robbery ruled out?”

“Yes,” Grimes replied. “Wallet, cash, plastic, jewelry; everything seems to be right here. Looks to me like murder, pure and simple.” He shook his head.

“What’s so pure and simple?” A woman joined their group. In heels she was as tall as Grimes, and while nowhere near as heavy, her figure had “matured.” Hutch knew her to be about 45 years old. Short, short red hair that was beginning to mutate into a muddy brown framed a ruddy, freckled complexion. An ill-fitting, burnt-orange suit gave the impression she was not particularly concerned with appearances, as well as her disregard of any makeup. Her reputation as an LAPD detective, however, was impeccable. She had been one of the first “policewomen” to join the force. Hutch found her to be a more-than-capable task force leader, as well as pleasing to be around, which was in part, he decided, explained by her appearance. She could put all her energy into her work and personality, and not her looks, because she didn’t have any looks. Which also went a long way in explaining why she, too, was unmarried: Who’d want to be on top of that face and body two-point-five times a week?
“Unfortunately, nothing's really pure and simple anymore, Ruthie,” Grimes smiled wistfully at her. “Did you get anything, hon?”

Ruth Boggs smiled back. “No witnesses, no answers; nobody knows anything.” She reached out and patted Grimes’ cheek. “And I’m not your ‘hon,’ dear.”

Starsky grinned and looked over at Hutch. Hutch returned the smile. After spending the last several weeks working closely with Boggs and Grimes, Hutch had begun to understand why so many in the past had taken such an interest in watching Starsky and him. The show was free, and always entertaining. They should have been more careful about that over the years, he and Starsk.

“Sorry, baby,” Grimes returned the pat, adding a pinch to her cheek. Ruth grimaced good-naturedly. “Did anyone get the race results?”

Ruth flipped through her notebook. “Sure, sweetie pie. Let’s see. Eleven got here first, followed by five, four, and then nine.”

“Damn,” Starsky muttered. “I had Channel 4 to win.”

Hutch clicked his tongue and arched an eyebrow. “Starsky, you’ve got to stop making bets based on the looks of the 11 o’clock newswomen.”

Ruth laughed. “Surely you’ve got better taste than Channel 4, Dave. I figured you for a Channel 7 man.” She reached over and flicked one of his curls mischievously.

“Next time I’ve got 4 to win, place, and show.” Starsky rummaged through his pockets, pulled out two crumpled ones, and offered them to Ruth.

Ruth plucked them from his fingers, made a note in her book, and tucked the bills away. “Let’s hope there is no next time, eh, boys?”

The group nodded in agreement. Grimes buttoned his collar and adjusted his tie. “Ready for duty, sweets?”

Ruth brushed his hands away and fixed the tie herself. Ruth and Grimes were like that, Hutch noted. Partners. No boundaries between their personal space. He and Starsky had been like that, almost from the day they’d met. He hadn’t even noticed it, until others around them started making constant remarks and cracks. Starsky could get as close as a condom, and he’d never felt awkward, self-conscious, discomfited, or insecure. It wasn’t even the kind of lack of boundaries brothers shared—it was more like the unbounded borders of twins. No touch too personal. My body was his. His body was mine. We could even sleep together and not feel peculiar or worry about the social implications. In fact, it had been comforting to know there was always a hand or an arm or a shoulder to lean on, feel the warmth of, when needed. So different from the way he’d grown up, with no touching or embracing. Starsky’s touch had made him feel—worthy.

Boggs and Grimes seemed to be like that. The thought of Boggs and Grimes in bed together flickered across his consciousness. Grimes’ belly cushioned between Ruth's aging breasts and hips… no, it couldn’t be the same as what he and Starsky had had. Besides being a much more attractive couple, he and Starsky had shared more emotionally than those two ever could have. And it was that body-entwined-in-body duality that had kept them emotionally constant. Hutch holding Starsky safe from the savagery of villains and desperados, arms protectively around his torso, head cradled securely against his shoulder. Starsky holding Hutch safe from the ravages of illness and assault, caressing away the fever in his brow, stroking away the pain in his chest. Seductive shelter. Would Starsky ever trust his shelter again? After what Hutch had let happen to him? There was only one
answer. Better not to even offer it than face the inevitable rejection. There were now other ways to protect Starsky.

Ruth smoothed Grimes’ collar tabs. “I’m always ready to face the media, sugar pie,” She patted his collar. “But you—try not to sweat so much this time, Harry. You look like Nixon when he debated Kennedy. And this suit! Can’t you dress more like our two young detectives here?”

“What can I say?” Grimes pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face. “The camera loves me no matter what.” His grin disappeared. He looked around the room. “I don’t have to remind everybody we’re not attributing this to our serial murderer until the lab results come back, do I?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“And you two—” Ruth ran two fingers through her bangs, then circled them back to point at Starsky and Hutch, “—low profiles—still. No comments, no interviews, don’t even get close to those cameras. With me on this?” Starsky shrugged. Hutch nodded. “Well, then, are we ready to go?”

“Ready,” Grimes offered his arm to his partner. “Shall we, then?”

“Love to,” Ruth took his arm. “We’ll give you boys a ring later this afternoon,” she said over her shoulder as the couple exited the room.

“Quite a pair, huh?” Hutch watched them go.

Starsky moved up beside him. “Yeah. I’m glad they’re heading up this task force. We could have done a lot worse.” He looked around the room. “Did Rodriguez ever show up?”

“Eventually,” Hutch used his shirt sleeve to blot the sweat from his upper lip. Emanuel Rodriguez had not been a deputy they’d been pleased to see when they’d joined Boggs’ and Grimes’ task force. More than once they’d had to coordinate efforts with him on past cases, and Hutch had found his conduct to be less than professional. He was lax, inexact, and seemed to have it in for them. And ugly. He was a thin, brown scarecrow with a shock of black hair that seemed too small for his head. Hutch knew he had a wife, but he imagined she must look something like Rodriguez herself to want to spend any time around him. Hutch attributed most of Rodriguez’s snottiness to insecurity over his scrappy looks. Starsky had pegged him as jealous of their reputations. Hutch finally just pegged him as stupid. Rodriguez had seemed just as irritated to see them brought in as senior officers in the investigation. And why shouldn’t Rodriguez? He and Starsky were not only miles ahead of him in ability, but also infinitely better looking. And so Rodriguez never missed an opportunity to offer them a smart remark. “He and his partner, Andy Gibbons, drove up right after all the camera crews arrived. I’m beginning to wonder just how committed the Sheriff’s Department actually is to this investigation.” Hutch blotted again. “Let’s get out of this sweatbox.”

Starsky took a final look around the room. “Okay,” he agreed. They moved out onto the small, second story balcony sidewalk overlooking a filth-encrusted pool. “You know—” Starsky proposed, apparently doing some scrutinizing of his own, “—you wouldn’t sweat so much if you didn’t dress like a partner in one of those Century City law firms.”

Hutch coldly eyed Starsky's choice of apparel. Why should Starsky have any interest in Hutch's clothes? It was none of his business. Especially the way Starsky was dressing lately. “At least I don't look like I just walked out of one of those Melrose Avenue trend-o-mats wearing this week's fashion fad.” He pinched the material of Starsky's jacket. “How much flattery did the salesgirl use to get you to buy that outfit?”

Starsky frowned at the remark. Hutch was immediately sorry he'd let his comments become cruel. He
shouldn't have let his irritation surface like that. Beside, there was really nothing wrong with Starsky's clothes. It was just that he simply hadn't wanted Starsky's opinion of his own attire.

Or was he really just uncomfortable with the implication that Starsky had been studying him? Hutch shook off the thought. No reason anybody would want to study him. No reason anybody would need to study him.

“You want the old jeans back?” Starsky finally retorted.

Hutch raised an eyebrow to announce the subject was closed.

Starsky accepted quietly—as he should—and turned his attention to the knot of camera crews and reporters that surrounded Boggs and Grimes. “I'm just as glad we don't have to handle that,” he tilted his head toward the group.

Hutch slipped a pair of sunglasses on. “I think they really enjoy it.”

Starsky shrugged. “You're just used to holding back your identity, laying low, not letting too many people get a fix on you. They're not.”

Hutch froze. Starsky had exactly hit on what he'd been thinking. Hutch had never liked it when people understood what was going on inside his head, or why he was doing what he was doing; and he was not happy that Starsky had identified a portion of his secretiveness. It was nobody's business why he did what he did, and certainly not up to them to judge him on it. But even more important, why had Starsky picked up on this? Could Starsky really be studying him? He'd have to be a little more alert to not only Starsky's personal behavior, but his behavior toward Hutch.

Hutch turned and jogged down the stairs to the parking lot, suddenly eager to move away from Starsky's scrutiny. Starsky followed behind. Hutch listened to the rhythm in Starsky's gait, noting the steadiness in his step as well as the energy. Leg strength. Muscle tone.

False hopes.

“That's the one thing I always hated about tying up a case and testifying,” Starsky went on as they reached the blacktop. He wasn't giving up this line of thought. “People find out who you are. Sometimes I think being undercover is safer than being out. Then no one can get to know you.”

Hutch lost a step at Starsky's admission. Starsky seemed to mark it as just another example of his clumsiness. But it was obvious the statement had been directed at Hutch. Of late Starsky had been very free with such off-hand remarks. Remarks that sounded very matter-of-fact and innocent, but held deep truths that Hutch was uncomfortable with, for more often than not they were made for Hutch's benefit. He took it to be a manifestation of Starsky's involvement in psychotherapy. He hoped the phase would end soon.

They wound their way between two mobile units to their car. Starsky leaned against the hood and looked back up at the motel room. Hutch opened his door to let the interior cool off.

“This is exactly like Browning,” Starsky folded his arms across his chest.

“And March, and Vasquez and Jun,” Hutch added from the other side of the car.

Starsky counted on his fingers. “And Lopez and Fields. This one makes seven in—” he counted on his fingers again, “—sixteen weeks.”

Hutch rubbed a thumb on a spot on the car top, then slid in and reached across to unlock Starsky's
door. Starsky folded into the car, Hutch started the engine, and a warning buzzer sounded. Hutch pulled his seat belt around, buckled it, then waited for Starsky to do the same. Starsky appeared preoccupied with something outside his window.

“I'm not moving—”

“All right!” Starsky grabbed at the metal clasp and jerked it around, shoving it into the catch. “I'm gonna have that buzzer disconnected one of these days,” he fumed.

“Fine.” Hutch shifted into gear and pulled out of the lot, knowing his acquiescence would be ignored. “Whatever.”

Starsky glared at his partner, then sighed. Hutch smiled inwardly at his handling of Starsky's discontent, although he wasn't happy that Starsky fought the belt every single time he rode in the car. It had practically become a routine. “Where to?” Starsky settled into the seat, leaving the seat belt issue behind.

“Where do you want to go?” Hutch replied. Immediately he regretted the question; he should have kept his mouth shut. Starsky would pick anywhere but the office, which was where they needed to stay.

Starsky gave it some thought. “Hell if I know. Might as well start with the guy's family and business associates.”

Hutch kept his eyes on the traffic flow and his composure calm. “I'd just as soon head back to the office and get started on the paperwork. We've got those uniforms they temporarily upgraded to take care of the legwork.” There. That wouldn't sound too emphatic.

Starsky sniffed. “I never met a uniform who could give me enough information so that I felt like I didn't have to go look things over myself. Besides, we've been assigned to this task force for six weeks now, and I'm tired of the desks and paper.”

“Grimes and Ruth said they'd call later.” Hutch continued to keep his eyes on the road and his voice expressionless. He didn't need to look at Starsky to know what was in his face. This was well trod-upon ground. Ever since Hutch had agreed to take this case, Starsky had constantly pushed to get back on the streets. It was as though Hutch's agreement to even take on this case carried with it a clause that allowed them to also return to their pre-shooting methods of detective work. It didn't. And it wasn't as if they hadn't discussed what accepting the case would mean. Hutch had been very explicit. They would use this assignment to become reacclimated to each other and to the department, and to ease into more supervisory roles. He knew Starsky understood it did not include days spent chasing after witnesses and suspects, and nights spent staking out possible trouble spots. He knew Starsky understood it to mean office hours and desk work. He knew it.

Starsky shifted within his belt to stare at Hutch. “They'll either route the call to us or take a message,” he dared.

A challenge. Hutch kept silent. A shiver exploded through his body; needles and pins flashed down his arms and out his fingertips. The adrenaline rush took him by surprise, and he glanced sideways to see if Starsky had noticed anything.

He hadn't.

“If Dobey were in command of this he’d have us all over the streets.” Starsky muttered.

Hutch pretended he hadn’t heard.
“We’d be rousting lowlifes, playing our snitches, climbing through the city’s dumps.” Starsky’s voice grew clearer and louder.

Pure fantasy, thought Hutch.

“Dobey’d let us run this on our own.”

Hutch slowly, dramatically, turned his head to stare at Starsky. “We are not under Dobey’s command.” Precise enunciation. “We are not working alone. We are part of a task force and as such are subsumed by the greater good of the team.” There. Big words ought to intimidate.

“Okay.” Starsky folded his arms tightly. “How’s this: We’ll head back to the office. I’ll get going on the paperwork. I’ll pick up my car from there and drive out to Morris’s place to talk with his wife.” He waited for a reaction.

Hutch set his mouth in a grim line. Starsky had checked him! His choices were now to either agree with Starsky's idea and let him go off alone, or admit defeat and give in to Starsky's earlier game plan. It was the first direct assault Starsky had made on him since they'd begun the case. Starsky wasn't giving in to Hutch's itinerary, he was offering alternatives. Well, thought Hutch, lose the battle but win the war.

“No. Forget the paperwork. It'll be easier if we go to Morris's house first, then swing back by his office before we hit Metro.” At least he could control Starsky's activities.

Hutch stole a glance at him. Starsky smiled and settled back into the seat, apparently thinking he’d won something. Starsky was testing him, marking his limits, discovering his boundaries. Fine, he determined. Starsky could damn well find those limits, and learn to live inside them. It would be better for all concerned once that was taken care of.

Hutch found himself once again playing the role of silent partner, studying Starsky as he probed and prodded the victim's widow. It was a masterful performance, perfected over years of sad practice. Starsky comforted in the face of tears, flattered to elicit bits of information, and promised to solve when he had no right to promise. He played a role they both knew well, one that could be satisfying when successfully performed for the guilty, but faintly disturbing when used on the innocent. But at least they knew both sides of that coin.

“That must have taken a lot of dedication.” Starsky was “admiring” a wall of diplomas and certificates. “And your supporting him through business school, then helping him get his MBA, well, that's really quite impressive.”

Mrs. Morris stood transfixed in front of the wall. In her late twenties, she was delicate and pretty. A bit underdeveloped, though, Hutch thought. Almost skinny. The kind whose pelvic bones tended to poke you at the most inopportune moments.

She didn't appear to really comprehend what Starsky was saying to her. “He was so ambitious,” she said softly. “So successful. He was moving up even more quickly than we'd planned.” She reached out to touch the glass of one of the diplomas. “I just can't think of what he was doing at a motel in the middle of the night. He told me he had a late business dinner to attend.” Tears filled her eyes.

Starsky took one of her hands between his. “Mrs. Morris, if you think of anything, or come across anything you think might help us find who murdered your husband, please call us.” He drew a card
from his pocket and placed it in the woman's hand. “Thank you for all your help. We'll be in touch.”
He gave her hand a final pat. “There will be other officers here today and maybe tomorrow, and the
coroner's office will be contacting you. And I think you ought to be prepared for the reporters that
will probably come. You might want to have a family member or friend come over and stay with
you.”

“You're leaving?” She stared off past Starsky's shoulder. “I was going to fix some coffee. Or tea?”

“That's all right,” he smiled. “We have to be going.”

“Oh. Well.” She shook her head, and her eyes finally managed to focus on Starsky. Starsky tried
another smile, but it was not returned.

Hutch rose, and the three of them walked silently to the door. Mrs. Morris waved after them as they
left. “Thank you,” she called feebly, then disappeared into the house.

“‘Thank you,'” Starsky sighed. “We come to her for information regarding her husband's murder,
and she thanks us.” He paused when they reached the car. “Was I too—phony?”

Hutch looked back at the house. “She was in shock, Starsk. She probably doesn't remember one
word you said. You did what you had to do.” It wasn't really an answer to Starsky's question, but
Starsky seemed content with the response. Probably because it spoke to his interrogative abilities.
When they had considered the offer to join the task force, Starsky had confessed he was afraid his
skills would be too rusty to serve them well. Another of his casual confessions, confessions probably
encouraged by his doctor. Perhaps, mused Hutch, that is what had convinced him to agree to take the
assignment. His desire to show Starsky that he hadn't lost those talents in the face of some of the
other things Starsky had lost.

And Starsky had lost quite a bit. A year of his life. The mobility in his right arm. The strength in his
body.

His body.

Hutch glanced at Starsky, waiting next to the car. Hutch had watched the man go from being a
robust, healthy young male to a frail, weakened old man. Forget the medical explanations for what
had ensued after the shooting, the physical transformation alone had been enough to sicken Hutch.
Weight loss and muscle atrophy had left Hutch a rag doll in place of a partner. The tanned skin lost
all its color. The turquoise eyes lost their radiance. The muscular chest lost its definition. Hutch had
been afraid to even touch Starsky after a time for fear of crushing his fragile body; every touch
seemed to leave behind a bruise.

Now, though, it was as if superficially nothing had ever happened. Of course, there were the scars,
but physically—the musculature was back in spades. A free-weight regimen designed to increase
Starsky's mobility range had firmed and toned beyond where he'd been before the accident. A
swimming regimen had brought back his stamina and strength. Starsky's back fairly rippled under his
shirt. His abdomen was flat and hard. His ass was firm and tight.

Hutch reached down and unlocked the car. He paused, staring down the street without really seeing
any of the street activity.

Just as his body had been. Starsky and Hutch. Two youthful, vital, healthy males in their prime.
Paragons of the male form, each in their own way. Strong. Powerful. A cut above the rest. The
perfect partnership. Brain and brawn. Princes of the city. Taken down by a vengeful Captain of
Industry and relegated to the land of the weak and impotent.
It took Starsky asking if they were going anywhere for Hutch to re-focus his attention. He shook himself mentally and brought his thoughts back to the case at hand. Responsibility replaced reverie.

Hutch entered the car, and opened Starsky's door. The engine turned over and the alarm sounded as Starsky dropped inside. Hutch belted himself. Starsky clenched his fists, then followed suit. Hutch smiled inwardly.

“So what do you think?” Starsky picked up the conversation as Hutch pulled away from the curb.

Hutch pursed his lips. “Unless she's up for this year's Oscar, I don't think she had anything to do with it.”

“Me either,” Starsky concurred. “If I'm any judge of character, and I ought to be by now, I'd say she's a devoted wife who's never going to understand what happened to her husband, or why.”

“Yeah,” Hutch turned down Wilshire. “Seven men,” he began to tally. “Seven different motels scattered over the area. All exhibiting signs of recent sexual activity, all strangled.”

“Tut, tut,” Starsky admonished. “We can't say number seven was officially strangled until the autopsy.”

“Screw the autopsy, we both saw the marks, he was strangled,” Hutch returned to his litany. “All the bodies were laid out for—viewing or something. All the bodies were washed. All the rooms were spotless—”

“Okay, okay,” Starsky interrupted. He rubbed his temples. “I'm getting a headache.” He rolled the window down further to increase the breeze. “You think poppers will show up in the autopsy?”

Hutch looked over at his partner. Real headache, or just a figure of speech? “Bet on it. These are kinky crimes, make no mistake about that. Someone or ones are getting their rocks off in a very sick way.”

“Disgruntled prostitute?” Starsky mused. “That's Ruth's theory. She thinks the killer is out for some kind of pay-back.”

“Could be,” Hutch said. “I'm wondering if all these murders aren't somehow business related. Morris' wife mentioned her husband was a fast mover.”

Starsky pulled out his notebook and flipped through it. “College in three and a half years, MBA in 12 months; moved from sales assistant to senior account executive in just under four years. He was either a junior Rockefeller or bedding the boss' wife.”

“Or the boss,” Hutch added.

Starsky cast a jaundiced eye on him.

Hutch continued his litany. “All our victims were white collar, successful businessmen. All were—”

“Hutch! Give me a break, will you? I'm tired of your countdown. It's all in the computer, anyway.”

Starsky pointed ahead of them. “There's the address.”

They pulled up in front of an office building on Wilshire. Starsky hopped out, and Hutch drove around the corner to find parking. That done, Hutch walked back and met Starsky in the lobby.

“Fifth floor,” Starsky greeted him. They rode the elevator up and found themselves entering a
spacious reception area. Starsky walked up to the receptionist while Hutch peeked down the various hallways branching out from the lobby. He studied the area before returning to Starsky's side.

Starsky took his wallet from his pocket and showed the receptionist his badge. “Police. We'd like to speak to a Mr. Gilliam.”

The receptionist barely glanced at Starsky's identification, instead buzzed down the corridor. There was no answer.

“I'm afraid Mr. Gilliam's out,” she said. She had laid down her paperback in order to use the intercom. That done, she picked it back up.

“Out where?” Starsky asked.

“Out to lunch,” she replied. The book must have been good; it was definitely more interesting than Starsky. And Starsky was normally very interesting to the opposite sex. The cover certainly indicated the book was full of heat and passion. It probably offered more excitement than she would ever see in real life, Hutch thought. Her face was so heavily made up anyone kissing it would only end up with a mouthful of cosmetic goo.

“When will he be back?” Hutch returned to the desk.

She shrugged. “I don't know. He's at lunch. When he's done, he'll come back.” She turned a page. Starsky flashed Hutch a “she's brilliant” look. Hutch shrugged.

“We'll wait.” Starsky sat down on the couch next to her desk.

Hutch mentally shook his head at Starsky. It was time for action, not dormancy. Starsky had called the situation wrong. Hutch placed both hands on the desk and leaned toward the woman. He used his index finger to push the book toward the desk. That should get her attention. “Is anyone else here?”

“I don't know,” she huffed. She pulled the book from under Hutch's finger, dog-eared the page, and picked up the phone. “Let me buzz around.”

Hutch gently took her hand and pushed the phone back into its cradle. She flinched under his touch. She'd probably never been touched by anyone of his class; certainly not anyone of his looks. “That's all right. I'll tell you what: Why don't you just tell us where Walter Morris's office is so we can take a look at it?”

“He's not here,” the woman answered. She ran a thumb over the cover of the paperback, tracing the illustration of the dashing cavalry officer on the front.

“I know,” Hutch smiled solicitously. “Where's his office?”

“Oh!” The receptionist finally looked up from her tome. “Well, it's the third on the right. No, the fourth. No—third.” She pointed down a corridor.

“We'll find it.” Hutch straightened and headed down the hall, Starsky on his heels, both glad to be away from the girl. Morris’ office turned out to be the fifth cubicle down, identified by a name plate outside the door.

Three steps each and the two men had covered the entire space. “Cozy,” Starsky commented. “Watcha got?”
Hutch was thumbing through the papers on the desk. “Let's see. Rate cards, confirmations, orders, contracts.”

“Huh?”

Hutch squatted to look through a stack of newspapers on the floor. “Yesterday's *Times, Herald*, and *Daily News*, last week's *L.A. Weekly* and *The Reader*, and several other local alternative papers.”

“Reads a lot,” Starsky noted.

“Yeah,” Hutch rose. “Let's see if we can't get Billings down here to catalog this stuff before someone cleans it out. She's been good at correlating all the victims' personal data.”

“She's after a permanent promotion.” Starsky's eyes swept the office. Satisfied, he turned and left.

Hutch strode up beside him, miffed that he'd been left behind. “She deserves one. She's a good cop.”

“She's after your ass,” Starsky smiled and waved at the receptionist as they crossed to the elevator. She, of course, was too wrapped up in her fantasy to notice.

A hint of a smile glittered in Hutch’s eyes. Leslie Billings was an ash blonde who wasn't afraid to let her hair grow long and silky in defiance of current shorter trends and department policy. She'd let it down once, in front of him. He'd estimated it would just reach the top of her shapely ass, and he'd been right. “She'd have more luck if she'd go after something in the front instead of the rear,” he said, surprised he'd voiced the thought. The elevator doors slid open.

Starsky slapped Hutch on the rear and pushed him into the car. “Oh, I don't know. Somebody might find something useful back there.”

The doors closed. Hutch glanced at Starsky, then focused on the numbers describing their descent.

CHAPTER TWO

“You're worried,” she smiled at him.

He blinked. “How can you tell?”

“This little line here—” she reached up and ran a finger down the furrow between his eyes, “—gets very, very deep.”

Hutch tried to smooth out his features. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she laughed. She ran her finger down to the tip of his nose. His skin tingled. “What are you worried about?”

Hutch captured her hand and brought the finger to his lips. “Nothing.” He kissed the tip of one finger, then kissed the tips of the others. “I have no worries when I'm with you.” It was a good phrase, if not exactly correct. At first, Elisa had offered a refuge from the concerns and stresses of the past year. Starsky had *had* to have Hutch's strength to climb out of his hell-hole; Elisa had merely *wanted* it. The strongest memory he still had of Elisa was the night he'd shown up on her doorstep to inform her that her husband, an officer with whom he'd been working a case, had been killed in the line of duty. She hadn't gone into shock, she hadn't gone into hysterics, she hadn't been calm in the
face of crushing grief. She had slowly, quietly, gratefully leaned into his arms and melted into his body, seeking his comfort and protection as she trembled and cried. His response had been immediate and intense. He would never let her go. She accepted his comfort and protection. And gradually, he'd coaxed her into not wanting him to let go. He just hadn't planned on having to coax her into so many other things.

Elisa laughed, breaking his reverie. She cupped his face in her hands, her green eyes shining. “I know you've been trying not to bring your work over here with you. But sometimes I know you can't help it. Don't forget I lived with a cop before.” A glimpse of loss flickered across her face, then disappeared. She kissed the tip of Hutch's nose, then his lips. When he opened his eyes, her smile was gone and her eyes were serious. “So if you're going to brood, at least let me know what you're brooding about so I can compensate accordingly.” Her thumbs caressed his cheeks, and then she stood. “More coffee?”

“No.” He looked up at her, confused. “Compensate?”

She shrugged. “I just need to know if it's me or your work.” She picked up their coffee cups and fled the room.

*Now what?* Hutch followed her into the kitchen. He leaned against the door frame as she washed the cups. “Elisa?”

“Yes?” she said, without looking up. The two cups were taking an unusually long time to wash clean.

“It's not you.” He actually believed that. It wasn't her rejection and refusal dampening his mood. After all, what was there about him to reject or refuse? Hutch came up behind her, slipped his arms around her waist, and nuzzled her neck. “How could it be you?” he murmured. Cool, black curls caressed his face.

Elisa's hands stilled in the dishwater. “It's just, you were so quiet all night,” she said softly. “I thought maybe you were thinking about something you wanted to tell me . . . or . . . didn't want to tell me.”

Hutch held her tighter, his cheek against her hair. “Truth?” he spoke into her ear. She nodded. “It's work.” Yes. Work was pulling him down.

Her head lifted a little. “Yes?”

“Yes.” He began to rock her gently. “But it's nothing you need to worry about. Sometimes I just can't stop thinking about the case, or what I should be doing on the case. But it's not you, 'Lisa.”

She dried her hands and slide around in his grasp. “I guess this is something I have to get used to. Again.” She sighed, a sound that raked through Hutch's heart. But Elisa clasped her hands around his neck, and the ache turned into longing.

Hutch looked at her troubled face, then brought her head to rest against his chest. “I'm sorry, sweetheart. I just—I can't always—” he stroked her hair and continued to rock, pressing into her. Her crotch, warm and inviting, hit him just at groin level. Her breasts pushed into his chest. Hutch squeezed her tighter, his rocking becoming more rhythmic. The friction between their bodies felt good. Elisa felt good.

She suddenly pushed away from him. “Don't.” Elisa took two steps back. “Don't try and turn the subject from work to sex.” She swallowed and turned her face from Hutch. “I know what you are, you know what I am, why does it always have to turn into a nightly struggle?” She fled again.
“Elisa,” Hutch called, exasperated and confounded. The loss of heat and pressure frustrated him. He followed her back into the living room, and found her hugging herself on the couch. Dinner suddenly didn't seem to be sitting too well.

He stood in the middle of the room. “Elisa—” he gestured helplessly, “—what's wrong? What did I do?” Actually, the better question was what wouldn't she do? But he knew better than to ask that.

“Don't play games with me, all right?” Her words were sharp, and she refused to look at him. “I wanted to talk about how you and I could better handle your work, then you try and avoid the subject by coming on to me when I've asked you not to do that! If you don't want to talk about something, then just say so! I can handle that!”

Hutch sat down next to her, brought his hand up to her shoulder. “Elisa—”

Elisa rose and walked away from him. “I said don't,” she said icily.

Hutch stood up. “I don't understand,” he pleaded, stumbling onward, unable to admit his guilt. “What's wrong? What did I do?” He took a step toward her. “Let's talk—”

“Go.” She backed away from him. “Just go. Please.” Her eyes filled with tears and her chin trembled.

“Go?” Hutch reached out for her, then stopped himself. What did he want with her anyway? He was nothing if not tired of trying to maneuver between the obstacles she constantly set up. And she certainly wasn't giving easily to this relationship. His queasiness suddenly left him. “Is that your answer to everything lately? Go?” He whisked up his jacket and headed for the door.

“Ken!” Elisa still stood in the middle of the room, trembling, looking after him with tear-filled eyes. “Wait! We can talk—”

He stopped and turned as he opened the door. Well. Something had finally gotten through to her. She didn't like it when he was the one doing the rejecting. “Talk?” He took a step back toward her. “You don't want to talk. You just want to torment me.” Anger burned white behind his eyes. It was extremely satisfying. “I didn't say anything or do anything tonight! You're just so intent on finding sex in everything I do or say that we can't even share an evening together anymore without you crying 'rape' every five minutes!” Hutch shoved the door into the wall and backed out. “Well, I've had enough,” he spat. “Don't call me, I'll call you,” he mocked, and left.

Hutch was in his car before he realized that he, too, was trembling, and his eyes stung. He rubbed them, taking a shaky breath. He wasn't sure what had happened back there, only that it had happened frighteningly quick. Everyone was coming down on him, and he hadn't done anything to deserve all the crap they were shoveling. Hutch's chest felt tight as the faces of all his tormentors flashed through his mind. Exhaustion bore down on his limbs. He'd better get home and get to bed and get out from under the load they were trying to hand him. Hutch started the car and drove off.

“I swear, I'm going to start carrying tranquilizers so I can hand them out to people whenever necessary.” Hutch rubbed his forehead painfully. A headache was threatening his morning. And he couldn't shake the nausea he'd awakened with. This was not the right morning to have to deal with Starsky and another DB.

“Hey! Lieutenant! Can you do something about that?” Starsky gestured toward a young girl sobbing
loudly in the corner of the room.

Grimes took the child by the shoulders and began guiding her toward the door. “Let’s get some air,” he said quietly to the girl. They stepped outside to the parking lot.

“Why do you think people scream when they see dead bodies?” Starsky made notes on a small pad as he thought out loud. Hutch glanced over at him, but he couldn’t keep his eyes focused. Even looking at Starsky this morning was more than he could handle. He just didn’t want to have to deal with the responsibility.

“Instinct,” Hutch crouched by the bed, examining the frayed ends of the bedspread, purposely brushing off his partner. “Warning. Survival.” He rose and walked around to the other side of the bed without elaborating. Why did Starsky always have to assume he knew the answer to everything? Everyone always expected him to know what was going on. Everyone always expected him to be in charge. Everyone always turned to him for details and information. And then when things didn’t turn out precisely as he’d explained, everyone always faulted him as well.


“Same marks,” Hutch pointed at the body lying on the bed. “Neck, wrists, ankles. He struggled, too. The bruises are larger and the cuts deeper. And did you catch the marks around his nipples? But still clean as a whistle.” Hutch looked around the room, managing to avoid eye contact with everybody. “Bed, bathroom, dresser, everything clean as a whistle.” Something nagged at him. “How do you have sex and keep everything so clean?”

“Damned if I know.” Starsky finished his observations and slipped the notebook back into his pocket. He didn’t seem to be aware Hutch was ignoring him. Hutch chanced another glance his way. “I’m tired.” Starsky yawned, then purposely looked at Hutch. Hutch recognized the dark tint in the eyes instantly. Guilt. “I wish someone would discover these bodies at more convenient times.”

Hutch looked at his watch to try and distance himself from Starsky, but his attention was dragged back. They’d both barely managed to put on more than clean shirts and slacks and throw jackets on after receiving their phone calls this morning. Dark circles rimmed Starsky’s eyes, and his skin seemed a little pasty. And Hutch was sucked in again. There was no way out; Starsky was his charge, his duty, his burden. His sacrifice.

He’d see to it Starsky took it easy for the rest of the day.

Hutch nodded in understanding at the hint of shame he caught in Starsky’s admission. “Yeah. Me, too,” he agreed quietly. And my shame is that I tried to ignore your distress.

A slight smile graced Starsky’s lips, his eyes suddenly lighting up in pleasure. The blue irises were like a searchlight on Hutch, trying to scan him and ferret out something inside him. A wave of dizziness nearly made Hutch reach out for the wall. He looked away, escaping Starsky’s gaze, finding refuge in noting the details of the room. But from the corner of his eye he could see Starsky continue to stare at him, opening his mouth to speak. More soul-baring admissions, Hutch quickly surmised. And he’d had enough of them. It was just too much.

Hutch would have fled the room if Ruth hadn’t entered and planted herself next to Starsky. Providence with carmine hair.

Ruth paid no attention to the two detectives. She merely stared down at the body before them. “Did you catch the mouth?” She leaned forward and used a fingernail to sweep the lips. “See? The corner’s got a cut.”
Hutch risked looking at Starsky. Regret had replaced the anticipation in Starsky's eyes. Hutch breathed a silent sigh of relief as Starsky finally shifted his attention from his partner to the corpse. Starsky reluctantly bent around Ruth and looked closely. "Gag? That's funny. The lab reports on the others indicated tape residue around the mouth." He turned to Hutch. Hutch shrugged, quickly averting his eyes. He wouldn't risk being sucked into Starsky's gaze again.

"Maybe she ran out of tape," Ruth suggested.

"'She'," Starsky raised an eyebrow. "You don't really think a woman could do this to a full grown man, do you?"

"Hmmm," Ruth appeared to be deep in thought. She glanced at Hutch—almost as though seeking permission—then turned to face Starsky. "A woman can make a man do a lot of things." She ran her fingers up and down the light material of Starsky's jacket lapels. Starsky looked down at her warily. "Especially if he's inclined that way in the first place." Her hands moved up to caress Starsky's neck, stroking upwards to trace the curve of his ear on one side, the line of his jaw on the other. Starsky shifted uncomfortably, his eyes locked to hers. "You know there are hookers who specialize in the kinkier trade," she continued her ministrations, running her fingers through his hair, then down to caress his neck. "Once the trick has submitted, she's got him under her thumb, so to speak." Her hands suddenly encircled Starsky's throat, thumbs punching up into his flesh. His head jerked back and his hands caught her forearms. "Bingo." Ruth just as suddenly released him and stepped out of his grasp. "He's hers."

Hutch turned sideways, suppressing a wry smile. Some people gave up control so easily. Starsky had always been one of those people. Just another reason to constantly watch out for him.

Starsky ran a finger under his shirt collar and cleared his throat. "I suppose." He looked away from both of them, and took a deep breath. "What else have you got?" Ruth's display had obviously unnerved him.

Ruth walked over to the door and looked out. "I've been pulling files for weeks now. I've got officers canvassing the streets. I'm up to my ying-yang in male prosties who are sure their last trick was trying to kill them, and just as many johns who are convinced their last date is the killer." She looked back at Starsky and Hutch. "In other words, we've got nothing."

"I hate that kind of attitude," Grimes came up behind her. "Even if it is the truth." He stepped past her into the room. "Do you think there could be some link between the victims' actual physical appearances?"

Ruth turned to scan the body stretched out on the bed. "Not unless the link is any length, any time. I think the victims are choosing themselves. The only link is the killer."


"I think she's an illegal," Grimes answered. " Barely knows English. Won't say much more than she found the body. I expect she'll disappear by tonight."

That meant Rodriguez was outside interviewing la niña in deference to his native-speaking ability, as opposed to Hutch's tutored ability. Didn't want to get into that argument again with Rodriguez, even if Hutch had been nannied by a Guatemalan and spent many a college summer in Mexico City. Starsky had been right in the middle of that one, right where he shouldn't have been, but right where he'd shown Hutch the necessity of allowing Rodriguez to have his area of expertise. If Hutch had won the position of interviewing all the Mexican speakers, he would have ended up with less time
available for Starsky. And sacrificing for Starsky was all that mattered.

“Same procedure?” Hutch stepped up to the door and squinted at the morning sun.

“Same procedure,” Grimes nodded. “You know what to do, we know what to do, everybody knows what to do.” He sighed.

“We'll be in touch, then.” Starsky stepped out past the group and into the early morning sun. He slipped on his sunglasses, took a deep breath, and headed for the car. Hutch followed. All he wanted to do was get out of there.

Starsky didn't get into the car. Instead, he balanced against the hood. Uh-oh, Hutch thought. He wants to talk.

“What do you think about this physical link?”

“Similar physical characteristics?” Hutch thought a moment. At least Starsky hadn't asked a stupid question. He scanned the list of DB's catalogued in his head. All were extremely attractive men, well able to attract interest from either sex. “Well, two were Black, three Caucasian, two Hispanic, one Oriental. Two were over 6 feet, six were under. Four were mustachioed—”

“Physical characteristics,” Starsky interrupted.

Hutch looked over at him, lifting an eyebrow. If people were going to insist he be a walking computer…. “Oh. Well. Five were of average len—”

“Shit. Don't tell me you've got those statistics up in your head, too.” Starsky turned around and planted his palms on the hood. “We need a break. A witness, a tip, a lead. Something to give us an idea of who we're dealing with.” He wiped his hands and smiled. “You really got their vital statistics in your head?”

Hutch chuckled and said nothing. Yes, really, he had their vital statistics up in his head. Of course, he and Starsky had nothing to worry about compared to these guys. They were both much better endowed than the victims.

“Hi, guys,” Ruth walked over to them. “Come here often?”

“I'm not that kind of guy,” Starsky stuck his nose in the air.

“These guys were,” Ruth tossed her head back at the motel room.

“They were, weren't they?” Hutch's brow creased in concentration. “Yet there's been no real evidence any of these men frequented prostitutes or led secret lives.” He smiled inwardly. Data Man strikes again. “According to family and friends, there's no evidence—”

“He's driving me crazy,” Starsky broke in, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Want to trade?”

Ruth appraised Hutch carefully, who pointedly ignored her scrutiny. “No,” she decided, “I think I'll keep mine. It'd be too much trouble to have to learn how to pull another partner's strings, even if yours is a better dresser.” She kissed her fingertips and pressed them against Hutch's cheek. “No offense, beautiful,” she smiled.

“None taken,” Hutch forced a smile in return. Beautiful…

Ruth kissed her fingertips again, pressing them against Starsky's lips. She seemed to like to touch
Starsky. And what was not to like? When healthy, his skin was always warm, his muscles always firm. “Do try and make the meeting on Thursday. The chief likes to see some return on the money he’s put into this little task force.” She wriggled her hips and swayed back to the motel room.

“Hold it!” Starsky suddenly called after her. Ruth stopped and turned. “Did I win?”

Ruth shook her head. “Only Channels 7 and 13 have shown up so far,” she held up seven fingers, then one and three. “I'll let you know if you Show.” She waggled all ten fingers, then disappeared into the room.

Starsky and Hutch watched her go, then got into the car.

“How do you suppose Grimes manages her?” Starsky asked. “Wait,” he suddenly reached out and grabbed Hutch's hand before he could fit the key in the ignition. Starsky quickly drew his belt around him and buckled it. “I hate that buzzer,” he grumbled.

Hutch smiled sardonically and buckled his own belt. He started the car and pulled away from the motel.

“I feel like I'm into bondage.” Starsky wriggled within the confines of the belt. “What do you say we go check out this guy's co-workers?”

“What do you say we let Harper and Regal do that?” Hutch replied without turning his head. He was suddenly very weary of this little struggle. Why wouldn't Starsky learn?

“They did it last time.” Starsky tried to turn his body toward his partner. “Frankly, I'm getting tired of letting them do all our work.”

Hutch allowed himself a second to hide his exasperation. “They're not doing ‘our’ work. They're doing ‘their’ work.” Give it up, Starsk! “This is a special case, buddy. We've been assigned to a special task force, and we're working with over twenty other officers.” He continued to watch the road instead of his partner. “This is not a case we can handle by ourselves. There's just no way.” He needed an antacid.

Starsky suddenly slammed a fist into the dashboard. Hutch snapped his head around in surprise. “You know what I mean,” Starsky grumbled, drawing his fist into his chest and massaging it. “It's just that, we've been spending all our time on paper trails while everyone else is out on the streets.” He was once again animated. “We are not that swamped that we can't afford to get out and do a little of our own hunting. We could at least hit some of our old snitches!”

Hutch recognized the plea inherent in the statement. Starsky had spent the last 14 months of his life learning to live in the world again, and he wanted things returned to the way they were before. But they couldn't, and they never would, and Hutch was beginning to see he was going to have to force Starsky to face this if he wouldn't accept it on his own. But for right now, it would simply be enough to quash this whole conversation. Besides, Hutch needed to get back to Metro and his locker full of stomach remedies.

Hutch maneuvered them onto the freeway. “‘Everyone else’ is not out on the streets. ‘Everyone else’ is doing whatever job they were assigned.” He pointed a finger at Starsky, angry and fed-up, but determined not to show it. “We can get just as much done searching through files and using the telephone as we can scouring the streets.” He paused. “If you tried it sometime you might see that.”

“Part of our new nine-to-five image?” Starsky snapped. Hutch didn't reply.

“It is, isn't it?” Starsky continued to probe. “Regular hours, less time on the street, more time behind
That was the agreement! Hutch ground his teeth together. “We're on a very specific case right now, Starsk,” Hutch replied evenly. “We're part of a task force, not out on our own—”

“You arranged that real good,” Starsky murmured.

“And as such, we are responsible not only to Lieutenants Boggs and Grimes, but also to every other member of that task force,” Hutch finished. “You want out?” He ended his lecture, but something nagged at him. What did Starsky mean, _arranged_?

Starsky looked sidelong at him. “What if I did?” he posed.

“Fine,” Hutch turned his attentions back to the road. “We resign from this case, we're back on burglary detail.”

“What ‘we’?” Starsky suddenly challenged. “You obviously seem very happy with this set-up.” He stared at Hutch, still and expectant.

Hutch’s chest heaved, his face flamed, but he refused to look at Starsky. “I told you, if you're not happy, resign from the case. Get out.” There. Fire with fire. Starsky wouldn't resign from the case; he coveted the assignment too much. And there was no way he could survive this assignment without Hutch; he knew that as well. It came down to this, and it had always been understood between them; where Hutch went, Starsky followed.

_Because he needs me more than I need him._

And suddenly:

_Oh yeah?_

The universe blinked.

Hutch pretended it hadn’t.

Hutch glanced quickly at Starsky without turning his head. Starsky had slunk down in his seat and was staring morosely out the window. Probably contemplating a return to that grubby little desk and that grubby little chair and that grubby little assignment in that windowless room on the twelfth floor of Parker Center, Hutch thought. If Starsky wanted to be out and about at all, he'd have to put up with Hutch’s rules, because he could no longer make his own. As a matter of fact, Elisa was trying to come up with some pretty ridiculous rules of her own, too, which needed to be overridden.

_Damn it, why won't anybody learn the rules?_

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**CHAPTER THREE**

Starsky sat down roughly in his chair. Hutch pointedly ignored him. It had been hours since they'd returned to Division, and Starsky had immediately abandoned Hutch to his computer files. Hutch
hadn't minded. It gave him a chance to collate some data without constant and unnecessary interruptions.

It was late enough now a cleaning man emptied wastebaskets in the corner.

“Well?” Starsky finally said. “Do you want to hear or not?”

Hutch sat back in his chair, a smug look on his face. Whatever Starsky had researched would be nothing to what he had come up with. He waited for Starsky to speak.

“Fellows was an ‘ass-kisser’ a ‘dirty tricks man, a ‘ladies’ man, or a ‘hard working team player,’ depending upon who you talk to.” Starsky picked up a pencil and began tapping it absently. “Half his office hated him, half loved him. I got no more and no less with Morris and Lopez.”

“What?” Hutch looked at him, confused. Where had Starsky come up with that information? Hutch had all the transcribed interviews signed out, and there was certainly no paper on Fellows as yet.

“What do you mean, ‘what’?” Starsky dropped his pencil, obviously exasperated. “I've been talking to Fellow's friends and business contacts. I've got a list of people that wouldn't have been sorry to see him go, but no reason why they'd also want to get rid of any of the others.” Starsky's tone lightened to reveal his pleasure with himself. “There's absolutely no connection between them except they've been murdered by the same person, unless they belong to some super-secret sex club and this is pledge month.”

Hutch shifted in his chair. His eyes narrowed. He couldn't have heard what he just heard. “You've been out interviewing people?”

Starsky stared at him. “No. I've got a crystal ball and saw all this from afar,” Starsky sniffed. “Of course I've been out interviewing people.”

Hutch's back stiffened. “I thought we agreed we weren't going to conduct anymore interviews,” he said darkly. Going behind his back was a new mode of behavior for Starsky. Hutch didn't like it. It signaled danger.

Starsky looked away. He picked up the pencil and began tapping it again.

Hutch glared at Starsky. “Is that where you went this afternoon? Out to interview Fellows' neighbors and acquaintances? I thought you were going to the doctor’s.” Hutch waited for Starsky to answer. The only noise in the room was the janitor emptying wastebaskets.

Starsky stopped his tapping. “I'm not your child.” He looked up at Hutch, daring him to respond. “I'm not your possession, or your responsibility.” The words were bait in a trap, confirmed by the expectancy in Starsky's eyes.

Hutch held his breath. He glanced down at the papers in front of him, then grabbed for the Styrofoam cup off to the side. The last few drops of cold coffee hit his throat. He crumpled the cup and pitched it into the janitor's trash cart. Starsky was testing him. No, Starsky was defying him.

Starsky was the child and he was the parent and Starsky was bound and determined to do something he'd been told not to. But couldn't the child see that the parent was only forbidding the action out of protection and love? Couldn't the child recognize that the parent was older and wiser and knew what was better for him? Hutch's thoughts tumbled by furiously. If he exploded now, it might send Starsky into more acts of rebellion. And if things were to run smoothly from now on in their partnership, the acts of rebellion would have to be quashed.

Hutch chose his course of action. Diversion. “I could've used some help with all this stuff this
afternoon,” Hutch subtly shifted the area of conversation.

“All that stuff.” Starsky huffed. “Why don't you let Billings do all that? That's her job, you know!”

Starsky let the pencil roll from his fingers. He appeared to be struggling for some sort of composure. And he must have found it, for Starsky suddenly settled quietly back in his chair. “Or is that where you spent your afternoon?” he smirked, opting for a verbal form of retaliation. “In Billings' office?”

Hutch set his jaw. “I've been working on a bottled water connection,” he explained, his voice tight. I'll show you just how smart I am. Not only do I know better how to run this case, but I can prove it.

“Bottled water?” Starsky snorted. “You're telling me there's a mad water bottler out on the streets strangling ambitious businessmen after sending them to the moon on poppers?”

“Yes,” Hutch's voice remained controlled. He'd show Starsky what could be done with some good, solid research. “All our victims worked at firms or owned business that received their bottled water from the same company.” He let a satisfied smile play on his lips. Brains over brawn, hadn't that always been their old skirmish? Well, brains were going to triumph. Especially since brawn was permanently disabled, weight training or no.


“Or the cleaning firm,” the janitor said. Both Starsky and Hutch glared at him. The janitor made a hasty retreat.

“It's the only connection so far,” Hutch insisted, his voice hinting at the tiniest loss of control. Starsky hadn't even gone through the reports yet! How did he know what was or wasn't right?

“Okay,” Starsky played along, his manner testy yet teasing. “What's the motive?”

Hutch ground his teeth together. If Starsky wanted to play with the big boys, he's better be prepared to play fast and hard. Hutch leaned forward, a glint in his eye. “Envy,” he answered, pleased with his interpretation of the case. “The killer's blue collar, and he feels cheated because he's not white. Or maybe he's just a sex psycho and latches onto the victims when he spots them in the office. Either way, the connection's being made in the victim's place of business.”

“How does he get them to the motel rooms without arousing suspicion?” Starsky prodded.

“They go willingly.”

Starsky looked bored. “Everybody's into this bondage thing.”

“Starsky!” Hutch was clearly at his wit's end. He was tired of Starsky's obstinacy on this one point, and was ready to backhand it into Starsky's face. “Why do you keep fighting this point? All the evidence indicated that most of these men struggled very little, if at all. They wanted to be tied up! They enjoyed it! It aroused them!”

“It hurts to be tied up!” Starsky suddenly hissed. “It's scary!”

“Yes!” Hutch planted two fists on the table, wrists touching. “It is when the bad guys are after you, trying to take you down or do whatever it is their sick little minds want to do to you!” He pulled his fists back. Hutch was suddenly very aware of where Starsky was coming from. It was another confession, an admission of old fears and unpleasant memories. Being tied up did hurt. It was scary.

And it also got the old adrenaline pumping.
Hutch met Starsky's eyes in a moment of shared understanding. “This is different,” Hutch continued, a new gentleness apparent in his manner. The parent must teach the child. “These men wanted to be tied up. And you've got to accept that. However the contact was made, the killer and the victim arranged to meet for the express purpose of engaging in sexual bondage.”

Starsky seemed disgusted at the change in tone from Hutch. “I'm not stupid,” he said. “I know what goes on in the world.” Starsky was silent a moment. Hutch held his breath. There was something else bothering him, and Hutch wasn't really up for any more confessions. “It’s just that, well, doesn't this case kind of get to you?”

“What do you mean, get to me?” Hutch raked a hand through his hair. He focused his gaze on his reports rather than Starsky. *I'm not your shrink, Starski! And I'm not going to be your patient!*

“I mean,” began Starsky quietly, ignoring Hutch's lack of attention, “doesn't it—don’t you—I mean it's been over a year for me, and when I see all this stuff, I don't know whether I want to throw up or—or come,” he finished sheepishly.

Hutch's eyes locked on to Starsky at this revelation. The need in Starsky's face was overwhelming. Of course. That was the cause of Starsky's recent antagonism. The constant tension, the constant tease, the constant frustration. It's over a year, Hutch thought. Starsky hadn't been with anyone since the attempt on their lives. He only assumed Hutch hadn't lost that part of his life.

“This is just a case, Starke.” Hutch wanted to alleviate some of Starsky's distress, but he really didn't want to go any further. The details of his sex life were just not important here, and Starsky had no details of his own. So if Starsky wanted to talk about this with someone, he could talk about it with his shrink. “So it involves a little bondage. We've seen that before.”

Starsky leaned forward. “Hutch?” His voice was soft and low. Another question. Another query. Another attempt to pierce Hutch’s psyche. “You ever had those impulses?” There was an honest curiosity in the question.

Hutch's lids lowered. He licked his lips, then sat back in his chair, relaxed and casual. Very shortly after he’d been issued his first pair of handcuffs, he'd done a little experimenting. That one redhead had certainly shown him a number of ways to immobilize a person. “What if I have?” The question just slipped out. Hutch didn't really want to talk about his past experiences. But Starsky had never pursued this subject before, so he probably wouldn't do it now.

Starsky eyed his partner carefully. But instead of dropping the subject, he relaxed also, draping an arm across the back of his chair. “Have you ever—acted—on any of those impulses?”

Damn the man! He was going to have to play this all the way. Well, Hutch could sustain a pose better than anybody. He'd tiptoe around the subject, avoiding it completely. Hutch smiled, feigning interest in a cuticle. “Maybe.” The tease was obvious, although Hutch hadn't meant it *that* way. Not really.

Starsky looked away, then shifted position. “You're reaching with the bottled water thing,” he returned to their former conversation.

Hutch sighed inwardly, thankful Starsky had finally dropped the subject. He reached back, clasping his hands behind his head. “You think your sex club idea is any better?” Game won. Starsky had backed off.

Starsky picked up the pencil and twirled it between his fingers. “No,” he admitted. “But your theory just doesn't hold water.” He smiled. Hutch ignored the pun. “It just seems a little complicated and far-
fetched.” Starsky paused, then smiled again as he realized he'd made a second joke. “Frankly, I'd rather put my money on Ruth and her prostitute-revenger or Gordie and his avenging street preacher.”

“I repeat. Do you have a better idea?”

Starsky slammed the pencil down on the desk. Hutch jerked upright. “Damn it all, Hutch! What is it with you? You won't hit the streets with me, you won't talk to me, and you're doing everything you can to make me feel like I'm going about this whole investigation the wrong way! It's like a damned contest! Which one of us can find the killer first—you and your printouts or me and my car!”

Hutch lowered his arms. Nausea was becoming his best friend. He sat forward. Starsky was on to him, although he'd misinterpreted Hutch's vigilance as competition. “No,” he said seriously. “This isn't a contest. It's not you against me. It's not even us against them.”

Starsky's eyes widened. Hutch backpedaled quickly, suddenly aware of how Starsky had taken that last statement. It was true, it wasn't them against the world anymore. But now wasn't the time to discuss it. “Look. We all have to work together on this one. We're part of a team now. And our part of this investigation requires us to try and piece together the evidence that is gathered for us.”

Starsky didn't look convinced. In fact, he looked downright hurt. “I swear, Hutch. I'm in no mood for stupid games.” Fire and ice warred in his eyes. “If you're acting like a jerk just so I'll get mad and call off our involvement in this investigation—”

Hutch slammed his hand down on the desk. “I told you, this is not a contest!” His hand stung from slapping the blond wood. He shouldn't have shown his anger like that.

Starsky shook his head, staring, his brow knitted in confusion. “Then if this isn't a contest, what the hell is going on here?”

“Good police work, I hope,” Ruth suddenly appeared at the head of the table. “Working late, boys?”

Starsky and Hutch shifted in their seats, dropping their battle stances. Starsky was obviously upset at the interruption.

Hutch wasn't. He smiled up at his superior warmly. “You're out late tonight.”

“Mmm,” Ruth stepped around the table and walked up to Hutch. “I'm glad I caught you here tonight. I was going to have you come in tomorrow morning.”

Starsky looked up at her expectantly, a trace of anger still evident in his eyes. “You found something?”

“Well,” Ruth placed her hand on the back of Hutch's chair. “That isn't why I was going to call you in. I have to discuss a procedural matter with you.”


Ruth cast her eyes on Starsky. “It seems that some of the other task force officers haven't been getting to their respective case interviews first. It seems you've been out interviewing family and business associates.”

Hutch remained silent. Starsky could field this one by himself. It might teach him a thing or two.

Starsky crossed his arms and looked across at Hutch. Hutch looked at the far wall. “Well—” he
began, “—interviewing people who might have knowledge that—”

“Please,” Ruth held up her hand. “Don't quote procedure at me. I'm considering this snafu my fault for not being as explicit in my initial instructions to you as I should have been.”

“Snafu’?” Starsky echoed. Hutch moved his gaze to the ceiling.

Ruth walked around to the other side of Hutch's chair. Starsky followed her with wary eyes. “Look. Harry and I were very selective about who we wanted on this task force, once we had determined that a very—specific—serial killer was on the loose. We chose officers with good undercover arrest records. Officers who show a flair for investigation. Officers who know the basics of dogged detective work.”

*He's in it up to his ears. Serves him right.*

Starsky smiled, affecting a modest pose. “Well—”

“Well nothing,” Ruth stopped him with a withering stare. Starsky immediately sobered. “You were brought in as senior officers, assigned to coordinate and co-direct this investigation. I thought we were clear on that, but since we obviously weren't, I'm making it clear now. You will not conduct any personal interviews unless authorized by Grimes or me. The only time I want to see you out on the field is at a crime scene. Got that?”

Hutch scratched his jaw. Luck! Now Starsky would have to do things his way. “We've got it. It won't happen again,” he answered laconically.

“Why?” Starsky pressed. Hutch glowered at him. Just swallow it! Admit you were wrong and I was right!

“Are you questioning a senior officer's orders?” Ruth shot back.

Starsky shook his head. “No ma'am. But if we're so all-fired wonderful, why aren't we being allowed to do what we do best?”

No, Starsky wasn't questioning Ruth's orders. He was disputing them. *Handle him, sweetheart!*

Hutch urged silently.

“Sergeant,” Ruth took a few steps toward the door. “In my opinion, you are being allowed to do what you do best. If you have a problem with that, then I suggest you need to re-think your place in this investigation. If you decide you aren't satisfied or happy with your contribution, then I would be happy to consider removing you from this case. Have I made myself clear?”

Starsky didn't blink. “Yes ma'am.”

Hutch cheered silently.

“Good.” Ruth reached the door and pushed it open. “I'll still expect the two of you in my office in the morning. We got a bit of a break this evening. March's wife found a veritable treasure trove of dirty magazines while cleaning out the trunk of her husband's car. Gordie's going through them now, but I want you two to give them a thorough going over.” She looked at Starsky. “I'll set you up in a conference room and you can put your investigative expertise to use. All right?”

Starsky opened his mouth to speak but Hutch jumped in. Enough was enough, and yet again Starsky couldn't see when to quit. “We'll be there,” he acknowledged. “Good night.”
“Good night,” Ruth said simply, and left.

“Shit.” Starsky stood up. “I'm friggin' tired of all these friggin' games. What are we doing on this investigation? What does she want us for, our bodies?”

Hutch pondered the question.

“And where does she get off treating us like puppets?” Starsky didn't wait for an answer. His anger had transferred from Hutch to Ruth, thank goodness. “I don't like being treated like we're rookie cops and we don't know our noses from our asses and—”

Hutch shut his eyes. “Starsky—”

“And I'm tired of being treated like a goddamned baby by you!” Apparently not all his anger had transferred. Hutch remained silent.

“I'm going,” Starsky grabbed for his jacket. “Are you coming or what?”

Hutch shrugged. He just wanted to put an end to the day. “Yeah.” He stood up. “I'm coming.”

“Want to come to the gym with me?” Starsky opened the door and waited for Hutch to step through.

Hutch looked at Starsky in surprise. He thought Starsky had learned long ago not to invite him to the gym. Why this invitation, and why now? “And have to listen to you groan and complain all evening?” Hutch walked through the door and strode down the hall. Starsky caught up to him. “No, thanks. I'm going over to Elisa's.” _Shit._ Hutch kicked himself mentally. He hadn't meant to mention her.

“Is this the same Elisa I haven't been introduced to yet, or is this a new Elisa in a string of Elisas you don't keep around long enough for me to meet?” Starsky asked sarcastically.

Hutch whirled and put out his hand to stop Starsky. He felt a little lightheaded, as though someone had filled his brain with helium. And the gas was crushing all his thoughts up against his skull as it expanded, threatening to rupture his whole head. Little pieces of Starsky and Elisa and Ruth and work and doctors and home and whatever else was in his brain were about to be splattered all over the ceiling and walls. God, why did he have to have so much to deal with right now? “Look. Why don't we just stop here, go home, and get a fresh start in the morning? I am really not in the mood to thrash things out now.” Hutch glared at him, hoping Starsky would feel sufficiently spurned to just go home and leave him alone!

Starsky removed the offending hand from his chest. He loosened his grip as if to drop it, then grasped Hutch's hand tightly. Hutch flinched at the contact. Starsky looked down at the floor, but if he'd caught Hutch's tremor he didn't react to it. “I'm hungry, I'm tired—and I'm sorry.” He gave the hand a gentle squeeze. “Fresh start tomorrow?” he offered, finally looking up at Hutch.

Liquid blue, pulling him in, sucking him down, enveloping him, suffocating him—

Hutch tried to match the sincerity in Starsky's eyes, knew he wasn't even coming close, but managed at least a smile. “Tomorrow.” Starsky's eyes were still pulling him down, offering him a haven of sorts, a sanctuary; relief from his concerns and burdens. But Starsky _was_ one of the burdens. Hutch tore himself away from Starsky's offer and walked off.

“Hutch?”

Hutch hesitated, then stopped and turned. Starsky seemed to be in shadow, except for his eyes which
burned like a beacon, accentuating the confusion and pain in his voice. Hutch bowed his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose. *Too much!*

“Don't go.” It was a plea.

Hutch was unable to look up at Starsky. Starsky's need was a tangible thing, pulling him back, draining his will, drawing him down. Hutch shook his head and shrugged, a gesture that suddenly exhausted him. It was as if his muscles had suddenly atrophied and could no longer support him. He was spent, drained, exhausted, worn down; he had to get away. Now.

It was only through extreme conscious effort Hutch was able to make his body turn and move down the hall. He felt tranquilized and detached. He felt hollow and vacant.

And he could feel Starsky's eyes on him long after he'd left the hallway.

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**CHAPTER FOUR**

Starsky shoved his clothes into the lopsided locker and slammed the door shut. Things were simply becoming too unwieldy lately. Things were becoming too confusing, as well as unmanageable. “Things,” meaning Hutch. And this evening had certainly been a prime example of that.

Starsky walked automatically to the shower area and splashed briefly under the warm spray. After the shooting, once he'd been able clear the drugs and pain out of his system and could think clearly again, he'd finally noticed the new man who'd been attending him throughout his convalescence.

Starsky padded out to the pool and chose a middle lane. He dove in awkwardly and began his laps with a steady crawl. Even as he'd struggled with his own feelings and confusion and tried to put some semblance of normalcy back into his life, he'd also had to deal with Hutch's adjustment to what had happened.

He thought he'd known what to expect from Hutch, and had counted heavily on Hutch's consistency in his reactions to Starsky's hospitalizations. Surprises were not what he'd needed.

But surprises were what he got. At first Hutch had done all the usual things, hovered over him protectively, smothered him with attention, bothered him with “doctor's orders,” and taken over the daily details of everyday life so Starsky would have no worries. It had been a comforting cocoon to convalesce in.

But after several months the officiousness had become tyrannical. Hutch became regimented and regimental. Schedules had to be adhered to. Appointments could not be missed. Timetables had to be set. And it all had to be done Hutch's way, or not at all. Hutch knew best, Hutch was always right; Hutch would take care of everything and everyone. Hutch would do it all.

At first Starsky had teased Hutch, calling him the “Great Blond Dictator,” but Hutch had met each affectionate jibe with perplexity or anger. It was increasingly clear that Hutch had no sense that he'd turned onto a road of confinement and imprisonment; he seemed to think he was acting in the only way possible. Hutch simply expected everyone to do things his way, because his way was right.
Starsky's therapist explained it all very simply: Hutch was attempting to control his environment, as well as Starsky's, because he'd been unable to control Gunther.

And as long as they were discussing Hutch, the therapist thought it also sounded as though he might be depressed, anxious, and in need of evaluation. Did Starsky think Hutch would accept some counseling also?

No. Starsky didn't think so.

Starsky switched to a labored sidestroke. Therapy had ultimately been his lifeline. He'd been able to start facing his fears; accepting some and changing others. He'd discovered strengths he never knew he had. He'd found possibilities he'd never considered and possibilities that, finally considered, filled him with fear and hope. Eventually, he'd found himself.

And he'd lost Hutch.

The man who had come out of their ordeal with him was not the same man Starsky had known before. The shell was there, but the insides had been removed and revamped. Sort of like a pod person. All the equipment was there, but somewhere a key component had been replaced. It was not only frustrating, but downright scary sometimes. Starsky wanted back the Old Hutch.

The Old Hutch. Starsky explored the image. Not just the Old Hutch that was lean of form, physically graceful and beautiful to look at. But the Old Hutch that wasn't afraid to be near him and touch him. The Old Hutch that trusted his choices and enjoyed his presence. The Old Hutch that took pleasure in their being together. As Starsky had healed, he'd come to miss that comforting presence.

What's more, he'd come to crave that comforting presence.

That had been a shock. Not only was there something missing in his life, but now he wanted something that had never been there to begin with. It was as though the bullets had broken through to places inside him he'd never known were there. Huge, empty caverns had been opened up to exploration, and he'd discovered their secret was in being filled, not plastered up. And they demanded to be filled with Hutch.

How many months before he'd admitted the need inside himself? And how many more before he'd come to accept that need? And then the inevitable question: What are you going to do about it?

Eventually he'd decided: It was worth the risk of seeking out Hutch. It had come down to this, simple and stupid but nonetheless true: their time together could too easily be ended, and Starsky wasn't going to go through the rest of his life regretting he'd never at least told Hutch how he felt. But he wanted to tell the Old Hutch. He wanted to tell the Hutch he loved.

It was only recently that Starsky had felt strong enough to start searching for the Old Hutch, the familiar Hutch, the gentle and loving Hutch. To start pushing here, and prodding there; challenging the new rules and structure. He'd wanted desperately to confront Hutch since they'd started the case, but until he could count on his own strength to shore himself up, he knew he couldn't hold Hutch up. And he had no idea how Hutch would react when Starsky made his confession.

Not to mention he'd have to be there for Hutch anyway, because this new, regimented Hutch was destined to take a fall regardless. Hutch simply couldn't keep up his incredible facade of control forever. So Starsky would have to be there, just as Hutch had been there for him. But how complicated the whole thing was. And how tiring.

Starsky had lost count of his laps. He did a few more sidestrokes for good measure, finished with an
awkward backstroke, and called it a day.

Elisa was crying. Again. The same tears over the same subject. The same scene constantly repeated. It only made Hutch's fatigue that much more oppressive. And after the earlier incident with Starsky, he didn't need any more trying moments. With great effort, Hutch walked back to the couch.

“Look,” he began, trying not to sound too exasperated. “Why do we always have to end up at the same point? Why can't we just talk about this without getting so upset all the time?” Hutch placed a hand on his stomach, his earlier nausea reasserting itself.

Elisa jerked her head up. “What do you mean, talk about this? We never talk about this, all we do is fight about this,” she sobbed. “All the time, over and over, every time we see each other.” She gestured helplessly. “If you really want to talk about this, then we'll talk about it now. Otherwise, this is not going to change, because I'm not going to change.”

“Why not?” Hutch exploded, the nausea subsiding a bit. Action, rather than inaction, seemed to be soothing to his nerves. Elisa reacted by falling into the pillows on the couch, muffling her sobs. Hutch flung himself into a nearby chair. What is all the fuss about? Hutch's thoughts whirled. This isn't high school where the guy dumps the girl as soon as he gets what he wants.

“Elisa,” he leaned toward her, trying to bring some control to the proceedings. His nausea reasserted itself. “I love you. I love Mateo. I'm going to stick around. What more do you want?” Good, dependable words. They always worked with women. Let them work their magic now.

Elisa moaned. She sat up, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “I want you to understand—”

“I do understand,” Hutch insisted. He understood precisely what she was thinking. She was afraid if she slept with him, he'd no longer have any reason to stay around. She didn't trust him. And that infuriated him.

“You don't understand!” she fought back. “If you did, you wouldn't keep pressuring me to go against my beliefs and do something I don't want to do!” Elisa's face was flushed, shiny with tears and perspiration.

Hutch's eyes narrowed as a thought worked through the nausea and entered his mind. Maybe it wasn't that she was afraid. Maybe she was holding back in order to get something from him. A test? Bribery? Damn her mistrust! “Oh, you want to do it,” he mocked, suddenly sure she really did.

Elisa stared at him, stunned. Her face lost all color. “Get out,” she hissed.

Hutch shut his eyes and lowered his head. Pain split his head, a steel band wrapping itself around his skull to contain the fracture in his brain. He needed to back out of this one as quickly as possible. Confronting her with the truth had been a mistake. “I'm sorry.” He shook his head, which only made him dizzy. “I didn't mean that.” Elisa needed to be seduced, not forced. He'd have to make a strategic retreat.

“Get out.” Elisa stood up, her arms crossed resolutely across her chest. She was no longer crying.

“Please, 'Lisa.” Hutch held out his hands to her. Soft and gentle was what was needed now. And something to get rid of the pounding behind his eyes.
Elisa suddenly grabbed his arms and hauled him upward. Hutch fell forward a few steps, unprepared for her angry strength.

“Get out!” she shoved him toward the door. “Go away! I don't want you here!” And then her head suddenly snapped around. Hutch had heard it, too.

Mateo was calling for his mamá.

Elisa burst into tears again, renewing her assault on Hutch. Hutch looked at the near-hysterical woman pushing at him, uncertain of what to do now. He backed away from her flailing arms, fleeing in the face of her fury. The front door slammed behind him, the lights in the house went out, and he found himself facing a darkened dwelling.

It was a shaken and shaking Hutch that finally stumbled out to the car. First Starsky, then Ruth, and now Elisa. His stomach and head battled for attention. Hutch headed as quickly as possible for home.

After his workout, Starsky headed for The Funky Eggroll, the latest incarnation of Huggy’s and The Pits. A slightly better location, a definitely better kitchen, and the (astonishing) addition of a partner had turned Huggy into more than just the owner of his own business. He’d become an entrepreneur. Starsky pushed open the door to the establishment and made a right toward the bar. Instead of a stool at the bar, he spotted a small table at the back and established property rights to it. It wasn’t long before Huggy made his appearance.

“Beer or Near?” Huggy asked, referring to Starsky’s disgusting substitution of near beer for the real stuff throughout his recuperation and rehabilitation.

“Water,” Starsky said. “It’s late and I’m dehydrated.”

Huggy made a quick trip behind the bar and returned with water for both Starsky and himself.

“Cheers,” Huggy clinked drinking glasses with Starsky.

“Same for you?” Starsky asked.

Huggy nodded. “I learned a long time ago not to take advantage of the so-called ‘free’ liquor behind the bar. Makes you stupid before your time.” Huggy took a long, satisfying drink.

Starsky drained half his glass. “Where’s Cho?”

“Taking the night off. He’s got a test tomorrow and a paper due the end of the week.” Huggy smiled. “Damned determined to get that MBA even though we’re doing fine with this place without it.”

Cho. Huggy’s partner. Helped his parents run their grocery in Koreatown down on Figueroa until a wanna-be gangster gunned down the parents over a Twinkie. Hutch had handled that case by himself, as Starsky was—inconvenienced—at the time. Not much of a case, actually. The eyewitness—Cho—had described the perp as an 18-year old gang banger, and the kid had turned out to be a very physically mature 13-year old stuck on the left side of the mental bell curve with his cousin’s gun and an automatic ticket to juvie instead of prison. Case closed, store closed, enter Huggy, who for all his street smarts couldn’t resist a hard-luck case.

Don’t do it, said Hutch. Just because he worked at his parents’ grocery and inherited some money doesn’t mean the kid knows what he’s doing.
He’s not a kid. Huggy had answered. He’s a 24-year old man with a college degree in business getting his MBA. And his ideas for turning this “pit” into a money-making establishment are good.

I’m telling you, man, Hutch warned. He’s taking advantage of you, and if you sign any contracts with him you’ll be back on the street on your ass. These people only take care of themselves.

Huggy had told Starsky it was the first time he’d ever heard Hutch even come close to making a racist remark. Starsky had allowed as how it had been the first time he’d ever heard Hutch come close to making a racist remark toward a non-perp. But they had both been troubled by Hutch’s comment. Huggy had taken it especially hard, especially personally, especially after he’d spent months acting as page to Hutch’s knight errant. Not that Starsky had asked, but he knew neither Huggy nor Hutch had had any contact after that. Starsky had tried to explain it away as an aberration brought on by the stress of the shooting. But Huggy hadn’t wanted any excuses, and he certainly hadn’t wanted any apologies from anyone but Hutch.

Hutch hadn’t told Starsky anything about the incident, except what a fool and an idiot Huggy was for listening to that kid. And then Hutch had stopped talking about it at all when that kid’s business plan turned out to be a success. Starsky had a feeling part of the anger was due to Hutch having introduced that kid to Huggy in the first place.

Huggy had a feeling of his own. One that came out the afternoon Starsky stopped by the place after one of his therapy sessions. The place hadn’t opened yet, and Starsky had walked into the kitchen to find Huggy and Cho in a luxuriant embrace. Flustered, Starsky had high-tailed it to the bar, followed by an amused Huggy.

You turned prude on me? Huggy said.

I’m sorry, man, I didn’t mean to, uh, I just came by for, uh….

Laughter. It ain’t like it’s some big secret I play both sides of the street!

Starsky had continued to stare at the bar counter, certain even the darkened room couldn’t disguise the blush on his face.

I didn’t think you had a problem with that. Huggy sat down next to Starsky.

Starsky had remained still.

Do you have a problem with that? Huggy slued his body to face Starsky.

Starsky shook his head, shrugged his shoulders. No.

Why don’t you have a problem with that?

Starsky shook and shrugged again.

If it bothers you then don’t think about it, Huggy had offered.

It doesn’t bother me! Starsky had shouted.

Okay! Huggy had jumped back at the volume booming through the room. It doesn’t bother you.
Okay, Starsky agreed.

*It bothers your partner, though Huggy said. He knows why me and Cho clicked. That’s part of his problem.*

And it was all Starsky could do not to burst into tears like a little boy.

*You okay, man?*

Starsky nodded, trying to convince at least himself.

*How come it bothers you more that it bothers your partner than it bothers you? He said something to you?*

Nods and shakes were Starsky’s means of communications. This time a shake of his head.

*You gonna tell me what’s bothering you?*

No movement.

*Want me to tell you what’s bothering you?*

Starsky had finally looked over at Huggy.

*What’s bothering you is that it not only does not bother you about me and Cho, but it draws you. And it bothers you that your partner and other half has pulled away from you just when you figured out how much you need him. Am I right?*

Starsky’s eyes had gotten a little bigger.

*I ain’t seen him with you in ages. Not that I’ve seen him at all, actually, but you’ve certainly been singular every time I see you around.*

*I can’t say I miss him, but I know you got to be missing him.*

Starsky managed to clear his throat. *He’s just...he’s having a hard time getting used to...he feels a little....*

*And what do you feel?* Huggy had interrupted.

Starsky had involuntarily looked back at the kitchen, caught himself, and looked back at Huggy.

*You want to talk about it?*

God, he’d just finished talking about it with his shrink! What could Huggy possibly do for him that a professional couldn’t?

As it happened, Huggy had done a lot for him that a professional couldn’t. Such as sympathize and empathize and theorize over the many ways in which he and Hutch had been sublimating their feelings for one another over the years. Experienced dude, Huggy. Unfortunately, his experience didn’t include telling one partner that the other partner had maybe sort of most likely probably kind of become a hitter for the other team—and wanted to hit on him.

Except come right out and tell him.

Which was not something Starsky wanted to tell to this New Hutch.
“I’d ask where your partner was, except you two being apart is now the rule, not the exception.”
Huggy lifted his glass and made a sign to a passing bus boy, who returned with a pitcher of ice water for the table.

Starsky didn’t look at Huggy, but focused on the neon behind the bar. Huggy refilled Starsky’s glass.

“But hey, it’s none of my business!” Huggy slashed a hand backwards through the air. “You two can’t kiss and make up, it’s not my problem.”

“Cut it out, Hug.” Starsky’s demeanor stiffened and he took another drink of water. “It’s not that easy.”

“Well it ain’t if you only ever talk about it to me! Huggy leaned back in his chair. “And you only talk about it to me! And Golden Boy is either thicker than I thought or playing so hard to get he can’t even get himself. In fact, that may be half his problem—he ain’t getting any even from himself.”

Starsky shot Huggy a withering glance.

Huggy ignored him.

“I don’t know why a couple of bullets can separate you two when nothing else has ever been able to,” Huggy continued. “I’d take words over bullets anytime.”

Starsky ran his fingers up and down the cold drinking glass. “Leave it be,” warned Starsky. “It’ll happen when it happens.”

“Call me next century,” Huggy jeered.

Starsky flushed and shifted uncomfortably. His grip on his glass whitened his knuckles.

“Yeah, okay, whatever.” Huggy backed off. “What’s up?”

Starsky ground his teeth. “What do you know about the murders that have been going on lately?” He still couldn’t look at Huggy.

Huggy shrugged. “I’ve been wondering when you were going to ask me about that. Didn’t even know you were assigned to it.”

“No one’s supposed to know we’re attached. It’s all top secret.” Starsky took another sip from his tightly-held glass.

“Okay, here’s what I know: only what I read in the papers and see on TV. People talking about it are joking about being more careful in their extracurricular activities, that’s all. No one on my side of the street knows anything about it.”

Starsky relaxed his grip on the glass—with effort. “Damn,” he finally said. “We need a break on this one.”

“You know I’d tell you if I knew anything.”


“For what?” Huggy asked. “The only person you need to say you’re sorry to is yourself.”
Starsky leaned forward and bowed his head, his forehead resting on his fists. “Stop it,” Starsky said.

“Hey, I’m just playing my part, helping you in your suffering, enlarging your misery until you do what you should have done months ago.” Huggy paused. “Which is to tell him. Isn’t that what you come in here for?”

Starsky shot up and glared at Huggy. “That’s enough. I’m outta here.” Starsky clipped a hip in his hurry to escape.

Huggy lifted his water glass in a toast. “See you for our next session.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Are you going to turn the page?”

Both Starsky and Hutch sat in their shirt-sleeves, a blazer and a jacket thrown together over a chair in the corner. The small conference table was littered with sheets of legal pad paper, Styrofoam coffee cups, two empty soda cans, a crumpled brown paper bag, an opened container of cream cheese, and almost 100 assorted pornographic magazines.

“Huh?” Starsky looked up, puzzled.

“I said—” Hutch pinched the bridge of his nose, “—is there something interesting on that page? You’ve been staring at it for almost five minutes.” Even when he didn't want to, he found himself noting Starsky's movements and habits.

Starsky looked down at the magazine opened in front of him. “Oh. No.” Grainy color photos of a woman being held down on a kitchen table by three men, while a fourth touched a lit cigar to various parts of her body, confronted him. He closed the book and leaned back in his chair. “That coffee and bagel I had earlier aren’t sitting too well. I don’t know how you managed to get through all those bagels and sodas,” he placed a hand on his stomach.

Hutch ignored Starsky. “It’s almost two,” Hutch glanced at his watch. A little courtesy right now wouldn’t hurt, especially after that incident yesterday. “I guess you don’t want to break for lunch?”

Starsky frowned at him. “You don’t really feel like eating after all this, do you?”

Hutch looked down at the magazine in front of him. Two men were sucking on the nipples of a hooded third man, while the fourth was piercing the hooded man’s penis. Well, maybe he wasn’t so hungry after all. “No.” Hutch pushed the magazine away. “Not really.” He’d only offered lunch as an appeasement for last night anyway.

“Besides, I have to get to my appointment by three.” Starsky looked at the table in dismay. “I don’t believe all this. I mean, I believe it—” he gestured at the various and sundry periodicals, “—but I don’t believe it, you know?”

“I understand gettin' off on a picture of a beautiful woman—” Starsky continued, fishing a Playboy out from under a pile of magazines, “—but this other stuff is just sick. It's not even about sex. It's about hurtin' other people.”

Hutch drew geometric figures in the border of his pad. “’Erotica is about sex,’” he quoted, “’while pornography is about power’.”

“Where'd you get that?” Starsky flipped through the Playboy, comparing it to the Screw at his side.

“Dunno. Some training seminar or something.”

Starsky studied the man across from him. “You all right?”

Starsky put down the magazine. “Are you sure? Did something happen between you and Elisa?” He hesitated. “I know you haven't told me much about her, but we could take a breather and talk about it.”

Hutch dropped the pencil in exasperation. “Nothing happened between Elisa and me, okay? Nothing.” He refused to look at Starsky. He wondered if Starsky told his doctor about this girlfriend his partner wouldn't discuss.

“Okay.” Starsky crossed his arms huffily. “So. What do you want to do now?”

Hutch leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes. Someone rapped on the door. “Why don't you answer the door?” he responded to the welcome interruption.

Starsky didn't need to. Ruth entered, holding a sheaf of papers.

“Afternoon, fellow voyeurs. Are you going to take a break soon, or did I throw you an assignment that's got your blood racing?”

Hutch peered at her through slitted eyes.

“Get 'em while they're hot, boys.” Ruth sat down at the end of the table and pushed several stapled pages toward the men, which they both retrieved.

“Gordie's got every magazine listed in order of publication date,” Ruth tapped the top sheet of the set. “March apparently started collecting only about six months ago. You can see he went from Playboy and Penthouse to the harder stuff in a relatively short period of time.” She flipped to the second page. The men did likewise. “By the last month of his life he was buying the hard-core S&M, bondage, and gay rags exclusively. Some foreign, some domestic.”

“A real connoisseur,” Hutch murmured.

“The rest of these pages contain the publishers' and distributors' addresses,” Ruth thumbed through the rest of the sheets. “I've got a couple of officers running all this down. See if they can pin down where March was getting all these filthy periodicals, how he was plugging into all this.”

Starsky studied the sheets. “Did March's wife find anything else?” He looked over at Ruth.

Ruth shook her head. “She says not. And frankly, if she was willing to let us see this stuff, I don't see why she'd hide anything else from us.” Ruth reached over and pulled a Blueboy out of the pack. “Cute ass,” she looked at the cover, then tossed it back on the pile. “Harry's pushing the other
victims' family and friends to see if we can come up with some similar stashes. I don't suppose you've come up with anything besides sore eyes?"

Hutch exchanged his sheaf for the legal pad. “We didn't come across any circled ads, any handwritten notes, or any extraneous paper tucked inside any of the magazines.” He looked over at Starsky, who shook his head in accord. “The relationship between all the books is obvious—they're hard and graphic.”

“The hoods,” Starsky prompted.

“Umm,” Hutch nodded. “We did discover that someone—March, presumably—went through and inked hoods over the heads of many of the male, uh, male . . .” he gestured, searching for the word.

“Submissives?” Starsky offered. Hutch nodded agreement wearily.

“I get the picture,” Ruth answered. “Sounds like a pretty good indication that he identified with those particular participants.”

Starsky found an altered photo. “In every picture we came across the hood was drawn on a man who was being restrained in some way.” The photo was of a man draped over a carpeted sawhorse, arms and legs bound to the wooden struts. A black hood had been inked over the face. Starsky hesitated, then shoved it over to Ruth. “They're all pretty much like this.”

“Lovely,” Ruth picked up the book, gave it a cursory glance, then let it drop to the table. “So we know March was kinky. We knew that before. What we need to know now is who he kinked with.”

Starsky and Hutch remained silent.

“I'd appreciate you finishing this up today,” Ruth stood up. “I know it's a bit tedious and repetitious, but the sooner you get it done—”

“No problem,” Hutch pulled another magazine from the remaining unviewed stack. “We'll have a written report on your desk by close of business today.”

It was Starsky's turn to glare at Hutch.

“First thing tomorrow morning is fine, but why don't you stop in my office before you leave tonight with an update,” Ruth replied. “By the way, nice shirt, Dave.” She waved wearily at them, and left the room.

Hutch shifted uncomfortably. What was wrong with his shirt?

“Here,” Starsky fished for a book. “What's this?” He held it up for Hutch to see the cover.

“What's what?” Hutch squinted at a photo collage of naked men and women pasted one on top of the other.

“What's it say?” Starsky said, exasperated.

“How should I know?” Hutch protested. “It looks like it's in Dutch or something.” He shook his head and went back to his magazine. “I don't know everything, you know,” he muttered under his breath. My brain's not a fucking library you can peruse at your leisure.

Starsky shrugged. “Oh. Okay.” He sighed, fingered the cover, then dropped it on the table. “I might as well leave for my appointment.” Starsky rose from his chair. “Want to come and take a break
“before we finish?”

Hutch shook his head. “No. Thanks anyway.” He picked up another magazine and thumbed through it. “I want to get through this stuff as quickly as possible.” He glanced up at Starsky. By “appointment,” Starsky meant his weekly psychotherapy session. At first encouraged by the doctors as part of his rehabilitation, Hutch was fairly certain Starsky now continued the therapy simply because he liked it. At least Starsky claimed to enjoy certain benefits. Hutch hadn't seen much use for the continued sessions after the first couple of months. He agreed they were helpful for getting over the immediate effects of a trauma, but after that he saw them as only a way for expensive shrinks to live in the style to which they had become accustomed.

Still, he couldn't totally deny they were having an effect on Starsky. There were times when Starsky left his therapy sessions in tears, others when he left full of talk, and still others when he came out silent and thoughtful. At least those were the reactions Hutch had seen while he'd still been accompanying Starsky to the doctor's office. Hutch hadn't driven him there since Christmas. So by the time Starsky returned from his appointment, he had pretty well contained his post-session emotions. Except for the occasional, inconvenient mood that refused to wait until they were away from work and prying eyes. He wondered that Starsky would take a chance at seeing his therapist when they'd have to see Ruth again later this afternoon. If he came out in one of his crying moods, it could be embarrassing. Not that Starsky ever seemed to realize just how foolish he looked with teary eyes, runny nose, and Kleenex falling out of his pockets. No, it was always Hutch who had to take him off to the side and help him sober up.

Starsky stood silently, scrutinizing Hutch. Hutch tried to look busy and put upon, as though it were the work refusing the invitation, not him.

“Okay,” Starsky gave in. “Want me to bring you back anything while I'm out?”

Hutch pretended to think a moment. “No. Thanks anyway.”

“Okay,” Starsky replied unenthusiastically. “See you later.” He left without looking back.

Hutch continued to thumb through his pile for a good five more minutes. He had been restive all morning, eager to do more than just wade through dirty magazines, but he hadn't wanted Starsky to take advantage of his cabin fever. Hutch had been devising a little detective footwork of his own. After all, Ruth may have been right about his organizational skills, but that was only part of his talents. And no one was going to tell him which of his talents to use and which to ignore.

Hutch scanned the room. Almost identical to the one they’d shared under Captain Dobey’s command. Tables substituted for desks and shared between shift officers. Straight-backed chairs instead of office rollers. Electric typewriters finally edging out the manual variety. Yet even though this new office was the same as their old office, Starsky wanted to go back to the old.

Feelings floated at the frayed edges of Hutch’s psyche. That office had been a safe haven. A sanctuary. A place to let the adrenaline build or the adrenaline ebb, all under the protection of his partner. He’d felt strong there. Physically invincible. Mentally unconquerable. Able to leap tall criminals in a single bound.

So? He could still do that in this office. It was just a new time and a different day. One that required a little more introspection and a little less impulsiveness. In fact, it begged credulity to think they’d managed to survive all those creeps and sickos and warpos and whatever else Starsky called them considering how rash and impetuous they’d been before. Did he want to go back to that? To a time when he’d been lax and careless and had allowed Starsky to weaken his defenses? Wasn’t it better to be shielded and guarded and immune from Starsky’s seductive needfulness?
Hutch remembered the first time he’d been really sucked in by Starsky. That was after Helen had been murdered. Not that Starsky and Helen had been a couple when she was killed, but they might as well have been for the way Starsky took her death. It had taken Hutch by surprise. When Helen had broken off with Starsky—right before she took that undercover assignment, it had turned out—Hutch had taken the usual male-bonding support approach: Lots of beer, lots of bowling, lots of “you’ll find someone else’s.” And Starsky had seemed to bounce back. But when Helen had been discovered dead, Hutch had been confronted with an agony that went deeper than Starsky had let on. Starsky stopped bowling, Starsky stopped drinking, Starsky stopped talking. Hutch was confronted with a choice: Let Starsky muddle through it on his own, or take shovel in hand and dig in deep. Starsky’s grief filled Hutch with despair; he hurt for that man, more than he’d hurt for himself when he’d lost Vanessa.

So Hutch had dug to China.

Helen hadn’t been a crush for Starsky, nor a fling, nor an affair. She’d been wife material, mother-of-his-children material. The kind of woman all men were supposed to cleave to for life. And she’d been the first of this kind of woman for Starsky. Hutch had mostly listened, occasionally offering deeply felt assessments of Starsky’s qualities that would insure there would be another Helen. Starsky was kind, he was generous; Starsky was joyful, he was caring; Starsky was committed, he was sensual. These were qualities which made Hutch happy, made Hutch content, made Hutch feel cared for. Attractive qualities which, as Hutch listed them, made him feel even more attracted to the man as his partner and best friend.

So attracted that he’d pandered to Starsky, letting him hold sway over their activities to make sure every moment Starsky had was filled with enjoyment instead of grief. And what had that led to? A late-night meal at an Italian restaurant, which wouldn’t have been so bad, except Hutch had been so focused on Starsky he’d missed the danger around them and allowed Starsky to get shot.

See what happens when Hutch becomes careless? Starsky gets hurt. Every time. How many more times must there be?

Hutch mentally flipped those frayed edges from his consciousness. Back to important things.

Starsky's brief absence was just the opportunity he'd been waiting for. Neither Starsky nor Ruth would find out about this. Once Starsky had mentioned his appointment, Hutch had known he'd be able to implement his plan. Five minutes would give Starsky plenty of time to get out of the building and out of the lot. And if anyone wondered where he was, they'd just assume he was with Starsky. He checked his watch, then stood and grabbed his coat. He left the conference room.

Ten minutes later he drove up to small bar on Vermont. Neon lit the entrance even in full daylight, although once inside he would have been hard-pressed to say what time of day it was. Hutch paused in the doorway, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then moved over to a booth near the back. A woman carrying a corked tray followed him.

“Lord,” she sucked in her breath as she stopped in front of him. “I didn't even recognize you. What have you done to yourself?”

Hutch smiled. “Like the changes?” He fingered his moustache self-consciously, then ran a hand threw his shortened hair.

The woman smiled back at him. “I sure do. Not that you weren't the handsomest thing on the streets back then, but this sure does set you up with a new image.” She fingered the lapel of his sport coat, then ran a finger around to trace the hair line in the back. It sent a shiver up his spine.
“Sit down, Sweet Alice,” Hutch motioned toward the other side of the table.

Alice glanced around the empty bar. “Might as well,” she decided. “Beats watchin’ the soaps in the back.”

Hutch watched as she slid in across from him, setting her tray off to the side. He wondered who cut her hair. The style never changed. The color did, though. This time it looked to be an experiment in red. It made the lines in her face more obvious. Or maybe it was only the dim light filtering in from the smoky window glass that emphasized the creases. Still, while the individual features indicated she was growing older, on the whole there was something about her that continued to speak to a man's desires. Her breasts were still smooth and full, and her body called out for a man to touch it and feel its warm, soft curves.

“I don't suppose this is a social call?” She fingered the bodice of her cocktail uniform.

Hutch looked away guiltily. “No,” he replied.

“Business, then,” she established. “That's why you're all dressed up in your Sunday finest.” Her fingers still traced the neckline of her outfit.

Hutch nodded. “I need some—information, Sweet Alice.” He paused in his request.

“Just like always,” she sighed. She clasped her hands on the table in front of her and straightened her shoulders. “Yeah, sugar?” She waited for Hutch to speak. “You gonna tell me what you want to know, or am I supposed to read your mind?”

Hutch looked off to the side at the bar. In the dim light it looked like a massive piece of sloppily molded mud.

“Hutch?” Alice leaned forward. “If I didn't know better, I'd say you were blushin’.”

Hutch drug his attention back to Alice. “I have to ask you some questions.” He refused to meet her eyes. “Uh, hard questions.”

Alice thought a moment. “Hard as in math—” she asked, “—or hard as in personal?”

“Hard as in personal,” Hutch answered softly.

Alice unfolded her hands and offered them to Hutch. “Same old same old,” she smiled. “Shoot.”

Hutch sat back in the booth, ignoring her outstretched hands. “I'm working on the ‘Gay Sex Slayings’, ” he used the name the papers had given the murders. Some of the members of the task force had started referring to it as the “Homo Homicides.” Sweet Alice's eyes widened in response.

“Hutch, I don't know nothin’ ’bout that.” She withdrew her hands.

“I know,” Hutch reassured her. “What I wanted to ask you about was, well,” he glanced back at the bar, then down at the table. “I, uh, we think the victims are walking into this on their own.” He paused. “Do you understand?”

Alice's brow knitted. “You want to know if I know anybody who likes that kind of stuff?” she tried. She thought a moment. “Well, you know there's this place down at the Marina, this club—”

Hutch shut his eyes and shook his head. “No.” With great effort he finally raised his face to hers. “I want to know—I need to know why they like it,” he said. “What they get out of it.”
Alice still looked confused. “I don't think I'm the one you oughtta be askin',” she answered. “Shouldn't you be talkin' to experts or somethin'?”

Hutch looked thoughtful. “No,” he mused. “Well, yes, but not for what I want to know.”

“I guess I don't understand,” Alice settled back into the leatherette cushion.

Hutch rubbed his face. Dim lighting or not, he knew she knew he was blushing. “I guess I want to know what it feels like to them,” he tried to explain. “Why someone would want it, seek it out, give in to it. Does that make any sense?”

Alice tried to conceal a smile. “I still don't think I'm the one you should be talkin' to.” Her eyes glittered in the dusky light of the bar. “Are you askin' me 'cause you think I've done some of this stuff?”

Hutch felt the flush grow in his cheeks. “I'm asking because I thought you might be able to help me figure some of this out.” He sought refuge in simple answers.

Alice nodded. “Well,” she appeared lost in thought, “I did once have this—steady date—who enjoyed that sort of thing. Didn't do much for me, but I wasn't real particular long as it was his date.” She looked at Hutch to see if he understood. He did.

“This—friend, he was real into the lace and leather thing, as opposed to the rubber thing.” Her tone became almost clinical. “He liked for me to dress up in silk. You know, crotchless panties, garter belts and silk stocking, those little bras with the holes cut out where your tits are?”

Hutch remained silent and still. Blue panties and white stockings filled his mind.

Alice went on. “Anyway, I'd get all dressed up in those things, then I'd put on regular clothes over them. He'd meet me in front of, umm, his place, and walk up to me like we'd never met and whisper something in my ear like ‘I have to see you now, you have to come with me, you have no choice.’ And then we'd go up to his room.”

“And then?” Hutch kept his tone steady and professional. It was insanely easy to picture the scenario.

“Then once we'd get up to his room, he'd start to go on about how he had no right to demand anythin' from me, and how bad he was for comin' up to me on the street and makin' me come up to his room and all that.” Alice paused. “Is this helpin’ at all, sugar?”

Hutch shifted slightly. “Go on.”

Alice licked her lips. Hutch was sure she was enjoying this. “So I'd make him strip in front of me, then he had this briefcase that he kept all these leather straps and stuff in and I'd tie him to the bed. Like a big X, you know?”

Hutch nodded.

“Then, I'd do a real slow strip tease in front of him while he was all trussed up like that, down to all those silk underthings. After that, I just sort of rubbed all over him until he came, tellin' him how bad he was, but I was never supposed to let him come inside of me, anywhere, if you get my drift.”

Hutch bit his lip. He got her drift. “He told you to do all that, like a script?”

“Oh yeah,” Alice added brightly. “I could make some of it up, but there were some things I was
never supposed to do. Most of my dates who liked that sort of thing were like that. But I never went in for the hurtin' kind of stuff, you understand.”

“Yeah.” Hutch chewed on his lip some more.

“That's not what you were lookin' for, is it?” Alice looked disappointed, but whether it was in the content she'd detailed for him, or the actual description itself, Hutch couldn't tell.

“I don't really know what I'm looking for,” Hutch admitted. “I've got psychiatric and psychological reports coming out my ears. None of it's helping me get any further into this case.” His eyes bore into Sweet Alice. “I suppose I thought if I could really understand what someone could be looking for in this type of sexual behavior, I'd be able to find this guy and stop him.”

Alice lowered her face, then looked back up at Hutch. “I could show you,” she proposed. Her eyes held an offer of diverse pleasures.

Hutch held them, then quickly averted his gaze. “No, Alice,” he stammered. He needed to leave, now.

“You could find out for yourself,” she prodded. “Isn't that the way you always liked to do things?”

Hutch cleared his throat. He slid to the end of the bench. “Thanks.” He stood and offered her his hand. “But no thanks.” Alice hesitated, then took the hand and let Hutch help her from the booth.

“Hutch,” she gripped his hand before he could release hers. Her face begged him to give her second thought. Hope seemed to erase all the lines in her face and add a bronze halo to her hair.

“I have to go,” he tried to pull away.

Alice held on for a moment longer, then reluctantly released him. He smiled gently, and brushed back a strand of hair from her cheek. “It's always good to see you, Sweet Alice.”

She smiled. “You too, Handsome Hutch.”

Hutch nodded. He turned from her and headed toward the exit.

“Hutch!”

Hutch turned back as he reached the door.

“Here,” Alice held out a matchbook. He took it, noting a phone number scribbled on the inside. Puzzled, he looked at Alice.

“You can get Mistress Anne at that number,” Alice explained. “Well, her real name is Heather. She sort of—specializes,” she elaborated. “If you know what I mean.”

Hutch's brow smoothed. “I know what you mean.”

She smiled halfheartedly. “Maybe she can help you find out what you want to know.”

“Thanks.” Hutch slipped the matchbook into his pocket, and came out with a twenty dollar bill. He handed it to Alice. “For the beer I would have ordered if I could have stayed.”

Alice folded the bill and tucked it inside her blouse. She glanced up at Hutch briefly, then turned and walked to the back room. It was always with that same look, he realized, that she left him. A mixture of sadness and disappointment, of frustration and regret, of things left incomplete. A look that always
made him feel that he hadn't done enough, or done the right thing, or done what he had somehow implied he would do. It left him feeling faintly—soiled. It took him a moment to shake off the feeling. Hutch watched her disappear, then left the bar. He made it back to the office just before Starsky returned.
Two nights later, Starsky stood in the doorway of a small motel room. “Paydirt.”

Hutch pushed past him. “Finally.”

“Hey, Hutch. You’re late.” A sheriff’s deputy of Mexican descent stood up from the far side of the double bed. Rodriguez, with another of his helpful comments.

“You try getting from Venice to Studio City with a stop in the Hills in under half an hour even if it is two o’clock in the morning.”

“Told you I’d meet you here,” Starsky stepped past Hutch. “You don’t always have to pick me up.” Hutch ignored the intended jab.

“Gentlemen!” Ruth greeted them from the bathroom. “We are on our way to solving our string of murders! Meet Mr. Burrows!” She gestured at the body on the bed.

“Ever the optimist.” Grimes voice carried from further inside the bathroom. The door opened wider and he stepped into the bedroom. Both he and Ruth had apparently thrown on whatever was handy after they’d gotten the call; Grimes had on a UCLA sweatshirt over paint-splattered work pants, and Ruth had pulled on a T-shirt, sweater, and jeans. Some people were sexier in casual clothes as opposed to more formal clothing. Starsky, for instance. A simple white cotton shirt and blue jeans seemed to augment his sensual aura. They seemed to invite an unbuttoning of his shirt, a dip into his denims….

But this wasn’t the case with the two Lieutenants. Starsky was dressed casually now, but having more time to get ready, had at least managed a shower and shave before choosing a multicolored sweater and clean jeans. Hutch had managed a sweatshirt and jeans, and hadn’t bothered with any grooming since he tended to need little help upon rising from bed.

“Look at these,” Grimes held up a collection of plastic bags. “One washcloth with what appears to be semen on it.” He separated the first bag from the group and handed it to Hutch. “One bottle identified as ‘Locker Room,’ your basic brand of popper.” He handed the second bag to Hutch, who passed both of them over to Starsky. “One penis ring,” Grimes dangled a bag containing a flesh-colored rubber item. “Probably a deluxe model because it has all these little tentacle things on it.” He wiggled his fingers at the bag. “And there are a ton of other toys spread around the room.”

Hutch cast a jaundiced eye on the rubber ring, then turned to study the body on the bed. The victim lay nude, spread-eagled on a piece of oil cloth that covered the bedspread. Each wrist was bound to a corner of the bed frame by a leather tether, as was each ankle. A rectangle of black electrician's tape covered the mouth. He was—was—a handsome man.

“Sick, huh?” Ruth came up beside Hutch. “I mean, I can accept two consenting adults doing what they want to do in the privacy of their own bedroom, but this—” she gestured tiredly at the body, and didn't finish.

“How’d we get to him so fast?” Starsky stood opposite them, scanning the body. He still held the two plastic bags.
“Not fast enough,” Ruth murmured.

“Night clerk.” Grimes reached for the bags Starsky held, then handed them over to a uniform. “Seems the victim rented this room by the hour, paid for three hours, 10pm to 1am. Come one o’clock, the clerk came over to see if he wanted a couple more hours since he hadn’t turned over the key. He knocks on the door, hears noises, but no one answers. He knocks again, still no answer. So he gets steamed because he figures he’s due some extra rent. This guy starts yelling and pounding on the door. He manages to beat the door open, but the chain’s on. So he busts the plate out of the wall, goes barreling in, and finds this mess. Lucky for us, he immediately calls the police. And fortunately for us, our memos have been circulating, because the first black & white to arrive recognized what they had and called us.”

“Did the clerk see anybody?” Hutch asked.

“No,” sighed Ruth. “By the time the clerk got in here, only Mr. Burrows was still around. Looks like our perp escaped through the window in the bathroom. The glass is smashed and the screen pushed out. I’d love to say we got a good set of footprints, but there are enough empty beer bottles and butts outside there’s no telling who the prints belong to. We’re canvassing the neighborhood now.” A twinkle sparked in her eye. “Course, this is the best part.” She took a few steps toward the dresser, and pointed next to it.

Hutch and Starsky peeked over. A plastic bucket sat on the floor, containing various cleaning supplies. Multi-purpose spray, glass cleaner, furniture polish, sponges and rags; it was the means by which their killer obliterated any trace of his or her presence.

“Brand names,” Ruth said. “You can find them anywhere.”

Starsky stooped to get a closer look. He reached out to pick up a plastic bottle, a handkerchief protecting the evidence from his intruding fingertips.

“Careful, Dave. Don’t get any of that bleach on your sweater.” Ruth took the bottle from Starsky and set it back in the bucket.

The officers spent the next few minutes organizing the search; Ruth organizing the collection of sexual paraphernalia, Rodriguez coordinating the neighborhood canvass, Starsky combing the room, Hutch and Grimes discussing the obvious similarities to the other murders and their method of coordinating the investigation.

After walking around the room several times, Starsky deliberately came up behind Grimes, facing Hutch. “Find any water bottles?” Starsky teased. Hutch shot him a withering stare. The discovery of the body, along with so many genuine clues, had obviously elated Starsky.

“What?” Grimes turned toward the voice in his ear, startled.

“Nothing,” Hutch sidestepped Grimes and bore down on Starsky. “Anything specific you want us on?”

“Not for now,” Grimes shook his head. “Just stay available. I’m going to have all this stuff analyzed, gather whatever we get from the canvass, and call a meeting of the task force this afternoon. Be warned; we’re going to lock ourselves in that room until we come up with something.”

“Hutch’ll bring refreshments,” Starsky volunteered, still in a jovial mood. Hutch carefully caught his left arm and started to drag him backward from the room.

“You know where you can find us,” Hutch called as they stumbled out of the room. He gave
Starsky's arm a jerk, then abruptly dropped it as if it were Starsky's bad arm. “Your mouth,” he mumbled, suddenly contrite.

“Where are we going?” Starsky rubbed his arm absently.

“Your place. To sleep,” Hutch decided. “We'll need it for when the lab gets all this processed.”

“Don't you want to go back to your place and pick up something more formal for the meeting?” Starsky asked amiably.

Hutch ignored the remark. They left the motel.

Sleep usually came easily to Starsky, but he was caught up in listening to the tossing and turning that was going on in the living room. He was fairly certain Hutch wouldn't have crashed at his apartment if they didn't have to be back at work in a few hours and Venice was simply too far away. Inconvenience was something Hutch no longer tolerated; if it were too far away, took too much time, interfered with his schedule, or disrupted his routine, it didn't happen.

It should have felt good to have Hutch back at his place; Hutch had given up sleeping over at all after Starsky had insisted he'd never regain his autonomy if Hutch didn't let him learn to be on his own again. That was another indication of Hutch's new personality: all or nothing. If Starsky didn't want Hutch to be there, then he'd never be there again. Inconvenience, intolerance—insanity.

It was obvious Hutch was having trouble finding sleep. The creak of the sofa springs, the rustling of blankets, the snorts and coughs and deep sighs that floated into the bedroom meant a restless night for Hutch tonight and a difficult day for everyone else tomorrow. Starsky knew how to calm the restlessness—he wanted to calm the restlessness. And the wanting was making it impossible for him to find sleep.

Yet Starsky couldn't forget the sight of Hutch's body as he'd skittered from the bathroom to the sofa after Starsky had turned in. Hutch had been pretty good at keeping it hidden lately; he'd stopped attending Starsky's workouts ever since Starsky had quit physical therapy and found his own, private gym. Showers at the precinct were rare, since they rarely (okay, never) returned to the office sweaty, dirty and deprived of more than 48 hours sleep nowadays. And since he and Hutch weren't sharing quarters as they'd used to, he guessed he hadn't seen Hutch stripped in a good four months.

And Hutch stripped had been a shock. Bloated belly, flabby thighs, handles of flesh where he'd only ever seen taut muscle. Starsky surmised a diet of beer, coffee, and junkier junk than even he'd ever been known to eat was responsible. That and an end to their previously energetic existence. Yet another side of the new Hutch.

Maybe, Starsky thought optimistically, Hutch looks so flabby because I don't have any recent memories to compare him to. But flab was flab, and New Hutch had a good helping of it. He was still fastidious in his attire, though. Clothes make the man, and hide a lot of him at the same time, too. Starsky wondered what other secrets Hutch was hiding. And then he wondered how much longer he could hide his own.

The small of Hutch’s back ached. He crooked his right knee, forcing a small arch in his back to offset the pain, but that left his other knee hanging over the edge of the couch. He bent both knees
and drew them upward, but he couldn’t sleep that way. He rolled to his left side, but that left him smooshed against the back of the couch. He switched to his right side, and settled for a time. The couch wasn’t comfortable; he hated the couch. He hated all couches. Couches were for the exiled and the ostracized; the banished and the cast out. The rejected. How many times had he slept on the couch when he’d been married to Vanessa? Certainly every time he came in late; he’d been trained early not to waken Van when she was asleep. And the couch also became his every time she was feeling ill. And every time she needed her rest. And every time he’d irritated, angered, infuriated or provoked her.

Then there was Starsky’s couch. At first just like his couch at home, a physical separation from Van, only located at his partner’s apartment instead of his own home. Then it had become a resting place for extreme exhaustion—or extreme drunkenness—but still an uncomfortable structure to regain consciousness on. And at its very worst it was a sentry post—or a nurse’s station, a place of watching and listening and worrying.

Much more comfortable was the floor next to Starsky’s bed. At least it offered unlimited room to stretch out legs and arms. A few strategically placed pillows and the floor actually felt good on his back. Plus it offered the advantage of being right there next to Starsky, should help to the bathroom be needed, or the next dose of medication.

Of course, even better was Starsky’s bed. He’d moved into it once Starsky’s pain had diminished, and every movement didn’t cause distress. That afforded constant monitoring of Starsky’s physical condition: body temperature, respiration, heart rate, muscle tone…by wrapping his body around Starsky’s, he’d been able to monitor all those things at once. It had been a relief to be able to keep such close surveillance of Starsky. And a pleasure to watch him sleep comfortably again. The steady rise and fall of Starsky’s chest. The even heat of Starsky’s body. As long as Hutch could feel those things against his own skin, he was content.

Hutch sighed deeply and shifted position again. His back still hurt and now his upper thigh muscles were cramping. He should move. He would feel better.

He didn’t.

“Late again,” Rodriguez greeted them. He was seated at one of the corner tables in the meeting room. Starsky and Hutch ignored him, and found seats around a table toward the front of the room. The room was fast filling with various detectives, deputies, and officers from all over the city, each one assigned to the task force in the hope that a multitude of brains, skills, and expertise would put an end to the bizarre serial killings.

“Oh! Everyone get a packet?” Grimes made his way to the front of the room. “We just got everything copied, so if you’re missing a page, look at the officer’s next to you.” He must have gone home since that morning, as he was wearing a clean shirt and blazer.

“For those of you who missed the crime scene this morning, we’ve got photos posted on the board here,” he threw a thumb over his shoulder. “Before we get to the main event, there are some things I want to go over.” Grimes pulled a chair over, lifted his right foot onto the seat, and balanced his packet on his knee.

“Up to this point we’ve been treading water in the Pacific. We had eight victims, all male, all currently enjoying careers in the white collar arena either as employees of prosperous companies or
successfully self-employed, each apparently fond of sexual bondage, although that trait has not been found to be common knowledge among family or friends. We know they all experienced some form of sexual activity before death, as every crime scene was found with a semen-covered washcloth which matched the victims’ blood types. Subsequent analysis of personal information failed to reveal any other common characteristics—so far. Geographically, they’ve been from all over the area, as have been the motels where each murder took place. The MO consists of a ritualistic positioning of the victim after a complete cleansing of the body, and the leaving of the washcloth. Every room was spotless, and if any fingerprints were found at all, they were those of the victim, maid or desk clerk. Each victim had been strangled by some sort of cord or cloth, and died from such.”

“Four other murders have been determined to be copycat killings. While they bore a resemblance to the other eight, as based on the MO reported by the news media,” several boos and hisses rose from the room, “none of the four victims had any traces of poppers in their bodies, which is the key piece of evidence we’ve withheld from the press.”

“At 1:45 this morning, the ninth killing was interrupted at a motel up in Studio City. While we have no witnesses to the actual crime, or any sightings of the perp or perps, you'll see from your packets we do have a bit more to go on. We now have actual evidence that the victims were tied to the bed, in at least one case by leather straps, which we have determined are sold by numerous paraphernalia shops and mail order outfits. Tape was used as a gag in all but one case, when a cloth was used. We also have physical evidence of the use of poppers at the crime scene, probably as a sexual stimulant as we surmised. Again, however, there were no fingerprints to be found except for those of the victim and night clerk.”

“Fortune smiled on us—” Grimes pulled a pink sheet from the packet, “—in the form of physical evidence found on the latest victim's body.” Pink pages appeared all over the room. “Analysis of the semen found on the body indicates that besides our victim, another male was present, blood type AB. Pubic hairs found on the victim confirm the presence of this second male, identified as a Caucasian—well, all the details are right here. Please also note that several pubic hair indicate our victim had been in the presence of a female recently, possibly at the crime scene.” He stole a glance at Ruth, who grinned back at him smugly. “It's conceivable we're dealing with a dog and cat team here.”

Grimes stopped, lifted his foot from the chair, and straightened to face the group. “But the piece de resistance is this:” He removed a piece of newspaper from his packet, unfolded it, and held it up. A red circle was all that could be plainly seen on the scrap. “You’ll find a copy of this at the back of your packets.” Pages rustled as the copy was retrieved by everyone.

Hutch looked at his copy carefully. It was approximately an eighth of a page from a sheet of newspaper. It was from the classifieds section; specifically, the personals. The circle surrounded one particular ad. Hutch read:

bwm wants to explore the more exciting side of life with you. my tender young flesh craves a disciplined touch. if you loved Story of O and wished the situation were slightly trans-gendered, then let's get together. note and photo get immediate response.

A reply number followed. Hutch looked over at Starsky, who rolled his eyes. They both looked up at Grimes, who was waiting for everyone to finish reading.

“We found this clipping in the latest victim's wallet. Ruth, you want to take over?”

Ruth stood up. “This particular ad ran in last week’s Singles Register. The same ad ran in last week’s Weekly. We spoke with both papers as to who placed the ad. Both ads were sent in by mail, accompanied by money orders. The name given was false, the phone number that of a pay phone on the Santa Monica Pier, and the address a P.O. number. The same false identity paid for the postal box.
However, the manager of the business that handles the boxes was able to identify the renter as our victim because the rental had been made so recently.

“Based on these leads, we’ve begun to check out our other victims for evidence they may have placed similar ads. So far we’ve discovered at least one ran an ad in the Reader, paid for under his own name. We’re checking out other alternative and neighborhood papers, and going back to talk with those who knew the victims. We believe this is how the victims are making contact with our killer or killers.”

There were murmurs of agreement. Starsky leaned over to Hutch. “Why do I have a feeling I know where this is going?” he whispered. Hutch had that same feeling. He didn’t like it.

Grimes resumed control of the meeting. He dropped his material on the chair, unbuttoned his cuffs, and pushed up the sleeves of his shirt and sweater. “Any questions before we start making assignments?”

The room had finally emptied but for four officers.

“We anticipated this, of course.” Ruth poured herself another cup of coffee.

“Of course,” Hutch intoned. Everything about their association with the task force was finally making sense.

“We knew we'd need men completely familiar with procedure, who could handle themselves undercover, and were also involved with this investigation yet not easily identified with it.”

“You were grooming us,” Hutch stated. He caught Starsky's eyes. They agreed with his assessment. They agreed with him. Just as they had agreed so many times before, when they’d found themselves two alone against the world. That was all it took for them, not even physical contact—a glint in the eye, a lift of the brow, a set to the shoulder. Where had that almost telepathic contact gone?

It had gone when Starsky had lost his ability to open his eyes, to move his brow, to lift his shoulder. But now that Starsky was able to do those things again…was it so harmful to reconnect? Was that such a terrible distraction to Hutch?

“Are you up to it?” Grimes asked. “No pun intended.”

“None inferred,” Hutch answered sarcastically. He had a pretty good idea where the conversation was going.

“Who else are you thinking of?” Starsky asked quietly.

“That's Ruthie's department,” Grimes poked a thumb at his partner. “I'm deferring to her expertise. She thinks she knows what kind of men make better sexual decoys than others.”

“Oh?” Starsky lifted an eyebrow. He seemed surprised there might be more to their choice than arrest records. Hutch mentally shook his head at his partner's naiveté.

“Look,” Ruth folded her arms under her ample bosom. “We've all agreed that our best chance at catching these sickos is to place some ads and see if we can't flush them out. For that we need good
cover cops. You came highly recommended. But we also need officers that have a chance of attracting our killer.” She looked at Starsky. “We were talking about physical characteristics the other day. Okay, there's nothing about all our victims that they specifically have in common. But—”

“But—” Hutch broke in, suddenly noting Ruth's attention to Starsky, “—you think one of us has a ‘look’.” Ruth's insistence in addressing herself to Starsky made him uncomfortable. “Maybe the same ‘look’ that the rest of the victims had?” He met Starsky's eyes, and addressed himself to Starsky. “I don’t like this.”

“Sounds pretty reasonable to me,” Starsky shrugged, refusing to maintain the eye contact, ignoring Hutch's concern.

Broken eye contact. Starsky broke contact with him. After they’d made a connection, Starsky was breaking it.

So that was it. Starsky had only made the connection to try and get Hutch on his side. Well, that wouldn’t work. Anger roiled in Hutch’s gut. Starsky would lose this one.

Hutch also sensed Starsky was holding back his excitement at returning to the streets, trying to hide his enthusiasm. He kept his eyes locked on Starsky's features. Hutch was getting very tired of Starsky choosing to stand opposite him every time he took a position, especially when it came down to procedure and safety. Starsky was simply not thinking of the ramifications of accepting this undercover assignment. So he would have to think for Starsky. He would have to control Starsky.

“Yeah, fine, it sounds reasonable now—” Hutch's heard his voice rise a notch, his speech become faster, “—but how reasonable is it going to sound when someone's got you stretched out on a bed and you're cramping up so bad you can't think about anything else and—”

“What?” Starsky stopped him. “What are you talking about?”

Hutch put a stranglehold on his thoughts and fought for control. Where had that outburst come from? Control. Control!

“Hutch,” Ruth put an hand on Hutch's arm. “We're just here to talk about this now, alright?” She patted him soothingly. “We want to hear your thoughts and objections, but let us finish, okay?”

Hutch ran a hand through his hair and looked away, flushed.

“You're right,” Ruth gave Hutch's arm a final pat, returning to the original topic. “We think there's a common look among the victims. Nothing you can really pin down, but a characteristic you might call ‘pretty’.”

Hutch looked up at Ruth accusingly, then suddenly found himself confused. Pretty? Starsky? He chanced a peek at Starsky. Starsky was looking at Ruth, his brow knitted in concentration. Starsky might have features that could attract another man, features that could be called handsome, perhaps refined, even beautiful. But not “pretty.”

“I don't mean to embarrass anybody,” Ruth shrugged. “It's nothing personal. It's just all we've got. There's a certain—prettiness—to their looks. It's sort of in the lips,” she fumbled for a better explanation. She gave up. “Anyway, we're asking officers that we feel would appeal to the killers to volunteer to go undercover.”

“What do you mean, ‘prettiness’?” Starsky asked.

“Don't, Starsky,” Hutch warned. He suddenly knew exactly what Ruth and Grimes were saying.
“Pretty” was a word he was all too familiar with, one that had embarrassed him when he was very young, and had angered him when he'd grown older. It was a word that provoked too many uncomfortable feelings and too many disagreeable memories. Hutch had to put a stop to this nonsense right now. He would not get into it any deeper than necessary.

Hutch deliberately glared at Starsky to shut him up. Starsky turned away, but he kept quiet.

“Who else are you thinking of?” Hutch said as evenly as possible, returning his gaze to Ruth. “And I assume you are thinking of me?” Me. Not Starsky. Me. Relief made Hutch light-headed and momentarily eradicated the “pretty” issue. What better way to keep Starsky safe than by putting himself in the line of fire?

Grimes stood and stirred his coffee. “Yes, we're thinking of you.” He tapped the stir stick on the cup, then pitched it into the trash. He managed to avoid looking at Hutch. “We're also thinking of Carter from Rampart. We'd like to pair him with Montoya.” He took a sip of coffee. “Gibbons and Rodriguez, with Rodriguez as the bait. Harris, from the sheriff’s department. He's partnered with Jay Miles. Harris is young, but he and Miles have brought in a couple of damn good narcotics busts.”

“And Harris is ‘pretty’, ” Starsky added. It irked Hutch that Starsky was so insistent on this particular point. What was Starsky trying to do, protect him? He didn't need or want Starsky's protection. He could take care of himself.

Besides, how dare Starsky concur with Ruth's assessment of his looks as being “pretty.”

“Get off it, Dave,” Ruth suddenly snapped. “Stop playing the innocent.” Starsky squared his shoulders. “You've been asked to go undercover before because you had a certain look or fit a certain type. This is nothing new. We need officers who have what we feel is a common look among our victims. Hutch has the look. He can also play the role of our blond victim, and our—slightly older—victim.” She glanced over at Hutch. “And if you haven't figured it out already, your homophobic attitude is embarrassing your partner.”

Hutch jumped up and fled to the coffee pot, yet glad Ruth had called Starsky on that point.

Starsky bowed his head. “I'm not homophobic,” he mumbled under his breath.

“If you have a problem with the homosexual implications of this case, then I suggest—”

“Yeah, okay,” Hutch turned from the coffee machine, pot in hand. This focus on sexual orientation was more than he cared to take. What did Starsky think, that he couldn't handle a little gay game-playing? That he wasn't strong enough, he wasn't officer enough, he wasn't man enough to take on this case? That he was too pretty to control the operation? He’d show Starsky a thing or two. Hutch's face was stony. “Let's just get on with this and stop with the personal comments. What's the plan?”

“First, we'd like to make a few visits to some of these more public sex clubs to see who's there, who's looking for something, what the word on the grapevine is. Then you'll start placing ads in some of the counter-culture papers,” Grimes sat down, obviously relieved at the return to business. “So will the others, if they agree. We'll space you out so there's nothing obvious about the ads. All we want is to whet the appetite of our friends.”

“Shit,” Starsky spat. “Do you know how many weirdos and flakes we could go through before we hit the right one? And I haven't heard anyone mention anything about how far this undercover thing is going to go, not to mention the question of entrapment.”

Hutch poured himself another cup of coffee. Cautious talk from a man who only a few minutes ago
had been ready to agree to anything to return them to undercover work. It rankled that Starsky was suddenly playing so defensive. And there could be only one reason: Starsky was angered that they had chosen his partner to go under, and not him. So Starsky was going to try and put the same constraints on him that he had placed on Starsky. Wrong move. Hutch wasn't the one who needed constraints. Hutch wasn't vulnerable like Starsky.

“We've already got a basic description of at least one of the people involved.” Grimes took another sip of coffee. “We can cross off any blacks—r09;“

“Assuming the white man in the room with Burrows is the only man who's in the room,” Starsky finished. “We don't really know how many people were in that room, which means we don't know how many people the undercover officer could be up against.”

Starsky was really going to be contentious over his going undercover. Tough. “‘Super secret sex initiations?’” Hutch whispered as he walked behind Starsky's chair. Touché.

“Look,” Ruth said, exasperated. “I'm not real sure what's going on here. Maybe we're just all tired. But if you don't want this, then don't take it.”

Hutch came around to sit back in his chair. “No one's said we don't want it.” He sipped his coffee.

Now it was Starsky's turn to look at him questioningly. “We have a right to know the details before we commit ourselves,” Starsky said.

“Fair enough,” Grimes stepped in. “We'll clear this, get a legal opinion from the DA, and pin some things down. We can all meet later, independent of the task force, and come to some kind of agreement as to how this assignment will be conducted. Starsky is right, we have to be comfortable with the depth of the cover and the safety nets.”

Ruth nodded. “Agreed.”

Grimes rose. “Why don't you two talk it over, work a few things out, and get back to us.”

Ruth tossed her coffee cup into the nearest trash can. “We'd like a decision in the next day or so. The sooner the better.” She walked over and took Grimes' arm. “Drive me home, Harry. I don't think I can handle the 101 tonight. Night, boys.” The two officers walked out.

Hutch didn't move. Starsky rose, swiveled the chair beneath him, and sat back down. He rested his arms on the back. Showdown? Hutch glared at him, daring him to fire the first shot. Starsky glared back.

“If you open your mouth to say something stupid again I'm going to permanently shut it.” Hutch drew first. Anger seemed to calm his annoyance a bit.

Starsky's eyes became slits. “Me? What about that little cramp tantrum you had when you thought they wanted me to go under? You trying to tell me something here, partner?” His nostrils flared. “Is this part of what you've been trying to tell me all along? I'm not a player anymore? I'm not on your first string?”

Hutch sat forward, hands on his knees. He ignored Starsky's question. “I'm getting pretty tired of your little ‘innocent act’.” He was determined to stick to his own grievances, to stave off this newfound and unnecessary protectionism on Starsky's part. “Ruth was right, the sexual aspects of this case are nothing new, and you shouldn't act as if you've been sheltered from them all your life. As uncomfortable as all this may be, I would appreciate a little maturity and professionalism from you.”
Starsky waved an arm at him, his eyes narrow and confused. “Wait a second. That's got nothing to do with what's going on here. I want to know why it's all right for you to go under, but it's not all right for me to go under.” He pointed his finger at Hutch. “You tell me more about this ‘cramp’ thing.”

“You tell me more about this ‘pretty’ thing!” Hutch yelled back. There. It was out.

Starsky sat back, brow furrowed. His voice was soft and questioning. “What's going on here, Hutch?” He grabbed the sides of the chair, as though to keep his anger in his hands and not his voice. “What the hell is going on here?”

Hutch pushed up from his chair. He paced around the room, from window to coffee machine to chalkboard. Hutch bet Starsky's shrink had put him up to this confrontation. He'd been waiting for it. He had a good idea they probably spent a lot of time talking about him, about how he'd handled the whole shooting mess, about how he was handling the so-called aftermath. Shrinks liked to make you think you need to talk about every fucking little thing that comes around the corner. How do you feel about school? How do you feel about your mother? How do you feel about your father? How do you feel about your partner?

Well, that wasn't the way life worked at all. A lot of things weren't worth talking about or even mentioning. A lot of things simply weren't. And Starsky had no right to try and force him to discuss these things. He spied Starsky out of the corner of his eye. Starsky was watching and waiting.

Hutch finally stopped. The room was silent for several moments. He didn't look at Starsky, but spoke to him nonetheless. Admitting to one small little non-fear should shut him up and satisfy his urge to confront. “I just, I got this sudden image of you all trussed up and all I could think of was what that would do to your shoulder and your arm.” He glanced at Starsky. “Okay?”

“Okay.” Starsky still looked confused. “I guess.” He thought a moment. “But then how do you expect me to back you up if you're gonna worry about all my muscles and strength?”

Get off this! Hutch struggled to reel in his exasperation. He managed a nonchalant shrug and walked up to the chalkboard. “Same as always,” he mumbled. He picked up a piece of chalk and began drawing lines on the board.

“No,” Starsky rose and walked over to him. “Not the same as always.”

Hutch turned his lines into squares.

“How far are you willing to go?” Starsky asked quietly. “You gonna just talk to this guy? Trade fantasies, swap stories, try and get him to confess?” He reached up and grabbed Hutch's hand, stilling it. “You going to hold hands, neck a little? Light petting, heavy petting? Play with a few gadgets?” He gripped Hutch's hand harder. “Let him tie you to a bed, stuff poppers up your nose, and strangle you? How're your muscles gonna feel after that?”

Hutch tried to pull his trembling hand free. They grappled a moment, then Starsky let him pull away.

“Where are they going to put a wire?” Starsky pressed. Hutch let his head drop against the board. Stop. Too much. “Where are they going to put a bug? Where are they going to put me?”

“Where would you put me if you were under?” Hutch lifted his head defiantly and stared at Starsky.
“Nowhere.” Starsky didn't blink. “You won't let me go under, remember?”

Hutch turned away and walked back to the coffee machine. He had to put an end to this. “I'm sorry.” He toyed with the on/off switch.

“The seat belts are bad enough—” Starsky crossed his arms, “—but if you don't think I can hold up my end of this partnership anymore, then we'd better talk. Now.”

Seat belts had nothing to do with this. This conversation was over. Hutch looked at his partner. “No, Starsky. I just—you have to understand, all I could think of was what being tied to a bed would do to your shoulder.” He took a few steps toward Starsky, his eyes sorrowful and plaintive. A look he knew would be very effective. “And I'm tired, and I'm angry that they've been leading us on as to what we're really supposed to be doing on this task force, and—r09;”

Starsky continued to face him down. “Is that all?”

Hutch ran a hand through his hair. He took a steadying breath. “Honest to God, Starsk, I didn't mean to start anything by it. I didn't mean to imply I didn't trust you or think you couldn't handle anything.”

Starsky looked at him, disbelieving. He finally shrugged and dropped his arms. “So what do you want?”

Hutch tried to smile. It felt more like a grimace. What do I want? If I don't accept the assignment, we'll both be back at our desks. Which is apparently where Starsky wants me right now.

More magazines, more worthless tips, more unanswered questions about the case. And it had suddenly become very important for Hutch to solve the case. To prove to certain individuals that they shouldn't underestimate him.

If I do accept, I'll have to take Starsky along for the ride. But he won't be the one in front. He'll be behind me, out of the line of fire. And he may not like that, but then it's not his decision. “I think I want this,” Hutch said, not at all surprised by his decision. “I'll tell you what: If we can work out a way where you can be right there with me when I make contact, and we're both comfortable with the level of that contact, will you take this with me?”

Starsky closed the distance between himself and Hutch. “If I don't?”

“Then I guess it's back to the paperwork,” Hutch concluded. “If they don't kick us off the case.” He knew Starsky couldn't face that possibility. At least with his partner under, Starsky would be out of the office and in the midst of some so-called excitement.

Starsky studied his face. Hutch tried to make the moment light, tried to put some whimsy in his eyes, tried not to make it seem so important, but Starsky just shook his head and walked past him.

Starsky stopped at the door. “Do you trust me?”

Hutch threw up his hands. “What kind of a question is that?”

“No,” Starsky turned to face him. “I mean, do you trust me to be able to get you out of whatever goes down if you can't help yourself.”

Hutch straightened. “I just told you I did.” If things worked out right, he wouldn't need Starsky's rescuing. After all, he'd faced many a maniac on his own, and triumphed with only his own reserves to call upon. It was Starsky that had a history of falling into the wrong hands at the wrong time. To wit, Starsky bore the scars of many encounters; he had only one bullet hole and a couple of cuts.
Starsky searched his face a moment longer, then turned back to the door. “I don't know. This all feels funny.” He twisted the door knob. For an instant, Hutch thought he saw Starsky walk through the door and disappear. But no, Starsky hadn't moved at all. His eyes had played a trick on him. “Yes. Okay. If you want to go ahead with this, so do I.”

An ache in his chest reminded Hutch to breathe. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath. “Well, if we don't, where are they going to find another pretty, blond cop?” Hutch meant to sound droll, but the word “pretty” had a bitter aftertaste.

“They'd find one,” Starsky mumbled. He looked back at Hutch. “Coming?”

So. Not only was Starsky not going to walk out on him, he was going to wait for him. Hutch grabbed their packets and walked over to Starsky. He passed Starsky's packet over, and was surprised to note a slight tremor in his hand. He quickly relinquished the envelope.

“Pull an all-nighter?” Starsky asked. Starsky opened the door and held it for Hutch to pass through.

“Not tonight,” Hutch dismissed the invitation. The tremor seemed to be working its way up his arm and down his back.

“Going over to Elisa's?”

It was another challenge to talk. Hutch eyed him, feeling the tremor spread into his other limbs. If he stood still any longer, he was going to break into obvious shivers. He started off down the hall, leaving Starsky holding the door. “See you tomorrow,” he called over his shoulder. A brisk walk down to his car might burn off the adrenaline rush. Too, getting away from the building's central air and out into the night heat might dissipate the tremor.

“Tomorrow,” Starsky called after him.

Hutch didn't look back. Rodriguez “boyish,” he detoured his thoughts. Boyish my ass!

Hutch walked automatically to his car, got in, and began to drive. The brief jog to the parking lot hadn't spent any of his energy, and the night's outrageously high temperature was merely suffocating, not warming. Hutch drove, hoping to find some body-calm in speed. He wasn't sure where he was headed until he found himself turning down Elisa's street. Rundown apartments, dilapidated single-family dwellings, cars balanced on cinder blocks everywhere. Hutch slowed as he approached Elisa's home, tempted to stop. Elisa's yard was well-kept; a primo lawn had been an obsession of Tony's. Elisa tried to maintain it with help from a neighborhood boy, but she did not have her deceased husband's touch. Her talents lay in other areas. Cooking, child-rearing, housekeeping . . . maybe she wasn't much in bed. Tony had never described her habits when they'd been partnered. And as prudish as she was, she was probably one of those women who simply lie back and take it. Starsky called them lox: fleshy, tasty, but raw and ultimately limp.

Now Starsky was never one to simply lie back and take it. Or so Hutch imagined. He'd never actually seen Starsky do anything more than heavy petting, but what he'd witnessed was always energetic and active. And he assumed the completion of the act was just as vigorous and vocal. Almost too vocal for this kind of assignment. Starsky would come across as phony porno movie actor instead of a genuine participant. He’d give himself away.

Perhaps he should start preparing himself now for this undercover role. Visualization always helped;
it gave him an idea of what to expect and how to react. Hutch would take on the persona of a successful businessman, with an interest in the more sordid side of sexual proclivities. That part was easy, he could handle that with one hand tied behind his back. So to speak.

But what about the actual sordid part? How far would he have to go? Hutch’s stomach did a flip-flop. He’d been on top of many women, but never on top of a man. And Hutch was certain he could control the situation enough to stay on top, if not have the case wrapped up before then. But it might come to being on top of someone. A male someone. Which had never appealed to him. The thought of being on top of another man made his slightly nauseated. Oh, maybe he’d done a few circle-jerks in scouts, but it was the jerk, not the scout, that was the attraction.

Hutch found it hard to imagine himself on top of any man. It just did nothing for him, he thought, with a slightly embarrassed relief. There was nothing wrong, of course, with being sexually aroused by any kind of sex, whether it was your thing or not. Sometimes just a word could get you going. But to be specifically aroused by this kind of gay sex thing was just a little bizarre. Unless you were gay, in which case it was fine. And he didn’t have to be gay to get into this case, he just had to be convincing.

Women kept intruding into the vision. He had no source of reference outside what’d he’d seen as a cop, as well as the magazines they’d been scouring for this case, which only made his stomach do another twist. And they had no idea who this killer was, so there was no way to insert a specific suspect into the fantasy. And he did need to visualize….

Well, he did know what Starsky looked like naked. It was easy to picture Starsky naked, lying on his back on a bed, hands behind his head, torso taut, left leg outstretched, right leg slightly bent. That was a non-threatening image. Hutch could see himself lowering his own body on top of Starsky’s, finding a fit. Instead of his chest resting on swollen breasts, it would be like resting on a smaller woman, with hard muscle instead of soft pillowing, and thick fur tickling his nipples. And instead of his cock slipping in between her legs, it would have to find a spot next to Starsky’s, rubbing against it, engorging his own….

Hutch felt his face flush as his cock stretched his jeans. Highway noise be damned, he rolled down the window for some cool air. He banished the image of Starsky from his brain. He was tired. That was it. He was tired, and he hadn’t had any for months (and months and months), and a container of Tic Tacs could have aroused him in his condition. Starsky didn’t arouse him. Starsky constrained him. Starsky forced him to handle everything because Starsky wouldn’t do what he was supposed to do.

Hutch suddenly accelerated and sped away. Irritation flared in his veins, and he used speed to express his frustration as he whipped through the East L.A. neighborhood. If it wasn't Starsky causing problems, it was Elisa, and if it wasn't either of them, it was this case. This case. This case bothered him. He must be missing something about the case. And it was something that had to do with the personalities of the victims, and something that had to do with the psyches of the murderers. He was close to discovering what it was that nagged at him, he could feel it every time he looked at one of the victims.

The victims had all been strong men, both physically and mentally. Well-toned bodies, the latest hair styles, the most fashionable clothing; all groomed to the teeth. And their lives were just as well attended. They were ambitious, career-oriented men. Plenty of schooling, plenty of networking, plenty of the trappings of success: homes, wives, kids, cars—and a sexual kink.

It was the sexual kink that bothered Hutch. Not the fact that they all had one—he'd run into more than his share of sexual kinks over the years; everybody seemed to get off on something a little
different. It was the fact that all these men would risk everything they had to indulge their kink. That they’d risk exposure, disease, and even death to satisfy their sexual itch. And these were smart, educated men! How could they give up control over their lives to a simple, physical urge?

It stymied Hutch. How could a man who controlled every element of his life give up control in this one arena? What was it that drove a man to allow another person to completely control him, all in the name of pleasure? Where was the pleasure in that?

Forget the physical aspects of this case, focus on the rational. If he could just get a handle on the psychological aspects of the case, then it would be a simple matter for him to track down the guilty parties and be done with the whole thing. Case closed. No more hassling with Starsky. No more worrying about Starsky. No more thinking about Starsky . . .

Hutch pulled into a corner mall and stopped in front of the pay phone. He rummaged through his pockets, and pulled out the matchbook Sweet Alice had given him. He flipped it open and studied the number written inside. She might be able to help him. It was worth a shot.

“What is it?” a voice called from behind the door. Hutch tried to stand where the peephole would afford a non-threatening view of him.

“Ken,” he answered. “We talked on the phone?”

The door unlocked, and was opened only far enough to put tension on the chain. A charcoal-lined eye peeked out.

“Ken who?” The eye peered at him.

“Ken Graham,” he replied, having chosen an innocent-sounding surname from the phone book. The door shut briefly, then opened to allow him entrance.

Hutch stepped inside the Spanish stucco house to find himself confronted with a tastefully decorated dining area. A large wooden table held the center of the room, with a delicate chandelier hanging above, and accompanied by an antique sideboard. The walls held homey and homespun knickknacks, with a Grandma Moses print the focus of the decor. Off to the left was the living room, to the right and off of the dining area was the kitchen, and straight ahead were probably the bedrooms. The woman closed and locked the door behind them.

“Sorry about all the rigmarole on the phone and all.” The woman crossed in front of him. She was about 5’5”, not particularly slender but certainly not fat. Pleasingly plump, or perhaps voluptuous would best describe her. Red hair coiled about her face and down her back. A simple white silk robe clung to her body, making her into something not so simple and very alluring. Pearls chokered about her throat and delicate silver earrings added to the effect. Or maybe it was her bare feet that made her so arousing. “So many guys call up just for the thrill of it, or chicken out and never show. Nice to meet you, Ken.” She offered her hand. “I'm Mistress Anne.”

Hutch gave it a gentle squeeze. “Pleasure.” Mistress Anne returned his greeting with a very firm, very forceful grip of her own.

“Would you care for some coffee? I was just about to have some.” She started for the kitchen.

“Thanks,” he replied. “Black.”
“Coming right up.” Heather disappeared into the kitchen. “Why don't you have a seat in the living room?” she called.

Hutch wandered into the living room. A fireplace dominated one wall, and the others were decorated with antiques and American Indian artifacts. He settled down on the couch, noting the French doors leading off to the side yard, and the bay window offering a view of the front lawn.

Heather swept back into the room carrying two mugs of coffee. She handed him one, then found a seat in the rocking chair across from him. They sipped silently for a few moments. The coffee tasted of nuts and spices. One of the expensive blends.

“Ken.” Heather set her mug on the coffee table between them. She'd drained most of her cup. “Before we get down to business, there are just a couple of things I'd like to ask you.”

Hutch nodded and shrugged. He quickly thought up a list of personal details he could finesse her with. “Fine.” He sipped at his coffee.

Heather sat forward, her face somber, her eyes piercing, her cleavage quite visible. “First, are you a cop?”

Hutch froze in mid-swallow, then forced down the liquid. “No.” He found the inner calm that allowed him to construct and keep a cover. He'd expected an inquiry into his background, but not this. “Why? Do I look like one?”

Heather shook her head. “It's not what a person looks like,” she explained. “It's simply a matter of precaution. If you were a cop, you'd have to admit to it, and I'd save myself a bust.” She smiled. “If I'd really thought you were a cop—” Heather looked at him through lowered lids, “—I would have had you take off your pants first and then asked you. Sort of a test. Most cops won't go that far.”

Hutch raised an eyebrow, but didn't reply. He knew a few cops who would go much further than that. Himself included. Besides, he didn’t have to admit he was a cop if she asked, but what did she know?

Heather settled back in her chair. She rocked ever so slightly. “Sweet Alice tells me you're a friend of hers. A professor. Is that right?”

Hutch made note that Heather had bothered to check back with Sweet Alice as to his claim of having been referred by her. This lady was cautious. Good thing Hutch has warned Sweet Alice. “That's right. I'm a professor of sociology.”

“Which school?” Heather interrupted.

Hutch thought quickly. If Sweet Alice had mentioned a school to Heather, and he guessed wrong... “Does it matter?” he asked.

“In the future it might,” Heather replied. “But for the moment, it doesn't. Alice said you were interested in exploring the more interesting side of life's little pleasures.” Heather leaned forward and picked up her mug, allowing Hutch another generous peek at her breasts.

Her breasts were what Starsky termed “a mouthful.” Hutch sat back and crossed his legs. “Yes. I'm doing research on sexual deviance.”

“Deviance?” Heather flipped her hair back from her face.

Hutch lifted an eyebrow. “Or not. That's what I'm trying to understand. What causes a person to
become interested in sexual activity outside of the mainstream. Why a person seeks pleasure in
certain practices. What drives a person to act out his fantasies and satisfy his sexual urges.” Hutch
watched for Heather's reaction.

Heather considered his proposal carefully. “And you think I could help you in your research?”

“I'm sure you could.” Hutch took another mouthful of coffee. He was certain.

“You'd like to talk to me,” Heather proposed.

“Yes.”

She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward again, setting her mug down and giving Hutch another
glimpse. “Would you want to watch?”

Hutch was taken by surprise. The voluptuous view was expected, the question was not. “Could that
be arranged?” He hoped she hadn't caught the hesitation in his voice. Participation of any kind hadn't
been on his agenda. He'd merely wanted to talk with Heather, pick her brain, get her opinion on a
few things. No, participation hadn't crossed his mind at all.

Unfortunately, it was crossing his cock’s mind. Stretching his jeans again, spoiling for a little action.
Godammit, he couldn’t control Starsky, he couldn’t control Elisa, he couldn’t control his own body!
It was betraying him right here in front of prostitute! It made him feel vulnerable, anxious. Heather
could not only see his susceptibility to the situation, which was humiliating, but a well-placed strike
could place him in a worse situation.

Heather continued to lean forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “Very easily,” she replied.
“There are several ways to approach it. In fact—” she smiled ferally, “—it might be possible to work
out a special in-person performance.”

Hutch slowly, evenly put his mug down on the table. “Excellent.” He gave her his best professorial
smile, all white teeth and intelligent eyes. He didn’t move his legs at all, preferring to pretend that by
not trying to hide his erection, he wouldn’t bring attention to it. And maybe it would subside if it
were kept stationary.

Concentrate on watching. Hutch could watch and keep something more from happening down there.
He’d done it before. Besides, watching might actually be of some help in this case. He might be able
to pick up a few ideas regarding the specifics of the case.

“So,” Heather laced her fingers together. “Would you also want to—participate?”

This time the question didn't take him by surprise. Hutch draped an arm over the back of the sofa,
still keeping the lower half of his body motionless. He could handle this. He was becoming quite
comfortable with his new persona. The Academic in Search of Knowledge. “Perhaps.” He turned his
attention to the view from the French doors. He didn't want to appear too eager in Heather's eyes.
Other parts were taking care of that. Hutch cursed his own body.

Heather actually seemed rather disinterested. She sat upright. “More coffee?”

Hutch turned back to Heather. “No. Thanks.”

She nodded. “One last thing.” She smoothed the wrinkles in her robe. “You're going to get a
wonderful paper out of all this, and enough stories to keep your colleagues salivating for the rest of
your tenure. What do I get out of all this?”
Hutch lifted his arm from the cushions and reached into his blazer pocket. “I would compensate you for your time and trouble.” He drew out a small piece of paper, carefully leaned forward, and offered it to Heather.

Heather reached across and took it, affording Hutch yet a third view of her attributes. And her attributes were very tantalizing. Much rounder and creamier than Elisa's. Elisa's attributes were smaller and firmer.

A fantasy spun through Hutch’s brain, unbidden, unwanted. But it so appeased his hardened organ! And how long it had been since he’d appeased that organ. Months and months and months! It would feel so good...as long as he was fantasizing he could hold it until he got out to the car…and Heather didn’t seem to be paying attention to him at all….

Hutch peeled the clothing from the women in his mind and imagined the two women. Elisa—chocolate with rose nipples. Mistress Anne—milky with strawberry nipples. Hutch suddenly flashed on the two women, in the same room, together. Together. Every man’s fantasy.

Heather unfolded the paper, noted the figure on it, then looked at Hutch expectantly.

“For each ‘session,’” Hutch explained. He marveled at how the simple sight of certain parts of the female anatomy could set a man off so easily. White sugar and brown sugar. It was freeing to slide into this fantasy and away from reality.

Heather gave a satisfied smile, then tossed it on the table. Hutch momentarily focused on the business at hand and retrieved it. He slipped the paper back into his pocket.

“Well,” Heather clapped her hands together. “Would you care to begin now?”

Begin? He’d begun a few minutes ago. “Why not?” Hutch took another sip of coffee, careful to hold the mug steady. That old familiar tingle continued to assert itself. And it felt so good!

“Why not?” Heather echoed. “How would you like to begin?”

Hutch pondered the query. Mistress Anne would begin by undressing Elisa. Elisa would resist, of course, she always did, but Mistress Anne would mesmerize her with smooth talk and firm hands. “Why don’t we begin the way you would be...” Hutch heard his voice come out a little hoarse.

Mistress Anne would begin to strip away Elisa's dress, and then her slip, letting them fall to the floor. Elisa would suddenly become aware of her nakedness and cover herself. Again she would resist. This time Mistress Anne would speak to her harshly. Firmly. Elisa would respond, dropping her hands, trembling ever so slightly.

Heather nodded. “Okay. Let's say you're one of my clients.” She leaned back in the rocking chair thoughtfully. “I'd start by laying down the rules: First off, I'd explain to you that there will be no sex involved.”

Hutch looked at Heather sharply. “No sex?” The fantasy switched itself off, his erection died. What the fuck?

No, his brain answered, there is no fuck.

Frustration charged through his body. How many goddamn times was this going to happen? He was going to end up in Emergency with the biggest case of blue balls anyone had ever seen! This had to stop!
She laughed. “No sex. This isn't prostitution, Professor. And I'm no prostitute, regardless of my earlier cautiousness. What I'm providing is an emotional experience.” She ran a hand up and down the lapel of her robe. “This is an exercise in control. You give up control, I take control. I'm the dominant, you're the submissive. That's why they call it D&S.”

Hutch closed his eyes, breathed deeply through his nose, opened his eyes, and exhaled slowly. **Undercover. Find your cover. Ignore everything that is not essential. Ignore everyone that is not essential. Focus….**

Hutch squared his shoulders and nodded in understanding. Dominance and submission. Dominance. Control. “So the men who come to you don't want sex?” And damned if his cock didn’t respond to that word even after it had wimped out! The fantasy began to play again. *Mistress Anne slowly, gracefully peeled away her own clothes. She commanded Elisa to watch. And Elisa watched, her green eyes like huge emeralds.*

“I didn't say they didn't want sex,” laughed Heather. “A lot of them do. But that's not what I'm here to give them.”

Hutch cleared his throat. “Never?” How could they not want sex? He wanted sex! Hutch continued to be amazed by her revelation. And fascinated with his fantasy.

Heather picked up her mug. “Well, sometimes I allow them to come during the session, or jack themselves off after the session is over.” She looked at Hutch carefully. “This is all confidential, right? I mean, Alice said I could trust you and all, but—”

What control Hutch was exhibiting! He could continue this business conversation, and at the same time weave such a fantasy. “This goes nowhere except into my paper,” Hutch assured her. “And while I will probably change your name to keep you anonymous—” he smiled, “—you are being compensated for your time.” *Both women stood facing one another, naked and vulnerable. Mistress Anne looked of hard white marble, a strawberry blush to her voluptuous skin. Elisa was a soft, slender cattail, swaying hypnotically.*

Heather nodded at Hutch's statement. “Okay. Just checking. About the sex, then—well, there are some clients, some long-time friends, let's say, that I sometimes give a little extra to.”

Hutch let his gaze wander over the room, trying not to appear too fascinated by the topic of conversation, or by his own erotic musings. “But generally, you—and they—get satisfaction from the act of dominance and submission only.” *Mistress Anne stepped up to Elisa. She put her hands on Elisa's shoulders, then ran them down Elisa's arms. She continued her trail, moving up over Elisa's hips, around her waist, and over her breasts. Elisa took a step back. Mistress Anne again put her hands on Elisa's shoulders, and forced her down to a kneeling position. Mistress Anne remained standing in front of her.*

“I think so,” Heather judged. “I know I do, and I believe they do. At least that's what they tell me.” She set her coffee cup down, and leaned forward. “I'll tell you something, because I know eventually you'll ask. I like what I do. I enjoy it. I get off on helping these men explore a different part of themselves, and find a sense of freedom and relaxation from the experience.” Heather rubbed her hands together. “I used to be a nurse. I liked helping people and how it made me feel to help people. But I burned out, you know?” She glanced at Hutch, then looked back down at her hands. “While I was working at the hospital, I met a doctor who turned me on to D&S. He liked it, I liked it. He said it made him feel relaxed and sort of purified to be ordered around, abused, humiliated, like that.” Heather was studying her nails. “And I'll admit it was a real turn-on for me, to feel so strong and powerful, to be able to vent my feelings and not have to keep things inside me like little girls are taught.” She eased back into the rocker. “So when I couldn't take it any more at the hospital, I'd
learned enough to know I could make a living in the D&S scene, and actually be happy doing it.” She finally looked straight at Hutch.

Hutch took a deep breath. Control. “I think I understand. At least I'm beginning to. It's something you feel compelled to do.” Mistress Anne stooped, pushing Elisa onto her back. Elisa's legs swung around until she lay prone on the floor. Mistress Anne straddled Elisa, dropping down until her ass barely touched Elisa's stomach. Mistress Anne leaned forward and began sucking on Elisa's nipples. Elisa began to struggle.

“Yes.” Heather rocked gently. “I think to get involved in this, you have to feel pretty compelled. Maybe even obsessed,” she laughed. “Are you obsessed?”

Hutch couldn't tamp down on the flame that licked his face, betraying his embarrassment. He tried to joke past it. “I guess I am if I'm willing to go to all this trouble for a little research paper.” Mistress pinned Elisa's wrists at her side. She shoved her knee between Elisa's legs, continuing to lick Elisa's breasts.

“I guess you are,” Heather agreed. “You showed up.”

Mistress Anne suddenly became Hutch. Hutch was between Elisa's legs, sucking at her breasts, holding her to the floor. Adrenaline kicked through him, erotic tinglings manipulating his nerves. And suddenly Elisa became Starsky. Firm muscle replaced soft breasts. Chocolate nipples became raspberry-stained. A hard cock pushed at his stomach. Hutch jerked his attention back to Heather, denying the fantasy. Where the hell had that come from? Maybe left over from his undercover visualizing earlier? Certainly not from his erotic hungers! Starsky had no place in those!

“All right then.” Heather picked up her cup and Hutch's. “Why don't you give me a call in a couple of days. I'll see what I can arrange. Unless—” She looked thoughtfully toward the hallway. “It just so happens I have a client in the back room, and he just so happens to enjoy being watched. Care to stay, Professor?”

A rush of heat swept through Hutch's body. It left his palms clammy and his mouth dry. Panic pushed any feelings of arousal from his body. You started this, he thought to himself. But what have you started? What if he saw Starsky in the place of this client? Another rush of heat enveloped him.

No. I know. Starsky keeps popping up because I'm worried about him, not because I want him. He's bound to intrude on every thought I have, sexual or not. It's not me—it's him.

“Why not?” Hutch heard himself say. He rose, wiping his palms on his pants. He blanked his mind; concentrate on nothing and Starsky wouldn't appear. And besides, if this session had no sex as Heather said, then it would be like watching a baseball game. No fantasies, no Starsky, just information-gathering.

Heather walked around the coffee table, dropped the cups off in the kitchen, and led Hutch into the back hallway. She stopped at the first door on the left and opened it. Hutch took a deep breath, and followed her into the room.

It was a den, nothing special or remarkable about it. A wet bar stood in one corner, a TV sat silently in a second corner; the largest item in the room was the leather sofa placed in the center.

“Sit down, Professor.” Heather patted the back of the couch. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Hutch did as he was told, finding an uncomfortable spot toward the left arm to keep himself focused. Heather walked over and turned on the TV. She punched up channel 3, and stood aside to allow
Hutch to see the picture.

Hutch kept his breathing slow and even, betraying nothing. A man was on the screen; naked, wrists bound to hooks in the ceiling, gagged. “Closed circuit. Very expensive. Another client hooked it up for me.” Heather tapped the picture tube proudly. “He's just in the next room.”

Hutch looked up at her in alarm. “You mean he's been like that the whole time I've been here?”

Heather grinned. “Yes. It's part of his punishment, if you get my drift. The longer the punishment, the greater the reward.”

Hutch stared at the television. Occasionally the man would struggle against his bonds. His cock rode semi-erect.

“You can just sit here and watch and take all the notes you want, and afterward I'll answer all your questions. This shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes.” Heather walked around behind Hutch. She ran a finger along the nape of his neck, sending a cold shiver up Hutch's spine. Ignore it. “If you get hungry or thirsty, there's snacks in the bar.” She gave his earlobe a flick. Hutch didn't move until he heard the door close behind him. Within seconds Heather appeared on the TV screen. Hutch ran a hand over his face. Heather ran a hand over the man's body.

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

PART TWO: CHAPTER SEVEN

Starsky sat at one of the outdoor tables close to the lemonade stand in the cafe court. One table down, and one to the left, sat Hutch. Hutch had picked up a paperback at Brentano's across the walk and appeared to be engrossed in it. Starsky had picked up a lunch of barbecue ribs from one of the food counters and was dividing his attention between Hutch and the beef.

It was a meet, just like dozens of other meets the two had set up over the years. They key to any meet, Hutch mused, was control. Or rather, who had control. As long as you were the one in control, nothing could happen that you didn’t want to. You chose the setting, you chose the timing, you chose the risk.

This time the risk was very low. A very public place, in the middle of the day, with Hutch in the driver’s seat, and Starsky safely tucked in the back. Piece of cake.

Not that they’d had many pieces lately. About half a dozen would-be actors had stopped into their studio wanting head shots—but unfortunately, it wasn’t the kind of “head” he and Starsky were looking for. Supposedly, Huggy was pitching Starsky’s wares among the more sexually adventurous of the city’s denizens, but all they’d had from that were a few phone calls from no one very interesting.

Billings and Gordie continued to sift through the detritus the task force teams were digging up. License plate numbers from cars parked at the sex palace. Phone numbers from the inquiries at their studio. Names of delivery men and water bottlers. And anyone else Vice happened to pass along as a “possible.” Not to mention there were three other teams all generating leads.
And to not mention at all that there’d been no other murders since the last one two weeks ago. Which might be good, if the perp had been scared away. But according to their consulting shrink, he was probably just cooling his heels after the last aborted attempt, and would come back bigger and badder.

Which made them all that much more determined to find this guy and put a stop to it now. Now, before he struck again. Now, before the sexual underground started taking out just anyone they thought might be this guy.

Now, before Starsky could get hurt.

But the forensics had been lousy on that last murder. Too many fingerprints, some of which matched the motel staff and none of which matched anything in their files. Too many fibers, from too many room occupants. Paraphernalia that could be bought in dozens of different places, all on the list to be checked out. All in all, too many clues.

Which is why Hutch was meeting one of his ad’s respondents now, even though his ad had only just appeared last Thursday. Not enough time to really gather any kind of response, or any information on the respondents. It could take weeks for someone—the right someone—to spot his repeating ad and answer it, if that happened at all. But a couple of letters had come in immediately, and Hutch had chosen one that seemed—persuasive. Gordie could check up on the others. But this one would at least give Hutch something to do. And he did fit what little profile they had: white and older.

“May I?” A businessman gestured with his tray at the empty seat across from Hutch.

Hutch glanced up from his book and quickly appraised the man. A corner of his mouth lifted smugly. “Certainly.” The man appeared to be about fifty-five years old, which in this town probably meant sixty-five, and impeccably dressed and accessorized. He looked at Hutch with a confidence that spoke years of knowing what he wanted and how to get it. The man's hair was thinning a little, but fashionably styled, and his coloring was blonde and fair, like Hutch’s. His height and weight also matched Hutch’s. Pale blue eyes shone out from under feathery eyebrows, yet showing only a hint of interest in his new-found lunch partner. “Please sit down,” invited Hutch.

They’d only spoken on the phone once the day before. A conversation that had lasted long enough to get a trace to a number of a phone outside one of the conference rooms of the Beverly Hilton, which no one remembered anyone using. Hutch had used the conversation to allude to his cover—“Richard’s”—background and status, and created a fictitious man of wealth, leisure, and hinted-at desires that would lure his prey in

The man sat. He removed the various plates containing his lunch from the tray, then placed the tray on top of a nearby trashcan. After carefully arranging the food around him, he unfolded a napkin and spread it over his right thigh. He took a careful bite from each plate, and once satisfied, went around again. Hutch snuck a peek at Starsky. Starsky answered him with a barely perceptible nod of his head.

“You're not eating?” the man began.

“No,” answered Hutch.

“Food for the mind, rather than the body.” The man gestured with his fork at Hutch's book.

“Yes.” Hutch smiled.

“Interesting choice,” the man continued. “Why did you wait for it to come out in paperback?”

The man nodded as though he understood the allure of covers. “Richard, isn’t it?”

Hutch studied the man in front of him. He seemed to be just another of the many businessmen that frequented the mall during the lunch hour. “Yes. Evan Crane?”

“Pleasure to meet you.” Crane wiped his hand on his napkin, then extended it. Hutch took it, gauging the grasp. It bore considerable strength.

“I must say—” Crane went on, “—from the way you described yourself in our conversation, I wasn’t expecting someone quite so—striking. You’re much too modest in your self-image.”

Hutch blushed with discomfort at the compliment. Not that he hadn’t started up that regimen of calisthenics after Heather’s humiliating remark—which had really been a good reminder that once he’d accepted his role as the “bait,” one must not only act the part, but look the part. However many sit-ups it took. A couple of weeks hadn’t done much, but it had made him feel a bit healthier. And the key to exercise was discipline. Just as it was the key to so many other things.

Heather had reminded him of that, too. He hadn’t been back to see her again, but he’d certainly been thinking about her. Discipline was just control. Controlling another. Controlling yourself. Controlling your gag reflex as you lick carpet. Controlling your boredom as you wade through another stack of printouts. Controlling your irritation as Starsky adjusts the lighting again for a simple headshot.

Hutch chanced another glance at Starsky. Starsky was sucking up soda through his straw, his gaze focused just to the right of Hutch’s table. Hutch returned his attention to Crane.

“You’re much too kind,” Hutch replied politely.

“Were there other points in your self-description you were also overly modest about?” Crane continued to eat his lunch by taking a bite from each dish, in a very particular order, then circling ’round again.

Hutch squinted up at the sun. “I don’t know,” he replied. “I suppose that would be up to you to decide.” He returned his gaze to Crane.

Crane smiled quietly. “And I’m sure I’d be a fair arbiter. What are you currently up to, Richard?” Crane asked.

Hutch laid out his cover. “As I mentioned earlier, I’m a man of leisure. I’m backing a small photography studio for a friend of mine, but work is not something I need to do. If you see what I mean.” Richard had been constructed to be a man of time and money.

Crane paused to take a sip of his coffee. “I’m having a little bridge party Tuesday night. Do you play?”

Hutch fingered the pages of his book. “Not really. But I’m eager to learn.”

“Excellent,” Crane reached into his coat and pulled out a small leather wallet, from which he plucked a card. “My address. Would eight be suitable?”

Hutch took the card and analyzed the address. Brentwood. Status. Money. “Eight would be just fine. Casual dress?”
“Whatever you feel comfortable in,” Crane replied.

Hutch nodded and rose. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Crane.”

Crane once again wiped his hand before offering it. This time, Hutch felt a more leisurely squeeze, as well as a slight caress by Crane's thumb.

“The pleasure is mutual,” Crane finally released him, then resumed his lunch.

Hutch walked away from the table. As he turned the corner he saw Starsky dump his trash in a trash can, then follow him discreetly. Hutch continued to walk ahead of him, heading for the escalators down to the parking garage. They’d meet back at work, and he could pass Crane’s card along to Starsky then. In the meantime, Crane didn’t need to see them together just yet. In fact, if Hutch controlled the situation well, Crane would never need to see Starsky.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What’s going on?” Hutch rounded the corner, hot on the heels of Lt. Grimes. Starsky was right behind him. It was 36 hours after the meet with Crane.

“My office,” Grimes pointed down one corridor, then took off in the opposite direction. Starsky and Hutch watched him disappear into the office of Captain Rogers, looked at each other in puzzlement, then walked silently to Grimes' office. They were barely seated before Grimes came barreling in.

“The shit's going to hit the fan,” Grimes thudded over to his chair and sat down roughly. He leaned forward to rest his face in his hands, then ran them through what hair he had left and sat back. He stared at Starsky and Hutch.

“What happened?” Hutch finally asked.

Grimes took a deep breath. “Rodriguez.”

Hutch glanced at Starsky. “He found our killer?”

Grimes shook his head. “Maybe. Or he found another killer. Damn.” Grimes scrubbed his beard and turned to look out his window. “Damn it! What gets into you men that you have to play hotdog and ignore the rules?”

Starsky’s eyes went wide and Hutch shrugged his shoulders in response. “Lieutenant—”

“Rodriguez made contact with a suspect and went home with him. Alone.” Grimes turned back toward them. “Alone. He didn't set up a meet for later, he didn't contact his partner, he didn't let anybody know where he was or what he was up to.” He paused. “Six hours later he managed to escape and call for help.” Grimes was shaking as he spoke, his voice tight and dry. He stared at a spot on the wall between Starsky and Hutch. “Six or eight or ten hours later—Rodriguez can’t remember—he managed to escape from the house, stumble to a neighbor's home, and telephone an emergency operator. He was—” Grimes hesitated, then looked directly into Hutch's eyes. “He was
naked, except for some sort of studded collars around his neck, wrists, and ankles. Rodriguez let the
guy initiate some bondage, but he lost control. And this guy then—used him as some sort of—I don’t
know—toy for the next several hours.” He continued to shake his head at the details of his story.
Hutch was ramrod straight in his chair, and a glance told him Starsky was reacting similarly.

“Where is he?” Starsky finally managed to ask.

“County USC,” Grimes closed his eyes. “They're holding him overnight for observation. Physically
he's not too bad off. Bruises, mostly. A few cuts. Soft tissue damage. But ...” he sat back in his chair,
collapsing as if all the air had been sucked out of him. “Ruth's still at the hospital with his wife.”

Starsky clasped his hands in front of him and let them hang between his knees. He stared at the floor.
“Where's Gibbons?”

Grimes reached up and began massaging his neck. “Over at the suspect's house. Rodriguez gleaned
enough from the guy to figure he'd done this before, and some of his victims were still around. In the
backyard. Buried.” Grimes his hand. “We used that information to obtain a search warrant. They're
digging up the yard now.”

The room became silent, each officer staring off into some corner of the office.

“This is him,” Starsky said. It was really more question than statement.

Grime cleared his throat. “Michaels said the inside of the house was a mess. Didn’t look like it had
been cleaned in months, maybe longer. The guys dishes were stacked up in the sink, trash piling up
in the kitchen…”

“Not a neat freak,” Hutch said quietly.

“And there was no use of poppers.” Grimes paused. “Our shrink says this is probably not our killer.
Different M.O., no ritual, burying the bodies instead of laying them out, no cleaners in the home,
none of the signature touches.” Grimes stood up. “This investigation is on hold as of now. First we
have to figure out how to deal with the press on this one. This story's going to hit big, and we need to
make sure Rodriguez's name is kept confidential, particularly within the department. There can be no
link between him and this investigation, either.” Grimes began talking to himself. “In fact, we'll need
to keep this whole mess separate from our serial killer, keep the press from knowing we've got any
kind of undercover thing going ...” Grimes left his office, still talking to himself.

Starsky and Hutch looked at each other.

“Shit,” Starsky finally broke the silence. He buried his face in his hands. “If you ever...” he spoke
from behind them.

Hutch rose and walked over to the window. “I'm supposed to visit that ‘bridge club’ Tuesday night.”
He fingered two blind slats apart and stared out at the city. Dawn was just beginning to break.

Starsky walked up beside him. “Not if you don't want to. Postpone it. Make up some excuse. You
have to work or something. At least put it off until this thing has settled down a little bit.”

Hutch turned to look at him, then turned back to the window. “You'll be outside in the car.”

“And you'll be in the house with a transmitter disguised as a pager. There are a million things that
could go wrong.”

Hutch took a seat in Grimes' chair, still facing the window. A million things that could go wrong.
There were always a million things that could go wrong. No matter how much you planned, no matter how much you anticipated, there was always something that could go wrong. Hutch didn't want to think about those things anymore. He didn't want to plan anymore. If all his experience wasn't enough to handle any situation that arose, then he just wasn't meant to handle it.

“I think we're ready for anything that comes up,” Hutch finally responded to Starsky's concern. He swiveled to face Starsky. “I'll be inside transmitting the whole time. You'll be outside listening. Rudd and Hughes will be down the block monitoring from the van. What more do you want?”

_There is no more, thought Hutch. And we never needed more. All we needed was each other. Between the two of us we had all the brains and brawn and experience either of us could want. No two other partners worked together like we did. We were legend on the force._

And no two partners could work this case like they could. That was already clear from the Rodriguez debacle. He and Starsky could exchange more information with just a look or a word than other partners could in a whole conversation.

If Hutch did his job well, they wouldn’t need more than a couple of looks or words to tie up this case. And the millions of things that could go wrong would never touch Starsky. Certainly that much could be relied upon.

Starsky looked down at the floor. He shrugged. “I don't know.” His face lifted, eyes sober and searching. Hutch turned from them. “I guess this Rodriguez thing has me spooked. I mean, this isn't just facing a bunch of guns and knives, you know?”

Hutch knew. Guns and knives, even death, those were fears he’d barely kept at bay when Starsky had been abducted by Simon Marcus. The fear he couldn’t even allow to invade his consciousness was the threat of sexual assault. Especially since Marcus himself never participated in his victims’ sexual abuse, just thought up the games for his sycophants. Which meant Marcus could sit in his jail cell, taunting Hutch, remaining “pure,” while his minions did whatever Marcus had “dreamed” they’d do to Starsky. And since Hutch had seen the results of Marcus’s minions’ work on other victims, he didn’t have to dream what they’d do to Starsky.

Relief didn’t begin to describe what he’d felt once he had Starsky in his arms, alive, moving, holding on to him with the grip of life. But it hadn’t compared to the release he’d experienced when he had Starsky back at the Torino (after he’d kicked a few more cultists in the head, the gut, and the kidneys, and rendered them incapable of escaping). Then, while they waited for the ambulance, he made his own examination, and discovered only _only_ burns and bruises and Starsky’s assurance that nothing else had happened.

Of course, there wouldn’t have been any burns or bruises at all if he’d kept his mind on the danger Simon Marcus presented, in custody or not. He shouldn’t have let Starsky out of his sight. He shouldn’t have let him out of arm’s reach.

Or in this case, Starsky _could_ be out of reach, as long as Hutch was in the line of fire. That was the way to keep Starsky safe.

Starsky took a deep breath. “This is—it isn't—it's more personal, see?” Starsky paused, and apparently noticing Hutch's continued frown, tried again. “We go after drug dealers or murderers, all we have to worry about is getting shot or stabbed or run over or something.” A brief smile flashed across his lips as he recognized the muddled logic of his statement. He forged ahead anyway.

“Whoever we're dealing with here is different. He gets his jollies from control games and sex games and power trips. It's not just that one of us could die, but that one of us could get really—hurt. Like Rodriguez.”
Hutch met Starsky's eyes. They were searching for insight and comprehension—and understanding?. Hutch understood, but he remained silent, waiting for more.

Starsky sighed. “It's like this,” Starsky spoke softly. “Sometimes, dealing with the aftereffects of something can be worse than the actual thing. Some people can deal with the aftereffects, and some can't.” He paused. “And there could be a lot of aftereffects here.” Starsky looked back down at the floor.

Hutch's eyes narrowed and he sat back in the chair. He studied his partner. Starsky was obviously bothered by the sexual assault aspects of this case. But he wasn't the one putting his sex on the line, so to speak. What was he really getting at?

Hutch stood up and stretched some of the kinks out of his body, trying to unkink his thoughts at the same time. “Want some breakfast?” he offered. Anything to get out of the stifling office.

Starsky looked up at him. He seemed confused, on the verge of saying something. Hutch ignored him. Instead, he walked behind him and opened the door to Grimes' office. “After you,” Hutch called.

Starsky remained still for a moment, then rose and walked past Hutch into the hallway. “Let's go to Gorky's,” he suggested quietly. Hutch followed him out.

Gorky's was a popular downtown cafe, frequented by the young and the hip, the bohemian and the offbeat, the lost and the numb. It was one of the few places both Starsky and Hutch had ever agreed upon, probably because they could both find something to eat there. This morning the cafe held a few USC students, a couple of transients, and a person whose gender was up for grabs. They settled into a booth against the wall.

Coffee was all Hutch could stomach at the moment. Starsky had selected the cheese blintzes. They sat silently while their morning meal was consumed. They were both on their second cup of coffee before either spoke.

“Okay, what's wrong?” Starsky who finally broke the silence.

Hutch shrugged. “I'm not hungry this morning.”

Starsky shook his head. He paused, as though gathering up his courage. “That's not what I'm talking about.” Another pause. “I want to know what's been wrong these past couple of months.”

Hutch shut his eyes wearily. So breakfast was to be a confrontation. _But dammit, there's nothing for you to confront!_ Hutch sipped his coffee, ignoring Starsky. It needed sugar. He reached for the old-fashioned glass jar and poured a grainy stream into his cup.

Starsky wasn't to be ignored. “You've got a lady you won't introduce me to, who you won't even talk about. You stopped going with me to the gym. Instead of working with me on this case, you work against me. You disappear for hours at a time. We haven’t had a real meal together in I don’t know when. And I feel like a fucking china doll with all this desk work bullshit and seat belt crap. Not to mention this superman, super-control obsession.”

The list Starsky had just laid out in front of Hutch was meaningless. The items had nothing to do with Starsky, nothing to do with the case, nothing to do with anything. Starsky was finding obstacles where there were none to be found. A slightly paranoid sign, Hutch noted. He discounted Starsky's litany of worries. Instead, Hutch paid particular attention to the flavor of his coffee. Now it was a tad
too sweet. He set his cup down. “The seat belts came with the car.”

“Your attitude didn't,” Starsky shot back.

Hutch picked up a napkin and began wiping the table. “If you want to meet Elisa, I'll arrange it.”

“That's not the point,” Starsky pressed.

“Then what is the point?” Hutch suddenly demanded. He glared at Starsky.

“The point is,” Starsky glared back, “You don't talk to me anymore. You don't tell me things. And you don't listen to me, either. The point is, we've got a problem. And I've had enough.”

Hutch sat back in the booth. “Is this something your shrink came up with?” He could feel the tension in his limbs, hear the tension in his voice. But he wouldn't lose control.

Starsky's features darkened. “Something is wrong,” he persisted. “Tell me what is wrong!”

“Nothing!” Hutch slapped the table in front of him.

Starsky slammed his hand on top of Hutch's, immobilizing it. “Talk to me, or I swear I'll take us both off this case until I figure out what's wrong.”

Hutch knew when to believe Starsky. And he believed him now. Starsky was demanding to be let in on non-existent secrets, so Hutch had better come up with something or he'd drag them both down in his psychoanalytic zeal. “You want to talk? Fine. We'll talk. Pick a topic.” He pulled his hand out from under Starsky's. It burned where Starsky's rings had scraped his skin. “Let's talk.”

Starsky's eyes bore into him. They blazed with anger and distrust. “Tell me about Elisa.”

“You know Elisa,” Hutch maintained the eye contact, daring Starsky to question his sincerity. “She's Tony Garcia's widow. You know I was partnered with him on the Westside drug bust when you were sick. And you know I've been seeing her since after his funeral. What else do you want to know?”

Hutch watched Starsky's nostrils flare as he took in a ragged breath and held it. He released the breath slowly through his nose, his jaw tightly clenched. “I know who she is,” he replied in controlled, measured tones. “I want to know why the two of you are.”

“We aren't,” Hutch suddenly blurted out. “Is that what you want to know? We aren't. We are nothing.” His face felt hot, but a chill seemed to skim his body. “There is nothing going on between us. We aren't sleeping together, we've never slept together, and we're never going to sleep together. She's got some goddamned medieval idea that people can't sleep together until they're married, and apparently I'm not worth any more than that. So does that satisfy your prurient little mind? Does that take care of all the sordid little details you think you're missing? Does that make you feel like you're being talked to?”

Starsky jerked back at the verbal assault. His eyes went wide, and his jaw went slack. He seemed to crumple under some unseen weight.

Hutch struggled to escape from the booth, his long legs tangling on the table leg, his knees banging against the wood, his body trapped between the seat and table. He upset the coffee cups as he forced his way out of the booth, leaving behind a bewildered and reeling partner, as well as several curious patrons.
Hutch stalked out of the cafe and rounded the corner, heading down the street toward the nearest pay phone. A steel strap seemed to be wrapped around his head. When he reached the phone he didn't bother to pull out the matchbook. He had the number memorized.

“What do you want?” Heather was wearing a man's dress shirt and faded blue jeans.

“I want whatever you can dish out.” Hutch stood his ground in front of her, tall, strong, confident, determined. “I wasn't prepared for the maid routine last time.” He didn't want his explanation to sound like too much of an excuse.


“I didn't know what I wanted.” Hutch tried to stand straighter. Shoulders back, stomach in, chin out. “That's why I came to you, remember? To learn.”

Heather walked around him as though appraising him. Hutch continued to look straight ahead.

“Maybe it's not D&S you want.” Heather appeared to have come to some conclusions. “Maybe it's B&D.” She stepped up to him and ran a fingernail over his moustache. “Is that what you want, honey?”

“I want to learn whatever I can.” Hutch resisted the urge to scratch the tickle she'd started with her caress of his 'stache. “I want to be able to write this up as accurately as possible.”

Heather backed away from him. “No you don't.” She sat down in her favorite chair. “But if that's what you want to call what you're doing, that's fine with me. It's your money.” She rocked slightly. “But it's my time. And I'm not going to waste my time on tantrums and timidity. If we're going to do this, then we're going to do this right. Understand?”

Hutch chafed at the domineering tone of her voice. But he swallowed his irritation and projected calm and cool. “I'm the student, you're the teacher. I'll follow your lesson plan.”

Heather shrugged. “Call me.” She picked up a magazine, obviously dismissing him.

Hutch left.

CHAPTER NINE

Starsky, Hutch knew, was parked at the top of the block in his department-issued, dark blue, two-door Aspen. Two houses away from the gracefully landscaped, one-story, multi-million dollar home Hutch had just been ushered into. And within excellent range of his top-of-the-line, ridiculously expensive, well-disguised radio transmitter. Ready to ride to the rescue at a moment's notice.

Hutch’s meet was back on in the aftermath of the Rodriguez debacle, which had been big news but remained unconnected to their serial killing investigation. For the past two days they had managed to
keep both Rodriguez’s name and occupation from the press. Speculation on the similarities between Rodriguez’s case and the serial murders was just that, speculation.

So one block over sat Hughes and Rudd and Boggs and Grimes, tuned in and hopefully not too turned on. Everyone was briefed and prepared for the evening’s events. Especially Hutch.

The plan was for Hutch to go in, but play it timid and hesitant. He’d look but not touch, gather information, and make contacts. Because all the murders up to now had occurred in motels, the feeling was that Hutch was in little danger of facing a life-threatening situation, although there was always the possibility he’d stumbled upon the same kind of scene Rodriguez had found. He hadn't seen Rodriguez, or talked to him, since before that awful night. He'd read the confidential case file, seen the pictures, followed the story as reported by the local news teams. There hadn't been much to learn. Rodriguez had simply gotten himself into a situation he couldn't get himself out of. Hutch had no intention of doing that. He would be in complete control tonight.

Not that Starsky had seemed particularly convinced of that. The past two days had been spent half in miffed silence and half in game show host mode. If Starsky wasn’t looking at him with mouth shut and eyes moving over his body in constant assessment, Starsky was quizzing him on how he would handle this situation or that circumstance. It was almost as if Starsky were questioning him on the need to follow up this lead.

Well, for one thing, it was a good lead. They hadn’t come up with anything on this Crane chap yet, so it was necessary for Hutch to find out more. And Crane’s “bridge club” would lead to more connections, and possibly a suspect. And no one else had come up with anything better.

And pursuing Crane kept Starsky in the background.

And that in itself made Crane a good lead.

Hutch had counted two other cars in front of the house. It appeared the bridge game was on for the night. Which meant license plate numbers, which meant leads.

Crane had opened the door and invited him in, complementing Hutch on his dove gray turtleneck sweater, black slacks and matching sports coat. Hutch had chosen the outfit carefully, First, for colors he looked good in. Second, because the turtleneck didn’t need to be tucked into the slacks.

Crane had then led him into the living room off the foyer.

Hutch now found himself standing before five men, Crane included, of varying ages, heights, weights, and coloring. Upon his entrance, all conversation had stopped and all eyes focused on Hutch. Each man seemed to be measuring him, appraising and rating him, almost valuating him. Not that he’d never been ogled, or leered at, or even undressed by someone’s eyes. But the intensity of the men’s scrutiny and the obviousness of their appetites startled Hutch and caused his heart to race. Their overwhelming attention brought a flush to Hutch’s cheeks that he couldn't stop. Hutch struggled to maintain at least an outward composure.

Crane proceeded to introduce them. “Richard,” he began, taking hold of Hutch's arm and guiding him into the room. “I’d like you to meet the Westside Bridge Club.” The other men in the room shifted in anticipation. Hutch drew a slow, deep breath, sought the inner core from whence he constructed his cover, and found “Richard.”

“This is Tom.” Crane directed Hutch toward a small, middle-aged, paunchy man sitting at the near end of the sofa. They shook hands, and Hutch came away with a moist palm. Tom was balding but pretending he wasn't; hair from one side of his scalp had been allowed to grow to cover the shiny
top. Tom was dressed in a green and white-striped imitation Polo shirt and brown slacks, set off by dirty white Nikes. He was the least well-dressed of the group, as well as the least physically fit. Tom simply didn’t exude the same kind of class the others did, and Hutch wondered how he fit into their group dynamics.

Gray sat next to Tom on the sofa. He stood when introduced to Hutch, and offered a much firmer handshake. Gray was about the same age as Hutch, a little shorter, with dull brown hair neatly cut and styled. He was dressed in a beige sports jacket, opened yellow Oxford shirt, brown slacks, and brown shoes. Hutch noted the gold Rolex on Gray's left wrist, the large onyx ring gracing his pinky, and the gold chain about Gray's throat. Wealth abounded. But the most obvious physical feature about Gray was the large mole on his left cheek. That would definitely go into his report. Two men stood next to the fireplace, drinks in hand, murmuring softly to each other every few minutes. The older of the two stepped forward as Hutch and Crane moved over to them. “Good evening,” said the older man, offering Hutch his hand. “I'm Lawrence.” Lawrence was somewhere in his sixties, about 5'9”, graying, and extremely handsome. He dressed the part of an elder statesman or much-experienced CEO, and he exuded confidence and elegance. Hutch couldn't help but return the charming smile Lawrence offered him. “This is Martin.” Lawrence, still holding Hutch’s hand, drew it toward his companion and passed the hand to Martin, without quite letting go. Hutch's smile faded at the contact.

If Lawrence were to be described as handsome, Martin would have to be described as beautiful. An inch or two shorter than Hutch, and a bit younger, he looked as if he’d just stepped from the pages of GQ or Esquire. Thick, black, curly hair topped a classically sculptured face. Blue on blue eyes set off a Roman nose. An even tan accented the clear eyes and white teeth. Designer clothing couldn't hide a muscular physique.

Hutch consciously sucked in his gut. The physical resemblance to Starsky was impossible to miss. So now, not only was there a Starsky listening to his every word in this cockamamie club, there was a Starsky watching his every move.

And possibly, a Starsky engaging his every move.

Hutch shivered. Strangers he could handle in an undercover situation. Starsky he could handle in an undercover situation, as long as Starsky was his partner and backup and comrade in connivance.

Starsky as his target, as his quarry, as the object of his pursuit….

Hutch banished the thought. Starsky was his protectorate, not his prey. Starsky was Starsky. Martin was Martin. The two needn’t be confused.

Hutch sensed an aloofness from Martin, and he found himself straightening his posture in response. He almost felt as if he were in some kind of competition with Martin, as to which of them was the most eye-catching. Hutch ended the handshake quickly.

“Good to meet you,” Martin said absently. “I notice you have a beeper. What line of work are you in?”

Hutch self-consciously touched the device, his link to Starsky.

“Martin!” Lawrence chided his companion. He took Hutch by the arm and walked him over to the bar. “Please excuse my associate. What will you have?”

Hutch glanced back at Martin, who was studying him over his drink. He turned his attention back to Lawrence. “Just club soda,” he answered, hoping no one would take exception to his abstinence.
“I'm not much of a drinker.”

A murmur of interest flowed behind Hutch's back as Lawrence fixed his drink. He sipped it slowly, letting the carbonation prickle over his tongue and down his throat.

“Sit down,” Crane pointed at a highback chair across from the sofa. Hutch sat and placed his glass on the coffee table in front of him, careful to use one of the crystal coasters. Gray and Tom still occupied the sofa. Lawrence took the matching highback, and Crane pulled up one of the bar stools. Martin remained off by himself, leaning against the mantelpiece.

“You'll forgive us if we stare a bit,” Crane began, apparently noting Hutch's color. “It's been a while since we've had interest from anyone in joining our little gatherings, and, well, we're just a bit curious.”

Hutch nodded. “Then you'll forgive me if I'm just a bit—nervous.” Sympathetic laughter greeted him. One of the rules of good conversation: expose a bit of yourself, and others will expose themselves to you.

“At the risk of embarrassing you,” Gray spoke for the first time, “Crane shared your advertisement with us.” He glanced over at Crane and smiled, a gentle, shy, almost grateful smile. Hutch reached for his club soda and took a quick, burning swallow.

Gray continued. “I sensed, and I think the others did, too, that you're a man seeking new experiences, and someone to share them with. But also that you're unsure how or where to begin.”

The overly polite and literary tone everyone was taking as they spoke was becoming an irritant. It matched exactly the tone of Crane's conversation. To Hutch it seemed phony and insincere, but he would play to it with coyness and a little uncertainty. Hutch took a deep breath. “New’ is right,” he began weaving his tale. “I'm not exactly sure I know what I'm looking for, I just know I haven't found it yet.”

“Dissatisfied?” Martin broke in, a cold sarcasm in his tone. “Unfulfilled? Feeling that old seven-year itch?” Martin walked behind Hutch to the bar and refreshed his drink. He lifted two cubes from the sterling ice bucket and plunked them into his glass. “You're searching for that Shangri-La you read about as a child,” Martin intoned dramatically. “That perfect world your mother promised you, that pinnacle of conquest your father spurred you to. You're trying to fill that hole in the middle of your soul, but barring that, you'll settle for filling the hole in the middle of your ass.”

“Martin!” Crane reprimanded. Lawrence looked aghast, Gray looked exasperated, and Tom could barely contain his laughter. Hutch set himself to look above it all.

“Obviously, yours has been filled and sealed,” Hutch responded coolly.

Tom tittered, Gray smirked, and Lawrence bowed his head. Martin flushed, his blues eyes darkening ominously. Crane regained control of the conversation, but was obviously pleased at Hutch's wit. “Richard, let me explain a little bit more about our group here, and then if you'd like to ask us anything, we'll be more than happy to answer your questions.”

“Or if you have anything to offer….” Gray finished off his drink. He, too, had been pleased at Hutch's quick retort.

Crane let the remark go without comment. “As I mentioned in my letter, we've banded together in order to better pursue our mutual interests, and to share those interests with each other.”

“Safety in numbers,” Martin elucidated from behind the bar.
Crane ignored him. “We discuss our experiences, we share our discoveries with each other, we introduce one another to our friends; in short we enjoy ourselves in a manner in which other people might not understand or approve.” There was quiet assent among the group, except for Martin, who glared into his drink.

“If there’s something you’re interested in, whatever it is, we can help you,” Lawrence picked up the thread. “We can help you find it, get to it, buy it, explore it, experience it. And you'll do the same for us.”

Hutch crossed his legs and relaxed back into the chair. This could be a very fruitful group to infiltrate. If their contacts were as extensive as they intimated…. “What else would I have to do to join your group?”

Tom frowned at him but said nothing, as he had all evening. Hutch had yet to figure out what Tom's place was here.

“All we ask—” said Lawrence, “—is that you keep our confidence, as we will keep yours.”

Hutch started to question Lawrence, but thought better of it. If he began asking questions about confidentiality and secrecy, and how they warded off possible blackmail from members, it might make them suspicious. Better to look for those answers later.

“You protect each other,” Hutch reasoned. “In order to pursue your pleasures.”

Gray smiled. “Tell me, Richard, what are your pleasures?”

Hutch averted his eyes from the group. They had responded to his bashfulness, and he'd continue to use that to his advantage. “My pleasures?” He spoke softly. He tried not to think of all the people listening in on the conversation. Especially Starsky. Starsky, who had given him the third degree about Elisa and his pleasures—or non-pleasures—with her. Pleasures? He had no pleasures. Or rather, his pleasure was keeping Starsky secure. His only pleasure. There was no other pleasure in life, except what he took from Starsky’s safety. That was the pleasure to be had from Starsky. And that was all.

“What do you like?” Lawrence urged. Hutch had obviously captured the fancy of the two older men, particularly Lawrence, and much to Martin's dislike.

“I like—” Hutch took a dramatic pause. “I'm not sure what I like.” He glanced over at Lawrence, eliciting a warm, encouraging smile. “I suppose that's why I'm here, to find out what it is that will interest me.”

“And that's why we're here.” Lawrence was talking only to Hutch now, as though the other men had left the room. “To help you find out what you like.” He reached over and put his hand on Hutch's arm in a comforting gesture. Ice cubes clinked from behind the bar and a bottle was slammed onto the counter. Lawrence ignored the intrusion. “If you could start anywhere, where would you start?”

Hutch took a deep breath for effect, then spoke in hesitant phrases. God, what a performance! And what power in that performance! “I would like to try—I think I would like—I enjoy ropes.” He looked down at his hands, then chanced an embarrassed peek at Lawrence. Lawrence continued to smile at him, patting his arm soothingly as though Hutch had just made confession.

Martin snorted behind him. Crane stood up, shot a threatening glance at Martin, then walked over to Hutch. “That's not an unusual desire, you know.” He patted Hutch's shoulder. Hutch looked up at him in feigned surprise. “Truly. Perhaps you'd like to visit our library.” Crane gestured toward a door on the far side of the room. “We can begin your education there.” He offered his hand to Hutch, who
took it and was immediately pulled upright.

“Tom, I believe you have something for Gray.” It sounded more like a command than a statement, and Tom disappeared from the room as soon as Crane issued it. Crane and Lawrence accompanied Hutch to the Library just off the living room, and Hutch barely caught a glimpse of Gray following Tom out of the room. The three of them spent the next hour browsing through a massive collection, and Hutch saw neither Tom or Gray again. The conversation was tame, concerning first editions and first amendment rights. Probably boring as hell to those listening. Which was fine with Hutch.

Martin remained behind the bar the rest of the evening, obviously sulking.

As soon as Hutch was sure he wasn't being followed by anyone but Starsky, he made a U-turn and drove back to the Federal building in Westwood. He parked at the far end of the parking lot, and waited for Starsky to pull up beside him.

Starsky entered the car quietly, and they both remained silent for several minutes. The lack of nearby lamplight painted them in gray shadows.

“Nice library?” Starsky finally asked.

Hutch rested his elbow on the window frame. “Incredible,” he finally chose a word to describe the contents. “First editions of erotic Victorian literature.”

“I heard,” Starsky said.

“Bound volumes of hard-core magazines.” Hutch itemized the library's contents. “Elaborate scrapbooks filled with French postcards and dirty tintypes. A catalogue collection you wouldn't believe.” Hutch reached behind Starsky's seat and picked something up from the car floor. “They sent me home with these.”

Starsky took two books from Hutch. He tipped them back and forth to try and read the titles from what little outside light there was. “Justine and Juliette.”

Hutch grabbed the books and tossed them into the back seat. “Both the Marquis de Sade. For my indoctrination.”

Starsky scraped at the stubble on his face. “Anybody touch you?”

Hutch glanced at him. “Not unless you count this.” He ran a finger down Starsky's arm, then trailed into Starsky's palm and gave him a fish handshake. Starsky jerked his hand away at the finger-tickling touch. Hutch's fingertips burned where they'd contacted Starsky's skin.

That seemed to be his body’s response to touching Starsky lately. Instead of warm comfort, the touches excited his nerve endings. Touching Elisa certainly didn’t elicit that response. Nor had touching Leslie. Which is not to say other body parts didn’t react to Lisa and Leslie. But it was only Starsky that his skin was sensitized to.

It had to be due to his hyper-vigilance toward his partner. That was it. His constant monitoring of Starsky’s physical and mental state. The slightest change in Starsky’s skin temperature or nervous system was fed back to him through his fingertips.

And maybe there was a little subconscious reaction to differentiating Starsky from Martin. It was simple to explain, really.
“So what we heard was all that happened.”

“Yes.” Hutch rolled his head back against the headrest. “Bunch of dirty old men looking for some off-beat thrills. I think they get a bigger kick out of having new blood to watch than in actually doing anything. But if they are as connected as they say they are, they might lead us to someone key.”

“Maybe.” Starsky turned at the sound of a car motor. The backup van had finally spotted them and was coming down the lot.

“Get anything from any of them?” He watched as Grimes and Boggs jumped out of the van.

“I don’t know.” Hutch turned to see who was approaching. “Maybe I can set something up. I don’t know yet.” Ruth and Grimes walked up to the car.

“Howdy, folks,” Ruth greeted them. “I thought we were rendezvousing in the VA lot.”

Hutch rubbed his hands along the steering wheel. “Forgot,” he mumbled.

“Yeah.” Ruth didn’t seem to believe him, but she didn’t press the issue. She glanced up at the Federal building. “Good work tonight.”

Grimes stepped up to the window. “We got license numbers, some pictures, and for now we'll just assume everyone was using their real names. We might be able to come up with something by tomorrow afternoon. Think you can get your report in by then?”

“If I can get in a couple of hours’ sleep right now.” Hutch started the engine. Starsky looked over at him, then opened his door and exited. “See you at the office about ten,” he addressed Starsky, then pulled away.

“Bye people,” he muttered to the dispersing group as he turned onto Veteran.

He felt vaguely uncomfortable and unsettled, as though there were an itch inside his stomach that wasn’t really an itch but demanded some sort of scratching. He found himself pulling into a gas station off the boulevard. Pay phones had become his life of late.

CHAPTER TEN

“Well. Look what came dragging in without his cat—where’s your golden lion? Haven’t you tamed him yet?” Sugar ran a delicate finger over Starsky’s leather-encased shoulder and wiggled her bead-encrusted hips. They were standing in a very unkempt dressing room.

Starsky took a step back. He eyed Sugar coldly. Sugar’s lion tamer comment turned his blood to sludge. It spoke of cages and control, which was not what Starsky wanted to do to Hutch. He just wanted Hutch to ease up on his own control issues; come out of the cage he’d built for himself and was trying to drag Starsky into.

Well, Hutch hadn’t been trying to drag Starsky into his cage this past week. This past week, he’d been trying to keep Starsky out of his cage. After the initial Bridge Club meeting, Hutch had divided his time between their studio (he was always there for the headshot appointments—which was all
they’d been able to arrange so far) and Parker Center, where he could pursue the backgrounds of the men he’d met at Crane’s and the men who were responding to his personal ad. Sure, it was good detective work, but to Starsky it felt more like a way to keep him hidden and safe.

As well as a way for Hutch to keep Starsky out of his life. Which was shredding Starsky’s nerves. It not only hurt his heart personally, but it was dangerous to this case. Hutch was not just laying his life on the line, but his sex, and if their partnership wasn’t alive and working then there was no safety net for either of them.

Starsky had been thinking a lot about that safety net over the past week. When he’d been kidnapped by that shit-eating Simon Marcus the thought of ending up with a reamed-out asshole or mutilated parts made every other physical insult leveled on him easily bearable. If he hadn’t been absolutely certain that Hutch would find him and would save him and would do so because they shared an ethereal bond as partners and friends then he would have lost his mind. It was only by knowing that Hutch would be there, and would be there during the aftermath as well, no matter what was done to him, that he had been able to mentally survive.

Where was the ethereal bond now? How would Starsky rescue Hutch if Crane turned out to be Marcus-like cult figure with followers willing to do whatever his freaked-up mind envisioned? It was time to solve this case. Solve it, then resolve the issues keeping the two of them apart.

“Don’t tell me—you want the dirt on those dirty little sex games that are decimating the upper crust of our crusted-over little city. Unzip me.” Sugar turned and offered Starsky her back.

Starsky hesitated, then took hold of the zipper and slashed downward.

“Oooh!” Sugar wiggled her hips again, this time as Marilyn. She let the dress fall down to the floor and stepped out of it, revealing a well-filled brassiere and a g-string.

Sugar sat down at her vanity and began pulling off false eyelashes. “Always use the individual lashes,” she explained. “They’re ever so much more classy.”

Starsky leaned against the wall of the small dressing room—away from Sugar. “You know something?”

Sugar grabbed the top of her head and pulled off her platinum Carol Channing wig. A nylon skull cap followed, allowing the few wisps of aging blond authentic hair that remained to live free.

“What if I do?” Sugar massaged cold cream onto her face, erasing all traces of Carol. “What’s in it for me?”

Starsky folded his arms across his chest. “I’m sure the department could come up with something. If the dirt is good.”

“My dirt is always good, sweetheart.” Sugar stood and reached behind her back, unhooking the brassiere and letting it fall to the floor. Starsky couldn’t help but stare at it.

“Tsk, tsk.” Sugar scolding, scooping up the undergarment and flinging it into the corner. “Curiosity killed the cat—or was that the cat’s toy? Is that what you are, his toy? Certainly not his tamer.”

Toy? Not hardly, Starsky thought. More like a valuable kept in a wall safe.

“Personally, I’d accept either role. But then, you’re straight, aren’t you? Neither role for you?”

Starsky straightened his posture and his nerve. “I’d appreciate any help you can give me.”
Sugar pushed the g-string off her hips and reached between her legs. She fingered up into her privates and dislodged a penis. “Tuck, tuck, tuck till it hurts!” she cackled. She waggled it at Starsky, then grabbed for a thread-bare chenille robe and wrapped it around her male body. “So, honey, tell me what you know.” Sugar sat back down at her vanity.

Starsky decided to play it straight—then at least one of them would be. Or, pretending to be. Pretending to not be attracted to a certain blond detective. Pretending to not have strong sexual urges every time his being was summoned or his name was spoken. Pretending to not be what they’d been accused of being since they’d partnered almost ten years ago.

And that was part of it, wasn’t it? Part of why it disturbed him to be here, in the dressing room of a female impersonator? The conflict between hidden desires and public actions? Sugar was clearly, obviously committed to exposing himself as what he was—whatever that was. It certainly included letting the world see that he was not unopposed to sexual contact with men. And it had included letting the world see that he was not unopposed to sexual contact with Hutch—he’d made that quite clear, in the squad room of the precinct, following the arrest of John Blaine’s murderer.

But he’d done that to tease and embarrass Hutch, hadn’t he? Make Hutch the butt of the joke among his police peers. It was entirely different to be truly in need of a physical relationship with Hutch because you were in love with him. Especially if you were a macho cop detective rather than a limp-wristed sissy-boy. There was the Grand Canyon between Sugar and himself.

Or was that just two sides of the same gorge?

Starsky kept his face impassive and professional. “Nothing. No good leads, and too many weirdos that have nothing to do with the case.”

Sugar nodded. “This town bleeds weirdos. Makes the rest of us look bad.” She adjusted her robe across her chest. “Do you know the mayor?”

Starsky perked up. “Met him once—why?”

Sugar smiled. “I thought you might introduce me sometime. I’d like to get to know him.”

Starsky’s eyes narrowed. “That’s a joke, right?”

“Right!” Sugar pointed a taloned finger at Starsky. “Now tell me if this is a joke: I’d like to get to know your jungle cat a little better, too.”

Starsky flushed. He reached for the door knob.

“Sweetcakes, you must develop a sense of humor about this!” Sugar laughed. “It’s the only way you’ll survive!”

“About what?” Starsky demanded angrily. He was immediately sorry he’d betrayed anything to Sugar. He gripped the knob tightly in his hand.

Sugar’s eyes widened. “Sweetheart, it’s a clear as the polish on my nails for those who are open to it. You can’t hide that sort of veneration. You may disguise it as something more socially acceptable, like friendship, but you can’t conceal it.”

Starsky’s nostrils flared, his lips a thin white line.

“The question is,” Sugar continued, “can you accept it and survive?”
Starsky turned the knob and opened the door.

Sugar rose and shut the door, her hand over Starsky’s on the knob.

“I’ve heard nothing about your specific weirdo,” she said soberly. “All anyone can talk about is either staying away from this cat or hunting this cat for some fun of their own. Whoever you’re looking for, he isn’t in my jungle.”

Starsky looked into the blue-blue eyes. There were clear and honest. He swallowed thickly and found some control. “Thanks,” he rasped.

“It is a ‘he,’” Sugar repeated. “And it won’t be anybody you know, I mean judicial-wise. He won’t have a record, and if anybody knows about his kinks, they’ll be as innocent-looking as he is.”

Starsky frowned, then nodded. “Thanks,” he said again. He started to open the door, but Sugar pulled it closed.

“You can live with whatever is most important to you,” Sugar said. “You just have to decide what that is and who’s going to decide it for you: the rest of the world, or yourself.”

Starsky didn’t blink, didn’t breathe, didn’t move.

Sugar released Starsky’s hand. Starsky opened the door and squeezed out into the hall.

“If I hear anything,” Sugar poked her head around the door, “I’ll call your partner!”

Starsky didn’t look back as he left the club.

Same night, different venue, for Hutch.

“This is more of what you had in mind, isn't it?” Heather smoothed the sheets on the bed. This time she was dressed in red and white, red crotchless panties and a white cut-out bra. Her hair hung in a braid down her back, and her legs were bare except for silver sandals with the ever-present spike heels.

Hutch shifted ever so slightly. “Yes, Mistress.” She had given him a red thong to wear, which he found uncomfortable. And he wasn't particularly thrilled at how his belly threatened to roll over the top of the briefs—although he’d been pleased to see he’d made progress in that department of late.

Heather smiled over at him. She patted the center of the bed. Hutch stepped over and sat down on the edge of the mattress.

“Lie back, little boy.” Heather put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him down. Hutch swung his legs up on the mattress and lay back, his head resting on a small pillow encased in white satin. The sheets were matching white satin. He felt as if he could slide off the bed at any moment. A part of him told him he should slide off the bed, and get out of there as quickly as possible. Surely something in Rodriguez’s brain had told him to quit now, run away, come back later with full backup, or at least his partner.

Gibbons, Rodriguez’s partner, now on paid leave, had been furious that Rodriguez had gone in on his own. So furious he’d nearly concussed a backhoe operator who wasn’t digging fast enough in the
backyard of the suspect who’d battered Rodriguez. So furious he’d been forcibly removed from Rodriguez’s home because Rodriguez’s wife was afraid Gibbons’ tongue-lashing of Rodriguez would turn into a fist-bashing.

Hutch wondered if that diatribe hadn’t been the element that pushed Rodriguez over the edge. Starsky would certainly give him a tongue-lashing if he knew Hutch was doing “homework” on his own. Boggs and Grimes would probably just remove him from the case, but Starsky would remind him of it minute by minute, day by day, until he was satisfied Hutch had learned his lesson and would never do it again.

But Hutch was different than Rodriguez. Rodriguez had that crazy macho code controlling his life, which meant doing things without thought merely to prove your manhood. The code controlling Hutch was: do whatever it took to protect Starsky. And that meant exploring every crack and crevice of this case to get it solved. Rodriguez was trying to prove he had cajones. Hutch didn’t need to prove anything, he already knew he had balls. It was just a matter of what to do with them.

And…there was a till recently unknown part of him telling him to stay. A part of him that needed to know what all this meant. That needed to know what kind of release it offered to these men. To him. It was the part of him that was wrapping itself around his spine, attempting another coup.

Heather opened a small drawer on the nightstand and pulled out a handful of white cotton cords. She had explained earlier that she washed the cord several times before using them, to soften them a bit. She preferred it to nylon cord, but she also had a supply of that for those of her friends who wanted it, as well as various other restraints. Heather sat down on the edge of the bed and selected one of the cords, running it through her hand as if testing its strength. She gently picked up his left wrist and knotted the rope around it, then brought it up over his head and knotted the other end of the cord to the metal bars of the headboard. Hutch tested the bond as she watched. The knots held, and he knew the cord would not break. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach. But the swirling sensation reveled.

Heather rose and walked around to the other side of the bed. Again she sat down at his side, took his wrist, and bound it to the bed frame. Hutch lifted his head to look at first one wrist, then the other. Then he lay his head back on the pillow. It fit just under his neck, giving him enough support so that he wasn’t terribly uncomfortable. Heather ran a finger over his lips.

“This will be the only time I break character tonight,” she traced his mouth. “Remember. If you want to stop, say the safe word. And we’ll stop.” Safe word. The word that, once uttered, stopped everything dead in its tracks. Rodriguez hadn’t been given a safe word. Hell, he hadn’t known to use one. The dumb fuck shrink consulting on this case had obviously never heard of one, or he’d have advised the task force. There was no one on this case who had enough knowledge to effectively solve it. That was why Hutch was here. He was educating himself. And his knowledge would most certainly lead him to the killer, as well as benefit the other undercover officers.

Hutch impulsively licked her finger stroking his lips. Heather drew back her hand swiftly, and just as swiftly slapped him. “This is discipline. I didn’t tell you to do that,” she punished, returning to character. Hutch closed his eyes and rolled his stinging cheek onto the cool satin. The knot in his stomach grew.

Heather ran her hands over his chest and belly. “Well,” she smiled approvingly. “Have we been working out? I believe I can feel the muscle under there.”

Hutch kept silent.

Heather picked up the remaining cords and moved to the foot of the bed. She lashed Hutch’s ankles
to the footboard, then left the room.

Hutch lay spread-eagled, able only to slightly flex each of his limbs. He tried to relax his muscles rather than give in to the impulse to struggle or tighten up. That would only lead to cramping. In fact, as he relaxed he found himself not so uncomfortable at all. What was causing him more discomfort now was the thong riding up his ass. He wriggled a bit, trying to relieve that particular itch. The thong couldn't be dislodged, and the strip of material in front rubbed against his cock. The knot in his stomach suddenly became arousal, and merged with the tingle crawling through his spine.

Heather returned to the bedroom, carrying some things Hutch couldn't see. She deposited the items on the table beside the bed, beyond Hutch's line of sight, and turned toward him.

“Do you like what you see?” She circled her aureolae, then pinched both her nipples.

“Yes, Mistress,” Hutch properly responded. He was, despite being bound hand and foot, becoming quite aroused. There was a sudden rush of heat and weightlessness to his head. He wanted to say more, to suggest more, to inspire more. And have her agree or disagree as she saw fit. But now it was all up to her; it was out of his hands. In fact, he didn't have to think, or act, or be responsible for whatever happened. He could simply lie back and enjoy it. Release.

Heather moved up to the bed. She knelt beside him, still fondling her breasts. “Would you like these?” she asked again.

“Yes, Mistress.” Hutch watched her play with herself, his breathing growing shallower as his arousal grew deeper. Put them in my mouth. Let me suck on them. Put them wherever you want.

Heather reached down and traced the cock that was straining at the red material. The nylon thong was strong and held Hutch in check. She bent down as if to kiss his cock, but only breathed gently on him. Hutch shivered and his cock strained painfully within its confines. The thong was pulled tighter up his ass. He pulled gently at his bonds, their stricture adding to the luxurious feeling of giving himself up to her practiced hands.

Heather slipped her leg over Hutch’s torso, straddling him. She rode lightly on his abdomen, continuing to tease him by playing with her nipples. Her panties had parted as she had moved over him, and her pubic curls tickled his stomach. She ran a fingernail around his chest, tracing odd patterns, then running up and down his forearm and tickling dangerously in the pit of his arm. Hutch struggled as the tickling continued, suddenly aware of how impossible it was to escape her finger. Physically, he couldn't make her stop. But unlike Rodriguez, he had a final out. It was a unique sensation, and served to fuel the fires in his groin.

“This is bondage.” Heather continued to stroke his skin. “I tie you up, and all choices are taken from you. Whatever I want to do to you, I can. And you have no choice but to submit. All the responsibility is mine. And all the pleasure is yours. So you might as well give in to whatever you're feeling because you're no longer in control.”

Heather finally stopped, and Hutch thanked her silently. She leaned over to retrieve the items she had put on the night stand, her breast brushing against Hutch's lips. This time he resisted the urge to lick her nipple and suck it into his mouth. Heather sat back, and Hutch could finally see what she had brought. All arousal instantly left him.

Heather balanced the items on his chest, still straddling Hutch. “Men simply have no idea how unpleasant their moustaches can be,” she began. Hutch found himself holding his breath, afraid to make the articles resting on his chest move at all. Heather picked up a pair of scissors. “These hairs are so scratchy.” She brought them up under Hutch’s nose, and began to trim.
Hutch listened to the metallic schssst of the blades. They skimmed awfully close to his skin…

The trimming stopped. Heather dropped the scissors and picked up a shaving mug, stirring the brush inside. A white lather worked itself up and bubbled over the rim of the cup. Heather swirled a dollop on the brush and leaned forward to cover Hutch’s face. Hutch jerked back at the first touch of the lather, and Heather sat up sternly. “Don’t move,” she warned. “You’ll accept this and enjoy it.” She bent back down and artistically covered his face, taking her time to get each foamy swirl just right. “This is domination.” She studied her handiwork. “I know we said we were going to explore B&D tonight, but after that little incident with the housework I thought we’d throw in a little D&S. So just submit, darling. And learn something.”

Hutch had tensed every muscle in his body to keep himself rigid and unmoving. Thoughts flew thick and fast as Heather lathered him. This is crazy, he thought. This isn’t what’s supposed to happen. This isn't sexy and it's not sex. He shut his eyes and searched for options. Say the safe word, a voice demanded. You agreed that if either one of you said a specific word, you'd both stop and end what was happening.

And what if that doesn't stop her, another voice inquired.

But you trusted her, the first voice replied. You trusted her.

Hutch swallowed thickly and opened his eyes. Heather was drawing out the process, playing with the shaving cream. Hutch remained silent. Finally satisfied with her work, Heather returned the mug and brush to the table. She then picked the last item up off Hutch’s chest. It was a straight razor. She opened it slowly, letting it flash in the lamplight.

She could slit his throat with that instrument! Worse, she could cut off other things besides his moustache! Rodriguez hadn’t been cut or beaten, just sodomized. Just. Sodomized. Bound and sodomized. Over and over. But Rodriguez had been sodomized by a man. This was just a girl. Girls didn’t sodomize. They sucked and fucked. But not with straight razors. Maybe all she meant to do was this: trim his ‘stache, and give him a close shave. That’s all it looked like. He shouldn’t jump to conclusions just because Rodriguez assessed danger poorly.

Hutch’s heart pounded in his chest. The voice inside his head screamed at him to say the word, or at least try and fight his way out of the bonds. For now all he could hear was the voice screaming and his blood pounding in his ears. But he could see Heather bending toward him, taking his face in one hand, placing the razor against his cheek. Steadily, slowly, she scraped the lather from his cheeks. Then she moved to do his neck, gently lifting his neck upward and scraping easily up over his chin. Finally it was time for his moustache. The razor suddenly became of secondary importance to Hutch.

“No!”

Heather looked at him quizzically. “No?” she repeated. She lifted the razor from his face.

“No!” Hutch insisted. “You’ve had your fun, now stop this.” He pulled vainly at the cords, aware his whole body was flushing.

Laughter poured from Heather. “Dearest, the moustache is coming off.”

“That’s enough, Heather!” Hutch demanded. He could feel the flush in his cheeks growing hotter.

“Is it now?” Heather lay the blade back against Hutch's cheek. “I don't think you know what's enough.” She pointed at his left wrist. “Now repeat after me. Bondage.” She moved the razor in front of his face. “Discipline.” She placed the tip of the razor between her breasts. “Domination.” She laid
the razor back on his cheek. “Submission.”

Hutch tried to roll away from it. Heather followed him, keeping the blade flat against his skin. Yet still he remained silent. I have to know….

“Darling,” she grabbed his hair and brought his head back roughly, holding him immobile. “Never tell me no.” She slid the razor above his lip, pulling his head back at the same time. His neck was stretched painfully and for a moment he couldn't breath. And suddenly, the swirling, tingling spinal sensation rushed through his body, overwhelming him, nearly causing him to pass out. He gave into its rush, relaxed into its motion, gave up all control. He felt as though his mind had separated from his body. He felt—absolved.

Four determined swipes later, and the moustache was gone. Heather released Hutch. His head flopped limply on the pillow.

Heather reached for a small towel and wiped off Hutch's face. Hutch ignored her as she cleaned him up, and took the shaving items out of the bedroom. He was still flushed, but from humiliation, not anger. Why, the voice asked, didn't you say the word and stop her? Why did you give in to that feeling and give up your control?

A better question, the second voice interrupted, might be why did you just have an orgasm?

Hutch lifted his head weakly and looked down at himself. A large stain covered the red thong.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The woman who answered the door was dressed in an old, worn, man's bathrobe. She wore no make-up and her hair was tangled as she'd just risen from bed. She squinted at Starsky as she held the door open for him to enter.

“You look disappointed,” she remarked as he stepped inside the small house. “You said you just wanted to talk, so I didn't dress. Especially at this hour of the morning.” She gestured toward the living room. “Have a seat.”

Starsky moved into the room and took a seat on the couch. The room was filled with interesting Indian artifacts and Americana that showed a definite eye for what was collectible and what was just for the tourist. He studied the room a moment, then turned his attention toward the woman. She had taken a seat opposite him in a rocking chair, and was rocking slowly.

“I wanted to ask you some questions,” he began.

“At 8am in the morning?” Heather asked. “The questions couldn’t wait until a more decent hour?”

No, they couldn’t, thought Starsky. I need to start getting things straightened out now.

He slipped a bill—a large one—from his shirt pocket and offered it to the woman. “Sweet Alice said you could help me.”

“Sweet Alice has been helping me a lot lately.” She seemed to be speaking to herself. “Ask away, sweetheart.” She reached over and took the bill, depositing it in one of her robe pockets.
Starsky clasped his hands together and rested them on his knees. “Uh, I'm interested in a man you might have had contact with.”

The woman smiled at him.


The woman continued rocking. “And?”

Starsky rubbed one thumb over the other. “Have you seen him? Has he been here?”


The moustache remark bothered Starsky for some reason. He decided not to waste any more time. Games were for Hutch, not him. Starsky reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his wallet. He flipped it open and showed the woman his badge. “I know what you are,” he stated. “Now you know what I am.” He stared into her eyes and held them. “Has the man been here?”

Heather shifted uncomfortably. “What is this?”

Starsky slid the wallet back into his pocket. “I need to know if the man's been here, and if he has, what he was doing here.”

Heather stopped rocking. “You just said you know what I am,” she leaned forward. “What do you think he was doing here?”

Starsky relaxed back into the couch, resting his arm along the back. He looked at ease, but he was not. What was Hutch doing here? Research? Heather was implying Hutch hadn’t just talked to her, but taken advantage of her profession. That wasn’t like Hutch. Even during a dry spell, Hutch had never satisfied his sexual urges with a prostitute. And plenty had offered over the years. Starsky supposed Hutch could have lied to him about having never gone to a prostitute, but it just didn’t seem like Hutch. Hutch had always discoursed on the despicable dicks who preyed upon women for sexual services. He saw prostitution as a social evil, not a sexual outlet. Starsky pushed further into the cushions. “I can make this official. But it would be a waste of my time and the taxpayers’ money.”

Heather, too, relaxed back in the rocking chair. “Do you know anything about phones?” she inquired.

Starsky shrugged. “I know how to tap them.”

Heather smiled. “No. I meant business-type phones.” She sighed and folded her arms under her breasts. “This thing I've got going now is just too tiring. Half the guys who call up don't even show, and half only want to jerk themselves off over the phone.” She pursed her lips. “I've been thinking about moving into tapes and phones. I can record one tape and sell it to whoever wants to buy it and I don't even have to get dressed up. Or if I could figure out some way to do the whole bit over the phone and get the guy to pay, that would work, too.” Heather let her head fall back against the chair. “I'm getting too old for this business. It's no fun anymore.”

Starsky let his eyes wander over the room. “The man has been here.” He knew the answer, but he needed to hear it to make it real.
Heather nodded. “I think you’re talking about the Professor. He’s been here a few times. Says he’s writing a paper. In fact, he was here last night.” She looked at Starsky. “He’s not a professor, is he?”

Electricity shot through Starsky’s spine. Hutch had been here just last night? Last night, when Starsky had been out alone doing his own recognizance? Well, why shouldn’t Hutch be doing his own recognizance, too? They weren’t doing much of anything together lately. And if Starsky could go behind Hutch’s back to wangle information, why couldn’t Hutch go behind his back? Isn’t that how it works? What’s good for the goose…?

Starsky didn’t like that line of thought. He shifted to find a more comfortable position. “No, he’s not a professor,” Starsky finally answered. There was no comfortable position to be found.

“Didn’t think so,” Heather let her hands fall into her lap. “He’s not that psycho that’s running loose, is he?”

“No.” At least not the particular psycho she was referring to.

Heather nodded to herself. “He came around wanting to find out about D&S and B&D and all those kinky sexual things. So we played with some humiliation, and he said he didn’t go for that. Then we played with some ropes, and he did go for that. But he wasn’t into true submission, and he never asked to be the dominant, so I think maybe all he wanted was a little bondage to get rid of some guilt or something.”

Starsky continued to catalog the items in the room. It gave his brain something to do while his mind assimilated the peril Hutch had put himself in. Starsky couldn’t imagine his partner allowing the woman in front of him to control his actions, to put himself at her mercy. The thought of Hutch tied up wasn’t arousing, it was frightening. Hutch’s naked and vulnerable body bound and offered up to whomever and whatever turned his stomach. Starsky certainly didn’t want Hutch like that. He wanted him willing and able to participate. He wanted to know his partner wanted to be there as much as he did.

And what if Ruth were right, and the predator out there was a woman? Hutch had purposely, deliberately, intentionally allowed this woman to render him helpless. Totally vulnerable. And with no one to save his sorry ass had something gone wrong. Had he learned nothing from Rodriguez? This was a blood sport to some people!

Anger fired through his veins. And how dare Hutch go behind his back and take a risk like that! How dare he betray their partnership and keep secrets that pertained to this case? This had gone beyond just trying to keep Starsky protected and safe. This had become personally insulting. Hutch was going to have to start trusting him, or Starsky would…would…would what? Tie him up and hold him down until Hutch came around? Beat him up? Leave him?

He ought to commit him.

Heather suddenly started to chuckle. “He's not a cop, is he?”

Starsky no longer wanted to look at Heather. He didn't answer.

Heather burst into gales of laughter. “God, he's a cop! A goddamn cop!” She couldn't control herself. “I shaved off the moustache of a goddamn cop!”

Starsky’s insides collapsed. Her earlier remark about moustaches had niggled his mind for a reason—she was saying she had shaved off Hutch’s moustache!

But surely Hutch wouldn’t lose the moustache simply because this woman didn’t like it? A lot of
women hadn’t liked Hutch’s moustache, and a couple of them had certainly been more important than this—he bit down hard on the word—whore. There were a lot of alarming aspects to what Hutch had done here, but he couldn’t imagine why Hutch would allow anyone besides himself—or Starsky—to make a decision about his moustache! Hutch had either gone stupid or crazy.

Starsky prayed for stupid.

If morning had come too soon for Heather, it was also going to come too soon for Hutch. And it was to be accompanied by the sound of pounding on his front door. Starsky stopped for a minute, waiting for the sound of Hutch coming to the door. But he heard nothing, so Starsky continued the tattoo, meant to convey only one thing: Starsky wanted in.

Suddenly the lock twisted savagely and the door was yanked open.

“Dammit!” Hutch hissed. “I told you last night before we left the studio I was sleeping in this morning!”

Starsky slipped passed him to move inside the apartment, ignoring the wrath of his partner. Hutch was left standing in the open doorway, dressed only in his briefs, for all the world to see. He slammed the door shut.

“This had better be good,” Hutch whirled on Starsky. “I am not in a good mood.”

Starsky’s arched an eyebrow. “Really? I—” He stopped suddenly, his eyes widening, then narrowing as he studied Hutch's features. “You did—what the hell did you do to yourself last night?” Starsky stepped closer to Hutch, reaching out toward his face. He needed to touch Hutch’s smooth upper lip to believe it. Gone. It was gone. Unbelievable.

Hutch backed away from the questing fingers, rubbing his upper lip self-consciously. “So?” He used anger to hide his embarrassment, walking huffily to the kitchen.

“What did you do?” Starsky followed him into the kitchen. Give him a chance to explain. Maybe there’s another explanation. Maybe Heather was lying.

“I suppose you're referring to the fact I shaved off my moustache?” He pulled down a jar of coffee and set the kettle on the burner.

“Look, Hutch,” Starsky struggled for control. If Hutch had made the decision on his own, fine. But if Hutch had played some game with that woman—Starsky needed to know. He needed to know so he could put a stop to them. Before someone got hurt. “It’s pretty obvious the ‘stache is missing. A good detective wouldn’t miss the fact it was gone.” Lousy joke. “Why’d you decide to shave it off?” Did that sound calm? Reasonable?

“Is there a problem with that, or am I not allowed to control my own facial hair?” Hutch twisted the lid off the jar of coffee rather savagely.

Starsky’s heart was pounding. Gotta know, but how do I get him to talk to me? Maybe if I keep playing it cool, not make it a big thing…

Starsky’s voice came out much calmer than he expected. “I didn't come over here to argue about your moustache. I want to talk about all the crap that's been going on between us lately, and
straighten a few things out.” There’s an interesting way to play it. Moustache chat or partnership talk. Starsky needed to talk about both, so it didn’t matter which option Hutch chose.

Hutch rolled his eyes and turned to make his coffee.

“I want you to come to the gym with me this morning. You can work out with me.” Starsky surprised himself with the request, but it made sense once he’d said it. It was a gamble, asking Hutch to go with him to the gym. But Hutch wouldn’t talk to him in the car, wouldn’t talk to him in the squad room, wouldn’t talk to him in the studio, wouldn’t talk to him at either of their apartments, and wouldn’t talk to him in a public restaurant. The gym was quiet in the mornings, the pool was reserved for lap swimming between 9 and noon, and a little exercise might loosen Hutch up. And it certainly wouldn’t hurt his body.

Hutch sipped at his coffee. He automatically wiped his upper lip to dry his moustache, his fingers apparently quite interested in the newly smooth skin. Hutch’s cheeks flushed. “I have a report to get in this morning.”

Starsky walked up behind him. He could feel the heat of Hutch’s body just inches away. Keep pushing.

“The gym’s off Wilshire. You can still be downtown by 10:30. That should give you plenty of time to get your report in.” Give him no excuses.

Hutch took another sip of coffee. “What's the alternative?”

Starsky spoke quietly into his ear. “No alternative.”

Hutch turned slowly and looked into Starsky's eyes. Starsky watched the fight drain from them. “I'll get dressed.”

Starsky turned away from Hutch so Hutch couldn’t see the incredulity in his eyes.

Somehow Starsky always managed to find the most pitiful commercial establishment to give his business to. His choice of gyms was no different. The place was an old YMCA, now under “new management.” Starsky hadn’t cared that it was tucked away in the Vietnamese section of L.A., or that there was no parking around the place, or that for all the shiny new equipment inside, the foundation of the building was cracking into thirds. According to Starsky it had all it needed: a pool, some Nautilus equipment, a basketball gym, and a nice, friendly guy at the front desk. According to Hutch it was a roach-infested health trap that was suckering body-building wannabes. Starsky had ignored Hutch, of course.

Of course.

The—dialogue—back in his apartment had come too early for him. Starsky had showed up before he’d had a chance to figure out how to explain the missing moustache. Of course, the easy explanation was that he’d simply decided to shave it off. And why did he owe anyone an explanation anyway?

Yet somehow he’d felt beholden to Starsky for an explanation. And instead of giving one, he’d swapped an explanation for a romp in a gym. Which was stupid. He should have just made Starsky leave, and saved the moustache talk for later. If ever. It was none of Starsky’s business how it had made its exit. And anything else Starsky wanted to talk about was negligible. So why was he at this gym?
But he was at this gym, and now he was angry not only at Starsky for his incessant need to talk, but
at himself for agreeing to come to this pit.

So Hutch had insisted, loudly, on parking the car in a legitimate parking area and not ignoring the
street signs. And then he had insisted, loudly, on bringing in his files rather than leaving them in the
car, particularly in this neighborhood. And finally he had insisted, loudly, on making sure they left in
time to get back to Parker Center so he could finish his report.

Starsky had ignored him. He’d merely retrieved his old army duffel tucked away in the trunk. Hutch
sullenly followed him into the aging building.

After checking in at the front desk and registering Hutch as a guest, Starsky led him into the men's
locker room. Hutch tried not to look too closely at the floor, the sinks, and the shower area.

Starsky chose a locker and began stripping for his workout. After slipping his files into the locker,
Hutch took a seat on the bench, at the end of the row, away from Starsky. Starsky looked over at
Hutch. He held a pair of red trunks in his hand. “Here, I have an extra pair.”

Red trunks.

Red thong.

Heat erupted from his belly and engulfed his entire body. He could barely stay upright under the
body-melting flush engulfing him. Heather…the moustache… Starsky…their weight was
overwhelming. It was all Hutch could do to make the requisite “Starz, I’m just too tired” excuse. He
felt the need for a shower, but he'd taken one as soon as he'd gotten home from Heather's, which had
only been a few hours ago.

“'Dave!” A man appeared from the shower area. Hutch closed his eyes, grateful for the interruption.

He glanced up to get a look at the man approaching Starsky, hand extended. He looked vaguely
familiar. White blond. Short. Hutch thought back a couple of weeks. The man at the sex club Starsky
had pointed out. It could be him. This could be something important. Something to focus on. That
would cool this fire.

Starsky freed himself from his T-shirt and turned to meet the man. He was muscular, broad-chested
with narrow waist and hips. He wore only a black Speedo, and a towel was flung over his shoulder.
Thick, wavy hair was combed back in a tiny ponytail, but very little hair covered his body, and in
fact Hutch guessed he probably shaved all over to enhance the appearance of his musculature. Hutch
thought he looked ludicrous, particularly because the man was only about five-and-a-half feet tall.

Starsky shook his hand.

“Hey! Where've you been lately?” The man pulled the towel from his shoulder and sat down,
straddling the bench. “We've missed you around here. Find a woman to keep you busy?”

Oh yeah. A woman. Right.

Starsky continued removing his clothes, finally replacing his briefs with a
pair of swim trunks. “Pretty good,” Starsky grinned. “Besides, I haven't missed that many weeks.”

Hutch studied Starsky. Black trunks, not red. Starsky looked good in black. Starsky would look
good in red. Red trunks. Red thong. The fire re-ignited. No! Focus!

The man smiled back at him. “Well, you still look in pretty good shape.” He leaned sideways to look
at Hutch. “That a friend of yours down there?”

Starsky glanced back at Hutch. Hutch stayed where he was, but he couldn’t stop himself from staring
business—partner. He’s just checking out the place. We’re going to do laps together.”

“Hey, Rich.” The man waved down at him. “I’m Eric.” Hutch shifted his gaze to Eric, and lifted his hand noncommittally. He didn't speak. He needed to focus. Focus on this man. Get his mind off red thongs!

“Friendly fellow,” the man commented. Starsky shrugged in reply. He started to stuff his clothes into the locker, only to have his duffel and Hutch's file come tumbling out. Starsky fumbled for the bag, and the contents of the file went flying.

Several pornographic magazines, a couple of reports, and three 8x10 glossy photos of men in bondage spilled onto the floor.

Hutch was instantly focused—protect Starsky, protect their cover. Retrieve those damned reports! He started toward the clutter, but caught his leg on the bench and nearly lurched into the lockers.

Starsky quickly dropped the bag and scooped up the file contents. He shoved everything back into the folder and slipped it into the locker, dumping the bag and his clothes on top of it, then locking the door. No one said anything.

“Ready?” Starsky turned to Hutch as casually as possible.

Hutch righted himself. His heart was beating hard at their possible discovery. He needed to stay on alert, stay on guard. “Too tired. Another time.” He couldn’t be swimming and leave Starsky unprotected. He wouldn’t swim with Starsky and give him an opening to converse.

And he was not putting on those red trunks.

Starsky looked at him with disappointment. Hutch ignored him and focused on Eric.

Eric spoke to Starsky. “I have to get back to the desk. How about a game of basketball tomorrow?”

Starsky thought a moment. “Don't think so. I'll have to put in some extra hours at the studio to make up for my time here today.”

“Studio?” Eric seemed intrigued. “I don't think so. I'll have to put in some extra hours at the studio to make up for my time here today.”

“Studio?” Eric seemed intrigued. “I don't think I've ever heard you mention working at a studio. Which one?”

Starsky shrugged. Watch it, thought Hutch. Keep your cover. Or I'll do it for you. Hutch prepared to leap between the two men and interrupt the conversation.

“It's my own studio. Photography, not movies,” Starsky downplayed. “Just a little set-up down on Sunset. We have our own business.”

Hutch breathed a sigh of relief.

Eric nodded. “Sounds nice. I always admire a man who bows to no master but himself. That's why I'm moving into my own business. Some people will pay a pretty penny for you to come to their house and actually force them to work out!” He smiled at Starsky. “Maybe I'll come down someday and let you take my picture. Anyway—” Eric slapped his thighs and lifted off the bench, “—next time then. Maybe I'll see you before you leave.” He waved good-bye, and left the locker room.

“Not swimming?” Starsky snarled. “I thought we came here to work out.”

Hutch shrugged. He really was drained. Really.
Starsky stared at the wall, then sighed. “Fine. Then you can just sit on side and watch me. Let’s go.”

Hutch walked up to Starsky. Focus. “Who was that?”

Starsky didn’t answer for a moment. Probably fuming. “That's Eric,” Starsky explained as they passed through the shower room to the pool. “He manages the place.” They emerged into the humid swimming area, the smell of chlorine overpowering. Pounding feet and the constant thump of a basketball slammed down from the court above them. “He’s a nice guy,” Starsky continued, leading Hutch down to the shallow end of the pool. They stood next to the wall, waiting for a swimming class to end. “He's the one who helped me come up with my program on the equipment upstairs.” He gestured toward the far end of the pool. “That's his twin sister over there, Janet.” Hutch looked down at the other end of the pool. A buxom white blonde, hair pulled into a short ponytail, was urging a group of middle-aged women from one side of the pool to the other. Kickboards and words of encouragement were barely keeping the group afloat. But Janet kept prodding them along. Hutch studied her. A black one-piece suit barely contained her breasts, and the legs were cut up to her hips. She was short, like her brother, and muscular as well. In fact, she looked quite a bit like him. But the overall effect was much more pleasing on her than on Eric.

Focus. “Isn’t this the guy you thought you saw at that club?”

Starsky’s brow furrowed. Hutch mentally rolled his eyes. Starsky couldn’t even remember seeing this guy? See, Starsky? You’re spending so much energy trying to find something wrong with me that you’re not paying attention to your job!

“Yeah, that’s right. I’d forgotten. It could have been him. What do you think a guy like Eric would have been doing out there?”

Hutch snorted. “What everyone except us was doing out there. Maybe we should talk to him.” We’re detectives here! Pay attention!

Starsky nodded. “I guess you can’t tell from looking at a person what they’re into. But I sure wouldn’t suspect a healthy-living guy like him of being into anything kinky.”

Hutch quickly damped the fire that wanted to reassert itself. Suspects are suspects. Healthy living and red thongs have nothing to do with one another. It’s simply a matter of preference. And controlling those preferences.

Starsky dropped his gaze to the concrete, then toward the pool entrance. “Maybe would could make that basketball game tomorrow, talk to him then.”

“Exactly.” Hutch moved away from the side of the pool. An employee came out of the office and began pulling the rope floats out to divide the pool into lap lanes. Janet dismissed her class and exited into the women’s locker room. Starsky dove awkwardly into the pool and began his laps.

What am I doing here, Hutch thought. I don’t want to talk to Starsky. And I don’t want to watch Starsky swim. And now we’ve got another lead that’s going to put Starsky at the forefront. How am I going to turn that around?. He sat down wearily on a bench next to the wall, leaned his head back, and tried not to think.

Hutch was relieving himself as Starsky toweled off in the changing area. Eric entered the locker room again, as though he’d known when Starsky would be back. Or at least the timing suggested that, Starsky thought. He’d been so furious at Hutch he’d paid no attention to Eric at all earlier—and
he should have. In fact, he should have pursued this guy two weeks ago if he’d thought he’d seen him at that sex house. Where was his mind?

On Hutch, of course.

“Dave!” Eric called to Starsky.

Starsky answered him with a quick greeting. He noted that Hutch was still behind the wall separating the urinals from the lockers.

“Listen, Dave,” Eric began. “I hope you’re not too embarrassed by what fell out of your locker earlier. I mean, by my seeing it and all.” He sat down on the bench next to Starsky, straddling it.

Starsky clankaed around in the locker. “Uh, no. It's okay.” He paused, thinking furiously—sex club, sex photos…maybe meeting for something besides basketball would be a better alternative. “I wouldn’t want it to get around, of course.” He glanced at Eric to see his response.

Eric was not at all embarrassed. “God, no!” he laughed. “I know exactly what you mean. Some things are personal and aren’t meant to be public knowledge.” There was more silence as Starsky continued to dress. “Can I ask you something?” Eric's voice suddenly became low, almost conspiratorial.

“Sure,” Starsky answered. Hutch was still hidden from sight. Presumably, Starsky thought, listening to their conversation.

“Was that really your stuff? Did you take those? I mean, is that your thing?”

Starsky caught his breath. Could they have stumbled onto something really big here? “Yeah,” he answered slowly, and not a little reluctantly. “Uh, is that your thing, too?” So far all the contacts in this case had been made by Hutch, nothing had come of their erotic photography setup. This was Starsky’s first chance to really get back into the undercover game. He flexed his mental muscles. Like riding a bike….

“Yeah,” Eric answered. He laughed, a hint of nervousness in his tone. “You know, I don't want you to think I go around prying into people’s sex lives or anything like that, and I wouldn't be saying anything to you about what I saw if those photos hadn't been so—obvious. But not a lot of guys carry around pictures that are quite that—extreme, and I figured I'd take a chance and ask you about them.”

First contact or not in a long time, Starsky was falling into the game easily. He spoke softly, but firmly. “Do you think they’re extreme?”

Eric laughed again. “No. In fact, I've seen a lot harder. And I've seen a lot worse. Those looked like pretty good quality. You're a good photographer, aren't you?”

Starsky cocked his head in an arrogant manner. “Yeah.”

“Develop your own film, of course.”

“Of course.”

Eric mulled over the information. “You wouldn't by any chance have one of those new video camera recorders, would you?

Starsky took a chance and glanced back at the shower room. Hutch was still hiding. “I might. Why?”
Eric shrugged. “No reason. There's just lots of people out here wanting to get into the private film business is all. Sounds like you might be one of them.”

Starsky reached into the locker and rummaged around. He pulled out a business card. “Call me. We can set something up.”

Eric smiled at Starsky, took the card, then rose from the bench and moved toward the door. “I'll be seeing you,” he pointed his finger at Starsky. “Or you'll be seeing me.” Eric grinned, and left.

Hutch finally came around the wall. Starsky remained sitting in front of the locker. Hutch walked up to him.

“You heard?”

Hutch nodded.

Starsky thumbed through the magazine. “What do you think?” he asked quietly. Starsky was pretty sure what he thought. He thought Eric was looking to shoot a few funny photos. A few kinky photos. Like the kind their victims enjoyed.

Hutch sat down next to him. He watched Starsky riffle pages. “I don't know,” he finally replied. “Do you think he could be the one?” Starsky looked at him, eyes questioning. They were facing a tough call here. Tough calls required hard answers. Answers that depended upon them knowing exactly what each other was thinking, so every step they made was in harmony. So no one got hurt. Could he pull Hutch back into that harmony? He hadn’t exactly made any headway this morning.

And he still didn’t know the story of the moustache.

Hutch shrugged. “He doesn't exactly fit our profile. We’re supposed to be looking for middle-aged white men, not surf rats.”

Starsky avoided this tactic—Hutch trying to down-play Starsky’s thoughts and ideas on the case. If they were to work together, Hutch would have to start respecting Starsky’s opinions again.

“Dr. Jasper told us the killer would probably start getting sloppy. That he'd get lazy or careless because he'd need more and more stimulation to get his rocks off. More murders more often. Jasper said maybe he'd choose a more conspicuous victim, or he'd forget to clean up after himself, or he'd need to do the whole thing in a more public place.” Starsky thought quietly a moment. “Maybe now he wants pictures of what he's done.” He gestured toward the door through which Eric had exited. “I'm sure that was him at that club last month.”

Hutch ran a hand over his jaw. “It's a straight club.”

Starsky shook his head. “No. You only have go in as couple. Once you're in, you can do whatever you like. Or arrange whatever you like for later. He could've come with his sister for all we know.”

Hutch shrugged again. “We have to take him to Ruth and Grimes and check him out. That should have been done weeks ago.”

Starsky studied the man next to him. Hutch's was purposely reprimanding him—and Starsky deserved it. But could Hutch also be upset that Starsky had landed a lead, instead of him? Makes sense. That would put Starsky in the thick of things, with Hutch on the fringes. Not the way Hutch wanted to operate lately.
Tough shit.

And he wouldn't stop fingering his damn upper lip. Hutch had grown that thing in the face of departmental regulation, undercover assignments notwithstanding, and kept it far longer than anyone in the department had bet on. Starsky had thought Hutch would get rid of it after his shooting—new life, new start, new face. Then Starsky had decided Hutch kept it as a reminder of who he was when Starsky had taken the hit. A never-forget memento. Hutch’s own hair-shirt, as it were.

A hope presented itself. Could it be that Old Hutch was trying to reassert himself? That it had nothing to do with Heather, but with a desire to go back to what they had before?

Starsky stood, wiping his hands on his pants. “We'll take him to Ruth and Grimes.” But I'll check him out, Starsky thought. And while I'm at it, I'd better check you out, too. We didn't get our chance to talk today, but it's going to happen. This can't go on any longer. If Old Hutch wants to come out, I'm going to help him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“This is unexpected.” Ruth walked around the small conference table and sat down next to Grimes. She dropped several file folders onto the middle of the table.

Starsky nodded. “You're telling me.” He glanced at Hutch. He’d given Hutch the grace of silence on their way over here. Now that Starsky had the upper hand, he didn’t need to push so desperately.

Hutch selected one of the folders and opened it. “The only thing in this guy's jacket is a misdemeanor possession rap ten years ago. And there's nothing on his sister.”

Starsky knew Hutch was trying to get Ruth to drop this lead, keeping Starsky from the forefront. But Hutch was no longer solely in charge of this investigation. “Jasper doesn’t know whether our perp will have a record or not, or has even been arrested before. We're working pretty blind here. But the word on the street is that this is going to be someone we've never had contact with, probably never even suspected.”

Hutch frowned at Starsky.

“Which street?” Ruth asked.

“Our street,” Starsky met Hutch’s gaze evenly. “We have a few informants that are always good for a word or two.”

Hutch raised an eyebrow. Hell, if Hutch could “interview” Heather, Starsky could talk to Huggy or Sugar.

“You trust them?” Grimes asked.

“We’ve known one of them since we first partnered,” Starsky answered.
Ruth and Grimes both nodded.

“I say we forget this Eric Lawson person and concentrate on my Bridge Club.” Hutch was glaring at Starsky.

Starsky remained non-plussed. “I don't think we can afford to do that. There've been too many murders already for us to just dismiss a suspect simply because he doesn't fit the profile we've constructed. And he's not that far from our profile. He’s white, he’s male, and he’s got an interest in kinky sex.”

Hutch continued to play with the file in front of him.

Grimes took a sip of his coffee. “I agree. I think we should pursue this Lawson character and find out as much about him as possible. Starsky, why don't you call him and see if he's interested in a photo session, or wants to look at your collection, or whatever. Even if he's not our killer, maybe he knows who is.”

Starsky nodded. Hutch stopped fiddling with his folder.

Ruth fanned the folders out in front of her. “I understand where you're coming from, though, Hutch. Your colleagues here have a much more interesting collection of backgrounds. Especially this Tom Evers person.” She selected a file and opened it. “Past business endeavors include a couple of adult book stores, a fairly long stint as a porn filmmaker, and an arrest for receiving kiddie porn through the mail. No conviction on that one.” She chose another file. “Your Evan Crane is the one we really want to watch. Not only does he seem to be the ringleader, but we can only trace him back to 1978.” Ruth opened the slender file. “His DMV records, his Social Security Number, real estate records—everything only goes back to 1978. Before that, we can’t find anything on an ‘Evan Crane’.”

Grimes pulled out another couple of folders. “Ruth and I have discussed this at length. We think you should concentrate your attentions on Crane, Evers and Markham Gray. Lawrence Phillips checks out as a fairly aboveboard businessman; at least there are no major blots on his trading record with the SEC. Plus Billings did some checking on each of their personal schedules the last couple of months, and he's been positively placed in New York during two of our slayings.”

“That doesn't mean he isn't involved—” Ruth interjected, “—but we don't want you focusing on him unless something else turns up.”

Hutch rose and reached for the coffee pot. “So because Evers and Gray have records of having been involved in the industry in some way, you think they're our best bets.” He refilled his cup, then offered some to Starsky.

Starsky lifted his mug and accepted a second cup. “Did we get a confirmation on Gray?”

“No yet,” Grimes answered. “Oh, wait—” Grimes was looking at something through the conference room window. He rose and walked to the door.

Everyone’s attention went to the door. Grimes had opened it, and from just outside Starsky could see Emmanuel Rodriguez handing over a piece of paper. Emmanuel Rodriguez. Sheriff’s Deputy. Member of this special task force. Late of the ill-planned meet with the sex fiend.

Starsky’s eyes flicked to the side, then back to Rodriguez. He seemed thinner than Starsky last remembered him, paler, almost transparent. Transparent and subjugated, Starsky thought. Slouching, with his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the floor, never looking at Grimes. He certainly hadn’t bothered to find Rodriguez and talk to him after his—misfortune. He’d been too embarrassed,
particularly since he’d never wanted to share any of his undercover misfortunes with anyone besides Hutch and whoever else absolutely had to know. And he’d heard Rodriquez was doing all right anyway; he’d just taken a behind-the-scenes role in this investigation.

Misfortunes. This case held the possibilities of misfortunes. Hutch had already exposed himself to misfortunes by visiting Heather. He might expose himself to further misfortunes, both on the case and off. Starsky was about to put himself in the way of misfortunes. Could they handle misfortunes?

Physically, Hutch was probably up to it. He was looking a little fitter lately. And if nothing else, his repressed anger was good for a maximum injection of adrenaline should the situation call for heroic efforts. As for himself, Starsky felt good, he felt strong. He could swim, he could lift weights, he could run—all under controlled conditions. But under uncontrolled conditions?

Could he shoot? Yes, he’d qualified, no problem. Of course, he hadn’t had to keep a steady hand for a long period of time, as he might out in the field. But anyone’s arm could start shaking under prolonged rigidity.

Could he fight? Yes. Maybe not for as long as he used to be able to, but he was getting older anyway. And the idea in any fight was to end it quickly.

But what about Hutch’s worry? What about being tied up for a time, forced into an inflexible position, unable to relieve the stiffness.

That had happened to Rodriquez. He’d been tied up for hours.

But he’d been alone. Even if Starsky should end up in that position, he wouldn’t be alone. Hutch would be right behind him. And if Hutch should be the one in that position, Starsky would be right behind him, armed and dangerous.

He had more to worry about from Hutch’s unauthorized expeditions. That was the real danger. That was what he had to stop.

So. They could certainly minimize the possibility of misfortunes, by doing careful prep work, knowing their escape routes…and trusting one another. Starsky was committed to bringing back that trust, now more than ever. Because he wanted it back. Because he needed it back.

Because it could save their lives.

Starsky watched Rodriquez move away. Grimes came back in the room and took his seat next to Ruth. Ruth reached out for a second cup of coffee poured by Hutch, then took the paper from Grimes.

“This is our fax from Miami Dade last night. Our ‘Markham Gray’ is their ‘Joseph Grayson,’ arrested and convicted on pandering charges in 1971. He served an eighteen month sentence, and they never heard from him again after he completed his parole term. Their loss is our gain,” she finished wryly.

Grimes shook his head as Hutch swung the coffeepot in his direction. Hutch returned the pot to the burner. Starsky noticed it shook ever so slightly. Had Hutch been thinking about Rodriquez, too?

“Martin’s my favorite,” Ruth pulled his file and flipped through the loose pages. “This Moore fellow has been modeling for a few years. But I’ll bet after we’ve done some more digging, we’ll find out he’s done more than just model for some high fashion magazines and clothing designers. I’ll wager a week’s pay he’s got some dirty films and photos in his past somewhere.”
Starsky nodded. “What else has Billings managed to come up with?” He tipped his mug from side to side, watching the liquid just touch the rim before swinging it back. “Any contact between any of our suspects and the victims?”

Ruth shook her head. “Nothing yet. But it's a slow process. She and Gordie have been going through cancelled checks, bills, receipts, whatever they can get their hands on from the victims' families, and we've got Sgt. Masters continuing to interview the families for common purchases, habits, movements, etc.” She sighed. “Even with all the officers we've got on this task force, it still isn't enough. It could be weeks before we come up with any connections. And we don't just have your suspects to investigate, either. Harris and Miles have been pretty busy lately, too. They've got a line on that Janus sex club that specializes in S&M, and it has about fifteen core members and a varying number of ‘guest members.’” She looked at Grimes. “Montoya and Carter have been running down a couple of porn producers.” She sighed. “You know, Harry, sometimes I wonder why we ever agreed to take on this mess.”

Grimes didn't look at her, but smiled down at his empty coffee cup. He reached over and patted her hand.

Hutch sat down in his chair. “So we go ahead and concentrate on my group and let Billings and her staff keep checking on Starsky's hustler. Is that where we stand?”

Starsky looked at him sharply. You never quit! Grimes frowned at him, and Ruth looked confused. Grimes started to speak, but Ruth cut him off.

“Where've you been, Hutch?” She spoke gently. “We're going ahead with both investigations. We want both you and Dave to set up meetings with your prospective playmates.” Hutch had turned away from her. “In fact, the sooner you can get set up the better. Especially you, Dave. I think I can get my hands on a videotape camera. He seemed interested in those.”

Starsky caught Hutch glancing at him from of the corner of his eye. Starsky nodded matter-of-factly to Ruth. “I gave Eric our business card. I think it's better if I wait until he calls rather than call him and look too eager.”

“Don't wait too long, Dave,” Ruth said. “In fact, I think it would be better if you didn’t wait. A discrete call to set up an appointment wouldn't be impolite.”

Grimes rose and ran a hand over his cropped scalp. “As soon as meets are arranged, let us know. Otherwise, business as usual.” He offered his hand to Ruth. “Ready for our next meeting, sweets?”

Ruth accepted the hand up. “Darling, meetings are what I live for.” She gestured down at the spill of files. “Why don't you boys go over these one more time—”

“—And then we can put them away,” Starsky finished with a grin. “Anything not to have to do clean-up duty?”

Ruth waved back at him as she and Grimes left the room. “You're on to me, hon,” she smiled, disappearing after her partner.

Starsky laughed quietly.

“What are you so happy about?” Hutch asked.

Starsky pulled a file toward him. “I like them.”

“T'm sure you do,” Hutch growled,
“Your lip itch?” Starsky didn’t look up from his file. “You keep rubbing it.” If Hutch was going to try to pull back from Starsky’s meet, Starsky was ready.

Hutch’s breathing became very obvious. He didn’t speak.

Starsky pushed a file toward Hutch. “Sit down and get to work.” There. Hutch’s moustache for Starsky’s meet. Even trade.

Hutch sat down heavily and began flipping through the file.

Starsky smiled. He’d get to the moustache later. For now, it was useful in controlling Hutch.
Starsky checked his watch for the umpteenth time this morning.

Ruth had been right; Starsky had called Eric the afternoon after their meeting and Eric and been quite amenable to setting up an appointment. For the next day. Especially since Starsky offered to do their first sitting free of charge.

So it was either keep checking his watch, or check his equipment over again. At least glancing at his watch was less obvious than fiddling with his lights, his tripods, or his cameras. Less obvious to Hutch, that is. Wouldn't do to show any nervousness in front of Hutch. Hutch would just call off the shoot, or worse, try and do it himself. That would be a laugh. His partner stumbling amongst all the equipment. Hutch seemed to think that just because he'd watched Starsky do a few portraits he could imitate the process himself. Fat chance, Starsky fumed silently. There are still some things I can do better than you. . . He glanced at his watch again. The appointment was set for 2 o'clock.

And it was just now 2. Hutch wandered in from the front reception area to eyeball the room Starsky had set up. He deliberately checked the wiring in the corner, and not for the first time that day. Starsky rolled his eyes in disgust.

Starsky was not just nervous about this meet. He was also nervous about Hutch. This meet had come up so fast they’d had no time to do anything except check out their equipment, set up their equipment, order some deli delivery, and grab a few hours of sleep. It had been decided he and Hutch would handle this whole thing without backup. Their studio was secure, they were very publicly located on Sunset Boulevard in a busy office building, and their weapons were quite handy. Besides, this was to be a photo session only. If Eric wanted anything more, it would be arranged for later, not to take place now.

But the quick set-up had left him no time to talk with Hutch beyond the basics. He’d used Hutch’s unwillingness to discuss the moustache as a bargaining chip for this meet, but he didn’t want to continue to use it that way. He wanted it out of the way, and he wanted Hutch on his side, by his side, the rest of this investigation.

Not to mention Hutch was still acting as if Starsky had regressed to cadet status and didn’t know his Miranda rights from his rear end. That hurt.

“It's all wired up correctly,” he snapped. “Just like it was an hour ago, just like it was this morning. I'm not some snot-nosed rookie at this.”

Hutch ignored the outburst and tugged away at the wires until he was satisfied the bug was well-hidden and operational. “Just checking, Starsky. I just want to make sure if this guy confesses to anything we get it down loud and clear.” He rose, smiling. “Maybe you can pretend you're a big-time director and you're shooting a screen test for some big-time star. The intent of the scene is to wring a passionate but brutally real confession from the actor without it being too hammy.”

Starsky stiffened and opened his mouth to deliver a quick comeback, but the door buzzer announced the entrance of a customer. Both he and Hutch turned toward the front. Hutch started toward the
front room, but the customer had already found his way to the back.

“Yo, Dave!” Eric greeted Starsky.

Starsky stepped forward for a quick handshake. “You remember my partner, Richard?” he gestured at Hutch.

“Yo, Rich!” Eric moved toward Hutch and grabbed for Hutch's hand. One firm grasp and he released Hutch, more interested in checking out the room.

Starsky and Hutch watched him, ready to note any unusual interest in the wires that led to the tape recorder. Eric merely scanned the room, without paying particular attention to any one object.

“Kinda dull,” Eric finally appraised.

Starsky shrugged. “It's your basic studio set-up. A few flats. Standard lighting. I can shoot you seated or standing. More exotic stuff I do out in the real world.” He folded his arms across his chest. “You didn't tell me what kind of a portrait you wanted when you said you were coming in today.”

Eric grinned at Starsky. “Didn't think I had to.” He glanced back at Hutch. “Scuse me a minute, fellas.” Eric walked back into the front room, and returned with a large, quite full, gym bag. He dropped it on the floor, knelt, and unzipped the canvas tote. He dipped his hand inside, paused, and looked at Hutch. “He staying?”

Starsky looked at Hutch. Hutch barely nodded. Starsky looked away. It wasn't that he didn't want Hutch around, in case the situation got ridiculous or extremely dangerous, but he also didn't want to be constantly monitored. Hutch could have excused himself to the reception area or the back room and simply listened in for any trouble. Starsky took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Sure. If you want. Richard, why don't you go out front, drop the shades, put up the closed sign, and lock the door?”

Hutch walked silently to the front room to take care of business. Eric began emptying his bag.

“I thought if would be great if you could start by taking some pictures of me in some of my gear.” Eric stood up and began removing his t-shirt and jeans. He had nothing on underneath. Starsky put on his best professional demeanor and began arranging his lights. Eric was lacing himself into a pair of black leather chaps. “Does he pose for you?” Eric finished tying his laces and pulled a black leather chest harness from the pile of things he'd dumped on the floor.

Starsky glanced down at Eric, then moved over to the small table upon which sat his cameras. He picked up one and played with the focus. “Sometimes.” It was a lie. Or it wasn’t. Hutch had sometimes allowed Starsky to photograph him while they were off-duty: vacationing, relaxing at home, hanging together, whatever. Hutch had just never allowed him to do any formal shooting.

And never any thing as formally kinky as this. Starsky fiddled with some of his lenses. Hutch as his model. His erotic model. Hutch in various states of undress…shirt open…jeans pushed down on his hips…shirt off…jeans off…classically naked…classically beautiful….

Hutch coughed from the studio front, bringing Starsky back to the task at hand. Wasn’t such a bad idea anyway, getting Hutch to pose. It would add to his portfolio. He’d suggest that later. For now, he’d better concentrate on Eric, and get rid of that swelling in his pants.

Starsky lifted the camera to his eye and aimed at Eric. Not even close to what Hutch could offer the lens. Eric had slipped the harness over his chest and was now pulling various black bands up over his arms. One was pushed up over his left bicep, two others remained tight around Eric's wrists.
“Would he pose this afternoon?” The question startled Starsky, as though Eric had been reading his mind. He really did need to concentrate on this shoot—this meeting—this professional investigation.

Eric finished adjusting his leather paraphernalia and stood straight, smiling at Starsky's lens. Starsky tilted his camera down slightly to focus on Eric's cock. It wasn't erect, but it wasn't totally limp. The attention seemed to amuse Eric. He took hold of his cock and wagged it at Starsky.

Starsky brought the camera down and exchanged it for another one. “Maybe,” Starsky answered Eric’s question. He wanted to keep Eric’s estimation of them open. Starsky busied himself with the small apparatus.

Eric walked over to stand in front of the flat. “You mean, ‘maybe’ if the price is right and you don't mind too much.”

Starsky looked up from the camera and stared hard at Eric. Eric was reading far too much into Starsky, and Starsky didn’t like it. There was nothing obvious about the way Starsky treated Hutch this time or the first time Eric had been around them. And Starsky’s cock may have kicked a bit as he was thinking of Hutch the Model, but he knew it hadn’t shown. There was no reason for Eric to assume anything about Hutch and him. That could be dangerous. No suspect should know how they felt about one another. No suspect should be able to use their feelings for each other against the other.

Whatever those feelings were.

Eric lifted his hands, palms forward, and grinned at Starsky. “Forget I said it, man.” He turned his palms up. “Let's just take some pictures and have a good time.”

Hutch returned to the room. He looked at Starsky just long enough to let him know the equipment was running, then moved to the back wall and leaned casually against it. He appeared totally disinterested in the scene before him. Good. Maybe Eric would take that as a hint that he and Starsky had nothing going.

And with a disinterested Hutch, Starsky could lead this little interrogation, as he should. Hutch could play the silent partner.

Starsky picked up the first camera and stepped in front of Eric. When he lifted the camera and found his focus he noticed Eric’s erection had grown. Had Eric been toying with it, or was it because Hutch had entered the room? Maybe that was Eric’s interest in his and Hutch’s relationship—he was really interested in Hutch.

Starsky snapped a couple of shots for effect and shouldered into his photographer persona.

Eric had no trouble taking direction from Starsky. He moved when Starsky asked him, remained still when requested, and was generally quite a ham in front of the camera. Starsky used up one roll of film before starting his patter.

“You’ve done this before,” Starsky began.

“Maybe,” Eric teased. He was now wearing nothing but a contraption that imprisoned his cock and balls in a rubber sling.

“Ever had your photo in a magazine?” Starsky was playing with the focus on his lens. He was also playing Eric.

Eric was playing with his cock. “A couple of times. Made a couple hundred dollars. You offering?”
He smiled.

Starsky lowered the camera and shook his head. “No. I do private sittings only. For personal collections.” He lifted the camera and snapped a few exposures.

Eric nodded in understanding. “Any limits?”

Starsky continued to shoot. Appalling, shocking, painful photos from the magazines they’d examined cut into his brain and gave him a reference. “No snuff,” he replied from behind the camera. “No torture. No maimings, no mutilations.” He paused. “No kids,” he added.

Eric seemed satisfied with the list. He tried out some body building poses. “Any preferences?” Eric flexed his pectorals.

Starsky remained hidden behind his camera. He shrugged, but his skin prickled. “Oh, I’m equal-opportunity,” he answered. “But I guess my specialty would be bondage shoots.” He used the viewfinder of the camera to study Eric’s face.

Eric remained non-plussed. “Cool,” he opined. “I like that shit, too. Maybe we could do some of that some time.”

Starsky lowered his camera and handed it to Hutch. Throughout the entire session Hutch’s only role had been to take cameras from Starsky, hand him new ones, and load and unload the film cartridges. No comments, no questions; virtually no presence. It was almost as if Hutch wasn’t there. Clearly, he’d handed the whole assignment over to Starsky.

Which was a win for Starsky, of sorts; Hutch was actually allowing him to conduct this meeting as Starsky saw fit. But it was a loss in that there was nothing happening between them: no supportive repartee, no silent exchange of shared energy; no comfort, no trust.

Starsky sighed. It was going to take all his acting skills to keep this session motivating.

Starsky tried to wheedle names of other possible clients Eric might refer, but Eric was not referring. If he knew of any, he was very discrete. The rest of the session was spent with casual conversation between Eric and Starsky as to which stores and catalogues offered the best quality equipment for the lowest price.

Finally—”That’s a wrap,” Starsky used the jargon of his “profession.”

Eric freed his cock and tossed the contraption into his gym bag. “That went fast.” He began putting his clothes back on.

“I’m good,” Starsky boasted, with a glance at Hutch. Hutch ignored his partner and remained seated on a stool, arms folded, demeanor bored. Starsky’s ego deflated.

Eric slithered into his t-shirt. “Maybe you could take some pictures of my sister, too.” He bent down and started re-packing all the items in his gym bag.

“Sure,” Starsky agreed. *Might as well. Maybe she’s more talkative than her brother.*

Eric stood up, gym bag hung over his shoulder. “When can I see them,” he tilted his head toward the cameras.

“I’ll call you in a couple of days.” Starsky put a hand on Eric’s shoulder as they walked to the front door of the business. “I can bring them over to the gym.”
Eric extended his hand toward Starsky, who took it. The grip was firm, with an added squeeze. “Thanks, man,” Eric smiled. “See you at the gym.”

Starsky unlocked the front door and let Eric out. Eric walked down Sunset Boulevard, headed east. Starsky watched him for a few seconds, then slipped back inside.

“That was a masterful interrogation,” Hutch greeted him. He’d moved into the front room.

Starsky walked past Hutch and back to the photo room. He began breaking down the set. Hutch followed him.

“You really got a lot of information out of him,” Hutch continued, making no move to help Starsky. “Background, contacts, whereabouts, movements,” Hutch listed. “Yes, a fine example of interrogating a subject.”

Starsky folded a light stand.

“We can definitely rule him out as a suspect, yes sir, it’s clear he has no motivation for the killings.” Hutch stood in the middle of the room, arms folded across his chest. A phony façade of satisfaction covered his face.

Starsky looked over at Hutch, disgusted. “I didn’t think I had to bust him right there. It’s a little early in the game to force a confession.” Starsky started folding another stand.

Hutch ignored Starsky’s explanation. “Yep, you’re really closing in on this killer now,” Hutch kept jabbing. “Brilliant police work.”

Starsky’s body froze in the midst of dismantling the light stand, his back stiffening. “Go fuck yourself,” he said, not looking at Hutch. *Enough was enough!*

Hutch’s body became even more rigid, then he abruptly turned and stomped out of the building.

Starsky didn’t bother to watch Hutch storm out. Starsky would need something to keep him busy and Hutch off his mind tonight, so he’d develop the film in a bit. Starsky finished cleaning his work area, then walked slowly back to the front desk and sat down. He left the blinds shut and the closed sign up. Some small portfolios were balanced on the edge of the desk, and he chose the black notebook from the pile.

Starsky opened the cover to the first photo. A black and white of Hutch, taken a couple of years ago. Starsky could place it in time by the lack of a moustache protecting Hutch’s upper lip, and the as-yet unlined brow. They’d gone to the Huntington Gardens so Hutch could study some of the plants and flowers. He was looking for inspiration for his greenhouse. Starsky had snapped Hutch just as he’d turned to look back at Starsky, eager to point out a flowering succulent. *Succulent.* Starsky mouthed the word silently. He’d always called them cactuses himself. What a discussion that had been. Hutch’s head just hid the sun, creating a white halo that blurred the line between his hair and the sun’s corona. A worry-free, stress-free, *sincere* smile added to the brilliance. Old Hutch.

Starsky slid the pad of his index finger over the photo, moving from the head to the torso and then off the edge. Unthinkingly, he brought the finger to his bottom lip and rubbed.

*Damn,* Hutch swore at Starsky. *I have to do everything myself. Investigation, infiltration, interrogation, masturbation...* Hutch shook himself mentally. Where had that come from? Hutch was two blocks up the street before he decided walking Sunset was not what he wanted. He doubled
back and headed for the parking structure that housed his car. It irritated him that parking was $15 a
day, even though as building tenants he and Starsky had key cards that allowed them access. He
squealed his tires over the cement, not hard to do in any parking garage, stimulated by the scary
sound they made.

Once free of the capitalistic parking dominion, Hutch headed east on Sunset. He replayed the photo
session in his mind. Wasted time, he thought. Pose after pose with Eric and his stupid costumes and
his stupid gadgets and his tiny little cock. Tiny and chubby. Hutch sneered at the image in his mind.
He should have brought out his cock and showed Eric what real manhood looked like. Hutch had
always been big; even in junior high he’d cowed his entire gym class. And thus had begun the
legend. It certainly would have impressed Eric if he’d let loose his member. And with his in-home
calisthenics program, his body wasn’t that slack anymore. At least he was certainly making far
quicker progress than Starsky had when he’d started his regimen. A couple of hours of dedicated
workout a day was showing immediate results. That’s what willpower could do. Bring a body results
in record time. Starsky could use some of that discipline in his body-building efforts.

Hutch’s cock stirred. Maybe Starsky would have focused his camera somewhere else if he could see
Hutch’s strengthening body and lengthening cock instead of Eric’s pitiful protuberance. He certainly
hadn’t been focusing on his assignment to wheedle information out of Eric. No, he’d been playing
fashion photographer, trying to get arty poses he could hang on a wall. Another Robert
Mapplethorpe. But as far as being a cop, Starsky hadn’t or gotten any more than some new addresses
of sex paraphernalia shops, or said any more than “let’s do this again sometime.” If Starsky wants to
do it again sometime, why doesn’t he do it with him sometime?

_Do it with me sometime?_

Hutch double-backed on his double-entendre.

That isn’t what he meant. He meant the whole meet had been a waste of time.

Right.

And this is a waste of time, too. Hutch drummed his fingers on the steering wheel waiting for yet
another red light to turn green. Damn Sunset in the middle of the afternoon, he fumed. Commuter
traffic and it isn’t even 4 o’clock. The itch in his pants grew stronger. Hutch adjusted his ass in the
car seat, trying to find a more comfortable position. Thinking of ways to scratch that itch.

Elisa.

A microscopic nova erupted in the pit of his stomach and sent a flush through his body. She, too,
needed to discover what manhood was really all about. _Feel_ what manhood was really all about.
After one good screwing by Hutch, her world would be turned inside out. Welcome to the land of
sexual ecstasy, Lady, he thought. That would quench his fire and start hers burning.

But Elisa lived out in Rosemead, and that was just too far. A blonder alternative suddenly presented
herself. _She could be interesting,_ Hutch thought. _She has some fire to her. I can show her a few
things as well. And I bet she can get as good as she can give._

Hutch got on his radio and made a call to dispatch—could he be connected with a certain
policewoman?

No problem. No problem at all.

And no problem with Leslie, either.
She could meet him right away to go over some details of the case. More than happy to accommodate Hutch. Eager to meet him at her apartment in Los Feliz.

Hutch found street parking—free—a block off to the side of Leslie’s apartment. She buzzed him in the front gate, and he virtually swaggered back to her unit. She must have just beat him here, as she was still wearing her uniform when she greeted him at the door.

“Hi,” she said, and rather seductively to Hutch’s ears.

Hutch slipped past her and inside.

He glanced around. A one-bedroom apartment. No roommate. Probably thin walls, but who cares in the middle of the afternoon?

“Hi,” he turned back to Leslie.

Leslie shut the door and leaned against it. “I knew you’d come find me.”

Hutch suddenly fished around in his pocket and pulled out a clip of bills. He separated a twenty from its kin, and shoved the rest back.

“I have a twenty that belongs to you,” he said. “Thought I’d return it.”

“I thought I’d invested that twenty,” Leslie pushed off from the door and walked up to Hutch. “It was supposed to buy me something.”

Hutch rustled the twenty between two fingers. “And what do you suppose it bought you?”

Leslie put her hands on Hutch’s shoulders and pressed up against him. “How about a test drive with a money-back guarantee?” she purred.

Hutch’s hands slid there way down to Leslie’s ass cheeks and gave them a squeeze. “Test drives are free.” He let go of the twenty.

Leslie let her hands wind around Hutch’s neck and pulled him down to her. “Let me be the judge of that,” she murmured. They kissed.

The kiss began gently, but quickly erupted into the more passionate duel she’d started the other night. Leslie bit and sucked on Hutch’s lips and tongue as they stumbled back into the bedroom. And Hutch followed suit, not quite as hard, but finding a certain pleasure in compressing her fleshly lips and tongue between his teeth.

The bedroom was cramped, mostly due to the king size four-poster planted squarely in the middle of the far wall and jutting into the room. Passion inflamed pace, and Leslie and Hutch had both stripped each other within seconds. Leslie pushed her breasts into Hutch’s chest, her groin into his, and pulled him into another bruising kiss. Her hands stroked up and down his back, then her fingers curled inward and nails dug into his skin—lightly at first, then deeper.

Leslie broke the kiss long enough to dip down to the floor and retrieve her handcuffs. She dangled them in front of Hutch, wordlessly. Then she clicked one around her left wrist.

Hutch clicked the other around her right wrist. He knew this game, even if it was a little rougher than he’d played before.

Another mashing of mouths as Hutch forced Leslie back on the bed. He lifted her cuffed wrists
above her head, pinning her arms as he engaged in not-so-gentle nibbling down her throat, to her breasts. Leslie responded to the bites with moans of excitement and an arching of her body up into Hutch’s.

A tremor moved through Hutch’s limbs and set up a constant buzz in his body. The buzz was irritating, and he sought to ease it through action. Hutch took a nipple between his teeth and pulled, stretching the light-brown nipple and aureole.

Leslie groaned, her legs pulling up and locking around Hutch’s waist.

The buzz eased a bit as Hutch gnawed on her other nipple. His hands massaged each breast roughly, fingers digging into the ample flesh. *Elisa wouldn’t like this, Hutch thought. Too rough. Too hard. Too painful. She couldn’t give in to the primal rhythms of her body and enjoy the concussive sensations.*

Hutch reached down to his own ample cock and guided it into Leslie. A groan escaped from his throat as he pushed into the not-quite lubricated refuge. *Damn you, Elisa. He began lifting and lowering his hips, lubricating as he moved inside Leslie to expedite his desire. You had no business toying with me like that! His rhythm quickened, and Hutch moved his hands off Leslie’s breasts and onto the mattress for better support.*

Leslie’s cuffed hands grabbed the slats of the headboard to brace her body against Hutch’s increasing thrusts.

Hutch’s thrusts became lunges as the woman underneath him became Elisa. His balls slapped hard against her ass and he rammed into the body beneath him. Each jab was an expression of his manhood. Each stab was a declaration of his importance. Each blow was an assertion of his worthiness.

The buzz built to an overpowering desire to *hurt* something, and Hutch came.

When awareness returned to Hutch, Leslie was trying to push him off her with her bound hands.

“You’re heavy,” she gasped.

Hutch rolled off her and onto his back, one arm limp across his chest, his eyes closed. The buzz still inhabited his body. And his climax, while biologically complete, had left him not only unsatisfied but feeling very vile.

And then Hutch finally understood what Heather—and Elisa—had been trying to explain: the difference between sex, and sexual fetish, and *love.* Two of them were mechanical, sterile, selfish, and grim. Only one of them offered a future.

An image of Starsky floated before Hutch’s eyes.

Weight shifted on the bed. Hutch was vaguely aware Leslie was scrambling about for something.

Elisa was no longer an answer. He didn’t want her, he’d never wanted her. All he’d wanted from her was someone to believe in him as a rescuer. As a savior. As a provider. Everything he hadn’t been to Starsky.

And maybe someone to relieve his blue balls.

And what was he doing with Heather? Researching his case? Digging for dirt? Relieving his blue
balls?

Or finding out just how low he’d go to convince himself he was worthless?

“Here, lover,” Leslie was offering him the key to the cuffs.

Hutch took the key, and after a few stabs found the hole and unlocked the cuffs. Leslie, sitting next to him, rubbed her wrists, rubbed her breasts, then massaged her sex.

“Now how did I know you liked it rough?” she leered. She leaned over to kiss Hutch, again taking a bite on his lower lip.

Hutch ended the kiss, took another roll onto his front, and buried his face in a convenient pillow.

And what was he doing here? Fucking, hurting a woman because he was mad at another woman? Mad at himself? Mad at Starsky?

Starsky.

Hutch didn’t want to see Starsky’s face, hear Starsky’s voice, think about Starsky’s body now. Starsky had no place in the middle of now. Starsky’s place was….was…. Behind him. Safe and protected.

Except what Hutch saw in his mind was Starsky standing behind him with his erection in hand, aiming for Hutch’s waiting ass.

Hutch groaned into the pillow. Get out of my head! I am purging the women from my life and you have no business here!

Leslie began tracing swirls with her nails in the firm flesh of his ass cheeks. “Babe, you are so white back here!” she laughed. “So tender,” she said more softly.

He felt the weight on the bed shift as Leslie stretched over the side of the bed. It felt like she was reaching for something. He wanted to reach for something: Starsky.

But Starsky is not the answer to my problem! He is my problem! I am his defender, not his significant other!

Then—

“Goddammit!” Hutch exclaimed as he whirled and grabbed at the arm wielding the belt. His ass stung.

Leslie looked at him in mock surprise. “Can’t take it, big boy?” Her wrist was suspended in the air, held fast by Hutch’s fist. The belt dangled between them.

Hutch squeezed her wrist, his fist turning red.

“Makes me hot,” Leslie hissed. And to prove it, she reached between her legs with her free hand and brought up two glistening fingers.


And he owed Leslie. He’d used her to hammer Elisa and Heather from his mind, used her body to
cleanse his own. If this gave her pleasure….

Hutch released Leslie’s arm. He stretched out on the bed, face down, his hands gripping the posts of the headboard.

Leslie straddled his legs, and lightly drew the belt across Hutch’s back and ass. His back and leg muscles tensed, and his knuckles turned white where he clutched the wood posts.

Each strike, Hutch hoped, would embed the lesson he’d learned this afternoon.

And each blow, Hutch hoped, would push Starsky from his mind.

Hutch dropped heavily into the car’s seat and was instantly sorry he’d done that. The pressure against his back and buttocks started the stinging all over again. He started the car and pulled away from the curb. Hutch shifted uncomfortably as he drove up the street, finally finding a position that reduced the pressure on certain areas while still allowing him to work the foot pedals.

*God,* Hutch thought, *what the boys in the bridge club would have thought if they could have seen him now.*

And what would Starsky think?

Starsky wouldn’t know.

_Have to protect Starsky,* Hutch repeated to himself. *Have to protect Starsky.*

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

One day later, and it was Hutch’s turn again.

They were in the ground floor at the back of Crane’s house. A game room.

Hutch had dressed a little more casually this time, upon Crane’s request. A little more casually, but definitely more seductively. Black turtleneck, black cords, black boots, and an innocuous beeper hanging off his belt. It was an outfit Hutch knew he looked good in, and not just because Starsky had often commented on how he looked in all black. But it turned his stomach a little to know that he was meant to look good only for this little group, and not someone whose opinion really mattered. Still, he was secretly satisfied that the pants had fit better than they had in a while. And a little burn cream on his back anesthetized the healing scratches and welts.

Martin, it appeared, had also been instructed as to how to dress. Faded denims with shiny spots on both cheeks. A blue workshirt opened to reveal a mass of curly chest hair, the sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular arms. Silver-toed cowboy boots. A gold necklace with a quarter-moon charm. An outfit Starsky could have worn. Had worn. And better than that turkey, Hutch thought.
Geez, when did I turn into GQ? Who cares what the fuck Starsky wears for me? Or what the fuck I wear for Starsky? Or what wears for Starsky—what I want him to—what I do for—FUCK IT!

Hutch made a concerted effort to make a visual sweep of the room.

Crane and Lawrence both wore slacks and blazers, and while neither actually wore a tie, they had that air of business dress about them regardless. Gray, on the other hand, was a sight for unbelieving eyes. Leather straps crisscrossed his body, and that was all he wore. The straps were cleverly fashioned with ringed holes about the nipples, and the strap that cut between his buttocks, then came up to attach to a waist belt that had a ringed hole through which his cock hung. Tom was not present.


All had been shown, with pride, to Hutch.

Hutch had had to be very careful as he feigned interest in each item. Every instrument of pain (how sick they must be to take pleasure from pain, Hutch was beginning to realize) seemed to irritate a different wound on his buttocks or back.

But now the games were about to begin. With a bigger audience than those in the group imagined.

Ruth had been explicit as to what Hutch’s role was to be. Watch only, don't participate unless his cover (and/or life, he amended) was compromised. Which also took care of having to explain any odd marks on his body. So Hutch had made it clear to Crane that he was still a little reluctant about joining in, and Crane had invited him to come and simply watch one of their little “sessions.”

And by the way, would he mind dressing as requested?

Martin continued to eye him suspiciously, circling him without speaking. There was a tension about Martin that hinted of something barely controlled, and it made Hutch nervous. He decided to keep his distance during this encounter. It had nothing to do, of course, with the fact Martin looked remarkably like Starsky and it made him self-conscious.

Gray took a seat in a slingback chair, his legs spread wide, one hand stroking his cock while the other pinched his nipples. Crane stood behind the bar, sipping a white wine. Hutch balanced as comfortably as possible on one of the bar stools. The game was to be played by Martin and Lawrence.

Gray chose a black crop from a drawer in an antique chest. Lawrence faced him quietly.

“Strip,” Martin commanded.

Lawrence didn't move.

“Strip!” Martin thundered. He slapped the crop onto his thigh, the sound hollow in the dark room. Hutch winced.

Lawrence reached up and began unbuttoning his shirt. Hutch could see that his hands were trembling, but whether it was from real fear or sexual excitement Hutch couldn't tell. The trembling was interfering with Lawrence's dexterity with the buttons.
“Stupid old fool.” Martin strode up to Lawrence and grabbed his wrists away from the buttons. He ripped the shirt open, spun Lawrence around, and yanked both the shirt and blazer off Lawrence's shoulders. Lawrence stumbled back, tripped, and fell to the floor.

Martin growled in frustration. He bent down and began ripping at Lawrence's clothes, causing Lawrence to roll into a fetal position to try and avoid Martin's ungentle hands. Martin, for his part, jerked off each article of clothing with no regard as to which way joints bent. Lawrence whimpered as he was stripped.

“Get up!” Martin yelled, whipping the crop across Lawrence's now-naked thighs. Lawrence crawled along the floor, trying in vain to avoid the stinging leather.

“Get up!” Martin screamed again, this time grabbing the older man's arm and dragging him to his feet. Lawrence was decidedly unsteady, but remained standing. Lawrence wasn't quite as trim as his clothing had suggested. His chest was a bit soft, and his belly protruded a bit, and soft gray hair covered his body. More to the point, Hutch could make out evidence of past beatings on the man's back, legs, and ass. He knew his back bore similar marks right now. For the same reason? Atonement?

Martin pushed Lawrence toward the table chair placed in the middle of the room. He brought the crop across Lawrence's upper legs, and the man stumbled and moaned as he made his way to the chair. Hutch sympathized with the pain.

“Dirty old man,” Martin accused. “I'm going to have to punish you for that.”

“I know, I know,” sniveled Lawrence. “I'm a bad man, and I have to be punished.” Atonement it is, then.

Hutch glanced back at Crane. Crane stood quietly, showing no sign of emotion, sipping his wine. Gray, on the other hand, was increasing the speed and intensity of the strokes he was giving his cock. Hutch took a deep breath and returned his attention to the main show.

“Move!” Martin thundered, shoving the old man toward the chair. Lawrence fell forward, his middle bent over the back of the chair, his hands grasping either side of the seat for balance. Martin smiled approvingly.

“Take your punishment, old man.” Martin took a step back, and began the retribution.

The crop was brought down again and again on Lawrence's aging flesh. Strokes on his back, on his ass, on his legs. Hutch finally had to look at the floor, he simply couldn't watch. Yet, even though the strokes were many, Martin obviously had practice and was doing little beside reddening Lawrence's skin. Quite different than the reds, purples and blues Hutch’s “virgin” skin had revealed in the mirror. A movement off to the side caught Hutch's eye, and he looked over to see Gray pull something from under his chair. It looked like a puffy piece of plastic, and Gray slid it over his cock and began squeezing. Gray was quickly in the throes of an orgasm.

Crane simply sipped his wine.

Evan, too, Hutch guessed, although Evan's specialty seemed to be in perfect muscle control. While Evan's left hand still held the wine glass, his right had dipped below the bar and was moving in a rhythm that told Hutch he, too, was doing the old hand jive. The expression on Evan's face hadn't changed, but his eyes were glassy and sweat beaded on his upper lip.

Sweat made dark stains on Martin's shirt. Hutch suddenly realized he'd better get into the act as well,
or someone might suspect something. He gingerly moved his hand along his thigh until it rested in his groin. He began rubbing cautiously. It caused a pleasant sensation to race up his spine, which sickened him a little. He no longer wanted reptilian reaction to simple stimulation—he wanted real passion.

Martin suddenly gave a guttural cry and threw the crop to the floor. Hutch froze in mid-caress. Martin unzipped his jeans and pulled them down to his hips, revealing an enormous erection that not only mastered Hutch’s, but Hutch hadn’t even seen that size in the videos they’d been viewing. Martin stepped forward, his hands on Lawrence's hips. Lawrence's face was a purple-red from being bent forward, which matched, Hutch noted, the color of Martin's cock. Both men were wet with perspiration.

Martin pushed his cock between Lawrence's cheeks. Lawrence moaned, as did Gray. He was squeezing the plastic sleeve furiously now.

Martin moved between the mounds of flesh for a few moments, then withdrew and positioned himself for the attack. He guided himself into Lawrence, easily enough to disclose this was not the first time either man had done this.

Martin began stroking slowly. “Take your punishment, old man,” he chanted, obviously inspired by the hackneyed dialogue in the porn films. “Take it from me, old man. Take my rod, you old bastard.”

Lawrence moaned and groaned in response, barely able to support himself as Martin began pounding faster. Gray caught their rhythm, and the three seemed to come together.

“God damn it!” Martin exclaimed, suddenly pulling out and stumbling back a few steps. He held his cock protectively, but it was obvious he had come. Lawrence fell off the chair and onto the floor, pumping his own cock furiously. His body spasmed, and a few shots of semen fell onto his hand. Gray gasped and fell back into his chair, the plastic tube still wrapped around his cock.

Hutch glanced back at Crane. Crane smiled down at him, then lifted his glass as if to salute Hutch. Hutch swallowed the burning bile that had refluxed into his throat.

“Richard!”

Hutch was almost to the driveway when Crane called to him. Hutch stopped and turned.

“Richard.” Crane caught up to him.

It was midnight, maybe, or a little after. Purple-black sky. Chilly breeze. Hutch was sweating.

“Yes?” Hutch held himself still. All he wanted to do was get to his car and get to the VA lot and get the debriefing over with. No amount of porno magazine photos and dirty movies could have prepared him for a live performance. And this was certainly not like Heather’s—or even Leslie’s—kind of act.

“Must you leave? I was hoping we could chat a bit.” Crane still held a glass of wine.

“I have an early appointment tomorrow,” Hutch lied.

“Photo session?” Crane asked.

“Yes.” Hutch kept his voice flat and even.
“And you have to be there. Even though it’s your partner who has all the expertise and you who have only the investment capital.”

Hutch’s eyes narrowed. His stance shifted subtly. “I like to see what’s being done with my money.” This conversation must be making Starsky sit up and take notice.

Crane nodded. “As I like to keep an eye on mine. And do you also keep an eye on your partner as well?”


“I do? I mean, I trusted him before all the shit came down. But now? Do I trust him to back me up physically? Do I trust his judgment? Do I trust him to trust me?

*Do I deserve for him to trust me?*

“I’m sure you do,” Crane affirmed. “He does look like a trustworthy man.”

Hutch stumbled mentally. Starsky had never been introduced to Crane. Or at least Starsky had never mentioned any meeting. Was Starsky keeping secrets? So much for trust…. 

“Hadn’t I told you? I was in Hollywood the other day and I drove by your place of business. Being stuck in traffic, I had a few minutes to study your establishment. A dusky looking man was unlocking the door to your studio, carrying an armload of take-out sacks. I assumed he was your photographer, and not just a delivery boy, since he had a key.”

Hutch’s head throbbed. First a night of—extreme—games, and now the disclosure that Crane knew more about them than they’d allowed.

“I’d like to stop by sometime and meet him formally, perhaps make an appointment.” Crane took a sip of wine.

Hutch ran a hand through his hair. It was damp. “Of course. Anytime.”

Crane seemed to be studying Hutch. Hutch shifted subtly, straightening his posture, controlling his heartbeat.

“Good.” Crane took another sip of wine. “Tell me what you thought of this evening.”

Hutch needed a deep breath, and he couldn’t hide taking one. Crane did notice.

“A little more profound than you expected, I take it.”

Hutch tried to appear more casual than he felt. “A little.”

Crane nodded sympathetically. “If you could be more specific about what you did and did not like, I could arrange for something more to your taste.”

Hutch looked off in the distance. Santa Monica, and then the ocean just a couple of miles to the west. To the east, Westwood and the VA lot. Both infinitely more desirable locations than where he was now.

“Well, think about it.” Crane stepped forward and patted Hutch’s arm. “I’m sure we’ll find your passion soon enough.” Crane smiled, then turned and walked back toward the house.

Hutch shut his eyes. He used his thumb and forefinger to rub them. His eyes burned, his stomach churned, and he was tired.
So tired.

This whole case was tiring. Nothing was going as he’d planned. He and Starsky were undercover, and they weren’t supposed to be. Starsky was a target, and he wasn’t supposed to be. Then there was Elisa, and Heather, and Leslie, and they really shouldn’t be. And what was he doing with any of those women, anyway? They were limiting and restricting him, trying to make him into less than the man he was.

The man he was.

A man who had found Starsky when no one would tell him where he was, who had battled a division of devils to free Starsky from their cultish persecution.

A man who had stayed by Starsky when his brother had betrayed him.

A man who had loved Starsky when his lover had abandoned him.

Something swirled in his gut. It wasn’t the usual loathing that came upon reflection of his old self; neither was it the routine fear. It was something far more melancholy. It was—

—sorrow.

And was the man he had been so bad?

Hutch immediately rejected the notion. That man had almost lost Starsky. That man was bad.

He turned, and walked to his car.

Starsky, Hutch; Boggs, Grimes; Gordie.

Stuffed in the back of a snooping van, parked in the corner of the V.A. lot.

Quietly going over the events of the evening.

“I’m not sure I like the fact this Crane person has been checking you out, Hutch.” It was Ruth.

“That’s why we set up extensive backgrounds.” It was Starsky who answered her. “So if someone bothered to check, they’d find something believable.” But, he had to admit, he was bothered someone had bothered to check. He was bothered by the whole evening. Not that he could see any of what had gone on, but hearing the grunts and groans and snap of the whip had been enough to jumble his insides.

Or to be more precise, the possibility that Hutch could suddenly be the cause of the grunts and groans and snaps. It was one thing to imagine Hutch having rough sex with Heather, who was, no matter what she professed to be dominance-wise, still a woman. But to imagine Hutch—Hutch’s body, Hutch’s flesh—in any kind of contact with the men in the Bridge Club….

Starsky squashed the image, for the sixteenth time that night. It was too paralyzing.

Grimes cleared his throat. “It would make sense that Crane is checking out his possible victims. Dr. Jaspar said we should be looking for someone smart, someone who believes himself above the law, even better than the law. So Crane would be making sure he’s not being set-up.”

“And looking for someone to make it worth his while,” Gordie added.
“What do you mean?” asked Ruth.

“Well,” Gordie looked over at Hutch, “someone to really give him a hard-on, as it were. Everything I’ve noticed about all the victims is that they were all very new to this kinky sex stuff. I think whoever’s doing it likes the excitement that comes from doing something new and different. Not the same old thing, if you see what I mean.”

Ruth nodded. “He likes not only being in control, but leading his victims to the kinky sex.”

Starsky glanced at Hutch. Hutch had yet to say anything since they’d joined up, besides a very cursory account of the events of the evening. Hutch seemed calm, but Starsky wondered if it were just another façade Hutch had been conjuring up lately.

Starsky rubbed his hands together. “If Crane wants a photo shoot, fine by me. The studio is set up for recording. But it seems to me that we’re not looking for a group of people, like this set-up, but for someone more like Lawson. Jasper said look for a loner, right?” Right. Look for someone like erotic Eric, and keep Hutch away from the clutches of this crazed clan.

Ruth thought a moment. “Yes, but what if Crane’s Bridge Club is just the come-on? What if Crane uses it only to select his victims? Cuts them out of the herd, and takes them to a private hotel room for the final get-together?”

“Wouldn’t the victims wonder why they had to go to a hotel room, when Crane’s got his own playroom?” Starsky asked.

Gordie shrugged. “I expect the victims were flattered for the personal attention. And maybe they preferred the privacy.”

Starsky glared at Gordie.

“We have to pursue all leads,” Grimes decided. “Hutch, make the appointment with Crane. See how far he takes it. Maybe suggest you don’t like the Bridge Club, but are looking for something more private.”

Now Starsky glared at Grimes. “What about Lawson?”

Grimes opened the van door. “Stay with him as well. Deliver his photos, see is he wants anything outside the studio. As long as we can keep this van in the range of your transmitters, we can follow these perverts anywhere.” Grimes stepped out and offered his hand to Ruth. Ruth followed him out of the vehicle.

“Okay, I’m taking this baby back to the police lot.” Gordie moved toward the driver’s seat.

Hutch exited the van. Starsky bade a quick goodbye to Gordie, and followed.

Hutch walked over to Starsky’s police-issued Aspen. He leaned forward against the trunk, arms stiff. Starsky walked up beside him.

“Tough gig, huh?”

Hutch didn’t move. “Brutal.”

“I guess you can imagine this stuff all you want, but until you’re right there, it isn’t the same.” Starsky wondered how Hutch would react to that statement, since this wasn’t the first “right there” Hutch had had.
Hutch bowed his head. “We have to stop this guy.”

Starsky’s gut did a somersault. If “this guy” was Crane, Hutch would be the point man, the enticement, the lure. Hutch would be the object of play. It was almost more than Starsky could bear, and he blanked his mind again.

Well, before Hutch got that far, they would have to discuss Heather and just how far Hutch would go. But not tonight; Starsky could see Hutch was in no shape to go into that. In fact, is Starsky were lucky, perhaps Hutch had been scared shitless by this evening and he wouldn’t have to worry at all as to how far Hutch would go.

Starsky drove Hutch home, then went home himself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hutch called the next morning. Crane came that afternoon.

Starsky shot Hutch a glance over the head of the man who was seated and looking through Starsky’s portfolios. Hutch shrugged back. They’d only just met up here at the Studio. After Starsky had dropped him off the night before, he’d taken a long, hot shower, then dropped into bed. Not that he’d slept. He couldn’t get the image of Martin skewering Lawrence out of his mind. It kept turning into an image of Martin skewering him. Not that he’d let that happen, Martin would be dead before he touched Hutch. But that’s what he was setting himself up for. A violent skewering by a stud pervert.

It had taken the conviction that it was better him skewered than Starsky that gave him any peace of mind.

And most certainly Starsky wouldn’t let it come to that, should the situation even go that far. Starsky would keep him safe. Starsky was his partner. His best friend. His defender. His protector.

Or had been. What was Starsky to him now? His ward? His responsibility? His charge? What fun was that? And the only comfort from it was in knowing that Starsky was safe and unharmed, nothing more.

For the rest of the night, an emptiness had replaced the unrest caused by the Bridge Club. An emptiness that warred with a longing for the old loving comfort he’d had with Starsky, replaced by the new protective shield he’d bestowed on Starsky.

And now, here he was, exposing Starsky to this possible killer. There was no kind of comfort in that. Hutch kept his gaze focused on Crane.

“I hope you won’t take it wrong if I say I prefer your black and white work to your color,” Crane continued studying the photos.
“No,” Starsky said. “I think sometimes the absence of color has more visual impact than an actual representation of the color spectrum.”

Crane looked up and flashed a perfect, white-toothed smile at Starsky. “Adams. Man-Ray. Mapplethorpe.” It seemed as if Crane were appraising Starsky, looking him over from top to bottom, judging his character, his appearance, his desirability….

Hutch forced himself into his cover. Reel this guy in and take him down. “David could make quite a mark in the secular market, if he weren’t so caught up in the private market. His talent with light and shadow is remarkable.”

“I agree,” Crane’s eyes continued to run over Starsky’s body. “Very talented.”

Hutch continued to let out the line. “He’s had offers to be exhibited.”

Starsky looked over at Hutch, beaming. Hutch allowed a small smile to find his own lips, secretly pleased at the reaction he’d garnered.

“Has he now?” Crane caught Starsky’s smile, and followed it to Hutch. “That must make you very proud of your partner.”

Hutch was suddenly alert. Partner! No, wait, they were supposed to be partners, as in business, not cop. They were doing what they were supposed to be doing, creating a credible cover. Just like old times. Again, Hutch let a smile grace his lips.

Crane shut one of the books, and opened another. He glanced from photo, to Starsky, to Hutch. Hutch watched Crane’s routine for a bit, assuming he was making a decision about all three. Finally: “What do you think of the photos?”

“There are really not as many erotic shots as I had hoped,” Crane flipped through a few more pages. “Actually, I’m surprised there are none of you, Richard.”

“Are you kidding? Richard is one of my best models! Here, let me show you,” Starsky reached toward one of the portfolios.

Hutch felt a flame light under his skin, not being immune to flattery himself.

“I meant erotic,” Crane stopped him. “Surely you’ve photographed Richard?”

Hutch’s skin immediately went cold. Neither of them answered. Crane didn’t seem to care. “David, do you ever pose?”

“No!” Hutch shot back.

Crane’s head turned slowly to study Hutch. Hutch turned away, flushed, angry with himself for being so obviously protective. “A pity. I’m sure David would make a lovely model himself. Actually, I wouldn’t mind seeing both of you together—now that could be a beautiful image. But I suppose that’s hard to arrange unless you use a timer—or another photographer.” Hutch felt Crane’s continued stare.

Starsky tried to regain Crane’s attention. “Most of my work stays private, including the negatives. But I have some books in the back….”

“Not necessary,” said Crane, turning his attention to Starsky. “Still, there’s not much here, and most
of it is of women. Fairly standard.”

Hutch forced himself to look at back at Crane, keep his attention on Crane.

“I can shoot whatever you like,” Starsky said.

“Excellent. Here’s what I want.”

Starsky balanced on the edge of the reception desk. “What?” he asked.

Hutch knew what was coming next. But that was what he wanted, wasn’t it? Hook the fish? He moved to sit down next to Crane, putting him between Crane and Starsky.

“Photographs of men in erotic poses of my choice.” Crane smiled as Hutch sat next to him.

Starsky didn’t flinch. “No problem.”

Crane looked at Hutch, then to Starsky. “I have a small proposition. Say, you do a shoot for me, my choice of subjects, but on your dime and your time. Then, if I like the quality, I’ll hire you for a private shooting, as well as making sure my friends know of your talent, which could be quite lucrative for you.”

Starsky’s eyes met Hutch’s. He was telling Hutch he wanted to go ahead, and asking Hutch if he agreed. Like old times, silent communication, shared schemes. Not one look of condemnation for protecting Starsky’s honor earlier. Only harmony and comfort. Hutch responded with a slight nod.

“How many dimes am I going to have to put into this?” Starsky folded his arms across his chest, acting the role

Crane smiled again. “Is that really a concern, with Richard here backing you?” He patted Hutch’s knee.

It was all Hutch could do to keep from brushing away Crane’s hand. But at least he wasn’t touching Starsky.

Starsky shifted his weight from one butt cheek to the other. “What’s the subject?”

Here it comes, thought Hutch. A few photos of a bondage session to whet Crane’s appetite.

Crane stood up. “I’d like to see more of Richard.” He smiled down at Hutch, this time his hand squeezing Hutch’s shoulder. “Figuratively and literally, of course.” He turned his smile on Starsky.

Neither detective moved.

“You have a few photos of Richard in your portfolio,” Richard gestured down at the leather folders on the coffee table, “but nothing very interesting. I’d like to see something more—adventurous—before I hire you as my personal photographer.”

Again, the two men’s eyes met. Shared understanding. Mutual agreement. A common distaste for what they were getting themselves into. “All right,” Starsky said.

“Is that all right with you, Richard?” He gave the shoulder another squeeze.

Hutch dredged up every ounce of poise he could muster. He wanted to appear blasé if not apathetic about the whole matter, when what he really felt was overcome by the whole enterprise. He’d expected to be bait in a trap, not a bare-assed model for his partner. Still, as long as he was the focus,
“Fine.” So. He’d just agreed to pose for Starsky. Just like Eric. En dishabille. Totally exposed. He could do that. After all, after what he’d shown Heather and Leslie, surely he could show a little skin to Starsky.

Starsky lifted himself upright. “I’ll call you when the proofs are ready.”

“Excellent!” Crane walked over and offered Starsky his hand. “Make sure they’re exceptional. And make it soon.”

Exceptional? Hutch snorted to himself. I’ll show you exceptional.

His eyes burned into the back of Crane’s head as Crane left.

Starsky scrubbed a hand over his cheeks and chin. “Charming.” It was understatement of the year. Crane would have given him the creeps, even if he hadn’t known about the man’s extracurricular activities.

Hutch leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “In a very sick way.”

“One man’s sick is another man’s sane.” Starsky walked to the front door and locked it. He flipped the sign to read closed and shut the blinds.

“What are you doing?” Hutch sat forward, eyes narrowed. The naked hate Starsky had noticed in Hutch’s eyes just a second ago had disappeared.

“Making sure no one walks in on us during your shoot.” Starsky walked past Hutch and back to the studio room.

Hutch rose and followed him. “Now?”

Starsky began setting up his lights. “When better? Get it done, get it over with.” Get you before you change your mind.

Hutch hovered behind him. “We can’t do it now.”

Starsky continued his task. “Do it now, get the proofs, move this investigation along. We’re trying to beat another murder, remember?” Maybe if Hutch were reminded of his professional obligation, he wouldn’t put up a fuss. Or at least such a big fuss. Starsky knew that Hutch might’ve agreed to this, but he also knew the more time Hutch had to think about it, the more time he’d have to come up with excuses not to do it. And this was now a sudden, necessary part of their search for the killer.

It was only secondary that Starsky would have Hutch “captive,” in a position to listen to him and maybe talk to him.

And it had nothing at all to do with the fact Hutch would be naked.

“Shit.” Hutch cursed behind him.

Starsky smiled and adjusted the flat. “Why don’t you call in and let them know how our meet with Crane went, and then we’ll get started?” He kept his back to Hutch, his smile warm and wide.

Hutch grunted and walked to the front desk. Starsky listened as Hutch made their report, grinning as
he loaded his cameras. But he removed the smile once Hutch had finished the conversation and plodded back into the room. Better not to appear to eager....

Starsky drug over a wooden stool and placed it in the center of the flat. He picked up a camera and motioned to Hutch to sit down.

Hutch ignored Starsky for a moment, then drug himself over to the stool. He plopped down.

Hutch sat stiffly on the stool. His arms were folded protectively across his chest, his feet were planted resolutely on the floor, and he refused to look at Starsky.

Starsky didn’t care at the moment. He didn’t care if Hutch’s displeasure toward Crane had turned into annoyance with Starsky. He continued to click away with his camera, moving himself to make up for the lack of movement on Hutch’s part. This was a golden opportunity, and he didn’t intend to waste it. He and Hutch, locked in a room, together, all by themselves. Because they had to be. Because it was a necessary part of the job. And even if Hutch wouldn’t talk to him, Hutch would have to be with him.

“Take off your boots,” Starsky directed. “Socks, too.”


Starsky kept looking through his lens. “Because you’re supposed to get naked, that’s why.”

Hutch exhaled dramatically, then lifted his leg gracelessly and pulled off a boot and a sock. “This is ridiculous,” Hutch groused. He switched legs and got rid of the other boot and sock. He then resumed his stiff pose.

“It is when you pose like that,” Starsky replied. Hutch had spoken to him!

Hutch shot him a look then went back to focusing on the far wall. “I don’t see why we have to do this now.”

Starsky lowered his camera, eager to engage in any kind of conversation with his partner. “Because Crane said so, that’s why. Not to mention Eric’s proofs looked more stupid than sexy, so we can’t substitute those.” That should take care of one of Hutch’s possible arguments. “And because I need more photos to show around to the people the task force is encountering.” Point and counterpoint. He checked the aperture. “Not to mention we need to at least make this business look like it’s in business.” He raised the viewfinder to his eye, acutely cognizant of what he was seeing. “Because I need to document your newly shorn upper lip.” He grinned behind the camera, hoping he’d provoke a response.

Hutch shot him another look. Starsky caught it with the shutter.

“Let’s try this,” Starsky appraised Hutch. “Stand up, open your shirt, and unzip your fly.”

“Classic pose,” Hutch observed gruffly. He didn’t move.

“Hutch!” Starsky pleaded.

“Oh, all right.” Hutch stood stiffly, unbuttoned his shirt, and unzipped his fly. Upon completion, his arms hung limply at his sides and his posture could have used some improvement.

“Open your flaps,” Starsky lifted his camera.
Hutch sighed his most put-upon sigh and opened his shirt a little wider.

“Your pants flaps,” Starsky directed. “Geez, Hutch. Work with me here.”

Hutch daintily grasped the aforementioned flaps with the thumb and forefinger of each hand and spread them apart. “Better?” He offered Starsky a bit of a bump, unexpectedly thrusting his pelvis forward. Then just as suddenly Hutch dropped his arms and returned to wet noodle status.

But the hint of humor hoisted Starsky’s spirit.

Starsky lowered his camera, walked over to his work table, and picked up a wooden cube composed of light and dark sections. He tossed it to Hutch.

“What’s this?” Hutch turned the cube around in his hands.

Starsky chose a different camera and began composing a shot. “Chinese puzzle cube,” he replied. “Try and open it.”

Hutch began pushing at the sides with his thumbs. His brow furrowed, then smoothed, then furrowed again as he worked at the interlocking pieces.

The cube had the desired effect. As Hutch concentrated on the puzzle, his posture relaxed, his muscles untensed, and he suddenly became—Old Hutch.

Starsky nearly laughed out loud at his appearance. It was all he could do not to stand grinning stupidly in front of Hutch. That might frighten the Old Hutch away.

Delighted, Starsky snapped off a few exposures, finding some different angles to accentuate the teasing nature of the opened clothing. Satisfied he’d captured the tease, he pushed for titillating.

“Shirt off,” Starsky ordered, as casually as possible. He moved to a side table and fiddled with some lenses, not looking at Hutch.

“What?” Hutch asked, absentmindedly, playing with his toy.

Starsky looked over at him. “Time to take your shirt off.” He was afraid of pushing his luck, but luck was made to be pushed.

“When?” Hutch whined. He was beginning to stiffen again.

Starsky knew how to push Hutch’s buttons. “Crane is looking for some ‘exceptional’ work here. Not just nudity, but something to really raise his blood pressure. We either give it to him, or lose him. It’s up to you.” Starsky counted on Hutch’s ego to overcome his disgust at having Crane see naked photos of him. No one questioned Hutch’s ability to see a case through to the end. No one.

Hutch looked up at him, frowned, then set his puzzle on the stool. He tugged the shirt off his shoulders and down his back. Unfortunately, the spell had been broken by Starsky’s request, and Hutch resumed his classic position of arms across his chest, feet on the floor, eyes anywhere but on Starsky.

Starsky turned to look at him, camera in hand. He lifted the instrument and looked at Hutch through the viewfinder. Finger and thumb turned the focus on a telephoto lens that allowed him to scrutinize Hutch’s torso, without being perceived.

The tan was still gone, but the skin didn’t look so—papery. And there was an unmistakable
definition to the biceps and triceps that had been long missing. Starsky snapped some shots, then couldn’t stand it anymore and lowered the camera.

“Hutch, you’ve got to move,” he complained. “You look like a wooden cigar store indian! These shots are lousy!”

Hutch shifted uncomfortably, but didn’t drop his arms or move his legs.

“Hutch!” Starsky whined some more. “If we’re going to do this, we have to do it right! Shit! Just move a little and I’ll get these photos taken and it’ll be over!”

Hutch suddenly—almost frantically—removed his jeans and briefs. “If we’re going to do this, then let’s do this!” He positioned himself in front of Starsky, feet apart, arms pointing out from his sides, literally offering up his nakedness. Two more pairs of arms and legs each and he could have come from the pen of Da Vinci. “Here! Satisfied?” Hutch asked.

Starsky rolled his eyes, and with great effort turned his head from Hutch. “Yeah, fine,” he mumbled, turning from Hutch, rewinding the film in one of his cameras. More than fine. Arousing! Starsky was slightly startled as his reaction. He’d expected to be—excited—by the opportunity to view Hutch in a very stirring state. Just not quite so fiercely. Starsky continued to rewind the film, trying for a modicum of composure.

Hutch just as suddenly deflated, picked up his cube and sat back on the stool, embarrassed. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Starsky perked up at this unusual comment—an apology! A rarity of late. Humor, guilt—Old Hutch! “S’okay.” Starsky offered, desperate to recapture the ease of a moment before. “This isn’t exactly what we’re used to when it comes to undercover assignments.” His own body began to calm, settle to a tolerable state of arousal. He lifted a camera and snapped a few dull shots. “It is kinda weird, me taking nude photos of you. What would your mother say?”

Hutch chuckled, and seemed to relax.

Starsky took advantage.

“Umm, why don’t you kinda sit on the edge of the stool and play with your game there, pretend you’re at home.”

A hint of a smile graced Hutch’s lips as he edged forward on the stool, his legs apart for balance, the cube once again the object of his attention. “Oh, I do this at home all the time,” he murmured. “Pose naked for strangers while I play with my game.”

“I’m not a stranger,” Starsky clicked away, moving closer, then farther, from the body in front of him. “I’ve seen you naked more times than your mother. Just stay loose. Try something casual. Stand up or something.” Yeah, do something there with yourself…bring yourself closer to me....

Hutch hesitated, then stood up and moved the stool over to the side. He was still clearly uncomfortable standing naked, but there seemed to be a definite effort to please Starsky.

Which was all Starsky needed to be happy. He could feel them sliding back into old banter, old habits—comfortable intimacy that had been missing for far too long.

The full-frontal nudity was an added bonus. And perhaps that missing comfortable intimacy could be nudged in another direction....
Starsky studied the Old Hutch before him. If he hadn’t had a camera in his hands and a task to accomplish, he would have been standing awestruck at the man before him. The body that had bothered him only a month ago was transforming back into a body that had impressed him years ago. Hutch’s belly was clearly shrinking, his thighs were clearly tightening, and the Hutchinson legacy—well, it had never suffered any ill effects.

A drunken Hutch had once told him that the above-average size of the family legacy was the true test of their genetic lineage—every male had the same distinguishing feature. And a drunken Starsky, ever the good investigator, had pulled out his not-too-shabby manhood as well, and measured it against Hutch’s. The agreed-upon results had been: Starsky was thicker, but Hutch was longer.

An extra heartbeat hammered in Starsky’s chest at the memory of their “research.” If he hadn’t been so drunk, he might have raised more than just a half-assed erection. On the other hand, if he hadn’t been so drunk, he might have run at the first sign of arousal stirred by Hutch. Instead, the alcohol had bought him release from inhibitions, which had bought him time—time not to overreact, but to consider later the events of the evening.

Of course, shortly after that a couple of bullets would buy him a whole lot of time to think about what that evening had meant.

Some truths came slow to Starsky. Some hit him like a speeding bus. Hutch had been the slowest speeding bus he’d ever been hit by. Years of friendship, partnership, companionship and brotherhood—years of constancy—had suddenly exploded into a simple revelation. Starsky loved Hutch. Starsky was in love with Hutch. Starsky wanted everything that went along with that kind of love.

And Starsky wasn’t afraid when the realization hit.

He had John Blaine to thank for that. From him Starsky learned the normalcy of homosexuality. Sgt. Esther Peterson had been enlightening as well. From her Starsky learned that most homosexuals weren’t predators; pedophiles were mostly heterosexual, and were playing out generations of child abuse. The hidden reality of John’s life, and the cold hard facts of Peterson’s job, had forced Starsky to reconsider a lot of the street wisdom he’d acquired as a kid. Homosexuals were fags and sissies. Fags and sissies were deviants and perverts. Deviants and perverts didn’t deserve to live. They were less than human, and what’s worse, they chose to be that way. So Starsky had done some of the most important thinking he’d done since his decision to become a cop.

When Starsky had finally affirmed that career decision to himself, there had been instant peace. No second thoughts, no self-recriminations, no worries as to what others would think. In fact, he felt like kicking himself over the length of time it had taken him to get there—what the fuck had been so confusing anyway?

So Starsky had become a cop.

And years later, after a similar bout of soul-searching, Starsky had accepted his love for Hutch.

What the fuck had been so confusing anyway?

Right now, Starsky continued to hide behind his camera. He was fully in his element, and enjoying it. The camera was almost as satisfying as his badge—almost. Combining the two callings was heaven to him. And now, perhaps, the camera and the investigation would help him to his third calling—Hutch.

It suddenly occurred to Starsky that most of the pictures they’d been studying were of men in semi-or
fully-aroused states. Maybe he should mention that to Hutch. After all, they were trying to entice Mr. Evan Crane here, and Starsky had a feeling that what enticed Starsky would entice Mr. Crane. Plus, they were trying to break into a very specific market, and the more involved they seemed, the better their chances at catching a killer, should it be someone other than Crane.

And maybe Starsky could catch something else.

“Uh, Hutch?” Starsky stayed hidden behind his camera, still framing shots.

Hutch looked up, his concentration suddenly broken. “What?”

Starsky dropped his camera and sidled over to his work table. With great concentration—and not a little plotting—he re-wound the now-finished roll of film, and inserted another one. “You know all those pictures we’ve been looking at?”

Hutch was once again studying the deformed—but unsolved—cube in his hands. “Yeah?”

“The men were all, um, hard, in those photos.”

Hutch stopped and looked up. “So?” His eyes narrowed.

Starsky continued to mess with some lenses. “So, um, maybe I should take some pictures like that.”

Hutch deliberately folded his arms against his chest. Starsky had just lost ground. “No, Starsky,” he answered.

Starsky turned toward Hutch, a sheepish look on his face. “I’m just thinkin’, if we’re supposed to be doing special portraits and kinky photography, we should have some shots like that.” Sheepishness had usually worked well with Hutch in the past, and if the Old Hutch were around…. Hutch remained a statue.

“I mean,” Starsky barreled ahead, “it’s not like I haven’t seen you like that, and you haven’t seen me like that…I mean, hell, I’ve seen you puking out your guts and that’s a lot worse than seeing you with a boner.” Starsky fiddled with the straps to his camera, trying to look innocent.

“Oh, thanks,” Hutch intoned. But there was the tiniest hint of relaxation.

“Aw, c’mon, Hutch.” Starsky looked about helplessly. “I’m not tryin’ to embarrass ya. But Crane is looking for exceptional, and I think we need an erection to reach exceptional.” He paused. “I’m just tryin’ to do this right.” Whatever this was…

Hutch looked off to his right, then back at Starsky. “I’ll do it if you’ll do it.”

Starsky stopped fiddling with his equipment. An unexpected twist. The Old Hutchinson challenge. Starsky knew exactly how to handle that. “You first,” he countered.

Hutch stared him down. “I’m a temperamental model. You do it first.”

Starsky didn’t flinch. Two could—and would—play this game. “What, you think I won’t?” C’mon, babe, walk into this one….

Hutch shrugged, uncrossed his arms, and returned his attention to the puzzle. “Crane thought you would make a good model. Not up to it?”

Ah, the Old Hutch taunt! Starsky held his camera in one hand, weighing his options. He kept his
eyes fastened on Hutch, and with his other hand made a decision. Starsky very deliberately unzipped his fly.

The sound was rough and metallic, easily identifiable. Hutch didn’t look up.

Starsky gave some spread to his opened fly, and touched the cotton underneath. Briefs had been a recent addition of late—he seemed to be wearing them more often since they’d started this case. He felt—more protected, he guessed. His fingers parted the seamed opening and with a flex disgorged his cock.

“Ahem,” Starsky announced.

Hutch glanced up, then pointedly resumed his attempts at opening the cube. “Big deal,” he mumbled. “I’m hanging loose, too.”

Starsky ran two fingers over his cock, the familiar sensation comforting and unbalancing. His cock responded by sucking the energies from his extremities and filling with their electricity. It was like swallowing; a bolus moved through his body into his cock. It lengthened, thickened; drained the blood from his head and made Starsky light-headed.

It was a balancing act, staying upright, holding the camera, stroking his cock, wondering what Hutch’s cock felt like. Starsky shut his eyes, a stuttering groan rumbling from his throat. With great effort, he opened his eyes to see what he was accomplishing.

Hutch was looking up at him through downturned face and lowered eyelids, haphazardly turning the cube in his hands.

In response, Starsky squeezed the hardening flesh in his hand, eliciting another groan from deep in his diaphragm. “Wouldn’t be surprised—” he managed to mutter, “—if I could best you in size this time.”

A blush suffused through Hutch’s entire body, and he abruptly stood and turned his back to Starsky.

Starsky didn’t even feel the death grip he suddenly had on his cock, the observable evidence of his soul’s constrictures at what he saw on Hutch’s back.

“What the fuck?” he gasped.

Hutch spun, glaring at Starsky. He threw the cube to the floor and snatched at the jeans lying on there, the pink flush of embarrassment replaced by the red tinge of anger on his skin.

Starsky took a few steps toward Hutch, camera still balanced in one hand, cock abandoned. “What happened?” was all he could muster. Scratches, healing vertically on Hutch’s back. Bruises on the back of his thighs. Raised welts on his ass.

“Nothing,” Hutch huffed.

“A few bruises and scratches are nothing,” Starsky took a step closer to Hutch. The arm holding the camera fell to his side. “Welts are something else.” His eyes narrowed accusingly. “You’ve been out there without me. Without backup.”

“Why?” Starsky asked, confused.

“Because!” Hutch exploded. “Because rules tell you what to do! Because rules tell you how to act! Because rules keep you out of trouble!” He jerked his zipper up. “Because rules keep you safe!”

“No no no!” Starsky shook his head, exasperated and bewildered. “Why did you let someone do that to you?” Starsky started to reach out toward Hutch. “Who did you let do that to you?”

“None of your goddamned business!” Hutch yelled, batting away the hand. Starsky’s other hand dropped the camera.

“Why?” Starsky challenged, just as vocally. “You got something to hide?”

“Stay out of it, Starsky,” Hutch threatened. He grabbed at his boots and stuffed his feet in them.

“Which one was it?” Starsky pushed. Anger had replaced any tender feelings he’d been having toward Hutch. Anger, and a debilitating exhaustion with Hutch’s behavior. Every time Starsky tried to get close to Hutch, Hutch pushed him away. Every time! Enough was enough!

And there was another feeling weighting his gut—jealousy?

“Was it Elisa?”

Hutch zipped up his right boot.

“No, can’t be, you’re not having sex with her. And I have no idea what Elisa sees in you anyway, unless she’s got a jones for cops. Yeah, that’s it, she just wants another cop in the family. And you fell into her trap.” Demeaning Hutch suddenly felt very good.

Hutch’s eyes blazed up at Starsky. Eye contact!

“Blonde, busty Billings?” Starsky continued his harangue. “Now that would be stupid, you sleeping with Billings. She’s only making time with you to get ahead in the department! No, that would be just plain dumb.”

Hutch zipped his left boot without looking, continuing to glare at Starsky. He stood up.

“I know!” Starsky’s eyes brightened. “It was Mistress Anne or Heather or whatever she calls herself! You made an appointment for her to beat you up, so you could get into the feel of the case! Only joke’s on you, you had to pay for the sex!”

Wrongwrongwrong! Starsky knew instantly his disengagement of his mouth from his brain had been a mistake.

Hutch turned white at the mention of Heather. His mouth worked, but no words came forth.

Starsky attempted to right his wrong. “Hutch.” He took a step forward. Now Hutch had a real reason to be angry with Starsky.

Hutch took a step back, banging into the stool. He bumbled around it, skimming the wall as he kept as far from Starsky as he could.

Like a con hugging the prison wall as he makes his escape, Starsky thought.

Hutch kept backing away, pausing only to grab his jacket as he edged toward the door.
Starsky didn’t go after him. He’d already impugned Hutch’s intelligence and manhood, admitted he’d been spying on him, and ruined any chance of a civilized conversation.

And quite possibly ruined any chance at anything else.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Hutch virtually fell from the studio, stumbling out the door onto Sunset. He fumbled to get into his jacket, then took off from the business. Hutch tucked in his shirt as he jaywalked through a don’t walk sign and maneuvered his way north to the next major thoroughfare. He needed a place to think.

Even in the middle of the day, even in the off-season, Hollywood Boulevard was far too jammed with tourists. Hutch cursed each foreign body that blocked his way to his destination—each body that stopped right in the middle of the sidewalk to gawk at the bronze pentagrams embedded in the concrete, the gaudy trinkets that plastered the tacky store windows, the ridiculous architecture that begged to be mistaken for glamour. Hutch damned these disruptive foreign bodies, invariably assimilated by photographic devices which controlled their actions and forced them to take picture after picture of every object designed to bolster the economic growth of the city by invoking worship through tourism.

He especially hated these invading interlopers when Starsky dragged him to a movie at Mann’s Chinese—just try and get a ticket to a film with dozens of enthralled dupes blocking the box office and keeping everyday citizens from their everyday routines. At least this time Hutch wasn’t headed to the movies—he was headed to one of the bookstores further down the boulevard. He navigated the human obstacle course to his destination.

Once inside, Hutch headed for the back stacks in the rear. He glanced at the labels on the shelves until he found the section he was looking for: Classic Fiction. Old stuff. Formal and formalized. Nice and calming. Hutch reached up and slid a book from the shelf.


Hutch started and swiveled, his back now to the shelf.

The man plucked the book from Hutch’s fingers and examined it. “Sinclair Lewis,” he read from the cover, almost distastefully. “I’m disappointed.” The man was dressed casually but impeccably. Gucci shoes, Ralph Lauren slacks, shirt and blazer. It was Crane.

Hutch straightened, inwardly startled. “Why?” he asked. Why was Crane still in the area? Was he watching them? Waiting to see what they’d do after his proposal? Waiting to follow them after they left the studio? What?

Crane thumbed through the tome. “I could point you in the direction of much more—interesting—literature.”

Hutch took the book back. “No, thanks.” He paused. “I’m quite capable of choosing my own reading material.” He turned and replaced the book on the shelf. “I’m just browsing, anyway.” Hutch locked eyes with Crane, then abruptly broke contact and walked toward the front of the store. He felt vaguely—vagrant, his clothes disheveled since they’d met only an hour ago. What would Crane
think of his appearance? Would he assume Starsky and he had been—intimate? The last thing he wanted to do right now was deal with Crane.

Crane displayed his opinion by following Hutch.

Hutch continued through the store and right out into the street, making yet another escape.

Crane followed.

Hutch stopped and turned toward Crane. “Are you following me?” Why not? Starsky certainly had been if he knew about Heather. So why not Crane?

“Not at all,” Crane answered. “Obviously, I was in the area, and I happen to frequent book stores that stock old, out-of-print, and hard-to-find printed matter. It was just lucky happenstance that I ran into you. In fact, I might ask the same question of you.”

Hutch considered the veracity—and menace—of Crane’s statement.

“Come, Richard,” Crane seemed to read Hutch’s mind. “Do you really think I would be following you? For what purpose?”

Because you’re the psycho-sexual-serial killer? Hutch looked away. Yes, because you are this psycho killer, and maybe I can finagle something out of you that doesn’t require nude photos and Starsky’s presence.

“Walk with me up the street,” Crane captured Hutch’s elbow between two of his fingers. “I’ll buy you a late lunch at the restaurant up there.” Crane nodded toward a less touristy, more business-like dining establishment.

Hutch considered his options. Back to the studio—unthinkable. Across town to Parker Center—questioning lieutenants. Leslie? He rolled his shoulders painfully. Elisa? Yeah, right. And Heather…he glanced around the street. Starsky didn’t appear to be following him…he wasn’t wired, no one was listening…he could report this however he wanted, if he reported it at all….

Hutch allowed himself to be propelled forward, gently disengaging his arm. They walked up the street silently. Hutch surreptitiously tucked in his shirt and adjusted his jacket, planning his strategy. No talk about erotic photos or modeling, concentrate on past activities, acquaintances, possible links to the victims. Good investigative work. Concentrate on the work.

It was clear upon entering the restaurant that Crane was a frequent patron. Even though Hutch was somewhat underdressed, they were shown to a table in the back, secluded and private. Once seated, drinks were ordered and entrees chosen without a menu. Then they were left alone.

“So. Did you and your partner start work on the photo shoot after I left? From your tousled appearance, I would guess yes.”

Hutch shivered at the word partner.

“We’re working on it,” he answered. “I’m sure you’ll find the photos satisfactory, and we look forward to being introduced to new clients.”

“Satisfactory?” Crane raised an eyebrow. “I want exceptional.”

Hutch flinched at the word. “Would Evers and Gray be interested, do you think? Who else might want to engage our services?”
“Are you greedy, or just stupid?” Crane leaned back in his seat. “This is not the time or place to discuss that particular business.”

Hutch blanched. Were his skills that rusty, or had he become that sensitive to perpetrator put-downs? Hutch decided he was off his game because of Starsky’s betrayal.

“Just asking.” He toyed with his salad fork. “Didn’t mean to overstep my bounds.”

Crane nodded knowingly. “And what are your bounds?”

Hutch dropped the fork. Bounds, the man had said, not bonds….

“Oh, I make them up as I go along. How about you?” There, let’s explore your psycho killer limits.

“I have none,” Crane answered. “I don’t need them.”

Hutch smiled inwardly. “So, you’ll do anything? Try anything?”

Crane smiled openly. “What are you doing?” Crane asked evenly.

Hutch calculated the real question behind the question. Was Crane telling Richard to stop questioning him, or was Crane implying that Hutch had been made and he was being called on it?

Hutch thought furiously, trying to construct the perfect answer to augment his cover, but Crane didn’t wait.

“What impetus drove you to place that ad? Why did you agree to meet me? Why do you come to our ‘parties’?” Crane placed his hand around his drink glass but didn’t drink.

Hutch did. Okay, I know where I stand, Crane wants to know what Richard is doing. I can play to that.

“You don’t like what we do,” Crane established.

Hutch looked at Crane questioningly, then quickly averted his eyes. You can’t possibly know what I like, he fumed internally. I am a good cover cop, and I made you think I like your little Bridge Club just fine.

“It doesn’t interest you,” Crane continued, “it certainly doesn’t excite you—and, frankly, no one seems much interested in you, either.” Crane looked hard at Hutch, waiting for Hutch’s reaction.

Hutch set his wine glass down, but held on to the stem. Not interested in me? He was thrown. I am there to be interested in! Not interested? How dare you!

Crane raised an eyebrow. “Except Martin. His vanity sees you as a threat.” Crane picked up his glass of Glenlivet. “But he’s young and stupid.”

Hutch felt the cadence of his heart speed up. “I’m—experimenting,” he invented. That should suffice to keep his cover.

Crane shook his head. “No, not experimenting.” He took another sip of scotch. “More like playing, I think.”

Hutch frowned in annoyance. Starsky had been playing with him during the shoot, had been playing with himself….
Crane explained. “Playing games with yourself—because games are easier than the truth.”

The waiter appeared carrying small salads piled with hard-to-pronounce greens. Crane accepted the freshly-ground pepper, Hutch waved it away. The waiter left.

Hutch stared at his salad. Silence seemed the better course at the moment, lest the thoughts swirling in his mind turn into vocalized remarks that endangered his cover. "I’m playing games? I’m not attractive enough? I’m not doing my job right? Who the hell do you think you are?"


Hutch picked up his salad fork, but only twirled it between thumb and forefinger. He kept his eyes averted from Crane. "Want, want…what do I want? He pushed some salad greens around his plate. Starsky…Elisa…Leslie…Heather…Starsky… He shook off the faces clamoring for his attention in his head. No, I want to catch the killer, he focused. I will catch the killer.


Hutch speared some endive and swirled it through a puddle of vinaigrette. He lifted it above the plate, but no further. Every one of Crane’s listed fetishes was accompanied by a graphically descriptive picture in his mind, most of which sickened him. So what do I want?

“Do you know what apotemnophilia is?” Crane asked. He was most of the way through his salad.

Hutch looked up at Crane. Apotemnophilia. A meaning a lack of…philia meaning a love of…a love of a lack of…?

“Sexual gratification from limb removal,” Crane explained. “Very rare, but I know a doctor who will indulge this desire for a small honorarium.” Crane suddenly smiled. “Or maybe you enjoy watching a woman kill an insect or small animal with the spike of her stiletto. Not as rare, but still uncommon. I can get you some film. 35 millimeter.” Crane finished his salad.

Hutch laid his fork back on his plate.

“No, I didn’t think so.” Crane wiped his mouth on his napkin, returned it to his lap, and pushed his salad plate toward the edge of the table. “I don’t think you’re much interested in any sexual peccadillo outside of the ‘slightly kinky’. Maybe something a little rough sometimes, maybe something a little dangerous, probably with you as the submissive, but nothing that is so far removed as to be considered a serious psychological oddity.”

The waiter returned, picked up Crane’s plate, and with a nod from Hutch also removed his. He disappeared back to the kitchen.

“Look,” Hutch finally found his voice. “If you don’t want me coming to your little parties anymore, that’s fine with me.” It wasn’t, that would mean he’d failed his assignment. But he had to say something. Crane was making a fool of him! Criticizing his ability to infiltrate a coterie. Demeaning his appearance! Questioning his psychology!

“That would probably be for the best,” Crane agreed.
Anger flared in Hutch.

It must have been obvious to Crane.

“You’re taking this too personally,” Crane soothed. He reached over and put his hand on Hutch’s hand, patting it. Hutch yanked his hand back.

“You belong somewhere else,” Crane continued. “With someone else. I’m offering to help you find that place.”

“I don’t need your help!” Hutch hissed.

“You obviously do, or you wouldn’t have come to me,” Crane replied calmly.


Crane cut into his and took a small bite. “Marvelous,” he declared.

Hutch pushed his plate away disgustedly. An internal tremble threatened to become external. He rose to leave before it did.

“Waste,” Crane observed, taking another bite. He pointed his knife at Hutch. “Sit.”

Hutch stared hard at Crane, who met his gaze unflinchingly. Hutch sat.

Crane laid his knife and fork on his plate. He clasped his hands and laid them on the edge of the table in front of him.

“You need me.” Crane’s voice was low and commanding. “You can’t bring yourself to admit what it is you really want, so you need me to force you toward it. You can’t bring yourself to take responsibility for your own desires, so you need me to make you do it.”

A chill skimmed Hutch’s flesh. He shivered. *Everything* in this case revolved around force and control. Who forced whom. Who controlled whom. And why it was not only allowed, but sought out.

And why had he joined the revolution as well?

Crane leaned forward. His eyes were bright with excitement. “What is it you desire, Richard? Tell me and I’ll impel you to accept it.” Crane’s body seemed to vibrate. “I’ll drive you to your knees in its service.”

The chill encasing Hutch’s body metamorphosed into a heat wrap, making him flushed and dizzy. *On your knees* echoed in his head, the words coalescing into an image of Hutch, on his knees, eagerly, greedily, sucking...

Hutch bolted from the table, knocking aside a chair in his haste to escape.

Back to the studio.
Hutch tried the front door, found it locked, fumbled for his key. Starsky must have also fled from the scene of the crime. Hutch entered the studio and walked along the wall, past the reception area, past the small set area, back to the storage room. He pulled a paper cup from the tin holder and pushed the button to release a stream of bottled water into the cup. He drank it in one swallow, crumpled the cup, and tossed it into the trashcan.

The front door opened and the buzzer went off. Hutch stayed back in the storage room, preparing himself for—what? A confrontation? An argument? A fist fight? Hutch forced calm into his body. No more yelling; Starsky would merely be made to understand what his business was, and what his business wasn’t. And right now Hutch’s sex life was none of his business. Not right now....

Hutch waited for Starsky to walk back to him.

Solid footsteps crossed the floor, and a dark figure walked through the middle studio area and finally stopped in front of the back room.

Hutch’s back straightened and eyes narrowed. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard you worked here,” Martin replied. “I need some new—headshots.”

Hutch took a few steps forward. “We’re not taking appointments right now.” Goddammit, is everyone following me?

Martin looked around the office. “Where’s your photographer?”

Hutch started to walk toward the front door. “Out. Let me show you where that is.”

Martin grabbed his arm and stopped him. Hutch pulled away and put a good three feet between the two of them.

“What is this?” Hutch glared at Martin. “Did Crane send you here?”

“I want to talk to you,” Martin said.

“About what?” Hutch asked. He assumed his favorite position of late—arms folded across his chest. Could be a casual pose, could be a protective pose—this time it was meant as a menacing pose. Hutch had had enough of everyone for today.

Martin roamed about the room, non-plussed. “Crane. I want you to stay away from him.”

Instinct clicked in, and Hutch assumed his cover. He began the interrogation. “Why?”

Martin ignored the question. “What would it take?”

Hutch dropped his arms and leaned back against the wall. This was becoming interesting. Maybe he hadn’t been pushed so far out of the case after all. “For what?”

“For you to disappear.” Martin stopped his tiny tour and faced Hutch.

“Why?” Hutch asked again. He liked this back-and-forth with Martin. It was comfortable. He was in control.

“Look,” Martin stepped toward Hutch, a friendly smile plastered on his face. “I know you’ve been where I am. It takes a lot of work to gain the favors of a man like Crane.” He walked up to Hutch, braced his arm against the wall at shoulder level, leaned toward him. “But you seem to have taken a shortcut with Crane. Now, I can tell you’re in this for the short term. Me, on the other hand, I’m in it
for the long haul. This gig is going to net me enough to take care of me for quite a while. Not to mention you seem to be quite comfortable all on your own.” It was all Hutch could do not to react. “So I’m asking—nicely—what would it take for you to resign from our little group?”

Hutch looked down at the floor, then back up at Martin. “Make me an offer,” he growled.

Martin pushed off from the wall and once again circled the small room. “Money you don’t need. I can see that. And if you don’t need money, you don’t need ‘things’.” He pursed his lips and rubbed his chin. “I think what you need is—excitement. That’s what I’m offering.”

Adrenaline surged through Hutch’s bloodstream. Maybe he hadn’t failed at infiltrating this group after all. “Go on,” Hutch said.

Martin shook his head. “Your turn,” he said. “I can’t quite put my finger on what you’re looking for, so you’ll have to help me. Tell me what you want, and I’ll set it up for you.”

Hutch considered his options. “Anything?” he prodded.

Martin lifted an eyebrow. “Try me,” he replied.

Hutch’s expression didn’t change. “Bondage.” He chose kind of sex play the killings indicated.

“Ever tried it?” Martin asked.

Hutch shook his head.

Martin nodded. “I can arrange that,” he leered. “How do you like it?”

Hutch choose the scenario carefully, based on the previous murders. “With rope.”

“Cotton or nylon?” Martin thrust.

“Surprise me,” Hutch parried.

Martin chuckled. “Dangerous set-up, man. That’s how these other dudes have been getting offed. Good thing you came to me.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

Martin started walking backward toward the front door. “Because I can guarantee you’ll be able to enjoy the experience again.” He turned forward and headed for the door, stopping at the desk to pick up a business card. “I’ll call you,” he shouted back at Hutch as he exited the building.

Hutch let his head fall back against the wall. Possible paydirt! The day wasn’t a complete loss after all. But to keep it that way, Hutch made a hasty exit from the studio. He no longer had a desire to discuss anything with Starsky.

Starsky took his anger and his frustration and his exasperation to the Y. Nothing but sheer physical exercise seemed to calm him lately. Or if it didn’t calm him, at least it exhausted him enough that he could find some relief.

This time he took it out on the barbells. On his back, forcing weight up and down and until his chest
ached and his upper arms burned. Didn’t cool the burning in his groin, though….

“Hey!” Eric came up beside him.

Starsky grunted and pushed the barbell up and back into its support. He’d nearly dropped it upon hearing Eric’s voice. After Crane and Hutch, Starsky was in no mood for Eric and his funny photos.

“Hey.” Starsky felt some resentment at having to become his cover persona at the gym. The gym had been a place of respite—now it represented this case, funky sex, and his inability to get through to Hutch.

And he’d almost had him this afternoon…in a couple of different ways. But he’d gotten too relaxed in the presence of his Old Hutch, and forgotten the New Hutch was suspicious, mistrustful and constantly on alert for any missteps Starsky might make.

That sent a pang of loneliness through his gut. So close! Hutch would never pose for him again—he was sure of that. And their lives were so circumscribed by the case lately that they rarely had a moment together alone. Starsky was beginning to feel that he’d have to tie Hutch down himself to get him to listen. And Starsky wouldn’t let him up until he talked some things out as well.

Damn this whole case to hell!

“Loved that session!” Eric grinned. “Very professional.”

Starsky lifted himself to a sitting position and grabbed for his towel. “Anytime.” He blotted his face and chest. “If I’d known you were going to be here, I’d have brought the shots around.” His voice was flat and dull even to his own ears. Sorry Ruth, sorry Grimes, I can’t dredge up the enthusiasm for the work today. All I can do is feel sorry for myself.

“Sounds like you’re having a bad day,” Eric mused.

“Whatever gave you that idea?” Starsky replied morosely. Yeah, I guess I couldn’t be more obvious about that.

“Maybe I can brighten things up,” Eric sat down on the bench, forcing Starsky to make room for him.

“Return the favor for that free photo session.”

Starsky looked closely at Eric and forced himself to pay attention. “Yeah?” he said. I hate this gym!

“How’d you like to party with me and my sister?” Eric asked.

Starsky’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Eric shrugged. “Just a little private party. Just the three of us. You mentioned before you were into bondage, and you know I am.”

Starsky scrubbed a hand over his chin. “You mean, tie each other up?”

Eric shrugged again. “Actually, I kinda prefer to be the one doing the tying.”

The past half-hour of tiring physical exertion was suddenly overcome by Starsky’s adrenaline kick. He straightened. “That could be arranged,” he said conspiratorially. Forget Crane and his cock shots, Starsky could have this case tied up in a matter of days, and then he could turn his full attention on Hutch!
Eric’s grin grew bigger. “Fan-fucking-tastic!”

Starsky grimaced inwardly. “When and where?” Starsky balled the towel between his hands.

“I’ll let you know about the place,” Eric answered. Starsky cocked an eyebrow. “I like motels. Makes it more exciting.” Starsky nodded. I guess that pretty much clinches it—you’re probably the perv we’re looking for.

“Can I bring anything special?” Starsky twisted the towel in his hands. The murder victims could be boiled down to one single image: a man, spread-eagled, his wrists and ankles bound to the four points of the bed, gagged and struggling as his life is squeezed from his body. Someone like Rodriguez. Someone like me….

“Just that body of yours.” Eric took a moment to run his eyes up and down Starsky’s sweaty figure. “You, uh, you busy day after tomorrow?”

Starsky gulped. So soon? “Got nothing going on,” he heard himself say.

“How about if I call you at the studio Monday and tell you where to meet us?”

Starsky nodded.

Eric patted Starsky’s upper thigh, then rose and left the weight room. Starsky took a deep breath, then tossed his towel into the corner.

He’d done it now. All Hutch had agreed to so far was posing nude for some pictures. Starsky had just agreed to have sex with another man while tied up and oh by the way maybe get killed, too. Not that he hadn’t recognized it could come up at some point in the case, it was simply that he hadn’t really accepted it would come up. Hutch had gone ballistic at that thought the night they’d decided to go undercover. Worried about him cramping up and such. Well, hadn’t Starsky just completed a half hour with different weights and reps? He wasn’t cramping now. He could swim for an hour without cramping.

Of course, Hutch would insist that his arm hadn’t been held in one position for any length of time, which is what would happen if he were tied up.

But Starsky didn’t intend to be tied up for any length of time. Just long enough to get a confession, or at least enough evidence to make an arrest. And Hutch would be just outside, in the van, listening for any signs of danger—well, any signs of danger.

Starsky looked down at his left arm. He lifted it until it was horizontal, ready to hold it there as long as he could—

—then he dropped it.

And he was ashamed at his own cowardice.

He bent his arm up protectively against his chest. It didn’t matter, Hutch would be right there.

Hutch would be pissed, though. And freaked. And a pissed, freaked Hutch was not going to be the Hutch that allowed Starsky to finally break through and make some sense of recent events. Starsky sighed. Pissed Hutch, Freaked Hutch, Kinky Hutch, Depressed Hutch. Stupid Hutch. Not a one of them accessible to Starsky. What was it going to take to get through to the man? How far were they both going to have to go?
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN


“What do you want?” Elisa has barely cracked open the front door, but at least she had opened it.

Hutch shifted from one foot to the other. *What do I want…I don’t know anymore.*

In 24 hours Starsky will offer himself up as willing sacrifice. *Again.* In 24 hours Starsky will expose his body and his life in the name of justice. *Again.* In 24 hours Starsky could be…. *and I can do nothing to stop it now.*

*What do I want? I want Starsky to be all right.* “I brought this,” Hutch lifted a small, round, furry object in his hand. “It’s for Mateo. It’s a birthday present.”

Elisa looked down at the ground grimly. “His birthday was last week.”

Hutch smiled, knowing it looked more genuine than it felt. “I know. I’ve been busy with work.” His weight continued to shift. “I’m sure he’ll like it just as much now as he would have last week.” He lifted the stuffed animal higher, an appeasement, an offering. *The way to a woman’s heart is through her child.*

Elisa looked back into the house. “It’s past Mateo’s bedtime. You know that.”

*At least Mateo gets a bedtime,* the sarcastic voice in Hutch’s head answered. *Oh god, leave me alone,* another voice groaned.

Elisa kept the door barely cracked. The eyes that peeked through were cold. “Ken, what are you doing here?”

Hutch continued to meet her gaze. His posture straightened. “Truth is,” this time he dredged up his most charming smile and glued it to his lips, “I wanted to see you.”

Elisa’s expression didn’t change. “It’s over, Ken,” she said. “It’s not going to work. We want different things. I want a real relationship, a commitment, something that starts before and continues after sex.” She shook her head. “You just want sex. They’re two different things.”

“Elisa, I’m sorry I pressured you,” Hutch began. “I promise it won’t happen again—“

Elisa shut the door in his face.

“Dammit—” Hutch slammed his fist against the door, “—sex is a relationship!” *Or it can lead to one! Or it can be part of one! At least open yourself up to it!*

“Elisa,” Hutch begged, dropping the stuffed animal and pressing his forehead and palms against the door. He heard her footsteps walk away from the door.

Hutch pushed off from the door and whirled, tripping over the proffered prize. He regained his
balance and kicked the offending object off into the dark. Hutch stomped back to his car, and took out his frustration by grinding the starter. If he hadn’t needed a vehicle to get back to L.A. he would have taken great pleasure in stripping the engine.

Hutch backed out of Elisa’s driveway and shifted into drive in one fluid movement. He sped out of the neighborhood and headed down toward the 10, barely paying attention to the various stop signs and red lights that barred his way. But what irritated him most was the car behind him, a shiny status symbol that seemed to purposely trail behind him as if to humiliate his own choice in automobile as well as his driving skills.

Hutch suddenly swerved into a darkened strip mall. He meant to swing back into traffic, position himself behind the car, give the car a taste of his own medicine, but the car pulled in behind him. Beyond irritated, Hutch threw open his door and stepped out to confront the car’s driver.

The car’s driver did likewise. He was dressed in a plaid shirt, faded jeans, and running shoes. A slight wind tousled his black curls. The parking lot light gave a sickening pink tint to his tanned skin. Martin.

The figure both repulsed Hutch because of its baseness, and attracted Hutch because of its physical similarity to Starsky, which only served to make Hutch angrier. “What the hell are you doing here?” sputtered Hutch. He walked forward menacingly.

“Following you,” replied the driver, folding his arms across his chest and resting his hip against the hood.

Damn, it might as well have been Starsky following him. Starsky had followed him to Heather’s, why shouldn’t he follow Hutch to Elisa’s? Of course, Starsky didn’t need to follow Hutch anymore, because Hutch was no longer the key figure in this case. Starsky had supplanted him in that department, setting up a little fuck time with that fuckface gym instructor.Starsky denied it, but Hutch was certain he’d put the moves on Eric just to throw it in Hutch’s face that he’d lost the invite to return to the Bridge Club. Oh sure, Starsky kept insisting he hadn’t known about Hutch running into Crane, but it was just too coincidental. And hadn’t Hutch traded the Bridge Club for a scene with Martin? Just because Starsky had set up his scene before Hutch had set up his didn’t mean Starsky had the killer and he didn’t.

And as far as that went, how dare Starsky set up his scene without checking with his partner first? Starsky wasn’t anywhere near ready for this physically. He’d probably have to ride in and rescue Starsky before he even got a “how do you do” out of the suspect. He’d have to ride in and unstrap Starsky from some flea-ridden motel bed. He’d have to hold Starsky’s damaged body after some physical trauma had been brought upon it—

Hutch could barely breathe at the thought of a damaged Starsky. He’d damage anyone who hurt Starsky. He’d damage anyone who thwarted his investigation. He’d damage anyone who ticked him off at the moment. Hutch just wanted to damage.

“Why the hell are you following me?” Hutch growled at the man.

“Was that your girlfriend?”

A sudden sense of vulnerability sent Hutch’s stomach into a spiral. He’d just put a civilian in danger. A woman who, for all the trouble she’d given Hutch, he cared about. A woman with a child. So not only couldn’t he find the psycho killer, he was leading other psychos to other victims! Hutch clenched his fists. His eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared. “How long have you been following
me?”

The other man shrugged. “Long enough. Or just enough to get to know something about you, find out what you’re like, find out what you like. Find out who you like.”

An alarm pierced through Hutch’s skull. He suddenly grabbed the other man’s upper arm and hauled him nose to nose. “How long? Who told you to?”

Blue eyes, dark and fierce, met his own. “Richard’s supposed to like boys, but Richard’s got a girlfriend. Richard’s got a couple of girlfriends. Richard’s got a couple of very sexy girlfriends. There are people who’d like to know that.”

Hutch shoved the other man away from him, sending him to the concrete. The other man rolled to a sitting position, and smiled up at him. Elisa, Heather, Leslie…any or all of them might have been unearthed by Martin. All of them put in danger from Martin, because he’d been a lousy detective and hadn’t paid attention to his own back.

“You’ve been found out, my friend.” Martin wiped his palms against each other. “I wonder who’d be interested in information like that?”

The alarm continued to sound in Hutch’s head, making it hard to think. Instead, he lashed out with a booted foot and caught the unguarded man in the kidney. It felt good.

Hutch knelt and grabbed the now-prone figure by the shirt. “Who are you working for?” he bellowed. Elisa, Heather and Leslie in danger. Starsky moving into danger. Hutch banned from the Bridge Club. Bad cop.

“No one,” gasped Martin. “But I know people who’d be interested.”

Hutch shoved him back against the ground, banging Martin’s head hard. Martin groaned.

Alarmalarmalarm continued to paralyze Hutch’s thoughts. Martin had been tailing him. Martin could have been on to him for at least a few weeks. Martin might even know he was a cop. Martin could hurt other people close to Hutch. Martin could blow his cover.

Hutch landed another kick, sending Martin rolling over into a fetal position. Who else knows? Hutch shoved his hands under Martin’s armpits and lifted him to his feet. Who has he told? He barely noticed the blood clotting in Martin’s hair as he half-walked, half-pushed Martin around the side of the mini-mall and out of the light. Does Crane know? Hutch spun Martin to face him. Rage overwhelmed Hutch. He smashed his fist into Martin’s jaw, sending Martin to the dirt. Dammitdammitdammit accompanied the alarm in Hutch head, as he pummeled the prostrate figure.

Hutch fairly staggered into The Funky Eggroll. He made a quick left and found the table he wanted, the one in the far corner, occupied by a solitary drinker. He grabbed the shirt collar of the man and lifted him upright. The man started to protest, but upon seeing the simmering rage on the face of the man holding him, thought better of it and scooted for the door. Hutch sat down heavily in the chair.

“You’re late.” A familiar figure stood next to his table.

“What do you mean?” growled Hutch.

Huggy sat down opposite him. “I expected you weeks ago.”
“What do you mean, weeks ago?” Hutch asked.

Huggy shrugged. “I figured you and your man would be in here after the first one of those kinky bodies showed up, looking for the word on the street, as only I know how to tell it.”

“Starsky’s already been here,” Hutch glared at Huggy, wiping his lips with the back of a trembling hand.

Huggy grabbed at the hand. “You take up boxing again?”

Hutch snatched away his hand. Why had he come here? “Mind your own damn business. And get me a whiskey.” He covered his right hand with his left.

Huggy didn’t move. He continued to look at Hutch’s hands. “You sure you don’t need something besides liquor? Maybe a doctor?”

“Whiskey!” Hutch demanded, slapping his palm on the table.

“Yassuh, massah!” Huggy rose, slouching, shuffling off to the bar. Hutch looked away from him in disgust.

Huggy returned to the table with a new bottle and a shot glass. He didn’t offer either to Hutch, but merely planted them on the table.

Hutch reached for the bottle. It shook has he filled the tiny glass. He hadn’t even made a conscious decision to come here. He’d just driven. Why did old habits die so hard?

“Whoever it was, I’m wondering if he’s still alive,” Huggy mused. “Wasn’t Starsky, was it?” There was a genuine concern in Huggy’s voice.

Hutch glared at Huggy.

Huggy lifted his hands, palms forward. “Just asking after the health and welfare of my two favorite men in blue.”

Hutch continued to glare at Huggy. “Why would I hit Starsky?” Damn! He’d literally admitted to the beating!

Huggy shrugged again. “Thought you and my man might have had a talk that required some—debate.”

“Hey, Hutch!” A young man appeared next to the table. “Great to see you again! It’s been ages!”

Hutch shivered once. He didn’t look up.

“Do you believe this?” the man continued, gesturing out toward the establishment. “We have turned this place into a monster!”

Hutch watched Huggy smile at the man. He felt his gorge rise. The—feeling—between these two men was palpable. And making him sick.

“And would you believe this?” The man was endlessly enthusiastic. “I am almost done with my MBA!”

“True!” Huggy looked at this man with obvious pride. “Cho will graduate in May. And after that… we’ve got our eyes on a little place on Melrose. We’re thinking ribs.”
“Do you believe it, Hutch?” Hutch looked at Cho from the corner of his eye. Cho was grinning ridiculously. “All this from such tragedy.” Cho’s grin disappeared at the memory of the loss of his parents, then reasserted itself. “And all because you hooked me up with Huggy here!”

Huggy’s grin had become as ridiculous as Cho’s. Hutch threw down another mouthful of whiskey, emptying the glass.

“Damn, Hutch.” Cho leaned over, peering at Hutch’s hand still gripping the glass. As he leaned over, he balanced by placing a hand on Huggy’s shoulder. “What did you do to yourself?” Cho looked at Huggy. “We’ve got some iodine in the back. Want me to get it?”

“Mind your own business!” Hutch hissed, jumping to his feet and backing himself against the wall.

Huggy was also immediately up, placing himself between Cho and Hutch. Huggy patted Cho’s shoulder, leaning in to whisper something in Cho’s ear. Hutch watched Huggy’s hand squeeze Cho’s shoulder, then saw his thumb caress Cho’s neck. Cho nodded, looked at Hutch with compassion, and walked away.

“What’s your problem?” Huggy demanded. His eyes were blazing, made blacker by the fire within them.

“Don’t you think you should keep that stuff to yourself?” Hutch still held the shot glass. He gestured with it in the direction Cho had gone. “Keep it in the closet?” he sneered. He wished the whiskey bottle wasn’t out of reach. Another shot might quell the queasiness in his gut. He’d touched Starsky like that many times. Starsky had touched him like that many times. So why did it irritate him so to see Huggy and Cho touch like that?

“At least my closet has an open door,” Huggy shot back. “Yours is shut so tight there’s no oxygen getting to your brain.”

Hutch lashed out toward the whiskey bottle, exchanging it with the shot glass. Huggy must have thought he was coming after him—he stepped back quickly.

“At least I don’t have a child in my closet.” Hutch put the bottle to his lips and tipped it upward. Huggy was trembling. “Get out.”

Hutch hesitated, then lowered his bottle. “Aw, I know he’s legal,” Hutch mumbled. “But sodomy isn’t.” Another wave of nausea. Another drink.

“I’m not asking. I’m telling. Get out.”

“Hug—“ Hutch began. At least some small piece of his brain was working well enough to tell him he’d made a bad mistake.

Huggy walked away from the table and disappeared into the back.

Hutch took another drink from the bottle. It didn’t calm any tremors, and it didn’t obliterate any shame. And it certainly didn’t pacify the antagonism he felt every time he looked at Cho and Huggy together. They’d hit it off quickly. Too quickly. Formed a partnership before they’d even known each other. And based on who knows what sort of mutual sexual attraction. Didn’t they know you can’t base a relationship on sex? Elisa knew that. You have to love first. Sex is for the kinks and perverts.

Hutch stood, thought a moment, then downed another mouthful. He left as he’d come, shaky, dazed,
and deliberately oblivious to the obvious.

And now he was drunk. Unsteady and inefficient, but no longer shaky and dazed. Hutch sat down on the concrete steps outside the back door of the Green Parrot and took the final swig from his bottle. He peered at his watch under the yellow flood. 8:30. No, it was too dark to be 8:30. He rotated the face. 2am. He slipped the watch back in his pocket.

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.” A voice spoke from behind Hutch. “They said there was a blond god staking out the stage door, but who knew it was Apollo himself?”

Hutch turned and squinted up at the figure.

The figure appraised his own appearance. “What? I can’t wear a shirt and slacks?” He tossed a scarf about his neck. “Better?”

Hutch’s lip curled and he turned away.

The man stepped down and sat next to him. “What are you doing here?”

Hutch peered into the bottle, looking for a few last drops. What am I doing here? You don’t just drive from downtown to Studio City on whim. You make that drive for a purpose. So what was your purpose? You didn’t like Huggy’s version of gay, so you come out here to see a more stereotyped version of gay? Visit a drag queen bar so you can make sure you’re not like any of them? Make sure you’re not gay? And what makes you think you’re gay? You can’t get Elisa to have sex with you? Heather will have sex with you. But you paid for that. Leslie will have sex with you, but you paid for that, too. Starsky will show you his sex, if you show him yours. And what is yours? Is yours your partner’s? Your partner….needs you.

“I need—" Hutch searched for what he needed—“informashun.” He slurred the word.

“Oh, so you’ve come for information!” the man smiled. “I thought maybe you came looking for a little comfort and advice from Sugar!”

Hutch frowned at Sugar. Comfort and advice? No, he came for in-for-ma-tion. Information about what? About…the case...yeah, the case. “What do you know about a brother and a sister team?”

Hutch suppressed a belch. Or thought he did.


Hutch hefted his empty bottle. “Swimming instructors.” Some of the consonants didn’t quite make it out properly. Or were they gym instructors? Hutch couldn’t remember. You’d better remember, a sober voice reminded him. They have a date with Starsky. Hutch’s head began to pound.

Sugar couldn’t hold in his laughter. “My golden lion, how many of these have you had?” He grabbed Hutch’s empty.

Hutch snatched it back. “I want information!” he demanded. I want my partner not to have a date tonight!

Sugar cocked an eyebrow at Hutch. “Sunshine, you couldn’t handle the information I’ve got. You want information, ask your partner.”
“About what?,” Hutch slurred.

Sugar rolled his eyes. “Let me guess. You’re trying to catch this killer, and you’re both undercover.”

Hutch’s eyes narrowed. “Who told you that?”

Sugar rolled his eyes a second time. “The pope. How else would you spend your detective time? Certainly not discussing your relationship with your partner.” He snickered.

“That is none of your business,” Hutch pointed an unsteady finger at Sugar. He tried to ignore the pounding in his head.

“Honey, that’s everyone’s business, it’s so obvious! You’re the only one who can’t see it!” Sugar was laughing.

Hutch frowned. What the hell did that mean? See what?

“See what?” he asked.

“See yourself,” Sugar answered. “Sunshine, instead of looking for this killer you should be looking for yourself. I guarantee your partner is.”

My partner…. What about my partner?

Sugar sighed. “I don’t know who your swimming instructors are. Or who this killer is. Did that get through?”

Hutch blinked hard. His eyelids hurt. “You’ll tell me….”

“…if I hear anything,” Sugar finished. He patted Hutch’s knee. “Quentin Crisp would absolutely adore you.”

Hutch looked puzzled. “Is he involved in this?”

Sugar laughed again. “Now I know you’re drunk! Given your full faculties, I’m sure you are familiar with his writings. But for now let’s just say you exemplify the state of his personally-defined heterosexual male.”

“Which is?” Hutch managed.

Sugar stood up. “Right where you are. Pretending life is a one-way street and you’re traveling in the correct direction.”

Hutch snorted.

Sugar stepped down into the alley. He turned back to look at Hutch. “When you want to know what you really came here for, come back when you’re sober.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Hutch eyed his empty bottle.

“Exactly,” replied Sugar. He walked away.

“Fuck,” reiterated Hutch.

Exactly.
The briefing room cleared of the officers assigned to tonight’s assignment. Hutch had left before Starsky, at the request of Lt. Boggs. Starsky wondered if Boggs and Grimes had caught Hutch’s hangover behavior. Starsky certainly had. Of course he had, he’d seen too many of Hutch’s hangovers to miss one. There wasn’t enough soap to wash away the liquor sweat or enough mouthwash to cover up the liquor stink, and Starsky had caught both when he’d hopped into Hutch’s car on their way to Parker Center. He’s also noticed the scrapped knuckles, but couldn’t decide if Hutch had battled a someone or a something. And he didn’t really want to know. All he wanted to know right now was that Hutch was sober enough—and sane enough—to back him up tonight.

What he desperately wanted—what he desperately needed—was Old Hutch.

But he couldn’t simply ask for Old Hutch to appear. So all he’d done was ask Hutch if Hutch were all right. And Hutch had said yes. And Starsky had watched a Sober Hutch sit through the briefing. So Starsky believed Hutch was all right. Because he wanted to. Because he needed to. Because he had to.

Ruth sat down next to Starsky. She raised her hand and stroked his face, letting her thumb caress his cheek.

Starsky blushed. Motherly touches always embarrassed him—even as he relished them.

“David,” she began quietly.

Starsky lifted his hand and placed it on top of hers. “You’re worried. It’s gonna be okay.” Intense, extreme, ludicrous, weird—but ultimately okay. He had Hutch.

Ruth smiled back at him, but there was pain in her eyes. “David,” she said again. “You need to know this before you go in tonight.” Her eyes never left his. “Rodriguez shot himself this afternoon.”

Starsky’s eyes narrowed. “Rodriguez was shot?” he asked, confused. Rodriguez…all he could remember of Rodriquez was the last time he’d seen him…handing a folder to Grimes…looking skeletal, looking burdened…unable to look anyone in the eye. Not at all the hotheaded, brazen detective he’d known before.

Ruth took Starsky’s hand in hers and brought it down to the table. “He shot himself. He committed suicide,” she explained patiently.

“What?” Starsky asked, bewildered. He couldn’t wrap his mind around the concept.

Ruth squeezed his hand. “I think he couldn’t handle what happened to him,” she said. “And I wanted you to know before you went in tonight. I want to make sure you know exactly what you’re getting into, and what the consequences could be.”
Starsky shook his head, dumbfounded. “I can’t believe Rodriguez would do that.”

“I know,” Ruth soothed. “But everyone reacts differently to different situations. He’d suffered a very personal attack. His partner wasn’t there. And we just didn’t see this coming—” she broke off.

Starsky was suddenly afraid Ruth was about to call off the meet. And he had to go through with this. It was not only his chance to prove to Hutch—and to himself—that he was capable of doing this job, but it was his chance to reconnect with Hutch. “It’s not the same,” he countered, defiance flooding his voice. “He went in alone. I have backup.” Starsky made two mental columns, one labeled Rodriguez and one labeled Starsky. A list of everything that separated him from Rodriguez. “We have background on the marks. He had no idea who he was dealing with. I’ve been briefed. He wasn’t. I have backup. He didn’t.” He was persuading himself as much as Ruth.

And I have Hutch, Starsky thought. Rodriguez didn’t.

Actually, Starsky was no longer sure if that was an advantage or not. And that terrified him. He’d always been able to count on Hutch, know exactly what he was thinking, exactly what he was doing, exactly where Hutch would be when he needed him.

Or at least those had been the qualities of Old Hutch.

But Starsky couldn’t tell what Hutch was doing now—except keeping him at arm’s distance. Hutch had a girlfriend he didn’t know, was seeing a hooker, pretending to be a gay bondage freak, and had bloody knuckles. And this was the man Starsky needed to be certain would keep him from a fate worse than death, as well as death.

Then again, there was something to be said for having a crazed Hutch at your back. Nothing stopped a crazed Hutch. Nothing prevented a crazed Hutch from his objective. So since protecting Starsky was Hutch’s objective tonight….

Starsky could believe in Hutch for tonight.

Grimes moved up to Hutch, who was currently doing his part for the assignment by holding up the hallway wall. Or maybe it was the other way around. He was sober by only about 4 hours. He vaguely remembered getting home, or at least he remembered trying to unlock his apartment door. He could only assume he’d driven there after having a very strange conversation with Sugar about Oscar Wilde or something. And why he’d gone to The Queen Mary to see Sugar was baffling; he must have thought she knew something about the investigation.

What he did remember clearly was going to Huggy’s. He knew why he’d gone there; it was safe haven away from his home, his job, and his partner. And he’d needed safe haven because of an all-too-clear memory of attacking Martin. He beat up a bad guy because he was mad at himself. Then he beat up a good guy because he was—mad at himself. Admitting it was an ice pick-sharp pain in his heart, but he’d been infuriated when confronted with Huggy and Cho’s relationship. It reminded him of what he and Starsky had had. Or almost had.

Or should have.

He squelched the thought. It was wrong. It would lead to more pain. All Starsky needed was his protection. And it was all Hutch deserved to give.

“You cool?” Grimes asked Hutch.
“Piece of cake,” Hutch replied. His eyes were slits, focused on the wall across from him. The damn hallway light was just too bright.

“You sober?”

Hutch grimaced. He decided discretion was the better part of valor. “Yes.”

Grimes nodded. “Your partner clear we’re not looking for heroics?”

Hutch’s jaw clenched. “He’s fine.”

Grimes studied him. “You taking up boxing?”

Hutch’s entire body clenched, especially his right hand. “No,” he said slowly. “Why?”

Grimes shrugged. “Just noticed your knuckles there in the meeting.”

Hutch shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. “I’m fine,” he urged.

Grimes nodded a final time. “Good. Make sure you stay fine. We need fine officers on this task force, not cowboys, and not drunks. Both cause problems. And problem causers end up on suspension.”

Hutch didn’t reply.

“Cowboys and drunks can also get their partners killed. Had you thought about that?” Grimes folded his arms across his chest.

Hutch’s heart skipped a beat.

“Ruth’s in there right now telling Starsky that Emmanuel Rodriguez shot himself this afternoon. He committed suicide.”

Hutch’s eyes widened. The pain of the hallway light was nothing compared to the pain of this knowledge. “What?” he managed.

Grimes took a step toward him, grabbed Hutch’s upper arm. “This is not a game. This is not an exercise in macho behavior. You have to be there for your partner, and you partner has to be there for you. Both of your lives depend upon it, as well as your sanity. Do you understand me?”

Grimes eyes bored into Hutch. Hutch nodded, trying to stop them from going deeper.

Grimes studied him for a moment, then released his arm. He nodded, probably more to himself than to Hutch, and walked back into the briefing room.

Oh God, Hutch thought. I’m protecting Starsky, not putting him at risk! Aren’t I? Hasn’t that been the whole point of this mess? To protect Starsky? To keep him safe? Make sure no one else hurts him?

Hutch ran a shaky thumb over his damp brow. He almost died from my lack of protection last time! That’s why I had to change, to learn to block out distractions and concentrate on keeping danger away! You are not telling me that what I am now is just as dangerous! I have to be this way to keep him safe! Starsky must be safe!

But is he? another other voice asked.
Hutch stumbled to the water fountain and took a long drink, soothing his raw throat, taking a handful to cool his face. He stood up.

*If Starsky isn’t any safer now than he was before, than what am I doing to him? To myself? To both of us? Are we any better off?*

Hutch turned and looked down the hall into the briefing room. Starsky was sitting with Ruth. Gordie had already taken the van out. Rudd and Hughes had also already taken off.

*I want Starsky to be safe,* Hutch thought. *I want him to be alive. I want him to be alive and happy.*

and?

*And…I want him next to me.*

and?

*And…I want me to be next to him.*

and are you accomplishing any of that?

“No,” Hutch whispered to the empty hallway.

well?

*I can keep Starsky safe for tonight. That’s all I have to do right now, just keep him safe for tonight. I’ll worry about tomorrow—tomorrow.*

Hutch took a deep, cleansing breath. He’d worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.

Starsky moved tentatively into the small motel room. The motel Eric had chosen was old, rundown; stuck on the eastern end of Ventura Boulevard, where Studio City is about to hit Universal City. He and Hutch were familiar with it; it wasn’t so much of a drug hangout as a hangout for prostitutes and winos.

Unfortunately, the choice made surveillance difficult. Eric had only called with the location around 5:30pm, and they were meeting at seven. That meant no time for fancy set-ups. They had the van, which could monitor the beeper Starsky wore. The van could be parked in the lot across the street, or down the street near the Mexican restaurant; it could be close enough to pick up the signal but not look out of place in the area. Hughes and Rudd would also have a radio in their car, as, of course, would Hutch.

And that was the only transmission signal they’d have. Eric had told Starsky the front desk would have the room key ready for him when he arrived, which meant the task force had no idea which room Starsky would be in, which meant they couldn’t set up any listening devices in that room or the room next door.

Grimes, and Boggs in particular, had not been happy with these conditions. Ruth wanted to have an officer check in to the room next door after they knew where Starsky was. Starsky hadn’t been sure what good that would do; the officer could do no more than listen through the wall, and having too many people ask for too many specific rooms might tip off the manager that something was up. And when Starsky gave the word he needed help, the officer probably couldn’t get there any faster than Hutch could.
Which actually made Starsky feel good, knowing all he had to do was say the code word, and Hutch would be right there. It was the only certain thing about this whole set-up.

So here he was, in a room at the end of this one-story, horseshoe-shaped complex, with only a radio transmitter disguised as a beeper between him and disaster.

The light switch just inside the door turned on a weak yellow lamp next to the bed. The room was the same as any hundred of cheap motel rooms, the same as any of the rooms previously rented by each of the deceased victims. The only difference was, Eric had rented this room for Starsky. Which made it Eric’s territory, possibly the killer’s territory. That made Starsky feel vulnerable.

The room was boringly rectangular: the bed perpendicular to the east wall, a dresser against the west wall, the door and a blind-covered window opened from the north wall, and the bathroom was just off the south wall. Starsky stepped fully inside and shut the door behind him.

"Looks just like every other motel room this department has ever had me in," he said out loud. He was speaking for the benefit of his backup outside, who were listening by means of the innocent-looking beeper attached to his belt. "We’ve got a nice, lumpy double bed, a splintering chest of drawers topped by a tarnished mirror, and no phone. There’s a small card table and one Holiday Inn-style caneback chair toward the front of the room, and—" he moved back toward the bathroom, "—a shower and toilet that are in sore need of my mother’s scrub brush. No back window through the bathroom." He turned and studied the room before him, hands planted on his hips. "The only entrance is through the door and front window, so I hope you guys brought your fire axes." He shivered and rubbed his arms. "This is pretty much just what we expected. Just exactly what we expected," he murmured to himself. His brain did a quick review of all the murder scenes and victims: if he was to survive with his—dignity—intact, he had to know what to expect and when to make a move. Room size and layout only mattered as far as knowing where the escape routes were. Lamp, chair, and card table could all be used as weapons. The bathroom could be used as a possible safe room, although there’d been no lock on the door. But if he were mobile, he’d only have to defend himself a few seconds before help would arrive.

More troubling was the bondage aspect. It was clear all the previous victims had been tied down before they’d been killed. And while Starsky knew what they didn’t, that the whole scene was about death, not sex, he was still going to have to allow himself to be bound. And once bound, he was helpless.

Hutch shifted in the driver’s seat until his back felt properly supported but the pressure on his injuries was slight. He had parked in the lot directly across from the motel, which was dark because the tenants of the tiny strip mall had all closed shop and gone home. Others might park here because, as always, street parking was hell and no one had enough parking around their own establishment in this city. But that didn’t bother Hutch; as long as no fool tried to block him in, which was damn near impossible since he was positioned on the far right side of the lot entrance with his front bumper not quite in the street and his motor running ready to make the dash across the street to his partner, he was happy.

Hutch picked up his radio mike. “Red Fox ready. Over” Ruth had picked the code names; he didn’t care. “Grey Wolf in position. Over,” answered Rudd. He and Hughes were parked down the street near the Mexican restaurant. “White Eagle we read you both and copy. Over and out.” That was Ruth, she and Grimes were in the van parked just around the corner, monitoring and recording this impossible mess.

Hutch’s eyes were fixed on the motel room where Starsky waited. He felt as if he were in a vacuum
tube, unable to breathe, unable to move, dependent upon someone to smash the glass and free him for action. Because if he were to smash the glass himself, he’d end up dragging Starsky out of the room, ruining the whole set-up, and making an even bigger asshole of himself than he’d managed lately.

He’d listened to Starsky’s description of the room, laying it out mentally so he’d know exactly how to get to Starsky if he had to. Starsky’s beeper cum transmitter wasn’t bad; he could definitely hear and understand what Starsky was saying, even if it was a little fuzzy.

Hutch kept his foot hovering over the accelerator, the rest of his body tense. He was angry at Grimes for making him as a street thug, he was mad at Starsky for agreeing to this, he was mad at himself for letting Starsky agree to this. The anger was fire inside him. And just as Robert Frost had said, warring with the fire was ice. The ice of dread, of apprehension, of fear. He alternately shivered and sweated, afraid one or the other would take over and he’d lose his precarious balance. If either paralyzed him, Starsky could be lost. Again. Because of him. Hutch’s heart skipped a beat.

Every heartbeat was agony; it represented another second Starsky was in danger. His whole being was attuned to just one word, the one word from Starsky that would send him running to the rescue.

Starsky removed his jacket, tossed it on the chair, and sat down. He patted the beeper hanging on his belt. So much rode on that one little device. Starsky was used to having no beeper, but having his gun, his own wits and strength, and his partner as his defense. Here he was with no gun, wits and strength which would be of no use once he was tied up, and a piece of metal recording whatever happened. But he did still have his partner. And he was convinced, at least for this moment, Hutch would be there.

He bounced experimentally a few times. “Bouncing on the bed,” he explained for the benefit of his audience. He lifted the edge of the gray-green bedspread to peek underneath. “Crappola bed linen.” The mattress and box springs rested on a metal frame bolted to the floor. Starsky looked to the head of the bed. A single piece of finished wood served as the headboard. Eric would have to fasten his wrists and ankles to the bed frame, which would give him no leverage at all. “Bed’s bolted to the floor. No way to hide under it, either.” Bad joke. If Hutch and the others took too long once he gave the signal, he’d make tomorrow’s news as the latest victim in this bizarre crime spree. Starsky shivered again.

The lines for this scene had been drawn by Ruth, negotiated by Starsky, and agreed to by Hutch. Ruth said no intercourse, Starsky said intercourse with Janet if necessary. After all, sleeping with someone while pursuing a case was not unknown to either him or Hutch. Hutch agreed.

Ruth said no anal. Starsky said only if absolutely necessary and Janet isn’t being forced. Hutch agreed.

Ruth said no oral. Starsky said oral with Janet, if necessary, meaning she could either blow him or he’d eat her no offense Ruth. Hutch had asked what if Eric…? and Starsky said he’d call in backup if that became an issue. Hutch agreed.

In fact, it had been agreed that should Eric what-if anything, Starsky would call for backup.

And under no circumstance was Starsky to allow himself to be gagged. Bound was one thing, gagged was another. If it came up, Starsky would refuse. If the refusal ended the encounter, the Lawsons would leave and be picked up later for questioning. If a gag was forced, Starsky would call for backup if able, or 60 seconds of silence would be considered a call in and of itself.
So. Starsky had as long as it took to get what he needed and prove he was the detective and hero he used to be. But he had to remember to keep talking or the cops would come busting in and the killer would be tipped off and he’d be a laughingstock. And somewhere in the middle of all that was maybe some sex, with a whole bunch of people listening.

And don’t forget the partnership hanging in the balance.

Hutch straightened as he saw the white Mercury pull into the motel lot. Two occupants in the car. It parked down at the end, down at Starsky’s end. Hutch held his breath. His right hand gripped the radio mike. A man and a woman, both wearing coats, got out of the car. Both short. Both blonde. Each carrying a bag. Hutch recognized them. “Red Wolf to pack, our team is here. Over.” Ruth and Rudd copied. Hutch honked his horn twice, then ran his hands over the steering wheel. He wanted desperately to floor the gas and run right straight over the two suspects. Instead, he watched the man and women walk to the door of Starsky’s room.

A car honked twice from across the road. It was a pre-arranged signal, meaning Lawson had been spotted and was presumably on his way up to the room. Starsky took a deep breath and steeled himself.

“Got it. I’m ready.” Starsky answered the honks. He made a final survey of the room. When the hell had this kind of gig ever been more fun than frightening? Starsky shook his head. When he and Hutch had first joined the department elite known as undercover cops, they had been elated! It was a game, first to put one over on the city’s evildoers, second to show up the rest of their peers, and finally to pit themselves against one another in a sort of “brains & brawn” contest. No bad guy had been too scary, no undercover gig had seemed to foul, no plan had seemed to risky. There was no such thing as too little sleep, too much peril, or too little backup. They had been a couple of overconfident, arrogant, bastards.

Overconfident, arrogant, lucky bastards.

Gunther had changed that. Even before the hit on Starsky, Gunther had been responsible for too many people’s deaths. Deaths they’d been unable to prevent with their brains and brawn and expertise. They hadn’t even prevented Starsky’s “death;” he was just a medical miracle. The only upside to that case was Hutch had gotten to Gunther before Gunther had gotten to Hutch.

Which was just another example of their luck, since Starsky had certainly been in no position to protect Hutch from Gunther.

Which was why there were in the position they were in now, because Hutch had been unable to protect Starsky from Gunther.

Couldn’t he see it was all just luck, it was all out of their control?

Starsky buried his face in his hands.

A few moments later there was an easy rap on the door. Starsky rose and moved to the window, peeking through the slats. Eric caught him looking, acknowledged Starsky, and jerked his head toward the door. Starsky reached over and opened it.

“Hi Eric. Hi Janet.”
Eric entered the room quickly, followed by his sister. Janet shut, locked, and chained the door behind them. Starsky would have to see if he could maneuver around and undo that chain—he was beginning to realize just how precious a few seconds could be between life and death. The brother and sister moved to the center of the room and deposited two athletic bags on the bed. Both were wearing full-length trench coats and leather gloves. Trés chic, Starsky thought to himself. He actually hoped Janet was wearing something underneath that would stir him up, because if he had to have sex with her he was going to have to have something to stimulate his arousal. Right now he wasn’t sure he could take a piss for the pressure of performing, the peril of the situation, a listening audience, and his concern for Hutch.

“What’s in the bags?” asked Starsky. “You’ve got two, I see.” Cleaning supplies, maybe?

Eric unzipped one of the bags and removed a small radio/tape player and three tapes. He set it on the dresser. "I brought along some of my favorite cassettes." Eric inserted a tape and hit the PLAY button. The Doors wafted through the room. Eric turned and spread his arms wide. "Atmosphere," he announced.

"I'm not much for music," Starsky said. "But we could keep it on low." That way there’d be less room noise for the radio, and less distraction for him. The Doors. That’s what a witness had said was playing in one of the victim’s motel rooms. Starsky unobtrusively tapped three times on his beeper. Another pre-arranged signal. Starsky was becoming less and less confident in the fancy technology his safety depended upon. Cops got killed when technology failed, regardless of who their partners were.

The signal needed a response; he had tapped to see if Hutch could still hear him with the background noise of the tape player. The response was forthcoming, another quick honk of the car horn. They could still hear him. And neither Eric nor Janet seemed to notice the car horn. Starsky was relieved. Janet turned down the volume of the tape.

A boulder rolled through Hutch’s head. The Doors. One of the ear witnesses had said he heard The Doors through the wall. He had just allowed two Doors fans to sequester themselves in a room with his partner. Two possible killers. At least the killers weren’t such fans that they wouldn’t allow Starsky to turn down the music and keep his transmissions clear. Hutch leaned his head against the wheel. Just don’t let anything go wrong!

“Can I take your coat, Janet?” Starsky reached out for the garment.

Janet smiled at Starsky, then untied her belt and let her coat drop to the floor. Starsky did the play-by-play. “Nothing sexier than a garter belt.” He managed a smile. “Silk stockings. Matching bra and panties. The white lace choker is a nice touch.” Janet smiled at him.

“Gloves?” Starsky was surprised, but shouldn’t have been. The white lace gloves were thick enough, Starsky noted, to keep her from leaving any fingerprints. Janet fussed with her appearance in the mirror, then turned and offered herself up to Starsky's inspection. Well, he could probably get stimulated over that outfit if he tried. Starsky looked over at Eric.

"What do you think?” Eric moved behind his sister and put his hands on her waist. "Beautiful, no?” He kissed her shoulder. Janet stretched her neck in pleasure, then twisted around to meet her brother's lips with her own. Starsky watched in increasing shock as Eric and Janet explored each
other's mouths. *Unexpected* was not the word for what Starsky was witnessing. *Unthought-of* was a better term. It suddenly occurred to Starsky that he might not need to summon an erection for Janet at all. That she was there for someone else’s erection!

*Stay focused,* Starsky instructed himself. *Not being ready for anything was what got Rodriguez in trouble.*

Eric finally released his sister and stepped away from her. He began removing his own coat. Starsky stayed where he was, mesmerized by the scene unfolding in front of him.

Too fascinated. He had to keep talking. The scene might be repugnant, it might be ridiculous, but he had to keep talking. If he stopped for too long, the back-up team would be on top of them. And Starsky hadn’t even begun to gather any evidence, much less a confession. He had to start talking. Talking would keep him focused. Talking would help him handle the unexpected. Talking would keep him connected to Hutch. Talk to Hutch.

“Beautiful, yes.” *Describe, detail…. “Very sexy. Lots of lace and, uh, stuff. Nice.”*

The fire in Hutch’s gut was melting the ice in his veins, leaving a sickening sludge to slog through his body. *Keep your mind on the details, just go over the details…there’s a scantily clad woman and her brother in that room, they brought two bags with them, and Starsky is still alive and well. Untouched, unharmed. All he has to do is get them to talk, gather some evidence, give us enough to pick them up. Don’t let them open the bags, Starsk! Don’t let them touch you! I know what we talked about, but just get them to talk!*

Not seeing, only listening, was going to be bad. Hutch had already dressed the woman in the garments Starsky described. He could see the two of them in the motel room, standing across from Starsky, ogling him, eyeing him. Hutch knew better than to let his mind add detail to what little Starsky was telling him, but it was impossible to stop. He needed to see the room Starsky was in, needed to see *Starsky* in the room, needed to know *exactly* what was going on. Starsky’s life depended upon it.

Hutch took a deep breath but was unable to hold it. *Lose control, lose Starsky.* The muck of despair hovered around the fire and ice.

Eric shouldered out of his coat, picked up his sister's coat as well as Starsky's jacket, and hung them on spindly wire hangers dangling from the thin rod posing as a closet.

“*I could have hung up the coats,*” Starsky narrated. *Brilliant commentary.*

Eric was in full regalia also, sporting black leather bondage pants and a black g-string, his chest crisscrossed by a studded leather harness. He kept his gloves on, thwarting fingerprint identification.

“*Well, now, there’s an outfit,*” Starsky continued. “*What is that, real leather for that harness? I like the pants. Black’s a good color for you. Goes well with blond hair.*” Now where had that thought come from? “*Like the gloves, too. Are they kid?*”

Eric stepped back beside his sister. They both grinned at Starsky. Eric burst out laughing.

"*Nervous?*"

Starsky shifted and tried to center himself. "Yeah," he grinned back, trying to use his nerves as part
of the play, rather than allowing them to use him. "This is all just so—different. I’ve never done anything like it before. I’m not sure what to expect or what to do." That was certainly true.

Hutch didn’t know exactly how to dress Eric in his mind, only that it had to be in leather. Probably similar to what he’d brought to the studio. A lingerie lass and a leather stud, targeting his Starsky. The thought of either one of them actually touching his partner, much less engaging in even more personal contact, nauseated him. No one has a right to touch my partner! No one! Only I have that right!

The world swum around Hutch, then steadied.

Have that right, or want that right?

Confusion joined the anger, fear and despair wallowing in his gut.

Janet sidled up to Starsky and hung onto his shoulder, letting her right hand roam freely around his chest. She began unbuttoning his shirt. Keep talking, he reminded himself. "I hope you’ve got something for me to wear, ‘cause all I brought was myself. I didn’t know we were supposed to come in costume. Not that I really have anything at home in my closet, but I could have found something. Not that this stuff is like a Halloween costume or anything, I mean, it’s not silly like a Halloween costume. It’s just, uh, specialized."

Eric pulled some paraphernalia from the first bag. Starsky was now sure the second bag contained all their cleaning supplies. Okay, there’s some evidence. “What’s in the second bag?”

"That’s for later.” Eric lifted the bag from the bed and pushed it over against the wall, under their coats. Then he pulled some straps from the first bag. “For you.” Eric handed over a set of leather restraints, each one smooth except for a large metal D-ring attached opposite the buckle. A similar set of ankle straps were passed over. The only other piece of costuming Eric handed Starsky was a matching belt.

"This isn’t much to cover myself with.” Starsky hefted the items. “Let’s see here: Four straps, two each for wrists and ankles, I’m guessing.” He looked at Eric, who winked back. “And, um, waist belt?” They felt strong and sturdy. “How come the wrist and ankle straps have D-rings and the belt only has a buckle? Is that regulation or something?” Only some of the bodies found in their investigation had appeared to have been strapped, others showed evidence of rope or tape burn. Killer’s choice, Starsky supposed.

The picture was now complete in Hutch’s mind: Lingerie lass, leather stud, and Starsky wearing straps around his ankles, wrists and waist. Nude, naked, in his birthday suit, whatever you wanted to call it: open and available to whatever these little perverts had on their perverted little minds. And he had a good idea of their perversions based on what they’d found the last time: Lots of tying up, penis traps and ball bondage, a dildo up the ass, a rope around the throat.

Hutch’s heart was racing; bile burned his throat. He was furious with himself, furious with Starsky for putting him in this position! Why had he let Starsky do this? It was clearly crazy! It was making him crazy! Was putting Starsky in danger worth getting some psycho warped killer off the streets?

Hutch knew the answer, tried to bring down the pace of his heart. Someone had to do it, just why did
it have to be them? Hutch swiped a thumb over his damp brow. All right, okay, I can handle this, I can do it. But I don’t have to wait until Starsky gives the word. I can use my own judgment. I know this man. I know when enough is too much for him. He is my partner!

Janet took the accoutrements from Starsky and laid them on the card table. “You are so cute!” She giggled. Janet finished unbuttoning his shirt and pulled it from his shoulders. “Let me help you get undressed.”

“I think that’s a good place to start.” Starsky said with false bravado. He allowed her to remove the shirt, shouldering out of it easily. “Then maybe I can do the same for you.” Janet dropped the shirt on the floor, returning her attentions to his chest. She brushed her lips against his skin, her hands caressing his sides and back. “Yeah, that’s nice, keep kissing right there.” Starsky actually found it hard to ignore the sensations she was promulgating. He tried focusing his attention on Eric. “What else have you got in those bags? More costumes? Straps? Toys?”

Eric took a few more items from the bag, then tossed that bag over toward the door. “What are those, toys?” Without thinking, Starsky had placed his hands on Janet’s head, stroking her hair as she kissed his chest. “I can’t say I’ve had much experience with toys, either. Although I’ve seen a lot of them. You know, my clients bring them sometimes when they pose. Like you did, But I try to keep business and personal separate, so I never really played with them or anything.”

“My games require toys,” Eric grinned at Starsky. He placed the items on the dresser top.

“What’s the cock ring for?” Starsky asked.

“Whoever,” Eric answered. “Got a butt plug and some nipple clamps, too. You like those?”

Starsky shivered. No. “Sure, whatever.”

“And look at this baby.” Eric held out a very large dildo.

“Oh. A dildo.” Starsky didn’t want to know who that was for. But all were items that had been found at previous murder scenes. Now to be used for the entertainment and enjoyment of one Detective Sergeant David Michael Starsky and Friends.

Okay. Here we go. A bagful of the same toys found at the last murder site. We’re getting somewhere. Now we just need some talk. Goddamn, Starsky, get them to talk!

The radio crackled. “You okay?” a woman’s voice asked.

Hutch swallowed, then picked up the mike. “Red Wolf to White Eagle, I copy you. Over.” Get back to procedure, I don’t need your concern! Over!

“Hang loose, son. Stay ready. We’ll be right behind you. Over.”

“Copy that. Over and out.” Hutch dropped the mike next to him on the seat. Ruth’s query had brought him back to a slightly less frenzied state. He sat up straight, stretching his back, flexing his ankle. Nothing had happened as yet. Nothing might happen at all. Starsky could get them to confess. Then they’d all go home happy.

Please just let this night be over!
“Hey, why’d you stop?” Starsky felt Janet move away from him. Janet picked up the wrist bands.
“Ah, I see, time to put on the straps.” Starsky’s heartbeat sped up. *Time to alert the troops. Time to offer myself up as sacrifice. Time to run screaming from the room.*

Starsky held up his hands. Janet fastened the leather snugly around Starsky’s wrists. “Yeah, nice and tight around my wrists,” Starsky commented. “Yeah, that feels nice.”

Eric, meanwhile, busied himself stripping the bed of all its linen. A stained mattress was revealed for Eric’s trouble.

"Isn’t that, uh, going to be a little rough on the body? No sheets on the bed, I mean."

Eric laughed. “Do you know how many people have probably used these sheets for exactly this purpose? And do you really think this establishment cares how clean they can wash these sheets? I don’t take any chances!” Eric pulled out a plain, white sheet from the toy bag and spread it over the crummy mattress. “There! At least we’ll be somewhat protected.” Eric looked at Starsky. “Well, you know!”

Starsky knew. Protected from germs, but not from whatever Eric had in mind once he was tied up and helpless. “That’s a good idea,” he commented. “Then you can just take it with you and wash it later.” Leaving behind no evidence. “I’ll have to remember that.”

"Shh," Janet put a finger to his lips. She expertly unbuckled his belt, then unzipped his jeans and pulled them down to his ankles. But Starsky couldn’t “shh,” and he knew it.

“I love it when a woman undresses me,” he said. He hoped it sounded more sexy than he felt. “It’s very sensual, you know? Makes me feel relaxed and kind of pampered. Like I’m getting lots of attention.”

Hutch almost laughed. It would have been funny, what he was listening to, if it weren’t so dangerous. Starsky, playing footsie with a hot mama, having to describe it blow by blow for the sake of the listening audience. What wasn’t so funny was the idea of someone undressing his partner. If Hutch had been a little more introspective, he might have recognized the feeling as jealousy. But there was just no room for introspection in his body. It was barely containing the emotions already there.

Gently, Janet pushed Starsky back toward the bed. Starsky sat down on the edge, his attention focused on his feet. He reached for his jeans, which had wrapped around the beeper. Janet also reached, and found it first.

“What’s this?” She held it up.

“Beeper.” Starsky reached for it and Janet easily gave it to him. He snatched it quickly enough that no one could see his hand tremble.

“What’s that for?” Eric watched as Starsky brushed off the device. He desperately wanted to tap it to make sure it was still transmitting, but he feared with Janet and Eric now scrutinizing the beeper, they would catch the answering horn honk.
“Business.” Starsky wondered if Hutch were poised to come riding in with his posse. “Everybody’s getting one these days. You can stay in touch when you’re not around a phone. See, it comes with a phone number, and when someone wants you, they call up the phone number and then the beeper beeps and tells you who called.” The truth is always the best lie.

Eric laughed. “What, you expecting some emergency photo shoot?”

Starsky laughed as well. He reached over and set it on the card table, transmitter side facing the action. “It’s in case my partner needs to get a hold of me.” If he was casual about it, no one would suspect its real purpose.

Janet returned to undressing Starsky. One disaster averted.

“You know, that thing would be good to have when I get my personal fitness business started,” Eric mused.

“Great idea,” Starsky replied. “Your clients could beep you when they wanted to make an appointment.” Janet untied each of his tennis shoes, then eased each one off. Next, she slipped his socks off. “That way, you don’t have to have an office, you could just return their messages and pretty much use your car to get around without having to have a secretary or anything.”

“Yeah,” Eric agreed. “You know, getting to know you has really been interesting. I get a lot of good ideas when I’m around you.” He leered at Starsky.

“Yeah, well, thanks.” Starsky looked down at Janet. “Well, looks like my clothes are off. Who’s next?”

Hutch was sure his heart had stopped beating when Janet had found the beeper. Even now it just barely kept a rhythm. He had his foot on the accelerator, his hands on the steering wheel, ready to peel out. Who knows how they might have reacted if they’d made the beeper? Lashed out at Starsky fatally? I swear, this is the last time we do this. Whatever it takes, I will keep you happy without having to indulge your love of undercover scenes.

Hutch rolled down his window and gulped cool air.

Janet giggled, and again placed her finger against Starsky's lips. She knelt at his feet, and strapped the ankle bands on.

“Nice fit,” Starsky pointed out. “I guess one size fits all when it comes to restraints and stuff, huh? You can really get those straps tight around a person’s and ankles. Although I guess if you were too fat….” He looked up at Eric. “Where’d you get them?”

“I got a catalogue. I’ll loan it to you if you want.”

Yeah, loan it to me if either of us is walking around after this, Starsky thought.

Janet, still kneeling, reached up and drew the belt around his waist, securely buckling it.

“Ah, I’m ticklish there on my tummy.” Starsky felt along the belt’s edge, felt how tightly it wrapped around his abdomen. “What’s the belt for? Anything special? I don’t seen any hooks or anything on it. Can’t go too much tighter unless you put in more holes for the buckle. Just for looks, huh? Or
maybe a good handhold?” He pushed his fingers in between the leather and his skin.

Janet giggled again. “David, do you ever shut up?”

Starsky flushed. “I’m, uh, I guess I’m just nervous.”

Janet stood up, offered Starsky her hands, and pulled him to a standing position. “You know, if you like dirty talk, I can do that.”

In one fluid motion she grabbed the waistband of his briefs and skimmed them off.

Starsky stood in front of her, naked except for the five slashes of black against his pale skin. “Looks like I’m naked and ready,” Starsky looked down at his own body. *Naked and unprotected is more like it.* “How about everyone else getting naked now?” He rubbed his hands together. Or more naked. Or at least with their parts hanging out just as his were.

*Naked and unprotected,* Hutch thought. His hands continued to caress the steering wheel, his foot to tap the gas pedal. The image of a naked Starsky plastered itself in his mind. No wrist restraints or ankle straps, just a wonderful, beautiful, unclothed body. A body that impressed him. A body that surprised him.

A body that aroused him.

Hutch shuddered. There was too much sex on this case. He was either horny or repulsed all the time. Even thoughts of his partner’s body could set him off. He did not need to be aroused right now. He did not want to think about why he was aroused right now. He was angry, he was afraid; that was enough.

Janet lowered herself to her knees and blew on his cock, causing it to stir even under the pressure of the situation. Starsky bit his lip as the voltage hit his brain.

"God, David." Eric stood on the far side of the bed. "You look magnificent. All my weight training was worth every drop of sweat." Starsky turned his head to see Eric leering at him. Undeniable sexual lust. Starsky shuddered. An image of Eric, kneeling before him, sucking his cock, presented itself. It wasn’t what he wanted his mind to focus on, but it was better than the other image trying to intrude, the one of Eric fucking his ass while he could do nothing but scream.

“You aren’t so bad yourself.” *Flattery will get you everywhere. Even into a killer’s bed. Just remember, you’re trying to get into a killer’s mind.* “Did you wear that just for me, or is that your standard outfit? I mean, I guess, do you do this often?” He laughed, trying to make the question a joke. “You know it’s a first for me.”

Eric shook his head, grinning. “So you keep saying. Just be cool, and you’ll be fine.”

Janet stood and placed her lips around his left nipple. White teeth gently nipped at him, then moved over to scrape at his right nipple. Starsky grabbed her shoulders to steady himself. His cock rode higher. He hadn't expected to be so aroused under the threat that confronted him. “Yeah, that’s it….” How did they do it in the porn films they’d seen? “Yeah, suck my nipple…that’s it…that’s right baby….” He looked down at the blonde head working on his chest. Not the blond head he craved, the blond head he wanted worshiping his body, making it vibrate with sexual electricity. Maybe if he pretended this blonde was *his* blond….” “That’s good, that is so good, feels wonderful, just keep
sucking….”

Starsky’s reliance on his body's quick response in times of emergency was suddenly in serious doubt. At this point there was only one thing he was certain of being able to do quickly.

Janet dropped lower, her lips and tongue moving over his belly button, his lower abdomen. Starsky let his vision blur, one shade of blonde slipping into another, Hutch’s mouth on his body…. “Nice… so nice…soft lips….” Janet’s hands moved around to clutch his buttocks, kneading the firm flesh. Janet’s hands were tiny…Hutch’s would be bigger…his mouth larger…. Starsky closed his eyes at the sudden sting of tears filling them. Could this be as close as he ever got to Hutch? A surrogate sucking him off while he did the play-by-play of what he wanted his partner to do, for the benefit of his partner?

Hutch rested his head on the hands, which still gripped the wheel. All he could see was a woman moving down Starsky’s body, giving him pleasure, making him hard. He could no longer ignore his own half-erection, thinking of Starsky’s body in full arousal. It was all he could do to ignore the thoughts circling in his brain—thoughts which had been hiding behind other thoughts. The thought of wanting Starsky hiding behind the thought of wanting to protect Starsky. The thought of loving Starsky hiding behind the thought of wanting to keep Starsky safe.

The thought of loving Starsky scaring him so much he tried to kill it by using others and hurting himself.

Hutch groaned.

He’d been trying to protect Starsky from his own lapses in vigilance. And that required removing all feeling from their partnership, any feeling that interfered with his pledge to be constantly on guard. He’d been trying to keep Starsky safe by being super-vigilant, keeping him off the streets, keeping him away from the bad guys.

But all he’d managed to do was force Starsky into proving he was still a good cover cop by placing himself right in the arms of danger.

And what was needed to take Starsky out of danger was exactly what Hutch had been denying—his feelings for Starsky.

God, was he screwed up or what?

Eric moved around the bed and gently disengaged Janet. "Now, now," he admonished, propelling her off to the side. “Save some for me.” He took Janet's place, running his hands up and down Starsky's arms. The hairs on Starsky's arms stood on end. Eric leaned forward, licking the hollow at the base of his throat. Starsky found himself repulsed by the explorer, but aroused by the exploration.

“David, you are one damn beautiful man.” Eric used the forefinger of his right hand to trace the musculature of Starsky’s body. “Look at this jaw line,” Eric’s finger outlined the jaw. “And this shoulder.” The finger slid down Starsky’s neck, running over the top of his shoulder. “Bicep, tricep.” The finger drew slow circles over his upper arm. It ran down to his elbow, then back up to travel over to his chest. “Strong chest.” Eric let all five fingers move over Starsky’s chest, entwining themselves in his chest hair, pulling gently. “I have been wanting you since the day you walked in that gym.” Eric leaned forward and blew on Starsky’s right nipple. Sparks shot from Starsky’s nipple
to his cock. “So goddamned beautiful.”

Starsky felt dizzy. He needed to grab something for balance, but the only thing to grab was Eric, and Eric was not the man he wanted to grab right now. But he also needed to stay upright, concentrate. He grabbed Eric’s upper arm for support. Eric looked pleased.

A bit of stability gave Starsky focus. “C’mon, Eric, I’m not all that good looking. I bet you’ve had a lot better before I came along.”

Eric grinned. “I thought I had, till you came along. And if you’re as good in action as you look just standing there, I’ll have to put you at the top of my list.” He leaned in and fastened his mouth around Starsky’s pulsating nipple.

Starsky took an involuntary step backward, his other hand grabbing Eric’s head. A male blond head attached to his body…. “Tell me about some of the others,” he rasped. Talk and keep your mouth off me!

Eric released the tender nub. “Nothing to tell now that you’ve come along. They were all pantywaists, really, not much interested in what I’m interested in.” He turned to look at Janet, who was sitting in the one chair, watching the two men. “Interested in what we are.”

Starsky took a deep breath, grateful to be momentarily left alone. “And what are you interested in?” Another breath, his head beginning to clear. “This bondage gig? Or something more?” Push a little… push a little…and see what you get.

“You’ll see.” Eric put his hands on Starsky’s chest and pushed him backward. “On the bed, please.”

Hutch’s face was a mask. He did not want that man’s hands on Starsky. He did not want Starsky on that bed. But he would respect Starsky enough to let him carry on his work. He knew every nuance of Starsky’s language, every inflection of Starsky’s speech, even over a scratchy transmitter. He would know when it was time to stop this scene.

And then he would beat the crap out of any person in that room who had touched his partner.

Starsky—reluctantly—sat down on the bed.

“Time for a little tying up?” Starsky attempted a smile, desperate not to appear desperate. “Me first, huh?”

“What?” Eric suddenly planted his hands on hips. “Don’t you like this? I thought you liked this?”

“No! I mean, yes!” His voice sounded strained to him, better get back to the nervous cover. “I just, I really don’t know what to do here, or what you want me to do, or what Janet wants,” he gestured toward the buxom blonde in the chair.

“Okay.” Eric’s posture relaxed. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Starsky decided. I’m committed. Or I probably will be after this. “If this is how you want it, then I want it, too.”

“Good,” Eric smiled. “‘Cause Janet doesn’t like to be tied up, and I’m not much into it, either,
although I can if you really need it to get off. But that’s not how the best part happens!” His smile widened, and he looked back at Janet.

“Sure, okay.” Starsky tensed his body, then relaxed. “I can go with it.” Gotta push. “I guess if others have done it, so can I.”

Eric moved toward the bed. “Stretch out.” Janet walked up behind him, her hand caressing his arm.

“Like this?” Starsky stretched out on his back, his hands behind his head, his ankles crossed. Janet moved to the end of the bed, openly admiring his body. She licked her lips as she smiled down at him. Without the physical sensations to distract him, Starsky found it easier to concentrate on the gravity of the situation. His arousal diminished under the naked, distasteful hunger both Janet and Eric exhibited. “Is this how the others did it?” Walked into their own deaths, you mean. Starsky surveyed the room, surveyed the suspects, surveyed his own body. I am supposed to be a willing participant, eager and willing to comply. I am supposed to be a cop, gathering evidence to convict a killer. If Eric doesn’t think I’m into this, he’ll leave and we’ll have nothing, not even probable cause. If Eric does think I’m into this, he’ll have probable cause to screw me.

Eric pulled thin leather straps from somewhere. Starsky’s gorge rose. “What are those for?” he asked. Eric handed two to Janet, then he moved to the head of the bed. Starsky rose on his elbows. “So that’s how you do it.” He watched Janet work on his ankles. “You thread the strap through the D-ring, then what do you do with the strap?” Janet pulled Starsky’s left ankle to the left corner of the mattress. She bent down. “Oh, I see. You thread the strap through the D-ring, then knot it off around the frame. What kind of knot do you use?”

Starsky continued to rest on his elbows and gaze down at his feet. With both legs secured, he could barely wiggle either foot, and he could not move his legs at all. “You’ve got my ankles tied down, nice and secure. What’s next?” His erection, he noted, had all but subsided.

Eric put his hand on Starsky’s shoulder and pushed him back onto the bed. He gripped Starsky’s left wrist.

Something niggled at Starsky, beyond the dread and the apprehension….something he was supposed to do….

“Wait a second.” Starsky stiffened his arm and kept Eric from raising it to the head of the bed. “What about a safe word?” Goddamnit, how could he have forgotten that? Jasper, Ruth, Hutch—everyone had reminded him about that!

Jesus Christ, you’re just now thinking about that? I told you and I told you and I told you how to play the game! And goddammit, why are you this far into the game anyway? Can’t you just make
them talk?

Hutch wouldn’t let go of the steering wheel long enough to wipe away the sweat dripping down the side of his face. If the previous images had been bad, this one was worse: Starsky spread-eagled and helpless, given over to the sick whims of perverted whackos.

Clutching the steering wheel also kept Hutch from leaving the car and running over to the motel room, gun blazing. Fire was definitely winning over ice, anger over fear. Hutch wanted to kill.

Eric stopped. “Oh yeah, you into safe words and all that? Okay. That’s probably a good idea. “How about ‘red’? ‘Red’ means ‘stop,’ how does that work for you?”

The word echoed in Starsky’s brain. “Red” was the code word he and Hutch had come up with should things start to go wrong. Could Eric know this was a set-up. Was Eric taunting him? Surely not! Surely it was just a coincidence…”Oh, yeah, ‘red’ is fine.” Starsky didn’t hear anyone running to his rescue, so he assumed those listening were following the conversation.

“Okay, then, no one uses the word ‘red’ from now on, unless you want to stop.”

Eric tugged on Starsky’s wrist, and Starsky allowed it to be drawn to the left corner of the bed. “So it’s going to be spread-eagle, huh?” He tried to get comfortable as his wrist was being bound. He tugged on the strap Eric had just attached to the bed. “Nice and tight, just like Janet. I couldn’t move my left arm or my legs if I wanted to.”

“That’s the idea!” Eric walked around the bed to the right side. He lifted Starsky’s right wrist and pulled it back. “Wouldn’t want you getting up and leaving during the best parts! A couple of others did just that, and what a fucking downer that was. That’s when we got into the whole bondage thing. And I’ve got to say, it really opened up a whole new scene for us!” He finished tying off Starsky’s wrist.

Eric stood back and grinned broadly at Starsky. Although constrained by the leather pouch, it was obvious he was aroused.

“A whole new scene,” Starsky echoed. He pulled at each strap. None of them gave. “Yep, this is a tight scene. A real tight scene. I can’t move an inch. There is no way I can get up from this bed.” Lay out the scene for Hutch. Let Hutch know exactly where you are, so when he comes through that door….

Eric rubbed his hands together triumphantly. “Okay, Janet, you first.”

Janet stepped up on the bed and knelt between Starsky’s spread legs.

“What now?” Starsky asked. He lifted his head as far as he was able, looking down his body to see Janet bending almost protectively over his groin. “Blow job from Janet?” Better than from Eric. “I can go for that.” No I can’t, but I don’t have much choice. “What are you going to do, Eric?” Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.

“Admire you,” Eric answered. “You have no idea how good you look all stretched out on that bed. There is such definition to your muscles. You got a guy all stretched out, and it is just beautiful. The limbs become so taut, you figure you could just touch a muscle and he’ll explode!”

Janet remained curled around Starsky’s groin, her mouth at his cock. Again, Starsky found himself unable to resist her touch. She started with feathery kisses against his thighs that stirred his cock, then
set her lips and tongue along the length of his ever-increasing erection. Starsky shut his eyes and caught his breath, wondering which of his teen-age erection-diminishing remedies he should try. Sports, algebra, prayers...

"God, what are you doing?" Starsky wrenched himself back to his play-by-play, embarrassing though it was. "Janet, your mouth on my cock is incredible." He hoped Hutch was taking this with a modicum of decorum. He hoped Hutch was taking notes....

"Isn't it?" Eric walked to the foot of the bed, behind Janet. His hands had moved down to her hips. "I love watching her," he breathed heavily.

Starsky forced himself to concentrate on Eric, where he was in the room, what his hands were doing, what he was saying. If he gave in to the temptation to focus on Janet, on her blond head moving up and down on his cock, the consequences could be disastrous.

"That's my girl," Eric urged. "Nice and slow. Make him grow slowly...slowly...make it really hard and long...that's right, do it right...."

Starsky was relieved Eric was doing the talking. His heart was beating faster, and his mouth was dry. Janet was expert, licking, sucking, stroking, caressing, teasing, tantalizing...and wisps of blonde hair were tickling his skin, begging him to give into another fantasy....

"Oh, damn!" Starsky finally breathed. If he came too soon, the scene could be over. But if he didn't come, Eric might become suspicious again. There was still a job to be done, still a killer to be drawn out, still a reputation to be salvaged...still a partner to be seduced.... "What a blow job!"

"Don't leave teeth marks," Eric instructed. Starsky managed to note his hands were squeezing Janet's hips. "Leave him nice and unmarked....nice and unmarked...is he getting big?...is he getting hard?...move your head, let me see....yeah, that's good...make him wet...make him slick...."

The words were hypnotizing Starsky. He had to stay focused! He shifted his gaze from Janet to Eric, his eyes on Eric's hands. Slowly, Eric slid Janet's panties down her legs. Starsky's eyes narrowed and he began to drag his concentration away from the shivers shooting up from his groin. Janet continued to lick his cock, but it was now Eric he was transfixed by.

Starsky was getting a blow job. Starsky was all right, but Starsky was getting a blow job. And Starsky couldn't do one fucking thing about it. And neither could Hutch. And what was Eric up to? Who knows? Starsky was just barely audible in his report on his own cock. But not panicked—not yet. Hutch heard the stress in Starsky's voice, and the unwelcome arousal—but he did not hear the need for help. And if Starsky could wait, so could Hutch.

"So," Starsky blinked hard. "How many times have you done this? I know I'm not the first."

"No, not the first." Eric kneaded Janet's bare ass, running his thumbs up into her crack, then back down. "Not the last, but maybe one of the best." He leaned over and kissed each ass cheek. Janet responded with low moans, timed to Eric's ministrations and not her rhythm with Starsky. Starsky clenched his jaw as Eric took his hands from Janet long enough to remove his g-sting and reveal an angry erection. He slipped his palm down and caressed himself.

"What do you think of this?" he lifted it toward Starsky.
It was bigger than Starsky remembered from the photo shoot. Bigger, stiffer, more dangerous…

“Huge,” Starsky managed, his voice hoarse. “Too bad I don’t have my camera now.” This scene
must be what really arouses Eric, he wasn’t anywhere near that excited in the studio. “That’s a cock
that needs documenting.”

Eric rubbed his thumb over his erection. “Maybe pictures. Maybe sometime. Not this time.” His
thumb rubbed some pre-cum, and he reached over to rub in on Janet’s ass. “Not too much, my little
girl. Not so far he can’t come back. Gotta save it for later.” He stepped closer to the end of the bed,
closer to Janet, his cock rubbing up against her.

As if Janet could see what Eric was doing, she lifted her ass and scooted her knees forward, still
sliding her tongue around Starsky’s cock. Starsky watched. “What…what are you doing, Eric? What
are you doing to Janet?” Focus! “I want her…to keep sucking…me.” He had a feeling he knew
what was coming, and he didn’t want to know.

Eric spread her cheeks and shoved his middle finger into her vagina, wiggling it around several times
before removing it to lubricate himself with her juices. He carefully prepared his cock, then knelt
with one knee on the bed and pushed himself into his sister.

Starsky gritted his teeth and momentarily lost all sensation, his eyes wide. Eric moved smoothly in
and out of Janet; Janet meeting his every stroke as she moaned around Starsky's cock. Eric and Janet.
Fucking.

“Eric, man,” Starsky tried to focus. “You’re fucking your sister!”

Starsky could feel his erection subside but Janet took no notice, merely holding him in her mouth as
Eric moved inside her. The whole spectacle was nauseating and left Starsky numb. Eric wanted to
fuck his sister, not him. Fuck his sister!

Hutch was—stunned. If he was hearing things right, brother and sister were fucking. Each other. Not
Starsky, but each other.

He had to bite his lip to bring himself back to some semblance of reality. He needed to listen for
Starsky, not the sounds of siblings screwing. He had to block out all images of screwing and
concentrate on Starsky.

A kind of calm settled over Hutch. It was all so simple. Just concentrate on Starsky, and everything
would be all right. Concentrate on Starsky. Listen for Starsky.

Listen to himself.

*Say something! Keep talking!*

“You’re fucking your sister.” It was all Starsky’s brain could grasp.


“I’ll give you more, sweetheart.” Eric picked up his rhythm, pounding harder into Janet. “I’ll give
you everything. Everything you want. Everything you deserve. What do you say, David, shouldn’t
she get everything she deserves?”
“Sure,” Starsky managed. This scene was not in anybody’s predictions! Brother and sister, Team Fuck. Team Killers. “Yeah, sure, do whatever you want,” he mumbled. Victim gets tied up, brother and sister have sex, victim gets killed, brother and sister clean up.

“Yesss, yesss,” Eric moaned, stringing out his s’s. “Good girl. Good fucking girl.”

*ShitShit!* Starsky was barely aware Janet was still working on his cock. *If this is how they get their rocks off, then I’m next on the list!* *They’ll try to get rid of me!* Starsky’s mind was running rapidly. *End it now. Say the code word. No confession, but maybe evidence in the bag.Unless it doesn’t have cleaning supplies. Then there’s not even enough for a search warrant. Only questioning. They’ll get a lawyer. We’ll have nothing.*

“Sweet thing,” Eric murmured. “C’mon, take it all, take it where you want it. Don’t let me go.”

*If I wait, and they put their hands on me, attempted murder. Of a cop. Probable cause for a search warrant. Their homes probably contain evidence. We can take these weirdos off the street. I’m a hero. This will all be over. There will only be Hutch left to deal with.*

“God, god…that’s it…take it, baby…just a little more.”

Janet came first, gasping shallowly as she let Starsky fall from her mouth and rested her head on his thigh. Eric continued to pump a few moments longer, finally freezing in mid-stroke, then pulling out of Janet and stumbling back into the dresser. He leaned against the dresser, catching his breath, his cock still dripping. Janet pulled herself up Starsky's body and laid on top of him, her head against his chest, her thighs gripping his leg as her muscles continued to spasm.

Starsky just stared, disbelieving, at the ceiling. “You fucked your sister.” There was not a drop of sexual arousal left in his body, only disgust. This wasn’t so much sex for the victim as an audience for the killers. He tensed his muscles, testing them. He hadn’t been tied down long, but his body wanted to move, change positions. So did his mind. "You fucked your sister,” Starsky said a final time.

There was silence for several seconds. Again, Starsky knew he had better say something or Hutch would be inside before he’d accomplished his task. And so far, all he really had was a case of incest. Could he get more before the scene was over? Before they came after him?

Janet tittered at his side. Eric wiped the sweat from his face. "What did you think?" He reached down and wiped his cock with his hand, rubbing the come into his belly. "Weren’t we good? Wasn’t that fantastic? Didn’t I tell you this would be amazing?"

Starsky stared at him. "I’m kind of cramping. How about letting me up?" Maybe they could talk in the “afterglow,” admit something. Recognizing his stiffening limbs was making him claustrophobic on top of his continuing helplessness.

*Aw, shit!* Starsky was cramping up! Hutch had warned him. Hutch had told him his body wasn’t the same as before. And now here it was, happening just like he’d said! If they didn’t release Starsky soon, he’d go into spasm! *Hell, I ought to go in there and release him!*

But it wasn’t time, not yet, he owed Starsky that much.

Hutch hunkered over the steering wheel.
Janet rose lazily and brushed the hair from her face. "You taste good," she cooed, then leaned down to kiss Starsky on the nose. Starsky couldn't help but turn his face away. Janet didn't seem to notice his rejection.

Eric reached out and Janet got up and walked over to him, cuddling against him. Eric wrapped an arm around her protectively, stroking her hair with his free hand.

"We let you watch." Eric said it as though he'd just granted Starsky a great privilege. "I thought you'd like that."

Starsky felt his muscles tightening against his bonds. He'd better relax or he'd cramp up. Just as Hutch had warned. If Hutch had any idea his prediction had come true, he'd never let Starsky away from his desk again. "I thought—" he tried to get a hold of his thoughts. "I thought this evening was going to be us trying something new, something—." Something what? Was he telling Eric the evening wasn't done until Starsky had...*partaken*? That wasn't what he wanted! Better get back on track, figure out how to come away from this whole mess with something other than intense embarrassment!

His left shoulder was beginning that old, familiar, dull ache. Starsky purposely tensed his body, then consciously began relaxing his muscles, trying to arrest any spasms. "I don't know what I thought. Maybe we can talk about it."

Eric shook his head. "You said you wanted to try some bondage with me." He continued to stroke Janet's hair. "There's your bondage," he gestured down at Starsky.

Starsky reviewed his options. Consciously trying to relax his muscles was going nowhere. His whole body was beginning to ache. "Let me up." He knew that wouldn't yet bring Hutch, but it might get Eric or Janet to release him.

Eric stopped his attentions toward Janet and stared at Starsky. He laughed. "No."

Fear detonated in his belly. An overwhelming sense of defenselessness was threatening to suffocate him. Starsky clenched his fists. He tried to look as serious as possible as he could in his vulnerable position. "Why not?" In another few seconds he would use the code word, mission accomplished or not.

"Why not?" Eric laughed again. "Because you obviously don't want me to let you up." Eric released Janet and walked over to the discarded athletic bag. "Because we're not done yet."

"I am done." Starsky glanced over at his transmitter. One word from him and he'd have Hutch in this room. They'd untie him. Yet, if he could just get a hold of his anxiety, maybe he could still drag something out of Eric….God, was he playing his life against his profession just to impress his partner?

"No, you're not." Eric took out a roll of gray duct tape from the bag, winking at Starsky. "See," he stepped over the bag and sat down on the edge of the bed. "It's like this. This whole scene was for me, not you. I made it sound like it was for you, but I needed you so I had to make it sound like that. See?"

Starsky eyed the tape. Things were beginning to become clear. "You needed me to get your rocks off," he guessed. "You have to do this in front of a captive audience or you can't do it." His heart rate was beyond accelerated; he could hear the blood pounding through his brain, threatening to block out all other sound.
Eric looked over at Janet. She was removing her stockings. He looked down, then back at Starsky, a
flush to his cheeks. Was he aroused—or embarrassed?

"Untie me." Starsky continued to watch the tape in Eric's hands. He was no longer an undercover
officer, he was a worried cop. "What's the tape for? Why is Janet taking off her stockings?" Had
there been evidence of stockings used in the other murders? There’d been evidence of tape. Evidence
of manual strangulation. Evidence of stocking strangulation? He might have something if he timed
this down to the second…if Hutch was listening carefully…if he could stay in control….

"Now—" Eric smiled, "—it's your turn." Janet walked over and sat down on Starsky's other side.
She handed her stockings to Eric, who laid them across Starsky's chest. He ran the roll of tape
between his fingers.

Starsky felt the sweat break out on his upper lip. "I know you've done this before," he prodded. If
this didn't get him a confession, he was screaming for help, regardless of the evidence they had.

Eric glanced back at Starsky's cock. "You didn't come." He looked over at Janet, who shook her
head in confirmation. "I'm sorry about that. I do want you to get some pleasure out of this."

"You killed the others who watched," Starsky tried desperately, pulling on the leather straps. "And
now you're going to kill me."

"What?" Eric laughed, his expression puzzled. "Who said anything about killing? You've been
reading too many newspapers! Just relax and enjoy." Eric patted the edge of the mattress. "Janet, try
again."

Janet whispered a soft "okay," and crawled once again between Starsky's legs. Her mouth
swallowed Starsky's cock. "Stop it," Starsky ordered. "Stop sucking my cock!" He squirmed under
her ministrations.

Eric rummaged through the bag again. He came out with a small vial that Starsky could immediately
identify. Poppers. Eric ripped off a length of tape. "'Red'?" he asked, holding the tape between his
hands.

Starsky stared up at him. *Ohgodohgodohgod...it was too much.* "Red."

*Red.*

But Hutch had shifted and slammed his foot on the accelerator before he even heard
the word, acting only on what he heard in Starsky’s voice. He pulled the car into the oncoming
traffic, barely avoiding a collision as he drove straight across the pavement and into the motel’s
parking lot. Hutch smashed the brake pedal, pulled the steering wheel hard to the left, and slid
sideways, stopping horizontal to the motel room door. He managed to jerk the car into park before
forcing his car door open. Hutch hurled himself toward Room 120.

Eric frowned, shrugged, then smiled down at Starsky. Starsky tried to turn away, but Eric pressed the
tape over his mouth. "Oh, don’t be such a baby," Eric soothed as he smoothed the tape over
Starsky’s mouth. “This is going to blow your mind. And don’t worry about the ‘red’ shit
Everything’s going to be just fine.”

*What the fuck?* Starsky reflexively balled his fists. Every muscle in Starsky's body rebelled. He tried
to twist away, but there was nowhere to twist. He was tied firmly to the bed. Eric grabbed a handful of his hair and held him steady, then brought the tiny bottle to Starsky's nostrils. It was impossible to not breathe in the vapors with the gag over his mouth. Dizziness overwhelmed him and his head fell back on the mattress.

If this was death approaching, it wasn’t like the death he’d experienced before. He was scared shitless, yelling from behind the tape gag, fighting to get away from this bed and this room and these sickos. He had no idea if he’d said “red” loud enough for the transmitter to pick up, and that meant he needed one terrible horrible excruciating minute to pass before Hutch showed up. Hutch. Hutch would catch on to his muffled yells. Hutch would save him.

Hutch would die if he didn’t save him.

Panic on top of panic. It wasn’t just his own life he had to save, he also had to save Hutch’s.

He had to stay alive long enough for Hutch to get there. Long enough for Hutch to be absolved of any complicity in this attack upon his body.

Long enough to see Hutch again, whether it be as a partner or as an asshole. It didn’t matter, as long as Hutch was with him.

Eric picked up the stockings and wrapped them around Starsky's neck. Starsky listened in vain for rescuing footsteps as the room began to spin. He desperately wanted to hang on to consciousness, to see Hutch in front of him, to have Hutch beside him, to have Hutch make it all go away.

There was no air to be gasped, and as the stockings around his neck began to pull tighter, a unique sensation filled Starsky’s head. It was like being light-headed and bone-tired at the same time. The ache in his muscles dulled. His throat tightened. Janet sucked on his cock, licked it, squeezed it, sending electricity up his spine, igniting his brain. Blue sparkles flickered behind his eyelids and a burning sensation filled his aching lungs. Gut-wrenching spasms overtook his body. Then everything exploded in a burst of white, white light.

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Hutch slammed his body against the door, grabbing for the knob and twisting violently. He was vaguely aware no one was behind him, really only conscious of a consuming fear that Starsky was lost and so was he.

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The door gave a quarter of an inch, but didn’t allow entry.

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“Starsky!” Adrenaline-fueled panic. All Hutch could think was that Starsky was helpless and the jackals were upon him.

·

Hutch took one step back and slammed a booted foot against the lock. Splinters flew. Hutch kicked again. And again. And then both metal and wood gave way.

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“Starsky!” Hutch yelled again. He tripped over a gym bag right inside the doorway, falling forward, landing on his hands and knees. He used the floor to push off and up, sending himself flying across the bed, taking two startled bodies off the mattress with him.

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Shrieking filled the room. Hutch yanked at the tangle of arms and legs flailing between the bed and the wall, scrambling for purchase, trying to get up and get to Starsky.

·

Someone grabbed his arm and he struck in that direction. His hand connected with flesh, and he sent another blow to that same area.
The shrieking stopped.

Someone grabbed him around the waist. Hutch sent his body backward, landing his weight on the offender. He pulled the arms from around his waist, found his knees and twisted his torso, reaching out for the arms now clutching at him. He grabbed a wrist, held it tight, and pulled back with his free hand to land a blow.

Someone grabbed his arm, pulled hard, and drug him out of the melee. Hutch was vaguely aware that someone was calling his name.

Hutch was pulled to his feet. Another detective pushed past him and grabbed one of the squirming bodies. Hutch’s attention fell on the bed. He jerked free of the restraining grip and stumbled to the calm side of the mattress.

“Starsky. Starsky,” Hutch whispered warily. He balanced his rear on the edge of the mattress and placed a hand on Starsky’s face.

Warm.

He put his hand on Starsky’s chest.

Moving.

“Stay with me. Stay with me,” Hutch murmured. He hand trembled as it lay on Starsky’s chest. He was terrified of what he’d find: a still body, a blood-soaked mattress, a grinning maniac and his sister….

Hutch slipped the stockings from around Starsky’s neck, whipping them off to the side. He picked at the tape over Starsky’s mouth and pulled it away quickly.

Over to the side the struggle of bodies continued. Someone was screaming again.

Hutch placed his palm along Starsky’s cheek, his thumb stroking Starsky’s chin. “Breathe, babe.” Breathe! I will not make it if you leave me again! Just breathe and I will listen to whatever you have to say, talk about whatever you want, do whatever you want me to do!

Starsky snorted but didn’t waken.

Hutch made a quick visual inspection of Starsky’s body. No blood, nothing—unnatural—sticking out of a place it shouldn’t be. Hutch stood and fished his knife from his pocket. He reached up and sawed at the rope holding Starsky’s right hand. It took only seconds to free, and he leaned across Starsky to cut the left wrist free.

Guilt flooded his mind. He remembered Starsky talking to him, telling him that it hurt to be tied up, it was scary. And here he’d let Starsky walk right into it that fear. What’s worse, he’d walked into it himself, and alone, all in the name of self-loathing and some sick need to purge his soul.

Starsky coughed and choked. Hutch stretched down to the edge of the bed and cut the ropes to Starsky’s ankles, first left, then right. He closed the knife and slipped it back into his pocket. Then he took both hands and rolled Starsky to his side, Starsky’s abdomen pressed against his hip. With one hand he supported Starsky’s back, and with the other and began massaging Starsky’s left shoulder.

Too familiar. Hutch’s stomach did a backflip. But as long as the outcome—staying
alive—was always the same, what did it matter? Wasn’t being alive, and together, all that mattered?

- “Wake up, Starsk,” Hutch urged. “C’mon, babe. Wake up.” Please! I need you!

- “Get them out of here,” a gruff voice instructed. It was Grimes. Hutch glanced behind him to see Hughes and Rudd walking sheet-covered arrestees toward the damaged door. “Make sure all the evidence is bagged.”

- Ruth was suddenly by Hutch’s side. “I know we’re supposed to wait for trained medical help,” Ruth held a white ampoule in her hand, “but let’s try this. I got it from the first aid kit in my car.”

- Hutch ran a hand through Starsky’s sweat-drenched curls and nodded. The world was starting to right itself. He was no longer angry, or even terrified, just exhausted and extremely grateful this night was over and Starsky was alive.

- Ruth snapped open the ammonia and held it under Starsky’s nose.

Starsky opened his eyes to a fuzzy image of someone leaning over him. The mouth moved, but all he could hear was the wind. Or maybe the ocean. Or maybe God.

And then his throat tickled and a fit of coughing overwhelmed him. He gasped and gagged until he threw up, convulsions the only thing controlling his body, burning acid the only thing he could taste.

Then his body began to calm down. Someone rolled him back onto his side from where he’d been hanging over the edge of the bed. His limbs tingled unmercifully, and his throat ached, but he was warm. Starsky gradually realized someone had covered him, and from the smell he thought it must be the old gray-green bedspread. And then someone was washing his face with a wet cloth, and the air was cool and he could breathe. It was painful, but he could breathe.

He opened his eyes again. Hutch was sitting against him, gently cleansing his face, brushing damp curls from his forehead. A calming, comforting, familiar feeling. The same touch Old Hutch had always given him. It was heaven! Starsky started to roll on his back, but Hutch kept him on his side.

"Hi," Hutch said grimly. Starsky could see fire in those eyes, but Hutch’s face was a white marble mask. "Why’d you wait so long to call for backup?"

A sledgehammer was beginning to pound just behind his eyes. Again, Starsky tried to roll over. A hand on his shoulder, from behind, forced Starsky to remain on his side. It squeezed gently.

"Just lie still, Dave." A woman’s voice. Ruth. "We've got paramedics on the way. I want you down at Emergency and checked over before you start worrying about anything else." She stroked his cheek, that motherly touch again. Starsky closed his eyes. "We'll worry about reports and debriefings later." She brushed his ear, and he felt her weight lift from the bed. His body felt like a solid block of granite, and Starsky wanted to let it fall back and sink into what little comfort the bed had to offer. But Hutch was keeping him firmly on his side, and instead Starsky let his weight roll against Hutch’s leg. With great effort he pulled his left arm from under the bedspread and draped it around Hutch’s knee, clinging tightly. Hutch massaged his throbbing shoulder in response.

Starsky opened his eyes. The headache was blurring his sight, the sepia light in the room too painfully bright to allow for clear vision. Starsky shifted his weight again, using Hutch’s leg to pull himself to a more comfortable position. And then he noticed his hand on Hutch’s knee. The damn leather strap was still fastened around his wrist. All the restraints were still binding him. He could feel
Starsky remembered that’s how they’d found Rodriguez—wearing nothing but restraints. Starsky did not want to be like Rodriguez. He 

wasn’t Rodriguez. He had to get the restraints off. Now. Starsky pushed himself away from Hutch, finally managing to lay on his back, scrabbling at the strip of leather around his left wrist. But his hands were tangled in the bedclothes, and he couldn't scratch it off.

"Whoa! Easy." Hutch reached for his shoulders, as if to pull Starsky back to his side.

"Medics," Starsky rasped, still pulling at his bonds. "Don't want ...."

Hutch reached under the bedcover and took hold of Starsky's wrists. Silently, he unbuckled the wrist restraints and dropped them on the floor. His hands skimmed their way down to Starsky's belly under the privacy of the bedspread and removed the leather belt. As unobtrusively as possible Hutch moved down to the end of the bed and stripped the bonds from Starsky's ankles. Hutch returned to the middle of the bed and sat back down next to Starsky.

To show his thankfulness, Starsky voluntarily rolled back onto his side. He could see the pile of leather straps by looking just over the edge of the bed. Starsky shut his eyes and shut out the sight. Hutch remained protectively over him, holding him on his side with a firm hand on the back of his neck. It felt good, Hutch’s touch. Tender and gentle and caring, not at all like what he’d experienced before he’d lost consciousness. This was what he wanted, what he’d always wanted—Hutch’s loving touch. His stomach churned when he remembered the way Eric had looked at him. There was good lust, and there was bad lust. And then there was just plain disgusting lust. Starsky reached out for Hutch’s leg again.

“I don’t know,” Starsky heard a low, male voice. Grimes. “The woman is too hysterical to get anything out of right now. The man just keeps insisting it was a game. ‘Breath control’ or something like that.”

“Dammit!” Starsky heard Hutch curse. “They tried to kill him! Book them on attempted murder! This case is closed!”

“Calm down, Hutch.” Ruth’s voice. Calm, soothing. Footsteps toward the bed. “We’ll take care of them. You take care of David.” Starsky opened his eyes to see Ruth looking at him. She winced, turned away, walked back to the door.


Hutch ran a hand through Starsky’s hair. Soothing touch. The first honest pleasure Starsky had felt that night. “Nothing, buddy,” he shushed. “You’re a little bruised, is all. Your eyes are a little bloodshot.”

“Great,” Starsky mumbled. He’d seen bloodshot eyes from strangulation before. That meant blood-filled. Shit! he breathed. If only he could give in to the weight of exhaustion and sleep. But why bother? The next few hours were only going to be filled with paramedics and interns and typewriters, and interrupted sleep was not better than no sleep at all. At least, not like this.

Actually, interrupted sleep would have been better than the aching fatigue Starsky felt now.

Grimes and Boggs had sent Hutch and him to Emergency, then home. Starsky had overheard a brief —discussion—between Ruth and Hutch as to who would be interrogating the suspects, but now they
were both here, at the entrance to Starsky’s apartment, Hutch fumbling for keys while Starsky tried to stay upright.

A few muttered profanities later and Hutch had them both inside, nearly falling on top of Starsky as Hutch tried to hold him erect while Starsky was adamant about letting gravity pull him to the couch.

Hutch finally released Starsky, who thudded onto the couch. He struggled to twist himself onto his back, barely able to lift his forearm and rest it on his pounding head. The pressure from Starsky’s arm seemed to dull the headache, although the percussion solo from the pounding made it hard for him to hear Hutch.

“What?” Starsky grunted.

“Do you want some water?” Hutch repeated.

Starsky shook his head, threatening to dislodge his eyeballs, which seemed unusually loose. He lowered his arm to cover his eyes.

Starsky felt Hutch shove an arm under his back and attempt to lift him. “No,” Starsky replied, as gravity helped make his dead weight even deader. “I’m fine here,” he mumbled.

He heard Hutch offer some dissension, then the offending arm was withdrawn. Shoes were tugged off Starsky’s feet, and a blanket tucked around his throbbing body.

Which would have been very comforting if Starsky’s stomach hadn’t suddenly spasmed and sent him rolling off the couch in a spray of vomit.

Starsky awoke in his bed, not surprised to find that Hutch had finally won the “where to sleep” argument. He could feel each individual muscle in his body berating him for improper use, and he appeased them by simply not moving. He was naked under the sheet but felt clean and cool, and actually rested.

Gradually he became aware it was dark in his room, and he managed to lift his head enough to see a digital, red 8:05 on his clock. The am or pm part was up for grabs.

Starsky ran a hand over his body, starting at his chest and running it down to his cock. All parts present and accounted for, he thought. Rodriguez had actually lived through his ordeal with all his parts as well, but obviously that had not been enough. Starsky was schooled in the macho creed of the Latinos he worked with, but he didn’t think any ordeal he came out of alive would be so terrible he wouldn’t want to stay alive.

And Rodriguez hadn’t had quite the partner Starsky had—loyal, caring, protective, domineering, manipulative—

Starsky closed his eyes wearily. It was time. His restoration was over. Hutch’s would begin.

But just for fun….

“Hutch!” Starsky yelled through a painfully ragged throat. Penitence.

He heard a series of stumblings and bumbling from the living room. There was a thud against his bedroom door, then the door flew open, the light flew on, and Hutch fell into the room.
“What? What’s wrong?” Hutch asked breathlessly. “Are you all right? What do you need?” He collapsed next to Starsky’s bed. Starsky could barely hide his smile at the reappearance of Old Hutch. He knew it wouldn’t last, but if he could bring out the Old Hutch for longer and longer periods of time, Old Hutch might stick around.

“Just wanted to know what time it is,” Starsky answered. “Kinda hungry, too.”

“It’s about 8pm,” Hutch responded. He laid a hand on Starsky’s forehead. If Starsky had slept for the past seventeen hours, it was clear Hutch hadn’t. “Think you can keep something down?”

“Yeah.” Starsky groaned and lifted himself up on his elbows. “Any word?”

Hutch shook his head. “They asked for lawyers. We got search warrants. We got ‘em, Starsk.”

Starsky struggled into a sitting position. “Damn well better have,” he muttered.

“You okay?” Hutch sat facing him on the edge of the bed.

Starsky shrugged. “Yeah. I guess. A little sore.” He held up his wrists and examined them. Reddish-blue bruises circled them.

“Why did you wait so long to call for back up?” Hutch finally asked. “Were you trying to impress me or something? You didn’t need to, you know.”

*Another accusation from Hutch? Or the beginnings of an apology?* “I was trying to get them to confess to something,” he replied evenly, not taking the bait. “They didn’t, you know,” he looked at Hutch. “Confess. Unless I missed something after I spiraled out.”

Hutch looked at the wall. “We’ve got search warrants,” he reiterated.

Starsky’s eyes narrowed. “Why’d you wait so long to come get me?”

Hutch kept his face turned from Starsky. “You were doing your job, trying to get information, playing your part—I came as soon as I knew you were in trouble.”

Starsky realized he’d been handed an acknowledgment from Hutch that Starsky was quite capable of running an operation, and Hutch was quite capable of letting him. As if they were partners. As if they always had been partners. As if they were still going to be partners. Starsky was flooded with delight!

The doorbell rang.

Hutch started, shaking the bed. He jumped up and strode out to the front door, shutting the bedroom door behind him.

Starsky eased out of the bed, forced complaining muscles to carry him into the bathroom, peed, and wrapped his robe around him. He glanced in the mirror long enough to verify his eyes were completely bloodshot and would scare everyone he came into contact with, then shuffled off to the living room.

Hutch had allowed in Lieutenants Grimes and Boggs. Grimes was still in the suit he’d been wearing yesterday; Ruth had also not had time to change.

“Oh, Dave.” Ruth came up to Starsky and clasped his face between her hands, still distressed over his appearance.
Starsky smiled warmly. “Doesn’t hurt,” he shrugged off her concern. “And nothin’ is colored red or anything when I look at it.”

Ruth clucked her tongue and helped Starsky to the couch. She sat down next to him. Hutch took the fanback chair, and Grimes remained standing.

“Why the home visit?” Starsky asked. He looked over at Hutch, who was glaring at the far wall.

“Harry and I thought we’d update you on our way home.” Ruth’s face was deeply creased, the exhaustion of the past 36 hours all over her face.

“Hutch said you got warrants?” Starsky began.

“Home and business,” Grimes said. “First pass turned up nothing except a considerable collection of dirty photos and magazines, some eight millimeter films, and an assortment of sex toys.” Grimes looked hard at Starsky. “The lawyer’s fighting any blood tests. And they’ve offered alibis for the times of some of the murders.”

“They won’t hold up,” Hutch said.

Grimes turned toward Hutch. “We’ll see.”

“It’s just that, well, they didn’t have any cleaning supplies with them,” Ruth continued. “We found the tape player and the cassettes and some toys in the room, and the second bag held their street clothes. There were no cleaning supplies at all. Not even in their car. And we found a blood donor card on Lawson and his blood type doesn’t match the evidence type.”

Hutch snorted. “No big deal. We know there was more than one person involved with these murders. It could be her blood type.”

Ruth nodded. “They’re insisting it was just a game, just consensual sex.”

“He ignored the safe word,” Hutch snapped.

“He says it was just a game, he wasn’t going to hurt David, it was part of the scene. All they were doing was trying to give David here an, uh, orgasm.” Ruth patted Starsky’s arm again, but wouldn’t quite look at him.

“They had poppers!” Hutch shouted. “And that is the only clue we did not give to the media!”

Grimes remained silent. Starsky spoke for everyone in the room.

“You think maybe we got the wrong people.”

“We’re still investigating,” Grimes said. “But until we have solid evidence that the Lawsons are our perps, this investigation is still underway and you are still undercover.”

“You understand,” Ruth patted Starsky’s hand, but she was directing her comment to Hutch.

“We have another complication,” Grimes informed.

Starsky blinked his eyes. What else could complicate this case?

“Martin Rice turned up at County yesterday.”

Starsky’s eyes widened in surprise. Hutch remained silent.

“He says he was jumped,” Ruth added. “And that he didn’t see his assailant.”

“Does it have something to do with our case?” Starsky asked.


Hutch remained impassive. “Could have picked up a violent john.”

“Maybe,” Grimes agreed. “Maybe not.”

“Could have been dumped by one of his party partners,” Hutch persisted.

“We’re still investigating,” Ruth said. “Always investigating,” she sighed softly.

“We’ll see you in the office tomorrow,” Grimes ended the briefing.

Ruth gave Starsky’s hand a final squeeze and stood up. “I’m hoping we have more information by then,” she said.

Starsky started to stand, but Ruth put her hand on his shoulder and kept him down. “We can see ourselves out,” she said. “Bye, Hutch.” She walked to the front door, where Grimes stood aside and allowed Ruth to leave first.

Hutch rose abruptly and headed for the kitchen. “Soup okay?” he called.

Starsky stood and followed him into the kitchen. “Whatever you find,” he replied. He watched as Hutch found a small pan, disinterred a can of soup from the cupboard, and located the can opener in the drawer.

Starsky was especially fascinated by those swollen and bruised knuckles on Hutch’s right hand. He watched Hutch twist the opener as it bit through the tin, watched as Hutch caught a fingernail under the top and lifted it free, watched as Hutch upended the can and shook it until the gelatinous mass slid out.

Starsky suddenly reached out and grabbed Hutch’s wrist. The can fell into the soup pan.

“I need to know,” Starsky said quietly but determinedly.

“It wasn’t me,” Hutch answered between gritted teeth.

And New Hutch was back. A man quite capable of lying to Starsky to achieve his ends. A man Starsky despised.

Starsky squeezed Hutch’s wrist. “Look at me and tell me that.”

Hutch stared at the pan. Starsky felt a shiver run through Hutch’s body.

Hutch looked up at Starsky. “It wasn’t me,” he repeated.

Starsky held Hutch’s gaze. Dark, chaotic eyes met his. Unfathomable eyes, with too much churning behind them. Lie? Truth? Starsky couldn’t tell, and that scared him.

“You’re sure it had nothing to do with us?”
Hutch looked down at the soup pan.

“Please, Hutch,” Starsky begged. “Talk to me.”

Amazingly, Hutch didn’t pull away. “About what?” His eyes narrowed.

Starsky suddenly realized he didn’t want Hutch to talk to him, he wanted to talk to Hutch. But if he couldn’t tell lie from truth…. “Us?” It was definitely a question, one that Starsky wanted answered.

Hutch’s eyes closed slowly and he sighed deeply. Starsky felt the muscles in Hutch’s arm tense. “I’m sorry—“ Hutch began.

Starsky released Hutch’s wrist with a jerk, turned, and walked back into the living room. “No, don’t talk. Don’t talk.” He flopped down on the couch and covered his face with his hands. “I can’t take those same words over and over and over.”

Starsky heard the soup pan clatter into the sink. He heard Hutch come up behind him.

“What do you want me to say?” Hutch whispered hoarsely.

Starsky’s arms folded across his stomach and he leaned over protectively. Say you love me, hot words scorched through his brain. Say you need me. Say you’ll do anything to stay with me.

“I just want to know—“ Starsky began. “I just want— I just—“ He leaned forward until his forehead touched his knees.

A trembling hand placed itself on the back of his neck.

“Starks? Are you all right? Are you sick? Do you need a doctor?”

Always the medical, Starsky laughed humorlessly to himself. He sat up, then reached up and once again grabbed Hutch’s wrist, pulling it down over his shoulder and holding it against his chest.

“Don’t leave me, okay?” he pleaded. “No matter what I do, or what I say, just don’t leave me.” He gripped Hutch’s hand tightly.

“I’m right here,” Hutch whispered.

“Don’t leave me.” Starsky squeezed Hutch’s hand. “Don’t leave me.”

· Starsky felt Hutch’s hand ball into a fist. He clasped it tighter to his chest.

· “I know you want to protect me. I know you believe you’re responsible for what happened to me. But the closer you stay to me to try to shield me the farther away you get from me. I don’t want you to leave me!”

· Hutch’s fist relaxed, and his palm flattened against Starsky’s chest.

· “God, please don’t say you’re sorry,” Starsky breathed. “Just say you won’t leave me.”

· “I won’t,” Hutch whispered.

· “It’s okay if you don’t want to be partners anymore, it’s okay if you don’t want to be a cop anymore, it’s okay if you don’t want to stay here anymore.” Starsky stroked his thumb over Hutch’s wrist. “Just don’t leave me.”
He heard Hutch sigh behind him. Starsky held Hutch’s hand tighter. “If you promise not to leave me, I promise not to leave you.”

Hutch slid his hand from Starsky’s, slid it up to cup Starsky’s face.

“I promise.”

A thumb stroked Starsky’s cheek, then Hutch’s hand lifted. Starsky heard Hutch walk back to the kitchen and retrieve the soup pan. It was enough for now. They hadn’t talked, but they hadn’t argued, and goddamn if Hutch had quit saying he was sorry.

It would do for a start.


CHAPTER NINETEEN

Starsky had allowed Hutch into his developing room.

It was two days after “it,” also referred to as “that,” “what happened,” “the other night,” and “the scene.” Yesterday had been spent writing reports, filling out reports, and typing reports. Ruth had put Hutch and him in a small, private room, kept everyone away, and even brought them lunch.

Not much had been said between them, and Starsky had actually enjoyed the quiet. It was a comfortable silence, although more likely it was the eye of the storm. He had yet to broach the subject of Heather. And nothing had been said about “it,” other than to go over a few facts and spellings. And of course, all talk of the state of their partnership was restricted.

But it felt like their old silences, when they didn’t need to talk, only to be with each other. Hutch had been up and down, in and out of the room, checking on the latest with the Incestuous Lawsons. Starsky had let him pace and stalk, because he paced and stalked right back to Starsky. And for now, that was enough.

Today they were back at the studio. There was no latest on the Lawsons; the Lawsons had a lawyer, they had alibis, and they had nothing which tied them to any of the murders. But Hutch still had Crane, and the other task force members still had their leads, and so the investigation struggled on.

So Starsky was in the studio, back in the dark room, developing those lovely photos he’d taken of Hutch less than a week ago. And Hutch was with him, because Grimes had told Starsky to keep Hutch with him, because Grimes had told both Starsky and Hutch that he was going to talk to Martin Rice this morning and see if he could get to the bottom of his beating.
Hutch had kept silent when Grimes had told them. Hadn’t said a word. Hadn’t manifested a drop of sweat. Simply walked out of Grimes’s office. At that moment Starsky had known Hutch was responsible for the beating. Or rather, he could no longer pretend he didn’t know.

In the old days, it wouldn’t have mattered so much. They had a few “off the record” tussles in their past—okay, several—but Dobey had allowed them to do their business as they saw fit, and no one had been really hurt, and most could be justified anyway.

But Grimes wasn’t Dobey, and Hutch wasn’t himself. And if Grimes got a statement from Rice, it could mean Hutch’s career. Ruth, Starsky was certain, was on Hutch’s side, and would turn a blind eye if it were up to her. But Grimes was more by-the-book. And Starsky had a sneaking suspicion Grimes was sweating Hutch as a lesson to his most volatile task force member.

So Hutch was standing just behind Starsky, watching him run paper through developer and finisher as photos of Hutch’s naked body dried on the line.

There wasn’t much to see, really. A couple of them were good, snapped when Hutch had relaxed a little, but most were stiff, and uninteresting, and even off-putting. Not much to show Crane, who had demanded “exceptional” quality. Starsky didn’t like the idea of having to ask Hutch to pose again. The whole idea seemed rather—distasteful—after “the scene” the other night. Nothing struck him as particularly erotic or arousing lately, not even the thought of Hutch posing. It was the aftereffect of “what happened,” a lowering of libido brought on by the use of sex as anything but a loving expression of a loving relationship.

The good news was Starsky’s stomach was back up and in operation after the poppers, strangling, and overall stress of “that,” proven by the unremarkable digestion of the steak and eggs, hash browns, oatmeal, toast, pancakes and chocolate meringue pie he’d had for breakfast. The blood was also clearing from his eyes.

Starsky yanked the light on in the darkroom, signaling the end of the process. Hutch didn’t say anything, but opened the door and walked out. Starsky gave the photos a last look, then followed Hutch into the storage room. Hutch had a cup of water, and Starsky got one for himself.

“I don’t think they’re going to do,” Starsky said. “It wasn’t a great shoot.” He sipped his water.

Hutch finished his water, crumpled the cup, and tossed it in the trash can. “We’ll think of something else.” He didn’t look at Starsky. “Maybe we can get something to add to Crane’s collection, something he doesn’t have, that will lure him out.”

The buzzer to the studio sounded, and both Starsky and Hutch turned toward the front of the office. They looked at each other, then walked up front.

Grimes stood in the front room. Hutch stopped about five feet from Grimes, Starsky moved up closer.

“Thought you boys would like to know what I came up with this morning.”

Starsky looked back at Hutch, who remained stoic, then at Grimes. “Sure. What did Rice have to say? Anything?”

Grimes was looking at Hutch. “Rice left the hospital late last night. He mentioned to a nurse something about a one-way ticket to Martinique, or Morocco, or some place that begins with an ‘M,’ she couldn’t remember.”
Hutch couldn’t hold Grimes stare and looked past Grimes, through the window, out onto Sunset. Starsky watched him carefully.

“With no statement from Rice, we really can’t pursue his case.” Grimes addressed himself to Starsky. “Although I’d like to know who paid for that ticket, and why he chose right now to leave the country.”

Starsky adjusted his stance. Grimes had gone as far as he could go with this, Hutch was safe, and Starsky was relieved. “We’re still pursuing Crane, maybe we can find something out from him.”

“And how’s that going?” Grimes asked.

Hutch was still studying the traffic on Sunset.

“We’ll need to call him, set up another meet, I think. At least see if we can pursue the idea of taking more pictures for him and maybe his friends.” Starsky crossed his arms across his chest. “That’s our only line of inquiry right now.”

A beeper went off. Grimes pulled one from his suit coat pocket, looked at it, and walked over to the phone. As Grimes walked over to the desk, Hutch moved over to stand in front of the couch. Hutch was still keeping his distance from Grimes, Starsky noted.

“What?” Grimes was nothing if not to the point. “Where? When?” He stuffed the beeper back in his pocket. “No, we’ll be there. We’re on our way.” He replaced the handset on the phone. “Let’s go, boys. We’ve got another one.”

“Another one” was another body, this one identified as Dr. Richerd Reid of Encino, California. Or his residential address was in Encino; his business address was in Beverly Hills, and his body was in Reseda, in a little motel off Saticoy.

No one was saying anything more than was absolutely necessary to accomplish the task at hand. Photos were taken, evidence was bagged, the coroner was called. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind this was the work of their serial killer: body scrubbed clean, room scrubbed clean, no witnesses and no clues. It was just as certain that when they began their investigation, no one in Reid’s family or circle of friends would have any idea he was interested or engaged in this kind of sexual activity.

Ruth corralled Starsky and Hutch over to one side of the motel, out of the way of the circling television vans. “I’m sorry.” This she said to Hutch, a hand on his arm. “The coroner is giving us a time of death between 1 and 5am, and we know where the Lawsons were. We’ve had them under surveillance.”

Starsky looked up at the sun, protected by his dark glasses, then back toward the activity around the motel room. That meant what he’d done the other night was pretty much worthless. A hollow formed in his stomach. Useless, worthless, all in vain; a total waste of time. He’d put his life—and his sex—on the line for nothing more than what the Lawsons claimed: some fun.

It made him sick to think of what he’d gone through in the name of justice, and for a moment he thought his breakfast might not stay down. Being ogled, being touched, being touched intimately, and not by anyone he wanted that behavior from made him nauseated.
Then Starsky looked at Hutch. Hutch, who was probably now eating himself up with guilt over letting Starsky go undercover and into danger for nothing. Starsky sighed. At least he could try and lessen Hutch’s guilt by pointing out that Hutch hadn’t let anything happen to him, and that knowing who wasn’t a killer was sometimes as important as knowing who was.

Starsky’s nausea eased. He felt good just standing next to Hutch. Hutch had protected him, and he felt protected. Hutch had let him hold his hand, and Hutch had even touched his face, and that had felt good. Starsky could focus on the good things, and handle the bad. Now if he could just get Hutch to do the same….

“I am so sick of this case,” Ruth sighed. “I just want to take whoever’s doing all this and strangle them myself.” Ruth seemed to have no qualms about sharing her feelings about this investigation. She looked at Starsky. “I’m sorry, David. You and Hutch will have to keep working. Why don’t you meet us back downtown this afternoon, when we’ve got this pulled together a little better.” Ruth smiled sadly, then walked away.

Starsky moved over to stand next to Hutch. “You okay?”

“Yes.” Hutch removed his sun glasses, cleaned them, and put them back on. “You?”


Hutch nodded. “I’m not sure any of us are headed in the right direction on this one.”

Starsky glanced at Hutch. Discussion about the case! Progress! “There are too many whackos out there,” Starsky concurred. “And not enough of us to go after them all. This case all hinges on luck. One of us being lucky enough to run into one of them. And we could spend years just trying to get lucky.”

Hutch rubbed his eyes under his glasses. Starsky took the initiative. “Let’s get some lunch and take it back to the studio. Maybe we can figure some things out and take them to Ruth and Grimes this afternoon.”

Hutch didn’t answer, but walked toward their car. Starsky followed.

Only Starsky could talk the manager of the Swedish restaurant up the street to give them take-out when the place didn’t do take-out. The manager being female helped, of course. Hutch and Starsky made their way back to the studio with an armful of Swedish meatballs, salmon lasagna, gravlax and beets.

The two men deposited their foil-wrapped bounty on the small coffee table in the front room. Hutch arranged the dishes, while Starsky scrounged in the back for some soda he’s stashed in their dorm-sized refrigerator. He returned with three cans of some store-brand cola, and the two sat down to eat.

And eat was all they did for a time, Starsky managing to get some of each dish mixed in with every other dish, Hutch being a little more circumspect.

Hutch was glad for the silence. He didn’t want to hear any words of comfort from Starsky about the folly of the other night. It made him sick every time he thought of someone—dirty—touching Starsky, hurting him in the name of sexual pleasure. For the past two days he’d had an urge to follow Starsky into the bathroom and scrub him clean himself. But that only led to thoughts
of touching Starsky, and the ensuing feelings of arousal from those thoughts were more than he could handle, so he ignored them. Squelched them. Squashed them. Denied them. And most of all, refused to figure out why he was having them.

- He also didn’t want to consider why Martin had taken off or who had paid for his trip. He wasn’t sure how far Grimes would have gone trying to find out who put him in the hospital, but he was relieved the jerk had kept his mouth shut and left for parts unknown. Hutch didn’t exactly regret what he’d done to Martin, but he felt a twinge of guilt because the beating had been more to release Hutch’s demons than to punish the fuck-off for his sneaking around.

- That was another notion Hutch didn’t want to address, why Martin had been following him. He wanted to believe it was out of jealousy, that Martin considered him a threat to his position in the Bridge Club and was merely looking for ways to have Hutch banished. Martin had said so. Crane had implied so. Why not believe it?

- Martin could only have been following him for two weeks at the most, but he’d been to Parker Center several times during those weeks, and if Martin had seen him go in…or if Martin had found someone who could identify him as a cop…but he had been careful—pretty careful—once they’d gone undercover, and Hutch didn’t feel that they’d been tailed. At least while Starsky was with him—Starsky would have noticed. It was just in those private moments when he’d gone off by himself that Martin had known about. So he and Starsky were probably safe.

- What Hutch was really afraid of was confronting any of the issues swarming around him. He was afraid that if he professed his frustrations with this investigation, his anger would spill over and he’d say—or do—something that would get him kicked off the task force, and maybe worse. Grimes would probably see to that. Grimes was all over his ass about Rice. What if Hutch had taken it out on one of the other detectives? Hutch didn’t want to do that to Starsky, to make Starsky ashamed of him.

- He wasn’t thrilled with the people he was working with. Hutch didn’t hate them, but he was aggravated they couldn’t come up with better leads and more solid evidence, which meant they ended up in situations like the other night. The only good thing about the other night had been his ability to get to Starsky on time. As afraid as he had been about Starsky’s safety, the conviction he could protect Starsky had been renewed.

- Hutch did hate the people they were having to mingle with; they used sex as a tool, as a weapon, as a means of control. He knew now he wanted nothing to do with those aspects of sex. But he didn’t want to talk about how he’d discovered that, either. He wanted to forget Heather, and Leslie, and even Elisa. They’d been objects to him, things he’d used to try and forget whatever was bothering him at the moment. And none of them had made him feel better.

- Starsky made him feel better. Starsky’s passion for his work made Hutch feel that it wasn’t a totally worthless pursuit.

- Starsky made him—feel.

- The front door opened, the buzzer sounded, and it was all Hutch could do not to choke on the meatball in his mouth.

- Evan Crane walked in.

- “Ah, lunch from Scandia. I recognize the aroma.”

- Hutch grabbed for a soda to wash down the meatball, wiped his hands on a napkin,
“I hope you don’t mind, I dropped in to see if you had the photos I’d requested.” Evan was dressed, as usual, in a business suit. “It has been a while, I really thought you’d have contacted me before now. Good heavens, what happened to your eyes?” He was peering at Starsky.

Starsky looked at Hutch. Hutch stood straighter, more protectively. He met Starsky’s eyes, and told him to go ahead. It felt good to know that they were silently communicating again, even if it was a bit of a shock to realize how long it had been since they had.

“Little accident. Nothing permanent.” Starsky looked back at Crane. “It hasn’t even been a week since the shoot,” he said, “but I, uh, I have the shots in the back if you’ll wait a minute.”

“Good, fine then.” Crane leaned back a little after the examination of Starsky’s eyes.

Hutch nodded to Starsky, and Starsky headed for the dark room.

Evan looked around the front room, then fixed on Hutch. “Have you thought about my offer?”

Hutch cleared his throat. “Not really. Maybe a little. Some.” He wasn’t quite certain what he needed to say to keep Crane happy. And he needed to keep Crane happy, because Crane was his and Starsky’s only suspect at the moment. Should he mention Martin’s recent disappearance? But how would Hutch know to ask about that? Better to play it very simple.

“I see.” Crane stood straight and still. “Not interested, or just undecided?”

Hutch shifted his weight. “Undecided.” That should keep him on the hook.

“Well, perhaps I can help you decide, then.” Crane turned a little as Starsky came back with the photos. Starsky offered them and Crane took them, shuffling them front to back with very little attention paid to any.

Starsky and Hutch stood silently as Crane scanned them.

“I’m underwhelmed.” He handed them back to Starsky.

Starsky evened them up in his hands. “They’re not my best work. But sometimes it takes time to—”

Crane held up his hand. “Excuses are not what I’m interested in. Results are what I want. I’m disappointed, but I still see potential.”

Starsky looked at Hutch. Hutch could see—and he was pleased with himself that he could see—Starsky was worried they were about to lose their suspect. Their communication was subtle, nothing Crane would pick up on, but it was there. Hutch stepped in.

“It’s probably my fault. I wasn’t really in the mood to have my picture taken that day.” Hutch forced a laugh. “I’m not really much of a model.”

“Perhaps.” Crane kept his hands at his side, his body still. “What if I gave you one more chance to prove your value?” He spoke to Starsky. “You come out to my place and shoot two models of my choice, and if I like what you do, there’ll be more work for you.”
Starsky’s brow furrowed. “I don’t really do home shoots.”

Crane seemed surprised. “But I thought you did private shoots?”

Starsky glanced at Hutch. “Oh, I do, but I really prefer less—personal—surroundings and more anonymous settings. Like hotel rooms, motel rooms, places like that.”

Crane nodded. “I have a house I just bought in the canyon. Almost entirely unfurnished. Very tucked away. Very private. Would that be suitable?”

Hutch watched Crane carefully. Crane was totally focused on Starsky, clearly ignoring Hutch. Starsky glanced at Hutch again, and Crane caught it, following the gaze to Hutch. It made Hutch uncomfortable to have Crane’s attention, but it was better than Starsky having it.

“Is there a problem, Richard?” Crane asked disingenuously.

“No,” Hutch responded, trying to sound cooperative. “One anonymous site is as good as another.”

“If the session were satisfactory enough, the house might even be useful to you as a studio. It’s certainly bigger than this place, and my acquaintances would be much more amenable to traveling to a private location, rather than this public one. And I do have many acquaintances who have interests similar to mine.” He nodded at Hutch. “Members of my bridge club, say. Has Richard told you of my bridge club?”

Starsky shrugged. “A little.”

“Well. Richard’s prerogative to tell or not, isn’t it?” Crane clasped his hands together. “Shall we say tomorrow afternoon?” He took a business card from his inside pocket, picked up a pen from the desk, and wrote on the back. “This is the address of the house. You’ll bring whatever equipment you need, of course. I’ll bring the rest. 2pm would be best for me.”

He handed the card to Starsky. Starsky noted the address, then passed it to Hutch. “2pm,” Starsky confirmed.

“Good day, gentlemen.” Crane left the office.

Starsky sat down on the desk top. “Is it just me, or are things happening way too fast lately?” He set the photos down next to him.

Hutch looked at the card, then out the window in the direction Crane had taken. “Another meet,” he said.

“We got through one, we can get through another.” He smiled a little at Hutch.

Hutch wanted to hang onto the smile, but he couldn’t. It made him want to walk over to Starsky, to touch Starsky, and he was afraid that once he started he couldn’t stop. He pocketed the business card and bent down to clean up their lunch. “Guess we’d better take this to Grimes and Ruth.”

Starsky hopped off the desk and gave Hutch a hand. “Yeah, we’d better.”

Everyone had a headache.
“I can’t be two places at once,” said Gordie. “Which is probably moot anyway; I’ll case the house but I’m betting there’s no way we can get a signal to go more than 25 yards in the canyon.”

“You’ll just have to reschedule,” Ruth said to Hutch.

Hutch looked at the floor. “I don’t think we can. I haven’t been invited back to the Bridge Club, and my sense is that Crane is ready to drop me if I don’t keep his interest up.” Hutch wasn’t sure if this were an admission or a confession; whatever, it galled him to admit failure.

“Reschedule and relocate,” said Gordie. “I’ll visit the address, but I’m betting you there will be no place to hide the van that’s close enough to pick up a radio signal. It’s either wide open no-place-to-hide acres or signal-stopping woods out there, and neither are going to make it easy for us to transmit.”

“How ‘not interested’ is Crane?” Grimes asked.

“I’d say very,” answered Starsky. “He didn’t like my photos, and he wants better or he’s going elsewhere. The bait for us being our business could pick up measurably if he likes what I do this time, since it will mean he’ll introduce us to his friends.” Starsky looked over at Hutch. Starsky’s photos were crap, Hutch couldn’t hold Crane’s interest; they were both failing here. And Hutch didn’t like failing.

Ruth was pacing. “I don’t like this. We’ve got a meet with Carter and Montoya going down Friday afternoon, and this is a solid lead. They met a woman who’s ex-boyfriend is into the whole bondage scene and wants to produce a snuff film. This guy has an incredible hard-core porn collection, fits our profile, and knows almost as much about the recent killings as we do. Carter says he reads every newspaper and watches every news report about the murders.”

“We’ll lose Crane if we don’t go,” said Hutch. He addressed himself to Grimes.

“You can get friendly with the others in his Bridge Club,” jumped in Ruth. “Open up new leads.”

“I thought Miles and Montoya were on that.” Hutch continued to speak to Grimes.”

“They are,” said Grimes. “And coming up with nothing. Your decision, gentlemen.”

Ruth sighed—loudly—and sat down.

Hutch looked at Starsky. Their eyes met and exchanged agreement. Agreement that they would stay with the investigation. Agreement that they would walk into another dangerous situation. Agreement that they would walk in together.

“It’s a photo shoot, not a sexual encounter,” said Starsky. “Me and Hutch, Crane, and two models.”

“You don’t know who those two models will be,” said Ruth. “Or what toys they’ll bring with them.”

“We’ll be in control of the situation.” Hutch spoke now to Ruth. “They’ll be naked and exposed, not us. Plus, we’ll have our weapons.”

“Where?” asked Ruth. “You can’t wear them.”
“If we use leg holsters we can,” answered Starsky. He squared his shoulders. “Or we can hide them in my cases. No one messes with my equipment except me and Hutch.” Hutch winced at the pronouncement. Starsky hadn’t seemed to have caught the double-entendre, and Hutch was uncomfortable he had.

“No wire and no mike,” said Gordie. “No backup.”

“We won’t need one. We can rig a recorder in one of Starsky’s cases to record the meet, but there’s no reason to think we’d need rescuing from this kind of set-up.” Hutch was beginning to feel more comfortable with the parameters of their photo shoot. “Two goons pose, we shoot them, Crane watches. Polite chit-chat, subtle interrogation. Crane gets his jollies, and we get an introduction to a whole new side of society.” Hutch couldn’t stop himself. “Or we can wait and see who turns up dead next.”

Ruth buried her face in her hands.

Grimes patted Ruth’s shoulder. “You check in before you go, you check in immediately after you leave, and we move in if you’re not back in a certain amount of time.”

“Works for me,” Starsky smiled. He sat down next to Ruth, who looked at him. “We’ll be careful. After the other night, we know exactly what we’re getting into and how to handle it. This is a lot less risky than that. Honest.”

Ruth finally returned Starsky’s smile, patting his hand. “You boys be careful.”

*Extra,* Hutch thought to himself.

**CHAPTER TWENTY**

“I don’t carry an umbrella, it never rains in California,” Starsky said, irritated. He peered at the massive raindrops that splattered paw prints onto his windshield.

“We can wait it out,” Hutch looked up at the sky through the passenger window. They were parked in the dirt circle drive of a mansion tucked up in Topanga Canyon. Unfortunately, the newly-built mansion didn’t have a covered walkway to the front door.

“Oh, yeah,” Starsky also evaluated the sky. Dark gray clouds hung low overhead, not a break in sight. “This is going to end real soon.”

“Then we make a run for it,” Hutch shrugged.

“And get my equipment wet?” Starsky spluttered. “I don’t think so. You didn’t save up for months for those lenses.”

“Most of it’s department provided,” Hutch muttered.

Starsky shot him an annoyed look.

Twenty-four hours had passed since they’d decided to hold a private photo shoot for Evan Crane. Not much time to do anything more than pack up all Starsky’s light stands and cameras,
rig two tape recorders in two of the cases, stick a couple of Smith & Wessons inside the foam padding protecting the lights, and strap something a little smaller to their calves. Good thing jeans come in different styles, Hutch thought.

· Gordie’s recorders could tape up to an hour each, and Starsky had assured everyone there was no need to for their shoot to last more than two hours. Hutch had assured everyone two hours was enough time to regain Crane’s interest and open up their leads.

· Gordie, Grimes, Starsky and he had taken a drive into the canyon last night. Gordie had been right: the address was off the highway, off the paved road, and tucked away in a nice little ravine surrounded by very high hills. The house was actually in a clearing of land scraped clean for the building of the house…and the tennis court, and the swimming pool. They couldn’t have parked the van close enough to pick up a signal from inside without being extremely obvious. Even their police radio was of no use until they got a few miles up and over from the home. And forget television reception in this area; but then that wasn’t Crane’s form of entertainment.

· No, this afternoon was more Crane’s form of entertainment: having people perform in front of him. Well, you get two hours out of us, and that’s that Hutch thought. If we don’t check in by 4:15, you will be dead meat, my elegant friend.

· The rain continued to pelt down on them. There were no other cars in the drive, but cars could have been hidden behind the house or elsewhere. They had no way of knowing; they might have seen tracks in the mud if the grounds weren’t full of old tracks from trucks and other vehicles used in the construction of the fancy manse.

Hutch clicked open his door handle, barely opening his door. “Let’s get his over with,” he said behind clenched teeth. “We’ll make a run for it and there’s probably an umbrella in the house we can borrow to get your precious equipment safely inside.”

Hutch suddenly dove from the car and dashed for the front door. Starsky hustled after him, nearly slamming into Hutch as he barreled blindly through the rain. Even a 15-yard dash had left them both soaked and nicely muddied.

“Fucking rich and he can’t build a covered walk to get his guests into his house,” Starsky grumbled.

“But it never rains in California, Starsk,” Hutch responded. “You just said so yourself.” Hutch ran a hand through his wet hair to lift it off his forehead and rang the doorbell.

Crane himself opened the door. He was dressed in a maroon turtleneck, camel sports coat and slacks. “Good afternoon, gentlemen. Right on time, I see.” He stepped back from the entrance and allowed the two men to enter.

“Dear me, you two are sopping. And wherever is your equipment?” Crane stood back from them, as if afraid their mess would ooze over to him.

Starsky blotted his face with his sleeve. “In the car. We were hoping you had an umbrella we could borrow so we could bring in the gear. I’ve got a couple of cases of lights and cameras.”

“Oh, later, later,” Crane brushed off the request. “Let’s get you two some dry clothes and chat awhile.” Crane flashed Starsky a appealing smile.

Starsky looked at Hutch. “Are the models here yet? We didn’t see their car.”

“As a matter of fact, they are.” Crane continued to smile broadly. “So why don’t we get you two dried off, and we can relax a bit before we get to work.”
Starsky turned back toward the door. “Well, my stuff is still in the car and I’d like to bring it in—“

“I’m sure it will be quite safe out there; we are really quite isolated.” Crane backed toward the staircase, as if by backing away he could persuade the two men to move forward. “It might even stop raining as hard and we can rescue your equipment with less risk.”

“I’d feel better if—“

“Nonsense.” Crane lost his smile, and apparently his patience with Starsky. “We will worry about it later. Right now we shall dry off and have a drink.”

Hutch pushed back wet hair from his forehead. He glanced at Starsky. They weren’t weaponless, but their recording equipment was out in the car. Still, they had time to bring it in before they began asking pertinent questions that might require validation. Hutch gave Starsky a quick shrug, who returned the gesture with a nod of his head.

“Please, follow me.” Crane led the two men upstairs to a back bedroom. “You’ll find an assortment of clothing in the armoire and dresser. I like to keep a good selection handy for guests who may not have come prepared. And there are towels in the bathroom. Let me get you some.” Crane walked across the room and into the bathroom, returning with two large, thick towels.

Starsky glanced at Hutch. It was quite clear that Crane expected them to change clothes. While he watched. And as muddy as their shoes and pants legs were, they weren’t going to get away with just putting on dry shirts. Which brought two thoughts to Hutch’s mind: what were they going to do about their concealed weapons, and was Crane actually checking to see if they were wired?

“Please,” Crane urged, offering them the towels, standing in the doorway.

Starsky gave the tiniest hint of a shrug and took one. Hutch took the other. They were coming to the same conclusion. In order to stay, they would have to strip. And while they could manage to get their holsters undone in the clumsiness of removing jeans and socks and shoes and keep the guns hidden in the wad of clothing, they weren’t going to be able to put them back on.

More disconcerting was the notion that Crane was actually looking to see if they were carrying, or wired, or both. But that would mean Crane suspected they were cops, and he’d have no reason to assume that. At best, even with Martin telling him what he had on Hutch, Crane could only suspect Hutch of not being truthful about his sexual proclivities.

But then, Crane had never questioned his sexual history, or his non-Bridge Club wanderings. So what if “Richard” had girlfriends? That didn’t negate his interest in any of Crane’s sexual offerings. More likely, Crane was worried about what the entire city was worried about: hooking up with the psycho sexual killer. Crane was probably checking to make sure he and Starsky didn’t have anything dangerous with which to harm him!

Hutch relaxed a bit. If Crane were afraid of them, then they were in control. Starsky and he could change clothes, make polite conversation, then bring in the equipment and get their business done. And they had weapons in the cases, so they were covered. Hutch wiped his face with the towel. This didn’t have to be anything like the other night. They might as well be back in the studio. Piece of cake.

Starsky finally made the decision for them, but Hutch hadn’t given him any sign not to. In fact, Starsky had probably come up with the same answer he had: Crane is checking to make sure we’re not the killers.
Starsky extricated himself from his wet jacket and shirt. He sat down on the edge of the bed, and very carefully, pushed down his jeans until they were around his legs, then began to struggle with wet denim, wet socks, and muddy shoes.

Hutch followed suit, managing to make a nice wad of the material covering his lower half. Fortunately, Crane seemed satisfied after the removal of their shirts and the pushing down of their pants, and was now more interested in the clothing he had in the armoire.

Crane rummaged through some sweaters, then moved to the closet and peered inside.

Starsky finished making a concealing pile of his clothes, and pushed it off against the wall. Hutch made a similar pile, and walked his over to set it next to Starsky’s.

“You’re not going to put dry clothes on over wet underwear, are you?” Crane was holding two pairs of pants.

Starsky arched an eyebrow, then shrugged and skimmed off his briefs. Hutch did likewise. He felt more than naked, he felt as if he were under inspection. Well, let Crane get his rocks off. Inspect away. Compare us to those two models you want “exceptional” pictures from. You’ll be sorry you and your Bridge Club didn’t want me around! Hutch found strength in such bravado, and straightened his posture.

“Underwear and socks are in the dresser, but why don’t we skip those?” Crane suggested. Or perhaps ordered.

Starsky stood still a moment, then reached for the pants Crane was holding. Crane handed over a pair of very pressed blue jeans. “I believe these will fit.”

“And for you.” Crane offered Hutch a similar pair of pants. He and Starsky stepped into them quickly.

Crane was back at the armoire. He chose a deep blue, light v-neck sweater. He tossed it to Starsky. For Hutch he chose a similar sweater, but in cream.

“Where are the other two, uh, gentlemen?” Starsky asked, shouldering into his sweater.

Crane stood in the middle of the room, watching them both. “Don’t worry, they’re here,” he replied. Crane’s eyes sparkled as he smiled at Starsky.

Hutch’s jeans felt stiff, but the sweater had to be a silk blend, it was so light and cool. He was glad to be dry, but still felt naked. Not just naked without his gun, but naked from the way Crane was eyeing him. Hutch wouldn’t be surprised if Crane asked him to pose at some point during the shoot. After all, Crane had wanted shots of him in the first place. Maybe the whole point of this exercise had just been to get Hutch alone and naked.

Hutch shivered. Now he knew how Starsky must have felt when he was in the room with Lawson. But the point of his exercise was not to catch someone in the act, but to extract more information, more leads. Much safer.

“We should use a room with light,” Starsky began planning his shoot. “Something big and bright, if you’ve got it.”

“Let me show you the dining hall,” Crane gestured toward the bedroom door. “I think it will suffice.”
Starsky walked past Crane and Hutch and out into the hall. Hutch hesitated as Crane didn’t move, then finally followed Starsky, with Crane behind.

“Down the stairs and to your right,” Crane directed. The three men walked down the curving staircase and into a massive room.

The room held no furniture save a small, 16th century couch in the center. Very ornate, very delicate, very expensive. A chandelier hung from a twenty-foot ceiling, clearly made of hand-crafted crystal. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the north side of the room, sending shafts of light onto the polished hardwood floor.

“I was worried when the sun disappeared,” Crane walked to the center of the room, “but the rain is lessening, and these windows allow in so much light anyway I thought perhaps we would be able to proceed.”

Starsky turned slowly in a circle, nodding, admiring the room. “Beautiful diffused light,” he said softly. He suddenly became animated. “We can stand a light there, throw up a cyc, maybe play with some color….” Starsky paced the room.

Crane walked up to Hutch. “Enthusiastic young man,” he murmured into Hutch’s ear. “Impressive portfolio. I can see why you would be attracted to him.”

Hutch looked at Crane from the corner of his eye, but said nothing. He bristled at the implication that Hutch was attracted to Starsky—or rather, that Crane would assume Hutch was attracted to Starsky. Not that Starsky wasn’t an attractive man, but how dare Crane notice?

Yet wasn’t that the point of the undercover investigation? To attract a certain kind of person, a certain kind of man, who is interested in attractive men? Still, it made Hutch uncomfortable for Crane’s attention to be on Starsky as anything more than the photographer. Starsky had had enough attention from the Lawsons. It was Hutch’s turn to be the bait.

Hutch scanned the room. Large double room doors between them and the foyer and the front door. Guns were at present upstairs and outside. A door down at one end of the room, presumably leading to the kitchen. Two escape routes, should they be needed. Just in case.

Crane walked behind him, then whispered into his other ear. “Is he a partner in your games?”

Partner? He knows? He couldn’t know. He means business partner. Hutch moved forward without looking at Crane. “Nice house,” he said through gritted teeth. Hutch had already examined the possibilities; even if Martin had told Crane about his extracurricular activities, Martin couldn’t have fingered them as cops. They were safe. Surely they were safe.

“One of many,” Crane once again stood immediately behind Hutch. “Rather plain, actually. Currently, the only furnished room is the bedroom upstairs. The rest of the house has a pool and court, sauna, kitchen, guest rooms—but no game room. If you catch my meaning.”

Hutch’s back stiffened. Steady…Crane is just trying to get under your skin with the sexual innuendo. No one’s playing sex games here today except maybe the two models. Easy to control the situation. Even without guns, Starsky and he could easily overpower Crane.

Starsky finished his tour of the hall. “Mr. Crane, if you’ve got that umbrella, I’d like to bring my equipment in.”

Crane walked past Hutch and over to Starsky.
“Oh come, David, we were going to get to know one another before we began our session.” Crane put his arm around Starsky’s shoulder and guided him over to the sofa. Starsky sat down. Reluctantly, Hutch noted. It was clear Starsky was as anxious to get to the cases—and the recorders and their guns—as Hutch was.

“Why don’t I get us some refreshments while we chat?” Crane smiled over at Hutch, then left them alone in the salon.

Starsky stood up and walked over to Hutch. “What do you think’s going on?” he said quietly.

Hutch blinked and crossed his arms. “More game playing,” Hutch determined. “Crane is a very theatrical man. He enjoys drawing out the drama in situations.”

Starsky lifted his eyebrows. “No shit. Just listening in on his little ‘bridge parties’ turned my stomach.” Starsky surveyed the room. “I’d feel better if we had those cases in here and not out in the car. In fact, maybe we should just go get them anyway. Crane’s got so many clothes upstairs we could get wet a dozen time. What do you think? How do you feel about this?”

*How do I feel?* Hutch turned away from Starsky, unwilling to go any deeper into their current exploration than what the very moment required. *I feel—nervous. I feel nervous around Crane. He gives me the willies. And I feel nervous around you. I don’t know what to do or say or how to act around anyone, especially you. I feel too much when I’m around you, and I don’t want to! It’s too dangerous because it keeps me from paying attention to the dangers around you!* Hutch shut his eyes and squeezed the bridge of his nose. *I’m tired of analyzing this situation. I’m tired of analyzing this case. I don’t want to analyze Crane, and I don’t want to analyze you, he thought. I just want to get out of here.*

Hutch suddenly turned to Starsky. “I don’t like this. Let’s get out of here.”

Starsky looked surprised. “Why?” he glanced around the room. “You think something is up?”

“I don’t know,” Hutch lied. “We’ll go upstairs and get our guns and go.” He couldn’t let go of the thought that if Martin knew he was a cop, if Martin had said anything to Crane, they were in deep shit. And he was the one who shat that shit. “I just don’t want to be here.” He shut his eyes tighter.

“Neither do I,” Starsky said sympathetically. “But we’ve got a job to do. Might as well get it done and over with. We haven’t even seen the models yet.” Starsky paused. “Wonder if they’ve got a bag full of props like Eric,” he muttered. “Actually, I wonder where those models are. Maybe we should go upstairs and grab our guns....”

“Gentlemen!” Crane announced his return. He carried a silver tray under a decanter of caramel colored liquid and three glasses.

Hutch heard Starsky suck in his breath, felt his partner stiffen beside him. He opened his eyes to see Crane setting the tray and its contents on the floor. Behind Crane stood a bruised but standing Martin.

Leveling a semi-automatic rifle at Starsky and him.

“You remember Martin,” Crane took a few steps toward Hutch. “And while your partner has never met him, I feel sure he knows who Martin is.”

Starsky and Hutch stood shoulder to shoulder. Hutch could feel the fear in his partner; could feel the fear and rage rising in his own gut. *Goddamn fucking asshole, Hutchinson, you knew there were bad elements to this and you ignored them! You shithole lousy fuck-up of a partner, you put Starsky in the*
Hutch took a protective step forward. “What’s going on?”

Crane’s smile widened. “Helping you find your place, dear boy! Forcing you to confront your deepest desires!” He spread his arms in a gesture of magnanimity.

“What the hell is this?” Hutch repeated. Pin prickles of adrenaline stung his flesh. He no longer cared what or how much Crane knew about them, he just wanted to walk away from this whole debacle. Just get Starsky and himself out of there safely. To hell with the investigation or anything else, he was getting them out of there, if he had to go through Martin to do it.

Starsky moved forward, even again with Hutch. “We don’t want any trouble,” he lifted his hands, palms forward and facing the weapon. “If we’ve got a problem here, let’s just call the whole thing off, and we’ll leave.”

“But there is no problem, David.” Crane circled the two until he was behind them. “And there’ll be no problems as long as you and your partner follow instructions.”

Martin stood silently, but raised the barrel of the gun slightly to indicate threat.

“Filthy fucking bastard,” Hutch rasped, looking directly at Martin. “I should have killed you.”

Starsky looked at Hutch sharply.

“Now, now,” Crane came up behind them, placing a hand on each of their shoulders. “Martin only does what I tell him to. And there’s no reason for anyone besides us to know what happened between you two.” He released his grip and walked back beside Martin.

Hutch clenched his jaw as Crane moved away. Should have elbowed the bastard and thrown him into the line of fire! Shit!

“Richard,” Crane began. “Or should I call you Detective Hutchinson? Doesn’t matter,” Crane shook his head, answering his own question. “You’re here because I want you here. I could have had Martin name you as his transgressor and brought down all sorts of trouble from your administration, but instead I had him play dumb.” Crane smiled at Martin, who ignored him.

“I could have revealed you to my associates, but what would be the point?” Crane gestured at Hutch. “No, I’m much more interested in helping you free your spirit and come to know yourself as you have never known yourself before!” Crane smiled gleefully.

Starsky lowered his hands. “Crane, if you know we’re cops, then you also know there’s a whole lot more out there backing us up.”

Crane laughed. “Where? I don’t see anyone else outside. You aren’t wired, we all know that. And you couldn’t possibly transmit any kind of signal from here without much more powerful equipment. No, I don’t think you have backup outside.”

“But they know where we are,” Starsky persisted. “And if we don’t check in, they’ll come after us. Not to mention the fall you’ll take if anything happens to us.”

“And nothing will!” Crane exclaimed. “As long as you do as I direct!”

“Listen,” Starsky’s voice remained amazingly calm. Hutch knew he’d settled into a zen-like state of composure that allowed him to assess, analyze and act in their best interest. “I’m telling you, if we
“Let’s find out, shall we?” Crane said gleefully.

“There are other people here, the models….” Starsky was looking for any out.

“Please,” Crane gave an exaggerated sigh. “Who do you think the two ‘models’ actually are? Or must I spell it out for you?” He pointed two fingers at Starsky and Hutch.

Hutch felt Starsky stiffen next to him. He clenched his fists at his side. “What do you want?” he demanded. Hutch wanted to reach the same zen as Starsky, but his rage at Crane as well as his fury at himself were making it nearly impossible for him to think clearly. Mix in the details of Crane’s sexual games and their lovely consequences, and it was a wonder he could manage any rational thought at all.

Crane rubbed his hands together. “Here are the rules: Do as I say, and you walk out of here, free to do whatever you think should be done following our little affair. Refuse, and Martin is allowed to take his revenge upon you by using his little toy on your partner.”

“They’ll come after you,” Starsky reiterated. “It’s not worth it.”

“But it is!” Crane bubbled. “And please don’t worry about me. I’m quite protected and safeguarded. After all—you haven’t found so much as a smudge on my record yet, have you?”

Starsky and Hutch looked at each other. Starsky’s eyes were clear, focused; offering the kind of support only one police partner could offer another. I’ll follow your lead, they said, or be the leader for you to follow. Doesn’t matter which, all that matters is getting us out alive.

Hutch looked back at Crane. He knew he was trembling, knew showing it was a mistake, but couldn’t stop it. This was worse than the other night; the other night he had been free and able to ride to Starsky’s rescue. Now he was just as captive as Starsky.

Let Martin waver once, just once, and Hutch would push Starsky out of the way and be on top of him like a hungry lion on a zebra. Didn’t matter the consequences to himself; all that mattered was Starsky.


“I want to give you what you want.” Crane momentarily left the room, then came back in carrying a straight back chair of the same style and period as the couch. He positioned the chair carefully, near to Martin but not next to him, about ten feet from the couch. “I want you to have your partner.”

Hutch frowned. He could sense Starsky was just as confused. Hutch shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, quiet his body.

“We’re leaving,” he declared, taking a step forward.

Martin aimed at Starsky.

Hutch stopped.

Crane smoothed his pants crease. “Not until you’ve done as I instruct. It’s very simple, dear ‘Richard.’ Do as I say, and you both walk out alive. Defy me, and you both die right here.” Crane folded his hands in his lap. “Now which part of that don’t you understand?”
Hutch held his breath, his heart beating hard in his chest. *I understand I will protect Starsky!*

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Starsky responded. “What makes you think we won’t walk out of here, then come back and arrest you?”

Crane roared with laughter. “Maybe you will!” he cried. “But I rather think you won’t.” His laughter died. “Now, Richard—I can’t seem to call you anything else! Richard, I want you to remove David’s sweater.”

Hutch didn’t move.


“S’okay,” Starsky said under his breath. “Go ahead.”

Hutch looked hard at Starsky. *He thinks this is going to be like those parties. Pain inflicted for pleasure.* ”No!” Hutch growled.

“Yes,” Crane countered. “Or he dies. First, of course. You’ll go after him.”

“Hutch!” Starsky hissed.

“You see?” Crane asked, “Even your partner knows which choice to make. Now walk behind dear David and remove his sweater.” Crane’s voice turned hard.

Hutch walked automatically behind Starsky. He grabbed the hem of Starsky’s sweater and stopped, frozen. *What am I doing?*

*Measuring the situation. Watching for opportunities.*

*Protecting Starsky.*

“S’okay,” Starsky reiterated under his breath. “Play along.”

The words were soft, cool; they floated into Hutch’s brain and soothed the chaos. The bespoke of past emergencies and calamities, of times when functioning as a single unit was their salvation. Be it close call or near miss, their luck had always depended upon acting as one.

Hutch fingered the hem of the sweater, then yanked it up over Starsky’s torso, off over his head.

“Put your arms around his waist,” Crane ordered.

*Acting as one...being as close as one...* Hutch couldn’t move. Being forced to be as one...forced to put his arms around Starsky, hold his body, feel his body...Hutch shuddered. Wasn’t that what he’d seen in his fantasies of late? Every woman had eventually repulsed him, to be replaced by an image of Starsky? Wasn’t this what he wanted but couldn’t admit to, wouldn’t even consider?

Starsky reached back and took Hutch’s hands, bringing them around to his front. He held them there, steadying them both.

Now a flush of embarrassment surged through Hutch. Starsky was handling this coolly, calmly, just as they both should. Whatever it took to get through this, that’s what Starsky was willing to give. Could Hutch handle it any less well?

Could he, and not be overcome by those boarded up, bricked up, locked away desires?
“What do you feel, Richard?” Crane crossed his legs. “A hard abdomen? Furry stomach? Place your nose in his hair and tell me what you smell.”

Starsky squeezed Hutch’s hands. Hutch leaned slightly forward and pushed his nose into Starsky’s curls. Damp smell of rain, musky smell of sweat, rancid smell of fear. He instinctively held Starsky tighter.


A metallic click echoed from Martin’s weapon.

“Skin.” The word came out as a whisper. Hutch cleared his throat. “Warm skin,” he said, barely audible. Warm skin…the skin of my partner…the skin of the man I’d do anything for… to protect him.

“Run a hand over his chest.”

Hutch was unable to move. That was exactly what he’d wanted to do, felt compelled to do, the minute he’d touched Starsky’s body. It felt natural. More natural than any touch he’d given in quite a while. But this wasn’t natural, not this place, not this moment. What if they played along and ended up—what if—what if they ended up alienated and estranged because it meant more than just playing along? What if it meant hurting Starsky?

Starsky shifted a hand from under one of Hutch’s and patted it.

S’okay, s’alright, the hand was saying. We’ll watch and wait for our chance, just as we always have. Long as we’re together, we’ll be fine.

So much in a single hand pat. But did Starsky know what he was saying? What he was offering? What the consequences were?

Hutch shuddered again, Starsky’s body jolted along with his. Starsky had trusted him the other night, and they had come out of it alive. Starsky was offering his trust again. Protecting Starsky would mean accepting it.

Hutch slowly disengaged his right hand and ran it up Starsky’s chest.

“Over the nipple, please.”

Hutch slid over to the left nipple, centering his palm over the springy nub. It burned where it poked into his palm. Starsky just barely shifted under his hand, sending the burn up into Hutch’s hand and down his arm. This wasn’t a fantasy he could stop, as he had at Heather’s. This was real feeling—and it felt good.

Terrifyingly good.

“Very nice,” Crane appraised.

Hutch was acutely aware of the distinct boundaries between his body and Starsky’s. The skin of his palm pressing against the skin of Starsky’s breast, separate yet glued flat against each other. Starsky’s back against his own chest, Hutch’s heart hammering against both his own chest wall and Starsky’s back. Starsky’s ass firm against his own groin, pressing against his cock, almost compressing it. The strength of the pressure’s pleasure surprised Hutch, another terrifyingly good sensation.

“Let me see you toy with it,” Crane instructed.
Hutch slid his hand until the nipple emerged between two of his fingers. He scissored his fingers, squeezing the pliant nub of flesh.

The nipple hardened. Starsky stiffened against him. Hutch froze. Starsky’s body’s reaction aroused him as nothing had so far. If Starsky aroused him, and he aroused Starsky…would it be so terrible to at least admit that not only did he love Starsky, but he was in love with him? And wanted to physically experience it?

“Continue,” Crane ordered.

Hutch was unable to move.

“Is that your choice?” Crane asked. “Should I allow Martin his freedom?”

Starsky reached up and placed his hand on top of Hutch’s. He began moving it around his chest, a circular rubbing whose rhythm was calming.

Hutch slowly began to take over the motion, finding himself better able to respond to Crane’s commands when he ignored Crane’s presence and concentrated on his own movements on a moment by moment basis.

Hutch still held Starsky by the waist with one hand. Protectively, his fingers slipped in between Starsky’s, pressing against Starsky’s belly. His other hand, intrigued by the feel of Starsky’s soft chest hair swirling under his palm, continued to rub. It made the center of his palm tingle, and he moved it back to cover Starsky’s nipple.

The nipple was stiff and hard, poking into that sensitive place on his palm. He moved his hand ever so slightly, making the nipple bend back and forth. Again Hutch slipped the nipple between his fingers, scissoring and tugging on it, before taking it between his thumb and forefinger to gently twist and pull. His own nipples ached to be touched and rubbed as well.

Starsky’s response was to allow a little more of his weight to fall back against Hutch’s supporting body, against Hutch’s sensitive nipples.

Hutch’s response was to suddenly disengage himself from Starsky. It was too much, his body’s arousal matched against what appeared to be Starsky’s arousal as well. It was too much, too quickly, and too publicly. And too scary. What if Starsky were really disgusted and repulsed, or couldn’t forgive Hutch for getting him into this mess?

What if Starsky couldn’t forgive him for loving and wanting him? Starsky had begged Hutch to stay with him; that’s all he’d asked for. Now Hutch was handing him reason to push Hutch away, to destroy Starsky’s heart.

“Now Richard,” Crane chided. “We aren’t nearly where we want to be, unless where you want to be is dead.”

Starsky took a deep, shaky breath. Hutch folded his arms against his own chest, trying to still his trembling body. Part arousal, part fear, part anger—Hutch couldn’t separate the three, couldn’t decide which one to appease, couldn’t decide which one would lead to less catastrophe.

“Take off your own sweater,” Crane dictated. “Oh, and David, please watch Richard do that.”

Starsky looked off to the side, seemed to make a decision, then turned to look at Hutch.

Hutch was sure he could see the trail of his hand’s movement in the whorls of Starsky’s chest hair.
Starsky gave a nearly imperceptible nod, and Hutch grabbed the back neck of his sweater and jerked it up and off before he had time to think.

Crane stood up and began a surreptitious circling of the two men. He stopped when he came behind Hutch.

“Goodness!” Crane exclaimed, peering at Hutch’s back. “You aren’t as virginal in this arena as I had thought!”

Hutch felt the flame of embarrassment flush his skin, probably highlighting the fading scars on his back. It reignited his anger, and he instinctively took a step back as if to move against Crane.

Martin was obviously not hampered by any lingering medication in his system, as he triggered another round off to Starsky’s right.

Starsky started.

Hutch stopped where he was.

Crane finished his circle and returned to his seat.

“Remove David’s pants, Richard.” Crane arranged himself comfortably on the chair.

Again, Starsky’s eyes met Hutch’s. Bright with a heightened sense of stimulation Hutch had seen in every threatening situation they’d ever faced, they told him what they had always told him: We’ll get through this. Hutch was momentarily stunned by their openness, their lack of blame or reproach, everything Hutch felt he deserved from his partner.

A sudden surge of despair overtook Hutch, completely disorienting him. It should have been anger he’d been flooded with. But instead he was filled with an exhaustion, a fatigue that threatened to send him to the floor in a limp heap.

Starsky stepped up to him and rubbed his upper arms, as if he knew exactly what Hutch was feeling.

“Richard,” Crane rebuked.

Without looking at Starsky, Hutch reached down, unbuttoned and unzipped Starsky’s fly, then stooped and pulled the pants down to Starsky’s ankles in an if-I-stop-now-I’ll-never-be-able-to-start-again movement.

Without being told, Starsky stepped out of the pants and kicked them off to the side.

“Let me see,” Crane said.

Starsky sighed, and turned to face Crane.

“Well!” exclaimed Crane, assessing the man before him. “Not particularly long, but thick. Very nice.”

Starsky shifted his weight and looked away.

“And not totally flaccid,” Crane added.

Adrenaline? Or had Hutch provoked another sexual response?

“Please, David, sit over on the divan.”
Starsky squared his shoulders and walked back to the antique couch. He plopped down in the center, spread his legs, and lifted his arms to rest on the back. Clearly a position of defiance. Hutch relaxed by a few atoms, buoyed by Starsky’s boldness. Their eyes met. They offered voluntary trust to Hutch, even as Starsky was being forced to offer his body. Starsky’s trust filled Hutch with warmth, and he vowed to be worthy of that conviction.

Crane clapped his hands delightedly. “Perfect! Richard, suck him off!”

Hutch blanked out for a moment. Another persuading round from Martin brought him back to awareness.

Starsky. Toned body and limbs openly positioned before him. Sheen of sweat highlighting scarred skin. Eyes offering—absolution?

Hutch stumbled forward, landing on his knees between Starsky’s legs. And he remembered:

“You need me.” Crane had said. “You can’t bring yourself to admit what it is you really want, so you need me to force you toward it. You can’t bring yourself to take responsibility for your own desires, so you need me to make you do it. What is it you desire? Tell me and I’ll impel you to accept it. I’ll drive you to your knees in its service.”

Concentrate on the moment, Hutch intoned. Focus on the here and now. Don’t think about your desires!

Protect Starsky!

There it was, the conviction he could live with.

Hutch reached out and placed a tentative finger on Starsky’s cock. He felt a tiny surge, and ran two fingers down its length. He looked up at Starsky.

Starsky’s eyes were shining, even under such terrible stress. They not only held trust, but love—love for Hutch, no matter the circumstance, no matter the situation. Unconditional and unchanging.

Hutch accepted it, knowing he would not get through this without it.

Hutch ran two fingers over Starsky again. He heard the man catch his breath as two fingers became four, stroking the firm flesh, watching it rise ever so slightly with each stroke.

“More,” Crane urged.

Hutch took the organ in his hand, wrapping his palm and fingers around it. Its heat touched the sensitive center of Hutch’s palm, and Hutch found himself squeezing the hardening cock to fill his entire hand with the heat and flesh.

Starsky groaned.

A shiver caught Hutch. He hadn’t expected Starsky to react to the pleasure, but merely sit back and accept it as part of the scene. Starsky was actually feeling pleasure from what Hutch was doing to him!

Hutch had never even considered that what he wanted from Starsky would please Starsky as well.

With each pump of Hutch’s hand Starsky’s cock became harder, longer and more alive. Hutch became aware that each movement of his hand elicited a different reaction from Starsky. Hard
squeeze: groan. Long, light stroke: shiver. Thumb rub: pre-come. Hutch was amazed that he could elicit such a response from his partner—that Starsky would allow him to arouse him so.

“Suck him,” ordered Crane, from far away.

Hutch felt Starsky tense, his thigh muscles tightening and trembling. *Protect Starsky*, Hutch began the chant in his head. He looked up. Starsky was looking down at him, his mouth a grim line, but his eyes *still* bestowing trust. Starsky barely nodded his head.

Hutch nodded back just as indiscernibly, hoping his eyes showed as much trust in Starsky as Starsky showed in his.

*Protect Starsky.*

Hutch lowered his head, his mouth just brushing the tumescent organ. Heat infused Hutch’s lips. He lifted his lips, then placed them once more on Starsky’s cock. Hot vibrations seared them. His tongue flicked between his lips, tasting the salty, musky sweat of his partner.

Hutch blocked everything from his mind except his mantra. He took the flat of his tongue and licked up Starsky’s cock, setting it quivering. His hand grasped the base of Starsky’s cock and steadied it as he allowed just the tip into his mouth, then in another now-or-never movement pushed it as far into his mouth as he could.

Starsky made a sound Hutch had never heard before, and his cock seemed to grow even larger, filling Hutch’s mouth with pliant, salty flesh. Hutch’s tongue barely stirred against the organ when hot fluid spurted into his throat and he gagged, ejecting the cock and sending him into a coughing fit on the floor.

Hutch rolled to a sitting position as the gagging and coughing ended, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. A chill took hold of his body; he shivered in response. From out of the corner of his eye he caught a crystal tumbler sliding across the floor. It stopped just to the side of him. Hutch reached out and grabbed the glass, tossing the amber contents into his mouth and searing his already burning throat.

“Not bad,” Crane reviewed. “But we’ll have to work on your technique, Richard.”

Hutch turned his head slightly toward Starsky. His peripheral vision could just make out his partner, leaning forward, his arms clutching his belly.

Hutch took another gulp of the alcohol. He wanted to get up and go to Starsky, to hold him, to make sure he hadn’t hurt him. To apologize for letting Crane force them into this. To tell him how proud he was that Starsky trusted him.

To admit to his desires and ask for more.

“How do you feel, Richard?” Crane walked up behind Hutch. “Was it what you imagined?”

Hutch shut his eyes. He’d barely let himself imagine something like this, barely allowed Starsky to enter his fantasies, barely allowed him to substitute for the various women he conjured. Hutch wouldn’t have been able to stand it if Martin or Crane had touched Starsky, could barely stand it that he himself had. It was too much and too little, a fantasy fulfilled and a fantasy denied. Hutch wanted it never to have happened, but would never forget that it had. He was furious at Crane for forcing it, and angry with himself that he hadn’t had enough courage to do it on his own.

Crane tapped his toe on the polished floor. “Probably not,” he answered himself. “The circumstances
are less than—favorable. But we make do, don’t we, Richard?”

“Go fuck yourself,” Hutch spat.

“Impossible,” Crane said evenly. “Besides, I’d much rather see you fuck your partner.”

Hutch stopped breathing. He heard Starsky suck in his breath.

“Not interested?” Crane said. “Perhaps Martin would be. I’m not unfamiliar with firearms, and could hold his weapon while he engages your partner.”

Hutch looked up at Crane, eyes blazing.

“Of course, the ultimate outcome is death to both you and your partner, but I do think Martin deserves a little something for all he’s put up with from you. And I’m sure David would be amazed by what Martin has to offer.”

Hutch remembered Martin’s “offering” to Lawrence. Martin had virtually split Lawrence in two, and Lawrence had clearly been used to such abuse. It would be a horrible emotional and physical attack on Starsky.

It would not happen.

Crane dropped something next to Hutch. It was a tube of K-Y jelly. It was reality.

Crane walked back to his chair. “We have all day. Take as long as you need to prepare yourself.”

Hutch’s insides turned to stone as he stared at the lubricant.

Suddenly, Starsky was squatting next to him.

Hutch looked into Starsky’s eyes. Unable—unwilling—to interpret what he saw, he focused simply on their color, their blueness, their aliveness.

Protect Starsky!

Starsky grasped Hutch’s upper arms and rose, pulling Hutch to his feet. With barely an inch of space between them, Starsky leaned in and rested his cheek against Hutch’s cheek. Starsky’s thumbs rubbed hard circles on Hutch’s biceps. “S’okay, babe,” he whispered. “We’ll get through it.”

Starsky pulled Hutch into him, wrapping his arms around him, enfolding him. Hutch remained limp in the embrace.

There were a few seconds of nothing, then Hutch became aware Starsky was not only caressing his back, but gently grinding his pelvis against him. “Don’t think,” Starsky whispered. “Just feel.”

Used to be they told you to think of baseball, multiplication tables, cold showers. Now here was Starsky telling him to concentrate on his dick.

Protect Starsky!

Hutch took a deep, shaky breath and flushed his mind of everything but feeling. The warmth of Starsky’s body next to his. The smell of Starsky’s body next to his. The feel of Starsky’s body next to his.

That old, familiar tingling started in Hutch’s belly, and wriggled down to his cock. Not just
stimulation, but exhilaration. He lifted his hands and placed them lightly on Starsky’s waist.

Starsky slid his hands down to Hutch’s waist and quickly undid Hutch’s fly. He gave them a push over Hutch’s hips, then shoved them down to Hutch’s ankles. Just as quickly, he was back standing and erect and pressing against Hutch.

Hutch was vaguely aware that he was no longer protecting Starsky, Starsky was now protecting him. Allowing him to do Crane’s bidding and save them both.

The stropping of Starsky’s cock against Hutch’s cock engorged them both. Hutch flattened everything but that stroking sensation against the walls of his brain, filling the emptiness with ache and throb and pulse and quiver and Starsky.

Hutch’s breathing grew shallower and quicker. His cock rose, the shaft moving up and under Starsky’s cock, brushing his balls. In an instant Starsky had turned and pushed his ass back into Hutch’s groin.

Hutch took a step forward to press harder against Starsky, tangled in the jeans around his ankles, and instead fell forward, sending both of them to their knees, Starsky landing against the couch. Starsky quickly adjusted his position to rest his elbows on the couch, lifting his ass up into Hutch’s cupping groin. It felt warm, firm, exciting against his cock.

To save Starsky, he would have to give in to his desire for Starsky.

And make sure he pleased Crane at the same time. Hutch had enough sense left to recognize that Crane was still in control, and had to be satisfied or their lives were forfeit.

Hutch draped himself over Starsky’s back, his brain almost totally disconnected from his body, his pelvis thrusting against Starsky’s buttocks. The rhythm felt good, felt natural; his cock rubbing against Starsky’s ass, his chest pressing against Starsky’s back. He moved slowly against Starsky, easily and leisurely, enjoying the tension in his cock.

Starsky, too, was enjoying the stroking. His head was resting on the couch, his hands balled into fists, his body giving in to Hutch’s easy thrusts and then pushing back. Tiny grunts and groans erupted from his throat.

The tease was becoming untenable, and Hutch began rubbing harder, pressing harder. He placed his hands around Starsky’s waist and lifted his torso up, giving him more freedom to move and press. Hutch was stroking between Starsky’s buttocks, trying to find space between them, desirous to feel them compress his cock until it imploded.

Starsky was breathing heavily, rocking back into Hutch, obviously not just accepting what was happening, but participating in it.

Hutch let his hands move down Starsky’s waist and around his back until they grasped Starsky’s fleshy cheeks. Hutch’s fingers kneaded them, eliciting throaty moans from his partner. His thumbs stroked their firmness, then moved to separate them.

“Lube,” Starsky groaned.

Hutch took a deep breath, trying to calm his body before he reached for the tube. He found it over to his side, but his body still betrayed him as he picked it up with a shaky hand, unable to let go of Starsky with his other. Hutch needed the constant contact; he was afraid the spell would be broken and he would be unable to complete his task, and the wrath of Crane would fall upon them.
Hutch kept his groin plastered to Starsky’s buttocks as he squeezed out the clear gel. Unsure of what he would do to Starsky, uncertain of what Starsky could take, unwilling to hurt Starsky more than was necessary, Hutch covered his fingers with jelly. He slipped them between Starsky’s buttocks, spreading jelly liberally over the hot flesh. Every place he touched Starsky Hutch wanted to be touched as well. His fingers dipped down and under, coating Starsky’s balls, slipping over Starsky’s cock.

Starsky moaned, his hips shifting as Hutch slid slippery fingers over the semi-erect flesh. Hutch continued to stroke, slightly surprised Starsky could manage another arousal so quickly.

Hutch’s own arousal was insistent, and his hands moved back to separate Starsky’s buttocks and allow his cock to slip between them. The pressure and heat were wonderful, amplifying the throbbing of Hutch’s cock and increasing the speed of the blood rushing through his veins. He finally moaned, seeking further pressure and greater heat, letting himself thrust against his partner to appease his own desire.

Starsky met each thrust, resisting them, adding to Hutch’s pleasure. Hutch’s hand slipped between Starsky’s ass cheeks, seeking the further entry. His fingers found the small entrance, circled it, spread gel around it to cool and relax it.

Hutch could feel Starsky breathing hard and arhythmically under him. He tried to slow down his own heartbeat, but was unable to grab it and hold it. Hutch slid a finger into Starsky, slowly, gently, shakily; Starsky tensed underneath him although the finger slipped in fairly easily. Hutch eased it back out, then slipped it in again, circling it smoothly inside Starsky.

Starsky gasped, and Hutch’s chest tightened. Sometimes you hurt the ones you love, a voice mocked. And sometimes you love the ones you have to hurt.

Hutch’s erection was insistent, persistent; it moved against Starsky and demanded more from both of them. Hutch slipped his finger out, then pressed two fingers together and tested the tightness of Starsky’s opening. The tips of his two fingers slid in, but going further was going to require a small amount of force.

“S’okay.” Starsky’s muffled voice came to Hutch from far away.

Hutch pushed his fingers further into Starsky.

It was hot and tight and slippery. Blood was pounding in Hutch’s ears, and his cock carried the same beat. It was almost unbearable, the throbbing and tension and need for release.

Hutch pulled out his fingers and found his aching cock, trying to guide it between Starsky’s slippery cheeks and into the coated orifice. Starsky grunted but remained still as Hutch pushed against him, tried to push into him, thrust against him in an excited rhythm.

One stroke allowed Hutch to slip just a little further between Starsky’s feverish cheeks, and suddenly Hutch was emptied, hard spasms wracking both his body and his partner’s.

Hutch slipped down to the floor; Starsky slipped down beside him. Both rested their heads against the edge of the couch. Hutch’s heart was pounding, and he could barely find air. Something inside whispered that he hadn’t completed his task, hadn’t done what was ordered, and Crane would show his displeasure by splattering their brains on the undecorated wall. He hadn’t protected Starsky at all, but had merely satisfied himself, carried out his own desires, and wrecked what was left of their partnership.
Maybe death was better than looking Starsky in the eye, seeing if the trust had turned to loathing and reprimand.

One moment of fire-bright passion and a lifetime of cold-ash regret. Gradually Hutch became aware Starsky had slipped an arm around his back and was cradling him. He felt fragile, crystalline; an errant sound would shatter him.

“I guess we did what he wanted,” Starsky said, barely audible. “They’re gone.”

Hutch didn’t move or speak. Starsky ran his hand up and down his arm. Hutch felt pressure, nothing more.

“Let’s just sit here awhile,” Starsky continued to speak softly. “You think they’ve filled the pool? I’ll bet it’s not filled. Or if it is filled, it isn’t heated.”

“Probably no changing rooms. Or wet bar, either. Or horses. No horse stable, even though we’re in the canyons.” The monologue continued.

“I’ll bet there’s a big room you can put a cool TV here somewhere, though. Big screen. Big room so you can move the couch back to the exact best viewing spot in the room. Huge couch. A comfy couch. Soft pillows, on the arms, so you can lay your head on them and fall asleep.”

Hutch heard Starsky’s voice coming to him from very far away, and the sensation along his arm grew lighter and lighter.

And then Starsky was forcing hard glass between his teeth and pouring warm liquid into his mouth. He sputtered as the alcohol choked down his throat.

“Easy, easy,” Starsky still spoke quietly. “You’re all right. You’re gonna be all right.” He was holding Hutch’s head and upper body now, gently rocking him.

The world settled into reality around Hutch. His vision and hearing cleared, and a big, empty, silent room surrounded them. The afternoon light was dimming, graying the room. He shivered.

“Think you can sit up?” Starsky asked, lifting Hutch’s upper body a bit to help him.

Hutch grabbed Starsky’s upper arm, and with Starsky’s help, sat up.

Starsky rubbed Hutch’s back, smooth strokes that ran gently over the fading wounds.

“Getting kind of cold in here. Think you can make it up the stairs to the bedroom, or shall I run up and get our clothes? I don’t really want to put what they gave us back on.”

Hutch’s response was to squeeze Starsky’s tricep and not let go.

“Okay,” Starsky got his feet under him, rose, and lifted Hutch to his feet. Starsky slid his arm around Hutch’s back, supporting a good portion of Hutch’s weight, and propelled him forward.

The stairs weren’t so bad; Starsky kept the two of them in a steady climbing rhythm, and all Hutch had to do was concentrate on the cadence. The bathroom wasn’t so bad, either; Starsky picked up one of the discarded towels and cleaned them both off.

The bedroom was bad. Starsky walked Hutch back into the bedroom and sat him on the edge of the bed. Starsky shouldered into his own shirt and pulled up his jeans. Then he grabbed Hutch’s pants and began slipping them on. Hutch was barely able to stand long enough for Starsky to get them up
over his ass. Hutch started to shiver again.

Starsky sat down next to him, pulled Hutch into an awkward embrace, rested his chin on Hutch’s head. He caressed Hutch’s back and arms. Hutch was beginning to feel warm again, less separated from reality.

Or maybe just glad to have Starsky as his reality.

Starsky’s touch felt good; clean and comforting.

“It’s never enough just to say it,” Starsky’s voice was low, tranquil, “but what you did saved my life.” He squeezed Hutch tighter. “Thank you.”

The sense of the words confused Hutch. “What?” he rasped.

Starsky continued to hold him, now rocking Hutch. “You didn’t have any choice, but the choice you made was for me.” He spoke softly into Hutch’s ear.

Hutch disengaged himself. He looked into Starsky’s face. Starsky looked back, open, unafraid.

“Starsk—” Hutch tried to find his voice.

“For a while there I thought we were in for one of your ‘bridge parties,’” Starsky admitted, still very matter-of-fact. “But I guess Crane just wanted to embarrass us. It was a little embarrassing, but no more than that accident I had when I first came home from the hospital and you had to clean it up.”

Starsky lifted his eyebrows, a very slight smile on his lips. “That was messy, too. This wasn’t as nearly as messy as that.”

Hutch shut his eyes. Starsky’s reaction was all wrong. Starsky should be angry, humiliated, distant, enraged. This was all Hutch’s fault. Starsky should be blaming him for his failure to properly assess the danger and keep him safe from it.

Hutch reached blindly for Starsky, pulling him into his arms. “I’m sorry.” Hutch’s voice caught. Guilt ballooned in his gut.

Hutch felt Starsky shrug within his arms. “Keepin’ me alive is nothing to be sorry for,” Starsky replied. “That’s your job as my partner.” Starsky returned the hug.

Hutch couldn’t believe Starsky’s composure. “Are you all right?” Hutch separated them and moved a hand over Starsky’s shoulder and arm. “Did I hurt you?”

“No a scratch,” Starsky replied. He smiled at Hutch. “You didn’t hurt me. Not at all.”

“I’m so sorry,” Hutch choked.

“No one’s fault,” Starsky soothed. “Who knew it would turn into this kind of scene?”

“I should have known,” Hutch insisted. “I’ve been to his parties. I know how sick he is. I never should have let us come up here without backup.” I knew Martin had made me!

Starsky stood up. “Let’s get out of here.” He reached for his jacket and patted the pocket, then fished out his keys.

Hutch blinked at him stupidly.

Starsky gripped Hutch’s upper arm and pulled him upright. “Grab your jacket and let’s go.” Starsky
reached over and grabbed their holsters and guns. “They never even touched these. They were right where we left them.”

Hutch looked around, spotted his jacket, and picked it up. Starsky still had his arm. Gently he was led out of the room, down the impressive staircase, and out the front door. Starsky slid him into the car, shut his door, then scooted around the front of the car and was quickly seated next to him.

Hutch leaned back, closing his eyes and letting his head fall against the headrest. The motor hummed and the car vibrated, cocooning him and cushioning him from anything that was tangible and true. It wasn’t until Starsky was again tugging on his arm that he was forced back into the now of real sensation and sense.

He allowed himself to be guided up into an apartment, only vaguely conscious it was Starsky’s, and not his. He was led into the bathroom, where he stood hunched and limp, staring at the bathmat on the floor.

Gentle hands undressed him, but Hutch couldn’t look up, his head felt so heavy. The shower hissed, and he was pushed under its hot pulse. He lifted his arms to brace himself against the shower wall, head still hanging, but shoulders massaged by the stinging water fingers.

A dull thud sounded behind him, and strong hands began rubbing his back.

Hutch shoved backwards and whirled defensively.

Starsky sagged against the far wall.

“Okay,” he groaned, his hands up in front of him. “I’ll wait.”

Hutch watched him stagger out of the shower. He stayed frozen under the hot spray, its sting the only sensation he allowed himself to feel until the heat turned chill and he was forced out of the stall.

Dumbly he grabbed at the bathrobe hanging on the door and fumbled into it, still wet, hair dripping into his eyes. If he didn’t think, he could do things…Hutch opened the door without thinking and stepped out.

“About time,” Starsky walked in from the living room and stepped past Hutch into the bathroom. “I’ll bet you used up all the hot water.” He closed the bathroom door, leaving Hutch to drip outside it.

Not thinking let Hutch shuffle into the living room and drop to the couch. Habit made him push sopping hair out of his eyes. Exhaustion pushed him back into the soft cushions and down to oblivion.

Hutch would have been on his feet if he could have found them. Adrenalin had jolted his entire system and brought him from nothingness to somethingness in a split second.

“You okay?” Starsky spoke from behind him.

“What?” Hutch’s mouth was dry.

“How do you feel?”

Hutch ran a hand through his hair. He looked down at the floor. The floor looked familiar. That was
a good start. But how did he feel?

Hutch felt clean and dry, but also dirty and soiled. He knew Starsky had forgiven him, had thanked him, but he still felt guilty for ignoring warning signs and putting ego above safety.

And he was embarrassed and self-conscious and felt humiliated at what Crane and put him through but especially what Crane had put Starsky through and he had no idea what to do or what to say or even if he could ever look Starsky in the eyes again.

“How long?” he finally asked. Hutch heard Starsky push back his chair and walk toward him.

“You weren’t even out for an hour.” Starsky walked around in front of him. Hutch lifted his eyes high enough to see a bowl in one of Starsky’s hands and a spoon in the other.

“Want some cereal?”

Hutch shook his head.

“I don’t have any milk,” Starsky continued. “Orange juice works pretty good instead.”

Hutch shut his eyes.

“You gonna live through this?”

Hutch leaned over, his elbows on his knees, his forehead resting on his fists.

“I reported us in,” Starsky said around a mouthful of cereal. “I told them we never got around to the photo shoot; Crane had made us as cops, and Rice was with him. I said they chatted us up before they fingered us, and we got nothing out of them. Then they left the house and left us there.” Hutch heard the clink of a spoon against Starsky’s teeth. “Ruth and Grimes are going to maintain surveillance.” Starsky paused. “I figure, we can deal with whatever they say happened this afternoon when it comes up. If it ever does.”

Hutch didn’t move.

Starsky scraped his spoon along the bowl’s bottom.

“Like I said, you gonna live through this?” Hutch sensed a panic sneaking up on him. Cold, suffocating; the Panic wanted his brain and lungs as shelter.

“Look at me, Hutch.”

Hutch tensed. The Panic was sliding up his back toward his neck.

Don’t think!

Hutch looked up at Starsky.

Starsky nodded his head once, assertively, defiantly. “Now I know you’re gonna be okay.”

Hutch stared at Starsky. Worn-out bathrobe clinging to a remodeled body. Hair obviously finger-combed. Cornflower blue eyes. Tanned skin. Strong limbs. Five o’clock shadow. Orange drips slipping off the spoon he held above his bowl.

Starsky.
The Panic slid away.

“How can you eat that slop?” Hutch sat up a little.

Starsky looked down at his bowl, frowning. “Because it tastes like crap dry.”

Hutch took a deep breath.

Starsky sat down next to him.

“I dunno.” Starsky played with the soggy slop in his bowl. “They say if you talk about stuff like this it helps.”

“Who’s ‘they’?” Hutch picked at a pill on the robe. “Your shrink?”

Starsky shrugged. “Yeah, my shrink.”

Hutch feigned fascination in the tiny ball. “What did he say about me?”

Starsky shifted his weight. “Nothing I hadn’t figured out. You’re angry about the shooting. Depressed. Trying to control the world so it doesn’t happen again.”

Hutch winced at the accuracy of the description. It was one thing to have stuff hidden inside you. It was another thing entirely to know it wasn’t all that hidden.

“I’m not mad, Hutch.” Starsky placed his spoon in the bowl, then placed the bowl on the arm of the couch. “I don’t hate you. I’m not afraid of you, I’m not worried about you being able to cover my back, and I’m not afraid to have you touch me.”

Hutch winced again. The sensation of touching Starsky, having his arms wrapped around Starsky, having his mouth on Starsky was lurking in the periphery of his consciousness, somewhere along with the Panic. Passion and Panic. Two feelings that could overwhelm him if Hutch let them.

Hutch knew Starsky was looking at him. He tried to keep the feelings at bay. “I hate feeling so helpless.” He continued picking at the robe. “I never want to hurt you.” He paused. “Or be responsible for you hurting.”

“Same here,” Starsky agreed. “That’s why you’ve been trying to control every little thing in my life for the past few months. And why you’ve tried to control every aspect of this investigation. But I know if you’d had any idea we would end up in that kind of situation, you wouldn’t have let us go in.”

Hutch glanced over at Starsky. He couldn’t face him. “Starsky, I—“

“You couldn’t have known he’d be there. We thought he’d taken off for parts unknown.”

“He knew,” Hutch whispered raggedly. “I should have—I never should have—“

“You did beat the shit out of him,” Starsky stated.

Hutch shut his eyes tight. “I caught him following me. He’d followed me to Elisa’s. He could have known about us.” His words were barely audible. “I’m so sorry. I thought Lawson was the danger. I never thought Crane was—“ Confession emptied Hutch, but left nothing to replace the emptiness. At least if he’d let the Panic or the Passion in, he’d have something, even if Starsky abandoned him in their wake. *I’m thinking too much!*
Starsky sighed. “This whole case has been fucked up from the start. You. Me. We aren’t connecting.” He paused. “We haven’t connected for a long time.”

“I’m so sorry,” Hutch repeated.

“For what? For being over-protective? For being not protective enough? For not controlling the universe?” Starsky cleared his throat. “For locking me out of your life, maybe? That’s the only one I want an apology for.”

They sat together for a moment.

“I miss the Old Hutch,” Starsky finally said.

Hutch looked up, frowning. Panic threatened to send him running from Starsky. Passion threatened to send him running to Starsky. If he didn’t move, maybe neither would threaten him at all.

Hutch watched Starsky take a very deep, very shaky breath.

“Things changed after I got shot. You changed. The closer you stood next to me to keep me safe from things, the further away you got from me inside.” Starsky bit his lip and looked away.

Hutch looked back down at the floor. It was easier to be objective at arms’ length. It was easier to see things coming. “I know,” he murmured. Don’t. Move. Don’t. Think.

“And the further away you got from me inside, the scareder I got—I was afraid I’d wake up one day and you’d be gone.”

Hutch studied his feet. “I wasn’t going to leave you, you know.” It was probably the first honest thing he’d said in months. It seemed to lessen the pressure from the Panic and the Passion.

Starsky turned toward Hutch. “No, I didn’t know. Every time I turned around you were threatening to take this away from me or take that away from me if I didn’t do what you wanted, with the ultimate threat being you’d take you away from me!”

Hutch was so empty, so exhausted, so drained—so mystified at his and Starsky’s behavior. This should be a knock-down, drag-out, to-the-death struggle. There should be accusations, recriminations, allegations, and counter-claims. He should be apologizing to the extreme! Starsky should be berating him in the fullest! They’d been working toward this for months! Instead, it was quiet, passive; more like a capitulation on both their parts.

But being honest had helped. And putting Starsky first this afternoon had helped. So….

Protect Starsky.

Don’t think.

Release the past, step into the present, ignore the future.

Think Starsky.

Hutch straightened his posture. “My mother used to watch soap operas when I was little. She called them her ‘stories,’ and threatened to take away my phone privileges if I ever told anyone she watched them. Sometimes I’d watch them for a few minutes with her. And all I could ever think about them was, why don’t all these people just tell each other the truth? They’d save themselves a lot of time and trouble if they just admitted what was going on and got it over with.” He paused.
“Then I grew up and understood why people didn’t talk about every thing they did.”


Hutch nodded again. “Or too oblivious. Sometimes you’re hiding from the pain, but sometimes you don’t even know you’re hiding.”

Starsky put his hand over Hutch’s. Hutch didn’t move, but he didn’t flinch, either. Starsky’s touch felt…okay. It aroused neither the Panic nor the Passion. It felt…like old times.

“I cannot go through almost losing you again,” Hutch whispered. “I can’t.”

Starsky squeezed his hand. “It’s not like I want to go through that again, either. Or lose you.”

Hutch looked directly at Starsky. “I don’t know how to keep that from happening. Look what happened this afternoon.”

A corner of Starsky’s mouth lifted. “Bomb shelter?” He lifted an eyebrow.

Hutch didn’t play to the joke. He was thinking again. ”First I have to let you back on the streets. Then I have to let you go undercover. Then I have to let you walk into a sex trap. Then I have to watch you—raped—under threat of death.” Hutch’s voice was flat, tightly controlled. His jaw clenched and unclenched. “Then I have to rape you.” It took him a moment before he could continue. “And all I can think is, it’s my fault. If I had kept us off this case, none of it would have happened. If I had handled this case better, you wouldn’t be hurting. I wouldn’t have hurt you.”

It was impossible for Hutch to keep the afternoon’s events from replaying in his head. Crane had taunted him, told him he would find Hutch’s deepest desire and force him under its domination. And Crane had done just that, discovered his desire for Starsky, and made it reality. Hutch’s desire turned into torment for Starsky. Hutch forced to harm Starsky. Hutch’s very presence cause for Starsky’s suffering, when his presence had been meant only to protect.

And for all the terribleness of being forced to arouse Starsky, forced to give in to his own arousal—he had taken pleasure in the acts.

And Starsky did not hate him for it.

Starsky closed his eyes and took another deep breath. He opened his eyes, and took Hutch’s hand between both of his.

“I love you.”

Hutch shut his eyes at the words. “I love you, too. But it’s not enough.”

“Enough for what?” Starsky asked.

“Enough to keep you safe,” Hutch answered.

“But it would be enough to keep me happy,” Starsky said. “Why can’t we trade safe for happy?”

This time Hutch did allow a faint smile. “God, Starsky. Why is your world so simple and my world so complicated?” Maybe Starsky knew how to Not Think...

Starsky let go of Hutch’s hand. “Mine’s not so simple,” he murmured. “I can sympathize with those soap opera people.”
Hutch was surprised. “What’s not so simple?”

Starsky held Hutch’s eyes. “You promised not to leave me.”

Starsky suddenly seemed so desperate, his eyes graying at the mention of Hutch’s promise. Hutch suddenly needed to reassure him. “You made the same promise,” Hutch said, remembering. “Even though we seem to be making each other miserable by staying together.” He thought a moment. Stop it! “Are we about to make each other more miserable?” He desperately hoped not. He was so tired of making Starsky miserable…and of making himself miserable.

“I made a list a month or so ago,” Starsky said. “I wrote down everything I thought we needed to talk about. On one side I put down everything I wanted to say, and on the other side I put down everything you wanted to say.”

“Thanks,” Hutch muttered.

“I guess I should probably add these last couple of incidents.”

Hutch rolled his eyes. “My side or yours?”

Starsky’s voice grew soft. “You’re not still seeing Elisa?”

Hutch’s brow furrowed. He was too—barren—to dredge up the energy needed for a deep discussion of his love life. He was just barely holding on to this calm that had settled on him when the Panic had retreated in the face of Starsky. Best to keep his answers short. “No.”

“Do you want to?”

Hutch answered without thinking. “No.”

“Officer Billings?”

Hutch looked surprised.

“Geez, Hutch, it’s all over the department. She couldn’t keep her mouth shut.”

Hutch leaned back into the sofa, his back stinging with memory. “God, no.”

“Madam Mistress?”

“I have no desire to discuss her tonight.” He suddenly sat forward. “What, were you following me, too? Is that how you found her?”

Starsky remained calm. “Sweet Alice.”

Hutch swallowed his next words and dropped back into the cushions. “Oh. Yeah.” He shut his eyes, resting his head back on the cushions. This calm capitulation was actually very soothing. The Panic was almost gone, and the Passion was safely tucked away.

“Hutch?”

Hutch lifted a hand and waved it as a sign of response.

And then he was covered, enfolded; a body moving on top of his and lips pressed against his and hands gripping his arms tightly.
Then just as quickly he was freed.

Starsky was sitting next to him, exactly where Hutch had last seen him.

*What—Was that real?*

He looked at Starsky. Except for a flush to his face, he was the same Starsky as a moment ago.

“Not simple,” Starsky managed to choke out.

Hutch eyed the room without moving his head. *I dreamed that*, he thought. *I fell asleep for a second, and I dreamed that. I wanted it so much I dreamed it!*

“And I dreamed that. I fell asleep for a second, and I dreamed that. I wanted it so much I dreamed it!*

“You won’t leave me now, will you?”

The words brought Hutch’s eyes back to Starsky.

*Oh God! It wasn’t a dream! He really did that!* Hutch took inventory of his body. His arms burned where Starsky had held them. His lips tingled where Starsky had kissed them. His chest ached where Starsky had lain against him.

And Starsky was searching for an answer in his eyes.

*Was that why everything had been kept so calm?*

*Don’t think!*

no! do think!

think about the past six months. the past 12 months. the past 12 years! what held value and what held worth? what gave him contentment, and pleasure, and joy, and love?

then separate the moments of artificial ecstasy, borne by quick fixes of emotion and shallow sex, from the easy quietude of certain love.

remember the moments where your spirit soared, because you felt happy, or fulfilled, or important, or needed—or impassioned or loved.

who was there?


*Starsky.*

and what were you like with those people? with him?

*I was—fragile.*

you were at ease.

*I was vulnerable. Ready to be hurt.*

you were happy. you were at peace.

*I lost them all! I scorched my soul for nothing! I wasn’t there when they needed me, and they lost all they had!*
because you are a poor, pathetic, pitiful excuse for a human. because you really deserved their contempt, not their love. because you are worthless excuse for a man. because your presence means death.

Yes. Oh yes.

and anyone who would seek to be with you, who couldn’t be deterred by your failings, who would ask you to be with him, must be defective himself.

Yes. No. That’s not Starsky. Starsky is good.

not if he wants you. if he can’t see your flaws, then he must be very flawed himself. a horrible, terrible, dismal—

Starsky is good! He’s not perfect, but he is good! I’m just bad for him.

yes. so bad he’s stayed with you for all these years. so bad he’s ignored every opportunity to leave you. so bad he even wants you to promise not to leave him.

I will destroy him! My passion for him will annihilate us both!

he doesn’t seem to care. he seems to crave it.

I have to save him from himself.

then he is defective.

He is human!

so are you! either starsky is as horrible as you are, because he has chosen you, or you are wrong about yourself!

I’m not worth—

being loved? loving back? he believes in you. he trusted his life with you.

Which wouldn’t have been in danger if—

maybe. maybe not. think! you have just gone through the worst year you could possibly imagine! if he ever had an excuse to abandon you, he would have abandoned you in the past year! and he didn’t!

No. He did stay. He didn’t leave.

he sees value and worth.

But the cost! The pain! The anguish!

it’s not better to have loved and lost. you mustn’t take what you want, even if you can pay for it.

Hutch wanted to sleep, wanted to pass out, wanted to do whatever would leave him the least amount of consciousness. He was so empty, so afraid, so miserable.

What had he accomplished in even the past few months? He couldn’t protect his partner. He couldn’t find love or contentment or happiness with a woman. He couldn’t solve a case. All he had were a string of rejections, from Elisa to Crane—but not from Starsky.
Starsky hung onto him. Starsky followed him. Starsky kept coming back no matter how many times Hutch pushed him away—or almost got him killed.

So Starsky was either stupid or—or loyal.

And loving.

There were few moments of contentment and pleasure and joy and worth in the past year—all involved Starsky.

The liberation from death Starsky’s rebirth had given him. The shared impetus of returning to work and solving a case.

Admiring a newly-toned physique on Starsky. Discovering the contentment of accepting his love.

Uncovering the delight of unexpected desire.

What had Starsky said? Isn’t it enough just to love and be happy? And wasn’t what he had really been saying was: Isn’t it enough for us just to love and be happy together?

And if Starsky loved the Old Hutch, could he have really been so hazardous? Starsky didn’t take chances with anyone’s life, and he never took chances with his own—unless he knew Hutch was there to rescue him.

Starsky was taking a chance on him.

Could Hutch do any less than take a chance on himself as well?

Hutch reached out to Starsky.

Starsky was immediately in his embrace, shivering against him.

“I thought you’d walk out the door,” Starsky breathed against his chest.

Hutch shook his head, oblivious to the fact Starsky couldn’t see his response. He couldn’t quite focus on any one idea in his head.

Now—don’t think!

Feel!

One arm snaked around Starsky’s back; a hand lay easily on Starsky’s neck. Hutch felt a little nauseated, a little light-headed, a little ashamed. A huge pressure was being held back just below his neck, like a hose full of water without the spout turned on. Open it up, and it would overwhelm his being. Choke it back, and it would leave him a hollowed-out statue. Funnel it to the right place, though…

…and it would engorge his cock.

And Elisa and Leslie and Heather and Martin and Crane and everyone who had touched him in the last few weeks were washed away from his consciousness and he held Starsky tighter to him.

Starsky settled within his embrace, then suddenly jumped out of it. He stared at Hutch’s lap.

“I didn’t—I don’t—I never thought—“
Hutch pulled Starsky back against him.  

“Don’t think,” he breathed.  

The center of the palm of Hutch’s hand suddenly burned, and he felt along Starsky’s chest until the burning center found Starsky’s supple nipple. He barely moved his hand, gently bending the nub, feeling it swell under his palm.  

Starsky looked up at him, surprise and delight brightening the blue in his eyes.  

And then Starsky jumped again.  

It must have been a Pavlovian response that caused Starsky to shoot up and answer the phone. Hutch himself couldn’t move. The ringing just caused a painful echo in his ears and shot his heart rate up another 60 beats per second. It was minutes before the world steadied around him and he could see and hear and breathe again.  

Starsky hung the handset back in the cradle and rested his forehead against the wall.  

“They need us,” he managed to say. “Sheriffs found a fresh DB on the southern edge of Topanga Canyon. It’s been tentatively identified as Martin Rice. Ruth and Grimes are already on their way out.”  

Hutch closed his eyes. Maybe if he kept them closed his brain would also close, and the day would just cease to exist. But then the last few minutes would never have happened…if they did happen…  


*Maybe I can get dressed with my eyes closed, Hutch thought. Maybe I can just keep my eyes closed for the rest of day. Then I won’t have to look at anybody, and nobody can see me. I can be invisible. I can disappear.*  

Hutch peeked at his body through slitted eyelids. Still visible. It was going to take more than magical thinking to get him through the next few hours.  

Neither of the two men had even looked at each other, much less spoken to one another, since the incident. Or incidents, Hutch thought. How many humiliating, embarrassing, discomforting moments could you pack into one day?  

*How many would you like?* a little voice answered him. *And what kind would you like? The kind you have no control over, or the kind you bring upon yourself?*  

The rain had stopped, leaving puddles and slick spots. Hutch concentrated on the road passing under the them. Two lanes, hairpin turns, blind turnouts, watch for horseback riders. Except it was dusk, and only a fool would be riding a horse at this time of day so close to the highway.  

*You could have spared yourself some pain with Elisa, you know. You knew from the beginning you weren’t in it for the long haul, and the only way you were going to get something was to persuade her to discard everything she believed about her world and herself. Or was that the whole point—to make someone do something you wanted them to—give up something they believed in just for you.*  

Beautiful sunset, when you could see it through the trees and hills. It was the only positive point
about smog. Brilliant mauves, spectacular roses, magnificent sapphires. A great chemical prism through which to filter the sun.

Or maybe the point was to punish yourself. To make yourself so ugly and so hateful that no one could stand to be around you. Elisa certainly couldn’t. But then again, Leslie seemed to enjoy that in you. The brutality and the viciousness. The physical pain.

Hutch calculated their travel time. There should be a farm up here on the right, then just after that a fruit and vegetable stand, and down the hill from that would be the body.

But then again, there was all that psychological shit with Heather. Talk about debasement and humiliation. And you kept coming back! Weren’t you getting enough from your girlfriend? Or did you require both physical and psychological torment in one?

The car slowed as they neared a cadre of sheriffs’ cars, unmarked LAPD vehicles, and other emergency transport.

How low can you go? sang the voice in his head. How low can you go, how ugly can you act, how vile can you be before he realizes this is your true self and he does what he should have done a very long time ago and abandons you?

He?

Hutch started. The car jerked to a stop. Starsky exited the car and joined the group gathered around the coroner’s wagon. Hutch managed to follow.

Ruth, clad in jeans and shirt and jacket, met them just outside the circle.

“You want to tell me what really happened this afternoon?”

Starsky glanced down the canyon where a team was hauling the body up the hill.

“Witness across the road at the vegetable stand said a van pulled up on the shoulder, paused, then sped off. When he came over to see what they’d dumped, he found the body.

“He called it in, sheriff came, same old same old. Except they found this on the body.”

Ruth held up an evidence bag. Starsky took it, straining to see what was written on the paper inside. He shut his eyes and his lips became a thin line. He handed it to Hutch.

Hutch scrutinized the block printing:

if found, please return to detective kenneth hutchinson, lapd.

“The body’s fresh,” Ruth continued. “Hasn’t been dead more than a few hours, according to the ME. One .38 through the heart, one through the head. Now. Will you tell me what happened this afternoon?”

Starsky looked at Hutch. Hutch fingered the evidence bag.

“It was like I said,” Starsky opened. “We went to Crane’s home. Rice was there. There was no photo shoot; we just talked. The talk was about the kind of work we were doing, how long we’d been doing it…and then they asked us if we were cops and working on the serial killer case. They smirked and taunted us a little, then left us in an empty house. Then Hutch and I took off. I told you that.”

Ruth nodded. “That’s it? That’s all? No indication of any violence? No threats? No idea this would
Starsky shook his head. “This was the last thing I would have expected,” he mumbled, looking back at the corpse, focusing his attention on the shrouded body.

“Hutch?” Ruth turned her attentions to him.

Hutch shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. He passed the bag back to Ruth. “I mean, what Starsky said. They made us. But why take Rice out? I don’t know why this happened.” He avoided looking at Starsky, choosing also to look at the body being hauled up the canyon.

“We issued arrest warrants for everyone in your little club.”

“License on the van?” Starsky asked.

“Nope,” Ruth answered. “Any clues as to where we might find Crane? Or the others?”

Starsky shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. Home. Office. Barbados.”


Starsky stuck his hands in his pockets. “Any non-U.S. port.”


Hutch straightened his posture. “No. Nothing.” He avoided looking at Ruth. Hutch suddenly felt as if everyone could see the wounds on his back, knew the truth behind his naked upper lip, could feel the heat from the seared center of his palm.

Ruth put the back of her hand up to his cheek. “You’re hot. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Hutch backed away from her touch. “I’m fine,” he murmured. Heat slithered along his body, under his clothes. His neck, his underarms, the back of his thighs were damp. He used his bottom lip to wipe the beads of sweat from his upper lip.

Ruth pushed the heels of her palms against her eyes. “Shit.” She rubbed hard. “Okay. Starsky, take your partner home. Be in the office first thing in the morning. Maybe we’ll have something by then, picked someone up—I don’t know.” She sighed deeply. “I think I hate this case.”

Hutch caught himself swaying.

“Yeah. Okay.” Starsky answered for both of them.

Ruth nodded, then walked away.

Starsky kicked at a rock, rolled his shoulders within his jacket. “Yeah. Okay,” he repeated. “Guess we should go.”

Hutch shivered. Now he was cold.

“Okay?” Starsky finally looked at him.

Hutch nodded slowly. He found some balance, turned, and carefully walked back to the car.

Starsky followed.
“You look sick again,” Starsky said, once they were both ensconced in the car. He started the engine, but didn’t shift gears.

“I don’t know.” Hutch let his head fall back against the seat.

Starsky didn’t reply. He backed the car up, then swung it around and headed away from the site. “Your place is closer this time,” he stated. “We’ll be home soon.”

Another blast of heat swept Hutch’s body.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hutch woke.

Or tried to wake.

The world was fuzzy and foggy and a deep lethargy urged him to come back to sleep but his bladder was bleating for relief and his colon wasn’t opposed to that idea, either.

Without really seeing Hutch stumbled to the bathroom and attended to a few basic needs. Piss, shit, shower, shave, spit the toothpaste from his mouth just keep moving. He didn’t want to know what time it was but he forced himself to look at the clock and it was nearly noon and his partner was nowhere near and he felt anxious and nervous and nauseated.

And the note was on top of the table under the salt shaker and it said went in

let you know

later

Ohgodohgodohgod.

What have I done? Hutch thought. What did I do what am I doing what am I going to do?

And then he threw up but that didn’t help so he went out to the greenhouse and lay down on the chaise and waited to throw up again.

Starsky just kept staring at his feet.

He hadn’t really slept well last night. Hutch had crashed on his bed as soon as they’d gotten to his apartment. Literally crashed; hadn’t even taken off his jacket but just walked back to the bed and fallen over and hadn’t moved the rest of the night.

Starsky had pretty much done the opposite. Tried some TV, tried some reading, even watered some plants. He had an urge to sit down at the piano and bang on the keys as loudly as he used to when Mrs. LaZebnik invited him into her apartment to have at her upright. But that might have
have, he truly wasn’t sure) awakened Hutch. So instead he’d prowled, looking for signs of Hutch’s recent transformations (Old Hutch, New Hutch, Strange Hutch, Brute Hutch), but found nothing more than a broken-backed copy of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police guide to calisthenics.

Pacing the apartment invariably led him back to Hutch, lying immobile on top of the bedspread. Every time Starsky wandered back to the bedroom he’d had to resist the urge to undress the man and then sneak in next to him. Hutch seemed to understand that what had happened yesterday had not hurt Starsky, had not pushed him away or made him resentful. But Hutch had also been pretty shaky, and his personality gymnastics left Starsky unable to gauge what Hutch’s reaction would be today.

Starsky himself had been left shaky by yesterday’s events, but for another reason: Starsky’s fantasies of showing Hutch his love had been made flesh. Granted, not in the most romantic or sensual or conducive of ways, but it had happened nonetheless. And it had been most exciting, probably made more so by the adrenaline rush from the accompanying threat.

Which was kind of sick, but Starsky had learned long ago that his sexual response could sometime rear its head in the most unlikely of situations. Narco bust, gun battle, hospital stay—he just never knew what might rev him up.

“None of this makes sense anymore,” Ruth sighed. She pushed her chair back from her desk. “People having weird sex, people risking everything for strange pleasures, people getting killed for no reason.”

Starsky shifted in his chair. Yep, that pretty well summed up the past two months: senseless.

The phone rang. Ruth picked it up. She affirmed and confirmed and reaffirmed and hung up.

“I told them to call me when they have something, and now they call me every time they almost have something and even when they have nothing.” She sighed again.

“Do we have anything?” Starsky asked. In other words, I have a schizo partner and huge boner for him. What do you have?

Ruth chuckled humorlessly. “Yeah. We’ve got a dead body. We’ve got lots of dead bodies. We’ve got a pair of twisted twins and all we can pin on them is consensual incest. We’ve got a bridge club on the lam and not a player in sight. We’ve got a folder full of expense reports including an outrageous bill for purchase of porno magazines and stag films.” Ruth paused. “We’ve got a dead officer. And I’m not so sure about the health of one of the others.”

Starsky looked up at Ruth. “He’s okay,” he defended.

“You’d say that if he were lying in the gutter with a bottle of AppleJack in one hand, drool running down his chin, and a bloody knife in his other hand.”

One corner of Starsky’s mouth lifted.

Ruth pulled herself back up to the desk. “We’re disbanding the task force,” she said.

Starsky nodded. He might have been surprised if he wasn’t so tired. So much time and money had been poured into the investigation. Not to mention sanity.

“I think you and your partner should take some time off.”

Starsky nodded again. Oh yeah. Me and Hutch will go off to some Caribbean isle and lay in the sun and make dazzling love by starlight.
Ruth laughed. “Well that was easy! I expected you to put up a fight and demand double-overtime!”

Starsky didn’t respond. It was just too much effort to try and think up an appropriate and professional response. Of course, that would be a much easier effort than to try and think up what he’d say to Hutch when he got back to Venice Place. *Hi. Which part of the past 48 hours do you want to pretend never happened?*

“David. Please. I’m worried about you both. If you’d just tell me what’s wrong, maybe I could help.”

Starsky smiled sadly. “You mean besides Hutch being an asshole over my shooting and interfering in every way he can with this case and beating up on suspects?”

Ruth smiled back at him. “I think we can keep that out of the report, but it could make him a suspect in Rice’s death.”

“He was with me the entire day,” Starsky shielded.

“It’s alright, Dave.”

They sat in silence for a minute.

“What about you, Dave?” Ruth asked.

Starsky shook his head. He suddenly felt as if Ruth knew everything about him. And he felt safe. “I don’t know. I’m not sure,” he murmured.

“You know you can tell me about it. Friend to friend. No business involved.” She paused. “There’s nothing you could tell me that would change the way I feel about you. Or Hutch.”

Starsky felt himself blush at her candor and understanding. “We’re working on it,” he whispered hoarsely. “It’s just—hard.”

“I know,” Ruth said. “Learning to live with love and death can seem impossible. Too much pain to bear. But the alternative is worse. You can end up being alone. And on a purely personal note I would find this life a little less easy to bear if I thought relationships like yours and Hutch’s could be dissolved at all. It makes me happy to know somebody can find a partner in this world, and stay with him, even if it’s not me.”

“Yeah,” Starsky answered weakly.

“I’d tell you to go home but there’s still work to be finished and if you finish it now then you really can go home.” Ruth stood up. “And not have to come back.”

Starsky also stood. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Ruth waved him away. “I won’t.”

Primal instincts are good. Cop instincts are better. Hutch went from deep sleep to wide awake in an instant, jerking his body up from the chaise as adrenalin flooded his body.

“Please.” The man standing in the greenhouse offered his hand. “I didn’t come here to hurt you. As for this,” the man gestured with the other hand, which was holding a gun, “it’s merely to make sure you don’t do anything stupid.”
“Get out,” Hutch hissed.

“I don’t think so,” Crane replied. “Not until I’m satisfied that the work I’ve started has been completed.”

The plants Hutch had backed up against quivered with his anger.

Crane took a seat on the bench, and gestured for Hutch to do so. Hutch remained standing.

“So. Did you and your partner come to an understanding after our little—playdate?”

Hutch’s hand balled into fists, but he didn’t answer. It infuriated him that Crane had so easily disinterred his deepest desires.

Especially the one he’d so carefully buried even from himself.

“I really thought it would be the catalyst needed to help you overcome your fear,” Crane continued. “Many times, what a person really wants is to be forced into action, so he can avoid responsibility for that action. This was your situation. You desired, you couldn’t admit to that desire, you needed to be forced.”

An unbidden image of Starsky, naked and open, sitting on Crane’s couch, materialized in Hutch’s mind. “What the hell gives you the right to meddle in other peoples’ lives?” Hutch spat. It hurt to remember that his negligence had put Starsky on that couch.

It hurt to think of the desire the image aroused.

And it hurt to think that maybe the kiss later was just an imagined part of that desire.

Crane laughed. “My superiority, of course! I’m smarter than you! I’m more intelligent! Better educated! More worldly! I can read people. I can see what they want and what they deny and it gives me great pleasure to show them their true selves. I enjoy forcing them to admit their weaknesses and frailties. I like to see their secrets made public. I want them to admit their failings.”

Hutch’s muscles began to ache from the tension. “You murdered Martin.”

“Prove it,” Crane challenged. “Not that I’m not happy to see him out of the way. He served his purpose, but he was no longer useful.” Crane looked around the greenhouse. “I don’t suppose you have any wine in this apartment?”

Hutch glared at Crane.

“Yes. Well,” Crane sighed. “I don’t suppose you’d offer me any even if you did.” His eyes suddenly lit up. “Wait until you search Martin’s abode! You’ll find everything you need to establish him as your deviant sexual serial murderer!”

“Thanks to you, no doubt.” Hutch shifted as unobtrusively as possible.

“Oh no. Martin is the actual perpetrator. I may have smoothed his way—as I did for you—but it was his bloodlust that caused the demise of all those men. Not that they aren’t just as responsible for their own deaths,” Crane mused. “After all, they did willingly walk into Martin’s hands. That was his desire—and their fragilities.”

“As for Lawrence, and Gray, and the others—there are many others, you know, over all the years and all the miles I’ve traveled—they were just players on my little stage. Some are simply given
bigger roles than others.”

Hutch took a shaky step forward. He’d stayed away from Crane yesterday because he’d had to protect Starsky. But Starsky wasn’t here.

“No no.” Crane rose, gun pointed at Hutch. “No need to show me out. I can find the way.” He began to back out of the greenhouse, attention focused on Hutch.

“Filthy stinking bastard,” Hutch breathed.

“Which reminds me,” Crane continued backing toward the front door. “Just to make sure you understand your true feelings, I’ve arranged for your cherished partner to meet with a small, shall we say, ordeal. I have often found that the pain experienced by one person will arouse the sentiments of another.”

Crane whirled and quickly left the apartment.

Hutch doubled over as if he’d been hit in the gut. No more! his brain screamed. He struggled to stand, looking helplessly around the apartment.

Starsky! I have to get to Starsky!

Hutch ran into the bedroom and grabbed for whatever apparel was handy.

Have to get to Starsky!

He pulled on pants and a shirt, fumbled for shoes, stumbled for his weapon.

Starsky!

He lurched into the living room, looking around frantically. Keys...keys...I need keys...

No—wait. Call the station. See if Starsky’s there.

Hutch panicked, couldn’t remember where the phone was.

Car, then. Get to the car. Get to the radio. Get to Starsky.

Hutch spun and nearly lost his balance. He tripped toward the door and finally did lose his balance as the door opened into him and sent him sprawling to the floor.

“Hey, babe, you okay?” Starsky shoved keys in his pocket, then leaned down to grasp Hutch’s arms.

“God. Starsky. Starsky.” Hutch’s voice was barely audible. He let Starsky pull him upright, then threw his arms around Starsky and pulled him into a constricting embrace.

Starsky fell against him, his arms pinned to his sides, his face smooshed against Hutch’s shoulder. “What’s wrong?” Starsky mumbled into Hutch’s clavicle.

Hutch answered by squeezing him tighter. Then hands frantically explored Starsky’s back and sides, searching for injury.

Starsky, arms now freed, made a grab for Hutch’s probing hands.

“Hold it! Easy. Tell me what’s wrong.” He held Hutch’s arms out and apart, quieting them.
Hutch looked at Starsky. Questioning, frightened eyes looked into his. And his own eyes answered by filling with stinging tears.

“Babe,” Starsky breathed.

And Hutch fell limply against his partner.

Starsky supported his weight, one arm around his back, a hand cradling his neck.

“S’okay,” Starsky soothed. “Take it easy. It’s gonna be okay.”

The words vibrated against Hutch’s cheek even as hot tears stained his face.

Slowly, Starsky eased them both over to the couch. They sat as one, Hutch still protectively held, Starsky still whispering words of comfort.

“What happened?” Starsky finally lifted Hutch’s face up, a thumb erasing some of the wetness.

“Crane was here,” Hutch rasped. “He said he hurt you.”

Starsky stiffened. “Crane was here? We need to report—“

Hutch shook his head, dislodging a few more tears. “Long gone.” He swallowed hard. “He said he hurt you again.”


Hutch slowly nodded at the realization. Mind fuck! He looked Starsky over carefully. It’s all one big mind fuck!

Starsky smiled at him. “Okay?”

Hutch took a deep breath. He reached out and allowed two fingers to trace Starsky’s smile.

Starsky’s smile grew bigger.

“Ruth says it’s over. There are a couple of reports you need to sign and there’ll probably be some loose ends to tie up and we’re to—“

Hutch leaned in and kissed the lips under his fingers.

Starsky didn’t move, but his lips softened.

Hutch lifted off the warm lips, but only backed away an inch.

“Hutch?”

No. Starsky.

Warm breath, warm body.

Right here, right now.

Not refusing, not rejecting; not ordering, not humiliating; not damaging, not injuring.

Hutch leaned in again.
This time Starsky’s lips met his with equal pressure, simply pressing. Hutch held the kiss, then backed off again.

Starsky immediately closed the distance, soft, quick kisses peppering Hutch’s upper and lower lips. Then longer, stronger pressure. Starsky sucked on Hutch’s lower lip, and Hutch’s stomach dropped.

He did kiss me yesterday! He was showing me the truth!

Hutch dropped his head to the left, and Starsky’s mouth opened to his.

Their tongues poked and prodded, explored the soft, hot, wet interiors of their mouths. Hutch sucked on the firm, pliant tongue Starsky offered him, and when Starsky sucked on his, Hutch lost his equilibrium completely.

The center of Hutch’s hand began to burn, and he fumbled inside Starsky’s shirt even as their mouths continued to tug and pull.

Crane made me touch you there, but this time I want to!

And I want you to accept it because you want to, not because you have to!

Hutch’s palm skimmed over Starsky’s chest until it found the wonderful nub. Hutch centered it in his palm, then began slow circles that moved the nipple around and around until it hardened under his touch. Starsky’s baritone groans vibrated in his mouth.

Hutch suddenly needed that supple appendage in his mouth. He pushed Starsky down to the sofa, his own body following, keeping their lips together. Balanced precariously on the edge of his cushions, Hutch disengaged his mouth from Starsky’s and targeted the nipple. His mouth formed a circle around the nipple; his tongue flicked it back and forth and then licked it slowly.

Starsky arched into his mouth, a sucking, hissing sound issuing from between Starsky’s clenched teeth. Then he lay back against the arm of the couch, and Hutch followed.

Hutch’s hands began pushing aside the fabric of Starsky’s jacket and shirt even as his mouth continued to minister to Starsky’s nipple. Starsky must have helped, as they both were suddenly whisked away, baring his entire chest to Hutch. Hutch changed to tiny kisses as he made his way to Starsky’s other nipple.

Starsky responded by taking Hutch’s head in his hands, his fingers twining through Hutch’s hair, thumbs stroking his temples.

Hutch scooted farther down the sofa, holding Starsky’s waist in his hands as he laved both Starsky’s nipples, feeling them lengthen and harden under his tongue and between his lips. Hutch teased and tested, sometimes holding them between his lips and tugging on them, sometimes bending them back and forth with his tongue.

I can’t believe you’re not shoving me away, screaming at me…rejecting me!

Starsky’s hands moved down to his back, stroking, then tugging on Hutch’s shirt. Hutch reluctantly released Starsky’s waist long enough to let Starsky pull the shirt off up over his head.

Warm, firm hands stroked up and down his back, ignoring the fading wounds and tracing their own route over his skin. Light touches alternated with harder kneading of his back and shoulder muscles. Hutch rolled his shoulders in pleasure.
Starsky’s fingers dug into Hutch’s back when Hutch took a nipple between his teeth and pulled. A groan emanated from deep in Starsky’s throat.

*I can make it even better...I can make the hurt go away, instead of lead it to you!*

Hutch’s fingers moved from Starsky’s waist to his belt. He slid the leather through the buckle with uncharacteristic smoothness, pushed the ends aside, and just as easily opened Starsky’s fly.

“Hutch?” Starsky whispered hoarsely.

Hutch’s answer was to tug Starsky’s jeans down his hips.

Starsky’s reply was to lift his ass in assistance.

Hutch pulled both jeans and briefs down Starsky’s legs to his ankles. Starsky struggled to kick off both shoes and free himself.

Hutch moved back up to Starsky’s groin.

“Hutch,” Starsky whispered again, this time more urgently.

Hutch looked up into deeply concerned blue eyes. But there weren’t scared, and they weren’t mocking, and they most certainly were not filled with hate.

“We can’t go back,” Starsky said.

And Hutch finally knew he didn’t want to go back. He didn’t want to lose what they had shared before Starsky’s shooting; he hated what they had gone through after the shooting; but he finally accepted what they were proclaiming now.

Hutch wanted more.

And the only way to have more was to take more and not look back.

Hutch turned his attention’s to Starsky’s tumescent cock. He ran a finger over it, watching it react to his touch, wondering that he could conjure such a reaction.

“I know,” Hutch said softly. “I tried to go back. It doesn’t work.” He leaned over and kissed Starsky’s cock. It was hot and pulsating and alive under his lips.

Starsky.

“But I think I’m ready to go forward. If you’ll go with me.”

Starsky took Hutch’s head in his hands, urging him upward. Their lips once again met. “God, I’m scared,” Starsky breathed into his mouth.

Hutch nodded as they continued to kiss. *Scared? You don’t know from scared,* he thought.

*Protect Starsky.*

Starsky’s hands were all over his back, his neck, his face as they kissed.

*The world will reject us...fear us...hate us...we'll lose everything.*

Starsky’s mouth moved to Hutch’s chin, then his neck, sucking on the soft flesh as the base of his
throat. Hutch shivered.

_Do you care?_ a voice suddenly asked. _Do you really care about protecting Starsky, or do you just care about protecting yourself?_

Starsky’s thumbs traced esses over Hutch’s smooth chest, Starsky’s mouth leaving a wet trail down his sternum.

_I care…about Starsky._

Starsky kissed his way back to Hutch’s mouth. His left hand slid down to Hutch’s waistband, unsnapped his jeans, and burrowed into Hutch’s groin.

_I want…Starsky._

Starsky’s hand wrapped around Hutch’s cock, squeezing it, a thumb stroking along its length.

_I want…Starsky…to stay with me._

Hot lips sucked and pressed against Hutch’s mouth. A tongue probed his palate. A hand pumped and gripped, fingers stroked and rubbed.

_Starsky!_

Hutch slid over a 90-degree drop, his body losing all consistency, his brain encased in white mesh. And then a time-stopping, breath-taking flash of infinity: _Release!_

Starsky planted easy kisses over his face. Hutch began to breathe again.

Hutch put his hand on Starsky’s chest and pushed back into the cushions. He looked carefully at Starsky. Glittering, delighted eyes met his. A flush suffused Starsky’s chest and cheeks.

And wonder of wonders, Starsky didn’t move! He didn’t leave, he didn’t cry, he didn’t laugh derisively, he didn’t throw up, and he most certainly didn’t die!

_He was smiling! At him! Starsky!_

_Goddammit, he likes me!_

“I can’t believe it,” Hutch breathed.

“I know!” Starsky grinned.

“What have we done?” Hutch asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Starsky answered. “I love you. That’s all that matters.”

_Goddammit, he loves me!_

“You really mean it.” Hutch was in awe.

“Huh?” Starsky sat up.

“You want me to stay with you.”

“Of course I do,” Starsky grabbed Hutch’s upper arms and pulled him into an embrace. He let his lips linger on Hutch’s shoulder. “Did you think I was kidding about that? I was scared shitless you
were going to leave me.” He nibbled on Hutch’s neck, then up to Hutch’s ear “That is the only thing you could have done to hurt me—leave me,” he whispered.

Hutch nodded, finally understanding what it really meant to protect Starsky. It didn’t involve guns, it didn’t involve seat belts, it didn’t involve punishing himself, and it didn’t involve control.

It didn’t even involve safety.

All it involved was letting Starsky be happy, by letting Starsky love him, and loving him back.

Starsky shifted to sit upright, his back against the sofa back. He guided Hutch to kneel between his legs. Starsky sat, bold, confident, his legs spread wide, his hands on Hutch’s face.

Hutch looked up into passionate eyes, then bowed his head and touched his swollen lips to Starsky’s swollen member. Hutch leaned over and kissed Starsky’s cock. It stirred and moved against his cheek. Hutch rubbed his cheek against it, and Starsky moaned.

Hutch took the base in his fist and let his thumb rub the underside. It lengthened, hardened; pre-cum glistened on the tip. He squeezed the base gently, and let his lips glide over the head. Each pump of Hutch’s hand, each kiss of Hutch’s lips, each stroke of Hutch’s thumb evoked another guttural reverberation from Starsky’s throat. Hutch recognized the sounds from their forced love-making; now he knew Starsky had not been putting on an act for Crane, but reacting to Hutch’s touch. Hutch was overjoyed.

Hutch planted soft, warm kisses along its length, feeling it quiver with every contact. Then Hutch began to rub his lips up and down its length, occasionally injecting his tongue to moisten the shaft.

Starsky shifted slightly as Hutch lifted Starsky’s cock and used strong fingers to probe, and then fondle, his balls. Starsky’s ass fairly lifted off the couch as Hutch squeezed the tender sacs, then moved his hand to encase Starsky’s cock and slide it up and down the firm flesh. It was natural, almost innate, to hold Starsky inside his fist and ride it up and down, gently tugging it to its full length.

Hutch bent over once more and used his mouth to lick and kiss, suck and wet Starsky’s cock. His right hand held Starsky’s balls, kneading them, his left guiding the penis into his mouth. Starsky groaned, loud and long, when Hutch took the sensitive head into his mouth and used his tongue to circle it. Hutch released it for another round of gentle mouthing of the entire length, then once again focused his attention on the head. He sucked more firmly, tonguing the heated head, a hand encircling the base of Starsky’s penis, pulling the skin taut.

Starsky jerked quietly, his entire body stiffening then seeming to explode in a burst of heat. Hutch held Starsky in his mouth easily, tenderly, holding it firmly but not sucking. Liquid spurted into his mouth and throat, but instead of choking this time, it flowed naturally down his throat as he swallowed, and then he let the spasming cock slip out of his mouth.

Hutch released Starsky’s balls as well, and rested his cheek on Starsky’s trembling thigh. Loving hands stroked Hutch’s hair, and a most satisfied sigh escaped from Starsky’s chest.

And once again, Starsky didn’t move, didn’t leave, didn’t die.

Starsky reached down and pulled Hutch up onto his chest. Hutch felt Starsky giggle, then explode in a war whoop. Hutch wrapped his arms around Starsky and held him tightly. He pressed his cheek against Starsky’s chest, felt his own cock stir again as it pressed against Starsky’s leg.

Starsky released Hutch and pushed out from under him. Hutch slipped back to the floor, his head
resting on the edge of the sofa cushions, as Starsky walked into the bathroom. When Starsky came back, he stood behind Hutch and pulled him to a standing position, Starsky’s groin pressed hard into Hutch’s ass.

Starsky’s thumbs hooked into Hutch’s waistband and skimmed off his jeans. Hutch stepped out and started to turn around, but Starsky kept them front to back. Starsky’s arms encircled him, his right hand rubbing over his chest, his left stroking down to his cock. Cool, slippery fingers ran over his cock and Hutch nearly lost his balance, his knees slightly buckling as Starsky held him upright with one arm and lubricated him with the other.

“’S’allright babe,” Starsky breathed.

Hutch felt himself hardening under Starsky’s ministrations. He held onto the arm supporting him and let his weight fall back against his partner.

Starsky’s hand slipped over his penis, then down to coat his balls, and Hutch shivered.

“Gotta move a little now.” Hutch could hear the grin in Starsky’s voice.

Starsky kept Hutch still, then slipped around in front of him, so now Starsky’s ass was cupped in Hutch’s groin. Hutch wrapped his arms around Starsky, for support as well as reassurance, holding him as tightly as possible against his heated body. Hutch’s hands moved over Starsky’s chest, feeling the chest hair swirl under his palms, seeking out the sensitive nipples that responded to his touch.

This time Starsky knees buckled, and his weight pushed back on Hutch as he clung to Hutch for support. His head fell back on Hutch’s shoulder, and Hutch fixed his mouth on Starsky’s neck, sucking at the flesh as he pinched Starsky’s nipples.

Starsky groaned, and as one they fell to the couch. Starsky quickly adjusted his position to rest his elbows on the couch, lifting his ass up into Hutch’s cupping groin.

Hutch ran a hand over his own swelling cock, then slipped it between Starsky’s ass cheeks and rubbed it between them, lubricating the outer anal area. The pressure was warm, wonderful. Hutch tentatively brought the tip of his penis to Starsky’s anus.

“S’okay,” Starsky purred.

Hutch pushed forward, entering gently, slowly, until Starsky moaned. Hutch didn’t force his entry, but maintained constant and gentle pressure against the tight internal muscle. Starsky grabbed the edge of the cushions and lifted up slightly, pushing back against Hutch, almost urging him to hasten his entry.

But Hutch concentrated on the sensations of the moment, the heat that encased him and held him tight; the electric shocks that flashed through his body with each soft thrust. Gradually, Starsky relaxed, and Hutch slid in until there was no space between their bodies.

They both groaned. “God, Hutch,” Starsky rasped. “I never imagined——“

Hutch held Starsky tightly, then began moving gently in and out, never quite slipping all the way from Starsky. Starsky moved with him, also seeming to need to keep them locked together. Hutch had one arm thrown around Starsky’s chest, the other braced against the couch. Starsky had both arms braced against the couch, his head thrown back as Hutch burrowed his face into Starsky’s neck.

Hutch began moving more swiftly, less gently, the heat and friction against his penis making him want even more friction, more heat. His strokes became quicker, shorter; his grip on Starsky
inflexible and unyielding. And his blood roared in his ears and he cried out against Starsky’s throat and he felt himself emptied yet not empty but full, filled with his own life and Starsky’s.

And Hutch finally slipped out of Starsky and fell to the side, and Starsky fell against him and they lay against the couch.

“Thank you,” Hutch finally found his breath, found his voice. He was wrapped around Starsky, not protecting him, but loving him.

“That was nothing,” Starsky panted. “Wait’ll you see me when I’ve had some time to plan.”

“No,” Hutch shook his head against Starsky’s shoulder. “Thank you for saving my life.”

Starsky chuckled within Hutch’s embrace. “That’s our job, us partners. We save each other’s lives.”

Hutch held him more firmly and marveled at how easy it was to have everything once you gave up trying to keep it.

So easy. So wonderful.

So long to get here.

Hutch sighed contentedly.

EPILOGUE

Starsky was a model of professional detachment.

Hutch watched him: Casually, carefully, secretly he measured Starsky’s every move. Of late Hutch had become expert at this game, peeking under half-closed lids, admiring from behind dark glasses, listening when he couldn’t look. He’d become a master of discovery, the Sherlock Holmes of the LAPD. And all his efforts were devoted toward one man. One man who wanted all his skills. One man who wanted all his attentions. One man who absolutely wanted him….

It hadn’t been a simple beginning. Vigilance, over-protectiveness, and suffocating watchfulness had nearly destroyed him. Particularly since it had been spent on the wrong person. He should have been watching himself. Should have been monitoring his own psyche, his own recovery. But Hutch was an expert at stealth, and he could hide even from himself.

Fortunately, he couldn’t hide from the observation of others. And they’d forced him to examine himself.

This morning, Hutch observed, he was dressed in Oxford shirt, pressed khakis, and light tan jacket. They were Starsky’s; he’d forgotten they were due at the precinct this morning for an official “mustering out.” The pants were a little short, but his boots hid that fact, and he rolled back the sleeves of the jacket and shirt to cover their lack of arm length. Not a new look for Hutch; he and Starsky had swapped clothes on a regular basis since they’d become friends. It was just now those swapped clothes felt—different. Better. More protective.
Starsky had on his favorite jeans, favorite plaid shirt, and favorite leather jacket. That is, Hutch’s favorites. Starsky had been raiding his closet as well.

“So officially, you’re signed off and out.” Grimes concluded his speech.

“Doesn’t feel finished,” Starsky said.

“Well,” Ruth pushed her bangs off her forehead, then pushed her chair back from her desk, “we’ve got Rice as our serial killer. His apartment had enough evidence to implicate him in every case on our list, as well as a couple more. We’ve got Lawrence as his accomplice, and he’s awaiting extradition in New Mexico. Our two gym teachers are just a couple of perverted weirdos who got caught in our operation. We’re probably never going to figure out exactly who offed Rice; there’s plenty of motive from a couple of different people but no evidence to point to anybody specific. And even though my money’s on Crane, we can’t prove it. What more do you want, Dave?”

Hutch watched Starsky take a deep breath and let it out slowly. His partner looked over at him, holding his eyes.

“I want Crane.”

Hutch nodded in understanding.

“We find him, we question him,” Grimes said.

“He’s a sociopath,” Hutch stated. “He manipulated Rice, he manipulated Lawrence, he manipulated the hunters as well as the hunted.”

“Including us?” mused Ruth.

“Especially us,” murmured Hutch.

“Okay, you’re debriefed.” Grimes stood and walked to the office door. “If we need you we’ll call you. I don’t want this all showing up in the L.A. Times or on 60 Minutes, understand?”

“Harry, you’re the media whore,” Ruth opined. “If there’s a book in this it’ll come from your typewriter.”

Grimes harrumphed and left the office.

Ruth laughed.

“Alright, boys, any last questions or words of wisdom before I release you?”

Hutch looked at Starsky, who looked back at him. “I don’t think so,” Hutch answered.

“Can’t say I’m sorry to be going,” Starsky said. He was still looking at Hutch.

“Yes, just too weird,” Ruth added. “I hope I never see another one like this again. Gave me the creepy-crawlies.”

“Gave me the willies,” Starsky smiled at Ruth.

Gave me you, Hutch thought.

“Gave me too much paperwork,” Ruth shuffled a pile of papers on her desk. “Which I
will never get done if I keep shooting the shit with you two. Out.”

- Hutch and Starsky rose.

- “By the way,” Ruth appeared engrossed in a report on the top of the pile. “Love your outfits.”

- Hutch blushed and looked at Starsky. Starsky cleared his throat and adjusted his jacket. They smiled at each other, and left the room.

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