Summary: A series of disturbing phone calls from people Dave Starsky knows is destroying his sleep and slowly driving him mad. The calls won't stop, and worst of all, the people making them...are all dead. Starsky knows these calls can't be real, but they sound so...real. Is he losing his mind?

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Categories: Gen

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Gaslight

by Sue David and Valerie Wells

For the first time in three weeks, Starsky was convinced he was going to get some real sleep. No phone calls to mar his rest. They had begun on the anniversary of Terry's shooting. Not her death, which seemed odd to Starsky, but the day she was shot. Strange phone calls that couldn't be explained. The simple solution would have been to leave the phone off the hook overnight a few times. That would probably dissuade whoever was playing this particular sick joke, but Starsky couldn't do that. He was supposed to be accessible to the department around the clock. Besides that, what if Hutch needed him? No. That wasn't an option.

In the beginning of this nightmare, Starsky had only told Hutch he kept getting prank calls in the middle of the night. He wasn't in a hurry to explain the nature of those calls. Knowing his partner, he'd drag him off to see a shrink. No, Starsky thought the better part of valor in this situation was just to change his phone number. He'd done it three times now, but each time, the calls had kept coming without a break. This time, when he changed the number, he'd given it only to the department, Hutch, and his mother. Tonight, a chilly February evening, he'd collapsed on the bed. He was too tired to even take off his clothes or climb under the blankets. Starsky had kicked off his shoes and fallen asleep immediately.

Starsky slept like a rock for two hours, but the phone jarred him awake at two a.m.

"'Lo?" he muttered as a question.

The female voice that had been tormenting him almost nightly spoke quietly, sadly. "Dave, it's me. Why do you keep changing your number? Don't you love me anymore?"

As long as he lived, Starsky thought he could never forget Terry's voice. Now, he almost wished he could. How had whoever this was gotten the new number? Again?

"Look, I don't know who the hell you are, but this is a pretty sick joke..." his tirade began.

"How can you ask that?" the plaintive voice said, interrupting him.

"I don't know how you got this number but stop calling here!" he shouted at the phone, punctuating the thought by the angry slamming of the receiver onto the hook switch.

He sat up in bed, panting, fuming. He had gotten little sleep in the past two weeks. His heart was racing.

The phone rang again. He almost didn't answer it this time, but he couldn't stop himself.

This time, the man's voice. "David?"
The voice sounded so much like his. Distant memories started to flood his mind. He was shaking and could say nothing -- he just breathed rapidly and his eyes opened wide. This isn't happening!

David Starsky's rational mind knew there was no chance the man on the end of the line was his father. Just like it knew there was no chance the woman who called earlier was his dead fiancée. However, exhaustion was making his head swim and his rational mind was losing to a sense of overwhelming dread.

"David. How can you talk to Terry like that? Especially when it's your fault she's dead."

Starsky hung up the phone. He stood and paced around the room. As soon as it started to ring again, he went out to the living room, his hands over his ears. The phone never stopped.

Looking up, his eyes came to rest on his gun. He quickly crossed the room and retrieved it -- returning to the bedroom, taking off the safety, and pointing it at the ringing phone -- but he didn't pull the trigger. In a blinding flash of pain and desperation, he turned the gun on himself. Uncontrollable shaking almost caused his finger to tighten on the trigger, but he stopped himself -- lowering his hand, but not releasing the weapon. A promise. He made his best friend a promise years ago. Can't break my promise. Hutch. He needed Hutch.

Starsky sat on the bed and grabbed the ringing phone. He picked up the receiver and he heard the man's voice calling his name again, but from a distance. Instead of listening, this time he hung up and picked the phone up again after only a second or two. The dial tone was a relief. He rested the receiver between his shoulder and his ear so he could dial his lifeline. The Beretta was still in his left hand.

~*~*~*~*

Ken Hutchinson hadn't fallen asleep yet. He was lying awake thinking of what he could do to help his best friend. Hutch had become increasingly worried about Starsky over the past two weeks. What had started with a series of prank phone calls in the middle of the night -- phone calls his partner refused to elaborate on -- had progressed to a full blown depression on his partner. Starsky had stopped telling him about the calls, insisting that he was sleeping despite his obvious physical deterioration. In the past two weeks, he had all but stopped eating. Hutch knew his best friend thought he had him fooled, but Starsky hadn't eaten what could be called a real meal in five or six days. Any attempt to get information out of him had failed and Starsky refused to let him stay at his place, or to stay with Hutch. He was at a loss, but determined he was going to get his partner taken off the duty roster the next day if things didn't improve. Hutch was worried about Starsky's state of mind, and his safety on the streets. Knowing his partner would die to protect him didn't mean he wouldn't make a stupid mistake with his own safety.

When Starsky suddenly announced he had changed his phone number again, Hutch was both relieved and suspicious. Why would Starsky need to do that if the calls had stopped? He only hoped the decision meant his best friend would finally get a good night's sleep. When Hutch's phone rang at a little after two in the morning, he was glad he was still awake.
"Starsky?" he said, knowing it was almost certain to be his partner.

The tone of the voice on the other end of the line was thin, tight, and frightening. "Hutch?"

"Starsk, what's wrong?" Hutch was already up and reaching for something to wear.

"I..." the catch in his friend's voice put Hutch on alert.

"Talk to me, buddy." This was serious, whatever it was.

"I'm sorry, Hutch. I can't...I know, I promised. Uh...."

"Are you all right?" Hutch asked as he pulled his cords on and bent to retrieve his shoes.

"No. I'm scared, Hutch. I'm afraid I...can't keep my promise. Need you."

Hutch's heart pounded in his chest. Promise? "What promise, buddy?"

"Terry. Aw, Hutch. God, I...please just come."

"I'm on my way. Don't do ANYTHING! Do you hear me?"

The pause on the other end of the line made his palms sweat. "Starsky, answer me. I want you to promise you won't do anything till I get there."

"Okay, Hutch. Hurry."

He hung up the phone, pulling a t-shirt on as he raced for the living room. Hutch grabbed his weapon and a jacket on the way out the door; all but killing himself, tripping on his own untied shoelaces as he pounded down the stairs of Venice Place. He could only think of one promise that Starsky might be talking about and he prayed to God he was wrong. After Terry died, his best friend had almost committed suicide in his grief and pain. Hutch would never forget the night he'd left Starsky alone just long enough to pick up dinner. When he returned, Starsky had left him a despondent note and disappeared, prompting a frantic search by Hutch and Huggy. They'd found Starsky out cold next to Terry's grave; lucky he'd been too sick and overcome with emotion to pull the trigger of the gun he still held in his hand. Hutch made him promise never to think of doing such a thing again and Starsky had given his word. If that was the promise, he had no time to lose. Hutch threw the light up on top of the car and screamed down the road, siren howling.

He cut the siren a block away from Starsky's and he turned the light off, throwing it onto the front seat as he pulled to a stop. Hutch took the stairs to Starsky's place two at a time, putting his key in the lock with shaking hands. When he flung open the door, Hutch immediately turned toward the bathroom, hearing the shower running. The door wasn't closed all the way. Hutch poked his head in and saw Starsky's gun lying on the bathmat.
"Starsky?" he said tentatively. Hutch was curious why there was no steam in the room with the shower blasting.

"Yeah," came a small sounding voice from inside the shower.

When Hutch stepped all the way into the room, he had his answer about the steam. Starsky was huddled in the corner of the shower, fully clothed and shivering in the cold-water spray.

Hutch swallowed hard as he scooped the Beretta up, put the safety back on, and tucked it into his jacket pocket. He moved in, turning off the cold water.

Starsky looked up at him, blue eyes filled with pain and confusion. "Sorry."

Hutch's heart was breaking for his friend and he was scared about what could possibly have driven him to this level of despair. "Hey, babe, let me help you out of there. What, are you trying to catch pneumonia?" He put his hand out for Starsky and was concerned by the icy hand that was given to him in return.

"Wait, take those wet clothes off, first." Hutch helped his friend peel off his soaked clothing and he handed him dry towels. Starsky was still shivering, his lips a little blue over chattering teeth.

"They found me, Hutch."

"Who did? What's this all about?" Hutch tried to help the nearly frozen fingers dry Starsky's thick curls. He didn't want Starsky going to bed with wet hair in the condition he was in at the moment.

The phone started to ring, interrupting what Starsky was about to say. Hutch moved toward it, but Starsky grabbed him by the wrist and said, "No, don't!"

Hutch put a hand on Starsky's shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this, buddy. It's all right."

After handing Starsky his robe from behind the door, he left him in the bathroom and grabbed the ringing phone in the bedroom. Instead of saying hello, he just listened. A familiar sounding man's voice said, "David?" If he hadn't known better, he would have sworn the man on the line was Starsky.

"Who the hell is this!?" Hutch demanded. He got no answer, just a click from the other end as the party hung up the phone. Disgusted, he hung up, too, and then took it off the hook.

Starsky was stumbling into the room, wrapped in the robe, still drying his hair with a towel. He didn't look any warmer and Hutch helped him get into bed, under the covers. He grabbed an extra blanket from Starsky's closet and covered him with it. Then he announced he was going to make some tea and get a hot water bottle together to warm his partner. Starsky nodded and closed his eyes as he settled under the blankets.
When Hutch returned, he had to awaken Starsky to drink the tea. He almost didn't, but he wanted some answers. He helped his friend sit up and put the tea into trembling hands.

"Starsky," Hutch started as he tucked the hot water bottle under the blankets against Starsky's abdomen, "I need you to tell me what happened. What promise?"

Sipping the tea carefully, trying not to spill it, Starsky responded with another apology. "Sh-shouldn't have called. 'S late."

"Don't worry about it, buddy, I'm glad you called. Please, you're scaring me here. Talk to me. Were you talking about the promise you made me...when Terry died?"

Starsky nodded. "My fault."

"Is that what these phone calls have been about, Starsk? Terry?"

"Yeah, Terry, others. My dad, Hutch. He said it was my fault."

Hutch could see Starsky wasn't rational yet. He needed some sleep. Uninterrupted sleep. "Buddy, you know Terry's death wasn't your fault and your dad has been dead more than twenty years. He didn't say any such thing."

"He did, Hutch. He called." Starsky's eyes were sliding closed again and Hutch hoped the brandy he'd spiked the tea with would help him sleep. He confiscated the cup before Starsky dropped it from limp fingers, setting it down on the nightstand. After easing his best friend down onto the bed, Hutch went out to the living room to make up the couch. He was exhausted, too. He crashed with both of their guns tucked under the couch cushions, making a lumpy sleeping surface even worse.

Hutch was startled awake by the sound of Starsky's alarm clock at six-thirty. Cursing himself for forgetting to turn it off, he stumbled into Starsky's room in time to see a hand come out from underneath the blankets and hit the snooze button.

"Hey," Hutch said quietly. He was answered by a moan from the bed.

"You rest a little longer," Hutch moved over and turned off the alarm clock so it wouldn't waken Starsky again. "I'm gonna take a shower and then I'll make some breakfast."

"Not hungry," the sleepy voice replied from under the covers.

"You're gonna eat it anyway, now go back to sleep." Unwilling to take any chances before he was certain Starsky was okay, Hutch took their guns with him into the bathroom and locked the door behind him.

Both men kept extra clothing and toiletries at each other's homes. Too many nights sleeping off a late stakeout or helping each other through sickness or injuries taught them to do that. Twenty
minutes later, Hutch was showered, shaved, dressed, and in the kitchen making breakfast. The smell of coffee had wafted into the bedroom and was coaxing his partner awake. He looked up from cooking bacon to see a disheveled looking Starsky shuffling toward him.

"What are you doing up? I would have brought it to you." Starsky still looked bad. The few hours of sleep had helped, but could not have been enough after nearly two weeks without much real rest.

"Morning to you, too. Gonna be late for work."

"You're not going to work today, Starsk."

"Yes, I am. I'm okay."

Hutch flipped a piece of bacon over, jumping back a little when some grease spattered up and hit him on the hand. He stuck the stinging hand under the cold tap and said, "No, you're not. I'm calling you in."

Starsky sighed and moved over to get a look at the burned appendage. "Just a flesh wound," he pronounced as he took over duties as cook. "Hutch, I need to go to work. If I don't, I'll just sit around here and freak myself out all day. I promise you, I'm okay now."

Hutch dried off his hand and looked at Starsky, deadly seriousness in his tone, "You promise, huh? What about the promise you came close to breaking last night?"

Concentrating on moving the now cooked bacon onto waiting paper towels, Starsky sighed. "I don't know what came over me last night. It's just these phone calls and when it was my dad... I just, I'm sorry. I swear I won't do anything stupid, okay?"

"I'm not giving your gun back until you tell me what's going on and you'd better be more convincing than that." Hutch busied himself with scrambling some eggs in a bowl. He tossed in a little milk and continued to stir as he patiently awaited an answer. "Get yourself some coffee, sit down over there and tell me what's happening here. You don't get to call me in the middle of the night, scare the devil out of me, and then just say it's all okay, Starsk."

Knowing he had no choice, Starsky complied. He got his coffee, grateful for the warmth that was seeping into his hand from the cup. Then he settled at the kitchen table, watching his best friend make breakfast as he tried his best to explain.

"I don't know where to start."

"How 'bout at the beginning. That usually works pretty well." Hutch smiled at him, hoping to relieve a little of Starsky's apprehension with his teasing.

"Like I said before, the phone calls. I thought when I changed my number they'd stop. They didn't. Every time I changed it, the calls just kept coming. She called again last night, Hutch."
"Who?"

"Terry."

"Starsk...."

"I know it ain't really Terry, just like I know it wasn't my dad. I just, well...for about two weeks now, I've been gettin' these phone calls from, uh, people who are supposed to be dead."

Hutch looked up from his frying pan and his mouth dropped open a little. "What did you say?"

"Your eggs are burning, and you heard me right. Dead people, Hutch. I didn't tell you before because I knew you'd think I was nuts." Starsky suddenly became engrossed in putting more sugar in his coffee.

The blond man stirred the eggs a little, tossing in some cheese and more pepper, then said with feigned lightness, "I've always know you were nuts, buddy. Pray, continue." He scooped the eggs onto plates, added the bacon and carried their breakfasts over to the table. "Sorry, no toast, you're out of bread."

"'S all right. I don't know if I can eat this anyway."

"Try."

Starsky nodded as he picked up one piece of bacon. "God, my mother would kill me if she knew I eat this stuff." Hutch chuckled at that.

"Come on, what about these calls, now." Hutch was ready for him to continue.

"The callers ask me why I caused them to die. They accuse me of stuff. They...." Starsky put his bacon down and pushed the plate back away, ignoring Hutch's frown. "Even my dad, Hutch. He says it's all my fault."

"Who has been calling?" Although this story sounded incredible, Hutch didn't doubt it. He knew Starsky wouldn't make up something like this. He was too worried and Starsky wouldn't do that to him.

"Lotta people really. Mostly it's been Terry and my dad. The reason I had the number changed was cause of the night you called, Hutch."

"Me?"

"Yeah. You said you were next and it was gonna be because of me. I knew I couldn't take it anymore and I pulled some strings yesterday to get the number changed right away. Didn't work, did it?"
Hutch stopped eating and looked at Starsky with nothing but compassion. No wonder he was so freaked. The poor man was being driven insane by some sicko, or by the sounds of it, multiple sickos. "Starsk, you know I didn't call you."

"I know it in my head, Hutch. You don't know what it's been like. I'm sorry, I shoulda told you, but I just couldn't. I thought it would stop."

"Well, obviously some whacko or whackos are pullin' something here. They're trying to get to you and I don't like it. Okay, we'll go to work today and we're gonna start looking for whoever the hell is doing this to you."

Starsky nodded, his eyes speaking their thanks. Then he pushed up from the table and headed for the bathroom.

"You not gonna eat again?"

Starsky cringed, knowing he'd been made. "I can't, Hutch. Not unless you want me to toss it all right away. I'm just gonna grab a quick shower so we can get to work before Dobey starts screamin' for us."

"A HOT shower, Star."

Starsky answered him with a dismissive wave as he went into the bathroom. Hutch looked at his plate with dismay. Starsky never touched the eggs and had only taken a couple of bites of bacon. This couldn't continue, no matter what. Starsky had a high metabolism and a few days not eating was sure to make him sick. That coupled with a lack of sleep equaled one worried partner. He sighed as he rose to clear away the dishes. Somehow, he was going to figure out what was happening.

When Starsky emerged, ready for work, he looked better. He was pale and obviously not completely well, but Hutch was going to let him go to work anyway. He needed to check this mess out and there was no way he was leaving Starsky alone.

Handing the Beretta over, Hutch said, "You'd better keep that promise. I'm glad you called."

Starsky smiled at him and answered, "Don't worry so much. I swear, it's passed. You're right and with you helping me, we're gonna figure out what this is."

Hutch went out the door first and when Starsky caught up to him, he was sliding into the driver's seat in the Torino.

"What are you doing?" Starsky asked incredulously as he opened the passenger door.

"I gave you your gun back, but I'm driving. Get in and don't argue."
Starsky decided it was better not to argue when his friend was like this, so he silently got in and shut the door. He was feeling pretty rough and was glad Hutch was driving.

"Thanks for not trying to get me to ride to work in the Squash when my head hurts. Those squeaks." Starsky shivered at the thought, getting a quiet laugh out of his partner.

On the ride down to Metro, Hutch stole frequent looks over at Starsky. He looked tired and ill. He reached over to pat his arm and was concerned by how warm Starsky felt. *Great, now he's getting sick to top off the rest of this mess.*

"You feeling okay?"

"Just tired, Blintz."

Hutch knew that wasn't all, but he wasn't about to push it. He was too relieved to see Starsky in his right mind, convinced that the phone calls weren't genuine. Lack of sleep and two weeks of a living nightmare must have seemed overwhelming the previous night. Hutch decided Starsky was coming home with him that night, or he'd stay over at Starsky's. He wasn't letting his friend spend another night alone until this issue was resolved.

The morning dragged with both men working on paperwork at the same time they were starting to investigate the strange phone calls. Hutch was especially concerned about the new number leaking out to whoever was doing this to his partner on the same day as it was activated. He anxiously awaited Captain Dobey's late morning arrival after a meeting in the commissioner's office.

Starsky's condition seemed to be worsening. He was drinking lots of coffee, but Hutch was unable to convince him to eat even a candy bar from the vending machine. The other detectives in the squad room that morning kept looking at Hutch with concern. They could see that Starsky wasn't all right.

When Dobey arrived, he passed through the squad room. After getting a glimpse at Starsky, he motioned to Hutch to come into his office. Hutch excused himself to go in and have a chat while Starsky finished up some phone calls on a case.

Hutch went inside and closed the door. "I need to talk to you, Cap'n."

"Is it about your partner? Starsky looks terrible, what's going on?"

Hutch proceeded to explain everything he knew about the situation. Dobey wasn't pleased that Starsky had kept this a secret for two weeks, but he understood the reasoning.

"Obviously someone's after him. Any ideas?" Dobey asked.

"Not yet, we just started looking."
While the two men were in Dobey's office, Starsky wrapped up his phone call. He hung up and stood to get a cup of coffee before going into Dobey's office to join his partner. He knew what they had to be discussing and he wanted in on that conversation.

Jack Hill watched Starsky surreptitiously as he stood at the coffee pot, swaying on his feet. Jack jerked his head at his partner and said, "He okay?"

Cavanaugh stole a quick look at Starsky and quietly said, "Doesn't look okay to me."

Before Starsky could go into the captain's office, his extension started to ring. Keeping the coffee cup in one hand, he punched the blinking line button and grabbed the phone with the other. "Starsky."

Jack was seated right next to Starsky when he answered the phone and he noticed when the dark-haired man started trembling. He couldn't hear what was said on the phone, but whatever it was, Starsky looked worse than he had all morning.

"Dave? It's Gillian, Dave."

"Wha...." Starsky started.

"Why do you want him to die? You have to go first. If you don't, Ken's going to die."

Starsky dropped the coffee cup to the floor with a loud crash as it broke. Jack had enough time to stand up, but he didn't react fast enough to catch Starsky. He watched, horrified, as Starsky's eyes rolled up and he collapsed to the floor.

The voice on the line of the dangling receiver said, "Dave? Dave?" and then the line went dead.

Inside Dobey's office, the two men heard the crash, followed by a heavy thud. Then they heard the sounds of chairs scooting out and Jack Hill's voice yelling, "Hutch!"

Hutch yanked open the door and was greeted by the sight of Jack Hill bent over his unconscious partner. He sank down on his knees and took Starsky by the hand, patting it and calling his name.

Dobey said, "What happened, Jack?"

"I don't know. He took a phone call, looked like he was gonna be sick, and down he went."

The department physician was in that day and Dobey ordered one of the bystanders to run and get him. They'd start with that and let the doctor decide if they needed an ambulance.

Starsky stirred a little and half opened his eyes, looking up at Hutch, but not really seeing him. All he said was, "I have to die first." Then he passed out again and Hutch couldn't revive him. Starsky's heart was racing and his pale, sweaty face felt hot. All Hutch could do while he waited for the doctor was treat his partner for shock.
The doctor arrived at a dead run, carrying his bag. He handed it to Hutch and knelt next to Starsky. Hutch and the other officers watched in utter silence as the doctor took Starsky's pulse and looked into his eyes. Starsky was conscious by this time, enough to obey orders to raise his head and answer questions.

Finally, the doctor shook his head. "Exhaustion," he said to Hutch. "What the hell's he been doing to himself?"

"Not eating and not sleeping," Hutch answered shortly.

"Well, he's going to have to start," the doctor said. "You hear me, Starsky? You got two choices. You go home for a week and get plenty of sleep and put some weight back on, or you go into the hospital and we'll do it for you."

"No hospital," Starsky mumbled.

The doctor looked at Hutch, then both of them looked at the captain.

"I'll take him to my place," Hutch said. "Huggy and I'll take turns. That way I can keep working."

Dobey nodded. "Take the rest of today to get things set up. But you get your can back in here tomorrow, Hutchinson."

"Yeah." Hutch and the doctor got Starsky to his feet, and Jack helped Hutch get him to the car.

"Want me to come with you?" Jack asked as they got Starsky settled.

"No, we'll be okay. Thanks, Jack."

Jack nodded, patted Starsky's shoulder, and stood back to shut the car door.

"I'm putting a tracer on your phone," Hutch said as he started the car. "We're going to find out who's doing this."

"They never stay on long enough, partner," Starsky said wearily, his face so pale it was almost translucent. "Tracer won't help."

"You gotta try to keep 'em on, buddy," Hutch said, turning the car into the traffic. When Starsky turned a stricken look toward him, he reached out one hand to pat his partner's arm. "I know what I'm asking, and I'm sorry. But somehow, we have to find out who's doing this. To do that, we have to trace the calls."

Starsky leaned his head against the seat and closed his eyes. "Don't know if I can handle that, Hutch."
"Yes, you can. You're gonna have me in your hair every minute I'm not working. You're gonna have Huggy while I'm at work. He can have Diane and Angie cover the day shift without him for a few days." Hutch softened his voice. "You know we love you, buddy, and we'll do anything for you."

Starsky opened his eyes and looked over at Hutch. He reached out his left hand and touched Hutch's hair briefly. "I know." But when they pulled up in front of Venice Place, Starsky raised surprised eyebrows. "What are we doing here?"

"Closer to Huggy's than your place," Hutch said. "Also, closer to the precinct. I figure if they can find you at work to call you there, they can find you here. But here, you'll have me and Huggy."

"You and Huggy could come to my place. It ain't that much further," Starsky said, though he opened the car door to get out.

"I know," Hutch said, getting out, too. "But your place is in a quiet, residential neighborhood. Mine's on a busy street. It's tougher to watch your place. Here, our brother cops can keep an eye on the place."

Starsky nodded. "I gotcha." He stopped at the outer door, looking up the stairs with the same expression he'd have used if it were a mountain.

Hutch, understanding, put an arm around him and helped him up the steps, slowly, finally depositing him on the couch upstairs. He then went straight to the kitchen and made a sandwich - salami and cheese, plenty of mustard, just the way Starsky liked it -- and brought it back with a big glass of orange juice. Starsky made a face.

"Don't argue with me," Hutch said, though Starsky hadn't said anything. "Eat it. Drink the orange juice. If you're a good boy, I'll get you some Dr. Pepper. But, right now, you need all the calories and vitamins you can hold."

"Okay, Mom," Starsky said, giving Hutch a wan grin and starting to work on the sandwich. Hutch stood over him until he was sure Starsky was really eating, and then he went to the kitchen again to look over his supplies. He was running low on Starsky Food and he knew good and well his partner wouldn't eat healthy meals for very long without making a fuss. He'd be lucky to get him to eat anything, actually.

He was making a list when the phone rang. His heart gave a leap and he dropped the pen and paper and hurried back out to the living room. Starsky had gone pale again and was just staring at it. Hutch got to it first and lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

There was a long silence and Hutch was almost ready to give up when a soft, feminine voice said, "Ken?"

Hutch felt cold, then heat, wash over him. It was Terry's voice. But it couldn't be Terry's voice.... "Yes, this is Ken Hutchinson."
Another silence. "So formal," she said, almost teasingly. "You know why I'm calling, don't you? I want to talk to Dave."

"What makes you think he's here?"

Starsky was watching him, eyes dilated, breathing too quickly. Hutch met his eyes and tried not to let his own uneasiness show. He suspected it wasn't working.

"I know he is," and now she sounded sad and defeated. "He's running from me. He promised he'd always love me."

"Who is this?" Hutch demanded. But the line was dead. He replaced the receiver.

"Which one?" Starsky asked.

"Terry," Hutch said reluctantly.

Starsky drew a deep, painful breath and closed his eyes.

"Starsk, it couldn't really be Terry. You know that."

Starsky nodded, but his expression didn't change.

"Wait a minute!" Hutch said suddenly. Starsky's eyes opened. "She called me 'Ken.'"

"So?" Starsky asked.

"Terry called me 'Hutch.' She always called me Hutch, because you do. She never, ever called me Ken unless she was introducing me to someone."

Starsky's eyes cleared marginally. "You're right."

"Whoever this is doesn't know everything, even if it seems as if they do," Hutch said, furrowing his brows as he searched his memory for any idea for who it could be. "But that voice sure did sound like Terry's."

Starsky nodded, his eyes clouding again. "She sure does."


"What about the one who sounds like my dad?"

"Then there are two of them," Hutch said. "Maybe they don't even know why they're doing it. A couple of out-of-work actors making a few phone calls to make a few extra bucks while they wait for their big break."
"How did they find out how my dad and Terry sounded?" Starsky said. "I read somewhere that Rich Little studies the people he does impressions of for a long time to get them just right."

Hutch shook his head, worried about the case and his partner, but encouraged that discussing the situation seemed to have improved Starsky's color. He had police work to focus on now instead of just his fear and emotions. "Who knew them both?"

"I did," Starsky said bleakly.

Hutch sat down next to him and put his hand on his arm. "Come on, Starsk. Focus. It's a case, like any other case. Treat it like that. I'll help."

Starsky took a deep breath. After a moment, he wet his lips. "Okay."

"Who else knew them both?" Hutch leaned closer. "Everybody who knew them both, no matter how unlikely."

"Aunt Rose and Uncle Al," Starsky said. "Ma and Nicky. Helen --"

"Helen who?" Hutch pounced.

"A neighbor back home. Helen and Ma have known each other since high school," Starsky said. "Kind of an honorary aunt to Nick and me."

Hutch frowned. Unlikely, but it wouldn't hurt to check Helen out. "What's her last name?"

"Aw, come on, Hutch. Helen's family. She wouldn't --"

"Maybe not. Probably not. But we have to check everybody out."

Starsky sighed. "McDermott."

Hutch nodded. "Okay. Anyone else?"

Starsky thought hard. Finally, he said, "No. Nobody else I can think of. That trip when I took Terry home was only a weekend. Didn't have time to introduce her to very many people who remembered my dad."

"Anybody here that knew your dad?"

Starsky shook his head. "Can't think of anyone."

"Okay. You keep thinking. I'll get busy on that tracer and run a check on Helen McDermott." Hutch put a tracer on both his phone and Starsky's, just in case.
Starsky had lost interest in his food. The orange juice was gone, but only about half of the sandwich. Hutch was worried. He couldn't force feed his partner, but he'd have to think of something to tempt him with that Starsky wouldn't refuse.

"Buddy, I know you don't want to eat, but you have to. You're sick and exhausted and you're going to land in the hospital if you don't."

"I'm sorry, Hutch. I can't. Not now, okay? Maybe if I sleep for a while."

Starsky's eyes were bright with fever and he looked close to collapsing again. Hutch put a hand on Starsky's forehead; his experienced touch telling him the fever was getting worse. He needed to ask Starsky about something, but he also did not want to push him too hard just yet.

"I'm going to get you some more juice and some aspirin first." Hutch let him rest on the couch while he got those things, then he told Starsky he'd better go lie down on the bed. Once he had Starsky settled, he watched with concern as his partner took the juice and aspirins with badly shaking hands. Sighing heavily, he said, "I need to ask you about something, Starsk."

"What's that?" Starsky replied as he handed back the half-consumed glass of juice and settled down on the bed.

"Do you remember saying something to me...back in the squad room, when you were pretty out of it?" he asked as he sat down on the bed.

"Uh, uh. Sorry. What'd I say?"

"You, you said, 'I have to die first,'" Hutch said nervously, unable to hide his dismay over what Starsky had said to him.

Starsky's eyes opened wider and he started to breathe so fast Hutch was afraid he'd hyperventilate.

"Hey, easy," he soothed, "take it easy. Was it something the caller said? Who was it?"

"I can't, Hutch," Starsky answered, closing his eyes tightly while he tried to get his breathing under control.

"You have to. I can't help you if you won't let me, now who was it?"

Starsky looked at him with pain etched in his eyes, reaching an unsteady hand out to rest on Hutch's arm. "She said it was Gillian."

Hutch didn't say anything for a few moments. "Did it sound like her?"

"Yeah...no...I don't know, Hutch. I don't know."
"Take it easy, we both know it wasn't really her."

"Yeah. You okay?"

"Am I okay? Starsk, you're too much. I'm not the one who can't sleep and won't eat. Now, what else did she say?"

How was Starsky supposed to explain this? "Um, it's a little hard to remember. I think she said you were gonna die if I didn't die first. Wanted to know why I want you to die."

"Aw, geez, buddy. I'm sorry. Look, that's bullshit and you know it. Somebody's tryin' to get to you and I'm not gonna let them. You rest. I'm on it."

The two men exchanged a look that conveyed the depth of their friendship, caring, and the trust they shared. If Hutch was on it, Starsky knew he'd do everything he could to figure out what was happening. Starsky didn't have to tell him to be careful. He just nodded and closed his eyes to try to get some sleep.

Hutch pulled Starsky's shoes off and covered him with a light blanket. He patted him on the shoulder and said, "No more talking about dying first, or dying at all. You got that?"

"Mm, no dying." Starsky was already falling asleep.

Hutch rubbed his face with his hand, trying to absorb everything that had happened that day. Whoever was doing this to his partner was dangerous. He was worried that they might not stop at Starsky's mental and emotional health. Whoever it was had already caused him to become ill. Hutch had to find them -- fast -- fearing that Starsky wouldn't really get better until the responsible party was caught. Before he got to work on his phone calls, he stood and watched to be sure his partner was really asleep.

First, he called Edith Dobey and explained what had happened. "I'm sorry, Edith. I don't mean to impose, but I really need your help. I hate to ask you...."

"Now, now, how can I help?" Edith's voice was reassuring.

"Could you please go to the store for me? I need food I can get him to eat. You know how he is on a good day. I'm afraid if he doesn't start eating, he's going to have to be hospitalized and he won't take that well."

"No, you're right about that. Do you have a list, or should I just shop for whatever Cal would most like to eat if I'd let him?" she said with a soft, motherly laugh that made Hutch smile a little.

"I have a list, but you use your best judgment. I just can't leave him alone like this. He's totally defenseless and whoever it is has already found him here."
He finished explaining what Edith should get and hung up, grateful that he and Starsky had such good friends in their captain and his wife. Edith also agreed to stop by Starsky's place and pick up some books for him. Hutch told her where to find the spare key. He wanted his partner to have something to do besides watching television. Reading should help take his mind off of things when he wasn't sleeping. He started pacing around the room while he placed the calls to put tracers on both of their phones. A glance out his front window revealed that Dobey had already sent a couple of uniforms over in a squad car to watch Venice Place. The captain was efficient and he never messed around when it looked like his men were in danger. Especially, these two men. Too much had happened to them for him to take anything for granted. Finally, he called Huggy and let him in on the situation. Their friend agreed to come over in the morning in time for Hutch to go to work.

~*~*~*~

The sound of the ringing phone interrupted Starsky's sleep four more times before Edith arrived with the groceries. The poor man wasn't doing well. Even though Hutch wasn't letting him anywhere near the phone, he knew what was happening. Each time it rang, he called out to Hutch to find out who was on the other end. He finally staggered out into the living room just as Edith got there. His pallor was frightening and Hutch's concern was mounting.

Not liking what she saw at all, Edith steered the wobbly detective back toward the bed as Hutch carried the grocery bags into the kitchen. After she spoke with him for a few minutes and got him settled again, she walked back to the kitchen to see Hutch. She caught him deep in concentration with a mortar and pestle.

"What are you doing?" she said in a low voice as she walked back toward the phone and took it off the hook.

"We can't leave it off the hook, Edith. If they don't call, I can't trace it."

"Just for a few minutes. Let him fall asleep, now, what are you doing?" she asked as she walked closer. Hutch was grinding two tablets up into powder. She picked up a medicine bottle on the counter. Sleeping pills. "Ken...."

Hutch whispered, "I know it's terrible, but I'm gonna slip him a Mickey. Edith, if he doesn't get some sleep, I'm afraid he could snap, or collapse again, or God forbid, m-maybe even die."

"He's going to be angry," she noted.

"I know, but at this point, I'd be pretty excited if he had the energy to yell at me."

The counter next to him held all the makings for a chocolate malt. He was hoping to get some quick, heavy calories into Starsky and he hoped he couldn't resist a malt. The concoction would disguise the taste of his secret weapon. Edith finished putting the normal ingredients into Hutch's blender and started it. She stopped it when he was finished pulverizing the pills.
Taking off the lid, she said, "You want to put it in?"

"No, I want to put it in the bottom so he'll get as much as he can before he refuses to drink it."

"I can't believe I'm helping you do this, Ken. Harold is never going to believe either of us did it," she said as she poured about two inches of the thick concoction into a large glass.

Hutch added the powered drug, stirred it a little, and nodded for her to pour in the rest. "Yeah, well, just blame me. Cap'd probably believe anything from me."

The blond rifled through his drawers looking for the box of straws he had left over from the last time he was sick. Starsky had bought them. He smiled at the thought as he found them and stuck one in the malt. Starsky had even gotten the kind that bend. "Thanks," he whispered to Edith as he went back to see his friend.

Hutch sat on the bed with the drink and said, "Hey, buddy, I want you to sit up and try to drink this." He shook Starsky's shoulder gently.

"Don't want anything, Hush. Lemme sleep." Starsky was so tired, his words were slurring. Hutch guessed it wouldn't take much of his creation to send his friend to the Land of Nod for hours.

"Sit up and drink it anyway. It's a chocolate malt, just like you like 'em."

Starsky cracked one eye open at that news. Maybe he could stand that. "Okay. But jus' 'cause you made it." He sat up and took a sip, making a confused face. "Tastes funny, Blondie. Too mush malt maybe?" Starsky's blinks were long; he was fading fast.

"Yeah, sorry. I'll make it different next time." Hutch was grateful Starsky was looking at the malt, not at him, when his face turned bright red with guilt.

As he suspected, Starsky wasn't able to drink all of it, but he did get almost half in before he gave up and handed it to Hutch. "Thanks." He fell back on the pillows and closed his eyes.

"Sleep this time, partner. You need it." Hutch took his guilty secret back to the kitchen and tossed the rest. Edith was sitting at the table drinking some coffee. By the time he sat down with her, his hands were shaking.

"God, Edith. I can't believe I just did that." Hutch shook his head, frustrated.

"You did the right thing, Ken. He's on the edge."

They waited for a while; talking softly about what had happened and what their friend had been going through for the past two weeks. Edith was stunned. She and Hutch discussed how whoever it was got the information. Talking it out with her gave him a few ideas. After half an hour, Hutch excused himself to check on Starsky. He found his friend deeply asleep. His breathing seemed even, and Hutch risked feeling his pulse to see if it had settled down again. He was
relieved to find it slowed to a reasonable level, and that his touch didn't disturb the sleeper. The aspirin seemed to have helped the fever.

Hutch returned to the kitchen, putting the phone back on the hook on the way back to the table. "He's out," he said, to which Edith sighed in relief.

After making sure Hutch had eaten, too, Edith finally consented to go home and make dinner for her own family, but she left stern orders for Hutch to call if he or Starsky needed anything.

"Cal's got his driver's license now," she said, still standing in the doorway. "I can send him on errands if necessary. He loves any excuse to go out in the car."

Hutch grinned a little. "I remember that feeling."

"So, don't hesitate to ask, you hear me, Ken? No matter what it is. You two are far too independent and you won't ask anybody to help you and I won't stand for it this time, you got that?"

Hutch gave her a weak salute. "Yes, ma'am. Message noted, loud and clear."

She relented and smiled, then kissed his cheek. "That's better. I'll check in tomorrow. You get some sleep, too."

"Okay. ‘Night." He closed the door after her, knowing the officers on watch in the street would see to it that she made it safely to her car, and went back to slump wearily on the couch. It was early, but he was exhausted, too. The strain of only a day of this had already depleted his reserves. No wonder Starsky was in such a state. Hutch lay his head back, intending only to close his eyes for a few moments, but soon he, too, was sound asleep.

~*~*~*~

When the ringing phone awakened him, Hutch realized he must have been sleeping a long time. It was completely dark outside. But in spite of his grogginess, he got to the phone before it could disturb his partner.

"H'lo?"

"Dave?"

Hutch swallowed. Gillian. It sounded just like her.

"Dave? Are you there?"

Hutch recovered with an effort and said "Yeah," doing his best to mimic Starsky's lingering east coast inflection. Would it work?
"Dave, you know how I loved Hutch," she said, tears in her voice. "I don't want him to die. But, if you don't, he will. It's that simple. Do you want that to happen?"

Hutch had to force the words out. It was crucial that he keep her on the line long enough to get a trace. "No. I don't. He's my best friend."

"Then, why are you doing this?"

"What'm I doin'?" Hutch asked, still working hard to sound like Starsky. By now, anyone who really knew them would have realized she wasn't speaking to Starsky. Hutch might be a hell of a good undercover cop, but he was no actor. Steve Hanson's movie had proved that to everyone.

"You know what you're doing," she said. "You have to die, Dave. You have to die." And she hung up.

Hutch swore under his breath and glanced at the clock. Just over a minute and a half. Not long enough to trace it.

"Hutch?"

Hutch hurried into the darkened bedroom. He couldn't believe Starsky was awake after the dose he'd given him. "Yeah, buddy?" Hutch sat down on the edge of the bed and laid his hand against his partner's forehead. It felt cool. The fever was gone. "What do you need?"

"Who was on the phone?" Starsky was groggy and his eyes would hardly stay open. Maybe if he could soothe him and keep him relaxed, Hutch thought, he'd go back to sleep.

"Wrong number," Hutch said lightly. "They thought this was a pizza joint."

Starsky grinned blearily. "What'd you tell 'em?"

"I took their order," Hutch said, forcing a grin. "They wanted a large pepperoni with black olives. Boy, are they gonna be mad when it doesn't come."

Starsky yawned. "That was mean," he mumbled, but the right side of his mouth quirked as he said it. "Pizza sounds good, though."

"You get another couple of hours of sleep and I'll order us a pizza when you wake up, okay?" Hutch gave in to the impulse to stroke the tumbled curls that fell over Starsky's forehead.

"K."

He was asleep again. Hutch rose carefully, so as not to jar the bed, and tiptoed out. He glanced at the clock again. It was only a little after eight, and there were pizza parlors all over town that stayed open until midnight or later. If Starsky still hadn't stirred by 11:00, he'd order a pizza anyway and warm it up for him when he did wake up.
Hutch went back to the phone and called Dobey at home.

"How's he doing?" Dobey asked.

"He's sleeping still and his fever's broken."

Dobey laughed and said, "Yeah, Edith told me about your new recipe for a malted. Good idea, but are you prepared for his reaction when he figures it out?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, Cap. He needed the rest so badly and I...."

"Hutch, don't feel guilty. You did the right thing. Was there something else?" Dobey knew Hutch didn't call just to tell him Starsky was sleeping.

"Yeah. I already had some calls for him here," he answered.

"At your house? I can see the station, but at your place?"

"I know. Almost like whoever this is knew where he was. They called three or four times this afternoon and hung up. This time, I tried to sound like Starsky. I attempted to keep her on the phone, but she hung up too fast."

"Who'd she say it was?"

"Same one who called him at the station before he collapsed. She said she was Gillian." Hutch let that sit in the silence between them for a few heartbeats, and then he added, "That's the interesting thing, Cap. I picked up the phone and she said 'Dave?' I pretended to be him, and I must say my Starsky impression is not as good as his Bogart. She fell for it, though. Kept talking to me like I was Starsky. No way she could really know him."

Dobey asked, "What did she say?"

"I talked to him about what she said on the phone at the precinct. She said pretty much the same thing to me -- that she wanted to know why 'Dave' would want Hutch to die and she repeated that he had to die a couple of times before she hung up on me. Said if he didn't, I would be killed."

"I don't like the sound of that, Hutch. Do you think they're after you?"

"No, I don't. I think they're trying to shove him over the edge -- knowing just the right buttons to push. Whoever is behind this knows about Starsky's instinct to protect me. They either want to drive him insane, or to suicide. Maybe they don't care which." Hutch sounded as disgusted as he felt. Over the years, a lot of bad things had happened to them both, especially Starsky. Their enemies had tried to destroy them in a variety of creative ways, but this was about as low a thing as Hutch could imagine. Even the poison Starsky had been injected with once seemed less cruel.
Dobey thought about it for a moment and said, "Someone must hate him a lot. Maybe you, too, Hutch. They’d have to know what it would do to you."

"I'm not worried about me, Cap. I just want to find these bastards before they hurt him worse. Let's just say, I'm not amused."

They discussed what should be done and agreed the squad car should stay. Hutch wasn't about to leave Starsky alone in the apartment, either. Dobey agreed that if Huggy wasn't available for some reason, Hutch would stay with Starsky until he was able to return to work.

"Why don't we just get him out of town until we find them?" Dobey asked, knowing what the response was likely to be.

As expected, Hutch refused the suggestion. "He'll never go for it, Cap. You know that."

"Yeah, I hear you. Get some rest, Hutch. If I get in first, I'll get Collins to start pulling your case folders."

"Thanks, Cap. Poor Charlie ought to just set up a special filing cabinet just for us." Hutch laughed at the irony. "G'night, Cap."

Hutch spent the next few hours making notes on what he knew about this situation and who might be responsible. He couldn't come up with a name, but he did have a list of suspect characteristics put together by the time the pizza arrived at around midnight. He forgot that the uniforms watching his place would refuse to let the pizza delivery boy up the stairs. The phone rang at midnight and Hutch jumped on it again. He tried to sound like Starsky. "Hello?"

The officer on the patch through line sounded confused. "Uh, Sergeant Hutchinson?"

Hutch immediately changed gears, "Yeah?"

"This is Officer Donley. I've got a kid down here trying to get up the stairs with a pizza. Is it okay?"

Hutch crossed the room and looked down to the street through the front shutters. Donley's partner had the poor pizza delivery kid in the position on the squad car, the pizza box sitting on the hood. He let the kid stand up as soon as he finished frisking him.

"Ah, geez, let the poor kid in, okay? I'm sorry. Shoulda told you. You guys want some pizza?"

Donley said, "No thanks. We already ate something and besides, if I get any more grease stains on my uniform my old lady's gonna kill me."

Hutch laughed and hung up, going to the door to get his pizza. The delivery boy was red faced. "Cops! Can't a guy even make a delivery? You ordered it!"
"Sorry for the flak," Hutch apologized. He gave the flustered kid an extra-large tip. "No hard feelings?"

The young man looked away from Hutch's steady gaze, shaking his head and stuffing the tip into his pocket. "Nah. Just hope my mom don't find out. She knows everything that goes on around here. See ya." He trotted down the stairs to go to his next stop.

He pushed the door closed and turned around, surprised to see Starsky leaning against the wall by the bathroom.

"Hey, you all right?" he asked as he advanced on his friend.

"I feel kind of weird. Woke up when I heard the phone and I came out to see what was going on. I got kinda dizzy and...." Starsky stopped, staring in disbelief at Hutch's clock.

"What?" Hutch asked, following Starsky's line of sight to the clock. He gulped and said, "Let me put this down and I'll give you a hand." He hurried from the room, dropping the pizza off on the kitchen table, trying to think of what he was going to say next. He heard the bathroom door click shut from the other room. *Great. He already knows. Man, am I gonna catch it.*

He got some plates and dished up the pizza while he waited. When Starsky still wasn't out of the bathroom, he got out a couple of root beers and opened them. Giving Starsky a real beer on top of two sleeping pills wasn't an option in his mind -- even if those pills were consumed hours ago.

"Starsk? You okay in there? Pizza's getting cold."

A few more minutes ticked by, the sound of Hutch's clock sounding loud to his ears. Then, he finally heard the bathroom door open and Starsky emerged. The curls around his face were damp, making Hutch guess he'd splashed cold water in his face.

Starsky didn't say anything to him as he made his slightly unsteady way over to the table to sit and eat. He almost fell off the chair as he dropped heavily onto it. He tucked his chin a little and Hutch could feel the storm rising in him. Looking up through dark lashes, he asked, "Can I trust the food?"

*Ouch! Don't pull any punches, buddy.* "Of course," Hutch replied meekly. "Starsk...."

One smoldering look from his partner silenced him. Starsky was groggy, but he knew what Hutch had done and he was clearly furious. "You slipped me a Mickey."

Denying it was useless and Hutch wouldn't lie anyway. "Yeah, I did. You okay?"

"Oh, now let's just see if I am...I can hardly walk a straight line, my pupils are dilated, my eyelids feel like they weigh ten pounds apiece, and I have a hangover. Hm. That about sums up how I am."
The heat of Starsky's glare made Hutch blush. He stammered and attempted an apology and finally said in a rush, "Dammit, buddy, I didn't know what else to do. You couldn't sleep with the phone ringing constantly. We have to leave it on the hook if we're going to trace the calls. What was I supposed to do?"

Starsky slammed his hand down on the table, causing the root beer bottle next to him to jump up a little. "How could you do that to me?"

Hutch was done being conciliatory. He stood up, shoving his chair back and starting to pace. He was combing his fingers through his hair and breathing rapidly, doing his best to contain the angry stream of tension produced words welling up in his mind. The ringing phone interrupted him.

When the phone rang, Starsky jumped and got a panicked look in his eyes. Hutch took a breath and started for it, but Starsky shouted, "Let it ring, dammit!"

They stared at each other, saying nothing as it rang again and again, finally stopping. Hutch had run out of steam before he said a word. He stood still for a minute, watching as Starsky put his head down on his arms on the table, and then he started toward him. The phone rang again.

This time, Starsky jumped from his seat. In a few rapid, but slightly unsteady strides, he reached the phone and answered it, "Hello!"

"Davy?" This time, he heard the man's voice.

Hutch looked on while Starsky started to tremble. He wasn't sure if it was from fear, stress, or anger, but he knew that it needed to go somewhere before his friend collapsed again. He walked toward his partner, wanting to listen in on the conversation.

"It's your dad, Davy. I'm waiting for you. Don't you see? It's time, David. You know what you have to do."

Anger, Hutch realized, definitely anger. "Look, you sick bastard, there's no way...."

The voice cut him off before he could finish, "He's going to die, David. You have to go first. Do what you have to do."

Starsky slammed the phone down on the hook switch. He grabbed it up and made a move like he was going to yank it out of the wall and throw it across the room. Hutch was too fast, though. He stopped Starsky's motion and then caught him as he started to crumple to the ground. He laid Starsky on the couch and ran to the bathroom to get a damp washcloth. The combination of exhaustion, the lingering effects of the sleeping pills, and a giant adrenaline rush worked against his friend. He sat next to Starsky when he returned with the cloth.

"Starsk?" Hutch said gently while he wiped Starsky's face with the cool cloth. "Hey?"
Starsky moaned and turned toward the sound of Hutch's voice, reaching a shaking hand up for him. Hutch took his hand and said, "It's okay. I'm here. Come on, now, open your eyes."

Obeying Hutch, Starsky opened his eyes and looked up at his friend's concerned face. "Hutch, I'm sorry, I...."

"God, Starsk, don't. I'm the one who's sorry. I don't know how to stop whoever this is, but I'm going to figure it out, I swear. Buddy, I'm sorry I tricked you this afternoon, but you're not doing so hot. Yeah, you've had some sleep now, but you still haven't eaten hardly anything in more than two days. Some juice, half of a sandwich, and half of a malt isn't enough to help you get better. You've gotta eat. I am sorry I slipped you the Mickey, but I'm glad you got some rest. If you keep going like this for another day, you're gonna land in the hospital on IVs and forced rest. I don't want that, do you?"

"No," came the sullen, quiet reply. Starsky knew his friend was right and that he'd only done what he did to take care of him.

"I want to take care of you here, where you'll be more comfortable. Trust me, huh? You know I'd never do anything to hurt you, babe."

Starsky sighed. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry I got so ticked. I just...don't want to be like this. I just want to make them stop, before..." he trailed off and Hutch felt a little adrenaline rush of his own.

He grabbed Starsky by the shoulders. "Before what?" he demanded.

The soft answer to that question was the one Hutch feared. "Before it comes true."

"Starsky, look at me," Hutch ordered. "Who'd they say they were this time?"

"My dad again. He said you were gonna die, Hutch. He said I knew what I had to do."

Starsky's sad eyes were pleading with his friend. Make them stop, Hutch. Please.

"We're going to figure this out. Don't listen to anything they say and don't answer that phone again. I'll handle it. I'm going in there to get you some of that pizza and you're gonna eat it. Understood?"

Starsky nodded. Hutch went to the kitchen to retrieve Starsky's plate. His mind was racing with thoughts of what should be done next. Whatever it was, he knew it needed to be fast. While he realized the phone trace was going to lead nowhere, he was afraid to just take the phone off the hook. Whoever was doing this, Hutch was afraid they'd come after Starsky in person if they thought they were failing to get to him on the phone. Hutch knew he stood a better chance of protecting his partner if he let them continue.
Starsky ate two slices of pizza and drank a whole bottle of root beer. Hutch wasn't completely happy, but it was better than he'd been eating. His color had improved a little, too. "I'm sorry, Hutch," Starsky said when he'd swallowed the last of the soft drink. "That's all I can stand to eat."

"That's okay, buddy," Hutch said. "It's a start. You still tired or do you want to see what's on the late, late show?"

Starsky gave a half-hearted grin. "I'm still kinda wiped."

"Good. Go back to bed. I'll do the dishes."

"The what?" This time, Starsky snorted a chuckle. "Pizza off paper plates and non-returnable root beer bottles don't make a big pile of dishes, partner."

Hutch smiled and ruffled the dark curls. "That's better. Made you laugh. Get your ass back in bed, Camille. Doctor Hutch has everything under control."

Still shaking his head, Starsky obeyed, yawning as he went.

Hutch couldn't sleep. He was too wound up. Before she left, Edith had brought in a stack of books from Starsky's. Hutch poked through them, rolling his eyes at some of the titles -- one Hardy Boys book had a Dear Abby column from a couple of months previous as a bookmark, so he knew Starsky'd been reading it recently. He finally found a John LeCarre' novel and though he thought it was almost like a busman's holiday to read something like that, he curled up on the couch with it and a cup of fresh coffee. Three or four chapters into it, the words were swimming in front of his eyes and his head drooped and he was asleep. So deeply asleep, in fact, that he didn't hear the phone ring around 5:00 a.m.

Starsky did. He had been dreaming of Terry and was still half asleep as he picked up the extension next to the bed.

"Dave?"

"Mm?"

"Honey, it's Terry. What's wrong? You sound funny."

"I was asleep," he said, slurring the words.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "But you do know what you have to do, right?"

"What's that, sweetheart?"

"I'm waiting for you," she said, softly and sweetly. "I've been so lonely without you, and I can't wait much longer. Please, Davy. Please come to me. I can't come to you."
"Okay, baby," he said sleepily. "Where are you? I'll be right there."

"You have to die, Davy. To come to me, you have to die." She hung up.

The last part finally woke him up. He lay there, half propped up on one elbow, still holding the phone, and cried.

The morning sun fell across the couch and woke Hutch with a start around 9:00 a.m. He glanced at the clock and swore under his breath. Dobey was going to have his hide for a lampshade. He was over an hour late. He scrambled off the couch and headed for the bathroom, shedding clothes as he went. He was going to have to take the world's fastest shower....

He froze partway there at the sight of Starsky lying asleep on his back, holding the telephone receiver in his hand. "Oh, God," Hutch whispered. He knew in an instant what had happened. Starsky'd taken another one of those calls. Hutch approached softly and took the phone out of his partner's hand and hung it up, stilling its beeping. Starsky must still be exhausted or that sound would have awakened him. The sight of dried tears on his partner's face almost broke Hutch's heart.

As soon as the phone was out of his hand, Starsky rolled over with a soft moan and curled up. Hutch shook his head and turned to go back to the bathroom, but a knock on the door made him veer that way instead. He peered through the peephole and saw Huggy standing there.

"Mornin'," Huggy said. "He still sleepin'?"

"Yeah." Hutch stepped back to let him in.

"Why ain't you at work?"

"Overslept," Hutch said. "Why weren't you here an hour ago?" he added, more sharply than he'd intended to.

"Same reason," Huggy said, flopping onto the couch. "I didn't close until 2:00 this morning."

"Sorry." Hutch rubbed his gritty eyes. "I forgot about that. Damn."

"Hey, it's okay, bro," Huggy said. "Go on. Get ready for work. I'll take over."

Hutch gave him a grateful smile and headed for the shower for the third time. This time, he made it, took a quick shower, threw on some clean clothes, and headed out the door. Huggy was watching some inane morning talk show and lifted a hand lazily as he left.

The entire drive to Metro was consumed by thoughts of Starsky and his situation. Hutch was glad Starsky had been able to sleep some and he had successfully gotten his best friend to eat a little. Starsky didn't have any reserves to draw from now and that phone call couldn't have helped
him. Hutch was walking into the building as the captain was walking out on his way to a court appearance. Dobey stopped himself from yelling at Hutch as soon as he took a good look at him.

"Rough night with him?" he asked instead of yelling about why Hutch was late.

"More calls. Cap, I don't know what's going on, but whoever it is knows where he is all the time. I looked around to see if anyone could be watching us but didn't see anyone. We weren't tailed yesterday either, unless they were so good I didn't see them."

They were talking about Starsky's safety. Dobey considered it unlikely that Hutch would have missed a tail. "Not likely. You have any idea where to start looking?"

"None, but I'm going to think of something."

Hutch went into the building and spent the next few hours in the records room, getting Charlie to help him look through cases where Starsky was the point person on an undercover, and cases where he worked without Hutch for any reason. Starsky's extended time away from work after he was shot in the police garage meant there were many more cases where Hutch worked without Starsky. Looking through case folders was tiring, frustrating work. Every time Hutch had to do it, he gained a little more respect for the people who had to deal with them every day. He hated being stuck in the records room, and unable to call to check on things at home. Hutch was afraid the phone ringing would, at the least, awaken Starsky, and at the worst, set him more on edge.

Back at Venice Place, Starsky woke up shortly after Hutch left for work. He emerged from the bathroom to find Huggy waiting for him with a glass of juice.

"Hey, Hug, where's Hutch?"

"He left for work about thirty minutes ago. Take this and sit yourself down before you fall down, Starsk. Man, you look paler than our blond brother."

Starsky took the juice and sat down on the couch. Huggy asked him about the calls. He knew what had been happening, but he told Starsky he wanted to hear about it, without his "Nordic filter." At least that had gotten him a small smile.

Huggy made Starsky several things to eat before he found one that was going inside more than it was being left on the plate. He made a note to tell Hutch that a crispy quesadilla seemed to have magic properties. Starsky was still exhausted, despite the sleep. Huggy was already concerned about him, but his concern was about to be increased.

At eleven-thirty, just as the lunch crowd was trickling into Chez Helene's restaurant, the owner, Marie, discovered that the icemaker had stopped working. The machine's water filter sometimes got clogged and it shut itself off automatically. She'd noticed Huggy as he walked past her front windows when he arrived to take care of Starsky and now she wanted his help. She and Huggy were friends and fellow restaurateurs so she knew she could count on him to rescue her. After
asking one of the waitresses to keep an eye on things, she dashed up the stairs to Hutch's apartment and knocked.

Starsky was still sitting up on the couch, but he let Huggy get the door. He was just too tired to move.

"Hi, Huggy," Marie said with a pleasant smile.

"Marie, mon petit," Huggy said, kissing the back of her hand with a rakish smile.

"I have a big problem. I'm short a couple of people as it is today and now the icemaker's filter is clogged. Would you be a dear and help me out, mon cher?"

"Aw, now you know I can't resist it when you speak French, but I'm 's'posed to be keepin' an eye on our friend there," he said as he looked back toward Starsky.

"Go on, Hug. I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"Huggy, will ya just go?"

"Stay put and rest. I'll be back in a shake. Take me to your failing machinery, mademoiselle." Huggy disappeared out the door, leaving Starsky alone with his thoughts.

Huggy hadn't been gone for ten minutes when the phone rang, causing Starsky to jump almost off the couch. He only vaguely remembered what it felt like for a phone ringer to be a normal sound, not an anxiety-producing one. He stared at the phone like it was an alligator. Afraid to answer it, afraid not to answer it. His heart started to race and he was breathing rapidly. Maybe it was Hutch, but Starsky thought Hutch probably would not call under the circumstances. Just in case it was important, he leaned over and picked up the phone on the seventh ring.

"Hello?"

"Davy?" Terry again.

Starsky took a deep breath. If nothing else, maybe he could keep her on the phone long enough for the trace. "Hello, baby, it's me."

"Oh, Dave, I want to see you so bad."

Sighing wearily, Starsky played along. "I want to see you, too, sweetheart." Even though he knew this wasn't his dead fiancée, the pain in his heart was real. The tears that had started to well up in his eyes were real, too. His heart was beating so hard, he was sure it was audible from across the room.
"Dave," the voice continued sweetly, "you know what you have to do."

"Yes, I know, you want me to come."

"Come to me, Dave," she said. "You know what will happen if you don't."

"Yes, Hutch will die."

"He will, Dave. You'll have to...."

Her hesitation didn't match all of her other calls. "What? I'll have to what?"

"Uh...you'll have to kill yourself, Dave."

Starsky was stunned by that remark. He stood up and said, "Who the hell is this?"

"Uh, it's Terry."

Huggy was walking back up the stairs when he heard Starsky's raised voice. He hastened his climb and when he got near the top of the stairs he heard his friend shout, "Fine, sweetheart. That what you want? I'LL KILL MYSELF THEN! IS THAT SUPPOSED TO KEEP HUTCH SAFE?"

The woman on the other end of the line said, "Dave...I'm sorry, this has gone too far."

"You'd better believe it has! Fine, 'Terry.' I'll just KILL MYSELF! That's what you want! Are you happy?"

Bursting into tears, the woman said, "Oh, my God." The line went dead again.

Huggy flung the door open in time to see Starsky slam the receiver down on the cradle, then throw the phone as far as its tethering cord would let it fly. He was shocked by Starsky's appearance -- paler than before, sweating, and almost hyperventilating. Starsky looked over at him just before he bolted for the bathroom. Huggy was chilled to his core by what he'd just heard and seen -- so chilled, that before he went to check on Starsky, he found his gun and hid it.

~*~*~*~

Hutch hung up the phone and went back to his files. He had called the phone company for information on Starsky's number change. After speaking with three different levels of supervisors and managers, and the lady who had made the change, he was satisfied that it was unlikely the number had been released to anyone.

Collins answered a call. "Collins. Yeah, he's here," he said as he put the caller on hold. "Hutch, Huggy Bear is on line three."
That was probably not a good thing. Hutch picked up the extension. "Huggy, is he all right?"

The frantic voice on the other end of the line said, "No, he ain't! You need to get here."

"What's happening?"

"He took one of them calls. He was hollerin' about killin' hisself and he's been gettin' sick for half an hour."

Hutch could hear Starsky in the background and he thought he heard, "Huuuuutch!"

"I'm on my way," Hutch said. He left the files where they were and ran for his car.

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Hutch practically flew up the stairs to his apartment. He burst through the door and heard Huggy calling him from the bathroom. He was distressed to find Starsky passed out on the bathroom floor.

Huggy moved out of the way so Hutch could examine his friend. Starsky's rapid heartbeat and shallow panting terrified him. "Did you call an ambulance?"

"No, I wanted to, but he wouldn't let me."

"Dammit, Huggy! What the hell were you thinking? How long has he been out like this?"

"Since right after I talked to you."

"Call an ambulance."

Huggy left to do that while Hutch tried to revive his partner. When an ambulance was on its way, Huggy explained what had happened. "I swear I was only gone fifteen minutes. The call must've come while I was downstairs."

"Did he say what they said to him?"

"No. He just kept asking for you, puking, sayin' how Terry wouldn't want him to die, and puking some more. I ain't seen him so sick since he tried to drink a whole bottle of Jose Cuervo 1800 after he found out you were gonna make it back from the plague." Huggy regretted running off at the mouth that way immediately. He'd promised Starsky not to tell Hutch about that. Hutch could see that in Huggy's eyes, and he made a mental note to knock Huggy and Starsky's heads together about it when his partner was well.

The sight of Hutch tearing out of his car without even acknowledging them had sent the uniformed cops up the stairs to see what was wrong. They stepped into the apartment and stopped, watching what was happening.
Donley turned to his partner, "Call an ambulance," he said.

Huggy shook his head and said, "No, I already did it."

They all waited nervously for the next few minutes, a sigh of group relief escaping when they heard the wail of the approaching paramedic van. Tom Jameson, one of the paramedics who responded, was on their spring baseball team. Hutch asked him to do them a favor by taking Starsky to Receiving Hospital.

"Memorial's a little closer, Hutch."

"Not much and if he's stable enough, I'm hoping maybe Dr. Franklin's there. He's seen Starsky before. Please?"

After rechecking Starsky's vitals, Jameson agreed. "His BP's lower than I'd like, but it really is only an extra couple of minutes. All right, Hutch."

Huggy followed them out of the apartment, locking the front door behind him. He stopped Hutch on the sidewalk. "I'm sorry, Hutch. I knew you were on your way and...."

Hutch put a hand on Huggy's shoulder and said, "I know, Hug. You coming?"

"I'm right behind you."

Hutch smiled at him briefly and stepped toward the ambulance to climb in the back, but he heard Huggy say his name again and he turned back toward him. Huggy whispered, "I, uh, put his gun in the ice box. He was talkin' about dyin' and all, and...well, I was scared, Hutch."

Donley was standing behind Huggy and he said, "Don't worry, Huggy. We'll go get it back out of there."

Hutch tossed him his keys, asking him to give them to Huggy when he was done and to let Dobey know what was happening. Then he turned to Huggy. "It's gonna be all right, Huggy. Just meet us there." Hutch patted him on the arm and got into the ambulance. He watched the ambulance drive away, siren blaring. Some of Chez Helene's lunch patrons had gathered at the windows to watch the show and Marie was walking toward him. She was fond of Hutch's usually exuberant partner and she delighted in getting him to try her newest dishes. The look she was wearing now was the concern of a friend. He decided he'd better explain that Starsky was sick before he left to meet his friends at the hospital.

The paramedic in the back asked Hutch if Starsky had a doctor as he was working on him during the ride.

"Yeah. Franklin."
Jameson, driving, overheard and called back, "I already notified the hospital, Billy. He's on duty and he'll be waiting."

Billy nodded and continued working on Starsky to stabilize him. "I think it's mostly exhaustion and a lack of proper nutrition," he said to Hutch. "I doubt if he's in any real danger, but then, I'm no doctor."

Hutch nodded tensely, still holding onto Starsky's free hand. In a few moments, they were pulling up outside Receiving's emergency room, and the paramedics quickly unloaded the stretcher and got Starsky inside. He still hadn't regained consciousness, and that seriously frightened Hutch.

Franklin was, indeed, waiting, and he immediately took over from the paramedics, ordering a nurse to get an IV started with glucose while he examined Starsky. Hutch hovered in a corner, trying to stay out of the way, and though Franklin cast him a glance with raised eyebrows, he didn't suggest he leave. Hutch was grateful for that.

He watched as Franklin listened to Starsky's heart, peered into his eyes, took his pulse and temperature. Finally, he turned to Hutch. "What the hell has this boy been doing to himself?"

"It's a long story," Hutch said. "Not eating, not sleeping, and worrying. Somebody's been messing with his mind by calling him on the phone and pretending to be people who are dead. People he knew and loved, like his fiancée and his father."

Franklin drew a heavy sigh and shook his head. "Is he on any medications?"

"I gave him a Mickey to make him sleep last night," Hutch admitted. "But other than that, no."

"Well, he's going to be all right," Franklin said. "I don't find any real damage that some rest and food won't fix. But he's lost too much weight and I don't like his color. I'm going to have to admit him. We'll do some tests, keep him a couple of days and force-feed him if necessary. What about this person 'messing with his mind'? I trust you're taking care of that angle?"

"Yeah," Hutch said grimly. "I'm working on it. Haven't figured it out yet."

Franklin gave a thoughtful nod. "I see. You can come back and see him tomorrow. He won't be conscious before then, because now I'm going to give him a ‘Mickey.' He needs all the rest he can get. Since that shooting that almost killed him, his body doesn't need this kind of punishment."

Hutch winced at that. He always hated to be reminded of how close a call Gunther's assassination attempt had been. "What time tomorrow?"

"Mid-morning. Now get out of here and let me do my job. You do yours."
When Hutch emerged from the treatment room, he almost ran into Huggy, who was hanging around outside, his eyes wide with fear. "He's okay," Hutch said quickly, knowing how he always felt in the same position. "They're keeping him for a couple of days to build up his strength."

"Thank God," Huggy said fervently, for once dispensing with fancy language and silly jokes. "He scared the hell out of me, Hutch."

"Me, too," Hutch agreed. "Come on, I need a ride back to my car. I've got work to do."

"Can't we see him?"

"Not until tomorrow. Dr. Franklin's going to keep him knocked out until then so he can rest."

Huggy dropped Hutch off and went back to The Pits. Hutch went back to the precinct, determined to figure out what the hell was going on.

He'd been going over files for a couple of hours when Babcock and Simmons came in, both looking grave and worried. "What's wrong, fellas?" he asked.

"Murder," Simmons said shortly.

Hutch was puzzled. This was the homicide division, after all. "Something special about this one?"

"No," Simmons answered. "Just a young girl, strangled and left in the reservoir. You know what water does to a dead body. She's probably only been dead a few hours."

"Yeah," Hutch said. "It's not pretty. But, still, that isn't that unusual."

"No ID," Babcock put in. "The M.E. thinks she's about 19 or 20, tops. It's just --"

Hutch nodded. He understood; no cop ever got cynical or hardened enough to be unmoved by violent death, especially when the victim was young.

"Guess we better start going through missing persons files," Babcock said to his partner.

Simmons nodded and picked up the phone.

Hutch went back to his own files. File after file, and none seemed a likely suspect. How many times had he and Starsky done this same task, looking for a clue to someone who wanted to harm them? Why the hell don't the jails and prisons keep them inside so they can't threaten the rest of the world outside? he asked himself.

Eventually, his aching shoulders and back insisted he stop for a while. He rubbed his eyes, realizing how long he'd been sitting there. Simmons and Babcock had long since left. In fact,
looking toward the window, Hutch realized it was dark. No wonder his neck was stiff and the words were swimming before his eyes. He slapped the file shut and tossed it on top of the stack. This was getting him nothing but a headache.

He rubbed the back of his neck and yawned, reaching for his jacket. He'd go home to supper and bed now and try again when his mind was clearer. He had made it almost to the door of the squad room when the phone rang. He almost went out anyway and let it ring. He'd been off duty, officially anyway, for almost two hours. But, just in case....

"Ninth Precinct, Homicide," he said. "Sergeant Hutchinson."

"Ken?"

His heart took a crazy leap but he forced it to calm down. "Hi, Rachel," he forced himself to say casually. "How are you? Is something wrong?"

"I'm fine, honey, but I need to talk to Davy. I couldn't get either of you at home and took a chance you'd still be at work."

"He's, uh, out of the room," Hutch said, cursing the telltale stammer that always appeared when he was upset and hoping against hope she hadn't noticed. "Can I have him call you?"

There was a brief silence, then Rachel said, "I don't know if this is important or not, but my neighbor's here and she told me something kind of disturbing. I thought I'd better tell Davy about it."

"What is it?"

"She said a man came to see her a few weeks ago, a man who said he worked with you two. He told her Davy was getting a medal and the guys were throwing him a surprise party with a kind of 'This is Your Life' theme and he asked her a lot of questions about Davy." She paused, while every cop instinct went ballistic in Hutch's head.

When she didn't go on, Hutch prompted her. "Yeah?"

"Well, I can't imagine Davy getting an award like that and not telling me," she said. "And it made me suspicious that maybe this man was fishing for information. I'm probably being silly -- "

"No, you're not," Hutch said. "David's not getting an award that I know of, either. What kind of information did she give this man? And why didn't she say anything to you before?"

"She's been in the hospital," Rachel said. "Surgery, nothing serious, but she just forgot to mention it before now. She got home today and I had her over for supper and that's when she told me. Is Davy okay?"
Starsky’s going to kill me, Hutch thought, but it occurred to him that Rachel might be in danger, too. They didn't know who was behind this or how far they might go, and it could be just as well for her to be on her guard. In a few words, he explained what had been going on.

"My God." she said when he finished, her voice shaking. "Poor Davy! Are you sure it's not serious?"

"Dr. Franklin said he'd be fine," Hutch reassured her. "He just needs rest and he's getting that in the hospital. Can I talk to your neighbor? Maybe she could describe the man who came to see her."

"Hang on."

In a moment, Helen McDermott was on the phone. She was horribly upset that she might have given information to the man that helped him hurt Starsky, and it took Hutch several minutes to calm her down enough to actually answer questions. He could hear Rachel in the background doing the same thing. Finally, the woman, still sniffling and with a catch in her voice, was able to tell Hutch that she'd told the man how much Davy was like his father and had given him some details about how old he'd been when his father died and when he'd left for California.

It didn't sound like anything serious, but it was enough for someone impersonating his father to be able to say the right things on the phone to upset Starsky. "What'd the man look like, Mrs. McDermott?"

"Not very tall -- maybe three inches shorter than Davy," she said. "He was around 40 or 45, kind of thick around the middle, and he had a receding hairline. I think his eyes were brown. So was his hair."

Hutch sighed. That could describe half the men on any street in America. "He didn't tell you his name, did he?"

"He said it was John Duncan," she said after a moment's thought.

Hutch closed his eyes and sank into a chair. John Duncan was -- had been -- a 30-year veteran of the department who'd died of a heart attack a few months earlier. It hadn't been Duncan himself, but someone using his name. "Can you remember anything else about him?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"Okay. Let me talk to Rachel again, please. Thank you, Mrs. McDermott."

She sniffled and handed the phone back to Starsky's mom. "Did that help at all, Ken?" she asked.

"I don't know yet," Hutch said. "Listen, Rachel, you and your friend be careful, okay? I don't know who or what we're dealing with and I don't want to scare you, but I'd feel better if you were on your guard."
"We will be," she said. "But you promise me you'll be careful, too, will you?"

"I will."

"And give my love to Davy," she added. "Where is he? I want to call him."

"Rachel, he'll draw and quarter me if he finds out I told you about this. Besides, he'll be home in a couple of days -- "

"The room number, Ken."

He sighed and gave it to her. "Wait until tomorrow to call. The doc's keeping him sedated so he'll sleep."

He went home, showered and rooted around in the refrigerator for something to eat. He wasn't at all hungry, but he forced down a couple of sandwiches and one of Starsky's root beers. This case was making him almost as crazy as it had made Starsky. But he couldn't afford to give in to it. He had to figure out who was doing this and stop him.

He concentrated on the description Helen McDermott had given him. Did they know anyone who fit that who might have a grudge against them, particularly against Starsky? He couldn't think of anyone, and there hadn't been anyone in the files who might fit that description who wasn't already in jail. He'd checked. A couple of guys had fit -- Willie Macklin, whom they'd busted for child molestation a couple of years ago. He was in prison. Donald Ketcham was another. He'd run a lucrative heroin business for a while, until a street dealer died of an overdose of bad stuff last summer. He was in prison, too. The other three or four who fit the general description were either in prison or dead.

He finally gave up and went to bed. Without Starsky to bounce ideas off of, this was an exercise in futility. He was getting nowhere by himself.

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Early in the morning, he was back at the hospital to see Starsky. Huggy met him there, yawning and clutching a Styrofoam cup of very strong, black coffee.

"If I didn't love that man like a relative, ain't no way I'd'a got me out of my nice warm bed at this ungodly hour," Huggy greeted him.

Hutch grinned. "Aw, come on, Huggy. He'd do it for you."

Huggy grinned. "Aw, come on, Huggy. He'd do it for you."

Huggy sank into a chair, gave another jaw-cracking yawn, and applied himself to his coffee. Hutch paced. The nurse had told them they couldn't see Starsky until Franklin approved it, and he hadn't appeared yet. Hutch was almost ready to barge into Starsky's room anyway when the doctor finally came. He looked grave, and Hutch's heart took another flying leap into his throat.
"Now, don't panic," Franklin said, while Huggy abandoned his coffee and came to stand next to Hutch. "Remember I said we were going to run some tests?"

Hutch nodded, unable to speak, his eyes fastened on the doctor's face.

"When we ran the EKG -- just as a precaution, considering his history -- there was a slight irregularity in his heartbeat."

Hutch's face went white, and Huggy slipped an arm around him to steady him. "Easy, brother," he murmured.

"It's probably not serious," Franklin said gently. "These things are often brought on by stress, and as I said, with his history, I'm not surprised. That's why I ordered the EKG. I'm sure that with rest and good nutrition, he'll be fine in a few days. But we may have to keep him a little longer than I thought. I don't want him to leave until I see a normal EKG. I'll need your help to convince him of that."

"We'll take care of it, Doc," Huggy said. Hutch still seemed incapable of speech, and Huggy tightened his arm around his waist a little.

"Did you -- did you tell h-him?" Hutch finally asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Franklin nodded. "I saw him just before I came down here. He's not happy," he added with a wry grin. "Called me a 'quack.' So, you've got to convince him you can handle this case on your own or he'll be checking himself out, and Ken," he paused and touched Hutch's arm, "we can't risk that."

Hutch nodded, his own heart thudding painfully in his chest.

"Go on and see him now," Franklin said. "Room 220."

"Dr. Franklin, is this related to...."

"The shooting? I know his heart stopped, Ken. I already talked to his doctor over at Memorial. Look, he has changes on his EKG and I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't concerned that it could be some kind of residual damage. I'm consulting with a cardiologist. He's going to be here in half an hour and he'll do a thorough exam on Detective Starsky. I promise we'll tell you as soon as we know for sure what's going on, okay?"

Hutch nodded gratefully and Dr. Franklin patted him on the arm and walked away. For a few moments, Hutch stood perfectly still, unsure what to do next. Finally, Huggy said, "Hutch?"

"Yeah. Guess we'd better go in there, huh?"
Huggy looked his friend in the eyes and said, "You'd better wipe that freaked out face off before you go in, Hutch. If Starsky gets a look at your mug like that, he's gonna think they're not telling him everything, you dig?"

Hutch smiled at him. Huggy was a good friend. "You're right. You go on in there and tell him I'll be right behind you, huh? Tell him I forgot to call Dobey and I stopped at a pay phone. Won't be a lie, that's exactly what I'm gonna do."

Huggy agreed and walked away to face Starsky with a cheerful demeanor.

Captain Dobey didn't like what Dr. Franklin had to say any more than Hutch did. "Did he think this could have anything to do with when his heart stopped?"

"I asked that, Cap. Doc says he's hoping it's not some kind of after effect. He's called in a cardiologist. I, uh...."

"Hutch, don't go in there to see him with your wigged-out-partner face on, you hear?"

Hutch smiled. "Yeah, Huggy warned me. I was wearing it a little while ago. That's why I thought I'd call you first. Give me a minute to get it under control."

"Huggy was right. Now go on in there and see him. Then, I want you to get your can down here to the station. You're not gonna be able to keep it up all day while you wait for a consult and a diagnosis."

"Thanks, Cap. I'll see you in an hour."

By the time he reached Starsky's room, Hutch's face was appropriately relaxed. He was sure he'd fool his partner.

"Hey, buddy. Dobey says 'hi' and to rest." Hutch smiled, but he couldn't help but let his eyes drift over to the heart monitor. Even resting, Starsky's heart rate was higher than it should be.

Starsky looked up at his friend. He was laughing at a crude comment Huggy had made about the oatmeal he had been served for breakfast. Hutch thought he was fooling him, but Starsky saw through it immediately.

"What?" he asked.

"What, what?" Hutch answered, attempting to look casual.

"You have that look on your face."

"What look?"

"Come on, Hutch. You know what I'm talkin' about. That 'I'm not worried about a thing' look."
Huggy couldn't help but laugh as he pulled up a chair and sat in it. Hutch turned and gave him an icy glare.

"Laugh it up, Huggy," he said before he tried to answer Starsky's question. "Nothin' you don't already know, partner. Dr. Franklin told me he talked to you about the EKG."

Starsky sighed and shifted his gaze up to the ceiling. "Yeah, I told him he was a quack. There's nothin' wrong with me solving this case won't help. I shouldn't even be here, dammit. You said we were gonna try and handle it ourselves, Hutch."

Huggy said, "Starsk, that was before you collapsed again. I shoulda called an ambulance before Hutch did. There wasn't any choice."

Starsky knew he was right, but that didn't help his frustration any. Hutch was watching the heart monitor again. The little green blip tracking his partner's heartbeat wasn't doing anything to make him feel better. Starsky's agitation was making his pulse climb. Hutch couldn't help but think about the time his partner had flat lined after the shooting.

Starsky called his name. "Hutch?" When he received no response, he said it again. "Hutch?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. What did you ask me?"

"Never mind, Blintz. Why don't you go find Dr. Quack and see how quick you can get me sprung."

Hutch shook his head. He walked closer to the bed and pulled the other chair up to sit next to Starsky. He reached out a hand and put it on Starsky's arm. "I know you think this is nothing -- and it probably is -- but I'm not willing to take that chance."

"Hutch...."

"Starsky, just listen. The doc isn't sure if it's related to when...when your...when your heart stopped after you were shot, but he wants to be sure everything's okay. He says they're gonna do some more tests and you need to stay here, resting, eating, and not getting upset by anything for a few days."

An angry flash in Starsky's eyes made Huggy cringe, but it didn't phase Hutch. "When did it stop being my decision where I do my resting and eating?" he said, his anger evident in his tone.

Hutch maintained his composure, and his eye contact with Starsky. "When did you stop trusting me with your life, partner?"

That disarmed Starsky's anger. A look of resignation passed across his face. "What about the case? I don't want you out there running down leads without me for backup. What about that, huh?"
Hutch looked at him with every ounce of sincerity he could muster. "If it were me, would you let me walk out of here, not knowing if everything was okay?" Hutch asked.

"I don't suppose I would. Okay, I'll stay and let them run their useless tests. That make you happy?"

"Happy, Gordo? No. This whole situation stinks. Nothing's gonna make me happy until I know you're okay and the whackos who got you in this situation are in custody. But if you stay here and be a good boy, at least I can get out there and get these guys so you can come home and finish recuperating in peace. Don't worry. I'll get Jack or Sean to go with me. I'll be okay, you just concentrate on getting better."

Huggy nodded his agreement with Hutch. "I'll even go and get you some real food, so you can work on earning that 'Gordo' nickname Blondie pinned on ya."

Starsky smiled. "I'm really not hungry, Huggy."

Huggy and Hutch said at the same time, "You have to EAT!"

"All right, you two, all right. Huggy, you bring me a carne asada burrito with extra jalapenos, and I'll eat."

They argued for a few minutes about the merits of what Starsky thought would be fine to eat versus what Hutch thought would be good and came to a semi-strained agreement. Huggy would return to the hospital with a salad, a steak, and vegetables Hutch insisted Starsky eat vegetables with a lot of iron in them. Hutch instructed Huggy to ask Dr. Franklin if their plan was all right. The extra caution was making Starsky feel like an invalid -- doing nothing for his humor -- but Hutch didn't let that change his mind. When the nurses came to get him for his consult with the cardiologist, Hutch and Huggy both told him they'd be back later. Hutch also took advantage of the fact that he was leaving to tell Starsky that his mother would be calling.

"You called my mother?" Starsky said, his voice rising.

"No, she called me. She was looking for you, buddy, and I tried, but...I couldn't lie to her. She insisted, so I told her to call you today."

"I'm gonna get you for that, Blintz. Hey, can't you stay while I have my tests?" Starsky wasn't afraid of the tests. Dr. Franklin had already assured him none of the tests would be more invasive than a blood draw. Starsky was still worried about his partner being on the streets alone.

"I'll be back, partner. Dobey was screaming for me to come down there. He said you didn't need me to stay here while they run tests and I have a lot of files to look through if I'm gonna catch these creeps. I'll get back later this afternoon. Okay?"

"Okay. Be careful. I don't like it."
"I'm always careful." Hutch and Huggy walked with Starsky and the nurse until they got on the elevator. When the door closed behind them, Hutch turned to Huggy and released a sigh.

"I thought I was doing pretty good hiding my feelings from him. I guess not."

"You should know by now that neither one of you can hide a thing from the other. You did fine. You got him to stay."

"Yeah."

Huggy headed off to find Dr. Franklin while Hutch left for the precinct. He wanted to follow up on the information he'd gotten from Helen McDermott. Maybe there was someone in the files he hadn't finished reviewing who met the description.

After a brief conference with Dobey to get his agreement to let Hutch leave after lunch to go back to the hospital, he returned to the records room to continue his research. He'd been at it for a couple of hours when a thought occurred to him. Why hadn't his phone rung last night? If the perpetrators knew Starsky was staying with him, why hadn't they tried to call him again? Hutch left the files behind and went to Captain Dobey's office.

He knocked on the door and opened it when the captain bellowed, "Come in."

"Cap, I just realized something. I found out about this whole mess right after Starsky changed his number the last time -- the same night. I followed up with the phone company, but they didn't give his number to anyone. Then, when I took Starsky to my place after he collapsed here, the mystery callers phoned him at my place the same night. Last night, Cap, Starsky wasn't at my place anymore. He was at the hospital."

Dobey thought he knew where Hutch was going with this. When Hutch paused for a moment to think, Dobey said, "Go on."

"Why didn't they call him at my place?"

"Good question."

They thought about the implications of that, and then Hutch said, "You don't suppose it could be somebody here at Metro?"

If it were someone at their precinct, that person would have access to Starsky's home number -- and his whereabouts. Dobey said, "I did tell the other detectives that Starsky was in the hospital. You know how fast things get around this building. Could be anybody."

"I'm going down to personnel records and get a list of everybody who was on duty when Starsky first collapsed and yesterday."
As Hutch got up to carry out that task, Dobey said, "Uh, Hutch...what if whoever this is knows his room number? That's not exactly privileged information. What if they try to call him there?"

Hutch's face took on an anxious expression. "He doesn't need that, Cap."

Dobey was already picking up the phone to call the hospital.

~*~*~*~

After Starsky had returned to his room from his tests, he rested for a while. The staff brought him another tray filled with items that barely deserved to be called food. His appetite was nonexistent and he was holding out hope that Hutch or Huggy would be bringing him something better to eat soon. He drifted in and out of sleep but was awakened by the ringing phone. Thinking it was probably his mother, he answered it.

"Hello?"

"Davy?"

Starsky held his breath for a few seconds. When he didn't answer, the caller repeated himself.

"Davy, are you there? It's Dad."

His heart rate was climbing and his breath was starting to come in shallow pants. "How did you find out I was here?"

"David? What kind of question is that, I'm your father."

"No, you're not." Starsky's voice was like ice. "For one thing, I called my father 'Pop,' not 'Dad.'"

There was a slight pause, but only a slight one. "Now, David. You haven't done what you've been told. You need to come to me. Didn't Terry tell you how important it is?"

The heart monitor was registering the physical effect this phone call was having on Starsky. One of the nurses walked over to the corresponding monitor at her station and watched it for a short time.

"This is some sick joke you're pulling, man! You're NOT my dad. My dad would never want me dead."

The nurse could hear the muffled sound of Starsky's rising voice all the way at her station. She turned to one of the other nurses and said, "Page Dr. Franklin. I'm going in there."

"David, listen carefully. You're running out of time. You have to die. You've been warned. If you don't, your partner is a dead man."
"Damn you!" Starsky shouted. "That's not true!"

"It is true. I'm not going to be able to warn you again. Do it."

Starsky slammed the receiver down and then tossed the phone, just like he'd done at Hutch's. He shoved the tray of food away from him, pulling out his IV and dislodging the heart leads at the same time. His nurse heard the monitor alarm going off just as she reached his room. When she opened the door, she was greeted by the sight of her patient, out of bed, with blood dripping down his arm from where he'd pulled out the IV. He was in the process of dismantling his hospital room in a fit of rage that had to be doing nothing for his condition. She tried to calm him down, but she wasn't getting anywhere. He was gasping for breath and he put one hand up to his chest. Starsky's racing heart felt like it was firing extra beats and the sensation was unsettling, but not painful. He leaned up against the wall and sank to the floor just as Dr. Franklin entered the room.

~*~*~*~

Hutch stood anxiously at the corner of Dobey's desk while he spoke with the charge nurse on Starsky's floor. "I see. Is he in any danger? Oh, yes, we'll be down there shortly." He hung up the phone and faced the panicked blond.

"There's been a problem. Starsky had some kind of attack after he got one of those phone calls."

Dobey never had a chance to explain what he'd been told. Hutch was out of his office and on his way to his car like he had been fired out of a cannon. He drove over to Receiving with lights and siren on, frantic that the doctor had been mistaken. Something was seriously wrong with his partner's heart.

Before leaving for the hospital, Dobey stopped by records and asked for the information Hutch wanted to be put on his desk within the hour.

~*~*~*~*~

Hutch bounded through the stairwell door onto Starsky's floor and ran straight to room 220. When he pushed open the door, he was frantic to see hospital maintenance putting the trashed room back together, but no Starsky in sight. Dr. Franklin had seen him run past and he quickly followed him.

"Ken," he called as he approached.

Hutch turned on his heel and went to the doctor. "What happened? Is he all right? Where the hell is he?"

The doctor nodded and put a reassuring hand on Hutch's shoulder. "Ken, he's okay. Calm down and I'll explain."
"Calm down? You said it was gonna be all right, what happened?"

"We had a little problem a while ago."

"I need to see him."

"Not yet. He's out anyway. I had to sedate him." Franklin steered Hutch to a waiting area and made him sit. Then he continued, "We don't know for certain, but the nurses think he got one of those phone calls. I have someone downstairs checking with the switchboard."

Hutch took a few calming breaths. "Dammit! Uh, I'm sorry, Doc. Please tell me he's gonna be okay."

"He'll be all right, Ken. But I think it's important that we shield him from whoever is doing this. He can't get more of these calls. When I reached his room, he had pulled off all of his leads and pulled out his IV. He had trashed the room and I found him sitting on the floor, completely out of breath."

Hutch said, "Oh, God. All right, Doc. I want the phone taken out of his room. I don't care who wants to talk to him, nobody gets him on the phone. I'm going to think of something to catch these people, but I need you to help me protect him by making sure the staff doesn't let anyone talk to him unless I say it's okay. In fact, nobody sees him but me, Dobey, and Huggy."

"Fine, Ken. Now, he was really worked up and I had to put him out for a while. Dr. Conrad, the cardiologist, has been in to see him. We both agree he's stable for now and we should know the results of his tests by tomorrow. Come with me and I'll show you to his new room. I've put him in an isolation room. No telephones and no unauthorized visitors."

Franklin led him to the isolation area and opened the door of Starsky's room, standing back to let Hutch go first. But Hutch was frozen in place at the sight of his partner. Starsky's face was paler than he'd ever seen it, even during those terrible days following Gunther, and there was a bruise on one cheek and a cut on his forehead. The harsh lighting made his dark eyebrows stand out in stark contrast to his pallor, and the gauntness of his face from the lost weight stood out even more clearly.

"Ken?" Franklin touched his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Hutch didn't realize he'd swayed and clutched at the doorframe for support. "My God, he looks awful," he whispered.

"I know," Franklin said. "But he overexerted himself, and he was already weak. Get in there and quit looking like that. He'll be all right. We're doing everything we can."

He gave Hutch a little push, and somehow Hutch forced his feet to carry him to the chair already waiting next to the bed. Franklin followed him and checked Starsky over, finally turning away.
"He ought to wake up in an hour or so," he said to Hutch. "You sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," Hutch said absently, his gaze transfixed on his partner.

Franklin gave a shrug and left the room.

It was uncannily silent in the room. Because it was an isolation ward, the walls were soundproof and Hutch couldn't even hear traffic or movement in the hallways. It seemed as though Starsky would never wake up, but finally, his eyes and nose twitched a few times and he blinked blearily up at Hutch.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty," Hutch said with a smile. "I was getting kind of bored waiting for you to rejoin us."

Starsky moved his eyes around with a puzzled expression. He was still pretty fuzzy. "Where'm I?"

"Receiving Hospital."

"But -- this ain't my room," Starsky said.

"They moved you to a different room," Hutch said. "You, uh, well --"

"Trashed the last one," Starsky finished, remembering. "Aw, hell. Dr. Quack's really gonna be pissed at me now."

Hutch gave a wry grin. "He is. I smoothed him over, though. How ya feel?"

"Awful," Starsky admitted. "Like I ran the Boston Marathon and lost. Badly."

"You can't get agitated like that, buddy. You know what Franklin said about -- about --"

"My heart," Starsky said. "You can't even say it, can ya, Blintz? Honest, though, he's overreactin'. I promise. I ain't goin' nowhere."

"Promise me," Hutch said, unreasonably. "Promise you won't.... "

"Aw, Blintz," Starsky smiled and patted his hand. "Find out anything yet?"

Hutch got hold of himself and shook his head. "No. Not yet. I know about the phone call. Who was it this time?"

"What phone call?"

"Don't pull that," Hutch said sharply. "You can't lie to me, you know that. The call that set you off. Who was it?"
"I didn't --"

"Bullshit, David Michael Starsky. Who was it?"

Starsky blinked. He didn't think he could remember a single time before that Hutch had used his full name like that. Sometimes he teased him and called him "Davy" like Ma did, but -

"Pop," he answered. "He said he was Pop."

"What else did he say?"

"That I hadn't done what he told me to. That I had to die, or you would."

Hutch swore so vehemently under his breath that it surprised even Starsky.

"Hey, easy, buddy," Starsky said. "Come on, it ain't that bad...."

"The hell it ain't!" Hutch shot out of his chair and paced. "When I get my hands on the worthless son of a bitch that's doing this, I'm gonna rip his goddamn lungs out!"

"Hutch," Starsky said, quietly, not shouting.

Hutch got himself back under control visibly and sat down in the chair, but his eyes were dilated and he was breathing too hard.

"Freakin' out ain't gonna catch him," Starsky said, still quietly. "Keepin' calm and thinkin' clearly is."

"I know," Hutch said, rubbing his face and eyes with one hand and drawing a long, deep breath in an effort to slow his thudding heart. "But look what it's done to you --"

"I shouldn't have let it," Starsky said. "I knew all along it wasn't really Terry or Pop or Gillian. I knew, but I let it get to me, and that's what they want, babe. They wanted me to freak out and I did. But you can't, Hutch. You're all that's keepin' me sane."

Hutch nodded and slowly his heartbeat returned to normal. "I'm sorry, buddy."

"Nah. Fuggedaboudit." Starsky grinned. "Just find the slimeball, huh?" He looked around the room. "I feel like I'm in prison," he complained, partially joking and partially not. "I never talked to Ma, either. Where's the phone? I'll give her a call." Hutch didn't answer, but a dull red began to creep up from his collar. Starsky frowned at him suspiciously.

"What is it now?"

"Uh, about the phone, Starsk --"
"What about the phone?"

"There, uh, there isn't one."

"And why NOT?"

Hutch wet his lips. "I told them to take it out."

Starsky rolled his eyes. "Look here, Blintz --"

"No, you look here," Hutch said. "You need to rest and get better. This son of a bitch knows our every move. He knew you were here. He knew which room you were in. He's not going to leave you in peace even here. So, no phone. No visitors except me and Huggy and the captain. And no arguments."

Starsky stared at him as if trying to decide what to say to this diatribe, and finally decided against saying anything. He shrugged. "Okay. You're probably right. What about Ma?"

"I'll call her and explain."

Hutch left when Huggy showed up with "real food" for Starsky so he could get back to the case. Something was nagging at him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. It wasn't until he was back at his desk in the precinct when it hit him. It was what he'd said to Starsky at the hospital: "This son of a bitch knows our every move."

He shot out of his chair and barged into Dobey's office without knocking.

"Hutchinson!" Dobey was on the phone and glared at him.

Hutch put his hands up in an "I surrender" gesture but he didn't leave.

Dobey sighed and said into the phone, "I have to call you back. I have a wild-eyed Viking in my office. Okay. Love you. Bye." He hung up. "What's so important I have to cut off my conversation with my little girl when she's telling me about her latest ballet lesson?"

"I think I know how to catch the bastard that's harassing my partner."

~*~*~*~

Starsky was trying to watch a game show on TV when Hutch arrived, accompanied by a young rookie officer they both knew slightly. Starsky's eyebrows rose when he saw Jeff Carter behind Hutch. Carter nodded at Starsky but didn't speak, and Starsky turned a quizzical look on his partner.

"I have a plan," Hutch said. "You remember Jeff, don't you?"
"Yeah."

"Look at him. Take your hat off, Jeff."

Carter obediently removed his uniform cap and tucked it under his arm.

"Who's he remind you of, Starsk?"

Starsky examined Carter. "Me, a little," he said at last. "I think I know what you've got up your sleeve, Blintz, and I don't think I like it."

"We'll have backup," Hutch said. "Dobey's working on it right now. Sean and Jack'll be in the street and we're getting the place wired for sound."

"He know what he's gettin' into?" Starsky nodded toward Jeff.

"Yeah. Don't you, Jeff?" Hutch patted the young man on the back. "We've briefed him. Now we gotta get him dressed and we'll put this plan into action." He had a paper bag under his arm and he handed it to the young officer. "Bathroom's over there."

Carter took the bag and left the room. He still hadn't spoken.

"You sure he can handle this, Hutch?" Starsky was frowning and obviously unhappy. "He's just a kid."

"He's 26," Hutch said, "and Dobey says he's bound to make detective in the next couple of years. He's good, buddy. Don't worry."

"He sure don't talk much," Starsky whispered, mindful that Carter was only behind the door.

"That's a problem," Hutch admitted with a snicker. "Nobody'll believe he's you if he keeps playing the strong, silent type."

"Very funny." Starsky rolled his eyes.

Carter emerged a few minutes later, wearing a pair of Starsky's jeans, one of Starsky's blue denim work shirts, and Starsky's blue windbreaker. He had a ball cap pulled down over his dark curly hair and a pair of Starsky's sunglasses in his hand. "Well, Sergeant?" he said to Hutch. "Do I pass?"

"Hutch, not ‘Sergeant,’” Hutch corrected him. "Turn around."

Carter turned in a circle. He was the same height as Starsky, but not quite as muscular, so the jeans weren't as tight as Starsky wore them. However, considering the weight Starsky had lost, Hutch thought, that shouldn't be an issue.
"Let's see you walk," Hutch commanded him.

Carter was definitely missing the Starsky Strut.

"That's not it," Hutch said. "Can't you swagger a little more?"

"Hutch!" Starsky complained.

"You do swagger, buddy," Hutch said, grinning to soften the remark. "You know you do."

Carter turned around and walked back toward Hutch and this time it was almost eerie.

"You're going to make a terrific undercover cop," Hutch said approvingly. "That was perfect."

Carter suddenly grinned. "Thanks, Ser-I mean, Hutch."

"Can you sound like him?" Hutch asked. "Just a touch of Brooklyn."

Starsky rolled his eyes and made a "harrumph" sound in his throat, but Carter nodded. "Yeah," he answered, and the right inflection was there. "Grew up in Queens, myself."

"No, you didn't," Starsky said. "Did you?"

Carter laughed and shook his head. "Albuquerque, actually. But I watched a lot of TV. And I was in all the school plays. I played 'Tony' in 'West Side Story.'"

"Your job," Hutch said to Starsky, "is to stay here and stay out of sight. I'll be in touch, but the whole plan'll be shot to hell if anybody guesses you're here. Dobey's noising it around the station that you're getting out today and I've come here to pick you up."

Starsky didn't speak aloud, but his eyes flickered just momentarily to Carter and back to Hutch. *He knows.*

*Yeah, but he won't be out of my sight or hearing.*

"I'll be good," Starsky said. "But you be careful."

"I will." Hutch gestured to Carter. "Get that cap and those shades on, Jeff. Showtime."

Hutch had borrowed a wheelchair with Franklin's knowledge and permission. Carter sat down in it, and on the way down in the elevator, Hutch told Carter he wanted him to lean on him and act sick as they left the hospital and until they were out of sight in Venice Place. Carter nodded.

As the door opened, Carter kept his head down. At the outer door, Hutch stopped the chair and leaned down to help him up. Carter put an arm around Hutch's shoulder and Hutch put his around Carter's waist.
"Easy, Starsk," Hutch said. "Don't try to do too much."

Carter leaned against him and they made their way slowly and carefully out to the Squash, Hutch treating Carter just the same as he would if he were really Starsky. He loaded him into the passenger side, where Carter slumped into the seat and leaned his head against the glass.

They continued the act until they were safely inside Venice Place. Hutch had the shutters closed just in case anyone could spy on them, and Carter took off the cap and glasses once Hutch indicated it was safe.

"How'd I do?"

"You did fine," Hutch said. "Want a beer?"

Carter shook his head. "No, thanks, but I'd take a glass of water or juice if you have it."

"Orange or grape?"

"Orange."

Hutch went to the kitchen and returned with a beer for himself and a glass of orange juice for Carter. "I hope you won't take this wrong," he said, "but I can't trust anybody. So, I can't let you out of my sight. My partner's life depends on it."

"I understand," Carter said. "I don't expect you to trust me all at once, Hutch."

The phone rang. Hutch jumped as if he'd been shot and had to force himself to relax. He looked at Carter. "I'll get it. But if it's for Starsk, I'm handing it off to you. Can you handle it?"

Carter nodded. "Yeah."

Hutch picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"David?"

"Just a minute." Hutch held out the phone and the look in his eyes would have sobered even a less intelligent man than Officer Jeffrey Carter.

"Yeah?" Carter's inflection was all but flawless. Hutch felt an unwilling admiration for him. His own first undercover assignment had scared him silly, but Carter was as cool as a cucumber. Hutch moved to the other side of the room where the recording equipment was set up. He slipped the headphones on.

"Davy? How ya feelin'?"

"You haven't done what I told you, David."

"Not yet," Carter said. "It's -- it ain't easy, Pop. Y'know? I mean, think how it'd affect Hutch."

Hutch stared at the young officer. He'd briefed him -- he'd spent a couple of hours coaching him, in fact -- but he was still stunned at Carter's grasp of the situation.

"Think about the alternative, Davy. If you don't die, he has to. Would you rather he died than you?"

Carter injected a slight tremor into his voice. "No, Pop. No! I can't let that happen!"

"Then you know what you gotta do, son." The caller hung up.

Carter replaced the receiver and turned toward Hutch, who was staring at him with wonder.

"Did I mess up?"

"Hell, no," Hutch said, astonished. "That was terrific, kid. How on earth...?"

Carter gave a wicked grin worthy of Starsky himself. "You two are living legends, don't you know that? It's no secret how tight you are. Toss in four years of high school drama club and there you are."

Hutch chuckled. "Remind me to request you next time we have an undercover job."

"I will." Carter reached for his orange juice.

~*~*~*~

Larry Newirth paced around his apartment waiting to place a phone call. He had been to the prison to visit Luke Huntley. Newirth told Huntley about Starsky landing in the hospital, which he'd heard through the thriving Metro grapevine before he left work the previous evening. He'd also told the convict about killing Deanna. Luke wasn't pleased about that, but it couldn't be helped. They'd have no more phone calls from "Terry" to torture Starsky with now that she was gone. He told Newirth to turn up the heat on their plot. Huntley was a cop long enough to know that there was a chance someone might connect the dead young woman to what was happening to Starsky.

Newirth remembered what Huntley had said with a chill. "Hutchinson is probably tearing up the precinct and their beat to figure out what's happening to his precious partner. You might not have much time before one of them starts to get wise. They're both damn good at what they do. Call your actor and get him to put the pressure on Starsky. Tell him his 'Pop' will come over to help him reach the other side. If his mind is as messed up as what it sounds like, as soon as he's back from the hospital...finish him. Shouldn't be too hard. Help him out." Luke Huntley wore an expression that Newirth would describe as evil delight at the thought of David Starsky's death.
He was finally going to get his revenge. They both were. Newirth had agreed to the idea, but it was he who would ensure that the detective crossed over to be with his dead loved ones. He'd wait until Starsky was back at his home or Hutch's. Then, when Hutch was not around, he'd get Starsky to let him in and he'd kill him. Making it look like a suicide didn't seem like a big challenge, given the other man's current condition. He had accepted that he might need to be the triggerman.

He picked up the phone and dialed the pay phone again. Jocko Malloy, his actor, was supposed to be waiting for his call to report his progress and wait for instructions. Newirth had called down to the precinct when he returned from the prison and he'd been told that Detective Starsky was being released from the hospital. He'd offered Jocko another hundred dollars to watch the hospital and follow them when Hutchinson came to pick up his partner.

The actor answered. "Yeah."

"Jocko, did you see them?"

"Yeah. I watched just like you told me to. The blond guy picked him up and they drove to a place in Venice on Ocean."

"How'd the patient look?"

"Pretty wiped. He was leaning on the blond pretty heavy and his clothes were even kinda hanging on him. Couldn't even walk up the stairs by himself."

"Excellent. Did you make the calls?"

"Yeah, I called him in the hospital. Really juiced him up, too." Jocko laughed unsympathetically. The man disliked cops and the idea of hurting one appealed to him.

"Called him at the number from before and got him. The other guy just gave him the phone, stupid jerk."

Newirth smiled at how well this was going. "How'd he take it?"

"I think he's giving in. He said he couldn't let his partner die, that he knew what he had to do, but it was hard. Idiot's actually worried about what it'll do to his partner if he offs himself."

_He should be worried. I'm hoping it'll kill Hutchinson, even if Luke just wants to get Starsky._

"I want you to keep it up during the night. Call him two or three times. Tell him you'll come and help him after his partner is gone. That way it'll be easier for 'Davy' and his partner."

"Okay, but listen, man...I ain't hurting him. Scaring him and driving him nuts are not the same thing as popping him."
"You let me worry about the final details. Just watch the place and make your calls. Tomorrow morning, let me know when Blondie leaves."

"You're the boss. Hey. Tell me something."

"What?"

"What makes you hate these guys so much?"

Newirth became angry at that remark. He hoped he wasn't going to have to dispose of Jocko before he was ready. That was his plan. As soon as Starsky was dead, he'd get the young actor to meet him at the reservoir and he'd finish him off just like he'd done Deanna.

"None of your damn business, Jocko. Just do your job. This is the last night, as long as Hutchinson leaves Starsky alone tomorrow."

Newirth got some sick pleasure at the thought of Starsky using Hutch's Magnum to do the job. He knew that would never happen -- Hutchinson would have his weapon on him. No, Starsky's Beretta would have to do. In case Starsky's gun wasn't at Hutch's place, the bitter man had other plans. He was going to have to chloroform Starsky anyway. He'd finish him off in some other way if the gun wasn't there.

~*~*~*~

Throughout the long night, Hutch's phone rang a few times. Each time the voice was the man claiming to be Mike Starsky. The conversations were similar to the other ones, but Jeff pretended to become increasingly despondent, and increasingly willing to end his life. He seemed to be playing into Jocko's hands.

Both Jeff and Hutch were tired from the night of interrupted sleep, but they managed to be alert whenever the phone rang. The call that came at six in the morning was the worst. Jeff and Hutch had already agreed on what Jeff should say.

Jeff picked up the phone and said, "Hello?"

"Davy? Are you ready, son?"

"I'm ready, Pop. Can you help me?"

"Help you, son? I'm here on the other side, waiting. Just come to me. Do it."

"No, I can't. Not by myself and I can't let Hutch see this. I wanna do it, Pop, but you've gotta help me."

Jocko paused briefly, pretending to consider the request.
"I can't help physically, son, but I'll be there. When your partner leaves, just think of me and I'll come. I'll help you through it. I'm so happy, Davy. I need you."

"I'm tired, Pop. I just want this to be over. I'll call your name, okay?"

"Yes, Davy. I'll be waiting." Jocko hung up the phone and laughed. *What a jackass. He deserves to die. Glad I don't have to see to it, but he deserves to die.* The only thing he had to do now was watch for Hutch to leave and call Newirth. His job was done and he'd wait to hear from Newirth about getting paid.

Hutch felt a chill listening to this young man who sounded so much like his partner as he acted suicidal. Even though he wasn't Starsky and the whole thing was an act, Jeff was a little too good at it.

"You missed your calling, man. Should've been an actor," Hutch said with a nervous smile.

"Nah, mostly that pays worse than bein' a cop. Hardly anybody makes it. If I make detective someday, maybe I'll get to do a lot of undercover and exercise my creative side."

"Oh, you'll make it. No doubt."

Hutch went into the kitchen to get them both some breakfast as they continued to discuss what they thought would happen next. Having someone to bounce his ideas off of usually helped Hutch. Jeff Carter was no substitute for his partner, but the younger man was intelligent and quick thinking. The long night's activities had helped him to trust Jeff. He was comfortable leaving for the next phase of the plan. As they talked about the case, their brainstorming led Hutch to an intriguing thought.

"Isn't it sort of odd that suddenly all of the calls are coming from the man?" Hutch mused. "What happened to the girl who said she was Terry and Gillian?"

"That is peculiar. You know, if you haven't missed any of the calls, everyone since Starsky went to the hospital has been the man."

Hutch handed Jeff a plate of scrambled eggs and toast and then went to the phone. He looked a number up in his book and called Babcock. He knew the man would be up getting ready for work by then.

"Hello?" Babcock answered.

"Hi, it's Hutch."

"Good morning. Everything okay?"
"Yeah. I know this is a long shot, but Jeff Carter and I have figured out something about this case. I know you and Simmons were working on a Jane Doe homicide the other day. You ever ID her?"

"Yeah, we did yesterday afternoon. Poor kid. Why?" Hutch could hear the sounds of Babcock munching on something while they talked.

"Well, this is probably nothing, but the girl that called Starsky before, when he collapsed at the station, she's stopped calling. She was pretty persistent for the first couple of weeks and then suddenly, no more calls from her. Who was your homicide?"

"Name was Deanna Mobley. Young girl, just 20."

"Any idea what she did for a living? I mean, was she a working girl or anything like that?"

"Nothing like that. She was an out of work actress. You really think this could be related?"

"I don't know, but my gut instinct is saying yes. Thanks, I'll let you know."

After he hung up the phone, Hutch went into the kitchen to retrieve his breakfast. Jeff asked, "You think it could be related somehow?"

"No reason to think it really, but yeah, I do."

Hutch was a good detective. His gut instincts were usually sound from what Jeff had heard. If Hutch thought it was related, he was probably right. "What does it mean?"

"I think it means whoever wants to hurt my partner is almost done playing this game. I also think it means you'd better be careful. You're gonna be in earshot of me and the rest of the cavalry all the time, but something can happen fast. I'm gonna take a quick shower, call to check on my partner, and then I'll call Dobey and we'll decide how to play this. Don't forget to turn on the recorder if he calls again, but I don't see him doing that. I think he's ready to make a move."

Hutch got ready to look like he was leaving for a day at work. A quick call to Receiving revealed that his partner had slept peacefully through the night -- when he wasn't being awakened for vital signs checks. He had asked his nurse to give Hutch a message.

Starsky's nurse said, "I hope this make sense to you. He said to tell you ‘See ya.’"

Hutch laughed out loud, causing Jeff to turn and look at him with a quizzical look. He couldn't imagine what the hospital could have told Hutch that was so funny.

"Thanks, yeah. Unfortunately, that makes perfect sense to me," Hutch replied. "Would you mind giving him a response for me? I hate to ask you to be our messenger."
"I don't mind. Especially if it makes him laugh like his message made you. He could use a little laughter."

"Thanks. Please just tell him 'I'm always careful.' Got it?"

"Yep. I'll give it to him after I wake him up for breakfast. By the way, Detective Starsky still isn't eating very well. Says he's worried about you being on the street without him. Anything you can do to encourage him?"

"No. My partner is about as stubborn as they come, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Oh, I noticed." Her gentle laugh warmed Hutch's heart. Starsky was in good hands there.

Hutch thanked her, hung up and called Dobey.

"Cap, I've been looking at these duty rosters you sent over. I think there are about fifteen names of personnel who might have quick access to Starsky's records that are common on both days. Most of them I'd eliminate without question, but I don't know four of them well enough to pass them off like that."

"Give me the names," Dobey replied.

"Larry Newirth, Kurt Schmidt, Lisa Hamilton, and Jerry Washington."

"I'll get on this and let you know. What's the plan as of this point?"

Hutch told Dobey about the calls throughout the night and his theory that the perpetrator or perpetrators would be looking to come to the apartment to "help" Starsky fulfill his destiny. He would leave for work and drive a few blocks away. After parking his car near the unmarked cars Dobey had already sent for the morning's activities, he'd double back on foot and sneak in through the back stairs. Jeff was wearing a wire and the apartment was bugged. The captain had even had a surveillance camera set up that Hutch would turn on when he left. The camera was hidden in one of Hutch's plants and it covered the living room. Dobey would head out to Venice as soon as he had gotten the information on the four people Hutch had named. That should help them know who they might be looking for that morning.

A few last-minute instructions to Jeff and Hutch was ready to go. "Jeff, I want you to be extra careful. These people are out to kill Starsky and I don't want you to be a sacrificial lamb."

"Don't worry so much. I'm a big boy and I know all about you two. You've pissed off more people than a dozen IRS Tax Auditors."

"That's a fact. All right, I'm going. Hang tight. I'm only going to be gone for about 15 minutes or so. I'll be able to hear you." He walked over and turned on the camera.
Hutch went down the stairs to the street. The windows were still covered and the light in the apartment was dim. Jeff decided to crash on the couch with a book he'd snagged from Hutch's bookshelf. He had no idea how long the wait would be and he decided he might as well get comfortable.

Meanwhile, Hutch was having a problem. When he turned off of Ocean, he got caught in a giant traffic jam within the next two blocks. He was totally pinned and would have no choice but to wait it out, unless he wanted to just abandon his car where it was. A serious injury accident had blocked his forward progress and a large group of cars were behind him on the one-way street. Until Life Flight came and collected the injured, he'd be sitting. Hutch turned up the gain on his receiver and notified the other officers that he was going to be delayed. Hoping everything would be all right, he sat and fumed, drummed his fingers on the dash, paced in his head, and generally worried for the next twenty minutes. Finally, he was able to move and he raced to where he could park the car.

Back in the apartment, Jeff had fallen asleep soon after he sat down with his book. The low light and his nearly sleepless night conspired against him. Larry Newirth had been watching the apartment. He waited twenty minutes to be sure Hutch was not going to return, and then he made his move.

Newirth crossed the street and walked up to the door at Venice Place. A quick look in either direction revealed that there was no one around to see him enter. He was unaware that he was being observed from an unmarked van. Captain Dobey had arrived by another route in the past five minutes. He was watching the closed-circuit camera they had trained on the entrance to Hutch's stairwell on the monitors inside the van. He recognized Newirth and notified the other officers to stand by.

At the top of the stairs, Newirth easily opened Hutch's door by sliding a credit card between the striker plate and the locking mechanism. He quietly opened the door and peeked inside the living room. Jeff was lying on the couch with his back to the door. The man found it all too easy to quietly pad over to the couch and use the chloroform he had with him on "Starsky."

Hutch ran full speed back to Venice Place, ducking past pedestrians and narrowly missing a few of them. He slowed to a jog a block away in order to catch his breath. He ducked into the alley next to the Chinese restaurant and approached his building from the back. Jack Hill and Sean Cavanaugh were back there, screened from view by a delivery truck parked behind Chez Helene's -- deliberately parked there, thanks to Marie, the owner, and a favor the bread company driver owed her.

"Seen anything?" Hutch asked softly.

Hill shook his head. "No, but Dobey says he saw Newirth go in a minute ago."

Hutch swore under his breath. "Newirth? From records?"

Hill nodded. "Yeah. Sucks, don't it? Can't even trust your own."
Hutch wiped sweat from his forehead. "I'm going in. Give me two minutes before you follow."

"Two?" Cavanaugh cocked his head. "One."

"One and a half."

"Deal. Be careful."

Hutch lifted a hand in acknowledgement, drew his gun, and sneaked up the stairs. He'd left the greenhouse door unlocked and moved some of the larger plants around to screen his approach from anyone who might be inside. He'd forgotten about the squeaky stair near the top, however. He stepped on it and his heart almost stopped beating when it made its usual loud groan. He froze and waited, listening. But there was no sound or movement from inside. Maybe Newirth hadn't heard it. Hutch was much more careful where he stepped as he slithered to the door, knelt, and eased the screen open. He crawled through on hands and knees and slid behind another plant he'd placed just inside the door. He listened again and heard someone going through the closet in the sleeping alcove. Newirth?

Hutch crawled over to the room divider and peered around it. It was Newirth, his back to Hutch as he abandoned the closet and started searching the bedside table. What the hell was he looking for? Behind him, Hutch could hear Hill and Cavanaugh climbing the outside stairs. If he could hear it, Newirth could.

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After Newirth was sure the man on the sofa was going to stay unconscious, he reached over and turned on the lamp. He needed Starsky's gun and he wasn't going to be able to find it in the dark room. The instant the light fell on the couch, he realized that this man wasn't Starsky.

He froze for a moment, staring. He'd seen this young man around the station, but he couldn't remember his name. He did bear a passing resemblance to Starsky, but he most emphatically was NOT Starsky. Which meant this was a setup. The whole place was probably surrounded by cops. He gently opened the officer's shirt and found the wire. He'd been trained in surveillance many years ago, before he got transferred to Records, and he knew how to disable the wire without making any noise. No sense in giving them any more of an edge than they already had.

Now he needed Starsky's gun more than ever. He wasn't going down without a fight -- and if necessary, he was taking the kid on the couch with him. He hurriedly searched the coat rack but there was no holster there. He ran to the closet and began searching there.

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Cavanaugh entered first and slid over to Hutch. Neither of them dared speak aloud, but Hutch gestured toward the sleeping alcove. Cavanaugh lay flat on the floor and poked his head over Hutch's knee to peek in that direction. He withdrew his head and slid behind Hutch, gesturing that he would approach from one side and Hutch could approach from the other. They didn't
know if the man was armed, and they weren't taking any chances. Hutch nodded and got his feet under him.

He raised his free hand and held up one finger, then two, then three and dived toward Newirth. Cavanaugh did the same from the other side and when Hutch reached the man, he grabbed him and threw him face down on the bed before Newirth even realized he was had, laying his gun barrel against Newirth's temple and growling, "Where's Jeff?"

Cavanaugh produced a pair of handcuffs and secured the prisoner, elaborately dusting his hands off afterward.


"Open the windows," Cavanaugh called back. "Try to revive him."

"Gotcha," Hill answered.

Hutch was still holding his gun barrel to Newirth's temple, his hand shaking from rage and his eyes flashing dangerously. "What the hell," he snarled, "were you trying to do to my partner? And WHY?"

Newirth didn't answer.

Hutch shoved the gun against his temple hard enough to move his head sideways a couple of inches. "I asked you a question, you worthless son of a bitch!"

"Hutch," Cavanaugh said nervously.

Hutch ignored him, and still keeping the gun leveled at Newirth, grabbed the man's arm and violently turned him over. This time he pointed the gun between his eyes. "What the hell were you doing?" he demanded again.

"Uh, Hutch," Cavanaugh said, afraid to do something and afraid not to. "Take it easy, man. Hutch?"

Newirth was trembling and his eyes were closed, but he still didn't answer. Hutch grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked his head off the bed so he could glare directly into his face. Newirth's eyes were open now and dilated with terror. "I asked you a question!"

"Hutch," Cavanaugh tried again, reaching over and putting his hand over Hutch's. "Let him go." When he got no response, he said, more forcefully, "Hutch. Let him go."

Hill appeared in the opening between the living room and sleeping areas, took one look at the situation and was at Hutch's side in two long strides. "Hutch, listen. Jeff's okay, he's coming around. Starsky'll kill me and Sean both if we let you get into any shit. So let go. Now."
Hutch let go, backed away, and let his gun hand fall to his side. "Get this scum out of my house," he said, his voice low and deadly. "Before I do something we'll all regret."

Hill used his radio to call in the other cops. Dobey arrived so quickly that he had to have been waiting outside on the stairs.

"Get Hutch," Hill said shortly. He and Cavanaugh would take care of getting Newirth down to the station and booking him. "What'd you hear in here?"

"Not a thing," Dobey said, meeting his eyes squarely. "What did you see?"

"I was in the living room trying to revive Carter. Didn't see a thing." Hill gestured to his partner, and the two of them left with Newirth. Hutch was still standing next to the bed, his gun still dangling from his hand, while other cops swept through the apartment looking for evidence. One called an ambulance for Jeff, though the young officer was awake now and sitting up, pale and a bit green around the gills, but otherwise unharmed.

"Hutch?" Dobey approached cautiously and put a hand on Hutch's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Hutch shook his head as if to clear it and slowly put his gun away. "Yeah." He suddenly seemed to remember Jeff and dodged around his captain to hurry to the other officer's side. "Hey, you all right?"

Jeff nodded and winced. "Yeah. That was really, really stupid."

"What was?" Hutch automatically peered into Jeff's eyes and felt his pulse and checked his color.

"Going to sleep like I did. If I'd been awake, I might've been able to help you guys. Could've stopped him from chloroforming me, anyhow."

Hutch grinned. "You did great. We had it covered."

"But I was supposed to help you catch him," Jeff said, visibly upset. "I promised Starsky --" He snapped his mouth shut.

"What was that?" Hutch sat back on his heels on the floor.

"Nothing."

"Like hell. Did that curly-haired southpaw call you?" Hutch wasn't smiling, but Dobey saw the twinkle in his eyes, even if Jeff didn't.

Jeff ducked his head. "Well...yeah. He did. While you were in the shower this morning. He said - -" He stopped again and looked up at Dobey as if for assistance.

"He said what?" Hutch was inexorable.
Jeff sighed. "He said -- and I quote -- 'You watch Hutch's back for me and if anything happens to him I'm gonna kick your ass.'"

Dobey chuckled and Hutch actually burst out laughing. But he stopped abruptly. "They took the phone out of his room."

"Guess he used somebody else's." Jeff rubbed his eyes; he still looked too wan and peaked, and they could all hear the ambulance's approach.

"I guess he did. I'll deal with him about that later. And I won't tell him anything, I promise." Hutch patted Jeff's shoulder and one of the other officers let the ambulance attendants in. While they checked Jeff out, Dobey pulled Hutch to one side.

"We still have a problem."

"The guy who made the calls," Hutch said. "Already thought of that. I'll get it out of Newirth or - -"

"No, you won't. Hill and Cavanaugh are going to question Newirth."

"So am I," Hutch said, low and menacing.

"Hutchinson, I won't have you roughing him up!" Dobey's voice was rising. He'd be bellowing soon.

"Who said anything about roughing him up?"

"If Cavanaugh and Hill hadn't been here a few minutes ago, what would you have done to him?" Dobey demanded. "I know how you feel about Starsky and anybody who harms him. Newirth's a cop. He knows the rules. You break those rules, and his lawyer'll eat you alive. And then, good-bye, case. You want that to happen? You're not questioning him."

"I ain't sittin' on my hands, either!"

"You can observe. From the other side of the glass. That's as far as I'll go."

Hutch opened his mouth to argue, but although he and Starsky often pushed their captain to the point of insubordination, they both knew when to stop. Dobey wasn't going to budge on this one. Hutch gave in. "Okay. Dammit, okay! But I'm staying on this case until we get every last person involved in it."

Dobey nodded.

Hutch called the hospital before he headed to the station. Franklin told him Starsky was doing well and chafing at his confinement. "Tell him I'll be there as soon as I can," Hutch said.
"I will."

By the time Hutch arrived at the precinct, Hill and Cavanaugh already had Newirth in an interrogation room. But he was clammed up and wouldn't tell them anything. Hutch couldn't stay in his chair on the other side of the glass. He paced, he fumed, he swore under his breath and out loud both, and finally got on the phone. "Ask him if he knows Deanna Mobley -- the girl who was killed at the reservoir a couple of days ago."

Hill's face showed his puzzlement, but he shrugged. "Okay." He turned back to Newirth and bent over him. "Who's Deanna Mobley?"

Newirth's eyes widened, just for a moment, and he looked scared to death, but the next moment he had his face back under control. "Dunno," he said.

Hill's eyes flickered up to the two-way mirror. "I see. Name means nothing to you?"

Newirth shook his head.

Cavanaugh had caught the look toward the mirror and though he didn't know exactly what Hutch had said to Hill on the phone, the fact that his partner had asked a seemingly irrelevant question told him enough. "That's funny," he remarked, scooting himself up to sit on the table so he could loom over Newirth. "We've got a witness who saw you with her down at the reservoir."

Newirth's face drained of all color and he sputtered, "That's impossible! No one else was there -- " he stopped, realizing what he'd said.

Hutch pumped a fist into the air, even though Hill and Cavanaugh couldn't see him.

Cavanaugh bent a little closer. "Did you pay her to call Starsky?"

"I don't know her," Newirth said desperately.

"Did you pay her to call Starsky?"

Newirth looked from Hill to Cavanaugh and back again. Even Hutch could see the sweat trickle down his face. "What are you talking about?"

"Look, Larry," Cavanaugh said. "We know. We know about the calls. We know you killed Deanna. All we don't know is why. Maybe you ought to tell us that part."

He was bluffing. They didn't have any proof for anything other than Newirth's breaking into Hutch's place and chloroforming Carter -- though that was enough to charge him and hold him -- but Newirth didn't know that. He looked wildly back and forth at the two detectives again, then a crafty look came into his eyes. "I might, if I thought I could make a deal."

"You know we can't promise that," Hill said.
"You can make a deal for me," Newirth said. "I'm not some street punk, Jack. I know the DA'll listen to you two if you make an effort. You want the guy's name or not?"

Hill and Cavanaugh looked at each other. "What guy?" Hill asked.

"The guy who thought the scam up," Newirth said. "And it wasn't me."

"If you're yankin' our chain, Newirth --" Cavanaugh said.

Newirth shook his head. "I'm not. I can prove it."

"Okay, then, who was it?"

"Not without a deal."

Cavanaugh suddenly grabbed a handful of the front of Newirth's shirt. "We ain't even gonna discuss a deal or whether we're willing to make any effort for a scumbag turncoat cop until you give us some information! You got that?"

In spite of his anger at Newirth, Hutch couldn't keep from grinning at Newirth's reaction to Cavanaugh's sudden transformation from "just folks" to snarling bulldog. Newirth's eyes were as big as saucers and Hutch strongly suspected he was going to require a change of underwear. Dobey came through the door just in time to see that part.

"I talked to Starsky," he said. "He's threatening to come down here."

"I hope you ordered him not to."

"I did, but you know how well that works."

Newirth was still staring, bug-eyed, at Cavanaugh. Finally, his eyes dropped. "Luke Huntley."

"Luke?" Hutch gasped.

Cavanaugh stared at Newirth almost blankly for a moment. He looked up at Hill whose mouth had dropped open as soon as Newirth said the former cop's name.

Recovering his senses, Hill said, "You really expect us to believe that?"

"I don't give a damn what you believe, it's the truth. Now do I get a deal or don't I?"

Dobey picked up the phone and when Cavanaugh answered it, the captain said, "I'll call the D.A."

Cavanaugh hung up and said, "All right. We're getting the D.A."
Newirth said, "Good. I want an attorney now."

While they took a break from the interrogation to wait for the attorneys and a stenographer, Hutch called the hospital and asked to speak with Starsky. The nurse said, "Okay, but Dr. Franklin wants to talk to you first. He tried to call, but he was told you couldn't be interrupted."

Hutch didn't like the sound of that. "Is Starsky all right?"

"Yes, he's fine. Hold the line and I'll get the doctor for you."

While he waited, Hutch looked through the two-way mirror at the man in the interrogation room. He didn't know Newirth well. He remembered hearing from some of the guys that Starsky had gotten into it with Newirth once while Hutch was in the hospital, but he was having a hard time imagining why that would make the man hate his partner enough to do this to him. He also wanted to know what Newirth's connection to Luke Huntley was.

Dr. Franklin's voice broke into his thoughts. "Ken?"

"Yeah, Doc. What's going on?" Hutch asked.

"Your captain called a little while ago and asked to speak with Starsky. Afterward, David told me in no uncertain terms that he's going to check out of here AMA if I don't move him back to a regular room and give him a phone. How are things on your end?"

Hutch sighed his relief. If Starsky was up to bitching and moaning, he must be feeling better. "We have one of them in custody, but I'm not taking any chances. We still don't have the guy who was making the calls. How's he doing?"

"Better, but I want him to stay till Dr. Conrad clears him. Do you think you might be able to talk some sense into him?"

"I haven't been able to for years, Doc, but if you put him on the phone, I'll try."

Dr. Franklin put Hutch on hold while one of the nurses went to get Starsky.

"Hey," Starsky said a few minutes later.

"Hey yourself. Listen to me...."

"Oh, no, you don't. Dobey told me you caught the guy. I'm feeling better and I'm coming down there. I want to see this dirtball."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am. I just need some clothes and the nurses seem to be conveniently unable to find mine."
"Starsky...."

"Hutch...."

"Shut up, will ya!" Hutch paused to make sure Starsky was going to listen. "Dr. Franklin says you need to stay, and I trust him."

"But, Hutch, I don't want you to have to face that guy alone with the way you're feelin' about this whole thing."

Hutch smiled. "Oh, I see. Go back to your room and relax, buddy. I'm okay. Sean and Jack are interrogating him. Dobey won't let me closer than the other side of the two-way glass."

"Did you do something?" Starsky was worried, because he knew how he would be reacting.

"No, well, look...don't worry about anything. I'm okay. We've got it under control. We think the guy who made the phone calls is still out there, but the perp's gonna give us a name."

"What about the girl?" Starsky knew there had to be at least two callers. Even Rich Little wasn't that good an impressionist.

Hutch paused, unsure as to how much to tell his ailing partner. "She's dead, Starsk. That's enough for now. You sound tired. I'll call or come down there in a few hours. By then, I think it'll be okay for you to go back to a regular room. Not till we catch this other guy, okay?"

Starsky didn't like it, but he understood it. He would have made the same decision if Hutch were the one in his position. "Okay, Blondie. You be careful and make sure either Sean or Jack goes with you. Everywhere -- I mean it."

"I will, now get back to bed. I'll see you in a few."

Hutch hung up and sat rubbing the bridge of his nose. A dull headache was forming between his eyes. The struggle to resist the need to beat the crap out of Newirth was not doing anything for his stomach either.

Over the next two hours, Newirth was taken to a private interview room to consult with his court appointed attorney. After that, he, the attorney, the D.A., Sean, and Jack went to the interrogation room to firm up the specifics of what Newirth and his lawyer hoped would be a good deal. Hutch sat in the observation room with Dobey. He alternated between pacing and sitting as Newirth laid out the details of what he had done. The detectives already knew Newirth learned from Helen McDermott how much Starsky sounded like his father. All he had to do was hide a small tape recorder in his pocket, stop Starsky in the hallway at work and shoot the breeze with him long enough to get a good sample of his speaking voice on tape.

Terry Roberts' voice had been trickier, but not unachievable. When George Prudholm was tried for her murder, the papers had mentioned home movies taken at Terry's school and the effect
watching them at the trial had had on her fiancé, David Starsky. He bribed one of the school's custodians to get him those films so that his actress could learn to mimic Terry's voice. Gillian's voice had been even easier. She'd made a few porn flicks -- not many, but easy enough to find if you knew where to look. The impression only had to be good enough to fool a half-asleep, thoroughly freaked-out Starsky. Finding a couple of out-of-work actors in Southern California to help him with the plan hadn't been any kind of challenge. Hutch couldn't help wondering if the actors missed the clause in their contracts that said Newirth would kill them when he was finished with their services. Poor Deanna obviously had no idea what could happen, even when things started to go bad.

Newirth had resented both Starsky and Hutch since they passed the exam to become detectives and were promoted past him. He'd already taken the test numerous times, but his score was always lower than those of other, younger officers. Several run-ins with the darker half of the dynamic duo had crystallized his ill will toward both men.

Once, Newirth was assigned to guard Hutch in the hospital when he was injured. He had failed so miserably, the detective was nearly killed in a hospital room and Starsky went ballistic on him in the aftermath. He knew that one incident was enough to keep him in uniform forever and he was lucky to have escaped firing. Even with all of that, Newirth's resentment of both detectives was nothing compared to Luke Huntley's hatred for them.

Hearing about Huntley's involvement made Hutch feel sicker. He had looked up to the older cop and he'd felt sorry for Luke when his world fell apart over his wife's gambling habit. Now, all he could feel was a smoldering anger that tempted him to drive straight to the prison to see his former friend. Dobey knew what Hutch must be thinking, and he put a reassuring hand on the other man's shoulder when Hutch sat down and put his head between his hands.

A warrant was drawn up for Jocko Malloy's arrest for being an accomplice in the attempted murder of a police officer. That was how the court was going to see it. In return for a guilty plea and for giving up Luke, Newirth would not face first-degree murder for Deanna Mobley's death. He would be charged with murder in the second degree, conspiracy to commit murder, and attempted murder of a police officer. These charges would save him from the gas chamber, and he might see parole in his golden years.

Hutch didn't like it that the man would ever get out of prison, or that he would escape the gas chamber for his obviously premeditated murder of a young woman. As angry as he was about the entire incident, Hutch knew the girl was probably killed for objecting to what was happening.

When it was over, Dobey turned to Hutch and said, "I'm going to go up there and see Huntley. You go on back to the hospital."

Hutch shook his head. "How could he do this, Cap? I just don't understand it."

"You heard Newirth, Hutch. Luke was his mentor and they both blame Starsky for his being in prison."
"I want to go with you, Cap. I need to see him."

Dobey sighed and shook his head. "Not this time, Hutch. Sean and Jack are going to go round up Jocko. You go be with Starsky. This one is mine."

The fire in Dobey's eyes convinced Hutch to agree. He wasn't sure he could restrain himself if he had to face Luke right then. Nodding at his captain, he said, "Yeah, all right. Thanks, Cap. I guess I'm just glad it's all over. Now, if I can just keep Starsky on ice long enough for his health to improve, everything can get back to normal."

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When Hutch reached the hospital, he found Jeff Carter waiting to see Starsky. He was patiently leafing through a magazine in the waiting room near the isolation area.

"Jeff, you okay?" Hutch said as he walked up to the younger man and extended his hand.

Jeff shook his hand and said, "I have a headache, but I'll live. I want to see your partner, but they said I couldn't go in without your permission." He chuckled at that. "You have him locked down so tight, you'd think he had the plague."

Hutch blanched at that, but Jeff had no way of knowing about Hutch's illness several years in the past. All he said in response was, "I don't take chances with his life."

They stopped at the nurses' station so Hutch could ask them to transfer Starsky back to a regular room. Sean and Jack would soon have Jocko in custody and Hutch felt secure that the man wouldn't try anything. Newirth had been the one who was supposed to physically hurt his partner. After speaking with the charge nurse, Hutch led the way into the isolation room to fill in his worried partner on the details of the case.

Starsky was up pacing around the room, pushing an IV pole when they entered. He had given the staff so much trouble with his cardiac monitor leads, they had put him on a twenty-four-hour Holter Monitor. This portable monitor meant he could pace, within reason, and they could still keep track of his heart rhythm by reviewing the readings.

"Hey, I thought I told you to go to bed. Up pacing isn't in bed," Hutch said.

"Hello to you, too," Starsky replied. "Dr. Conrad put me on this stupid portable thing. They want to watch my heart rate for a whole day to make sure I ain't gonna drop dead or something." The look on Hutch's face caused him to immediately regret his sarcasm.

"Sorry, buddy. I already told you they're just overreacting. I'm not going anywhere."

Hutch gave him a lame smile that didn't hide his worry. Starsky shook Jeff's hand and said, "How'd he do, substitute partner?"
Jeff answered, "He did fine. See, you don't need to kick my ass."

Hutch was shooing his partner back to bed when he said, "Yeah, what were you doing out of bed making phone calls from God knows where early this morning?"

Starsky let his partner cover him with the blanket as he adjusted the bulky, annoying monitor and answered, "You said I couldn't GET any phone calls, Hutch, not that I couldn't MAKE any phone calls."

Jeff laughed at the older man's reasoning. Exposure to the partners was giving him a real-life lesson in why they were a legendary team. He thought about how well they worked each other. Hutch glared at both men.

"Fine, you just laugh it up, Jeff. And you," he said as he turned back toward his errant partner, "you are in trouble."

Starsky's eyes had a mischievous gleam in them that Hutch hadn't seen for a few weeks. He was relieved to see it.

"What?" Starsky innocently asked.

"Your nurses told me you still haven't been eating. I've come to tell you about the case, but you only get to hear it if you'll eat."

"What about a regular room?"

"I already told them to get one ready. Now, you gonna eat?"

Starsky agreed to eat and Hutch told him about the case. He was shocked when he heard about Luke Huntley's involvement. Hutch's former friend was guilty of a plot to kill Starsky. The fact that it had nearly worked, and that Newirth was there in Hutch's apartment to ensure that Starsky died -- seemingly of suicide -- made him feel sick, too.

Hutch and Jeff were just finishing when a nurse arrived with a wheelchair to return Starsky to a regular hospital room.

"Your chariot, Detective," she said.

"I can walk."

"Nope, you ride. Climb aboard and don't argue with me." Hutch was amused that, as usual, the hospital staff had quickly figured out how to handle his stubborn partner.

As they wheeled through the halls, the nurse said, "As soon as you're settled, Dr. Conrad and Dr. Franklin are going to come and see you."
Jeff took that as his cue to leave. When they had Starsky in his new bed, he wished him well and made his exit. Starsky promised him a nice meal when he got out of the hospital. He knew Hutch would agree that was the least they could do for him to thank him for his willingness to be bait for a killer and to help Hutch with the case while Starsky was unable to do so.

The two men waited for the doctors, unable to hide their anxiety from each other. Starsky knew things were going to be all right, but there was a chance they wouldn't be. They'd performed some more tests that day and he was telling Hutch about that when the doctors arrived. Starsky introduced Hutch to Dr. Conrad.

"Well, gentlemen, good news," Dr. Conrad said. "The irregularities in your heartbeat seem to be transient and I feel safe in saying they are not related to your previous injuries and the resulting compromise to your heart."

"Thank God," Hutch said and Starsky smiled.

Dr. Conrad put a hand up to forestall their relief. "Just a minute, now. I'm leaving you on the Holter until tomorrow. If things continue to look good, and Dr. Franklin agrees, I think you can go home then. The fact remains that your system was severely compromised when you were shot. Your heart stopped and you had to be defibrillated. I'm sure Dr. Franklin has already told you that your body doesn't need to be put under any unnecessary strain. I know what happened to you here was a bit...unusual to say the least. However, you need to eat regularly and get enough rest. As a police officer, your job is stressful and dangerous enough, without putting yourself in jeopardy by your own hand, no matter how upset you are. Am I making myself clear?"

Starsky started to protest, "Yeah, but, Doc...."

Hutch interrupted him by saying, "He understands, Doc. I do too and I'll see to it that he takes care of himself."

Dr. Franklin nodded at him, sure that Hutch would do everything he could to protect his best friend. "See that you do, Ken. We can't promise the outcome will always be good."

Starsky looked a little sheepish at that, but he nodded. Inside his head, he was wondering how he was going to make sure he got enough to eat on their schedule on the best of days. He also knew how he shut down when he was under significant stress.

Dr. Conrad finished, "So, if things look good in the morning, you can go home. I want you to rest for a week, and then report to my office for another stress test and blood draw. I want to see your weight up, too -- by at least five pounds. If everything looks okay, I'll sign your release for active duty."

"Yeah, okay, Doc." Starsky knew when he was defeated. He didn't have to like it, but he recognized it.
After the doctors left, a strained silence reigned for several minutes. Finally, Starsky coughed and said, "So, good news, huh?"

Hutch paced around the room without answering him for a few minutes while Starsky patiently awaited his reply. Twice, he turned on Starsky with his warning finger in the air, but he changed his mind and shut his mouth again, resuming the pacing. Starsky knew the best thing at the moment would be to let Hutch run out to the end of his line, then try to reel him in again.

Seemingly paced out, Hutch pulled up a chair next to Starsky's bed. He rested his hand on Starsky's hand and looked him in the eyes. Whatever he had to say, Starsky knew he'd never be able to fight it when Hutch looked at him with such a mixture of pain and relief, worry and gratitude.

"Starsk, I'm more relieved than I can say. As far as you thinking anyone was overreacting here, they weren't. This whole thing had me scared to death. You've gotta promise me you're never gonna keep something like this from me again."

"I won't, Hutch."

"And promise me you're gonna take better care of yourself?"

Starsky smiled at him. Whatever he had done to deserve it, Hutch was the best friend anyone could ever want. He would do anything to make him feel more secure.

"Are you kidding?" he asked, his tone teasing. "You're gonna be all over me like a duck on a June bug. No way I'm gonna be able to miss a midnight snack anymore, much less a whole meal."

"Ha, ha. This is serious. Promise me."

"Uncle. I promise. You know how I get when things are buggin' me, though. Blintz. If you make me eat, the results could wind up on your shoes. You prepared for that?"

"I'll take my chances and keep a trash can handy at all times. Gonna buy you one for the Tomato." Hutch smiled back at him, telling Starsky the tension was lifting.

Then, Hutch started a new topic -- Starsky could see him shift gears. "Hey, speaking of needing a trash can, I hear you were pretty sick that night after they told you I was going to survive the plague." Hutch hadn't forgotten to get to the bottom of that revelation.

Starsky looked shocked. "What?" he asked.

"Come on, Starsk, come clean. A little bird told me you drank a whole bottle of Cuervo that night. That true?"

"A little bird, huh? More like a scrawny barkeep. Huggy swore he wouldn't tell you that."
Hutch patted Starsky's hand and said, "Huggy didn't mean to tell. He was comparing how sick you were the other day to that night. What were you thinking?"

"Come on, Hutch. That was years ago. You'll notice I don't drink tequila anymore."

"Cured you, huh?"

"Damn straight. I'd never been so sick in my whole life and it was self-inflicted misery. Huggy was partly to blame. He kept pouring me shots. Then he took me to his place to sleep it off so I wouldn't drive. Said later he was sorry I was so sick, but I needed it."

Hutch laughed at the combination of self-disgust and embarrassment Starsky's face wore at having to talk about that dark night. Everything had worked out well and Huggy took care of things. Hutch said, "Okay, okay, no need to get embarrassed. I just wanted you to know I knew."

"Don't give Huggy a hard time. He handled it."

"You got it. Just don't do it again. That much tequila is dangerous."

"Don't worry, buddy. Me and Señor Cuervo have a mutual understanding. I stay away from him and he doesn't cause me to bow at the porcelain throne."

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Dobey drummed his fingers on the countertop in the prison visiting area. It was taking a long time for Luke to be brought out and Dobey was not a patient man on his best day. He pulled the sworn statement out of his pocket and looked at it again. No, Luke Huntley would not be seeing the light of day for some time to come. He'd made a stop by the warden's office before coming to the visiting area, and he had the last link in the chain now. Huntley was most definitely guilty.

Finally, Luke was led in by a guard and seated across from Dobey. "What brings you here, Captain?" he asked in a friendly tone, but his eyes were wide with panic and Dobey knew the man realized what had happened.

Dobey laid the sworn statement on the surface in front of him. He wished he could slap it into Huntley's hand. "Newirth rolled over on you, Luke. It's over."

"Newirth? Who's that?"

"Don't jive me, Huntley!" Dobey hissed at him. "We know everything. Your stoolie sang like a canary. Now I want to know what the hell you thought you were doing!"

Huntley leaned back in a gesture of carelessness. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Huntley," Dobey leaned forward and glared at his former colleague, "the guards have several visitors' logs showing that Larry Newirth came here to visit you over the last few months. Look
up there," he pointed at the security cameras mounted near the ceiling. "We have the tapes showing the two of you together, here."

Huntley shrugged. "Doesn't prove a thing, Captain. I was his training officer. We've remained friendly. He just came to check on me now and again."

"Hutchinson and Starsky put you in here," Dobey said, struggling not to lose his temper. "You think any judge is going to believe you had nothing to do with this?"

"It doesn't matter what the judge believes," Huntley said. "It matters what the jury believes and what you can prove. And you can't prove it."

Dobey was trembling with rage by this time. "What about the letters?" Dobey said now, raising one eyebrow.

"What letters?" Huntley said coolly, but something had sparked in his eyes and Dobey pressed his momentary advantage.

"The letters you wrote to Newirth when you came up with this, demanding that he come and see you."

Huntley shrugged again. "Nothing wrong with writing to a friend and asking him to visit you in the joint."

"No," Dobey said, "but there is something very wrong with making a collect call to that friend to ask him 'Is Starsky dead yet?'"

That shot hit its target. Huntley went visibly pale. "What phone call?" he asked, his voice not quite steady.

"You think your phone calls are private, Luke?" Dobey gave a nasty laugh. "Not in prison, my friend. They're recorded. Every last one of them. And you were pretty careful, I'll admit. But that last call you made hung you. Newirth told us all about it, and I saw the warden before coming here. The tape is in my pocket right now."

That wasn't true, strictly speaking. The warden had the tape and couldn't turn it over without a court order. But that would be a simple matter to arrange, and Dobey was the one, now, who leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, and gave Huntley plenty of time to think it over.

Huntley stared at him for several moments, his eyes wide. Finally, he shook his head. "Don't suppose it matters now," he said at last. "What's a few more years when your life is over, anyway?"

"Why? Just to get back at them for putting you in here?" Dobey asked the question without displaying the venom he felt. He wanted to know.
Huntley resolutely shut his mouth. He knew he was made and that he should not say anything else before he spoke with his attorney. The convict still couldn't resist the urge to find out how close he'd gotten to killing Starsky. "Well, whoever did whatever it is you're talking about...how'd they do?"

Dobey's dark eyes flashed his anger at the callous question. As a courtesy, the warden had permitted the interview to take place in a locked and guarded room usually devoted to attorney/client meetings. Nothing separated them except the counter. The captain could have easily reached across that barrier and throttled the self-satisfied prisoner. He resisted that urge. Harold Dobey was the consummate professional, despite his fury at this man who'd tried to kill Starsky. If Luke had succeeded, Hutch would have been devastated. Dobey knew he was reading that in the other man's eyes. "Huntley, you tried to kill one of my men. If you think I'm going to give you the satisfaction of knowing if you came close or not, think again. Starsky is going to be fine, no thanks to you. You're never getting out of here. You know that. Just tell me why."

Luke Huntley shook his head. He called to the guard that he wanted to be returned to his cell. Dobey watched as he walked away with his escort. He hadn't really expected a response. Before he left the room, Luke turned halfway toward Dobey and said, "Did you know my wife committed suicide? About six months ago, back east. She did it because I'm in here. Tell Hutchinson thanks for me, huh?" That said, he walked out of the room.

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Starsky was released the next day. His tests looked good and he was sent home on strict orders to rest, eat, and regain his strength. Sean and Jack had arrested Jocko. When the newspaper had broken the story that a Bay City police officer had been arrested on suspicion of trying to kill another cop, he had rushed home to pack. The partners busted him trying to run down the fire escape, caught in the crosshairs between Sean running up the fire escape, and Jack climbing down toward him. He went along quietly.

When Hutch returned to Starsky's place after watching Jocko's interrogation through the two-way mirror, he looked so wired and wrung out Starsky was worried about him. Hutch hadn't said much. After minimal conversation, Hutch went out to the kitchen to warm up the dinner that Edith Dobey had left for them. She was on a mission to fatten up Starsky and that, at least, brought a small smile to Hutch's face.

"What did she bring, Hutch?" Starsky asked as he walked into the kitchen.

Hutch looked up from turning on the oven. Starsky was still too thin and a little pale, but he was looking much better. A few more days of uninterrupted sleep and maybe the dark circles would fade from under his eyes. Hutch noticed he was still wearing the hospital identification band on his left wrist, so he opened a drawer to look for Starsky's scissors.

"Meatloaf, a baked potato dish with lots of cheese on it, salad, and a chocolate meringue pie," Hutch answered. He retrieved the scissors and motioned for Starsky to give him his wrist.
When Hutch cut off the plastic bracelet, Starsky said, "Thanks. I didn't want to try cutting it off using my right hand. I might miss." He laughed softly, giving Hutch his warmest "lighten up, everything is okay now" look.

The unspoken message got through to Hutch. He smiled back and then pointed at a chair, unmistakably ordering his partner to sit. Starsky parodied a salute and obliged him.

"You planning to hover for the next week?" Starsky asked congenially.

"Hover? I don't hover," Hutch protested mildly as he went back to his heating dinner chores.

"Only like a Huey," Starsky said.

Hutch looked back and said, "Okay, maybe I do a little. The answer is yes. I plan to hover. In fact, your couch and I are going to renew our relationship."

"You don't have to stay, Blintz. I'll be all right. They got the guy, right?" Thanks, Blondie. You gave me the perfect segue.

Hutch joined Starsky at the table, handing him a glass of juice. Starsky accepted the glass and asked, "Did you pick up any root beer or Dr. Pepper?"

"No. Drink juice."

"Root beer has lots of calories in it."

"So does juice and you might accidentally get a nutrient in you if you drink it instead of brown, fizzy, sugar water, remember?" Didn't we just have this discussion?

That round went to Hutch, which made Starsky smile again. He licked the tip of his finger and made a hash mark in the air to signal Hutch's win, causing the other man to laugh for the first time in a while.

"So, how'd the interrogation go?" Starsky was determined to hear about it, even if Hutch didn't want to discuss it.

"You know, I just don't get it. A lot of people have been mad enough at us to try to kill one or both of us, but Luke got himself into trouble. We didn't do it."

"He blames us, Hutch."

"But HE let that witness be assassinated. Then HE tried to get the money back from those guys after Doris lost it all gambling. We didn't do anything but save his sorry ass from being killed. They would have burned him, you know that." Hutch was in the kitchen pacing now. Starsky started to say something but decided to wait and let Hutch get out the rest of his rant.
"That son of a bitch!" he shouted angrily. The normally collected man wanted desperately to throw something, but he wasn't in his own home. He didn't want to break anything of Starsky's. His rational side knew it wouldn't help anyway. Instead, he slapped his palm down on the counter, causing Starsky to jump just a little.

"Sorry, buddy."

"It's okay, Hutch. I understand. I know how I'd feel if this had happened to you. Everything's okay, now."

Hutch turned to him and said, "This was like a bad dream, Starsk. I mean, how could he hate you so much? The captain went to see him. Said Doris committed suicide and that was probably what set him off like this. Poor woman. She deserved better than she got."

"I know. He told me about it when he called a while ago."

"He called?"

"Yeah, he wanted to warn me that you were on your way and a little tightly strung. He's glad it's over, too." Besides being a top-notch cop, Captain Dobey was a good friend and a caring boss. They both knew they were lucky to have him.

Starsky continued, "I guess Luke thought since I came with you when he met those goons to get his money back, I pressured you into arresting him instead of letting him go. My fault he didn't escape with the money to Mexico or something."

Hutch nodded. Starsky could see that Hutch was feeling guilty about involving Starsky with Luke in the first place. That wouldn't do.

"You know he was trying to get to you, too, don't you?" he asked pointedly.

"How do you figure?"

"By killing me. Come on, Detective. You're too wrapped up with guilt over the whole thing and concern for me. Do some detecting. He had to have known what it would do to you if I committed suicide, or even just turned up dead."

That was a chilling thought. Hutch remembered the night that seemed long ago now when Starsky had called him over, scaring him to death with his tone and his insistence that he needed him if he was going to keep his promise. The memory of finding him huddled in a cold shower, trying to chase away the crushing pain in his heart made Hutch shiver.

"You're right," he said. "Dammit! I wish people wouldn't try to use us to hurt each other like that."
Starsky walked up to stand next to Hutch, placing a hand on his shoulder and looking at him with a wise expression. "Hutch, everybody knows how important we are to each other. Bad guys included. We are each other's strongest asset, and each other's weakest link. Does that make sense?"

Hutch smiled at him. "Thought I was supposed to be the brains of this outfit, dirtball."

"You keep thinking those happy thoughts," Starsky shot back as he patted his best friend on the head. He reached around Hutch and snagged a dinner roll that the other man had forgotten to mention on the menu from Edith.

Over the next week, Hutch made sure that Starsky rested and got regular, nutritious meals. He'd cooked for Starsky more times in their friendship than either of them could count and over the years he'd become an expert at how far he could push nutritious food and still expect his buddy to eat it. When Starsky had his final tests done, he'd gained seven pounds back -- enough to please the doctor and gain him his release to return to active duty. They'd taken Jeff out to the nice dinner they'd promised as a combination thank you and celebration meal. Starsky chose Giovanni's, the restaurant he'd been shot in many years in the past. Hutch didn't like it when he did that, but he often used it as his "I win" restaurant. Once, he'd explained to Hutch that it was like getting back up on a horse. "Every time we go there, I get a little charge to my batteries, Hutch. We won. You won. I know you have bad memories of that place, but you can see how proud of you I am when we eat there, can't you?" Hutch had conceded that. Starsky knew it was good for him, too. For his part, Starsky agreed to sit in a booth against the wall, not at a table, and to allow Hutch to have full view of the front door.

Jeff Carter was a promising young officer. The two older men were determined to help him climb up the ranks and they'd already started snooping around the other up-and-comers for a good partner to recommend for Jeff when he made detective.

Captain Dobey lectured Starsky long and hard about his health and resting. The paternal discussion made Starsky uncomfortable, but he was glad Dobey was in his corner. The captain had already promised Hutch he was going to avoid assigning them to double shifts as much as possible, and no more than once a week when they were in a bind. The younger detectives could take those extra shifts just as easily as his best team, and he reasoned to himself that the dynamic duo's long hours on the streets had made them the best. Time to allow some of the younger men to shoulder more of the burden and gain the experience.

Jocko Malloy was sent back to prison for parole violations and was awaiting trial. He chose not to plead guilty to a lesser charge. Since Newirth had already rolled over on Huntley, any deal Malloy could make was unlikely to be a good one. He was hoping to get off on the premise that he was an actor and Newirth had told him this was just an elaborate prank on an old army buddy. Originally, Newirth had told him that, but Malloy knew it was a lie. Both Starsky and Hutch were looking forward to testifying at his trial.

Luke Huntley pled guilty to the charges against him. He was probably looking at spending the rest of his life in prison. At Dobey's request, he was transferred to another facility, close to the
Oregon border. He wanted the man farther away from easy access to anyone else who might be willing to help him with any additional schemes he might concoct. He was also forbidden to have unsupervised visits with anyone, even his elderly mother.

Starsky managed to convince Hutch after only one day that it was all right if he answered his own phone. The other man had consistently grabbed it every time it rang on Starsky's desk. Things were settling back into their regular rhythm.

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Two weeks after he returned to work, Starsky was lying awake at midnight. He was worried about a case they were working and he couldn't seem to fall asleep. They had one of those double shifts ahead the next day and he needed to rest. Doctor Franklin had given him some sleeping pills for nights like these, but he refused to take them.

When his phone rang so late, Hutch was instantly worried. He hadn't been able to fall asleep either. A string of prostitute murders on porno row was also keeping his mind overactive. "Hello?"

"Hey."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Can't sleep. You?"

"Nope. Why don't you take one of those pills? You didn't sleep well last night, either." Hutch didn't want to see one sleepless night turn into too many in a row for his partner.

"Nah, I don't like the way they make me feel. I was hoping you could tell me what you put in that milkshake that day you wanted me to fall asleep." Starsky hadn't ever asked him, but he thought maybe it was a double shot of liqueur and he'd just been too wiped to notice.

Hutch snickered. "Sorry, buddy. I'm afraid I put in a couple of Dalmane. You might as well take your sleeping pills."

"You didn't! Two of 'em?"

"Yep. Sorry, pal."

Starsky was quiet for enough time to worry Hutch into thinking he was angry. Then, he heard light chuckling coming from the other end of the line. "You're really devious, Blintz. You remember that if I ever have to return the favor."

"I will. Why don't you go make one of those hot chocolates I make when you're sick and can't sleep? Just make a regular cup of hot chocolate and throw in a shot of Kahlua. I put it in that cabinet with your popcorn maker."
"Thanks, that'll do it. Why don't you do the same thing and get some sleep? We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Yeah. I know you hate split shifts, but I told Dobey we needed a four-hour break between them tomorrow. He said okay. That way we can grab some dinner and rest a little before we go on the stakeout." They were planning to run down leads all day and then stake out the porno district during the night when the murders were taking place.

"You're a worrywart, you know that, Blondie?"

"And your point would be..." Hutch's voice trailed off, his tone sarcastic.

"Goodnight, Hutch."

"'Night, Starsk."