Hutch's feet hit the pavement before the Torino skewed to a stop at the curb, and so he stumbled a little, his hand coming down to catch in the scrubby grass by the sidewalk to break his fall before he was up and running again. Starsky went over the hood on his hip, so he was right behind him when Hutch hit the stairs and took them two at a time.

There was no-one in the courtyard pool when they tore through the wrought-iron gate and past the two uniforms holding back the gaggle of rubberneckers. Starsky flashed his badge at them, but they were district guys, so they waved him on without checking the I.D. Not that Hutch was stopping for formalities, anyway. There were two more at the apartment door, one of them with his notebook out, taking a statement from a girl in an itsy bitsy bikini that was just this side of not there at all.

"I never heard a scream like that," the girl was saying. There were mascara tracks down her cheeks and she rubbed at them with the side of her fist. "I mean, she sometimes has real winners in there, but she never makes a peep, you know? I knew it was something real bad going down."

Hutch pulled up when the other uniform held out a hand to stop him for identification. Under the leather jacket Hutch's shoulders had an ominous hunch that meant there was scary stuff going on inside. Before he could go right through the uniform, Starsky grabbed him by the arm.

Hutch tried to shrug him off. "Starsk--"

"Hang on." Starsky turned him and stepped up close so he could grip the other arm, too, and look him in the eye. He held his gaze until Hutch closed his eyes for a second and blew out a slow breath. "Okay?" Starsky gave him a little shake and checked out the blues again. They were still scary, but he could see Hutch getting some distance there, stepping back a little. "Okay." With one hand still on Hutch's arm, Starsky showed his badge again and pushed past the uniform to lead the way into the apartment.

The paramedics were packing up, but the stretcher in the middle of the living room was empty. Starsky's brain did a bit of a twist as the two possibilities there sheared off from each other. It was pretty clear that Hutch's brain was doing that dance, too, because the hunch in his shoulders got worse as he stepped around the stretcher and stalked down the hallway toward the bedroom. There was no coroner's wagon outside, Starsky reminded himself. Not yet, anyway. He sent a cursory glance over the room, taking in the toppled bar stools, the broken lamp, the patio door half-open and the curtains askew on the bent rod, but he filed all that away for the moment and followed his partner.
Seeing them, the paramedic in the bedroom rose from his crouch and nodded a greeting.

"Can she answer a couple of questions?" Starsky asked as Hutch took the paramedic's place by the bed.

"A couple, if you make it fast. We're gonna take her in so they can run the kit."

A fist tightened up under Starsky's ribs. A quick glance at Hutch proved that he'd heard, too. He was all gentle in the hands and wire-tight in the neck. "Yeah, okay."

"She's not too with it," the paramedic added unnecessarily. He was weighted down with a case in each hand, so he aimed an elbow at the bed where the woman was sitting, head bowed low, unmoving.

"Yeah." Starsky stepped around Hutch and sat down on the edge of the bed so he wouldn't be looming.

It took a long time for Alice to look up and then she blinked slowly a few times before her eyes focused and something like recognition gleamed in them. "Hey there, Handsome Hutch," she said in her breathy, slow-sweet drawl, but the smile—which was always just an inch away from sad on the good days—was pale and didn't last, and the gleam went dull pretty quick. That was hard to look at because it was so much like Alice and so not like her at all. Starsky was getting used to the kind of slippery distance Alice had from things, that kind of dreamy drifting that was partly worldly resignation and partly wistful denial, like Alice watched the crappy world from inside a mist. This look to her now, it made Starsky's hands feel suddenly empty. He patted himself down, looking for his notebook and pencil.

"Hey there, Sweet Alice," Hutch said, mustering up a smile to go with the gentle tone. His hand came up and hovered for a second over the bruise around her eye, but then fell to his knee in a fist. He looked like he was going to ask if she was okay but he didn't go in for the absurd much, so he just said again, "Hey, Sweet Alice."

There was blood on her nightgown, her shoulder showing through the tear. Buttons were missing and she held the front shut with two fists twisting in the fabric. Starsky got a little fixated by that, by the fists, because Alice never seemed like she could even manage one, like her hands just wouldn't know how. And Hutch couldn't even hold her hand like he probably wanted to, because she was trying to keep something, even that little wisp of material, between her and the world and he wasn't going to be the one to take that away. She'd have to face that pretty soon. The paramedic was waiting in the doorway to take her to the hospital where they could do an exam, patch her up, dry her out, and there'd be nothing between her and the world then. So Hutch put one hand on the edge of the bad instead, and used the other to brush a curl of Sweet Alice's hair out of her eyes.

"Aw, Hutch," Alice said, the smile coming back, pretty-sad and soft with compassion. "Don't you worry. I don't feel a thing."

"Shock," the paramedic explained.
The half-turn of Hutch's head shut the paramedic up quick and he did a fade back into the hallway.

"Who did this, Sweet Alice?" Hutch asked, barely above a whisper, like she was a deer, maybe, and the question would spook her away.

When she let go of the negligee to pat Hutch on the cheek, Starsky could see the bruises on her skin, three purple welts across her stomach. Hutch's eyes strayed there, too, flicked up to meet Starsky's before Hutch pulled the nightgown together again and took Alice's hand.

"Just a guy," she answered, her smile dismissing it all, like it was just one of those things that happen, leave their mark, are lost in the protective mist of scotch. "You know how it is, Hutch. Girls like me." Her shrug showed more shoulder, four bruises in the shape of fingers there. "What else can we expect? Girls like me. Don't you worry."

"Girls like--" Hutch ducked his head and Starsky could almost hear the sound of his teeth grinding together, keeping the anger in. When he looked up, the outrage was distilled into the blue. Starsky had been on the other end of that look. He could remember how it felt to have that slicing through you. It was almost enough to bring Alice into the world again. Hutch's voice was still gentle, but taut inside, vibrating. "Did you say no?"

She looked distantly baffled.

Hutch gripped her arms and gave her a little shake. "Alice. Did you say no?"

"Sure. Sure, I said no. But--"

"Nobody has to expect this, Alice. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She looked like she honestly didn't. Girls like Alice didn't get to understand that kind of thing. Starsky wondered for the millionth time when the world got to be so screwed up.

"Don't be mad, honey," she said, an edge of pleading making her sound more present than at any time since Starsky had met her. "I don't want you to be mad."

Hutch's laugh was choked.

"We're not mad, Sweet Alice," Starsky said. "Not at you. We just want to find this turkey, that's all." She still looked like she couldn't imagine why it was worth dealing with, and Starsky told himself it was the shock, that's all, because otherwise the truth of that bewildered expression was too much to take. He let his knee fall against Hutch's for a second, bracing them both against that. "You know, in case he wants to do something like this to other girls."

"Oh. Yeah. Okay."

"Yeah, okay." Hutch let her touch his face, but only for a second before he pulled her hand away and held it between his own. Then he stood up and prowled around the room while Starsky took notes.
Alice was vague about the description, but they had a first name, at least, and the bar where Alice had made the connection. He wasn't much like Alice's usual clientèle--she had more class than that--but Alice said he had pretty eyes and she wasn't busy. And maybe the scotch was doing its thing, the mist making things seem more safe than they were, or maybe the mist was thin and Alice was believing she wasn't good enough for high rollers today. Some days were like that for Alice, and then the smile went all the way sad. But she'd put up a fight, anyway, and that was something. She wasn't giving in all the way. Starsky made a note to tell Hutch that. She wasn't giving in all the way today, no matter what it seemed like.

It wasn't much but it was something to work with. The guy was a junkie so he'd have to surface in the usual places before too long.

With a pat on Alice's knee, Starsky got up and signaled to the paramedics, then got out of the way while Hutch helped them settle her onto the stretcher. As Hutch was following them out, Starsky stepped in his path.

"You're gonna be cool about this, right?"

"Girls like her," Hutch answered, his voice pitched low in the way that could make perps piss themselves. There was more to be said, but he looked like he couldn't get his jaws to unlock to say it.

Starsky said it for him. "There aren't girls like her. There's just girls."

"She doesn't get it, Starsk. She doesn't believe it."

Starsky didn't have to look to know Hutch's hands were clenched in his pockets. He slapped his notebook against Hutch's chest. "So we show her, right?" He didn't get out of Hutch's way just yet. "But you're gonna do it cool, yes?"

"Yes."

Starsky stepped aside.

"I'm cool," Hutch asserted mildly, but his shoulders were still hunched under the jacket.

^^^

Hutch bent over and rested his forehead on his closed fists on the top of the filing cabinet.

Starsky heard him growl.

He was straightening up to protest in real human language, but Starsky beat him to it. "Captain, we already got a case."

Dobey looked like he was two minutes from apoplexy, which meant he was having one of his good days. He aimed a blunt finger at Starsky. "That's right, you do. It's a narco case and I'm not gonna remind you what I had to do to get the feds to let you in on this stake-out." He went back to the stack of files on his desk and started arranging them from thickest to thinnest. Then he
changed his mind and rearranged them from thinnest to thickest. "Estavez comes into town once a year to check his operation. You guys are gonna be there to make sure the feds don't screw up the bust this time."

To his credit, Hutch seemed to decide to go for conciliation, finding his calm voice somewhere and playing it out all nice and neutral. "Sir, Huggy's got a line on the guy who attacked Alice. Denny Luckless."

Dobey arched a beetle brow at him. "Denny Luckless? Now there's a new one."

"Dennis Lockley," Starsky clarified, going for just the facts ma'am, which was about as close to a calm voice as he could muster. "He hangs out in a joint down on Acorn."

This time Dobey didn't bother to look up. He slapped a file closed and opened another. "I don't care if he hangs out on our front steps. You got a stake-out. And you're gonna be there."

^^^^

"So, here we are," Starsky said. He wiggled around a bit and adjusted his holster before slouching down a little more behind the wheel with his knee braced against the gearshift. He did a quick survey of the slice of scenery visible through the end of the alley and grimaced. "Nice corner." The street sign on the pole next to the Torino's bumper was angled so that it indicated neither the thoroughfare nor the intersecting side street across from the alley. It said, "Viewcrest." Starsky looked around for something view-worthy or crestlike and gave up with a disgusted wave of the hand. "So-o," he said again. "Here we are."

Hutch's grunt was enough, at least, to prove he was still alive over there. He was leaning against the passenger door, elbow on the window sill, his fist against his mouth. He let his hand fall and drummed his fingers on the frame of the side mirror. "Here we are."

In the daytime, the garment district buzzed with traffic, but after six the respectable folks lined up for the buses or wandered off to the low-rent apartment complexes a few blocks east. Now the windows of the Chinese restaurant painted the sidewalk in red and gold squares, and the recessed doorways of the shops filled up with a different kind of traffic, shifty and tending to slink in and out of shadows like bats through headlights. From their vantage point, Starsky could see that the blue-white circles around the streetlamps on the block were occupied by women--one to each lamp--all of them in platform heels and black stockings. The outfits were otherwise different from each other, but it didn't make them look any less like the streetwalker's uniform. Across the street, the storefront he and Hutch were watching was dark, an armless mannequin ghostly behind yellow cellophane in the display window, a faint gleam from a lamp behind a crooked blind three stories up. It looked like any other shop, except that it wasn't. Maybe. All they needed was for Estavez to put himself in the picture.

And Estavez wasn't co-operating. Starsky rubbed his palms against his jeans hoping the friction would wear away the antsy feeling. A sudden image flashed in his head: Hutch's place, Hutch strumming the guitar and pausing to lean forward to snag his beer--one finger in the mouth of the bottle's stubby neck--and the strings brushing up against Starsky's wine glass, making it sing. Tonight Hutch was putting out vibrations that had nothing to do with music, and Starsky was
buzzing. It was the "should be" that did it: should be elsewhere, should be here, should be helping Denny Luckless earn his nickname, should be making sure Estavez didn't poison anybody this year, should be bringing Alice flowers, or maybe, while they were at it, going back in time and changing everything. Should be, should be, should be. Starsky squinted his eyes against it and stopped himself from rubbing the skin off his hands by groping in his pocket instead.

"You hungry?"

Hutch nodded, a Pavlovian response, his eyes on the street.

"Here." Starsky nudged him with the apple.

Looking at it suspiciously, Hutch said, "Huh."

"What?" Starsky held the apple up into the angled street light. "What? It's an apple."

Hutch was reading the apple like it had letters carved in its slightly spotted, maybe a little bruised but well-meaning green and red skin. With an exasperated sigh, Starsky picked up Hutch's hand from his lap, put the apple in it and closed his fingers around it.

Hutch's smile was a brief flash as he looked down at it. "When did they start selling apples in candy machines?" In response to Starsky's warning look, he said, "Right. Never mind. I don't want to know." Before he bit into the apple, he reached into the inside pocket and tossed a cellophane-wrapped chocolate chip cookie into Starsky's lap.

"Thanks." Starsky paused in the middle of tearing the package open with his teeth. Hutch was watching him speculatively while he chewed. "Yeah?"

"What's next? Aunt Rosa's chicken soup?"

"No. I'm saving that for when I need to put me out of your misery."

"I think you mean me out of yours."

"We'll make a pact. Murder-suicide by soup."

Hutch grunted again. His jacket creaked as he straightened in his seat. "Is that Rhonda?" Lifting a finger from the mirror frame, he pointed at the middle street lamp.

Starsky leaned forward to get a better look. "I know that 'fro."

Rhonda was in shiny gold short shorts and red boots that had to make her at least 6'3". The afro was tamer than when he'd seen her last, but it was accessorized with hoop earrings big enough to jump a dog through. While they watched, a skinny, balding guy in what had to be a discount business suit came to hover at the edge of the circle of streetlight.

"We took a wrong turn," Hutch said, as Rhonda patted the little guy on the head the way she'd shine an apple and, taking his arm, led him off up the street and out of sight.
"Are you talking geographically or metaphysically?"

It took Hutch a long time to answer. He put the half-eaten apple on the dash. "I mean as a species." He scratched his forehead with his thumb and went back to drumming his fingers against the mirror. On the other side of the intersection, two men came together and parted again, one smooth hand-off. The twitchier-looking one ducked up an alley, the other slithered on to the next customer. "Bottom feeders somehow got the upper-hand." Hutch lifted his chin to indicate the storefront. "Estavez." After a pause he added, "Denny Luckless."

"Bottom feeders don't have hands," Starsky said after awhile, smiling at the exhalation of breath that passed for Hutch's rueful laugh. "I suppose there's a sort of logic to it." From here, Starsky could see at least half a dozen people who needed arresting. But the cops had a hook in the water, and while they were fishing for barracuda, the minnows got to swim. "The mean prey on the meek."

"Fucked-up logic. Backward logic." The edge on Hutch's voice could score metal, even if Starsky had to listen carefully to hear it over the sound of shouting coming from up the street. "Funhouse mirror logic."

"Speaking of."

Rhonda was back, striding along like one of those Amazon women. Over her head she waved something, a dark banner of cloth. A few seconds brought them the answer to the mystery when the discount business man rounded the corner from behind the Chinese restaurant, walking stiffly with a little hop-step that wouldn't quite break into the indignity of a run. And he needed to keep whatever dignity he could get because he was wearing his white shirt and suit jacket and socks and shoes, but was missing that essential wardrobe item that makes the man, namely his pants. Getting back to her lamp-post, Rhonda struck a pose and swung the pants around her head like a lasso. Her throaty whoop made even the junkie in the doorway of Estavez's shop look up from his nod long enough to point and laugh until he had to give his full attention to hacking up a lung.

"No money, no pants, you honky prick," Rhonda crowed while discount business man tried jumping for the prize.

Behind her, the junkie had fallen out of the doorway and was stretched out on the sidewalk on his back, pointing a loose-jointed arm at the sky. He was singing, and his thin voice cut across Rhonda's taunting like piccolos over bass drums.

"The meek." This time, Hutch's grunt was something between pitying and resigned. "Strung-out trash-can babies growing up believing they're garbage."

"Should we step in, ya think?" Starsky nodded at the scene on the street.

"On whose side?" It was hard to say who was in more danger out there: Rhonda had reach; the guy had the motivation.
It was a moot point, anyway: they couldn't blow the stake-out. Should be, should be, should be. Crap.

At that moment, a Chevy pulled up against the curb and a woman got out. Smart sweater-set and sensible shoes. Choosing the lesser of two humiliations, discount business man set off in that stiff-legged walk while sweater-set yanked the pants away from Rhonda in exchange for a tossed handful of bills that Rhonda had to scramble after as they fluttered down around her. One landed on the junkie's forehead, but he brushed it away like it was a fallen leaf.

The minute wave of Hutch's hand took in the whole intersection and the city beyond it. "Some goddamn inheritance."

By then, sweater-set had caught up with discount and they were engaged in a variation of a Baptist revival call-and-response, her shrill-voiced "Why, Mikey? You promised!" alternating with his clenched-jawed, "Shut up! You never shut up!"

"It's the wrong side of the looking glass, Starsky."

At the other end of the block, Rhonda was already leaning down to display her cleavage at the window of another car.

Three hours later, Rhonda had come and gone enough times that Starsky would've lost count even if he hadn't been sleeping with his eyes open. The sudden burst of static from the radio made him start so that the half-full paper cup at his feet tipped and cold coffee sluiced over his tennis shoes. The tail end of his muttered curse found its way over the airways to Hess, who said, "Say again?"

"Nothing. What's up, Hess? No sign of Estavez and we're out of coffee." Hutch handed him a napkin and Starsky dabbed at his sock with it.

Hess answered, "He never made the flight from San Juan."

Pausing in his clean-up, Starsky shot Hutch a glare. "That was at eight o'clock. We've been sitting out here twiddling our thumbs for four hours. I no longer have opposable thumbs, Hess."

"Sorry." Hess didn't sound sorry. "You can shut it down for now."

Hutch rubbed vigorously at his eyes before letting his hands fall to his lap. "Son of a bitch."

Starsky was about to throw the radio onto the dash when it chattered again and the dispatcher's voice said, "Zebra 3, Zebra 3, see the man named Huggy in the bar at the corner of 4th and Acorn."

"Yes, ma'am," Starsky said, saluting smartly with one hand while tossing the napkin and the coffee cup out the window in the direction of the trash can. Finally. The buzz in his hands started to settle a little.

From the passenger side, Hutch reached over and started the engine.
Bottoms Up! boasted "Girls Girls Girls" in flickering neon out front, but what it delivered was a stage the size of a milk crate in the corner and one bored, gum-chewing dancer gyrating half-heartedy, an arm looped around the pole. Her left pasty was missing its tassel.

"Classy place," Starsky muttered, but Hutch was already too far away to hear him over the throbbing of the music.

A tap on his hip made Starsky duck under the smoke to find Huggy slouched in a booth in front of a watery-looking drink. From the condensation on the table, it seemed like he'd been nursing it awhile. The ashtray was full of peanut shells and the little bowl beside it was empty.

"Nice of you gents to show up," Huggy shouted. "I was getting lonely."

Starsky slid in beside him. "We were busy sitting on our asses for God and country," Starsky explained.

Hutch sat on the edge of the bench on the other side of the table and scanned the room. "Where is he?" Or at least Starsky figured that's what he said. His lip-reading wasn't all that good.

Huggy pointed with his glass. "At the bar. The twitchy gingerbread on the end." Hutch threw an arm over the back of the booth to get a better look. Huggy sat forward, pulling Starsky with him, and waited for Hutch to join the tête-à-tête. "Listen, the owner of this establishment is a friend of mine, and he'd be much obliged if you would do your business outside."

Hutch nodded and went back to boring a hole in Denny Luckless's head. Satisfied, Huggy pushed Starsky out of the booth and got up. Even the lights on the stage seemed bored and flashed just a fraction slower than the beat of the music, tracing out Hutch's grim profile in blue and then red. Sliding a look Starsky's way, Huggy furrowed his brow with a question. Starksy nodded a "s'okay, I got him," and watched Huggy saunter out before turning his attention to their friend at the bar.

"Twitchy gingerbread" was close to the mark. Denny was cookie-cutter junkie, wire-thin and twisted tight, but he could've been somebody's dream-date once. His shoulders were probably broad way back when, before he got cave-chested and hunched-in from trying to shelter his score from the other rats. His hands moved restlessly on the bar in front of him, small animals that kept getting away from him, and the wrists that stuck out the ends of the tattered cuffs of his sleeves made Starsky think of Hallowe'en and paper skeletons. The eyes were pale, ash grey maybe, and moving fast around the scene like a bird caught in a room and unable to find a way out. Even in the dim bar, his curly hair was red. It stuck straight up on one side where he kept twisting it with his fingers. Around his mouth was an angry scabbing of acne.

Coughing out a lungful of cigarette smoke, Starsky hooked a chair from the next table with his foot and dragged it over next to Hutch. "He's just a kid," he said loudly with his mouth right against Hutch's ear.

Maybe Hutch answered, "He's old enough," but Starsky wasn't sure.
On the stage, the listless lady was winding up for a big finale, which seemed to consist of letting go of the pole and almost toppling off of her platform heels into the lap of the guy at the next table. The guy thought it was a sign from God or something and tried to grab a handful before she used the pole to yank herself out of reach again. Her mouth opened, and Starsky didn't have to be a lip-reader to know she wasn't asking him home for dinner.

Beside Starsky, Hutch came to attention, lifting his chin out of the crook in his elbow. He angled his head toward the door and then leaned in close to say, "Here's the fix."

They knew him, of course. The rat worked the district, and in fact, they'd put him away twice, and that was just this year. Last time he'd been in custody for a grand total of eighty-five minutes. It took about thirty seconds to do the deal and then he was oozing back toward the street door while Denny Luckless went the other way, toward the bathrooms at the back.

They found him in the lone stall, a two-inch mirror balanced on one knee, rolled dollar bill already up his nose. The guy was lucky he didn't inhale the damn thing when Hutch kicked the door open, but he wasn't too grateful when his startled jump launched the mirror into the air, an eye winking as it fell to spin between Denny's shoes. Streamers of white powder streaked the floor. Denny howled.

"What the fuck--!" In half a second he was on his knees, pressing his fingers to the grit on the tile. "No. Nononono, you fucks."

After hauling him to his feet by the back of his shirt, Hutch dragged him out of the stall and then out of the bathroom and into the hallway. It was only a few paces to the door to the alley and Hutch used Denny to open it. Starsky caught him on the rebound from the opposite wall and held him up against it with both hands wound in his collar.

"Dennis Lockley?"

"What the fuck?"

"Dennis Lockley," Starsky repeated. It took too long for the bleary eyes to stop rolling around and focus on Starsky's face. "You're under arrest for rape and battery."

For a second Denny looked baffled, but when the confusion cleared, a leer yanked his scabby mouth into a crooked line. "What? That blonde bitch--"

"Her name is Alice," Hutch said tightly from right behind Starsky's shoulder.

Denny's eyes shifted to look at him, and when they snapped back to Starsky's they were scared. "You're kiddin' me, right?" His hands were scrabbling at Starsky's wrists, trying to pry him loose. "I paid my money--"

Bracing himself against the sudden press of Hutch's weight on his back, Starsky tightened his grip, but not as tight as he wanted to. "You know what? You have a right to remain silent."

"But I bought her, man!"
A shift in Hutch's stance, and then the Magnum angled over Starsky's shoulder. "What he means is shut up."

Starsky could feel the hammering of Hutch's heart through the back of his leather jacket, the slow boil of the long night rising and rattling the lid, and his own heart picked up the beat. Hutch was going still back there, poised. The quiet in his voice was a dead giveaway. Starsky loosened his grip on Denny's shirt, pressed back a little into his partner's heavy, thrumming weight. A few more seconds and they'd be up the alley and Denny would be trussed up nice and neat in the back seat. Forcing Hutch to give a little, Starsky held him off. A few more seconds to get a grip. That's all they needed here.

But Denny wasn't going to give them a few more seconds. Like the junkie he was, Denny just didn't know when to quit.

Maybe Denny wasn't as good as he could be at reading things, because when he felt Starsky easing up, felt him opening up a space, he panicked, eyes darting in Hutch's direction again, and he made a grab for Starsky's arms to keep him close, his fingers sliding across the battered leather like he was groping for a life ring in an oily sea. He didn't get how lucky he was. He got that Starsky was partly focused on keeping Hutch from maybe bashing his head in. He didn't get that this divided attention was the only thing keeping Starsky from seriously considering doing it himself.

When Denny spoke in his own defense his voice was thick, cotton-mouthed with fear. "She's just a whore!"

In one continuous motion Hutch sidestepped Starsky and threw Denny to the ground, straddled him, and pressed the muzzle of the gun to his forehead. Crouching, he cocked the hammer and then leaned low, close to Denny's face, and, almost too softly for Starsky to hear it over the growl of traffic at the end of the alley, he asked, "If you turned up murdered, who would even raise an eyebrow?" He shook Denny hard. "Huh?" Hutch shook him again. "Who would give a fuck?" Denny started to cry. For a long moment, twenty heartbeats at least, they were motionless except for Denny's eyes blinking back the tears so he could see it coming, good-bye-cruel-world in the shape of one righteously pissed-off cop. Finally, Starsky brushed his fingers against Hutch's shoulder, and like some kind of spell was broken, Hutch eased the hammer on the Magnum. When it settled with a click, Denny's silent weeping turned into a sob of relief. "Who'd lift a finger to find out who did you, Denny?" Letting Denny go, Hutch tipped his head back wearily so he could find Starsky's eyes. His face was stained red in the neon light. "Besides us."

^^^ Alice held the photos in her hands, caressed them with her thumbs, but didn't look at them. Beside her on the bed, her nightgown was folded neatly in a paper grocery bag. The jeans and baggy t-shirt she wore didn't seem very Alice-like at all, but they hid a lot--unlike the careful make-up job that still showed green and purple around her eye. She held the mug shots out to Hutch, but when he didn't move to take them, she tried to give them to Starsky.

Even though Alice's eyes went dark and pleading, Starsky kept his hands in his pockets.
"You don't have to come down to the station or see him in person." Hutch was trying to sound patient and gentle. "Just pick him out from the photos, that's all."

With a small sigh, Alice leaned her hip against the side of the bed and twisted the toe of her sneaker into the tile, but although her eyes skated down away from Hutch's, they didn't make it to the pictures in her hands. Her gaze settled somewhere on the floor between the three of them.

"You know," she began in that familiar tone that meant she was drifting away from them. "I had to move after Janos...." Starsky could see her fingertips whiten against the faces she wouldn't look at. "When Janos got out. And then after that there was...." She raised her eyes to the ceiling, searched the hospital blandness for the name, and finally shrugged it away as unimportant. When she looked down again, it was Starsky she aimed the smile at, askance. "I like my place. The patio is really nice."

"Alice--" Hutch took a step toward her.

"You should buy Handsome Hutch some dinner," she said, keeping her eyes on Starsky's. "He looks pale." She pressed the mug shots firmly into the blanket before picking up the paper bag and rolling the top of it down tight. "My ride's here."

Starsky turned to see the bikini girl from the other day waiting in the doorway. He barely recognized her with all those clothes on.

As Alice passed Hutch, she trailed her fingers up his arm to his elbow and gave it a squeeze. Maybe she breathed an "I'm sorry" into his shoulder, because Hutch patted her hand. His mouth said "It's okay," but his face said something different.

They followed Alice and her friend into the hallway, but instead of getting on the elevator with them, Hutch took a sharp right and headed for the stairs. As he wound down the six flights to the parking garage, his pace was deliberate, like he was counting. In Starsky's breast pocket, the corners of the mug shots pinched his skin. He pulled them out, shuffled them as he walked, burying Denny in the middle, and slipped them into his jacket pocket instead.

In the parking garage, Hutch stood still while the stairwell door hissed shut with a click, and it was like the sound was a trigger, or a hammer falling home, because he swung around, and before Starsky could get his own hands out of his pockets, aimed a punch at the door. Hutch recoiled at the last second, but only to shift the angle so that he hit the door with the side of his fist instead of his knuckles. The hollow crack of bone against steel rattled up the stairwell and out across the low-ceilinged parking lot until it was rounded and flattened by echoes. In the glare of the overhead lights, Hutch stood in his shadow and his eyes were drained of color.

The two of them stayed like that for what felt like a long time, Hutch breathing hard and staring sightlessly at the concrete wall beside the door, Starsky with his hands still in the air, too late to ward off anything. Finally, Hutch blinked and looked down at his fist.

"Ow," he said dully.
"Yeah, no kiddin'." Starsky reached out and took his hand, prying the clenched fingers open and turning it over for inspection. There was already a purple stain spreading in the flesh, darker on the jutting bone of the wrist and the side of the pinky's first and second knuckles. "You want to go back in for an X-ray? We're conveniently located."

Hutch stretched and curled his fingers experimentally a few times, finally closing Starsky's hand in a tight grip, then letting him go. "No," he said. "It's fine." When Starsky reached up and folded his hand around the back of Hutch's neck, Hutch closed his eyes and shook his head. "She's on the wrong side of the mirror, Starsk."

"Yep." Starsky squeezed harder, bringing Hutch's head down so he could say close to his ear, "Then I guess it's a good thing we're stuck in here with her."

^^^

Estavez didn't show that night, either.

Hutch sat in the passenger seat and didn't move much at all except for his thumb rubbing back and forth over the blooming bruise on the side of his hand. Outside, the drama of the corner played itself out like it probably did every night of the year.

Somewhere around five hours in, after even Rhonda had called it a night, Hess radioed to tell them that Estavez wasn't coming on account of the bullet in his head. He'd never left his estate in San Juan.

Starsky turned the key in the ignition just as the sound of sirens scraped a livid gash across the relative silence of the street, and two black-and-whites blasted across their bow. He edged the Torino out of the alley to get a look.

The flashing red and blue was too diluted to change the lines of Hutch's face. He stared past Starsky at the two patrol cars askew across both lanes at the end of the short block. Beyond them, the night was stretched taut and threadbare, and tomorrow was already showing through.

The tires squealed as Starsky turned the other way.

The end.