

Summary: Hutch has to choose between doing something terrible to his partner or breaking his cover and maybe getting them both killed.

Story Notes: Written in 2003. First published in the gen hurt/comfort multifandom anthology, "[Ouch!](#) 17" produced by Neon Rainbow Press in 2005.

Categories: Gen

Genre: Action/Adventure, E-Book, Zinefic

Warnings: Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

A Lesser of Two Evils

by **K Hanna Korossy**

for Barb

Some choices were impossible. Yet you had to make them, regardless.

Being undercover was always full of choices, Hutch reminded himself as he sorted the little powder-filled baggies on the table before him. Who you were going to be while you were under. How far you would take the game. What you would allow and what would be going too far.

Take the kid standing in the doorway, for instance, giving Hutch and his little stash a hungry look. Barely into his teens and still new at the game, but the look in his eyes told Hutch that he already knew the rules. But there was the choice: send him a little farther down the path, or stop him while he still might be saved. The rules said to help him die a little more, but there was always the choice of forgetting the rules.

But not that day.

Hutch tucked his sadness away and gave the kid a hard, uncaring look. "We're about to close, you want something?" It was the same voice he used with felons, implicitly saying they were wasting his time and he wouldn't tolerate that long.

The kid seemed to shrink from the tone, but he was too hungry to leave. "Dime bag," he said in a hushed tone, shuffling a step inside the door. He looked too healthy to be a long-time addict, but already the aging had begun, his face lined, his eyes circled. Hutch winced inside.

"You got the money?" he asked flatly.

A hand flicked into the too-large jacket pocket and came out with a crumpled bill. It was laid hesitantly on the table before him. Hutch didn't even glance at it, just shoved one of the baggies across to the kid, who grabbed it without hesitation. Two seconds later, he was gone.

Hutch stilled, looking after him for a long moment, before pulling the small notebook out of his pocket with a sigh. Flipping it open, he wrote in tight print: *Black male, 13-15 yrs., 5'5", 110 lbs., denim jacket, black shirt, jeans, grey sneakers, scar above l. eye.*

Starsky would get the kid on film and by the end of the week they would probably have a name and address and could move in for an arrest... or in this case, rehab, maybe counseling. At least, that was the plan. No one talked about the faces that inevitably wouldn't be matched to a name.

He was just tucking the notebook back into his pocket when a different face appeared in the doorway, grinning, older, ruthless. "Good take?"

Hutch shrugged. "Good enough." It was far easier to hide his revulsion now than it had been to hide his empathy a minute earlier. "Sold almost half the case."

The new arrival, a particularly sleazy dealer who also happened to be Hutch's boss and went by the name of Jester, looked impressed. "Guess we're gonna have to set up another buy soon. You want in this time?"

Hutch played it cool even as his pulse sped up. This was the chance they had been waiting for. He cocked an eyebrow, unimpressed. "What's in it for me?"

Jester's grin widened. "Chance to impress the boss, maybe get your own stake. Could mean big opportunities if he likes you."

Hutch nodded. "Okay. Set it up."

Jester returned the gesture. "Lock up the stuff. We'll go out for beers when everybody's back."

"Everybody" meant the other dealers working under Jester, either in that building or nearby on the streets and in alleys. Hutch usually only saw the three who were also in the same building, packaging drugs, selling hallucinogens or uppers, providing muscle. They were underlings just as he was, but he'd gotten the prime spot because of certain recommendations on his resume from his connections, and he made sure no one forgot that. People left you alone if they thought you were higher up on the totem pole.

The bags of heroin were stored in a safe in the wall, the only thing maintained in the otherwise decaying empty apartment. Hutch locked the safe and gave it a tug before moving a filthy mattress to lean in front of it. Not exactly high security, but it was as good as it got on the street. Besides, most hypes were smarter than to try to steal a known dealer's stash. And Jester's invisible boss was as well known as they came.

Hutch left the apartment with long strides, jogging down the steps. This was the only part of the day he ever looked forward to, and he couldn't get there fast enough. Nevertheless, outside the abandoned apartment building he paused to take a breath of relatively clean city air. After a day spent inside the stinking room, surrounded by little packets of hell, he'd almost forgotten what it was to breathe.

And then, finally, he walked across the street to the phone booth on the opposite corner.

Jester hadn't been too keen about this daily ritual, but Hutch had been unyielding that he needed to call his mother every day or she would worry about him. He'd taken both ribbing and heat for it, but finally the drug dealer had relented. Girlfriends you could cross, friends came and went, but even hardened felons had to respect their mothers.

Hutch picked up the phone, dropped in a dime, and dialed the number that would come up on any registry as "Mr. and Mrs. George Hatch." The phone only rang once before it was picked up. "Hello," a voice creaked.

Hutch's mouth turned up despite itself. "Hey, Dad."

The age fell away from his partner's voice. "Hey, yourself. You behavin' out there?"

"Oh, I'm doing terrific. Mom would be proud." He pulled the notebook out of his pocket and tore off the three sheets with writing on them.

"I bet. Any problems?"

"Nope. Good news, in fact -- I get to meet the big guy soon, get patted on the head." The pages were folded in half, then half again.

"Sounds fun. You know when yet?"

"I think I'll find out tomorrow. Anything going on at your end?" A surreptitious glance up and down the street, then Hutch slipped the small wad of paper up into the crack between the phone and the wall.

"Dobey's starting a new diet," Starsky said without enthusiasm.

"Huh. Wanna trade places?" Hutch grinned. He wasn't sure from where, but Starsky was watching and would see it.

"Don't tempt me." There was a moment of silence and Starsky's voice had changed when he spoke again. "Kid looked young."

Hutch's smile fell away. "Yeah... Can't be more than fifteen."

"We'll find 'im. You doin' okay?"

He gripped the phone a little harder. "Hangin' in there."

"Just a few more days, buddy. Then you can go back to eatin' that crunchy birdfood you like."

Hutch snorted, the momentary painful tug eased. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"I'll be here." The phone clicked off.

"Love you, too, Mom," Hutch said softly, only half-whimsical, and hung up. Then lingered there a moment, knowing Starsky wouldn't come down to retrieve his notes until well after he'd seen Hutch leave. It was safer that way, but darned if he didn't miss his partner.

That was something else you didn't talk about, how hard it was to go undercover, to immerse yourself in a person you hated, doing things that made you sick. How easy it was to lose yourself in the process. Your partner was sometimes the only link you had to who you really were, and Starsky knew that more than most. He had worked hard to keep Hutch grounded, and when the job was over, Hutch figured maybe he would tell his partner thanks over a pizza-with-everything. Starsky would get the message.

Giving the receiver a pat, Hutch left the phone booth without a backward glance and went back to work.

Beer with the guys was a mandatory part of being received into the group, and Hutch had accepted it as part of the assignment, but not without regrets. He hated this part of the life almost as much as the dealing.

After downing beers for the better part of the night while playing pool and hitting on half-dressed women, Jester's thin veneer of civility slipped away and a cruel streak appeared. Women usually bore its brunt, and that evening had been no exception. It had taken all Hutch's self-control to talk the dealer into going back to the tenement, instead of just putting his lights out after the second woman left the bar bruised and in tears.

And still Jester was gloating about it on the way back, telling a particularly nauseating story that had Hutch's hands curled into fists. The punchline tore it. Hutch cast the dealer a disgusted look. "That how you get your kicks, beating up helpless women?"

The dealer's gimlet eye settled on him. "Hey, who asked you, Hatch, huh? You wanna tell me that?"

"Someday, an angry boyfriend or brother or dad isn't gonna take so kindly to you beating up their girl," Hutch said coldly.

"Well, that's my business, ain't it? Did I ask you?"

They reached the tenement and Hutch paused to give Jester a feral grin. "Nope. Just lookin' out for myself. I don't think the boss would be too happy if you landed in lock-up for A&B, would he?" As if Assault and Battery was even the worst the dealer had ever done.

"What do you know?" Jester muttered darkly, but apparently the point had struck home. He shoved past Hutch on his way inside, and Hutch followed, two other dealers he worked with under Jester silently trickling in behind him. And then he froze, barely feeling it when the others bumped into and passed him, grumbling.

Starsky sat on the ground in the middle of the dim lobby, Jester's muscle holding a gun to his head.

"What've we got here?" Jester asked, slurred voice halfway between anger and curiosity.

Hutch swallowed, trying not to stare at his partner, whose eyes firmly stayed away from him, on Jester. Apparently unhurt and obviously defiant, only Hutch would have seen he was also scared.

The muscle, a bodybuilder who watched over the building, nodded at his captive. "Saw him across the street. Seen him there two other times this week, different times from different directions, but seemed kinda funny to me."

Jester was nodding. "Sounds kinda funny to me, too. You search him?"

Hutch's stomach balled in dread. If they found his notes on Starsky, the gig was up for both of them. But the ice in his gut just got colder and harder when the only thing the muscle tossed the drug dealer was a holstered gun and a leather fold. Starsky's badge.

The dealer's eyes narrowed as he studied Starsky's ID. "A cop. A cop's been casing us?" He flipped the fold shut and glared at Starsky. "Well, Officer? You got an answer for me?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about. I go home this way from work every day. I never even noticed this place."

Hutch willed the dealer to believe him, teeth clenching as Jester took a menacing step closer to Starsky.

"I'm not stupid. You've been casing us. But why the walk-by every day, huh?"

Starsky just glared back at him.

Jester's jaw shifted as he considered that, then his mouth drew tight. "Fine. Guess we'll just have to make sure you don't talk to anybody then. Kill him." The last was thrown at the muscle, whose grip immediately flexed on the gun.

The temperature in the room seemed to plummet, and for the first time, Starsky's eyes flicked over to Hutch, just for a second, as if drawing strength from him -- or saying goodbye.

The two worlds Hutch straddled were crashing together, crushing the one thing that allowed him to survive in either, and he was the only one who could stop it. Who had to stop it.

Hutch jerked forward a step. "Wait."

All eyes turned to him, including Starsky's. Hutch didn't dare meet their gaze, focusing instead on Jester.

"You know what'll happen if you kill a cop."

"Yeah." Jester nodded. "Nobody finds out where we are, and we got one less thing to worry about."

Hutch shook his head sharply. "If you kill one of 'em, you bring every other cop in the department down on you. They won't rest until we're all locked up or dead."

"We'll be long gone by the time they find him."

"That's not how they work," Hutch raged back. "If he knows we're here, his partner knows, too, and so does his boss and probably all the rest of his unit. You kill him and it'll be like committing suicide -- cops, especially partners, look after their own."

Jester stared at him. "How come you know so much about cops?"

Hutch took a mental step back. He'd be no help to Starsky if he brought himself under suspicion, too. He shrugged as casually as he could. "You live on the streets long enough, you learn."

Alcohol had dulled what was otherwise a piercing glance, and Jester finally accepted the surface explanation for what it was. "So what do you think we should do with him?" he asked with mock politeness that told Hutch he still wasn't off the hook.

He'd thought about that question already. "Tie him up," he said immediately. "Put him in a closet somewhere. By the time he gets out or they find him, we'll be gone."

"Yeah, man, that sounds like a good idea," came a murmur from one of the other pushers.

"What makes you think they won't come after us then?" Jester asked, a little less hostilely. Even leaders had to watch themselves when the popular vote was against them.

"I didn't say they wouldn't. But that'll be nothing compared to how hard they'll be looking if they're searching for a copkiller."

Jester's jaw flexed, his eyes raking over Hutch. Then, "No. Too many chances. He knows what we look like, how we operate. If we don't kill 'im, he'll talk."

Hutch's heart thudded painfully in his chest, his mouth dry and his hands clammy. He glanced again at his partner. Starsky was frowning at him, looking less scared than worried now. Trying to figure out what this meant, and trusting Hutch's play -- trusting Hutch with his life.

Hutch lifted his chin and played another card in his dwindling hand.

"You kill him and I walk. I don't want to be hunted down like the rest of you."

There was an uneasy stirring among the others in the room now. For all their hatred of cops, few felons wanted to risk killing one. In a gunfight to protect your life, yeah, but not like this, not when there were other options. And Jester knew it.

Hutch saw him take a subtle glance around the room before facing Hutch again. He suddenly smiled, drawing his gun, and his glee chilled Hutch. "Okay. I'll give you a choice then. We let

Maxie here kill the pig, or you teach him a lesson, make sure he's in no shape to go running to his cop friends for a while."

Hutch faltered, heart skipping. Teach him a lesson? Hurt him? Starsky?

Or watch him be killed.

Who could choose between those two? Jester was simply trying to regain the upper hand, but he had no idea what he was asking. Injure the one person Hutch was sworn to protect -- how could he even consider it?

Jester flicked the safety off his semi-automatic. Much longer and the decision would be made for Hutch, and that frightened him even more. Helpless, he looked at his partner.

Starsky's eyes had widened in exaggerated alarm and fear, ping-ponging between Hutch and Jester during the casual conversation about his living or dying. But deeper than that was a calm that managed to steady Hutch a little, an equanimity about what had to be done along with, God help him, sympathy for Hutch for being in that position. But he wasn't leaving the decision solely on Hutch's shoulders. *Do it.* It was as clear as if Starsky had said it aloud. *It's the only way. Do it. I trust you.*

That could be the weightiest, most frightening thing someone could say to you. Hutch knew Starsky trusted him with his life, knew it as certainly as he himself trusted the man. But this...?

Hutch took a breath. Well, they could pull it off. They'd had to stagefight before, once in front of a bar full of cops when Starsky was playing a rogue officer, and a recent undercover job as stuntmen on a western had even taught him some of the tricks. Just throw a punch or two, make it look good, and get Starsky out of there before Jester changed his mind.

Hutch could see Starsky register the decision he'd made and steel himself, his eyes never hardening, almost a twinkle of encouragement in them. In other circumstances, Hutch would have shaken his head in fond longsuffering, but they were being watched now and he had to make it look good...for the sake of both their lives.

Hutch looked again at Jester, all the warmth he'd channeled to his partner a moment before, shutting off. "Fine," he said simply, relieved his voice didn't shake.

The drug dealer's grin was cruelly cheerful as he tucked his gun away and leaned back to watch. To be entertained.

Hutch soaked in the anger for a few seconds, then locked it away. There would be no room for it now, not if he was to do this right and save them both. This was one fight he could only win with gentleness.

He braced himself, then jerked Starsky away from Maxie's grasp, the larger man obediently releasing his prisoner. Hutch immediately drew back and let loose a punch that looked hard, but that he pulled just before it connected. Near misses wouldn't work, but he knew how to hit without causing a lot of damage.

Starsky appropriately reeled, lurching back a step, looking stunned. Only the clarity of his eyes -- that damnably trusting blue -- and the light impact against his fist reassured Hutch his partner wasn't hurt. The second punch he followed it with made Starsky stagger again and looked just as good.

Or so Hutch thought. "A lesson, Hatch, not a rap on the knuckles," was Jester's angry pronouncement behind him. And suddenly Maxie was next to Hutch, throwing a punch that wasn't pulled one bit.

Starsky's head snapped back, his lip split and blood already trickling down his chin, expression startled.

Maxie gave Hutch a shove before he could react, propelling him toward Starsky, the message clear. If he didn't do it, Maxie would. Hutch looked in dismay at his best friend, who was still shaking off the pain, not realizing yet what was coming next. That if Hutch didn't follow through, they would both likely end up dead. Hutch had sacrificed his own security by speaking up for his partner, but that was the least of his concerns now.

Hurt his best friend in order to save him. What kind of job required an impossible decision like that?

Throwing his partner a despairing silent request for forgiveness, Hutch's next blow sent the air whooshing out of Starsky's lungs and he doubled over. It was the perfect set-up for an uppercut, and Hutch didn't dare hold back, hoping it would knock his friend out and stop this torture session. His face twisted in a mirror of the other man's pain, he swung.

But Starsky hadn't had time to prepare, or react. Hutch's fist sent him into the wall behind him, his head cracking against the brick under the peeling wallpaper and sending him to his knees, stunned. But not out. Even as Hutch prayed he would fall over for the count, the bewildered, bloody face turned upward.

Hutch hesitated, searching for some other way, unable to look away from those bruised features, and Maxie took another step closer with a growl.

Oh, God. Starsky, I'm sorry. His eyes were stinging and his heart sank to somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach, both twisted into knots. He was going to be sick, but managed to aim one more blow at the cheek Starsky wasn't even trying to defend, sending his partner crashing to the floor. Like tearing his own flesh.

And then, as Hutch prayed Starsky would stay down this time, self-defense finally seemed to kick in for the man. No doubt acting on instinct now, Starsky pushed himself to his knees again and then, drunkenly, to his feet, blindly striking out at his attacker. Hutch wanted to be hit, craving some sort of penance for the pain he was imposing, but it wouldn't have looked good. Their damnable audience -- how could he forget? A simple side-step moved him out of the way of the sloppy swing and sent Starsky, off-balance, back to the floor with a groan.

"Finish up," came the merciless order from behind him.

Swallowing bile, Hutch aimed a weak kick low, well clear of kidneys and ribs, but it landed hard and high when Starsky unexpectedly rolled into it. Hutch flinched as he heard bone break and Starsky cried out.

It was the last straw. Show or no, no matter what they did to him, he couldn't hurt his partner any further. Hutch held his defiant ground, staring at Jester with murder in his heart and tears pricking the back of his eyes. Trying to tune out another moan from near the ground as Starsky shifted, no longer trying to rise.

"That's enough. I may be a peddler, but I'm not a sadist." Hutch's voice sounded loud to his own ears even though he felt faint, his blood drained down into his feet and his gut hurting as badly as if he'd been the one just worked over. He couldn't bear to look at the figure lying prone at his feet, the man he loved as a brother and whose blood was now on his knuckles.

Jester's answer was to his muscle. "Throw him in the dumpster."

Maxie stepped forward and lifted Starsky's arms, forcing another pained cry from the injured man, and disinterestedly dragged him out the back door. Hutch bit his lip until he tasted blood, willing himself not to be physically sick in front of the monster standing before him.

Whose mouth curved into a slight smile. "Yeah, I'm convinced. He won't be talking for a while. Didn't know you had it in you. Pack your stuff, we move in an hour."

Hutch gave him no acknowledgement, just turned with stiff legs and trembling steps and fled the room, dying inside.

He was breathing with ragged gasps by the time he reached his room and immediately staggered into the bathroom to throw up, then sank down onto the dirty tile.

What now?

If he could get out to the phone again, he could call 911, but the others were bound to notice if an ambulance arrived at the back of the apartment building. But Jester had given no sign of how far away their new base was to be, and Starsky would be lying in that filth, suffering or maybe unconscious, during the whole time it took them to relocate. Hutch couldn't bear the thought of that. He would break cover and get his partner to the hospital. It was what his heart was desperately demanding, too.

The ability to act calmed his frenzied thoughts and Hutch climbed unsteadily to his feet. It wouldn't fix what he'd already done, but at least it might help a little.

There was no way he could go downstairs without being seen, which left only one option. Hutch's bloody hands slipped a little on the window lock, but he got it undone, then savagely heaved the stuck window open. The fire escape was rusty and loose, but he didn't even hesitate. It was the only way to get to his partner and that was all that mattered right now.

Hutch crept down as steadily as he could, both to keep the ton of metal from crashing down with him and to keep the others from hearing. He still had no gun and was badly outnumbered, and wouldn't be able to help Starsky if he got himself shot.

The last level of the fire escape was nearly a story off the ground and Hutch let himself dangle from it and dropped quietly to the ground. Then he took off for the back of the building.

His nose led him to the dumpster, because there was no sound in the alley other than the scuttle of rats. Starsky wasn't even trying to get out, and Hutch's heart shredded a little more. What if he'd been hurt even worse than he seemed? A broken rib could do serious damage internally, as could any abdominal blow, not to mention the way his head had smacked against the wall.

Bracing himself, Hutch grabbed hold of the edge of the dumpster and pulled himself up to look inside.

Reeking trash filled the bin halfway, full of lumps he didn't even want to try to identify, but nothing that looked human. Had Maxie gotten lazy and left Starsky somewhere else? Or was there any way his injured partner could have climbed out on his own?

Hutch didn't dare speak, afraid of being overheard and even more so of Starsky's reaction to his voice, but he peered hard into the gloom as he skirted the dumpster.

And nearly tripped over Starsky's leg.

His partner was sprawled by the trash bin, his back propped against it. Enough refuse smeared his clothes to indicate he had indeed been inside the bin, but how he had managed to climb out confounded Hutch. Probably that stubborn Starsky will. Which had apparently run out once he'd dropped into the alley; he was only semi-conscious now, eyelids fluttering in a face that was pale even in the scant light. His chest rose and fell unevenly, and his pulse leaped as Hutch took hold of his wrist with a shaking hand. Starsky rolled his head toward him.

Hutch's face tightened in empathy as he wiped away the blood still oozing from Starsky's lip, feeling as though he himself were bleeding inside. "I'm sorry," Hutch whispered bleakly to his partner.

Starsky blinked at him, blue eyes dazed and hurting. "Hu--"

Hutch covered the man's mouth, putting a finger to his own, waiting until he got a bare nod of understanding at least of the directive if not the cause. But Starsky was now struggling to get up, pushing weakly against Hutch's arm for leverage.

Again that will. His partner never ceased to amaze him. But Starsky would just hurt himself worse that way, so Hutch tried to help instead of hinder, supporting his partner as Starsky slowly, stooped, made it to his feet. Then just as silently, both for the sake of safety and of not knowing what to say, Hutch slipped under the arm on Starsky's good left side and, taking a large portion of his weight, limped out of the alley with him.

Even lopsided, they fell into a rhythm like they always did. Starsky's head lolled against his shoulder and Hutch did his best not to joggle it, dodging the litter in the street as best he could, not daring to take another look at his companion. He just held on, coaxing under his breath, trying not to think beyond the moment. At least taking care of Starsky was one thing he knew how to do.

Hadn't he already done so that day, his mind cynically cut in?

Hutch locked his jaw and kept going.

They made it nearly a block before Starsky's strength began to flag, dragging their steps. His breathing was harsh, his arm curled around his waist, and afraid of further injury, Hutch finally lowered him into the doorway of a locked store. He would've carried his partner if he had to, but they had gotten far enough and he couldn't stand the thought of causing Starsky yet more pain. Hutch crouched down to face his partner.

But Starsky's eyes were shut in his grey face, all his attention apparently on taking in air. An occasional groan broke through without his even seeming to know it.

Heart tearing inside, Hutch cringed in empathy and slipped his hand under the sagging chin. "Starsk, I'm so sorry."

"M okay," Starsky mumbled, coughed, repeated, "M okay."

"Yeah, you look terrific. Listen, just take it easy right here. I think we're far enough to be safe. I'm gonna go for help."

Starsky caught his hand before he could move away and gave him a look of startling clarity. "Y'have t'go back."

"What?" Hutch stared at his partner as if Starsky had spoken French.

"Go back... 'fore they miss ya."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Starsky, I'm not leaving you here like this."

"Car's not too far... 'll be a'right."

Hutch almost spluttered a laugh. "You expect me to let you drive yourself to the hospital like this? Starsk--"

Starsky was straightening now, getting his second wind, and his hand curled nearly painfully around Hutch's. "Then I'll call... Dobey... but go. Ass'nment--"

"Screw the assignment. The assignment didn't include me working you over."

Starsky's eyes gentled. "'S not your fault, Hutch. 'M okay -- tougher 'an that. Gotta get this guy. Go." And he gave Hutch a weak shove.

Another wrenching choice. "Starsk," Hutch said softly, reaching out to touch a stubbled cheek as much for his own comfort as his partner's.

And jerked back as Starsky flinched, something that could only be fear flitting through his eyes.

Hutch stumbled back a step, gutted. That look... Well, it made it easier, in a way. No matter what he said, Starsky obviously didn't trust Hutch. Every movement had to be reminding him of what his partner had done to him that evening. Leaving him would probably be the kindest thing Hutch could do. He turned away, the weight on his chest making it hard to breathe.

"Hutch, wait a minute." Starsky was struggling to get up.

"Stay there. I'll call for help," Hutch managed. And then he ran.

At least with his ragged breaths and his pulse pounding in his ear, he wouldn't be able to hear Starsky not calling after him.

Jester's new location was all of five blocks away, a building in even worse shape than the previous one had been. They had to rout a few homeless people who had taken refuge in it, but soon the new claim was staked.

Hutch couldn't have cared less.

He had called 911, not giving his name or Starsky's, only his partner's location and condition, before he'd snuck back into his room in the old place. Hutch had just gotten rid of his filthy clothes before the order came from Jester to move. There was little to pack and Hutch had numbly followed orders.

His new room smelled, but Hutch ignored it, stripping mechanically and climbing into his bedroll. He needed a scalding shower, but there was no running water in the deserted building, and Jester wasn't trusting him enough at the moment to go elsewhere. The floor was warped and uncomfortable beneath his back, but for penance, it barely qualified. Starsky was in a lot more discomfort, wherever he was.

Hutch had strained for any faint sound of a siren on the way over and finally was sure now Starsky was safe, being taken care of. Certainly safer than he had been with his partner, his best friend who had beaten him senseless, leaving him bloody and broken... Hutch squeezed his eyes shut, but the image couldn't be obliterated so easily. The pain-contorted face and awful groans were bad enough, but his partner's clear panic as Hutch had reached for him was carved into his soul. Reactions only came from the deepest instincts, which had been instinctive trust between them for a long time. That had changed now. No matter how good his reasons and how few his options, Hutch had inevitably changed it when he had attacked and injured the person he'd sworn to protect, whom he would have given his life for -- the one he loved probably more unselfishly than anyone else in his life. How could Starsky's heart forgive and his subconscious forget that, even if he wanted to, if his head knew there'd been no other choice? Even if Hutch had ultimately done it out of love.

He didn't have contact with the Department now, no one who knew about the change of plans or location. Technically, he was rogue now, not undercover, but Starsky had wanted him to finish out the job and so there he was. He would just have to play it by ear. And afterwards... Well, Starsky would be fine and that was all that ultimately mattered. He'd been in a lot of pain, but surely not in immediate danger.

Suddenly very cold, Hutch pulled the cover around him, rolling into a ball. Trying to forget he'd just beaten his best friend into semi-conscious Hell and knowing he'd thus landed there himself.

He didn't sleep at all that night.

The next day, the nightmare continued in a slow crawl.

It took a while for word to get around about their new base, so business was slow, leaving Hutch too much time to think. He still took notes because he didn't know what else to do, but Starsky wouldn't be out there photographing the buyers as they left, so the vague descriptions would do little good. And most of those would get away with the drugs he was selling them. One kid, impossibly young, had been too much to bear, and Hutch had snarled at him so menacingly that he'd left without buying. It had been the only small saving grace of the day.

Of course, Jester hadn't been happy. He was still wary of Hutch and looked in on him frequently, often frowning. Hutch glowered back. The man sickened him now, not just a drug dealer but a sadist. It took energy he didn't have not to bash the creep's face in.

But he had to find out about the deal, and his phone call that evening was to Huggy to leave him the details of the meet the next day, with a promise from the barkeep he'd pass the news on to Dobey. Hutch hadn't dared call the station, not under Jester's nose, but he trusted Huggy to deliver the message.

"Oh, and, uh, Huggy... Do you know how Starsky's doing?"

"Just saw him this afternoon. He's still in the hospital but doin' fine, already itchin' to get out."

Hutch closed his eyes.

"Say, what happened out there, anyway? All he said was, he got made."

Was that the official version? Well, no one would want to admit their partner had put them in the hospital. "Not now, Hug," Hutch said hoarsely.

"And how're you?"

"I have to go. Make sure you get that message to Dobey tomorrow morning, no sooner, okay?"

"Yeah, I got it, but--"

"Thanks, Huggy." Hutch hung up and stood there with bowed head for some time before finally squaring his shoulders and walking back to his prison.

The next morning went the same, business brisker now as their old buyers found them, and then one of the other dealers took over his spot while Jester and Hutch took a drive, Maxie planted in the back seat and a half-full duffel bag tucked close to Jester's side.

The meet had cleverly been set up in a crowded place, the pedestrian market of Santa Monica. Hard to stake out and, as Hutch risked a few glances around, he saw no sign of Dobey's men. Either they were doing a good job, or he really was out in the cold, and wouldn't that make for an interesting afternoon?

Hutch and Jester took a seat on a park bench, Maxie pretending not very well to do some window shopping behind them. And then they waited.

"I hear they found that cop you worked over," Jester said conversationally.

Hutch stiffened.

"Somehow the pig managed to crawl down to the end of the street. They say he's in the hospital now, doin' all right. Guess you should've been harder on the guy."

"Shut up," Hutch ground through his teeth.

Jester's eyebrow rose. "I'm just sayin'. His friends raided the old place yesterday. What did I tell you about him talking?"

If their meet didn't come soon, Hutch didn't think he could keep from wrapping his hands around his companion's neck.

Someone must have been listening, for once. The same moment, an expensively dressed young man appeared from the left, his muscled escort peeling off at the last minute to hover less obtrusively nearby, watching. As the young man got close, he started patting himself, pulling out a cigarette case that glistened gold in the sunlight and extracting a cigarette from it. The case went back into his pocket and the young man looked for a lighter now, switching his briefcase from one hand to the other. No luck. He reached their bench and smiled, holding out his cigarette.

"Would you happen to have a light, sir?"

Jester immediately began going through his pockets, but he answered, voice pitched low.

"Twenty G's, right in the bag."

The young man nodded, still smiling, and casually set his briefcase on the ground next to Jester.

"Fine. I heard you had some trouble?"

"Nothing Mr. Hatch here couldn't take care of." Jester nodded at Hutch, that same sadistic smile in his eyes. Reliving the fun apparently even outweighed his dislike for Hutch.

"Really?" The newcomer's gaze raked Hutch. They were even flatter than Jester's, holding none of the man's hatred or anger, only a calculating gleam that made the detective shiver. This was the kind of person he was there to put away, the one who had no heart to redeem.

"I did what I had to," Hutch said. Let them take it as they would.

"I'm glad to hear that," was the boss's only answer. Then, as Jester finally located a lighter and lit the cigarette, he took a deep pull. "I'll remember you, Hatch."

Hutch just nodded. He would remember the young man, too.

"Jester," the boss nodded, and just as casually picked up the duffel bag sitting next to him on the bench and turned away.

This was it, where the cavalry was supposed to ride in. Hutch watched the two bodyguards return to their boss's side and disappear with him around a corner. And felt hollow at the realization no one had come. The excruciating charade had continued for nothing, and the bad guys were getting away. What was he supposed to do now, acting on his--

Cold steel touched his neck. "Freeze," a voice just as cold and solid whispered in his ear.

But it wasn't Maxie's voice, and as Hutch sat in motionless confusion, he realized Jester also had a gun held on him, sitting in rigid obedience and fury.

"This way." The gun coaxed him to his feet, and Hutch rose with it. Was this the boss's way of firing them? Or had Dobey come through, after all? If so, he certainly wasn't pulling any punches. Even informants usually weren't arrested at close-contact gunpoint.

They were led around the bench, then back toward an art store that was too empty. Through the store, then out the back door into the parking lot behind it, where several police cars, the SWAT truck, and a police wagon stood waiting.

"Against the wall," the same voice commanded, and Hutch was jostled against the wall next to Jester and Maxie and searched, then his hands cuffed roughly behind him. Jester, oblivious now of Hutch and cursing without pause, was put into a police car and driven off, and Hutch felt only numbness as he watched the monster go. Maxie was loaded into a wagon, and another police car drove by with the young boss handcuffed in the back seat, looking ten years older in his rage. The cavalry had come after all and, just like that, it was over.

A small well of relief finally rose in Hutch at the recognition. Perhaps some good had come of this horror, after all. It was little compared to the cost, but his weary heart grasped after any gain.

Someone was unlocking his cuffs, and Hutch pulled his arms in front of him to rub his chafed wrists with relief. He turned to thank the officer, breaking off when he saw Dobey standing there, watching him seriously.

"Sorry about that, Hutch, but after Starsky, we didn't want to take any chances."

His small joy was stamped out, battered heart taking another hit. Of course -- he'd already attacked one cop, hadn't he?

Dobey was still talking. "...and I didn't want them coming after you, too. We'll make sure they keep thinking you were arrested, too, until we have the whole group in custody."

What? Hutch stared at him, uncomprehending.

Dobey's voice softened. "Why don't you go clean up and see your partner? He was released this morning. The paperwork can wait 'til tomorrow."

He didn't know. Apparently, Starsky hadn't told anyone. And, Hutch realized, he wasn't surprised. Even if Starsky couldn't forgive him, it would be just like the man to nevertheless cover for his partner. Hutch opened his mouth to tell Dobby the truth, then closed it again, subdued by a wash of humility. If that was how Starsky wanted it, that was how it would be. It wouldn't change what Hutch knew. "Yeah," was all he said. He managed a smile. "Thanks, Cap'n."

"All right." Dobby cuffed him on the shoulder, his brand of affection. "You did a good job, Hutch."

The kindness was killing him. Hutch flinched mid-turn, but couldn't bring himself to answer, just kept going.

Two different uniformed officers, one of them a stranger to him, offered him a ride as he walked through the crowd, but he turned them down. He wanted to see Starsky more than anything. To touch him, talk to him, make sure he was really all right. And then to look him in the eye and apologize, ask his forgiveness. Hutch wanted to go to him so badly, it hurt.

But not nearly as much as it would if Starsky flinched from him again. He didn't think he could bear seeing fear in those blue eyes directed at him again.

Hutch turned instead toward the beach.

He walked until the sounds of Santa Monica disappeared behind him and the crowds thinned to nothing, the restlessness in him settling into a soul-tired ache. He was so tired of hurting.

The last time he had been on the beach, it had been in Venice, near his home. His job had brought him there then, too, as Hutch had struggled with his own mortality after nearly dying from the plague. The humbleness of it, and of Starsky's unceasing efforts to find the antidote, had both wounded and calmed him. He had long consigned his own fate to a God who had been merciful so many times before, but the reminder of how much he meant to someone else and how close that person had come to leaving him was unsettling. Hutch had sat on the beach for hours then, too, until Starsky had worried and come out to find him and, soon laughing over some shared joke, they'd gone home together. He'd slept with restored contentment that night, having accepted the gift but determined never to take it for granted in the future.

But then he'd done far worse than that. He'd crushed it.

Not that he'd had any choice. Maxie and Jester both wanted Starsky dead and had been armed and prepared to do it, and the other dealers in the room would have followed their lead. Getting away was impossible, and Jester had refused any other options. Surely a beating was a small price to pay for his partner's survival. Hutch knew that for certain, and yet couldn't forget the confused look on his partner's face as Hutch had hit him over and over. No matter what his motive, there was no changing the fact of what he'd done. He couldn't imagine Starsky ever being able to forget it, either, no matter how much they both had known it was the only way. It would still be there in his unconscious memory, showing up in his dreams and instincts and reactions. Between them.

The sun started to creep into the water, changing the blue of the ocean into pinks and reds. Hutch stared at the colorful ripples, idly sifting sand through his fingers, until the salt air stung the water out of his eyes and throat and the natural rhythm numbed the worst of his grief. He could do this. He didn't want to, but he could do it.

With resignation, Hutch rose on half-asleep legs and started back.

It wasn't too hard to find a taxi; the city's nightlife was just beginning. He'd had to push his way through some crowds to get back to the street, but no one had given the slumped and tattered cop a second glance, too busy chattering and laughing. These were the people he was sworn to defend, to even give his life for. These were the people he'd hurt his partner for. Had it been worth it?

God forgive him, yes.

Hutch stood for a long moment in front of his apartment building where the taxi dropped him off, summoning the energy and the desire to climb the steps. All he wanted now was a shower and a long night's sleep, then he would figure out what to do in the morning. Resign, maybe. He no longer wanted a job that required him to make unbearable choices.

It was a sign of how dulled he was, physically and mentally, that the fact he wasn't alone didn't hit him until Hutch was inside the door, shutting it behind him.

"It's about time you got home. Where've you been? Dobby called hours ago."

Hutch whirled, mind going blank at the sight of Starsky struggling to sit up on his couch, one arm wrapped around his chest to support himself. His right eye was swollen and black, his cheek and lip just as puffed and purple. Another bruise spread over the left side of the chin, and he held himself gingerly. This was... Hutch swallowed, his throat tight. This was all his work...

"You were at the beach, weren't you?" The second question came when he didn't say a word, milder this time as Starsky sat and intently watched his face.

Sitting there in his apartment, on his sofa. "Shouldn't you be in the hospital?" Hutch asked stupidly, still frozen by the door.

A careless wave. "I'm fine. They let me out this morning. Probably woulda let me out sooner, but I didn't have a pushy partner backing me up when I wanted t'go home. I'm okay, just a few bruises."

"A few bruises," Hutch repeated bitterly.

Starsky's expression unexpectedly gentled. "Hey, don't." He lifted a hand toward Hutch, an unaccepted offer. The hand lowered again, unfazed. "Okay, yeah, I bent a rib, too, but that's all, I swear. And it wasn't your fault, anyway, Hutch. You did what you had to do, I know that."

Starsky tried to lean forward, whitened slightly, and subsided again into the cushions before Hutch could do more than cringe. Starsky just gave him that half-smile that said he knew what Hutch was thinking.

"But you ran off before I could tell ya that, so I came after you." Those eyes saw right through him, and the dark curls slowly shook. "You didn't think I would, did ya?"

Hutch stalled, trying to think as he dropped his keys onto the table beside the door and pulled off his jacket, letting it fall carelessly in a heap by the door.

"Hutch..." The word was a sigh behind him. "It wasn't your fault. I don't blame you."

Funny how dead he felt inside, like the beach had washed all feeling out of him. "I saw you," Hutch said dully. "You were scared of me, Starsky. Maybe you think you're not, but..." He shook his hanging head. "We can't work together like this."

A pause, then. "C'mere and sit down." No attempt to argue.

Wary, Hutch's head came up and he looked at Starsky a long moment, trying to read him and, perhaps too distant now, failing. He finally, slowly, circled the easy chair sitting by the near end of the couch and perched near its edge. This wouldn't be a long conversation.

He was within touching distance now, but Starsky made no effort to bridge the gap between them, for once. Only his gaze latched on to Hutch.

There was a long pause, Starsky seemingly searching for words Hutch didn't think existed. But he was surprised by what finally came out. "Did we get 'em?"

We. Hutch swallowed a sigh and played along. "Yeah. The boss, Jester, and Maxie are in custody. Dobby's going after the rest now."

"So... that's good."

He huffed, almost a laugh. "Sure. Great. I had to beat my partner to a pulp to do it, but it doesn't matter because we got 'em."

Starsky softened. "It wasn't like that, Hutch."

"Yeah? Well, you tell me what it was like, Starsky, because it might not bother you, but I'm having a little trouble with the idea, myself."

Starsky thought about that for a moment. "Yeah, okay, at first I wasn't exactly thinkin' straight and I blamed you." He leveled a finger at Hutch, a habit he'd picked up from his partner over the years. "But I was there, remember? I know you didn't have any choice. It was either knock me around a little or watch me get killed, and I know which one I'd choose. Matter of fact, I seem to remember I *did* choose."

Do it.

Hutch remembered, too. It just didn't make a difference.

"There was no other way I coulda made it outta there, Hutch. I *know* that. And I know you tried to go easy and protect me, but Jester was too smart to fall for that."

Starsky's calm voice was having its usual effect, whether Hutch wanted it to or not, relaxing him, making it seem like they could work through anything. Hutch knew he could easily have been keeping a death watch or paying a visit to the coroner's office if he hadn't done what he had that night. The blood on his hands didn't outweigh the fact Starsky would be all right. But... Hutch worried his already raw lip, not wanting to think. The numbness from the beach was starting to wear off and he didn't want it to go.

"If anything, this is my fault for getting caught." Starsky's voice sounded chagrined. "Talk about a rookie mistake. I'm sorry I put you on the spot like that. But you kept him from killing me, and you figured something out, just like I knew you would."

"Heck of a plan," Hutch said gruffly, glancing up at him.

Starsky flashed a sympathetic grin at him. "Yeah, well, we'll work on it for next time. That doesn't mean you didn't do the best you could under the circumstances. We both got out alive. The bad guys are in jail. Seems to me you did pretty good, partner."

But he could hear Starsky grasping at straws, his partner trying to convince himself as well as Hutch. It wouldn't work, didn't he know that? Partnerships couldn't be based on wishful thinking. "I saw your face out there." Hutch was down to a whisper. "Don't tell me it didn't affect you."

Starsky grimaced. "That was a natural instinct, Hutch. Happened when the doctor reached too fast for me, too. It doesn't mean anything. Doesn't change what I know here..." Starsky pointed to his head. "...and here..." His heart.

Hutch slowly shook his head.

A tired, almost exasperated sigh from his partner. "Hutch..."

Tired. He had to be tired, fresh out of the hospital, and if Hutch knew his partner, starving. Did he have tea in the house? Hutch jumped to his feet, anxious to be moving, to be away from the painful conversation. "Let me fix you something to eat, Starsky."

No argument again from the man, but Hutch could feel the dark eyes track him as he crossed into the kitchen and quickly started going through cupboards. Yep, the tin of tea bags was still half-full from the last time Starsky had been ill. Hutch took out a handful of bags and scattered them on the counter before digging in another cabinet for the kettle. That was half-filled, too, and put on the stove to heat. That done, Hutch cast around for something else to do. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches maybe? Or the ever-popular omelet? Eggs would be among the few things in his refrigerator that would still be--

The unexpected touch on the back of his shoulder made him start and whirl, nearly knocking Starsky over.

"What're you doing up?" Hutch asked incredulously, and without thinking grabbed hold of his wobbly partner's arm. Then, realizing what he'd done, he yanked his hand away just as quickly.

Starsky's body might have been unsteady with weakness, but his stare was rock solid. It didn't even flicker when Hutch touched him. Not until the blond retreated. "See?" was all he said, softly.

"Starsky, sit down before you fall down," Hutch said helplessly.

"Not until I get through that thick of skull of yours."

"You did, okay? I get it. I'm fine, everything's great. Now, sit down, will ya?"

"Make me." There was humor in Starsky's voice, but no mocking.

Hutch's exasperation rose. "What do you expect me to do, Starsky, act like nothing happened? Maybe Jester was really responsible, but I can't believe you're just gonna forget these are the hands that actually bashed your face in." And he raised his fists to inches away from Starsky's face.

Starsky's gaze flicked down to them, then back to Hutch, reflecting nothing but empathy. "To save my life, Hutch. One time--"

"Twice," Hutch cut in mercilessly.

The dark head inclined fractionally. "I'm not countin' what happened at Gillian's, that was different and you know it, but, okay, twice. And how many times have those hands kept me from fallin' on my face?"

Hutch started.

Starsky's hand clenched the back of a kitchen chair with a white-knuckled grip. He wasn't supposed to be on his feet this long, Hutch was sure of it. But Starsky himself didn't seem to notice, he was so intent on Hutch. "How many times have they wiped my blood away, huh? How many times have they been the only thing keeping my head above the filth and muck, Hutch? If we're keepin' count now, how many times?"

He was actually hurting now, his chest tight and aching. Hutch cast his friend a drowning look. What kind of question was that?

Starsky kept going. "I whacked you once to put on an act, too, remember? We gonna count that, too?"

The show they had put on for the rogue cops was peanuts in comparison. "That was different," Hutch said weakly.

"Yeah, your life wasn't on the line then. C'mon, Hutch, it's gonna take a lot more than one -- or even two -- bad times to wipe out nine years of us trustin' each other. What I know about you goes deeper than that. So listen to me, huh? Please. This is where I wanna be." Starsky's face creased, half-hopeful, half-pleading.

He hadn't made a sound when Hutch had been hitting him, but he was pleading now for Hutch to stop beating himself up. Maybe the only straw Starsky was grasping for was to try to get through to his partner what he himself already knew for certain.

Hutch really wanted to believe. And Starsky, for all his determination, was getting paler and shakier by the minute.

Hutch took a deep breath, then, eyes never wavering from Starsky's, reached out for him again, taking hold of his arm.

Starsky didn't flinch from him. On the contrary, as if he could finally let himself, he sagged toward his partner, heavy and clumsy as Hutch quickly maneuvered him into a chair. There, he bent over in wordless pain, arm clasped tightly around his middle.

"Can I get--" Hutch began.

"Just stay here," Starsky said roughly. He leaned his forehead against Hutch's and took sharp, shallow breaths.

Hutch's reticence lasted two seconds longer. Then he reached down between them and found Starsky's free hand, which unclenched long enough to grab onto him.

The kettle started whistling behind him, but Hutch ignored it, his chest loosening as Starsky's labored breathing slowed. Nine years was a long time, wasn't it? It felt like most of his life.

"You wanna know what I think, partner?" Starsky finally turned his head enough to whisper in Hutch's ear. "I think it took a lot of guts to do what you did. I know how much it killed ya to do it, but you did it for me. That's the part that sunk in, and *that* I'm not gonna get over any time soon."

Boulders were rolling off his heart, leaving it bruised but able to beat again. Hutch squeezed his eyes shut and, swallowing, stretched up to briefly tousle the curls above Starsky's neck. You didn't get much more forgiven than that, did you? Apparently, even though his act had fooled Jester, it would take a lot more than being beaten up by his best friend for Starsky to stop

believing him worthy of trust. God willing, they would never find out how much more, if there even was a limit.

Humility 101. It came right after graduation in Unconditional Love. His fingers clasped Starsky's tighter, and his partner silently gripped back.

"So, you gonna get that?" Starsky finally asked, nodding fractionally toward the stove.

"You gonna fall over if I do?"

The bunching of Starsky's shoulders was probably meant to be a shrug. "You'll pick me up if I do."

"Yeah," Hutch said softly.

"Then I'm okay."

He squeezed his eyes tighter shut for a minute, then gently slid out of Starsky's grasp, patted his leg, and eased away. Starsky leaned back slowly in the chair, still too white and now damp with sweat, but offering Hutch a small grin nevertheless.

Hutch's was probably shaky in return, but he managed one before turning away to see to the screaming kettle. There were mugs in the cupboard next to the stove, and he hovered over one featuring a grinning moose before picking out one with an LAPD logo. Tea bag first, then hot water. And then, casually, over his shoulder as he wiped his hands, "So does this mean you won't be asking Dobey for another partner?"

"I will if you keep asking stupid questions like that," came the friendly growl behind him. "And you keep sayin' you're the smart one..."

A laugh bubbled out of him from God knew where. He didn't know he had any left.

The bottle of Tylenol sat by the kitchen sink, and Hutch retrieved two pills from it before he turned back to the table, tea in hand. Mug and pills were planted in front of Starsky, who gratefully washed down one with the other, then wrapped his hands wearily around the mug.

Hutch sank into the chair next to him, now candidly taking in the bruises that colored Starsky's face. It was a reminder of what he'd done, yeah, but it was also a reminder of how strong their partnership was. He decided he could live with that. And he found himself smiling as Starsky leaned in toward him, knees brushing Hutch's and one hand giving his wrist a squeeze before nodding to him.

"So, you gonna tell me what went down with the meet?"

Hutch leaned forward, too, in Starsky's space now with no reaction other than the usual affectionate glance before they got down to business. Hutch cleared his throat. "It happened just like we hoped. Jester told me yesterday it'd been set up..."

Some choices were impossible. But some, thank God, were really, really easy.