

Eagle's Flight
An additional scene to "Bloodbath"
by Brit

"What took you so long, huh?"

There was a huge amount of relief in his voice, but I heard his fear. Or rather felt it. Not that he tried to hide it from me; he didn't need to. Perhaps he couldn't have anyway, considering the shape he was in. This time it was so close—*too close*. I would have had a hard time releasing Starsky's grip from my jacket if I'd wanted to, but I didn't. I wasn't going anywhere, and there was no way I was letting him out of my sight any time soon.

"Nice looking nightgown you got there."

He eventually choked out a laugh, most likely for my benefit. The girl at his legs shifted and clung a bit tighter. She was a surprise. I can't begin to tell you what it was like breaking into the clearing and seeing my partner bound by his wrists to the framework of an aviary. Seeing this woman standing in front of him with a butcher knife raised, the rest of the whackos all but salivating, ready to— *No; push it back, Hutchinson.*

Minutes before, I'd had my gun out with her in my sights, my finger at that split-second before pulling the trigger. I would have taken her out if Starsky's body hadn't twisted where he hung, blocking a clear shot. I remember at that instant thinking his arbitrary movement saved her life, but would cost him his own. Once the fighting started in close quarters, my gun was useless anyway. If we hadn't got there in time, I...

No, don't dwell on that right now. Not ever. It's just that the pictures of Marcus's other victims were burned into my memory. What was left of them no longer human, just indistinguishable masses of flesh and bone. No amount of whiskey will wash those images away. To think if we hadn't gotten here in time, Starsky would have been one more of them...

Stop it. Focus on what's in front of you.

I was shocked when the woman had cut Starsky's bonds rather than following through with the strike. I'd thank her later, after I took care of my partner. She released her hold on Starsky's leg and withdrew out of my line of vision. Starsky began to tremble—I think everything was catching up with him. That, and I had no way of knowing what he'd been through the last twenty-four hours. I was going to get him to a hospital regardless of how much complaining he'd predictably do. As gently as I could, I held him at arm's length so I could get a better look at the extent of his injuries.

I was about to ask him how he was doing when I heard his sharp intake of breath, and the next thing I knew, Starsky was pulling me down beside him and forcing the two of us to roll a few feet away. “Freeze, police!” came from one of the uniformed officers, and I pulled my gun and made it up on one knee, looking for the threat. One of Marcus’s followers had recovered. He was only a few feet from us, and he had clutched the redheaded woman in front of him like a shield. His left hand was clenching her jaw, forcing her head painfully to one side. The other hand held a kitchen knife, the blade pressed up against her throat hard enough to cause a trickle of blood.

“Put the knife down!” The freak’s inverted cross was dead in my sites. I could have taken him out—should have taken him out—right then and there. This guy was maniacal, but even if I nailed him, it wouldn’t necessarily save the woman. Honestly? It would have given me at least a moment of satisfaction for him to provoke retaliation. My nerves were as taut as a piano wire, and I had a lot of anger just begging to be released. The patrolmen and Dobey had their weapons drawn and weren’t standing down, either. There was no reasoning with him, but I had to try. Starsky whispered my name, a plea to help her.

“Look, you’re already in enough trouble. Don’t add murder—”

He just shook his head. His eyes were out of focus, like he was demented or on some sort of trip.

“Simon didn’t dream this...Simon said he’d be released if there’s a sacrifice.” The mumbling stopped and he focused on us. “Simon dreamed *your* death, Starsky!”

The woman sobbed, begging to be released. I had a bad feeling this wasn’t going to end well unless something hap—

That *something* happened before I could even blink. I reacted on instinct the second I saw his arm move, but it was too late. The blade ran across the woman’s throat in one vicious stroke, laying it open, her blood splattering both Starsky and me. My gun went off in the same instant, but not before the damage was already done. I felt Starsky go boneless and slump against me. It was too much to take in, too much to comprehend. I would have been sick right then and there if Starsky still hadn’t needed my protection. The uniforms had the other sickos covered, so I put my gun away and eased Starsky onto his back. His breathing was shallow, but steady, so I left him long enough to scramble over to the woman.

She never had a chance. I was at her side just in time to see the light fade from her eyes, and I knew there was nothing that could have been done for her. After the nightmare I could only guess she’d been living, I hoped death was a merciful thing. As gently as I could, I closed her eyes.

As for the man with the knife, I won’t go into detail, but if anyone would even *want* to mourn the scum, they’d have to have a closed casket.

Dobey was kneeling next to Starsky, barking out orders and demanding the ETA of the ambulance we had called for en route to the zoo, not knowing what we were going to find. I hurried back to my partner—I just couldn't slow down, even now that we'd found him—and slipped, none too gracefully settling beside him. His eyes fluttered open, and his hand groped toward me. My hand locked onto his, and I again felt the trembling in his arm, far beyond fear or shock. I wondered how long they'd had him strung up by his wrists.

“*Gail?*” His voice was raspy. I automatically shifted, blocking her corpse from his view. I didn't have the words to tell him, so I just shook my head. Starsky blinked a few times before closing his eyes, and nodded, compartmentalizing his grief. At least for the moment, *survival* was taking up all of his energy.

Dobey cleared his throat. “Starsky, are you hurt? What do you need?”

He drew in a breath and shook his head, then opened his eyes. His rage was gaining ground and overriding the horror. Starsky pushed himself up awkwardly, and we helped him to sit, angling him so his back was to the gruesome sight behind us. The bodies had to be left as they were until the ME and lab did their thing. I swallowed hard and focused on the huddled figure next to me. Dobey had been given a blanket and was draping it over Starsky's shoulders.

He accepted the blanket and clutched it around himself to his chest. His head drooped in exhaustion for a second before it jerked back up as if he had been stung. He nearly toppled over as he tried to get to his feet. I grabbed him by the arm to steady him. “What's wrong? Just hang in there for a few more minutes, pal, the ambu—”

“Get this—” He was struggling so hard to stand that I scrambled to my feet and, with Dobey's help, got him upright. “*Get this damn robe off me!*”

The inverted cross stood out like a bloody welt on the robe. I wouldn't have wanted it against my skin for a second longer, either. Still, I had no idea where his own clothes were and he didn't care. Starsky couldn't muster the strength in his abused arms and shoulders to pull the robe over his head, and looked at me wildly, desperately. I didn't need further convincing to take hold of the rough material and pull it off over his head. The captain quickly picked up the discarded blanket and held it open to shield Starsky's body from the other officers, but my partner never noticed and didn't care who saw what.

My heart stopped when I saw the bruises. There literally weren't more than a few inches anywhere on his body that weren't marred, evidence of the beatings he'd taken. The burn below his right eye was still damp, and a bloody wound along his hairline wept. His wrists were raw, and his hands had a bluish tint from the lack of circulation.

I helped Starsky wrap the blanket around him and steered him to the front seat of the nearest squad car. Dobeey was a step behind us, anger in his eyes. “The ambulance just got off the highway; should be here any minute.”

Starsky surprised me by just nodding. That told me a lot, and my rage swelled up inside me again until I felt like I was going to explode. *Focus, Hutchinson. Focus on what he needs right now.* “Starsk...hey, buddy?”

Trying to keep it together, Starsky exhaled and looked at me, trusting me to care for him. The leather straps they had strung him up with were cutting off the circulation to his hands and were swelling now that they were no longer above his head. “I need to get these off, okay?”

My jackknife was out of my pocket, but I didn’t open it until he nodded. Not that Starsky was in *that* fragile a condition; I just didn’t want to push things since minutes ago he was surrounded by blades and maniacs. He kept his eyes glued to my face while I slipped the knife between the leather and his skin. The bindings were tough and took some effort before I was finally able to cut through them. It didn’t take long before Starsky grimaced, the circulation returning to his numb hands. We remained there until the stretcher was beside us, me kneeling next to him, rubbing his hands as circulation was restored.

Starsky needed help getting out of the squad car. He stood for a moment and looked around—again taking in the aviary where he had been a heartbeat away from being one more victim, one more sacrifice to whatever god Simon Marcus worshiped.

Without a word, Starsky sat on the stretcher and was quickly loaded into the ambulance. I scrambled in after him and we left Hell behind us.

Or so I thought.



Huggy was at the hospital by the time the doctor finished the examination. He had stopped at my place, knowing where I kept my spare key, and had picked up something for Starsky to change into. He had wisely brought sweats—loose and comfortable—that would work whether Starsky was released or admitted. It was the latter, mainly for observation of his mild concussion and whatever form of drug he’d been given, inducing muscle cramping, mostly in his stomach. The doctor drew blood and sent it on to the lab for testing, though it would be days before any results came back. The testing would later reveal only a small percentile of what *might* have been used. All they could do at this point was treat the symptoms, which fortunately had abated. The IV that had been started in the ambulance to re-hydrate Starsky remained in his arm, and antibiotics had been added, as well as an anti-inflammatory and a muscle relaxant. He had blood in his urine, and the doctors wanted to ensure that it was due to bruised kidneys and

dehydration rather than anything chemical or a more extensive injury. It surprised me again that Starsky's protests to being kept overnight at the hospital were minimal.

Captain Dobey and a new IA agent took Starsky's statement while he sat on the examining room table in a loosely draped hospital gown. His eyes remained on the floor throughout his monotone depiction of everything that had happened over the last twenty-seven hours.

Being abducted from the courthouse men's room, bound and blindfolded, then beaten and kicked into unconsciousness.

Gail and the purification ritual. His escape attempt and the bear, then a fight that earned him a second degree burn on his cheekbone.

More beatings and a drug that caused his muscles, particularly his stomach, to cramp violently.

And, finally, being hung by his wrists so only the balls of his feet touched the ground, most likely for around an hour to an hour and a half, according to the doctor's estimates.

Then came the ceremony—how he was to be a sacrifice. How they told him, word-for-word, what they were going to do to him.

Starsky's voice held little inflection, and he gave every detail in a matter-of-fact, professional manner, withholding nothing.

Except how he felt.

When he came to the point of the rescue, both Dobey and I interjected, giving our statements as well. Huggy sat off in a corner, unconsciously clutching the change of clothes in his fists, his face pinched with anger and disgust. The captain looked the same, and I'm sure my expression wasn't much better.

With our statements out of the way, Dobey ushered in a police photographer. Pictures of Starsky's wounds would be used as evidence in the case against Marcus and his remaining followers. When asked, Starsky slid off the table and quickly donned the pair of boxers Huggy had brought from my place. The exam gown was pulled off and I helped Starsky over to the stark white wall, pulling the IV along side him.

I squeezed his shoulder and tried to smile encouragingly before I backed out of the way. "I'll bet Minnie would pay me twenty bucks for a picture of you in your underwear."

He managed a hint of a smile before facing forward, his expression becoming stony though, as the photographer moved into position. The bulb going off made him blink and almost flinch. The bright flash caused me to close my eyes as well, and the image of my battered partner was instantly replaced with one from a black and white photo—one of

the cult's latest victims, all humanness destroyed. There was nothing more left of the person than a rubble of decimated flesh. I forced my eyes open to see Starsky staring back at me, concern on his face. The bulb went off again and I reflectively shut my eyes. Another gruesome image replaced the first—the remains of a body with all of its limbs hacked off...

Pressure on my arm brought me back to the present. Dobeey was beside me, his jaw clenched and brow pinched. Starsky had been asked to turn around so the camera could capture the tapestry of vivid bruises on his back. My experienced eye could easily determine which had been made by fists.

Which had been made by booted feet.

Which had been made by boards and something round—pipes or broom handles.

The photographer stuffed the now unloaded film into his coat pocket and placed his camera back in the bag. He swallowed and uneasily smiled at Starsky. "I'm glad you're okay, Detective Starsky. I mean, I'm glad you're..." He awkwardly shrugged his shoulders, at a loss for words, and left the room. I looked at my partner as he slumped onto the examining table.

He was anything *but* okay.

Huggy rose and crossed over to him, offering him the sweats. Starsky thanked him and accepted them, but made no move to put them on. I imagine the effort of bending over to slip his feet into the pants would have been daunting in the condition he was in. Maybe the shorts alone would do for now.

A nurse pushing a wheelchair rolled in, announcing that Starsky's room was ready. I helped him into the chair, again dismayed at his lack of protest. The nurse chatted away as she transferred the saline drip to the rod attached to the wheelchair, hardly pausing to take a breath. "...to your room, then we can get you settled in."

Starsky surprised us all by trying to push himself up out of the chair. "I need a shower."

The nurse hardly paused as she firmly pressed him back and continued to roll out of the room to the hallway. Dobeey, Huggy, and I followed. "From the looks of things, we can't let you take a shower just yet, Mr. Starsky. Plus, with that IV, it's not possible. If you'd like, I'd be happy to give you a bath, though, before we—"

The medication to ease his bruised and aching muscles must have been working because Starsky's arms shot out and gripped the tires of the wheelchair, stopping it suddenly enough to cause the nurse to stumble into his back. "Mr. Starsky, what are you—?"

“*No bath!*” Starsky managed to lurch out of the wheelchair. With one swift motion, the IV needle was ripped out and left to dangle. A small trickle of blood trailed down his arm as he looked past the nurse to me. “Hutch?”

To others, Starsky might have looked angry, almost crazed. But I saw what lay under it—disgust, desperation. Fear. “I want a shower—*now*.”

I moved up next to him, as much for moral support as physical, not sure how much longer he could remain on his feet. The details of the “purification bath” he’d been forced to take and the failed escape attempt were fresh in my memory as well. I was angry, too, but forced myself not to take it out on the unsuspecting nurse. She was, after all, just doing her job and hadn’t been around for the gruesome narrative of what Starsky had been through.

“Look...uh...Susan, is it?” Great detective that I am, I read her nametag as I edged up beside her. “Look, sweetheart, I understand you’re just following procedures—”

“That’s right, Mr. Hutchinson, and procedure for someone in your friend’s current condition is that—”

“—and normally, my friend here would *love* to have someone as beautiful as you give him a sponge bath, but, well...” I looked at Starsky with mock disdain, and he made a sour face at me, immediately knowing where I was going with my rapid-fire speech. I lowered my voice. “My friend is rather...*rank* at the moment and really needs a good hosing down, if you know what I mean.”

She looked at me knowingly. “Well, I didn’t want to say anything...”

“Hey!” Starsky objected, some of his earlier panic dissipating. Still, his need to be rid of whatever ghosts lingered on his skin was evident by the tautness around his eyes and the hard set of his jaw.

“Yes, well, Susan, I know for a fact that you have here in the hospital those shower seats. You know, the kind with the handles on them? Like for the elderly?” I heard Starsky grumble under his breath, but Susan nodded.

“Well, yes, we do have those, but I’m not so sure it would be a good idea for somebody with Mr. Starsky’s wounds to—”

I took Susan’s hand in mine and gently stroked the top of it with my thumb, lowering my voice. “Now, sweetheart, I know that you’re a very conscientious nurse and wouldn’t ever, *ever* let anything happen to one of your patients.”

“Oh, no! Never. But his stitches—”

“Will be fine. You can check them when he gets out.”

“I really need to get that IV back in—”

“We only need twenty minutes. Thirty, tops.”

“A shower will wash away the salve on his burn—”

“Then you can reapply it later, right, Susan? Now, how about if I...if I promise to...*be* with Mr. Starsky as he takes his shower and—”

“Oh, no you won’t!”

I didn’t even glance in Starsky’s direction. “—make sure that he doesn’t slip or fall. Hmm? Then, once I get him settled in bed, you can finish what you need to do, and no one will be the wiser? Hmm? What do you say?” I smiled charmingly, raising my brows a little.

Works every time.

She looked up and down the hall, as if someone might have been eavesdropping, then finally nodded. I thanked her and turned to step away, only to find that she had latched onto my hand and wasn’t letting go. I smiled again and, with a jerk, withdrew my hand. Moving the wheelchair into position, Starsky looked at me with disgust before gingerly lowering himself onto the seat.

By the time we reached his room, the shower chair was in place.



As promised, I stayed in the bathroom while Starsky took his shower. I really was worried he wouldn’t have the strength to stand long, but the murderous look he gave me convinced me to remain on the opposite side of the small room. I set up camp on a chair I dragged in, because I refused to make use of the only other place to sit in the room while I waited. Huggy had dropped off a newspaper before he and Dobey left, but I couldn’t concentrate on the print and found my mind running in circles, much as it had for the past day and a half.

Starsky paused before he stepped into the shower, and I forced myself to calmly meet his gaze rather than again take in the mass of bruises covering his body. Knowing they were there without focusing on them still brought bile to my throat.

His expression changed, and I know he was trying to find a way to tell me something. I unconsciously held my breath, waiting. He finally gave up and looked away, nodding once then entering the steaming shower.

My feelings of rage had to be suppressed—*again*—as I anxiously waited for him. If I dwelt on what Simon Marcus had put us through, both physically and psychologically, I would have torn the room apart. But right now, Starsky needed me to be calm, in control. He needed me to take care of him. I knew that down to my core, even though he never asked me, never did anything more than simply say my name. That was enough. Always was.

He'd been in the shower quite a while, and I was trying my best not to worry. Finally, it got to the point that I knew I wasn't overreacting. "Starsk?"

When I got no response, I moved quickly, the newspaper falling to the floor. The water still pounded down and steam billowed out when I opened the glass shower door. Starsky sat on the hospital chair, his elbows resting on his knees, his head in his hands, the water bouncing off his abused body.

"Starsky?" I reached out to touch his shoulder, and his head slowly came up. His eyes were out of focus for a moment before they met mine, and he nodded. I turned off the water, then offered him a towel from the rack. He'd already pushed himself up off the chair and was flushed, and I knew it was from more than just the heat of the water. I was ready to talk, but wouldn't push him—he would when he was ready, knowing I'd be there.

He hadn't shaved, probably wasn't ready to attempt it yet, though it looked like he managed to wash his hair. I'm sure it helped to feel like he'd washed off some of their filth, but I knew it was going to take a lot more than a shower before he'd feel clean again.

I steadied him while he dressed, then followed slowly behind as he made his way out of the bathroom. He got as far as the doorway before pausing, one hand unsteadily grabbing the wall before his knees began to buckle.

He gasped when I encircled his torso, my head tucked under his arm to hold him up. His knees gave way again and, ignoring his protests, I crouched and scooped him up, carrying him to the hospital bed. He swore under his breath and mumbled something I didn't quite catch. It didn't matter if he was swearing at me, the situation, or at life in general, I was grateful to get some reaction out of him rather than the carefully controlled placidity I'd seen earlier. I sat him on the edge of the bed, knowing he'd prefer that to my laying him in it like a child. He didn't meet my eyes as he struggled farther onto the bed, finally stretching out with a groan.

I gave him a moment to get settled before reaching for the call button that would summon the nurse. "You ready for that pretty blonde nurse?"

"When have I *not* been ready for a pretty blonde nurse?"

The call button made a muffled buzzing when I depressed it. “Put your stethoscope away, Dr. Kildare, you’re in no shape to—”

I didn’t finish my sentence. Starsky was already asleep.



Starsky was released the next day, with the typical warning to be careful, and for me to watch for complications from his concussion and monitor his progress. Fortunately, the blood in his urine didn’t reappear during the night, but we were again charged with “keeping an eye on it.” In response, Starsky growled that *he’d* be in charge of monitoring *that* progress. I didn’t disagree.

The drive to Starsky’s apartment was a quiet one, and getting him up the stairs was a slow process. By the time I got him inside, he was sweating and pale. The painkillers and muscle relaxants they’d given him worked well, but he still ached and was going to be incredibly stiff for the next several days.

We were surprised to find a bouquet of flowers adorning his coffee table, the accompanying card signed by Terry. She’s the schoolteacher Starsky’s been dating the last few months. I hadn’t realized things had gotten serious enough that he’d given her a key. When I commented as much, Starsky just shrugged stiffly. “Did you talk to her?”

I shook my head and got his next dosage of medication out. “I asked Huggy to call her last night after we’d gotten you to the hospital. He said she’d been pretty worried.”

Someone—probably Terry or Huggy—had also dropped off quite a few groceries, mainly quick-fix meals and Starsky’s favorite junk food. When Starsky didn’t pursue discussing Terry, I changed topics. “You up for some dinner?”

Unsurprisingly, he shook his head and sat staring morosely at nothing in particular, so I poured him a glass of juice and crossed back to him. “Here.”

Starsky glanced up at me and accepted the glass and pills without a complaint—another unusual response for him. Typically, I have to all but sit on him to make him take medication, especially ones that knock him out. He quickly popped them into his mouth so he could use both hands to hold the glass—a slight tremor still lingered in his arms. The abused muscles must have hurt like blazes, but he never complained.

I flicked on the TV and found a ball game, then joined him on the couch. Every now and then, I’d glance over and see that he was focused on anything but baseball. When he finally began dosing off, I roused him enough so I could help him to the bedroom and get him settled for the night. I was leaving the room when Starsky called my name.

“Yeah? What is it, buddy?”

The silence was long before he finally responded. “Nothing. G’night, Hutch.”

“I’m right outside here if you need anything.” I hoped he’d change his mind and tell me whatever it was he was about to say. When he didn’t, I nodded and left, then waited outside his room for a few minutes, listening. It wasn’t long before Starsky’s breathing became deep and even, and I knew he was asleep.

The ball game was only in the fifth inning, but I turned down the volume in case he woke and called out during the night. The sun had set, but the lingering light was still strong enough to cast a shadow throughout the apartment.

Looking back toward Starsky’s bedroom, I wondered what kind of shadows had been cast across my partner’s heart.



I half expected to be wakened by nightmares—either his or mine—but I hadn’t expected it to be by the sound of retching. Scrambling off the couch, my legs got tangled in the blanket, and I almost fell on my face before rushing to the bathroom.

Starsky was on his knees before the toilet, dry-heaving. Apparently, this wasn’t the first round, either, because of...well...let’s just call it “evidence,” and leave it at that. There was also a new knot over his right eye that stood out angrily among the older ones.

“Easy, Starsk, easy.” I knelt beside him and placed a hand on his back. After a moment, he slumped to his butt, one arm shakily supporting him. His face was pale and his sweatshirt had damp spots at his armpits and down the center of his back. “You okay? You need me to call the doctor?”

After he shook his head, I brushed the hair away from his face to get a better look at the new knot above his eye. “Well, I know it wasn’t my cooking that made you throw up.”

“Not this time.”

It was encouraging to hear him grouse. “You still feel sick?”

He grimaced. “I’m okay now.”

“So, what happened to your head?”

Starsky reached up to push my hand away and gingerly touched the wound himself. “Slipped.”

“Coming in here?” He nodded. “You must’ve been in a hurry.”

“Beats doing it in the bed.”

“Good point.” I stood and offered him my hand. “You ready to get up, or you just want to sit there hugging the john?”

He gave me a dirty look and locked his hand around my wrist. I used both of mine to slowly pull him up, and while he brushed his teeth, I cleaned up the mess. When I finished, I found him huddled on the couch, a blanket draped around him. He declined my offer of a 7-Up, but I pulled one out of the fridge anyway and popped it open. After I took a drink, I set it down on the coffee table closer to him and sat on the other side.

“You want to tell me about it?”

“About what? I already told you I feel fine now.”

“Right, which leads me to believe it wasn’t anything physical that made you lose your lunch.” I wished he’d get it through his thick skull that things would get better quicker if he’d just open up and talk about it. *Patience, Hutchinson, patience.* “Nightmare?”

He glanced at me, debating whether or not to deny he’d had one. He knew I’d know anyway, so he simply nodded and picked up the 7-Up can. At least that small admission was a step.

“I had one, too.” That got his attention, and he looked back at me. “Hearing you tossing your cookies in there woke me up out of it.”

“Tossing my cookies?”

I grinned at him—I don’t mind playing the fool sometimes. Starsky just rolled his eyes and shook his head a little. “What happened in yours?”

It had scared the hell out of me. “I didn’t get there in time.”

It was a long minute before he turned his eyes away. “Mine, too.” I gave him a couple of seconds before I swung my legs up onto the space between us to get more comfortable, and I nudged him with my foot. “Tell me.”

Starsky sighed and turned back toward me. “I don’t know, it was all jumbled up. The thing I was strung up from, what’d you call it?”

“An aviary. A cage for birds.”

“Yeah, well, in my dream, it wasn’t just the framework, it was all caged in with some kind of wire fence or something. No door or opening, but I keep trying to find a way out. The dream changes all of a sudden, and I’m tied up like before, swinging by my wrists. No matter what I do or how hard I try, I just can’t get free. Then Gail...” Starsky trailed

off when his voice got husky at the mention her name. “Gail’s there with the knife, but instead of cutting me, she slits her own throat, and she...her blood...”

He sighed heavily and paused, pushing away the image. “The next thing I know, the rest of Marcus’s whack-jobs start stabbing me. It hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt before—worse than getting shot.” Starsky’s voice became low. “They kept cutting me, and I’m bleeding all over the place, and there wasn’t a stupid thing I could do but *watch*...watch them kill me.”

I whistled a bit as I exhaled. “That’s some nightmare, pal.”

“Gail died because of me, Hutch.”

I shook my head. “She died because of Simon Marcus.”

“But if she had killed me—”

“Starsk, we don’t know what would’ve happened. If she had...killed you, I would’ve blown her and the rest of them away, right then and there. Then...” I hadn’t given what I was saying much thought, but it didn’t surprise me, and we both knew it was true. “I would’ve gone to Simon Marcus’s cell...”

Our eyes locked for a minute, the weight of what I’d said seemed to penetrate something within him. Starsky nodded. “What was your nightmare?”

Somehow, it made it easier to poke that wound with him sitting beside me. “It was exactly how it all really happened—who said what, the clues, the dead-ends, Huggy finally figuring out where you were—it was all the same. Except that after we got to the zoo, and I broke into the clearing...”

He looked knowingly at me, understanding what was left unspoken—my fear, what it would have done to me to find him...find his body. I felt the familiar nausea begin to churn in my gut.

Starsky’s eyes bore into mine. “I want...”

“What, Starsk?”

“Popcorn.”

“*What?*” I have to admit, he never ceases to amaze me.

“I want *popcorn*. And while you’re up, turn on the TV to channel fourteen. I think there’s a John Wayne double feature still be going on.”

“And is there anything *else* I can do for you while I'm up? Do a load of laundry? Wax your car?”

“Bring a root beer with the popcorn.”

I was careful when I cuffed him on the side of head. Then, I headed for the kitchen.



The healing came slowly. For his body, anyway. Those nuts really did a number on him, beating him the way they had. I'm surprised they didn't break any bones or dislocate his shoulders. The burn on his cheek became a fading pink welt, and the ones on his wrists from the leather bonds gradually began to fade. More than once, though, I caught him looking at his wrists or absently rubbing them, as if they ached, or more likely, to unconsciously try to scrub away the memory of being bound, being defenseless.

Being caged.

I was getting out the steaks I planned to throw on the grill for dinner, when I saw him staring off into space again, one hand locked around the other wrist. I knew Starsky's body was still stiff, but after five days, his inactivity and quietness were beginning to concern me.

The meat went back into the fridge, and I grabbed my jacket and his hooded sweatshirt, which I threw over the top of his head. “C'mon, let's go.”

The look he gave me was less than pleasant. “What are you talking about? Go where?”

“Out. I'm getting tired of seeing you hobbling around here like my grandmother. Let's go get some dinner at Huggy's.”

“What about the steaks?”

“What am I now, your personal chef? You heard me, Gordo, get your gludias maximus off my couch and get shaking.”

With a martyred sigh, he rose carefully, knowing exactly what I was doing, and humoring my need to care for him. When he went into the bedroom, I thought he was ducking out on me, but he was back in a minute, zipping up his sweatshirt. I followed him out the front door, glad for the distraction dinner might offer him, but it didn't erase my concern.

The familiar bulge of his Baretta and shoulder holster was evident, even under the sweatshirt.



Starsky was cleared for active duty a week and a half later, and, while he seemed like the same old Starsky he'd always been to others, I knew there was still something wrong, like an undercurrent running just below the surface. Mostly, I saw the difference in him in little things—how sudden noises or movements would make him flinch. It was almost imperceptible, but it was there. Or how he wasn't sleeping well at night, evidenced by the doubling of his already enormous caffeine intake in the morning and the dark circles that remained under his eyes well after his other bruises faded. Once, I even caught him checking out all the stalls in the locker room to make sure no one was lurking there before he got into the shower. He was very casual about it, simply nudging each door open as he walked by, but I saw him do it, and I knew why.

I thought it was all going to come to a boiling point one day while we were interviewing witnesses at a two-eleven that went down in a convenience store. The robbers had gotten away through the back door and escaped down the alley. We stood out there, retracing their steps, while the store personnel relayed the series of events.

The narrow lane was noisy, being right off a heavily trafficked street. Low-rent apartments flanked either side of the alley, and kids were playing stickball there. A garbage truck had also just pulled in to empty a trash bin, adding to the racket.

A couple of black-and-white units were at the scene ahead of us, and the officers had spent their time inside, checking out the damage. The store manager was outside, rambling on to me about his escalating insurance rates, when the uniforms came out, and I gave them a cursory glance. One warranted a smile and quick wave: MacGreggor, an old friend from our "days in blue." Catching up with him would have to wait until I finished up with the manager.

Mac smiled and waved back, then instinctively looked around for my partner. Starsky had flagged down the garbage truck driver and was trying to yell over the noise of the engine, instructing him to wait until we'd had a chance to check out the dumpster and the area around it—a wonderful part of police work, but necessary. From there, the uniformed officers would make their way through the apartment complexes, asking the tenants if they'd seen or heard anything that might be useful in tracking down the robbers.

Mac spied Starsky standing alongside the garbage truck, trying unsuccessfully to communicate with the driver, who didn't know enough to turn off his engine. I glanced up again to see Mac dogtrot over to my partner, who had his back toward the approach. One thing I hadn't taken into account was Mac's effusiveness. Starsky never heard Mac come up from behind, and I watched as Mac wrapped his arms around him in a bear hug that lifted my partner up off his feet.

Starsky's reaction was swift and violent. He threw his head backward, directly into Mac's nose. As expected, Mac's arms loosened and Starsky was dropped. Starsky continued his fall into a crouch and spun, his gun instantly out of its holster as he threw

himself against Mac. Mac slammed into the side of the garbage truck, Starsky's arm pressed against his throat and the Baretta under his chin.

"Starsky!" I was beside Mac now, in Starsky's line of vision. Recognition dawned on his face and he slowly withdrew, stunned by his own violence.

Starsky holstered his gun, shaken. "Mac, I...I didn't..."

Mac nodded, realizing the mistake he'd made, as he fished a handkerchief out of his pocket to stem the flow of blood from his nose. "Jeez, kiddo, if you weren't a hugger, ya should have told me before!"

Even though the older officer smiled apologetically in the way of understanding, Starsky was still contrite and looked lost. "Mac, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Hey, don't worry about it; no damage done." Mac dabbed at his nose, the bleeding already beginning to slow.

"Detectives?" One of the other uniformed officers leaned out of the back door of the store and was calling to us. "There's a witness in here I think one of you should talk with."

Starsky immediately turned from us toward the store. He paused before walking away and clapped Mac on the arm. Mac smiled and patted Starsky's hand, forgiving him. When Starsky was out of earshot, Mac sighed. "Boy, I'm sorry, Hutch. I was just so darn glad to see him after I heard what he went through with those weirdoes. I guess I just wasn't thinkin' that he might still be gun shy."

I smiled and gripped his arm. "It's all right, Mac. You sure you're okay?"

"Me? Heck, yes. You always said your partner had a hard head. Guess mine's harder." Mac smiled before he went back to his squad car. "You'll get him through this, Hutch."

I nodded and waved, wishing I knew how.



The answer came the next day when I least expected it, and in the form of a blind date, of all things. Starsky's girlfriend, Terry, worked with a lady who had recently gone through a messy breakup. Fortunately for me, this happened almost half a year ago, and she was just now getting back into the dating game. I was grateful some time had passed, because the last thing I wanted was to be somebody's first "rebound date." Those tended to be anything but enjoyable, spending most of the date listening to the woman either tearing apart her former boyfriend, or crying over him. Usually, I ended up being the perfect gentleman and listening patiently until she ran out of steam—which typically happened long after I did—then taking her home and never seeing her again.

It turned out that Terry's friend, Tamara, taught part-time at the Marshall School for Exceptional Children while working on her Ph.D. at UCLA. If nothing else, I was hoping she'd turn out to be an interesting conversationalist over dinner, which would be Friday night.

The rest of the week passed uneventfully, and the incident with Mac was never spoken of again. Well, actually, I did try to bring it up once, but Starsky's response was simply, "Mac said it was no big deal, right? So, don't make a big deal out of it."

But it *was* a big deal, and we both knew it.



Tamara was everything I had hoped for and more as a dinner companion, and she wasn't too hard on the eyes, either. Starsky even seemed to enjoy himself and relax a little in Terry's presence. We ended up at Huggy's for drinks and a round of darts, and between games, I asked Tamara more about her studies. It turns out she was doing a research project at UCLA, in conjunction with Cal Fish and Game.

"You mentioned that you were a biology major—what's your field of study?"

"Ornithology. I'm researching the eagle population here in southern California and the effects of pesticides and other chemicals on them. How they affect everything from their nesting and migration, to their eating and mating habits."

"One of my favorite subjects," Starsky piped in, as he and Terry returned from the bar with the next round. No one bothered to ask him to clarify, but Terry dug her elbow into Starsky's ribs. He just smiled wickedly and whispered something in her ear that made her laugh before including Tamara and me. "What were we talking about?"

"Eagles, actually, you hedonist." I took two beers from Starsky's grip and handed one to Tamara. "Ignore him. I have to have him back to the home for perverts by eleven o'clock."

Starsky took a drink of his beer, but not before murmuring, "Yeah? And who do you think has the room next to mine?"

My dirty look had no effect on him.

"Tell them about your helping out with their rescue work, Tamara," Terry prompted.

That sounded intriguing. "Rescue work?"

Tamara shrugged her shoulders modestly, but instantly warmed up to the topic. "It's really incredible. Rewarding. Each year, there are hundreds of birds of prey that are

injured or become sick. There's a team that works with different agencies throughout the state to rescue the birds, give them medical treatment, and then work to release them back into their native environments. Or, on occasion, if they're beyond being able to care for themselves, they're introduced to a bird sanctuary or zoo."

I glanced at my partner. He was still smiling, encouraging Tamara as she continued extolling their efforts, but I could see the slight tightening of his jaw, the tension around his mouth.

"...well, have you?" I missed the remainder of Tamara's recitation and question.

"What? I'm sorry, have I what?"

"Seen an eagle up close and personal?"

"Well, no, I can't say that I have. What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting since it's a nice night we take a short drive out to the campus. What do you say?"



It was longer than a "short drive" over to UCLA, but the company was pleasant. Every now and then I'd glance at Starsky, who wore his affable expression like a mask. He only made eye contact with me once, and gave me a look that told me not to worry. Just the fact that he had to tell me *not* to worry was enough cause to *make* me worry.

Okay, I realize that probably doesn't make a lot of sense to anybody else, but that's the way it is with us.

Even though we didn't get to the university until almost midnight, the security guard didn't think twice about letting us through the gate, once he recognized Tamara. The Biology Department was quite a distance from the main campus, and in addition to the offices and classrooms, there were several aviaries of varying sizes and form, specific to the type of birds they housed. Between the cages, ran a walkway, lit by a string of outdoor lights and the aid of a full moon. It could have made for a very romantic stroll if I hadn't found the framework of the cages casting a sinister shadow before us. I knew Starsky was feeling the same way.

We followed Tamara as she pointed out the different species in each cage, their ailments, and what treatments were being followed. The birds were in assorted stages of healing—everything from accidental poisonings, to being shot by poachers. Some looked to be in perfect health to my inexperienced eye, while others appeared to be without hope. Hearing story after story of how the birds came to be in their conditions infuriated me.

I kept a close watch on Starsky. At times, his focus left the cages' occupants and latched on to the cages themselves. I was grateful the aviaries were much larger than the one he'd been bound in, perhaps softening the blow of his being there. Still, I hoped seeing these might nudge him to deal a little with what's been eating him up inside for the last month, and help him move on.

At first, he kept himself and Terry back from being as close to the cages as Tamara and I were, telling Terry, "You never know when one of those big guys is going to make a break for it." She smiled and acquiesced, but I knew she could tell something was wrong. After a while, she moved closer to get a better look at a red tail hawk, but Starsky stayed a few steps behind.

When the women moved ahead to the next cage, I waited for Starsky and walked beside him. "You okay?"

He gave me one of his "try-to-fake-out-Hutch-that-everything's-fine" expressions. "Why wouldn't I—"

I sighed. "Give me some credit, Starsk. I *know*—"

"Well, if you *know*, then why ask?"

He lucked out that the ladies came within earshot before I threatened to kick his butt. He was exasperating at best some times. Starsky moved right up to the next cage, as if to prove his point that he *was* fine. He put his arm around Terry and peered into the cage.

The eagle was magnificent. Maybe *regal* is the only word that comes close to describing him. He flew the short distance from one perch to the next, putting as much space between himself and us as he could. He looked healthy and I said as much.

Tamara nodded. "He is—now. He sure wasn't when he came to us a few months ago. We named him 'Hercules,' because he's such a big guy. Some kids had shot him with a pellet rifle over in the canyon. Typically, that wouldn't have hurt a bird this size, except they were at a fairly close range, which is quite unusual, and they hit him by chance in the wing, breaking some of the smaller bones. You wouldn't think it would have had that much effect on him, but it messed up his mobility. We were able to get to him and actually managed to set the bones."

"You're kidding!" This, from Starsky. "How'd you manage to get a little cast on him?"

Tamara laughed, thinking Starsky was making a joke. I'm not so sure he was. "So, what happens to Hercules now?"

"He'll be released back into his natural habitat in a couple of weeks. It's really amazing to see."

“What about this one?” I hadn’t noticed that Starsky had wandered up to the last cage. It looked identical to the one we were at, but the eagle within was a polar opposite of Hercules. I followed the ladies over, and Tamara grimaced. “This poor guy. We didn’t think he was going to make it. Would you believe he got clipped by a semi?”

I could believe it. This eagle was missing feathers in several areas, and the flesh beneath was scarred from healed wounds. His color even seemed to be less vibrant than Hercules’s and, instead of moving away from our approach he remained still, almost brooding.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Starsky move closer to the cage, actually placing a hand—though hesitantly—on the mesh enclosure and peering in at the still form. “What’s the matter with him? Is he still hurt?”

“His breaks and contusions have all healed, actually. He’s just not responding well.”

“How long has he been here?” I asked.

“About four months now.”

Starsky turned his focus back on Tamara. “Can’t you let him go?”

She shook her head. “My professor’s pretty much decided he won’t be released. I think he’s just not ready yet. But from what I understand, the tests are indicating that Rod just can’t make it on his own anymore.”

I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. “Rod? As in ‘Rodney’?”

Tamara smiled and shook her head. “Short for ‘Nimrod,’ you know, the—”

“Mighty Hunter,” Starsky finished. Terry and I both looked at him in mild surprise. He turned back toward the eagle. “Genesis. So, if you don’t let him go, what happens to him?”

“He’ll be cared for. The university has a pretty good relationship with some of the zoos in the area. It’s not the ideal solution, but he’ll be okay.”

“But never free.” It was barely a whisper, but I was close enough to Starsky to hear it. In comparison to the other eagle, this one seemed like a shell of what it once was—what, perhaps, it could be again.

When Tamara moved in closer to me, I asked her the question I knew Starsky was thinking, too. “What happens if you were to release him and he wasn’t ready?”

Tamara sighed. “Well, unfortunately, he wouldn’t adapt back to his environment. He wouldn’t be like he was before—able to hunt, able to care for himself. If that’s the case,

and we're lucky, we can recapture him and then...well, then he'd have to stay in captivity. But if we're not lucky and can't get to him..."

The unspoken reality hung around us for a moment. Starsky walked around the cage to get a better look at the sullen bird. Nimrod never moved, though I imagine he followed Starsky's trek. Starsky's voice was hushed. "Do you think he's just forgotten?"

"Forgotten what, Dave?" To her credit, Tamara's voice was gentle, as if she knew there was something almost fragile deep inside him right now.

I had to strain to hear his response. "How to fly. What it feels like to be free."

Tamara shrugged, but her expression was thoughtful. I glanced at Terry, and I'm sure the concern in her eyes mirrored my own. I don't know how much Starsky had shared with her about what happened while he was held hostage, or what he was still struggling with, but she knew enough to be anxious for him.

"I don't know, Dave. I mean, flying's an instinct, so is hunting, but sometimes there's so much damage...there's a lot we just don't know."

We were all quiet again for a long moment, but Terry had the good sense to break it. She slipped under Starsky's arm and wrapped her own around his waist. "Dave, I'm surprised you're still on your feet. It's been at least an hour since we fed you last."

I chuckled. *Boy, does she know my partner.* I offered Tamara my arm, and she accepted it, and the four of us started back down the path. I stopped and turned around when I heard Terry ask Starsky, "What is it?" He was just straightening from where he had bent over to pick something up—an eagle's feather, fallen from one of the cages. Tamara smiled and gave my arm a little tug, urging us forward.

I glanced back at Terry and Starsky trailing behind us, walking quietly as they enjoyed the moonlight. I wondered what Starsky was thinking as he stared at the sky, the eagle feather still in his hand.



We got called in to work on Saturday because of a breaking case. Starsky was late, as usual, so I let myself in to his apartment to help speed things along. I wasn't surprised to see a half-eaten box of donuts sitting next to the percolator, which was nearly empty. Detective that I am, I figured he'd already drunk it all, which meant another rough night.

"Starsk? Shake a leg or Dobby's going to have our butts in a sling!" I yelled as I made my way to his bedroom. Starsky emerged from the bathroom, shirtless, his belt undone, and his hair dripping wet. Foam covered most of his mouth as he rapidly brushed his teeth, giving me a "one minute" finger before disappearing back into the bathroom.

I looked around the room, exasperated. The bed was unmade and torn apart, looking like it had hosted a wrestling match. But what kept my attention was the eagle feather he'd found last night, now next to the alarm clock, looking well handled.

Starsky emerged from the bathroom, pulling his shirt over his head as he went, and charged into the living room to find his shoes.

I gave the feather one last glance as I left the room, wondering for the hundredth time what it felt like to be bound to a cage.



We weren't on the road for more than twenty minutes before my car started acting up—again. We went back and got the Torino, and Starsky followed me to the garage to drop it off, hoping Merle could coax at least a few more months of life out of it. The rest of the day was uneventful, spent mostly tracking down leads on the new case. It was another homicide—this time, the victim was an unidentified male of around fifty, most likely one of the city's hundreds of homeless people.

Starsky remained unnaturally quiet, even pensive, and while he did what was expected of him, he always seemed to be a half-second behind the game. I'd cover for him, watch out for him, but it killed me to see Starsky this way. Quiet, placid, and brooding were just not words you associated with him. But worse than any of those, was his fear. It was a silent thing, running just below the surface, but it was there. Not that it kept him from functioning, but something inside of him was fading away—dying, even—because of it, strangling that certain *something* that made Starsky...well, Starsky.

Every now and then, I'd catch him gazing off into space, and see it cloud his eyes. Anybody who didn't know us would probably say I was crazy, reading much too much into things. But I knew the fear was there, and I'd do anything I could to take it away.

I wanted my partner back. And I just had this feeling that if something didn't happen soon...

We clocked out while we were on the road. I'd timed our day so the last lead we had to follow up on—one who just happened to live in Venice—would be at the end of day, putting us near the beach. I'd sprung for dinner—tacos from the only edible Mexican joint in the area—and I convinced Starsky to eat at the park instead of in the car or at my place. He sighed, making sure I knew he was humoring me, and parked near one of my favorite stretches of beach to jog on.

There was a cool breeze coming in off the ocean, and most of the beach-goers had already left for the night. Eating tacos on a park bench with a stiff breeze blowing in your face is a challenge if nothing else, and I would have given up if I hadn't had a plan.

Starsky managed better than I did, practically inhaling his dinner, which was good, since his appetite hadn't consistently returned. I could tell by the way his clothes hung on him that he'd lost some weight over the last month.

The breeze picked up enough for me to lose some of the cheese, lettuce, and tomatoes from my taco, which Starsky surveyed with the smirk he sometimes gets. My paper napkin was long gone, too. "I'm glad you find this amusing."

He just rolled his eyes and chuckled, watching the seagulls that had begun to gather nearby, waiting for the opportunity to get a little closer and share my dinner. After a few more bites, I finally gave up and offered the rest of my meal to Starsky. When he declined, I flung it away, and we watched as the birds fought over it. "That ought to give them heartburn."

"Yeah, let's make sure we don't walk under them when we leave."

I hadn't thought of that. I stood and stretched, then stuffed my hands in my pockets and wandered down closer to the water. I waited a moment for him to join me, and when he didn't, I turned back and nodded, gesturing for him to join me.

He stood, but shook his head. "I should probably get going since we've got to work tomorrow."

"Oh, come on, Starsk, brisk breeze, fresh salt air, nice sunset—perfect for a quick walk down the beach. Clears a man's mind. Gives him new perspective—"

"Puts hair on his chest and gives him cleaner, fresher breath. Hutch, it's getting cold out here."

"Well, if you'd get your butt in gear, you'd get your blood flowing and you wouldn't be cold."

"Or if I got in the car, I could turn on the heater."

Well, when words don't convince him, there's always staring. Starsky stared back at me for a moment before sighing and moving toward me. "Fine. But if I get pneumonia, I'm calling in sick tomorrow, and you can run all over the city by yourself."

"Gripe, gripe, gripe."

He flipped up the collar of his jacket and then pulled his head down into whatever warmth it offered. Still, he fell in step with me as we made our way down the beach. We walked farther than we might normally have because I kept hoping that, given enough time and with no distractions, maybe he'd open up. For someone who typically doesn't know when to *shut* up, Starsky could certainly *clam* up.

After what seemed like miles of silence, I finally decided to push. “Starsk, look, I know it’s eating you up inside—”

“Hutch, I’m—”

I stopped and pulled him back when he didn’t. “*Don’t* tell me you’re ‘fine,’ because you’re *not*, Starsk.”

His eyes flashed in anger for a second. “Yes, I am. I don’t know what you want.”

“I want you to talk to me. You can’t keep this bottled up in—”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Hutch, what do you want me to say?”

“It’s not what *I* want, it’s what you—” I stopped, tried to slow down. “Tell me again what happened. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“You were there when I gave my statement in the hospital. You already heard it all. I don’t see what rehashing this is going to accomplish. What am I supposed to say?”

I exhaled and looked away, my anger flaring at his placidness. “*Anything*, say anything! Tell me that you’re angry, that you’re scared. Tell me how much it burns you that those nuts tried to kill you. How they were going to hack you to pieces.” My voice began to escalate, but I couldn’t stop it and was past caring. I had my hands on his arms now, trying to get a reaction out of him besides his mild irritation at my pushing. “Tell me how it shook you to your core that no matter how hard you tried, you couldn’t get away! Tell me how much you hated being a victim, Starsk! Tell me how afraid you were that you were going to die, and there wasn’t anything you could do about it!”

“All right!” His arms flashed out and shoved my hands away. “Is that what you want to hear? That I’m angry? That I was afraid? Fine! I’m mad, Hutch! No, I’m past mad. I’d like to see them all fry. I’d like to be the one that flips the switch on Marcus! Is that what you want to hear? That I was scared?”

“And you still are.” The quietness of my voice stopped him as nothing else could. He looked at me steadily, the heat still burning in his eyes. Every muscle was taut, like he was ready to explode. But after a minute his breathing became slow and quiet. “Starsky, you know that we got them all. You know that they’re in lockup with twenty-four-hour surveillance. They can’t get to you now.”

“I *know* that.”

“Then, what is it?” Considering everything we’d been through, every warped and twisted person we’d encountered, every conceivable horror we’d faced, I’d never seen Starsky withdraw into himself like this. And it scared me.

“Hutch, I...” He was quiet for a long time before he finally shook his head, deflating. “Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, really, I do, buddy. It’s just that I can’t...I just need...It’s just that I’m...”

I waited, my breath caught in my throat. *Say it, Starsk! Come on, I know this is killing you. Just don’t shut down. Don’t shut me out.* “Starsk, there’s...there’s something inside you—something good, something...*important*—that’s slipping away, and it’s like you don’t care. You’re just letting it go. I can’t do that. I can’t let go. I’m afraid if I do, you won’t get it back.”

Even as it came out of my mouth, I knew it probably didn’t make a whole lot of sense. I didn’t know how else to explain it. Starsky looked at me for a moment before he finally nodded and took a few steps back the way we came. “Do you want a ride home?”

Ah, Starsk. “No, you go on, I think I’m going to walk a while longer.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll see you in the morning.”

I watched him walk away, wondering how much longer he could hold up before it broke him. He didn’t get too far before he stopped and turned back toward me. “Hutch? Don’t let go.”



The next morning, I was heading for the shower when the phone rang. The last person I expected to hear from at six o’clock on a Sunday morning was Terry. A chill ran right through me when she breathlessly started off by saying, “Hutch, there’s something you need to know.”



I was rinsing out my coffee cup when he burst into the apartment. *Burst* in, not just walked in—he fairly bounced. There was an energy in every movement, and his eyes danced when they met mine.

My partner was back.

“C’mon, Blintz, get a move on, we got crimes to solve, snitches to roust, whippos to bust—”

“Hands to shake and babies to kiss—yeah, yeah.” I kept my voice nonchalant, but I really wanted to shout. I looked at him expectantly, trying not to burst while I waited for him to tell me what I already knew. He looked back at me, mirroring my bland expression, his eyebrows raised. I nearly yelled in exasperation. “So?”

“So, *what?*”

“So, isn’t there anything you want to tell me?”

Starsky looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “No. Is there anything *you* want to tell *me?*”

I sighed. I should be nominated for sainthood. “I got a call from Terry this morning.”

“Yeah? What’d she have to say?” He was bounding around the room now, gathering up my shoes, jacket, and gun.

I gave him a look when he finally stood still long enough to meet my eyes. “Wouldn’t the better question have been why was *your* girlfriend was calling *me?*”

I’m sure I saw a flash of *something* run across his face. Now he knew that I knew, but he wasn’t going to give in. “Probably, but I happen to know that the lady is positively *crazy* about me, and that her calling you was probably out of sympathy. She does work with the mentally handicapped, you know.”

Good comeback. Still... I sat down on the couch and pulled on the shoes he thrust into my hands. “No, funny man, she called me to say that she’d heard from Tamara and—”

“And Tamara’s finally over the trauma of going out with you.”

“—and Tamara said that someone broke into the grounds at UCLA last night.”

“Yeah? Probably just some college kids pulling a prank. What’d they do, drill peepholes in the sorority house showers?”

“No, actually, it was a B&E at the aviary.”

“Huh. And they don’t think it was some prank?”

“No, apparently, it was quite a professional job. Whoever did it must have known what they were doing, because there’s no sign of forced entry, no fingerprints. The weird thing though, is that nothing was taken. Except...”

“Hmm?” He was already heading toward the door, supposedly eager to start the day.

“Except the only thing missing was that eagle, Nimrod. His cage door was open and he was nowhere to be found.”

Starsky stopped with his hand on the doorknob, but didn’t turn to face me. “They couldn’t find him?”

“No. They searched the aviary, the campus, and the surrounding area for about a ten miles radius—he was gone. Nothing left in his aviary...but a feather.”

My partner was silent for a moment before he responded in a low voice. “Some things weren’t meant to be caged.”

When he turned and his gaze met mine, I knew the eagle had remembered how to fly.



~ *Brit*