

VIETNAM



BAY CITY



SAN DIEGO





SOJOURN

A STORY SET IN THE LAND OF STARKY & HUTCH

JUNE 2011

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Author's Notes:

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This story is dedicated to the Girls of Sunday –most particularly to Carolyn and Sharon.

Prelude

Event Horizon – November 1975

Detective Ken Hutchinson took the stairs three at a time, his long legs effortlessly gobbling up the distance. With his left shoulder, he nudged open the front door of Detective David Starsky's apartment. He stumbled inelegantly over the threshold and wind milled his arms to salvage his balance as his knapsack slipped to the floor. A weekend smile brightened his handsome features as he breathed in the comforting Starsky scents of leather, sandalwood and coffee. He listened to the sound of pounding shower water and enthusiastic singing from behind the closed bathroom door.

Looks like I'm early, lover. Do I barge in there for a light snack of warm tan skin and an even warmer red mouth? Or should I be a good boy – a patient boy- and make myself useful? Aw, hell. Against every instinct I have, I'll sacrifice and go with useful. Pay a few bills. Read a few headlines. Earn me some Starsky redeemable atta-boy points.

A car backfired in the street outside. Hutch looked up instinctively, alert and braced, until his mind tracked the sound to a non-threatening source. He lingered at Starsky's desk in a circle of warm late morning sunlight, a stack of sealed envelopes containing his electric, water, and gas bills in one hand and a glass of iced tea in the other.

"Starsky! Hey, Starsk! You got postage stamps?"

Silence.

He pulled open the top drawer of Starsky's desk. He chuckled as he rummaged through the disorganized piles.

"So much for your legendary tidiness, lover. Look at this mess. If I was a postage stamp in here, where would I be?"

He dumped out a handful of papers and shuffled through random scribbled notes, drycleaner stubs, receipts, empty coin rolls. As he hunted, his eyes swept across fragments of words, disconnected and meaningless.

He reached under another stack of papers.

Paused.

Blinked.

A cylinder in his brain clicked.

Backtracking through the disorderly jumble, he retrieved a light green index card. He read carefully, exhaled, read again.

A name. A phone number. An address. A date. A time.

He froze with fingers tight on the sturdy rectangle of paper, head tilted to one side, blond bangs in need of a trim sweeping near his blue eyes. He looked toward the bathroom door and back at the card.

“Starsk?” A half-guilty question. Water and singing, accompanied by steam escaping around the closed bathroom door, were the only replies. Furtively, feeling like half-sucker, half-sneak, he read the information again.

Name: Martin Detwilder

Name’s familiar. Perp? Snitch? Politician? No...no...wait. Oh. Yeah. Starsky’s old army buddy. Alcohol-Tobacco-Firearms Special Agent now. Hear he’s a big guy. Big ego. Big gun. Big laugh.

Phone number and address

San Diego. Starsky’s kind of town more than mine. He still rides me about the time I got us lost on that forlorn stretch of asphalt outside of San Marcos. He huffed like the big bad wolf until I got him a bag of burritos and a root beer.

Date and Time

November 8th – 9th - 7:00 PM. Tonight and tomorrow. Huh?

Hutch shoved the rest of the contents back into the drawer and slid it closed, his scavenger hunt forgotten. He stood up, tall and lean, faded jeans hugging his slender frame and green short-sleeved t-shirt untucked – stood and pondered, turning the card over and over in his long fingers.

Put it back, Hutchinson. It’s none of your business. Starsky said “lunch today” – not “weekend together.”

A faint blush of embarrassment crept over his cheeks. Pathetically grateful that Starsky wasn’t there to witness his covert action, he picked up the knapsack containing extra clothes and sundries that he’d carried in. Hurrying to his car, he tossed it through the open passenger window.

*No need to stand in front of him with my weekend bag, looking like a runaway, eager for the crumbs from his table. Or worse, a besotted lover making assumptions. Starsky’s got a right to make his own plans and do his own thing. But. He’s **my** lover. Do I have a right? Dammit! Why does it feel like I’m tampering with the evidence?*

He forced out a falsely cheerful whistle as he retraced his steps back up to Starsky’s apartment. With fabricated casualness, he dropped into one of the kitchen chairs. The shower droned on. He imagined the hot water drumming over his lover’s naked body, lending a red tinge to the

sun-burnished skin. Index card on the table in front of him, he leaned forward with elbows resting on the table and face propped between his fists.

Okay, Hutchinson. What can we conclude here? One - Starsky's spending the weekend with a guy. His army buddy guy. Two - for some reason, probably innocent enough, he forgot to mention it. Starsky - who mentions the number of times he burps in a day - forgot to mention that he's hauling off for the weekend? Three - I don't like it.

He shifted in the chair, hands cupped over his closed eyes. Hard won confidence and security in Starsky's love for him tumbled away, falling like a line of dominoes. Uninvited doubts and a wave of jealousy, jacked up like a steroid high, attacked and stripped away the carefree morning glow. He felt a stomach-clenching shift from inside out, could almost see the bold, seasoned detective he believed himself to be retreat, defeated, to a dark corner.

This was about Starsky and Starsky keeping secrets and Starsky shutting him out.

Starsky - who owned his heart.

Anxious and numb, he watched condensation from his chilled glass smear the ink on the incriminating card.

.....

Starsky eyed his blond prey from the hallway, his mouth set in a mischievous grin, his dark curls still shower damp, his chest bare. With panther-like stealth, he moved within striking distance and pounced. His well-made fingers gripped the thin fabric of Hutch's t-shirt.

"Surprise, surprise!" Starsky's grin widened at Hutch's startled yelp. He forced Hutch's chair back to balance on the two rear legs and rubbed his damp chest hair against Hutch's shoulder.

Hutch frowned.

In rapid sequence, Starsky snapped his fingers - right, left, right, left.

"G'morning, Blondie. Here I am - your favorite person in the whole world. And here ya sit, looking like a little boy who lost his puppy." Teasing fondness infused Starsky's voice. "I spend all morning slaving over a perfect lunch for your tender tummy--" He paused, chin dipping down to Hutch's left ear, "and that long face is the best you can do?"

Hutch twisted his head slightly, sunlight sketching a single golden line down his long neck.

Starsky placed his thumbs on either side of his partner's mouth, pressing the corners up into a smile.

Hutch tried and failed at a grimace. "Leave my mouth alone, Starsky!"

Starsky's licked his lips. He wagged his eyebrows, his face closing in on Hutch's, nose to nose.

"I love your mouth, partner." He tapped the top of the blond head. "Show us a smile, Detective Hutchinson."

Hutch slammed the chair down on all four legs.

"Ah Ah Ah." Starsky shook his curls. "No ice cream for sullen boys. And no nookie, either."

Hutch tapped his index finger over his closed lips.

"Suit yourself, Hutchinson. You just sit right there 'n suck all the sunshine outta the room. I'll get our lunch."

Starsky's infectious energy whirled him around the small kitchen like a dervish. He gathered napkins and clattered forks and knives onto the table. He pulled prepared plates from the refrigerator, pausing to bump a cabinet door closed with his elbow. He simultaneously slid a plate in front of Hutch and his own jean clad ass into a chair.

The silence between them pinged the meter at "uncomfortable".

Starsky's keen blue eyes flickered across Hutch's face. He shoved a fork into Hutch's hand.

"C'mon Hutch. Chow's on. Chef salad. Your favorite. Me 'n my knife spent hours making those vegetables scream for mercy. This meal's a Hutchinson jackpot. Just for you."

Hutch ignored the food. With exaggerated slowness, he slid the index card over to the edge of Starsky's full plate.

"Don't know about the jackpot, Starsk. I think I'm the runner up." Hutch's voice was humorless, slightly sarcastic. "Sure, I get lunch. But t-this guy--" he gestured with raised eyebrows, "*—he* gets the jackpot."

Starsky's eyes scanned the card. He lowered his corned beef sandwich.

"Looks like somebody went snooping in stuff that ain't his." Starsky's voice was clipped, colored with a subtle sense of danger, all signs of boyish playfulness evaporated.

Hutch recognized the biting syllables, the unstated taunt.

Starsky's street voice – the trademark of the cop only a suicidal moron would fuck with.

"I was looking for a postage stamp, for crying out loud, Starsky. Is it my fault you left it sitting out where I'd find it and read it?"

A razor sharp glint darkened Starsky's blue eyes. "Ever heard of asking permission, buddy?"

"Isn't it better to ask forgiveness than permission?" Hutch's jaw tensed.

"Are you mocking me, partner? I won't do that if I were you." He nearly smiled at the hesitation in Hutch's eyes. "Or are you askin' forgiveness?"

He watched as his chilled words batted away the updraft of Hutch's anger.

Your move, Blondie. Gimme a good comeback – throw me a right hook.

He wasn't prepared Hutch's face to shift, instantaneously, from defensive haughtiness to undisguised confusion and vulnerability.

"Does it mean what I think it means?" A question.

"Who am I supposed to know what's playing in that brain of yours?" A dodge.

"Are you spending the weekend with this guy in San Diego?"

Starsky nodded.

"Without mentioning it to me."

Starsky tipped his head slightly, eyes exploring the seam where wall paneling met ceiling.

"Yeah."

"With your old army buddy."

"Correct."

"Why? A war games reunion? Or are you guys missing your glory days as 'Nam jungle commandoes?"

"Something like that."

"And like I said before – you didn't tell me and you weren't going to tell me."

"No. I wasn't going to tell you."

Starsky watched his partner pivot toward the window, face in profile, mouth working noiselessly. He reached out a hand to encircle Hutch's left wrist.

Hutch started.

"Hey." Starsky's voice was as gentling as his touch. "An old throwaway line comes to mind. Y'know – 'It ain't what you think.' But I can't say that line 'cause I'd be lying to your face. Know why? Because you ain't capable of coming up with what it is or how to think about it."

Hutch's mouth snapped into a perfectly shaped "O."

Starsky waited him out, watching intently from under thick smudged eyelashes as Hutch coughed and gulped a mouthful of air.

"You don't know what I'm thinking, Starsk. You don't know everything I'm capable of." He tugged his arm from Starsky's hold and tucked both elbows close.

There ya go, Hutch. Right into that same old stubborn underdog stance.

"Hutch, it looks to me like somebody in here jumped to conclusions."

"Starsky, it looks to me like somebody in here isn't coming clean."

"You mean about my own weekend plans 'n why they're any of your business? *Partner.*"

Hutch flinched. "I mean about whether you got an extra-curricular love life and why it might kinda be my business. *Lover.*"

Starsky shook his head, his voice in answer gruffer and louder than he intended.

"Wilder and I ain't lovers, Hutch." He draped an arm on Hutch's shoulder.

"Then why not just tell me what you had on your dance card for the weekend? Since it's innocent and all? Why hide your plans?" Hutch struggled to maintain a casual tone. Starsky's arm on his shoulder was firm, representing something so necessary and inexpressible that Hutch fought the urge to lean into its comfort.

"Because I know you and what you do best is invent trouble. Don't make up your own answers for what I do. I got my reasons, Hutch."

"Your secrets, you mean." Hutch glanced sideways.

The dark underside of my soul released, Hutch. You have no idea, sweet boy.

"Yeah. Suppose so."

Hutch's head snapped around.

Starsky touched Hutch's forehead with his thumb.

"I see the wheels turning inside there, Blondie. Listen up. Hear me. Wilder 'n me ain't lovers. But...but we're more than just buddies. We shared things, freak war-zone things, in a hot infested jungle with death dogging us every step. I wasn't much more than a kid, Hutch. Maybe I didn't have any childhood left by then and, hell, if I did, that tour in hell stole whatever scraps remained. Wilder was the senior guy, the big brother, the pal, the leader. He was the go-to guy with the ticket to sanity."

Starsky exhaled, a forced, agonized sound. "I survived. I stayed sane. But it changed me, Hutch. I learned about appetites...about needs...about how to tap a hidden part of myself to do my bidding when the pain 'n ugliness were too much. Wilder and me were joined, in our own private brotherhood...."

He faltered at the questions in Hutch's eyes, reading the bewilderment that pounded like surf from their depths.

“Wilder and me got something between us, Hutch, but it ain’t love. Not like we got – you ‘n me. Not like anything I could name for you. He taught me how to conquer fear ‘n how to keep insanity from eating me alive. It was all about finding a place to feed a hunger. Feeding that hunger became a part of who I am. Same as him. Together, we found a safe way to release the demons.”

Hutch’s lower lip trembled, barely perceivable. He raised his index finger slowly and pressed to stop it.

Starsky observed his lover, compassion warring with bleak satisfaction; the instinct to protect clashing with the desire to rip comfortable illusions to shreds. His gaze devoured Hutch in an unspoken challenge, a showdown, until Hutch looked away in an unconscious bid for safety.

Starsky’s voice dropped to a whisper. “It’s a prowl instinct, Hutch. A hunt. A need to make someone go down hard, lose control jump right off the edge. The need never goes away. It hides, but then it wakes, and then it feeds. And it whispers questions, babe. I hear them. Wilder hears them. ‘How far can we push someone? Each other? Who’ll juggle the grenade the longest after the pin is pulled?’”

Starsky licked his lower lip.

Hutch brushed fingertips across his own chest.

“S-Starsky? Is – is it s-sexual?”

“Sometimes. Yeah. Maybe it is.” Starsky looked at his hands. The strength there. The blunt cut nails. The veins channeling the heated blood through his body.

“Okay. I think I get it, Starsk. You maul each other, draw first blood, clean your guns, shoot your loads, drink some beer – ”

“If that’s what you think, then you ain’t hearing me, Hutch!”

Hutch’s fair lashes hid his expression. He hugged his arms tight around his ribcage, huddling in his own comfortless embrace.

“Having a hard time putting the pieces together, Stark. It sounds like mumbo jumbo and riddles. But I got the part about it being a private party.” Frustrated and hurting, he sneered, his voice rising. “So. If it’s sexual or maybe sexual, but you guys *aren’t* lovers or sexual, how does it work? Cardboard cutouts and dirty phone sex? Hookers? Porn movies and hand puppets?”

Starsky grabbed handfuls of Hutch’s cotton t-shirt. Hutch went still in his grip.

“You ain’t gonna stop, are ya, Hutch?”

“Just tell me, Starsk! I hear the words and each word makes sense by itself, but when I put them together, I can’t tell what the hell you’re talking about! How it goes down, what you do, how it works.”

“You wanna know how it works, hotshot? Like this. It’s a three-way party, Hutch. Wilder. Me. The guy we pay to join us there. Can you see it in your brain, now?” Starsky’s fists tightened, knuckles white, as he watched the color drain from Hutch’s face.

“The g-guy?”

“Yeah, Hutch, yeah. The guy we take down. The guy we dominate. The guy we control.”

“What?”

“You ain’t deaf, Hutch. You heard me.”

“The guy you ‘take down – dominate – control’.”

“My partner’s a genius, catching on just like that.”

“You mean the guy you use.”

“No. Never use. It ain’t using. He knows why he’s there and he’s there willingly.”

“You do things with him.”

“More like things *to* him.”

“You and Wilder.

“Me and Wilder.”

“To a stranger.”

“Yes.”

“You do things with a stranger you won’t do with me.” A challenge.

“Think of it as not really *me*, babe. More like someone leftover from another time ‘n another country.” A return volley.

“Is ‘it’ – whatever ‘it’ turns into –” Hutch paused. “Is it done with love?”

Starsky’s dark curls shook. “Love? No. Respect? Yes.”

“Can it be done with love?”

“Anything can be, Hutch. Even taking out the garbage can be done with love.”

“Can it be done with me?”

Hutch repeated the question.

“Can it be done with me?”

“With you?”

“Yeah, Starsky. Me. Not a hired gun. Me. Me instead. Me with you.” Hutch swallowed. “I want it to be with me. Me and you. Please. I’m asking you.”

Starsky stared at his partner, eyes widening. He shook his head, helpless, unwilling. “Like hell, Hutch. You don’t know what you’re asking for. Just like that, you decide you wanna come with me ‘n volunteer for something you ain’t got the first clue about?” His question was gently spoken if awkwardly phrased. He hoped Hutch recognized the love and concern in his voice were for him and him alone.

Damn it, Hutch. My crazy Virgo-boy. You exhaust yourself thinking everything into a slow, undeserving, untimely death.

Hutch’s eyes were enormous in the golden light, a clear ocean blue, the storm of anger evaporated.

“Let me tell you something, Starsk. It’s gonna sound stupid, but bear with me.” Hutch’s melodic voice was low as a whisper. Under that bashful gaze, Starsky leaned back and nodded.

“When I think of the two of us, here’s what I see. You were always the magician, Starsk – with a charmed bird on your shoulder and bag of tricks in your hands.” The surety in Hutch’s voice was testimony to the thought and time he’d put into the observation.

“And me…” Hutch absently brushed the backs of his fingers on his chest. “I was one of a hundred apprentices at the edge of your circle, hoping if I stood close enough, you’d notice. And once you noticed, you’d say – ‘Yeah. That’s it. That’s him. Search. Over.’ Gods.”

Hutch stood abruptly, sending the chair overturning and clattering on the floor. He paced the narrow passage from table to miniscule kitchen, back and forth.

“What do I tell ya about your imagination running away with you, buddy?” Starsky was on his feet, tagging along.

He trapped Hutch’s face in his palms.

How can you see me that way, Hutch?

Hutch pulled away and leaned, hands braced on the table. Starsky huddled close, forcing Hutch into his embrace.

“I want to go with you, Starsky. Haven’t I earned the right? I already have the right to watch your back – to die with you or for you. I’ve earned the right to call you my lover. And I’ve told you – you get a free pass to examine any dark corner of my soul if or when you want to look.

Let me go with you, Starsk. Take me inside your magic. All of it. I don't care if it's dark or if it threatens something you think is innocent."

Starsky held him tighter, fingernails curving up along Hutch's cheekbones. He stalled.

"You won't be in control, Hutch. I know you've got some issues with that sometimes."

Hutch's eyes narrowed.

"We both have some control issues, Starsk. It evens out. I dominate, you dominate. I submit, you submit. Half 'n half. Live and let live." Hutch offered a guarded smile.

Starsky returned a tepid smile of his own.

"And if you don't like it?"

"Is there a safe zone? A way to stop?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll call time out. Lesson learned. No penalty. No foul. No more interference." He smiled again, that irresistible Hutch smile. "I trust you at the wheel, Starsky. Do I get the part? Or do I need to audition or sleep with the director?"

Starsky stretched down and picked up the index card. His thoughts spun in dizzy circles, a metallic ball on a roulette wheel. Whatever business was being transacted here, he knew precious commodities were on the table – love, trust, honesty. His love for Hutch, powerful as a tidal surge and lethal as a full metal jacket, detonated somewhere mid-chest, blasting any protest to rubble.

Secrets or no secrets, risks or countermeasures, the central truth of the matter remained. Hutch was asking and he could not deny Hutch anything.

I can't refuse him any-fucking-thing. Never could, never will. What makes me think I can start now?

Hutch's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Will he mind a switch out? Your army buddy, I mean."

Starsky shook his head. "No. For what he needs, any willing body works. He plays a different role – hears a different tune in his head. He –"

Hutch's eyebrows raised in a mute question.

"I give some of the control over to him, Hutch. It's hard to explain 'n it sounds like a contradiction, but for him, sexual acts aren't about sexual hunger. They're all about power and dominance. He rarely gets off this way..." Starsky's hand brushed his crotch. "He gets off on the way it wipes the white noise outta his head."

“Starsk? I know I’m pushing this hard. But. D-do you want to share this part of your history with me?”

Starsky was surprised at his own reply, as though readymade and secretly coveted.

I’m all for blind curves and dangerous journeys, baby boy. So long as I trust myself to keep you safe.

“Yeah. Yeah, babe. I do.”

“Got a deal, then?”

“We got a deal.”

“So.” Hutch’s hands played along Starsky’s strong shoulders, finding the familiar muscles and hollows. His fingers squeezed and kneaded, right and left simultaneously. “What next?”

Starsky smoothed a handful of fine white gold hair from Hutch’s forehead. Taking his partner by the shoulders, he pulled him gently forward and explained until all the words were said. Then he watched from the doorway as Hutch coaxed his battered LTD to life and pulled away from the curb.

• • • • •

Starsky flipped the navy blue t-shirt over his bare shoulder like a hand towel. He lifted the telephone receiver, brow furrowed in concentration. He dialed, leaning back against the door jamb.

Three rings, a pickup, a rumbling voice.

“Wilder.”

“Wilder. It’s Davey. Listen. Change of plans. Cancel the paid talent. I’m bringing something better. Something fine.”

Starsky’s lips curled back from his teeth, a lick of anticipation firing along his spine. He explained in sentences as terse as gunfire bursts.

“Your partner? You mean that white bread blond I’ve heard about?” Wilder’s voice was edgy. Hungry. “What the fuck do I care? It’s your play, Davey boy. No objections here. But, isn’t he about as passionate as ice water?”

Starsky nearly laughed. His heart lurched at the memories of long teasing nights, when the touch of Hutch’s hands and body nearly caused his flesh to melt and his blood to boil. He swallowed, dry-mouthed. “Trust me. He ain’t ice water. He’s 90 proof whiskey. The kind you drink straight up.”

Wilder laughed.

“Then bring it on, because I’m damn thirsty. Never thought we’d play it like this in a million years. Three lawmen dancing with the devil. We’d better park our guns at the door as a token to Lady Luck.”

Starsky’s restless fingers tangled in the phone cord. “Never in a million years,” he echoed. “And as for Lady Luck, I’d rather be lucky than good.”

“Lucky bastards for sure.”

“Keep the door unlocked. See ya around six with Hutch.”

Starsky hung up and looked at the white glare of sunlight beyond the window. Shaking himself into motion, he tossed the t-shirt away, sliding instead into a blue cotton long-sleeved shirt. He left the shirt tail hanging loose over his tight jeans. Overnight bag in hand, he slipped out the door and into the heat-baked, leather-scented cocoon of the Torino.

He revved the engine, shifted gears.

Doubt and euphoria looped in his thoughts, battling and buzzing his brain like hornets.

Hutch ain’t an innocent. Those butter-won’t-melt-in-my-mouth looks deceive. But...but...Hutch is somehow one notch gentler. He’s stained glass, catching the sun, changing its colors. How will the fantasies we set in motion play against such light? Fantasies exposing the deepest longings, deepest hungers – releasing the soul, even as they threaten to shred it.

He absently fingered his corded necklace strung with Chinese good luck coins. He remembered the sweltering Saigon day when he’d purchased the coins from a street vendor...remembered the smells of unwashed streets and the sated fullness of lust bled from his veins. A light breeze tousled his thick curls through the open car window. He drove toward Venice Beach, distracted by the vision of the distant past and the fast-moving present spinning together in a shared orbit.

• • • • •

The front and back doors of Hutch’s tiny yellow canal cottage stood open to air scented with jasmine and roses and the faint tang of ocean salt. Hutch loitered in the kitchen, basking in the crosscurrents of unseasonably warm air. His head was tilted back, light hair flecked with pale gold in the light, his eyes closed.

Starsky stood in a tiny square of floor space between door and closet, silently watching his partner.

The light flatters you, Blondie. You look like a lynx, golden and sleek.

"I love you, Starsky." Hutch's quiet voice acknowledged Starsky's presence. He spoke without turning. "I want to be everything you ever wanted and everything you ever believed you would need." He reached out an arm to steady himself, fingers splayed on the cupboard doors.

Starsky crept closer. He impulsively pulled Hutch's rigid body snug against his. The arm he snaked possessively across Hutch's bare back transformed from reassuring comforter to questing trickster. His fingers toyed with the frayed waistband of Hutch's jeans and dipped, finger pads caressing the dimple just above Hutch's ass. Hutch nestled closer, his hitched breathing meshing with Starsky's own heartbeat. Strands of shower damp flaxen hair feathered Starsky's cheek.

"Hey." Starsky's voice was safe, protective – a parent's arms shielding a child from the cold wind. "You're doing it again, buddy. You're dissecting love instead of taking it on faith and trust."

Hutch whispered. "Y'know, Starsk, I got a shelf full of first place trophies for screwing up love. I thought loving you was gonna be so simple. Like taking everything we already have--"

~a bedrock of faith and trust, a dose of respect and ease and comfort, all solid as granite~

"—and just pointing it in a different direction. Easy. Like breathing."

Hutch angled, chest half turned to Starsky's. His voice held no recriminations or self-pity. Just puzzlement and awe and hope.

"So I gotta ask you to help me. Again. Please. Don't let me screw us up."

Starsky ignored him. He nibbled gently against Hutch's right temple.

"Hey, Blondie. I hear you're a cop."

Hutch laughed, a genuine laugh, in response.

"Heh. You heard right. A good cop, too. They call me the Miranda reading wonder kid."

Starsky's lips brushed Hutch's cheekbone.

"I hear you're a lover, too."

"Oh."

"Good at that too, are ya?"

"Uhhhhh..." Hutch's shoulder wedged against Starsky's pecs. "Nope. Kinda lousy at that."

"Don't believe you for one second on that, babe."

"Yeah...a bad lover. Sometimes I don't do anything except push my lover so hard, he thinks he might break from the pressure of it."

“Maybe sometimes you push for stuff that ain’t good for you?”

“That’s my reputation with him, no question.”

“What’s he do about you wantin’ that kind of stuff? This...lover of yours?”

Hutch squeezed into the tight triangle of Starsky’s heart space.

“He gives me what I *want*. Then--” Hutch’s voice quavered. “T-then, if it goes south, he fixes it and gets me what I *need*.”

Starsky swayed slightly, leading Hutch into his rhythm.

Hutch, if you wanted the rings of Saturn, I’d burn up good muscle power ‘n good brain cells trying to grab them for you. But you don’t want Saturn’s rings. You want to dart between the barriers to a private world I tried to keep you from. You want a guided tour - to drink down my secrets like wine. And because I love you, and because you asked, I am going to let you.

His fingers tested the heat of Hutch’s naked skin.

“I love you, Hutch. You got no idea where you fall in the order of what’s important to me. And nobody could ever stand here in your place.” He kissed the fringe of light hair at Hutch’s earlobe.

“It’s time to go, babe. But it ain’t too late to change your mind.”

Hutch smiled. “You mean time to exit or pay toll?”

Starsky paused a moment. Chuckled. “Yep. Put down your coins or get off the road.”

Hutch kissed his own palm and held it to Starsky’s mouth.

“No exit. No regrets. No way.”

Starsky gripped Hutch’s hand, still pressed to his mouth, and slowly lowered it with their fingers entwined. His smile was as warm as sunrise across blue water.

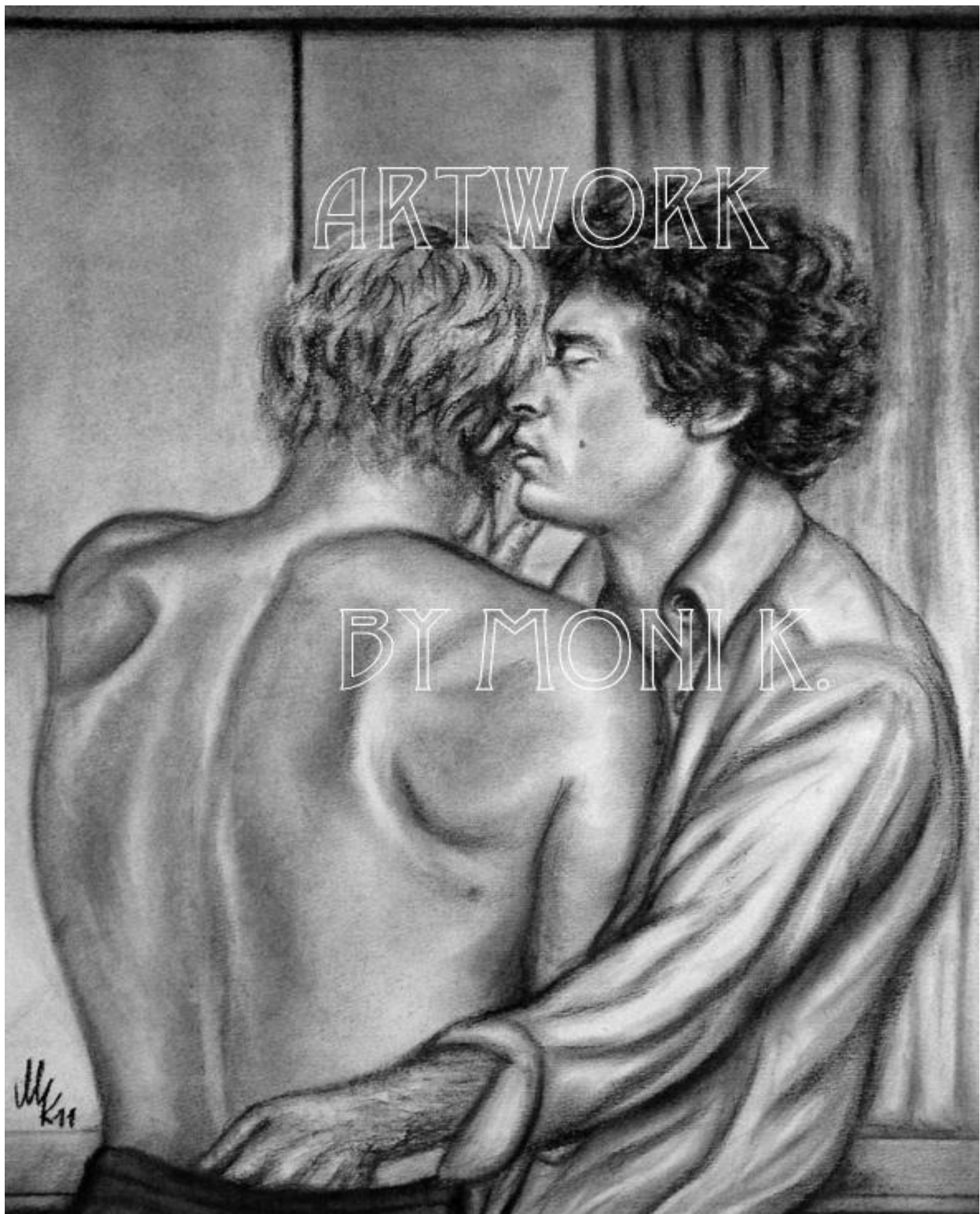
“I’m kinda liking the idea of having my cake and eating it, too.” He raised his eyebrows playfully. “Or should I say, ‘my Blintz.’ My warm, tough, sentimental, cream-filled Blintz.”

He watched under lowered lids as Hutch pulled on a plain white t-shirt and picked up his wallet.

“Let’s go, Blondie. Let’s go down to San Diego and play with fire.”

ARTWORK

BY MONI K.



Sojourn

Event Horizon: November 1975

Chapter 1: Pre-Game

The coast road was surrounded by a dozen shades of blue - the shimmer of early evening sky above and the expanse of ocean waters to the west. Starsky drove south, pushing for speed in the open spaces and navigating artfully around clusters of slow traffic. The Torino's wheels played the asphalt like an instrument, producing a monotonous Doppler Effect infused with air horns.

Hutch tapped his fingers on the dashboard, and fiddled impatiently in the passenger seat until Starsky elbowed him in the shoulder. Desperate for any diversion and irritated by Starsky's erratic silences, he unlatched the glove compartment door.

"Hutch! Will you get your nose outta there? You been in there a hundred times before. You think you're gonna find something new this time?"

Hutch glanced at his partner. Instead of intercepting a playful Starsky grin, he was confronted with his partner's dark scowl. He methodically gathered the glove box contents – map and spare dome light bulbs and papers – and shoved them back into the cramped compartment. A spike of free-floating anxiety hovered over him like a soap bubble. He deflected it by turning his attention to the duffle bag Starsky had crammed on the floorboards between his feet. Unzipping the bag, he examined the top layer of contents.

First Aid Kit.

My partner. Starsky. I like to call him "Mr. Safety."

A familiar sweat suit and a faded t-shirt – both black.

Aren't those mine?

A pair of white sports socks.

*Those **are** mine.*

He leaned forward in the seat and dug lower in the bag.

"Hutch!" The exasperation in Starsky's voice was not his imagination.

Hutch paused. A ridiculous wave of guilt caught him in its wake, leaving him feeling like a child sneaking in late to the dinner table. "Just looking, Starsk," he said lightly.

"Just snooping, you mean. You been snooping all day. And look what it's got you."

"Are you referring to my all expenses paid weekend in San Diego?" Hutch tried a wink.

Starsky snorted.

"Sorry, Starsk. Like I said, just looking. No harm, no foul."

"Well knock it off. All your fidgeting makes me wanna reach over there and swat you like a bug. Just sit still, would ya?"

Hutch sat up.

"And zip that thing back up. I don't want dust getting in my stuff."

"Dust in your precious 'Rolling Tomato', buddy?" Hutch complied.

"Road dust."

"Picky shit."

"Slob."

Hutch's reward for instigating the exchange was a crooked Starsky grin. He grinned back.

"And don't think I'm not watching you, Hutch." Starsky flipped the sun visor up. "Sit quiet and sit still."

Biting back a retort, Hutch slouched at an angle in the passenger seat, surreptitiously drinking in the sight of his partner. Starsky's well-shaped hands babied the finger grips of the steering wheel. His tumble of brown curls was loose and flowing, flirting with the rushing air.

Hutch admired the strong lines of Starsky's chest, visible beneath the button-down shirt. He appreciated the tapered, narrow waist and the tight jeans stretched and molded over muscular thighs. Even driving, Starsky's restless energy bled over to shifting shoulders and nervous bounces.

Sheesh Starsk. And you're scolding me to sit still.

Unspoken tension etched Starsky's face, evident in the subtle clench of the finely-shaped jaw and downward slope of dark eyebrows over thick lashes. The light seemed to refract the river blue of his usually forthright and unencumbered gaze.

Hey Starsk. You're familiar yet unfamiliar. So familiar but also so unknown.

Hutch impulsively pressed a hand to Starsky's thigh. The heat ached against his fingertips and blended with the wiry pull of muscles.

Starsky offered a tight-lipped smile.

Your whole body's wired, Starsk. Like it it's booty trapped. "Play with fire" – isn't that what you said to me? You're heat lightning, buddy – clean and white. I felt your burn from the first handshake, the first smile.

The Torino's wheels ate up the miles.

Silence settled like a shroud, pinning them in their seats.

Hutch finally reached for the radio's power button.

"Don't." Starsky's voice surprised him. The sound was welcome after the overdose of unsettling quiet.

"Are we declaring war on music today?" Hutch's tease fell flat.

Starsky placed a hand over Hutch's, a light stroke like the brushing of wings, there and gone.

"Hutch. I didn't talk to you about what happens when we get there." Starsky spared him a hawk-quick glance.

Hutch shook his head. "No."

"I'm talking now. So listen up. There're only four easy steps, Hutch. I mean 'easy' as in 'easy to remember' – not as in easy to follow." Starsky clenched and unclenched the wheel. He sat up straighter, pulling his shoulders back and rotating his neck.

That's Starsky code for "bleed off the excess pressure."

Hutch edged back to his side of the car, allowing Starsky the space he instinctively knew his partner needed. "The dress code is easy enough. Simple. Understated." Hutch pointed to his own faded, tight jeans, bleached white t-shirt, bare feet.

Starsky's eyes completed one hungry, approving lap from Hutch's head to his bare toes.

"Wilder likes the punk-innocent look." This time, Starsky's smile showed the edges of teeth. He stroked a hand through Hutch's hair. "And you do punk-innocent with the best of 'em. That hair 'n that face of yours get bonus points. You can't pick up a face like yours for luck or dollars on the street."

"Ah." Hutch examined his fingernails and waited.

Here we go.

"Here's the game plan, Hutch. When we pull up, I go in alone. You wait until I come and get you. When you're inside, the four easy steps come in. So listen up."

Starsky recited the first rule in a single unbroken breath. "Rule number one – posture and obedience. If Wilder tells you to kneel, you drop and you kneel. If he tells you to stand straight,

you stand as straight as you ever stood. If he says to lock your hands behind your neck, you hold 'em there until he calls time. Whatever he says – when he says it – you do it. Got me?”

Hutch nodded.

“Rule number two – eye contact. Never look him in the eye unless he orders you to. Until and if he says different, you keep those baby blues of yours trained down on your toes.”

“Why?” Hutch’s expression slipped past tolerant to curious.

“To show him you understand. To show him you’re submissive to him.”

“Oh. I guess. If you say so, Starsk.”

“I’m not joking, Hutch.”

“Okay, okay buddy. I got it. Two easy rules committed to memory.”

Starsky continued, fingers lifting from the steering wheel to count. “Rule number three – watch your mouth. You don’t talk unless he says ‘talk’. Knowing you, that’ll be the hardest one of all. Rule number four – show respect. If he says to call him ‘Sir’ then you call him ‘Sir.’ You don’t correct him if he decides to call you something other than your name. You don’t correct him for any reason.”

“Sounds like I’m meeting the Queen of England.” Hutch couldn’t help the chuckle, regretting it instantly when Starsky treated him to another disapproving glare.

“You wanted to play, Hutch. Then you play by the rules. If you break them, I’m gonna let him punish you ‘cause you’ll deserve it.”

And I bet “punish” doesn’t mean going to my room without dessert, Starsk.

Hutch tapped his partner’s arm.

“What about your rules Starsky? I’ve got my stage orders. Does he give you yours?”

Starsky shook his head. His mouth narrowed, lips pressed in a tense line. “I’ve been his partner in this game before, Hutch. I know my lines.”

Hutch pressed both index fingers lightly to the bridge of his nose. He released and sighed, lowering his right arm, elbow canted on the passenger door.

“Do you have the patience for another question, Starsk?”

Starsky half turned. Hutch looked into his haunted eyes and swallowed.

He’s pulling back from me and widened the distance between us. He doesn’t know whether to be close or cold and he’s psyching himself up so he doesn’t freak himself out. Hey Starsk. What’s this Wilder guy to you, anyway? Why’s he so important to you?

A wide stretch of flat road opened up. Starsky pressed the accelerator down to full speed. The Torino lurched and lunged, the pavement flashing beneath the wheels in a drunken blur.

“Hutch, the only question I won’t take right now is ‘Why?’.”

“Fair enough. ‘Why’ can wait. We’ve got plenty of time to cover that waterfront later. My question right now is –” Hutch looked away. “Are you going to leave me alone with Wilder?”

Starsky grumbled, his expression tightening. He snorted. “Alone? With him? Fuck. No.”

Hutch’s eyebrows shot up under blond bangs.

“I couldn’t tell, Starsk. All of the rules are about him and what I’m supposed to act like with him. Not a word about you, or about you and me. I suddenly had visions of you sitting down with a beer ‘n a ballgame after handing me over to him carte blanche.”

“Since you meant no offense by your words, I ain’t taking any, Hutch.”

Starsky flipped on the turn signal and took the west exit in a clean, smooth arc. The car climbed steadily up the canyon ridge. The ocean disappeared and came back into view – a mirror of light and sparkling movement far below. The sunset drenched the clouds in an abstract riot of purple, pink, silver, and gold.

“You don’t seem happy or excited to be on your way to see him, buddy.” Hutch tried again.

“I’m a lot of things, Hutch. Hell. I lost track so long ago...” Starsky swallowed, words fading like the light.

“But going to see him like this is important to you.”

Starsky didn’t answer.

“It is important, right Starsky?”

Starsky frowned. “We’re going, ain’t we? That should tell you something.”

Hutch struggled for his next move – as laden with missteps as a mine field. This complicated and foreign side of Starsky blindsided him with its layers of mystery and camouflage. He plunged forward, stumbling over his words. “Wilder, he...h-he was your salvation in Vietnam. In that hell. He helped bring you out of that place in one piece.”

“It’s that and more, Hutch. He saved my life. He was the last protection between me and a waking nightmare, a stench, where everything was so immediate and hair trigger. I couldn’t describe it to you if I tried.”

“He was a brother in arms.”

“He was a brother who wouldn’t leave me behind. Without him, I would’ve been cut to ribbons by the hostile fire I was too gung-ho to duck. Or I would’a been captured and would’a ended up behind a locked door – a bat-mad lunatic howling at the moon.”

“The soldier you once were owes him.”

“The man I am, who’s alive today, owes him. And I’m a man who remembers and repays my debts, Hutch.”

“So that’s why you see him, Starsk? To make a payment?”

Starsky blinked and leaned a little too sharply into a well-executed turn. “If he needs a little something from time to time, I’m on his team, Hutch. Is that paying a debt? Don’t ask me. I say it’s a fact – no more and no less.”

“The past and what you endured together keep you tied to him. It pulls you to him and you can’t break free. Willing or unwilling, he’s like a tractor beam.”

“And just who said I want freedom?”

Hutch watched his partner, watched the renewed clench of the strong jaw. “Nobody, Starsk. You didn’t say it.”

But there’s more to this story, Starsk. I know you and I know something’s eating at you.

“Hutch, can you understand, even one bit, why I didn’t tell you about him before? Why I wanted and needed this to be between him and me, like it always was?”

“Yes.”

“I love you, Hutch. I caved on bringing you into this ‘cause I love you.”

“I know. And maybe you’re regretting caving in. You’re worried. Don’t deny it. I feel it, as sure as I feel wind out there and the road underneath us.”

“Yeah, I’m worried, Hutch. And maybe I’m afraid.”

“Afraid? You?” Hutch was open-mouthed, thrown off guard.

“I’m afraid I’m gonna be caught between serving two masters tonight.”

“Two masters?”

“Two masters. On the one hand, there’s Wilder – his needs and what he wants from me. On the other, there’s my love for you and what we’re gonna be doing to you.” Starsky put a solid hand on Hutch’s ankle and squeezed. “The whole sky isn’t big enough to hold my love for you, Hutch. I’ve tried to measure my love for you and I can’t. There’s too much of it to measure.”

Hutch averted his eyes, thoughts churning.

Dammit, Starsk. So it's all about Wilder. Not once have you said this arrangement gives you pleasure. Is your heart even in playing his games? Are you on this path because of loyalty and an eternal sense of obligation? You aren't that 19-year-old in a war zone anymore, babe. You're the strongest and most sane man I have ever known.

"Why am I bringing you here with me? I'm selfish. Destructive. Crazy." Starsky's words were a jumble, spat and discarded into the wind. He snagged Hutch around the shoulders, pulling him close in a suffocating one-armed embrace. "Never doubt how important you are to me, Blondie. No matter what I say – no matter what my hands or body do. No matter what I allow –"

Hutch kissed the rough stubble under Starsky's jaw line. "I won't. And you, don't you doubt my respect for you, Starsk." He took a long breath. "And don't doubt my willingness to respect your friend, either. Sight unseen, I want to respect him. He saved you. Because of him, you're alive and you're here. You aren't the only one who owes him a debt of honor, partner."

I may not know what lies beneath all of this, Starsk. Hell, I may not know anything but my four easy steps. But I promise, I will try to honor him – because you believe he deserves it. All things being equal, that's good enough for me.

The gratitude in Starsky's eyes shifted to an unreadable hardness.

Hutch grimaced as his partner impatiently shoved him back out of reach. He pulled out his pocket watch, rubbing his thumb over the glass face nervously. In the ensuing quiet, he replayed scenes from the drive, examining some of its oddities more thoroughly.

He flashed on Starsky's heavy silences interspersed with the tense grumbles and snarling one-liners. When compared to Starsky's customary cheerful chatter, the trip was like cruising down the golden coast in the company of a marginally grumpy and mute alien.

Hutch counted the minutes to arrival.

Chapter 2: Destination

Starsky's trademark verve and rapid reflexes guided the Tornio around the last hairpin turn and up a ribbon of narrow road hugging the cliff. He veered left. The Torino's nose poised over open air for a split second before the firm grip of paving stones and brick caught beneath the tires. He steered expertly and effortlessly down the sharp incline, clipping neatly around a low stone and mortar wall and stopping at the top of a sloping brick driveway.

"We went that last 30 miles without a single word, partner. I think it's a new record." Hutch swept a handful of breeze-tangled blond hair back from his forehead.

Starsky cut the engine. For a silent moment, he looked out of the car window, scanning down the hill and then upward to the darkening horizon.

Without speaking, he reached across Hutch and pulled the duffle from the floorboards onto the seat, extracting the oversized first aid kit.

"We're here?" Hutch glanced down the angled driveway, past the well kept borders of bay and boxwood to the half hidden front door.

"Yeah." Starsky piled gauze and bandage tape in his lap.

"Don't ask me why, but I think I was expecting a tumbled down shack with a 'Beware of Dog' sign tacked to the mailbox." Hutch's voice was light, almost playful, his words only half in jest.

Starsky laughed. His hands were full of gauze strips, his expression impossible to read. "Wilder has a money problem, babe."

At Hutch's raised eyebrows, Starsky laughed again.

"Wilder has a problem finding ways to spend all his money. After his parents died, a fortune got dumped on him. He likes investing in property. And he always did like the ocean."

"Yet he's a working stiff like most of us." Hutch couldn't help his surprised comment.

"He believes in an honest day's work. He believes in doing right for his country and being part of a solution to fix what's wrong in the world." The notes of respect and pride in Starsky's voice were pure.

Starsky grasped Hutch's wrists. Without speaking, he busied himself with wrapping them, first right and then left, in protective layers of thick white gauze. He secured thin bracelets of bandage tape over top.

Hutch tolerated the strange action until he could no longer stand it.

"Starsk, you've lost me here. We've done lots of weird stuff in this car, but this ranks right up in the top three. Do you think I'll be hit with a sudden strong desire to slit my wrists?"

Starsky ignored the feeble attempt at humor. He jabbed Hutch, not lightly, just under the lower ribcage until he hunched over. He grabbed his partner's left ankle, performed a similar wrapping job, and hauled Hutch's right ankle onto his lap.

"Now you got me." Hutch tried another grin. "Are there ankle biters on the premises?"

Starsky growled in reply and fashioned stout loops of gauze around Hutch's ankles, adding a covering of bandage tape. "Hutch, spare me the lip. If I see bloody welts on your wrists and ankles, it's gonna distract me. It's gonna bother me."

Hutch glanced nervously at Starsky. "You're going to tie me up."

"Yeah. We are. I can handle bruises on you, but I can't handle bloody friction burns." Starsky tucked the remaining circle of gauze neatly into the kit and closed the latch.

“What’ll you tie me up with?” Hutch wasn’t sure what conclusions emerged from the rush of mental images somersaulting in his brain.

“I don’t know. I haven’t looked at Wilder’s game plan or at the scorecard.” Starsky leaned back in his seat, eyes trained on the moonrise straight ahead. Without turning, he felt for and found Hutch’s left hand. He captured it in a slight squeeze.

“You stay here, Hutch. Stay here and wait until I come get you.”

Hutch considered a sarcastic retort at being banished in the car like an irresponsible child. But the almost agonized look on Starsky’s face convinced him to remain quiet.

He bowed his head obediently to show that he understood.

Starsky’s warm mouth was on his for one scant, dizzying moment. And then he was gone, all dancer’s movements and masculine fluid grace, hands in the back pockets of his faded jeans, heading toward the double glow of the porch lights.

Chapter 3: Negotiation

The carved oak front door swung wide. Starsky’s greeting was muffled against a broad, familiar shoulder as he was enveloped in a gruff bear hug. He closed his eyes and relaxed in the custody of this man he had known and admired for more than a decade.

Martin Detwilder – aka “Wilder.” His former platoon leader, his first grownup hero, his mentor. The man who had once offered whatever meager scraps of security could be afforded to the confused, angry young soldier he had been, stranded all those years ago in foreign fields of blood, jungle, war.

“Davey-boy!” Wilder’s voice was like a boom of thunder, softened at the edges by an undisguised affection. The burly arms repositioned Starsky, exploiting finger holds at the shoulders, half lifting him, half hauling him.

The buzz of Starsky’s smile widened. He felt the eternal and indefinable draw of this man, a draw grounded in history and survival and secrets.

I’m like a moth trapped in a glass, wings beating to reach his circle of light and safety. I know it’s true but I can’t explain it – not to myself and not to Hutch.

“Let’s look at you, boy!” Wilder’s eyes and smile approved and admired. “It’s been nearly a year this time, nine months the time before that. No matter how many years go by, time takes no prisoner with my Davey-boy. You’re still the finest young man I was ever proud to call a brother- in-arms. And I’m proud to call you a fellow cop.”

A square, heavy hand playfully tugged a tendril of Starsky’s dark curls. “You could use a haircut, soldier.”

Starsky laughed, easing into the moment, the feeling of brotherhood as comfortable as his favorite shirt, his favorite chair. The ghost of apprehension that had plagued him on the drive down the coast vanished.

I was over thinking. Like Hutch would say – ‘catastrophising’. This is fine. This is good.

“Civilians get haircuts or they don’t, Wildman. It’s called ‘free will.’ Nobody gets my ass up at the crack of dawn anymore or marches me around the swamp like his little drone. Nobody tells me when to get my hair cut. I sure as hell don’t miss some gung-ho-fo officer cracking the whip over me just because he can.”

Starsky’s blue eyes regarded his taller mentor. Wilder, seven years his senior, was refreshingly unchanged. He was dressed, as expected, in black from head to toe - black Army issue field pants, black t-shirt, black boots. The smallest glimpse of a bicep tattoo showed at the edge of one rolled back short sleeve. The wide shoulders and broad chest tapered to a trim waist devoid of fat, and muscles strained against the tight fabric across his chest. His body was well-defined and sturdy, build for strength, endurance, action. Starsky noted the regulation cut of medium brown hair, the rigid set of the strong features, the flat, blunt nose, and the sunburned skin around narrowed brown eyes.

He also felt the subterranean flow of raw energy emanating from his old friend – a perpetual sense of being on edge, of being wired for danger and welcoming it with enthusiasm and confidence.

He shifted under Wilder’s piercing and vaguely predatory gaze. Those eyes and his actions – sometimes aloof, sometimes cruel.

But not if he takes a liking to you.

Wilder led Starsky inside, landing a playful punch between Starsky’s shoulder blades as they walked.

As always, the soaring indoor space threw Starsky slightly off center. The proportions of the room suited its owner’s size and personality. The elevation set the front entry at ground level, but then gave way in the back to a main floor situated more than 40 feet above the rocks below. Where the cliff fell away, the house jutted out and over, secured by footers and steel girding.

A bunker-like entry foyer flowed effortlessly into a great room, sparsely furnished and punctuated with wall to wall windows. The sounds of the Pacific and the wind whispered in the corners. Moonlight streamed against blank walls like a moving work of art.

Starsky followed Wilder to the open rectangle of kitchen in the middle of the room, defined by concrete counters, gleaming stainless steel, and cool blue-gray slate tiles. He perched on the edge of a tall metal stool, one sneaker clad foot braced on the high cross rail. The stretch of bare counter top was interrupted only by a legal sized sheet of paper on a wooden clipboard, two double tall shot glasses, and an unopened bottle of Patron Silver Tequila.

Wilder commandeered a stool at Starsky's side. He slid the clipboard over to Starsky, his fingers tapping the top and then skimming down the margin.

"I laid out scenes for us in advance, Davey."

Like you always do, Wildman. I owe everything I learned about organization to you and the Army.

"We've been away from the devil's playground for awhile now, soldier." Wilder offered his canine-like grin.

"So Wildman – what's your core temperature? Are you controlling the burn rate?" Starsky slipped automatically into their private language, their shared code for assessing Wilder's level of need and his degree of hunger for what the night would bring. A questioning glance of his shielded blue eyes accompanied the soft questions.

Wilder clipped his tongue between prominent teeth for a moment. "It's been awhile. I'd put the core temperature at the boiling point."

Starsky closed his eyes briefly, a surge of unsettling conflict flaring in his gut. His own appetite for the activities ahead was capricious, oscillating between eagerness and dread. A slip noose knot of red desire blazed forward, then made a reluctant U turn. All the while, a dissenting voice screamed in his brain. He tracked the reason for his mood shifts – out the door, up the hill, and directly to the tall fair-haired man who was waiting, probably impatiently, in the car outside.

He picked up the clipboard and scanned the paper. He held out his left hand wordlessly as he read. Wilder placed a black pen in his waiting fingers.

"How's it look to you, soldier?"

The opening move - the first move on the chess board.

Starsky bent low over the counter.

"The set up works." He drew a box around the words, isolating them from the rest of the page.

He read on. His brow wrinkled in a frown, accompanied by a headshake of thick curls. He adamantly attacked the page, black ink slashing through whole paragraphs.

"No. Not this. No flogger. No crop. No belt."

Wilder pretended to grab the pen. "You promised me a fair-skinned blond. Lash marks on pale skin feed me, Davey."

Starsky shook his head firmly. "No. I ain't signing on to you hitting on Hutch."

I can't stand for anybody deliberately hitting him. I don't know it for a fact, but I think people who claimed to love him used to hit him, back when he was too little to do anything about it. We ain't resurrecting any ghosts here. It's gonna be haunted enough.

He continued down the page, reading cautiously. With the scenes, all of Wilder's secret cards were on the table, organized in increments of time with roles as precise as stage directions.

Chains. Bondage. Humiliation. Penetration. Rough trade. Controlled movements.

This is Hutch we're talking about. My cock's splitting my crotch thinking about him offered up to us like this. I'm envisioning him naked and chained up for the taking and it's kicking my lust meter to overload. But I feel the breath of a different beast on the back of my neck. Reluctance. Fear.

"I can't wait to meet this partner of yours, Davey. From what you say, every inch of him is choice." Wilder's tongue flicked over his lower lip.

Starsky nodded. "The reality of Hutch is better than anything your imagination could've cooked up, Wilder."

"That's good news, 'cause my imagination's already smoking."

"You'll have the lead for each scene." Starsky spoke quietly.

Wilder half-snickered. "As it always is. As it should be. Now and forever. Amen."

"I won't question your control – "

"Have you ever?" Wilder interrupted him.

Starsky continued, his voice deadly serious. "I won't question your control without good reason. If I do, you gotta trust I know what I'm talking about. If he calls his safe word, it stops. And if I decide something stops, it stops."

Wilder's expression was tight. Calculating.

"It seems you're in a negotiating mood here, detective. We aren't rookies in this game. 'Sane. Safe. Consensual.' Same as ever."

"It's just a little different this time." Starsky pushed the paper back across the counter.

"Our bait is your police partner. That makes it different. That makes it weird. Let me say right now, Starsky – I find it fucking weird."

"That's the starting point, yeah. There's more to the story than that." Starsky placed a reassuring hand on Wilder's shoulder. "I know you, buddy. I know what you need and I know why. And I know what he means to me. You gotta trust me to know where the line is and to pull us back if we start to cross it."

Wilder's eyes were half-mocking and impatient. "You got it, Davey. Just having you still in the game is enough for me." He examined Starsky's notes on the paper, now heavily dotted with crossed out sections and handwritten notations. "I see some of my favorite scenes are casualties of war. You run a tight campaign. But I see all the sex scenes survived your ambush."

Starsky embraced his inner beast, the vampire hunger within.

Like swallowing a flaming sword.

"I got my priorities."

"You say he's no virgin with men."

Starsky thought back, two scant months in past, to the afterglow of his first time with Hutch. He smiled at the memory of their entangled legs and kiss swollen lips – the sweat and spunk scents of their lovemaking.

Hutch's first time ever with a man...any man. His eyes were wide – lit like stars.

"He ain't a virgin. But he ain't a rent-boy either. We'll be doing things he's never had done to him before."

"Your point is well taken, Private Starsky." Wilder stood up and rubbed his hands together. Starsky looked at those utilitarian hands, the heavy knuckles and the breadth of the palms. He recognized the signal.

It's almost time to cut the talk and start the action.

As Starsky pushed to his feet, he nodded to the bottle of tequila and made his final demand.

"No alcohol."

Wilder laughed – a brief, humorless bark. "Now you're starting to meddle with our traditions, Davey."

"I'm not joking. A new rule – my rule. No alcohol."

"No alcohol? No shots of the smoothest and finest tequila in the world? Am I to believe you'll abstain from tossing back a shot or two to cool off? You're saying you won't drink to another fine game?"

Starsky listened to the coaxing drawl of Wilder's words. The sound activated his cop's instinct, signaling possible danger ahead. He recognized anew his mentor's strength – the barely concealed power and the crushing potential in the muscled frame and large hands.

"No alcohol. I won't risk any slip ups. We stay tight and we stay focused. We stay sober."

“I’m not proposing drinking while in the scene, Davey. I’ll wait for a break in the action. I might need a drop of oiling.”

“And I’m saying, if you need oiling, then you won’t be touching Hutch.”

“We’ve tipped a few at halftime before, buddy.”

Starsky held firm, lips closed over his teeth. A sharp blade of regret cut a path, shaving away a tiny sliver of the unshakeable trust he held for his old friend. Didn’t Wilder deserve better?

He challenged because he had no choice. He couldn’t – he wouldn’t compromise. Not with Hutch in the game – not with Hutch captive to the external will of someone other than himself.

“Like I said, if you got alcohol in your system, you aren’t touching him.”

“Is that your last word, soldier boy?”

“My final offer. I’m sorry.”

“Then I’ll give you the point, Davey. No alcohol.” Wilder’s rough laugh was more subdued. He tucked the clipboard under his arm and crossed the room, disappearing around a corner. He threw open a reinforced wooden door. From where he sat, Starsky could just see the contours of the vaulted ceilings and tall windows within.

Wilder’s dungeon. What’s that fancy name he calls it? His “Sanctum Sanctorum.”

Wilder left the door open, firelight spilling into the hallway.

“It’s time, Davey-boy.”

Starsky acknowledged Wilder’s thumbs up sign with a slight nod of his own. Tugging his jacket closer across his chest, he headed back out into the night air to find Hutch.

Chapter 4: Waiting

Hutch lounged sideways in the Torino’s front seat, his back against the driver’s door and his knees akimbo on the leather. His fingers drummed on his thighs. Every few seconds he looked down toward the house and the front door that had opened and swallowed Starsky into its silence.

Nightfall had overpowered twilight moments before. The coolness of the breeze on his bare arms and bare feet was a surprise after the gentle warmth of the day. The rhythmic ocean sounds were so close, he almost expected to see a rush of blue waves advancing and swallowing him whole.

He straightened his legs, allowing his head to fall back on the half-open window. He looked more closely at the house, nestled down a sharp ravine below, where the front entry hid the extensive floor space. The minutes ticked and his restless impatience continued to build.

Exasperated at himself and suddenly claustrophobic in the confines of the Torino, he flung the door open and rolled out into the falling darkness.

Moving did nothing to change time dragging on him like a headwind, did nothing to summon Starsky back to his side. With a soft curse, he jumped up onto the Torino's hood. The residual warmth was a welcome counterbalance to the increasing chill of sea-sharpened nightfall.

Come on out and catch me in the act, Starsk – find me desecrating your precious car with my ass and fingerprints.

He forced himself to sit still, legs dangling and arms locked behind him. He divided his attention among three separate points – the doorway through which Starsky had disappeared, the charging white line of ocean spray beyond the stone walls and cliffs, and the moonrise gaining altitude above. He readjusted position, pulling knees up to hug his chest and wrapping his arms around them. His bare toes spread to secure his perch on the wax-slick surface of the car.

Come on, Starsky. This is worse than the dentist's waiting room. Enough waiting. Isn't it show time?

He regarded the thick gauze festooned around his wrists and ankles like funerary wrappings from ancient times.

You've wrapped me in a layer of protection. Don't you know – your love alone is protection enough? C'mon Starsk. Let's go. Find me. Right now – come out of that door – look over – find me here.

He whispered, sincere and quiet, covertly offering his promise like a pagan sacrifice to the stars and the moon and the sea.

I promise to honor you and make you proud. I promise to be worthy of your love.

The front door below remained closed, no hint of shadow or movement to entice or divert. The breeze disarranged locks of his sun-lightened hair.

Patience. Patience.

The ocean roared along, eternal and soothing.

Hutch watched the flirtation of sand and rock and water. "Ocean chorus," he whispered. "With its songs for a night's journey." The tumbling antics reminded him of innocence. A childhood memory flickered– the sensation of rolling down a hill, out of control, flipping –

stomach-back-stomach-back

–and landing at the flat bottom, bruised and breathless and eager for another turn.

That's how you make me, Starsk. Greedy and hungry for another turn.

He shivered.

Partner. Hurry.

The heavens above and the house below were stingy with their clues, dark with mystery. In a gesture of surrender, Hutch dropped his forehead onto his knees and, closing his eyes, tuned out. Minutes passed.

Footsteps, light as quicksilver, moved over the scree and gravel. Hutch brought his head up with a jolt. He pivoted and slid to his feet. Yellow light pulsed from the doorway below.

"You're freezing, Hutch. How come the words 'wait in the car' never work on you?"

Hutch's confusion melted to comfort as Starsky's warm arms found his waist and tugged him close, enfolding him. Starsky's living, smiling breath tickled against his ear in a kiss and a whisper.

Hutch hauled Starsky even closer into a chest squeezing hug. He sought and found the heat bloom of Starsky's mouth, snatching a long kiss.

Starsky's agile fingertips brushed up and down Hutch's spine. He chuckled.

"Your presence is requested, good fellow."

Hutch's mouth gulped the words in another kiss.

"You're gonna make me lose my footing here, Blondie." Those nimble Starsky fingers played at Hutch's neck, teasing the edge of his thin t-shirt.

"Starsky. You left me waiting here too long. I was losing my mind and my nerve."

"You're gonna need both down there, Hutch. And you're gonna need to listen to me – to trust me. Tomorrow night, when we're back home and I've got you squeaky shower clean and relaxing the aches away in bed, we'll talk. I'll give you the whole story. Including the 'why.' Fair enough?"

Hutch stiffened, attuned to the worried plea in his partner's voice.

"I'd like that, Starsk."

Starsky's mouth brushed his again, wetness mingled with passion, an adrenaline kick layered over a promise.

"You'll have it, babe. All the words and all the love and all the explanations I can give you."

Starsky started down the paved walkway.

"That's all I want, Starsk."

Hutch fell in beside him.

Chapter 5: Threshold

Starsky sat on the glass coffee table, silently congratulating himself on the success of Hutch's brief introduction to Wilder. He caught Wilder's frank scan of Hutch from blond hair to bare toes. Wilder's nod of approval, as Hutch offered his hand in a firm shake, left him light-headed with relief.

That said, he wasn't sure he liked how pleasing Wilder seemed to find Hutch.

His collateral nervousness made him talkative and wired, to the point where he asked Hutch questions only to answer them himself. He finally expanded to playfully answering the questions that Wilder directed to Hutch.

Wilder held up a hand as Starsky started to interrupt once more.

"Davey, here's an idea. Butt out. How about letting Hutch take a crack at answering the questions I'm asking him?" Wilder's voice was light-hearted.

Starsky flashed a crooked grin, bashful at the chiding. "Okay. Right. Terrific." He slid backward and several inches closer to where Hutch stood, alert and attentive.

You're holding your tongue more from uncertainty than respect, Blondie.

From his vantage point, Starsky saw Hutch's shoulder flex and drop.

Hutch is nervous.

"Hutch, like I was telling you, communication on this side of the door is different from what you'll find on the other side. Are you prepared for that? Do you understand why?" Wilder peered into the deceptive blue calm of Hutch's eyes.

"Yes." Hutch's one syllable reply was bloated with false bravado.

"Tell us why, Hutch." Wilder toyed with the door key.

Hutch's left arm brushed Starsky's shoulder. "Why? Here's why. On this side of the door, we're ourselves. He's Starsky. I'm Hutch. You're Wilder. But in there – " Hutch's thumb thrust behind him, toward the dungeon, "we're players – players in your game. We're characters, we're like imaginary people. Out here, we're all equal. In there, we aren't."

"Do you have an idea of how long we'll stay in there?"

"We'll be in there until we finish all the scenes you and Starsk – and by extension I – agreed to. Or until I melt down." Hutch's brilliant smile flashed. "'Clean up in aisle one, Mr. Starsky.' Heh."

Starsky laughed. He rested a supportive hand on Hutch's waistband.

"One last point before we start." Wilder's voice and expression reverted to seriousness.

Hutch's head was slightly lowered, his comportment perfect.

"Out here, I call you by your name. You're 'Hutch.' Not in there. You won't be hearing your name from me. You're "boy" or "punk" or whatever else comes to mind. Can you deal?"

Hutch tilted his head toward Starsky as he answered. "I don't like it, but I'll deal."

"Good, Hutch. That's good, buddy." Starsky couldn't keep the zealotry from his voice.

As Wilder left them alone to check the dungeon door, Starsky leaned closer. "I'll be in there, too, Hutch." He kissed the warm curve under Hutch's jaw. "Even if you're zoning, even if you think you're lost – you aren't. I got your back. That ain't ever changing. Not out here. Not in there."

Starsky didn't realize how much his peace of mind depended on Hutch's faith in him until he was rewarded with a beatific smile of absolute trust.

Wilder beckoned from the open dungeon door. "Go in and look around, Hutch. Touch anything you like. Get used to the light and the atmosphere. We'll join you soon."

Hutch paused at the threshold. "Thanks for the head start."

Wilder winked. "No problem. You're gonna need it."

Starsky swung around at Wilder's rejoinder. Cold pricked the back of his neck like a phantom serpent – a snakebite of apprehension. Trust and trepidation seesawed, clamoring for his attention. He refused to acknowledge either.

When he looked up, the doorway was empty and Wilder was summoning him into observation range in the narrow alcove just outside of the dungeon door.

Chapter 6: Dungeon

Shoulder to shoulder with Wilder, Starsky spied on Hutch.

"There he is – our blond prey inside the walls of my dungeon at last." Wilder's joking voice coincided with the slap of his hand to Starsky's shoulder.

Dungeon.

The grim medieval word, with its connotations of crouching stone walls, oozing dampness, airless darkness, and hidden decay, was the antithesis of Wilder's scene space. This room, accessed by a short hallway from the main house, was large and square. A full wall of floor to ceiling windows, some open to the refreshing night air, were interspersed with glass doors

connected to a terrace. The isolated location of the house bestowed absolute privacy, no curtains required to disguise the action within or to mar the view without. Twelve foot ceilings added to the sense of vertical space. A fire burned in the stone fireplace, adding welcome warmth.

Starsky watched as Hutch attempted to make peace with his surroundings and its odd collection of furnishings. He grinned. His partner's cautiously thorough inspection of the room was a direct descendent of his detective techniques.

Hutch assessed the fireplace first, extending hands to test the flame's heat. He ran a hand along the smooth mantle and inhaled the scents of pine smoke. He leaned down and poked behind the neat stack of firewood. Next, he backtracked to the walls. He stopped in front of a padded wall. The vertical furrow between his eyebrows deepened as he ran fingers over its mixed textures. He stood on tiptoe to study the pair of shackles fastened to the wall, dangling from linked chains.

Starsky smiled at Wilder, offering a matter-of-fact shrug of his shoulders.

Wilder shook his head, a wide grin splitting his mouth.

Hutch moved to the table on the opposite side of the entry door. His long fingers traced the carved surface and poked at the objects littering its top. His eyes swept over heavy black cuffs and several pairs of gloves. He picked up and squeezed a set of nipple clamps, then dropped them hurriedly. He nudged the short handled riding crop, the flogger, the assortment of leather lacings. Even from afar, Starsky saw the pink blush on Hutch's fair skin.

Hutch suddenly tensed and cocked his head. His blue eyes alert, he scanned the room and the shadows by the door. Starsky pressed closer to the wall in an instinctive attempt to hide.

Hutch turned away, seemingly satisfied in his privacy. He walked to the farthest corner and went down on one knee, exploring a floor pad set at an angle where the walls joined in a deep corner. He fingered two sets of ring bolts; wrapped a fist around a length of chain and gave an experimental tug.

He slid onto the mat on his back, arms stretched behind his head, as though measuring the distance. Starsky could see the slow swallow of his lover's throat, accompanied by the taut pull of lean, muscled arms.

Hutch rolled to the edge of the floor mat and scrambled up. His cautious eyes finally studied the large bed occupying the center of the room. He started toward it, but abruptly stopped. He turned and retreated back to the fireplace. Once there, he stood at the hearth, arms braced on the mantle. Firelight dressed him in a kaleidoscope of warm colors, from palest orange to sun gold.

Starsky admired the clean chisel of Hutch's body bathed in a flickering web of light. A hard breeze through open windows chilled his growing fever, dried the trickle of sweat on his brow.

Wilder cleared his throat. His hand tightened on Starsky's shoulder. Starsky looked around and saw the unquenched hunger in his old friend's eyes, transparent as the open pages of a book.

"Look at him. He's tracking his route like he's securing a crime scene. Well done, Blondie." Wilder's smile flashed, a brighter glow, in the darkness.

Hey Wildman - don't call him "Blondie."

Starsky agreed. "He's patrolling. That's typical Hutch – careful and methodical. He's playing by the book, looking at everything worth looking at. Now it's all clicking in his mind, each piece falling into the right place."

Not that you necessarily understand the pieces or their place here, partner.

"He's stunning. He's perfect. He's a living classical statue strolling around in there."

"You're eager." Starsky's fingers dug into the smooth wood of the door frame.

"I'm past eager, Davey. The gun's loaded and the safety's off. It's time to hunt."

"Just remember what I said before, Wildman. If he calls time or I call time, we stop. I mean it. No matter where we are – no matter how hot the burn."

Wilder's voice was tinged with annoyance. "I heard you the first five times."

Starsky stared at the burnished halo of Hutch's hair.

"You're right. He looks good, Wilder."

"He looks lonely, Davey, and it's time. Fall in, soldier."

Chapter 7: Dominant

"Kneel down." Wilder's stern command was his only greeting to Hutch.

Hutch turned from the fireplace to face him. He stepped out into the room. His hands snaked self-consciously into the front pockets of his jeans as he sought and found the welcome refuge of Starsky's eyes.

Starsk. Did you hear him? He's ordering me around like I'm his trained animal.

Starsky heard the words as clearly as if Hutch had spoken them aloud. The shake of his head was nearly invisible.

Hutch. You said you'd deal. Prove it, buddy.

Wilder swung a long leg, the flat of his boot landing against the back of Hutch's knees.

Starsky's left hand shot out and hovered, the rings on his pinky finger glinting in the firelight.

Hutch stumbled and fell to his knees, his eyes lowered, studying the foot of floor space in front of him. Wilder took his chin and tilted his head backward sharply, forcing eye contact.

Starsky dropped his arm to his side.

Wilder's tone was calm and low. "Listen carefully, Davey's partner. I don't repeat myself."

Raised eyebrows were the only subtle change in the manufactured neutrality of Hutch's expression.

"I don't care who or what you are out there. I don't care if you're the baddest ass cop in California or the fucking King of Siam. In here, you're nobody. You're nobody unless I tell you different. If I say you're a punk, you're a punk. If I say you're dirt, you're dirt. If I say you're a whore – you get the idea."

The blond lashes flickered.

"Do you hear me?" Wilder's knee grazed the front of Hutch's t-shirt.

"I hear you." Hutch shifted his weight to favor his right knee.

"Put your hands behind your neck."

Hutch's chin jutted forward. He caught Starsky's silent stare with split second timing.

I'm a proud man, Starsky.

Starsky's eyes delivered an unambiguous message in return.

I told you, Hutch. I warned you.

Hutch's mouth softened, curving into the intimate smile Starsky loved. He pressed both palms to the back of his neck and laced his fingers. He grimaced at the tug of Wilder's wide hand sampling the texture of his hair.

"What's your safe word, boy?"

Starsky inched closer. He pressed the length of his right leg against Hutch's side.

"'Ice'. My safe word is 'ice'."

"Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes."

"Say, 'Yes Sir.'"

Hutch opened his mouth and closed it again.

"I gave you a direct order. Say 'Yes Sir.'"

“*Yes Sir.*” The sarcasm in Hutch’s voice contradicted the compliant posing of his body and the submissive cast of his eyes.

Wilder responded with a forceful, backhanded blow to Hutch’s jaw.

Hutch’s head snapped sideways. He rocked and steadied, his eyes on the floor, biting his lower lip.

“Wilder!” Starsky shook his head sharply.

Wilder clapped Starsky’s back.

“You brought us a challenge, Davey. His spirit’s good and I like spirit. But I don’t like disobedience.”

“Once we get started, he’ll be obedient.” Starsk rushed the reassurance.

Obedient.

Starsky nearly smiled at the characterization, of labeling his strong and independent partner with a word used to describe an unruly pet. “He’s still learning about this and you, Wildman. And you’re still learning about him. Patience is gonna work better than hitting on him.”

Wilder twisted his fist in Hutch’s shirt and hauled him higher on his knees. “Let’s talk about your safe word. If you need to stop, then you call it. If the pain gets too bad or if we push past a limit, you say it. But if you use your safe word to subvert my directions, or to play with my scene or with my head for your own reasons, you’ll be punished. Do you understand?”

A red blush crept across Hutch’s cheeks and trailed down his neck. He clenched his jaw, as though biting back careless words.

He nodded.

“Do you have any questions, boy?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Ask.”

“What about Starsky?”

“What about him?”

“Will he touch me?”

Wilder laughed, amused. "You better believe he'll touch you. You're a tool for us and our pleasure, boy. You're nothing but the means to an end for us. I can't think of many times you won't be touched."

"Will you touch me?"

Wilder elbowed Starsky. "Is he this slow on the street?"

Once again, Starsky nearly tripped on his words, hurrying to clarify. "Hutch, we'll touch you when the scene calls for it. Wilder will and I will. And remember, I'll be here the whole time. Every second – just like we talked about."

Hutch's shoulders visibly relaxed.

"Anymore questions?"

Hutch shook his head. "No Sir."

Wilder closed the dungeon door. Three locks clicked into place.

"Stand up, boy." He indicated the padded wall across the room that Hutch had scrutinized earlier. "Go and stand over there. Turn your chest and face to the wall."

"Can I lower my hands?"

"No. And if you talk to me again without being asked a question or invited you to open your mouth, I guarantee you'll be sorry."

Hutch struggled to his feet, arms still raised and fingers interlaced behind his neck. Wilder followed with one hand on the back of Starsky's neck.

Hutch moved awkwardly and hesitantly, like a barge in the strong tow of twin tugboats. He stopped in front of the padded wall, pressed close to it. The textures were otherworldly, alien, against his bare chest. He didn't resist when Wilder and Starsky took his wrists and shoulders, Wilder on one side and his partner on the other, to pose him at will. The position they forced on him, with his arms stretched straight out to the sides, plastered his chest so close to the wall that no daylight could pass.

Starsky found Hutch's stance perversely comforting, compared to the tortures and freak show poses his mind had conjured when his partner was ordered to kneel, when Wilder's opening salvos were so foreboding and authoritarian.

Wilder braced one hand at Hutch's waist and another at his neck to straighten him. He used his knee to spread Hutch's legs.

"Keep your chest up against the padding. Turn your head and look sideways at Davey. Keep your legs just like I left them."

Starsky watched Hutch watch him. The trust in Hutch wide eyes caused his chest to tighten, as though his heart was snagged in a noose. Hutch attempted a half wink but abandoned the effort when Wilder's hand tangled in his hair, jerked him off balance, and slammed him into the padded wall.

Starsky hastily stepped forward, catching Hutch by the shoulders to steady him. He brushed his lips against the softness of blond hair at the nape of Hutch's neck. He felt Hutch press into the small embrace of warmth.

Wilder nudged him.

"Step right up, Davey. I think we need some warm up exercises before the team goes on the field."

Chapter 8: Submissive

Thrust against the wall, Hutch tried to catalog the textures brushing his body. The contradictions of touch, temperature, and surface confused him. Finally giving up, he settled his chest against the wall and waited.

The fabric beneath his turned cheek was like the sweet hollow Starsky's neck.

Silk or satin

The composition was different in the area from mid-chest to the waistband of his jeans. Here, butter softness gave way to a harder surface covered with ridges and valleys that both caressed and tormented nerve-endings.

Leather imprinted with something rough – like upholstered metal studs

He didn't resist as Wilder and Starsky fastened shackles around his wrists and secured his spread arms, left and right, with chains dangling from wall mountings. The tension on his shoulders and arms was bearable, just a whisper away from painful.

Starsky's cool fingertips and rough palm cradled his neck like a life saving device.

Hutch tilted his head back.

Wilder's pocket knife glinted. He stretched Hutch's white t-shirt at the base of his neck and nicked the fabric, creating a tiny tear. Hutch instinctively flinched into the wall to dodge the blade. He twisted under Starsky's steady hand.

"Wildman! Careful!" Starsky spat warning words. "You ain't carving a Halloween pumpkin or a piece of meat here!"

Wilder's large hands slowly tore the flimsy fabric, the shirt separating along a perfect line down the center of Hutch's back, exposing bare flesh.

“He’s smooth and sweet, Davey. Doesn’t he remind you of our punks in ‘Nam? Color’s wrong, but the feel is the same.”

“Steady, babe.” Starsky’s whisper was like notes of a discordant song.

Hutch caught the briefest glimpse of his partner, now almost beyond his line of sight. Starsky’s eyes were fever-bright, his mouth moist and slightly open. Hutch lurched sideways, trying to penetrate the strange mask that settled over Starsky’s familiar features. The prison of chains denied him the necessary range of motion.

Without warning, four hands touched him simultaneously, the fingers stroking him, exploring him from neck to ribs to the small of his back. They petted him and pressed harder, concentrating on the jutting angles of his shoulder blades. They traced a path of curiosity – vertebrae to vertebrae – down his spine.

“Agh! God!”

Hutch turned his face into the wall, unprepared for the guerilla assault of a foreign mouth – damp and hot and greedy – biting his skin, teething away the sweat, and paving a raw, stinging path down his spine. He hissed and tried to arch away from a flame thrower of pain that shredded the light.

It’s not Starsky’s mouth...it’s not Starsk...

Hutch’s body jerked again into the shelter of the wall. The lips and teeth rubbed and suckled, nipped and tasted. He gulped air that burned his lungs, trying to escape the bites and the onslaught of instant agony they delivered. The punishing teeth found a sensitive spot – the private hollow just inside his waistband and chewed at the tiny fold of flesh. He bucked backward and rocked forward, failing to dislodge the invader.

Defeated, his cries rang out over the ocean sounds beyond the window. He tried to find Starsky’s blue gaze, somewhere close by, but the pain from that mouth dragged him toward a precipice and dangled him over the edge.

Trapped...trapped...trapped...

“Wilder! For fuck’s sake!” Starsky’s protest meshed with a press of blessed warmth and gentle hands on his shoulders. Starsky was holding him, shielding him.

Just like that, the torture stopped.

Hutch tried to follow the flurry of words from raised voices, but the pain garbled their meanings, making them impossible to decipher. Only the furious cadence of Starsky’s curses blended with the sound of his own name made it through.

Another voice answered and dominated.

Starsky stepped away.

Hutch burrowed into the wall like a sanctuary, his hands looped around the lengths of chains for balance.

Insistent fingers probed the bite marks rising across his shoulders. A loud voice questioned him. Preoccupied with lick of flame across his back, he ignored it. He sucked in more life-giving air, panting. He screamed when the torment of teeth and tongue returned and found a new feeding ground at the small of his back. Escape still denied, freedom unattainable, his body fought on instinct alone. But there were too many hands, too many weights, too much pain pinning him in place.

Desperate, he cried out again.

“Shhhhhh....Babe...”

Starsky was with him again, soothing and reassuring. The familiar touch dislodged the worst of the pain, forcing it behind the blackness that fell over his eyes like a veil.

The floor dipped, the room tilting and spinning like a carnival ride. Hutch heard the metal clatter of chains and felt his body break free, rotating in a confusing orbit. Blinking sweat from his eyes, he took stock. His raw back was now pressed against the padded wall, where small barbs of steel embedded in the leather dug at his sore flesh.

Wilder’s muscular arms steadied him, holding him momentarily by the throat. The ragged remnants of his t-shirt were torn away. He watched a blue cotton shirt flutter like a flag to the floor.

Starsky’s shirt. Starsk?

Starsky stood out of reach, in profile, his curls auburn and wild in the fire glow, sweat slicking his forehead.

“Skin to skin to skin.” Wilder’s whisper was sibilant against Hutch’s ear. Hutch shivered at the soft, slithering taunt of the words.

His arms were free from chains, dangling in front of him, with shackles still weighting his wrists. Wilder slid a length of connecting rope through the rings on the shackles, binding Hutch’s wrists together. Hutch tripped as he was shoved forward. He groaned as Wilder draped an imprisoning arm around his neck and across his chest, holding him in a perverted embrace. He sought Starsky’s reassuring eyes, sought solid evidence that he was not abandoned alone under the hands and mouth of this stranger. He shuddered when Wilder tasted the fresh bite marks at the base of his neck, tongue swirling – wet saliva to wet blood.

Starsk...

Starsky met his stare, unblinking – blue eyes to blue eyes. Hutch searched his partner's face, longing for a spark of their familiar solidarity, for a wink of encouragement. Instead, doubt clouded Starsky's features and sweat wept, like desperation, down the toned plane of his chest.

Starsk. Please Starsk...

Starsky remained mute, an impartial observer.

"Don't they say there're two sides to everything?" Wilder's teasing voice attacked with hungry energy from the side, distracting Hutch from Starsky's hollow gaze.

"Help me here, Davey." Wilder pulled Hutch's bound wrists up, stretching them over his head. "Pull that release, soldier. Get the ring down so we can secure him nice and tight."

Starsky stepped forward and pulled the lever down, freeing a large metal ring from the anchor above. His curls brushed the edge of Hutch's face. Hutch groaned - a desolate protest. His side hitched as his arms were captured and hooked over his head, pulling him onto his toes.

Wilder touched Hutch again, efficiently unfastening the button and zipper of his jeans. He whimpered, softer this time, almost imploring. He was helpless to stop the hands sliding his jeans lower on his hips, revealing his lower belly and the uppermost fuzz of his pubic hair.

"Beautiful. Fucking. Beautiful. Look at him, Davey. Ready for consumption."

Starsky's scent washed over him. Starsky's hands cradled his face, the heated metal of the pinky rings against the contour of his left cheekbone. The tenderness of the touch was contradicted by the open hunger he saw on Starsky's face.

Starsky's wolf gaze. Starsky ready to feed – he has that same look right before he throws me down and pulverizes me into the mattress.

Hands holding his hips reinforced Hutch's captivity. He released a hopeless cry, threaded with fear and shame.

A new ambush started on his nipples, chest, belly – sudden and brutal. Starsky's questing mouth conquered the left side of his body, Wilder devoured the right. Their mouths worked him in unison, teeth scraping and biting – opening tiny cuts, creating eruptions that pooled blood within rapidly forming bruises.

"NoNoNoNo!" Hutch's screams, drenched red with terror, were alien to his ears – feral and forlorn.

A cherished voice reached him then, caressed him like a melody soaring over the confusion and pain.

"Sweet boy. Sweet needy boy. The pain is good – it's good. Good boy. You're safe...you're safe. We're gonna keep touching you, babe – but you're safe."

Hutch's jeans were stripped lower on his body, pulled open below his hips. A clumsy hand reached into the folds of material and closed around his cock, teasing it out into the open. He jerked, his body fighting the invasive touch.

His screams climbed to an unsteady octave and wavered, thin as wire.

Just as the madness threatened to strip away consciousness, a mouth captured and silenced him – comforting and quenching. Starsky's touch – Starsky's taste. Hutch fell into the kiss, whimpering to his lover his displeasure at the hands punishing his cock. When Starsky didn't knock the roaming hands away or free him from the chains, he panicked.

"Breathe, Hutch. Breathe beautiful boy. We're just warming you up. S'okay." Starsky broke the kiss to murmur against the sweat streaked curve of Hutch's ear.

Hutch moaned when oil-drenched fingers painted his cockhead and pumped him roughly. Starsky's hands cupped his face, kissed over the bridge of his nose.

"Shhhh...you know this game, babe. Good cop. Bad cop."

"Whore." Another voice intruded, its roughness matched by the breaching of a fingertip into his cock slit.

Hutch breathed out a shallow sigh, a low-pitched plea for mercy.

"I liked that sound, boy. Do it again."

Hutch was helpless to disobey. He did.

Nimble fingers took over at his cock, a tender stroke he recognized, long sweeping pulls that stretched him into a shallow arch. He opened his mouth to beg, but found his breath captured by a different mouth, curious and uncaring. A long tongue slithered, probing around his, passionless and intent only on control. He tried to escape, but a heavy fist held him by the hair. A vice grip of finger pads refused to allow his mouth to close in protection. The warring sensations interrupted his heartbeat and scrambled his sense of time and self.

Stop. Stop. Stop. Starsk.

"He's being such a good boy, Davey."

"It's me, Hutch. Feel me. Only me." Starsky's tight fist stroked him. Talented fingers skated over his swollen flesh and finger-painted in the droplets of pre-cum and sweat.

Hutch gave himself over to Starsky. His hips moved with their own hungry thrusts as Starsky pumped him, enticed him, touched him. His body switched gears and begged, nerve-tripping, rushing toward sweet release.

Wilder's words bled over, a low frequency rumble. "How you doing, soldier?"

Starsky's reply was tight, barely controlled. "Gonna shoot my own wad along with him."

"Not now! Shut it down, soldier!" Wilder barked the order.

The response was instantaneous. Starsky's touch morphed from coaxing and hungry strokes to a cruel clamp of fist on his cock, blocking release and ending the maddening pleasure.

Thwarted, Hutch moaned. He slumped, defeated again, in his chains, shivering in time to the pounding of his heart.

Wilder's palm caught Hutch's temple and pushed his head upright. His voice snapped like a whip.

"Amateur. Whore. You were ready to come like a little boy. Like a greedy fuck toy. Not yet, boy. Not yet. Practice makes perfect. So we're going to practice –" he pinched Hutch's cheek lightly, "again and again."

He laughed. "Let's move him to the floor, Davey-boy."

Hutch tried to tune sarcastic voice out.

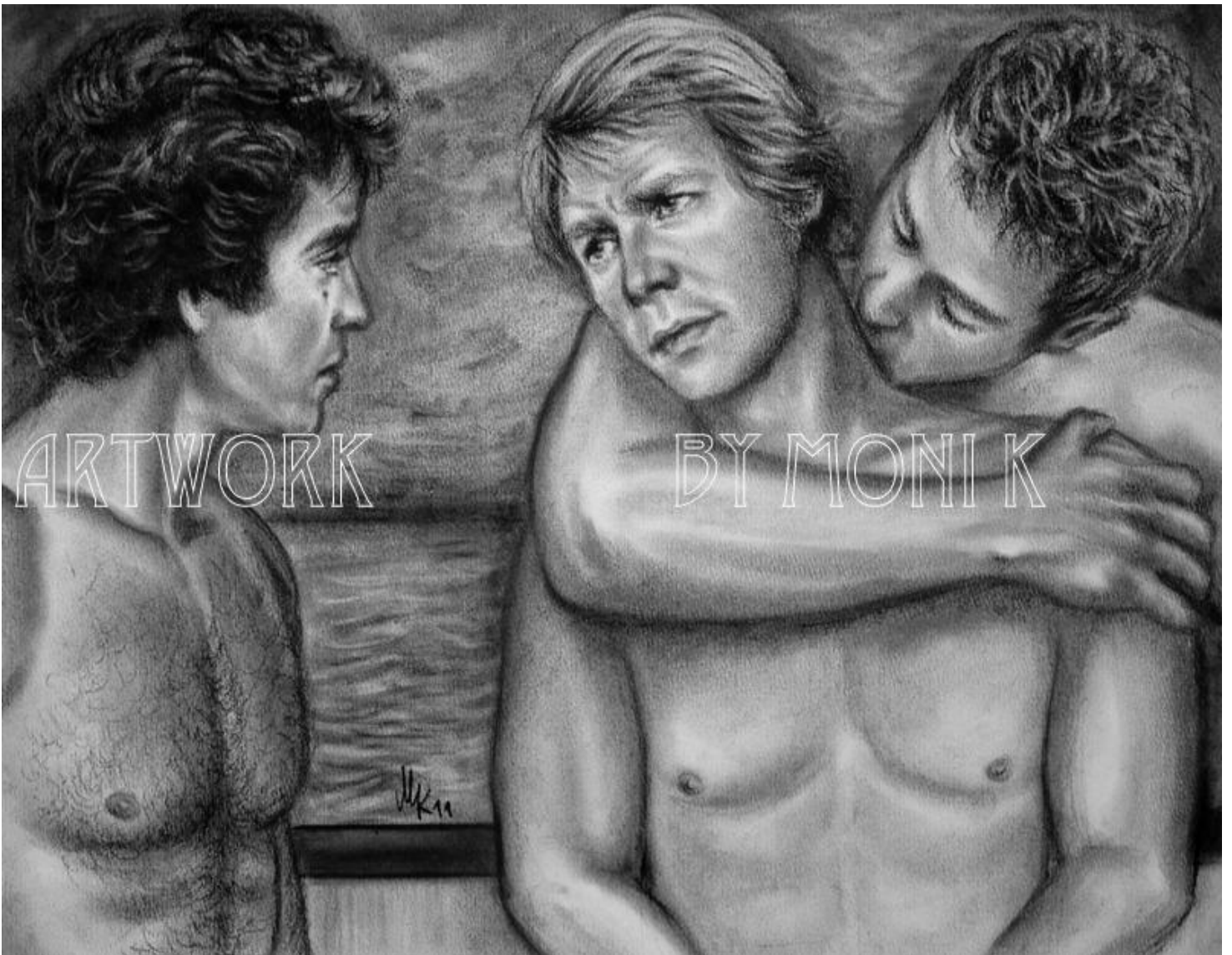
"Starsk?" He tricked his clouded brain into speech, into stating his wishes. "P-please. Not like that. Don't want...that."

Starsky's face was a mystery – love blended with kindness, anger seasoned with lust – unreadable and shrouded. He released Hutch's wrists from the chains and cuffs and caught him before he fell.

Hutch sagged into the arms and love of his partner. He hated the unsettled conflict visible in Starsky's eyes, in the downturned corners of his mouth.

This was Starsky – the man who snuffed any threat to Hutch as easily as killing a fly. His partner. The man whose soul was open to him, whose strength he never questioned. But, transposed over the known features and mingled with reassurances fed by years of love, was a Starsky he didn't recognize.

He saw the former soldier who shared a pact of loyalty to the strange man dressed in black – the man who had Starsky's permission to hurt him at will.



Chapter 9: Leather

The thick floor mat reminded Starsky of the combat practice room from his and Hutch's academy days. It was positioned so that a person lying on it could be secured to the walls, the floor, or a combination. Ring bolts and chains were attached to the walls at the corner a couple of feet from the ground. More bolts with chains were cemented into the floor tile at various intervals.

Starsky held Hutch's waist, steadying and steering him. Sounds drifted from across the room as Wilder picked objects up from the wooden table.

Hutch's eyes were enormous and appeared to swallow the wavering light of candle flame. His body was as tense and poised as in the split second before a raid or a covert entry into a room of armed criminals.

Starsky stroked his left index finger along the warm crease of Hutch's lowest ribs.

And so we begin at the beginning, baby blue.

Wilder approached from the left and dropped to a knee, securing cuffs to the sets of light chains dangling from the four ring bolts – two on the wall, two on the floor. He checked the clips and braces for security, giving a tug and a grunt of satisfaction.

One of his ungentle hands snagged Hutch's waistband and yanked him forward, away from Starsky. Hutch stood where he was posed, jaw locked, in the middle of the mat. Starsky nosed in, his hands claiming Hutch's shoulders.

"It's time to lie down now, little fly. It's too late to beat your wings." Wilder's teeth clenched. "The spider is home. The spider is hungry."

Starsky held Hutch's shoulders, attuned to the invisible tremors riding up the lean length of Hutch's spine.

He pressed, gently, encouraging Hutch to submit. To obey.

Hutch drew a shaky breath and dropped to his knees. His head tilted up, eyes never breaking contact with Starsky's.

Wilder impatiently elbowed Starsky back to the edge of the mat, releasing an amused laugh when Starsky's stumbled.

Starsky pressed his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans, watching cautiously as Wilder shoved Hutch roughly onto his back. Similar to his position on the wall, Hutch's long arms were spread and stretched sideways, captured in the jaws of black cuffs.

Starsky knelt and placed a hand on Hutch's flushed right cheek. He swept back Hutch's blond bangs, his thoughts whirling in a cloud of color and emotion.

*Good God – we ain't even out of the starting gate and everyone's control is getting whacked.
We're like runaway trains.*

"Easy, Hutch." Starsky continued his stroking and soothing, trying to distract Hutch from Wilder's hands and their journey over his body - moving, probing, stripping him naked.

Awareness of everything but Hutch faded as Starsky focused on his partner's pale face. Anxiety dilated the pupils of Hutch's eyes, India ink across sky blue.

The rattle of chains jolted him back. He squinted, surprised by Wilder's industriousness.

Hutch's legs had been lifted and spread, with a cuff on each ankle secured by silvery chains to the rings in the wall. A large leather bolster was wedged under his lower back, shifting weight onto his shoulders. The bonds and slope stretched his torso and propped his ass high for easy access. Hutch was deadly still, his lanky body ensnared by restraints. His apprehension was

only evident in the slight heaving of his chest, the first droplets of sweat on his forehead, the thin ghosting of his breath. He tested his bonds briefly, his head raised curiously. Then, as though closing a door, his eyes fell shut, his cheek desperately pressed to Starsky's palm.

Starsky took in the tall form straddling his partner. Raw need sparked in the periphery of his vision. His heartbeat quickened, a snare drum, aroused by the sight of Hutch chained before him like an invitation – any part of his body free for the tasting or taking. The bruises and bite marks were like signposts on the white glow of smooth skin.

My beautiful boy. My sweet boy.

Wilder linked his thumbs together and stroked his hands over the contours of Hutch's bare chest and belly. He nodded appreciatively, fanning rough fingertips over Hutch's bruised nipples, ribcage, hips.

Slowly, almost lovingly, he pulled on gloves – supple black leather edged with gray seams. He flexed the leather over his long fingers, massaging the stiffness away with motion and heat, and positioned himself on hands and knees over Hutch's captured body. A gloved palm pressed lightly to Hutch's vulnerable throat.

"You're warm silk on the outside aren't you, golden boy? Let's see how you feel on the inside."

Hutch's eyes remained stubbornly closed, fair lashes dipped over the heat of his cheeks.

Starsky continued to cradle Hutch's face, sliding his fingers over the strong jaw line. The tenderness of the caress clashed sharply with the raw hunger spearing him, beckoning him.

Wilder glided gloved fingertips through a shallow dish of fragrant oil.

Starsky inhaled, his senses conjuring half-remembered fragrances from years past.

Saigon. The smells of our old sanctuary – cinnabar and cloves, sweat and sex. I breathe in the smells and I'm flung head first back there, back into the old days. The old ways.

"Read him his rights, Davey boy."

Starsky stretched out on the floor, belly down and body perpendicular to Hutch. He slipped an arm across Hutch's chest and placed his mouth against Hutch's right ear.

"Listen to me, babe. You gotta accept what's happening. You agreed to it and you can't stop it. We're gonna touch you everywhere. There ain't one part of you we can't have. Fight or surrender up front, sweet boy. Either way, the end's the same. You're gonna dance for us."

Wilder used his left hand to lift Hutch higher, adjusting the leather bolster to hold him in place. The ankle restraints snapped over the layers of white gauze and tape. He teased Hutch's ass, playing lightly over the crack, the tight opening, smiling when Hutch gasped. With one fluid

motion of his right hand, he breached the tightness and drove his index and middle fingers inside, plowing deep and deliberate. His eyes devoured Hutch's body with a wordless, unmasked greed.

Hutch moaned. His arms lifted and pulled, trying to jerk away. He cried out again, sharply, when the invading touch pulsed in short, agonizing jabs far inside of him.

"Wilder! Not so rough! Slow it down!"

At Hutch's cry, Starsky rolled up into a low crouch. Keeping one hand on Hutch's forehead, he slid his index finger of the other hand over his own throat. "Knock it off! You're hurting him!"

Wilder showed no sign of stopping. A third finger joined the other two opening Hutch. He punched hard, seeking the hot center of Hutch's body.

Hutch's head tossed back, neck arching, a unbidden whisper escaping.

"NoNoNoNoNo..."

Starsky grabbed Wilder's wrist, his eyes dangerous. He held on, as though hypnotized, staring at Wilder's long gloved fingers, oil smeared and dripping, as they pushed and pulled and snagged Hutch's prostate with shallow, agonizing pulses.

"Wait, Davey. Not so fast. Look at him. We got him. He's turned the corner."

A satisfied smile played across Wilder's face. Starsky pushed up on his knees. His deep blue eyes drank in the sights and sounds, the firelight a warm glow on his back.

Hutch was transformed. He had crossed the border from dark pain to open need. The ambushed player was now a willing collaborator in his own tortured pleasure. Hutch's mouth was agape in a soundless groan as the leather clad fingers rammed the sensitive hidden spot buried within his naked body. His pale flesh was flecked with a misty coating of sweat, his eyes dazed blue slits. His cock rose from his belly like a hand to be patted. It hardened to steel when Starsky grasped the root and gave one long stroke.

Yes. My winter acrobat...here you are. Here you are.

Starsky watched, fascinated by the sight of Hutch calling out wordlessly, riding his own wave of pleasure, filled another man's questing fingers. His own untamed lust backhanded him, filling him with the indiscriminate hunger of a wild creature.

Clear precum oozed from Hutch's cock slit, diamond bright glimmers in the shifting light.

My blond is hungry. He wants.

Wilder continued fingering Hutch, hand fucking him with a measured, steady motion. He jutted his chin out, motioning to Starsky to pick up a length of narrow leather braid from the floor.

“Tie a double knot at one end.” Wilder’s command was terse.

Starsky’s fingers fumbled, clumsy, his eyes never leaving his lover’s body. He knew what the next command would be. Hutch looked up at him, eyes pleading and lips parting, begging for the taste of his mouth in a kiss.

Not yet, babe. Soon...soon...

“Use the leather on him, Davey. Own him. Work him. Create your own vision with him.”

Starsky twisted the leather cord in his hands. He dangled it over the curve between thumb and forefinger. He twisted the cabled length around Hutch’s balls and pulled, allowing the leather tail to squeeze and then slide free.

Hutch moaned.

“Sweet boy. Say that again.”

Hutch panted, the tip of his tongue curled around his upper teeth.

Starsky strung the cord around Hutch’s cock root like a noose and tightened. He smiled when his play wrenched another ragged moan from Hutch’s throat. The bulk of the leather knot warmed his fingers. He listened to Hutch’s raspy half-sobs and imagined a leather gag stuffed in that curved mouth, changing groans to silence.

He shuddered and reached for the hard length of Hutch’s cock.

You’re in for a long slow ride, babe.

He caressed the sensitive button just beneath the domed cockhead, swirled a figure-eight with his ring finger through the pool of precum. Then he slowly pressed, forcing the slit open like a tiny mouth. He pushed the leather knot in place, plugging the wet slit. His thumb seated the knot securely in place.

Hutch howled, squirming under his hand.

“You should see yourself, baby blue. You’re beautiful – tied like this, hand fucked like this, a leather cock gag shoved deep inside you like this.”

“Nice work, Davey. Without a rein, we can’t get a proper ride out of him.” Wilder sat back on his haunches, his fingers planted to the hilt inside of Hutch. He used his free hand to fondle the heaviness of Hutch’s balls, carefully avoiding the fully lengthened hardness of Hutch’s cock.

“Look at me, boy. Raise your head. Look at me.”

Hutch tried to arch, his wrists and ankles bruised by the bindings that held him spread eagle.

Starsky slipped a hand under the mop of sweat damp hair and eased Hutch's head up. He gripped the base of Hutch's neck protectively.

Wilder laughed. Winked. "You're fired up, aren't you? I feel it. I got my hand right on the trigger switch from the inside." His brown eyes absorbed Hutch's panting stare. "Should we see how much more you can take, boy?"

Hutch stammered, an airy whisper, an entreaty to Starsky. "Help me. T-touch me."

Starsky lowered Hutch's head. His eyes consumed the sight of sculpted muscle and sinew in a battle with the chains.

He whispered. "Get that knot nice and wet for me, babe. Then you get handled. Then you get relief."

Hutch whimpered, too far from reason or coherence to understand.

"Starsk-Starsk-now-"

"Shhhh...No. Hutch."

Hutch's flat belly stretched as he arched and shamelessly offered his cock flesh to Starsky's hand.

Starsky fingered the fringe of leather cord trailing from Hutch's cock slit. He traced the bulge of the leather knot, counting Hutch's cries as the quake of pain-fueled need tore through his body.

I want to be in there, sweet boy – inside that searing heat. I know you from the inside-out. I know what you can do.

Wilder continued fondling Hutch, opening him with strokes as steady and precise as a metronome.

"Go ahead." He nodded to Starsky. "Enjoy him. Taste him."

Starsky knelt, his shaking fingers circling Hutch's hardened nipples. He painted his tongue over one, then the other. He nipped harder, leaving fresh blood in his path and adding new marks to already damaged flesh. He moved languidly down along Hutch's ribcage, feasting on the smoothness there, silky hot against his mouth. He left a hard bite mark on either side of Hutch's belly and admired the twin scarlet bursts on fair skin. He took Wilder's free gloved hand and centered it on Hutch's cock slit, forcing leather to meet leather, setting the pace as Wilder's fingers pressed the knot and tugged, pressed and tugged.

Hutch released a forlorn wordless cry that rose and repeated, again and again.

Starsky tested the leather strip trailing from the knot.

“He’s ready. The leather’s drenched. He’s soaked it through.” Starsky’s voice was guttural, a caged growl. He stroked Hutch’s cheek slowly, admiring the sea colors of his half-focused eyes.

“He’s an obedient, pup.” Wilder’s fingers jammed and held, suspending Hutch on their full length.

Starsky gripped Hutch’s shaft and pumped, swift and steady, building the pressure in time to Hutch’s anguished cries. His thumb and forefinger plucked the leather plug away, teasing fingers remaining to play over sensitive swollen skin like an instrument.

“Ask permission, Hutch,” he coached. He felt the heaviness of Hutch’s sac and lifted him upward, hammering him with a volley of cock strokes.

“Say ‘permission please Sir.’” Wilder’s voice coached him.

“PermissionpleaseSir.” Hutch’s eyes were frantic, his body like a tripwire, hijacked by need. He thrust into Starsky’s fist and fell back onto Wilder’s braced fingers. Starsky’s palm delivered an upstroke and dropped Hutch back down again onto the gloved fingers opening him to the core. Hutch danced under their touch...up and down. Once. Twice. A third time.

“PleaseSirPermissionPermission –”

Wilder nodded.

“Permission.”

Hutch trembled, thrust, breathing halted, blood pounding. His hot seed gushed, soaking Starsky’s fist. He thrust, cried out, thrust again, the slickness painting a sticky coat over his belly. Trembling, spent, he sank down, grimacing as the hands deserted him.

Wilder used his leather gloves and unleashed a round of slaps against Hutch’s inner thighs.

Hutch took the blows without a sound.

Starsky did not.

“You’re bruising him!” Starsky’s nearby voice was indignant.

“You bruised him, yourself. That skin of his was made for bruising.”

“Stop hitting him.” Starsky batted the gloves away. He met Wilder’s offended stare without blinking. Without apology.

He’s mine. He’s mine to bruise. He’s not yours.

Starsky picked up his discarded shirt and started to wipe the moist residue from Hutch’s stomach. Wilder shook his head.

“Leave it. He’s a greedy whore. Why hide the evidence?”

Starsky dropped the shirt.

“I want to warm him up. He’s shivering.”

“It’s aftershock. You know that.” Wilder stood between Hutch’s trapped legs. He nudged Hutch’s ass with the toe of his boot. “Boy. Say ‘Thank you Sir.’”

Starsky looked away.

Why am I so fucking confused? I love Hutch looking this way – love the jolt of power. And I’m hating Wilder’s hands on him – hating anybody but me touching him. I can’t keep it all straight. What the hell is with that? Is this my baptism of darkness?

He heard Hutch’s soft voice.

“T-thank you, Sir.”

“I think your partner’s getting the hang of it.” Wilder casually released Hutch’s bindings. He kept a captive arm on Starsky, holding him in place even as Starsky tried to pull away – tried to catch Hutch as he dropped, deadweight, on the mat.

“I’m calling a timeout, Wilder – he needs some water and he needs a breather.” Starsky managed to grasp one of Hutch’s wrists. He squeezed lightly. He looked up, noting Wilder’s dismissive expression.

“That’s the last thing he needs. He’s in the zone, Davey. We need to keep him there. Go on. Go on – stand aside and trust me on this.”

Starsky reluctantly acquiesced.

I’m trying to trust you, old friend.

Chapter 10: Humiliation

The scene was off right from the start – the energy faintly malignant and transitions too quick, too abrupt, for Starsky’s comfort. One minute Hutch was sprawled, half on the mat and half on the tile. The next, he was strong-armed by Wilder into the middle of the room, forced onto his hands and knees. His head hung down, his flaxen hair darkened with sweat and his fingers wobbly on the wool rug. Once more, Starsky noticed Hutch’s bruises, colorful like abstract paintings.

“You didn’t say anything about him being a sissy boy, Davey.” Wilder pulled Hutch’s head back sharply. “Do you want your Mama, sissy boy? Are you ready to suck your thumb for us?”

The jeering words and laughter invited Starsky to join in.

He didn’t.

Humiliating words continued in a waterfall, punctuated by harsh questions and boot kicks to Hutch's hands, belly, thighs. Starsky stood by the hearth, battling for control, disturbed by his odd curiosity.

Hutch sure takes enough pleasure in knocking people down a peg or two. He's good at dishing it out. How'll he handle this?

"Tell me what you're good for, boy. Are you good for anything? Pretty blond boy." Wilder's knee bore down on Hutch's back, applying steady pressure. Hutch rounded his back upward, a cat stretch, trying to escape the weight.

Starsky toed his sneakered foot under Hutch's chin and lifted his head.

Look at me, Hutch.

Hutch raised his eyes, his face open and despairing.

Lost.

Starsky's gut heaved in a half-spasm. He dropped his foot and simultaneously sank down on one knee in front of his partner.

Hutch's discomfort rolled off of him like a fog.

From nearby, Wilder's voice spewed barbed words in an unbroken flow.

"Pansy boy. Punk. Look at him, Davey. He's ready to cry. Are you crying, little boy?"

Hutch lowered his forehead to the floor and folded his arms over his head.

"Look at you, curled up there trying to hide – pansy coward. Yeah look at you – big tough cop crawling on the floor. Not a big man now, are you?" Wilder stepped lightly on Hutch's exposed knuckles. "I asked you a question. Answer it."

Hutch's buried head gave a slight shake. The movement transferred down his shoulders and quivered in the tendons of his braced forearms.

"I didn't hear you, punk! Are you so tough now?"

"No." The word was a sigh of subjugation.

"No what?"

"No S-Sir."

"You're a useless punk, aren't you, boy?"

"Yes Sir."

The abject humiliation in Hutch's voice galvanized Starsky. Inserting himself between his old friend and his partner, he pulled Hutch upward and into his arms.

Hutch tucked against him willingly.

"Hey. Hey there, buddy. Okay. Okay now." Starsky kissed his temple.

"Thank you, Sir."

Starsky's heart jack hammered.

Oh babe.

Hutch's jittery, puppet-like movements and the blank obedience in his voice resembled subspace. Starsky knew better. He inherently understood that the humiliation scene had come dangerously close to cracking the private pillars of Hutch's self-respect. Something in Hutch's psyche, in his upbringing or his wiring, made him vulnerable. Too vulnerable. Hutch didn't fight back, a fact that Starsky found troubling. Hutch wasn't retaliating or protecting himself. He appeared under the spell of a visceral helplessness that stripped away his will in a complete abdication of self-preservation and pride.

If I let this keep going, knowing what it's doing to him, I've forfeited every right to deserve his trust.

Starsky shot Wilder a non-negotiable warning.

This part of the game is over.

He huddled down with Hutch against his shoulder, feeding him small sips of water and reassurances. He felt the brush of Wilder's fingers to the top of his head. Whether in apology or disappointment, he didn't know.

Chapter 11: Passion

The massive oak bed frame with its stout footboard and towering headboard reminded Starsky of a lumbering old world sailing vessel. Built into the headboard was an overhang arching high above the middle of the bed. Its scrolled carvings were interspersed with sturdy hooks and chains dangling at uneven heights.

Starsky's possessive arms held Hutch in a circle of temporary comfort.

I'm with you all the way in this scene, Hutch.

Hutch's silently surveyed the bed and its hardware.

At Wilder's nod, Starsky led Hutch to the bed. Hutch stopped at its side, his knees nudging the mattress and its draping of white sheets. He glowed golden against the winter white – blond

hair blended with the sun's touch on his cheeks, neck and arms where tattoos of bruises stood out in stark relief.

You have miles of fair skin, Blondie. You bruise too easily.

Starsky climbed easily onto the bed, his muscles flexing, their strong definition sharpened in the candle flames and firelight.

He knelt with his back almost against the headboard.

"C'mere, Hutch. Right here." His tanned fingers with their square cut nails patted the space directly in front of him.

As though hypnotized, Hutch obeyed, one leg and then the other folding until he was kneeling, facing his partner. Starsky combed fingers through Hutch's hair and pulled gently. Hutch imitated the gesture and snaked his fingers into Starsky's mane of curls.

"Starsk. Why are you still half dressed?" A soft question.

Starsky shushed him and rotated him – turning Hutch away from him until the smooth back was against his chest hair.

Gonna love you now, baby blue. Gonna love you rough. Gonna love you good.

Starsky unzipped his tight jeans. The instant relief from the pressure pulled a satisfied groan from far in his throat. He eased his cock out, rebar solid, hard and thick. He took a practice thrust against Hutch's lower back, satisfied that his thighs and hips were free for maximum movement. He reached for Hutch, fingertips gliding in guiltless indulgence over the smooth flesh from upper back to ribs to belly. He felt Hutch featherweight shivers, like a tuning fork vibrating to harmonics.

His whisper teased Hutch's right ear.

"You're tethered to me, beautiful man. You move when I say. You do as I say. Understood?" His teeth grazed the broken skin on Hutch's shoulder.

Hutch nodded.

"Call me 'Sir' again, babe." Starsky traced the curve of Hutch's jaw with a fingertip. "Say, 'Use me, Sir.' Say it, Hutch."

Hutch hung his head.

Starsk widened the spread of his knees, forcing Hutch's legs apart. He positioned his cock, dripping from hours of wanting, at Hutch's opening. He rocked there, playing, slicking the skin with cock drool.

Sweet insanity.

With a low growl he forced his cock head through the barrier of Hutch's ass and an inch into the tight glove of his body. His hands stabilized Hutch's hips, trapping him.

"Say, 'Use me, Sir' or I'm going to shred you to ribbons." His hips rotated, angling off center, forcing his cock deeper.

"Use me, Sir." Hutch's whisper called to him, soft and musical.

Starsky gritted his teeth as the tight ring of muscles at Hutch's opening battled feebly and lost. His full hard length entered in one uninterrupted slow-motion glide, stopping only when he was deep and snug, his balls seated against the heat of Hutch's flesh.

Hutch groaned and slumped forward, his forehead down on the mattress, his fingers clawing the sheets. Starsky continued to hold his hips, playing him out like a fish on the line.

"Nice work, Davey." Wilder's voice was almost shaking.

Starsky's looked up, unconsciously seeking approval, intercepting Wilder's hungry stare. His mouth moved, but the words were nearly silent.

"Show me what you need, Wildman."

Wilder's boot falls on the woolen rug were muffled, muddy. He stopped next to the bed, his eyes still locked to Starsky's. He whispered, dark and ferocious. "Stay inside of him. Make him feel you."

Starsky rocked slightly back and forth, dragging his lover's body with him. Hutch released another moan as Starsky's girth probed inside of him, shifting his forehead to his bent arms.

Wilder gripped Hutch's shoulders and pulled him upright. "Up and over you go, boy." He forced a long finger into Hutch's mouth and bent him back across Starsky's chest.

Hutch's mouth opened as he was positioned, his chest heaving.

"How far inside him are you, soldier?" Wilder used a forefinger to probe Hutch's cock slit.

"To the core." Starsky could barely hiss the words. The intense tightness gripping his cock drove long pulses, aching shudders, through his entire body. He licked his lips to moisten them as Wilder pressed Hutch's head backward, resting it on Starsky's left shoulder.

"Fucking. Beautiful." Wilder held Hutch lightly by the collar bone with one hand. With the other, he turned Hutch's face toward Starsky's.

"Keep that mouth of yours open boy." He nudged Hutch's lips wider. Hutch's answer was a garbled moan that faded to a sigh.

Wilder reached for Starsky's cheek, tenderly fingering the tanned flesh, the light stubble.

In an exquisitely choreographed move, he guided Starsky's mouth to cover Hutch's.

Starsky leaned in eagerly, tasting the warmth of Hutch's mouth. His tongue flicked around the gum line before jabbing back to the depths of his throat. Hutch swallowed the need and offered his own wet kisses, sucking greedily on Starsky's tongue.

"You boys are better than a Vegas production." Wilder's observation was otherworldly, amazed, appreciative. "Your darkness with his blondness mixed together."

He kept his hand on Starsky's neck controlling the pressure of the kisses, angling to help Starsky better access Hutch's bruised mouth. Satisfied at last, he pulled Hutch's wrists straight up, cuffing them over his head to the bar dangling above. He stood back again to study his living statues in their poses.

"Now fuck him, Davey. But do it slow. Slow – like leaves floating down the Mae Nam Kong. Don't let up on him. Break him. Make him accept your power. Make him beg. Don't touch his cock. Don't give him anything."

"Baby." Starsky breathed into Hutch's pliant mouth. He found an achingly slow rhythm and settled in, using the strength of his thighs to balance and hold the pace. His mind swirled with memories of the Mekong River and its hot green shade. He envisioned his body riding Hutch like a lazy boat, riding him for miles and miles in that humid stillness. He locked his hands around Hutch's lower belly and closed his eyes, rocking him in an agonizingly slow fucking.

Hutch whimpered.

"That's right, Davey. Just like that. Deeper. Go deeper. He can take more." Wilder caressed Starsky's neck, sliding fingertips in the sweat. He added the damp finger to their joined mouths, directing the kiss.

Hutch's moans were like prayers, begging him for mercy.

He slide into the deepest cavern of Hutch's body, exploring him. Owning him. Breaking him open.

"Touch him now, Davey. He's ready."

"You want to be touched, babe?" Starsky stretched a finger to explore Hutch's cock, smiling at the bubble of wetness coating his fingertip and at the hardness of Hutch's cock shaft. He sealed his mouth over Hutch's a smothering kiss, consuming Hutch's answering moan.

"Sweet boy. Sweet boy, Mine. That's right. Steady...steady." Starsky blended words with kisses. He closed his eyes, inhaling the blend of sweat and soap.

Wilder sat on the bed, his smooth leather gloves exchanged for a new pair made of coarse canvas, the ribbing and fingertips dyed a garish scarlet.

“You were right, Davey. Your partner’s smooth as whiskey.”

Starsky spared him a glance, his eyes like blue stone, his mouth swallowing Hutch’s kisses.

Wilder squeezed Hutch’s chained wrists and arms, applying pressure to fresh bruises.

Hutch jerked in pain.

Starsky shot Wilder a warning look.

Stop hurting him.

Wilder met his stare, stubbornness lighting his brown eyes. His gloved hands clasped in double fists around Hutch’s cock, letting rough fabric scrape sensitive skin.

“AhAhAhAh--” Hutch’s plea was like hot wax in the sun, melting liquid vowels.

Starsky felt Hutch’s body struggle, felt the tight channel squeeze his thickness, maddening and alluring. He rode Hutch with even tempered strokes. Hutch shivered and groaned against him, lapping up Starsky’s teasing-tender words, his body suspended between the damp demands of Starsky’s mouth and the painful milking by Wilder’s gloved hands.

Starsky’s control was crystal fragile, close to shattering. Blinding need sent every other sensation into retreat. He shivered in a cold outbreak of sudden sweat.

“Take him down, Davey-boy. Ride him hard.”

Starsky groaned and increased the pace of his thrusts, pulling all the way out of Hutch and driving forward, mining deep. He gritted his teeth, tripping closer, his hunger mounting to full gallop, uncontained.

Madness. Red fucking madness.

Wilder’s squeezed Hutch’s balls and smiled at Hutch’s pained cry. Wrapping a large fist around the cock root, he started a perfectly timed pace. His thumb scraped the sensitive cock slit, wiping away cock drool, clearing the path for more, bringing Hutch to the very edge and stalling – pulling away and starting again.

Hutch crumpled back against Starsky, opening his mouth wider to the changed tempo of Starsky’s kisses. Starsky battered him, plundering, pulling moan after moan from Hutch in a sweet dark refrain.

“He’s losing it.” Starsky heard his own whisper over the pounding of rushing blood. He felt the tempo of Wilder’s hands on Hutch echoing through the lean body and matched it, pile driving hard and mindless. Hutch thrust greedily into the biting grip of Wilder’s waiting glove, lost in the sensations flogging him.

“Give it up for Davey, boy.” Wilder’s words were a half-groan, an insistent command.

Hutch's body stilled for a split second, his cries building. He jerked and froze and came. Starsky answered a split second behind, pounding and jack hammering in short bursts – coming – falling – gasping in the airless space. His heart slammed, a wind tunnel sound.

Sweet God. Sweet boy.

Drained, Starsky slumped against the headboard. Wilder released Hutch's cuffs and chains and shoved Hutch onto his partner. Starsky was grateful for Hutch's body weight, crumpled on him and for the weak grip of Hutch's fist at his waist. He slid a hand behind the long neck, his thumb pressed over the tension groove between Hutch's eyebrows.

Wilder tosses a fresh log on the fire and stepped back from the shower of sparks that flew upward like fireflies. Starsky watched him. In the semi-shadows, he couldn't gauge his old friend's expression. But he felt the persistent ooze of Wilder's impatience, always so close to the surface of his turbulent, competitive personality.

Memories came to him, unbidden, of an open air campfire from long ago. He thought of his constant loneliness, as a green Army Private, at facing a bewildering unknown. He recalled his insecurity and the patience Wilder showed to him, and how he basked in the older man's attention.

He remembered inhaling the frightening lessons and barbed stories like air. Wilder had his unshakeable trust then. His faith in their platoon leader to call the right shots was untarnished, unquestioning.

I want to please him. When I'm around him, a small part of me always coming out of hiding – that scared kid I once was.

He scuffed a fist over Hutch's cheek.

Wilder's hand crowned Starsky's curls. His other hand simultaneously flicked over Hutch's bruised cheekbone.

Starsky carefully shifted Hutch in his arms, out of touching distance.

"Is he your partner or your pet rabbit, Davey?" Wilder's tone was half-play, half-venom.

Starsky swallowed a sudden mouthful of irritation, another unwelcome sign of his buried confusion. Wilder's taunt pulled like an undertow at his composure, leaving a bitter residue of guilt and conflict. From a soul-deep source within, he felt old loyalties – perhaps obsolete, sentimental favorites – trying to dislodge his contentment with the life and love he now called his own.

With a grunt he hefted Hutch, bringing him against his chest, timing their breathing in unison. He bit back impulsive words and busied himself, instead, examining the skin under the gauze wrappings on Hutch's wrists. He grimaced at the darkly colored pressure bruises, slipping a thumb absently over the raised marks.

Where there is heat, there is pain.

Wilder's voice called to him. "Good scene, Davey-boy. A fine scene. It's intermission. Let's grab some drinks and our breath outside." Wilder's voice was loud against the night cry of breakers crashing outside.

High tide...

Starsky refused the offer with a stubborn shake of his head. "I gotta stay here with Hutch right now. I'll take some coffee for me and some water for him if you're offering." He looked down at Hutch, unable to suppress a chuckle. "He's checked out."

"Your little boy needs his nap, does he, Private?" The undertone was slightly contemptuous. "He's well made, but not so much on stamina."

"Wilder, for fuck's sake, we've been working him over for hours. He's held up as long, if not longer, than some of the other bait you've hauled in over the years."

"Temper, temper, soldier. Bad comparison. But we've gone easy on him. You saw to that." He beckoned again. "Come out on the deck, Davey – out to the fresh air and wind. Let's talk."

"Let's talk here."

Wilder snort faded to an ugly laugh. "I'm distracted watching you cuddling him like he's your teddy bear. Can't you see it's messing with your reputation and with my mood?" The question lingered in the air.

"Maybe my own stamina's taken a hit after all these years." Starsky carefully eased Hutch down onto his side. He rubbed knuckles over his eyes. "I'm bushed. And maybe –"

For the first time, Starsky tested aloud the thought that secretly nagged at him, no matter how much he tried to ignore it. "Maybe it's more than a matter of stamina. Maybe my appetite for this game ain't what it used to be."

I have Hutch's love now. What need could I possibly have for this game?

He looked at his slumbering partner. Hutch had lengthened his sprawl, one hand tucked under his cheek, one lanky arm thrown wide, hand splayed with the palm up.

Wilder crossed his arms, his expression neutral. "It was a good session with him just then." His smile seemed encouraging and sincere.

Starsky laughed. "That last slow motion cha-cha about killed me. I was rowing a boat upstream. No floating merrily down."

"You know his body and he knows yours. It looked good for you and good for him. Watching you together was hot as hell itself. But I admit, I'm ready for something rougher in the next round." Wilder's shadow fell across the bed as he strolled within touching distance.

Starsky leaned forward and rolled off the bed, unconsciously blocking Wilder's access to Hutch.

"He's my partner, Wildman. I know him better than anybody."

"I know all about partners, Davey. I've got a good one myself. Responsible. Fast. Smart. Good head on his shoulders and a good family man. Can't say I ever fucked him or scened with him, though."

Starsky pulled up his rumpled jeans. He went to one of the open sliding doors and leaned against the frame. His hair whipped in the damp breeze.

"You're holding something back, soldier." Wilder squeezed Starsky's shoulder, carrying a long-entrenched promise of safety and friendship.

Starsky watched the ocean foam swallow the worn rocks below.

"Yeah. I am. I know I am." He paused. "It's about me and Hutch. There's more to Hutch and me than the job."

"You boys have your own sideshow going or something?" The voice was neutral.

"Something."

"No shit. I saw it from the first second you arrived through my door."

Starsky turned to face his old mentor, hands shoved into his jeans pockets.

Chapter 12: Disclosure

"I'm about to tell you something I've never told anybody but Hutch before. Not even to my mother. I'm wondering if it'll sound different when I say it to you – different than how it sounds when I say to him or when I say it inside my head."

"How's that, Davey-boy?"

"Hutch is more than my best friend and my police partner. He's also my lover."

Wilder's eyes darted to Hutch and back to Starsky. "Your lover? No shit?"

"No shit."

"You got yourself a male police partner lover?"

"Looks that way." Starsky grinned.

And it feels damn good to say so.

"Since –?"

“Two months.” He nodded. “Yeah. Two months.”

Wilder smile was sly, fox-like. He whistled. “Imagine that. My boy Davey with a boy-toy lover. Not sure what to say. Is he one of a pack or can he handle you solo?”

Starsky winked. “He’s the only one. He don’t share and I don’t share.”

Wilder whistled again, low-pitched against the night sounds.

“This is big news, Davey. This is a big change.”

Starsky bent down and picked up a stray pebble from the deck. He tossed it overhand into the swirl of the restless water beyond.

“Trust me – it’s a good change. Hutch has always been good for me. He makes me stop and think what’s important. Like doing our job and doing our best work. Like staying sharp and dodging work risks while we take other kinds of risks. Like having the balls to admit a truth or two.”

Wilder urged him closer, his face a closed mask. “This sounds important, soldier. C’mere. Sit. Talk to me.” He motioned to the hearthside with its wide stone seat. “You sit. I’ll get the coffee.” He nodded toward Hutch’s unmoving form. “We’ve got time to regroup. You knocked it out of the park. Your last homerun sent your boy right into dreamland.”

Starsky gave into the temptation of the fire’s warmth. He dropped gracefully to the elevated stone hearth, willing his body and mind to uncoil.

He looked over and Hutch and chuckled. “Give Hutch a good fucking and he flat-lines for an hour or more. He doesn’t hold back. He spends all his reserves.” He smiled, more to himself than for an audience. “Don’t mistake my words for complaining, though.”

The fire kissed the aches in his shoulders and the stiffness in his lower back. With a nod of gratitude, he accepted the steaming coffee mug offered.

Wilder lowered himself onto the rug.

Starsky swallowed a mouthful of the coffee, scalding hot and fragrant with cream and sugar. Across the room, Hutch muttered nonsensical Spanish words and sank back down into the blanket of his dreams.

“I still remember my first glimpse of you, Davey.” Wilder’s eyes turned to the dancing flames, as though he was a tunnel leading to another time. “You were greener than green. You were all swagger – all toughness. Back then, I couldn’t tell how much of it was real and how much was pure bluff.”

He paused for a sloppy gulp of coffee. “I learned about you, but quick. None of it was bluff. You weren’t like most. They looked at combat and wanted Mama’s apron or a private place to

heave their guts. I thought to myself, 'How am I going to turn these candy asses into soldiers?' But you..." Wilder laughed quietly inside the mirror of his memories. "I looked at you and I thought, 'How am I going to keep this hothead from getting himself killed the first day out?' You ran toward danger, Davey. You had courage. And you had the smarts and the instincts to back it up."

He tilted his head, brushing a hand in his close-cropped brown hair.

"I was never prouder of any man on my team than I was of you. I trusted you – I recognized the fairness under all that fire in your belly. Hell, you were like the brighter side of my own reflection – I'd look at you and see the best of me."

Starsky flushed with pleasure at the compliments. His words in response were quiet and respectful. "You never lacked courage or common sense, Wildman. I trusted your leadership. Your trust in me and your interest in me, they kept me going more than once."

Wilder laughed. "Where did the time go?"

"It went to better times." Starsky glanced sideways, a slight and almost covert move, at Hutch slumbering on the rumpled sheets. "We came out on the other side from hell on earth. We found our feet and found a place in the world waiting for us – outside of that jungle and its death traps."

Wilder shook his head. "There wasn't much from that hell was worth hanging onto. You were." He hesitated. "But now Davey, every year I've sensed you growing farther and farther away from me. I let myself see it, but didn't want to jinx anything by talking about it. Not while you were still willing to pick up the phone when I called or were still willing to come around here and shadow box with me and my hungry demons."

Starsky looked up, surprised by the unprotected truth in Wilder's confession. He tracked his mentor's glances, from firelight to Hutch's sleeping form, and sensed an unspoken despair in between.

In the next instant, Wilder's tone changed, hardened. "And now you bring him here. Your lover. I can't help but wonder. Did you bring him here to teach me a lesson? Are you pushing some competitive agenda, my competitive Davey-boy? Is it maybe a game of 'look who wins – look who does it better'? " Wilder jerked his chin at Hutch again. His gaze turned coarser.

"I brought Hutch because he asked and because he **is** my lover. I brought him because he has rights too, when it comes to me." Starsky's voice matched Wilder's cautious timbre.

"You wanted to share our war games with your lover?"

"They were never my games, Wilder. You know that. They were always yours."

And God help me – I was caught up in the spell. I care too much about how special I am to you – how I'm one of your chosen. I care too much to leave you in your own dungeon and doubt alone, wallowing in that darkness of the past.

"I think having him here changes things, soldier."

"I've just been thinking the same thing. Things change. Things become different. Not better and not worse. Just...different."

"I know you too well, Davey, and a poker face, you ain't. There isn't room in you for more than one highest allegiance. I can't help thinking you've shuffled the deck, and I'm not at the top anymore."

Starsky bit down on his lip, lashes lowered to hide his eyes.

You're right. You're right and I didn't want to admit it to you or to myself. But now you've brought it into the open and you've called my bluff.

"Like you said, Wildman, I was never the best at keeping a straight face or playing games."

"What's he worth to you, Davey?"

"He's worth the world to me and more."

"Then, I guess a thank you is in order. Should I thank you for bringing your bright shiny lover to my playground?" Wilder put his mug down. He cracked his knuckles. "I know sharing him with me goes against your nature. That's another truth about you – what's yours is yours and you don't share. But you brought him here – here to all of this – and let me put him in the bulls-eye. Should I take it as a compliment?"

Starsky raised his eyebrows. "I didn't think about it like that. He laid out a case to come. You try saying 'no' to a guy who's curious as a cat and stubborn as a mule. I wasn't honest with him at first. He didn't know about any of this – about you or our past. He was blindsided when he learned about our – secrets. I got caught."

"So. Because he's your lover, do you believe he's entitled to your secrets – even if the secrets aren't just yours?" Wilder's question was conversational, but with a noticeably darker subtext.

Starsky looked at the fire. His reply was cautious and honest. "I don't know."

"Davey. You brought him here under false pretenses. That wasn't fair, was it?"

"I explained it to him as best I could. I tried to be fair to him."

"I don't mean fairness to him –" Wilder was suddenly leaning over Starsky, shadow to shadow. "I mean fairness to **me**."

Starsky balanced forward on the stone hearth, with his weight shifted to the balls of his feet.

“Davey. You brought him into our secrets – our traditions. You brought him, knowing full well it would change the tone, change the scene.” He dangled a hand close to Starsky’s face. “You shared me and my secrets with him, and you didn’t return the favor. You brought him and then you manipulated and controlled every move in the game. I shared with you in good faith. But you – you didn’t share him openly with me. Not fair, Davey. Not honest. Not worthy of you. Not respectful.”

The subtle anger in Wilder’s voice hit Starsky like the cold water. He held his silence, biding his time. The hair on the back of his neck tingled.

“You brought him into a dangerous game. Then you put your energy in trying to protect him. I wonder, did you spare a thought for my needs or my desires? Maybe you were too busy running interference, babysitting and protecting your blond lover from this ‘monster’ from your past?”

Starsky gazed back over his shoulder toward the bed, at Hutch on stained sheets and scattered pillows.

You learn about yourself and how you feel about another person by how you treat your secrets. Knowing I had a secret hurt Hutch – it was gonna hurt us together. I wasn’t gonna run the risk of losing him when I knew coming clean would keep him with me. Wilder, you’re right. I barely spared a thought for you. There wasn’t enough energy to spare – Hutch took it all.

Starsky spread his hands, open with palms up, as though in surrender. His eyes flagged with fatigue and sorrow.

“I’ve disappointed you.”

“Hell. Oh hell.” Wilder shook his head. “Enough of this talk for now. You’ve got a lot of change in your life and a lot of emotions running through you right now. I’m starting to see there’s truth in that ‘zero stamina’ crack you made about yourself earlier.” He jerked his thumb toward the door. “You need to be ready for the next round, cowboy. Go treat yourself to one of those infamous Starsky showers.”

“Infamous?” Starsky stretched.

“Draining the water tank. That’s what we used to call it, remember?”

“Sure it wasn’t ‘beating the wood’?”

“Wrong metaphor.”

“Yeah.”

The allure of hot water and cleansing soap streaming down his overtired, strained muscles was too tempting to resist. Starsky almost stumbled with pleasure at the thought. He was ten paces to the door when he suddenly stopped and reversed course back to Hutch.

“Forget something?” Wilder was a shadow at the fireside.

“Just thinking I oughta wake Hutch and haul him in with me for a good scrubbing. I wouldn’t mind getting him cleaned up and comfortable before he slides too far over the line.”

“Think he can manage?” Wilder’s voice was doubtful. “From here, it sure likes you put him out.”

Starsky teased fingers through Hutch’s bangs. Hutch slept on. Starsky shook his head hopelessly, fondly. “He’s a lost cause. You’re right, Wilder. Looks like it’s on me, all by my lonesome, to use up every last drop of hot water.”

He skimmed a thumb over the gauze on Hutch’s left wrist, the pristine whiteness now sweat soiled.

“Wilder, when I get back, we need to talk about doing another session with him.”

“You don’t sound enthusiastic.”

Starsky hesitated, that ever-present twinge of conflict resurfacing. “I say it’s enough for now, Wildman.”

He smiled, attempting to strip the edge from his words.

“He gave us everything he had tonight. Each time and every time.” His dark blue eyes searched Wilder’s. “And we took it. **You** took it. I watched you. I saw you. I know the signs you give off when the feeding is to your satisfaction, and believe me, I could tell you thought the meal was just fine.”

Wilder walked over to Starsky and gripped his shoulders in a gruff squeeze. “Shut your mind down and get your shower. Lower your guard and enjoy, soldier.”

Starsky pressed the pad of his thumb one last time over Hutch’s brow. With a wink, he headed out the door and down the hallway to the lavishly outfitted bathroom.

Wilder listened to the sound of Starsky’s retreating footsteps followed by a cascade of hot shower water. He pondered for a long moment. And, coming to a decision, he closed and deliberately locked the dungeon door.

Starsky alone on one side.

He and Hutch together on the other.

Chapter 13: Duplicity

Hutch's thoughts rolled along, sluggish and lazy, one displacing the next before he could adequately pass judgment or comprehend. A heavy lassitude tugged at his limbs, imprisoning him to the sheets. The first aches from bruises inflicted on and within his body pulsed. Eyes shuttered, he mapped a drowsy path of the pain from bruise to bruise, like pins on a map board tracking an advancing army.

I keep seeing Starsky's eyes when they touched me. It was like a crystal ball showing Starsky – past and present. First there was Starsky the caged animal – captive and pacing. Then there was Starsky the magnificent wild creature, finally free in a gluttonous rampage – uncontrollable and blood feasting.

He reached out an arm haphazardly, needing the compact, muscled body of his partner.

Nothing. No one.

“Starsk?”

He frowned his disappointment. Starsky's physical absence, in his moment of intense craving, left him sad and oddly lonely.

But did I make you happy tonight, Starsk? Did I make you proud? Did you get what you needed?

He floated, tendrils of consciousness tumbling like kites in a down draft.

Do we stop now, Starsk? Is it over?

The mattress dipped at his side and the weight of another body settled close by. Hutch rolled toward it in anticipation, stretching out an eager, searching hand.

“Starsk?”

“No.”

The answering voice clashed, discordant, with his assumptions. He opened his eyes, blinking in surprise at Wilder next to him, nearly on top of him. Starsky's old friend had emerged, clothed in solid black, like an apparition rising from the shadowy broth of the air.

Wrong smell, wrong voice, wrong person.

Hutch scratched his right temple.

“You're looking for Starsky, are you, boy?”

Apprehensive, Hutch chanced a slight nod.

“He’s in the shower.”

Hutch arched his eyebrows.

“He wants us to get acquainted.”

Hutch waited, uncertain if the established roles of the game still held. Wilder gave no signals of what to expect, how to behave. He leaned close and Hutch felt his breath against his cheek.

“Let’s talk a minute, Hutch. Let’s talk about you. Davey thinks you’re about average. He thinks you’re trustworthy. You cover his ass during every futile and useless shift of your lives. You’re his willing sidekick, always at his side.” Wilder poked his thumb against Hutch’s windpipe.

Hutch held his silence, unsure of the next move and unwilling to be tricked. He gritted his teeth as Wilder’s right palm stroked his neck. Only a steadily increasing pressure on the delicate hollow of his throat spoke of a more sinister intent.

“But you disappoint him, Hutch. He wants you to meet my expectations. You don’t. That’s a shame. He deserves better, don’t you think?” Wilder’s smile baited him.

“I admit I’m surprised – surprised at how you got under his skin. Who would’ve thought Davey’d let something like love get the best of him? Yeah. You’re a pretty boy. Is that what you are? Are you his cop partner by day and his pussy to fuck by night?”

Hutch recoiled from the jeering and the uninvited touch. A deep pink stain of humiliation and anger spread across his cheeks and down his neck. He flicked his gaze to the door, straining to detect Starsky’s distinctive voice or the sound of his high energy movements.

I disappointed you, babe? You told him all that?

Wilder gestured impatiently.

“Get up and move. Get to the bottom of the bed. Get down there and then get on your knees. Put your belly against the rail and put your arms out beside you. Lift them high.”

Woodenly, his mind churning at Wilder’s revelations, Hutch obeyed. Metal cuffs clicked around each of his wrists with a disturbingly familiar sound.

I’m supposed to be the one doing the cuffing.

He glanced toward the door again.

Is this what you want me to do, Starsk?

Wilder tested the stretch of Hutch’s arms. Dissatisfied, he looped the securing chains tighter and pulled. Hutch raised higher on his knees to ease the jolts of pain firing along his shoulders.

“You don’t like me, do you, Davey’s partner? Maybe you can’t deal with the history we have together – your lover and me. Maybe you don’t like to compete. Maybe you glorify him so much that you can’t accept his weaknesses and his failures and his appetites. Not the way I can.” He trailed the edge of a fingernail along Hutch’s wrists.

“I don’t like to admit it, but Davey’s a weakling. He’s pathetic at times. That’s why he needs me. To pull his head out of his ass and slap him back into sanity.” Wilder’s voice was almost cordial.

Hutch listened, struck by the tone of pure contempt.

Failure? Weakling? Pathetic? About Starsk? What the fuck?

“Davey’s just a poor lost boy – a lost little weakling. Sad. So much damn potential flushed away” Wilder gave Hutch an exaggerated wink.

You don’t insult him, asshole. Not in my company.

His anger awakened, Hutch abandoned his submissive role and lunged at Wilder. He hissed when the chains trapped him, the game forgotten in the backwash of his outrage.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!” Hutch snarled the words.

Wilder sat down on the bed behind him.

“You resent the hell out of me and all this, don’t you little boy?”

Hutch ran his tongue over his lower lip, trying to tame his temper.

“Resent is the wrong word.”

“What the right word, then?”

“Distrust. Disappointment.”

“How’s that?”

“You just proved yourself to be a liar. And liars, by nature, are to be distrusted. You claim to know my partner, to respect my partner. I’ve been watching you and listening to you. What you say is a load of crap. I’ve been watching Starsky, too. He’s being a good sport with your game here. But if you know him like you say you do, why can’t you see his heart isn’t in it? Have you asked Starsky what he’s getting out of it – out of these games of yours? Have you thought or asked what it’s like on his side of your game board?”

“What are you implying?”

“Have you considered maybe Starsky’s only here to please you? Have you thought that maybe it’s less about feeding his habit and more about not knowing how to tell you to deal him out without risking your friendship?”

“He doesn’t want out.”

“Have you asked him?”

“You’re saying there’s a reason to ask him?”

Hutch tried for a casual shrug, but his bound shoulders screamed in response. He winced.

“What harm is there in asking him? Ask him what he wants. Listen to him. I know you’ve got some power over him. I was hoping you deserved that power. He trusts you. He thinks you’re honorable.”

“I am honorable.”

“Okay. If you’re so honorable, ask him what he wants with you and your games. When you block his questions or confuse him or play to his loyalty, is that honorable? Is that right? Are you doing the right thing for him - for ‘Davey-boy’ – your old pal?”

“He can’t take the lead when it comes to questions or answers like that. He doesn’t know himself or his real desires enough.”

“Bullshit. Starsky knows more about what he wants than any other man I’ve ever met. If that’s what you think, then you don’t know jack shit about the man he is.” Hutch shook his head in contempt.

“Now you’re the expert on David Starsky? Are you the one who molded him, shaped him, taught him?”

“I’m not talking about me or what I did or didn’t do. I’m not talking about Starsky the Army Private or Starsky the cop. I’m talking about Starsky the man. Yes. I’m an expert when it comes to the man. And what you just said about him shows me your ignorance of and disrespect for the worthy, decent, honorable man he is.”

Wilder tapped Hutch’s elbow. “Starsky is a man who will always need help getting in touch with his innermost self – his dark desires – the secrets he keeps hidden even from himself.”

“I think I said this before. You’re a liar.”

“You sound offended by my description of him.”

“You claim to know and care about him. That’s bullshit. Your words cheapen and mock him. I wanted to respect you, but that’s not the point. I’m talking about Starsky. I don’t want him to be disappointed in the people he trusts.” Hutch caught his breath, peered forward to catch Wilder’s brown eyes. “Please. He cares about you. Show him the respect and honesty he

deserves. And see him as he is right now. As he is – not who he once was or who you want him to be. He’s a long way from the scared kid who needed you in Vietnam.”

“Have you ever considered you might be his pity fuck, pretty boy?”

“Have you ever considered that coming here and playing your games may be hurting him?”

“You know that?”

“I believe that.”

Wilder shoved his fist under Hutch’s chin, bruising his jaw.

“Shut up, Hutch. Did anybody give you permission to speak in here? You can’t follow orders. You can’t follow rules.” He pinched rough fingers to Hutch’s nipples, squeezing blood from fresh welts. “You would’ve made a piss poor POW, Hutch.”

Hutch slammed forward, his clarity nose-diving in an explosion of white pain.

Wilder tilted him backward and held him.

“Davey said he wants us to get acquainted. You don’t want to disappoint him again, do you?”

Chapter 14: Desperation

Starsky smiled at his reflection in the foggy bathroom mirror, luxuriating in the trifecta of clean skin, clean hair, clean jeans. With one final haphazard sweep of a comb over his wild curls, he left the steamy heat of the bathroom and headed back down the hall toward the dungeon. His smile widened as he imagined the next hours ahead – of awakening sore and sleepy Hutch for a shower, warm clothes, and the opportunity to know Wilder, not as a Master of dark games, but as Starsky’s intriguing and intelligent friend. He envisioned them sitting around a table on the terrace, wrapped in stadium blankets, talking over beers or shots of coffee. He could almost hear the memories and stories recounted, could almost mimic Hutch’s droll sarcasm. Best of all, he anticipated the opportunity to recast his relationship with his old mentor – to free it from the mantle of the past and allow it to flourish as a friendship of equals.

He grasped the dungeon’s doorknob and turned it, surprised to find it locked. Vaguely insulted, he tried again, twisting the knob and pressing the door with his opposite hand.

It didn’t budge.

He knocked, evenly and regularly at first, then louder – building to pounding with the heels of his hands when his efforts went unanswered.

“Wildman! Huuutch! The damn door’s locked! Open up!” The volume escalated to shouting, accompanied by a gnawing apprehension.

"I said open up! Hutch! Hutch! Wilder! Open the damn door!" Starsky was banging now with fists and the sides of his bare feet.

Faintly, very faintly, Wilder's voice answered.

"Not now Davey-boy. We're busy."

"Wilder!" Starsky shouted the name, hitting the door frame and the lock in his mounting confusion.

"I said be patient, Davey! We're busy here."

Starsky yelled back, repeating their names over and over.

Silence.

His dread saturated and smothered the sinister quiet.

He stepped back, studying options.

It's wrong. This is wrong. I'm fucking getting in there! What the hell?

He left the doorway and tore across the great room, his bare feet barely skimming the floor. He spied the heavy andirons in the cold fireplace and grabbed one up like a club. With a battle cry resurrected from a different era and place, he launched toward the locked door, swinging. A satisfying crash of metal to wood rang out in a shower of flying splinters.

Wiping away perspiration from his forehead, he lunged, slamming his shoulder full force to the damaged door.

And ricocheted backward, thrown onto the floor.

Wilder! Why the hell won't you answer me? Why is the door locked?

He stared in disbelief. The door held, the lock unbroken.

He pounded the door again, his fists bruised and aching from the repeated battering.

"Wilder! Hutch! Open the door! Open the fucking door!"

Nothing.

He was stranded, frustrated and confused, on the wrong side of the threshold. He slid on his knees to the closed door and pressed his ear close, listening over the drumbeat of his heart.

You're gonna regret playing this game on me, Wilder. It ain't funny. I'm deadly serious.

An agonized cry vibrated faintly near the surface of his hearing. Panicked, he staggered to his feet.

Hutch. Hutch in pain.

Starsky dashed back toward the center of the room, fingers grabbing at the freestanding kitchen countertop for balance as he spun around the corner, directionless and desperate. Cold air touched his shower warmed skin, carrying wild ocean harmonies on its wings.

Open doors. A way in. Outside doors connect this terrace to the dungeon terrace. Good. Good.

He vaulted the low table blocking his path and skidded onto the slick slate deck of the exterior terrace. Small lights, inset along the wall, illuminated the curve of the railing. He followed the comforting glow, turned the last corner.

And gasped in horror.

The deck where he stood ended abruptly at the corner of the house. There was no continuous connecting bridge between the two decks. Instead, open space yawned between them. Far below, rocks and encroaching water moved in shadows and darkness.

He sucked in a deep breath and measured the distance from terrace to terrace.

At least thirty feet. I'm trapped on this side. He's over there – in there. And I'm fucking trapped.

Ice cold despair took a seat with anger and frustration in his belly.

No. Wait. Wait.

Starsky studied a wall of contiguous windows, one after another in an uninterrupted line from the edge of the deck where he stood to his destination. Each window was oversized and outfitted with a narrow ledge at the bottom and woefully small side grooves holding glass and screen.

A way across. Toe holds. Finger holds. But if I fall...

He shivered, mouth wide, studying a freefall of space of more than forty feet straight down. One unbroken vertical drop. Vertigo swam up and knocked him backwards from the thin ribbon of railing.

Fucking heights. This is like crossing the damn Rubicon.

He slumped back against the wall, hating the tremble of his legs, the dryness of his throat.

I can't. I can't climb over there.

A fresh rush of wind carried new sounds, low groans that melted into half-sobs.

Fuck. Hutch. Hutch!

Starsky abandoned his safe retreat by the wall. He willed himself to look at nothing but the stationary panorama of the moon above black water – to not look at the equally black chasm

below. A vision burned, the fuel of pure terror, of falling away into that inky black to his death on the rubble. He clung to the rough stucco exterior wall and, banishing any other thought except for Hutch, forced himself up and over the slim safety of the railing.

Don't. Look. Don't. Blink. Don't. Think. Breathe.

With his fingers in a claw grip and his palms moist from sub-level panic, he tested the narrow window ledge with a bare toe. He shuffled his weight minutely from his braced right leg to the questing left. The bite of toes to solid ledge seemed very slight indeed.

Okay. Not great, but there are toe holds. Toe holds below. Hand holds above. Stomach to the wall. Creep along. Oh. Fuck.

The breeze caught stray leaves and sent them skittering across the slate. Starsky froze, beating down fresh panic.

No monsters here. No goblins here. No perps with switchblades and attitudes here.

He allowed himself the indulgence of wishing it was one or all three, anything but the reality of this solo journey, clinging to air and luck, too far above the ground to even contemplate.

Nope. Got a worse problem right now.

He stretched his right arm flat against the wall, squeezed his body close, and grasped the narrow edge of the window frame. He pushed off, toe by toe, finger hold to finger hold, moving another few inches away from the security of the railing. He redirected his gaze to the comfort of the second terrace.

Hold on. Steady. I hate heights. I hate them.

A foolhardy glance between his feet caused his stomach to lurch, leaving him light-headed and nearly hyperventilating with terror. He stopped and clung, mouth gaping to drag in the salty air. The rough stucco scraped his cheek.

Miraculously, the splinter of terror passed.

He crept forward, toes bracing. He paused to rest in the way station of a window frame, reveling in the sturdier hand and footholds offered.

Stay tight. Stay focused. Hey Hutch. You ain't gonna believe me when I tell you about this.

He eased into motion, knees locking at each step, methodically anticipating placement before each foot settled, before each hand hold was relinquished for the next.

Nearly there – nearly there.

He reached the haven of another window, savoring the solid assurance of the wood framing under his fingers. He stubbornly ignored the growing numbness in his toes and the aching strain of his calf muscles. Most of all, he ignored his own reflection in the window glass.

*I don't need the sight of a half-mad, wild-eyed savage freaking me and tossing me over the edge.
No pun intended.*

He slid a toe forward to grip the next frame, belly flat against the cooler kiss of the glass...

...and shouted in horror when the expected handgrip failed to materialize. His greedy fingers closed only on air. Off balance he swayed, fingertips trying to claw at the smooth glass.

Fuck! Fuck!

He forced himself to calmness, waiting until equilibrium swung back into balance like weights on a fulcrum.

The only way forward is pure balance. Toes and body in formation. No hand holds for another five feet. Don't panic. Don't think. Just get moving.

He clung. He cursed himself, immobile, statue straight, shadow drenched. His heart hammered. His feet refused to budge.

Deer. Headlights. That's me...

Another sound drifted to him on the fickle wind, a pleading drawn out cry, sketching the outline of a word.

"Ice. Ice. Ice."

Hutch's voice . Hutch's safe word.

That voice motivated him to immediate action. He lunged, toes almost tangling, and flew, suspended over open air for a slow motion eternity. He felt his body swing under the tug of gravity and felt an iron railing brush his palms. He grabbed. The railing held. His grip held. His legs swung free and dangled below him. His shoulders transmitted a sharp code of pain to his brain.

Heaving with effort, he flexed biceps and clawed his way up the railing. He rolled, tumbled. The slam of breath leaving his lungs was the first clue – he had landed heavily on his back, safe on the rough slate of the dungeon's terrace.

Not bothering to savor success or to marvel at his survival on his desperate route, he scrambled to his feet.

Closed windows glowed with polished moonlight that flowed through the open terrace doors and inside. Starsky followed the path of light across the threshold and into the dungeon, his stomach cramped with anxiety. He blinked rapidly, willing his eyes to adjust to gloom that

played shape-shifter, refusing to reveal identities. Objects crouched in the darkness, tripping him as he moved forward.

Disconnected sounds tangled together like strings – the symphony of ocean and wind, his own labored breathing, and an almost mechanical timpani rhythm.

**Slap* Pause*

**Slap* Pause*

**Slap* Pause*

The bed took form in the grayness, its hanging chains flashing silver. Movement flickered in the folds of shadow and then a glow – naked white skin and a cap of white-blond hair.

“Hutch!” Starsky used his insistent “on-the-job-answer-me-now” voice.

A low groan answered. The sound was warped in his ears, as though traveling underwater.

Hutch. In pain.

Starsky dove forward.

Chapter 15: Betrayal

Starsky hit the wall switch and shielded his eyes from the immediate brightness of lamp light. The shadows parted like a curtain. He instinctively reached for his absent shoulder holster and missing gun. Overcorrecting, he tilted forward in a crouch, on point, silently taking stock. He scanned the room, seeking answers, seeking clues.

Hutch.

Hutch knelt, posed on the bed, facing him. His belly was jammed against the horizontal rail of the footboard, his arms pulled severely to the sides and bound to the bedposts. A length of chain trailed across white sheets, snaking down and disappearing like a hidden mooring behind him.

The steady pulse of percussion sounds continued.

**Slap* Pause*

**Slap* Pause*

**Slap* Pause*

Tracking the sounds to their origin, Starsky’s shoulders slumped momentarily in disbelief.

What the hell?

Wilder stood at the footboard facing Hutch, his back to Starsky. He took no notice of Starsky's quiet entrance. His black t-shirt was tight over his shoulders, muscles flexing and bunching as he moved. He grasped Hutch by the chin, holding the blond head steady for a split second. He delivered a stinging open palmed slap across Hutch's left cheek, releasing his grip, allowing Hutch's head to roll with the blow. The arc of motion ended with Hutch's head lolling sideways. He grabbed Hutch again, repositioned his head, repeated the slap. The cadence had a military precision, crisp and uniform, like boots marching in formation.

Hutch's eyes were open, wide and unseeing, above his swollen left cheek.

"Thank me, boy. Say, 'Thank you, Sir.'" Wilder's voice was jeering.

"No." Hutch's reply wavered, unsteady.

Wilder delivered another jarring slap to Hutch's cheekbone, the sound crackling like static.

Starsky sprinted and pounced. He trapped Wilder's wrists in his own hands, his shout furious.

"Wilder! **Stop! Now! Now! I said now!**"

Wilder looked up mutely, as though looking straight through him, his gaze flickering and his lips set in a thin line. He pulled his hands free. His left hand reached for Hutch's chin, his right raised to deliver a blow.

Starsky body slammed him into the wall, knocking him away from Hutch.

"Wilder! **I said fucking stop!** What the hell? Did you lose your mind while I was in the shower?"

Wilder rocked against the wall, arms dropping to his sides. He turned his brown eyes from Hutch to the pure rage in Starsky's unblinking blue stare.

At the sound of Starsky's voice, Hutch tried to reach his arms out, but the chains held him fast.

Starsky caught his partner's head gently. Balancing it on his shoulder, he unloaded his fury on the man braced against the wall.

"Wilder! You heard me at the door! At the locked door! I nearly fucking killed myself getting in here! What the hell is going on?"

Wilder took a step toward him. Starsky held up a warning hand. "Stay right there. Don't move. Stay the hell away from me. Stay the hell away from my partner."

The controlled calm of Starsky's voice reinforced rather than contradicted the forcefulness of his order. He stepped around the footboard and slid onto the bed. He reached for his dazed partner, slinging a careful arm around and bracing him as he released the cuffs and chains. Hutch rolled into his arms, eerily docile.

Wilder slid down the wall, slouching low, his arms cross on his propped knees. His eyes followed Starsky.

Starsky ignored him.

“Ice. Ice.” Hutch’s voice was a ragged, plaintive whisper.

Starsky nodded. “That’s right. ‘Ice’ is safety, buddy. It’s safe. You’re safe.”

He used his right arm as a protective perimeter as Hutch burrowed against his chest.

“Hutch. I gotta take a look at you.” Starsky eased Hutch’s unresisting body onto the mattress. Hutch’s hands curled in the folds of the ruined sheets. He lay, unmoving, as Starsky’s eyes and hands explored.

The repeated slaps to Hutch’s face spared his features with the exception of a swelling over the arch of his left cheekbone. A second bruise, midnight blue, trailed across his throat. Starsky stroked it lightly, feeling the rapid pulse beneath the fragile skin. When Hutch flinched, he flinched. He continued his scan of Hutch’s body – left and right, working his way down.

He looked closely at Hutch’s bare chest.

Now what?

He recognized the outlines of earlier bite marks around Hutch’s nipples and down his ribcage. The bruising was benign, almost gentle, compared with new trauma on the fair skin. Thin ribbons of blood traced the path of shallow lash marks. Scarlet streaks seeped from cuts, drying in abstract whorls like ink spilled on paper.

Starsky’s fury reignited. He turned accusingly to his old friend, his voice like a barely contained burn.

“You. You lashed him. You did this to him. Are you fucking crazy?”

He stroked the ridges at the edges of the ragged cuts, sick with shock.

“Wilder! Look at me! You call this ‘safe’? You call this ‘sane’? You call this fucking ‘consensual’?” With each word, Starsky’s voice rose in increments until he was shouting. “Look at him! Look what you did! What happened to your sanctioned guidelines – your precious rules of engagement? Tell me! Why?”

“The marks won’t scar him. I knew what I was doing.” Wilder’s response was deadpan. Hollow.

“I ain’t talking about scars right now! I’m talking about you – I’m **talking about** you going ape shit. I’m **talking about** you locking me out of here and doing this to him! I’m talking about you making a deliberate choice –and a bad fucking mistake – to hurt Hutch!”

God help me. You hurt Hutch, you get a few free rounds with the monster I keep hidden inside. That goes for you too, Wildman. The past and the memories I've cherished for a decade won't save you. Hell, they make it worse. Too late – too bad. You've forced a showdown.

“Why Wilder? Why?” Starsky shook his head, unable to connect the disparate realities together.

The friend and mentor I trusted. The lover I failed to protect.

“You’re the one who brought him here, Davey.” Wilder looked up, his neck craned sharply in the glare of lights.

“Not for this. Not like this.”

“You can’t predict how the cards will fall when you break the rules, soldier.”

Their eyes met, each taking the measure of the other, searching for an advantage on this newly formed battleground.

Wilder – Wildman – my old friend. Who are you?

Starsky rubbed a hand over his sore neck, semi-nauseous from a chaotic sensation of freefall, of complete confusion.

He studied Wilder – his friend and companion.

Wilder looked back at him. His eyes were like black glass, hard and unblinking with a silent dare. Starsky read the signals in those pinpoint pupils. An unsettling déjà vu flashed.

Wilder the Vietnam warrior looked back at him – the man whose instincts and leadership and presence of mind had kept him functioning and sane in a world without mercy. This was the man who combined stealth and strength with the skill of a merciless, natural born predator – the man who had once helped him to justify anything.

The realization froze Starsky in place. Marooned the past and this immediate, baffling moment, words deserted him.

Hutch’s fingers curled weakly against his forearm.

“Hey. Hey, partner.” Starsky redirected his attention to Hutch, his smile gentle, reassuring. He eased Hutch into an awkward embrace, soothing him with a steady sweep of his hand, stroking from waist to upper thigh to ass.

His hand slid through a tacky wetness. Puzzled, he rubbed his fingers together and held them up to the light, studying the sticky red coating.

More blood? More of Hutch’s blood?

“Hutch?” Starsky’s voice caught, barely above a whisper.

Hutch shook his head. “Don’t. T-t-touch.”

Fear and urgency merged, roughening Starsky’s hands. He pushed Hutch away, face down on the mattress. His fingers, confident in this known territory, easily found their on Hutch’s body. He skimmed the narrow hips and pressed his palm over Hutch’s ass, into a pool of oily wetness. His eyes found a cluster of small, ragged tears at Hutch’s opening.

He probed, gently, lightly, exploring with fingertips and eyes.

Hutch stiffened and moaned into the mattress, the anguished sound an accelerant to Starsky’s rising anger. Keeping a possessive hand on Hutch’s ass, he slid to the floor, facing his old mentor.

“Wilder. He’s bleeding. What did you do to him?” He snapped the accusing words. His dangerous anger was volatile, ready to explode like a child on the edge of a tantrum.

I don’t understand!

“Look at me. Wilder. Look at me! Talk to me!” He grabbed Wilder’s shoulders, dragging him forward and slamming him against the wall. Unfulfilled and unsatisfied, he did it again.

“I’m talking to you. I asked you a question. Why? You hurt him. You chained him up – you tortured him – and he couldn’t fight back! Answer me! Why? I said answer me!”

Wilder didn’t speak or blink. Instead, he stared at Starsky as though watching a performance artist.

Starsky sat back down on the bed, his hand on the small of Hutch’s back. Hutch squirmed under his touch, drawing a knee up along the edge of the mattress. Starsky’s fingers tried to maintain contact but instead slipped down to a short length of chain trapped under Hutch’s hipbone. His fingers probed the chain, tracing it link by link until they butted up against a blunt wooden shaft.

Starsky pulled back, eyebrows raised. He closed his fist around the wood.

“What the hell?”

Wilder made a nose in his throat, defiant and defensive.

“Fucking. Son. Of. A. Bitch!” With furious curiosity, Starsky examined the object in his hand.

Wilder’s con nhi kucu – his “twin joined sticks.” His hand crafted, scrolled, pasania wood, custom made Vietnamese nunchuk.

In his palm, the rounded wooden shaft was honed for balance, the bottom slightly curved and tapered. The top was threaded with a hand wrought chain, joined to an identical wooden bar screwed in place to a bridle-shaped metal flange.

The thick wood was sticky and streaked with blood.

Hutch's blood.

"Hutch?" Starsky nearly choked from a sickly wave of queasiness.

Wilder. Dear God! You fucked him with this. Damn you to hell. Why?

Starsky shook his unresisting partner. "Hutch! What did you let him do to you? Answer me!" He tightened his jaw, face folding into snarling fury. A savage tide crested and threatened to blind him to Hutch, to Wilder, to everything under his hands.

Damn you Wilder. Is this where I got no choice but to call you a sick fuck and beat you to death?

"Starsk. No."

Hutch's voice somehow pierced the fog of his howling anger.

Wilder laughed softly in the shadows.

Starsky whipped his head around, his patience snapping. He vaulted to his feet and charged his old mentor, fists raised. He clipped Wilder under the shoulders, driving him to the floor. One fist delivered a right cross, the other a stomach jab. A kick in the ribs landed solidly next, followed by a well-aimed throat punch. Wilder sank down under the blows. Starsky found the nunchuk and slammed it into the wall beside Wilder's face.

"Laughing? You're laughing? You sick fuck! You used this on him! You put this inside of him!"

He pressed his face close to Wilder's, his jaw so tight that a spear of pain radiated to his temples. "I oughta fucking kill you! My old friend. My old leader. What made you think I was fucking around when I told you, 'I call the shots here, when it comes to Hutch'?"

Wilder. My false friend.

Starsky dropped his head to his hands. Gripping his forehead fiercely, he tried to squeeze away the reality of the moment and the barrage of oscillating emotions that dragged him back and forth, from extreme to extreme.

I trusted you!

"I trusted you! I trusted you! And you did this? You did this to me! You betrayed me!" Starsky shouted the words, a howl of pained betrayal.

"Betrayals are a two-way street, soldier. You started it. I finished it." Wilder's voice was composed, self-righteous. He sat back, arms crossed.

"I betrayed you?" Starsky sneered. He backed up again, drawn to Hutch as though by a magnet. He leaned over his barely conscious partner, gauging the injuries, the level of damage.

"He'll be sore as hell for a few days." Wilder straightened his back, a half-ghost in the firelight. "Give him aspirin, arnica cream, antiseptic, a day in bed, and your golden boy is good as new."

"You said I betrayed you." Starsky repeated the words, confused, disbelieving. He teased a hand over Hutch's hair. "If you think I betrayed you, then you're fucking crazy."

"Maybe you didn't plan it, but it was a betrayal, Davey. I thought you came here in good faith with no hidden agenda. Instead I learn you brought your lover to my house, to my game, to my rules. You never hinted you had your own rules. You never said anything was different. You never signaled you'd contaminate my will with yours. You played a bait-and-switch on me, soldier. In my book, that's betrayal. You challenged me and I don't let any challenge go unanswered. Not even yours. Every action has a consequence, right Davey-boy? You needed a lesson. I gave you one."

He held out a hand, as though reaching for Starsky's understanding. "I gave you a proportional response. If I'd wanted to go all out, he'd be half-dead. You know that much."

Starsky's response was a silent and dismissive glare.

With exaggerated, deliberate care, he pulled his duffle bag up from beside the bed, digging inside until he found sweatpants and a t-shirt. Ignoring Wilder, he carefully eased the sweatpants over Hutch's long legs and hips, swaddling nakedness and injuries in soft black cloth.

"Now everything's out in the open, soldier. We've cleared the air. We each did what we had to do. Now it's time to talk, to make sense of it so we can put it behind us." In the flat gray shadows, Wilder resembled the young platoon leader and courageous friend Starsky had always known.

Starsky's thoughts spun like a child's toy top.

Love. Fury. Gratitude. Confusion. Respect. Revulsion. Trust. Betrayal.

Over their long history, Wilder had chided him more than once for his black and white thinking. That the observation was tired and worn made it no less true. When it came to Hutch, the accuracy was laser sharp. For Starsky, one thing was refreshingly uncomplicated, perfectly binary. Do intentional harm to Hutch and any option for forgiveness was off the table. No exceptions.

Starsky tried to expand his thinking, tried to find a way to respond positively to Wilder's olive branch. It was no use. He couldn't do it. He couldn't spin the straw of this disillusionment into the gold of honor and acceptance. This act, Wilder's act of violence against Hutch, split the earth between them. Treasured memories of battles fought and secrets shared – always bathed in the warm glow of Wilder's acceptance – seemed like mere dust compared to the betrayal of this past hour.

I can't forgive this. The lesson's lost on me. You think you have a side to this story. I don't. I don't want to hear it. I don't much care.

Starsky shook his head. "No. No. Wilder. No."

Wilder extended his hand again. "C'mere boy. Come on, soldier." He stepped away from the wall. "Let's take a deep breath here, Private Starsky. Let's try to see things for what they are."

Starsky shook his head again, firmly and sadly. "Do you remember our platoon's first rule, Wilder? I do. I never forgot it. 'No circular firing squads.' You always told us that. You said we had a common enemy – the Viet Cong. We didn't go gunning for each other instead. We didn't turn on our own team."

He closed his eyes and, one last time, permitted himself the luxury of remembering Wilder as a brother in that long ago war-drenched world.

"You broke our rule here, Wilder. Here – tonight. You betrayed everything you ever taught me. 'Don't get distracted. Don't break rank. If you do – you got no respect for yourself and don't deserve no respect from anybody else.'" Starsky studied his old leader, heart sore with disappointment. His eyes and his decision were resolute. "You broke rank. You hurt Hutch. Hurting him is the same as aiming your weapon at me and pulling the trigger."

That's it. No more. No second chances. What you did here – it goes too deep.

"Come on, Davey." The sound of his name was cajoling, another peace offering. Starsky looked over his shoulder at the hope in Wilder's eyes flaring like a match in the darkness.

"No."

It's too late.

"It's not like you to overreact, soldier." Now Wilder's voice was less assured.

Starsky looked away. With gentle movements, he carefully guided a t-shirt over Hutch's head. Hutch's eyes opened, unshielded, searching. Starsky slid a hand behind Hutch's right ear, pressing the blond head to his shoulder.

"You ain't in any position to judge how I'm acting," he said. His hands on Hutch were tender, at odds with the dismissive inflection of his words.

“Impulsive. Untamed. Ungrateful. That’s what you were. I thought you’d outgrown all of that, Davey.”

Starsky studied his old mentor coldly, his eyes hard enough to punch holes in steel. “I was your friend. I was the faithful soldier, the loyal underling. I was those things. It meant a lot to me to be those things. But now, after what you did here tonight, I’m none of those things.”

“All the history between us, soldier? Erased over one small action?” Wilder’s came closer.

“Don’t insult me, Wilder. I trusted you with Hutch. **With Hutch.** You spit my trust back in my face – like it was litter on the street.” Starsky paused, murmured in Hutch’s ear to encourage him to stand. “You weren’t worth all those years of my friendship and my trust. You weren’t worth one hour.”

Wilder’s eyes hardened. He turned his back and gripped the mantle over the dying fire. He didn’t call out again, didn’t move or acknowledge, as Starsky steered an unsteady Hutch out the door and into the weak light of false dawn.

Chapter 16: Whistle

Starsky drove north, the Torino going it alone on the deserted highway.

Regrets and reflections would hit soon. Already he felt them jockeying for position, ready to bolt free like so many skittish horses from the gate. The back and forth tennis game in his head would continue until he understood how things he once considered eternal could end without warning.

He whistled in the darkness like a small boy whistles past a graveyard, holding the guilt at bay.

Not now. Please. Not yet. Get outta my thoughts and stay away until after I’ve got him home and tended and settled.

Guilt and sadness and answers would come.

Maybe in his dreams.

Maybe staring up at him from the bottom of a shot glass.

But not now. Right now was about safe travels on the quiet road with the stars and the sea over his shoulder. And it was about Hutch’s head in his lap, cramping his thigh and crowding the steering wheel.

He whistled up his courage again, louder and stronger. The whine of the Torino’s wheels on the highway joined in, keeping him company on the lonesome journey home.

Chapter 17: Home

Moonlight and lamplight intersected the shadows on wall, creating a mosaic over Hutch as he lay on his stomach asleep in his bedroom alcove. Branches dipped with the wind and curled leaves and shadow against the windows like claws.

Starsky stood in Hutch's bathroom and listened to his partner's uneven breathing. He paused, hands on the faucet, to study his reflection in the mirror. The man returning his critical gaze was a self-portrait of despair. He saw the worried pull of his frown and the darkened shadows under his eyes. He turned on the cold water tap full force and splashed his face until the iciness numbed his cheeks and chin.

"There's no cure in this medicine chest for what ails me, buddy," he whispered over his shoulder to Hutch.

He looked at the water in the shallow basin he'd carried from Hutch's bedside, saddened by the blood-tinged water and the washcloth floating there, like a sail torn from the mast. He drained the water away and tossed used gauze and first aid tape into the trash can. After a moment, and with surprising force, he wadded up the stained cloth he'd used to sponge away the blood and sweat from Hutch's torn skin and threw it out the bathroom door and across the room. It smacked wetly against the bookcase and landed, dripping, on the rug.

"I don't feel good right now, partner." Starsky shook his head. His spirit felt weighted, crushed under an anvil of guilt and regret. Every pain-laced sigh from Hutch slipped into his bloodstream like slow-acting poison.

"Nope. Don't feel so good. Dammit Hutch, look at what happened. I took you there and I let you get hurt. I made promises and I broke them."

Hutch shifted toward him as though in reply. His outstretched hand curled and uncurled.

Starsky responded, suddenly needing Hutch's life-breath against him, needing an outlet and a safety valve before he crash-landed into a bleak landscape of guilt and self-loathing. Shedding clothes as he went, he crossed the cramped space from bathroom to bed and settled down next to Hutch.

Hutch moved his head and groaned against the pillow.

Starsky reached out and held him, trying to calm himself by calming Hutch. The nonsense words of comfort he offered were like dust in his throat, choking him. Quietly frantic, he urged Hutch closer, coaxing him up and into the haven of his arms. Hutch moved over him, a signal to a homing beacon, settling his head against Starsky's familiar chest. Starsky pulled a blanket around the shaking shoulders and turned Hutch's bruised cheek against his body where he could feel and absorb the heat.

Why can't I just throw a blanket over my own guilt, as easy as throwing a blanket over you?

His right hand rested lightly on Hutch's head. He played his fingers through the tangle of blond strands in time to Hutch's breathing. The swift staccato inhale-exhale slowed as Hutch slid deeper into exhausted sleep.

"Know what, Hutch?" Starsky brushed a fingertip against Hutch's lower lip. Hutch didn't stir, but Starsky knew that, at some level, he heard every word.

We're partners – even in silence.

"I got a crazy imagination, Hutch." Starsky tried to grin as he imagined a typical Hutchinson retort – candid and scathing. "Sometimes my imagination's fun and sometimes it's a pain in the butt. Sometimes I imagine us taking motorcycles up to the mountains and just driving for miles – out there where there's just wind and trails and no scum to distract us. Other times, I think of us on the job – moving together and breathing together and reading each other's minds..." He trailed off, sighed. "I think of us keeping each other safe, like we always do. Keeping each other alive. I'll always do anything I can to keep you safe and alive, Hutch. You know that, don'tcha, Hutch? Don't you, buddy?"

Hutch's fingers tightened against Starsky's, as though acknowledging a promise made and reciprocated.

"I know. I know, Hutch. It's too hard to think right now. You rest. We don't need to talk yet. But soon – soon we're gonna talk it all out. I'm gonna slam myself to the dirt for letting this happen, and you're gonna kick my ass until I get back up. You're gonna go all strong-and-silent on me, cause you're hurting and you're confused, and I'm gonna boot your butt until you level with me. I'm gonna feel guilty and you're gonna throw your own guilt-trip down. Yeah, it'll be a damn mess. But, we're gonna do what we always do and trust who we always trust. Love who we always love. Each other. Together." He pressed a kiss to the side of Hutch's face. "And, when we're relaxed and happy, after all the words are said, I'm gonna get on this bed with you – just like now – except then, I'm gonna screw you right through the mattress until you don't remember any other body on yours but mine. I'm gonna hold you and kiss you – your mouths and your eyes. I'm gonna chew a hole in your neck. I'm gonna make you feel good, Hutch, so good and so loved. I promise you. You know me, Hutch. I always keep my promises."

The corners of Hutch's mouth turned up in a half-conscious smile.

Starsky's hand stroked over Hutch's face, brow to jawline. He blinked until his vision cleared.

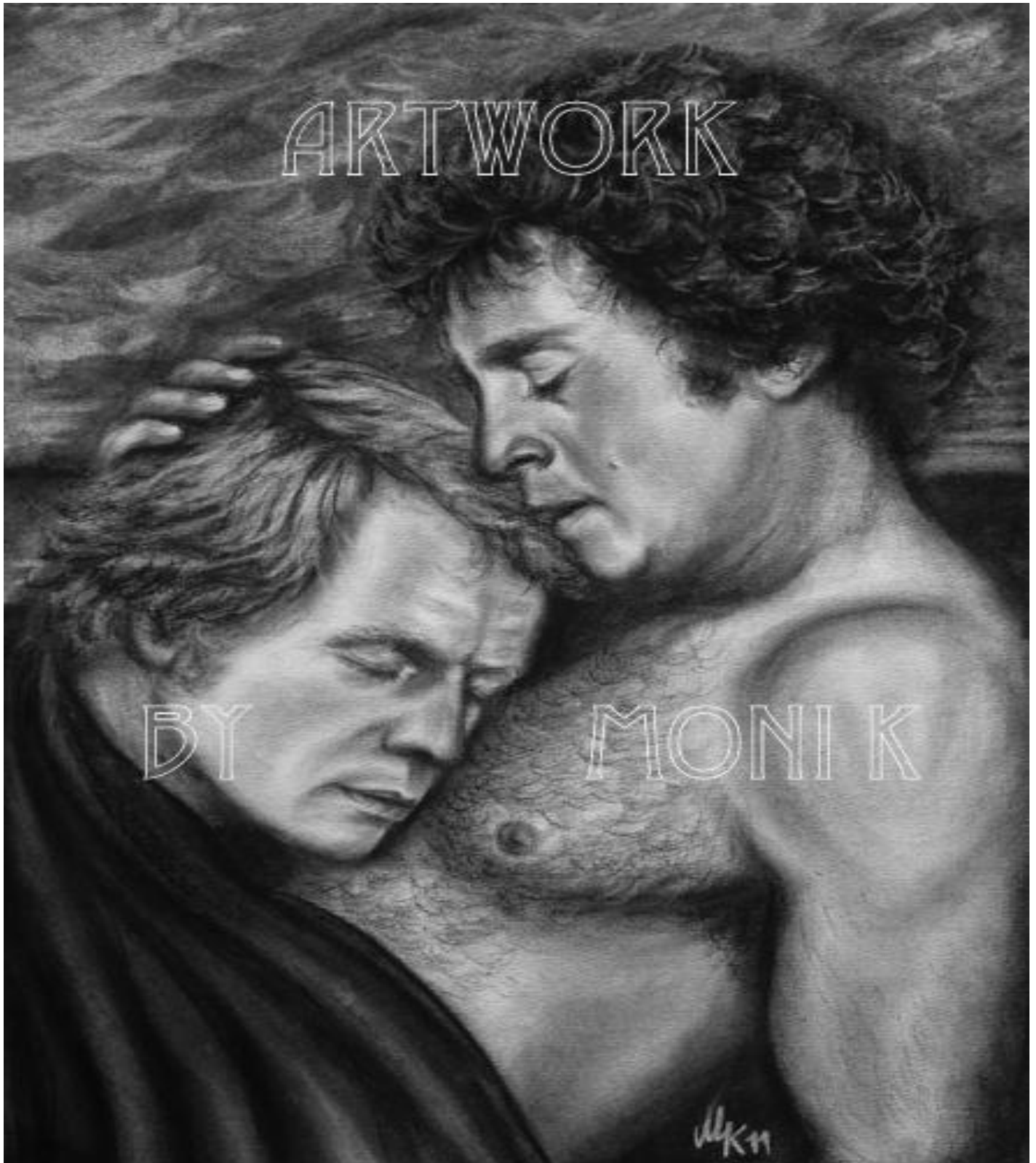
Forgive me, Hutch. Help me forgive myself.

Starsky knew, with pristine clarity, that Hutch's forgiveness would come easier, much easier than his own.

Braced on his left forearm, he steadied his partner and thought about their unique brand of mutual love. Often, it was like a stampede - a free-for-all with the breathless pace of a barroom

brawl. It was a dance of equals, grounded in strength and pride, tempered by enduring affection.

But in this moment, love was teacup fragile - protective and tender, an oasis in a world bloodied by old wounds and old debts. It was simply Hutch's heartbeat – the beating heart that mattered the most to him – strong and safe against his chest.



Epilogue

Two weeks later

Hutch settled into the sheltered fortress of the sea worn rocks. He smiled quietly.

It had been a good day, relaxing and lazy, with the rare opportunity to love long and sleep deeply, as he and Starsky twisted around one another like a double helix.

The chilly November winds had chased Saturday families and overly-friendly spinster ladies with their poodles indoors, away from the Venice Beach jetty. Now it was just them, just him and Starsky, sitting on the cluster of black rocks above the swirl of white foamed waters.

Blessed solitude.

Sunset was scant minutes away. Sunset – when the day was at its most peaceful.

Hutch anticipated the healing light and its promise that every burden could be lifted. Starsky's weight was against him, the blue windbreaker clad back to his own denim jacketed chest.

Starsky's tangled curls were salt and sea fragrant in the playful sunlight.

"Hey, Starsk?" Hutch smiled into the nape of Starsky's neck.

"Ummm?" Starsky tilted his head, offered his ear for a nibble. Hutch obliged.

"Starsk – sometimes I think it's a fine coincidence that 'star' is the first part of your last name."

"Yeah? Why's that?" Starsky put his empty beer bottle down and tucked hands into his jacket pockets.

Hutch constructed his answer carefully. "Some people blaze into our lives like a comet – all flash and flame. It's wonderful but it doesn't last. Then they're off – streaking away to the next place and the one after that. It kinda hurts if you don't understand." He paused. "You get left with magical experiences, but you get left behind. That's what comets do. They come. They go.

"But stars – stars are true in the sky. They have pull and power and heat. They don't dash by and disappear. That's you, Starsky. You're fixed in your orbit. You won't let many people to get caught in your gravity field. But when you do, you want to keep them forever."

Starsky smiled. "I never been much of one for changing partners."

"You are on the dance floor. But in life, at least as I see it – no. You aren't."

"I agree with you, babe."

"But how do you decide who gets to be in your orbit, Starsk?" Hutch hid the shyness of his question by lifting his cupped hands to his mouth and blowing a long exhale to warm them. His eyes were on the expanse of the horizon and the multitude of liquid miles beyond.

Starsky straightened at the question. "You're in a philosophical mood, are you, Blondie?"

"I'm in a mood to talk about you." Hutch's mouth teased into the stray brown curls, tasting the flavor of ocean winds. He pressed closer, inviting Starsky's hands to encircle his own.

I'm in the mood to share love. Share warmth.

"I see that." Starsky's voice was slightly hoarse from the cold. "Okay. For somebody get close to me, or be in my orbit as you call it, I gotta be confident that I know them. I gotta know what they're like and what they'll do and what they believe in. It starts there and goes or doesn't go from there."

"You're talking about them being honest with you?"

"Honesty's part of it, but it's bigger. Honesty is kinda like one block in that damn game you love so much."

"Game?"

"The one with the blocks all stacked together. Y'know – if you pull the wrong block out or handle the move wrong, the tower crashes down. What's that game called? 'Jerk off?'"

Hutch laughed. "Uh. Jenga."

Starsky squinted up at him, still smiling. "Yeah. It's like that. Honesty is a block. Respect for yourself and other people is a block. Loyalty is a block. And being what you say you are. That's what I value, Hutch. No traitors. No games. You game me, then the deal's off."

Hutch felt nimble fingers like a cage around his.

"What counts as gaming or breaking the deal, Starsk? What kind of stuff gets people exiled from you?"

"C'mon Hutch. It's Saturday. We've been relaxing all day. The sun's going down. I'm fixing to take you home and love you 'til you're a babbling idiot. Save your hard questions for another day."

Hutch kissed the warm curve of Starsky's left shoulder. "Please?"

Starsky surrendered. "Okay. What gets people kicked out of my club? That's a harder question."

"Why?"

"I was gonna say nothing gets you the boot quicker than betraying me. By doing something outta line with all you've made me believe about you."

"But that isn't the answer?"

Starsky rested against Hutch's shoulder. "It isn't the whole answer. The people in my 'orbit' aren't all equal or all the same. They didn't arrive at the same time. They don't fill the same roles." He flexed backwards, agile as a cat, finding Hutch's mouth with his own.

Hutch smiled into the quick sweetness of the kiss.

"C'mon Hutchinson. This is too hard. You and the sunset are too distracting. Did I mention I got plans for you later?"

"You mentioned something about loving and babbling. And the sunset's still ten minutes away, babe."

Starsky nibbled at Hutch's chin until Hutch pulled away with a faked grimace.

"I know what this is, Hutch. I know who you're talking about by talking around."

"You do?"

"Yeah. This is about Wilder."

"We didn't talk about him, Starsk. At least not about the part where you walked away from a friend you loved and needed. I know he was a hero to you and you supported him. You supported him and you valued him."

Starsky's hand darted to cover his partner's mouth, but Hutch dodged. "I think he was a significant symbol to you, Starsk. He was a symbol of power and safety to the boy soldier you were and to the fatherless young man who needed guidance. I think, in doing what you thought you had to do to help him, you lost a part of yourself. And then, in doing what you had to do for yourself, you walked away from him forever. He was another loss for you. And I never want you to lose anything you care about. To me, where you're concerned, one loss is one too many."

"Hey buddy?" Starsky effortlessly slipped from Hutch's arms to appear, Houdini-style, facing him. Hutch raised his eyebrows, startled as always by Starsky's agility and effortless grace of movement.

"You're right, Hutch. Wilder was important to me. He was all you just said and more. I tried to be loyal to him and to what he needed. We were brothers once. Back when it was simple."

Hutch watched him, biting back a stricken groan.

"But...Hutch. Even before that final move, and that final break, the foundation of what Wilder and me had was already cracked."

Hutch saw the emotions move like a storm across Starsky's face, from hope to sadness, from fury to stoic acceptance.

"I always encouraged Wilder to rely on me, Hutch. He needed me. I was his companion in his dark games. He didn't hide what he needed and he didn't pretend it was otherwise. I didn't need those games like he did, but I needed to be there for him. I'd outgrown the games pretty fast, once we got back from the war. I found other ways. Strange thing is, the more I grew away from needing that fix, the more he craved it. We finally ended up coming at it from two separate points of view and motivations. Like we were in two different countries and needed a translator."

Starsky's eyes were scrutinizing him. Hutch looked down at his hands as Starsky shifted his blue gaze to the bolder blue of the darkening sky.

"You know, Hutch, the distance between Wilder and me was there for a long time. I think we both knew it, but nobody wanted to be the one to say it."

Hutch nodded. "It was mutual loyalty. It was you supporting something he needed to survive. And for you..."

"For me it was a habit and an offering of respect to the comrades we once were." Starsky's sigh mingled with the rush of the rising sea on the rocks. "I don't think anybody ever wants to look at a private history with someone who was once so important and be the one stuck saying the party's over."

Hutch held him, embracing his strong-shouldered, dark-haired partner and lover. He pushed closer when Starsky threaded long fingers through his light hair.

"Hutch." Starsky spoke promises against his ear. "Listen to me. 'Cause you gotta know this. I don't have any regrets about walking away from Wilder. You gotta believe me. Believe me when I tell you – we were only hanging onto lukewarm ashes of a blazing bonfire we once shared."

Starsky's body jittered from an undercurrent of pent up emotions.

"And that fire died for good, Hutch, the minute he raised his hand and decided to hurt you."

Hutch blinked and looked away, half-ashamed, half-relieved.

You sniffed out the guilt complex in me again, buddy. At the end of the day, did I cost you that friendship?

"His actions that night erased everything, Hutch. He became a person I'd never known. He was a dangerous stranger – a new enemy. A person I couldn't recognize and couldn't respect."

Starsky hesitated. “He became the person who gives you nightmares now, Hutch. He hurt you so damn much, so deeply, and you still won’t talk to me about it. I won’t push you yet, but soon, I know you’re gonna talk to me.”

“So I didn’t t-take him away from you, Starsk?” The childish hope in Hutch’s voice made him cringe again as he dodged Starsky’s observations about his own buried trauma.

Starsky’s headshake was furious, earnest.

“No! No, Hutch. Not that – never that. I’ll always have the good memories of Wilder and me together. I’ll always have the gifts he gave me and the lessons he taught me. I won’t deny the good for what it was. But on the other side of the door, I’ll always have the betrayal and deceit he showed me when he made the choice to hurt you. He decided to step across the line. He decided to harm the person who matters most to me. That was his choice. Not yours.”

Starsky’s palm stroked his cheek.

“I can’t keep anybody in my life who’d hurt you, Hutch. Doing you harm or wishing you harm is the one thing I won’t tolerate or forgive. I don’t make deals or offer terms of surrender to anybody who hurts you. I either cut them loose or make them pay.”

Starsky smiled suddenly, a flashpoint of white teeth. “You’re the one who talked about my ‘orbits’ Hutch. There’s only room for one in the orbit closest to my soul. There’s only room for you.”

Starsky enveloped him then, crushing him from ribs to belly. Hutch surrendered to the almost brutal embrace and its promise of Starsky’s love. Eyes closed, he lingered in the sanctuary, listening to Starsky’s heartbeat behind the eternal rhythm of waves on the winter ocean.

“Look, babe. Sunset.” Starsky’s whisper and Starsky’s kiss summoned him back.

Arms and hands entwined, they watched the watercolor parade of jeweled colors – turquoise and red and silver and orange. The colors glowed like a swiftly changing banner until they slid drunkenly into the ocean.

Far overhead, in the last thin rays of pure light, a flock of seabirds flew home to roost. They dipped in unison, one after another, tumbling over the waves and soaring toward land – their wingtips gold against the sky.

~Finis~

Feedback is always welcome and appreciated – barricadesofheaven.angel@gmail.com